

Experimental Film and Artists' Moving Image

Experimental and Expanded Animation

New Perspectives and Practices

Edited by Vicky Smith & Nicky Hamlyn



Experimental Film and Artists' Moving Image

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Cut to Cute: Fact, Form, and Feeling in Digital Animation

Johanna Gosse in Conversation
with Peggy Ahwesh

Johanna Gosse

This conversation with film-maker Peggy Ahwesh focuses on three of her recent works, *Lessons of War* (2015), *The Blackest Sea* (2016), and *The Falling Sky* (2017), a trilogy of experimental films that sit at the intersection of digital animation, found-footage essay, and moving-image installation. The films are comprised of animated CGI video that Ahwesh sourced from YouTube and then edited into original compilations. Their source material was produced by two Taiwanese news agencies, TomoNews US and News Direct, which specialize in CGI ‘newsreels’ that report on global catastrophes like war, the refugee crisis, and climate change, to more everyday stories like politics, crime, and celebrity gossip.

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Ahwesh's appropriation of this curious genre of animated news raises a number of concerns, both aesthetic and political. On the one hand, the CGI depicts a range of complex and often overwhelming real-world problems, yet on the other, they also raise questions about journalistic ethics in our ostensibly 'post-factual' era, when the line between reporting, opinion, and entertainment is increasingly blurred by the proliferation of viral memes, clickbait, and 'fake news' paranoia. The following conversation between Ahwesh and scholar Johanna Gosse considers the experimental uses (and dystopian mis-uses) of digital animation at a time of political, economic, and ecological instability. Starting with a discussion of her films' production and exhibition, the dialogue moves into more conceptual territory, addressing issues of genre, affect, violence, gender, and finally, the aesthetics and politics of 'cuteness', a quality often attributed to animation, but rarely to newsreel or essay film.

PRODUCTION

Gosse: Let's start with your source footage. Can you describe how you first encountered these Taiwanese news agencies? On their YouTube page, TomoNews markets itself, half tongue-in-cheek, as 'your best source for real news. We cover the funniest, craziest and most talked-about stories on the internet. And because we can animate stories, TomoNews brings you news like you've never seen before' (TomoNews 2017). They play up the zaniness factor and market their brand of cartoon news as an entertaining novelty. Meanwhile, the Reuters-owned News Direct presents itself as a more professional journalistic outlet, claiming that their product 'fills in the gaps when video footage is missing and provides clear illustrations of news that is highly conceptual or technical in nature' (News Direct). What do you make of these agencies' claims for zany entertainment versus evidentiary documentation? Do you have specific criteria or guidelines in mind as you edit the footage?

Ahwesh: I was researching re-enactment when I first came across the Taiwanese animators. Of immediate interest was the re-enactment of the Trayvon Martin killing in Florida as it was portrayed as animated news, a literal play-by-play retelling of the event with details that were available from the major news networks, and as reported on the major networks. These details were presented without analysis, irony, or perceived point of view. It was frightening and cold as a story. The attempt to mimic the

so-called objectivity of the mainstream news was amplified by the simplicity of the animation, in which the people are depicted with the slightest ethnic features and generic bodies. Since there were no pictures of the actual event, the clues and the police reports, the harrowing calls to 911 and the forensic crime scene data all had to be compiled in order to determine the sequence of events and how to narrate it. The look of the animation, its aesthetic style, makes it palatable to watch, since it leaves out the gruesome reality of the killing. To watch a story sandwiched between reportage and cartoons is a queasy and disconnected experience—like the uncanny creepiness of a happy clown.

At the time, I was teaching a class in documentary and I edited a quick sequence of short bits of video into a timeline. This led to a great class discussion about news, re-enactment, and docudrama, and raised issues about ethics and exploitation. Making animations of news doesn't eradicate the problem of exploitation that accompanies the recording of real people, but it does somehow sidestep its thorniest aspects. That's how I initially became interested in the Taiwanese news animations, and since then I have mined their inventory quite obsessively.

TomoNews and News Direct are very distinct and their respective 'philosophies' as stated on their websites are fairly well reflected in the videos themselves. Tomo is ironic and over-the-top satire, with in-jokes and hilarious spoofs on the antics of politicians and movie stars, celebrity figures who are sitting ducks for that kind of mockery and exaggeration. News Direct copies the style of regular news. It is more straightforward and serious, and totally un-ironic. I mainly work with the more straightforward material, the neutrality of which has been necessary for me to reinvent their meanings for what I am trying to say.

