

Sianne Ngai / Abigail Child

PhillyTalks 16

Thur. April 13, 2000, 6 p.m.

Kelly Writers House, 3805 Locust Walk, Philadelphia

Sianne Ngai

ORIENTATION

Ingestion ending
alley hum,
ousted incommodius
strip. Not by
bent analogy. But
incorporated by phone
where mealies mouthed-in oaths
under flag or foot.
Say a miserable “something-to-prove”
meeting the description of the subject
in chronic sync.

As far as science is concerned,
blippety blips. The adultomorph aointed
by TALENT AGENCY.
Rights of way bolted down but one camera falling off track

while striving for that cone of light feeling.

ROUTINE

Penancing the dough out pseudoidealist one last paraphrase before getting down to brain trusters as yet unfound operative two little brains pratfalling I attacked with the wrong information.

Compared portions assure squeeze.

Error instead of
after: no less thematically affected heap of it collapsing——familiar grounds proving the usual problem where houses are and words going behind each other instead of after.

One thick word. Easy there, citizen: used just to say hey there, citizen, subtract simpers from minor landscape. Feminish nomenclature comes into the offish close to closure contemporary prefab. Stains versus marks in optical illusion of serious, wall. It is someone's trade—deleting trace.

Drenched pile of blab in thee. “Of.” And this claim slaps all. No cars.
Fear smell. Me sing bladdered all get out, off, on, to host mistake in volume
hence cloudy drama solution. A backyard automatically insures.
Grammatically moody examples appeal tender as description.

Halt now fore I been you there can’t compare loyal, nor an aesthetics or
suss. And so blister nation cans smaller portions of pop scrape factotum to
the grand theme of trust. Betray shifts rival assure; finished abstraction as
ointment’s best squeeze. Error grounds each other used it womanly sustains
trace.

Aging national mainframe a cognitive structure INTERNALIZED BY THE REGIONAL SPEAKER stiff in reflex objection but not in profile thus delays continuing IT REPRESENTS THE REGIONAL SPEAKER'S KNOWLEDGE OF A SMALL PART OF THE WORLD where the one of a kind stands among its own ilk but goes ahead and searches for microscopic ticks anyway.

Wee symbol wiggles in bitten digits. Often hearing "effect" instead mentions feeling tired at that address. Manifested all subjunctives that town you drive through when a swell time comes. Baby factotum betrays maternal theme, heavy inside some seriality. While decanting detector who feels it without go figure.

Chemistry joke passes over the similarity in the picture though fist and thumb were much of a muchness nourishing attributes in a cup. Was wrongly attributed to an estranged family member so went ahead and quoted everything. Where we now say excuse me means a rat fink or swooning third person. I became suspicious, said I was in a big hurry, and hung up.

Fessed me blather for ahem
I had minioned in the company of wisers.
Bolts in the rights of way bolted down because between
two half-assed eyewitness descriptions there was large and efficient technology.

Inside pink realism cake puts the episode
under a more glamorous byline names dates and causes squelch noises
from right-on-the-button hardcases striving for that cone of light feeling.
THE GOONS MADE ME DO IT in static-
layered repetitions—creepy they or them hiding in
sad feminine you, meaning me.

A cake-eater makes herself independent as a military unit,
entering the data of your examples.

“Vicarious knuckles more if one
of your friendlies balks substantial say-so from
whatever hatchet exists between us.”

Utilizes inside skinny to convince a partial rube:
every ack acked every gasp leaks somehow blue in the absorbing
demonstrative. But in an earlier version
of the same joke, the price of the leper’s drink was not so high.

“Mustering up
strange hinkers is bum ballast

up docket time by jeez it’s
effective curtains.”

Abigail Child

from **INTOXICATION**
(LIVE FEED)

That swelled

Diagram

shifting and

morphing

differently sharpened

vertebrate inversion

What it is.

This or that

knobby confluence

and cloacal folk hole

For Pete's sake, duck

evil sounds for big corporations which promote

napless fatigue

in a pantheon of work states

you know what I mean, honey punch?

inopportune

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Their way of loving was having good ideas for you.

(all of which)

frequencies rap out

larger and larger

categories
of contradictions

while indentured turbans set to (by

Floridians

rejoice

Yucko!

They're minors in the chain of command

Bubble pack rocks
sound as synth

I'll try to reverse my class

vacationing temp codes

a pay phone

un ahab

Live feed through gestural letter

could be an animation movie
A SERIES of questions regarding milieu

Lines

hook up

tape loop

behind the speaker
(no pussyfooting)

social coding

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as the stubby

mortification cheese-cake stiffeners

read racism into pictures

Aim at sky, focus on infinity

"The moo of verdure"

with lovely horntrimmed cotton candy cadre

a perpetual onanist

at work in the store

fried

The "why" of the site.

