

Morgan Fisher

“()”, 2003 / “Film cans and film boxes”, 1968

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“()”, 2003
16mm film, color, b/w, 21’

The origin of () was my fascination with inserts. Inserts are a crucial kind of shot in the syntax of narrative films. Inserts show newspaper headlines, letters, and similar sorts of significant details that have to be included for the sake of clarity in telling the story. I have long been struck by a quality of inserts that can be called the alien, and as well the alienated. Narrative films depend on inserts (it’s a very rare film that has none), but at the same time they are utterly marginal.

Inserts are far from the traffic in faces and bodies that are the heart of narrative films. Inserts have the power of the indispensable, but in the register of bathos.

Inserts are above all instrumental. They have a job to do, and they do it; and they do little, if anything, else. Sometimes inserts are remarkably beautiful, but this beauty is usually hard to see because the only thing that registers is the news, the expository information, that the insert conveys. That’s the unhappy ideal of the insert: you see only what it does, and not what it is. This of course is no more than the ideal of all the instruments of narrative filmmaking and the rules that govern their use.

So inserts are like all shots in a narrative film in that they are purely instrumental. But inserts embody this fact to the most extreme degree. If there is one kind of shot in a movie in which there is the least latitude for the exercise of expressive intelligence, it is the insert. This is so because all considerations in composing the shot must bend to the single imperative to make something clear. If there is a hierarchy in the prestige and glamour of the different kinds of shots in a narrative film, inserts are at the bottom. In the old days, the inserts were sometimes directed, if indeed that is the word, by someone other than the director. That is how little inserts matter as occasions for expression.

I wanted to make a film out of nothing but inserts, or shots that were close enough to being inserts, as a way of making them visible, to release them from their self-effacing performance of drudge-work, to free them from their servitude to story.

By chance I learned that the root of “parenthesis” is a Greek word that means the act of inserting. And so I was given the title of the film.

Inserts are the subject that I began with. The question was, how to construct the film. I have long been interested in work that is constructed according to rules. Sol LeWitt is one of my favorite artists. A rule may be arbitrary, but it has enormous power: it provides a reason for the work to be as it is. The rule can be stated, and its being stateable locates the origin of the work outside the artist. The artist didn’t make the work, the rule did. The rule produced the work from which we understand the rule that produced the work. This reciprocity between rule and result leaves the artist out. (LeWitt underscores this by hiring art workers to execute the work.) Of course ultimately any work made by a rule can only point back to the artist as its origin because the artist composes the rule. But at least the rule introduces an intermediate term that does what it can to assign responsibility for the composing to somewhere else.

I think it’s fair to say that rules by their nature are inconsonant with expressivity, as that notion is conventionally understood. The rule accounts for everything we see. There are no surprises. A rule, if arbitrary at the outset, produces the effect of the inevitable.

I’ve made films according to rules. The films announce the rules more or less explicitly, so the films are predictable. The viewer can anticipate what will happen before it occurs on the screen. There will be no surprises. Further, the films I’ve made according to rules have the unity of being shot in continuous time and in the same space. In constructing () I was dealing with many inserts from many films. How to compose a film that is not unified by time and place?

Unsere Afrikareise by Peter Kubelka stands as one of the great examples of a film that embraces cutting as a positive device, an occasion to make cuts that produce meaning. The meaning of each cut depends specifically

on what is in the shots. I greatly admire Peter, and I greatly admire his films, but I felt that the editorial principles that his film raises to such heights were not available to me. I did not want to work within that history, glorious though it may be; I did not want to make each cut with a view to producing a specific meaning or enacting a specific trope. This would have amounted to imposing myself on the material, when my wish was to set the shots free. But there had to be cuts. Far from wanting to take the same pains that Peter took in making each cut in his film, I wanted cuts whose significance was something I did not intend. This of course is a deliberate refusal of the power of the cut, as that power has been conventionally understood, but that was what I wanted to do. So it was a question of finding a rule that would make the cuts for me.

In 1967 a friend of mine named Thom Andersen, with a collaborator named Malcolm Brodwick, made a film called — — —-. This title is resistant to language, so those who know the film usually call it the rock 'n' roll film. It is constructed according to a rule, two rules, actually, and they are both simple.

