

3a~Alan Gilbert to Nancy Shaw.**Notes on “Cultural Poetics”**

Nancy—

March 9, 2000

Techno DJ extraordinaire Jeff Mills is playing at Twilo here in New York City tomorrow night. I'm tempted to go because I'm a fan of his work. He is, at heart, a kind of structuralist DJ. The strength of this approach is that he's constantly investigating the formal properties of techno music in particular and dance music in general. In this sense, his three *Waveform Transmission* CDs are studies for a larger, ongoing project – ongoing, because of its conceptual quality and intellectual tenacity. Thus, his work injects a theoretical element into “electronica” and “dance,” genres that all-too-frequently champion various types of anti-intellectualisms and easy feel-goodisms.

Yet Mills's structuralist orientation partially substitutes a timeless now of formalist interrogation for the revisionist history that is a large part of what DJs do. For a related alternative to this formalist approach, compare Carl Craig and his Innerzone Orchestra's *Programmed* CD. With its mix of jazz and techno, past and future, local and global, it pushes “electronica” into a hybridized tomorrow. Its historical grounding finds reference in versions of songs from the past three decades and decades yet to be imagined – from the '70s “People Make the World Go Round” by The Stylistics, to Craig's own early '90s “Bug in the Bass Bin” (which was a major influence on the decade's underground drum'n'bass phenomenon), to the 21st-century “Blakula.”

Mills's song “Workers” on *Waveform Transmission, Vol. 3* references the poundingly repetitive aspect of assembly line automation (specifically, the car factories of his Detroit hometown) and combines it with eruptions of scrambled data, along with the experience of capitalist labor as a discipline imposed on the human body. With Mills, it's the form of work that's investigated, with a lesser focus on the larger contexts that create and perpetuate these conditions.

—Alan

Nancy—

March 10, 2000

One of the biggest challenges facing those interested in articulating a cultural poetics is not falling back on a reductive one-to-one correspondence between a text/cultural product and its context. However thoroughly the historical/social/economic conditions of a cultural product are examined, they don't in themselves sufficiently exhaust its meaning, precisely because there's no such thing as an in-itself (including language). At the same time, the limitations inherent in an exclusively textual-based approach to cultural products are signaled by the relatively recent use of phrases such as “cultural poetics” and “cultural materialism” in response to some of postmodern poetry's formalist excesses.

In the copy you sent me of the talk entitled “Cultural Poetics” you gave at SUNY Buffalo's Poetics Program in March of last year, you focus on this relationship between text and context. Using as a model Raymond Williams's blending of New Criticism's focus on close reading with a historical materialist interest in socio-economic processes, you argue for an approach to both the writing of and thinking about poetry that doesn't abandon the notion of language as materiality, but doesn't go on to reduce all forms of materiality to language, or conceive of all social formations as discursive ones. This allows for a flexible definition of materiality that doesn't essentialize in either extreme, i.e., that all material and social conditions are a product of – or even find their most fitting analogy in – discourse and language; or, conversely, that discourse and language (and ideology in general) are solely the products of determining economic conditions.

I think it's useful – particularly in regard to literary artifacts – to think of these relationships between language and materiality as much in terms of the influence of ideological processes as material ones. Does this, then, move us back into the domain of idealism, or is there a way of thinking about the symbolic realm as having a power over social conditions without abandoning the historical materialist spirit that is – as in Raymond Williams's case – at the heart of a “cultural poetics”? The question is obviously a rhetorical one, but I'm curious as to your own thinking about these issues. In doing so, maybe you could

expand on your incisive description of the ways in which “text and context are read in terms of their organizing modalities intended to render a specific account of a text’s location in a competing array of social and cultural relations.”

—Alan

Nancy—

March 11, 2000

Iconoclasm in general is an act of violence against a symbol representing a particular system of political or social power. During the Reformation, Protestants said they were smashing religious icons because these images represented both idolatry and the disgracing of sacred figures, when in fact what they were attempting to deface and destroy was a naturalized, rigid social hierarchy in which all forms of mobility – horizontal and vertical – were mediated and had to be approved by the proper authorities. When state sponsored Communism collapsed in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late '80s, many statues and monuments of Communist leaders were toppled as well. Others were defaced. Some were written upon. Along with the phrase “We are innocent” that someone painted on the pedestal of a statue of Marx and Lenin in Berlin, Dario Gamboni describes a statue of Marx in Moscow: to its original inscription “‘Proletarians of all countries, unite!’ was added ‘in the fight against communism!’, before ‘please forgive me!’ was painted over both ‘unite!’ and the first graffito.”