Mass media become the environment
in reverse

Error of the alienated pods

driven through chopstick euthanasia

and tenure litter

to shoebox ready attention

Panic lives

a quantum recurrence

Something had gone wrong with

thigh against thigh

track it

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About the kids in sleeper sets

I'm not negotiating *(we like to think of ourselves as different)*

Are you now?

syntactically excess

slurry, rolling

ubiquitous

duck

enervated Conan gut

Knees actually

fix engagement

smothering

Dr. Lucas and his holiday heart. Delicatessen noche

A radical cadavor

ritmo

percolating

atop frisky morose

hairdos

adorning brains

PLOT

amber bambi

pissy diva

vinyl shag wannabe

metal rocker

Resolution pin stops

Behavior modification. I'm for it.

Stripped to household allotment

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watching the same program

working the xerox

pushing and pulling

the short term forgetting paradigm

My sounds are laid down by the underground

muttering in the lotus position

Eurocentric prints

You smell chicks.

Ecco sophia

I couldn't afford to be pluralistic.

Street beef

Put up coup

at cake and steak

in rapid tala technos

Chordal ad

Then I noticed the hands

the trade motto bodies

the average skinniness

of tragic clown-citizen.

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Head line instigates bar blues

parabolic

to form a giant flower
(giant! flower!)

Periodically

the wire must expand

Autoerotic pulps

ego.

Background looks

opposite soothing sounds of movie cash

Palated warps provide

a driving force that is wrong

on tongue,

densely populated

in the margins I'm depending on

Getting a letter

can be expressed

in a

recitation, sun sums

sharp-witted

Loss

Lump it.

ABIGAIL CHILD

November 27, 1999

Dear Sianne,

In Bordeaux, awaiting the next meal, between meals, generosity of the culture, friends, abundance, super-abundance- slippage between pleasure and disgust-I have had enough-the line between them is thin. Desire and surfeit move inevitably across a certain bodily knowledge, known before (or sometimes after(?) rational thought. Is pleasure, fullness that is compatible? and disgust a fullness that overwhelms? thus- vomit?

I have as of now read Criteria and your essay "Raw Matter." I am struck by a number of ideas, piling on in multiplicities, digressive, the landscape of travel, wanting to be said. I must step into the muck, engage-

"Raw Matter" is generative I feel, 'inevitable' in the best sense of its intrinsic rightness-as a response to capital certainly. I laughed out loud at your anecdotal grammar of disgust: pointing, averting, repetition. Of the poets you use as exemplars, Andrews, Ferguson's and Lusk's enjambed syntax seem more indicative: their raucausness pushes one away, averts grammar in their textural- word and page/rage- enjambment. Whereas Davies and Derksen seem in this context, at least in your selections, more restrained. Their sentences denounce and comment, are disgusted, but do not enact it. They are not formless, which seems key to the syntax of raw matter (for me?). Disgusted perhaps, but not spewing. The effect of their sentences retain a whiff of morality in Bernard Noel's terms "the vocabulary of indignation is exclusively moral". Is it that humor and enjambment, off-the-wall excess, create a syntax that evades (?) bourgeois morality more completely than sentences can?.

You write "the dominant mode of disgust is thus one of exclusion," and though I find this helpful in terms of negotiating the social, critiquing a softened pluralism, defending a non-seductive/non-lyrical surface in poetry, and performing the close reading on the texts as you do, I am as intrigued by the ooze, by the transmission, by the border spaces: the inside turned out, that which causes disgust, causes the turning away.

You comment that a poetics of disgust would be based on "outwardness and excess." Pleasure is, of course, based on the same aspects...and the food

reference with which I start is surely an obvious location, in which "the problem of certainty" of which you speak in relation to disgust, is made uncertain in the process of experience, wherein the transformation of desire to disgust happens exactly out of "outwardness and excess." You speak of their "concomitance" but want to emphasize their "conflict." Which is valuable yes, we come back to it, this conflict-but one-I for instance-do(es) not want to lose sight of desire's repugnance.

If paradigmatic as a theoretical term and popular in academic debate, desire in these discussions is cleansed/has been often cut off from the abject, from organs and actually running, leaking, smelling, bodily functions. [You do not reference Kristeva...?] Female and homosexual versions of desire are seen as tantamount to uncontained flow and thus powerfully inscribed/circumscribed within social-ized thinking and in law, as excessive and repugnant, as 'disgusting.' Feminist (and gay) critical thinking of the last 30 years has attempted variously to redefine these definitions: hence "bad girl" shows, critical collections such as "Caught Looking: Feminism, Pornography & Censorship," and many many others.

