

Temporality, Post Production and Transformation

By Corinna Ghaznavi

Ernest Daetwyler's recent projects *Life is But a Dream* and *Reality in Reverse [barn raising]* foreground ideas of community, rebuilding, commodification and art as a practice of renewal. The barn, made obsolete and torn down, points to a rural tradition that is fast disappearing. The wooden boards show signs of wear and use; they are the materials of rural structures that evoke nostalgia for a way of life that we already no longer know in a world where industrial agriculture is rapidly replacing the family farm.

Reality in Reverse [barn raising] operates on several levels: it is a sculptural object with immediate presence, it commemorates and critiques, and it juxtaposes radically different and contradictory elements of contemporary culture. The barn was reassembled in the gallery upside down. The inversion points to an inherent irrationality in our contemporary approaches towards progress, and reinvigorates the material by giving it new form. The tradition of barn raising is a social one that is still practiced by the Amish and Mennonites today. Existing without banks or insurance, the people carry their own and come to one another's aid in times of crisis. The values of this particular community are foregrounded because their members made up Daetwyler's installation crew. Their way of life is brought into tension with the barn that is rendered functionless in a contemporary gallery, demonstrating what Andreas Huyssen terms the 'relentless museummania' that acts as a counterpoint to the planned obsolescence of consumer society (Huyssen 1995, 14).

According to Huyssen, 'museummania,' witnessed in the unprecedented restoration of old urban centers, museum villages and landscapes, occupy ever larger chunks of everyday culture and experience (Huyssen 1995, 14). This, writes Pierre Nora, demonstrates the eradication of memory by history, where musealization suppresses and destroys lived memory. In this process, reconstruction replaces permanent flux, representation actual phenomenon, and analysis subjective experience (Nora 1989, 8f). Huyssen reminds us that historically collective memory depended on the stability of social/group memory. Currently, the clashing and fragmented memory politics of specific social and ethnic groups challenge notions of collective consensual memory and hence, social and cultural cohesion (Huyssen 2003, 17). But where Nora laments a de-ritualizing of the world through a preference for the new over the old, and warns that unless we are vigilant, history will disappear, Huyssen points to the more positive aspects of critical memory cultures that disrupt master narratives and reflect more clearly on the realities of contemporary life. By deconstructing and reconfiguring the barn, Daetwyler operates within this uniquely postmodern space defined by David Harvey as one where radically different realities coexist, collide and interpenetrate (Harvey 1990, 49). Reminding us of Jacques Derrida's project of deconstruction, where meaning is always unstable, and collage/montage is the primary form of discourse, Harvey outlines how the new practice of any producer is to work with raw materials (fragments and elements) that the consumer can recombine. This creates a democratic (and empowered) reader and a local, pragmatic representation of the world rather than a unified one (Harvey 1990 51f).

Daetwyler's project is not nostalgic but rather an attempt at encompassing the radically different realities and contradictions that we necessarily inhabit. After all nostalgia, as Susan Stewart reminds us, especially in the form of the museummania that Huyssen refers to, is both an objectification of peasant classes and an aestheticization of rural life (Stewart 1993, 140). Daetwyler's sculptural reconfiguration of the materials of the barn, and his inclusion, in the gallery space, of Mennonites who represent a real contemporary community, and exemplify a historical collective memory, makes visible the postmodern space that Harvey calls the 'constant present' where schizophrenia is favoured over (Marxist) alienation, and the focus is on the participatory/performative rather than on the finished product (Harvey 1990, 53). He holds at bay the closing off of lived experience, which Stewart describes as the process of abstraction replacing labour, art replacing nature, and the still life replacing history (Stewart 1993, 164).

The video shown alongside the installation *Reality in Reverse [barn raising]* further works against a dematerialization and an erasure of history and process: the video was shot in the basement of the original barn where, against the sounds of boards and steel roof elements clapping in the wind, we see the details of the working barn, the basement and foundation, and light streaming through the cracks. Once the details of the structure have been documented, the camera moves to the exterior and tracks the dismantling of the building; the sequence of boards and braces being removed ends in the final great crash when the structure is pulled over and collapses. Daetwyler's inversion of the barn also addresses the real ecological disasters that we face today. Specifically how corporations, monocultures and genetic engineering threaten not only the family farm and a traditional way of life, but also the very health of the planet. As Alexander Wilson points out, the characteristics of industrial agriculture are high-input cropping dependent on fossil fuels, resulting in intensive animal husbandry, mechanization, and the reduction of human labour. The goals are efficiency and monetary, the 'by-products' pollution, habitat destruction and unemployment (Wilson 1992, 194f).

