



**Serg Riva:**  
Couture Swimwear Designer By Day  
Class Espionage Agent After Dark

Richard Rinehart

"Waking while the night persists, with the sound of waves on either side of me, the stars old and drifting, the moon hot, but cut by the Earth's shadow, and my body warm against the cold of the sea, I am pulled to thoughts of fashion, and how I might create something transformative. No amount of description is enough. I must not describe - but instead must transform. Without transformation, we have only text, not poetics - we have illustration, not art - we have memory but with no poignancy. "

- *Serg Riva, blog entry, Oct. 11, 2009*

### **Introduction to the Authors**

Serg Riva is the fictional persona and art project of Bay Area artist James Buckhouse that extends into the digital era the strategies of cultural insertion exemplified by Marcel Broodthaer, Andrea Fraser, or the Artist Placement Group. Riva authors a blog where he chronicles his privileged and yet insecure life and career as an haute couture swimwear designer (<http://sergriva.blogspot.com>). Riva furthers his reach by posting on real email discussion lists and fashion blogs such as the New York Times "Moment" where he collects more fans and followers. You can easily enjoy Riva at the level of a witty send-up of the contemporary fashion world, but there is much more going on here.

Riva's blog is also very much part of the discourse around social class, specifically the sub-thread of that discourse known as "taste culture". Taste culture is a matrix of everyday aesthetics, lifestyle choices, mannerisms, language, and cultural values that reinforce the economic foundations of class structures (Fussell, 1983). It may

seem simplistic to reduce class to home decorating or how one shops, but this is exactly how class structures are reinforced in everyday practice - through seemingly trivial instances of cultural code that act like a game of chutes and ladders, keeping the classes tracked and discrete. Riva weaves in these signs of class (I'll provide examples later) that create a semiotically symbolic link with class discourse and add up to an overall styling of the blog that links the entire Serg Riva project to class considerations. This linkage doesn't depend on the intent of the author, but in Riva's case, it's also not entirely outside his intent.

Speaking of authors, since there is more than one here, with which am I mainly concerned? First there is James Buckhouse. Buckhouse himself comes from working-class semi-rural Oregon and one can see him, under the delicate toils of Riva's writing, pondering and playing through class issues as he makes his way into and around the art world. I began my investigation into his work when I was first considering curating Serg Riva for a net art exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum (March-May, 2010), and I was somewhat surprised to find out about James' background because his is basically my story too. Here we are, two Oregon rednecks class-hopping our way into the art world in the big city. Clearly we both have stakes in, warrants around, and experience with the topic of class (travelers notice details that natives often take for granted). However, it is not my goal here to excavate biography nor to provide an accounting of Buckhouse's authorial intent. Second, there is Serg Riva, the fictional protagonist. Serg is a delight; fanciful, liminal, and vulnerable, but Serg, the fashion blogger, is not my primary project either. I'm interested in how the text, the discourse, creates the author instead of the other way around, and how it may even give rise to multiple authors, multiple subject positions

(Foucault, Author, 1998). So, here I'm more concerned with a third author - I'll call him Riva-after-dark - birthed in the space between Buckhouse and Riva and from the taste culture discourse engaged by the Serg Riva project.

Riva-after-Dark may be addressing a serious topic, but like Riva and Buckhouse, he likes to have fun and has a light hand. Luckily taste culture lends itself to a softer touch - a kind of "velvet Marxist" theory – instead of the usual podium thumping. In addition to this analysis, I will insert the Serg Riva project into an historical timeline of social interventionist art in order to better understand how contemporary artworks critique institutions and class structures in twenty-first century America.

### **Timeline and Tactics**

Riva (now that I've identified the specific author-voice I'm talking about, I'll go back to calling him Riva for simplicity's sake) is part of a long history of artists who invent fake personae in order to pursue this or that artistic goal, often as a way of talking about the construction of self and the impact of class. The fake persona is a favorite trope among new media artists, and in particular net artists, because the Internet increases the scale of the masquerade - it's potential longevity and exposure – beyond any precedent from the worlds of the gallery or performance art. Well-known examples of early Internet art masquerades from the mid 1990's include Luthor Blisset and Mouchette (<http://www.mouchette.org/>). Mouchette was a fictional 13-year old Dutch girl who maintained a personal website. One page on her site included a picture of her face smashed up against a glass surface, as if she were just on the other side of the computer's own glass screen. Here she invited viewers to press their face up against hers and taste

her tongue, tossing up issues of voyeurism, pedophilia, anonymity, and privacy that continue to characterize the discourse around the Internet. These earlier works established their fake identities quickly – for instance, pithy text on Mouchette’s homepage announced, “I am Mouchette. I am 13. I live in Amsterdam.” – after which these works could get on having some direct effect in the world. Serg Riva differs from and extends these projects in that he carefully constructs his identity over a long time, in fact that is the point of the work; affect is effect.

