



## Erika Vogt's *Secret Traveler Navigator*

By Juli Carson

*A specter is haunting the cinema: the specter of narrative. If that apparition is an Angel, we must embrace it; and if it is a Devil, then we must cast it out. But we cannot know what it is until we have met it face to face.*

*It is precisely universal gravitation that makes the skills of the acrobat or aerialist both possible and meaningful. The levitation of our dreams confirms the gravity of our wakefulness.<sup>1</sup>*

– Hollis Frampton

In 1970, the experimental filmmaker Hollis Frampton imagined an avant-garde universe where narrative storytelling was the center of gravity. Like the aerialist or dreamer of flight, the artist was defined by the very gravity s/he was determined to resist. Narrative lurked on every avant-garde corner. Even in Tony Conrad's abstract film *The Flicker*, it was axiomatically inevitable. Drawing on mathematical logic, Frampton saw narrative as a type of axiom – or self-evident truth – upon which other abstract truths could be deduced or inferred. Such was the task of the structuralist filmmaker. S/he had to wiggle *through* the cosmic polyhedron of storytelling in order to enter the critical realm of abstraction. Plotting a course through this and various other avant-garde practices, Vogt's *Secret Traveler Navigator* intentionally defies dialectical logic. A story with no “narrative arc” – no beginning, middle or end – the work follows a psychoanalytic logic, defined by metonymic associations and chronological reversals. Like a rebus, *Secret Traveler Navigator* is at once enigmatic and structured, suspending the aged old opposition between poetic and analytic aesthetics. In so doing, Vogt's engagement with abstract poetics instances an acute historical *consciousness* – formalism no longer being cast as the dialectical other of the *real*.

First, a key literary precedent. Dialectical suspension was the modus operandi of Roland Barthes's biography of nineteenth-century French historian Jules Michelet, a quintessential tactic given that Michelet was an historian personally provoked by the horror of narrated history. As would increasingly be his signature in such books as *A Lover's Discourse*, Barthes' biography transgresses the boundary between the subjective and objective worlds, a categorical distinction that conventionally defines the historian and philosopher alike. Barthes instead connects Michelet's existential crises – migraines initiated

by historical events – to the task of writing history. In the process, “history” figures as a landscape that Michelet, the historian-traveler, works arduously to conquer. “Landscape surrounds, presses in, threatens, invades – one must force one's way through it, and not only with the eyes but by muscles and patience: whence its beauty and its terror.”<sup>2</sup> Michelet wades through history's landscape, a journey that physically affects him. The traditional historian-traveler, to the contrary, *observes* history from a disembodied eye and conjures a detached meta-narrative. For Barthes, Michelet's historicism alternates between these two axes:

*Consider how he progresses in his fourteenth century; he advances, he narrates, he adds the years to the years, the facts to the facts, in short he rows, blind and stubborn as a long-distance swimmer; and then, all of a sudden, without any warning, he encounters the figure of the peasant Jacques, standing on his plowed field: profound astonishment, even trauma, then emotion, euphoria of the traveler who, caught short, stops, sees, and understands; a second level of history, this one entirely panoramic, consisting of intellection, is revealed: the historian shifts, for a while, from labor to Festivity.<sup>3</sup>*

Two worlds, one of physical labor the other panoramic retrospective – the subjective and the objective – merge in Michelet's universe. Here again, meta-narrative may be the gravitational pull insisting in the historian-traveler's itinerary, but it's one mediated by a kind of “existential tempo.” In *Secret Traveler Navigator* we embark on a like-minded journey through the landscape of various historical and neo-avant-garde aesthetics, with Michelet's existential tempo finding its equivalent in Vogt's “intuitive” approach to narrative structure.

