

FORGETTING THE SCISSORS.

Histories of Cutting and other Discontinuous Practices.

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In 1926 Sergei Eisenstein famously faulted pioneering film critic and theorist Béla Balázs by contending “Béla forgets the scissors”. In these words the Soviet film director reproached his contemporary with basing his account of cinema solely on the unit of the shot, at the expense of the very category that formed the fundament of Eisenstein’s practice, and a constituent element of nearly all of cinema counterbalancing the recording powers of the camera: the cut.

What at that time summed up a controversy regarding the reflection and practice of the nascent art of filmmaking, can be seen as pointing more widely - beyond the medial specificities of the cinema - to a general cultural technique that manifested itself by way of interventions in concrete layers of aesthetic material: the incision, dissection, or untethering of continua with the intention of producing form. Scissors cut into paper, pages, sections of print, cloth, segments of text, photographs, strips of celluloid, yarn, fields of canvas, magnetic tape, following patterns or not, in these acts of disarticulation either laying the groundwork for later recombinations, or contributing to the immediate generation of artistic and aesthetic products of great variety. Tied to this cutting practice were, concretely or conceptually, a whole set of promises and a host of pathos formulae of discontinuous production, from Saussure to Foucault and Kittler, from the idea of ‘critical’ montage programs to the aesthetics of shock, from the poetics of cut up and collage to a wider understanding of assemblages as aggregations of non-organically connected entities.

Nowadays matters may have shifted considerably. One of the prior forces behind this transformation coincides with the fundamental dynamic behind the current restructuring of our societies, cultures, knowledge systems etc which is digitization. With the emergence of the digital we are not only facing a stratum in which the generation of form occurs in a manner that makes older models of resistant material(ity) seem oddly agonistic. We are also encountering a technologically mediated mode of symbolization in which, in contrast to the compact and fused layers of the analog, a segmented regime is implemented from the very beginning: the always already discrete operations of the digital. Whether digitally motivated or not - models of discontinuity and incision could be seen as losing clout, as evidenced, for example, in those assemblage theories that we see emerging in the wake of actor-network-theory, in which constituent elements lock into remarkably smooth, non-antagonistically functioning arrangements. Gone seem the conflicts, hierarchies, and incompatibilities that were profiled in theorizations of such material/political conglomerates which deemed themselves “critical”. Gone are the cuts with

which erstwhile strata of stuff needed to be surgically cut apart, in order to render fragments which could become building blocks for new constructions.

Given these transformations: What did it, what does it mean to cut? Is it time we forgot the scissors? Or, that we started addressing them as a device of a different era, less as historical tool, and more as an instrument of a prehistory to our present? Or, are we to recalibrate our very notions of such discontinuous practices, present and past, and resurrect the tools of incision? If so, under what premises?

SPEAKERS:

- Florian Cramer (Willem de Kooning Academy, Rotterdam)
- Philipp Ekardt (eikones, Universität Basel)
- Gertrud Koch (Freie Universität Berlin)
- Markus Krajewski (Universität Basel)
- Catriona MacLeod (University of Chicago)
- Malika Maskarinec (eikones, Universität Basel)
- Tessa Paneth-Pollak (Michigan State University)
- Leif Weatherby (New York University)