The first rule is announced by the film's title, a short line followed by a longer line. The film is made up of pairs of shots that follow this relation of relative lengths. The second shot in each pair is longer than the first. In each succeeding pair, the first shot is longer than the first shot in the preceding pair but shorter than the second. And the second shot in each pair is longer than the second shot in the preceding pair. The relations among the lengths of the shots weave the pairs of shots together.

The second rule assigns a dominant hue to each shot and arranges the hues in an order that proceeds crosswise around the color circle. Even if this second rule is the less evident of the two, in any case we sense the operation of the first: as the film unfolds the shots get longer. There is a sense of diffusion, a relaxation of tension. The increase in the length of the shots is in itself anti-dramatic. In dramatic films the correlative for the rising action that drama demands is shots that, if anything, get shorter.

I consider Thom and Malcolm's film to be groundbreaking in its brilliant demonstration of the power of a rule in constructing a film that is made of shots taken at different times and places. It refuses the power of montage as that idea has been conventionally understood, only to rediscover its power in a different form, on a new plane. I have always admired the film, and I have always been puzzled that it remains largely unknown.

The title of Thom and Malcolm's film declares the more conspicuous of the two rules that construct it, and we sense it in our experience of the film. And Thom's notes on the film describe the two rules, if in terms that are oblique.

But there are works that are composed according to rules, or mechanical procedures, that are not evident in the work. The great example is the French writer Raymond Roussel. (And here I must acknowledge, with gratitude, that it was Thom who introduced me to Roussel.)

Roussel had several methods. They are all simple. In his two novels *Impressions of Africa* and *Locus Solus* he used the same method. His unit of composition was the scene. He didn't compose a scene so much as he generated it. His method of generating was arbitrary (or, if you like, mechanistic). He chose a cluster of words that he found in the world around him, for example the name and address of his bootmaker, then transformed it into a homophone, or near-homophone, that served as the seed of a scene. From this beginning he composed additional material to eke out the scene. I am tempted to say that Roussel's transmutation of scraps of non-literary texts into prose is a case of the assisted readymade. Both novels are an accumulation of scenes that are composed in this way, assembled in an order that is essentially arbitrary as well: the order in which the scenes occur does not matter. (I simplify.)

Roussel's method guaranteed in advance that the construction of both novels is radically anti-dramatic. They are barely stories, and they certainly don't have plots, in the usual meaning of the word. Roussel composed the scenes independently of one another and arranged them without design, so there can be no interweaving of incidents that gather to a climax and resolution. Instead, the novels are a series of turns, or tableaux, each scene receiving equal emphasis, assembled one after the other within a framing device that justifies such a construction. In both novels the device is the equivalent of a variety show, one unrelated act after another. To put it another way (and again I simplify), the construction of both novels follows the principle of a list, a succession of independent elements in an order that does not matter.

Roussel's arbitrary and mechanical method secured the realization of scenes utterly beyond the power of imagination to invent. The disturbance that we experience in Roussel comes in part from our somehow grasping that the writing does not originate in mere human imagination but comes from somewhere else.

Roussel's writing teaches a simple lesson. Why confine yourself to something so limited and already ruled by convention as what your imagination can dream up, which in any case will almost certainly conform to an already existing model of construction? Why not let the phonic manipulation of fragments of language you find already in the world do the work for you? But when you read Roussel, you lose sight of the origin of his prose in a method, seemingly anti-literary, that combines the arbitrary and the mechanical. Instead you respond to what the method produced, some of the most extraordinary writing in all of literature.

The Surrealists held Roussel in high regard, but among the general public his work met with utter incomprehension. So in the end Roussel revealed his methods in a book entitled *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, as if his revelations would help win over a hostile public.

A rule, or a method, underlies (), and I have obeyed it, even if the rule and my obedience to it are not visible. I needed the rule to make the film; it is not necessary for you to know what it is. A rule has the power of prediction, but only if you see it. To the extent that the rule remains invisible, the unfolding of the film is, for better or worse, difficult to foresee. The important thing is what the rule does. No two shots from the same film appear in succession. Every cut is a cut to another film.

There is interweaving, but it is not the interweaving of dramatic construction, where intention and counterintention are composed in relation to each other to produce friction that culminates in a climax. Instead it is an interweaving according to a rule that assigns the shots as I found them to their places in an order. In keeping with my wish to locate () as far as possible from the usual conventions of cutting, whether those of montage or those of story films, the rule that puts the shots in the order has nothing to do with what is happening in them.

