

SUZANNE MCCLELLAND speaks with GARRETT BRADLEY

Garrett Bradley: I'm glad we're talking about Mikhail Kalatozov's 1964 film, *Soy Cuba*. It's a visual masterpiece, and the story surrounding its production and distribution sparks a great dialogue about what it means to make a successful film.

Suzanne McClelland: Does your interest in it also have to do with the relationship between beauty and sociopolitical subject matter?

GB: Yes, I really appreciate the political narrative surrounding the film's making and reception. After the Cuban revolution, Cuba and the USSR agreed to give Kalatozov support for a film that would promote socialist ideology. I imagine they wanted something like Robert Flaherty's 1948 film *Louisiana Story*, which was funded by an oil company and tells the story of a poor Cajun family who strikes it rich after agreeing to get their land drilled. Flaherty's beautiful film was successful in promoting the agenda of his funders. This wasn't the case with Kalatozov. He made a stunning and technically innovative film, with the money and manpower of two governments, but *Soy Cuba* failed in the eyes of its funders and was pulled from USSR and Cuban theaters shortly after its release.

SM: Kalatozov did convey the message, wouldn't you agree? The camera shoots *from* the points of view of a range of Cuban characters rather than shooting *at* "the people." The American characters, "business" men who use Cuban nightclubs as playgrounds, are closely examined, and Kalatozov's empathy for the women who work in them is evident. Much of the dialogue is absorbed by the light and sound of the scenes, which may contribute to questions about "message."

GB: I think the narrative of an artist who is perceived of as a "failure" is interesting, and in this case there are many contributing factors.

SM: A work of art may fail, whether it's in a transparent way or in a

tedious way, a casual way or a heavy way. Overworked failure may be the result of not trusting the imagination. Can we switch the language from failure to *mis-take*? For me, when a plan or vision "fails" to deliver original intentions, the process may reveal subtext, which can be developed. There is some beauty when there is a rub between the hard facts and the delivery—a sensuality perhaps. Art is made in navigating between facts and perceptions. I don't recall hearing discussion around "success" much before Reagan and Thatcher changed the political landscape in 1980.

As a painter, I think hierarchy and ranking systems are problems because they control perceptions in predictable ways. I am drawn to abstraction in painting because it offers opportunity to search for flexible patterns of reading. There is no primary figure to lead the way in abstraction, nothing to reflect the viewer—entry and exit are optional and less fixed. What I find alarming today is the need for measurement: the "best of," the "top ten." It's an arbitrary notion—what is it based on? Our digits, our ten fingers? . . . These piles or lists appear everywhere from *Consumer Reports* to mainstream fashion and art magazines and blogs. They encourage "competition," which has little to do with making.

GB: In a sense, measurement can push a medium in a new direction, though. This happens when artists work together, offering individual assets, rather than when individual "talents" of artists are quantified. Being a maker of any kind presents challenges which are mental and material, and part of the process is navigating those challenges with each other. Experimentation based

on previously existing forms is how any art form evolves. What do you think? Is that how you approached Sigmar Polke's *Solutions*?

SM: I saw Sigmar Polke's 1967 painting *Solutions V* at the Brooklyn Museum in 1991, over twenty years ago, and it never left my memory bank. His painting is a list of equations delivered in a deadpan way, with no explanation, no struggle, no sign of desire, no obvious logic—really funny and open. The years 2011 and 2012 seemed like a good time to examine this work. I made a group of nine paintings about its parts, minus any promise of a unified whole. I double his solutions and use his equations to make new answers to his mathematical questions, but of course my formulas are "wrong" . . .

GB: In mathematics, there really is a correct answer.

SM: But there is a process of search that may be riddled with mistakes. Data is used to justify, predict, rate our physical bodies and their dimensions, strength, beauty, talent, potential success . . . Numbers display certain kinds of power. Perhaps it is part of creating identity or justification, it rationalizes people's experiences, it establishes who we are? I am wondering if it is an attempt to give comfort or satisfaction, stillness in some sense. I was speaking recently with Celia Lury, who writes so clearly about how people can put a lot of emotion and affect into numbers, and how numbers have a particular visibility at the moment. Celia proposes this in a 2012 issue of *Theory, Culture and Society* she coedited:

"We no longer live in or experience movement or transformation as the transmission of fixed forms in space and time but rather movement—organised in terms of ordering and continuity of transformation—*composes the forms of social life itself*. These dynamic, distinctively topological 'abstractions' emerge in practices of sorting, naming, numbering, comparing, and calculating. The effect of these practices is to

introduce new continuities into a discontinuous world, linked to the topological forms of lists, models, networks, clouds, fractals, and flows. There is a multiplication of relations of equivalence and difference and a radical expansion of the possibilities of establishing comparisons. Ordinal rankings and ratings, for example, are proliferating and increasing in importance not only in the economy but also in education, health, and popular culture, as they are used to derive and justify the allocation of resources. Such practices, we suggest, are changing how change itself is made legible.”

