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SOCIAL SPACE IN "DIRECT ADDRESS"

I want to begin a consideration of the social space of "Direct Address" by means of a "thought experiment" based on an imagined relation of art to the developing suburban landscape of the late fifties reported by the sculptor Tony Smith and later elaborated on by Robert Smithson. Smith had somehow gained access to the then-unfinished New Jersey Turnpike, driving along empty and unlit stretches of it at night: "It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes, and colored lights." According to Smithson, Smith made of this encounter a paradigm for the immediacy of his art; "physically engulfed," Smith would "give evidence of this experience" of negative social space "through a limited (mapped) revision" ironically equivalent to the state of mind he was in. In order to follow this thought experiment into the present (where the former absences of the New Jersey Turnpike have been more than filled in), one can imagine the Nimitz Freeway where it makes its southward turn to the right through the brick walls of what used to be factory buildings, or, in Southern California, highway 5 at about the point it reaches the Babylonian tire plant. Generally one travels with the windows rolled up; the vibration level is so intense that it surpasses the possibility of perception. The landscape seems strangely detached, as if one were outside it as an observer at the same time that one is traveling within it. There is a particular thrill at being in a place that is so intensely man-made and that at the same time excludes any thought of habitation. I remember driving on the New Jersey Turnpike and encountering a highway sign, seen in an instant through the forward momentum and a pane of glass, that read "The noise level is now..." underneath which were flashing neon lights indicating "65 dB." It was very thoughtful of the New Jersey Turnpike Authority to build in a register of experience at the moment when it could not be perceived.

What I imagine Smith to have produced to approximate New Jersey is generally recognized as one of the founding works of minimalism in sculpture: a black metal cube six feet on a side. The title

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of the work is *Die*—a rich word that yields, simultaneously, “a small cube . . . used in pairs in various games and in gambling by being shaken and thrown to come to rest at random on a flat surface”; “any of various tools or devices for imparting a desired shape, form, or finish to a material, as . . . the mold in which a die casting . . . or a drop forging is made”; and finally, “(you) die,” imperative form of the verb, here implying a speaker somewhere else who is sending a message possibly in the form of the sculpture or “(would it) die,” the third-person subjunctive, indicating the sculpture as the logical extension of the function “to die.” The several senses of the title extend the work in several ways. A kind of “objective chance” is embodied in the first sense—Breton’s notion of a significant encounter with an externalized and objectified given. The work’s geometrical properties (its literal object status) leave off where a temporal romance of the object begins; the object’s meaning is only an experience of it. (Mallarmé’s “throw of the dice” is excluded—this is a monument to the twentieth century, not the nineteenth.) Second, the notion of industrial processes (as in a “tool and die factory”) alternates between the work’s “making something” as a die (giving concrete form, perhaps, to the disorganized and spread-out New Jersey landscape) and its “having been made” in a die—a form existing prior to the work’s materialization, which must then be perceived as ironic. Lastly, a voice is implicated in the work in its “saying” “(you) die” or “(would it) die.” This could be the voice of the work addressing the spectator, or it could be a voice exterior to the work whose injunction is being embodied or expressed. A mode of address and a moment of pure mental automatism are collapsed—so it is unclear whether the sculpture speaks or is spoken. The moment of objectification that may have produced such a work out of the experience of New Jersey can be indicated as coming into being in a similar way—an excess of deferred signification, an overwhelming pressure that is not to be simply named, “dies” into the form of the work as into its enunciation in the title. Through all of these senses, it appears that a double aspect of the work—its appearing out of eternity but as being concretized and encountered in time, of making and having been made, and of speaking and having been spoken—is essential to its meaning. The more densely and resolutely a grammatical subject (the geometrical cube fixed in place by eternal laws) the more multiply a grammatical predicate—a principle from which sequential acts of predication must extend. The work may be seen as having been predicated on New Jersey and as itself predicating a series of responses. Thus the temporal aspect of Smith’s sculpture—it travels in time at the same time that it embodies an irreversible process, a commitment that Robert Smithson later elevated to a con-

structive principle in his dictum that “poetry is a dying language but never a dead one.”

