

March 10, 2016

[...]

There's a dossier to open on Barthes and the gesture, which I want to reduce, if only provisionally, to Barthes and the hand, the hand at work and the hand as fragment, severable and serviceable trope of Eros. From the various and famously remarked upon hands of *Camera Lucida* (Mapplethorpe's, Warhol's, Tzara's) to the left handedness – the perverse hand? – of Twombly:

In a certain sense, TW liberates painting from seeing; for the “gauche” (the “lefty”) undoes the link between hand and eye: he draws without light ...

To the lover's hand, the very risk and revelation of contact, contact underneath meaning but not without it:

Language is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words.

What I notice immediately is that Barthes' writings on film and photography, even “The Third Meaning,” should be distinguished from those on music and drawing, where the hand moves and is moved in sympathy with the one playing, the one writing, the one painting or drawing – just as the lips and tongue move and are moved in sympathy with the vocal performance. Barthes will not treat film and photography as occasions where he will find himself ravished by the hand of the maker/artist/author (though he does write in *Camera Lucida*, tantalizingly, “For me, the Photographer's organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger: what is linked to the trigger of the lens...”) but only by the hand depicted, which for him both *is* there and was there. Which means that Barthes, when faced with an expert, thinks and feels with his amateurism: he draws, paints, sings, acts, and plays piano. Even as a writer, he treats himself like an amateur, i.e., not a novelist, not a playwright, not a poet. But he can't do the same with either film or photography, not being even an amateur photographer. The most he proposes in “The Third Meaning” is that this third, the obtuse, holds him, which implies that the first and second have no hold at all; critical reflection and thus criticism, the criticism that exhausts him, breaks rather than attaches him to things. There is though, on third thought, a mimetic residue and amateur's enthusiasm even underneath the third meaning: Barthes was as well an amateur actor and so the hunch that the disguise, the disguise that fails because it succeeds in failing, no doubt attracts him, attracts and holds his attention because the disguised body is neither discrete nor indiscrete, having neutralized the structural coherence of legibility as such, which the first and second meaning would simply reiterate. Hence his call at the end for “a veritable mutation of reading” and his gamble on per-mutational play, against the grain of diegesis but still, as you say, “within ‘interlunction.’”

My conclusion? Any “protocol of gestural replication” inspired and sustained by the

above would have to acknowledge the difference that some training makes – some training, but not too much, a training that didn't quite take, or which supports fantasies of expertise but which knows full well and even better appreciates the work of the expert. Amateur Hour, which is just about the right time and title, wouldn't literally replicate the making, wouldn't demand sweat equity or public spectacle, but would foreground the handiwork of all work, whether in the venerable modes of reverse engineering or in the more erotically inflected modes organized around Barthes's neutralization of both the oblivion of common sense and the arrogance of critical distance. Amateur Hour wouldn't have to take seriously Barthes's odd attunement – expert attunement – to the speaking body's dance with and manipulation by structure, hence his delight in Panzera's phonetics, in his articulation, the muzzle's slicing and dicing of vowels and consonants. Neither expression nor communication – but not the so-called body without organ either. The body that Barthes has in view – and in his mouth and in his hands – is a disciplined body, where the discipline is keyed to and unlocked by perversion. A strange and exciting turn then, one that could be replicated but wouldn't have to be. No need to make ourselves expert amateurs, though I suppose that's a better, more noble outcome than the inverse.