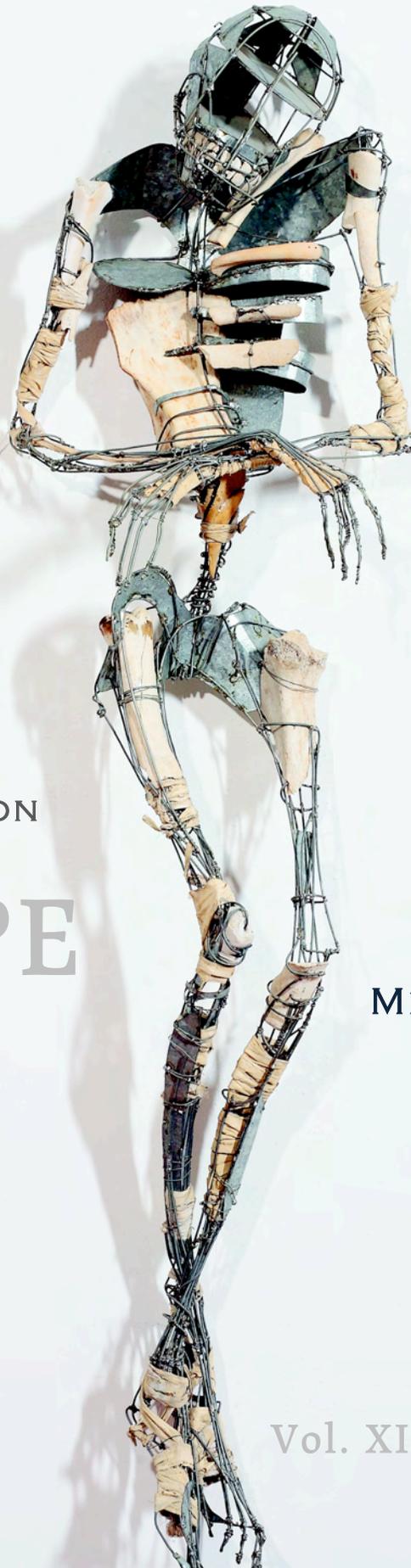


HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



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BERSON**

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Vol. XI, No. 1 (summer 2018)

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics



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Location: New York, London, Melbourne

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Hyperion is published biannually

by Contra Mundum Press, Ltd.

P.O. Box 1326, New York, NY 10276, U.S.A.

W: <http://contramundum.net>

For advertising inquiries, e-mail: info@contramundum.net

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Thoughts to the Purpose. . .

In certain epochs poetry has been able to coexist with society and its impulse has nourished the best undertakings of society. In primitive times poetry, religion, and society together formed a living and creative unity. The poet was magician and priest, and his word was divine. That unity was broken thousands of years ago — at that very moment when the division of labor created a clergy and the first theocracies were born — but the schism between poetry and society was never total. The great divorcement began in the 18th century and coincided with the downfall of the beliefs that were the foundations of our civilization. Nothing has replaced Christianity, and for two centuries we have lived in a kind of spiritual interregnum. In our epoch poetry cannot live within what capitalistic society calls its ideals: the lives of Shelley, Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Bécquer are proofs that spare the necessity of argument. If, toward the end of the last century, Mallarmé was able to create his poetry outside of society, today all poetic activity, if it is truly poetic, must oppose that society. It is not strange that for certain sensitive souls the only possible vocation is solitude or suicide; neither is it strange that for others, beautiful and passionate, the only imaginable poetic activities are dynamite, political assassination, or the gratuitous crime. In certain cases, at least, one must have the courage to say that one sympathizes with those explosions, which are testimony of the desperation to which a social system based solely upon the conservation of the status quo, and especially economic gain, leads us. — Octavio Paz

Since art is dead, it has evidently become extremely easy to disguise police officers as artists. [...] We open empty pseudo museums, or pseudo-research centers on the complete work of a non-existent person, as quickly as we make the reputation of journalist-cops, or historian-cops, or novelist-cops. [...] The general conspiracy, having become so dense, is displayed almost openly so that [...] all these professional conspirators come to observe each other without knowing exactly why, or meet by chance, without being able to recognize themselves with certainty. Who wants to observe who? On whose behalf, apparently? But in reality? — Guy Debord

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ROLAND BARTHES

Dear Antonioni

Translated by Rainer J. Hanshe



Still from Antonioni's *Michelangelo Eye to Eye* (2004)

Dear Antonioni ...

