

NOTES

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Henri Michaux, *Les Grandes Epreuves de l'esprit et les innombrables petites* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 156-7. English translation: *The Major Ordeals of the Mind and the Countless Minor Ones* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974)

Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* [p. 7]

Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 110-1.

Colin McCabe, *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003): 228-9.

now turned into mannerism by the padding, lechery, faking required to combine today's esthetics with the components of traditional Great Art." [WEAVTA, 534]

We are in a white elephant moment, though perhaps it is a different white elephant than Farber's in 1962, or Gorin's in 1986. (And, to state the obvious: My Manny Farber is not necessarily Gorin's Farber, just as my Jean-Pierre Gorin is probably not Gorin's Gorin. Perhaps I should have said this at the outset.) But, the white elephant I'm looking at does pertain to a kind of mannerism—one that fills up booths at art fairs, one that keeps the wheels of the Big Machine churning. Everything is Great Art if it sells. But there is no chewing, no digestion, only swallowing: endless consumption, but no frass.

For the termite, there is no center. To work from the margins is not just a project, but *the* project. The kind of project I'm thinking of is a protracted negotiation with destabilized particularity, one that tends to consume and exceed the presumed boundaries of a fixed position: A project is a task that doubles as a mode of being-in-the-world: It's an utter inseparability between these things. Is Farber's termite a metaphor for the work of art or the art worker? It's unclear, to judge by the evidence of his writing. Both, at times, seem true. But the termite, if it is to remain useful, must be located in the connection between the work and worker, between artist and art—in the inseparability of these things. It is routine, even if the routine is one of getting lost.

UNRULINESS ITSELF

To *essay*, I often remind myself as somebody who writes them, means *to try*. An essay is an *attempt*. Which will inevitably provoke the question: *an attempt at what, exactly?* Among other possibilities: to give into a thing (a work of art, for example, or an engagement with one's twin brain—or one's colony), to understand a thing by tunneling inside it, by getting below its surface, even at the risk of losing oneself without the light of day to guide the way. Nietzsche's rumination is, much like the termite's advance, not without squandering, not without frass. Inevitably so. The work of the termite, as I understand it, is both plodding and urgent, all at once. It is squandering and progress at the same time, "eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leav[ing] nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity."

We shouldn't overlook the polemics of Farber's "Termite Art" essay. Perhaps Gorin, the "ex-Marxist" is the perfect agent to remind us, though this essay film never really offers its stance, or the finality of judgment, preferring to embed itself in the plural delectation of the train people—and the singular termite path of Farber—while laying some new tracks. *Routine Pleasures* eschews the didacticism that marked Gorin's work with Godard in the wake of May '68 in favor of essaying. Relentless, noisy, and plural by design, the Dziga Vertov films surely exemplify the termite tendency, or some version of it, but it's as if Gorin had to gradually dislocate himself from those strategies, had to ambulate and drift in order to discover that the termite's path must be as plodding as it is urgent.

Farber's 1962 essay is polemical—not only as cheerleading for the "squandering-beaverish" model of art making, which of course it is, but also as a kind of prophesy about the inevitable growth of the white elephant in years to come. "The painting, sculpture, assemblage becomes a yawning production of overripe technique shrieking with preciousness, fame, ambition; far inside are tiny pillows holding up the artist's signature,

The essay films are thus condemned to playfulness. Their need to delay pushes them constantly outside of themselves. [...] The essay film does not labor toward the creation of a sui generis image as do fiction and documentary. It feels perfectly at ease quoting, plundering, hijacking, and reordering what is already there and established to serve its purpose. And it feels perfectly at ease doing that twice or three times over, so that the same elements switch into new configurations. It is the rhizomatic form par excellence, forever expanding and finding no better reason to stop than the exhaustion of its own animating energy. The essay is rumination in Nietzsche's sense of the word, the meandering of an intelligence that tries to multiply the entries and the exits into the material it has elected (or by which it has been elected). It is surplus, drifts, ruptures, ellipses and double-backs. It is, in a word, thought... It flirts with a range of aesthetics but attaches itself to none. It is, both in form and content, unruliness itself, "termite art" and not "White Elephant art."

—Jean-Pierre Gorin, "Proposal for a Tussle"

well as moving. Niesłuchowski performs for the camera—performs “himself,” but inevitably performs Leung’s version of “himself” as well.

In Jennifer Bornstein’s *Collector’s Favorites* (1994), the artist appears on an eponymous cable access show devoted to personal and idiosyncratic collections. Here, Bornstein displays her unlikely collection of fast food packaging gathered at the mall, all methodically arranged on colored boards according to more or less legible taxonomies. The work (of video art) precisely doubles an episode of a cable access television show, and there is a sense that these collections were assembled in order to be on this show, or that the show only exists to show this particular collection. Strangely, Bornstein seems to mimic the appearance of the shows host: Both wear vests and glasses—is this what collectors look like? Is the host a collector of objects, too, or a collector of collectors? The subject of Bornstein’s video, like Leung’s, is plural: The subject is the proximity and affinity between observer and observed, the space (or lack of space) between them.

Tuning Meditation (1979), composed by Pauline Oliveros, exemplifies the composer’s ongoing exploration of deep listening and practically defines plural delectation with individual voices producing tones that only momentarily stabilize as a legible, collective totality.

Using any vowel sound, sing a tone that you hear in your imagination. After contributing your tone, listen for someone else’s tone and tune to its pitch as exactly as possible. Continue by alternating between singing a tone of your own and tuning to the tone of another voice. Introduce new tones at will and tune to as many different voices as are present. Sing warmly.

Paying attention, the observer is fully subsumed into the field of observation, becomes part of it—becomes it. With warmth.

Sistine Chapel and a hangar at the Del Mar Fairgrounds. Either way, there is no shortage of matter to chew on.

“The important trait of termite-fungus-centipede art,” Farber reminds us, “is an ambulatory creation which is an act both of observing and being in the world, a journeying in which the artist seems to be ingesting both the material of his art and the outside world through a horizontal coverage.” This horizontal coverage aptly describes the elaborate indexing of Lee Lozano’s private notebooks by the writer Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, as an act of scholarship that burrows deep into a subject who, in an act of resistance, eventually dropped out of the so-called art world. “Dropout made her unstuck, untraceable,” observes Lehrer-Graiwer.

Lee, the free radical. By design, it wasn’t a vanishing act as much as it was a project of disappearance and atomization—“I aint goin nowhere because I’m everywhere”—another way to simultaneously pursue self-realization and self-loss.

Living the self as an unknown thing to be studied and taken apart was very destabilizing. The experience of self-experimentation warped her findings, confusing presumed cause and effect while merging fact and perception [...] As one thing comes into focus, another falls into blur. For psychologists, it’s the “observer effect”: the act of observation always influences the behavior of the observed. And when observer and observed are the same, wires get crossed and sparks fly: “the body, like photons, changes under observation.”

