

# THE CRITICS CURATORS ARTISTS

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# WORKSHOP



## ABOUT

*Me, I always regarded cinema as greater than I. JLG/JLG is an attempt to see what cinema can do with me, not what I can do with it.*<sup>1</sup>

Me, I, Godard, he, identifies cinema, as an agent who creates by means of the artist. In this formation Cinema does something *with* the artist or *through* the artist. Thus the artist's authorship is always triangulated by way of medium (which for Godard is intensive, historical, vast.) In structuring our workshop *about* the "Artist Talk" my primary interest was in the institutional drive to have the artist publicly testify *about* their work. Under what conditions does it appear desirable or even possible that the artist should talk *about* their work? Is this a desire to trace backwards the making of the work to extract ontological assurances from the artist, which serve to interpolate between object and audience? It's obvious that the artist's talk masks, or pretends to settle, some very unsettled relations between the artwork, the artist, their speech, their authorship and artistic intention. *Rotterdam Dialogues: The Artists* was searching for a form by which to reframe the taken for granted suture between artist and art. The assignment presented to panel participants by the *Dialogues* was to speak on a topic, but not necessarily about one's art, and without the use of any visuals. The range of panel topics suggested discussions of History, Truth, Power. It seemed that the artist should talk about everything, *except* their art. In not wanting to replicate the status quo – an artist clicking through slides in a dark room to a silent audience – this structure more or less preserved a central motif: We believe that the artist should talk. In the pages that follow, the artists who participated in the workshop respond (some time after the event) with images, keeping in mind that words can also image.

This talking artist is an active agent of some yet to be determined type. In the workshop, the most salient text we discussed was Kaja Silverman's "The Author as Receiver." In her title and in her text Silverman references the influence of Brecht's model of the artist as *producer*. In this model the artist is conceived of as a non-alienated laborer whose efforts can be aligned

with the working class and the role of audience is one of active engagement rather than passive consumption. Although deeply influenced by this Brechtian construct Silverman contends that, in his work of 1994 *JLG/JLG*, Godard carries out a "radical reconceptualization of authorship" through the idea of the artist as "receiver."<sup>2</sup> Silverman writes about the film as a self-portrait in which the author attempts to erase himself. Godard comes to think of himself, like film emulsion, as one who "receives" and thereby calls into question the causal chain of artistic activity by which social engagement is equated with the "active" agent. She quotes Godard from a 1983 interview, "I am a person who likes to receive," he says there, "the camera, for me, cannot be a rifle, since it is not an instrument that sends out but an instrument that receives. And it receives with the aid of light."<sup>3</sup> According to Silverman, Godard tries to formulate an active receptivity: "he attempts to become himself not merely the blank page where the world writes itself and the receptacle housing sensory data, but also the reflecting surface that allows others to see what has been written."<sup>4</sup>

This artist-receiver's talk is implicitly engaged in a different power dynamic, one in which what has been "done with," perceived or reflected by the artist must be accounted for as much as, what the artist intended or produced through action or analysis. In a voiceover for *JLG/JLG*, quoted by Silverman, Godard describes his artist's talk thus: "In speaking, I throw myself into an unknown, foreign land, and I become responsible for it. I have to be come universal."<sup>5</sup> Given Godard's plays at Brechtian theatics, we might think he's being ironic here, but he is seriously considering the concept of universality as a parallax displacement of the artist as a causal agent. Through Godard's quoting of Mallarmé, Silverman aligns their notions of the "universal" as that which *posses* us, rather than the universal as a set of shared traits or a totalized "humanity" which we posses. I relate this to Jacques Rancière's "good inhuman" – that kernel of otherness inside us which we luckily cannot tame or dominate, but which possesses us.

We shift from talking *about* to talking in tongues. The artist's sensation of infiltration, or possession, seems

1.— Jean Luc Godard, quoted in Kaja Silverman, "Author as Receiver," October 96, ISpring, 2001: 14, 17-34.

2.— Ibid, 27.

3.— Ibid, 17.

4.— Ibid, 30.

5.— Ibid, 24.



most interesting to me if it avoids the conventional (pseudo religious) notions of artist as a vessel, and rather, as in the case of poet Jack Spicer, takes on the idea of the artist as a device, a radio-like receiver/amplifier/translator of spectral (but not divine) transmissions. Jack Spicer (1925-1965) was a remarkable, irritable, and early to die San Francisco poet, who credited his later works to a poetics of dictation.

Jared White explains: "...it is not exactly a misrepresentation for Spicer to label his own poems 'translations,' since his entire project depends upon envisioning the poet as not exactly the creator of his poetry, but rather a passive listener to the poems' active music, taking dictation upon their arrival. The mysterious, magical source of poems remains in question, a worthy subject for speculation. In a series of lectures in Vancouver delivered shortly before his death, Spicer offered the most memorable narrative: poetry comes as radio signals 'from Mars.' [...] Mars delineates a proud, tender bunker of otherness, a space of alienation and exclusion from the normative project of being an earthling."<sup>6</sup>

How to account for artistic gestures that feel like *responses* not decisions? When an artist is asked to talk *about* their work, it is this fragile sensation, which is most easily talked over and erased by the speaking "I" and the organization of discourse into thematics and concepts. At times artists refuse to talk about their art, because the positivity of this talk occludes a fundamental unavailability from which the artist (paradoxically) draws. The clear subject-object relation proposed by the idea of "artists talking *about* their work" does not easily invite in the voices from Mars.

**Judy Radul**

6. — Jared White, "Jack Spicer on Mars," *Open Letters Monthly* (January 2009) available at <http://www.openlettersmonthly.com/january-2009-jack-spicer/>

