LOYAL DOGGEDNESS

By

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A PROJECT IN LIEU OF THESIS PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2010
To all dog lovers
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my partner Stephanie Boluk; my brother, Steven LeMieux; and my committee members Jack Stenner, Shep Steiner, Gregory Ulmer, and Terry Harpold. I am also indebted to my colleagues in Digital Media Art, especially Sheila Bishop and Daniel Tankersley.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1  THEORY</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound Subjectivity</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking the Dog</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjectivity Unleashed</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  PRACTICE</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Googling the Handmaids</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Cultural Analytics</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Close Reading</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF REFERENCES</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>Las Meninas</em> (1656), by Diego Velázquez</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>The Ambassadors</em> (1553), by Hans Holbein the Younger</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>skulls</em> (2000), by Robert Lazzarini</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Beinhund</em> (2010), by Patrick LeMieux</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Hundbein</em> (2010), by Patrick LeMieux</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>Hundbein and Beinhund</em> (2010), by Patrick LeMieux</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>Diego Velázquez's Birthday</em> (2008), by Denis Hwang</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Three of Five <em>Dilbert Google Doodles</em> (2002), by Scott Adams</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>Las Meninas (Flickrshow)</em> (2009), by Patrick LeMieux</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>The Ambassadors (Keynote)</em> (2009), by Patrick LeMieux</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>Loyal Doggedness</em> (2010), by Patrick LeMieux</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the introductory chapter of _The Order of Things_ (1966), Michel Foucault performs a close reading of Diego Velázquez’s _Las Meninas_ (1956). In developing this lengthy description, Foucault proposes that _Las Meninas_ is not a figurative illustration of the court of Spanish monarch King Philip IV but is instead a painting of representation itself — representation in its pure form. The specific composition of each figure in the painting informs this conclusion. However, for all his detailing, Foucault overlooks the dog for which his only description reads “to the right the dog lying on the floor, the only element in the picture that is neither looking at anything nor moving, because it is not intended, with its deep reliefs and the light playing on its silky hair, to be anything but an object to be seen.” In this way the figure of the dog becomes a supplement to Foucault’s episteme.

Later, in an article entitled “Frames of Reference” published in Art Forum in 2003, Jeff Wall casually notes that “you could, imaginably, stand on [a Carl] Andre [sculpture] while looking at _Las Meninas_ and the whole experience would be resonant because the artists, so different in other respects, were in accord about the relation of their object to
the body of the spectator who would see it, as well as, of course, to their own bodies while they were making it." Wall’s attentiveness to subjectivity and scale suggest a possible treatment for Velázquez’s dog.

If cropped around the figure of the dog, the life scale of the Spanish Mastiff and exemplifying foot of Nicolas Pertusanto, the Italian jester, make Diego Velázquez’s Las Meninas the perfect welcome mat for the art institution. For my artwork Loyal Doggedness (2010) a Stainmaster nylon mat with a nitrile rubber backing has been injection dyed by a Millitron computer with the cropped, to-scale image of the dog from Las Meninas. Once installed outside at the front door of a museum or gallery, this customized accessory embodies a heuretic methodology for ethical close reading and a practical art history. Based on the welcome mat I have also implemented a post card, audio tour, and screen saver to extend the invisible support mechanisms local to the art institution. Taken as a whole, Loyal Doggedness is an attempt to trouble what it means to look at art, question how to be an ethical viewer, generate knowledge through close reading techniques, and understand the aesthetic of referentiality. The planning, production, and theoretical underpinning of my work with Las Meninas demonstrates a type of loyal doggedness for the art discourse.
CHAPTER 1  
THEORY  

Bound Subjectivity  

In the introductory chapter of *The Order of Things* (1966), Michel Foucault performs a close reading of Diego Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* (1656) (Figure 1). In developing this lengthy description, Foucault proposes that *Las Meninas* is not a figurative illustration of the court of Spanish monarch King Philip IV but is instead a painting of representation itself—“representation in its pure form” (16). The specific composition of each figure in the painting informs this conclusion.

In pure-representation Foucault discovers the condition I call “bound subjectivity” in which the body of the viewer is disciplined by the painting through the conflation of three unique subject positions: that of the artist making the work, the audience viewing the work, and the subject depicted in the work. These three positions, traditionally distinct in their physical relation, are inextricably linked in Foucault’s reading of *Las Meninas*. When looking at *Las Meninas*, an audience member, no matter her level of awareness, subtly embodies not only her own subject position signaled by the inclusion of the unknown guest at the doorway, but also those of Diego Velázquez hard at work and the Spanish Monarchy reflected in the mirror.

