

FILM POEMS

REDELL OLSEN



LES FIGES PRESS

Los Angeles

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SELVAGE, RAFTS, AND PEACHES: REDELL OLSEN'S *FILM POEMS*

This book brings together five poetic sequences, proposing film poems as the compound title—genre even—for these different texts. We might take the title more as a flag of convenience, and move directly to the particulars and materials of each sequence. On the other hand, noting the risk of conflating different poems, we might also read the title as a conceptual manifesto, a call to re-orient image-text relations in contemporary poetics. Wittily indeterminate, the different formal mixes in *Film Poems* suggest new relations for film, performance, and poetry.

Part of the resonance and delight of film-poem as the relevant genre or compound concept for these poems is this play of relations between media. These are not poems that somehow illustrate or amplify stable references to film. The films that coordinate these texts are films made or remade by Olsen herself as film-texts rather than as homages to cinema or the Hollywood firmament. Her earlier poems include inter-medial interventions into our cinematic imaginations. 'Corrupted by Showgirls' in *Secure Portable Space* (2004), for example, re-animates the narrative grammar of noir femininity. In *Film Poems*, the textual

syntax owes less to cinematic narratives, and more to film's frame rates and the syntax of image correlations.

Put crudely, Olsen's films don't do narrative realism, actors doing dialogue, all that kind of thing. Her essay on the poetics of the swoon in the film poetics of Abigail Child suggests some perspectives on her own aesthetics. Along with Abigail Child, a fondness for Matthew Barney's *Cremaster Cycle* is evident in Olsen's recent book *Punk Faun*. In search of other precedents, not least to articulate the fragility of film's performance, one might cite Robert Smithson's slide lecture *Hotel Palenque* (1972) or Victor Burgin's *Between* (1986). In Olsen's work, however, the conceptual weave is distinctive in its emphasis on poetry. Her films rarely use the soundtracks of found film materials, preferring to create a soundscape that can exist independently, whether as printed text or in performance, and so as film poems.

Some of the moves from poetry to film bear comparison with works such as Marcel Broodthaers's *Voyage on the North Sea*. In an interview, Broodthaers once remarked:

I began with poetry, moved on to three-dimensional works, finally to film, which combines several artistic elements. That is, it is writing (poetry), object (something three-dimensional), and image (film). The great difficulty lies, of course, in finding a harmony among these three elements.

Olsen's work prefers disjunctions between media over any kind of harmony: opening differences amid media rather than among elements thereby

unified. Indeed, her films have a structuralist quality akin to the theory and practice of 1970s film, or what Stephen Heath once termed ‘cinetext’: ‘At work in the structuration of the cinetext is an overdetermination of codes which found its intelligibility.’ One imagines Olsen could make stylish neo-feminist movies—Jean-Luc Godard crossed with Agnès Varda—if anyone offered her the resources. But rather than wait for the call from Universal Pictures, she has got on with making numerous films with the technology and materials, often found footage, closer to hand.

Olsen’s practice as a film-maker and performer can be glimpsed from her website *filmpoems.wordpress.com*. Her films are also film-texts for performance, films that co-exist with poems for a variety of screening contexts, from gallery spaces and installations to shopping malls and sheds. The essay by Olsen entitled ‘To Quill At Film,’ published in parallel by Les Figues in *Logistics: Aesthetics*, offers an indispensable introduction to the concrete materiality of the films for which these poems were written, while also dramatising the poetics engaged. What emerges is a practice of poetic research that offers unusually powerful incisions in the intertwining of aesthetics and politics.

In ‘London Land Marks’ (2007), for example, expressions of survival from a teach-yourself Arabic audiotape cut into the grammatically fragmented film stills that would celebrate Speaker’s Corner in Hyde Park. The practice of historical research into her materials is the more prominent in ‘A New Booke of Copies’ (2009) and ‘SPRIGS & spots’ (2011-12), in which ruffs, quills, lace, whitework and textiles of various kinds are investigated, re-

made or re-purposed. There are aspects of the resulting poetics that suggest critical analogies with Susan Howe, whose essay on Chris Marker emphasizes montage conflicts and the ideogram as a construction parameter in Eisenstein's materialism of cinema. Olsen's work is persistently engaged with the montage of materials and material relations, but also, especially as compared with Susan Howe's poetry, with a grittier, less minimalist conceptuality that is more troubled by its delighted complicity with art and culture, including what is still rather awkwardly known as popular culture. 'The Lost Pool' tribute to Esther Williams, for example, and the replay of daft ghillie suit wearers in 'Bucolic Picnic' both suggest satire and the pacifist's dismay at art's complicity with war.

