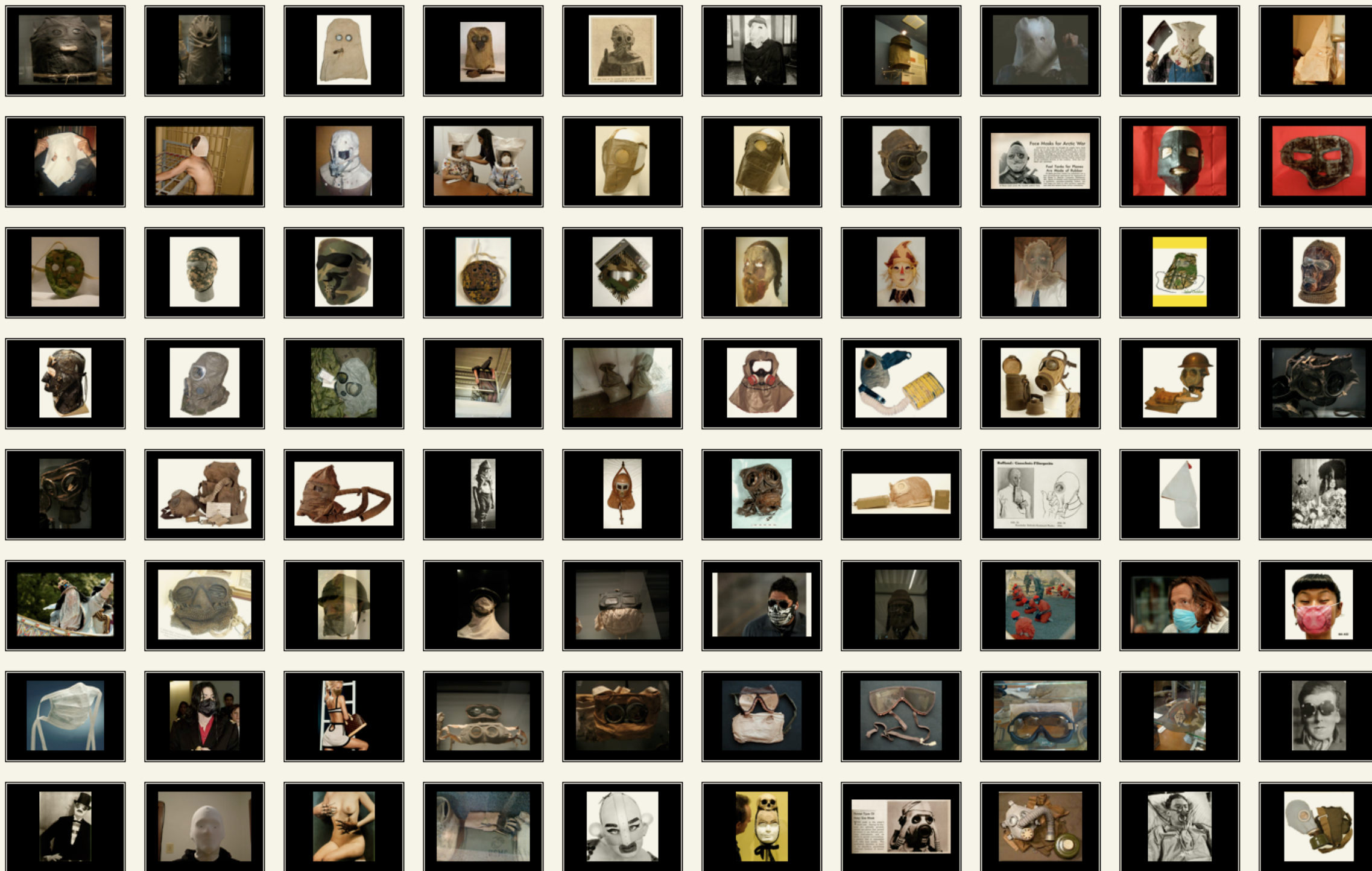

ALLISON SMITH: NEEDLE WORK

Essay by Wendy Vogel
Interviews with Lauren Adams and Allison Smith

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum
Washington University in St. Louis



EMBODIED MA(S)KING: NEEDLE WORK

Wendy Vogel

I am literally face to face with a grid of images, whose crumpled, bunched, baggy, sagging forms contrast with the neatly black-framed boxes in which they are embedded. This is a digital face-off, a PowerPoint display on the glossy screen of my MacBook. I click the slide show function and move through the images one by one: first, a pillowcase with eyeholes and a drawstring; next, two scratchy felt blobs studded with round metal goggle-holes and stumpy cigars in place of mouths. Three images later, a caption underneath a similar form reveals what the powers of imagination have already surmised: “A near view of a trench helmet which gives the soldier the appearance of a ghoul.” In humble cotton, metal, leather, fur, or glass, each of these “masks” meets my stare with its own hollow “eyes,” whether alone on a table, donned by a mannequin, or worn by a human.

