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LANGUAGE

#17: Debates on the Avant-garde

Katya Sander

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[The image of an activist, a protester, a demonstrator...](#)

Becoming a Mother

Some years ago I worked on a film, "Exterior City", in which I wanted to investigate some thoughts and images about urban planning in the light of social democracy and its history of turning 'masses' - a idea of a disorderly, disruptive and chaotic force of bodies - into 'a people', implying an orderly collective entity with direction and name. Part of my investigation was carried by my curiosity for how this production of 'people' (or 'citizens') was in many ways contingent on organization of an address and articulation of a demand.

Make Film Politically

OLDER ISSUES

#16: Potentialities Beyond Political Sadness

I set the story in an imaginary city in which no indoors existed, no interiors, only outdoors, exteriors. When opening a door that seemed to lead from a street into a building, my main character would begin moving through that door only to find herself exiting through this door on it other side, out to another outside. It was a city with no rooms, apartments, shops or malls; only the exteriors to those, their surfaces: A flat city, like a screen, with no functions, only movements, flows and directions. However, my main character knew this city and wasn't looking for insides. Rather, she was moving resolutely through the doors from one outdoor to another outdoor in order to put up posters, addressing other people also moving through these doors.

#15: Reactionary Times

#14: Self-Education

#13: Culture and Protest

#12: (Im)possible Spaces

#11: Why Brecht?

#10: How do politics begin? Part II

I did not want these posters to carry any specific text. I wanted them to mark an articulation of an address, an attempt of summoning, mobilizing or organizing people; of imagining people, at the same time as I wanted to investigate the projection of this "people". I deliberately didn't want the posters to spell out any specific claim or refer to any particular struggle. I saw the poster to be an attempt at expressing something that people might have in common; a shared experience of oppression, fear, hope or demand. But I did not want to give a precise name to that commonality.

#10: How do politics begin? Part I

#9: What do we have in common?

My strategy was instead to follow and focus on the action my main character was performing. Within the same logic of the city with no content, only structure, I wanted it to be clear what my main character was doing, but not why she was doing it. I wanted her action, but no functionality, meaning or reason to explain it.

#8: State of Emergency

#7: Drift. Narvskaya Zastava

#6: Revolution or Resistance?

In a strategically almost opposite motion, Sharon Hayes extracted exactly the specific texts and signs from banners and posters of political movements as her point of departure for her piece "In The Near Future" (2005). Here, Hayes re-wrote signs from different historically significant political struggles, marches, demonstrations and strikes, and carried them, one at a time, in public spaces. Hayes asked her audience to document her demonstration by photographing her, and showed these images as slide-shows in a related exhibition space. As such, the work had several places of presentation: It was not only the random encounter with the single demonstrator on the streets of the city, but also a series of photographs produced, collected and shown in a looping slide-show in another space. In this space, the documentations of Hayes carrying each sign - each of them very specific and different - were collected and projected in succession; in series, suggesting something shared between them, a category of images defined by the action they portrayed: the figure supporting the sign, the body signaling something to someone.

#5: Love and Politics

#4: International Now-Here

#3: Emancipation of-from Labor

#2: Autonomy Zones

#1: What is to be done?

As the original signs were found by Hayes on historical photos in archives and books, one could say that Hayes' piece at once both executes and points to a circularity in the existence of these images: In them, the gesture of carrying the sign in order for it to be seen by others becomes also about the instance of this gesture becoming an image; an image both produced by and referring to the collective memory - or imaginary if you will - of these acts, but at the same time overwriting it, turning it into a counting of singular events, each detached from the next as separated parts of a whole. However, the preservation of frozen fragments performed by the photos makes possible another kind of motion, a movement of a different order, namely the transport from one image to the next, browsing through books, moving through archives, clicking through slides: activities which re-situates these images as always-already inhabiting each other, and thus not only ascribing a past to them, but also making a future accessible through them, a moving-towards, in the form of a repertoire of actions.

Not only did the lonely figure holding its detached sign point to the "missing" bodies, the absent others necessary for the "we" the signs marked out, it also pointed to a history of these multiple "we's", each carrying - and carried by - a sign; a shared utterance, claim or demand - an expression not only of a shared experience, but also the capability of recognizing this experience as common, and of articulating it as common.

[Image, speech, gesture](#)

An action fragmented to an extent where it seems empty, stripped from immediate function and meaning, but repeatedly conducted because it points to the very act of itself being performed as carrying meaning, could be understood through the notion of gesture as coined by Giorgio Agamben in his essay "Notes on Gesturality". Here, Agamben describes the gesture as an action which does not aim at either producing something, nor at illustrating, acting or mimicking anything. Rather, a gesture is an action that exists through its performance, its being-carried-out, but as a repetition of itself, thus referring only to itself, but itself as a possibility. As such, not producing nor acting, the gesture is rather "enduring or supporting" - or in other words "carrying" something at the same time as it is being "carried" (literally as in "carried out"). The gesture is not a producer or assigner of meaning, but rather a carrier. Yet, it is also carried itself, carried out, by the body that performs its repetition. The gesture thus points to the body as carrier of meaning: The body not only embedded in, but also as an instance of, language.

Significant for the gesture is that it is to be found in the realm of language, but does not involve speech. It is tempting to compare it with a specific kind of speech, one which likewise performs itself and thereby carries (out) its own meaning. A performative speech act has been described as an act of speech which does not refer to something else, but is its own meaning. An example of this could be the taking of an oath: To say "I swear" is to swear, it is an act of speech which does what it says in the moment of saying.