Pornography is an exemplary aesthetic of "outwardness and excess" and negatively resists both 'limits' and middle-class morality, existing on the edge of capital and repeatedly subject to institutional restraints [reputedly seen as threatening]. Pornography mirrors your poetic 'grammer,' of pointing, aversion and repetition, albeit with aversion playing out under the social/psychological dynamic of the appeal of the 'forbidden.' Pornography, for all its discussion over the last decade, has not been elevated as a critical and aesthetic paradigm. Pornography retains the dirt, should we say, disgust, that the tidying of (academic) desire does not.

These distinctions are important I think, in reexamining "the privileged role played by 'desire'". Important because it is the troublesome aspects of desire, that are ignored, that still need attention/analysis. The women's theory group of a number of years back [see publication in Raddle Moon -circa 1993] fell apart, in part, because the majority of the women refused a rigid theoretical language and 'flowed' toward digression, anecdote. We had disgust towards the very critical language that was our desire. My own film work has been repeatedly censored and critiqued on specific grounds of excess: "too many elements; not enough homogeneity" (re COVERT ACTION and the whole BORN FOR? project); "too many exclamatory inserts; too aggressive"

(re MUTINY); "too upsetting, brutal, masculinist " (re MAYHEM). [The last has also been called too modern, too post-modern, too feminist-!?!]

Perhaps it is harder to stay on the edge of paradoxical response, the inside/outside conundrum than make a defined exclusionary gesture? The plague of dogmatism... It seems an endless opening up-the trope of the hysteric, is, if not more threatening, less assimilable. [Is this true?]

Perhaps you would say desire is not "externalizing" [in your set of definitions for disgust] but I would argue pornography is exactly that, that is, indeed its 'crime'-it externalizes desire, which is why it draws such critical flak.

-Your critique of pluralism with the Hal Foster quote is essential. I remember a conversation with a colleague who spoke in reference to an important decision, saying "I couldn't afford to be pluralistic"-implying he needed to retain a critical difference. Unfortunately, pluralism as is currently defined not only establishes a romantic middle ground, but\ excises-through critiques of elitism, opacity and non-sequential form-exactly the tradition of leftward-oriented innovation in which you and I are interested. So that the so-called pluralism becomes a caricature of inclusivity under bourgeois/capitalism, limited and limiting-a Benetton ad. Excising disgust and leakage, under assumptive multi-poly greed.

-Re your inclusion of Thoreau and James: Do you know Peter Brooks' *The Melodramatic Imagination* which includes Henry James as well? Brooks exposes the melodramatic tropes of pointing, silence, negation, hyperbole, excess and contingency in James' work, as well as in that of Balzac and Mallarme. Brooks argues that Melodrama arises after the French Revolution, as a response-visual, dramatic, literary- to an ethical absence, an excess to express what has become impossible to express. An aesthetic of disgust has similar motives, and parallel stylistic gears. Interestingly the Andrews, Ferguson and Lusk share certain melodramatic tropes: extended enjambment, associative and ferocious piling up of imagery, 'hysteric' declaration. Is this a helpful line of inquiry? The hysteric male and the hysteric female as societal outlaws. I'm brought up by a memory of Louise Bourgeois' sculpture of the "hysteric male" - a chilling admonition: she portrays him as a golden body levitated four feet off the ground.... Oh NO. De Sade as a male hysteric? Certainly.

Motive always seems crucial to analysis: what are the aims? (the aims of the writer) what are the arguments one is answering? what is being defended? what is the milieu or the importance of milieu amidst which this discussion is happening?

Thinking of disgust in the visual arts: Sue Williams and her plastic vomit on the floor of the Whitney, a puddle of whitish material, disorganized, flecked with now homogenized difference. People stepped around it. Mathew Barney's melting wax that oozed, but remained contained within a field of narcissitic masquerade. Jeff Koons' very funny, kitsch living 'puppy' sculpture.

Yet... all of these have managed to assimilate. In the white walled museum, filled with viewers, voyeurs, the work is seen as personal, not as critical. Though Kiki Smith's 20 foot roll of shit coming out of the ass of a full size crawling female was definitely not decorative. At that show, The American Century 1950-2000, at the Whitney Museum, I thought the dogmatically defined movements-minimalism most especially-fared badly. My favorite room was "eccentric abstraction" with Samaras and Eva Hesse, where the internal was externalized -at one, disturbing and haunting. Seeing the inside of your brain....

Humor is part, it seems, of the externalizing project. If to laugh is to be 'anxious', humor is also a kind of courage-a courage to wade in-. Black humor. Film noir.