These masks, hoods, veils, and empty sacks are images collected by Allison Smith that form the basis of her research for the exhibition *Needle Work* (2009). They suggest a staggering array of contexts, from horror movies to sexual fantasy to, most importantly, war. Smith acquired most of the images from the Internet, and many of them retain a grainy or pixelated quality that betrays their origin as mass-circulated visual information. Smith also includes snapshots of cloth gas masks surreptitiously captured with her camera phone in European and American military museums. These images function within the context of the exhibition, not as a closed archive, however, but rather as an associative blueprint for Smith’s own needlework: the recreation of early cloth gas masks used by soldiers in World War I.

Needle Work, conceived by Smith during her semester as the Henry L. and Natalie E. Freund Visiting Artist at Washington University’s Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts, stems from her interest in early cloth gas masks as icons of an unwritten history of needlework, and by association, of the handmade in modernism. Returning to questions of historical reenactment, the conceptual use of craft, and making-as-performance that have long motivated her practice, Smith centers the exhibition on

handmade recreations of the masks that, while entrenched in a history of modern warfare, stubbornly resist a mass-produced aesthetic. Indeed, their modest appearance, closer to hand-stitched Halloween costumes than the mass-produced rubber masks worn by soldiers today, suggests a “functional inadequacy”¹ that invites purposeful misreadings. Neither militaria nor autonomous sculpture, the masks open up a vast web of psychic territory: a slippage in function between concealment, protective disguise, costume, and memento of war. *Needle Work* extends the line of inquiry in Smith’s previous projects that invite direct participatory practice to an installation that attests to an embodied making-as-performance of historical objects.

Smith has considered the role of craft and war throughout her practice. She has been intellectually preoccupied by historical reenactment culture (also known as living history) and its relationship to craft traditions that often do not find expression in contemporary visual art discourse. Living history practitioners privilege “authentic reproductions” of the tools, props, weapons, and costumes utilized in reenactment. This stress on authenticity has inspired an entire subculture of “hard-core” reenactors who meticulously, if not obsessively, research their roles and objects, sometimes going as far as urinating on their jacket buttons to give them the proper patina. Smith, however, is interested in the practice of living history not only as a formulation of nationhood shaped by contemporary sociopolitical factors, but also for its reinvestment in the techniques and traditions of historical material culture. In other words, within reenactment culture, craft is not regarded simply as a feminized domestic activity, but rather as a vital aspect of performing patriotism—and especially for male reenactors, the values of “crafting” become virtuosic. This reverse gendering resonates with queering central to much of Smith’s practice and informs the readings and display of recreated historical objects in *Needle Work*.

Smith’s previous projects have burlesqued the traditions of reenactment culture, often reconfiguring them as participation-oriented public events within an art discourse informed by contemporary legacies of conceptual art, feminist practice, and relational aesthetics. She is also deeply invested in how notions of gender(ed) hierarchies may be subverted within the performative sphere of reenactment. In this way, Smith’s process is linked to a notion of queering put forward by thinkers such as Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler. Rooted in the poststructuralist idea of linguistic slippage as the site where new and subversive meanings are generated, queering refers to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made

(or can't be made) to signify monolithically.³² These slippages also occur in the production of a queered and insistent materiality in Smith's projects.

