

## A Response to Jacob Korczynski's Research Project *I See/La Camera: I*

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The aim of the adventurous research programme Performance in Residence, which If I Can't Dance has organized in recent years, is to prompt "a constant reverberation between past and present." We can find this statement in the introduction to the informative publication which presents the research project *I See/La Camera: I* that was conceived by guest-curator Jacob Korczynski. The performance programme of If I Can't Dance has been a much welcome addition to the Dutch art scene, providing access to work that otherwise would not have easily received an audience. Among the different projects on display this edition, I was intrigued by Korczynski's proposal to work with Babette Mangolte, a French-American filmmaker who was closely tied to the advanced practices of art, film, dance and performance in New York during the seventies, working not only with Yvonne Rainer, Michael Snow, Richard Foreman, and Simone Forti, to name a few, but also collaborating on several films of Chantal Akerman. The 1970s were a complicated period which, to a certain extent, was part of the 'long sixties,' still working through its artistic and political legacies, but it was also a transitional moment opening on to what, at first, was theorized as 'post-modernity', but we have come to know better by such terms as the 'control society' (Deleuze) or 'post-Fordism'. What interested me, therefore, was not only to become better acquainted with Mangolte's work, which I had known about for a long time, but only encountered on rare occasions, but also to understand Korczynski's stakes in returning to the work of Mangolte and, in particular, the film *The Camera: Je, or La Camera: I* of 1977. A curious work, which depending on one's point of view could be seen as fulfilling a certain historical logic that was set in motion by such diverse, earlier practices as the nouveau roman, minimalism and structural film, or as a belated, perhaps even anachronistic work in relation to the contemporary context of 'appropriation' art. (Unfortunately, I shall

have no space to directly address this work, but it has informed the following comments.)

I should immediately note that my response to Korczynski's project will not only be brief (too brief for such a complex endeavour), but also partial as I only had the occasion to attend the discussion between him and Mangolte as part of the Performance Days. During the conversation Korczynski introduced a number of issues that are elaborated more fully in his essay in the publication *I See/La Camera: I*, illustrating these themes by means of lengthy quotations by, among others, Lucy Lippard and Sylvère Lotringer on Kathy Acker, and by screening a number of short films. Before I go into certain aspects of this conversation in more detail, first a few words on the general nature of Korczynski's project.

As we can read in the publication, Korczynski used his residency to investigate the emergence of a feminist critique in the practices of Lucy Lippard and Babette Mangolte during the 1970s. Although I'm highly sympathetic to his aims, I'm a little surprised by such blanket statements as "a contemporary history of Minimalism is no longer written by voices like those of Lippard or Rose, who were engaged in direct dialogue with the artists (...) emphasizing the role of the body through the choreography that was then emerging around the Judson Dance Theater, as well as new forms of language deployed by the *nouveau roman*" (p. 28), or "structural film, dominated by formalism, dominated by men, and divorced from the body, language, and the social and political consequences of someone looking" (p. 29). There has been much work done on this period, which questions the master narratives of, for instance, P. Adams Sitney's historical construct of 'structural film,' and has fully acknowledged the importance of the *nouveau roman*, for instance, to the circles around Sol LeWitt to which Lucy Lippard belonged. But, more importantly, as the fascination of so many '(post-)minimalists' with the work of Muybridge demonstrates, the question of 'narrative' and the 'body' had never been off the table even though it is not always clear what was meant by these two terms.

Korczynski's specific approach was to compare Lippard's interrogation of text and image in her novel *I See/You Mean* (the first draft completed in 1970, but published only in 1979) and Mangolte's film *The Camera: Je, or La Camera: I* (1977), which explores the use of 'subjective' cinema that implicates the camera – and, by extension, the spectator – as a protagonist within the film. Whereas there is an obvious correlation between the two, I think it is worthwhile to also explore the differences between them as come to the fore, for instance, when Lippard, in a discussion with Yvonne Rainer, proposes that 'feminism' has replaced 'formalism' by 'humanism', whereas Rainer retorts: "why can't we have both?" As indeed is the case, for instance, in her film *Lives of Performers* (1972) which combines, as Rainer puts it, 'melodrama' with 'rigorous formal means.' It is a question worth exploring in more depth what is exactly meant at this moment by a feminist practice or, more exactly, *how* does a feminist critique enter the work: does it emerge in relation to the 'formal' dialectics of the work or does it entail, as Lippard seems to imply, an abandonment of such dialectics?

