

# HYPERALLERGIC

INTERVIEWS • WEEKEND

## Crime, Culture and Black Leather Shoes: A Talk with Dennis Adams

Thomas Micchelli September 29, 2012



Dennis Adams, "Malraux's Shoes" (2012). Video still. Single-channel video, 42 minutes. Written and performed by Dennis Adams. Directed by Dennis Adams and Paul Colin. (All images courtesy Kent Fine Art LLC)

"FUCK Sherrie Levine!" thunders Andre Malraux, quaking with rage, "I was fucking stealing *statues* in *Cambodia!*"

Not, however, the real Andre Malraux — the writer, adventurer, and assembler of imaginary museums who became France's first Minister of Cultural Affairs under Charles de Gaulle (and who, having shed his mortal coil in 1976, would never have heard of Sherrie

Levine) — but Andre Malraux as incarnated by the artist Dennis Adams in his 42-minute video tour de force, [\*Malraux's Shoes\*](#).

Shot in black-and-white and performed on a vast hardwood floor covered with pages from Malraux's book, *The Imaginary Museum of World Sculpture*, Adams' alternately manic and contemplative monologue, gliding on waves of poetic indirection and deliberate anachronisms, fixes Malraux's righteous fury on the exquisite paradox of Western culture — like a schoolboy with a magnifying glass — until it burns.

Adams plowed mountains of research into his writing of the script, and yet its logorrheic torrents contain virtually none of Malraux's own words, one exception being this enigmatic, ego-maniacal stab at self-effacement:

I'm the only one that doesn't know what culture is.

The film slices through much of the 20th century — and a nice chunk of the 21st — evoking a once-upon-a-time when art, philosophy and movies were all that mattered. But it also peels back high culture's symbiosis with colonialism and exploitation, implying that the former could not exist without the latter, even yanking earthward Europe's better angels:

If Genet had not slept with Algerian boys, would he have supported the Algerian insurgency?

As a speaker of uncomfortable truths, however, Malraux was an imperfect messenger. A 2001 article by Katherine Knorr in *The New York Times* titled “Andre Malraux, the Great Pretender,” discusses the extent to which the just-released biography, *Andre Malraux*, by Olivier Todd “chronicles not only the minor lies, the name-dropping, the self-aggrandizement, but also the more troubling holes in Malraux's story, notably his dubious Resistance activities, which won him apparently undeserved glory and medals.”



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I asked Adams whether Malraux's controversial reputation played into his choice to impersonate him in the video; specifically, if Malraux were indeed a great pretender, does pretending to be him constitute a meta-characterization of a magnificent but corrupt and corrupting culture? Would such a characterization thereby call his every utterance into question?

**Dennis Adams:** Todd's biography has petty and moralistic undertones. Jean-Francois Lyotard's two books on Malraux are much more generous with their subject and redeem the larger spirit of his project. But for sure, Malraux was a great pretender with his autobiography and perhaps beyond. He is riddled with contradictions that we may expect from our artists but not our cultural ambassadors.

This “pretending” made Malruax an ideal vehicle for many of my own unanswered questions about the larger stakes of culture as they brush up against my own angst and love of art making. I make no claims for Malraux. For me, he is a persona that I stepped into to exercise my own voice against the backdrop of the beautiful field of photographs we used to depict the floor of his study.

There are only two lines in the entire film that are taken directly from Malraux. The rest are mine. That said, there were moments when I attempted to take the first steps in Malraux’s shoes, to get into his swagger a bit. Yet for the most part, I was looking for some relief from the cultural world that bred him and by extension the post-Malraux world that I was bred into.

At best, he is a kind of surrogate father with all the love and hate that goes with that. His known Tourette’s syndrome which inflected his public pronouncements gave me license to test the fault line between rage and poetic reflection. It also set up the structure of the cuts and I hope in some ways mirrored the reality that feeds my own passion.



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**TM:** *The shock cuts are especially unsettling in the way the trailing-off of the previous voiceover is interrupted by the sync sound of Malraux’s rants. They vividly embody a Tourette’s-like mental short circuit, which are repeatedly triggered by slights to Malraux’s ego or by the collision between the grandeur of world culture and its trivialization in the hands of minor artists. In both instances they indicate shifts of scale, with Malraux defending what he views as the*

*monumental against the inadequate. Do these dichotomies play into your own worldview?*

**DA:** Absolutely, the sudden cut from the poetics of interior monologue to on-camera rage may represent Malraux’s Tourette’s, but it is paced to my own mental processes.