For instance, drawing on traditions such as wartime knitting circles and political stumping, Smith created a series of open-air protest events entitled *The Muster*, a project of New York's Public Art Fund, from 2004 to 2006. Participants were asked "What are you fighting for?," and invited to "muster" for their causes in self-fashioned uniforms and campsites against a stage set resembling the "aesthetic vernacular of the American Civil War battle reenactment."³³ Smith played the Mustering Officer, an androgynous figure who delivered rousing speeches and directed the activity. Another project that queered the notion of craft and its relationship to the economy of fine art, *Notion Nanny*, was performed by Smith, with London-based curatorial partnership B + B, from 2005 to 2007. The artist cast herself as an itinerant apprentice in homage to a genre of peddler dolls called "notion nannies," a tradition that commemorates the social custom of traders who traversed the land carrying baskets of handcrafted wares. Smith traveled to various English and American sites, setting up mini-residences, apprenticeships, and local dialogues with people about the politics of craft and economies of the handmade far beyond notions of the decorative.⁴ And in another work, entitled *Hobby Horse*, commissioned by Artpace San Antonio in 2006, Smith wrote a melancholic song about the trauma of war to the tune of "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" and performed it while riding on a large handcrafted rocking horse—a tongue-in-cheek reference to war monuments of soldiers on horseback.

In keeping with Smith's earlier projects that have addressed specifically Anglo-American wars and reenactment traditions, *Needle Work* is comprised of a series of objects, some of which function as historical memory-triggers of the trauma of war. Recreations of early cloth gas masks, ready to wear yet installed within glass vitrines, are imbued with evidence of the history of their own making, or contemporary remaking, by military-style tags that reference the found photographic source imagery that Smith used to reconstruct them. The source imagery itself becomes the patterning on billowing silk parachutes installed within the space. Also included are photographs of the masks as protagonists captured in the process of their creation and "use"—with hands stitching them and bodies wearing them—as well as in tabletop still lifes that resemble anthropomorphized portraits. Similar to the toylike objects that have been the sculptural centerpieces of previous of Smith's installations (hobby horses, pull-toys, wooden rifles, dolls), the masks have an uncanny quality to them that can be experienced as both haunting and humorous.

The gaps and inconsistencies between the "authentic" and its recreation, between the ghoulish and the childlike, open up the associative play between the different types of masks included as Smith's source imagery. These images, willfully selected for their missing information as much as for their visual appeal, contain gaps in information that Smith mnemonically fills when recreating her masks. From the innocently costumelike (a burlap scarecrow's face) to the campy (performance artist Leigh Bowery pictured as a partially-veiled harlequin inexplicably topped with a skull "hat") to the ultimate luxurious and protective accessory (the ubiquitous black silk surgical mask like that donned by the late pop star Michael Jackson), the masks often indicate a precarious balance of positive and negative forces. Yet their dehumanizing aspects—as terrorist disguises (a Klansman's hood) and objects of humiliation and forced sexual submission (a pair of underwear over an Abu Ghraib prisoner's face)—also populate the images. It is in this commingling of horror and delight that the masks are placed in dialogue with the carnivalesque.

The Russian Formalist writer Mikhail Bakhtin proposed a theory of the carnivalesque in his work *Rabelais and His World*, a lengthy analysis of the then-little-known sixteenth-century French writer whose work reflects a medieval folk culture of humor. Bakhtin explains that for medieval subjects, carnival was an important part of social life. Unlike religious and feudal ceremonies, which sought to reinscribe sharp social divisions, carnival celebrated bawdy humor, a suspension of hierarchical rank, and spectacular imagery that blur the line between life and art: "It is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play."³⁵

The role of the mask in this celebratory atmosphere is complex:

The mask is connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself.... It contains the playful element of life; it is based on a peculiar interrelation of reality and image, characteristic of the most ancient rituals and spectacles.³⁶

That is to say, the mask represents a blank slate to which any desire can be projected and any fantasy fulfilled—within the realm of the corporeal grotesque, which primarily concerned itself with the lower-body stratum functions of sex, digestion, and birth. The possibilities for gender-bending and queer sex implicated by masquerade (the wearing of masks) are endless. Bakhtin contrasts this definition of the mask as a prop teeming with libertine possibility to its Romantic form that "keeps a secret, deceives," its

“regenerating and renewing element” transformed into a “terrible vacuum, a nothingness [that] lurks behind it.”⁷ It is this symbolism that Judith Butler also pursues, relating the queered mask to Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic writing in her work *Gender Trouble*:

The mask has a double function which is the double function of melancholy. The mask is taken on through the process of incorporation, which is a way of inscribing and then wearing a melancholic identification in and on the body; in effect, it is the signification of the body in the mold of the Other who has [been] refused.⁸

Liberation and shame are bound together as closely and seamlessly as the flip sides of a coin, as are the pain and pleasures of love and war.