Simon Leung’s *War After War* (2011) is a video portrait of Warren Niesłuchowski, a Pole born in a German displaced persons’ camp and globe-trotting nomad who relies on the hospitality of friends and strangers for room and board. Leung is largely absent from the video, or at least seems to be, though his presence becomes acute in a hospital room where Warren is being treated. The video marks a sustained engagement between observer and observed: The former’s care toward the latter makes this work possible, as

THE OBSERVER EFFECT

“I have a very simple definition of an artist,” James Benning has remarked, echoing Least Heat Moon, and Walt Whitman before him: “The artist is someone who pays attention and reports back.” In Benning’s case, paying attention sometimes takes the form of a class, which he calls “Looking and Listening.” And attention paid sometimes solidifies into a work of art—for example, in the film *Ten Skies* (200_), which shows us exactly that, over the course of 100 minutes: skies we can’t name or identify but can understand as varied—this framing of the sky, at this time, on this day, with these atmospheric conditions—and remarkably interesting. He pays attention, he frames the experience for the viewer to do the same. It’s directed, but open. And if we follow his lead, we leave the film and reenter the world seeing (and listening) anew, looking at sky (say a purplish night sky over the Egyptian Theater on Hollywood Boulevard) as if we had never looked at it before. In recent years, he has been paying attention to objects—like a painting of cryptic hatch marks by Forrest Bess, or a poem-fragment written on an envelope by Emily Dickinson, or a tiny cabin built by Theodore Kaczynski—and remaking these things more or less as they are. There is no question of authorship or forgery; there is only a question of observation, of becoming so fully engulfed in the subject at hand that the self gives way to the thing observed.

A bus tour organized by the Center for Land Use Interpretation might coax us to pay attention to the trailers that accumulate at construction sites at a hectic international airport or alongside the busiest freeway in America. On a tour titled *Margins in our Midst: A Journey into Irwindale*, a tour that often skirted the edge of the vast military-industrial complex that is Edwards Air Force Base, the Center’s Matt Coolidge served as the tour guide, drily noting, “We will be going to some of the most banal and dramatic landscapes in Los Angeles, and by the time we are done, we won’t be able to tell the difference”—reminding us of the termites that don’t know the difference between the

Had I gone looking for some particular place rather than any place, I'd never have found this spring under the sycamores. Since leaving home, I felt for the first time at rest. Sitting full in the moment. I practiced on the god-awful difficulty of just paying attention. It's a contention of Heat Moon's—believing as he does any traveler who misses the journey misses about all he's going to get—that a man becomes his attentions. His observations and curiosity, they make and remake him.

Etymology: curious, related to cure, once meant 'carefully observant.' Maybe a tonic of curiosity would counter my numbing sense, that life inevitably creeps toward the absurd. Absurd, by the way, derives from a Latin word meaning 'deaf, dulled.' Maybe the road could provide a therapy through observation of the ordinary and obvious, a means whereby the outer eye opens an inner one. STOP, LOOK, LISTEN, the old railroad crossing signs warned. Whitman calls it 'the profound lesson of reception.'

New ways of seeing can disclose new things: the radio telescope revealed quasars and pulsars, and the scanning electron microscope showed the whiskers of the dust mite. But turn the question around: Do new things make for new ways of seeing?

—William Least Heat Moon, *Blue Highways*

by taking Farber's subject as his own. Even as we watch him gradually burrow deeper into the terminus of the train people, he slyly elaborates connections to his twin brain Farber, who remains largely out of the frame.

For what it's worth, *Routine Pleasures* was not the end of Gorin's fascination or engagement with collectivity as a subject. His next film, *My Crasy Life* (1992), finds him tunneling into the social fabric of a Samoan gang in Long Beach, California, in order to discover their routine pleasures. For every termite there is potential band of outsiders, ready to connect with.

“One reason it seems so important to work collaboratively at this moment is to take advantage of what you can get with collage, putting two disparates together—not only working with Patricia, but in class, in discussion with other film people, things that are said on the screen—just the effect of putting screen conversation into an article. I’d never do that in earlier writing, not that I didn’t want to but it never occurred to me that it was important. Now it seems so important to get these other viewpoints, other ways of saying things, hitting against other types of discourse to get the feeling of multiples.” [NS, 363]

He was surely thinking about his other twin brain, too. In *Routine Pleasures*, Gorin relocates Farber’s little termite and sets it in motion, allowing the singular termite to become many, to become a Deleuzian rhizome, ambulating in all directions. Here we should also take note of Gorin’s termite, and the way in which it—or, rather, the whole colony—seems to chew incessantly at whatever boundaries separate Farber from the train people. There is a political gesture in bringing Farber’s paintings into such close proximity to the train people, who certainly don’t talk about what they do as “art.” The tracks in Farber’s paintings allow the parallel tracks in Gorin’s film to converge.

How do we categorize or account for the plural delectation he finds in these weekly routines at the Del Mar fairgrounds? If the collective activity of the Pacific Beach & Western club doesn’t exemplify “signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity”—who or what would? And, following Farber’s termite logic further, one might imply that the question of art is beside the point. Eating away at the boundaries of these categorical distinctions, Gorin’s film leads us to wonder if the train people might offer important lessons for artists, even though they aren’t trying to change the world. Therein lies one paradox of the termite’s advance.

For artists, the termite represents a figure of stubborn resistance—resistant to the demands for novelty and expectations of modernist progress, resistant to demands for capital “A” Art. The termite is also a model for continuation. Gorin advances the termite

Gorin's twin brain Farber, to take his film writing as evidence, seems similarly committed to the group dynamic—Farber, a former card-carrying member of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners, was obsessed with the odd-couple antics of Laurel and Hardy and the ad hoc squadron assembled in Howard Hawks's *Only Angels Have Wings*. Later, he begins writing all of his film criticism with his wife and fellow painter Patricia Patterson—another twin brain. Funny, then, that Farber's well-known metaphor, one that arrived in 1962 with the publication of "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art" in *Film Culture*, focuses on what seems to be a very singular termite—all the more profound to contrast one tiny pest with the monstrosity of a white elephant. Funny, too, because in reality the termite rarely works alone, a point that will sound obvious to anyone who's seen a tree or house eaten away by a team of insects working together like a vast conspiracy.

One possibility: The "termite tendency" Farber identifies is not only a diagnosis of overwrought Hollywood product, but also a prescription for self-medication in the painting studio: one that signals his eventual shift from expansive color field paintings on panels of paper, which are unquestionably in conversation with the "major" painting of his day—which is also to say the brand of Greenberg-approved abstraction prevalent in New York, circa 1962—to his highly composed and obsessively detailed tabletop observations of the "everyday," which he would continue pursuing until his death in 2008. Farber suggested as much in his interview with Richard Thompson in 1971: "The things I do—the painting, criticism, and teaching—all crawl along the termite path I promulgated years ago; I am still painting directly against a white-elephant style." ["Manny Farber and Patricia Patterson Interviewed by Richard Thompson," in *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies* 354]

In the same interview, which also included Patricia Patterson, Farber addresses shared authorship—namely, his ongoing collaboration in writing criticism with his wife:

apprentice, operating as a *Bande à part* against the individualist grain of auteurist cinema. Gorin's first film completed in the U.S., made some eight years after the dissolution of his collaboration with Godard, was *Poto and Cabengo* (1980), an interrogation of twin girls in San Diego who had developed a shared, private language. It's not difficult to imagine Grace and Virginia Kennedy—known to each other as Poto and Cabengo, respectively—as stand-ins for Godard and Gorin in the Dziga Vertov years, speaking telepathically and finishing each other's sentences. Lynne Tillman, interviewing Gorin in 1988, intimates that upon rewatching *Letter to Jane*—the acidic and thrifty essay film that marks the definitive end of the Dziga Vertov collaboration—admits to him that she “heard your and Godard's voices with Poto's and Cabengo's playing in my mind. [...] I got the feeling that part of your fascination with the twins was the possibility you saw to divest yourself of your twin-ship with Godard.”