*Secret Traveler Navigator* features a twelve-minute video – at once obtuse and hypnotic – in which episodic sequences feature silhouetted figures handling small (mostly industrial) objects in front of an abstract background of varying colors. The silhouette is the effect of an event. In her studio, Vogt and a companion performed the handling of these objects on either side of a screened back-projection of colored film leader and film transfers of RGB colors. Alternately, Vogt ran filmless projectors at multiple angles onto the same screen to create black and white backgrounds, against which the pair also performed. Because Vogt worked without a storyboard – that series of sequential illustrations filmmakers typically draw up to pre-visualize their narrative – she strung the scenes together in the order that they were filmed. Finally, a soundtrack was added that captured various

sounds from the staged event – the film projector, objects falling to the ground, silence

The ensuing installation, a version of which was featured in the 2010 Whitney Biennial, is an expedition to key avant-garde practices that are fading all too fast within the contemporary landscape. Most notably we encounter László Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, two innovators of what later became known as “structuralist” photography. Their respective photographic experiments resulted in the photogram, a process of producing an image without a camera. To make a photogram, you simply place an object onto a sheet of photographic paper and expose it to light. The result is a negative silhouette of that object. Quite often, the object placed on the paper was industrial, meant to reiterate the material base of photography's serial medium. Man Ray went so far as to place a roll of film on the light sensitive paper, producing a sort of visual pun. Unique to all photograms, the object's representation is inextricably bound up with the photographic process through which it was made. Which is to say, to read a photogram fully, to understand its signification, we need to psychically step back into the site of the photogram's production – when we get the *a ha* moment of recognizing the image's operation.

A fellow traveler of the structuralist tradition, Vogt's video is as much about *how* it was made, a staged projection within a projection, as it is about the silhouetted forms her video captures. First of all, the soundtrack – part of which captures the sound of a film projector spooling leader – directs us to the colored film backdrop captured within the video. This backdrop is redoubled in the form of the video image itself, generated from the silent video projector, in the exhibition space. The viewer, who can walk in front of the video projection, casting his or her shadow onto the projected image, is a stand-in for the silhouetted figures of the event *within* the video. This kinetic form of direct address literally calls the viewer *into* the picture. Vogt further expands the projection's frame outward, incorporating the exhibition space at large. Hand-sized objects related to the ones featured in the video – objects the viewers are encouraged to pick up – are hidden in the shadows of the room, periodically illuminated by the video projection when it is bright enough. As was the historical and neo-avant-gardes' signature, from Moholy Nagy to Tony Conrad, *Secret Traveler Navigator* is self-reflexive to the point of parody. But it is not

Cover: Erika Vogt, *Secret Traveler Navigator*, installation view  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2010  
Interior: *Secret Traveler Navigator* (detail)  
Images courtesy of Overduin and Kite, Los Angeles

tautological. This is where Vogt departs from the historical avant-garde and pivots off Frampton's assertion that narrative has an axiomatic presence even in the most abstract, experimental film.

In fact, *Secret Traveler Navigator* does tell a story, even if the narrative ambiguously oscillates between the oblique and the tangible. Vogt explains: "I was thinking about the story as an active secret agent, as one part in an unfolding series of thought processes that included the rational and irrational, the emotive and the intellectual, as well as thinking about how one comes to knowledge or information."<sup>4</sup> A story that's an "active secret agent," one that can only be gleaned anamorphically, evokes the operation of the unconscious, as does the story's tendency to collapse dialectical categories. In psychoanalytic terms, this is what makes our own personal story – our true history – so illusive because much of it is locked in the (porous) vault of the unconscious. The story can still be told, but it is paradoxically found by looking awry, away from the "self." As Lacan would have it:

*The unconscious is that chapter of my history which is marked by a blank or occupied by falsehood: it is the censored chapter. But the truth can be found again: it is most often written down elsewhere: in monuments...archival documents...semantic evolution...traditions...and in traces.*<sup>5</sup>

We must note, therefore, that *Secret Traveler Navigator's* story is not that of Vogt's own unconscious. It's a story structured like the unconscious, the truth of which can be recovered in the various monuments, documents and traditions of the avant-garde.

