Ludwig Fischer Review

In legalese the distinction between the pornographic and the erotic is somewhat straightforward: the former depicts the genitals; the latter does not. In Camera Lucida, Roland Barthes suggested that the difference was central to the meaning of the photograph itself: the latter has a punctum; the former does not. For Barthes the erotic photograph gestures beyond itself, puts the viewer in a chain of signification, reflection, momentary comprehension. The pornographic photographic photograph can do no more than amuse. It is stuck within itself, unable to generate meaning, or even the less personal reflective capacity Barthes called the studium. Pornography, in other words that which shows everything, ultimately shows nothing, since it can only show itself.

Although there is nothing that would classify as ‘pornographic’ in Ludwig Fischer’s intervention in the show Yes, yes I am happy aber glücklich ich bin nicht, this may still be the most fitting appellation for his work. Consider: (1) The reproduction of an Yves Saint-Laurent ad from Art Forum of a woman with split open blazer and no shirt or bra underneath (the image is of course erotic but it is suggestive of art as pornography for the market); (2) The Lorenzo-Lamas style photograph of Fischer with head cocked in such a position that he could be saying either ‘Fuck you’ or ‘I’m going to...’; (3) The photograph of a whiskey ad; (4) A piece entitled Pink Kant; (5) the positioning of the self on the mirror itself. But these are rather inessential elements. If the show is pornographic, it is less for these references than for the meaning of pornography as such: that which shows everything. We could start to list the themes: self, production, self-production, markets, art markets, resistance, cultural resistance, environmental catastrophe, catastrophic markets, auto-immunity of resistance and markets, etc. We could name names: Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Marx, Adorno. We could dig in to the archive: Dada, Fluxus, appropriation art. With images ranging from an inverted Hegel to a glacier to mirrors, coins (embazoned with Fichte’s visage), and oxen (the only to survive the last ice age), it seems, indeed, as if Fischer wants to show everything, and, if this is the case, we are left with an essential question: does he wind up showing nothing?

Another way to pose the question of the relation between the erotic and the pornographic is as the relation between art and criticism. If the old adages prove true (creation is the ‘spontaneous overflow of emotion’; the function of criticism is to ‘see the object as in itself it really is’), then art is figured as erotic and criticism as pornographic. Art generates its allure in refusing to tell everything, while criticism seeks again and again to inscribe and control the erotic mystery. With such a definition in mind, we could easily call Fischer’s work, which seems to impose so much of its own conditions of reception, pornographic in the worst sense. But if this were indeed the case, if criticism and art really had this relationship, I would not bother writing criticism, and I doubt that Ludwig Fischer would continue making art. Indeed, the question of this relationship is precisely what is posed by Fischer’s practice. The artist is no longer the creative genius unable to control his or her own meaning, nor is the critic left in a position of gaining that mastery and control. In refusing to believe that showing everything is showing nothing, pornography is trying to force its way back into the erotic domain.

This, I would say, is the essential gamble of Fischer’s practice: to suggest that critically informed art can put its claims on the table without fleeing into the opaqueness of the symbol or the obviousness of the reference. If the practice remains a gamble it is because Fischer still seeks the appropriate medium of this concern, the condensed vision which would allow the critical practice to come through while at the same time eliciting the wonder of the viewer. It is an imprecise formulation on my part, for it is an imprecise practice to attempt, but allow me one example.

In his short story ‘Funes,’ Borges gives a vision of a man dreamt of by the philosophers: a man with exact perception and memory. There is nothing that he sees that he cannot recall instantaneously and from all angles. In almost Aesopian fashion, Borges gives us the moral near the end: ‘I suspect, nevertheless, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details.” Then Borges concludes with his own detail, “Ireneo Funes died in 1888 of a pulmonary congestion.”

Such is the artistry of Borges: the moral does not close the story; it anticipates it. The end of the story returns to the body, to the necessity of life and death, and of the singularity of a named person who passes through the years. Add to this the pulmonary congestion: a blockage of the blood flow between the heart and the lungs, between that which takes in the outside world in the breath, and that which moves that world around the body to make life possible. The breath is timeless life; the blood puts it into circulation. When the world is only taken in, is only contained, there is congestion – cessation of life.

