AMBIVALENT INSTRUMENTS

AVIGAIL MOSS

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"The letter is an ambivalent instrument…"
- Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (1982)

When does letter writing become an art? In a groundbreaking comparative study entitled *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*, Janet Gurkin Altman examined eighteenth century publications like Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (*Dangerous Liaisons*, 1782) and twentieth century novels like Saul Bellow's *Herzog* (1964) to see how literary works used the letter's formal attributes to make meaning. Challenging earlier critics who dismissed epistolary genres as unsystematic, unimportant, or merely antecedent to the narrative structures of the modern novel, Altman found the letter to be a rich, multivalent instrument in fictional narrative.

Altman is only one of many critics seeking to understand and delineate the possibilities inherent in epistolary form. Others have chronicled the rise and decline of earlier letter practices, practices aligned with episodic changes in communication technologies such as the invention of the postcard in 1840, the founding of the World Postal Union in 1874, and the introduction of the typewriter. Still others have argued that the letter's ambiguity and public/private performativity make it an important tool with which to address complex social relations -- particularly gender relations.

This continuing interest in letter-writing invites a new question: what does epistolarity offer to the visual arts? Since the advent of systems of postal delivery, artists have reflected on and employed the letter in all of its numerous forms. In her book, *Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972*, Lucy Lippard tried to catalogue and contextualize the work of international artists who were privileging idea and information over production and materiality. Artists such as Eleanor Antin, Douglas Huebler, and On Kawara sent works through the mail to circumvent the gallery (Antin), to map idiosyncratic topographies (Huebler), and to contemplate passages through time and space (Kawara). Even now, the mail art movement that Ray Johnson inaugurated in the 1950s continues in the work and activities of other international artists. It is within these kinds of contexts that the multivalent possibilities of epistolarity become apparent.

Epistolary mediation

Chantal Akerman, *News from home* (1976) Color video, sound, 85 minutes.

As flexible intermediaries, letters literally and sometimes metaphorically connect senders and receivers, even binding or merging the voices of letter writers and readers.

In her film, *News from Home*, Chantal Akerman foregrounded the role of letters as mediating instruments. Made while she was taking her second trip to New York City in 1976, the film consists of still camera shots and pans of the city paired with an audio track of urban sounds and a voiceover of Akerman reading letters that her mother sent to her from Belgium when Akerman first visited New York in 1971. During the course of the film Akerman reads aloud her mother's letters, which she translates from Yiddish to French and from written text to speech, creating a non-chronological, contrapuntal effect by interlacing language, traffic sounds, and street scenes. In the letters, Akerman's mother reports on friends, acquaintances, and the family business, offering to send her daughter money and asking if she has found a job. She rarely mentions Belgium, let alone world affairs; the news is entirely personal in nature.

But this is personal news of a highly unique quality. As Akerman re-reads her mother's letters while withholding her own, she merges two

uncertain accounts: a fragmented textual account of her mother's domestic frustrations, and a visual account of her own precarious position as an émigré drifting on city streets. Akerman defamiliarizes the familiar letter's structure, frustrating our expectations of a logical beginning and end while also confounding our expectations of a cinematic narrative. The result is that the fragmented maternal litany seems to emanate from, and reverberate within, the city's corridors. Neither mother-tongue nor mother-land: in Akerman's final shot of the city from the Staten Island Ferry, the letters trail off as the skyline fades from view, giving the impression that the city itself is emitting the dispatches.

The tense present

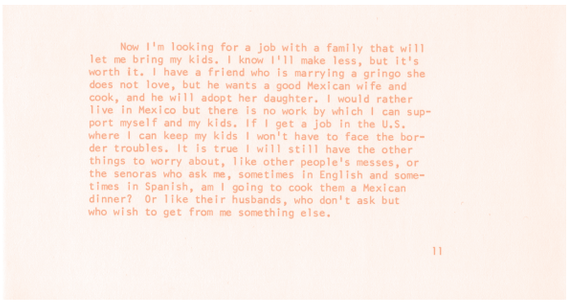
Vija Celmins, *Letter* (1968) Graphite on acrylic ground on paper 33.5 x 46 cm. Collection of the artist.

