A Video that Questions the Primacy of Narrative

John Conomos

To appreciate *Techno/Dumb/Show*`s sumptuous multifaceted conceptual and textual complexities we need at the outset to mention how it was constructed. Working together John Gillies and the Sydney Front wanted to do a work that went beyond the form and vocabulary of the conventional documentary, to create a work that would delineate the pleasurable gestural theatricality of performance, and suggest, in the process, the chaotic order of performance as well. Thus, the works dynamic intertextual aesthetic tries to avoid the compulsion to create a narrative text, in the more traditional sense of the term, and provides a highly sensuous and thought provoking audio-visual architecture where the spectator encounters a whole array of different theatrical gestures and in tense emotions constituting a veritable labyrinth of dislocation, pleasure, reverie and vertigo. Gestures evoke the melodramatic character of performance in the classic narrative cinema (particularly the silent era) and the theatre.

More specifically, both Gillies and the Sydney Front worked on an improvisatory basis over three months, where Gillies as director was not so much concerned to exercise tight control over the content and shape of the work but, in collaboration with the Sydney Front, fulfill a role something akin to Renoir's definition of filmmaker as sleepwalker - someone who allows the poetry of chance and dialogue to slip through the net of directorial intent. The individual performers were able to direct themselves and capture some of the more improvisatory and emotional aspects of their performances.

Techno/Dumb/Show`s extraordinarily allusive and elaborate images and sound speak not only of video`s postmodernist aesthetic of temporality but also suggest the art form`s conceptual and formal plasticity in connecting with other and different art forms. Aside from references to melodrama, cinema and painting, we can also see how the work`s polyvalent textuality borrows ideas and experimental forms from the art movements of early twentieth century Modernism. Black and white images of crouched male and female bodies moving along an imaginary axle facing the spectator connote Futurism`s aesthetic of speed and its attendant cult of the new. These bodies, hurtling along with flickering lights in the background, form one of the key sequences of the work and enhance its underlying concern to portray the heightened emotionalism and gestural pleasures of performance: echoing Vertov`s cinema and the Russian avant-gardes of the twenties, and more recently, Paik`s video (I`m thinking especially of *Global Groove*, 1973).

What impresses is the work`s formal deftness, exploring through colour, image, performance, space and sound the aesthetic and cultural parameters of performance as excess, and at the same time, contextualising this project in relation to other media. There is at play in *Techno/Dumb/Show* an experimental push to stretch the imagistic and sonic language of video and enunciate new and improvisatory riches. In terms of video installation it is simple in its sculptural mode:

overhead projection, a large screen and two small speakers on either side of the screen. It works as an installation because it astutely focuses on the video`s images and sounds. What is significant in the dark architectonics of the installation space is the cacophonous soundtrack of clanging bells, boat and car horns, people crying, laughing and applauding, determining the look of each sequence of people waiting anxiously by a phone, whispering to one another, frozen in Duras-like positions, dialing phones, swinging on ropes and conducting an (off-screen) symphony orchestra as exaggerated burlesque parody. Close-ups of faces are emphasized in their various performative expressions, close-ups that remind you or Acconci, Campus and Oldenbach. The contrapuntal aesthetics of the soundtrack in certain passages also evokes the aural stylistics of concrete music.

Visually and sonically this is a work that is notable for the elaborate refinement and conceptual open-endedness in questioning the primacy of narrative in twentieth century art and culture. Further *Techno/Dumb/Show* succeeds as experimental video because it challenges the spectator to question traditional definitions of melodrama, naturalism and performance and contemplates an aesthetics of the body and its manifold gestural pleasures that go beyond the troubling strictures of Aristotelian dramaturgy. This is a video that poses questions it does not pretend to answer; this is a video that is alive to the multiple conceptual and ironic registers of its own title.

Bio:

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