In a more subtle way, the saying of the word "I" could similarly be seen in the light of the notion of performative speech, since it refers to the speaking subject, the "I", as well as it performs or demonstrates it in the moment of its utterance: the "I" is the one who says (does) "I". Following this line of thought, where, then, can we locate the utterance of the word "we"? Is it a word which, when said, always involves more than the one voice saying it, more than one body? - A word which when carried or spoken invokes a body or voice multiplied by and at the same time fragmented in itself? The posters are put up and held by isolated singular bodies, but in both instances bearing on a "we": A "we" that is not only the literal "we" (on some of Hayes' signs), but also a "we" that is presumed, projected and proposed by the nature of the address the signs perform.

In both pieces there is no speech taking place, rather text seem to have taken the place of speech. The image of the silent bodies holding text as a kind of frozen outcry, places itself curiously in this scism between the performative speech-act and the idea of gesturality: Between the speech performing itself as action, and the body performing itself as carrier of meaning.

A motion from image to image

Agamben links his notion of gesturality to cinema - in fact he positions the gesture as a central element to cinema, thus suggesting cinema as an expanded notion: a many-ordered technology - or relation - of movement between images. Since the gesture entails a loss or detachment from one order of meaning for it to be able to take place and circulate in another order of meaning, it is no surprise that cinema, understood in the light of gesturality, necessarily articulates as a relation of loss: "In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what was lost and to record its loss" Agamben writes, and continues proposing that, "an age that has lost its gestures is, for this reason, obsessed by them".

And indeed, it seems that the circulation of unending numbers of images of political activists, demonstrators and protesters is a mark of our times; slogans from revolutions of all kinds in advertising as well as fashion mimicking alternative and critical lifestyles, are found everywhere. Such images are often criticized - and often rightly so - for co-opting and through fetishization turning the imaginary of political action into a fixed object to circulate on a market.

As we know from Freud, the fetish is an object which is being used to substitute a lost part (of a whole), however one that was never there, and thus was never lost. It not only proposes a false history of loss, but also a state of a whole of fullness prior to that loss, orchestrating itself - i.e. the fetish - as effect of the loss, rather than cause. Since it was never there in the first place, the attempt at recognizing it will always fail. The fetish is thus a manifestation of the paradox of the unattainable object which satisfies exactly by its unattainability. Thus, at the same time an obstacle standing in the way of recognizing that which it stands in for, that which was never lost, the fetish also constitutes a repeated (and pleasurable) pointing at - and thus production of - the absence of that which can never be replaced appropriately.

When an object - or image - becomes a fetish it is taken out of its everyday practical use and function, and in relation to this order, becomes meaningless. However, by being detached from these ordinary relationships, it gains new meaning, since this detachment allows for insertion into another circulation, one in which the object is allowed to stand in for something else, to 'mean' something else. Though, for the fetish, this meaning can only always fail, and is desired exactly for its repeated collapse. Thus, the image of 'political action' as fetish becomes a decoy, one which will always fall short in doing anything else than refer to itself as an incapable, which is exactly what gives it 'meaning' (surplus value) on a market - market of course also understood as a structure for circulating images.

Regarding the figure of loss, the question seems to be whether the images circulating via its vacuum actually attempt closure (however much they might fail), or whether their undertaking is different. I would like to suggest that through the relation described by the notions of gesturality and speech act, the

imaging carried out in the two above projects are not attempting closure in the form of surrogate object, but rather are keeping the place of the lost vacated, inherently vibrating between action and speech and action and body. Perhaps their organization is one of melancholia, rather than fetishism?

Where the fetish always 'stands in the way' of understanding what has been lost (because it tries to replace it, to cover it), melancholia is a closely related figure which similarly describes a mourning of a loss, but a loss which - according to Freud - does not project itself onto an object of replacement. Rather, it is a mourning of an unidentifiable absence which becomes on the one hand generalized to the world as such, and on the other hand turns the mourning subject itself into the lost object. Where fetishism describes a mourning of a loss by constant replacement, melancholia maintains the place of the lost open.

"we"

Following Agamben's notion of cinema, its circulation of images can be seen as an attempt to, at the one hand reclaim and on the other hand record, a loss of a gesture. The question we of course cannot help asking cinema - hereunder indeed also the versions of cinema presented by the two described art projects - is what gestures we are losing, or describing as lost, here? That of the "city" - or polis - as ordering device for the saying of "we"? That of the "people" as organizing projection? That of the "we" as plot or imaginary? Of course, the nature of melancholia tells us that as well as we will not be able to fully know this - it is even unsure whether they are in fact lost in the first place. However, it seems clear that what is at stake is the "we" described by the two projects; the "we" which we can only perhaps glimpse in its curious position between gesturality and performative speech: The "we" that marks a hitching of the two; a joint between the saying and the doing; between utterance, action, language and body.

If the absence - the lost which was never there - is to be found in the vicinity of this "we"; a "we" not constantly replaced by a surrogate and thus repeatedly tied into an object, but rather a "we" which - through the geometry of melancholia - is turned at the same time out towards the world as such, out between objects and bodies, but also into the subject itself, the self becoming that which is lost - then this experience of loss is perhaps exactly a loss of self-as-singular, and points towards that self of the "we" which was described earlier, the "we" which carries with it an absent choir embedded in its gesture: impossible, yet attempted appropriated.

Katya Sander - artist and writer, and co-editor of OE-Critical Readers in Visual Cultures, lives in Berlin

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