

# WERO

## The runway darling!

### or what drones taught me about being a better tranny

#### An interview with Regrette Etcetera by Rachael Sweting

I must admit I'm a fan of Regrette's. After reading *Plunder Magazine's* 2010 description of her as "Kathy Acker's X-Files, or Alfred Jarry as a Cockette", I first encountered Regrette's pan-disciplinary, para-academic work in a high-costume and high-sex 'Performance-Lecture' for her project *The Fauxist International*. Since then, I've come across her doing anything and everything from labyrinthine textual exhibitions, academic panels and political workshops, to 'subliminal' Youtube videos, and freaky 3am club shows, and *Ask A Tranny* 'blowjob booths'. Not merely trading on her subcultural freak capital – Regrette gets around daily in all neon and drag makeup and she actually showed me her stab-wound scars! – and the street-cred of a tranny sex-worker, her unabashedly iconoclastic, syncretic output evinces real conceptual depth.

**Rachael Sweting: 'Queer' performance has become well-known as a genre in recent years. How would you characterise transgender work, and more specifically, its relationship with genre and with terms like 'Post-drag', or even 'Post-gender'?**

**Regrette Etcetera:** The vast majority of my work doesn't explicitly engage with transgender, or gender. It's interesting that you think that what 'we' do to 'gender' must adhere to a monolithic category, a cross-cultural legibility, and as such to genre...

**R.S:** Well, you critically combine genres, and move in a lot of scenes/venues not traditionally associated with trans women?

**R.E:** Wow. Your question is a good example. ("Tell us why or how you are exceptional or noteworthy for transcending the cultural ghettos we construct for trans women?")... "Well I never thought I'd see an Aboriginal ice skater! Explain yourself!") How do you think the 'autobiographical impulse' is preferred or required by the art world? Is it such an 'impulse' at all? In my experience, it's more like what Vivianne Namaste, writing about trans and sex worker representation, calls the 'Autobiographical Imperative'. My 2010 work *'So this one time I turn up for a trick...'*<sup>3</sup> is a good example. A collection of autobiographical whose stories which sits at the confluence of transgender, sex worker, and drug autobiographies, it deliberately plays with this forced self-reflexivity, the

confession and titillation required of the stereotypically abject and these genre-devices. It's like the Fauxist oeuvre really – those infamous exhibitions with thousands of pages of text, the obscurantism – there's a certain pushiness and obfuscation aiming at times to exclude the viewer, or disrupt the expectation of the 'normative gaze' to be centred, educated, confessed to and so on. Is that a relationship to genre or reception, or just an effect of marginalisation?

**R.S:** I asked because I've seen you onstage piercing your genitals with Australian flags, and talking about feminisation hypnosis... This is an interview for an art journal's gender issue after all...

**R.E:** And that's why I'm here right? Maybe I could ask you what effect you think the concerted focus of reviewers and interviewers on my work on 'gender' and 'the body' marked – by them – as 'transgressive' has on my practice? How 'Drones becomes my gender' here is a good example of how uniformly my work is read back to 'the trans body', even while I read away from or against it. The 'cock-piercing show', *Monsterpussy* (2010) is actually about trans and queer inclusion in the colonial-imperial project via histories of sexualised colonial violence, and looks at the linkages between the excessive, intimate violence of trans and racialised killing, and the fetishising, surveillant liberal gaze. Maybe you could also see a link there to drones, right? Is that Post-Drag? For me, any link to drag is increasingly attenuated.

**R.S:** But isn't your anger precisely what we want to hear? Isn't that the titillation you mention?

**R.E:** Certainly. It's a cute trap. "Regrette, how exactly are you positioned as hysterical for refusing to answer our questions?" I'm very aware of the multivalence of asking "How many trans women artists have ever been in this art journal?". It reminds me of Fusco and Gómez Peña's writings on the 'Compassion fatigue' facing 'multicultural' art in the 90s after the temporary vogue of 'minority anger'. Maybe you'd like me to say: "Transgender, that new U.S. brand, is hot right now. Trans is the new 'queer'. Gender is the new sexuality"? Besides the autobiographical imperative in your questions, I think they also mirror the art-world's desires for something like a transgender *Guerilla Girls*, campaigning for access, to allow it to re-centre itself, stroke its self-congratulatory tolerance,



not to really interrogate its maintenance of both a quasi-anthropological, fetishising gaze and its material complicity in gentrification, for example, which affects 'such populations'. "We're waiting for tranny art to come of age".