One of the game rules I established early on was to limit myself to the News Direct channel and not go trash-picking from all the crazy stuff available on YouTube. Imposing this limitation on my visual vocabulary allowed for a kind of dialogue to emerge between the animators and myself. I feel that we have a relationship on some level. I think of it as an act of complicity between us; if they make artful news, I make newsy art.

The Blackest Sea has a sweet poetry about its movement, with a very emotive and dramatic soundtrack, but as it develops through the various themes, I want it to feel strongly connected to current issues that we are dealing with today—the viability of the oceans, the man-made dilemmas of climate change, and the migrants who have cast their fate upon unforgiving waters. The sea, in all its ceaseless flow and uncontrollable

force, is the subject of *The Blackest Sea*, and that trope is transposed in *The Falling Sky* to the wind and sky, the airwaves and the man-made data flows, invisible force fields that surround us when we work and are carried along by us in our handbags and coat pockets. As an installation, the two videos are projected at a large scale on opposite walls, in sync with a shared soundtrack. The lyricism between the above and below, sky and sea, becomes clear.

INSTALLATION

Gosse: This recent installation mirrors your exhibition last year at Brooklyn's Microscope Gallery, where *Lessons of War* and *The Blackest Sea* were shown via three different presentational modes: large-scale, floor-to-ceiling projection, multi-channel monitor installation, and streaming on handheld devices. Your earlier films have been shown in numerous exhibition contexts and across multiple platforms, from experimental film festivals, to museums and galleries, and streaming online. Is there something about these most recent animated films that makes them especially well suited to an expanded installation context?

Ahwesh: It's so much fun to experiment in the gallery. Different ideas attach to different formats and presentation schemes as appropriate to the room, the light, synced sound, and the other physical factors. Video installations loop and repeat and let the viewer's attention wander, so there is a play of peripheral vision. Often I include a number of discrete elements in an installation that make a spatial puzzle that a visitor can walk around and examine—like books, found objects, an iPhone, all depending on the themes of the piece. Installation allows the viewer an opportunity to spend some time in the space and perhaps watch different bits of the repeating cycles of the videos, collating the sensations as they go.

I make single-channel versions of installation videos and vice versa for different platforms. It's not a problem but a challenge, and I think it has become a more accepted practice as technologies come and go and people utilize multiple devices in their daily lives. As you mentioned, *Lessons of War* was originally made for an exhibition at Microscope Gallery in 2014, where it was shown as a 'video sculpture', in which the film played on a stack of five teetering, off-center TV monitors. The sync would drift over time and the soundtrack was noisy and echoing. The edit of the single-channel and the installation version is the same, but they are strikingly different experiences. The single-channel version is more narrative

in character and more emotionally charged, since the viewer follows it closely as a storyline, and is more attentive from beginning to end. Getting to the end is important for closure. The installation version is more diffuse and associative and the viewer intuitively calculates the formal qualities of the monitor stack as a sculptural object. There really is no end to get to.

SOUND

Gosse: *The Blackest Sea* and *The Falling Sky* are both set to the same haunting orchestral score, Passacaglia, for Organ and Strings, K. 11, by Ellis B. Kohs, which features a rather eerie-sounding electric organ. In *Lessons of War*, you added a montage of faint ambient sound recordings, which generate their own uncanny effects—like a calm before the storm. Can you explain your approach to sound in these films, both in terms of selection and exhibition?

Ahwesh: The soundtrack to *Lessons of War* is mainly foley sound I recorded around the house or took from a sound effects library, so the gestures and movements of the figures would be more present. *The Blackest Sea* and *The Falling Sky* both have the same soundtrack by Kohs, very chromatic with dramatic tonal clusters. I heard the music on the radio one day and knew that it would be great for these films. Unlike *Lessons of War*, here I wanted a surging, romantic, and a bit unpredictable sound to propel the film emotionally.

In terms of exhibition, spatializing sound in the gallery is one of the most dynamic elements of installation. On a fundamental level, the gallery space is a box that situates the body of the viewer in terms of scale, personal space, arm's length, comfort zone, territory, perspective, and so on. Sound directs and locates the body in space. Its seduction operates unconsciously on most people, remaining in the background, second to the visual. The gallery becomes a soundscape that changes your perspective and movement through the space, like choreography.

