

# RADICAL FORM

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The idea that radical content demands radical form has been crucial to art production from feminist film in the 1960s and 1970s, Situationism, and some aspects of neoconcrete art, to the post-1968 films of Jean-Luc Godard and concrete poetry. Although not exactly parallel, this notion is tied to the existence of an avant-garde, in that it necessitates a rupture with art-historical norms and a turning instead to new formulations of aesthetic operations that question the role of perception, movement, materials, language, the relationship and the expectations of artist and audience, participation, the structures of the art institution itself, and the everyday. It is possible to scour 20th-century history for moments in which this aesthetic reformulation has been taken to its conceptual and material limit, and to witness the consequences that this has wrought: social change, state suppression, a change in the aesthetic paradigm, and even failure.

Collective proclamations or manifestos that assert that radical content demands radical form are largely born out of moments in history with clearly defined political projects—well-articulated movements in which a critical mass of artists feel compelled to participate in an earnest remaking of social, economic, or political relations. The Russian Revolution and American and European feminism in the

1960s are two examples. The work produced during these moments largely follows the argument in that precise order: radical form *follows* radical content.

What might the inverse of this be? That radical forms can generate, prefigure, and imagine powerful radical ideas. A radical artwork can move thought forward, rather than simply replicating political analysis. Art is a way of *thinking* through forms, of *working* through forms, whether they are abstract forms or conceptual processes. The radical work, then, operates not only as a formal and aesthetic experiment, but as an unstable analogue for imagined political and social forms that do not and perhaps cannot yet exist. Sometimes the work itself serves as a microsocial testing ground for a new way of thinking about life. At other times the work remains as a stark sign of its own unreasonable hopefulness.

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The work of Dziga Vertov, the Russian Constructivist filmmaker, for example, is not so much a radical illustration of a set of existing political proposals or of Marxist analysis, but rather an analogue of an imagined future in which the mode of production is unfolded and presented transparently. His *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) is a film about its own production, in which no part of the process is left secret and all illusion, manipulation, and trickery is revealed as manufactured. The film's rapid editing, use of non-actors, and interaction of mechanical and human movements might have come out of the zeitgeist, but it is not simply a form in which a set of existing political ideas unfolds. Rather, the film's form stands in for an ecstatic dream of participation, machine-human symbiosis, and collective political transformation that surpasses the radicalism of the Revolution, which, 12 years on, was already ossifying into a bureaucratic repressive state.

Vertov's output was slowly marginalized and only resurfaced decades later, in Paris, as a sort of oracular artifact rediscovered by Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin. They understood Vertov's production as an injunction to "make political films politically," which does not leave much room for visionary aesthetic experimentation.

*The women say, I refuse henceforward to speak this language, I refuse to mumble after them the words lack of penis lack of money lack of insignia lack of name. I refuse to pronounce the names of possession and non-possession. They say, If I take over the world, let it be to dispossess myself of it immediately, let it be to forge new links between myself and the world. . . .*

ROSAMUND AIELE EDME  
DEBORAH OSMENA GALLIA  
EDVOKIA ABIGAIL LAMIA  
ESTEVA TIMARETA SAUGE  
LEUCOTHEA ARLETTE MERE  
PASIPHAË CARRIE AUDREY

–Monique Wittig, *Les guérillères*

*Les guérillères* is an experimental novel written by Monique Wittig in 1969. The collective subject of the text is an army of women coming together to overthrow patriarchal rule. Alternating between the gory and the violent, the tender and the boisterous, the text shifts back and forth between the perspective of the collective ("they" or "the women," rendered in the original French almost always as "*elles*") to that of individual women within the group. The novel announces its own strategies and structure with the first line:

GOLDEN SPACES LACUNAE

The text's narrative gaps and silences stand in for the desires, landscapes, and experiences that are unnamed and unnamable within the French language. As the narrative progresses, individual subjects sometimes criticize, take apart, and at times forcefully object to the rituals, positions, and ideas taken up by the women in previous sections of the narrative. The text vacillates between collective declarations and individual dissent. The women both rejoice and are dismayed by the necessity of a violent overthrow, and the text itself embodies the contradictions of calling for a *tabula rasa* of language and of the political order.

