



WEDDED BLISS

The Marriage of Art and Ceremony

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S T R A I G H T E N I N G U P :

THE MARRIAGE OF CONFORMITY AND RESISTANCE IN WEDDING ART

Chrys Ingraham

One is not born a bride. Culture installs meaning in our lives from the very first moment we enter the social world. Everything from how we sit, stand, and feel to how we learn to interact according to our sex, class, or ethnic background, to how we practice heterosexuality is the product of the dominant culture and its social order. Frequently, the circulation of meanings we create is so significant, pervasive, and taken for granted that cultural constructions appear to occur naturally. In other words, we no longer see them as part of a social landscape that we help to create. There are many cultural sites through which this process is visible but few as fertile as the wedding and various representations of weddings for understanding how our social world is organized, given meaning, and implemented. As the entry point for the institution of marriage, the wedding—particularly the white wedding—constitutes an exceptionally rich spectacle for visual and performance artists. Considered historically, these works have engaged with weddings and wedding artifacts, providing an ongoing and in-depth view of the cultural values and social priorities traditionally associated with the experience of heterosexuality. While these works express a host of themes, among the most compelling are those that reveal the disquieting marriage of conformity and resistance.

In Western societies today, the *white* wedding prevails as the dominant form for this popular ritual, and is rapidly becoming the standard for weddings internationally. Although considered traditional, this type of wedding is anything but. The stereotypical, lavish white wedding that has become a highly prescribed spectacle featuring a bride in a formal white wedding gown, a formally dressed groom, some combination of attendants and witnesses, a religious ceremony, and an elaborate—and expensive—wedding reception is largely the product of a host of very successful marketing campaigns. The white wedding has become so overdetermined in the popular imagination that to consider an alternative seems unthinkable.

As we enter the twenty-first century, with the ever-present realities of globalization influencing social and cultural practices around the world, the context for and images of weddings are changing dramatically. The white wedding is rapidly becoming an accepted and sought-after model for many non-Western societies. Largely as a result of the growth and reach of the Internet, satellite communications, and mass media, the globalization of the white wedding mirrors the excesses of a globalized commodity culture that simultaneously contains and exploits difference and appears to leave little room for creativity. The mass-produced, mass-consumed, and extraordinarily expensive white wedding is both iconic and a cookie-cutter model for the average wedding. Approaching “McBride” status, the current white wedding functions as mass production and sacred ritual, defying reinterpretation, resistance, and creativity. As a cultural sacred the white wedding can be experienced by some as oppressive, making it a significant seedbed for artists whose passion and imagination is aroused by resistance to conformity.

Referred to by Wall Street analysts as “recession-proof,” the wedding industry has reached such proportions that it can more accurately be described as a wedding-industrial complex. This structure reflects the close association among weddings, the transnational wedding industry, labor, global economics, marriage, the state, finance, religion, media, the Internet, and popular culture. Current Western industry estimates of the total annual revenues of the primary (white) wedding market are upwards of \$125 billion. Considered in relation to earnings, the cost of the average wedding in the United States represents 62.3 percent of the median earnings for a white family and 92 percent for black and Hispanic families. In Japan, with markets rivaling or exceeding American consumption patterns, couples are spending twice as much as Americans to create a two-ceremony wedding: a Western white wedding complete with Anglo clergy officiating followed by a traditional Japanese wedding. In Kenya, India, Mexico, and other parts of the world, brides are opting for a Western white wedding gown to supplement or actually replace the attire called for by their traditional ceremonies.¹

The works chosen for this essay follow in the long-standing tradition of activist art by interrupting the taken-for-granted and contradictory landscape of weddings. Throughout history, people have used art and creativity to effect change and to find ways to address struggles. Whether in the context of mass efforts against repressive states or in the interest of effecting lesser forms of social change, art tells stories by intervening in the expected and shapes the way we think about issues. Activist wedding art challenges the production of white weddings as spectacles of accumulation and conformity and creates openings that allow us to imagine alternatives. Ultimately, these artists invite us to use the lens of wedding art to examine our social, economic, and cultural priorities and challenge our position as disinterested observer. They offer a global, historical, ideological, and sometimes humorous context and address the ways in which weddings have served as a symbolic target and site for social commentary in the United States and around the world.²

The title of this book—*Wedded Bliss*—itself offers commentary on the marriage of art and ceremony. When linked to weddings, bliss—a state of extreme happiness—can conjure up a fantasy of perfection and romance for many while provoking a cynical snicker from others. But a closer look at wedding art reveals a more complex relationship between weddings and marriage. Instead of finding a homogeneous representation of the wedding ritual, we discover a complex and contradictory landscape that reveals an important and consequential relationship: the marriage of conformity—the prescribed, the obligatory, the essential, the cultural sacred—and resistance.