COMPLICITY AND LABOUR POLITICS

Gosse: Earlier, you spoke about your 'complicity' with the Taiwanese animators—a term that casts you as more of an accomplice or co-conspirator than a collaborator or co-author. This idea reminds me of your found-footage film *The Color of Love* (1994), which utilizes a decaying,

low-budget pornographic snuff film in which two women perform various sexual and violent acts on a lifeless male body. By appropriating that footage, you as the film-maker, and by extension, the viewer also, are framed as witness and accomplice to the illicit acts shown on screen.

As an act of complicity, your use of these animations points back to your accomplices—the anonymous crew of digital artists—and their relationship to the global economy. I wonder, is their labour considered high or low-skilled? Are these studios run like digital sweatshops? By appropriating their products, are you actually outsourcing your own artistic labour and further contributing to the workers' exploitation? What are the political implications of framing appropriation as complicity and collusion rather than collaboration and solidarity?

Ahwesh: These are really good questions that always need to be considered when it comes to appropriation. In some way, the kinship I feel to the makers of these videos is similar to how an author uses a quotation in a text. It can be used to bolster the argument that the author is trying to make, it can be an incantation to add levels of meaning, and/or it can be a betrayal or a critical reading of the original. Perhaps there are more uses to quotation, but in my work, I try to hit upon these three. That said, these questions of labour persist, and remain relevant and provocative. My research tells me that Next Studios is like a digital Disney with hundreds of animators cranking out not just newsreels, but also zombie films, fighting *manga* features, and commercial work for clients. It is a pretty sophisticated corporate production of the entertainment industry and I would guess that most of the workers are hunched over computers all day, rendering figures against backgrounds. I am piggybacking on the resources and investment of the company. I don't take it for granted and it might be useful to compare what I do to a fan edit instead of the more academic trope of appropriation.

Our relationship to entertainment media is not unlike our relationship to commodities like a cup and saucer, or a power cable. These are highly designed objects manufactured for the mass marketplace that we often take for granted. I appreciate that the process of making these things should be transparent. Entertainment products operate differently in the culture than domestic goods and electronics, but I think the comparison holds. I hope it's clear to any viewer of my videos that I am presenting a critique of authorship.

ANIMATION WITHOUT ANIMATORS

Gosse: Of the three tiers of quotation you describe, I think the notion of a productive or deliberate misreading best describes your work. But I'm also curious about how your critique of authorship operates specifically in films of yours that utilize digital animation. Looking back at your earlier work, there are a number of films that could be included under an expanded definition of 'animation'. For instance, I'm thinking of 2001's *She Puppet*, which follows video game vixen Lara Croft through a virtual landscape, but also of the various techniques associated with direct animation—hand-tinting, optical printing, hand-scratched, and decaying celluloid—seen in *The Color of Love*. However, it's also fair to assume that you wouldn't describe yourself as an animator. What does it mean, then, to be a film-maker who appropriates from the genre of animation—both as raw material and a set of experimental techniques—but does not identify as an animator? The notion of authorship as a form of complicity, but also as a kind of parasitism, seems key here.

We might also consider your recent work as partaking in your ongoing fascination with low-status cultural production, from low-budget, to lowbrow. I'm thinking about the cheap porno in *The Color of Love* and video game footage from *Tomb Raider* (1996–2015), which both in some sense anticipate your use of these animated newsreels. The CGI you appropriate is crisp, clean, and high-resolution, not degraded or low-quality 'poor images' in the sense described (and defended) by Hito Steyerl as the 'wretched of the screen'. Yet once we factor in the CGI's industrial manufacture and uncredited makers, they do qualify as what Steyerl describes as the 'lumpen proletarian in the class society of appearances' (Steyerl 2012, 32). Is it accurate, then, to say that you feel a certain affinity, even solidarity, with these 'lumpen' cultural products? Is there a class politics embedded in your act of appropriation?