Another effect of epistolarity in visual art is the way it heightens an awareness of time. In epistolary time the letter writer looks to both the past as well as the future. Correspondingly, a letter contains within itself numerous moments: the act, its transcription, the letter's dispatch, its arrival, being read, reread. In paintings by seventeenth century artists like Gabriel Metsu (Dutch, 1629-1667), people read or write letters, but while we see their real-life contexts (bourgeois interiors, servants and household objects), their letters remain inaccessible, and the passage of time is only implied.

In a more contemporary work, Vija Celmins' picture entitled *Letter* (1968), the epistle is both close at hand and withheld. A stamped envelope sits askew against an even-toned background. The picture's shallow space is nearly depthless and would appear to deny the existence of Albertian perspective if it weren't for the five stamps depicting images of burning or clouded landscapes: collaged panoramic fragments. Addressed to Celmins in California from her mother in Indiana, the envelope's obscuring postmarks and ragged edge speak of this missive's travel through the post to be opened at its final destination as the artist's model.

Like Chantal Akerman's *News from home*, Celmins' *Letter* considers the correspondence from mothers to daughters. But *Letter*'s date (1968) and its evocative postage stamps also suggest a nation in turmoil. One could think of a number of events taking place in the year that Celmins made the picture, events inflammatory enough to inspire commemorative stamps appearing to consume themselves. By contrast, the "First Class Forever" stamps issued by the United States Postal Service in 2007 appear unshakable and timeless. They show an image of the Liberty Bell (American symbol of longevity and independence) instead of a numerical denomination, and they are touted by the US Postal Service as useful for mailing a one-ounce letter "regardless of when the stamps are purchased or used and no matter how prices may change in the future." Both postal forms – First Class Forever Stamp and envelope enfold similar promises (kept or not): from a mother to a daughter or from a state to its citizen. Celmins' *Letter* situates domestic news in a volatile social context – a nation on fire – and attests to the epistolary's ability to allude to or frame the interplay of those two words so venerated in the era of Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan – the personal and the political.

Epistolary mosaic


Now I'm looking for a job with a family that will let me bring my kids. I know I'll make less, but it's worth it. I have a friend who is marrying a gringo she does not love, but he wants a good Mexican wife and cook, and he will adopt her daughter. I would rather live in Mexico but there is no work by which I can support myself and my kids. If I get a job in the U.S. where I can keep my kids I won't have to face the border troubles. It is true I will still have the other things to worry about, like other people's messes, or the senoras who ask me, sometimes in English and sometimes in Spanish, am I going to cook them a Mexican dinner? Or like their husbands, who don't ask but who wish to get from me something else.

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Martha Rosler, *Service: a trilogy on colonization* (1978. Second printing, 2008). Printed Matter Inc. New York

A letter is sometimes a stand-alone unit, sometimes a part of a larger narrative or mosaic. Early letter narratives were often told through assemblages of prose, poetry and other genres alongside the familiar letter. Since the women's movements of the 1970s, letters and letter mosaics have proved to be capable of relating the experiences of an individual or group struggling with different forms of inequity or oppression.

Using letters to reflect on class and labor, Martha Rosler addresses ways that women experience colonialism as service providers in three postcard novels collected under the title, *Service: A Trilogy On Colonization*, which Rosler sent in serial installments to recipients from 1973-74. In the first novel, "A Budding Gourmet," a middle-class housewife takes a cooking class to expand her self-awareness. In the second novel, "McTowers Maid," a woman organizes her co-workers in a fast-food restaurant. In the final novel, "Tijuana Maid," a Mexican woman describes her experiences of working as an undocumented domestic worker in Southern California. These first-person narratives alternate with recipes for different dishes in both English and Spanish.

Rosler mobilizes the letter's capacity to create meaning and intrigue from textual fragments, a technique of serial fiction that extends back to the seventeenth century. In his book, *The Rape of Clarissa*, Terry Eagleton describes how Samuel Richardson (1689-1761) released his fictions in successive installments to many correspondents as a strategy to test his work's reception. Like Richardson, Rosler foregrounds the epistolary process and the letter's potential to be seen and commented upon by many viewers. But rather than writing a romantic "novel of sensibility" Rosler's alludes to a whole other world of the open letter, the political letter, letters from servitude – genres important as means for gathering first person experiences when other kinds of utterance are impossible.