**R.S:** What of your other work then that reads away from the body?

**R.E:** We're getting warmer! I'd say 'most of it'! Though in terms of trans stuff, I've made work and written elsewhere on Transgender's 'Abject-Iconic' status in broader queer politics, and how it functions as part of a homonationalist and 'Pinkwashing' discourse, or as an exemplary neo-liberal subjectivity.... Otherwise I've also engaged a lot with colonialism, critical science, sacrificial economies, excess, Utopias, psychology, and especially monumentality, like genocide museums, abject monuments and archives. Anyway, this is getting boring. So, to bring 'your interview' back to drones, I'll give you a handy segue...

**R.S:** Ok. I'd suspected I might have to throw away my notes...

**R.E:** Well, as part of the trans-nationalism work I mentioned, we (the Fauxist International) recently conducted an exclusive interview with the world's first transsexual drone pilot in the USA!

**R.S:** Sounds like it was made for the Fauxists!

**R.E:** And you thought transgender police were new! Well, that's not actually true, I just wanted to tease you a minute. Really, the segue is our piece *Drone Drag*. In this series we're playing from Jasbir Puar's notion of 'terrorist drag', beginning with the key role of satellite and UAS (Unmanned Aerial Systems) biometry in Osama bin Laden's detection – most people don't know he was found by satellite and then UAS analysis of shadows cast by his body, gait recognition etc. This project looks at tactics to evade or confuse the UAS's stare, in North Waziristan, Africa, wherever. You may've seen the recently 'intercepted' 22 tips for avoiding drones Al Qaeda memo, which recommends various dissimulation tactics tying architectural, gathering, transport and movement to heat signatures, reflectivity, or algorithmic pattern-recognition. So, by reading back from U.S. military and contractor reports, I'm investigating how this techno-evolutionary 'ecosystem' is changing the ways in which 'militants' communicate, gather, travel, dress, and move, and how it thus produces 'performative militant comportments' intended to dissimulate – or drag – the UAS. There's lots of Judith Butler jokes. Of course it'd be a mistake to think it's just 'over there'. Territory is pixellated, and we're also looking into the growing amount of US civil 'survivalist' and militia literature on 'how to fool drones', and similar activist work on security cultures within movements. Given that animal-mimetic dragonfly drones have been caught on video at US protests, I'd say this stuff is very much coming home to roost in the nearest future.

**R.S:** Consider me segued. You're actually getting at an expanded notion of drag and performance?

**R.E:** And more. The work asks: how do you 'drag' the UAS's extra-perceptual spectrums – the infrared, UV, nano-tagging etc. – and the temporal. Most simply: How do you perform camouflage *telepresently* and in machinic time? How do you



Elliot Hughes *Regrette Etcetera* 2012, HD video still, 33min. Courtesy the artist.

haunt, inject noise into, and move in the spaces between the data-body and the 'real' body? Further, how does this surveillant assemblage's 'extra-perceptual body' then *invite* these kind of innovative guerilla noise-signal and figure-ground body relations, which try to create camouflage on the non-visual and biometric-information spectrums? And, how can you create work from or about this? It makes drag look like categorical nostalgia. Though I'm sure glitter would still be involved.