**TM:** *Throughout the piece we encounter a passion for the tactility of the object and a mounting sense of despair over its dematerialization and the rise of “biennial culture”:*

*What did R. Mutt know? He never cut to the bone, never chiseled through the delicate ankles of an ancient Cambodian statue, never savored the beauty of little broken feet on a plinth swarming with colored mosses.*

*However, the image of “little broken feet on a plinth” speaks as much to the erotic attachment to the thing of beauty as to colonialism’s crimes against it. How would you parse that out? Is crime an inevitable corollary to aesthetic eroticism? In our devotion to world culture, are we all guilty of exploitation, one way or another, actively or passively? As Malraux says:*

*We’ll never get to the bottom of voyeurism There are pyromaniacs that start fires and those that wait for others to start fires.*

**DA:** We know only too well the crimes of colonialism with all its dark tentacles into the history of culture. I wanted to get beyond all the post-colonial litanies that have become the entrance ticket to the biennale circuit. The passion toward the tactility of the object you ask about is my own. I wanted to act out that tactility inside the framework of Malraux’s private world where it was already being displaced by the reduction of the physical and cultural differences between objects depicted in his collection of black-and-white photographs.

**TM:** *Among the many provocations in the piece, I’ve spent some time unpacking the following:*

*A chameleon without a leaf is a Gila monster from Texas. What do the Americans know! Culture is born out of defeat! Warhol is only the pimples on Joe Dallesandro’s ass and a couple of half-baked electric chairs*

*On the dermal level, these lines can be viewed as European haute disdain for American provincialism and naïveté. On another, they make a claim both for and against Warhol: that his most significant contribution was as a producer of films like Paul Morrissey’s Trash (1970), which opens with the image you describe.*

*The pimples on Joe Dallesandro’s ass are emblematic of a raw and transgressive mindset that is a world away from Warhol’s hands-free celebrity icons or even his more interesting, though still clinically detached, silkscreens of electric chairs.*

**DA:** My editor, Paul Colin, and I had a lot fun inserting that internal monologue over an image of a disheveled Malraux flashing his ass as he literally rolls over the photographs on the floor. It's a sweet moment, a full bloom of text and image.

The centerpiece of this scrap of text is "culture is born out of defeat!" I bracketed it with a "Gila Monster from Texas" and a reference to "Warhol." And you're right, I wanted to pin it on American postwar bravado in a very snotty French sense. But as you well know, there is as much defeat in Warhol's America as there is glamour and celebration. I chose Warhol as a bad example to destabilize my own declaration.



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**TM:** *The sense of transgression is compounded by Malraux's evocations of Elvis and Marilyn, two of Warhol's most overexposed subjects:*

*Kick the ant pile — no blood no foul, Elvis Presley — Harem Scarum, the long leash back to Lynndie England at Abu Ghraib.*

*Distant train passing through its own whistle, the little seashell stand on the*

*way to dreamland. Marilyn's personal script for Some Like It Hot: "Sugar" circled in red crayon on 54 pages.*

*Are these passages — the first pinning a foolish Elvis Presley movie set in the Middle East to the horrors of Abu Ghraib, the second pondering the human touch of Marilyn Monroe's departed ghost — posed as a rejection of the idol worship implied by Warhol's portraits?*

*And what of Malraux's own idol worship, which led him to steal bas-reliefs from a Cambodian temple? Was that act Warhol-like in its willful amnesia of context?*

**DA:** I have no axe to grind with Warhol. I love the range in his work too much. I hadn't thought of it, but perhaps you're right, the lines on Elvis and Marilyn do relieve them of their iconic duties. But I was simply trying to draw them into larger questions.

For certain, Malraux's theft of bas-reliefs from a Cambodian temple at age 21 is the primal scene that grounds the film. For me this action is of another order than the appropriation strategies of Duchamp and Warhol. Of course, it is well known that Malraux planned the theft so he could resell the artifacts to support his bohemian lifestyle back in Paris.

But I also wanted to spin it as an act of total love, which in many ways I believe it was: The idea that the rights of possession go to the one who loves it the most. I wanted to get my hands around this debased romantic ideal, to test it against my own doubts about the very generation of artists and ideas I was a part of.

