

BURNT BRIDGE



TUESDAY, MARCH 6, 2012

John Miserendino: Pavilion



John Miserendino currently is in residence at [Recess](#) in Soho. For his two month session there, John has been creating facsimiles and hybrids out of artifacts of culture, including one of Dan Graham's *Pavilions*, Micheal Haneke's *Funny Games*, Sonic Youth's *Daydream Nation*, Albert Beirstadt landscape paintings, and Julie Taymor's costume designs for *Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark*. I asked John if he wouldn't mind doing an email interview to illuminate some of the thoughts behind this excellent show.

John Miserendino *Pavilion*

January 10 – March 10, 2012

DKC: The unifying theme of *Pavilion* seems to be bootlegging or the remaking of things, but also there is a cross-pollination or remixing of cultural artifacts. In the show, you've remade Dan Graham's *Pavilion* (using a Bierstadt painting to model a wall in a country house), a third version of Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (the second 'American' version which you worked on), and rejected costume designs from *Spider Man: Turn Off The Dark*. I think you are about to begin work on a translation of Sonic Youth's *Daydream Nation*, which you've never heard, through the accounts of others. Part of your remaking or remixing these works is that you seem to rely on partly on the original and partly on the legend or oral telling of cultural artifacts. Do you have a larger idea in mind about borrowing, remaking, bootlegging, or even the way that precedents get lost in translation? Is there anything more specific that unites these artifacts that you are remaking?

JM: The relationships and connections between the different fragments I'm working with in *Pavilion* are things I've become conscious of over the course of the project. Initially the only requisite for the different pieces was that they be performative, somehow lost, discarded or forgotten and that I have some sort of back door connection to them. The pavilion acts like a blender for all these disparate bits. Over time I noticed each of the fragments have a strong idea or critique of American society and culture. I also realized that there are some funny musical overlaps between *Daydream Nation* and *Spiderman Turn off the Dark!*

For each part of the project there are little rules I work with regarding what I know and what I don't know. Like with *Funny Games*, where I worked in the art department as a P.A. on the 2nd version but never watched the film. I watched the 1st version countless times since we were trying to copy it so precisely. So I approached my remake like it was the 1st-and-a-half version of the film. I find working along that line between known and unknown leads you towards a more honest relationship with something. It starts to feel less like appropriation and more like a kind of lopsided collaboration.



Collection of film stills from John Misserendino's remake of Funny Games.
[Watch the video.](#)

DKC: It does feel like you set up a loose structure, but then allowed a lot of room for improvisation, which makes your show so generous and sometimes funny. Perhaps the funniest part is your reenactment of the role of the female protagonist of *Funny Games*. I can't help but think that you've accidentally made a kind of feminist critique of a movie where a woman is being tortured. It becomes absurd by decontextualizing the cause of her emotional distress and the fact that you are being filmed, so obviously a man with 5 o'clock shadow. On top of that it makes the artifice highly apparent, especially in the Hollywood version, with Naomi Watts' performance seeming so overblown. Thoughts?

JM: Its true you can see how hard Naomi watts is trying to distinguish her version of the film when they're played side by side. I pretty quickly realized that each of the performances is anchored by a female lead. The mother in funny games, Arachnia (and Julie Taymor) in Spiderman and Kim Gordon. What can I say besides I am drawn to strong women and I have enjoyed playing them in these roles! Not fitting in Naomi watts' dress and having some face stubble is funny but I have to admit that part of me is genuinely attempting to embody that woman and her suffering. The gap between my intention and the result is where there's room for the humor. After two versions of Haneke's film it was time to put some funny in the games.

DKC: I really admire how you have taken you past job experiences and turn them into artworks. You also did this years ago for videos you made while working for a pretty famous artist. It seems like our creative employers steal our time, so I find justice in the fact that you steal back. But, like you said, it also feels like a collaboration, albeit one that is a bit undermining. Are you interested in this kind of dynamic, or does it just seem like these jobs are your "materials" that you make works out of?

JM: Jonathan Lethem writes about how you can't steal a gift. I love that. Sometimes when you work for another artist in their painting making factory or whatever, the art begins to feel like only a commodity. Maybe by working with that material to make something else, the artist's assistant is able to turn the 'art' back into Art? Or maybe it's just really boring tracing huge paintings with an overhead projector?

There is definitely something inevitably disappointing about the moment when our heroes become real people. No matter how wonderful they turn out to be in real life, that superhero we had in our mind is changed irrevocably. Maybe that's good, maybe its bad but it always requires a kind of mental killing-off of our imagined version.

I think those early pieces, whatever their initial motivations, ultimately felt satisfying in the way I wanted collaborations to feel. A curator friend recently described what I'm doing as cynical collaboration and he meant that in a positive way but I don't think of it like that. I feel like I'm searching for a way in, the trap door that leads me to a position where both me and my collaborator can work from our strengths as well as our vulnerabilities. A real working relationship!



Console prop from Funny Games, constructed from inkjet printed onto plastic substrate.



Props that become artworks

DKC: Another theme to the show is transparency. *The Pavilion* itself, and a lot of the props are transparent, or are like slides or image projections. I'm curious to know more about this formal decision.

JM: In Dan Graham's pavilions you have the whole double-sided mirrored glass thing going on where you see yourself, what's behind you and what's on the other side simultaneously. This idea of the transparent image developed from wanting to find a way to superimpose multiple but fixed information onto the wall surface of the pavilion. The surface has an image printed on it, which is also cut and glued into another thing, and you can also see through it. Graham's pavilions are elegant in the way they reflect and absorb their surroundings making them infinitely contextual. My pavilion becomes embedded with layers of specific programmatic information so that it only reflects the very finite world I'm constructing.



