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The Matter of Recognition

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Flora, 2017 gives a material substance and a form to the experience of recognition but is only partly concerned with recognition in the conventional art historical sense. Hubbard and Birchler are interested in the forces that shape the construction of biographies, the making of canons, and the acknowledgement of made things as artworks. But they are equally attentive to more ordinary ongoing acts of recognition that are integral and essential to the formation of social bonds, and to the construction of the self as a coherent and stable entity. In their work, it is matter – whether encountered in the form of sculptures, diaries, letters, photographs or costumes, props, sets and actors' bodies – that enables a powerful and public act of recognition, which resonates beyond the limit of a human lifetime. Some of these material things are encountered first hand within the exhibition space, as is the case with the photographic and sculptural components that constitute *Bust*, 2017. But others can only be grasped through imagination and observation, since they belong to the dual screen worlds of *Flora*, which are carefully separated from each other in time and space, and constructed using techniques drawn either from drama or from documentary. All of these material things, whether experienced or imagined, work together to produce a conduit in time and space that is both conceptually impossible and physically palpable.

Flora was conceived for *Women of Venice*, an exhibition curated by Philipp Kaiser that takes its title from a sculptural group by Alberto Giacometti, shown in the French pavilion in the Giardini della Biennale in 1956. This was the only time that the Swiss-born artist ever agreed to participate in a national representation; Giacometti refused repeated invitations to present his work in the Swiss pavilion, even though the building was designed by his own brother Bruno. While researching this history of absence and refusal, Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler encountered a photograph in James Lord's biography of Giacometti¹, depicting the latter with a US artist identified as Flora Mayo. The two are known to have studied at the same Paris art school, the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, and they were

lovers during the mid 1920s through the early 1930s. The photograph shows them seated on either side of a bust of Giacometti's head, sculpted by Mayo. This image, which exists now only as a reproduction, provides the most tangible evidence of Flora Mayo's output as an artist. Yet in commenting upon this image, Lord largely ignores Mayo's own history and identity as an artist and reads the photograph as documentary evidence of her devotion to Giacometti. He also claims to see "something weak" in her facial expression, which he interprets as a portent of her difficult future; "it must have been apparent even then that she was one of those destined to be destroyed by circumstances"². Lord issues his dismissal casually, but with certainty, as though performing an act of expert recognition.

This photograph, and Lord's fleeting reference to Mayo prompted Hubbard and Birchler to look further, leading them to research her life in France and in the US. They made contact with her only remaining descendant, her son David, now in his eighties. Using letters, photographs and other materials in David's possession to reconstruct events from her past, they built a replica of Flora's Paris studio and dramatized scenes from her life. Performed by costumed actors, and presented in black and white, the dramatization centers upon her daily routine and the pragmatic challenges involved in making art, often overlooked in fictional depictions of the artist's studio. So Flora is depicted chopping wood for fuel, and preparing clay, as well as in the act of sculpting, with Giacometti sitting quietly in the background in the role of a model.

Other scenes of the couple, and of Flora alone, are more self-consciously melodramatic. She and her lover dance to jazz records, drink wine and embrace, and later she weeps in frustration and despair. We hear, as well as see, her laughing, so her body appears to have substance, but there is no synchronized speech. Instead, Flora's off-screen voiceover frames these moments as fragments, both precious and painful. It is her voiceover that reveals the complexity of her relationship with Giacometti, an artist who was, for a short time at least, her peer as well as her lover. She even recalls buying one of his sculptures, in order to encourage and support him, explaining that she returned this work to him when she had to give up her own studio, and leave Paris. There is also a significant moment in Flora's story when the black and white footage changes to color, and the dramatization gives way to an

extreme close-up of *Tête de femme (Flora Mayo)*, a sculpture by Giacometti. As it turns slowly in front of the camera, the back of this object discloses a fingerprint that, prior to the making of *Flora*, had escaped recognition.