GB: When you bring formulas into a new realm, rules can change and the capacity for “success” can expand.

SM: I think that’s what I like about your film *Below Dreams*. You don’t quantify or judge the success of the three characters that you are following—they are not competing; you’re sharing their experiences as they share with you, so the exchange system is more horizontal than vertical. They live physically near each other but are isolated. They live with different sets of rules. You bring us inside their parallel worlds, and we experience their attempts to solve problems that are similar in content but very different in context. We witness their *mis-takes*, and solutions are outside of the camera frame. Your young generation is offering an alternative form of exchange, a step away from a ladder of “progress.” And you do this without the need for justification through quantification.

JM: I imagined how it would feel to play on a black court with a white ball; and out of my periphery, I would have lines and markers of space. I had the sense that I would be more conscious of my position within the court. When I looked at a photograph of this historic court, I sensed how it would make a player feel. The whole room is one court, and the room is irregular. I imagined playing between a high wall and a low wall. It’s like having one headphone on your ear; it makes your body feel uncentered. This court design was replicated hundreds of times for a reason: it isn’t too asymmetrical, but it is off enough that a player must have a constant sense of the space. This made me think that court tennis requires a certain cantilevered awareness rather than a centered mind, which I struggle to have in tennis. The idea that the light was coming from above and that I would be in black, submerged space seemed to fit.

JOSHUA MOSLEY speaks with PAUL CHAN and ROBERT FAHEY

Paul Chan: I didn’t know you play tennis, when did you start playing?

Joshua Mosley: I’ve played all of my life. I’m competitive, but I often find myself paying so much attention to the design of the courts, the light, and the sounds and movements of the game that I quickly lose track of the match. A few years ago, I came up with a way to concentrate on the game by counting down the twenty-four points needed to win the set, so that I could focus on what was left rather than play a game as if it were open-ended.

JM: I had often thought about Robert Rauschenberg’s performance from 1966 *Open Score*, which included an electroacoustic tennis rally between Mimi Kanarek and Frank Stella. I thought that I could let a game play itself out as an animation that would unfold in front of me day by day as I choreographed the points. I was looking forward to the idea of working on this slowly.

PC: Is the court that you’ve built proportionate to the modern court?

JM: No, I used the court from the older French sport *jeu de paume*, also called court tennis or real tennis. The court is elongated and asymmetrical in length and width. There are slanted penthouse roofs along three sides of it, above the viewing galleries, off of which the ball can be played.

PC: Which came first, the model or the moving image?

PC: Since the space is asymmetrical, it cannot be neutral in your mind; because of that, you can never fully escape into the game. That reminds me of the architects Arakawa and Madeline Gins, whose buildings have no right angles; they’re constructed so that you are constantly distracted and your mind is never stable, you are never grounded in any plane. The thinking is that if your cells cannot settle and they are constantly agitated, you will live forever. Unfortunately, Arakawa passed away a couple of years ago, which puts a damper on their vision, but it is a compelling image. So you developed a space, and then you developed the characters?

JM: For these two players, I read biographical descriptions of professional court-tennis players from 1890 to 1920, looking for figures who were isolated from the culture surrounding the sport. Something happens in the first couple of shots that defines how the puppets will be on-screen. I motion-capture the camera’s movement and then, using a robotic crane, scale it down to the size of the puppet. The puppet plays

PC: The way you describe paying attention to all elements of the game makes perfect sense to me. There has always been an almost perverse *democraticness* about your work. The surface on the leaf of a tree is as important as what-ever might be considered a plot. The vertiginous quality in what I have seen of your work is unique. It reminds me of what you just said about playing tennis. What were the elements that led you to making this new puppet animation, *Jeu de Paume*?