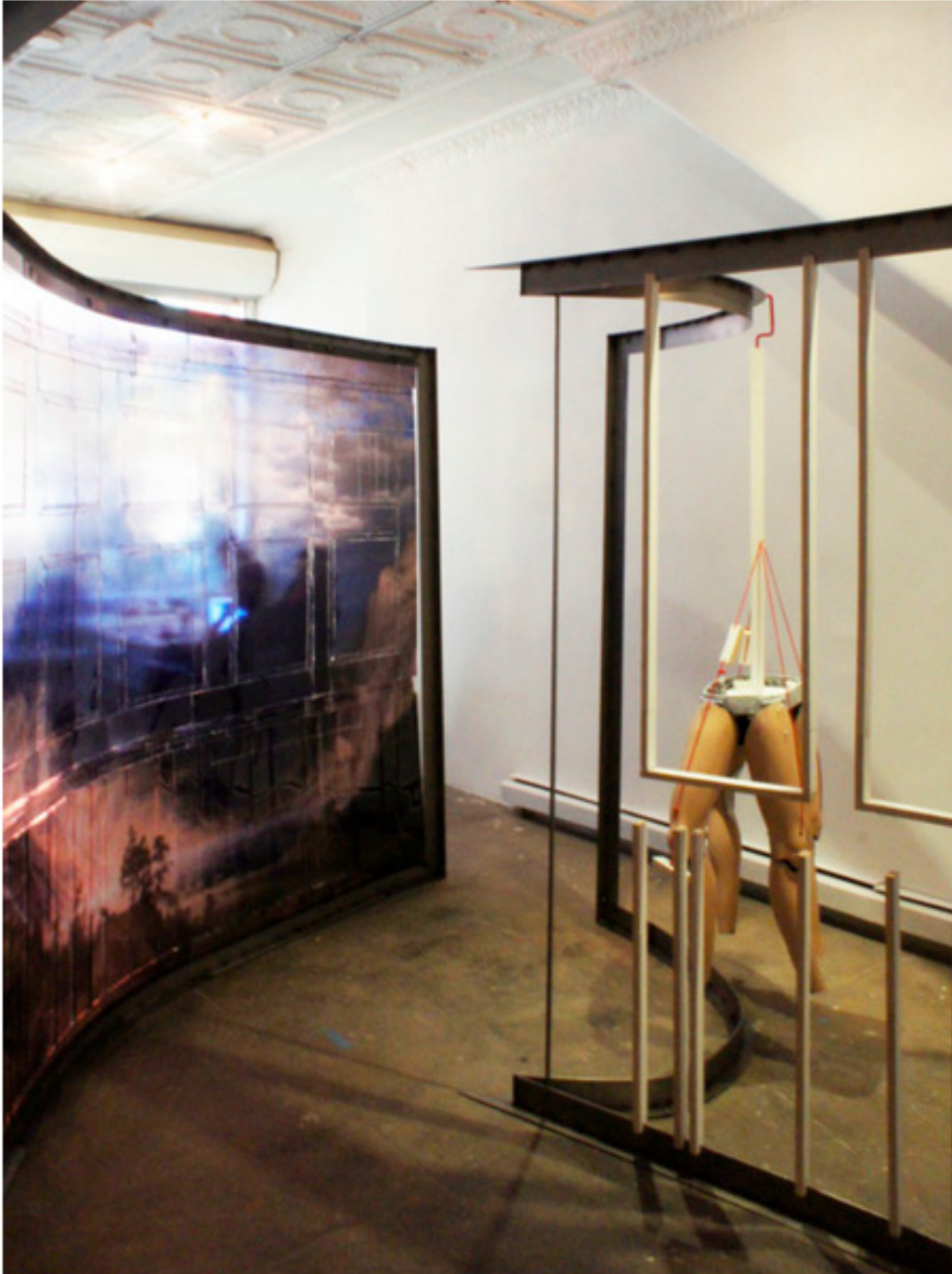
Wardrobe with sketch of rejected costume design from Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark

DKC: The fusion of performance and object-making in the exhibition is particularly thrilling. The strategy of making seems to be really important to a lot of artists of our generation. Do you have an indication as to why you pursue this duality?

JM: I think it has a lot to do with having studied architecture. In school, everything you designed grew out from the program. When you design a building, the narrative you develop at the start of the project helps you make every decision after that. I guess it's just more satisfying to me when I feel like something needs what I'm making even if that something is the simultaneous re-staging of a film, a rock album and a Broadway musical! There is also a tendency in architecture school to get to the end of a studio project and realize the little model you made a month ago is much better than the fancy one you made for your final review. That's why retaining the process is so valuable.

DKC: You mentioned that you realized that all the fragments you were using carry a critique of American culture. Did spending a lot of time in Europe give you a new view of America? And how do you feel about New York after having so much time away?

JM: Pretty much all the clichés of living abroad have held true for me. The time I spent living in other countries made me think about what it means to be American. I don't think I'm any closer to an answer but the complex sensation of pride, shame, optimism and cynicism you get telling someone you moved to wherever you are from New York is very hard to lose. It's important to leave New York. You get to see how well the world gets on without you and then you get to feel how great it is to be back.



View from inside Pavilion with Miserendino's Spiderman multi-leg costume hanging. Note that the Pavilion is constructed from a Bierstadt painting printed onto transparent plastic; the plastic is then formed to model the moulding and wainscoting of the living room in Funny Games.

Read a review of Pavilion in The New Yorker [here](#).