

## ROBERTS & TILTON



*Doug Hubler's Cadillac, Variable piece #19 (after Douglas Huebler)*  
4x5 inch Kodak Tri-X, black and white negative sheet film, 1976  
Essay by Juli Carson, PhD

In 1969, Douglas Huebler – a founding artist of “dematerialist” Conceptualism along with Joseph Kosuth, Robert Barry and Lawrence Weiner – participated in a landmark exhibition of conceptual art curated by Seth Siegelaub. As part of the show, Huebler’s contribution was simply the following statement: “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more. I prefer, simply, to state the existence of things in terms of time and place.” Henceforth his art practice was to combine documentary photography with maps and text in order to explore social environments and the effect of passing time on objects, alternately titled as “duration,” “location” and “variable” pieces.

In 1976 Daniel Joseph Martinez was Huebler’s student at CalArts. Opened in 1970, CalArts was Southern California’s best known art school due largely to its teachers with Michael Asher, Huebler and John Baldassari key among them. Oh, yeah...and it was 99% white. Huebler’s *Secret, Variable Piece 4, New York City, 1970*, revealed the American art world’s unconscious at that time. Visitors to the exhibition SOFTWARE at the Jewish Museum were given forms upon which to write an authentic, anonymous secret they’d never revealed before. The slip of paper was placed into a box provided at the museum. The exchange was completed when the visitor received a photo-copy of a confession that someone else had previously submitted. This call and response was later transformed into the artist’s book entitled *Secret*. As Huebler described it: “Nearly 1,800 ‘secrets’ were submitted for exchange and have been transcribed exactly as written except that surnames have been edited: all are printed in this book and join with this statement as final form of this piece.” The results provide a remarkable psychoanalytic lens into the zeitgeist of the moment. At every turn there’s a racial confession: “I hate Negroes;” a sexual confession: “I balled my dog when I was really horny. She’s good.” Or there’s an expression of self-doubt: “I am a truly fucked up person.” As Martinez recalls, Huebler taught from this book, although this book is virtually unknown outside that pedagogical context. Certainly such content was entirely repressed in Huebler’s better-known corpus, one characterized by its abstract, positivist take on temporality. Alongside Martinez’s influential mentors in Baldassari and Asher, Huebler’s body of work was influential both for what it consciously presented – the artwork as documentation – the secondary process in psychoanalytic terms – and what it repressed – the artwork’s primary process or unconscious. Martinez’s entire corpus negotiates this primary and secondary process, at once an homage and critique of his mentor’s legacy.

In 1976, when Martinez was studying at CalArts, Huebler was dean. It was, for all intents and purposes, Huebler's school – both in its pioneering model of Conceptualism and its pernicious lack of diversity. Proposing that he photograph Huebler – and Huebler agreeing to sit for his 19 year-old student – Martinez, in essence, makes an object out of a man who had famously declared he wasn't interested in contributing any more objects to the world. This process of objectification is precisely how Roland Barthes describes the *effect* of being photographed in *Camera Lucida*: "Once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of 'posing,' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice...In front of the lens, I am at the same time: *the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art.* [my emphasis] In other words, a strange action: I do not stop imitating myself, and because of this, each time I am (or let myself be) photographed, I invariably suffer from sensation of inauthenticity, sometimes imposture..."

Martinez's *Doug Hubler's Cadillac, Variable piece #19 (after Douglas Huebler)* literally gives us this four-part "I," punctuated by a strange signifier within the fifth panel: a Cadillac that MARTINEZ freely admits associating with blackness in that it had been the ubiquitous mode of transportation in the working class Crenshaw District [?] where Martinez grew up. In the first four panels, Huebler's pose is curiously awkward for a man who not only wanted to take portraits of everyone in the world – *Variable Piece #70: 1971 (In Process) Global 1975* – but also of himself in exchange with his collectors – *Variable Piece No. 44 1971*. So to what could this squirminess – this impostured presentation of the self – more specifically be attributed? Moreover, what were the aesthetic, theoretical and political intentions of Martinez (no matter how unconscious at this tender age) of presenting Huebler this way, or should we say of *capturing* him this way?