The issue of labour is deeply embedded in Daetwyler's projects: his inclusion of the Mennonite crew disallows abstraction to replace labour; and his own labour and that of the community, work against the erasure of labour that occurs in a capitalist system that drives us to commodify everything and forces us into an endless drive to accumulate without guilt. *Life is But a Dream* follows this project further by reflecting on the objects we acquire, consume and discard; in this case toys that the artist believes mirror our society. While the title of the exhibition is taken from the merrily lyrical childhood song, the other installations, entitled *Monster TV*, *Monster Sofa*, *Dream Spheres*, and *The Wall of Nightmares and Dreams*, are more ambiguous. Indeed, even while the title evokes the lyrics of 'row, row, row your boat,' it simultaneously recalls the fragility and fleeting nature of life and dreams. Whereas 'life is but a dream' can suggest a carefree life, it also suggests the ephemeral nature of dreaming life, where the soap bubble we have just blown into existence grows, quivers only momentarily and then bursts, leaving only thin air.

Although connected under one title, the three installations function as three fully developed and independent works. In the first, Daetwyler again harnessed the aid of his community with a call for discarded toys. *Monster TV*, *Monster Sofa* and the suspended *Clouds and Sun* are entirely made from found, collected, and donated stuffed toys. The sofa and TV are made from stuffies that are crowded, piled and pushed together to create

a dense textile fabric that exudes both the comfort of cozy opulence and a nightmarish scene of horror vacui. Every kind of soft toy is found here from small to large, from frog to fish, dog, duck, Cat in the Hat, snake, crocodile, Tigger, hippo, gorilla, Elmo, Teletubbies and Winnie-the-Pooh. All the objects in these two sculptures are whole and recognizable whereas those (all white, grey and pink) in the clouds have been rendered abstract and formed into a cohesive whole hanging mass. The sun is the most hybrid assemblage where yellow and red stuffed toys have been reconfigured into rays by stitching together toys like Big Bird, the Cookie Monster and Homer Simpson.

Despite the overwhelming excess of these objects, they nonetheless attract as much as repel, unlike the *Wall of Nightmares and Dreams* which is made entirely out of plastic toys. All have been used, some are damaged, many continue to play a plastic tune, and when mounted across a large expanse of wall, all are revealed as ugly, garish, slightly repugnant, and disposable. We see naked Barbies frolicking in the Barbie RV, loads of naked dolls, plastic castles and dollhouses, a pink butterfly and a pink rearing horse, cars, Spiderman, robots, dinosaurs, a telephone, a bucket and a huge array of plastic animals varying in scale. At the bottom right toy soldiers, monsters and policemen are assembled to create a particularly violent mini-scene within this mass of cheap plastic from which the endless refrains of some melody sound alongside other grating and glaring audio. If, as the artist claims, these objects somehow mirror our society, what are we to make of all these made-in-China things that he received in the thousands, many of which in duplicate?

Theodor Adorno claims that 'the culture industry' constantly reproduces the same under the guise of the new, and replaces the autonomy of art. Through conformity and endless duplication, an enforced solidarity is produced around something that has not been pre-judged. The monopoly supplies information rather than knowledge, and information cannot lead to either thought, or experience (Adorno 1991, 69ff). The mass of Elmos and Winnie-the-Pooh demonstrates standardization and conformity. The obsolescence of these discarded objects points to a restless consumer driven to constantly acquire the next new (same) object. Although a critique of this culture industry is clearly inscribed in Daetwyler's work, more complex, and less pessimistic ideas are also present.

