



PHANTOM OBJECTIVITY

REBECCA LANE ON ELEANOR MORGAN

Eleanor Morgan, *The Puffin Hunter*, video still, 2007.

Even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden 'it should be otherwise.' When a work is merely itself and no other thing, as in a pseudoscientific construction, it becomes bad art—literally pre-artistic. The moment of true volition, however, is mediated through nothing other than the form of the work itself, whose crystallization becomes an analogy of that other condition which should be. As eminently constructed and produced objects, works of art...point to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life.

—Theodor W. Adorno¹

It might sound overly conservative to entreat an audience to take something at face value these days: to focus on how a work of art functions rather than on how it is intended to *appear to function*. It is far easier to just agree that a work must be "about something" *a priori* and that this something should serve as the truth of the piece. How that same work looks—its material makeup, installation, and execution—might often be readily described or critiqued, but it is rarely isolated as the actual "content" of a work of contemporary art. Jacques Derrida's ubiquitous assertion that "*there is nothing outside of the text* [there is no outside-text; *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]," should serve to remind us that form does in fact illuminate content—and that often the truth of appearances lies in their failure to cohere.²

Eleanor Morgan's *The Puffin Hunter* necessitates just such a discussion, for its conceptual gambit masks an anxious preoccupation with a variety of artistic genres and modes of presentation. Upon arrival at the gallery one first encounters a colourful, printed poster in its window announcing the screening of *The Puffin Hunter*. Inside stand two roughly constructed wooden benches facing a free-standing projection screen. The screen features a video accompanied by an overwhelming audio track of roaring wind, surf, the fluttering of wings and squawking. There is a lot going on here, yet it is easy to focus one's attention solely upon the video itself, whose striking imagery immediately commands attention. But to do so is to overlook the fact that two separate formal

programs are at work here; the first consists of a self-contained video piece, the second encompasses an installation simulating a public film screening in a rural community. These programs are far from complementary, however, and do not converge to form a coherent conceptual whole. Instead, the individual aspects of *The Puffin Hunter*'s installation operate distinctly from one another, belying a deep-seated uncertainty of the legitimacy of the work's assumed "content."

The video's vigorous pull on our attention is a distraction from this profound hesitation at the heart of the work's overall execution. It commences with a seductive assemblage of stark yet lush views of an Icelandic landscape scattered with evidence of human intervention. These images eventually give way to abrupt, interspersed shots of the island's puffin population. It is only in the culminating sequence of the video that we witness the capture and killing of the puffins by the hunter, who towers above the camera in dramatic silhouette against the illuminated nighttime arctic sky—and is further "shadowed" by the presence of the artist-observer. The exhibition's press release describes the video as a "documentary film" whereas Morgan was more inclined towards "pseudo-documentary" in her artist's talk; it would perhaps be more accurate, though, to describe this as an assemblage of filmic genres through which the subjectivity of the artist's visit to this Icelandic outpost is filtered.³ The video vacillates between nostalgic travelogue, embedded reportage, wildlife documentary, suspense thriller, and heroic romanticism. The handheld digital camera-work similarly alternates between a soft surface and a dreamy tempo (particularly in the early landscape images) and choppy, grittiness with harsh lighting and cuts. Much of the imagery is arresting, but the video's noncommittal use of multiple genre devices, coupled with the erratic quality of the handheld camerawork, results in a disjuncture between form and concept that is difficult for the viewer to reconcile.

I would argue that this formal inconsistency—between the dual formats of the installation and the use of multiple narrative genres employed in the video—reveals the incongruous nature of the claims the exhibition makes

to the triad of empathy, nature and politics. Morgan's artistic practice is presented as an examination of "empathy in light of cultural and personal politics;" in like fashion, the activity of puffin-harvesting in the video is said to force "viewers to question notions of nature, necessity, and empathy."⁴ Both statements paraphrase much of what the artist also alluded to in her artist's talk, and highlight her longstanding engagement with animals within her artistic practice.⁵ When these statements are juxtaposed with the formal quandaries of *The Puffin Hunter* what emerges is an inflicted caesura between form and content—that the work speaks to a concept external to itself, rather than to the nature of its own realization. This enacts a form of reification, or "the moment that a process or relation is generalized into an abstraction, and thereby turned into a 'thing,'" a "process in which 'thing-hood' becomes the standard of objective reality; the 'given world', in other words, is taken to be the truth of the world," and thus generates a form of "phantom objectivity."⁶ Put differently, the externalization of the work's content renders *The Puffin Hunter* a "thing" or an illustration of a political program that does not necessarily emerge from the work itself. If anything, we are confronted with a work of art that seems to negate any possibility for "empathy in light of cultural political politics."

The Puffin Hunter thus confronts us with a "phantom objectivity" concerning the relationship between humans and animals which Morgan hopes to allegorize in relation to one another. The video's title and presumed subject matter suggest a chronicle of the hunter's relationship to his prey, but its content in actuality is a fractured, nostalgic musing on the exoticism of the film's setting rather than a full-fledged attempt at documentary mimicry. The puffins themselves function more as an interruption of the landscape, rather than as subjects situated within it. Because the birds are presented as objects—as blots upon the lush, rocky landscape—it almost comes as no surprise to see them swiftly impaled upon stakes by the hunter after netting them in midair, only to be immediately stuck into the ground to serve as decoys. I would even venture that it is intensely satisfying rather than gruesome to witness this culmination of the hunt. This is due mainly to

the haphazard buildup of imagistic narrative which precedes it, and the glorifying silhouette of the hunter only serves to intensify this reaction. The film's unwitting narrative structure leads us to identify with the hunter, and ultimately renders empathy between human viewers and animal subjects/prey next to impossible.

It becomes apparent just how distressing *The Puffin Hunter*'s formal content is if we return to the issue of the video's installation. The rustic quaintness of the simulated "screening" set-up—one which Morgan intended as a re-creation of a similar event witnessed on the island—reveals precisely an anxiety about allowing the video to stand on its own. Instead, it is abstracted to serve as a component of an installation that evokes the nostalgic qualities of the island lingered upon in the video, eschewing any reference to human-animal relations. The video's subject is thus divorced from its object: its representation. Such an attempt to reify the formal content of *The Puffin Hunter*'s video within this installation as the "truth of the world," rather than as the "given world" demonstrates the profound anxiety involved in efforts to mediate artistic production by political abstraction, and hinders art's ability to speak its own truths to the falsity and injustice of the world.

Rebecca Lane is a Ph.D. candidate in Art History at the University of British Columbia. She is currently conducting her doctoral research on materialist aesthetics, radical leftist politics and technological dystopia in art of the American West from 1968-1978.

1 Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment," in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1982): 317.

2 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected edition, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, [1976] 1997): 158.

3 *The Puffin Hunter: Eleanor Morgan*, press release, <http://artspeak.ca/home.html>, accessed on March 4, 2007.

4 *The Puffin Hunter: Eleanor Morgan*, press release.

5 See the artist's website for additional statements to this effect: <http://www.eleanormorgan.com/files/frames.htm>.

6 Timothy Bewes, *Reification, or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002): 3-4.