

JOAN RETALLACK

MEMNOIR

The Post-Apollo Press, 2004, \$10

So what is a suitable rating for "the unnoticed actual condition of [the] life (32)"? Joan Retallack's *Memnoir* takes us to the movies only for us to find that we are already there—complete with "violence & graphic photos of murder victims in black and white" (13). There is no handy Archimedean (read American/ read coalition) point for us to hypothetically cling to from the outside. The ideal of removing oneself from this scopical line of inquiry is not an option. We are flung out—and back in—on a cinematic clinamen swerve that pans towards us in an "indigenous aquiline twilight" where reality is cut with representation and vice versa (27).

This is living ("a person is a place after all" (24)), and this is a poem which challenges the location of a here and now where we "don't want to know" our relationship to the past or the future (1). It posits a present tense under threat which necessitates a "reconfiguration" of "the geometry of attention" (14), in other words a re-examination of the codes, systems and definitions with which we read, inhabit and make sense of our "optics of horizon" (17), our understanding of memory and its place or *place* of representation.

In *Memnoir* the cinema seems to offer a ritual catharsis of the everyday but it is a "ritual, which can hardly contain the virtual pain" (34) of "even a portion of life" (7). Retallack challenges prescribed figurations of time and knowledge by investigating the possibilities and impossibilities of the "carefully constructed" containers of the book, the movie, and even language itself: "i.e. ok this is the vocabulary in which you will be locked up for the next ten years there is no good behaviour clause" (24). The only possible hint of escape is the potential for knowledge—to go on discovering the plots, the codings, the clues that swerve the reader into multiple modes of attention and engagement with the poem and the world in and around it. For Retallack, this is knowledge as self-awareness, the *poethical* moment of curiousness, which helps one to tell "the story of [...] life, in a calm, clear voice" (7).

In *Memnoir* Retallack makes a series of formal and narrative correspondences that parallel the zoom of the camera lens with the zoom of language, from word to referent and also from concepts to ideas. Distance and mapping are crucial concerns of both reading and seeing. The poem is an examination of how to map strata of memory and projection (14), how "to find one's position on the graph" of memory and not knowing. To do this

Retallack embodies a "stream of self-translation" (6) that negotiates its way through the cultural seepage of film into personal memory. She avoids the fixity of the still, the *known* meaning, and therefore value, of a word, a sentence or scene; definitions are not only always "otherwise," but lead in alternate "other" ways to reveal a faulty structure leaking narrative in all directions. The question that the poem poses of "how to tell the story now without telling lies" (26) answers itself formally in the circuitous returnings and revisionings of this half-glimpsed noir as *memnoir*.

Periodically featured is a woman who might or might not be Eurydice, a figure refracted through the mythic black and white underworld of femme fatale screen history who, in a comically sinister twist, is periodically trapped in *langue* and apparently seeking *parole* (21, 24, 28). Similarly she is there in the (re)projected ("i.e. don't look back" (29)) glimpse of the murderous aunt:

or to zoom in on the scene in the darkened room on the screen the shadow of the murderous aunt is moving across the screen along the far wall of the screen one can tell it is the murderous aunt from the feather in the hat and the dagger in the hand of the silhouette of the shadow on the wall (16)

The poem also provides us with a kind of memoir of Retallack's own practice. The text resolutely occupies the middle of the page in prose blocks which avoid what she calls the "smarmy margins." She comments wryly that "my margins (were) much too wide" (33), a possible reference to the way in which her concerns have always exceeded categorisation—particularly in relation to an earlier wave of Feminist work which self-consciously inhabited the margins of the page. Here, despite or in addition to Eurydice, we have an "ungendered silhouette" crossing a "vacant lot" (33), underlining the fact that Retallack's concerns have always been too large to be easily assimilable as being only about gender.

Formally the poem attempts to occupy a space that "might not reflect a purported fact" (22). An "i.e. how to get here by means of a swerve out of the grammer" [sic] (37). The addition and deletion of punctuation throws us into a dilemma about our location of the tense of the writing: present, past, future? At the edges of knowledge we come to the edges of language, of representation:

i.e. for a very long time the child want(ed) more than she could say to not want more than she could say i.e. impossible according to any simple formula for mirroring formulas (5)

Similarly, Retallack seems to ask whether rep-

resentation is even an option? How do we figure an ethical relationship between language and its referents? Do yards of shimmering adjectives *equal* a sunrise?

without yards of shimmering adjectives
description: is description possible can a
sunrise
be described by yards of shimmering
adjectives (6)

The grammar and syntax use the precision of mathematical formulas to cancel out, rather than to balance (the book). The constant irruptions of the "e.g." into the poem offer examples that double and replicate subject positions. They continually (re)project themselves but refuse to move us from the general to the specific. Instead of the contraction of the world view to a specific point (i.e. "to hit upon here i.e. the e.g. clarification" (15)) we are met with the frustrating realisation that we are already there, that there is no privileged "point" of perfect view to be reached; instead there is only "the fatality of of the preposition reaching out to its object even as it e.g. it slips away" (18).

Redell Olsen's *Small Portable Space* will be published by Reality Street Editions, London in 2004.

december-january at danspace project

IMPROVISATION FESTIVAL/NY
December 2, 3, 5 at 8:30 PM

Anniversaries (10): THE REMEM-
BER PROJECT 2004
December 4 Noon to Midnight

City/Dans: GLITA HEDEWIG
December 9-12 at 8:30 PM

Shares: LIONEL POPKIN &
ANDY RUSS
December 17-18 at 8:30 PM,
December 19 at 7:30 PM

Global Exchange: DANIEL
LÉVEILLÉ DANSE
January 6-9

City/Dans: KARINNE KEITHLEY
January 13-16

City/Dans: YVONNE MEIER
January 21-23

FOOD FOR THOUGHT
January 28-30

www.danspaceproject.org
(212) 674-8194