[Another kind of processual flow: Mayhem's gestures and gestural space constructing an incomplete noir-a breakdown of the machine of suspense through a succession of non-delivering events.]

Some questions: did you not include Genet, Burroughs, Acker as too obvious, overdone? Or as prose writers not fitting into your discussion. Ditto with Sade? You speak of him as filled with 'virile libertines' and not as 'helpful' as the impotent characters in Sterne. But are not de Sade's libertines the critical targets of disgust? Does not de Sade work within a socializing and extremely externalizing, indeed overdetermined, network? His excess has always seemed exclamatory to me. His a very 'helpful'-i.e. provocative, structurally useful- if/and over-the-top critique. His work illustrates your syntactical grammar, even to the deictic [as in Sodom where enumerated acts are all that is left of narrative events, pornography reduced to numbered acts]. In Justine, for example, the invitation to come

in/join up with the (sequence of) seducers, the deranged act/betrayal and escape (a pointing/aversion/and repetition) are a tri-part scheme on which the book is built. [See Barthes as well on this pyramiding [[toppling]] structure]. I use loosely similar structures in MAYHEM.

Disgust never seemed my response to Sterne, more delight, broad humor, and I do not think digression = aversion. It seems more than that, a surplus rather than repugnance [back to desire again....?!] Digression does seem like raw matter, the very stuff of thought, uncontained, returning us into the materiality, formlessness and paradoxical seepage of thought-form. I think of POST-INDUSTRIALS, from which I include a page, [will need mail it/hand it to you-not possible in email] the stanzas coming loose, into enjambed word flow, falling off the page, -impossible to contain on the 8 1/2 x 11 sheet.

And I keep thinking of the raw matter of excrement and the disgust/repugnance in war - Bosnia and the Holocaust. What happens to people, to poetry, when one cannot look away? There is an essay on the Holocaust which speaks of living in shit. This is a level of disgust that has no potential for aversion. The human body is radical externality in the camps, no invitation in, just head in shit. The ellipsis is life itself. Humor is swallowed and melodrama is not sufficient. Shapes are lost, shapes of living, of bodies, of inside and outsided-ness. Grammar here is truly formless, futile, stuttering. The urge to tell or the need to tell is the return to form, to at least the attempt to speak that which cannot be spoken. Of course Celan-

Returning from Hungary last night, makes insistence of such reflections. The Holocaust revives in little tales of denial late at night, in bars, with half Jews and non-Jews. Austria has just elected rightist forces and the front page of the International Tribute had young women of Indonesia cutting the hair of their fellow [female] citizens for the crime of prostitution. How is this disgust formulated, and then critiqued? The disgusting act is made in an ellipsis of the human, and the privileged/aesthetic/necessary position comes after?

"the good doodoo" versus fearful disgust? Which returns us to context, argument, inside and outside, no unilateral stance, but not a wishy-washy softness either.

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B/side, about the homeless, begins as radical exteriority, inviting the viewer in, transmogrifying donkey to devil. Of Mayhem, I speak of pulling the carpet, inviting in and dislodging the viewer, a grammar of disruption, hyperbole, push/pull, in/out. Can a bridge be a(ny) kind of home?

That said, 1. I'd like to talk about process in this dialogue: how one starts a poem, ideas that go into it, the form it takes, the processes it goes through to reach that form. This aspect is rarely discussed, and I feel it is one of the most interesting. Where the ideas come from? How they are worked on? How form is imposed or found or left to chance or planned with chance? Or?

2. I'd like some discussion of historicity. How you come to this place? Watching the various generations jockey, I'm reminded of Laura Mulvey's comment at a talk that print owned history and she and Peter Wollen knew that when they proposed SCREEN magazine. WE'RE doing the same thing. I'd rather revolt than be indignant. Wouldn't you? Small tactics, ways of infiltrating the system with (even tiny) bombs.

3) There's more to talk about, a deep study of abstraction and surfacing meaning-palpability of abstraction, it's resonance, the 'feel' of mind's ideas, Ponge's sense of depth in words.

4) The comfort of objects and names- I'd love to see a chrono-logy of names, origins.

5) And, what about action and the 'movement of event'- The transformative moment, the present participle. How does writing do? Or how does writing get off the page?

and 6) I'm always interested in encyclopedic form, heterogeneous, on the edge of formlessness. what holds in these cases? Rhythm is one answer and has all too much been written on that? And what do these forms mean in the social/gender critique? In your poetry and mine and in my films.