Flora's story is presented on the reverse of a large sculptural hanging screen. Unfolding on the front of this screen is a documentary interview with David, shot and presented in color. The two projections share a common soundtrack, which emanates partly from audio speakers located inside the hanging structure. Crucially, while the voiceover of 'Flora' seems to come from a place that is never fully localized, David frequently speaks directly into the camera. We see him in his own home, filled with material things – both mundane and precious – accumulated over time. The lines upon his expressive face and hands, framed in tight close-ups, offer further evidence of a long and relatively ordinary life. At one point, he stands amongst a pile of boxes filled with dusty Christmas decorations. Elsewhere, his hands turn the pages of a tiny address book, bearing the names of the many Paris streets through which his mother once walked.

David expresses a deep sympathy for his mother and all that she suffered. But he is also fiercely proud of her. Although his account is rooted in his knowledge of family history, he is at pains to situate Flora's life within the context of wider economic and social forces. Born into a home of wealth and privilege in Denver, she was encouraged to marry a man that her parents deemed suitable. Soon, however, Flora left her husband and young daughter in the family home, departing for New York and then Paris, motivated by the certainty that she was an artist. Initially, she received financial assistance from her parents, primarily because they were keen to keep her at a respectable distance. But when the family fortune was depleted during the Depression, she was left in poverty. Aided by a charity, Flora reluctantly returned to the US. She never regained custody of her daughter, but had a second child – David – and dutifully supported them both by taking on a series of menial jobs, until her son reached adulthood. She also battled with periods of depression and David's own ambition to attend university was thwarted when she became ill. Following her recovery, Flora briefly attempted to resume her old life in Paris but was forced to accept that the world she had left behind in 1933 no longer existed, and so she returned again to the US.

David acknowledges that Flora lived the latter part of her life in relative solitude, but he sees this as a choice. He adamantly rejects James Lord's reading of her as 'weak', emphasizing her determination to survive hardship for the sake of her child: "It's true that she was just getting by, but it's also very true that James Lord is ignoring that fortitude, that strength, when she lost everything."³ The 'Flora' we hear in voiceover seems, however, to imply that her fate could have been, to some extent, predetermined. In her very first utterance, she recalls being compared to a tragic heroine: "Did you know I'm supposed to have a Russian soul? I was told I could have stepped out of *The Cherry Orchard*".⁴ A quote from Anton Chekhov's play also appears on screen: "My love is like a stone tied round my neck; it's dragging me down to the bottom. But I love my stone. I can't live without it". At the same moment, a different quote from *The Cherry Orchard* appears on David's side of the screen: "Fate tosses you about from place to place". All of these words, like the music that forms part of the soundtrack, belong to an emotional register more familiar in literature and theatre than contemporary art.

Flora is an exploration of a relationship between a mother and her son, but Hubbard and Birchler are also deeply sensitive to the attachments that exist between humans and material things. David's story is bookended by sequences filmed in Paris and in Zurich, both featuring the sculpture of Flora made by Giacometti. First, we see art workers in a Paris workshop using sharp tools to make a bespoke surround for this treasured object, carving and shaping foam material to protect it for transport. We hear 'Flora', speaking from some imagined past or future, recalling her experience of standing with Giacometti, looking at this head. She then describes hearing, on some other occasion, that "Alberto had also painted the head and carved into my face using his pocket knife". In the closing moments, the camera follows David as he moves through an exhibition of Giacometti's work in Kunsthaus Zurich, coming face to face with the sculpture of his mother. As though echoing Flora's (mis)recognition of the object as her 'face', he states "This is my Mom, my mother."