This is not mimesis as it is normally understood—as a representation of the world “seen” through a conventional frame that is the work’s outer boundary. Nothing could be more boring than a description of the New Jersey turnpike—or for that matter any description. No one cares about how drivers get on and off turnpikes (or characters in and out of rooms); attention to such matters in writing is always fatal. What we care about is what it means to be on the road (or in the room); readers of short fiction or verse in the *New Yorker* in this sense are investing in an endlessly deferred expectation that might some day fall due—in the meantime it’s all the trappings of an ethical distance on polishing the car in New England, as if anyone cared. In fact, there’s a kind of cultivation of the worst aspects of writerliness at present, a self-sufficiency of getting characters, objectively correlative interior or nature scenes, and moral observations in and out of the poem, as if by suffocating the reader with the necessities of oblique and postponed craft so totally the reader might finally admit it to be adequate itself as experience. And very likely its awful artificiality is about all that can be imagined as experience—it is its own guarantee. Some have even begun to “like” meter and rhyme to the extent that they intensify this effect.

Against this kind of encrusted impediment to the life-world, the clarity of Smith’s sculpture stands out. I’m interested in the way *Die* may be said to represent New Jersey as an approach to technique in recent writing that doesn’t limit mimesis to views from a conventional frame. Mimesis in this sense could be understood as broadly as Aristotle conceived it—as the action, not *like* the action—not needing to put quotations marks around the form. Form, in Smith’s sculpture, is as self-evident as drama would have been for *The Poetics*. In this sense the doubleness that can be read out of minimal sculpture specifies its object status as a kind of agency—as the objectification of a series of coincident actions as its intention for the world. Negativity figures centrally in Smith’s notion of the object—as a kind of displacement of or alterity to what exists but does not signify, a way of representing what can’t be represented. More positive tropes include the initiation of a temporal sequence by the act of the sculpture and its predicative mode of address—a poetics of singular assertions that implicates a subject in its larger discourse. The New Jersey experience Smith may refer to, in short, involves the conflicted objectification of a unitary subject. Social space is known not as the view out the window but as a displacement that occurs when the subject experiences it. This displacement precedes the form of an assertion that the work of art intends. In this sense, many of what seem to be subjective qualities of

social space—the partiality of any one person’s view of it, the inability to perceive its fragmentary aspects completely, and the distance that results from these (interior and exterior) physical states—are constitutive of our being in the world as we know it. Being “out of it” is in this sense essential training for social life at the center of things (either end of the turnpike is art, if we’re still speaking of New Jersey). In Smith’s response, the distance we would thus put back into circulation in the realm of the aesthetic demands a statement that is three-dimensional, self-evident, and very much still at odds.

But enough of sculpture—how is this response to social space to be realized in words?

DIRECT ADDRESS

Address itself, to the world.

Some kind of breakdown.

A bird, almost inverted. The anarchy of production, rugs.

Stripped, and the words are *there*.

In computer-animated time.

Tripping over a fireplug, think . . . Warren G. Harding wanted to meet Debs.

Abstract from Into-European.

Thorns that lust and hate.

“In order to make them believe.” At the end of history, air molecules on eyes.

Eyes open wide.

The opposite is what I intend.

Parking lots in Fremont convert an image to X. This many increments stacked up to be shipped.

In how many boxes?

Poetry, in the medium of their claims. [...]

If this is direct address, what is its social intention? A useful distinction is made by the historian Randolph Starn between “the conventions of *grande histoire* concerned with war, revolution, social upheaval, and high culture” and “*petite histoire* . . . the microhistory, the nonevent, the implicit cultural script, the role of the repressed.” For both kinds of history, there is a circularity of structure and event where “institutional procedures and public narratives . . . not only portray but actually produce their stories,” but the account of the admitted great events, where “flesh and blood . . . are as invisible and ultimately as expendable . . . as they are to ambitious generals” tends to obscure the way their form of presentation guarantees the inevitability of their outcomes. In consideration of a politics of poetic address, similar lines

can be drawn as a distinction, between a grand rhetoric of sweeping compass and lesser rhetoric of the particular and inconsequential (here “the new sentence” comes to mind). In Robert Duncan’s obituary, for example, the adjective *commanding* in the epithet “commanding figure of the San Francisco Renaissance” reinforces Duncan’s own statement of his largeness: “I make poetry as other men make war or make love or states or revolutions: to exercise my faculties at large.” This statement is no less a nonevent than Tony Smith’s *Die*, but it conveys entirely different politics in its social reproduction. In its symbolic economy, “flesh and blood . . . are [also] invisible and expendable,” but what is of interest is that these imagined turmoils and conflagrations are a form of release of excess signification in much the same way that the experience of New Jersey demanded an inevitable objectification as sculpture. The world intended by Duncan’s grand rhetoric as outcome, however, is very different from the one predicated on Smith’s ambiguous cube.