Let us begin. best, Abigail

* * *

SIANNE NGAI

February 27, 2000

Dear Abigail,

I'm attracted to your work's insistence on diverse modes of non-adequation and the relationships between them: dissonance, asymmetry, contradiction, conflict: "Slippage is a property of aim" ["Climate."] And also your emphasis on *gesture*, some thing I think of as extra-rather than pre-linguistic: a movement on the border between indication and signification, showing and saying [Agamben]. "Signalling you on / An uncertainty diagram / A kind of speech to frame / Impermanence." In melodrama, gesture plays a crucial role in the mobilization of affect. One of the things I admire about your writing is the way it shows how affect can be mobilized without there necessarily being a subject who "has" it (something I have been trying to argue in my own critical work), through the multiplication and amplification of social gestures. I'm particularly invested in this idea because one of the things detractors frequently say about the work of many writers you and I like is that it is affectless—that it substitutes irony *in place of* emotion. This has never made very much sense to me— not just because work described as "affectless" frequently has an emotional impact on me while work described as "emotional" rarely does, but because irony HAS ANGER AT ITS BASE. (As you noted in your article on Buñuel). Also underlying this criticism, I believe, is the assumption that affect requires and emanates from a fixed self-point or interior (the "I" of the official verse culture poem), rather than inhering in intersubjective relations. Affect is not "in"—it is a transpersonal and social "between." Your writing constantly reminds one of this.

During one of our philosophy reading group meetings last year, I remember you saying that late 20th century theoretical writing tends to split into two trajectories: one emphasizing excess (Bataille, Deleuze) and the other lack (Lacan, Žižek). And that excess interested you far more than lack, particularly as a way of thinking about gender categories. This comment stuck in my mind in thinking about your practices in both film/video and poetry, where excess seems to play an equally important role in creating numerous studies in oppositionality. I think, for instance, of the frenetic movements of the female body in confined social spaces (office, gymnasium, kitchen) in *MUTINY* [part 2 of the *IS THIS WHAT YOU WERE BORN FOR?* series], deliberately placed in collision, or counterpoint with the mechanical/social forces exerted *on* the body featured in *PREFACES* [part 1]. The relation I see featured here is one of

againstness, which your editing techniques bring out beautifully. The strange difference-in-similarity between Sally Silvers' cartoonish thumping and rolling in her office, and the images of machinic functions which have become virtually emblematic of modernity (automated punching gloves pounding bread, disembodied hands tapping on keys of adding machines, the operations of heavy machinery at a construction site, etc.) Also a moment from PREFACES in which the ominous shot of an airplane's shadow moving left to right is immediately counterposed by an image of a boy swinging a baseball bat right to left. The principle of "collision" used by Eisenstein in his theory of montage taken to a gestural extreme—you stage the collision between collisions, the force or impact of them on the other. I also think of one of the funniest lines (and one of my favorite lines) from the eponymous long poem in *Scatter Matrix*: "minimalism is about having a dick." Is minimalism's tendency to privilege lack over excess — and frequently make lack romantic and profound — what gives it its machismo? Funny because lack has been more typically associated with the feminine, at least in psychoanalysis and its general assimilation into popular culture.

There is an interesting shift in the first section of this same poem (beginning with the line, "Against rotation"), from the phrase "tacitly sexed" to "tactically sexed." Is excess where we might locate this transition? from the tacit (not-spoken or passively inferred because of its "obviousness") to tactics (maneuvers used against an enemy)? "Tactically sexed / *rather than burning or banking*": alternatives to more overt acts of resistance as well as to business as usual. I read "Scatter Matrix" as exploring this transition and actively facilitating it. Am struck, too, by the way this poem, in its focus on movement (*pivot, rotation*), and inertia, and bodies, and noise, and struggle, and threat, and "ambiguous intimacies," and discipline, and gestures, and grids, and employees, and prohibitions, engages with the relations of power you've constantly explored in your films. If "scattering matrix" is a theory of the universe that explains it as the sum total of all the relations/interactions between particles, rather than the particles themselves (correct me if I've gotten this wrong), it also seems to be a fruitful way of thinking about language.

Like excess, "scattering" also seems useful in thinking about gender categories constructed in melodrama and pornography, genres Linda Williams has described, along with the horror film, as "body genres" based on different categories of excess—as *systems* of excess with sex, violence, and emotion as fundamental elements. (I think we share an interest in these elements, though I am particularly preoccupied with the last two.) She also notes that these popular genres share "a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm—of the body 'beside itself' with sexual pleasure, fear, and terror, or overwhelming sadness. Aurally, excess

is marked by recourse not to the coded articulations of language but to inarticulate cries of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama.” I’d argue that these articulations *of* inarticulateness are coded as well, but that the codes are harder to read—make normative methods of reading difficult; still, Williams’ note on the spasm/body-beside-itself useful to me in thinking about features of your poetic as well as filmic work. Writing demanding that one take it seriously, as Stanley Cavell puts it, while managing to avoid assuming the burden of seriousness. Interesting how porn, horror, and melodrama, for all the orgasms, screams of fear and sobs, can so easily become CARTOONISH. Which is something your work seems to frequently and deliberately foreground - like Takashi Murakami does in his sculptures.