David's words suggest a desire for some kind of closure, but in the final shot he is pictured at a remove from the sculpture sitting on a gallery bench, his expression unreadable. emotional toll. These images are accompanied by a voice that speaks from a wholly different place and time, as 'Flora' recalls how she sometimes struggled to accept her own

finished work, and was even filled with a kind of hatred for art. Her feelings, although difficult to manage, did not isolate her from Giacometti. Instead, he identified her experience as something familiar, which he shared. Giacometti seems to have functioned for Flora as a kind of ideal mirror, reflecting a version of herself that she valued: "Alberto recognized something in me, which I only very rarely recognized in myself." The objects made by Flora, through which she sought to manifest that part of her she valued most, were lost (to her and to others) when she was forced to leave Paris. In both *Flora* and *Bust*, Hubbard and Birchler acknowledge and materialize this loss through a process of reconstruction that calls attention to its own operations. *Bust* consists of a framed copy of the studio photograph reproduced in Lord's book, and a three dimensional reconstruction of Mayo's sculpture, cast in brass. The lengthy full title of this work is a record of its complex provenance: *Original clay bust portrait of Alberto Giacometti by Flora Mayo, lost. Reconstructed and cast in brass.* *Flora* and *Bust* are inextricably linked, because the clay model used in the making of the brass sculpture doubles as a prop in the studio scenes, so that the installation functions as a material extension of the image in Lord's book.

In *Flora*, Hubbard and Birchler approach the screen as an object rather than surface. For this reason, it is possible to draw a parallel with Michael Snow's *Two Sides to Every Story*, 1974, in which two films are projected onto each side of a metal sheet, suspended in the center of the room. The screen, which can be viewed from the side as well as head on,⁵ creates a physical separation between shots that might conventionally be edited together. *Two Sides to Every Story* clearly forms part of Snow's broader exploration of the cinematic apparatus, and it should be noted that the positions assigned to the projectors correspond directly to those of the cameras used to shoot each 'side'. *Flora* is equally marked by an emphasis on separation, but the sound that emanates (partly) from the screen in Hubbard and Birchler's work exerts an affective force that is largely absent from Snow's work. A closer connection arguably exists between *Flora* and *Hors-champs*, 1992, by Stan Douglas. Shot in Paris, *Hors-champs* presents two versions of a 'free jazz' performance by four musicians projected onto the front and reverse of a suspended screen, with a shared soundtrack. The costuming, the architecture of the studio setting, and the black and white camerawork are all intended to mimic the style of a 1960s French television show. One of the projections is edited to closely match this historically-specific broadcast context and the shots tend to emphasize solo

performance at the expense of the interplay between the musicians. The reverse side, composed of details not included in the 'broadcast' edit, shows the musicians listening, waiting, and thinking, as well as playing. Through this structure, Douglas explores not the televisual construction of jazz performance at a specific moment in time but also the ongoing processes through which certain forms of culture are positioned 'out of field'.

Finally, Clemens von Wedemeyer's *Muster*, 2012, a three-channel HD film installation with a common soundtrack,⁶ also seems relevant primarily because it uses a multi-channel structure to explore the forces shaping the formation of history. While *Two Sides to Every Story* and *Hors-champ* both offer dual vantage points on a single event, *Muster* consists of three distinct storylines, unfolding at different moments within a specific place. This place is Breitenau, a German medieval monastery complex that has functioned as a site of incarceration as well as worship for many centuries. Von Wedemeyer imagines Breitenau as a kind of temporal portal, and his characters occasionally slip from one timeline to another. Such devices are widely used in science fiction and fantasy narratives. But in *Muster*, these slippages in time are not motivated by the desires and dilemmas of characters. Instead, Breitenau is cast as the central protagonist in the narrative. Occupants and visitors come and go. But the structure itself persists in time, not unlike the (far more benign) material things that help to correct a historical narrative, and repair a relationship, in *Flora*.

