

10-5-2012

Re-Purposing the Elderly Body

Charlotte H. Wellman

Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, cwellman@edinboro.edu

Recommended Citation

Wellman, Charlotte H., "Re-Purposing the Elderly Body" (2012). *Mid-America College Art Association Conference 2012 Digital Publications*. Paper 15.

<http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/macaa2012scholarship/15>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mid-America College Art Association Conference at DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mid-America College Art Association Conference 2012 Digital Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

Charlotte H. Wellman

Edinboro University of Pennsylvania

Panel: Laid Waste: Dead Matter, New Landscapes and the Politics of Trash

Re-Purposing the Elderly Body

In cross-disciplinary scholarship, an emerging “trash” discourse considers the implications of excessive production and consumption and their inevitable corollary—the sense that all things are disposable. From first world eco-chic to third world sustainability, the re-purposing of trash emerges as a global enterprise, one with profound economic, aesthetic, and ethical ramifications. My research on gender and aging leads me to link new trash terminologies to perspectives on aging, one that compels us to confront and examine mortality on a number of levels. I would suggest that while pejorative associations permit us to contain and defer the inevitability of degeneration, an alternate vocabulary demands more embodied, empathetic engagement with the realities of waste and aging. If we attend to the proliferation of waste, we also introduce the idea of recycling or “re-purposing” discarded materials, actions that have vast repercussions for transforming perspectives on both waste and aging.

Responding to Mireille Rosello's call for "new visual and narrative grammars of old age" (Rosello 2001: 34), I seek to interlace these parallel discourses to establish new vantage points on waste and aging. Considering Agnes Varda's film, *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse (The Gleaners and I)*, I will isolate particular strategies Varda employs to disrupt any attempt to remain physically removed from her subject by confronting us with the materiality of waste matter through the interposition of her aging body.

Varda's film instantly sets official discourse in tension with direct experience. *The Gleaners and I* opens with the texts that organize and regulate our understanding of her chosen subject. She sets epistemologies in tension with the substance and materiality of text. The upper case G of the word Glean is stamped firmly into a supple red binding of an encyclopedia, like a brand or bas relief. Printed letters, blocks of text and engravings assume a sculptural density, evoking material weight even as they reference historical records. The written record is thus exposed as both idea and thing, words transcribed onto objects that are subject to wear and tear. From the first frame, Varda proposes that our preconceptions, in being linked to physical objects, are also subject to change. This device also implies that meanings will

be forged not from secondary sources, but from direct contact with people and things.

In Varda's project, encounters with gleaners and gleaning are repeatedly interposed with images of her aging body, both scrutinized from intimate, proximate viewpoints. What do the two have in common? Varda offers no easy answers, letting the coexistence of gleaning and aging cross-fertilize each other. Gleaning suggests making use of waste. Yet it is also demeaned because we associate it with women's work and with economic deprivation. The history of gleaning establishes the humbling, crouching posture of women, indelibly captured in Jean-Francois Millet's famous painting and in footage of modern gleaners. It is often a solitary practice. Records dictate the rules confining gleaning from before dawn to after dusk, placing it after the official harvest and even mandating the distance between the harvester and gleaner in the field. Such laws impose firm boundaries between a host of oppositions: official law and unofficial actions, high and low casts, male and female roles, bounty and want. Seized by her subject, Varda's handheld camera jiggles as it draws close to its target. Her elderly hand enters the frame, reaching out for potatoes turned out on the soil. Her wrinkled skin is instantly equated with the begrimed,

irregularly shaped potatoes she gleanes. Varda's aging body is thus equated with waste. Rather than reinforcing pejorative connotations, Varda's perpetual references to human intervention invests entropic raw materials with regenerative potential.

The comparison also engages the equation of women's bodies with nature and landscape. In art, younger bodies usually repose in landscape settings, their recumbent curves echoed by the land's undulations. Varda's interactions with farmers and gleaners are intercut with footage of potatoes dumped in the field, turning green and inedible as they rot. They form mounds, hills of spent leavings. In contrast to the sinuous curves of pastoral landscapes, these potato fields suggest degenerative fodder ripe with possibility. Her camera also studies gleaners closely, her conversation rendering crisp portraits that lend her subjects dimension, motivation, and agency. Waste is thus repurposed not only by the gleaners, but also by Varda herself. Varda eschews passive roles for a greater emphasis on human intervention and agency that recasts her own aging as purposeful and creative.

We tend to marginalize waste, just as we sequester the elderly in retirement communities. We don't want to see it. Varda's intimate camera work compels us to parse her aging body closely as she travels

the French countryside. Varda underscores her great age by dwelling on her elderly body, even rendering it monstrous – a “horror,” in her words—by looking at it closely. Like the discarded potatoes she handles, her elderly body departs from the ideal, classical proportions that might render Varda and her cast-off potatoes desirable commodities. Rather than the reassuring containment offered by art’s classical ideal, the degeneration of the elderly body violates boundaries. Aging’s anarchic potential offers parallels to the regulation of form imposed by the potato industry that cleaves the ideal potato from its imperfect cousin. As one farmer explains, only perfectly round potatoes of a certain size appeal to discriminating customers. Yet Varda remains entranced by the abandoned potatoes’ eccentric, unpredictable variations. Like the heart-shaped spuds she covets, Varda’s body no longer conforms to classical standards; it departs from convention, resisting the uniformity of standardized products. The potato, too, becomes more like a body: its knobby protrusions look like arthritic fingers. In a culture that prizes conformity and homogeneity, Varda’s hymn to the potato celebrates resistance, difference. In teasing out such metaphoric associations, Varda intensifies the inevitable identification of organic waste with human aging.