The identity that Riva constructs is an aspirational class identity. Specifically Riva explores how identity is constructed in the slippery class environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century where high and low culture continue their decades-long slow-motion collision, perhaps best exemplified by the couture fashion reality TV show (one storyline on Riva’s blog recounts his participation in a reality TV show about his atelier). Riva attempts to reveal the earmarks of classes through demonstrations of taste culture as well as how these classes are communicated, in part, through new media.

### **Display and Power**

By constructing Riva’s identity online, Buckhouse grapples with issues of display and power. Foucault proposed that in medieval Europe display manifested and reified power structures. Public beheadings, coronations, etc. served as visible reminders of the power of the state. However, the theory continues, modern society has reversed the equation and now true power is hidden from view while the common person is on (and complicit with their) display as a form of self-surveillance and subjugation before the all-seeing eye of power (Foucault, *Discipline*, 1995). Riva problematizes this equation by

attempting to claim an ever higher class status entirely in the public eye. Riva brings to mind figures whose power is a direct result of their display, like Oprah, and suggests that while perhaps some bluebloods may look down on such a vulgar sacrifice of privacy, in fact, that celebrity may be a perfectly good target for most American's aspirations. Will Riva's strategy succeed? Perhaps Oprah merely serves as mis-direction for class-climbers or, worse, public figures like this imply that fame alone equals power. This would seem to be the case as thousands line up to appear on reality TV shows for little or no compensation other than attention. To mis-quote Warhol, perhaps in the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes, but they'll all still be broke. But, departing from literal Marxist though here into the world of taste culture, in the fashion world and in the art world (insofar as the fashion world is a also proxy for the art world in the Riva project) fame may be the end goal, the ultimate currency. Perhaps in the "attention economy" of the information age display can generate power and Riva will achieve his goals after all.

### **Site and Institution**

Speaking of display, it would seem that a public, museum exhibition of Serg Riva would undermine the project as a cultural stealth attack and radical gesture. This is true and not true.

Some fake persona art projects rely on a cultural "stealth attack" whose power relies on some form of ignorance followed by surprise on the part of the viewer. However, the stealth strategy is only one weapon in the arsenal of social intervention and Riva takes a subtler approach. It is probably apparent to the careful observer that Riva is not truly a fashion designer, or at least not a simple case of that breed. Riva's writing

often starts by addressing some fashion staple but progresses and devolves into rambling flowery assertions about culture or love. And where one would expect to find photographs on his blog depicting Riva's fashion creations or his models or even himself, instead you find drawings made in the style of photos. Something is up from the start. Again, Riva does not aim for an effect that is made possible by surprise; rather Riva's careful and ongoing construction of his own identity is the main show and this requires at most a modest fiction. Following the implications of an Andrea Fraser essay in ArtForum on institutional critique [Fraser, 2005], Serg Riva makes the fiction explicit and thus declares that artists cannot live "outside" of the institution from where they may launch such sneak attacks. The institution is defined by its discourse, not its walls. Artists, and even their alter-egos, are part of that discourse. Further, the collapse of reality and fiction, especially in the world of fashion (not to mention the art world), represents Frederic Jameson's "sensorium" in which image and reality, taste and aesthetics, pervade everywhere and fuse into one false ideology [Jameson, 1998].