In his typology, Nietzsche distinguishes two figures: the priest and the artist. Of priests, we have an abundance today: from every religion, and even outside of religion; but artists? I would like, dear Antonioni, to be allowed to borrow some traits from your work to permit me to delineate the three forces — or, if you like, the three virtues — which to my eyes constitute the artist. I shall name them at once: vigilance, wisdom, and, most paradoxical of all, fragility.

Contrarily to the priest, the artist is capable of astonishment and admiration; his gaze may be critical, but it is not accusatory: the artist does not know *ressentiment*. It is because you are an artist that your work is open to the Modern. Many take the Modern as a battle flag against the old world, its values compromised; but for you, the Modern is not a static term of facile opposition; contrarily, the Modern is an active difficulty in following the changes of Time, not only at the level of grand History, but within the little History of which the existence of each of us is the measure. Beginning with the aftermath of the last war, your work has thus proceeded, from moment to moment, according to a movement of double vigilance, toward the contemporary world and toward yourself; each of your films has been, at your personal level, a historic experience, that is, the abandonment of an old problem and the formulation of a new question — this means that you have lived through and treated the history of the last thirty years with subtlety, not as the material of an artistic reflection or an ideological commitment, but as a substance whose magnetism it was your task to capture, from work to work. For you, contents and forms are equally historical; dramas, you have said, are equally psychological and plastic. The social, the narrative, and the neurotic are just levels — pertinences, as they say in linguistics — of the world as a whole, which is the object of every artist: there is a succession, not a hierarchy of interests. Strictly speaking, contrarily to the thinker, an artist does not evolve; he surveys, like a very sensitive instrument, the successive Novelty which his own history presents to him: your work is not a fixed reflection, but a *moiré* over which passes, according to the inclination of your gaze and the demands of the time, figures of the Social or the Passional, and those formal innovations, from narrative modes to the use of Color. Your concern for the epoch is not that of a historian, a politician, or a moralist, but rather that of a utopian who seeks to perceive the new world on precise points, because he is eager for this world and he already wants to be part of it. The vigilance of the artist, which is yours, is an amorous vigilance, a vigilance of desire.

I call the wisdom of the artist not an ancient virtue, still less a mediocre discourse, but, on the contrary, a moral knowing, a discerning acuity that enables him to keep from confounding meaning and truth. What crimes has humanity not committed in the name of Truth! And yet that truth was nothing but a meaning. What wars, what repressions, what terrors, what genocides, for the triumph of a meaning! The artist himself knows that the meaning of a thing is not its truth; that knowledge is a wisdom — a mad wisdom, one might say, since it withdraws him from the community, from the herd of fanatics and the arrogant.

Not all artists, however, possess this wisdom: many make a hypostasis of meaning. This terrorist operation is generally called realism. So, when you declare (in an interview with Godard): “I feel the need to express reality, but in terms which are not entirely realist,” you show a true sense of meaning: you do not impose it, but you do not abolish it. This dialectic gives your films (I will use again the same word) a great subtlety: your art consists in always leaving the road of meaning open, and as if undecided, out of scrupulousness. It’s how you very precisely accomplish the task of the artist that our time has need of: neither dogmatic, nor devoid of meaning. Thus, in your first short films on the Rome street-cleaners or the manufacture of rayon at Torviscosa, the critical description of social alienation vacillates, without yielding, in favor of a more immediate, more pathos-laden sentiment of bodies at work. In *Il grido*, the strong meaning of the work is, one might say, the very uncertainty of meaning: the wandering of a man who cannot find his identity confirmed anywhere and the ambiguity of the conclusion (suicide or accident) lead the spectator to doubt the meaning of the message. This departure of meaning, which is not the same as its abolition, enables you to unhinge the psychological certitudes of realism: in *Red Desert* the crisis is no longer a crisis of feelings, as in *L’eclisse*, because feelings in it are secure (the heroine loves her husband): everything is bound and hurts in a second zone where the affects — the discomfiture of affects — escape to that armature of meaning that is the code of the passions. Finally — to proceed quickly — your last films carry this crisis of meaning at the heart of the identity of events (*Blow Up*) or

of people (*The Passenger*). Throughout your work, at bottom, there is a constant critique, at once painful and demanding, of that strong mark of meaning known as destiny.

