

■ Letter from Stockholm

Sally O'Reilly

The most difficult thing to prove is the absence of something. Whereas the vestiges of empiricism that lurk in most of us can identify the effect of a courageous action a mile off, the lack of action associated with cowardice is so ubiquitous as to be impossible to point at. We can measure the outcome of wilful resistance, for instance, but the impact of complicity is less easy to gauge. If courage can be characterised as a tendency towards change in a system that insists on stasis or the singular resistance to imposed change, then cowardice may be thought of as passive acceptance of a state.

Translate this into art practice and we appear to be having a discussion on the transgression of authoritarian division, or the avant-garde idea of progressive genre-bending. This is a debate currently underway in Stockholm: the question 'why are we all so damn cowardly here?' has been posed to a number of people involved in live art, theatre, dance and interdisciplinary performance, who will then present their thoughts on the matter in a series of public forums during the coming year. Formulating my own thoughts on the subject in the context of visual art was not straightforward, and involved asking myself whether art is an especially ethically driven mode of cultural production. However, it became clear in the ensuing discussion that the main subject of the organisers' enquiry was the institutional and financial structures that support the arts in Sweden. Perfect Performance Festival, which is organising the forums, works to infect the programmes of large state-run institutions, such as Kulturhuset and Modernamuseet, with less mainstream work that scrambles genre and frustrates easy consumption.

If we take the definition of genre to be the characterisation of form, style or purpose, it becomes an extension of the epistemological basis of the image along an ontological axis. When something is not identifiable as pertaining to a specific genre the viewer asks not only what is this representing, but what is this mode of representation? As an act of infiltration and protest against controlling institutions, a piratical approach to genre might be thought analogous to what Chris Townsend

describes as the images that 'ruptured the spectacle of our culture' in his recent feature 'Protest Art' [AM303]. With reference to Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri's *Empire*, 2000, and Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, 1967, he states that the images of the WTC atrocities and prisoners in Abu Ghraib reveal 'the incipient alienation created by that culture', whereas most art reinforces that spectacle. Rather than giving up on the possibility of art as a form of dissent, it is worth considering whether there might be a homeopathic method available to artists.

Townsend talks of art that 'aids rather than afflicts those powers we oppose because it offers the illusion of effective free speech and the right to protest', and of Modernism's legacy of art perceived as a utopian agent that generates democratic processes in the public sphere. Perhaps more effective than Townsend's example, El Perro's *Memorial (Serie Democracia)*, 2005 – which is an image-based, iconoclastic artwork for public consumption – is the negation of the image entirely and the use of hidden sectors of production and distribution for dissent. In *Empire* Hardt and Negri identify 'the hidden abode of production' rather than the 'noisy sphere of exchange' as the realm where social inequalities are more clearly revealed. Kajsa Dahlberg's video *20 mins (Female Fist)*, 2005, at Index, Stockholm, exposes an instance of an operational lack in both realms of production and exchange, and relays to us a project that readdresses just this. We watch a long, silent shot of some busy northern European city centre and the political implication of social networks and flux needs no further articulation: the scene of cursory interaction laced with mutual obliviousness is set. The lens cap is replaced, obliterating the scene, and a woman starts speaking: 'About two years ago, I and a few others decided that we would like to make a lesbian porn movie. It was going to be a porn movie made by lesbians, and by political activists as a non-profit collaboration. We were a group of political activists who wanted to act in it, and do the set design for the film. And the idea was that we would be an anonymous collective making this film as a contribution to lesbian culture. Because we think that lesbians are invisible, and that lesbian sexuality is invisible and when we make its acquaintance, it is only in the form of hetero-normative mainstream pornography in porn outlets. We wanted some pornography that we thought was hot, and that was made by someone