As if to add insult to injury, the Governor of Arizona, Jan Brewer, has recently signed a new law banning ethnic studies in public schools. President Obama’s reaction to Arizona’s reactionary attacks on immigrants has been rhetorically firm and practically reactionary attacks on immigrants has been rhetorically firm and practically status quo as he has decided to further militarize the border with Mexico. Along these lines, Janet Napolitano, the current Secretary of Homeland Security chief and former Governor of Arizona, has recently decided to send unmanned Predator drones to the Mexican border and launched a program to photograph every license plate of vehicles that cross the border.

In Europe, Belgium recently forbade the wearing of the veil in public places. Switzerland has banned the minaret and launched a program to photograph every license plate of vehicles that cross the border. In Europe, Belgium recently forbade the wearing of the veil in public places. Switzerland has banned the minaret and launched a program to photograph every license plate of vehicles that cross the border.

In short, immigration is, as the French say, à l’ordre du jour. The Euro-American world is preoccupied—if not obsessed—with the foreigners at its borders and within. In the current political imaginary, the former cold war polarization between “democracy” and “communism” has been replaced by the flexible, global opposition between “democracy” and “terrorism” in which any individual or group can make the film Children of Men look more like a work of social realism than science fiction.
be identified as a “security threat.” Immigrants are precisely such a group: a threat to homeland security, a threat to job security, a threat to the security of values, a threat to “who we are as a people,” etc.

Securitarian Logic
This obsession with security has produced a perverted logic of inevitable intensification that is readily visible in the case of immigration. The first sign of this perverted logic of securitarianism is that there is a double bind in which the possibility of reducing security measures is foreclosed. There are two possibilities: either the perceived problems increase such as in the case of greater illegal immigration, or they decrease. If they increase, than this is taken as a sign that more security measures are needed such as more unmanned Predator drones on the border. If they decrease, then this is taken as proof that the security measures are working and, therefore, they need to be maintained or increased (to augment their proven efficacy). Regardless of the situation, then, the same or more security measures are always necessary. The reduction of security measures is a structural impossibility.

It is worth noting that, as Barry Glassner has demonstrated in *The Culture of Fear*, media hype and “public” dismay are rarely correlated with factual threats. In fact, it is often the opposite, with fear of rape, murder, etc. increasing precisely at times when the real rape and murder rate are decreasing. It is important to emphasize, therefore, that the perceived threat—constructed through media hype, political jockeying and a manipulative punditocracy—is more important than the “real threat.” Secondly, the double bind logic of securitarianism that excludes the possibility of reducing security measures is a structural impossibility.

This reveals the deep complicity between securitarianism and the commercialization of the security industry. For there are at least two parties that benefit from this perverted logic of security: the private companies that are increasingly in charge of policing the world (Blackwater, now Xe, is of course the most infamous) and the governmental forces whose strategic interests benefit from diversionary tactics. Securitarianism therefore goes hand in hand with the privatization of the military and secret service, as well as with the neo-liberal agenda of the Washington consensus for it serves to distract from the lack of fundamental social services in this country by locating the threat elsewhere.

Solving the “Immigration Problem”
The attempt to “solve” the “immigration problem” through increased securitarianism is not only inefficient, measures will inevitably, over time, lead to increased security measures. Given that the perceived threat will increase at some point in time based on sheer probability (not to mention the manipulation of public sentiment by the powers that be, such as was illustrated by Dick Cheney’s fiendish exploitation of the color-coded terror threats), security measures are destined to increase with time.
In Praise of Vain Gestures – Roberto Bolano’s Antwerp

A peculiar fact about termitetape-worm-junguss moss- art is that it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, he led culture not, is not, leaving nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unimpertinent activity. The most inclusive description of the art is that, termite-like, it feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than what he is physically eating. It suggests the processes of reading art, and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement.

The best examples of termite art appear in places where the spotlight of culture is nowhere to be found, in the absence of evidence, so that the craftsmen can be ornery, wasteful, stubbornly self-involved, doing go-for-broke art and not caring what comes of it.

- from Manny Farber’s manifesto “White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art”

“The scorn I felt for so-called official literature was great, though only a little greater than the scorn I felt for marginal literature. But I believed in literature: or rather, I didn’t believe in arrivisme or any version of the philosophy of impertinence, and I did believe in vain gestures, I did believe in fate.”

- from “Total Anarchy: Twenty-Two Years Later”, Bolano’s introduction to _Antwerp_.