Exhibiting Serg Riva a physical installation in the museum galleries might have an apologetic or "gallerifying" effect that invites questions about its physical presence and distracts from its core project and its effectiveness in its native medium; the Internet. Riva's updated artistic strategies demand an updated institutional response. One way to have this cake and eat it too is to present Riva as a net art project that interrupts the discourse of the museum on several fronts without being safely contained in the literal white box of the gallery. The Berkeley Art Museum exhibition of Serg Riva is planned to include several concurrent online activities including; presenting Riva in the museum's NetArt portal, inviting Buckhouse to post, as Riva, a guest-blogger on the museum's own

blog, and producing a print-on-demand book that does not pre-exist physically, but can be ordered online. The book serves as both artist project and exhibition catalog (in which, coincidentally, this essay may appear). These activities conflate the voice of the artist with the voice of the institution and beg the question of who is producing cultural status for whom? Does the museum make the artist, or do the artists make the museum? These activities will allow Riva to invade the discourse of the institution by routing around the gallery, the playpen designed to contain the artist, into the museum's marketing, community outreach, and earned income centers. The book, in particular, invites taste culture analysis because it not only furthers Riva's goals of inflating his commodity, brand, and status with that of the museum, but it begs us to ask who is the target audience for the book. It is aimed at those who aspire to conflate their own class aspirations with "high" art, but cannot afford to buy artworks so they co-brand by taking home (and proudly displaying) exhibition catalogs and posters from museum exhibitions. The book is aimed at class-insecure yet upward-aspiring climbers much like Riva himself.

If the museum presents Riva specifically as a net art project then Riva takes place outside the physical space of the museum, but within its discursive space, placing it at the threshold of museum and world, art and society, simultaneously in and out like Riva in his class yearnings.

### **Longing and Romance**

The images on Riva's blog present snapshot-like images of Riva and his high-culture cohorts much as one would expect from a fashion blog, except, as mentioned



James Buckhouse  
untitled  
digital image  
2009

earlier, these images were not captured by a camera, instead they were drawn (or, in some cases, animated).

The dissonance set up by presenting the expected subjects and images, down to depicting the lens-flare of the camera, while clearly undermining those expectations, creates a vacuum as in a dream where you were sitting in the center of a crowded glamorous party when you suddenly realize that everyone else there is a life-size cardboard cutout you are alone. In Riva's images, you expect to be looking at celebrities and auteurs, but no one is home and you are looking at nothing. This could be read as a superficial statement about a superficial class and industry, but there is something more. Riva presents a case where, apparently, the usual celebrities are on view and you cast the subjective gaze, but in reality, you are the only one in the room and it is you who are on view (further reinforced by one image in particular where the "subject" holds a camera pointed back out at you). Riva's invocation of Lacan's "mirror stage" suggests direct class analogies of unfulfilled longing, incompleteness, and of course allowing one's self to be shaped by external forces, through the gaze of others.

In addition to longing, Riva exhibits several flavors of romance. There is Buckhouse's romance with Riva (it's not entirely class-problematizing subterfuge; he also clearly loves the material and is having fun with this), Riva's romance with fashion and style, and Riva's romantic interest, a woman named Tako. As with other aspects of the Riva project, there is also more to the story and in this Riva is not only inked with class discourse, but makes an original contribution to it.



James Buckhouse  
untitled  
digital image  
2009

Riva's blog is filled with plotlines, writing style, imagery, and video that are unmistakably romantic and this romance is articulated in the specific upper-middle to upper class dialect of romance. The images are drawings rather than photographs and this signifies the upper class that values anything antiquarian or laboriously hand-made over anything mechanically produced; buttons trump zippers, couture trumps off-the-rack, and drawings trump photographs. The images are consistently muted and monochromatic, resembling the visually restrained ads in Conde Nast Traveler magazine or the dress of opening-night opera-goers much more than the colorful chaos of People magazine or Nike sportswear. The protagonist and his love interest have exotic and jet-set names; Serg

and Tako; a far cry from “When Harry met Sally”. Serg is constantly depicted aboard his boat (the fact that he has a boat signifies his up-class striving, while the fact that he calls it a “yacht” betrays his lower class origins and lack of modesty). Serg refers to "some show called Gossip Girl" as if he doesn't spend his time on anything as plebian as TV, though the fact that he agreed to star in his own reality TV show indicates his own class conflict (or his post-Foucauldian disposition with regards to display). Riva's writing exhibits the florid lilt of fashion-speak made even more romantic by the constant interjection of subjects like dreams and love.