Concretely, Wittig excises the word "*femme*" (woman) from the French. The narrative portion of the text is repeatedly interrupted by

lists of women's names (some of which evoke history and myth, and some of which signal anonymity) and collapses an epic plot, if it can be called that, into dense lists of objects, actions, and thoughts. The text equalizes what the women eat, what their bodies do, how they laugh, their war strategy, and their memories of the dead.

The narrative imagines violent warfare as a precondition for a community of women in which woman is at the center—or lesbians, rather, since for Wittig it was very clear that lesbians were the only human beings not defined in relation to patriarchal rule. Quite apart from its literal imagining of a future society, the radical potential of *Les guérillères* lies in its form: the language, syntax, and structure of the text. Which is not an illustration, or a proposal, but a *beginning*.

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*How can we say which type of film will make "people" think, or make them active, and which will not?*

—Yvonne Rainer

Yvonne Rainer's *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, a film made in 1980, is an altogether anorexic set of footage. Rainer's main project in the film was to create a new kind of audience. This is a Brechtian project. The radical potential of the work is not in the overt subject, the relationship between political violence and personal experience, but in the construction of a new audience.

Early in the film, the voice of a young woman reads from Rainer's high-school diaries:

*April 27, 1951. Yesterday I went to an assembly in 306. A girl singing "Come, come, I love you truly" from The Chocolate Soldier. As she sang, I began to feel the most peculiar sensation, cold shivers were racking my entire body, clammy currents ran all over me. I thought I was sick, but when she was finished the shivers left me. Very often these sensations come over me when I hear or read some outstanding experience of bravery or perseverance or a story of great emotional appeal. . . .*

*Sometimes these stories are absolutely corny or excessively melodramatic. I really fight against these feelings because basically I reject such stories for their contrived nature and unreality. Intense drama is always so removed from my own life that it leaves me with an empty feeling. I was also irked by the melodramatic method of delivery. Then what in god's name do those damn shivers mean?*

Here, in the most unauthoritative voice possible, that of an adolescent girl, she presents herself as audience, as an inexpert listener, who feels she is being fed a line but can't quite put her finger on why or how it is being done. She mentions the "contrived nature and unreality," and from here on we are fed another contrived narrative, although this one is forever being upended by the everyday, the unrelated, and the pedestrian. The elements of the film are minimal, which makes it all the more impressive that throughout the film, the image is always pulling the rug out from under the text, or vice versa. No political pronouncement, however equivocally delivered, is left standing; an answer to it is always at hand to unseat it. A scrolling-text history of the Baader-Meinhof Gang, presented in stark white text over black, is accompanied by a silly techno-dance soundtrack; by the time the music starts doing its work over the text, Rainer disowns it. ("It's the neighbors playing their music." Maybe the Baader-Meinhof Gang just had bad taste in music?) In perhaps the only truly tense moment, anarchist Alexander Berkman's description of his attempt to assassinate Henry Clay Frick is undercut on-screen by looping footage of a woman and a man (Chilean writer Antonio Skármeta), strolling pleasantly in front of an entrance to a brick building with a pagoda entrance (specific enough to be unsettling, but impossible to place and mine for meaningfulness).

The audience is asked to do a tremendous amount of work. And what is the work? We are asked to empty out our mental cache, throwing up as many connections as possible between the references. This comes up earlier, when, after a few instances of absurdly open-ended footage (aerials of Stonehenge, a nondescript landscape sweeping past a train window) accompanying a text on political violence, the voice of Vito Acconci pops up with a list of possible meanings: "I'll take a stab at it," he says, and rattles off a list of unrelated interpretations of the footage. And then there's Annette Michelson's long, rambling, surreal, and hallucinatory monologue, an exuberant version of the film's constant self-mockery, in which she, as the patient, spews forth and self-analyzes, attacks and questions the analyst stand-in and begs for his/her help. This is *Annette Michelson*, an influential Marxist film critic, a known ball-buster and an important interpreter of film culture for a larger audience—she who sets the meaning of the work, who *fixes* it for the audience—playing the role of the patient, which is a

very direct way of highlighting the formal questions pertaining to film and the idea of creating a fixed meaning.