One might be tempted to argue, conversely, for a poetics of the *petite histoire*—the microhistory, the nonevent, the role of the repressed—but I’m not. Readers might look to the extended compilations of cultural data, and their psychosocial axes, in the work of Ron Silliman and Bruce Andrews, for example, for that. I’m interested in a larger sense of a social subjectivity enacted in poetry than simply its level of its social reference—which in “Direct Address” is clearly often concerned with nonevents of no easy assignation—that is to say, of “language”—as much as with those we recognize as the familiar pratfalls of everyday life. In order to see the intentions for politics in the poem, we need to look at the discursive frame of the entire work—its intention for a direct address that is at the same time an effect of inherence in its parts rather than a speech toward an identified political constituency. This is a poem argued among increments of non-events—but does “Direct Address” add up to only that? Here the example of Mayakovsky, for instance in his poem *Lenin*, offers a counter-example of a rhetoric conveying an explicit political agenda. The limits of his linguistically coded agency were reached, however, not in the poetry of the revolution itself but in the mode of address of “At the Top of My Voice” where Mayakovsky attempted to speak *out of* the historical frame in a manner that could not be supported by any event *in history*. Literally impossible speech was Mayakovsky’s design, as it came into being through his trajectory as a historical agent. Again, the same pattern that produced Tony Smith’s *Die* out of a social surplus of signification is at work here in what is usually taken as a poetry of instrumental address. Mayakovsky’s suicide confirms his interest in an impossible speech as an irreversible act.

Poetry at least since Allen Ginsberg has not been so fortunate as

to have a trajectory of explicit or generally recognizable social agency through which to articulate its concerns. Rather, a kind of recalcitrant, recombinant social metanarrative, largely negative, has been the overarching figure of time against which poetry has been striking out in divergent directions. This metanarrative has “produced” the “new formalism” of meter and rhyme just as much as it has led to developments in experimental writing. Poetry, in turn, recreates this metanarrative—at least for those who read it. In the symbolic economy, a logic of feedback articulates meaning as much for the producer as the consumer—for either, the value of what one is saying becomes known, in time, as a sequential argument out of an initial act. This could be understood as a way of thinking about the relation of symbolization, with which poetry is primarily concerned, and the larger scale of the gratuitous event as an historical index. The political theorist Ernesto Laclau extends the dynamic of poetry into the broader social arena of the production of meaning:

[Rosa] Luxemburg describes Russia... as a country in which there was widespread repression and, as a consequence, an accumulation of unfulfilled democratic demands. Then, in one locality we have a strike... around a very local and particular issue. But in this climate of generalized repression, the meaning of this strike cannot simply rest there. Immediately, this strike begins to represent, for the whole population, a resistance against the regime. And immediately the meaning of this event is transformed into a political act. This, Luxemburg says, is the unity between political and ideological demands. It is not a unity that is given by any structure determinable a priori, but is constructed in this process of what today we would call the overdetermination of the meaning of a social event... We have a symbol whenever the signified is more abundant than, or overflows, a given signifier. That is to say, we have a process of condensation. And in this process of condensation, the unity of a series of signifieds is created. (250)

I describe the United States as a country “in which there is widespread repression, and in consequence, an accumulation of unfulfilled democratic demands.” Reagan’s suppression of the air traffic controllers’ strike in this sense was a negative condensation whose overdetermination became a political event—the opposite of the positive example of Luxemburg’s strike. Social space in such an environment, rather than tending toward the broad fields of utopian socialism spreading out underneath the collectivizing sun, can be imagined in its objectified nonevents as increments of negativity argued back in a sequence of feedback that means “your interests are being denied.” The elements that might be mistaken as positive counters of a micronarrative of nonevents are in fact the temporal condensation of a politics of stasis, the metanarrative against which contemporary writing adds the counterweight of its symbolic force in an attempt, through the feedback of repetition, to create “a series of signifieds,” that is, a chain of acts in

real social space. The rhetoric of “Direct Address” is not simply an accretion of nonevents; its formal argument of symbolic reproduction thus collapses the distinction between greater and lesser histories with which I began.