I can only sketch out a possible response to this dilemma. To this purpose, let us take the historical schema that is offered to us by Fredric Jameson. He identifies three stages in the historical 'transformation of the image' between the 1950s and the present, of which only stage two is fully relevant here. First, there is the notion of the Sartrean gaze that posits a relationship between the self and an other, but it does so, as Jameson writes, "by way of an unexpected reversal in which the

experience of being looked at becomes primary and my own look a secondary reaction.” Visuality thus becomes a struggle for recognition between self and other. And from this recognition of the gaze as an instrument of domination and subjection will flow the political and aesthetic strategies of feminism and post-colonialism, which is as much part of ‘stage two’ as the discourses of the nouveau roman and minimalism. The third stage is taken up by postmodernity, where “social space is completely saturated with the culture of the image” and the “utopian space of the Sartrean reversal” has been fully colonized.

The problematic aspects of this fatal, historical narrative, which completely detaches the present from an emancipatory ‘neo-avantgarde project’ that sought to transfigure the visible space of domination, is well-known and need not concern us here, beyond noting that Mangolte herself has indicated that certain options that once seemed viable are now closed off to us. Rather, I have two other questions. First, what does it mean to ‘return’ to this moment, to ‘re-enact’ it? And, secondly, how can we gain a more specific understanding of the aesthetic politics of the ‘gaze’ during the 1970s – how was that “utopian space of Sartrean reversal” differentiated by Mangolte’s practice and others in her vicinity? Korczynski’s project makes a valiant attempt to address such questions, but I would encourage him to push his approach a bit further.

In regard to the first problem, we may consider Korczynski’s decision to re-execute an instructional work of Lucy Lippard, which originally was submitted in 1969 to David Askevold’s well-known Projects Class at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. Lippard’s instructions read that a series of group photographs were to be made on consecutive days and, subsequently, submitted to a process of description by either the photographer or another person who was not present during the photo shoot. This work demonstrates precisely something of the post-Sartrean dynamics of ‘recognition.’ On the one hand, there is the serialized portrait of a group which is split between a relaxed sense of togetherness and the discomfiting stare of the camera. On the other hand, there are the notes of the observers – I refer here to Korczynski’s 2013 version – who either project an affective quality upon the portrayed bodies or, to the contrary, deny any subjective point of entry to the photography by, for instance, making listing colours: “black, pink, light brown...”

These enumerative notes oddly return to the descriptive methods of the nouveau roman in which, as Jameson observes, an absent subject obsessively describes the surface of the world, underscoring a dissociation between the sensorial world and abstract thought that is “still felt to be active somewhere, impersonally, behind the now denuded sense perception.” The obsessive voyeurs of Robbe-Grillet’s novels, for instance, are ‘absent’ in the sense that they can’t project their own thoughts or desires upon the world they so insistently observe: they have internalized the omnipotence of a ‘bureaucratic’ gaze (or Foucault’s panoptic gaze), yet are unable to provide this geometricized world with a centre. Which coincides, of course, quite well with the minimalist project that also sought to both activate and decentre the viewing subject by means of its serial arrangement of identical modules. Now enter Lucy Lippard: *Her I See/You Mean* was composed of a series of descriptions of group photographs (like the preceding Nova Scotia project) that provided the reader, as she states, only minimal ‘clues’ as to the plot of the book. For Lippard, however, *I See/You Mean* was a transitional work causing her to undergo a kind of epiphany: “I realized I was writing about a woman (surprise surprise), and I was forced to explore what that meant to me...” What strikes me