This vacillation — or perhaps it would be more accurate to say: this syncope of meaning, follows technical, specifically filmic paths (decor, shots, montage), which it is not for me to analyze, because I don't have the competence; I am here, it seems to me, to say in what way your work, above and beyond its role as cinema, offers a challenge to all contemporary artists: you work at making subtle the meaning of what man says, recounts, sees or feels, and this subtlety of meaning, this conviction that meaning does not stop crudely at the thing being said, but always goes much further, fascinated by what lies beyond — it's that, I believe, that of all artists, whose object is not this or that technique, but that strange phenomenon, vibration. The represented object vibrates, to the detriment of dogma. I think of the words of the painter Braque: "The painting is finished when it has effaced the idea." I think of Matisse drawing an olive tree, from his bed, and beginning, after a while, to observe the spaces between the branches, and discovering that this new vision enabled him to escape the habitual image of the object being drawn — the cliché "olive tree." Matisse thus discovered the principle of oriental art, which always wants to paint the void, or rather, which seizes the object to be represented at the rare moment when the fullness of its identity suddenly falls into a new space, that of the Interstice. In a certain way, your art is also an art of the Interstice (the most striking example of this proposition would be *L'Avventura*) and then, in a certain way too, your art has some relationship to the Orient. It was your film on China that gave me the urge to travel there; and if this film was initially rejected by those who should have understood that its force of love was superior to all propaganda, that is because it was judged according to a reflex of power and not according to the demand of truth. The artist has no power, but he has some relationship with truth; his work — always allegorical if it is a great work — approaches truth at an angle; his world is the Indirect of truth.

Why is this subtlety of meaning itself so decisive? Precisely because meaning, from when it is fixed and imposed, from when it ceases to be subtle, becomes an instrument, a force of power. Making meaning subtle is therefore a second political activity, as is any attempt to break up, to disrupt, to dismantle the fanaticism of meaning. This is not without its danger. So the third virtue of the artist (I use the word "virtue" in its Latin sense) is his fragility: the artist is never confident of living, of working: a simple but serious proposition: his erasure is a possible thing.

The first fragility of the artist is this: he is part of a world which changes, but he himself changes too; this is banal, but for the artist, it is dizzying, because he never knows if the work he is offering is the result of changes in the world or changes in his subjectivity. You have always been conscious, it seems to me, of this relativity of Time, declaring, for example, in an interview: "If the things we talk about today are no longer those that we talked about just after the war, it's because the world around us has changed, but we too have changed. Our needs, our words, our themes have changed." This fragility is that of an existential doubt that seizes the artist as and when his life and work advance; this doubt is difficult, painful even, because the artist never knows if what he sets out to say is a truthful witnessing of the world as that which has changed, or the simple egotistical reflection of his nostalgia or his desire: an Einsteinian traveller, he never knows if it is the train or space-time that moves, if he is a witness or a man of desire.

Another aspect of fragility for the artist — it is paradoxical —, is the firmness and insistence of his gaze. Power, of any kind, because it is violence, never gazes: if it gazed one minute longer (one minute too much), it would lose its essence as power. The artist, he alone, stops and gazes lengthily, and I am imagining that you became a filmmaker because the camera is an eye, constrained, by its technical disposition, to gaze. What you add to this disposition, like all filmmakers, is to gaze at things radically, until their depletion. To one degree you gaze lengthily at what you were not expected to gaze at either due to political convention (the Chinese peasants) or due to narrative convention (the dead time of

an adventure). Alternatively, your preferred hero is someone who gazes (photographer or reporter). This is dangerous, because to look longer than is necessary (I insist on this supplementary intensity) disturbs every established order, of every kind, to the extent that, normally, the time of the gaze is controlled by society: hence, when the work escapes this control, the scandalous nature of certain photographs and films: not the most indecent or the most combative, but simply the most “staged.”

The artist is then threatened, not solely by established power — the martyrology of artists censored by the State, throughout all of History, would be of a despairing length —, but also by a collective feeling, always possible, that society can do without art: artistic activity is suspect because it disturbs the comfort, the security of established meanings, because it is at once expensive and free, and because the new society in search of itself, whatever every different regime it lives under, has not yet decided what it should think about luxury. Our fate is uncertain, and this incertitude does not have a simple relationship with the political solutions that we can envisage for the disquiet of the world: it depends on this monumental History, which decides, in a hardly suitable manner, not on our needs, but on our desires.

