RHETORIC

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MARCO BRAUNSCHWEILER
JIBADE-KHALIL HUFFMAN
KATE STECIW
MARTINE SYMS

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ARAN CRAVEY GALLERY

NOTES ON RHETORIC:
FOUR SIDES OF AN ARGUMENT

I.   Martine Syms

II.   Marco Braunschweiler

III. Jibade–Khalil Huffman

IV. Kate Steciw

0. RHETORIC OF THE SCREEN

Rhetoric brings together the work of four artists using lens based/screen based technologies in search of a new visual lexicon, entrenched in the historical aims of abstraction made contemporary through strategies of repetition and dislocation.

The screen suggests "liveness"—consider the terms "moving image," or "motion pictures,"—but it is ultimately static. What we encounter on a computer screen or television screen is a mess of code, signals filtered and restructured to appear familiar and vital. Reality is a distant memory, what is left is spectral replication.

I. "ACCEPT THE STRANDED, STRANGE, AND ILLEGITIMATE." [2]

"The televisual has been theorized as a 'repository of our knowing and as memory [...] mark[ing] a key moment in the partial transference of metaphysics into techno-cultural systems' conducting a 'reshaping of ways in which we see [...with] repercussions on the way that we think'."[3]

The work of conceptual entrepreneur Martine Syms is buoyed by a willingness to "accept myths as truth."[4] Syms questions reality and the making and reception of meaning through her multidisciplinary practice, which encompasses publishing, film/video, and performative pedagogy. An active part of her process involves appropriation and alteration of found text, video footage, or images, unmooring the image from its contextual, affective, and subjective burdens. Here, Syms simulates flipping through television channels, repurposing advertisements and listings culled from TV Guide. The flickering, repetitive sensation of moving from one neatly contained narrative to the next creates a glut of signifiers through which to wade. The edges of visual memory become less resolute, and are subject to confusion and total collapse. The televisual presents a multiplicity of entries and departures, which Syms puts in the service of defining possibilities for a culturally specific aesthetic tradition. That definition, however, remains assertively porous.

II. SYSTEMS OF REALITY

In a series of short videos, Marco Braunschweiler uses audio clips from a selection of speeches delivered by writer James Baldwin between 1963 and 1986. Braunschweiler removes the images altogether, leaving a rotoscoped white, shifting silhouette of Baldwin against a black background to contend with Baldwin's disembodied voice. A giant of American and expatriate literature, Baldwin delivered effective, incisive rhetoric to speak truth to the power of white supremacy in America, against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement. In a 1965 debate with conservative William F. Buckley, Baldwin speaks often of "systems of reality," the socio-cultural order of things that maintains structures of oppression that are as present today as they were 50 years ago. Forcing the viewer to concentrate closely on Baldwin's voice, without a clear visual point of reference, Braunschweiler subverts the televisual system of reality—the privileging of images and subjects onto which we project our fantasies and identifications.

III. THE BEGINNING IS THE END IS THE BEGINNING

Both image and text are destabilized in the work of Jibade-Khalil Huffman, whose practice spans installation, video, photography, performance, and most centrally, poetry. Recently, his installations layered multiple video and slide projections, without sequencing or syncing; all is complicated further by the presence of text or sound seemingly untethered to the visuals, yet nevertheless inscribes them with meaning through proximity. The delivery of text sometimes takes on the conventions of a karaoke monitor or teleprompter's scroll; the pacing is predetermined, but left open for interpretation. Huffman positions the viewer to take an active role in the experience of the work through his choices in staging, editing, and pacing. Improvisation is key, though every collision feels right. In the end, the viewer becomes the actor in a play of unresolved narrative.

IV. REFRACTIONS IN THE PLASTIC PULSE

Kate Steciw furthers the objecthood of photographs by wresting the image from the rectilinear conventions of printing and framing. The shaped frames of her choosing--irregular polygons and slices--reinforce the fragmentation approached in the images' composition. Recent gestures include placing frames upright on the floor in sculptural configurations, or on casters to move about a space--perhaps a reflection on (post)minimalist tendencies. The works on casters fold back into the contemporary discourse of how images and other content are collected and disseminated online--everything is in constant flux. Recirculation and dislocation of reference is of equal importance; Steciw uses stock imagery—found digitalia—and flattens all context, allowing disparate elements to commingle, bumping up and pushing back against each other. The transition from plane to plane of the images is seamless; even with much textural interest, cohesion prevails, even as a persistent state of rupture unfolds.

—— Ayesha B. Jones

1   See Philip Auslander's *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture.* New York: Routledge, 1999

2   See Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness.* Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012

3   Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness.* New York: Routledge, 2006. 35

4   Martine Syms, *"Black Vernacular: Lessons of the Tradition."* Lecture. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. March 18, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iug5T6YpLdk