I wanted to free the inserts from their stories, I wanted them to have as much autonomy as they could. I thought that discontinuity, cutting from one film to another, was the best way to do this. It is narrative that creates the need for an insert, assigns an insert to its place and keeps it there. The less the sense of narrative, the greater the freedom each insert would have.

But of course any succession of shots, no matter how disparate, brings into play the principles of montage. That cannot be helped. Where there is juxtaposition we assume specific intention and so look for meaning. Even if there is no specific intention, and here there is none, we still look for meaning, some way of understanding the juxtapositions.

At each cut I intended only discontinuity, cutting from one film to another, but beyond that nothing more. Indeed, beyond that simple device I could not intend any specific meaning, because whatever happens at each cut is the consequence of whatever two shots the rule put together, and the rule does not know what is in the shots. So what happens specifically at each cut is a matter of chance.

Morgan Fisher

"Film Cans and Film Boxes", 1968
Spray paint and stencils on paper, each 46 x 61 cm

In the late '60s I was interested in several things going on in art. Two of them were Warhol and Minimalism. That's one way to think about the film cans and film boxes, they combine Warhol with Minimalism, above all Morris and Judd. The particular Morris piece I think of is the four low box-like squares arranged in a square. And the Warhol I think of is the boxes from 1964, of which the best known are probably the Brillo boxes.

We usually see the Brillo boxes in artfully casual arrangements. But sometimes the boxes are arranged more regularly, in rows or stacks. The rows and stacks suggest Minimalism, but without being exactly Minimalist. They are just a little too casual, a little too irregular, too crowded together to register as separate units in a space, as much of Minimalism does. And, as far as I am aware, the Brillo boxes have never been arranged according to another compositional principle in Minimalism, the exact regular spacing of the grid. Perhaps this has never been done because it would emphasize resemblance in shape while neutralizing the importance of Warhol's iconography.

For some of these pieces, I arranged four identical box shapes that are packaging for a consumer commodity in an exact square—a vestigial grid—and so combined Warhol with Morris and Judd. And in the pieces that include not just boxes, but boxes and cans, there is still the repeated packaging and its repeated simple shape, and there is still the square array.

Of course the Minimalism in these pieces is not Minimalism in actuality, but rather a picture of it. The objects themselves would be too small to operate as Minimalist objects do, but they can be depicted as Minimalist objects. The proximity of Pop to Minimalism has been remarked on, but I can't remember by whom. I can't remember if it was Pop in general or only Warhol, and who the Minimalist artists were. I can't remember the terms of the discussion, and whether it was a casual remark or a sustained examination of the question. I acknowledge that what I say here could unconsciously repeat what I read.

What the work of Warhol and Judd shares is repetition and impersonal fabrication, on the model of industrial production. One implies the other. If you're going to make a lot of the same thing, it's easier if the technique produces the same result every time. Warhol, in his use of silkscreens, did this literally. When Warhol called his studio the Factory, he wasn't being ironic, he was describing his production process. Judd's repeated forms,

disturbing in their perfection, are facsimiles of the impersonal fabrication that repetitive production depends on and necessarily produces.

The devices of impersonal fabrication and repetition that Warhol and Judd used also describe the production of the commodity. This mode of production produces not only the commodity, but also the effect that the commodity has on us. The commodity appears as if by magic, free of any evidence that it was made by human hands, and each one is the same as every other one. The magic of its origin equally implies vast quantities. There is more to be said, but here I only remark that on this point Judd and Warhol overlap.

It's worth pointing out that Judd was not the only Minimalist to make work that is underpinned by the commodity. The repetition of industrially-produced objects is the literal case in Andre's bricks and Flavin's fluorescent tubes. These are not consumer commodities supported by mass-market advertising, but they are commodities nonetheless, and they produce the commodity effect.

So if we look at the question in a certain way, some of Warhol's work and some work in Minimalism collapse into each other. They both enact the same fundamental mechanism: lots of the same thing. We can think of Warhol's Brillo boxes as Judds with silkscreens, and Judd's boxes as Warhols without silkscreens. This is not to deny the importance of Warhol's iconography, but rather to point to an underlying trait they share that deserves to be remarked on. The commodity effect operates in Warhol apart from the fact that the work depicts commodities, and it operates in Judd apart from the fact that the work does not depict commodities.