Two works that make visible the homogeneity of weddings are Julia Jacquette’s *White on White* paintings (2001–2003; plates 119 and 120) and Sandy Skoglund’s *The Wedding* (1994; plate 2).

In each instance, the artist’s image conveys a homogeneous landscape as well as meaning system that is exceptionally complex. Within the prescription for the white wedding lies the possibility for change that contradiction enables. Jacquette uses repetition in a masterful way to signal a compliant practice, yet a close examination of her repetitive images reveals a host of intricacies in each plate. The challenge she presents is to the common-sense assumption that the white wedding conforms to tradition while a closer look reveals that the wedding objects are highly variant. The real contradiction she reveals is the notion that our wedding choices are somehow unique. At the same time the uniqueness is in the details not in the broad strokes. One walks away from her paintings ambivalent—feeling somewhat uncomfortable that the sameness was revealed and intrigued and captivated by the complexity of difference.

Skoglund’s red-on-red image is both defiant and obedient. The red breaks all the rules for color and purity, conveying a powerfully passionate image that is also complicated in its photograph of a couple challenged by the landscape they must negotiate. The conformist wedding participates in the illusion that the betrothed are new to each other and without lust or passion. Skoglund boldly interrupts this notion with the truth that the couple will *know* each other out loud—defying the codes that require their participation in a heterosexual order that requires some degree of reserve and chastity. The perspective in the photograph with the groom seeming larger than the bride and the bride appearing smaller, almost cowering and cornered, provides yet another commentary—that of predatory male to trapped female in a landscape that is both confining and laden with obstacles. This photograph projects a sense of outrage and discomfort; a feeling that defies the notion of well-being upon which depends the dominant meaning system about weddings.³

In Florine Stettheimer’s canvas *Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue* (1931; figure 23), we find a surprisingly current commentary on the marriage of romance and materialism. Given the unprecedented level of consumerism in contemporary culture, this earlier critique reflects and anticipates what is to come as the wedding industry evolves.

At first glance, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the white wedding taking place in the center of the

painting. The still-veiled bride in her white wedding gown and the groom in his requisite tuxedo appear to be emerging from the canopy following their wedding. Contrary to the usual image of the unveiled bride and the newly wedded couple being celebrated by friends and family, this blessed couple is surrounded with images of chaos and consumerism. Stettheimer's veiled bride remains cloaked in illusion and fantasy, unaware of the culture she has enabled. With the name *Tiffany's* written across the sky, a Rolls Royce with a dollar sign on its grille, a Tarré couture shop, a billboard in production, photographers, vendors, and a parade complete with U.S. and City of New York flags, Stettheimer offers a somewhat heavy-handed depiction of the real celebrants of this wedding—the producers of capital and the state. To complete this image, Stettheimer includes a bishop offering a blessing next to someone in peasant clothing, who looks strikingly like Diego Rivera, the leftist artist, also offering a blessing. This comparison uses the Rivera figure to signify a materialist commentary that implicates the church in the production of capitalist exploitation. The entire landscape appears to offer a critique of weddings as over-produced spectacles of accumulation wrapped up in the interests of class struggle.

Stettheimer's *Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue* is charged with social commentary but it also pokes fun at the family, friends, dog, and spectators, all of whom are seemingly engaged with this event. Images of family appear both iconic and cartoonlike portraying the parents as statuesque and elite and the wedding party as stiff and formal. Meanwhile images of children and other family members are depicted as comical and distracted.⁴

Arthur Tress's *Untitled (Bride and Groom)* [*Stephan Brecht, Bride and Groom*] (1970; plate 122) also provides a dramatic critique. In this photograph from his *Theater of the Mind* collection, Tress offers a social commentary on gender, marriage, and weddings using an actor and staged photography to show how enigmatic and contradictory our relationship to the social world is. Tress creates a setting that suggests the aftermath of destruction into which he places among the debris an individual who is both male and female, bride and groom. This incongruous image is contradicted by the oath-taking raised hand and stand-at-attention posture, implying some form of social compliance in the midst of obvious cultural and individual dissonance. The overall image is one of both confusion and coherence. The actor is at once different and the same, externally and internally one. Once again, we are greeted with the marriage of conformity and resistance.

Fractured Wedding Ring: Divorce Attorney's Quilt (2005; plate 123) by Teddy Pruett is an extraordinary example of weddings reinterpreted as art. Using the traditional "wedding ring" quilt as her model Pruett creates a commentary on the contemporary state of matrimony in American culture.