Olsen's gritty conceptualism is shot through with affects and politics that disrupt the engines of its conceptual work. Stills from Olsen's films are glimpsed in these pages, but these films and their performance relations nevertheless come into play as generative absences. Her film poems are written in dynamic relations to film—by, with or from film as a grammarian might put it—and in new prepositional relations to film and performance, rather than as adjuncts, adverts, or sub-titles. As Olsen puts it in 'To Quill At Film': 'Words are the film between what was said and seen and also the means of seeing that is something burning in the projector called language.' This sense of film predates the now dominant sense of celluloid film. Indeed, many of these poems throw plumb lines into a deeper history of film than those suggested by its current technology.

Although Olsen's texts weave modern and ancient senses of film, this is no etymological game. Rather, these texts open up poetry's historical potentials in relation to other media, and not just to film, but also to hand-made, industrial and digital processes, investigating what it might still mean to 'manufacture' something. The alienation of manufacturing from production by hand, by manual labour, is perhaps most explicit in the film and text of 'A Newe Book of Copies' in which Olsen embodies the physical effort required to make quills and, by extension, to write. Similarly, the possibility of writing struggles to assert a different quality of text, of voice even, amid the programmes and Jacquard looms of 'SPRIGS & spots.' The recovery and rewriting of oral history—a substantial part of the interview materials reworked in 'The Lost pool'—is less concerned with manufacturing labour, than with leisure and the history of swimming and sport. Various histories of this kind—such as the history of canvas, of sheets and screens on which the moving image has been projected—could be read backwards through to some archetypal Platonic cave, but Olsen's gestures look forward, toward a radical new kind of masque.

Having attempted to sketch some of the conceptual and indeed poetic relations to film implicit in this book, it becomes possible to read the book's poetics as poetry. The emphasis on scanned footage broken up into grammatical misprisions is at its most stringent and programmatic in 'London Landmarks.' Playing across hide / Hyde, or (s)peech / peach, tensions between language acquisition, tourism, and frame rates run London's landmark speech freedoms into a new kind of Speaker's Corner, one in

which speech is cornered, reduced to media bites. Speech is suspect: freedom is impeached. The syntax of 'A Newe Book Booke of Copies' is more extended, less immediately constrained, though the tone of the manual, and the trials of following instructions, are implicitly tragic, almost funereal in the memory scored out of dead feathers, into roughs and dead fashions. 'Bucolic Picnic' is lighter in spirit, the baroque imagery newly turned to questions of pastoral and revolutionary classicism, a modernist dazzle cut against the bias of chintz and military camouflage. 'Bucolic Picnic' concludes with a scissored quotation from *Robinson Crusoe*, which echoes the poem's epigraph, suggesting a determined concern to build rafts out of found materials wrapped in canvas, rafts for survival. This concluding raft is picked up in the opening of 'The Lost Pool,' and this perhaps is the book's hinge, the poetic pivot around which serial montage turns back on itself. A string of homonyms and cognates around 'salvage' and 'selvage' bleeds through into 'SPRIGS & spots.' This latter text takes facsimile fragments from found material in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, among them the startling stage direction 'fall to writing.' The figure of 'selvage' nevertheless runs through *Film Poems* as a whole: selvage keeps the edges of fabric from fraying, and the various historical terms for 'selvage' and 'selvedge' across hand-made and industrial processes, all cut through the corruption of 'self-edges,' from which the term appears to be derived. *Film Poems* is alive to such corruptions, but not so as to offer some purer craft or a poetics of truth, but to fall again to new copies, new writing that is as quick to its micro-commitments and materials as it is wise to the sounds in the torn fabrics of our being. This is too sombre as a description of poems

that are also full of mischief and hilarity. Olsen's raft of salvage and peaches has torn a few strips off Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa*, but also sets out in search of new pools and wild water swimming. Amid so many complicities with the possibilities of manufacture, of construction, and of artifice as such, we may not be able to swim fast, but Olsen invites us to swim witty.