Dear Antonioni, I have tried to say in my intellectual language the reasons that make you, over and above the cinema, one of the artists of our time. This compliment is not simple, as you know; because being an artist today is being in a position no longer supported by the good conscience of a great sacred or social function; it is no longer being in the bourgeois Pantheon of the Lighthouses of Humanity; it is, at the moment of each work, confronting in oneself those spectra of modern subjectivity, which are (from the moment one is no longer a priest), ideological lassitude, bad social conscience, the attraction and disgust of facile art, the quivering of responsibility, the incessant scruple that quarters the artist between solitude and gregariousness. You must then today benefit from this peaceful, harmonious, reconciled moment, where a whole collectivity joins together to recognize,

admire, and love your work. Because tomorrow the hard work begins again.

Roland Barthes first presented this text as a speech at the ceremony granting the "Archiginnasio d'oro" to Antonioni by the City of Bologna in February of 1980. Originally published in Roland Barthes '*Caro Antonioni*': *con antologia degli scritti di Antonioni sul cinema*, ed. by Carlo di Carlo (Bologna: Cineteca Comunale, 1980), and subsequently in *Cahiers du Cinema*, No. 311 (May 1980) 90–111.

"Dear friend,

Thank you for *Camera Lucida*, which is a book both bright and very beautiful. It surprises me that you say in chapter three to be "a subject tossed between two languages, one expressive, the other critical," and you confirm this opinion in your extraordinary first lesson at the College de France.

But what is the artist if not a subject tossed between two languages also, one language that expresses, another that does not express? It is always thus. The inexorable and inexplicable dramas of artistic creation."

I was in the midst of writing this letter when the news of R.B.'s death reached me by phone. I did not know that he had an accident and I remained breathless, with a sharp pain in my head. The first thing I thought was this: there is a little less sweetness and intelligence in the world now. A little less love. All the love he put to live and write in his life and in his writing.

I believe that the more we advance in this world which brutally regresses, the more we will feel the lack of those "virtues" that were his.

Michelangelo Antonioni

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On the future of aesthetics

**ÉLIANE RADIGUE :
FOR FREE EARS**



**INTERVIEW CONDUCTED & TRANSLATED
BY MARCO CACCIALUPI**

BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

Éliane Radigue is a French composer. After years of solitary work in the field of electronic music, today she enjoys working with other musicians, composing solos, duos, trios, and so on up to orchestral works. In spite of a large variety of approaches to sound and music, her production is quite consistent in spirit.

From her first steps in *musique concrète*, through electronic music, to today's compositional works for flesh-and-bone musicians, the listener and reader of Radigue's work will find common points. A sense of fluidity, a series of organic movements that evolve slowly, very slowly, accompany the listener through the experience that is exposing oneself to her sound universe.

This continuity is a signature that characterizes not only Radigue's music, but first and foremost her very life.

Although her music can understandably be defined as meditative, yet it is not soporific, even less new age 'easy listening.' Just as in real life, tiny details appear, here and there, to shake the listener's attention and return him or her to a more conscious state, before music and before life.

As the readers of this interview will find through her own words, interestingly, Radigue's intention is always purely musical. She remains humble as she never intends to instruct anyone, leaving the listener free to live each experience in their own way.

Her interest in Buddhist philosophy began in the early 70's and further accentuates the aforementioned aspects.

A woman of sharp wit and sparkling humor, she turned this interview into a moment of further revelations regarding not only her approach to music, but her approach to life itself, for everyone interested in her work, and in music thinking in general.

While almost all of the titles mentioned in this interview are available on CD, her most recent acoustic compositional works have not yet been distributed, but concert performances of some of them can be found on YouTube, such as ONCEIM's rendition of *Occam Océan* at the Louis Vuitton Foundation.

Don't call her work "drone music"!

INTERVIEW PREFACE

When Éliane Radigue accepted to be interviewed on June 8, 2017, she asked me to surprise her with questions that she never thought about before. I decided that it would have been more interesting to note down simply words, ideas, and names which her music and answers to other interviewers would suggest to me, at random, on a piece of paper, to form a sort of constellation, without any specific hierarchy, and to pass them from one to another according to her answers and reactions.

We started the interview with the one that I put at the center of this constellation. — Marco Caccialupi

Marco Caccialupi: *Becoming aware. James Turrell. What is the experience? From which side: musician or listener?*

Éliane Radigue: I think the two are inseparable. It is absolutely impossible to be a musician if we don't develop a particularly acute gear to listen. And I would rather use the word "listener" than "hearer."¹ "Hearer" [*auditrice*] is a rather passive action; while listening [*écoute*] is a thoroughly active action. And music demands that active form of listening to be truly heard. Of course, you can have background music; there is muzak in every shop, but you cannot call that truly musical listening.