Advertisements for consumer products took the place of a number of the removed monuments, verifying Gamboni’s “distinction between iconoclasms ‘from above’ and ‘from below’.” What is remarkable about the iconoclasms directed at official monuments in the former Communist countries is that many of them were preceded by strenuous public debate over the value and meaning of the act. Graffitied monuments are just a small sliver of this discourse. I think it’s important to note that there wasn’t a similar level of public debate – or any public debate at all – concerning the decision to put commercial advertisements in their place.

—Alan

Nancy—

March 12, 2000

If Shelley called poets “the unacknowledged legislators of the World” (“A Defence of Poetry”) and George Oppen described them as “legislators // of the unacknowledged // world” (*Primitive*), then what is the role for poets in a “cultural poetics”? Shelley and Oppen’s respective definitions of the poet were informed by a belief in the power of artists and intellectuals to shape the political culture around them. With the rise of the mass media and the eviction of an intellectual elite from the halls of power, the work that poets, artists, and intellectuals do has been transformed. Starting in the late 17th-century, intellectuals and artists began to be conceived of and began to define themselves as legislators. Part of their duties was to root out localism, folk traditions, and cultural differences in the name of what was soon to be known as an Enlightenment society structured according to universalized rational principles:

Popular, locally administered ways of life were now constituted, from the perspective of universalistic ambitions, as retrograde and backward-looking, a residue of a different social order to be left behind; as imperfect, immature stages in an overall line of development toward a ‘true’ and universal way of life, exemplified by the hegemonic elite; as grounded in superstition or error, passion-ridden, infested with animal drives, and otherwise resisting the ennobling influence of the truly human – shortly to be dubbed ‘enlightened’ – order. Such a redefinition placed the elite, for the first time, in a position of a collective *teacher* on top of its traditional role as the collective *ruler*. Diversity of ways of life has become now a temporary phenomenon, a transient phase to be left behind in the effort aimed towards a universal humanity ...

Metaphorically, the kind of authority in which such a vision of the world established men of knowledge could be described as ‘legislative’. The authority involved the right to command the rules the social world was to obey; and it was legitimized in terms of a better judgment, a superior knowledge guaranteed by the proper method of its production.

(Bauman “Legislators”; emphasis in original)

Now that this modernist project of universal rationalization has been a) abandoned, b) critiqued, c) exposed as never having occurred, d) continued on a much more modest scale, e) transformed into a global economics, or f) _____, the notion of poets as legislators has shifted as well. Perhaps in order to make up for previous attacks on local differences, pluralism, and competing systems of knowledge, poetry now finds itself more answerable to the needs of particular communities. As Bauman writes: "The full history of the relentless suppression of locality- and class-related forms of life at home remains still to be written, though many long-forgotten alternative narratives have been unearthed in recent years."

Bauman continues way too optimistically: "[T]he effort to invalidate alternative traditions, forms of life, positive ideologies, cultures, etc. as erroneous, biased, or otherwise inferior, has been all but abandoned." Huh? The fact that it has *not* been abandoned all that much provides one mode of entry into a "cultural poetics." This entails poetry and poetry criticism being experienced differently within different contexts and communities. After honoring these differences, the point is to continue maintaining a dialogue between them.

—Alan

Nancy—

March 13, 2000

Hip-hop artist Jay-Z's alleged – though not yet proven – stabbing of a record executive in a club last December in New York City is an interesting example of Oscar Wilde's maxim that "Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life," since around the time of the attack Jay-Z's single "Do It Again (Put Ya Hands Up)," which narrates "the blood they can drip in the club," was in heavy rotation on Hot 97 FM, a popular hip-hop station in New York City. Jay-Z's remarkable production methods – including his off-balance rap style, with its heavy reliance on alliteration and both internal and slant rhymes, and equally off-kilter beats – help break down the distinctions between mainstream and non-mainstream that have become increasingly tenuous in other aspects of North American culture as well – independent filmmaking, poetry, etc. But what remains disturbing is that the stabbing is another example of the symbolic and literal transformation that tends to accompany underground cultures – in this instance, '90s club culture – when they move from more utopian aspirations to ones affecting empty thuggery. Didn't punk rock – or the Rolling Stones at Altamont, for that matter – sufficiently chart this journey already?

Maybe in the media-saturated era of the spectacle, history does not even have to repeat itself to occur as farce.

