

ART PAPERS

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Orphan Theory: Anna Craycroft In Conversation with Erin Shirreff

We have little influence on who we are—and there is little we can know about ourselves. This much has been persuasively demonstrated by research in social and behavioral psychology. Still, American ideology remains steeped in the myth of self-determination. Anna Craycroft exploits the power of this romantic trope in her debut exhibition, *The Agency of the Orphan* [Tracy Williams, Ltd., March 7 – April 25, 2008], focusing on the long tradition of orphan protagonists in books and movies, from Tom Jones to Harry Potter. These characters are icons of independence: resilient, resourceful, and rife with potential. For Craycroft, they are also ciphers, screens onto which we project our enduring fantasies of autonomy and control. The *Agency of the Orphan* presents a quasi-scientific analysis of the Orphan—the idealized, self-possessed archetype—and floats a deadpan theory called “The Agency of the Orphan,” which outlines a route to self-definition through identification with these fictional, parentless characters.



In a dense and hilariously illustrated artist’s book, Craycroft’s theory is knowingly if sincerely put forth in proper-sounding psychoanalytic terms. The works on view in the gallery are more somber. An exhaustive archive of film headshots and illustrations fills the main space with orphans from fictions past and present. Upstairs, oversized graphite portraits loom: Webster, Dorothy, Anne and company are coolly classified into Orphan subgenres—the Beguiling Orphan, the Piteous Orphan, and the Dissident Orphan. They never looked so blank and menacing. In an adjacent room, water pours from the mouths, eyes and ears of two ceramic portrait busts of children, faces downcast, into pools of stones.

Erin Shirreff: I have to ask: Are you an orphan?

Anna Craycroft: I’m not an orphan but I do like to think of myself as Orphan, or at least I am striving to be one. This question comes up a lot because I include a picture of myself in the headshots. My family pictures also appear in the book. I did this to implicate myself and my subjectivity in the narrative of the theory. I also see the Orphan as metaphor for the role and role-play of the artist. I am an artist, so Orphanhood is part of my identity.



ES: How is Orphanhood a metaphor for being an artist?

AC: Orphanhood is the discovery and declaration of autonomy as an adult through a reunion with one’s child self. I can this “regressive individuation”: the realization of a true individual and independent self through a concomitance of adulthood and childhood. To be Orphan—a fictional state that is distinct from the actual circumstance of being orphaned, distinguished by the capitalization of the word—is to simultaneously embody the freedoms of childhood and the sophistications of adulthood.

Artists have been infantilized and admired for centuries. They are expected to observe the world and articulate their impressions with the wonderment of a young mind and the sagacity of a visionary. Need I mention the all-too-familiar social construct of the artist as juvenile, adolescent—*l’enfant terrible*? These stereotypes are, of course, a bastardization of the enlightened state of Orphanhood.

ES: Somehow the apartness of the individual in this romantic image of the artist meshes with the cultural archetype of the orphan; both seem at a remove, which supposedly gives them this freedom to act, to live more authentically. Both, too, carry a sense of melancholy.

AC: Yes, the melancholy of longing, of striving in vain to possess a phantom, whether it’s a lost parent of an artwork yet to be conceived. There is the loneliness of living on the margins, and the disquiet associated with absolute solitude.

In the case of the Orphan, there is this same melancholy of longing and absence... the lack that is inherent in desire. But the Orphan is not a tragic character. The Orphan is a hero. As an archetype, the Orphan embodies our aspiration to stand apart and to triumph as a solitary, independent self. It is an inherently flawed mythology but it drives our culture.

ES: Were your earlier works about identity or self-image? What led you to develop this highly specific theory?

AC: I’m always ruminating on identity construction at some level in my work, but the concept of “The Agency of the Orphan” came out of my desire to address it more directly. It came out of conversations with friends about various orphan characters we loved as children. We all seemed to have an intense nostalgic attachment to these characters, and I wanted to understand why, say, the bravery of Little



Orphan Annie of the pathos of *Oliver Twist* still affected us as adults. These kids embodied a desire that was still unnervingly resonant. I started wondering about the prevalence of the orphan archetype, and this brought me back to my longstanding interest in cultural constructions of childhood, theories of



childhood development and sexuality, and the representation of children in the arts and mass media.

I started to think more specifically about these ideas in relationship to objects and fabrication when I was making a gift for a friend. I was replicating a lost drawing from her childhood- a portrait of the child actor Jack Wild, who played the Artful Dodger in the 1968 film *Oliver!*

I myself was so obsessed with this character when I was ten years old that I used to dress like

him and mimic his thick cockney accent.

As I was making the drawing, I started to think about the act of drawing portraits of fictional characters, especially as a child, as a way to try and understand or capture the meaning they hold for you.

ES: As if the act of copying a face produced some kind of decoding of closeness.

AC: The result is a kind of decoding, but the process isn't calculating or intellectual. In a way, the paper becomes a kind of mirror because the maker invariably integrates her own likeness into the portrait she's creating. As a child, I frequently took part in this "conversation." For this project, I wanted to recreate it as a means to understand and yes, decode the reciprocal influences of artist and drawing, or artist and subject. Here, I focused on a particular dialogue—between myself and the fictionalized Orphan.

ES: You talk about the origins of the project in terms that are personal and intimate. Yet, its presentation sets a sort of chilly tone – the archive of images hung in a grid, the gigantic renderings of Orphan types, the highly specific jargon in the book, even the theory itself. "The Agency of the Orphan" sounds like it could be some sort of shadowy government bureau from the 1950s.

AC: When I was conceiving of the project as an exhibition, I envisioned it installed in a private space retrofitted for public use. Tracy Williams, Ltd., which is a nineteenth-century townhouse-cum-white-cube, fit this idea. I hoped that a familiar but ultimately homogenous space would create a kind of tabula rasa, allowing the subject to identify with the subject of the exhibition. This was also my goal as I crafted the psychoanalytic rhetoric in the book.

ES: It has a very persuasive, seamless tone. You must have drawn from many historical texts.

AC: As I was developing the Agency of the Orphan theory, I did a lot of research – some in depth and some superficial—in psychology, cultural history, literature and pop culture and so on. The more I

researched, the more my enterprise seemed to be substantiated. I was aware that this is sometimes evidence of the “Clever Hans” effect—that is, the involuntary pre-determination of the results of one’s research. So I played with these possible distortions as I adopted or cited sources.

In the book, there are a number of explicit references to psychology—Freud’s Oedipus, Jung’s archetypes, Winnicott’s emotional development, Lacan’s *objet petit a*, to name a few—but overall it is important to me that the reader approach the text, even the theory, like a novel. The reader’s identification with the content itself is crucial. It should be judged as truthful or meaningful in itself, rather than for the accuracy of its sources. The project is as much a hypothesized psychological malady as it is a cultural study, or oblique confessional.

ES: For me, the book’s visuals and deadpan captions create this interpretive space. You parody the pretensions of academic writing and invest stock pictures of training bras with believable gravitas. The pictures are so diverse and compelling they leave the impression that the world is proving your theory.

AC: It’s perfect when people relate to the project and recognize the theory in operation out in the world. Aside from the embellishments or distortions of my handiwork, I’m not sure that I can even take ownership of the ideas—they’re all out there already. All I did was point a spotlight.

Erin Shirreff is an artist living in Brooklyn, New York. Her work is currently on view in Some Thing Else, an exhibition curated by Simone Subal at Peter Blum Gallery in New York.