Figure 1. *Las Meninas* (1656), by Diego Velázquez
However, for all his detailing and disciplining, Foucault overlooks the dog for which his only description reads “to the right the dog lying on the floor, the only element in the picture that is neither looking at anything nor moving, because it is not intended, with its deep reliefs and the light playing on its silky hair, to be anything but an object to be seen” (14). In this way the figure of the dog becomes a supplement to Foucault’s episteme.

**Walking the Dog**

Given the dog’s unique position as a supplement to the regime of pure-representation, possibilities emerge for “unleashing” the bound subject through a close reading of this figure. Here, the critical question is “what does the dog mean?” However, before engaging any one answer I wonder “what can the dog mean?”

Upon initial consideration, the dog simply reinscribes Foucault’s paradigm. When considering the historical narrative it is no coincidence that the dog is the closest figure to the picture plane. King Philip the IV is known to have always kept his personal mastiff around the palace and the dog in *Las Meninas* could simply signify that the king is directly in front of the picture plane. By pointing toward the monarchy, the dog operates like the reflecting mirror, the artist busy at work, or the Infanta Margarita and her entourage.

Following this trajectory, the dog could also function as a signifier for the serial condition, standing in for all of King Philip’s dogs, or all Spanish Mastiffs, or all dogs in general. Rather than a portrait or likeness of one particular, named mastiff, the dog in *Las Meninas* is the single unnamed character in Foucault’s schema.

By opening the discussion beyond the historical conditions in which *Las Meninas* was produced, the dog becomes a polysemic signifier for various theoretical and
philosophical discourses. Perhaps Foucault does not include the dog in pure-representation because he believes the dog is not human. This classic marginalized subject position could be theorized through the lens of animal studies using Donna Haraway’s writing. Or perhaps the dog signifies the posthuman and could be figured as a kind of cyborg using Haraway or N. Katherine Hayle’s work. Similarly, if the dog cannot stand in for a human subjectivity, perhaps it could work as object subjectivity like Graham Harmon describes in his object-oriented ontology.

Regarding the dog as an inanimate object, one of the first questions asked by Las Meninas’ contemporary audience, both in person and voiced on various blogs and forums, is if the loyal mastiff is indeed stuffed. This question is prompted by the dog’s closed eyes, stationary form, and strange interaction with Nicolas Pertusanto. Is the diminutive Italian jester stepping on the dog or petting it gently with his foot? Embedded within these questions is the possibility of a stuffed dog. The impossibility of determining whether the dog is living or dead activates a feeling of the uncanny as Freud famously elaborated as the *unheimliche* in his 1919 essay “The Uncanny.” Along with theories of the uncanny, the dog begins to function as a *momento mori* signifying the viewer’s mortality through the representation of decayed or decaying organic matter.

Investigating the matter, or the materiality of the painting itself, suggests turning toward Clement Greenberg’s fierce defense of Jackson Pollock and the Modernist slogan of “paint as paint.” And indeed the dog appears the most loosely painted figure in *Las Meninas*. Velázquez’s hand is clearly seen in the dry brush strokes around the dog’s muzzle and scruff. This impressionistic brushwork begins to break the figuration
into an abstract smear. A similarly decomposing, designifying encounter with the raw materiality of Claude Monet’s *Haystack* (1890-91) prompted Wassily Kandinsky to write:

> Up till then I had known nothing but realist art . . . And suddenly for the first time I saw a picture. The catalogue told me that it was a haystack: I couldn’t tell it from looking. Not being able to tell it upset me. I also considered that the artist had no right to paint so indistinctly . . . I had a dull sensation that the picture’s subject was missing. And was amazed and confused to realize that the picture did not merely fascinate but impressed itself indelibly on my memory and constantly floated before my eyes, quite unexpectedly, complete in every detail (Holtzman 71).

A similarly illuminating quote, also taken from Kandinsky’s writing, suggests that anamorphosis may have something to do with envisioning the materiality of paint:

> I had just come home when I suddenly saw an indescribably beautiful picture, suffused with an inner radiance. I stood gaping at first, then I rushed up to this mysterious picture, in which I could see nothing but forms and colors, and whose subject was incomprehensible. At once I discovered the answer to the puzzle: it was one of my own pictures that was leaning against the wall on its side . . . Now I knew for certain that the [subject] harmed my paintings (Holtzman 72).

