

# The Fugue of Art

By Joan Braderman

Everyone is in a kind of fugue state—politically, theoretically, artistically. Left-wing anarchists are finding themselves registering Democratic, and they're going to vote for a tight-ass little technocrat in November and praise their lucky stars that there's even one Democrat (besides the amazing Jesse) who might actually win.

But this is supposed to be about "theory," not "politics." (How foolish of me to forget; you see I have this annoying tic, I always want theories to be good for something, you know, help you figure out what the hell is going on—so banal, so American, and so *feminist*.) Now, on to the important things, you guessed it, the French. Okay, I don't know how to be subtle about this so here it is: the French are finished. Those halcyon days of Althusserian certainty are long over (those days when you were so relieved to find that *in the final instance*, ethics had nothing whatsoever to do with politics—which was pure strategy).

And with them, gone the glory days and nights of delicious Lacanian whispering, when each year, with your students, you would feel the sweet surrounding plenitude of the pre-Oedipal and plunge, as if for the first time, into the symbolic order, the Word, the Father, the Law. You knew that without knowing it, Lacan in his commitment to the phallus, his odd semi-misogyny, had made a map for feminists. The map of subjectivity pointed to language, to representation, not to the destiny of biology as

critical edge but is more ironic and less universalizing than the best of the last decades. In other words, if all you had to do was get rid of false consciousness (about class, race, gender, etc.) and then everybody would rise up angry, why aren't people here ferociously pissed already? Look, the fact that the best thing on TV is a (dark) raisin commercial that owes most of its charm to a ripped-off '60s hit by Smokey Robinson should make just about anyone want to overthrow the government. But no one does.

Anyway, I never said I was a "theorist," for chrissakes. I'm a theory cannibal and in video, yet. But as far as I can tell, theories of art and culture, and gender too, are in a transitional period, a time between, of uncertainty and fear, but consolidation as well. As usual, those with different interests will offer you a different narrative. I like the one about postmodernism in art in which one set of canons gets fractured and feminists and others insist on a wider palette of strategies to multiply the stories getting told (à la the Women's Art Movement, remember, when you could say Women's Liberation with no irony in your voice?).

And however fraught the present may be with its own angst and despair, it's a damned sight more promising than the worst of the mean, snotty certainties of a decade ago. I admit to being part of that too, but no regrets. For us, feminists on the left, the rush of collaging theories which finally matched, however roughly, our lived experience was too exhilarating to pass up. We're sorry for acting like Miss Thing but we're paying, don't worry. The young scared careerists with a new kind of historical blindness, who think the women's movement was "someone trying to stop them from using hair conditioner," just don't get it (I quote our vicious journal of record, *The New York Times*). We embarrass them. Et tu, Brute.

Hey, it's happened before, you remember Joe McCarthy. One novelist, feeling fuguish, described our state as like "amnesia and déjà vu at the same time." Last night, on national TV, Republicans said that Karl

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the key battleground for reinventing gender. Here we would stage our victory. Through some miraculous sleight of hand (induced by drugs, music, or perhaps too many meetings and study groups) we would somehow manage to be both of our culture and not of it—at the same time—and make something radically other, radically transformative.

But Foucault is dead and that was in another country. And the French boys now keep thinking back fondly on guys like Nietzsche, not your more upbeat types (and certainly harboring no kind place in their hearts for girls—yeah, "becoming woman" was cool, sans PMS). With their small troop of clones, and their Lilliputian Americanettes, they spew forth glamorous-sounding, hermetic hyperboles, all of which can be reversed in locutionary flips: viz., the disappearance of history ... the history of disappearance; the state of theory ... presto chango ... the theory of the state; the ecstasy of communication, yes, now you've got it. (With Marx this was okay, but only once or twice.) Cute, but as I suggested earlier, that and a dollar ... Or as Andreas Huyssens pointed out, Baudrillard, in his current incarnation, is doing a routine that looks a hell of a lot like the one Marshall McLuhan did at his most popular and silliest.

Tourist-intellectuals are still wandering the East Village, straining to experience the primitive *jouissance* of lumpen art-life. I salute French bread. But I spit on their idea of a high priest of "theory." Of course, none of this would produce such bile if the intellectual marketplace, the import-export idea circuit, had not so successfully drawn us, the Americans, under a certain hypnotic French spell of fashionable nihilism, causing some of us to forget our own stake in here and now for a while.

The next big paradigms are not yet visible. The bold brushstrokes and outlines are out of focus. Or seem dead-ended, at least in the romance languages. Instead of trying to answer the Big Questions, like how *does* ideology play us anyway, much fine current work includes detailed analyses of concrete phenomena, disturbing self-portraits, work that's still passionate and has not lost its

Marx knew less about economics than Groucho. Others proclaimed this to be peace time, right before the news came on showing U.S. troops on a ship near Iran. Republicans said they are in the vanguard of the fight against racism. My neighbor asked if this meant they were killing more blacks than anyone else.

We will go on asking questions because we can still, on a late summer evening near the end of a century in ruins, find the will to assert that what is at stake is our history itself, one which is, as ever, in process, being made, never completely theirs. Before our wholesale consignment to the museum, some of us will still, in a good mood, putting the greenhouse effect completely out of our minds, say that in order to change the world, you do need some ideas about just where to tinker. So you see, theory bashing is not so smart either. The maps we have, like stencils, can be layered in different ways or shifted slightly, offering up surprising new readings of the texts we live, "lost" subjectivities changing fundamental rhythms. One writer claimed we opted out of the main stage to hide in universities and "alternative" activities, but speak for yourself, Jack, a job is a job and you can still get a free slot on cable TV, if you want to rail at the gods.

Nothing happened, they say, and anyway it's over. Okay, we're regrouping, treading water, sometimes in a kind of fugue state. But some of us are still working, teaching, writing, making art, performances, videos and films, yes and still organizing and registering voters, gathering our friends around us, marshalling our strength, caring for the sick, mourning the dead, and scaling down the battles to winnable skirmishes. You've got to read the small print, the small presses, count the subtler victories which have scared our enemies to death—if you judge by the movies and campaign speeches they make. Jesse Jackson showed up at the gay and lesbian march on Washington last fall and still won the votes of blue-collar workers in the Midwest. Keep working. Use witchcraft if necessary to fight off forgetfulness. It's not over till it's over. ■

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