Likewise, it's not difficult to see *Routine Pleasures* as a reflection on the filmmaker's intensifying twin-ship with Manny Farber, who inevitably became a surrogate for Godard as a mentor-colleague when Gorin arrived in California. Farber, according to Gorin, even refers to the younger filmmaker as his “twin brain.” If, as I've already suggested, one understands *Routine Pleasures* as a reflection on Gorin's entrenched relationship with collectivism, then the train people of Del Mar provide an unlikely rejoinder to the collected protagonists of the May '68 upheaval and the Dziga Vertov Group experiments that followed. If Gorin and the young *gauchistes* of May '68 were fervently committed to overthrowing the existing paradigm, the guys in *Routine Pleasures* are, seemingly, no less fervently committed to maintaining the world as it is, endlessly reenacting the “small-scale epic” they constructed of the world in its own image. Week after week, the Pacific Beach & Western crew stay “busy as beavers,” content to brush away the dust gathering on the tracks in order to keep their trains running on schedule. Compared to the Dziga Vertov Group they are—pardon the pun, or don't—a “model collective.” How could Gorin not be bemused in the face of it?

PLURAL DELECTATION—TWIN BRAINS

Routine Pleasures begins with a dedication “To Chuck Jones and Gustave Flaubert,” and on the face of it, it would be hard to imagine a more unlikely coupling: the latter, a 19th Century French novelist conjoined to the former, a 20th century Hollywood animator. Then again, it’s easy to imagine that particular pairing as one Gorin could appreciate as an exiled Parisian intellectual getting ever more deeply entrenched in the sleepy surfside village of Del Mar, California. It isn’t such a stretch to see Jones and Flaubert performing as two sides of the coin of this realm.

Jones is perhaps best known for *Duck Amuck* (1953), his brilliant animated film for Warner Bros., starring a volatile cartoon waterfowl with a speech impediment who finds himself estranged from his environment. The duck—Daffy—might be a surprisingly appropriate avatar for Gorin, transposed and bewildered against an unfixed backdrop. But one could also imagine Jones as Gorin’s surrogate: Both filmmakers tend toward cinematic reflexivity, putting the authors’ hands very much in evidence. (And, worth asking: Is there a more *American* auteur than Chuck Jones?)

Flaubert is perhaps a more inevitable choice for a stand-in, as the novelist who wrote *Sentimental Education* against the unfixed backdrop of revolution and later spent years attempting to finish *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, a hilarious if maddening account (satirical, but still) of two nitwit copyists who do everything together, and manage to do all of it badly, as perpetual amateurs. (Flaubert’s early working title for *Bouvard and Pécuchet* was *The Two Woodlice*—a funny insectile precursor to Farber’s termite.) Gorin, needless to say, knew a few things about working in pairs.

After all, the Dziga Vertov Group was from the outset an experiment in teamwork, with Godard and Gorin, the venerated *enfant terrible* of the Nouvelle Vague and his younger

For the rustle [...] implies a community of bodies: in the sounds of the pleasure which is 'working,' no voice is raised, guides, or swerves, no voice is constituted; the rustle is the very sound of plural delectation—plural but never massive (the mass, quite the contrary, has a single voice, and terribly loud).

—Roland Barthes, "The Rustle of Language"

listens before he speaks. He eases into their world, sitting close to these train people, asking questions, listening with bemused attention, grinning almost against his will. In the process, their routine becomes his pleasure.

expected audience for the film that would become *Routine Pleasures*. As Godard biographer Colin MacCabe has argued:

The great problem confronting the collaboration, a problem that Gorin characterizes in terms of “anguish,” was that of the audience. The enormous weakness of the Dziga Vertov position was that it assumed that a revolutionary politics would provide another audience [...] a militant audience for whom the screen would be a blackboard and the soundtrack merely the beginning of a conversation. In fact, when Godard and Gorin made a film which genuinely tried to address student militants, not only did the commissioning broadcaster refuse to show it—on the by now predictable grounds that it was not political enough—it also failed to find any political audience whatsoever.

“I realized it wasn’t going to be easy to live up to Corky’s film-making standards,” Gorin admits, his tongue gently lodged in cheek. But clearly it is no longer May, and by the time he makes *Routine Pleasures*, things have changed. These workers are not on strike—as the title of the film announces, there is only a sense of pleasure in their cooperative effort. Gorin has admitted his interest in investigating the conservative imagination of his American subjects. They are Reagan voters, he surmises, and one might also assume that at least some of these guys fought in Vietnam or Korea, against the very Marxist-Maoist principles with which Gorin once identified. (Their geographic proximity to Camp Pendleton—a major United States Marine base—is worth noting.) His conversation with Chester, an ex-Navy technician, edges us closer to potential conflict, but Chester’s account of his military years are of procedural matters—not unlike the stuff of train schedules. Nowhere in the film are the politics of the train people made explicit.

“The problem,” Godard once stated, “is not to make political films, but to make films politically.” And if Gorin indeed draws upon the lessons of his old comrade and the “failed” experiments from the Dziga Vertov period in making *Routine Pleasures*, he does so by becoming an *enquêteur*, to use Kristin Ross’s terminology—the investigator who

their expression, then synthesizing them and returning them in the form of political propositions.”

“Sans enquêtes, pas de droit à la parole” [No investigation, no right to speak]. Gather the news of the struggle, write it up, give it back in new form, circulate it, reproduce it, become the vehicle. Theoretical *a priori*s must be set aside, in the patient expectation that a political line will disengage itself directly from workers’ representations of their own conditions, problems, aspirations, desires, from their own disparate voices. “Nothing, in effect, can be understood ‘spontaneously’: to understand, one must investigate [*enquêter*].”

Routine Pleasures returns to cinema’s degree zero, with Gorin and cinematographer Babette Mangolte lavishing attention on the train people as they arrive at their tracks, on their workman’s attire, their schedule, their ritualized customs. “Just because you’re an ex-Marxist, don’t feel obliged to start the film with the opening of a toolbox,” intones Gorin, quoting an admonition he had received from Farber. And just like that, he shows one of the train enthusiasts’ toolboxes as it gently lands on a workbench. Work is everywhere in *Routine Pleasures*, as a kind of whirring machinic hum that fills the air.

Nowhere in the film are the events of May ’68 specifically evoked. (1958, however—yes: the year de Gaulle reclaimed power following the collapse of the Fourth Republic, but also the year the Pacific Beach & Western club got rolling.) And yet, despite Gorin’s careful sidewinding around the subject of ’68, it’s not a stretch to see *Routine Pleasures* as a reenactment of a *gauchiste* intellectual entering the factory, and the lingering anxiety of him crossing that significant threshold. In Del Mar, he returns to another version of the same scene, crawling on all fours. Even his dented Citroën is part of this restaging: the factory in which it was likely built was the site of a strike in May.

Gorin’s rhetorical question—“Could I ever hope to have such a hold on an audience?”—might very well address his past endeavors with the Dziga Vertov Group as much as the

the brothers' factory in 1894 and first shown to a private Parisian audience on March 22 the following year, a 46-second industrial miracle: cinema degree zero. The first act of cinema would have been startling to its audience, regardless of the image projected.

The brothers Lumière undoubtedly chose this image of workers leaving their own factory in Lyon because it was an image close at hand, immediately recognizable and teeming with movement. Their invention—an “invention without a future,” according to Louis—was remarkable despite the ordinariness of their subject. An image of workers exiting a factory was a familiar scene extracted from the modern world, not unlike a train arriving at a station.

