

Alternative Scenario: History of the Refused

Abigail Child

I always wanted to be historical, from almost a baby on...
—Gertrude Stein in a letter to Carl Van Vechten¹

You can't fully critique the dominant culture if you are confined to the forms through which it reproduces itself, not because hegemonic forms are compromised "in themselves" but because their criticality has been commandeered.
—Charles Bernstein in "Revenge of the Poet-critic"²

I'd like to point out the tremendous blossoming in the work of the eighties under the apex of gender and race. It seems to me the given Scenario (cf. *The Politics of Time: Using and Cruising History*, p. 180 this issue) and its simplistic if schematic opposition is only fruitful in that it might bring up debates that have been conveniently erased, or, all too frequently, forgotten. These debates—of form vs. content, modernism vs. post-modernism, 'political' speech vs. apolitical form, ambiguity vs. accessibility, radicalism vs. populism, etc.—are longstanding in film and other art discourses, including those of painting, dance, experimental music, and language writing. It is important to underline that I especially mean to critique the idea of the masterwork, the original, and the apolitical—as I recall an alternative history, a History of the Refused.

Objects

Dances

eliminate or minimize

1. role of artist's hand
2. hierarchical relationships of parts
 3. texture
 4. figure reference
 5. illusionism
6. complexity and detail
7. monumentality

1. phrasing
2. development and climax
3. variation: rhythm, shape, dynamics
4. character
5. performance
6. variety: phases and the spatial field
7. the virtuostic feat and the fully extended body

substitute

1. factory fabrication
2. unitary forms, modules
3. uninterrupted surface
4. nonreferential
5. literalness
6. simplicity
7. human scale

1. energy equality and "found" movement
2. equality of parts, repetition
3. repetition or discrete events
4. netural performance
5. task or tasklike activity
6. singular action, event, or tone
7. human scale

—Yvonne Rainer, *Mind is a Muscle*, 1966³

What I find interesting about this list is how its author, a dancer, engages the contemporary discourse in visual art constructing an anti-dialogue with abstract expressionism, placing her critique within a democratized field, engaging popular forms, and eliminating “the virtuostic” and “monumental.” Combining pop material within a minimalist aesthetic, Rainer establishes early an opposition to the mythopoetic, the autonomous imagination, the celebration of nature (i.e., what we might find in contemporaneous work by Brakhage, Baille, Deren, Frampton, Kubelka).

There’s been a paradigm shift and more are to come.

In 1979, I attend a performance-presentation of Michael Snow at the San Francisco Art Institute in which he declares that his work has no politics. I gasp, recognizing his refusal: that to establish a *nonpolitical* frame is in itself a political privilege.

I think what happens in the post-modern is that as it redefines the past, the modern, different elements surface, so there is a multiplicity of availabilities. There is, along with a retreat from monumentality, a return to complexity, to detail, figure reference, illusion, a variety of possible subjects and subjective positions, virtuostic and banal, serial and individual. This kind of plentitude—can we call these leftovers, border states?—epitomizes the work of 1980s filmmakers. The world shines through them.

What we have is a variety of valences. Nin-sene sense is too binary and opposition, too much oall or nothing.

—Charles Bernstein, *My Way*⁴

Instead, we have a **torquing** of thought, with reversal, countershot, dancing thumb, dancing ball, dancing bear, digressions incorporating error, **anxiety, insecurity, and doubt**.

In the 1980s I’m teaching at NYU and access excellent prints of early movies: *Intolerance* and *Menilmontant*, *Vampyr* and *Orpheus*, films I happily see again and again. I have a sense of a history of experimental NARRATIVE where research had been dropped, forgotten, submitted to history of the Depression, the onslaught of sound and Stalin.

Look, tradition is not necessarily a prison. You cannot deny the validity of all the beautiful things that have happened in the past. And you cannot claim that the energies of the past have no relationship to whatever you’re engaged in now... Another thing, there are always ideas that somebody started and never quite finished. And ideas that somebody never quite finished in the way you would.

—Cecil Taylor, *The Beautiful One Has Come*⁵

The distinction of the artists of the 80s is that they are the first **TV generation**. They are also, and I speak for my colleagues and myself, coming out of civil rights and anti-Vietnam movements. They are in touch with the dialogue of their age and they are connected to pop life, photography, rock and roll. They see film within these contexts. That kind of mix created new subjects, new methodologies, new typologies of interest and focus.

I cannot repeat this too often, anyone is of one's period and this our period was undoubtedly the period of cinema and series production and each of us in our own way was bound to express in our own way the world we are living in is doing.

—Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America*⁶

The work shifts paradigms—again, it is not about silence, not about purity, not about transcendence. More, it references TV, pop culture, the political context through which we had been burnished (Vietnam and civil rights, feminism), a sense of ambiguities and whole fields of relations that had not been explored. For me this took the form of **multilayered rhythmical complexes** influenced by language and jazz.

Existing within maximum usage of ultimate variables is realization, ability to relate instantly and build concomitant sound structures. Improvisation is cultivated. Tools operating in creative seizure. Reflection being possible through multi-layered rhythmic complexes. Sound becomes language. Language becomes process.⁷

My own work serves as an illustration of this alternative history, reflecting issues of gender, race, and the influences of jazz, narrativity, language, and structural relations of image and sound. Central to this work is my use of **language and narration**. While a number of my peers addressed language in the 80s through a politics of identity, my own work explored the materiality of language and film and looked at strategies for constructing or deciphering meaning.

The idea of the old and new, the opposition between the original and the derived, is particularly interesting when you begin to look at **found material**. Instead of make it new, the Poundian dictum from the beginning of the last century, at the beginning of the 21st it has been reformulated to “make it fucked up.” Appropriation, cut and paste is anti new, or quasi new, or really about recycling material and accepting a kind of sensory overload. Yet its array is social and, in this, rejects singularity, personality, the romantic body, to explore our collective unconscious.

heritage...shmeritage⁸

In our alternative scenario we borrow from early movies, we translate from other art discourses. We take permission, wherever we find it.

& a lot of the practitioners are women who are less prone to make a lot of noise about what they're doing than when boys are setting out to create something "new." That testosterone rush.⁹

In the late '80s **language and text** enter the equation of experimental film, signifying impurities or "alien" matter. Perhaps the culprit (again) is television in that TV uses titles in the news, its advertising a combination of numbers + texts and image, or at its most primitive, late at night, the title crawls with voiceovers hawking 20 songs and phone numbers for where to call for your "miracle vegetable peeler." The face and sound of television is imprinted, abetted by educational movies we watched in grammar school, with their confusing directions, sanctimonious voiceovers and hi-powered arrows, a world of superficial insignia, whose insistence of authority caused most of us to giggle in the dark. Perhaps it is the density of information that trailed after us from high school on, into the current, o internet o internet..., so that we desire a kind of density of information to participate in the realities around us. In any case, the personal lyric won't do and neither will exploration of the apparatus itself. We ask for more complex complexes...neurotic, autistic, anti-authoritarian, intimate, artificial, synthetic, not natural, antagonistic, contradictory and urban—emphatically in and of the world. Much like the lives we have created.

I'm always doing something, but never what's required. In school, for example, when a lesson was assigned, I'd read the whole book, skipping the assignment. When I forced myself to read the assignment, I couldn't understand a thing.

—Dziga Vertov, from the *Diaries*¹⁰

In Danny Eisenberg's *Displaced Person*, language and text approach memory and loss, weaving the heroic strains of Beethoven over whiteout, over rational (impossible) interrogation. *Displaced Person* re-works Marcel Ophul's *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1971)—an appropriation of parts from a feature-length documentary about French collaboration with the Nazis during the Occupation. Eisenberg optically prints the frames, zooming in on the image through printing, so the viewer reads scales and

levels of representation. The image is re-photographed, the image taken out of focus, over-exposed. Against this is a voiceover from a different source that plays against the image, interacting but never fully penetrating, its slippage symptomatic of the irrationality of the National Socialist Democrats. The printed words are from the subtitled voiceover of Ophul's movie, translated into English and now lifted into the foreground. The text reads in one case: "but National Socialist Germany." It's the "but" that interrupts. The words present an unfinished, partial, unreconstructed and opaque reality, one **without closure**.

The significance of the Pound tradition requires that we interrogate it for what it excludes as much as what it makes possible: interrogate the assumptions of poetic lineage not just to acknowledge their effects but also to counteract their effects.¹¹

In Leslie Thornton's *Peggy and Fred in Hell* the authoritative voice from a science film on the larynx is combined with the theatrical autism of the children. Just as *Displaced Person* played with documentary material, *Peggy and Fred* initiates narrativity, reflecting back into the body. The children are placed against counter demanding and judging voices.

The pitch most people prefer for the female voice is high c.¹²

The voice is over determined and undermined; the children reject this disembodied voice and enter, or overtake, the discourse. Thornton focuses on the bodies in her frame, but on the edge of her frame, off of centre frame. The bodies never quite occupy the cluttered and chaotic space in which we encounter them. The children appear and disappear, flopping onto their beds, casual and inventive. They talk in a kind of jerky odd rhythm. **They speak against flow**. They speak to absence, to absence at the centre, to a lack of a central or homogeneous pattern or plan or mode. They are not harmonious, they are flying apart.