The romance of Riva does more than send-up fashion writing and more than serve as a vehicle to indicate Riva's class; it acknowledges the fundamental role of romance in constructing class in general. (Here, taste culture allows us to examine the psychological and emotional aspects of class that makes no sense in the rational enterprise of orthodox Marxist thought.) Money certainly enables class differences, but romance is the gravitational force of class structures. Romance serves to hold classes in their place as people develop romances with their own class. In “The Redneck Manifesto”, author Jim Goad valorizes the values of his own working classes indicated as “honest” manual labor and an uninhibited sense of play and, rather than aspire to the middle or upper classes, he dismisses them as sissies and sycophants. Romance of course also serves to attract bodies across and between classes as people develop romances with the other side. Class aspirations are only partially monetary in that usually money is a means to an end and that end is to be seen differently based on a romantic notion of what living in that new identity will be like. Sometimes class aspirations are decidedly anti-monetary as evinced when the “romantic force” of class attracts people downward. In “The Bohemian

Bourgeois” author David Brooks outlines the romantic impulse that leads kids from upper-middle-class homes to get tattooed, enroll in art school, and move to west Oakland.

Placing romance, rather than money, at the center of class upends the notion that those with the most money get to define class strata and structures and allows us to ask questions about who defines social status in relation to class. Which end is up on the class ladder? This line of thought can lead to a dangerous form of class relativism masquerading as egalitarianism. It leads to Jim Goad convincing the lower class that they are just as “good” as the upper classes (and thus need not leave their class) when in fact, they are seriously disadvantaged in numerous ways (and should attempt to change the class structure or at least leave their class if given the opportunity). For better or worse, the romantic force suggests that there is no fixed perspective from which to view class.

Marx wrote from the proletariat’s point of view, not only in protecting or extending their stake, but also in exhibiting the view that money and resources define class boundaries. Whereas Riva writes from an upper-class perspective in which it is taste, not resources, that delineate class.

“At the bottom, people tend to believe that class is defined by the amount of money you have. In the middle, people grant that money may have something to do with it, but think education and the kind of work you do almost equally important. Nearer the top, people perceive that taste, values, ideas, style, and behavior are indispensable criteria of class.”

(Fussell, 1983)

In speaking the language of romance, one speaks the language that all classes speak, regardless of viewpoint, and this can only help in navigating the fluid discourse of

class. Nothing about this proposition prohibits you from having an agenda with regards to specific classes (“Workers of the world unite!”) or to class structures. Romance - or recognizing the romantic inflection in class discourse and practice - gives you a tool for observing or attacking from many vantages at once.

## **Conclusion**

Serg Riva is not the first artwork to employ the strategy of a fake identity, not the first artwork to use the Internet for social intervention, nor the first artwork to address class issues. But it doesn't need to be first to be as relevant as any earlier works. These projects are never complete as long as they aim at moving targets in the form of: institutional strategies of dominance and co-optation; class structures and their expressions; the construction of self subordinate to those forces; and the resistance - strategies for upsetting the construction of this subordinate self. This is the intersection at which Riva positions itself; not toward a massive restructuring of class and capital in the Marxist sense, but in questioning and upsetting the construction of self identity in relation to class, capital, and the gaze of others (while having fun and being catty of course).

The only way that this assertion is false; that these projects have been completed and Riva is irrelevant, is to claim that Riva is merely skimming the surface, reflecting momentary fluctuations of taste culture, but that the rules of class, the underlying structure of their discourse, do not change; that someone else has already explicated those rules and they have done so in a way that wrapped up and closed off this discourse. One might suppose that Foucault or even Marx, if not an earlier artist, might fit this bill, but the opposite is true. Foucault wrote that while some authors create “content”, others

create new discourses, whole new ways of speaking, and he claimed that Marx was just such a person with regards to the discourse around class (Foucault, Author, 1998). In this sense, Marx did not already say all their was to be said about class; he did not fix the conversation, but rather opened up a whole new space in which future conversations could take place; conversations such as Serg Riva or this essay.

Taste culture suggests that class is a dynamic and mutually-negotiated social territory as well as an economic condition. Riva artfully employs this approach and then extends it by positioning romance at its center. Earlier net artworks like Mouchette took us to a certain point in thinking about how identity, class or otherwise, interacts through new media, and Riva takes us further by unpacking the stages of that interaction. Like Serg Riva the fictional character, Riva the social project and artwork is nuanced, elegant, funny, and provocative. It exemplifies how contemporary art can effectively critique today's social structures, but more importantly it tells me how to wear my boyfriend's shirt just so.

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