Still, the image haunts cinema: it is the signal image of the mass subject. The image of workers leaving the factory has been remade in varied contexts on numerous occasions. It is echoed in the arrival of droves of weary workers via conveyor belt in the extraordinary opening sequence of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927). The workers, of course, are the real automatons in Lang's allegory; the shiny, Art Deco robot (“Maschinenmensch”) named Maria is far more expressive by comparison. Vertov's *Man with the Movie Camera* again comes to mind, with its symphonic account of a day in the life of the mass subject. Vertov's kino-eye is likewise born from the inception of cinema just outside the Lumière factory.

The factory and its workers were central to the intellectual concerns of many of the filmmakers associated with the events of May '68, Dziga Vertov Group among them. The primary challenge for the *gauchistes* of May '68, represented by the militant students and young intellectuals such as Gorin, was to construct genuine connections to the working class, bridging the ideological principles of Maoism or Trotskyism to the urgent and pragmatic concerns of workers on strike. As Kristin Ross argues in *May '68 and its Afterlives*, “Immersing oneself ‘in the school of the masses,’ the intellectual's role would not be that of a sociologist, hygienist, teacher, of Leninist vanguard leader, but at best that of midwife: drawing out revolutionary aspirations existing in a latent state, encouraging

of a Train at La Ciotat (*L'Arrivée d'un Train en Gare de la Ciotat*), the famous film that induced its initial, wide-eyed audience to jump from its collective seat.

The brothers Lumière inaugurated a long history of train films, an intersection of two mechanical technologies that define modernity. *The Arrival* is followed by Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), Abel Gance's *La Roue* (1923), Buster Keaton's *Go West* (1925), Josef Von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express* (1932), Jacques Tourneur's *Berlin Express* (1948), Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951), Ernie Gehr's *Eureka* (1974)—a slowed, elegiac re-photographing of a 1903 actualité shot from a train chugging down Market before arriving at San Francisco's Ferry Building... one could go on. Perhaps no film more powerfully synthesizes the destinies of these technologies than *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929), directed by Dziga Vertov, the filmmaker whose assumed name Gorin and Godard took as their own.

In 1931, Vertov's comrade Alexander Medvedkin took charge of an ambitious state proposal for a three-car film-train, outfitted with equipment and a large crew, that was to travel across the Soviet countryside visiting newly formed *kolkhoz* farming collectives. These train people would survey each *kolkhoz* and determine which issues inhibited the collective's success, and then, in the course of a day, would shoot, process, edit, and screen the resulting film. Medvedkin was unafraid to use humorous or satirical ends to achieve his desired ends. His slapstick feature *Happiness* (1934) is dedicated "to the last lazy Kolkhozian." As he recounts in Chris Marker's *Le Train en marche* (*The Train Rolls On*), 1971—another title for our accumulating list: "Film, in the hands of the people, was a fantastic weapon. Of course that filled us with renewed force, and, thanks to that experience, we knew that we could keep going. It also brought home the fact that the makers of a film aren't just the director and cameraman."

Gorin's invocation of cinema's original "twin brain"—Auguste and Louis—inevitably conjures the opening salvo of cinema along with it. *La Sorties de l'Usine Lumière à Lyon* (*Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*) was captured with the Cinématographe outside

A FRIENDLY PARTY IN THE GARDEN OF LUMIÈRE

Gorin gradually immerses him in the miniaturized world of the Pacific Beach & Western Model Railroad Club, laying tracks with care and considerable charm. He engages these train people with genuine curiosity; he listens intently, flashes smiles as he goes.

In his journey, there are thresholds marked by a quiet drama, like a train entering and emerging from a dark tunnel. Early on, he crawls on all fours as he enters the interior of the model landscape to meet Corky Thomson, the club's de facto leader. Corky, burrowed deep in the command center and absorbed in the orchestral movement of trains, is initially indifferent to this intruder. Or, rather, he performs indifference. What could this Frenchman want, anyway? His presence is a surely a disruption, a break in the routine. But, eventually Gorin becomes part of the routine, too, and is given a sense of belonging when the train people introduce a scale model of his dented Citroën to the landscape.

The termite gnaws away.

Finally initiated into the tribe, Gorin joins the Pacific Beach & Western crew for a screening of Corky's Super-8 train films. The Royal Hudson line thunders out of Fresno toward Bakersfield, in grainy black and white. "What happened, Corky," one of the men teases, "did you lose your tripod?" And Gorin, in his voiceover, wonders aloud, "Could I ever hope to have such a hold on an audience?"

Gorin inserts an inter-title that reads "Friendly Party in the Garden of Lumière," a title borrowed from the 1896 actualité *Une partie d'écarté* by the brothers who invented the Cinématographe a year earlier. The nod to cinema's founding fathers, Louis and Auguste Lumière, is provocative. In this setting, we are also immediately reminded of *The Arrival*

pleasures have truly become routinized, fending off the dust accumulating on the tracks week after week, though it is important to remember the train set—one that reconstructs a *mise-en-abyme* of the surrounding world in and around Del Mar, California—was built from scratch over time, track by track, train car by train car. Godlike, the train people even constructed the mountains and the trees.

Change is incremental, and is largely invisible to the *arriviste*. A site is only understood when observed over time. And over time, the observer inevitably becomes part of the landscape under observation. The temporal landscape is the termite's project—a chewing away through space and time.

eternal toward the ephemeral. The impressionists, with Manet before them, and Turner before him, were eager to bring industrialization into the pictorial tradition of landscape painting. A train cutting across the landscape, even an unseen train puffing steam in the background, changes a picture profoundly: The scene no longer belongs to God but to modern industry. "This rationalization of time found its fullest realization in a world standardization that took its impetus from the development of railway travel and telegraphy," Mary Anne Doane writes in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, and the Archive*.

The standardization of time was originally effected by the railroad companies themselves, which found it extraordinarily difficult to maintain comprehensible schedules in the face of scores of differing local times. In England, London time was four minutes ahead of time in Reading, seven minutes and thirty seconds of Cirencester time, and fourteen minutes ahead of Bridgewater time. Railroad time became general standard time in England in 1880, in Germany in 1893. In 1884 an international conference on time standards held in Washington, D.C., divided the world into twenty-four time zones, established Greenwich as the zero median, and set the exact length of a day. In 1913 the first regulating time signal transmitted around the world was sent from the Eiffel Tower. As Stephen Kern points out, "The independence of local times began to collapse once the framework of a global electronic network was established." The sheer speed of transportation and communication worked to annihilate the uniqueness and isolation of the local.

The temporal landscape of the Pacific Beach & Western Model Railroad Club relies precisely on this logic of standardization—it replicates real world scheduling, but just as it does spatially, reduces time according to scale. What is striking here, and also amusing, is how much Gorin's train people have—in contradistinction to Doane's analysis, and modernization more generally—determinedly constructed and then maintained the uniqueness and isolation of the local. Gorin joins these train people *in media res*—that is, once their elaborate landscape is largely developed: He joins them only once their

TEMPORAL LANDSCAPE

There is a production still of Jean-Pierre Gorin, taken by Babette Mangolte, on the set of *Routine Pleasures*. By “set” I mean train set—a location that became a film set. Gorin is, so to speak, deep in it. He’s literally embedded, with only his head emerging from a void in the fabricated terra, between two parallel tracks leading toward a little town at the bottom of the mountain. Along with his head protrudes a light stand, projecting like a fake sun on the little town, and an Arriflex camera, pointed in the same direction. Gorin is turned away from the scene, but facing the camera, and staring into its viewfinder. Like the little model of his dented Citroën, he is now part of the landscape.