Correspondence course

Jay Street Film Project (Anthony McCall, Claire Pajaczkowska, Andrew Tyndall, Ivan Ward, and Jane Weinstock, *Sigmund Freud's Dora: A Case of Mistaken Identity* (1979) Color video, sound, 40 minutes.

In the film, Sigmund Freud's *Dora*: *A Case of Mistaken Identity,* many, if not all of the letter's ambiguities addressed in the previous works come into play. Additionally the letter presents itself as an instructional guide, as a form of teaching.

Like Rosler's epistolary postcards, *Dora* consists of three sections that invite viewers to question the way they encounter a work. The directors of the film appropriate Sigmund Freud's famous case study of female hysteria, *Fragments of an Analysis* ('*Dora*') (1905), as the textual basis for their film. In the first section, a woman's lips relate a narrative about psychoanalysis as a running text visually presents a series of historic dates in modern Western history ("1882 Dora is born. Darwin dies. Nietzsche declares 'God is Dead.'"). The second section presents sequences of television advertisements, pornographic cuts, and Freud and Dora in a shot-reverse-shot dialogue. In the final section an elderly woman, "a

mother," reads postcards from several different "Doras": a nineteenth century Dora describing her analysis with Dr. Freud, and a twentieth century Dora who relates her experiences of participating in a women's consciousness-raising group. The backs of the picture postcards re-represent stills from the film's previous sections, along with canonic paintings and pop-cultural icons.

At the time they made *Dora*, several of the film's five directors were engaged in feminist readings of psychoanalysis and film theory. These readings provided a backdrop for *Dora*'s feminist critique of pornography, consumerism, and cinematic auterism. *Dora* is one of a number of filmic projects from the 1970s to address these issues, along with works by artists such as Yvonne Rainer, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen. With *Dora*, the five directors: McCall, Pajaczkowska, Tyndall, Ward, and Weinstock actively engaged their audiences, screening it in different clinical and academic contexts and framing these screenings with didactic film notes in order to stimulate debate. Correspondingly, the film remains interesting for viewers from different backgrounds. In recent screenings, (e.g. at London's Whitechapel Gallery in 2009) critics and designers discussed its formal techniques while feminist critics discussed its historic position within avant-garde film, feminist criticism, and psychoanalysis.

For our purposes, *Dora*'s third sequence condenses the epistolary's radical forms, questioning the positions of speaker and listener. Dora's letters at times seem to instruct "the mother"– or us, the viewers—in lessons in feminism, or in psychoanalysis. In the fifth postcard letter, Dora asks:

"How can I differentiate between you, my mother, and The Mother who is always absent? *Unless* I can somehow separate the you, from the symbolic Mother, it is difficult to see how it is that we share a position as women."

In his original case study, a study on pathological interiority, female sexuality and hysteria, Sigmund Freud more or less omitted the figure of the mother, which many feminist critics saw as one of psychoanalysis' major oversights: a disavowal of a voice of difference. By invoking this voiceless figure in the film, *Dora*'s directors question the unity of a first person 'I' who speaks or writes, as well as the time and place from which this "I" speaks, asking if it is even possible to retrospectively represent such a figure. In *Dora*, the indeterminate "mother" leaves all questions unanswered, inviting us to offer our own interpretations.

To a conclusion

As social beings we are arguably always thinking or acting in real or imagined correspondence with others. Whether visual or textual, epistolary forms present a desire for exchange. In the above examples, I have sought to show how some artists have exploited the letter's multivalent possibilities for creating meaning: posting, displaying, withholding, consuming and being consumed by the letter. These works also show just some of the ways the letter is implicated in gender and domesticity, the way identity is construed and constructed. In all cases, a reader or viewer is called upon to respond, regardless of whether the message is intended for them. But then, this list is hardly exhaustive. The letter's myriad shapes remain to be charted. This is only an invocation: I invite your response, dear reader.

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