

INSTRUMENTS FOR CHORUS AND ORCHESTRA: A polemical feminist reading

by Kate Zizys, 2019

Irene Proebsting and Barry Browns' film collaboration *Instruments for Chorus and Orchestra* (1999, 12 mins, Super 8/ 2018, Digital Video) is an arresting experimental sound and image montage which demonstrates a close resemblance to an artist's book referencing the Dada, Fluxus and Post-Modern eras. In many ways this work takes the logical format of a 21st century contemporary artists publication – bound together by a discordant soundscape, looped as digitised video and encased in plastic. Foremost, *Instruments for Chorus and Orchestra* is an extraordinary experimental film with a masterful electro punk soundscape produced on Super 8 celluloid when sound and stop-frame animation were at the forefront of emerging experimental art in Melbourne during the 1990's. *Instruments for Chorus and Orchestra* is situated in a radical and a scholastic arts framework, built by counterculture politics inherent within anti-institutional resistance and teamed with the rise of art and design as a research pursuit through the submergence of artistic practices within the academic tradition.





Instruments for Chorus and Orchestra

is a multivalent work. The film's overt thematic is concerned with gender politics, transhumanism, technological intervention and artificial intelligence while the covert narrative is shaped through the subtle shifts in sound and focus. On one hand there is a suggestion of deep scepticism regarding a monetized cultural expression which was rapidly building trajectory throughout

the 1990's, on the other hand sound and light summon the possibility of a transcendent experience.

This work sits alongside the experimental sound, performance and film works produced by Melbourne based post-punk group Arf Arf [1. Adrian Martin, "Incidental Pleasures", *Realtime* #7 (June-July 1995), <https://www.realtime.org.au/incidental-pleasures-arf-arf/>] as well as the cyber experiments of Adelaide media-arts collective VNS Matrix. *Instruments for Chorus and Orchestra* also recalls some of the theoretical concerns of Marguerite Duras, including the idea that a distortion of chronology can lead to revelations regarding the nature of relationships and being, through perceiving human experience as suggestive and poetic rather than descriptive and analytic. [2. Susan Hursserl-Kapit, "An Interview with Marguerite Duras," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (Volume 1 n.o 2 , 1975) p 423.] Neoliberal feminist concerns regarding the male gaze are noted but it is Valerie Solanas and Shulamith Firestone's anarchic, surrealist rage that underpins Proebsting's acknowledgement of the scholarly corset holding together the affective experience of a generation who have been reduced to universal alienation in the face of the global capital experiment. [3. David Harvey, "Universal Alienation", *tripleC* 16.2 (May 5th 2018), <https://www.triple-c.at>] Proebsting and Browns' work suggests a critical alliance between two branches of practice, *Instruments for Chorus and Orchestra* pays equal attention to the sensorially subversive as it does to the ontological traditions claimed by academic and establishment artists. This alliance is valuable because it suggests a way forward, an informed compromise which can potentially push against looming environmental destruction caused by endless growth and consumption and the promise of absolute death. [4. Noam Chomsky, "Survival of Organised Human Life is at Risk due to Climate Change and Nuclear Weapons", *Democracy Now* (July 2018). https://www.democracynow.org/2018/7/30/noam_chomsky_survival_of_organized_human]

The film's title is a nod to composer Morton Feldman but Browns soundscape is also reminiscent of Ennio Morricone's score for the science fiction film *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982). The association with a cult horror film where machismo battles with an unknown quantity in a hostile arctic expanse, unsure who to trust, and routinely exploded by a monstrous ancient alien-mimic exactly like men in form, action and speech, is an alternate route into Proebstings' feminist dialectic. Even as Proebstings' ecoanarcho-feminist imagery is critical of the patriarchal superstructure and its institutions it also subverts the neoliberal feminist critique through a suggestion of dissidence within the movement.

Gradually unfurling through the absence of a fully sequential narrative, stress, tension and gore are punctuated by static historical archetypes and architectural tropes. Proebsting demonstrates astute in-camera editing in her tracking of an iconic female evolution from the heroic, battling and birthing Goddess into a beleaguered, bound mannequin. The archetype is transformed, invaded, hybridised, pulped, and junked, reduced

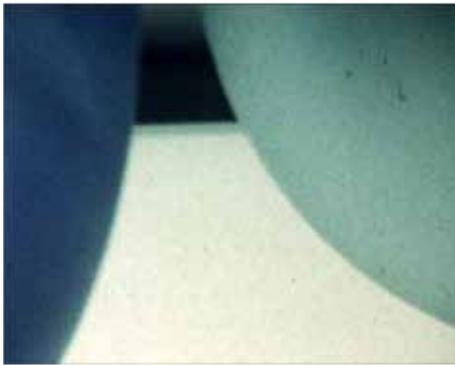


to cell and sinew. Donna Haraway's elegant cyborg hybrid is also suggested in the still shot collages which prophesise the complex tech-based platform supporting post-humanist communications. [5. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York; Routledge, 1991) p.149-181.] The collision between anorexic bodies and broadened minds developed through the liminal industrial, technologic and socio-political parameters of the late 20th century is mirrored in the pieced together images. However, Proebstings' trans-humanism is built on human insects. A gaunt face partially composed from digital hardware is co-supported by the body of a grub, suggesting that global e-waste has merged with decaying supermarket refuse. On close inspection the film's scope was predictive, much of the imagery suggesting 21st century concerns with the problem of consumer culture and financier greed. The subliminal utopias offered up by sublime waxy lipsticks and hazy designer fashions are disrupted by surgical interventions and hardware in a fusion of insect exoskeleton, flesh, plastic and products.



Here we are faced with the complexity of our innards, which are visceral and psychologically ghastly. The technotopian promise of human advancement through mechanical and digital development is measured against the mash-up of consumer culture centred in eroticism and distorted into fetish. The measurement of our contemporary capabilities within this Valarie Solanas-meets-The Thing world, is the possibility of

birth and what that might mean in such a void of kindness. This empiricism is made against the pitched sounds of Browns' composition. It is sound that marries the cyborg brides of Frankenstein with sublime flickers of movement and light, which Proebsting tracks at a rapidly changing rate.



Light and movement accompanied by sound. Nothing is fixed or in focus. These are the first sensory experiences of the newborn. Fertility and love reside here. The real birth is not suggested in the static, montaged images, these are merely the critique. It is the blurred movement of the frames, so up-close to details that only colour and shape remain, matched with sound and illumination which are most deeply affective.

What is so extraordinary about this film is the fusion of these static and non-static elements. The collages, so carefully studied, magnified by empirical tools and categorised against real products of desire are matched with the newborn state and all the potential and possibility inherent here. Here lies uncertainty. The greatest and most underrated aspect of knowledge – *perhaps things will not be as understood*, and if not, then what?

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