**TM:** *I think that's what I responded to the most: the "debased romantic ideal" that "the rights of possession go to the one who loves it the most." It is a prescription for abuse and exploitation, but it also pitches the flame of desire into an amoral or supra-moral sphere, in which anything art touches, the artist or the lover of art, transcends the rules most of us live by.*

*Such a notion is quaint and outdated but also, in its own cockeyed way, precious. Your characterization of Malraux is that of a man for whom absolutely nothing matters more than culture, and his relentless absorption of it exponentially empowered him — into megalomania, to be sure, but also into a state of wild-eyed prophecy fluctuating between awe and despair.*

*Malraux's awe in the face of the phenomena of world culture and its modernist offshoots, coupled with his despair over philistinism, triviality and careerism, is the humanist idea writ large. How much of this struggle plays into your doubts about your generation of artists?*

**DA:** I'm overreaching in Malraux's shoes with every step and phrase. In some ways my crude impersonation was an attempt to track my parents' generation for clues to the limitations of my own. And I must admit that I loved to step into Malraux's debased masculinity. It was frightening how easy it was to be part of. But ultimately I could give a damn about sorting out the ethics between generations. What I really wanted was to be situated in the adolescence of the present with all the false starts visible.

**TM:** *Malraux doesn't seem to despair over popular culture, however. The above-cited passages about Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe, though trenchant, are mentioned only in passing. So are references to Elizabeth Taylor, Klaus Kinski, Brigitte Bardot, Faye*

*Dunaway and Paul Newman, whose character in Cool Hand Luke, as Malraux cryptically remarks (“Cool Hand Luke, 50 eggs”), makes a bet that he can eat fifty eggs in an hour.*

*Is there a demotic or democratic ideal in cinema that you see as missing from “biennale culture”?*

**DA:** Not really, I just find revelation in certain fragments from popular culture. In *Fitzcarraldo*, when Klaus Kinski screams from a bell tower, “This Church remains closed until this town gets its opera house,” I was upended. That is pure blackmail brought to the level of a cultural challenge. It doesn’t get better than that.

As for *Cool Hand Luke*’s fifty eggs, I want to eat every one of them. I want more from my projects intellectually and ethically than I can handle. Each line and each image in the video is a call for more. I’m after a kind of suffocation of my mental processes. I want to test the risk between total enlightenment and total exhaustion. My greatest fear is that in such a space there is no room for an audience.



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**TM:** *Malraux’s Shoes is based, quite literally, on the photographs from The Imaginary Museum of World Sculpture, upon which Malraux walks, sprawls and dances throughout the film. It seems as if he is not simply walking across the floor, but also a map of world history.*

*I was particularly struck by the way these two lines aligned themselves with the imagery on the floor:*

*I can no longer tell a photograph of an ancient Greek bas-relief from a satellite image of Zuccotti park, pitted stone from digital bits. Time and place are up for grabs.*

*Malraux is often shot from above, awarding him dominance over these images of ancient sculpture, yet the single set upon which they are arranged simultaneously imprisons him. Does this indicate that Malraux cannot transcend his historical moment despite his insatiable quest for knowledge? And if not, how are time and place up for grabs?*

**DA:** The set for the video is based on the famous photograph of Malraux surveying the plates from his *Imaginary Museum of World Sculpture* as they are laid out on the floor of his study. This was the private site he returned to again and again in his attempt to discover the transcendent value of those objects beyond their cultural and historical roots.

This solitary quest, which was absolutely historically grounded, was in stark contrast to his inflated public persona. I wanted to walk with Malraux behind the scenes to imagine the full potential of that conflict as an analogue for my own speculations and doubts.

The video was shot from above to animate Malraux against the plane of the floor as it represents a flattened modernist space. And yes you're right, this also suggests the photographs as a global map. They are both Malraux's prison and a vast index for his escape fantasies.

Malraux's quest for total knowledge is the legacy of his modernist project. The impossibility of that quest and the remnants of that desire are my project. Between Malraux and me, there was a lot to be sorted out and this called for a spreadsheet of rage, poetics, and comic relief.

[Dennis Adams: Malraux's Shoes & Tagging the Archive continues at Kent Fine Art \(210 Eleventh Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan\) through October 20.](#)

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