Though the result of years of innovation and experimentation, the cloth gas masks used in World War I suggest a handmade, even improvised materiality due to their anthropomorphized forms and visible stitches. They can be linked in inverse relationship to another group of objects that are part of a hidden, personal aesthetic of early modernism: trench art, an array of objects created by male soldiers on the battlefields of World War I from war matériel, or the mechanical detritus of war. For soldiers as well as civilians, crafting served to pass the time while also addressing the trauma of war through nonverbal means. Just as communal bandage rolling, knitting circles, and other tactile traditions on the civilian home front sought to sublimate women’s feelings of loss and anxiety into a productive, creative outlet, soldiers created their own “memory-objects” in homage to loved ones at home, their fallen comrades, or simply as objects of aesthetic value exchanged for food, cigarettes, and other useful items.⁹ Trench art took many forms, yet much of it was overwhelmingly decorative, detailed, and feminized: pincushions, embroidered postcards, and vases created from artillery shells patterned with organic flower motifs.

Because trench art objects more closely resemble decorative art objects, however, they are not easily assimilable to the aesthetic discourses of either modern art or militaria (that is, artifacts of war that are preserved and displayed in military museums). For that reason, argues scholar Nicholas Saunders, they have been curiously absent from existing histories of war, and require a scholarly approach akin to material culture studies that also examine domestic crafts. Smith’s masks, constructed from common materials readily available at craft stores and recreated from a series of blurry photographs, fall into a similarly iconoclastic category. They do not aspire to expert craft technique; nor do they appear as objects

that fit within a polished history of modern and conceptual art. But in the slippages between the original masks and their recreations, a sense of estrangement from this unwritten history of modernist needlework is revealed. This reflects the very conditions of latency and modernity that informed their production.

For Smith, a theoretical touchstone that connects gas warfare to modernism is Peter Sloterdijk’s *Terror from the Air*. In this text, Sloterdijk links conditions of modernity (terrorism, product design, and environmental thinking) to the conditions of gas warfare, assigning a date to the symbolic dawning of the twentieth century: April 22, 1915, the day German troops executed the first chlorine gas attack in World War I. By attacking the enemy’s environment instead of his body—that is, by engaging in acts of atmospheric (atmo-) terrorism undetectable by the human senses until too late—gas warfare transformed the modern subject’s relationship to his or her environment. When danger could be lurking invisibly in the air around them, modern subjects could no longer take their natural environment for granted.¹⁰ Rather, even the most basic atmospheric conditions of life required an “acceleration in explication” that resonated not only with modernism’s increasing dematerialization of art objects in favor of conceptual practice, but also with the rise of discourses such as psychoanalysis that seek to reveal the “background givens underlying manifest operations.”¹¹

Sloterdijk cites a key artwork demonstrating this new relationship to atmosphere and product design: Marcel Duchamp’s readymade object *Air de Paris*, given by the artist to collectors Walter and Louise Arensberg in 1919.¹² To create this work, Duchamp asked a pharmacist in Le Havre, a town in northern France, to empty a perfume bottle, which he rechristened as fifty cubic centimeters of Parisian air when he gave it to the Arensbergs. And so, just as the air we breathe was reconceptualized from the introduction of atmo-terrorism not as a natural envelope, but as a penetrable membrane that could be deadly, Parisian air is rebranded as a commodity fetish.

Duchamp’s interest in ephemeral readymades continued in his creation of the readymade perfume *Belle Haleine*, *Eau de Voilette*, endorsed by his female alter-ego, Rose Sélavy, in 1921. In this work, a label bearing Rose’s portrait (Duchamp in drag, photographed by Man Ray) was applied to a repurposed bottle of the exotic fragrance Rigaud. Couched in layers of puns, the term “Belle Haleine,” meaning “beautiful breath,” also bears reference to “belle Hélène,” that is, the mythical Helen of Troy. “Eau de Voilette” reverses the i and o in “eau de violette,” the French term for perfume, and translates as “little veil water,” hinting at Duchamp’s veiled gender identity in his masquerade as Rose.

