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ART

Circuits and Loops: Tom McCarthy & Margarita Gluzberg

by Tom McCarthy and Margarita Gluzberg May 04, 2012

Tom McCarthy and Margarita Gluzberg ask whether psychosis can ever be critical, whether matter can transmit, and what the word *fiction* finally means.



From "Consumystic," Avenue des Gobelins. All images courtesy of Margarita Gluzberg and Paradise Row (London) and the MAC/VAL Museum (Paris).

INS Black Box Transmission, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 2009.

Artist Margarita Gluzberg and novelist Tom McCarthy have publicly dialogued several times about concerns that run through both their work. In London's Austrian Cultural Forum in 2001 they discussed their shared fascination with "base materialism"; at the Hayward Gallery in 2002 they debated the issues of the double and the monstrous; and at Paradise Row in 2008 they considered the erotic dimensions of capitalism. Conducting the latest episode of this ongoing dialogue on the pages of BOMBlog, they ask whether psychosis can ever be critical, whether matter can transmit, and what the word "fiction" finally means.

TOM MCCARTHY Your recent exhibition, *Avenue des Gobelins*, charts a journey into capitalism—into a space of capitalism which is an imaginative, or imaginary, space as much as a physical one. And that space has a strong relation to desire. Does that sound fair?

MARGARITA GLUZBERG I think it does. And I think it's this kind of territory that drives your novels too—especially *Remainder*. Whether either of our work is 'critical' or whether it just stages a certain situation is harder to say. Perhaps it describes the ambiguity of the consumer. It's the consumer's position that I'm interested in—the desiring consumer, and the desire-filled city that the consumer sees: like *Remainder's* central protagonist. It's his desire rather than a critical position on the world of capitalism that we're looking at.

TMCC My protagonist is such a good consumer that he pushes the system to its absolute limit, which is the point where it collapses, simply by taking it too seriously. He believes in loyalty cards, these stupid cards you get in Café Nero or whatever: he believes in them so much that he'll actually buy ten coffees just to get the free eleventh one, and then throw away the ten in order to relish that reward, that surplus bonus. That's where consumerism slips into psychosis. You make the same slippage: in your *Consumystic* series you have all these double, triple exposures, where shop windows and reflections are all meshed into a semi-psychotic collage.



From "Consumystic," Avenue des Gobelins.

MG Yes – and with this slippage the strictly critical position recedes. But you can have a kind of critical psychosis.

TMCC You can. By withholding one more blatant type of criticality I think you manage to do more damage, if you like, to the reputation of a particular system, just by enacting and exposing its internal logic, over and over. And repetition is important here, because that's part of the psychosis.

MG The loop, the continuous loop. In the *Consumystic* series there's a slide projection, which is an 80 image loop. But as it plays over and over, it also highlights the impossibility of absolute repetition: again thinking of *Remainder*, where the hero keeps re-enacting things but he can never get it quite right. So they're not repetitions but versions, like when you play a record. The next time you play it it's essentially a different sound because the crackle of the dust and the static has got in the way.

TMCC We've both become obsessed with records of late: vinyl, blackness, watching needles snagging . . .

MG I'm very interested in the idea of information hidden within record grooves. As when a photographic emulsion embeds an image: it's as though there are images inherently inside a record that are then activated. With my performance work *The Captive Bird Society*, I was collecting 78rpm records of bird songs, and it was as though every time I played them the birds were released. And in your latest novel, *C*, you talk a lot about static: you call it 'the sound of thinking'.



Captive Bird Society, performance-installation, MAC/VAL Musée d'Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Paris, 2009

TMCC Yes. That's where Serge, the hero, is listening to the radio. But there's another bit in that book where he's playing a record and he lets it run on after it's finished to listen to the static at the end, and he hears a huge amount of information in all that silence.

MG And radio signals are also so much part of the ongoing project you've developed with your 'semi-fictitious organisation', the International Necronautical Society. You send out lines of poem-code from galleries over the radio, these Burroughsian cut-ups made by mixing and repeating bits of other media . . .

TMCC I'm taken by the idea of transmission and of code and of things being buried. The word encryption is linked etymologically to crypt. That's why I love records: because they're just so black, they're like death. I was very struck by your performance where you played old illegal Samizdat records from the Soviet Union, when they couldn't get proper vinyl to make their bootlegs so they used old X-ray acetate sheets; you're literally watching a piece of somebody's lung.

MG The Soviet nation's bones were being pressed with the sounds of degenerate Western music like jazz. That's phonography as cryptography completely: an actual body is embedded inside the grooves of the record, so that the X-ray plate, the sarcophagus, becomes static—becomes illegal music.

TMCC There's an amazing bit in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* where he describes this Guantanamo-type place where prisoners are punished by basically becoming records. Their bodies are strapped into a massive recording device and this needle writes on them and what it writes is the law. And the prisoner, as they die, reads their wounds, this beautiful encoded calligraphy. There's something almost sacred about it: you're beholding the tablets of Moses or something.

MG You've written recently about Kittler. I love that bit in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* where he talks about Rilke's notion of running a gramophone needle down the suture of a skull, or, in fact, over any surface . . .

TMCC You could run it on the pavement or the table . . .



Captive Bird Society, performance-installation, Distance and Sensivility, Calvert 22, London, 2010
photo credit: Thierry Bal

MG That's another kind of psychosis that I think attacks both Serge and his sister in *C*: the potentiality of each thing to contain, to resonate, to transmit.

TMCC Yes. He's flying over the trenches in World War One—which, of course, are also grooves

cut into a dark surface, tracings and diagrams full of death and buried things, which he's reading, calling into sound. He uses his machine gun like a needle, angling it till it's right over the trench, and crackle rises up from the enemy guns . . .