Back to Barthes. In "Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers," Barthes describes the double action of authority and castration that the student always instigates within the teacher: "Imagine that I am a teacher: I speak, endlessly, in front of and for someone who remains silent. I am the person who says *I*. I am the person who, under cover of *setting out* a body of knowledge, *puts out* a discourse, *never knowing how that discourse is being received* and thus forever forbidden the reassurance of a definitive image – even if offensive – which would *constitute me*. In the *exposé*, more aptly named than we tend to think, it is not knowledge which is exposed, it is the subject. The mirror is empty, reflecting back to me no more than the falling away of my language as it gradually unrolls..." Consequently: "...in accordance with psychoanalytic description...when the teacher speaks to his audience, the Other is always there, *puncturing* his discourse. Were the discourse held tightly fastened by an intelligence, armed with scientific 'rigour' or political radicality, it would nevertheless be *punctured*."

Back to *Hubler's Cadillac*. In the context of CalArt's pedagogical mise-en-scene, the five panels constitute a historical rebus of sort, one that can be read like a dreamscape. Never exhibited before and never to be reproduced more than once, *Hubler's Cadillac* also functions as a kind primal scene for Martinez's subsequent corpus. For just as *Secret, Variable Piece 4* constituted the art world's unconscious in 1976, the latent content of Martinez's portrait returns what is repressed in the unconscious of the sitter-teacher: the fact of whiteness. A fact – both imaginary and symbolic, both tangible and linguistic – that Martinez would go on to mobilize with infamous Whitney Biennial Museum Tags of 1993 (also a five part construction): *I can't / imagine / ever wanting / to be / white*. Employing the modality of deferred action, what if we were to fold the second work *back* onto the first work? Which is to say, what if we were to *puncture* each of the five images of *Hubler's Cadillac* – photographic signifiers – with the words of each of the five Museum Tags – linguistic signified?

We would then have a Saussurean / Lacanian algorithm of the work as such:

Hubler's Cadillac (conscious signifier)

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Museum Tags (unconscious signified)

Let's restage this primal scene. A young student in 1976 – a minority amongst his peers and mentors – asks his teacher to sit for him. The teacher submits. He knows his student is doing photographic portraiture and is flattered by the proposition. The photographer first asks the subject to hold a Kodak grey scale card – a standard quality control device of stepped, neutral values to help the photographer compare the tone values of reflection originals with the tone values of the reproduced image – and snaps the picture. Thus far, this is the denotative content of scene. We can imagine the student saying: "Here hold this. Kodak is God. I know how to make a good photograph. You've taught me well." But, as Barthes would say, there is also the connotative, latent meaning of this simple gesture, one that punctures the banality of the image by the mere fact that Martinez included this functional "test" or "tool" image in the actual portrait series itself. Suddenly the missing "e" in Huebler's name within the last panel – the one with the black Cadillac from the hood – comes to encode the first panel. Semantically to remove the "e" from Huebler is to whiten him. No longer is the "predicate" within his name "hue" (color). Such that, when juxtaposed to the inverted (phallic) Cadillac, the words "Hubler's Cadillac" semiotically render Huebler's namesake – that is to say his *legacy* – transparent. Subsequently, the connotative meaning of having Huebler pose with the Kodak gray card punctures this seemingly innocent scene. We can now imagine a more critical request being made by the student, one that interpellates the teacher into an entirely different (detumescent) subject position: "Here hold this color scale card because we need to see how white you are as an object *and* a subject in relation to the (cultural) shades of gray and black repressed in your work."

And so there we have it. Teacher and student – locked together in this double bind, this tautology of self and other facilitated by the photographic sitting – as the primal oedipal scene for those famous words Martinez would craft in 1993: *I can't / imagine / ever wanting / to be / white*. Always a mindful student of Huebler, Martinez indeed has come to "state the existence of things in terms of time and place" in his body of work using the systematic procedures of "duration," "variation" and "location." It's just that, unlike Huebler, these *things* that are stated by Martinez are what he observes to be culturally repressed in the space of predominately white art conservative art production. That said, lest we delimit the *consequence* of Martinez's actions to the isolation of the art world, we should heed another paternal influence in his art education – Joseph Beuys – whose model of "social sculptures" denied the delineation between art and the world. Ah, but that is a different essay. To be continued...

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