here, however, is not some kind of exit from 'formalism', but that it was actually the systemic rigour of her writing procedure that forced the dialectics of the Sartrean gaze into the open. And I would argue this procedure lies at the heart of Mangolte's film as well. The nouveau roman, minimalism and structural film, provided the formal matrix by which the problematics of (feminist) spectatorship became foregrounded. As to my first question: We need to ask what it means to re-enact Lippard's project in a present that is dominated by a neo-liberalist demand to engage in endless acts of 'self-performance.' It can, at best, acquire an allegorical value for us.

I shall not deny that I am less impressed by Lippard's novel than Korczynski appears to be, which brings me, finally, to my second question. I would have enjoyed being able to respond to some of the arguments raised within the essay, but that would entail another kind of discursive platform. In the case of the conversation with Mangolte, I would have preferred that he engaged the dialogic character of Mangolte's own work in more detail as she had many interlocutors, such as Yvonne Rainer, Chantal Akerman, Marcel Hanoun, George Perec, Richard Foreman, Simone Forti and Trisha Brown, who were all engaged in similar investigations of how subjectivity is constituted, negotiated or interpellated within the modern field of an 'impersonal visibility.' Nevertheless, due to the lively intelligence of Mangolte and Korczynski's willingness to let her develop her own train of thought, there was more than one electrifying moment during the conversation.

One such instant came when Mangolte excitedly exclaimed that "We wanted to do abstract film!" What she meant to say was that filmmakers, like herself or Yvonne Rainer, followed a method not unlike minimalism in which 'concrete' reality was juxtaposed with a 'graphic' structure. What prompted this comment was the screening of Michael Snow and Joyce Wieland's short film of 1969, called *Dripping Water*, which was shot with a fixed camera. For twelve minutes, the spectator is confronted with the (fairly) static image of a white dish in a sink into which water is dripping. Yet, as Mangolte points out, the tightly framed shot creates a sense of dissociation on the part of the viewer. Just as the shallow, concave space of the sink is partially obscured by shadow, 'interrupting' the sharp, rounded contours of the plate, the recorded sound enters a similar degree of abstraction within the 'documentary' reality of this seemingly banal still life. The sound track is, namely, not strictly in synch (note the pun) with the filmic image. The 'literal' time of the continuous film shot – more or less the length of a standard, 16 mm film roll – is thus punctuated by another track of 'real' time; one that is itself 'interrupted' by the irregular, percussive beat of the water drops. The present time of film – its chronometric regularity of 24 frames per second -- is thus confronted with the temporality of another duration which is *immeasurable*; that is to say, unpredictable and aleatory. This immeasurable time is one the spectator strives to internalize by discovering rhythms in the dripping water, yet such contractions of time which provide the very foundation of *habitual* experience, are constantly confounded by the sheer randomness of the sound. The film does not simply induce a "meditative" state of mind as Jonas Mekas once suggested, but it creates an alternation in the spectator between two modalities of time: the 'boredom' of extensive, mechanical time and the 'subjective' experience of intensive time.

I admire the manner in which Mangolte was able to draw our attention to the dissociative structure of this work – the paradoxical breaks within its repetitions – as it is precisely such moments of incommensurability that Mangolte and her

contemporaries attempted to locate and expand within the mediated space of visibility. I would say that this constitutes the real success of the afternoon – Mangolte’s ability to resuscitate our awareness of a certain aesthetic sensibility in which the operative terms were accumulation, disjunction, and dissociation, leaving the audience with the impression that there is still much to discover about this period, even though its tropes no longer have the same resonance in the present.

This visitor report by Eric de Bruyn was written at the invitation of If I Can't Dance, and follows the presentation by Jacob Korczynski and Babette Mangolte on Korczynski's research project *I See/La Camera: I*, that took place during the Performance Days festival, 27 November - 3 December 2014, Amsterdam.