

FORM AND CONTENT: The Continuing Use Value of Dialogue

by Abigail Child

Issues of form and content are haunting me right now. Robert Creeley's "form is never more than an extension of content," or Louis Sullivan's earlier dictum: "form ever follows function" or Shaker founder Ann Lee's directive: "every force evolves a form". These quotes seem thoughtful, provocative, *somewhat* or *partially* accurate—and then the fine tuning of these thoughts or the poly-prismatic potential of an extended form, a form that might reveal the turning of thought, a digressive functioning or 'active theory' seem challenging and more appealing. Not the starkness of dichotomies. We look instead for an art that might encompass the (w)hole of things, their veritable partials, a four-dimensional fractal that could haunt time, a non-holy perforated segment of glorious and non-glorious moments.

All this as I aim to complete *RIDING THE TIGER: Letters from Capitalist China*. I have moved from a singular voiceover into a polyphony of voices, each reading [imaginary] letters from the filmmaker, questioning, reporting, theorizing on the events and disruptions/dislocations of life in China today. So many things to consider: tone, pronunciation, comprehensibility, lowering and raising of the voice, emphasis, establishment of 'person' and context, timing, placement. The story, apocryphal or not, that it took seventy-two 'takes' to get de Niro's monologue for *Taxi Driver* consoles me. Of course Thelma Schoonmaker (the editor) had a recording booth located (likely) near her editing station and assistants to transfer (digitize today) her edit tracks. Still and all, techne is fast, here and now; it's the decisions that *take* time.

One might describe decisions as an aesthetic superstructure. If so, it is the base or infra structure that interests me as well. Becomes the thing I want to "mess up". Nada Gordon responds to the above quotes with the following: "It's a false binary (Form/Content), as content is/makes form. That is, content is formed, and is shape-making. "Form" and "structure" are too often confused: hence, perhaps the haunting. Creeley was wrong. Form is not an "extension" of content (i.e..

something extra) but is intrinsic to it. Sullivan seems here to be talking about furniture, not poetry, or other art.”

I might agree form is not an “extension” of content, not only NOT something extra, not something that explodes out of content, new or not. And I wouldn’t disagree that these —form and content—might be false binaries. That’s implied in my first paragraph’s last sentence. Yet I would disagree that content is “simply” formed and is shape-making. My disagreement is based on my sense of the social, the implementation of the infrastructure of form, the *invisibility* of the cultural set that performs the forming—before content— and the power of these invisibilities to let us think our content *is* the shaping.

Take Gordon’s work for instance. I would suggest the form of Gordon’s poetics is shaped not by content per se but by the page and line, in part by the traditional format of book printing. In *FOLLY* (Segue), the works’ range is held together by an aching comic sharp-witted tongue and Gordon’s alertness to and ironic re-statements of both poetic tradition and feminine hi-jinx. Many poems are a page or two, and the line breaks and shaping seem mostly page-based. Not ‘breath based’ a la Olson; rather their constraints seem to lie within a body typing into a computer within a page format: thus, the body at work, how long can it continue its research before the next student arrives; the body, a bit ache-y today, what is it looking for? Microsoft word or simple text aids the process, with its traditional page structure. So that —the form appears subjective, rising out of content, but in fact has an infrastructure behind it based on page and perhaps time within the work-week that Gordon has to write.

A more recent set of poems from Gordon that I experience at an early unpublished stage—her love poems. They are used by me in a collaboration with Gordon that resulted in the five-minute film *LIGATURES* (2009). Here Gordon’s pages were half filled, with full and broken lines: clever, maudlin, ironic, angry, ambiguous, un-self-deceived. Large parts of her vocabulary came from web-located romantic love poems: earthy, comic and unexpected: “*is this a triangle within liquescence?butteriness....shimmying....gargoyle....A croon in this twinkly holomorph?*”. Here

several initial 'structures' are operative: the web itself, what's available, what's found; Gordon's time which seemed to be stolen from work; the resultant half-full page itself with its unequal lines, redolent with content and plaintive reference to the 'missing' other. Did the content shape these poems? There seems to be a much more complicated *give and take* in this creation, modeled on a number of different forces: the eye, the body, the page, the printer, the format of the web itself, Gordon's associative mind/eye/ear. For the film I ended up taking single or two words from almost every page by Gordon, using three phrases lifted entire to her writing, otherwise montaging among her vocabulary, using my own associative mind/eye/ear. Thus, for the film, the page was an originary source; while the word became a 'brick' or sign, suggestive signified that could un-anchor the image against itself, pin it up and release it, unsettle the image, cold-shoulder the image, thrust up against a two-dimensional universe of 'stills' of 'girls' from early in the 20th century— and in this conjoining make a four-dimensional slip up, an off spring, a hy-brid, a caco-phony, unsettling, a new (hi)story of sexuality.

Form and content seem inherently *and*, an intermix not binary but polygonal, not two but multiple, not confrontational or opposite, but apposite and twisting, unlegislated Yes but ultimately shaped by the invisible multiple directionalities inside the originary processing. Not unlike a good collaboration.