Covert Action, an early work of mine, differently explores exploded narration—in this instance, through multiple subjectivities, multiple players, narrative digression, anecdotal streams filled with complicated detail. It is multi-vocal work—loud, rude, polyphonic, creating a vortex tracing heterogeneous parts that don't coalesce, though they do collide. To structure a critique of minimalist strategies and create a musical borrowing; to dislodge the myth of family and romance, tongue to cheek and tongue to check. There is image, printed text, and voiceover. Three realities moving simultaneously, raising issues of simultaneity, of difference, of coexistence and conflict, as part of meaning.

DIARY MOMENT: When I was a child in the '50s, we had this tiny screen TV inset into a cabinet, or console, combined with a victrola and a radio. Watching TV or playing a record or listening to the radio periodically we would get our signals crossed. Torquing twists and stops and starts. We would hear the coast guard calling out "Bill Bill nice day eh eh?" Or "Susie, we're going down." And the sun would be shining out my window. These sorts of inexplicable calls were uncanny reminders of an outer world. Of an ether outside the suburban home. Even as these calls were never answered, even as I could hear only one side, even as I could not reply, there was the *fact* of the fragmentary, the strange, the unseen particular and the uncertain peculiar. This affected my recognition and definition of what is "possible," creating an expanded reality that had **nothing to do with naturalism.**

Or alternately (additionally), it's been pointed out that comic books use storytelling techniques resembling medieval art, including serial reproduction of full figures in well-known sequences or legends, recreating stories not dissimilar to Biblical tales or fairy tales. Using these older methodologies, comic books incorporate as well the cinematic close-up, to create a dialogue that spans centuries and figures powerfully, if "unrealistically," in our imaginations.

My point, that the "real" and our acceptance of same is varied and expansive. That there is an instability of the real, an instability of authority or "masters." And that these openings, these sets of cleavages in the real, allow new imaginaries and new forms to emerge. The past, like the present, is not fixed.

One wants an art not of memories or association, of resemblance, but of merging enactment, vital talking and listening. To rewrite and paraphrase Gertrude Stein: anyone is of one's period and this our period was undoubtedly the period of television and border production. And each of us is bound to express the world of our living is doing.

For a very long time everybody refuses and then without a pause almost everybody accepts. In the history of the refused in art and literature the rapidity of the change is always startling.¹³

This permission to use all the characteristics of the modern and the postmodern, to include contradiction, to operate surgically on insistent social habit, to stay distorted, dislocated, to stay multiple—all of this expands the boundaries of moving image art. If TV manipulates us, alienates us, watches us, if we are no longer in the society of the spectacle but in the society of television and global communications and surveillance, we need to propose more complicated perspectives, profound analysis,

deep examination of cause and affect, multi-linked and powerfully focused. To an extent, such an aesthetic incorporates discrepancy, error, and a vortex or physicality of difference and dislocation. Such works resist easy solutions and, rather, celebrate anxiety and the unknown. Neither montage “experiments” nor transcendent nature reverie, these works brake for the body politic. There’s populist anonymity in these works rather than an autonomous master. They are in the world, broadcasting forgotten spaces, crossing borders, moving into the future, “going to town.”

Notes

- 1 Carl Van Vechten, *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein* (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, 1972), vii.
- 2 Charles Bernstein, “Revenge of the Poet Critic,” *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 4.
- 3 Yvonne Rainer, “The Mind Is a Muscle,” *Work 1961-73* (Halifax and New York: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press), 63.
- 4 Opcit. Bernstein, “A Defense of Poetry,” 1.
- 5 Cecil Taylor, *Nefertiti, The Beautiful One Has Come* (New York: Arista, 1976). In a 1965 interview with Nat Hentoff printed as liner notes.
- 6 Gertrude Stein, “Portraits and Repetition,” *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1935), 177.
- 7 Cecil Taylor, *air above mountains <buildings within>* (New York: Inner City Records, 1973), cover notes.
- 8 Robert Fitterman, “Taking Inventory: a conversation with Bruce Andrews,” *Tripwire: a journal of poetics*, #4 *Work*, eds. Yedda Morrison and David Buuck (Winter 2000-2001): 154.
- 9 Fitterman, 152.
- 10 Dziga Vertov, *Kino Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 173.
- 11 Opcit. Bernstein, “Pound and the Poetry of Today,” 159.
- 12 Leslie Thornton, *Peggy and Fred in Hell*, 1981.
- 13 Opcit. Stein, *Composition as Explanation*, Van Vechten edition, 515.