

SOCIAL CHARACTER AND SOCIAL SCULPTURE IN JUDITH GOLDMAN & JENNIFER SCAPPETONE

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In “Notes against the Form of Appearance,” her contribution to *War and Peace: The Future*, Judith Goldman writes, “Truth is not enough: This / is just its Social Character.” The “Form of Appearance”—a “screen life” in which the transactions of the War Machine reify, sponsor, and sell both truths and selves “hidden in plain sight” (those of us safe in our nests *and* those vulnerably public)—draws our attention to both the screen itself and our willful collusion to, as Freud has it in her epigraph, “experience (the) present naïvely.” That we acknowledge the screen—that we pick it up and move it and put it back to protect ourselves from our experience of ourselves experiencing ourselves screened:

Let us now examine the residue
of my screen life:
From one of numerous starting Points
I am not applying myself,
I have not applied.
The innate structure needs your sponsorship
but how am I the one to see the thing transacted?
this is just its Social Character...

There’s a familiar desperation here—that we are always already culpably complacent, that the “guilt of subjectivity,” as Horkheimer and Adorno have it in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is both telos and cause of our (non)participation. But how *not* to “participate” while trying desperately *to* participate?

...To do right, let’s declare
and undeclare war on tonight,
in hopes that under stringed lights of bombers
we don’t have to pay fare,
we don’t have to, *we*
don’t have to

In her response to these “balled-up Fists of Ragged individualism,” Jennifer Scappetone turns Goldman’s “screen life” into an onscreen “scream life”:

[E]very partition, every mirror, is rigged.
In one place, you can hear the sighs, in
another the echo of the moans,

public woman
against the mechanical sons
for lack of a box—
for lack of a violent banality of parts—

Both Goldman and Scappettone share an interest in “rigged partitions.” For Goldman, the poem sets partitions of affect in which tonal shifts of voice lift the corner of the curtain and peek below; live, Goldman paces her reading with repetitive pregnant pauses, shifting her facial expressions as she wears rhetorical registers from some shared public subjectivity, likely a disembodied internet personality [certainly male] addressing the female body with a barely concealed mixture of disdain and arousal—that is, disdainful arousal, or better, aroused disdain. Spending time with her current chapbook, *The Disposessions*, as its editor, I caught myself inventing voices for these personalities, acting as a kind of switchboard, a collective ventriloquist. Partitions shift as Goldman switches from character to narrator to critic—from disembodied to embodied to a body:

Get on w/ it

On w/it, yes

[That] fucked people over like [that] or [that] fucked me over like
[that] or [that] fucked me like [that]

Fits and starts, heart fits

or: Starts and backs away

Take a deep breath

The poem serves as a response to the *Lyrical Ballads* in that it promotes *and* challenges the use of the colloquial as poetic material: here, the poet struggles to charge and unravel a language that posits itself as alternative while deactivating and/or amplifying its compulsive desire to serve the primary goals of sovereign power. The poem too corroborates with the intersubjective field of voices subsumed by a wash of violence while striking out above the din in percussive moments of vivid clarity, as if somehow striking an incredibly clear frequency only to drown in a din of static. In her epigraph to the poem, Roger Callois writes, “I know where I am but I do not feel as though I am at the spot where I find myself”; in response, Goldman writes,

in this labyrinth I lost
my sense of sense, senescent
trackless errand
my errant reins slack, Here comes
the recruiter; offer hole to the discharge

Scappettone’s project similarly struggles with the rigged partitions of truth’s Social Character, and as a reader of her work, like Callois, I often feel as though I know where I am (or think I do) only to find myself somewhere else entirely. Using Shakespeare’s Dame Quickly as the organizing figure of her first collection, or at least using Shakespeare’s figure through the lens of Marx, the work attains a “plurality in the whole as well as an annihilating fusion of disparities” (as she has it in “Antigonal Complex”). She derives her organizing conceit from Henry IV, Part 1, as Hostess Quickly and Falstaff volley shifting signifiers back and forth in a quickly disintegrat-

ing sheen of apperception:

Fal. There's no more faith in thee than in a stewed prune; nor no more truth in thee than in a drawn fox; and for womanhood, Maid Marian may be the deputy's wife of the ward to thee. Go, you thing, go.