Ahwesh: Yes, I agree. You have said it quite well. I embrace the 'lumpen', the ephemeral, or oddity, the genre, the illicit, and the home movie. Over the years, I have worked broadly across aesthetic and technical boundaries but have not developed a recognizable signature style like many of my contemporaries have wisely done. But when you look at the overall body of work, the patterns of subject matter I am attracted to are evident, whether it's a video game or a porn film. The sources have a genre element, they are themes that impact the social and political lives

of women, and material that no one else has regard for or claims. It's a political choice to not align myself with dominant media products that are already over-determined.

The original 8 mm film for *The Color of Love* was an amateur porn film from the 1970s that had been water damaged, which gave it a really unique decayed emulsion. It was salvaged from the trash—not my first episode of dumpster-diving to find cast-off treasures—and was beautifully abstract and weathered. At the point when I found the reel in the 1990s, it was already completely obsolete, a real obscurity. I loved the magic of how this film came to me. It is my *Perfect Film* (this is the title of a 1969 'readymade' film by Ken Jacobs, comprised of unedited, un-manipulated found footage). What you see on screen is simply the organic process of decay, the effects of time passing, and the cruel fate of our culture of value, or in this case the lack of it. I quote Karl Marx in reference to the film: 'In history as in nature, decay is the laboratory of life.' I did do some surface manipulation, but the prominent visual effects of the accordion motion of the decay and the colorful staining on the film were there when I found it.

I would never describe myself as an animator, with its traditional associations of hand-drawing and single-framing. However, with current technologies and software, basically all video is animated—with special effects, composited layers in post-production, and image-processing. My tools have always been cameras and computers. I start with captured representations of the world and although I am certainly interested in the intuitive and the subjective, my use of the 'artist's hand' is limited to the things you describe in reference to *The Color of Love*—hand-processing and chemical changes to the surface.

The process of making *She Puppet* did engage my direct physical gestures, since the footage was recorded as I played the video game *Tomb Raider* and is an index of my physical gestures, decisions, and tricks. I take the opportunity with this video to ponder the meaning of a female game character that is constructed of cones and cylinders, and to wonder about the consequences of our identification and ability to fantasize. I learned all the game modifications and was involved on the online Tomb Raider community. The technique is called *machinima*, but I made the video before that term was popularized.

The video consists of the game footage and the voiceover is all quotation—so nothing is 'original' in the old-fashioned sense. The emphasis is on the digital identity of women and on women as fictional

characters at a particular moment of history (2001). Lara Croft is the virtual girl-doll of the late twentieth century, and in *She Puppet* she is cast into a persona that portends the crisis in identity that hit around that time and has since escalated. Her condition is defined by an unstable yet powerful triad of outsiders—the alien, the orphan, and the clone.

GENDER AND FEMINISM

Gosse: So far we've talked about labour and class, but I wonder if you can speak further to the feminist impulse in your work, and if it relates to the films we are discussing here? Not so much in terms of their literal content (especially since the animated human figures are given only the most basic attributes of gender, such as hairstyle and clothing) but perhaps more in terms of methodology?

Ahwesh: I have a tendency to work with trash, discards, and 'worthless' bits of low-status film. Other film-makers working with found footage aim to dismantle masterpieces. To appropriate such masterpieces is a privilege that I won't claim; instead, I adopt the role of the outsider as a position of strength. I'm not sure this is a feminist issue or a class issue, or both.

I have pondered the potential feminist implications of the animated films. In *Lessons of War*, there is a shot of a woman having a nightmare—she is up in the clouds flying on a mission with drones—in a way, she is a stand-in for me and gives an unsettling perspective on the events that follow. Is this me offering a *literal* feminist perspective? Perhaps. Another example and one that may be essentializing but comes to mind is this: the *Lessons of War* appropriates the 'cuteness' of the animation in order to reveal an underlying horror, and to render the cute object—my version thus offers a critical use of cuteness (see Fig. 1).

IRONY, HUMOR, AND FAKE NEWS

Gosse: Before you mentioned the lack of irony in the original animations, but I am similarly struck by the lack of irony in your revisionist versions. One of the *ur-texts* of experimental found-footage film, Bruce Conner's *A MOVIE* (1958), is often considered a proto-postmodern example of ironic appropriation, but I would argue that this interpretation neutralizes the film's intense and highly contingent affect. Rather



Fig. 1 Peggy Ahwesh, *The Lessons of War* (2015)

than ironic detachment à la Pop Art, A MOVIE is charged with emotion and humor, and its tone oscillates wildly between comedy and tragedy depending on context. I have a similar experience viewing your animated films—at times, they jolt me with their sense of pathos and existential alienation, and, at others, are laughably bizarre and awkward, hovering on the brink of absurdity.