“The important trait of termite-fungus-centipede art,” Farber noted in 1971, “is an ambulatory creation which is an act both of observing and being in the world, a journeying in which the artist seems to be ingesting both the material of his art and the outside world through a horizontal coverage.” On one hand, what he describes here suggests a spatial understanding of the termite—its ambulatory nature, its horizontal coverage. On the other hand, this model could only be temporal: “an act both of observing and being in the world” occurs in time, over time.

After a detailed explanation of the elaborate timetables that structure the kinetic activity of the Pacific Beach & Western model rail system, the president of the club describes the microuniverse they’ve constructed and control as a “temporal landscape.” Gorin is clearly taken aback by the concision of terminology used to describe such a complex operation—and surely by its philosophical implications. The film pauses as he isolates the phrase, handwritten in white against a blackboard-like screen, as an idea worth remembering.

Of course, “temporal landscape” is also redundant. Isn’t every landscape a record of time? This seems true at least since modernity and a concurrent shift in attention away from the

The Concord's current followed the same law in a system of time and all that is known. He [Thoreau] liked to watch this current that was for him an emblem of all progress. Weeds under the surface bent gently downstream shaken by watery wind. Chips, sticks, logs, and even tree stems drifted past. There came a day at the end of the summer or the beginning of autumn, when he resolved to launch a boat from shore and let the river carry him.

Emily Dickinson is my emblematic Concord River.

I am heading toward certain discoveries...

—Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*

first glance, but then must attend to myriad details—the specificity of a box of candy, a handwritten note, a muddy leek—before being handed the task of deciphering the connection between these disparate things. “The painter’s will to nettle the viewer is all over the picture,” Gorin and Amos report. “He offers material to be read but places it upside down and half erases it to boot.” [TFM, 6] Farber’s use of train tracks, which emerged in his paintings of the late 1970s, trace larger connections across the pictures and provide some sense of visual coherence. I’m referring to the connections implied within the space of individual paintings, but these connections are also evident from one painting to the next. There is tremendous consistency between paintings once Farber arrives at his hovering vantage of the picture plane: One can imagine them all as isolated fragments of one vast tabletop of sprawling networked activity.

Gorin surely understands these connections as something akin to Deleuzian lines of flight diagramming a rhizomatic network of ins and outs without center or hierarchy. The painted train tracks, which are in some sense stand-ins for strips of celluloid, are latter replaced by rebar, ribbons, and floral stems which similarly drag the eye around a painting. Farber’s lines extend thought across the picture plane; they promote detour, delay—in a word, rereading. One is reminded of Gorin describing Farber screening films for his classes, projecting them backward, or in slow motion, often turning off the sound. In short, this pedagogical approach is analogous to the paintings in his attempt to circumvent the relentless linearity of the film object—and, inevitably, its narrative continuity—while trafficking, even luxuriating in its stream of collided images. Farber’s paintings are, to borrow from Michaux again, “contraption[s] for which there is no manual.” Or, as Gorin and Amos explain, “Farber’s paintings stand celibate, whirring at a pace so fast one could confuse it with stillness, inviting decoding and then spinning off preemptively and perversely a thousand and one codes. It is a state of intense vibration, where the many moving parts of the Farber Machine could at any moment be shaken loose.” [TFM, 14] So, when the engine stammers, it does so in order to remind us that it is, in fact, an engine.

Never one thing but many, the film surely checks enough boxes to qualify as termite art as Farber seemed to define it. Not only is *Routine Pleasures* a significant example of the termite tendency, but Gorin's essay "The Farber Machine" (written with Patrick Amos) extends this track through Farber's painting as well:

"Because Farber proceeds by addition, he always insists on the discreteness of each and every object in his painting. Everything is assigned a materiality of its own: an image is never freed from a material context, but remains an illustration on a package label or a picture in a book, creased by its binding. It is the specific weight Farber gives to his objects, their definition and claim to space, their near-equal standing which pushes to the fore what links and separates them—the in-between." [10]

Farber's paintings, like Henri Michaux's hallucinated "table of additions"—"only finished in as much as there was no way to add anything to it, the table having become more and more an agglomeration, less and less a table"—gather complexity not by design but through accrual of parts that gradually articulate connections and relationships, moving determinedly if not definitively toward a kind of totality.

The paintings substantiate the lessons of montage, theorized and categorized by Eisenstein and many others, but surely gleaned from Farber's hours (days, weeks...) of watching film and understanding the potency of abutting images: an exponential potential of sheer proximity manifested in the act of putting one painted thing—a kind of ideogram—next to another... and next to another... all the while making new connections. Unlike a film, this elaborate assemblage of meaning-production is not linear—rather, it sprawls across the provisionally bounded, rectangular (or sometimes circular) space of the picture, appearing to its audience all at once.

Which is not to say a viewer takes in one of Farber's picture all at once—hardly. To do so would be a difficult task, presumably impossible. Certainly one gets a *sense* of the whole at

One of the potential fault-lines of these works is condescension. Are Gorin, Bornstein, and Fiskin distancing themselves from their subjects, performing a patronizing voyeurism into worlds they do not fully inhabit? What I'm trying to propose, though I am still hesitant about it, is actually the opposite, for each of these works tells us something about leveling as they make space for conversations that happen across class lines. I'm suggesting then that the filmic still life, at least for Gorin, Bornstein, and Fiskin, is a site of cross-class exchange and intersection, an encounter or meeting place, however temporary, over shared objects. They are reminders that we inhabit the same spheres of material exchange and production. If there is a trace of condescension, it is tempered by a sense of affinity and mutual respect, for to make a film or video is also to be obsessed by placement, by detail, held in the thrall of meticulousness.

Patty Hearst was arrested on September 18, 1975, with another SLA member, Wendy Masako Yoshimura. Yoshimura, who was born in the Japanese-American internment camp Manzanar, now resides in Oakland where she paints—what else—still lives.

Las Vegas apartment developments and street names —“Paradise Road”—also anxiously invokes class distortions, a comic, or painful, mismatch between label and thing.

Class in the US is very often confounding. It stratifies in ways both fine-grained and sweeping. As I see it, there are multiple levels of class interaction thematized in Fiskin’s video. First, the judges with their tastes are positioned in relation to the competitors, one of whose use of plastic shrimp, for instance, is deemed to have “cheapened the look.” As is always the case with the US, woven throughout their observations about class differences are statements of racial distinction, including comments (when adjudicating on a Lion King table) from the judges about “colorful” Africans wearing turbans and textiles dyed with “beet juice.” Then there are differences among the competitors; what is presented by one as formal might be understood by another as casual. Third, there is the Fiskin’s relation to the people in competition and within the larger frame of the county fair, which is not a place that artists like Fiskin display their art. The judges themselves have a difference of opinion—of “personal taste” as one explains, which could signal a slight difference in class formation—and solicit the cameraperson (who demurs) for a tie-breaking opinion about which table should be awarded “best in show.” They end up recruiting a security guard for her opinion precisely because she is not of their milieu —“Let’s pull a guard!,” declares a judge. “Let’s pull someone totally out of the loop.” This is the final and most revelatory cross-class interaction in the video, as the guard, with no official credentials, casts the deciding vote.

Gorin intones in the voice-over. Chester examines its contents, but they are too small for us to really see.