In Duchamp's work, Rose's drag operates in an ambivalent—and queer—place.¹³ Sélavy, clad in a fashionable feather hat, a bob-length wig, and a ruched-collar coat with a mysterious, off-center gaze, displays herself in a luxurious manner characteristic of the upper bourgeoisie. At the same time, “her” garishly lit, hawkish, masculine face suggests an inauthentic slippage in Rose's self-presentation as the feminine ideal. Rather, it occupies a queer space between feminine “masquerade” and male “parade.” In Duchamp's inhabitation of the “character” Rose, he is not attempting to mock lower-class women (which has been suggested as a masochistic function of drag),¹⁴ but rather constructs himself as the object of his own (queer) desire. This narcissistic desire to perform and possess the self-as-sexual-other defines the painful position of the dandy, a role often ascribed to Duchamp's practice.¹⁵

Rose Sélavy's queered portrait functions *performatively* in two ways that are synonymous with Smith's photographs of the gas masks. Both portraits function not just as an index of a particular event (a legible performance), but as markers of a constructed subjectivity that is not fixed, but articulated over and over again in time to achieve materiality. This relates to theoretical constructions of queer performativity as addressed by Judith Butler: “Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act’ but, rather, as a reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”¹⁶ This process can as easily produce non-normative “performances” such as Rose's drag and the coming-into-being of anthropomorphized masks. Just as Duchamp conjured the fictional author Rose Sélavy through assigning her signature to various works of art (a nominal gesture as performance), he also manifested her visually in the photographic portraits (an interpellative gesture that “performs” her subjectivity as a female author).¹⁷ In Smith's project, the masks' photos not only stand as indexical documentation of a (making-as-) performance, but they also depict the masks' “performance” as protagonists inhabiting a space.

Moreover, Smith's inclusion of *hands* entering the space of the mask “portraits” places these images in a photographic tradition that symbolizes the notion of craftsmanship: the idea of “thinking with the hands” and a connection to a corporeal being dissociated from the analytical mind. That is to say, these photographs are self-consciously performing the fiction of a craft tradition. In a lecture entitled “Sleight of Hand: Directions and Displacements in Modern Craft,” theorist Glenn Adamson debunked the notion of essentialized craft. It is craft's flirtation with the avant-garde, Adamson explained, that emphasizes its artificial nature as a separate tradition.¹⁸ By creating institutions of exhibition and reception like those for

avant-garde art, such as museums and magazines, midcentury practitioners of craft asserted it as a separate, constructed sphere of production. Adamson, however, defines craft not as a medium but as a set of material and aesthetic concerns that carry forward to contemporary production. Smith's portraits reference this traditional notion of craft as a separate, bodily activity disconnected from intellectual concerns—but as a way of reclaiming the idea of embodiment in her practice informed by craft.

The contemporary notion of “craft,” in all its tactile materiality, links Smith's *Needle Work* to the production of one of Duchamp's most irreverent successors, a female artist who prefers to be known only by her surname: Sturtevant. Retrospectively crowned as the first appropriation artist, Sturtevant began her career by creating what she calls “repetitions” of the most famous works by other (male) artists of the time. Beginning in the mid 1960s with Andy Warhol's Flower paintings, Sturtevant created the closest versions of her contemporaries' work as she could. Regarding her process, she states:

It is imperative that I see, know, and visually implant every work that I attempt. Photographs are not taken and catalogues [are] used only to check size and scale. The work is done *predominantly from memory, using the same techniques, making the same errors and thus coming out in the same place*. The dilemma is that technique is crucial but not important.¹⁹

The ambivalent place that Sturtevant assigns technique, or craftsmanship, in her work is similar to Smith's reliance on subpar images and humble materials to recreate the masks in *Needle Work*. Furthermore, like Smith's subversive use of craft, Sturtevant's entrance into the game of modern art turned the rules of that game upside down. While other artists were charging themselves with the task of the genius to create new imagery, Sturtevant was preoccupied with fundamentally different questions of making, inhabiting, and self-positioning. As critic Bruce Hainley stated: “Through her exploration of the underpinnings of what the encounter and / or physics nominated as ‘art’ is, she dematerializes the primacy of the object and of the visual, but not by abandoning the object, the methods of its making, or even visibility itself.”²⁰

Rather, in her investigation of being-through-making (repetitions), Sturtevant challenged the frame governing the production, display, and markets of art. Sturtevant examined the canon of modern art and selected sources that best exemplify overall aesthetic progress. By choosing to privilege the aesthetic discourse surrounding art, she elevates the discourse itself

to an object of connoisseurship.²¹ This refusal of traditional, male-encoded authorship in favor of an examination of the context of aesthetic creation also reflects a protofeminist orientation in Sturtevant's practice.