Host. Say, what thing? what thing?

Fal. What thing! why, a thing to thank God on.

Host. I am no thing to thank God on, I would thou shouldst know it; I am an honest man's wife; and, setting thy knighthood aside, thou art a knave to call me so.

Fal. Setting thy womanhood aside, thou art a beast to say otherwise.

Host. Say, what beast, what knave, thou?

Fal. What beast! why, an otter.

P. Hen. An otter, Sit John! why an otter?

Fal. Why, she's neither fish nor flesh; a man knows not where to have her.

Host. Thou art an unjust man in saying so: thou or any man knows where to have me, thou knave, thou!

What thing? What value? According to Marx, in the unifying quotation of the project, "The objectivity of commodities as values differs from Dame Quickly in the sense that 'A man knows not where to have it,'" and for Scappettone, our Host, there is a kind of dialectic in the thing in which the abstraction of value serves as both curse and freedom. Heidegger sees the moment of "enframing" — in which humanity serves itself as standing-reserve, a thing like other commodities ready at hand — as an *opportunity* to capitalize on the nature of the process, a moment Heidegger calls (in his vaguely Romantic terminology) "unconcealment." Scappettone laments the Social Character of value, its enframed scream life, as an opportunity to emphasize that *Falstaff's right*, that Dame Quickly is a privileged site of schizophrenic subjectivity, a slippery Janus-face (squared), multiplying face value as it turns to face security, terror, protection, policing, all similarly base without base.

While Goldman incorporates a plethora of voices, Scappettone bends hers through a multitude of registers, so that as the poem unfolds, the thing is turned and turned and turned before us, and it is no longer as it was moments before with each revolution. Often Scappettone writes a long unwieldy prose line that, like Henry James before her, refracts into any number of clauses spinning out and shifting under our feet: "She was inert, that is, until, in the bloom of her sixth phrase, in withering rains and ending airs, with her glossy pants seeming singularity, like the desperate boots of others, at their hungriest, the empty paramour rolled out the carpet and admitted Mr. Pace." She writes in the first of her "Derrida is Dead" poems, "My way into it was barbous, forks," that is, "culture forked her." And culture forks us as we spin through the quickly shifting signifiers of the poem: "My proper / chessmistress would serf me about the board black for perpetuities with a stick. Over June / retreats, guest, the gang pissed / that I wouldn't scream with it. I wouldn't snitch upon the John unshopping his crotch ahead of Ross lingerie..." — or in "Delection Even," as she puns through choppy collective memory so that "I dredge allegedly" becomes "I edge a legibly" becomes "I pledge alien" becomes "I pluck allegiance" — "one ration under planes." The tonal shifts from longer syntactical units to short percussive vowel sounds is dizzying; in an open spread we find "After Amnesty" on the verso:

Oil, illth-oil, rebuttal recast—lust,
sickle-bloom, trusted trash—two
geists as a clam crease, and your
mess—their loath—is a wind

and on the recto, this line from “Fodderialism”:

Outskirt weeps, disclosed, would make the phallus go but ain't ergoic, mouth I miss

The pace of the lines enacts and rehearses the incommensurate fosse between the Social Character of the “thing” and our intimate experience of it, whether the thing materialized is product or person or poem. But it is mostly the *person* fixing Scappettone’s attention: weaving Hegel into the fabric of “Antigonal Complex” she quotes, “Womankind—the everlasting irony of the community—changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family.” Womankind, perverter of public ends, stands here as “thing” *par excellence* in that she serves the particular by transforming the public into private use. In Scappettone, the “guilt of subjectivity” manifests itself as no-thing, or no-mere-thing, in that the Social Character of experience, the naïve experience of the present as presented, is faced with its untruth in the face of the subject’s fragmentation, in this case, “womankind,” the most “complicated” of human subjects, of whom “a *man* knows not where to have her.” Alternately, in Goldman, “woman” is a sieve of subjects—her public performance of an intimate self appears as it *really* does in public: as a transcript of *other* voices speaking *about* and *through* her, as if the woman as subject serves only as a palette for the abstract expression of male subjectivities.