This detour through the unconscious, therefore, doesn't veer us off-track from the avant-garde. Rather, we've stumbled onto Surrealism's legacy – a practice shunned by contiguous avant-gardes in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the surrealists' fascination with the irrational, the unconscious and concomitant *dreamwork*. According to Freud, a dream's manifest content, made up of recognizable objects and events, is presented to the dreamer in a nonlinear, seemingly irrational manner. Upon closer analysis, however, there's a latent structure to the dream and thus a "secret" meaning. Andre Breton, Surrealism's spokesman, famously translated Freud's notions into such art practices as automatic (or free associative) writing and strolling, in an attempt to eschew rational, realist story-telling. In surrealist film narratives – Louis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou* is a quintessential example – the story is structured like a dream, its scenes purposively disjointed and tenuously related. For instance, in *Un Chien Andalou* a thin cloud drifting across a full moon turns into a shaving blade slicing a woman's eye, books turn into guns, breasts into buttocks. As in a dream, the *details* of Buñuel's narrative may be tangible, but the *logic* of their mutual relation is purposefully oblique.

Incorporating surrealist strategies, Vogt's sequences were filmed as a series of free associations. First she would stage and film one event. This was intuitively followed by another, and so on and so forth. As in a dream, the final storyline is a coded rebus. Only through Vogt's production notes do we positively identify the performers' changing roles: Starter/Builder/Capitalist, Image Voyager/Spirit Inductor, Poorman, Narrator/Accountant and Traveler/Wayfarer/Helmsman. And yet, throughout the video the figures are as tangible as the objects that they grasp in their hands:

a crane from a toy truck, a weather vane, a conveyor belt, military tent stakes, weights, a compass, a scale. *And then, all of a sudden, without any warning, a voiceover repeats the phrase:*

*The narrator, a man of shimmering devices, has lost his way. To go back or forward?*

With this line, the viewer is momentarily given the hope of direction or narrative closure. It's not unlike the final moments in *Un Chien Andalou* when the musical score swells to a melodic resolve. But in both cases, should we take the bait, we are fooled. For the dreamscape returns, casting us back into a loop of free association.

We are once again on a rendezvous with Michelet's non-dialectical journey. In Vogt's video and installation, an event's latent meaning lies at the interstice between the spectator's body and eye, the emotive and cerebral and – specific to Vogt's case – aesthetic regression and progression. *To go back or forward?* In *Secret Traveler Navigator* this question is never resolved. Or perhaps it's just displaced. For Vogt's journey through avant-garde's landscape – from Structuralism to Surrealism – is neither a nostalgic trip *back* towards medium specificity nor a futurist step *forward* beyond tactical struggles with narrative. Rather, Vogt, as the artist-traveler-navigator, *rows, blind and stubborn as a long-distance swimmer*, through various avant-garde traditions, all the while transgressing their attendant polemics. Indeed, in *Secret Traveler Navigator's* the Devil-as-narrative *surrounds, presses in, threatens and invades* the story. But Vogt instinctively and tenaciously presses on in her pursuit of poetic abstraction – the pleasure of this journey being more aim than it is goal. Driven by an intellectual curiosity about the limitations of form and meaning, Vogt's pleasure thus lies in *perpetuating* a never-ending journey. This formal operation, this rehabilitation of avant-garde strategies, ultimately expresses historical consciousness, which, in turn, is a political act. In a contemporary landscape, where such analytically informed poetics are an endangered subject, those fellow travelers among us are enticed to join her.

- 1 Hollis Frampton, "A Pentagonagram for Conjuring the Narrative," *Avant-Garde Film*, P. Adams Sitney, ed., (Praeger Publishers, 1970).
- 2 Roland Barthes, *Michelet*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987), p. 22.
- 3 Ibid., p. 23.
- 4 "Erika Vogt in Conversation with Cecilia Alemani," *Mousse Magazine*, (September, 2010), <http://www.moussemagazine.it/index.mm>
- 5 Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, Anthony Wilden, trans., (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1981), p. 21.

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