Yet the objects created by Sturtevant continue stubbornly to elicit visual pleasure and a sense of the artist's powers of transformation—the latter a purportedly unintended side effect.²² These operations of aesthetic surprise equally apply to Allison Smith's *Needle Work* project. Though the recreations of cloth gas masks may at first seem utilitarian, there are moments of delightful inauthenticity when the masks seem to take on flamboyant, queer characteristics that are entirely their own. Shifts in scale, vibrant color choices, and the use of metallic fabrics elevate the masks to the expression of a personal sensibility that, like Sturtevant's production, resists simple copying.

Needle Work, as an exhibition, works within and through the politics of reenactment. Smith's recreations of wartime effects on display—staged photographs, recreated masks, and recreated parachutes—subtly resist notions of polished “craftsmanship” while inhabiting the formal idiom of “craft.” The masks, seemingly so “inadequate” and fragile to the ominous threats that surround them, allow us as viewers to take stock of our own human capacities and fears in the face of global wars still being fought. By recreating haunting objects on a personal scale and bringing them to the exhibition space through a queered, embodied sense of making-as-performance, Allison Smith might well pose the question of her *Muster* proposal yet again, but with a rejoinder: What are you fighting for, and how does your mask function? In the end, the masks are only a provocation. It is entirely in their reception that they do their painful needlework, getting under our skin.

Notes

- ¹ Allison Smith, email to the author, October 18, 2009.
- ² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Queer and Now,” in *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.
- ³ Allison Smith, “What Are You Fighting For?,” <http://www.themuster.com>. Reproduced in Tom Eccles, Allison Smith, James Trainor, and Anne Wehr, *Allison Smith: The Muster: What Are You Fighting For?* (New York: Public Art Fund, 2007), 42–45.
- ⁴ For more information on this project, see <http://www.notionnanny.net>.
- ⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 7.
- ⁶ Ibid., 40.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 50.
- ⁹ Nicholas J. Saunders, *Trench Art: Materialities and Memories of War* (New York: Berg, 2003), 42.
- ¹⁰ Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror from the Air*, trans. Amy Patton and Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 47–48.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 9.
- ¹² Ibid., 106.
- ¹³ For more on ambivalent drag, see Judith Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in her *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 124–28.
- ¹⁴ This has been theorized by writers such as Marilyn Frye in “Lesbian Feminism and the Gay Rights Movement: Another View of Male Supremacy, Another Separatism,” in her *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (New York: Crossing Press, 1983), 128–51, and picked up more recently by writers such as bell hooks, who quotes Frye in her article “Is Paris Burning?,” in *Reel to Real: Race, Sex and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 216–18.
- ¹⁵ Robert Viscusi remarks on the dandy's poignantly “incurable sense of self-division” in *Max Beerbohm or the Dandy Dante: Reading with Mirrors* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985), 30, as quoted in John Miller, “The Weather Is Here, Wish You Were Beautiful: The Persistence of Dandyism,” *Artforum* 28, no. 9 (May 1990): 156.
- ¹⁶ Judith Butler, “Introduction,” in *Bodies that Matter*, 2.
- ¹⁷ Butler, “Gender Is Burning,” 121–23.
- ¹⁸ See Glenn Adamson, “Sleight of Hand: Directions and Displacements in Modern Craft,” http://www.saic.edu/gallery/saic_podcast/2009_trashtospectacle/gadamson (accessed November 21, 2009). This lecture was presented as part of the lecture series *From Trash to Spectacle: Materiality in Contemporary Art Production*, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, March 5, 2009.
- ¹⁹ Sturtevant, “Interior Visibilities,” in *Magritte* (Québec: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1997), 124 (italics mine), as quoted in Bruce Hainley, “Erase and Rewind,” *Frieze* 53 (June–August 2000): 84.
- ²⁰ Hainley, “Erase and Rewind,” 84.
- ²¹ Miller, “The Weather Is Here,” 156–58.
- ²² “People will [sometimes] say that a work looks better than the original. Then I say, that's totally wrong, it's not supposed to be better.” Sturtevant, as quoted in Dan Cameron, “A Conversation: A Salon History of Appropriation with Leo Castelli and Elaine Sturtevant,” *Flash Art* 143 (November–December 1988): 77.