In order for feminist or otherwise politicized writing to be made visible *as such* to the mainstream (particularly in “first wave” formations), the usual demand is that it not only assume the burden of seriousness, but the burden of producing positive representations or images. A demand for earnestness, in particular. Which leads me back to the question of irony, which seems to have become a convenient whipping-boy lately—often invoked to dismiss certain kinds of poetic practice right off the bat. “X’s work is just ironic.” How does one respond to this characterization (as the basis for dismissal)? Well, for one thing, the reminder that irony has anger at its base undermines the argument that it functions merely as a convenient *substitute* for emotion: irony is rather the rhetorical expression of *the negative affect that enables oppositional consciousness and agency*. One understands, however, the objection to irony that it is simply about smugness and superiority and being outside or above ideology. Of course. This makes for bad art, as well as ineffectual politics. But as Peter Sloterdijk has noted, there are two kinds of irony. Žižek nicely sums up Sloterdijk’s distinction:

Sloterdijk puts forward the thesis that ideology’s dominant mode of function is cynical, which renders impossible--or more precisely, VAIN--the classical critical-ideological procedure. The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists on the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would be: ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.’ Cynical reason is no longer naive, but is a paradox of an enlightened FALSE consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, BUT STILL ONE DOES NOT RENOUNCE IT.

We must distinguish this cynical position strictly from what Sloterdijk calls “kynicism.” Kynicism represents the popular, plebian rejection of the official culture by means of irony

and sarcasm: the classical kynical procedure is to confront the pathetic phrases of the ruling official ideology, thus exposing behind the sublime noblesse of the ideological phrases the egotistical interests, the violence, the brutal claims to power. This procedure, then, is more PRAGMATIC than argumentative: it subverts the official proposition by confronting it with the situation of its enunciation . . . for example when a politician preaches the duty of patriotic sacrifice, cynicism exposes the personal gain he is making from the sacrifice of others." (Sublime Object of Ideology, 29)

I am not so confident that simply exposing or laying bare the sites of enunciation will always do the trick, but I do find Sloterdijk's distinction useful. One kind of irony is lofty and critiques from above - the other is dirty and critiques from below. Getting *into* the muck is the tactic here. Like finding a way to undermine or contest power relations inherent in forms of popular culture *not* by saying how stupid or problematic popular culture is, but by exploring aspects of popular culture as sites of contradiction yielding some interesting and unsuspected political effects. As in melodrama, the horror film, and porn. As in the way your own kynical writing engages with these and other popular forms: the way your writing "Is the consideration of language / Alienated to have accelerated the speed of the ordinary." Accelerating the speed (and noise) of the ordinary also being IS THIS WHAT YOU WERE BORN FOR? seems to do.

Speaking of muck, I'm grateful for your wonderfully thoughtful response to Raw Matter, and esp. for the perceptive suggestion that some distinction should probably have been clarified between the kind of "desire" I was being impatient with in the essay — that is, the libidinal concepts which have dominated the way innovative writing practices have been thought about and discussed for decades — and actual sexual practices like pornography, which, I agree, *do* resist middle-class morality and function as exemplary modes of outwardness and excess. I tried to clarify this in a footnote in the revised version of the essay, by saying that by "desire" I obviously did not mean sex or sexuality. [Dodie Bellamy once made the very funny remark that "desire" was simply French for sex, or like saying "mauve" instead of "pink".] So my polemic against "desire" wasn't intended to be a diatribe against sex, though I do worry about it coming across this way. Instead, I was trying to register impatience with the desire *model* as a conventional way of theorizing innovative writing practices (*jouissance*, etc.), and "desire" as a thematic term constantly invoked and appealed to as the basis for claiming innovative writing's subversive potential or intent [i.e. the innovative text is subversive *simply because* it is "libidinal"]. I guess what I wanted to do was to explore the aesthetic and political implications of a *negative* affect that does stand apart from, while also often articulating itself to, trajectories

based on attraction —a negative affect I see foundational to the formation of oppositional consciousness and agency. But am grateful for your insistence on the difference between the “cleansed” quality of desire as the abstract theoretical term I was feeling impatient with, its cut-off-ness from the abject and “actually running, leaking, smelling, bodily functions,” and the kind of desire operating in pornography - fully agree that these distinctions are necessary, and should have been made more carefully in the text.