Ahwesh: I have had some of my most sublime movie moments watching Bruce Conner, and I agree with you that the experience is not ironic. Not ironic, but knowing and deliberate in showing cultural inadequacy and a breakdown in values. The bittersweet melancholy of the images tug against the soundtrack and the despair of knowing that the images and the world that is idealized in the images is so ephemeral and ungraspable. It's the history of the American heartland in a time capsule. I have seen his work hundreds of times and each viewing is as powerful as the first. I feel a particularly deep connection to Conner's later work such as *Valse Triste* (1978), with references that are open and dreamy and not tied so directly to heavy, significant historical events.

I have also been looking to some younger media artists, not necessarily from the experimental film tradition, who lift images from the data stream—Cécile Evans, Basma Alsharif, and Ian Cheng come to mind.

They go far into the mash-up world of associations and make well-chosen juxtapositions, using the computer like an instrument. These makers smuggle multiple layers into the frame with superimposition, simultaneous events, and an uncanny emotional depth.

In terms of historical avant-garde films, I am a fan of Harry Smith—I love his film and collage work, his use of found materials and his deep sense of obligation and prescience in collecting ephemera from the street and the thrift stores. He was singularly eclectic in his practice, interests, and accomplishments, and in tandem with his art-making he was devoted to ethnography and language dialects. His *Mirror Animations* (1956–1957) are dense, magical cut-up collages that make reference to the occult and alchemy, running forwards and backwards at different intervals.

THE AESTHETICS OF CONTROL

Gosse: It's interesting to hear you bring up Harry Smith, who we associate with hand-made collage and direct animation and thus with the 'indexical'. The CGI animations you work with have a more ambiguous and fraught relationship to 'the real', or at least to notions of cinematic realism that are rooted in an indexical relationship to the world. CGI seems uniquely suited for weaponization—for the purposes of propaganda, misinformation, or training—and in this sense has a unique relationship to the visual culture of war. *Lessons of War*, in particular, reminds me of Harun Farocki's interest in military VR training and therapeutic exercises in *Serious Games I–IV* (2009–2010), or, even more menacing, Colin Powell's use of animated simulations when he convinced the United Nations to sign off on the Iraq War.

Writing on Farocki's final video installation, *Parallel I–IV* (2012–2014), scholar Erika Balsom characterizes his use of computer animation as 'a form of world-making' that is inextricably linked to 'a fantasy of governance, rationality, and mastery at a time of crisis, uncertainty, and environmental catastrophe'. Lacking an indexical relation to the 'real' world, Farocki's appropriated CGI offers the seductive possibility of 'Control over represented worlds [...] as a distracting substitute for the impossibility of control over our own' (Balsom 2015, unpaginated). This description strikes me as equally applicable to your recent films as Farocki's. How do you understand the relationship between CGI and control in the animated newsreels you borrow, which, like Farocki's

films, address the complex intersections of governmental, economic, existential, and environmental crisis?

Ahwesh: The experience you get from Farocki of contemporary corporate and state control over our private lives is oddly comforting. He is a master teacher, using a woman's voice in voiceover to calmly explain how things work and the source of our alienation. However, the end result is not immersion into the comfort of the synthetic world; his critical 'gamesmanship' ultimately spits the viewer back to reality.

Balsom describes Farocki as 'pursuing an essayistic cinema of thought'. I'd like to think that's what I do in my work. *The Blackest Sea* and *Lessons of War* hang in a gap between the real and the synthetic—not as a substitute but as a supplement to the real world and also a challenge. At the time, I was specifically addressing 'fake news' as an aspect of the animations, but the technique has evolved with frightening consequences since the 2016 presidential election. With the rude wake-up call of our current political dilemma, more people are internalizing the lessons of semiotics and are being more careful about what they believe. My films examine the classic strategies of the spectacle that we have seen gradually mutate, warp, and intensify over time as information speeds up and goes viral. My hope is that the videos enable an anti-virality, offering a pause for contemplation or a kind of research headspace for poetic verification. The beauty of all of this is that truth is not mere facts.