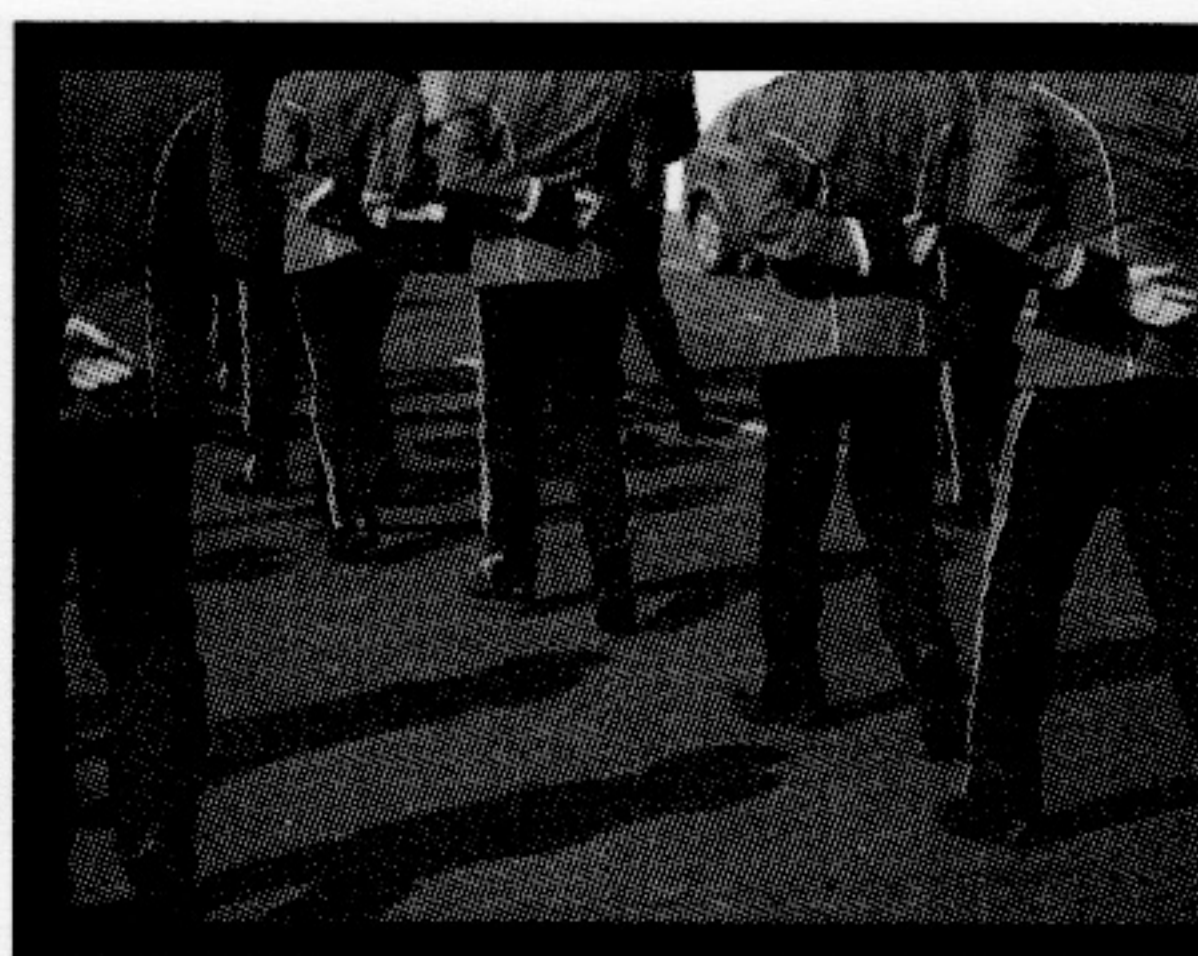
we knew was having a good time while making it.'

The speaker then goes on to outline how the porn video is distributed among women only, and only then if the recipient is felt to have deserved it in some way. Debord defines the spectacle as 'the omnipresent celebration of a choice *already made* in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice'. Here, though, the direct solution to a problem, the candour of the woman's speech and the straightforwardness with which Dahlberg represents this circumvention of predetermined choice cuts a swathe through mutual separation and alienation, relocating the mode of production back in the province of the individual.

The withdrawal of the speaker's identity – as well as footage of the porn film – is vital to the continuation and validity of the project. Although it is not a given that the removal of imagery automatically reverses Debord's evolutionary model of a culture of 'being' downgraded to one of 'having', then to one of 'appearing', it is instrumental in undermining the visual constitution of the spectacle. As the anonymous woman in *20 mins* says: 'When you've sort of found out that you don't fit into the norms for how you socialise yourself into society, what do you do then? There's nowhere to run ... How do you find yourself without operating with one of those essentialist notions of the self? For me, you do that by making some platforms; making some separatist rooms, some little, autonomous units, where you can just worship your deviance; where you don't seek a dialogue. You want a monologue ...'

Voice, not image, becomes a tool for struggle. Hardt and Negri specify such struggle as 'variables that act in the realm between the common and the singular, between the axiomatic of command and the self-identification of the subject, and between the production of subjectivity by power and the autonomous resistance of the subjects themselves.' These liminal zones would seem to feed better into a discussion of genre and its insurrection much more usefully than a discussion of imagery and its mismanagement. A video with no picture, then, is more than mere titillation, but the €20,000 question is whether the constitutions of the gallery, the market, the reviewer and the art press necessitate a reversion to imagery, albeit a blank image. ■

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Histrionics

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