Take another collaboration: *THE CHAMP* by Kenward Elmslie (The Figures) with drawings by Joe Brainard. The piece is a mis-translation of Raymond Roussel prose. The vocabulary transformed into local, quotidian, gossipy, lyric, often pastoral Americana. The lines are short, free verse in quatrains (mostly) until the last three stanzas which are five lines each. The words are often declarative, subject-verb-object and then not: a listing of nouns, inequalities, surrealist shuddering, jumbles. But never a *sublimated* surrealism, suggesting dream or other in-the-sky imagism. Rather a continuous outpouring of daily movement and comic combo: "a homosexual platter" ranging over *everything*, unfit to be tied, romping, pearled, drugged, kissing the river. The content not so much random as mis-translated, associative—a whole set of structures between French and English, experience and knowledge, person and reference—re-enclosed into stanzas. The form not new,

neither the vocabulary, but the resulting poetic structure a kind of multi turning “all-over post-anthropomorphizing!” to quote Bruce Andrews. Human, social, comic, contemporary. Within this play, the irony is dear, the embrace wide and comfortable, the language neither aristocratic nor abstract—*Always bells*. There is a sweetness in this poetic mis-mash, a translation made under meritorious strategies: “ A big kiss, the best part, will part/the route across the platform for each part.”

So parts that move across; the form outside the content to an extent, *shaping* content, *housing* content one might say, while the originary impulse is a matter of open signifiers reflected associatively through a poet’s knowledge and ignorance (?) of French. Here prose acts as a web of potential. Shouldering a subjective jumble, crossing grumpy dust to basin. As closure: “Hot milk tidied up the attendant’s pot.” The stanzas sustain a drift of dailiness, a humane saga: diffuse. “Forget the moment,/gypsies, the sun, the evenings, the world.”

The pictures that accompany the text by Joe Brainard are equally daily, line drawings in black and white that capture the quotidian with delicacy and emotional nuance to match Elmslie’s language. A baseball pitcher on the field, thoughtful, perhaps defeated or having just let in a run? His back sags. The girl’s hair so neatly tied with a perfect bow, speaking concisely to a moment in time and life when ends are tied up, within family. Both Brainard and Elmslie capture slippery ignored smallnesses of life’s delights: “smiling tomato” while someone “is showering upstairs”. The poem then of the day and its interstices, its overabundance contained by a structure, not content-driven per se to *make* structure, but rather utilizing historical poetic structures to contain a parallel imagined embrace, form used to escape constraints, attending to this world’s gifts: “magnificent silhouettes await you.”

How recognize how the invisible shapes you? Then, how escape constraints of the *invisible?* “

As a filmmaker, I particularly recognize how myself and fellow citizens are vulnerable to illusion machines: the fiction normalized, the standard shaping form.

For example, *The Wire*, long form television at its best. Already breaking TV structure by continuing, by not wrapping up its stories after each hour, to begin again and again, as if on a treadmill, so many mice at home in America. This more like a 19th century novel: in parts that go on and on and on and on. But yet, ultimately it is TV, and what do I mean by that? A box, a sizing, always dialogue, not enough visual surprises, plot and event twisting across time yes with great acting, truthful neo-realism.....yet, maybe...that it ends for the next show? That it is slotted? The sublimation of the real in the model? *The Wire* is great within its form. No question about it. But it makes me understand more deeply perhaps why the time-artists of the late 60s and 70s, seizing on TV's increasingly form-u-liz-ing moment(s) of our communal screen, made expanded durational pieces, that sprawl ambitiously and out of control throughout the culture landscape: whether Morton Feldman or Ken Jacobs or Michael Snow or Lamont Young. A kind of *why not?* But also *take that*.

What do we need now?

Our face to the mirror? Our face in the sand? Our face to the other? Our face to the ground? Sending money to Haiti is essential —but I want to destabilize the infrastructure, remake it —so a Haiti-as-is doesn't happen in the future.

to be continued—

BLUEPRINT #3

I would like to put this on film.

That is my obsession.

I have a good idea of how I would too.

It would look something like this:

Three dimensional images made from music to correspond to large and small, fat and thin, think bright white and darkest red sounds, spiky sounds, soft cloud sound indirectly represented as tonal layers of pitch sound with appropriate color. Forests of spiky sound, dark staccato and light stalagmite as synth introducing a cue line. Perhaps drum walls formed in deepest electric street cities.

I envision the pulse of the last machine.

I've got to synthesize a new one. A mutant combo or an emulator display. A limitless ado, an edit, a to be had. With these facilities I inflect a bit of imagination into direct file still music seen.

That you relate to it is less

than the possible sum of its affects. Whether or not music swells for reaction shots.

I like it a lot. I have no idea why this is true. But the film made me think of eggplant.

Light linked to time. Light regulates time.

Once upon time

beats edits charged during moments of black during which sound jumps double in pace and returns to original. Pull represents flowers' prelude. Chaos first itself your counter then your fluid machines a new one shoots itself light and fence advance.

He's got her *buffaloed*.

I think fenced-in flowers represent heaven.

Another foreground, green focus to focus. Moon moves to that. Sky and moon exist together. Moon shines times it. So a musical mailbox alliance quartet. Reset depends beams down as well.

Feel of a doc of a real is presented sound. Sounds are open, whites out non-edited time atop mind reminded of. Radio being angle eight.

Colors seem to say *kiss me*.

A concurrence, a real concrete, a mini epiphany of little middlemen
missed maid man misses. Stresses family as venter of theater
pitching form undefined prowlers' defiant. Water etcetera an intense
leaf left. Murder is suspect.

Machines kill train. In soft four-photo history moves out. A gun pages
magazine. Prank eats favorite, ransoms baby reads on.

Reasoning splices. Structure becomes a possible friction

Editing strategy a blue print on how friction is achieved.

I thought I would address you all in black and white.

I decompose differently

Energy and anger

aging anti cartoons. We disown this.

Sectioning musicality

Subjectivity hammers his dog

Goes further into the past each time

A study on how things aren't.