In his discussion of Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of 'bricolage,' Derrida reminds us that the bricoleur uses the means at hand to create what he needs, and that this requires both adaptation and change to the original. For Derrida, bricolage is the critical language wherein totalization and empiricism give way to a surplus of signification resulting in freeplay (Derrida 1967, 4ff). The important difference between Adorno's 'endless duplication of the same' and Derrida's 'freeplay of repetition and repetition of freeplay' is that the former regulates behaviour and creates a passive consumer whereas the latter is affirmative, working against prescription and towards a more nuanced and open interpretation of events (Derrida 1967, 9). If we think of Daetwyler as a bricoleur, who uses a seemingly endless repertoire of mass produced and disposable objects to create something new, we invert Adorno's premise and experience the viewer as one who is empowered by her abilities to play with and reinvent forms instead of merely consuming them. Daetwyler's installation then becomes both a forum for critique and a playground for thinking about our culture. The space that the artist creates for a moment of reprieve is

embedded in the crazy toy-covered television monitor where a video plays a subtle and abstract loop of fireflies. Attracted by and flying, again and again, into the lure of the light, the subtle movements of the fireflies shot at night translate into a black and white image of forms moving across the screen. The open image allows the viewer to meditate on the seduction of media, and form and movement, without having to follow an already concluded narrative or scan for readymade meaning.

The term 'postproduction' was coined by Nicolas Bourriauld to describe the artwork that is created on the basis of pre-existing works in response to the proliferating chaos of global culture in the information age. Based on objects that are already in circulation, and already informed by other objects, art challenges passive culture made of merchandise and consumers and instead makes the forms and cultural objects of our daily lives function (Bourriauld 2002, 14ff). Hence, the experience of joy *and* horror that fills the viewer when engulfed in Daetwyler's world of commodified childhood. Like the nostalgic wish for a past that is already gone, the simplicity of merely rejecting a commodified world is not useful for living within this world.

Life is But a Dream is an elegant, industrial, interactive sculpture that hangs suspended in yet another room and best exemplifies how art can make commodified objects function. Metal 'feelers' extend from a steel sphere, and a series of sounds are activated when the viewer interacts with the piece. The sounds are those of electronic, interactive toys and include a rooster crowing, the duck song, "the better to eat you with, the wolf replied", Jingle Bells, Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, a cricket sound, a child's prayer, techno sounds, "wanna play, wanna play," and countless others. Thirty-two motion sensors each activate three toys, and the lengths of the sequences programmed to play vary from five seconds to two minutes. Activated by the movement of visitors, a trickle of noise might be followed by a crescendo or a slow decline where only a single voice persists. No matter what the movement, the viewer isn't able to predict the sequence of sounds which seem always to be moving between a chorus overlaid by individual voices, to almost-silence, but then again a confusing jumble. Because the toy is stripped down to its bare essence (sound) the viewer is able to bypass the mass produced object and enter into an experiential space where memory, imagination and fragments of narratives are allowed to surface in freely associative (freeplay) manner. The memories of a fairground, rides, cotton candy, the recollection of the vivid gaudy colours and excitement that accompanied childhood, all surface in the haunting presence of this sculpture made of ninety-six disembodied toy speakers. Bourriauld writes that postproduction scrambles the boundaries between consumption and production such that art enables a culture of use and activity, and allows for narratives to extend and reinterpret preexisting ones (Bourriauld 2002, 19). He maintains that the forms that surround us are the materialization of late capitalism narratives; narratives that create communal scenarios that promote collective values and visions of the world. By making these imposed narratives material, artists bring them to consciousness and offer us other pathways through reality. By revealing the invisible structures of the ideological apparatus, artists enable activity and offer up the exhibition site as a place of production. Art is an activity that produces relationships to the world (Bourriauld 2002 46ff).

This space for freeplay and fantasy is most evident in the installation of *Dream Spheres* suspended throughout the room in different heights and scales and flanked by

two walls of heavy tree trunks. The spheres are translucent and able to hold the weight of a viewer should they wish to enter into a magic bubble. This space is uncluttered; the gently rotating spheres recall childhood fantasies of elves in dewdrops and sentinel trees that guard the magical forest. Plastic spheres that invoke artificial fantasies and illusions are juxtaposed with the nearly hundred-year old felled trunks of dead trees. The open and natural forms act as a counterpoint to the busy opulence of prescribed commodities and create a space for reflection.

Although Daetwyler creates a space for engagement rather than passive consumption, Huyssen reminds us that no pure space exists outside of commodity culture (Huyssen 2003, 19). Hence, Bourriaud's insistence on the use of commodified objects and processes not merely to make sense of culture, but to also compose alternative scenarios by reediting historical or ideological narratives (Bourriaud 2002 45). It is in this space of intervention that Daetwyler works. By refusing to avert our eyes from the obvious failings of the culture industry, he is able to use and transform them in such a way as to offer the viewer a new context for engagement. Focusing on the creative act (of the artist, of the viewer participant), Daetwyler affirms the power of art as a vehicle for critique, insight, and change.

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