RE-ENACTMENT, FORENSICS, AND THE 'REAL'

Gosse: To the extent that the CGI newsreels are framed as *reenactments* rather than entertainment, they claim a unique evidentiary power, a truth-value that actually serves to highlight the gulf between image and real event. While watching your work, I often sense that my judgment is being solicited, as if I'm a member of a courtroom jury or military tribunal. In an earlier conversation, we discussed how the evaluative criteria of 'evidence' has superseded 'testimony' within recent human rights discourse, and how the practice of forensics and reconstruction are increasingly popular techniques for recovering the historical 'real'. How do your films navigate this fundamental tension between the forensic and the fictional?

Ahwesh: My intention is to force the source material to point back to itself and lay bare the gap between that sketchy cartoon world and reality. I recut the videos into a configuration that is not reliant on montage like in the Conner films, but instead is apparently seamless, in order to generate a subtle continuity in the mind of the viewer. I am trying to create a critical dimension, a slippage in the closed system of the synthetic world of CGI, what in video games they call world-making. With these recent works, as was true with *She Puppet*, it's difficult to see where I made the cuts.

Forensics is an aspect of police work but recently, different groups, most prominently Forensic Architecture, have developed new techniques, charged by both intellect and politics, that use material evidence to lay out a sequence of events and its consequences by reconstructing them in reverse order. This procedure has superseded the use of testimony in our post-truth era. In my work with cartoon newsreels, my argument is not about fake news per se, but about the theory and effect of the indexical image.

APPROPRIATION V. ANIMATION

Gosse: Like Farocki's, your films address political and humanitarian concerns like military violence and data surveillance, the migrant and refugee crisis, climate change and ecological collapse. They function like forensic cartoon newsreels depicting large-scale phenomena that are so overwhelmingly complex, ubiquitous, and powerful—like war, displacement, big data, and the Anthropocene—that they threaten to exceed human comprehension.

I imagine that the market for these animations emerged not just from the incessant 24-hour news cycle, but also the need for image content that can reach global audiences across language barriers. Yet, I also wonder about the voyeuristic impulse to watch disasters and atrocities unfold, from refugee drownings to dash-cam snuff films of police brutality. How do your films avoid both this sense of total despair, as well as the scopophilia and desensitization that are fueled by media spectacle?

Ahwesh: I made *Lessons of War* in response to the Israeli conflict (or war) with Gaza in the summer of 2014, called Operation Protective

Edge. I have lived in the West Bank and for a number years went there on a semi-regular basis to teach media class, so I have many friends in the Occupied territories, and am pretty familiar with the obstacles of daily life there. The deaths of many innocent people occurred that summer, the most prominent being the bombing of four boys on the beach. *The New York Times* first reported that story with the headline ‘Four Young Boys Killed Playing on Gaza Beach’, which was changed later the same day to ‘Boys Drawn to Gaza Beach, and into Center of Mideast Strife’. There was a terrifying intensity to the descriptions and a horror of detail about things you didn’t want to believe were really happening, but of course they were (Fig. 2)

I made the video in part so I could move on and to remember the particulars of the events, to mourn the dead and to stop the deluge of up-to-the-minute news frenzy. Also, to make a point about how memory softens and blurs the details of events, leaving a more generalized outline as they fade with time. I satisfied my own need to make a memory aide while knowing that, at the same time, the animations would do the work of rendering these experiences more palatable. They are in comic book form, several protective layers away from reality. *Lessons of War* consists of five short narratives, stories that pervaded every news outlet when they occurred, here repurposed for critique. For example, one vignette



Fig. 2 Peggy Ahwesh, *The Lessons of War* (2015)

features the use of the Iron Dome deployed to deflect Hamas rockets fired into southern Israel, and another details the underground tunnels dug to transport consumer goods and soldiers to and from Gaza.

One of the most direct consequences of war is death. In some sense, animation is an act of bringing to life dead matter, of reanimating the dead. The pageantry of war has a design element—soldiers in formation, movement of troops, the choreography of parades and the deadly precision of weapons—these designs are transcribed into the design of animation as form, as an aestheticization of politics and literally, death.

CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE ANIMATED TURN

Gosse: Over the past two decades, with the rise of computer-imaging software, digital animation has emerged as a major genre of contemporary art, especially animation that emphasizes the violent, uncanny, taboo, and grotesque: take, for example, Paul Chan's *Happiness (Finally) After 35,000 Years of Civilization—After Henry Darger and Charles Fourier* (2000–2003). How would you contextualize your work against Chan's work and the 'animated turn' in contemporary art more broadly?

Ahwesh: There are many things our work has in common, one being the diminutive scale of the characters—the miniaturization of the bodies in their tiny settings. Cartoons imply immaturity, I suppose, but my attraction to them, and I assume that of the artists we are talking about, is as a tactic that suppresses 'taste', or at least moves it to the periphery, and opens up a game space of substitutions with avatars and animated figures. I have a long-standing obsession with puppets, as well as souvenirs, miniature books, comics; I find it deeply satisfying to inhabit my tidy subjective world alongside these miniaturized objects.

Chan's video of Darger's Vivian girls is a pageant that contrasts scenes of the girls frolicking in bucolic gardens with brutal battle scenes. It's an intense and dire mash-up of the 'cute' with the brutality of war and violence. Chan describes so clearly that cognitive dissonance one experiences when being mesmerized equally by beauty and violence. In *She Puppet*, our heroine figure 'talks' in voiceover and describes the dilemma of contemporary digital life while trapped inside a video game. This rescaled cartoon world becomes increasingly convincing as we shrink to fit inside it.

CRITICAL CUTENESS // THE CUT

Gosse: This tension between cuteness and violence in Chan's work brings me back to your earlier, provocative description of your films as a critical use of the cute, or perhaps a *detourning* of cuteness. In her book *Our Aesthetic Categories*, philosopher Sianne Ngai theorizes cuteness as an aesthetic category that is conventionally applied to objects or creatures that are viewed as dainty, weak, and minor, characteristics that suggest a political dynamic of domination and control. In her chapter on 'The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde', Ngai writes:

Realist verisimilitude and formal precision tend to work against or even nullify cuteness, which becomes most pronounced in objects with simple round contours and little or no ornamentation or details. By this logic, the epitome of the cute would be an undifferentiated blob of soft doughy matter. Since cuteness is an aestheticization of powerlessness ('what we love because it submits to us'), and since soft contours suggest pliancy or responsiveness to the will of others, the less formally articulated the commodity, the cuter. (Ngai 2012, 64)

Ngai points out that the etymology of cute stems from 'acute', suggesting that the cute is essentially something lacking sharpness or angularity, something soft, malleable, and thus easily dominated or manipulated. Her description of an archetypal cute object as an 'undifferentiated blob of soft doughy matter' recalls Sergei Eisenstein's influential theories of animation, particularly his concept of plasmaticness, which he defines as 'a rejection of once-and-forever allotted form, freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form' (Eisenstein 1986, 21). For Eisenstein, plasmaticness enables animation to behave like 'primal protoplasm, not yet possessing a "stable" form, but capable of assuming any form and which, skipping along the rungs of the evolutionary ladder, attaches itself to any and all forms of animal existence' (Eisenstein 1986, 21). Importantly, though, he frames animation's plasmaticness as an expression of its freedom from form rather than its domination by external forces. Accordingly, the formlessness and mutability of animation registers a utopian possibility. Thus, Ngai's cuteness and Eisenstein's plasmaticness represent two competing understandings of animated form, one framed in terms of domination, the other in terms of freedom. Where do you locate your films in relation to Ngai and Eisenstein's theories?

Ahwesh: Eisenstein's dialectical montage is a form of ideological cutting that is in direct opposition to 'cute'. Eisenstein admired Disney animations for their sense of freedom of form and playfulness, and was excited by the instability of those transformations. A different way to think of this aesthetic concept of 'cuteness' might be Bataille's theory of the *informe* (formless). With my films, I am scavenging forms and messing with them in a betrayal of their intended logic, shape, and meaning—I take forms and render them *informe*.

I am aware of the limitations of 'form' but at the same time I am seduced by the awesome beauty and balance it can attain. My work seeks to upend formal significance. By definition, one aspect of the formless is a base materialism that includes the use of discards, low technologies, found materials, decay, and the marginal. Though generating 'meaning' is typically the professed goal of an artist, I find that we often want to connect on a more fundamental, irrational level of feeling and process, between the push-pull of revulsion and attraction. This impulse is something we recognize easily in sculpture or while molding shapes out of clay, but I think it is equally operative in moving images.