In the center of this his-and-hers quilt she stitched images of white, heterosexual couples imbued with romance and love along with the classic intertwined wedding ring which reads "With this ring I thee wed . . . until I change my mind." On the "her" side of the quilt Pruett provides a collage for the crying wife,

who is now disillusioned with her marriage and her husband's failure to fulfill promises to love, honor, and cherish her. And on the "his" side the artist provides a medium for the husband to complain about how he can't make enough money to satisfy his wife, has to tolerate her mother, and has to endure her efforts to ruin his fun—cards, fishing, infidelity, and television. Among the most prominent images in this quilt is the large red heart that frames the marital conflict. The tension Pruett creates by overlaying this conflict with a signifier of love and romance sets up a dramatic commentary on the unmet expectations of the wedding promise. According to this template, expectations that make women economically dependent on and subservient to a man's need for power and play are central to this betrayal. All sewn up in this presentation of the traditional wedding-ring quilt is the gender system that undermines the promise of wedded bliss.

In her *Dada Poem Wedding Dress* (1994; plate 124), Lesley Dill presents another resistant wedding image in the form of a Victorian-style, corseted, paper wedding gown complete with tight bodice, train, and loose threads hanging from the hem and sleeves. Dill's enigmatic paper dress, defiant against the image of the perfect bride, presents instead a bride who is confined, soiled, and unraveling at the seams. Made for a Dada Ball AIDS benefit in New York, this virginal wedding dress was intended to serve as a reminder of the significant number of women who contracted HIV and with it lost their innocence. The copy of a biological heart contrasting against the text of Emily Dickinson's poem "The Soul has Bandaged Moments" with the phrase "moments of escape" imprinted across the waist of this tight-fitting gown delivers a cutting commentary on women's place in relation to marriage and domestic violence.

The dress was used for performance art during this benefit. As the words to Dickinson's poem were read, portions of the dress were torn apart word by word, signifying the tearing of the fabric of heterosexual illusion. At the end of this performance, the bride's naked body was painted with the same words of the poem. "With silent dignity she pulled a red ribbon from her mouth, mutely testifying to the survival and strength of the spirit."⁵

Similar to Tress's existential notion of duality, Dill inscribes Dickinson's inner contradictions into the very material of the bridal experience. This poem describes a woman who is at once bandaged and undone, "too appalled to stir," she "feels some ghastly Fright come up." She touches freedom and then "with shackles on the plumed feet" is recaptured by time and tradition, imprisoned by culture and history. Dill's dress offers an image of the antibrude, devoid of any hint of perfection and confronted with structures that will ultimately break her spirit and destroy her.

The catharsis for Dill's bridal oppression could be E.V. Day's *Bride Fight* (2005; plate 125), in which veils, gloves, and gowns explode and transform any remnant of tradition and perfection. Each dress portrays a view of a conventional bride in a dramatic stop-action explosion. This textile-and-wire installation is constructed to represent a powerful explosion that blows the dresses up and off making

room for the emergence of something unimagined. Day's "fight" seems light at first glance, but reveals a powerful discharge of emotions and confinement that Dickinson would have celebrated.⁶

The other side of the confinement that Dill addresses is the experience of the family. Cecily Brown's canvas *Father of the Bride* (1999; plate 126), takes its title from the 1950s classic film of the same title, which was remade in 1991. The central theme in both films is the loss of the father's "little girl," which is played out against a backdrop of wedding-preparation chaos. The first impression Brown's work evokes is the image one might achieve by squinting at the chaos created by the mixing of white bodies and fabrics during the preparation for a white wedding. This work appears to be less about social commentary than about the affective experience of the bride's father.

Another depiction of familial experience with weddings is found in Frida Kahlo's painting from 1936, *My Grandparents, My Parents, and I (Family Tree)* (figure 24). Using the format of the family tree, Kahlo offers a disturbing narrative on her birth, family, and history. She portrays herself as a very young child standing naked in the garden of her family home. Holding a red ribbon signifying an umbilical cord with one end leading to her maternal grandparents and the other to her paternal grandparents, Kahlo paints herself as a fetus in her mother's womb at the time of her parents' wedding. Defying cultural conventions of her time, Kahlo reveals the moment of conception and unveils the truth about her birth and her parents' premarital sexuality. To accomplish this, she portrays her parents and grandparents as compliant subjects following the social order of their time, with her mother standing in the obligatory position and posture of the good wife. While Kahlo was frequently fascinated with her origins, this painting goes beyond origins to the place of moral hypocrisy in the social world.