MC: *The expression: "becoming aware" came to me because of your interest in Tibetan Buddhism, and in every form of Buddhism reaching full awareness is the final goal of the eightfold path. Is there a desire or maybe even a need in you that the listener reaches full awareness through your work?*

ER: Listen, that belongs to the listener. I try to suggest sounds that are open and free enough for each listener [*auditeur*] to reveal his own music to himself. That is my sole aim — that the listener may leave [the concert hall] and have in himself his own little music that keeps on singing. And I impose nothing, I have no strict rule, I have no grand theory, nothing like that. This are just what re-

¹ In French there are two words indicating who listens, according to whether one simply hears or whether one listens attentively.

mains from when I started seriously in the 60's, what I used to call my little sound threads. Sound propositions. And I keep on making sound propositions, which one may call music & which, somehow, reach their goal precisely when the person can find in himself an awakening to his own musical conscience, more exactly.

"Conscience" is an extremely vast and rich word, opening up to many territories, and we would get lost. So, as we remain in the territory of sound, of listening and of music [I'd say that my aim is] the awakening of the listening person to his own inner music. Because each one of us has his inner music.

MC: *Is it therefore more of an invitation to a voyage?*

ER: For travellers such as you are why not; for someone on another quest, another pursuit, it could be something else. Each one of us has his or her own ruling forces. I repeat: I impose nothing, I ask for nothing. It is there, it is what I feel like doing; and then everything is in the answer that the listener finds. If he finds answers in himself, that's good. But again, if he finds nothing, if he gets bored and leaves, it's equally fine. For me, it's the same thing. It's a way to establish a link; the link is there or it is not; and the link is created also according to the personality that you have before you.

MC: *Talking about how to transmit the work. The first time you started working with instrumentalists, if I am correct, was in 2000 with Kasper Toeplitz for "Elemental"... So, transmitting the work: that is done with specific musicians, there is the relevance of the performance space, there is no partition, and I noted: Meredith Monk, because I know she too approaches the work with the musicians face-to-face, or in any case it is about meeting certain specific persons.*

ER: Yes. I made some solos. I always considered the instrumentalist and his instrument as an indissociable unity. And it seems obvious to me to create an almost osmotic bond. On the other hand, an essentially oral transmission is necessary. It is indispensable, due to my quest, which is shared by the musicians who ask to work with me. Because musicians ask to work with me, I don't

want to impose anything, but they know my work — [the reason for] this is essentially to make the music within the music to emerge, the music of partials, of overtones, the music of light beats, of pulses, of harmonics, of the very rare and wonderful sub-harmonics, which is of course a very special approach. You need a fundamental; but the fundamental is only there to bring forth this emergence. And writing on a piece of paper means nothing, if the musician does not do all this work, either on his bow, or with his breath. It is structured; it is not the work of improvisation; that is, we always have a structure, an approach that we share. And obviously the freedom of the musician is present when he grasps something particularly interesting, that he develops it as long as he wishes to. By contrast, if a difficulty appears [in an articulation, he should] gently move to the following articulation. But otherwise the work is structured. And only the musicians with whom I work can transmit it, since I never do the same work twice. Every musician has a unique piece. The one you heard by H el ene Bre-schand is very much different from the one for Rhodri Davis, be-cause they are both wonderful harpists, but they have very differ-ent personalities. Rhodri Davis was the first with whom I had started the “Occams”² series, but with H el ene it has been a totally different work, though just as exciting too. What is exciting is the sort of osmosis that is created with the musician. And then, when we work for duos, trios, or quartets, after the initial work has been done, [it becomes very easy,] the exchange happens immedi-ately, because we already had that intimate exchange, if I may say so, the three of us, the instrumentalist, me, and the instrument.

MC: *What intrigued me was to know if you think that, once the work is transmitted to the musician, that person can then transmit it.*

ER: But of course! And not only — it’s something that I tell them, but until now, they preferred keeping it for themselves. The only one who tried to transmit it, was Charles Curtis;³ but it is eventu-ally very exacting and very difficult. I always say that this is a

² “Occam XIV,” premiered at the Coll ege des Bernardins, in Paris, on April 26, 2017.

³ American cello player, who worked with Radigue on the first “Narjorlak” piece.