

INSTALLATION/ INSTALLMENT

» BRIAN GRAHAM

I have had a strong resistance to theories of the sentencing machine as a metaphor for ‘the writing process’ in Kafka, but the way of discussing this and presenting it in the installation certainly differs from views in which ‘the world’ disappears and writing and torment become the whole issue. In the installation and writing on it, the machine has secrets and Kafka has secrets, and ‘reading the world as if the world were himself’ is bound to produce torment within. There is a psychoanalytic element that I perhaps do not understand. That the story exposes the secret of the machine, ‘the ecstasy of the impersonal’—that I am sure I do understand. In the Benjamin essay cited, “Conversations with Brecht,” Brecht also accused Kafka of being a petty-bourgeois with a desire for a leader. Yet in the performance-installation and notes, it is abundantly clear that both the identification with the machine and the identification with the leader are the property of the officer, however instructive the strong point the installation makes of the story’s relation to the machines Kafka knew, worked with, and depicted.

Zaslove calls it a Brechtian (in part) staging, and I have long felt that Kafka is more ‘Brechtian’ than B.B. himself could have known. Perhaps it was the Lao Tzu style of aphorisms that misled Brecht. The notion of “The Way.” It makes me think of the short story “Give it Up”. The man has to ask a policeman the way to the station. “You asking me the way?” the policeman says. You know the story. In any case, the

policeman knows that it is no use asking a policeman “or any other authority” the way. By definition the authorities have given up long ago. So this petty authority can have his little laugh. In Kafka, all those who have ‘given up’ and become authorities have a great stake in protecting the system they have given in to. All except this one policeman, who is satisfied to tell the man to ‘give it up,’ and can turn away “like someone who wants to be alone with his laughter.” Follow the leaders, Kafka certainly did; he felt summoned to create in this void (or silence) where authority ruled. The “command”: “The machine has a secret memory function that transforms a command into a life of writing....” I won’t pretend that I can pry open Zaslove’s words (which have his own stamp on them as much as Kafka’s his) but Kafka was commanded to give a kind of ‘memory’ to the (otherwise) “silent” place of the inhuman apparatuses. It is scandalous, what the explorer/reader has to witness; a transgression to be there. And that is what I think the installation is reconstructing; a kind of silent transgressive act within Kafka’s imaginative and real world. I thought of another penal colony story after being in the room: *Narrative Of The Life Of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Reading this story, I could confidently say Kafka knew it; he was clearly aware of documents of American slavery. However, unlike Douglass’ narrative, which invites the reader to identify with (or at least share the horrors of) the victim(s), in Kafka’s story we must suffer the convictions of the perpetrator(s). I know the warning against interpreting the stories as the individual against the world, but seeing ‘world’ as the place where ‘individual’ is not permitted to be, is not the same. If Kafka conforms to the world, it is only by imagining and depicting it. ‘Literacy’ as being in the very place you are not supposed to be. Inside the place where (to paraphrase Zaslove in another context) “the apparatus becomes the subject ... and takes

upon itself an independent existence.”¹ By picturing the convictions of those who have already given in to domination, by giving form to their identifications, a space can be preserved that imagines a person who is not dominated. That person can not be found inside the stories. But I tend to read the stories as what the author has overcome, and ‘world’ not as world *per se*, but dominating world. Many images and scenes from Kafka are engraved into me; sometimes one image appears to jump from one story to the other (in the mind’s eye). Robinson’s stream of vomit into the elevator shaft, while reading *In the Penal Colony*—or the empty file folder with the name “surveyor” written on it in blue. In this scene of course, the Chairman is the perfect complement of the penal colony Officer; for him the “excellence of the organization” is as inviolable as the perfection of the machine is to the Officer. As Zaslove says, the motifs repeat themselves. Perhaps this is one of the reasons behind the idea for an installation that ranged from the comic to the horrible. Now I’m trying to re-picture it, was the battery connected to the ‘gonads’ of the Austro-Hungarian officer, the one standing next to the beds, attached to the beds as well? Must have been. When I look into historical texts, and learn about how German Jews were stripped of citizenship “for their protection” and see the beginning of “extra-judicial” killings for the protection of the state by the supreme judge, I find in documents what Kafka already knew in probing them.



Kafka's Father's Fancy Goods Store ("Galanteriewaren"),
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Berlin.

1 "One Way Street: The Production of Literate Culture—The Legacy of Formalism and the Dilemma of Bureaucratic Literacy," in *Quaderno: Filosofia E Scienza Sociali, Nuove Perpetive*, ed. Michele Schiavone, Genoa, 1985, 164.