

ENTERING INTO DIALOGUE

About Owen Land in the Kunsthalle Bern

There was a time when Owen Land was called George Landow and considered a prominent representative of the Structural Film-movement, which self-referentially referred to the cinematographic apparatus and its technical means and conditions. His name change in the eighties does not just indicate an identity crisis turned into an artistic concept: it also marked his final farewell to the premises of cinematic minimalism. The current consequences of this apparent break with the past are now on display in the form of a new work by Owen Land – his first since 1999 – as part of a solo exhibition on the filmmaker in the Kunsthalle Bern. With “Dialogues or A Waist Is a Terrible Thing To Mind”, the Canadian artist seems to aim at nothing less than a rehabilitation of the softcore-porn-genre. However, this endeavour is not without its very own structural complications.

Owen Land is not a post-porn-filmmaker. He does not discover new erogenous zones, and neither does he deconstruct sexual desire according to the aims of gender-politics. On the contrary: the insinuating stares, poses and striptease-displays performed by the actresses in his new film “Dialogues or A Waist Is A Terrible Thing To Mind” (2007-2009) – a sequence of 36 grotesques permeated by literary allusions – which are directed at their prospective mates, fetish objects or, via camera, the viewers themselves, seem more like banal and prurient male fantasies. Even the fact that the artist under suspicion changed his name from George Landow, under which he gained recognition as one of the main representatives of the Structural Film-movement in the sixties and seventies, to Owen Land in the early eighties does not indicate queer strategy, but rather a split personality. The latter, which constantly manifests itself in his video works, appears to be a celebrated passion rather than a pathological condition. Consequently, Land is represented by two different characters in “Dialogues”, a pair of non-identical twins, as it were: for one, there is the “literary Owen Land”, a poor schmuck who tricks evil Gods and is pitied by women. Then, there is a “visual Owen Land”, a ‘pure fool’ who charms women into bed. From this schizophrenic perspective, Land, according to his own statements, embarks on an autobiographical consideration of his “midlife un-crisis” in the mid-80s, when he returned to Los Angeles from a prolonged foreign exchange scholarship in Japan. If one looks for signs of this migratory “un-crisis” in “Dialogues”, the various travesties of religious beliefs, which one already encounters in Land/ow’s early films, seem more germane than the pornographic scenes. For it is in these travesties that Land demonstrates the inconstant and precarious nature of religious belief systems, as well as their tendency to reappear time and again. As early as 1973, Land/ow documented an encounter between Jesus-People and the established Christian Church in his film “A Film of Their 1973 Spring Tour Commissioned by Christian World Liberation Front of Berkeley, California”, and in “Wide Angle Saxon” (1975), he