—Alan

Nancy—

March 14, 2000

In "The Modernist Document," a catalog essay for the photography exhibition you curated in Montréal last fall, you write: "As such, these artists engage the modernist document and its surrounding formations in order to produce culturally located forms of social and aesthetic research and critique." I think the site-specific element in this description is crucial to thinking about contemporary poetry. It also points to a way of rearticulating the relationship between poetry – and art in general – and politics. In response to strong showings in recent elections in Austria by the Freedom Party – with its xenophobic political program and public statements by recently-resigned FPOE leader Jörg Haider expressing approval of certain Nazi policies – the Austrian writer Robert Fleck posted a call on the Internet for artists to boycott Austria. In response, a group of mostly "Austrian artists and cultural workers," including the Canadian poet and critic Jeff Derksen, published a rejoinder on the Internet.

The collectively signed document argues:

The call to boycott Austrian artists and institutions is irresponsible, contraproductive and is equal to an incapacitation and generalization of actually active artists. The galleries, theatres and museums of Austria should now become a site for intensified social protest (from artists from every country) and not abandoned as contaminated sites. To abandon these cultural sites plays into the FPOE's isolationist and anti-cultural rhetoric; particularly at this moment, a renewed role for art as a materialization of social protest is called for, not a more passive boycotting.

Art possesses this capacity for immediate political action because of its flexibility in making ideological interventions. But art can only be one of many components of political protest, and no longer a vanguard one at that.

—Alan

Nancy—

March 15, 2000

In various best of the '90s music polls, the "alternative" super-group Nirvana finished near or at the top of many of them. When I first heard Nirvana almost a decade ago, I thought they sounded a bit like Bon Jovi meets Sonic Youth, though a number of music critics pointed to the song structures of '70s hard rock for a more relevant model. Had I the cultural cachet to participate in one of these best of the '90s musical surveys, I would have put the band Uncle Tupelo near the top of these lists. In any case, Nirvana was clearly synthesizing and making accessible various musical trends from the '70s and '80s, whereas Uncle Tupelo was drawing from a much more extensive musical background.

One of the original alternative country bands (a movement also known as "insurgent country," "grange rock," "y'alternative" ...), Uncle Tupelo was articulating blue-collar anger at the same time Nirvana became media darlings for refurbishing suburban teen-age angst. The title of Uncle Tupelo's third album, *March 16-20*, places the work firmly in its immediate historical conditions, as does the line, "They want us kinder and gentler at their feet," from the song "Criminals" – a reference to then-United States President George Bush's Gulf War era description of America as a "kinder and gentler nation." This absurd formulation found an eerie echo later in the decade when in the midst of NATO's bombing of Kosovo a spate of school shootings in the US prodded President Bill Clinton to ask US citizens to help fashion a less violent nation.

"Alternatives," as Uncle Tupelo "organically" realized, are contained in unwritten and unrecognized histories, frequently local in origin, though oftentimes universal in their aspirations to social justice. Their mass appeal is never a statistically analyzable consumer trend, which is part of what gives them their shimmering political edge.

—Alan

Nancy—

March 16, 2000

In the copy of your talk "Cultural Poetics," you also spend time addressing the issue of affectivity in experimental poetry, and how this might be distinguished from a more conventional lyrical impulse within mainstream and non-mainstream poetries. You focus much of this discussion on an essay that appeared in a previous issue of *Open Letter*: Sianne Ngai's "Raw Matter: A Poetics of Disgust." In your talk, you state: "Historically, the issue of affect has been devalued in avant garde poetics...." What are the reasons for this? Is it because affectivity is too quickly associated with the Romantic effusions of traditional lyric verse and an overly reductive identification of affectivity with stable conceptions of self? Is it because rationality as one of the primary structuring principles of modernity was too difficult for the avant-garde to completely abandon, despite its resistance to the conditions of modernity – from, say, Baudelaire until the beginnings of postmodernism? Or is it because affectivity has frequently been theorized as the domain of women, the poor, and minority groups, thereby paralleling the scorn contemporary media critics heap on some of the populist aspects of daytime talk shows such as *Jerry Springer*, *Rikki Lake*, *Montel Williams*, etc.?

In what ways would a renewed emphasis on affectivity connect – or not – with some of these issues? I think the interest in affectivity has something to do with a focus on lived experiences and the role affectivity plays in the daily negotiations, contestations, alignments, and resistances in which human subjects are always ideologically engaged, and not just during macrohistorical moments of society-wide significance. It's also a way of reclaiming a place for the body as one of the first and last lines of defense against the exercise of political power. These conjectures seem related to your own descriptions of affectivity in your talk, particularly the connection you make between "expression" and "social location."