Affectionately yours,
Sianne

* * *

ABIGAIL CHILD

March 27th

Dear Sianne,

One of the best things of this exchange, Sian, has been the opportunity to close read and think about your work. I thank you.

Re ORIENTATION:

blab bliss squeeze suss wiggles Baby factotum rat fink wisers the goons made me do it.

If Criteria locates/sifts among various positionings, Orientation dances around the "adultomorph." A doubled pull (out) of the "cone of light feeling." To do an inversion, referencing in this reader Bunuel's Land Without Bread. The inner voice is twisted, before the sentence ends, turns back, halts and makes a new move. "Error grounds each other."

Admiring here your un bolted thought, where Skeptical Brain trusters collapse hey there into "grammatically moody." The glamorous byline/striving itself/ is made more "'bitten" than efficient. Disorder of the organization. A patterned de-selection. Or in Bakhtin's words "parodic antibodies." This is a__ a broken masquerade.

Which brings us to IRONY: which does seem a kicking boy, or girl. I have found, on occasions -people (people!) associate irony with non-sincerity and with non-indentity. She's just joshing. [The just perhaps the key word in that sentence.] Yet I want to offer up Swift and a felt politics. To conceive an alternative, an alternative irony. Not something at a distance, not from high, nor from below, but rather from inside. Irony as doubly dense, anti-authoritarian, challenging the inert. Irony addresses the subject at hand and repositions it, referencing its movement, not only as in the Zizek quote, "confronting the official proposal with the situation of its enunciation," but transposing, re-situating the proposal. Irony re-constructs relational contexts, re-focuses context, reframes information, most generously using humor to strategically reposition- to read through and make new sense.

In this reading then, irony resists 'not-caring', is instead an inverted response to speech-less-ness. If anger is at "base" with irony, so too is

silence. Through irony, things curve back on themselves, jump round, express what cannot be said directly.

Does irony emerge as a tactic when sincerity has failed? as a response to extreme conditions?

Irony uses humor to make relations. Laughter is agent - inverting, upending stagnant beliefs. Is not the popular critique of irony partly the result that irony cuts the links of cherished values? Isn't this what hurts in irony? Not the joking, not distancing-humor engages, after all-but the tweaking of something thought or imagined as invincible. Irony-rude, startling, clever-contradicts expectations. This reframing, this constancy of self-examination, of word examination, of obsessive watching, is not transcendent, not peaceful, but it permits us to speak.

In his green box for *The Bride Stripped Bare of her Bachelors*, Even Duchamp writes under "General notes: for a Hilarious picture" of an "Ironism of affirmation: differences from negative ironism dependent solely on Laughter." Laughter discharging communal critique. D. describes as well turning work inside out "to contradict myself so as to avoid conforming to my own taste." Likewise, I feel a contemporary distrust of style, solo positionality, in person or work. D. foregrounds through his obsessive, sparkling and enigmatic notes, the irrationality of rationality [so evident in our readings this last year of the 'major' philosophers....!]. I think this kind of demolition is in our work, this constant revaluation of 'value', this undermining of hierarchies, this impudence.

Which in *CRITERIA* creates an incantatory logic, whimsical and obsessed: ranging from the blankly quotidian "it's a good bus" to the tantalizing knuckleheadery of "get to know your inner poodle." [I can hear you say that one...Sianne!] Mixing cartoonery and melodrama-the logic of the overstated, overheated, the endzone of the mediated. "to make the razor the fork for puncture." A Kynical book-negative wrapped rock hung in a pink frame.

Your use of vocabularies in *CRITERIA*- of judging, law, analysis, science-relate I think to the statistic and scientific vocabularies in the writings of Jena Osman and Juliana Spahr: for each of you there is a process of assimilation, reconfiguration and assembly, making the authoritative language one's own and then refiguring/ transforming/ ridiculing that. A revolt or mismatch of the 'told.'

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Utilizing a kind of harmelodic of the social, pushing syntax and word order TO challenge criteria, "to chip the chip" is this praise? To come to Chrono paradise: a gaggle of deconnections-mental gymnastics even as "humiliated by weaker muscles." Marking the social with skeptical intelligence. What was it that kept the characters in the narrative intact?

and-we still have not -more- even if-as we are busy-

Warmly,
XOA

* * *

SIANNE NGAI

March 29, 2000

"When the telephone rings, an intentional signal addressed to us is being produced, informing us that a communication is to be expected through our telephone at this moment. But when we are near our telephone, as we happen to hear a low buzzing sound, then we realize that the receiver is off the hook. What we are hearing is the dial tone which we use as an indicator informing us of the state of the telephone; but it is not an intentional communication directed at us." (Rene Spitz, *No and Yes*)