As Bornstein explains in the video, she grew her collection in part by scavenging cast-offs out of the garbage. Within the confines of her limited budget, she is interested both in middlebrow mall stores and more upscale venues, including “gourmet” coffee purveyors. Among her curated sets of throw-away paper goods are napkins and ice-cream cups of graduated sizes from Baskin Robbins; Baskin Robbins was, she tells Shishmanian, her first job, and so has special meaning for her. This disclosure about food service employment is one of ^{the} moments in the video that I find genuinely touching; this, and Shishmanian’s absolutely game acceptance of Bornstein’s non-material collection of phrases, and her legitimization of Bornstein’s literal rubbish and oddball, junior-high science fair poster boards with their glued-on breath mints from different countries as “very elegant presentations.” There is a generational divide here that is each party is reaching across. In *Collector’s Favorites*, the nascent class difference between budding video artist—Bornstein was getting her MFA from UCLA at the time—and cable-access host is also both marked and tentatively bridged. Now, Bornstein shows her art internationally, while Shishmanian’s cable access show, and indeed the entire phenomenon of cable access, is long gone; this video is a chronicle of the brief moment their trajectories converge while it foreshadows their diverging futures. Shishmanian seizes on the potential populism of Bornstein’s project, commenting that the richly descriptive names used for chain-store coffee use to be reserved for high-priced fancy perfumes, but is now available to everyone. Yet Bornstein’s list of

scrutinized for every last detail: beads that do not drape properly, a tablecloth so white that it that makes salt look jarringly off-colored, unironed linens.

Still lives are frequently laden with symbolism, functioning as memento mori. They can be deceptively placid scenes where death gets smuggled in, either covertly with rotting food amidst the plenty or the disruption of an indecorous fly, or more overtly, with the presence of a skull. In Steve Rodin's video *everything she left behind that fit in my hands* (2012), a hand opens and shuts, revealing figurines, bits of coral, shells, a safety pin—all objects previously owned (the viewer is told, and must take on faith) by Martha Graham, who died some twenty years previously. Is this display of sundries an oblique portrait of the dancer, or is it a comment on her ultimate unknowability? (The little things are in the main unremarkable.) In Fiskin's *50 Ways to Set a Table*, we hear of a woman who competed from the grave when her family pulled out the plates and glasses from her closet after she passed away, in order to resurrect her vision of hospitality and rightness.

Gorin quotes Farber in *Routine Pleasures*: “‘Just because you’re an ex-Marxist, don’t feel obliged to start a film with the opening of a toolbox,’ he offered as a warning.” A few minutes later the film shows a man, Chester, opening a toolbox, a scene “thrown in...for Farber’s sake”

two million dollar food disbursement program, an SLA ransom demand that went unfulfilled: another still life. In retrospect it seems likely that my desire to become an art historian pivoted on an unconscious wish to invert Hearst's trajectory—when she took up a gun and donned a beret she attempted (but failed) to step down and distance herself from her own privilege, while I looked to art history as a vehicle to move me up and out of grim childhood circumstances. (Bornstein went to Berkeley, too, as an undergraduate, and so did Farber, for one year.)

Judy Fiskin's *50 Ways to Set a Table* (2003) is another video still life that lingers over subtle distinctions in the presentation of things. In it, she documents the judging of a tablescaping competition at the 2001 Los Angeles County Fair, a phenomenon I did not know existed until I saw her video. Judges discuss the "proper guidelines" for formal dinner place settings and explain their objective standards of historical authenticity (if a table has a Titanic theme, for instance, it better have accurate silverware). The video shows a range of participants—men, women, a variety of ages and races— all linked by their passion for decorative table settings. Who these people are beyond these very gross categorizations I cannot say, for as is true of most subcultures, its codes are hermetic and difficult to read for those on the outside. Fiskin's careful framing shows hands adjusting plates, using tape measures to calibrate spacing. One scorecard emphasizes, tautologically, that "correctness is perfect!" The tables speak to timely trends—there is a whole category devoted to the Lion King—as well as nod to distant eras, including one table set for a Kennedy family Valentine's Day meal in 1961. They are

theorist of connoisseurship and categorization, noting that when things are grouped together for comparison, they take on greater significance than when viewed separately. “When you see them all together,” she states, “you realize how different the designs are.” Bornstein comments that while such apparently ephemeral items as paper cups or sugar packets (she calls them “ephemorabilia”) might appear banal or even invisible to a contemporary audience, in twenty years these items will “really look unique.” I am writing in 2016, 22 years since *Collector’s Favorites*, and the current Starbucks logo no longer matches the one on Bornstein’s cups. The familiar green icon was changed in 2011 with the removal of text that read STARBUCKS COFFEE encircling the mermaid; presumably the words were viewed as redundant given the brand’s hegemonic market saturation and the logo’s maximal visual recognition. The Ebay search I conducted yesterday for “Starbucks 1994” produced 512 listings.

Art history is a discipline obsessed by parsing structures of economic differentiation as they ramify into cultural production—it is conditioned by and predicated upon taste. I did not realize the extent to which a degree in art history has been considered a kind of finishing school for the wealthy when I decided to pursue my PhD. I chose to go to graduate school at UC Berkeley soon after I discovered that Patty Hearst was studying art history there when she was kidnapped from her apartment by the Symbionese Liberation Army. Hearst had been a figure of great scorn and fascination for me as a teenager, as the surveillance camera images of her with a gun and beret seemed to illustrate an impossible nexus of amorphous class betrayal and poseur radical chic. Trucks unloaded cabbages on the streets of West Oakland as part of Randolph Hearst’s

Within the hierarchy of genres, the still life has historically been positioned at the very bottom rung, beneath history scenes, portraits, landscapes, and animal paintings; domestic, modest in scale, tainted by gendered associations of femininity, it hovers dangerously close to falling out of the category of art altogether. Still lives have been understood as depictions of class distinction, with every included element signifying value, acquisition, and status—this expensive cut of meat, these coveted fruits, this fine tablecloth. The still life is thus a gesture of aspiration, straining up against the simultaneous and countervailing pressures that might drag it down into the realm of the low.

In Jennifer Bornstein's video *Collector's Favorites* (1994), the artist appears on a cable-access video program dedicated to collectors discussing their stashes. Rather than vintage cordial glasses or porcelain dolls, Bornstein has assembled an eccentric array of non-material artifacts such as words (i.e. descriptions of coffee flavors) and disposable merchandise, including ziplock bags and every size of cup and pastry bag from Starbucks and Cinnabon. Lined up neatly on shelves and clustered together on display boards, Bornstein's dry goods (many of them vessels slightly stained inside with the trace of the liquids they are meant to hold) are carefully explicated over the course of this video still life, and elevated by virtue of the dignifying rubric of the "collection." The host of the show, Sally Shishmanian, proves herself to be an acute

site schematically aggregates dry goods by way of the negative, as objects that would not be found in a hardware store or a grocery. Dry goods, as opposed one presumes to wet goods, are not perishable, and carry with them the hardy feeling of stuff that might be packed up and put into a wagon for a long journey, things that will endure into the future with minimal care or attention. In fact, to look up “dry goods” in the dictionary is to be drawn down a chain of meaning back into the past, as it is defined in relation to equally dusty terms of yesteryear, including “notions” and “white goods.” The dry goods store conjures a world of textiles and patterns for clothes-making, a world of sundries—various small items too unimportant to single out individually but that might be arranged for display and visual delectation. A world, we might say, of the still life.