Essentially I'm trying to get at the radical behavioural and temporal conceptions of such drag and camouflage. And

what's really interesting is that UAS surveillance missions currently amass something like 16,000 hours or 2 years worth of video each month in AF/PAK – that collapsed sovereignty – alone. Because the military surprisingly can't get enough people to watch it all, it necessitates automated video-algorithmic data-mining and narrative-bioinformatics synthesis to deal with it, to sift through this glut of excess temporality and territory. What's really interesting is that you have these algorithms sorting video, and doing data-base synthesis and recombination, looking for certain behavioural signatures or triggers – known as 'pattern of life' or cultural

'cues' – which are comportments, movements, body-types, and digital histories, on an aggregate, diffuse population level over long periods of time and vast areas. Is 'military aged male' a new gender? Here subjectivity and the body expands beyond liberal and humanist ideas of the individual, the body and so on, which is part of why liberal or rights discourse can't deal with it. Coming back to 'drag', the work asks how can we theorise attempts to drag the UAS's use of video-algorithmic 'Target Signature' searches, and how can we consider or use this creatively as a new kind of networked 'biopolitical theatre' blurring the population and individual?



Regrette Etcetera *Miss Telepathology* character and props from The Fauxist International's 'Schizo((Aliens//Trannies//Noise))Science', performance-lecture series, Aus/USA 2012, and 'Saint Schreber's Centenary' performance/action, various locations, Australia 2011.

**R.S:** There's currently some interesting theory on algorithms in financial capital. Are there similarities?

**R.E:** Algorithms are the thing now, and we have a big focus on what we call 'Algorithmic power', which deals with the aleatory, 'eventfulness', the affective, and emergence in war, surveillance and capital. Particularly, how the US is currently intensely focused on the futurity of insurgent and terrorist emergence – the 'becoming-terrorist' or insurgent activation. Coming out of the militant closet. The simulation, modelling, prediction and preemption of this stuff – how to quantify population morale, errant affect and political activation – is a massive new area of this algorithmic, aleatory power. We joke that we're doing R&D for the military!

**R.S:** Essentially then you're looking at the more deeply ontological and cultural effects of drones?

**R.E:** Indeed. Across a number of projects we're looking at the biopolitics of counterinsurgency and dataveillance – the new recombination of data types and spheres – and how they create and traffic in data-doubles, data-bodies, flows and

affect beyond gender, the body, the individual. So naturally there's a focus on what happens to the imperial imaginary of the terrorist body and population under the drone-network, and particularly how the current US focal shift into Africa and Asia is generating new types of terrorist identities and embodiments. In this context too, we're looking at how notions of problematised, 'primitivised', orientalist kinship, sexuality, and gender are made anthropologically legible, machine-readable, and algorithmically meaningful. A large part of the work considers the drone-network's deployment of an expanded, networked and diffuse type of biometry and bioinformatics as a contemporary resurgence and expansion of that great racial-criminological-eugenic science of anthropometry in a process Keith Feldman calls 'racialisation from above'. As I said earlier, the imminent proliferation of 'civil' drones in policing and so on will also create new forms of culture, subjectivity and bodies in the 'homeland' or metropole, and may further blur or collapse the terror-domestic division in some cute ways.

**R.S:** There is currently a lot of media coverage of drones... Do you see good art out there addressing drones or network war? What got you started on working on it?

**R.E:** Well, I thought 'tranny drone art' may be the next big thing. The majority of the coverage consists of intensely naïve writing on 'privacy', ethics, outmoded ideas of nation-state sovereignty and territory, etcetera. A lot of 'ethics' and 'CIA' in the same sentence. It's embarrassing. Given the preponderance of twee, naïve artistic engagement with surveillance, war and networks, it may well echo the media coverage. The majority of existing work really doesn't take in the biopolitical, ontological, cultural scale change inherent to these technologies, and seems mainly to be in the 'how very dare they' or 'imagine drones at home' school, of which Omer Fast's video work<sup>4</sup> is a better example. Alex Riviera and Trevor Paglen are worth mentioning, as are the numerous US DIY drones groups. In terms of anything on drone drag, Adam Harvey's anti-facial-recognition makeup and anti-infrared fashion line<sup>5</sup> will give you an idea of what I mean by naïve. The interesting stuff is mostly in the realm of theory, and the military is way ahead of everyone else here. To an extent our interest in drones came out of Fauxist publications on military simulation, participatory surveillance and conducting an anthropology of Counter-Insurgency.