staged the religious epiphany of a recent Christian convert. "Dialogues", on the other hand, not only contains references to biblical tales, but also to oriental mysticism. However, if we interpret this religious eclecticism as a symptom of an acute crisis, we are overlooking the fact that Land/ow's references to pre-filmic experience are always linked to strategies of deconstruction and parody. In this vein, he defamiliarized the documentation about the Jesus-People by fragmenting the recordings, thereby turning them into a quickly alternating cut-up of chaotic scenes and perspectives. The high frequency of these sequences makes for a stark contrast to the gesture of gentle determination exhibited by the preachers and the congregations in the film. At the beginning of the seventies, with this kind of aesthetic practice, Land/ow already distinguished himself from the mainstream of Structural filmmakers who, at the time, focussed almost exclusively on minimalist self-reflective examinations of the technical aspects of filmmaking and its methods. However, Land/ow himself had created a canonical example of Structural filmmaking with his piece "Film in Which There Appear Edge Lettering, Sprocket Holes, Dirt Particles, Etc." in 1965/66. This film is conceived as a five-minute-loop, and all its motifs reflect the conditions of the cinema-apparatus: not only through the eponymous sprocket holes, edge lettering and dirt particles, but also through the appearance of a so-called China Girl – i.e. a short close-up of an anonymous female face, which was traditionally inserted at the start of a film roll to get a feel for the lighting before developing it. Still, in his subsequent films Land/ow succeeded in linking such formal analyses to reflections on social issues and environments, employing ever more complex and multi-faceted methods in the process. Apart from his penchant for eloquent titles and puns, this development could mostly be traced to his ironic inclusion of topoi from news reporting, advertisement, educational films and avant-garde filmmaking. Thus, it is not just the ubiquitous anagrams and palindromes that act as foils to that Christian epiphany experienced by the protagonist Earl Greaves in "Wide Angle Saxon", an actual convert and amateur actor, during a visit to the cinema at the Walker Art Center in Chicago. (Greaves watches a fictional experimental movie by a certain Al Rutcurts – 'structural' if read backwards –, the title of which, "Regrettable Redding Condensation", evokes Land/ow's own early work "Remedial Reading Comprehension" from 1970). There are other ironic subtexts that add to those aforementioned palindromes and anagrams, such as the intercut newsreel-images featuring a reporter who repeatedly messes up his statement on the Panama-Canal-Conflict or a scene in which Greaves polishes a Cadillac's hood, an allegorical reference to his biography before his Christian chastity. The unenlightened viewer might be astonished by the fact that Land/ow's protagonists participate so readily in the filmic deconstruction of their own convictions; be it Greaves, the Jesus-People, or Land/ow's avant-garde-colleague Morgan Fisher during his appearance as a film professor turned poet in "On the Marriage Broker Joke as Cited by Sigmund Freud in Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious or Can the Avantgarde Artist Be Wholed?" (1977-79). The willingness of Land/ow's subjects to perform ironic self-portrayals is, however, understandable if one considers the films' various transgressions that transcend medial or mental divides. The 'open' playing field that results from this

allows Land/ow to overcome the affirmative nature parodic forms have long since taken on. It also allows Land/ow to rehabilitate the genre patterns of soft-core pornography mentioned at the beginning. Even though they are presented from an ironic distance and made the subject of parodies, the various acts and poses performed mainly by women in "Dialogues ..." could be construed as phantasms of fetishizing reification. During all this, there is a constant interplay between individualization and reification, for example when the actress Ana Lopez, dressed in transparent panties, cleans a red Jeep with a sponge to the sound of Patti Smith's "Because the Night", all the while seductively gyrating her hips: the erotic elegance of this harmonic dance is subverted by intermittent movements that seem more expressive and improvised. The male and female actors subvert their roles time and again – they express sovereignty, autonomy and determination in one scene only to revert to naiveté and weakness in the next. In doing so, they keep the film's modernist intermediality, its interplay between sound and image, writing and acting, as well as its referentiality between pornography, comedy and video clip from devolving into an end in itself. In another episode, Land succeeds in mythologizing a critique of the artist Morgan Fisher's work in the journal *Artforum* as well as Fisher's misgivings towards the sublime. Furthermore, the film relates this discursive reference to the sensual, the physical, in a manner that seems both vulgar and bashful: Melpomene, the muse of tragedy portrayed by Sheryl Chambers, exposes her breast to Morgan Fisher – here played by comic Alex Cobo – as a "load" of the sublime, to which he replies, stuttering, "insert this!"

Kunsthalle Bern is to be complimented for giving a protagonist of Structural Film like Land/ow a public platform in the international art scene – not only because it allowed the artist to complete a new production in the form of "Dialogues..." after a creative break of more than twenty years, a new production that is surprisingly different from his earlier work, but also connects to it in a meaningful way. What made the exhibition in Bern especially pleasing and plausible was the mode of presentation employed in the exhibition of Land/ow's older works: the looped films were mounted on two or three projectors per room which were positioned next to each other – the different images and sounds (to be heard either via loudspeakers or headphones) were running in parallel. The fact that the projectors (and the environmental noise) were turned on by the viewers in the exhibition rooms with the help of a motion sensor (and were turned off automatically after long periods of inactivity) further reflects Land/ow's multi-layered, creative and playful use of interruptions and transgressions of sensual, spiritual and medial practices.

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(Translation: Julian Reidy)