—Alan

Nancy—

March 17, 2000

“A most important point has been promoted for some time by S.M. Eisenstadt in his seminal comparative study of civilizations. Eisenstadt insists that the very idea of the *social system* is in need of a radical reconsideration. He suggests that no human population is confined within a single system, ‘but rather in a multiplicity of only partly coalescing organizations, collectivities and systems’.”

Unlike the view found in many sociological and anthropological studies – namely that social systems are natural or given, and that they change through internal processes of differentiation – we stress that these systems are constructed through continuous process and that this construction is always both there and very fragile. ... These systems never develop as entirely self-enclosed ones. ... Different structures evince differences in organization, continuity and change and, together with their patterns may change to different degrees or in different constellations within the ‘same’ society.

“Thus the current sociological theory (at least in its most advanced versions) takes cognizance of the increasingly apparent plurality and heterogeneity of the sociocultural world, and on the whole abandons the orthodox imagery of a co-ordinated, hierarchized, deviance-fighting social system in favour of a much more fluid, processual social setting with no clear-cut distinction between order and abnormality, consensus and conflict” (Bauman “Sociological”)

—Alan

Nancy—

March 18, 2000

Upon first encountering Thievery Corporation’s *DJ-Kicks* CD, it’s easy to mistake it for an example of the “It’s all good” quality pervading much of contemporary “electronica” and “dance.” The liner notes describe the CD as “a mix suitable for smoke and seduction, audio countermeasures to deal [with] the tensions of cold, hard city life.” The CD is a mid-tempo mix of global beats and music from Jamaica, India, Brazil, London, Vienna, New York, Thievery Corporation’s hometown of Washington DC, etc. Is this an example of cultural hybridity or politically suspect appropriation? The fact that these sounds aren’t just sampled but stolen is alluded to in the first half of the duo’s name. The global economic conditions providing the license for this kind of approach can be found in the second half.

Culture is always political, and if the globalization of capitalism has any positive side whatsoever, it’s that it makes all politics immanent. I would distinguish this process to a certain degree from the aestheticization of culture accompanying the spread of global capitalism. Socially engaged art doesn’t aim to aestheticize culture, but to culturize aesthetics. Within the limits of their method, this is what Thievery Corporation does. They take the techno/house/DJ/electronica format and expand its cultural dimensions. They’re obviously not the first to do this, yet their project is closely interrelated with and comments on larger cultural and economic conditions in late ’90s North America. Leisure + art = lounge isn’t typically the soil in which a progressive politics takes root, but in the shadow of the United States Capitol building, every little bit helps.

—Alan

Nancy—

March 19, 2000

In regard to the way in which you frame the work discussed in your catalog essay “The Modernist Document” as investigating different artistic modes of critique in relation to previous aesthetic strategies and cultural constellations, I’m reminded of Martha Rosler’s comment in a recent interview with Benjamin Buchloh: “The incipient collapse of high modernism precipitated a search for new ways of knowing and representing, and new ways of reaching audiences. At that point everything was ‘heterodox’: there is no one source of knowledge, there is no one line of production.”

I think we’re currently in a similar type of situation in relation to high postmodernism.

—Alan

Nancy—

March 20, 2000

Without falling into a deterministic trap that would have the cultural and symbolic aspects of society be exclusively influenced by economic conditions, it's important to remember that aesthetic strategies are always accompanied by specific socio-economic conditions. Thus, the idea of "estrangement" – as formulated by Viktor Shklovsky in Russia in 1917 and which has played such a crucial role in 20th-century theories of the avant-garde – functions quite differently in a society such as Russia, which at the time was still in the process of emerging out of a near feudal social order and into the modern era, and a late 20th-century North American society in which estrangement is a fact of everyday life.

In late postmodern societies, it sometimes seems as if there's no longer any such thing as content, only varying degrees of information. This situation results in a very different type of estrangement than one created by a revolution seeking to overturn thousands of years of Russian history. Thus, I'm in agreement with you when you write in the "The Modernist Document": "[Q]ueries surrounding the status of the real and its representation are no less contentious today."

At the same time, it should be stressed that artistic communities don't exist because of shared sets of formal techniques or reading practices. They exist because of their complex relations to available resources. This is why it's important to keep foregrounded the question: What are the material and institutional conditions that allow you to do what you do? Or, as you write in "The Modernist Document": "At stake ... is the question of how art can best contribute to constructing livable realities, and conducting social critique." Do you consider these the same stakes for poetry as well?

—Alan