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### **A Radical Sense of Form: Against organic unity, or Notes for discussion of Broomer's films**

This all-too-brief theoretical note concerns a mode of construction that, despite its current importance, has hardly been considered in critical discourse. Its contemporary relevance is largely the result of its close relationship to permutational or algorithmic methods and to forms that make use of the unvarying repetition of a modulus or group of moduli. Beyond this reason for its importance, this mode of construction should have commanded widespread interest for the sweeping challenge it offers to received ideas about art and art-making. Alas, that has not been the case.

Among the filmmakers who have used this form of construction is Stephen Broomer. This essay is also propaedeutic to an examination of his work. Were this mode of construction better understood, I would call on that awareness to analyse his body of work. However, that understanding is not commonly available, so all I can do is offer preliminaries to analysis, in the form of a few superficial theoretical observations about a mode of construction he favours and asides about its importance. I hope that this essay on the implications of a sort of construction that is common in his work might inspire another film analyst to under that close analysis they deserve. Or, what would be better still, I hope that I can leave that analysis as an exercise for the reader.

Basic to this form of construction is the belief that the integration of an artwork need not result in an organic unity: artists proposed, almost militantly, that the relations among the juxtaposed units in this new art would be entirely external: the elements would remain what they are—they would not be transformed internally—when they enter into relations with other units. There was work in the 1920s that anticipated this development, but by the mid-1960s, serial art, serial painting, systems art and systematic painters were aggressively bodying forth a new sort of artistic unity, based on simple geometric configurations that are repeated with little or no variation. That work relied on readily apprehensible arrangements of basic elements (stark lines and simple geometric shapes, often mechanically produced) and voids (binary structures, opposing presence and absence were common); such readily apprehensible configurations of the basic elements were often generated algorithmically (as algebraic permutations of a set, for example). Lawrence Alloway's 1966 show for the Guggenheim Museum, *Systematic Painting*, announced this development to the world at large. These approaches would influence the work—and polemical advocacy—of new media and cybernetic artists (such as Jer Thorp) who plump for “rule-based art.”

By 1970, the sculptor Carl Andre could identify the fundamental tension in his own art-making as that between plastic and clastic tendencies, which he characterized as follows: “plastic is flowing of form, and clastic means broken or preexisting parts which can be put together or taken apart without joining or cementing.” The term Andre's has adopted here, clastic, comes from the Greek κλαστικός (klastikos), meaning broken; the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that in geology it means “consisting of broken pieces or of older rocks” and in anatomy “composed of a number of separable pieces.”

Let's take 1966, the year of the *Primary Structures* exhibition at New York's Jewish Museum as the moment that marks the institutional recognition of clastic art. The art of the preceding two decades had been overwhelmingly plastic in character, reflecting an enthusiasm for *compenetrazione* that suggested a higher realm of organic unity that subsumes all particulars. Nonetheless, as I have noted, in the 1910s and 1920s, a sizeable number of artists brought into question the belief that the unity suitable to a work of art is necessarily organic, which each element or quality being changed inwardly by forming relations with other elements or qualities of the work. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, artists in considerable numbers began to advocate for new form of unity,

one appropriate to the mechanical technology that seemed to many at the time to represent the most advanced stage of economic and cultural development. The technological unity they advocated—and this truly was a revolution in the arts—involved the assembly of standardized units. In a mechanical artwork (or an artwork whose unity has a mechanical, rather than an organic character), the elements assembled are not changed inwardly by being formed into a whole any more than the nuts and bolts of a machine are transformed by being integrated into a machine.

Various factors (including the rise of the electrologic paradigm and the rise to prominence of esoteric traditions) contrived to usher this conception from centre stage. By the mid-1960s, it returned with a vengeance. Among those who asserted the importance of this form of unity was the sculptor Carl Andre (who likes to remind us that he grew up in the industrial town of Quincy, Massachusetts). But Carl Andre did not start out as a sculptor, but rather as a poet. And the poet he most admired, and elected to apprentice himself to, was Ezra Pound.