"Mass media becomes the environment/ in reverse." (Child, INTOXICATION)

Dear Abigail,

There is a kind of thinking only vertiginousness makes available (irony also as vertiginousness of difference and contradiction) and which your writing activates. LIVE FEED. I was just recently reading a television essay by Jane Feuer where she talks about “liveness” as the governing ideology of the medium: “the promise of presence and immediacy made available by video technology’s capacity to record and transmit images simultaneously.” Sasha Torres has pointed out that this simultaneity between event and transmission frequently shores up national cohesion and unity during emergencies demonstrating just how divided by race and economic lines this country is—live coverage of LA riots in 1993, for instance (“the revolution is being televised”), with the back-and-forth passes between NBC, ABC, CBS and their local network affiliates reframing the occasion into a seamless continuity—the kind of continuity patriotism depends on and needs. Thus even “as television in fact becomes less and less a ‘live’ medium, in the sense of an equivalence between time of event and time of transmission, the medium in its practices insists more and more on the live, the immediate, the direct, the spontaneous, the real” [Feuer].

The immediate, the direct, the spontaneous, the real—values also frequently privileged in poetry. But I’m struck by the way INTOXICATION (LIVE FEED) introduces “a jam of possibility” into both discursive arenas, undermining any conception of language as closed circuit of transmission. Here it seems like you are using the clash between words to call attention to the medium’s own capacity to produce excess feedback and vibration, deliberately instigating the intrusion of *noise* into *signal*. A subfrequency not unlike Spitz’s “low buzzing sound,” which he invokes to make a distinction between signals intentionally transmitted through a channel of communication, and “indicators” directing our attention *to the state of the communicative channel itself*—noise vs. signal, dial tone vs. ring, poetry versus prose. These “vibrations in excess of any narrative or functional line” [Brian Massumi] reveal a split between the normally conjoined functions of indication and signification themselves. Reminding us that even when communications indicate and signify at the same time, they may not be signifying *what* they indicate, nor indicating what they signify. Deictic functions in particular (the “gestural letter) seem to carry an insistence with the potential not only to disrupt, but override the signifying function one would think they would support.

I see INTOXICATION as paying attention to this splitting. Paying attention to the channel, as well as the signifying communications we receive through it, precisely by wallowing in (rather than trying to rise above) the glut of what one is fed. Pointing also to the fact that it is

the moment when we start paying attention to relationships between individual signals that noise begins to intrude. Offering “a redundancy of resonance that plays *up*...(feeds back disconnection, enabling a different connectivity)” versus “a redundancy of signification that plays *out* or linearizes” [Massumi]. *Feeds back disconnection, enabling a different connectivity.*

Panic lives

a quantum recurrence

Something had gone wrong with

thigh against thigh

track it

As Eve Segdwick and Adam Frank have noted, though almost everything is digitized now (on/off), perhaps states of feeling are still analog: panic as “a quantum recurrence”; “*intoxication is a number/* in the/ vortex.” INTOXICATION tracks the signals fed to us continuously in the never-sleeping “wired tight” world of hyperconnectedness—where all “lines / hook up” and “big corporations...promote / napless fatigue/ in a pantheon of work states”—and constantly adjusts and readjusts its own tracking, Not in the effort to maintain a stable image, like one does while watching videos on the VCR, but to deliberately introduce patterns of growing and subsiding dissonance: “frequencies rap out / larger and larger.” “INTERFERE.” The irony here is not that of ascending but falling: a profoundly *affective* set-toward the world in its own right (the “felt politics” of Swift—YES), rather than a mere substitution for the affect which, according to Jameson in his classic essay on postmodernism, has purportedly weakened or waned. This is the kind of sincerity—the sincerity of one’s oppositionality, of one’s desire to intervene and interfere—*only* irony can make possible.

Yours,
Sianne

* * *

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Up next: summer response issue & the Fall 2000 series (t.b.a.). "PhillyTalks" invites two poets to begin a dialogue on each other's work, then have the resulting exchange published in newsletter form & made available to readers prior to the event. The poets, following their poetry reading, informally extend their dialogue. The audience then joins in. A future newsletter will feature a transcript of the event, as well as written responses to previous newsletters. Produced with indispensable help of the poets, Writers House staff & volunteers; funded by subscribers (\$12/5 issues) & by the Kelly Writers House (<http://www.english.upenn.edu/~wh>) at University of Pennsylvania. Copyright © reverts to authors on publication. For further info, please email lcabri@dept.english.upenn.edu, or write: Louis Cabri, 529B - 19 Ave SW, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2S 0E3.