Both the placement on the floor and anamorphic effects that Kandinsky experienced create a sense of the uncanny, the defamiliarized familiar. Kandinsky’s writing foreshadows Greenberg’s interest in Pollock as the hero of American painting. The relation of these art historical moments of the raw materiality and uncanny nature of the dog in *Las Meninas* lead to another art historical artifact used to emblemize post-structuralist aesthetic theory: Hans Holbein the Younger’s *The Ambassadors* (1553) (Figure 2).
Subjectivity Unleashed

At the conclusion of *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (1997), Espen Aarseth proposes an overlap and near conflation of his theory of ergodic literature (literature that requires “nontrivial effort” (1-2) for a user to traverse the text) and the tradition of anamorphosis in early modern painting. Drawing a parallel between the two processes, Aarseth suggests that anamorphosis, the process by which a viewer must adopt a nonstandard viewing angle to reveal a perspectively warped image, is a “solvable enigma” which produces aporia and epiphany, the master tropes of ergodic literature (181). To reduce both the ergodic and anamorphic to a solvable point of resolution reasserts Foucault’s bound subject position, the conflation of artist, subject, and audience. Instead, anamorphic subjectivity suggests the opposite. Rather than reifying a specific subject position in front of a painting, image, or artifact, anamorphosis radically critiques all subject positions as tenuous and fraught. There is no prime viewing angle. The anamorphic skull in Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* is not a *memento mori* in the sense that it reminds the viewer of her mortality but rather because it proves there is no correct subject position, that subjectivity in itself is never true. As Lacan discusses in the *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, subjectivity ex-ists only in terms of this impossibility of being fixed.
Following from Lacan’s discussion of *The Ambassadors*, in *New Philosophy for New Media* (2004) Mark Hansen discusses Robert Lazzarini’s sculptural installation *skulls* (2000) and the way their anamorphic design fails to resolve into proper perspective no matter what angle the distorted objects are viewed from (Figure 3). As Hansen writes, *skulls* "'makes sense' visually—only within the weird logic and topology of the computer" (202). Basing his theory of *skulls* on Gilles Deleuze's cinematic any-space-whatever, Hansen suggests that *skulls* functions as a "digital ASW." Using Lazzarini’s work as a metonymy for speaking about the ontological status of new media in general, he describes how the spatial regime of *skulls* is an impossible space for any human subjectivity to embody. Upon attempting access “you feel the space around you begin to ripple, to bubble, to infold . . . and you notice an odd tensing in your gut, as if your viscera were itself trying to adjust to this warped space" (198-9).

Thinking back to the morphing signification of the dog in *Las Meninas*, it seems as though Hans Holbein’s smeared skull, with its dual implications of subjective...
embodiment and raw materiality, could prefigure a dogged position in Foucault’s episteme of pure-representation. To address this cross feed, or feedback, I created two images in which the dog and skull are exchanged (Figures 4 and 5). Titled *Beinhund* (2010) and *Hunbein* (2010), which translate roughly to “Bonedog” and “Dogbone,” the names of these artworks are a play on the name Holbein (which is estimated to mean “hollow bones” in subverted German). These images are exhibited together on Apple eMacs, leashed and sitting on the floor (Figure 6). This artwork begins to suggest a practical dimension to this theoretical undertaking.
Googling the Handmaids

In 1998, while in the process of refining their now iconic logo, Google began to feature themed “holiday logos” on their front page. These customized logos typically recognize select cultural events, annual festivals, and historic moments relevant to a local user base on any given day. As a secondary function, the logos link to a Google search directing users to more information on the given topic. Each holiday logo is used for a single day and on the company’s website they request that visitors “please don’t use [the custom logos] elsewhere as each has a special history at Google and we'd like them to enjoy their well-deserved retirement” (Google).

The first modification to the standard front page was a Burning Man themed logo designed to signify the location of Google founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin one weekend early in the company’s history. The following, more traditional holiday logos were produced by various outside contractors until Denis Hwang was hired by Google in 2000. With Google’s main logo finalized by Ruth Kedar in 1999, Page and Brin suggested Hwang begin his now-famous series of “Google Doodles” to standardize the logo designs and extend the early holiday-based variations.