Let's consider Pound's example, and consider what Andre might have learned from it. I'll choose Canto 83 for my example.

the sage  
delighteth in water  
the human man has amity with the hills

as the grass grows by the weirs  
thought Uncle William *consiros*

as the grass on the roof of St. What's his name  
near "Cane e Gatto"  
soll deine Liebe sein

it would be about a-level the window  
the grass would, or I dare say above that  
when they bless the wax for Palio

Olim de Malatestis  
with Maria's face there on the fresco

This clearly is an assemblage of a new sort: as Andre notes, "no poet before Pound wrote in the form he created." We could almost say any of the cantos after the first fifteen, that "any arbitrary element can follow any other." Certainly, nothing in the novel syntax he worked out prevents any element from following any other, though, of course, the unique semantics (capturing thought processes) entails that some juxtapositions will be more resonant than others. To show that, I comment on the passage—but want to make it clear that my commentary on that work draws extensively on Carroll F. Terrell's glosses on the poem (in *A Companion to **The Cantos** of Ezra Pound*). First, "the sage/ delighteth in water/ the humane man has amity with the hills": the cross-references among the three lines suggest Pound's commitment to Confucian ethics—sitting in a cage near Pisa (under arrest for treason), Pound attempts to renounce striving and to accept the world he was given. He is helped in this by a passage from the *Analects* (IV, 21). "He [Kung] said: "This wise delight in water, the human delight in the hills. The knowing are active; the humane, tranquil; the knowing get pleasure, and the human get long life." Then, "as the grass grows by the weirs/ thought Uncle William": the "William" here is William Butler Yeats, who, in "Down by the Sally Gardens" wrote: "She bid me take my life easy." What justifies making a connection between the Yeats's work and the passage from the *Analects* is that both advise tranquility: "as the grass grows on the weirs;/ But I was young and foolish [I didn't take the lesson of tranquility —no doubt the caged Pound was feeling just that], and now am full of tears." That last

phrase provides the semantic ground for the next juxtaposed term, *consiros* or with grief. The term appears in a Provençal passage incorporated into Dante's *Commedia (Purgatorio, XXVI, 144)*: "Ieu sui Arnautz , che plor e vai cantan;/ Consiros , vei la passada follor,/ E vei jauzen lo joi qu'esper denan;/ Aras vos prec , per aquella valor/ Que us guida al som sens freich e sens calina,/ Sovegna vos atenprar ma dolor." The lines mean, "I am Arnaut [one of Pound's favorite poets, and with whom, at this juncture, he doubtless identified], who weep and go singing. Grieved I see the past folly [there is the semantic ground for the connection with the passage from Yeats's "Down by the Sally Gardens"], and I see with pleasure the joy which I hope for in the future [the Confucian rewards for a life of tranquility and generosity]. Now I entreat you by that virtue which guides you to the summit without cold and without heat, that you will remember to assuage my grief." The reference to grass in the line from Yeats prompts Pound to think of grass in a different context: "As the grass on the roof of St. What's his name/ near 'Cane e Gatto.'" Cane e Gatto (The Cat and the Dog) is the intersection of two streets (each named after one of those animals), near San Giorgio, a cathedral in Pantaneto, Siena—so that explains the link to "St. What's his name." ("Soll deine Liebe sein" [is to be your love], by Carl Bohm, was a popular art song in the early twentieth century"; it proclaims that one's love should be as deep as the sea and as strong as steel.) But what explains "the grass on the roof"? The phrase relates to "about a-level to the windows" (though the close relation among them obscured by the apparently distant relations among the moduli internal to the poem): twice a year there is a horse-race in Siena —on July 2, for the Festival of Our Lady's Visitation and August 15, for the Festival of Our Lady's Assumption"; the horse-race is called the Palio, and Pound refers to it two lines after the reference to the grass on the roof being "a-level to the windows." Before the horse-races, there is a procession, issuing from San Giorgio, where "they bless the wax [candles] for Palio"; Pound is alluding to having watched the procession from the Palazzo Capuquadri Salimbene, whose first floor windows look over the church roof. "Olim de Malestestis [formerly of the Malestestas]/—the Palazzo Capuquadri Salimbene was once owned by the Maletesta family (Pound declared himself a pagan, and he believed that Sigismondo Maletesta was at the centre of a pagan erotic cult)—"with Maria's face there in the fresco": a face in a painting over one of the doors in one of the palazzo's halls reminded Pound of his daughter Maria's face (no doubt he regretted being relatively estranged from her).

The loosening of the bonds among the *Canto's* lexical units accounts for the fact that these units are not changed internally—at least not radically changed—as they enter into relations with other moduli in the artwork (in an organic artwork, the relations between the elements are so integral and complex they transform whatever they incorporate). Pound understood those implications more deeply than any of his predecessors and contemporaries, and more deeply than most of his followers. The loosening of the bonds between elements permits any element to follow any other. This idea was made explicit by Carl Andre's friend, Hollis Frampton, in what he humorously labelled Brakhage's theorem: "*For any finite series of shots ["film"] whatsoever, there exists in real time a rational narrative, such that every term in the series, together with its position, duration, partition, and reference shall be perfectly and entirely accounted for.*" Another way of saying this is to say that, given any sequence of shots, any arbitrary shot can be adjoined to it, and one can give a perfect and complete account of the new sequence (the sequence as it was before the shot was added, along with the new shot). As a way of attempting to spell out that idea, we can say that in any film (or, for that matter, any piece of serial art) any element can be adjoined to any other (though, of course, not with the same richness of implication). That new form of unity is a result of eliminating internal relations from the nexus of elements that compose a work of art and converting all relations to ones whose character is entirely external. One form of construction that highlights the possibilities resulting from the free juxtaposition of elements are those that result from repeating a single unit without variation (though of course the different units' places—relations—within the resulting configuration necessarily changes); another are those that result from permuting a set of basic moduli. Thus, Carl Andre often borrowed his material from external sources (for example, accounts of wars