CUTENESS AND AGENCY

Gosse: What strikes me about the type of animation that interests you is that in spite of its cuteness, it actually lacks the quality of plasmaticness as Eisenstein describes it. The living creatures that populate these virtual worlds are emphatically *not* protean or changeable—nor are they remotely social. To the contrary, their shapes, movements, and fates are digitally preordained. Like puppets or mannequins, they utterly lack any sense of agency or interiority, and do not act so much as *are acted upon*. They do not speak or communicate, and when a thought-bubble pops up, it is filled with picture language and emoji. When living beings are threatened or killed, they don't resist or appear to suffer, they merely change colors: red indicates dead. Unlike Lara Croft in *She Puppet*, these figures don't rise to the level of individual avatars or characters, just pawns in an overarching algorithmic narrative. In a more dystopian interpretation, these animations provide a glimpse of how computers view humanity, as toys to be manipulated and controlled rather than individual agents endowed with choice and freedom.

However, if there is a protean sense of mutability (*qua* Eisenstein) available here, it is registered not through the figures themselves but

rather through your editing, which injects unpredictability and unruliness, and thus injects some human agency into these virtual worlds. As editor, you reanimate and remobilize these inert digital narratives, opening up new possibilities for historical revision and new horizons of possibility.

Ahwesh: Yes, this word ‘mobilized’ is a really good descriptor—the figures in the videos are not the totems of so-called primitive culture-animistic figures of magic with changing temperaments and form. They are almost the opposite, since they are used in the service of representation—confined by the industry of news production. I hope I return to them to a bit of their shape-shifting potential—allowing for irony, distortions of the real and playful and multiple meanings.

Mick Taussig’s *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (1993) is a fantastic text that actually relates to Eisenstein’s theory of animation. Taussig describes how native peoples design fetishes and mimetic figures that adopt the likenesses of the colonizers and their alien utilitarian objects, and then use these objects to invert colonial power in the struggle for independence and control over cultural meaning.

To bring something into proximity versus keeping it at a distance—this push-pull constitutes the dynamic of appropriation, in which the original meaning and the revision often move in opposite directions. It creates an eerie friction that gets these multifarious associations all revved up, or in other words, animated.

CUTENESS AND CONTROL

Gosse: Your films go beyond a critiquing cuteness, they weaponize it. I detect a feminist subtext here that, once again, points back to *She Puppet*—like animation, in puppetry, cuteness and control are co-constitutive. In what ways do you think that the cuteness of the animated newsreels, and of animation in general, might provide an opportunity for the deployment of feminized forms and aesthetics (such as cuteness) as a political strategy?

Ahwesh: Deep down I have always disparaged the ‘cute’ and have felt it to be a weakness of femininity and sentimentality, a genteel cover-up of strong emotions. Over the years, most of my work has come from an opposing point of view—one that is raw, direct, and improvised. The development

of video games in the 1990s was so rapid, their beauty, sophistication, and interactivity so amazing, but what was really cool was the constant mutations by users with mods and cheats—play that breaks the rules of the game. I saw gameplay in line with this kind of rule-breaking and improvisation, and started messing around with *Tomb Raider*, eventually resulting in *She Puppet*. It struck me that there was power in inverting my approach, and discovered that using the game was a shortcut to dismantling this power. I could work with and against femaleness as portrayed in *Tomb Raider* as an imaginary adventure world designed for the female protagonist's exploits and confrontations. It's a productive mimesis that *detourns* the dominant structures of power and control, allowing for a radical subjectivity to sneak through as a form of redemption.

Regarding the use of cartoons and computer-generated figures as imagery, by me and other artists, I think it's also an attempt to chart the specific reality of who we are right now, how to communicate the complex, deep substrate that is the texture of our present moment. The formal elements an artist chooses are the codes that activate the work, and relay ideas and feelings to make a gestalt within the viewer. The catalogue of old gestures and styles just doesn't work in our new machine world. Using the cartoons in a critical way, or 'weaponizing' them as you say, makes visible what is already omnipresent but brings it forward with higher definition. It puts these forms into dialogue with subjective experience in a way that feels real and challenging but also, in some cases, oddly comforting.

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