**R.S:** In mentioning terrorist emergence, I'm reminded of your work that engages deep time and monumentality, like the time capsules, or the speculative futures of space travel...

**R.E:** Maybe this'd be the time to plug our ongoing projects for the 2088 Australian Tricentennial! Anyway, beyond the notions of anti-infrastructure and 'slow' violence, temporality circulates in really interesting ways here. The title of our work on this is *Our Silicon vs. Their Sons*, which was a pretty prescient quip by a U.S. MIT engineer. We look at how *Our Silicon vs. Their Sons* captures not just the 'risk-transfer' facilitated by the UAS, but the layers of these allochronic typologies, like that of flesh versus data embodiment, cyborgian and autological versus genealogical kinship, 'dead' versus fleshy labour and reproduction, and gets closer to the erotics or fetish of telepresent time and affect. What's ironic



Regrette Etcetera *P...P...Policy*, 2011, performance/action with Still Fierce. Photo: Huck Luck. Courtesy the artist.

in this case is that 'terrorist-militants' are often positioned as the theoretical future. That is, they're considered to be more networked, diffuse, flexible, the rhizomatic leaders in a co-evolving ecosystem. Anyway, this is a lot of what I'm getting at in my project *Meta Etcetera*, particularly the narrative cycle entitled *Terminator Realness: Future War Now!*

**R.S:** I've always considered *Terminator 2* to be very prescient. Tell us more about *Meta Etcetera*.

**R.E:** *Meta Etcetera* is a six-week club residency I'm curating in Sydney in 2014<sup>6</sup>. It's about putting the kind of politics and ideas I've discussed here into a queer nightclub performance, installation and party space, and it's structured around a six-part narrative cycle and, of course, an extensive text-base<sup>7</sup>. Never knew you missed club performance work on algorithms, ACTUP and counter-insurgency right?

**R.S:** I guess I didn't. What's your current work looking at?

**R.E:** Over the next year I'm working and presenting on a series of academic journal articles including what we've discussed, and a new performance-lecture series called *Schizo((Aliens//Trannies//Noise))science* we're taking on tour next year to the USA, which takes in cryptozoology, techno-hysterics, alien hybrids and the tranny stuff you so love<sup>8</sup>. Plus there'll be a lot more on the playful-controversial end of things too. ■

Rachael Sweting, a Melbourne-based artist, writes for various blogs and underground magazines. She is currently working on a collaborative 3D-printing ritual project, and an anthology of writings on 'Feminist Failure', due for publication in 2014. Rachael can be contacted at: [r.sweting@gmail.com](mailto:r.sweting@gmail.com)

<sup>1</sup> Founded in 2001 by Etcetera in Sydney, The Fauxist International and its mouthpiece *News From the Fauxist International*, is now known internationally for their voluminous speculative literary output and 'crypto-political stunts'. Largely eschewing the art-world (with the exception of a major working retrospective show in 2010) the Fauxists are more likely to be found tabling events, peddling their collectively authored political parody, popping up where least expected online, or in myriad performance manifestations. See: [thefauxistinternational.wordpress.com/](http://thefauxistinternational.wordpress.com/)

<sup>2</sup> Viviane Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions and Imperialism*, Women's Press, Toronto, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> [thefauxistinternational.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/so-this-one-time.pdf](http://thefauxistinternational.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/so-this-one-time.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Omer Fast 'Five Thousand feet is the Best' (video, 2011) <http://vimeo.com/34050994>

<sup>5</sup> See: [cvdazzle.com/](http://cvdazzle.com/) and [ahprojects.com/projects/stealth-wear](http://ahprojects.com/projects/stealth-wear)

<sup>6</sup> [clubmetaetcetera.wordpress.com/](http://clubmetaetcetera.wordpress.com/)

<sup>7</sup> [metaetceteraetcetera.wordpress.com/](http://metaetceteraetcetera.wordpress.com/)

<sup>8</sup> [thefauxistinternational.wordpress.com/2011/11/19/2103/](http://thefauxistinternational.wordpress.com/2011/11/19/2103/)

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