The film cans and film boxes illustrate this intersection where Judd and Warhol become versions of each other, both in what the work depicts, industrially-produced identical units that are simple geometrical shapes, and in how I made it, with stencils. The impersonality of the stencil technique conforms to the model of industrial production, and it is repeatable, as Warhol confirmed in his silkscreens, which are a form of stencil. And Warhol used other techniques for repeating an image, such as actual stencils and stamps.

The cans and boxes are simple shapes defined by broad areas of color. There's no lettering, not just because it would have been difficult with the technique I used, but because its specificity and detail would have gotten in the way of the simplicity that I wanted. The pieces move Warhol toward Minimalism as much as they move Minimalism toward Warhol.

For me the cans and boxes were the perfect subject. They let me conflate my responses to several artists that I admired. I found them beautiful, and they were an extension of the tendency in my films at the time to deal with the subject of film by showing the equipment that you use to make it. A camera stands for the entire system of machines that make movies, and beyond that, the institution of which the machines are the technical base. A roll of film does the same thing. Sprocket holes are the universal signifier of film in the abstract sense, as their frequent appearance on posters for film festivals tells us.

I had 16mm film boxes on hand because I was making films, and their proportions were like the Morris boxes, much flatter than they were tall. But I was also interested in 35mm motion picture film. So I bought a single box of 35mm Eastman Double-X on a 100' spool to use as a subject. I still have the box and I still have the film in the can, although the can is no longer shiny. A 35mm box is taller than a 16mm box, so it's closer to the proportions of a lot of Judd's boxy work.

The drawing system that I used is isometric. It's a system that has something of the appearance of perspective but with crucial differences that make it quite distinct. Here I simplify, but the broad ideas are correct.

In perspective, lines that are parallel to each other and oblique to the picture plane converge at a vanishing point on the horizon. In isometric, lines that are parallel to each other remain parallel. In perspective, the telephone poles get shorter and closer together as they get closer to the horizon, but in isometric the telephone poles remain the same height and the same distance apart no matter how far away they are. You can't say, "No matter how close to the horizon," because in isometric there isn't one. Recession into the distance, yes, but no horizon, and no vanishing points.

The parallels in isometric give it an advantage over perspective. In isometric you can measure the object and copy the dimensions directly in the drawing, as long as you measure and draw in the three principal dimensions. That is how I did this work. I measured the cans and boxes, then transferred the measurements to the drawing. From the drawing I made the stencils. Isometric is easy and simple and fast. Anyone can do it. It's almost as easy as stenciling.

The difference between perspective and isometric has far-reaching consequences for composition, taking that word in a broad sense. In perspective you have to choose the station point. It's the equivalent of deciding where to stand when you take a photograph. It's a key part of the act of composition in the usual sense, composing the image to produce an effect. You have to take responsibility for making a choice, and your choice makes a huge difference. Think of Ruscha's paintings and prints of gas stations.

In perspective you must choose the station point from an infinite number of possibilities. Not so in isometric. If the shape is a box, there are eight corners. The angles that govern the drawing are predetermined. No matter which of the eight corners you look at, the angles at each of them are the same. Eight corners, eight predetermined views. That's all.

In isometric the limitation on size is even more extreme than the limitation on the views. In perspective the object is bigger or smaller, depending on whether it is nearer to or farther from the picture plane. In isometric the object is always the same size.

So isometric, in contrast to perspective, drastically curtails your choices in viewing the object. It can only be one size. You cannot see the object from any angle you like. Instead you must select a view from a predetermined set of only eight possibilities.

As a practical matter, the choices are even fewer. In choosing the view for the film cans and boxes, I wanted to show their fronts, and I wanted to show them right-side up. That reduced the choices to two: either the lower right-hand corner or the lower left-hand corner had to be closer. I chose the lower right-hand corner, I don't remember why.

At the time, I had only a dim grasp of what I later understood more clearly, that I was attracted to isometric not just because it was fast and easy, but because of the drastic limitations that it imposed on me. So my interest in isometric was an early manifestation of what I have understood in retrospect is my long-standing interest in finding ways to compose that release me from having to make compositional decisions of the conventional kind. Rather, I have been drawn to strategies or systems that make those decisions for me, and isometric is such a system.

I'm glad the stenciling isn't perfect. It tells you it's a stencil, so it tells you that it's perfect in principle even though it isn't in fact. The imperfections give it more character. If it were perfect it would be dead. There are effects that could almost be called painterly, which are entirely accidental. And you can see that the paint is this stuff that sits on the surface of the paper, even while it's also making a picture.

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