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*The environmental program (to which I have given the generic name of Parangolé) does not purport to establish a “new morality” or some such thing, but to “overthrow all moralities,” seeing as how they tend to stagnating conformism, stereotyped opinions, and the creation of uncreative concepts. Moral freedom is not a new morality, but a sort of antimorality based on individual experience.*

*Only through the furious act of overthrowing can we hope to create something palpable and worthwhile: our reality.*

—Hélio Oiticica

Hélio Oiticica’s *Parangolés* (1964–68) arose from a process of investigation into the formal aspects of art and its phenomenological implications. He saw the word “*Parangolé*” written on the side of a shack in a favela on Mangueira hill in Rio de Janeiro, and this word became the overarching concept for a series of objects: capes, tents, and banners. Perhaps his capes were meant to be worn by anyone, but the most powerful images of them being worn are of Mangueira hill residents with whom he had friendships and who introduced him to samba, which freed him to consider other aspects of his work. Oiticica conceived of the series as research and investigation. His writings are also naturally part of the work. Should we consider the form of his social life as well, the sorts of exchanges and relationships that he sought to make a central form in his work? What is the form of the encounter between the maker and the wearer of a *Parangolé*?

A participatory work implies the negotiation of subjectivity, an honest encounter and exchange. This moment of encounter, exchange, and transformation is captured by the photographs of Mangueira hill residents dancing and posing with the *Parangolés*. Whether their bodies are ambivalent or celebratory, the photographs themselves stand in for this moment, where the radical possibilities of the work reside. The concerns of the work are phenomenological: there is a formal investigation into perceptual operations, embodying performance and the transformative power of forms. The concern with form extends to the social encounter as well. The form of this encounter—not an institutional intervention, not one shaped by the structures of edu-

cation, ethnography, consumption, or organizing, but one based on an intimate, individual exchange—pushes the work further. This is Oiticica’s “existential life–experience” and where the potential for a meaningful transformation of artist, participant, and audience resides.

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In 1977 Esteban Valdés Arzate published a book of concrete poetry that culled some 50 poems from the preceding decade. The book is called *Fuera de trabajo* (Out of work). This was his first and only publication.

Valdés Arzate’s work arises from the convergence of literature and art in modernism. Some of the poems are ruthlessly funny critiques of the staid, top-down, and dogmatic language of the nationalist political project in Puerto Rico. Others, like “Homenaje a Nicolás Guillén” translate the title of Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén’s first “politically engaged” poem and a culturally iconic song of the same title (a salsa classic by Ismael Rivera) into the onomatopoeic rhythms of the word.

In poems like “Homenaje al Che,” “La fijación de Betances,” and “Puertorico para los puertorriqueños,” he selects shorthand phrases and iconic figures of a traditional organized Left and achieves an alternative iteration through typographical forms, appropriation, repetition, and the form and placement of the letter on the page. His use of language and his formal solutions to the text are antimonumental, anti-authoritarian, and antiheroic.

Similarly, some of the works in *Fuera de trabajo* are instruction pieces. For instance, in “Homenaje al aire libre/Vientos alisios”:

1. *Cut 10 sentence fragments from the newspaper Claridad.*

2. *Hang them out in the open, in plain sight.*

*Note: with the passing of the years, think again about the fragments’ absurd meaning. Make the necessary adjustments to the current reality.*

Valdés Arzate’s output is inconsistent and unprofessional, and as a consequence his work is largely unknown. This is as it must be. An anarchist and a union leader, Valdés Arzate has made the choice not to professionalize his practice. He does not produce series of works or work in a continuous fashion. For 30 years he worked at the Department of Labor in Puerto Rico and is now retired. The biography included in his 1977 publication is itself a concrete poem,

a parody of work applications and bureaucratic self-assessments, an answer to the pathos of the curriculum vitae. This decision to step outside the norms of “professional” art production makes his work virtually invisible within the parameters of what art institutions consider aesthetic discourse.

I only know *Fuera de trabajo* because my trash-picking husband found it among a heap of discarded books near our house. My first reaction upon reading it was to imagine how the political history of Puerto Rico would have been different had this work been shown, read, and considered important in 1977. I tracked down Valdés Arzate in 2002 and asked him why he had decided not to participate or engage more directly with the art world. “I was never interested in being consistent,” he said. This seemed fitting, smart, poetic. It filled me with hope and admiration for the succinct elegance of his form of institutional critique: noncooperation. Like Wittig’s work, it is a beginning. But it still leaves me with a sense of loss, for what his work might have meant within the larger public sphere. And for all the other books that remain in trash bins, unread, and all the other films at the bottom of the river.

\* This essay came out of a research class given by the artist as part of the CCA Graduate Program in Fine Arts in fall 2008.