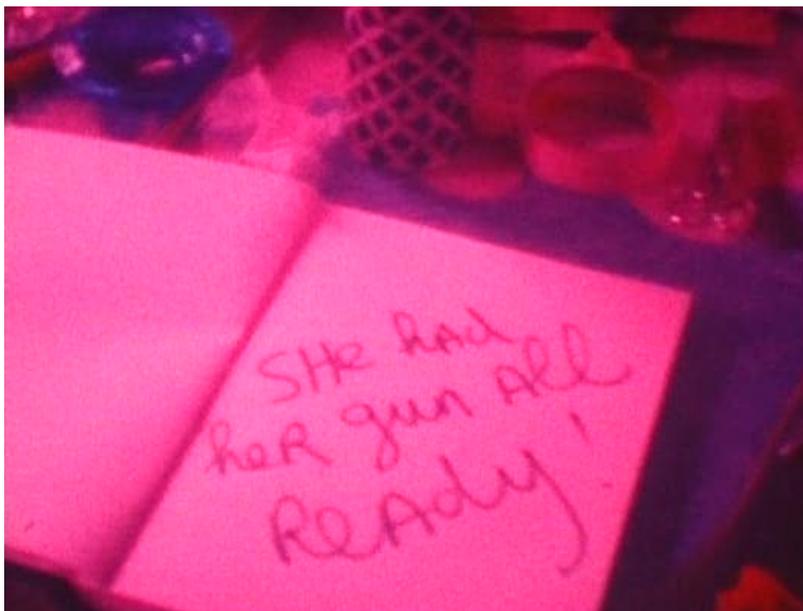


Production values, ugliness and commodification March 2011

I've been thinking more about how the costs of video production affect the way its valued aesthetically and in the market place (the miniscule one that could be said to exist for video anyway), and realized a consideration of one particular niche of low budget filmmaking was in order: the No Wave cinema of 80s New York. Described by critic [J. Hoberman](#) as 'unpolished 'on the street verité', made with an 'aggressive anyone-can-do-it aesthetic', the films had a listless, punk quality which echoes the notions of deskilling and of rejection of 'specialist' craft and techniques that I was thinking about in the context of Conceptual Art. Unlike earlier avant-garde film practices, like Structural film, No Wave tended towards 'content-rich, performance-oriented narrative films' (Hoberman again) that, explored through loosely told stories "thematics of role playing...and the exploration of power relations and sexuality often in combination", according to Christian Höller in the Oberhausen catalogue.



This citation attests to their critical rehabilitation, and underlines the process by which 'subversive' cinemas (and art practices) get co-opted into a mainstream or corporate aesthetic by marketing execs looking for genuine, *authentic* instances of uncommodified 'cool' and/ or and film historians, curators and academics perhaps looking for something similar albeit not for commercial ends. Something low-cost, unspecialized and low budget nevertheless accrues value, through its aura of authenticity rather than the 'mental labour' involved.

This links in with my last post where I was trying to work through the relationship of cost of production to a moving image work's 'value'. I wondered whether funders' desires for expensive looking productions influence the type of work that gets made - does it skew the output to certain types of film-making (which, for example, No Wave would sit uncomfortably within)? In a different context [Omar EL Khairy's article in Mute](#) about Clio Barnard's *The Arbor* gives an account of how funding bodies affect the work, arguing that the 'issues' presented in it- 'delinquency, addiction and squalor' and race were favoured for the narrative focus of the film by the funders and were integral to the packaging (distribution, publicity, contextualising) of the film. In a different way, then, funding parameters affect the style of work being made.

Another angle on the question of value was also offered by Dave Beech's article 'On Ugliness' in this month's Art Monthly, which outlines both the ideological dimension of beauty and the potential of ugliness to create an uncomfortable rupture into the smoothness of corporate culture. He discusses philosophers like Elaine Scarry and Roger Scruton, whose aim is to reinstate beauty and, although perhaps not obviously stated, devalue ugliness- for aesthetic as well as ethical/ moral reasons. Roughly speaking, beauty and goodness correlate, and their stance could be caricatured as "why must we allow radicals and avant-gardists to take it away from us?"

An association is thus clearly drawn between reactionary practices and beauty and on the flip side, ugliness and radical, avant-gardist practices. He asks, "does ugliness refer to a part of the aesthetic spectrum that can never be satisfactorily incorporated or instrumentalised", suggesting that beauty occupies the other end of that spectrum. The beauty he refers to, and believes they advocate, harks back to a Victorian belief in the 'character building' effects of beauty, one which is all about retaining order and being obedient. Making the leap back into video, would that imply that 'ugly' videos have more chance of being critical and disobedient?



It obviously depends how we define ugliness- a cack-handed lack of skill, intentional or not; or a polished kind of repulsiveness. Beech puts forward artists like John Russell as examples of an ugliness that- unlike, say, Impressionism- will not 'weather with age' and be selling postcards 100 years from now. And his work certainly isn't lo-fi; it's just intentionally repellent in a hyper-saturated, digital-surreal way. Maybe ugliness isn't about a lo-fi aesthetic but, as Beech says, about a rupture, an obstacle that can't be ignored. The work of [Ryan Trecartin](#) could be an example of this tendency, combining a YouTube-style, paranoid self-performance ('cheap') idiom with a 'wildly stylized', super post-produced and excessive look. The results are pretty ugly, in that a bad-taste/ confounding kind of way that both repulses and transfixes, without being cheap to produce.