As the camera pans slowly over a painting by Farber called *Birthplace--Douglas, Arizona* (1979), Gorin fills out some of the histories of the town and store, mentioning racism against African Americans, copper wars, arson, damaged goods. In this way the film animates the painting, puts it into motion by wandering over the surface teeming with railroad tracks, buildings, cowboys, scrawled notes. It becomes, paradoxically, a moving still life in which we glimpse Farber’s own class mobility -- from son of immigrant shop owners to celebrated critic. Along with its meditation on Farber and his art, *Routine Pleasures* also documents a group of train enthusiasts, all white, all men, none of whom occupy what might be called a particularly high station of privilege or cultural capital. These targets of Gorin’s observation intersect and veer apart; my essay follows his lead.

Dry Goods and Sundries: On the Filmic Still Life

-- Julia Bryan-Wilson

"Emanuel Farber was born in 1917 in Douglas, Arizona, near the Mexican border, where his father ran a dry-goods store."--- William Grimes, *New York Times*, Aug. 19, 2008

"He was born Emanuel Farber on Feb. 20, 1917, in Douglas, Ariz., a copper-mining town near the Mexico border where his Russian Jewish immigrant parents ran a dry goods store. " -- Elaine Woo, *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 19, 2008

"A congenital maverick, Farber was born in an Arizona copper town one mile from the Mexican border. His parents owned a dry-goods store." -- J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*, Aug. 19, 2008

In obituaries and post-mortem assessments of the film critic and artist Manny Farber, details of his early life come in and out of focus. His hometown's location, for instance, often floats next to Mexico in the vague proximity of "nearness," only to be sharply pinpointed by some with an exact measurement of distance from the border—one mile, or even more granularly, five blocks.¹ His parents are often generically named merely as "parents," while in other accounts they are given a more specific ethnic formation: Russian Jewish immigrant. Yet within this descriptive fluctuation, in which some authors zoom in while others zoom out, one phrase remains constant—"dry goods store." The repetition of the antiquated phrase (variably hyphenated) makes it seem as if the obituaries themselves were written in 1917, contemporary to the birth of Farber, rather than in 2008, when the exact contents of such a store are hazy, bewilderingly out of reach. Jean-Pierre Gorin, for his part, sets the biographical pattern into place with his voice-over intoning the facts of Farber's early life in his movie *Routine Pleasures* (1986). He calls Douglas, Arizona a "border town" and refers to Farber's parents as "a couple of dry goods store owners." Noting that the name has "largely disappeared from everyday usage," the Wikipedia

¹ See Robert Polito, "Introduction: Other Roads, Other Tracks," *Farber on Film: The Complete Writings of Manny Farber* (New York: Library of America, 2009), p. TK.

A TABLE OF ADDITIONS

The fundamental dynamic of Gorin's *Routine Pleasures* is a restless diverting of one thing into two, a constant drive toward multiplicity. The film is a switching station, with its momentum defined by detours and digressions rather than forward motion. As a result of this movement, linkages proliferate. Gorin locates his twin subjects—Manny Farber and the “train people” of the Pacific Beach & Western Model Railroad—along parallel tracks that only occasionally intersect. Likewise, Farber the subject never stabilizes as one thing, but rather as Farber the painter and Farber the film critic. And Farber's paintings serve as a model for this switching station routine, all entries and exits without a singular visual focus, even if the ostensible subject of one painting is one named thing—say, an auteur, like Wellman in *Road and Tracks* or the director pair Straub and Huillet in *Thinking about “History Lessons.”* The rail tracks that return again and again as motif in Farber's “Auteur” paintings of the late 1970s and early 1980s are only the most obvious point of intersection. (An unexpected film screening by the train people is another.)

“*Routine Pleasures* is an essay film in which Manny's work plays an essential role and my closer-than-close relationship to him is abundantly evoked,” Gorin explains.

It is not a documentary on Manny (he never appears in it). It is a meditation on method and work, the American landscape, the male imaginary, the high and low of American culture, the materialist nature of artistic imagination, friendship, the endless obsessive pursuit of details... In short, if asked what it is about, I find myself forced to say simply that it is a film about *about*.

About *about*? The engine stutters, stammers, stalls.

As soon as you saw it, it filled the mind. God knows what it went about—its own business, no doubt. What hit you was that it was not simple but not complex either, initially or intentionally complex, or the result of a complex design. More to the point, it had been desimplified as it had been worked on. As it stood, it was a table of additions ... and only finished in as much as there was no way to add anything to it, the table having become more and more an agglomeration, less and less a table ... It could serve no purpose, nothing you could expect of a table ... There was no way to handle it (either physically or mentally). Its surface, the useful part of the table, having been gradually reduced, was disappearing, with so little relation to the clumsy framework that it struck you not as a table, but as something 'other', a contraption for which there was no manual. A dehumanised table, nothing graceful about it, nothing bourgeois, nothing rustic, not a kitchen table, not a work table. It lent itself to no function, it defended itself, it refused to serve or communicate. There was something stunned and petrified about it. It suggested, maybe, a stalled engine.

—Henri Michaux, *The Major Ordeals of the Mind and the Countless Minor Ones*

Farber's conflated landscape-still life paintings, which emerge in the early 1970s, are at once myopic in their bird's eye vantage and utterly expansive in the way they insinuate endless territory beyond all four edges of the picture. Curiously, they arrive at almost the exact time critic and historian Leo Steinberg defines the "flatbed picture plane," with which he specifically identified the combines of Rauschenberg his 1972 essay "Other Criteria"—and with them a shift from painting as a window onto the world to painting as an accumulation of the world, a table of additions:

Any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane—radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man's visual field. And it seemed at times that Rauschenberg's work surface stood for the mind itself—dump, reservoir, switching center, abundant with concrete references freely associated as in an internal monologue—the outward symbol of the mind as a running transformer of the external world, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data to be mapped in an overcharged field.

Here, Steinberg could just as well be describing Farber, with the "dump, reservoir" evoking Farber's frass—those "signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity"—or, for that matter, the "isn't anywhere or for anything" of Laurel and Hardy. The rhizome, like Farber's termite, like Steinberg's flatbed, operates horizontally. Its force is centripetal rather than linear. Farber's paintings represent nothing if not a termite-like *working-through*—a horizontal processing of a film or films (Straub and Huillet's "History Lessons" or Rivette's "Celine and Julie Go Boating") seen projected on the vertical plane. Thought emerges through an engagement with the muck.

is why Jean-Pierre Gorin is so eager to take Farber's termite and hitch it to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome. ("It's an impasse. Nonetheless, we can realize that even an impasse is good if it forms part of the rhizome." [4]) In *Routine Pleasures*, Gorin, following Farber's lead, describes a termite that is indifferent to whether it is devouring the Sistine Chapel or a hangar at the Del Mar fairgrounds. In the essay "The Farber Machine," Gorin and Patrick Amos explicitly position the termite as an embodiment of the rhizome, exemplified by Farber's detail-dense oil on board compositions:

At stake in these paintings is the mapping of his mental processes; and the works' originality holds to his anti-dialectical approach, the pluralist strategies that tend to produce contradictions within the picture, and within each of its gestures, without offering any resolution. In their refusal to coalesce into a single image, their reliance on a cumulative "and ... and ... and" advance, these paintings operate as rhizomatic arrangements, boards that can be entered or exited at any point, where each object in the field functions as a switching device, where ideas of closure and origin seem irrelevant.