I would like to conclude by returning to the representation of social space in “Direct Address” in order to specify this reflexive condensation that intends acts in the world. The level of reference to the urban landscape of the East Bay—the structure of repetition within which I have been making my home, at least outwardly, for the last seven years, is one of the poem’s marked devices. In the course of the poem are named the major cities from Fremont to Richmond, cited along an “axis of equivalence” with a wide range of contingent information that is argued to diverse effects. Fremont, Union City, San Lorenzo, San Leandro, Oakland, Berkeley, Emeryville, Piedmont, Albany, El Cerrito, Concord, Richmond, specifically appear :

Parking lots in Fremont convert an image to X. This many increments stacked up to be shipped. [...]

The intention is *for* Oakland.

Twenty years later, I am there! [...]

In El Cerrito, where the light forces us to see.

The noise level is now 85 dB. [...]

More rats on the treadmill in San Leandro. Offramps spit out vans at a rate. [...]

This set of minimal pairs argues a context for social space that is a series of potential or realized actions. Some of these actions are of malign intent; others are comedic, ironizing. Some are impossibly exceptional, never to be achieved or if so only in a dream; others are reiterative, commonplace—yesterday’s papers made into a social design. Other levels of place name connect these social islands by means of the transportation system :

The Nimitz Freeway is a dead end.... equivalent to all of New Jersey! [...]

Or in terms of a generalized regional perspective :

At the edge of the West Coast, the bottom of a lake.

An order fully formed in what we speak of it. [...]

Or by juxtaposition with world capitals and their organization of social space :

Belgrade, Dublin, Helsinki ...

Egyptian artifacts for collectors of direct mail. [...]

As well as with gratuitous locations anywhere :

Width of Argentina = 1000 miles at the extremes.
Realism, thus, is an *intention!* [...]

Social space, it would seem, is an index of action—of the successful, deferred, partial, frustrated, absurd outcomes of our efforts. This is not “real” social space but the way its being in language indicates the sense that, as Zukofsky wrote, “there shall be a complete fragment.” One way to give this register of social space a value is through references to American cities in a different form, in songs from the fifties and sixties where the refrain of all the possible cities in which one can dance indicated a surplus of signification of a different order :

In my home town
Where I used to stay—
The name of the place
Is Augusta, Ga.

Down there, we have a good time
We don't talk.
We all get together
In any kind of weather
And we do “The Camel Walk.”

Or :

They'll be dancin in Chicago
Down in New Orleans
Way down in L.A.
Can't forget the Motor City...

But is this a celebration or a lament? No one's going back to where they're from... Something's been lost, not to be reclaimed, and the first response is spontaneous joy. The second response is... violence and fear. While the release of the working class from place created a floating world of signification in its historical moment, a socially regulated feedback quickly turned that displacement into nightmare. “Can't forget the Motor City...” In an article on postmodernism and Detroit, Jerry Herron writes of the level of violence that is continually reinforced in the isolation of events in an underdetermined social space—a very real social rhetoric of nonevents. The complete failure of downtown social confidence left as an option for reconstruction the puny reinvestments of Detroit's boosters in a one-mile-long street-car line linking the Renaissance Center and the former theater district that appears now as a kind of Mélièsian magic trick—“now you see it, now you don't.” I have heard of another public relations nonevent recently in which the City of Detroit commissioned a high-priced two-minute video of “its vision” in the hope that such symbolic magic would help. This kind of social disappearance act is predicated on the utter horror for the city's inhabitants of the social collapse that occurred almost overnight with the Riots at the end of the sixties. Displaced agency in social space becomes nearly filmic in its sutured con-

tinuity—and the meaning of this temporal autonomy of signification is not entertainment but fear.

Finally, I want to give a value to the logic of juxtaposition and discontinuity in "Direct Address" as an index to the condensations of displaced agency that have been argued back at us as a recurrent politics. The subject in the poem *must* address not the world through language but language displaced from the world—because this is the only way he will comprehend what has been mapped onto him in its possibility:

... and the history we are not yet aware of. (Picture of cloud chamber effects.)

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