At the Venice Biennale, where moving image installations sometimes struggle to engage distracted visitors for more than a few moments, Hubbard and Birchler's work seemed to cast a spell. Bodies entered the darkened interior, arranging themselves carefully and quietly on the benches and floor, on both sides of the hanging screen. Many people followed each story to its full conclusion, and so experienced the shared soundtrack at least twice. Familiarity with the structure of this work does not break its spell. The shared soundtrack gives substance and weight to the bodies and objects imaged on both screens, and the audience is drawn bodily into the 'audiovisual illusion' that Michel Chion identifies as a characteristic of synchronized sound in cinema. Chion emphasizes "the expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image so as to create the definite impression, [whether] in the immediate or remembered experience one has of it, that this

information or expression “naturally” comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself”.⁷

Audiovisual illusion, according to Chion, “gives the impression that sound is unnecessary, that sound merely duplicates a meaning which in reality it brings about, either all on its own or by discrepancies between it and the image”.⁸ He is fascinated by *synchresis*, which is the “forging of an immediate and necessary relationship between something one sees and something one hears. Most falls, blows, and explosions on the screen, simulated to some extent or created from the impact of nonresistant materials, only take on consistency and materiality through sound”.⁹ Chion also observes that, in the era of silent cinema, it was relatively easy to stretch and contract time, and he suggests that a degree of temporal flexibility has been preserved in the action sequences of the sound era. Time can expand or slow in action sequence, if they include “strong points of synchronization”.¹⁰

The sharp crack of an axe’s blade, as it splits a small wooden log, offers the most dramatic example of synchronization in *Flora*. At another moment, a crackle can be heard (or perhaps it is imagined) when a gramophone needle touches the spinning surface of a record. These sounds are, however, synchronized only to the images in Flora’s story. As such, they should have a distracting or dislocating effect for viewers of David’s story. But this does not happen. Instead, the audience participates wholly in the work of *synchresis*, assembling a cohesive entity from fragments. For Chion, the “irresistible weld” that is formed between sound and image, when they seem to occur at the same moment in time exists “beyond rational logic”.¹¹ The body of ‘Flora’ is itself the product of fragments. On screen, she breathes, laughs, even weeps. Her body seems alive to the surfaces and textures of the things that surround her. She pulls a coat with a soft fur collar tightly around her shoulders, grasps the dark matter of wet clay, and rolls the soft flesh of shelled eggs between her fingers. She is a fleshy being, deeply immersed in the material world. Flora’s words do not, however, belong to this material world because the voiceover that communicates her interior life is performed by another actor, and it emanates from a different space and time.

Yet even when ‘Flora’ is recognized as a construct, Hubbard and Birchler’s work does not lose any of its affective power. According to Jane Bennett, affect is forcefully bound to

materiality. Crucially, however, Bennett observes no specific hierarchy of matter. She recognizes the affective capacities of “organic and inorganic bodies, natural and cultural objects”¹² and seeks to understand the “nonhuman, thingly power, the material agency of natural bodies [as well as] technological artifacts”.¹³ In *Flora* and in *Bust*, natural and constructed bodies are drawn into close proximity and material things manifest their agency in the process of reconstructing something precious. Hubbard and Birchler’s work lays bare the mechanisms of its own construction, both revealing and relying upon the audience’s desire to forge a relationship between sound and image, even in defiance of logic. The affective force of the uncanny join that *Flora* creates in time and space cannot be fully explained and yet it remains undeniable, demanding recognition.

¹ James Lord: *Giacometti: A Biography*, New York 1985.

² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

³ Quote of Flora’s son David in Hubbard’s / Birchler’s film *Flora*.

⁴ In her letters, Flora mentions being compared by others to Madame Ranevesky in *The Cherry Orchard*. Anton Chekhov’s character is an heiress who, at the start of the play, returns to her homeland Russia from Paris, where she has been living in self-imposed exile since the death of her young son.

⁵ Kate Mondloch makes this point in her analysis of Michael Snow’s work in *Body and Screen: The Architecture of Screen Spectatorship*, in: *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art*, Minneapolis and London 2010, pp. 12–18.

⁶ I discuss this aspect of *Muster* more fully in Maeve Connolly, *TV Museum: Contemporary Art and the Age of Television*, Bristol and Chicago 2014, p. 253.

⁷ Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, translated by Claudia Gorbman, New York 1994. p. 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham 2010, p. xii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.