Further, there’s a curious relationship to the panoptic in both projects that strikes me as a shared concern. Scappettone writes, “Inlaws and neural smarts will thrive under lock and heed: We will do the police.” And Goldman:

Words do not harm each other

Looking for words [that] don’t harm each other

Grammar as window,
Words as voyeurs

A word [that] does not give
Onto anything else

Voyeurism of one word giving onto another

Unlike, say, the work of Rob Halpern, in which the confluence of eros, violence, and power serve to fuck the subject into a kind of exhaustive stupor, where political submission *is* erotic submission and erotic stimulation is political activism, Goldman and Scappettone seem less concerned with a policing of the body’s intimate extensions than they do with an extension of the body into the intimacy of a shared public. My initial impulse is to call this a response to, or even a critique of, second wave feminism, mostly because the abjection here seems so public and diffuse and *disembodied*. There are cunts and cocks in *The Dispossessions*, but it’s mostly due to an abstraction from private to public that the poem attains its creepy level of critique. When Goldman writes, “My vagina as ass / Simile cracks” or “My cock rises out of the picture, the words / My cock rises out of the words,” it is precisely due to the glitchy Google search tone (I repeat *tone*) that the poem arrives at a collective critique that keeps the body of the poet at a distance. And in *Dame Quickly*, it is because “man knows not

where to have it" that the female body is unfixable, that the poem attains a level of collective legibility. Both poems capitalize on the voyeuristic as tool and critique, and in the distance suss out how *we too* replicate, rehash, and reinforce modes of power when left to police ourselves.

In this sense I like to think of both projects as an extension of Joseph Beuys' notion of social sculpture, of "A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART," as he has it in a short statement entitled "I am searching for field character" in *Energy Plan for Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America*. He writes,

EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who—from his state of freedom—the position of freedom that he experiences at firsthand—learns to determine the other positions in the TOTAL ARTWORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER. Self-determination and participation in the cultural sphere (freedom); in the structuring of laws (democracy); and in the sphere of economics (socialism). Self-administration and decentralization (threefold structure) occurs: FREE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM.

Self-administration and decentralization as a public performance of the energy of social order; orchestrating the schizophrenic energies of the public by creating an intimacy of [dis]order on the level of participation—further, both writers use materials that, like Beuys, conduct energy and/or insulate. In his description of "Rubberized Box" (Gummierte Kiste, 1957) he writes,

The nature of the materials used means this insulation has an elastic quality, softening the rigid form of the box which has nothing to do with minimalism. In addition it is significant that the box is open, which suggests that while everything else in the environment works as a distraction, energy directed towards or flowing from a higher level increases concentration. The mixture of asphalt and rubber on wood functions as a sound insulator, too. Asphalt insulates electric power, while rubber resists blows. With time its elasticity has gone and the surface has hardened, although originally you could knead it.

Both poets make use of similarly elastic material, language that either conducts or insulates or both. In fact, Goldman's project reads like a script for public performance, taking the materials of intimate compartment and reading them through the lens of enframement as public fact (read: Social Character). And for Scappettone, the language of the immediate "happening" is decentralized and recommitted to an elasticity that serves both content and sound:

I dredge allegedly
to repair and upgrade the Port of Umm Qasr
I edge a legibly duty free
transrational contract drag
well I pledge alien
lesions will be doled
expensively (not on the cheap)
and not to um miss explosives
who shell
Bechtel by the—that is Shell it by the
shore Bechtel sells

The work here is social sculpture at its most intense: ciphering the din of public immediacy through the person of the disjointed subject only to feed out the stream of

information as a critique of participation, colored by the guilt of subjectivity. Rather than, like Beuys, taking the energy of social critique to the people, Goldman and Scapettone make a social critique *of the people*, insulating them *by* conducting. This work is by all, the product of many subjectivities imbued with shades of public guilt rivaling the varieties of color in second nature "herself." According to the authors, guilt, abjection, and fear are the very tools by which the human becomes an artist and/or a subject and/or a thing, or else, the tools by which a woman becomes "a woman."