Drew Milne
Cambridge, UK
2013

FILM POEMS

London Landmarks



London landmarks London land marks
say the subjects are universal language
Christianity some poetry a little astronomy *say*
Hyde Park where everyone can make a speech
about anything *say* excuse me to get someone's
attention *say* I and you me *say* I am sorry *say*
some other basic expressions of survival are *say*
do you speak English *say* London landmarks *say*
London land marks *say* London land is marked
say the marks are on London's land *say* the mark
of London is land *say* land is a mark of London
say mark is a land made London *say* made land
is a mark in London *say* marks make London
land *say* making marks makes land London *say*
London marks making land *say* these are some of
London's landmarks *say* the subjects are London
landmarks *say* the subjects are London land *say*
the subjects are long done *say* the subjects are
language *say* the subjects are language marks *say*
the subjects are long marked *say* the subjects are
London *say* this is land *say* language is marked
say the land is marks in language *say* language is
marks land made

say I and you London land marks
say I and you in London mark land
say London land is marked by you and I
say I and you make marks in London's land
say I and you mark lands in London
say I and you marked by land
say London land marks
say long done land marks
say long done marks in land
say land in long marks in language

say the subjects are universal language

say the language is universal

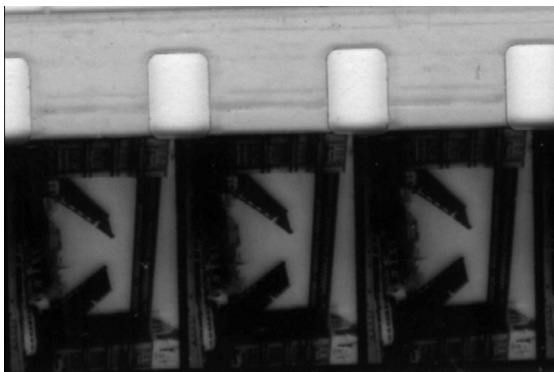
say the language is subject to it

say the language is its subject

say the language is subjected

say the language is suspected

say say the gauge is suspect



say Hyde Park where everyone can make a speech
about anything

say Hyde Park where everyone can mark a speech
about

say Hyde Park where everyone can mar a speech
about any

say Hyde Park where everyone can mar a peach
about any thing

say hide in the park where everyone can mark a
peach

say excuse me to get someone's attention

say hide in the park

say hide in the park

where evil ones can mark a peach

say

I you me

hide in the marks

say

I you me

lied in the marks

say

I am sorry

evil ones can mark a peach

say you me

say we are in the marks

say some other basic expressions of survival are

sorry *say*

evil ones can mark a peach

say

I you me

run from the parks

where evil ones can mark

a peach with land

say

I you me

where evil ones can mark

a peach with

say

London is marked

I you me London land marks

say

I you me marks in London's land

say

I you me mark land of London

say

I you me make marks in London land

say

I you me London marks in land

say

I you me can mark

a peach

Film Poems collects REDELL OLSEN's texts for film and performance from 2007-2012. Her previous publications include *Punk Faun: a bar rock pastel* (Subpress, 2012), *Secure Portable Space* (Reality Street, 2004), *Book of the Fur* (rem press 2000), and the collaboratively produced *Here Are My Instructions* (Gefn, 2004). From 2006-2010 she was the editor of *How2*, the international online journal for Modernist and contemporary writing by women. She is a Reader in Poetic Practice at Royal Holloway, University of London and the Judith E. Wilson visiting fellow in poetry at the University of Cambridge for 2013-14.

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ALICE KÖNITZ studied at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf and at CalArts. She has presented her work in numerous exhibitions including the 2008 Whitney Biennial (Whitney Museum of American Art, NY); the 2008 California Biennial (Joshua Tree/Orange County Museum of Art); "Half Square Half Crazy," Villa Arson (Nice, France); International Paper (UCLA Hammer Museum, LA); and the Tirana Biennial (Tiranana, Albania). Her solo exhibitions were at Susanne Vielmetter Projects, Los Angeles and Berlin; The University Art Museum, CSU Long Beach; LAXArt; Hudson Franklin, New York; LACE, Los Angeles; and Luis Campaña, Cologne. Her work has been reviewed and published in *Artforum*, *Frieze*, *Flash Art*, *Sculpture Magazine*, *Art and Text*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and other publications.

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REDELL OLSEN

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