One such extension was a celebration of visual artists. Starting with Claude Monet on November 14th, 2001, Denis Hwang designed a series of custom logos dedicated to various artists and exhibited globally via Google’s front page on an anniversary of their birthdays. In an interview for CNN, Hwang said "having been a student of art history for a long time those are a little bit more personal [and] trying to
mimic the style of a master is always difficult and humbling, so it does take a lot more
time to do those, but it's also a lot more fun" (Williams).

On June 6th, 2008, Google featured a *Las Meninas* themed logo as a tribute to
Diego Velázquez on his 408th birthday
(Figure 7). As expected, the Velázquez
Google Doodle features Google’s logo
rendered in a painterly style and embedded in a laterally extended digital reproduction
of *Las Meninas*. Conforming to Google’s horizontal logo, the densely positioned figures
in *Las Meninas* have been spaced apart. Specifically, distance has been added around
doña María de Sotomayor and the reflecting mirror has been lowered to join the crowd.
Rather than forming the lower half of a vertical painting as in the original, the Google
version has been cropped and recomposed to frame the figures only. Among the
reduced, saturated likenesses of Diego Velázquez, the Infanta Margarita, and even the
loyal mastiff, five of the Google logo’s six letters are arranged spatially as if members of
the royal family.

Wrapped around the body of the artist, the big blue “G” that begins the logo is
rendered as a three-dimensional form via shaded shadows and highlights. In a possibly
anamorphic gesture, the “G” tilts from behind Velázquez, around his waist, and then

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1 Google Doodles have been the source of political arguments in the United States due to the popular
source engine’s ubiquity and the company’s corporate ideology. Starting with their Burning Man logo in
1998, Page and Brin have often been accused of supporting liberal, anti-American, and even communist
sentiments. Modifications to the Google logo often celebrate the arts and sciences while ignoring most
national and religious holidays. Diego Velázquez’s June 6th birthday falls on the anniversary of D-Day and
in 2008, to the chagrin of a vocal American audience, Google celebrated Velázquez by posting *Las
Meninas* logo. That day Kathryn Jean Lopez of the National Review wrote “so today is the D-Day
Anniversary. Today is the day RFK died 40 years ago. So Google is celebrating Diego Velázquez’s
birthday, natch” (Lopez).
emerges in front of the leftmost maid of honor. Similarly, the lowercase blue “g” is heavily highlighted to stand out from scene and wraps its tail around the head of the dog, the most forefront element of the scene. Matching the clothing of Maribarbola and Nicolas Pertusato, the green “l” and red “e” submerge back into the shadows and blend in behind their respective figures.

Beyond these first four letters which reinforce the spatial dynamics of the original painting, the treatment of the “oo” in Google’s logo continues Denis Hwang’s close reading of Las Meninas. At first glance, like the initial reading of Las Meninas, the red “o” appears to be included in the scene, perhaps peeking through a window in the background. It is only later that the full meaning of the reflection emerges: the red “o,” as with the king and queen, is in front of the picture plane. However, the yellow “o” is harder to pin down. At first it seems that the place of the yellow “o” is being filled by the Infanta Margarita, whose dress is tinted yellow. However, a second reading suggests that the yellow “o” reflects the red “o”. This possibility opens up the Foucaultian subject position in which Google, the Google user, and that which is Google Searched are conflated in the Velázquez logo.

Google has always engaged in this play on representation. The very name of their search engine connotes looking. The word “google” functions doubly, as a

![Figure 8. Three of Five Dilbert Google Doodles (2002), by Scott Adams](image)
misspelling of “googol,” the term for $10^{100}$ which suggests an unlimited number of search results, and also contains “oogle” and “ogle.” Between May 20th and 24th in 2002, Scott Adams, the creator of *Dilbert*, noted these connotations when he produced a week of guest Doodles featuring his famous cartoon characters discussing Google’s logo design (Figure 8). Through Dilbert and his classic critique of corporate culture, Adams suggests Google may not be as clear a lens for analyzing cultural data as might be originally assumed.

**Critical Cultural Analytics**

In “How to Follow Global Digital Cultures, or Cultural Analytics for Beginners” Lev Manovich writes:

On August 25, 2008, Google’s software engineers announced on googleblog.blogspot.com that the index of web pages, which Google is computing several times daily, has reached 1 trillion unique URLs. During the same month, YouTube.com reported that users were upload[ing] 13 hours of new video to the site every minute. And in November 2008, the number of images housed on Flickr reached 3 billions [sic] (1).