MG So it's sounding, but also drawing.

TMCC That's right. This is something that's really strong in your work, too: the sense of what a line is. You've done these amazing huge drawings of close-up gramophone grooves, at which point the lines aren't representing gramophone grooves any more, but rather are just marks, the act of making marks on paper. It's like a meta-commentary on drawing.

MG I saw each line as a time recording of an event—also as an activation of matter, or an expulsion of it. For me, images never operate in metaphors—they're actual material manifestations.

TMCC Right now we're sitting in front of these black paintings of yours which are of designer food and they're utterly disgusting. They're so black they're like tumors or something.

MG Black is the color of shiny consumer goods: the Chanel compact, the lipstick case, the vanity case—shop interiors themselves are always black and shiny.

In *C*, Serge has a blockage in his stomach after his sister's death, black bile—which is also part of the four humours I presume: melancholia?

TMCC Yes. *Mela chole* means 'black bile'. I wanted to play out melancholia in an un-romantic, un-spiritual way: for Serge, it's not an affliction of his soul or of his imagination but of his stomach. His dead sister has been lodged in his stomach; as he watches her being buried he feels something raising up and sticking there. There's something almost cannibalistic about it: incesto-cannibalistic—digesting his dead sister . . .

MG : Or failing to digest her, so she just amalgamates formlessly inside him . . .

TMCC Aha: the formless. We've both raved in the past about Bataille's notion of *l'informe*: matter which won't be placed within some taxonomic system or *Aufgehobt*—lifted up, sublimated into refined concepts or objects of representation—but instead just gets itself squashed and messed everywhere. Similarly, in these paintings, the food is oozing beyond its taxonomic limit, it's rotting across the plate. I was reading this Agamben passage, in *The Coming Community*, where he says that what is truly divine about things is precisely their refusal to transcend. He uses this weird Christian imagery: the fallenness of things 'hangs about them like a halo.'



The Consumystic IV (handbag and spheres), platinum print, 60.3cm x 38.6cm, 2011

MG : I like fallenness, flaws. On all my images there are flaws . . .

TMCC Glitches . . .

MG Ruptures . . .

TMCC But then I think in your paintings and photographs and drawings, and in my books, there's also a kind of ecstasy, once that rupture has taken place: once the grand system has collapsed, once objects and people are released into this orgy of materiality.

MG There is definitely an ecstasy—especially at the end of *C*, where there's a literal orgy in a tomb, with body parts alive and dead all falling over Serge. A scenario for which I think Bataille still presents the most compelling conceptual model!

TMCC The question of pornography arises here. In that same book, Agamben claims that if pornography, and the pornographic imagination, could be liberated from its containment by capitalism, then this would be a magnificent thing. He even says that the task, the aesthetic and erotic and political task of our generation, is to do that.

MG Talking of our generation—I mean ours (we're exactly the same age)—a real symptom of it, as this conversation is so aptly demonstrating, is that we keep referencing theory when we talk about our work. More than that: theory informs the making of it.

TMCC But that's always the case, even for people who claim not to 'have' theory. 'Not' having theory just means having crap theory, i.e. adhering to a humanism that has erased all traces of its own constructedness.

MG Yes, of course. For me, theory (by which we mean continental philosophy) is embedded in the art-making process without being imposed on or illustrated by it in any way. There are these brilliant thinkers who spend their lives negotiating ideas within the world and as an artist it would be really weird to ignore them and their propositions.

TMCC This idea of the proposition is a good way of thinking about stuff in general. I saw you do a performance once that you started out by denying was a performance at all, and you framed it like a lawyer's opening speech. You said, 'I have here a set of briefs,' and each one was a proposition: you were making a set of propositions. And the fact that you were standing there talking didn't seem to mark a huge shift of category from when you're painting, in a way.

MG Exactly, they're propositions made through different materials. Propositions are very important because if someone makes a proposition I think you can't ignore it. Propositions and manifestations.

TMCC Or manifestos. For me these are all forms of fiction. You told me a couple of years ago that when you started teaching drawing at the Royal College of Art, you proposed to get not only your job title but your entire department renamed as Fiction.

MG Yes. I like the idea of fictional operational modes. And I do tend to think of lots of different modes as fiction that people don't really describe as such. I think psychoanalysis, particularly Lacanian psychoanalysis—and I'm sure I'll get kicked for this—is actually fiction. But by being fiction, it doesn't mean it's fake. Lacan invented a fictional structure in which to deal with the self, in all its reality.

TMCC Which is incidentally all about circuits and loops, isn't it?

MG Exactly—and desire, the orgiastic, everything we've just been talking about.

Sourcery, from Consumystic, Avenue des Gobelins.

Martina Gluzberg's recent solo shows include *The Money Plot*, Paradise Row, London, 2008; *Phonofrapicon*, Zonca&Zonca, Milan, 2010; and *Avenue des Gobelins*, Paradise Row, London, 2012. Her ongoing sound project *The Captive Bird Society* was first performed at the MAC/VAL Museum, Paris, 2009.

Tom McCarthy is a writer and artist whose work has been translated into more than twenty languages. His first novel, *Remainder* won the 2008 Believer Book Award; his third, *C*, was shortlisted for the 2010 Booker Prize. McCarthy is also author of the 2006 non-fiction book *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* and of numerous essays that have appeared in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The London Review of Books*, *Harper's* and *Artforum*. In addition, he is founder and General Secretary of the International Necronautical Society (INS), a semi-fictitious avant-garde network of writers, philosophers and artists whose work has been exhibited internationally at venues including the Palais de Tokyo Paris, Tate Britain and Moderna Museet Stockholm.

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