The only novel that doesn’t embarrass me is _Antwerp_. So says Roberto Bolano in the quote on the back cover of his novel _Antwerp_. As anyone interested in literature knows, Bolano has by now been as widely acclaimed as any writer in recent times, and he is the rarest kind of cultural/ literary phenomenon – one whose work actually merits the wild enthusiasm heaped upon it. So the quote could at first glance seem disingenuous, especially after reading _Antwerp_, which no one in his right mind could prefer over _2666_ and _The Savage Detectives_, the two Bolano novels that have deservedly been the focus of the most praise. However, it is worth remembering Bolano’s ambivalent relationship to the notion of the writer as cultural hero, as well as his highly critical view of culture in general and literary culture in particular. It is perhaps not hard to imagine why _Antwerp_ is the only one of Bolano’s novels that doesn’t embarrass him – because it is hardly a novel at all, and certainly not one at risk of becoming a cultural phenomenon. This reversal of the usual shame over the relationship of a flawed early attempt to later more acclaimed achievements is indicative of an important aspect of Bolano’s writing. The novel is the first English translation of _Antwerp_, which was written in 1980 but not published in Spanish until 2002, shortly before Bolano’s death, provides occasion to pause and consider this element of Bolano’s work.

One of the most unique and admirable qualities of Bolano’s novels is his lack of reverence for literature. This is not to be mistaken for a lack of love for literature, nor a lack of belief in its possibilities, but Bolano understands all the ways literature can lose one astray or corrupt one, including itself, all these ways its supposedly noble intentions can unfold into self-justifications and corroborations with forces of oppression and mediocrity and collective, culturally-sanctified insanity. Bolano’s consistent twin subjects are the end of literature and the salvation of literature. For him the only literature that’s still conceivable is either one that catalogues all the ways literature has gone and can go wrong (as in _Nazi Literature in the Americas_ and _By Night in Chile_), or one that catalogues the ways one can delineate oneself or go wrong, which locate the existence of true literature outside of literature (as is _The Savage Detectives_, a book about poets whose poems we never see, in search of a mythic poet who wrote one non-poem/poem composed of squiggled lines and shapes). We could see Bolano’s approach as

If we are truly interested in a secure world for all rather than the manipulation of security interests for the perpetuation of privatized industries and the neoliberal consolidation of wealth, then we should abandon the system that is at the heart of the “immigration problem”: the neo-liberal system that has concentrated the majority of the wealth of the world in the hands of a very few and made a few select “lands of prosperity” in the sea of desert poverty where the global work force is restrained. Rather than blaming the victims for attempting to individually overcome the global disparities they have inherited, we should attack the structures that are at the source of these disparities. While working for the material reversal of the systematic perpetuation of global inequality, we should declare our solidarity with the victims for attempting to individually move into the realm of “so-called official literature” and culture.

Using Manny Farber’s distinction between “termite art” (as described above), and “white elephant art”, the term he used for the outdated concept of the masterpiece in European art, we could say that Bolano is a born termite-artist who later seemed to move, however reluctantly, toward the white elephant realm with his two epoch-defining tomes, _The Savage Detectives_ and _2666_. And yet even in these his termite inclinations remained present—is it not, after all, his two long experimental novels, _The Savage Detectives_ and _2666_, but also over a dozen shorter novels and many short stories). Only in middle age, in the shadow of imminent death and under the inescapable burden of the responsibility of fatherhood was Bolano able to force himself to move into the realm of “so-called official literature” and culture.

One of the most unique and admirable qualities of Bolano’s novels is his lack of reverence for literature. This is not to be mistaken for a lack of love for literature, nor a lack of belief in its possibilities, but Bolano understands all the ways literature can lose one astray or corrupt one, including itself, all these ways its supposedly noble intentions can unfold into self-justifications and corroborations with forces of oppression and mediocrity and collective, culturally-sanctified insanity. Bolano’s consistent twin subjects are the end of literature and the salvation of literature. For him the only literature that’s still conceivable is either one that catalogues all the ways literature has gone and can go wrong (as in _Nazi Literature in the Americas_ and _By Night in Chile_), or one that catalogues the ways one can delineate oneself or go wrong, which locate the existence of true literature outside of literature (as is _The Savage Detectives_, a book about poets whose poems we never see, in search of a mythic poet who wrote one non-poem/poem composed of squiggled lines and shapes). We could see Bolano’s approach as...