Using these statistics, Manovich estimates that “the number of images uploaded to Flickr every week today is probably larger than all objects contained in all art museums in the world” (1). A simple Google search for "Las Meninas" yields thousands of
digital photographs uploaded from the Museo del Prado in Madrid depicting the famous 1656 painting of the same title. After narrowing the query to exclude all but the "extra large" images, I downloaded a collection of every unsized tourist photograph in April 2009 and sequenced at 15 images per second to create a film titled *Las Meninas* (*Flickrshow*) (2009) (Figure 9). The uncanny similarities between photographs produce a striking and somewhat unsettling effect when seen in rapid succession. As if extending Hollywood’s filmic language of trauma, *Las Meninas* (*Flickrshow*) renders the collective photographer’s quaking hand, transfixed in ecstatic reproduction of *Las Meninas* ad infinitum. This bound subject, simultaneously looking, making, and being made, echoes Michel Foucault’s reading of *Las Meninas*. *Las Meninas* (*Flickrshow*) articulates the current cultural valence of the bound subject.

One could imagine a similar outcome from time-based follow-up to Google’s successful Similar Image Search, which compiles like images based on their particular pixel data rather than keywords or page ranking. As Lev Manovich suggests “we can use the same developments—computers, software, and availability of massive amounts of ‘born digital’ cultural content—to track global cultural processes in ways impossible
with traditional tools” (3). However, cultural analytics that do not perform critically risk the problem of reinscribing the data analyzed and also contributing to the massive quantity of cultural data at large.

To contrast the effects of Las Meninas (Flickrshow), a second film titled The Ambassadors (Keynote) (2009) was conceived in which I placed an infinitely nested version of The Ambassadors by Hans Holbein the Younger as the only slide in an endlessly repeating Keynote presentation (Figure 10). The 3D OpenGL effects famously used in Steve Jobs' Macworld addresses work to activate anamorphosis in the image so illuminating to Lacan's thought. One can imagine Jaques Lacan pressing the space bar with flourish to conclude a point in his lectures on the Four Fundamental Elements of Psychoanalysis. However, there is no clear point of resolution as the point of the presentation is always repressed.

The Ambassadors (Keynote) is exhibited in tandem with Las Meninas (Flickrshow), often projected on two opposing walls. Once juxtaposed, the “shaking
hand” of bound subjectivity begins to suggest micro-anamorphic effects within the individual angle of each photographic gesture. Likewise, the infinitely repressed painting nested in *The Ambassadors (Keynote)* figures an unapproachable Real.

Continuing their apparent collaboration, on Tuesday, January 13, 2009, the Museo del Prado and Google announced the completion of “Masterpieces from the Prado on Google,” an unprecedented project in which 14 of the museum’s masterpieces including *Las Meninas* were photographed at 1,400 mega-pixel resolution and made available to the public via Google Earth and Google Maps. In their press release the Museo del Prado is figured as “the first museum in the world to offer high-resolution images of its masterpieces for access and navigation on the Internet” and that “these images will reveal details invisible to the naked eye of paintings such as *Las Meninas* (Museo del Prado). This type of high-resolution image with its extra-sensory affect leads to my final artwork, which brings together theories of subjectivity, anamorphosis, and embodiment.

**Ethical Close Reading**

In an article titled “Frames of Reference” published in Art Forum in 2003, Jeff Wall casually notes that “you could, imaginably, stand on [a Carl] Andre [sculpture] while looking at *Las Meninas* and the whole experience would be resonant because the artists, so different in other respects, were in accord about the relation of their object to the body of the spectator who would see it, as well as, of course, to their own bodies while they were making it” (191). Wall’s attentiveness to subjectivity and scale suggest a possible treatment for Velázquez’s dog.

If cropped around the figure of the dog, the life scale of the Spanish Mastiff and exemplifying foot of Nicolas Pertusanto, the Italian jester, make Diego Velázquez’s *Las
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Figure 11. Loyal Doggedness (2010), by Patrick LeMieux
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Patrick LeMieux is receiving an MFA in Digital Media Art from the School of Art and Art History at the University of Florida. His scholarship, artwork, teaching, and curatorial activity are centered on networked and programmable media, gallery analytics, and videogames as an emergent art form. Over the past year he exhibited artwork at the Tampa Museum of Art, FSU Museum of Fine Arts, and the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art. This fall he will be beginning his PhD in the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies at Duke University. For more information please visit http://patrick-lemieux.com/