Perhaps anticipating Gorin's reading, Deleuze and Guattari's consideration of the "minor literature" of Franz Kafka could just as easily describe a Farber painting of the late 1970s or early 1980s, with its dispersed clutter of ideograms and its network of roads and tracks leading both off and into the picture:

We will enter, then, by any point whatsoever; none matters more than another, and no entrance is more privileged even if it seems an impasse, a tight passage, a siphon. We will be trying only to discover what other points our entrance connects to, what crossroads and galleries one passes through to link two points, what the map of the rhizome is and how the map is modified if one enters by another point. Only the principle of multiple entrances prevents the introduction of the enemy, the Signifier and those attempts to interpret a work that is actually only open to experimentation." [3]

I am amused whenever I return to this formulation—in part because it's typically bravura writing by Farber, but mostly because I can't read the phrase "signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity" and not think of the termite shit that accumulates around the doors and windows of my Los Angeles apartment, materially equal in scale to the holes that appear and expand in those same locations. A few years ago I learned the term "frass," which was a museum registrar's polite term for termite waste. (It had appeared around an infested sculpture, much to the horror of said registrar.) Apparently the word is borrowed from German *Frass*, which in the noun form means something like muck but in the verb form, *frassen*, translates roughly as eating (away).

It's doubtful Farber considered the full implications of his termite terminology (despite his certain familiarity with them in his work as a carpenter, but perhaps it's useful to think of him outlining an All-American cousin to Bataille's *l'informe* or even a precursor to Smithson's notion of entropy that he promotes in the mid to late 1960s. Farber's push for the termite celebrates a kind of negative economy, one marked by squandering rather than progress. (It hardly matters that Laurel and Hardy never get the antenna installed.) It's an economic model that is seemingly at odds with the narrative of modernist progress, though it imagines squandering as a kind of productivity that is potentially useful to an artist.

In hindsight, it seems more than obvious that the very qualities Farber sought in the movie theater—boundary-eating among them—were analogous to those he would pursue in his painting studio as well. The termite tendency, as Farber concluded his 1962 essay, is a "buglike immersion in a small area without point or aim, and, over all, concentration on nailing down one moment without glamorizing it, but forgetting this accomplishment as soon as it has been passed; the feeling that all is expendable, that it can be chopped up and flung down in a different arrangement without ruin."

The termite's work is simultaneously subtractive and additive. The "product," however, is not found in the end state (which may never arrive) but in its ceaseless becoming. Which

still chewing, laying the groundwork for the termite in 1959—with the review's title, "Underground Magic, Eccentric Vitality and Artful Direction Salvage Banal Stories," rather humorously summing up his critical agenda:

"Since every film is the product of an agglomeration of technicians who are situated in different spots of the universe in relation to art, business and talent, the real fascination of a movie isn't the sum total of esthetic effects, but the underground channels created by each artist pursuing his path." [UMEVADSBS, 512]

Even with the "underground" action films of Hawks, Wellman, and Mann that he loved, Farber's interest as a critic wasn't focused on the protagonists of those films bringing the narrative to its conclusion in heroic fashion, but rather on the corny look of Cary Grant's pants, belted just below his armpits, in Hawks's airplane adventure *Only Angels Have Wings*, or the "hoboish spirit" of John Wayne, and his "bitter-amused counterpoint to the pale, neutral film life around him" in John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Vallance*.

It should be no surprise, then, that in the years after writing "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art," Farber would swing his antennae in the direction of avant-garde cinema: toward the glacially slow zoom of Michael Snow's *Wavelength*, or the "impoverishment" of the critically-conjoined underground entity of Kuchar-Warhol—"so impoverished," according to Farber, "that it gives the spectator the kind of disenchantment, sordidness, feverish wastage that no other movie even suggests." [EF, 597] It's not that Farber wants to extol the virtues of lassitude—inertia is one of his terms of certain damnation, one that we might associate with the gilt culture of the White Elephant. No, his termite keeps busy, constantly in motion, even if whatever it's doing is a kind of undoing: "A peculiar fact about the termite-tapeworm-fungus-moss art," he notes, "is that it goes always forward eating its own boundaries, and, likely as not, leaves nothing in its path other than the signs of eager, industrious, unkempt activity."

The slight inflection on the word “help” signals everything that will happen in the next fifteen minutes—which is to say the remainder of the film. Ollie knows what’s in store and, resigned, still enlists his buddy in the effort. We wouldn’t have it any other way. The antenna is never installed, of course, but before the movie is over Ollie falls off the roof three times—once with Stan in tow—landing in the fountain; Ollie’s ass is set on fire; Stan is hit in the head with a falling hammer, twice; the chimney collapses; and the car, out of Stan’s control with Ollie held aloft from it on a precarious ladder, careens into town before getting pancaked between two trollies. It’s not hard to see why Farber enjoyed the film so much—perhaps all the more so from his vantage as a former member of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners.

Farber coined “termite art” in 1962, along with a number of conjunctive variants, but the phrase emerged from the critic’s value system—if that’s the right way to put it—that was already invested in tunneling. In his “Underground Film” essay, written five years earlier, Farber predicts that “[...] any day now, Americans may realize that scrambling after the obvious in art is a losing game. The sharpest work of the last thirty years is to be found by studying the most unlikely, self-destroying, uncompromising, roundabout artists...”

The films of the Hawks-Wellman group are underground for more reasons than the fact that the director hides out in subsurface reaches of his work. The hard bitten action film finds its natural home in caves: the murky, congested theaters, looking like glorified tattoo parlors on the outside and located near bus terminals in big cities.” [UF, 489]

If “the obvious in art” predicts the White Elephant to come, the phrase “self-destroying, uncompromising, roundabout” would likewise anticipate the termite—akin to what Evan Calder Williams would many years later, in his *Roman Letters*, call “the slow consumptive engulfing that is a doing-in of things for the sake of it.” What is Farber’s writing—really, the ongoing work of *any* critic—if not a termite’s version of progress? Here he is again,

FRASS AND PROGRESS

The termite gnaws and gnaws—but to what end?

In his “White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art” essay, published in *Film Culture* in 1962, Manny Farber tantalizes with his provocative introduction of the termite, but provides surprisingly few examples of the tendency. Most—like “the team of Howard Hawks and William Faulkner operating on the first half of Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*”—are fragmented specimens, and not fully explained. Perhaps the most useful example Farber provides is the termite-like performance of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy in that pair’s *Hog Wild* (1930). “Good work,” suggests Farber, “usually arises where the creators... seem to have no ambition toward the gilt culture but are involved in a kind of squandering-beaverish that isn’t anywhere or for anything.”

The phrase “squandering-beaverish” sticks in my teeth as I watch the disastrous duo attempt to install a radio antenna on the roof of Ollie’s Culver City house. Stan pulls up in his jalopy just as Ollie is midway up the ladder. Unable to scare up a whistle, Laurel blasts the horn, and Hardy comes crashing down, obliterating the ladder in the process. As if nothing happened, begin talking—picking up wherever they left off.

Stan: I thought you were going to meet me.

Ollie: I was. (Pause.) But I’ve got to put the aerial up. (Pause.) Mrs. Hardy wants to get Japan.

Stan: Gee, I’d like to hear Japan, too. Do you mind if I help you?

Ollie: I don’t mind. (Pause.) That is, if you’ll *help* me.

Squandering is consumption without owning it and it is the enemy of progress which wants all things to be progress without the swerve. Nothing to offer or to be taken away, nothing worth holding back or protecting indeed, a holding of nothing. But it is the fact which demands the fiercest protection and holding, which is not a right to squander, not the right to be lazy and not do, but the slow consumptive engulfing that is a doing-in of things for the sake of it, a simpler violence to value and conservation, a wasting of time that could not have been otherwise and that, un-dreadfully, was not.

—Evan Calder Williams, *Roman Letters*