against the First Nations of America, the *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, and biographies of Charles Lindbergh) which were then organized according to arbitrary systems (for example, an alphabetic system, in which words starting with a particular letter drop out, then words starting with another. Looking at a series of pages, we see repeated clusters of units changing position or being reorganized (and sometimes the constitution of these clusters being changed, as a unit will be dropped from or added to the grouping). The units themselves are not original, but the organizing system is.

Artists' use of such variational processes motivated Hugh Kenner to propose in "Art in a Closed Field" that poets and novelists of the modern era redefine the boundaries of their respective practices by selecting specific elements from the medium with which they work (or, alternatively, from their environment) and ordering them according to laws or rules of their own devising. Kenner describes this method as involving the arrangement of a finite set of elements within a closed field. For Kenner, the modernist aesthetic is based on the linguistic paradigm of a combinatorial process within a closed field, where what is important is the generation of novel syntactic relations. He connects this sense of composition to machine translation, about which he states, "to program a translating machine . . . you must treat each of the two languages as (1) a set of elements and (2) a set of rules for dealing with those elements." (Consider Carl Andre works: many of his sculptures consist of a quantity of identical units—bricks, concrete blocks, metal plates—that are arranged in forms that can be notated using simple and elegant mathematical patterns.) "These rules, correctly stated, will generate all possible sentences of the language to which they apply, and of this concept the sentences in a given book may be regarded as special cases." One of the works that Kenner uses to elucidate his ideas is Gustav Flaubert's *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Of it, he writes that it "does but repeat the same small cyclic motion, study, enthusiasm, practice, disaster, over and over until it has used up all the things that the curriculum affords us to study: a closed field of plot consuming a closed field of material." This is what a composition by the unit and the interval make possible. And film is the art of the unit and the interval. This conception of the nature of composition ("putting together") is the primary theoretical basis for working with algorithmic processes, which has won the allegiance of recent artists—and behind that theory is the artistically revolutionary conception of the unit and the interval. Kenner notes Gustave Flaubert's interest in lexicographic structures (an interest Flaubert shared with Hollis Frampton and Carl Andre)—which interest I see developing out a sense of composition as reliant on the unit and the interval.

The dictionary takes discourse apart into separate words, and arranges them in alphabetical order. It implies that the number of words at our disposal is finite; it also implies that the process by which new words are made has been terminated. Hence, the persistent lexicographical concern, from Johnson's day to nearly our own, with fixing the language. That Shakespeare had no dictionary and that he was less occupied with words than with a continuous curve of utterance are corollary phenomena . . . Flaubert, the connoisseur of the *mot juste*, comes to terms with the fact that, whatever printed discourse may be modeled on, it is assembled out of the constituents of the written language; and the written language has been analysed, by a long process which took its inception with the invention of printing, into . . . two desiderata: a closed field, and discrete counters to be arranged according to rules.

Regarding such lexicographic enthusiasms, he notes, of James Joyce's masterwork, *Ulysses*:

The closed set of words which we call the book's vocabulary was most deliberately arrived at. It was not simply Joyce's own vocabulary, but one that he compiled. And the rules by which the words are selected and combined are not the usual rules that used to be said to govern the novelist.

The traditional novelist is governed by some canon of verisimilitude regarding the words people actually use and by a more or less linear correspondence between the sequence of his statements and the chronology of a set of events. In "Ulysses" the events are very simple, and are apt to disappear beneath the surface of the prose; the style, as the book goes on, complicates itself according to laws which have nothing to do with the reporting of the visible and audible; and again and again we find Joyce inserting a word, or a combination of words, precisely so that he can allow it to carry a motif, as in music, by simply repeating it on a future page. System, in fact, sometimes took precedence over lexicography.

Such combinatorial processes are fundamental to Stephen Broomer's work as well. He, too, works by the unit and the interval. Other papers in this collection will highlight the importance of these processes in his work.