As we consider the relationship of conformity and resistance in the marriage of art and ceremony, it is also important to observe the way in which works of art allow us to imagine alternatives. *New Jerusalem* by Sister Gertrude Morgan (1960; plate 127), represents a primitive but significant effort to depict her religious evangelism. Drawn from the New Testament book of Revelation, Sister Gertrude's vision of a New Jerusalem is of a land where Jesus is of African descent, the skies are filled with multicultural angels, and Sister Gertrude herself is the bride of Christ.⁷

Similarly, Gay Block and Malka Drucker's piece, *A Recontextualized Ketubbah* (1994; figure 25), shows us their Jewish marriage contract, which frames the couple's wedding portrait, offering an alternative image in the form of a lesbian wedding. Along with the Sister Gertrude Morgan, Block and Drucker reframe the marriage of art and ceremony as inclusive and varied, establishing a wedding landscape that reclaims tradition in the name of "other."

Finally, Robert Boyd's *Cake Cutter* (plate 118), *True Blue*, and *L'Age d'Or* (figure 26), from his 2001 show "The Virgin Collection," calls an end to our romance with the white wedding by offering a variety of images that shatter associations of weddings with innocence and purity. When Boyd was in Seville, Spain, he was

struck by the number of bridal shops and reminded by the wedding attire of its similarity to the white-hooded robes worn by Jewish “heretics” during the Spanish Inquisition as well as those worn by the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan in the United States. Boyd creates a show of wedding art that intervenes commonplace notions of the white wedding. By “cutting” through the ideology of romance associated with this dominant form, Boyd offers an analysis of heterosexuality as imbricated in both racism and heterosexism, and he changes the viewer’s idealized notion of weddings forever.⁸

Considered together, all of these works dismantle and challenge the taken-for-granted and offer an alternative perspective to the romanticized experience of weddings and marriage. These reinterpretations tell a story the wedding-industrial complex would prefer to suppress. It is a tale of confining, oppressive, contradictory, and silenced lives. These works convey a message about gender, sexuality, and race that historically has been embedded in traditions that uphold forms of dominance while obliterating real needs and the freedom to be who we are. They reveal the ways in which our romance with weddings and tradition manages the contradictions and disillusionments that come with scripts and cultural mandates. To be without choice, without the variability that is central to all life, is to live outside of bliss. It is to die to life itself.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Chrys Ingraham, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*, 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008).
- 2 Deborah Barndt, ed., *Wild Fire: Art as Activism* (Toronto: Sumach Press, 2006).
- 3 Charles Hagen, “The Wedding by Sandy Skoglund,” *New York Times* (September 23, 1994): C1.
- 4 Florine Stettheimer, *The Cathedrals of Fifth Avenue* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1931). www.metmuseum.org/explore/artists_view/cathedrals_tide.html
- 5 Nina Felshin, “Women’s Work: A Lineage, 1966–94,” *Art Journal* (Spring 1995): 71–85.
- 6 E. V. Day, *Bride Fight* (New York: Deitch Projects, 2006). www.deitch.com
- 7 William A. Fagley, Jason Berry, and Helen Shannon, *Tools of Her Ministry: The Art of Sister Gertrude Morgan* (New York: American Folk Museum and Rizzoli, 2004).
- 8 Holland Cotter, “Robert Boyd—‘The Virgin Collection’,” *New York Times* (November 22, 2002): C1.

Plates





STRAIGHTENING UP
THE MARRIAGE OF CONFORMITY AND
RESISTANCE IN WEDDING ART

Chrys Ingraham

PLATE 118
Robert Boyd (b. 1969)
Cake Cutter, 2002 / New York / Digital
Duraflex print / Jeremy E. Steinke
collection, New York

One is not born a bride. Culture installs meaning in our lives from the very first moment we enter the social world. Everything from how we sit, stand, and feel to how we learn to interact according to our sex, class, or ethnic background, to how we practice heterosexuality is the product of the dominant culture and its social order. Frequently, the circulation of meanings we create is so significant, pervasive, and taken for granted that cultural constructions appear to occur naturally. In other words, we no longer see them as part of a social



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PLATE 127

Sister Gertrude Morgan (1900–1980)

New Jerusalem, ca. 1960 / New Orleans,

Louisiana / Acrylic and ink on cardboard /

Louisiana State Museum



FIGURE 26
Robert Boyd (b. 1969)
L'Age d'Or, 2001 / Brooklyn, New York /
Digital Duraflex print / Courtesy of the
artist

ity to the white-hooded robes worn by Jewish “heretics” during the Spanish Inquisition as well as those worn by the white supremacist Ku Klux Klan in the United States. Boyd creates a show of wedding art that intervenes commonplace notions of the white wedding. By “cutting” through the ideology of romance associated with this dominant form, Boyd offers an analysis of heterosexuality as imbricated in both racism and heterosexism, and he changes the viewer’s idealized notion of weddings forever.⁸

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