The emphasis on variation versus uniformity anchors Gillian Whiteley's definition of bricolage, a term that weds aesthetic approaches to a more heterogeneous, transformative politics. Bricolage, she argues, is a "mixity," rooted in texture, tension, structure, and surface, what Colin Rowe identifies as "collisive fields of interstitial debris." Bricolage entails a "perpetual state of re-making." (Whiteley 2010: 3). This is the very essence of aging as the body passes beyond the confines of convention into a more inchoate, metamorphic state. It is also the core of waste itself, whose archaeology of matter retains a pungent history in its unstable layers. Whiteley describes detritus as a dense narrative; its "reclaimed materials tell stories in a way that new things do not" (xii). Trash as bricolage highlights a pronounced difference between the abbreviated, condensed temporal frames driving mainstream capitalist practice and the more expanded time landfills encapsulate. Capitalism promotes a youth-oriented culture eager to procure and quickly discard things. Perpetual youth deflects longer, more sustained narratives, while old age—the so-called "fourth chapter"—inspires a more protracted tale. The life of objects in this economic model is telescoped, compressed into a short shelf life. No thing is built to last or, to put it differently, to live a long life. In

compliance with the idea of planned obsolescence, consumers invest in the new edition or latest technology, perpetually surrounding themselves with the new before anything has a chance to age. The very essence of a sustained narrative trajectory is eschewed for the quick strobe of simultaneity and instant gratification.

The liaison of waste with aging is equally applicable to inorganic trash. Much of Varda's film considers gleaning potatoes, grapes, apples, and overripe figs. The latter part of her documentary, however, turns to the urban landscape and to city trash. Trash landfill brings to mind the photographic panoramas of Chris Jordan; Varda, however, is less interested in the reconfigured landscape than in the repurposing of abandoned appliances by city dwellers. We watch two men salvage meats from street markets and store food in refurbished fridges; they promptly cook poultry for themselves and neighbors. These appliances, though discarded, still have some life left in them. Even though their husks and Freon tubes are not biodegradable, these fridges and TVs are considered old, and hence beyond use or desirability. Kathleen Woodward has argued that the "rhetoric (as well as social practices) of the technological culture of advanced capitalism contributes to widespread ageism against older generations" (Woodward 2006: 58).

The history of technology has abrogated the distance between the body and the machine; in the modern age, technology has first functioned as an extension, then as a substitute for the body. As Donna Haraway has famously argued, we are all already cyborgs. This is, of course, all the more true of elderly persons who benefit from hip and knee implants, corneal transplants, and heart valves as organic parts fail. Yet technology continues to be associated with innovation, while aging is ineluctably connected to a fragile, organic body. Technological intervention triggers debate about the advisability of medical procedures to sustain and extend life into old age. For most consumers, technology is best used to sustain youthful vigor, not to prolong old age. Paradoxically, Woodward points out, the body has dematerialized as technology rises to supplant it. Its widescale implementation replaces experience with virtual space and simulated actions.

Varda presents technology not as antithetical to the body, but as a tool that might intensify human exchange and connection. We watch gleaners move from combing street markets to pillaging televisions and refrigerators carried to curbs, harvesting copper elements or storing them for later conversion to *objets trouvés*. Varda, however, seems less interested in actions where the object's identity is subsumed into a

retro-modernist, totalizing aesthetic than in gestures that preserve the distinction and particularity of each element. Her sensibility is shared with scholars like Whiteley, who contrast the cachet of arty trash with the more transgressive abjection of messier interventions.

In more affluent societies, landscapes of waste are placed at a distance from the body and out of sight. Waste and aging remain invisible. Intimations of aging, decay and endings are antithetical to the mythology of perpetual renewal promoted under capitalism. Acts of segregation and the containment and curtailment of elderly subjects suggest the same horror and threat mortality poses. Varda confronts this issue in interposing her aging hands between the camera eye and the trucks whizzing past her as her crew drives to the next destination. The eye becomes a hand; sight becomes tactile. Critical engagement, Varda's strategy suggests, is premised on "grasping" the organic and inorganic matter that comprises our world. She "captures" each truck with fingers curled to frame the vehicle. Her curved fingers take the place of the camera aperture widening to consider the image, pinching shut to record it. Responding to her physical environment constitutes, in turn, a physical act. The truck in her fingers is reduced to a tiny toy, an object to palpate, to turn and handle in the hands of a *bricoleuse*. She

“captures” it like the gleaners she so lovingly studies, transforming discarded materials—and the aging body that frames that encounter—into the stuff of art.

Rosello, Mireille. "Agnès Varda's *Gleaners and I*. Portrait of the Artist as an Old Lady." In: *Studies in French Cinema* 1:1 (2001).

Whiteley, Gillian. *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2011.

