



What Was She Thinking? Some Reflections on Avital Ronell's "What Was I Thinking"?

Daryl Chin, 29 June 2010

When I was growing up, there were certain books which really galvanized me, making me think that critical writing was as richly evocative as any other kind of writing. One such book was Susan Sontag's *Against Interpretation*; it was so inspiring that I rushed out to get her second collection of essays, *Styles of Radical Will*, the minute it was published. (I still have the hardcover, though the jacket has long since disintegrated.) But then I read her novels, *The Benefactor* and *Death Kit*, and I was stumped. I couldn't understand how someone with such a keen, critical mind could turn out such... crap. Soon after, I remember reading Gore Vidal's review of her novels in *The New York Review of Books*, in which he explained how the analytic sense and the intellectual enthusiasm, which made Sontag such a formidable essayist, were not the same as the imaginative and emotional qualities needed for a novelist. He noted that Sontag was one of the few American writers well-acquainted with the most recent developments in European literature, but ticking off the influences (a little Sarraute here, a dollop of Robbe-Grillet there, Tomasso Landolfi coming in during the final stretch) wasn't the same as being transported into the imaginative realm of the aesthetic.

I had a flashback to Susan Sontag's novels (I fear I never did think Sontag overcame her limitations as a novelist, she simply bloated her faults to epic proportions in *The Volcano Lover* and *In America* after seeing Avital Ronell's performance *What Was I Thinking?*, at the HAU 2 on Saturday, 19 June 2010. It's too easy to quip, "What was she thinking?" but it's actually not too difficult to understand.

When I heard the name Avital Ronell, I remembered the period of the late 1960s through the early 1980s when feminism was such an important part of the art world. There were several journals which attempted to create a critical context for feminist art, among them *The Feminist Art Journal*, *Heresies*, and *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*. There were performance artists whose work tried to provide a feminist perspective; that was the period of the W.O.W Cafe, of collectives such as Split Britches, and artists such as Julia Heyward, Christa Maiwald, Adrian Piper, Jill Kroesen, and Karen Finley. Often, their work was inchoate, messy, quite explosive; no matter how "cool" their presentation was, the emotions fueling that work were powerfully present, often emerging from hurt, injury and rage. Older artists, such as Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, and Hannah Wilke, had worked from their

sense of isolation, which became an ironic but nevertheless angry acknowledgement of the exclusionary practices of the patriarchal art world. During the 1970s, Avital Ronell established herself as a performance artist, and her work had an explicit art-critical agenda. Her work was highly articulated in its absolute critique of patriarchal structures. And she published essays in several of the feminist art publications, in which she attempted to deconstruct the practices of the art world, to reveal the hidden sexism behind the determination of value and its ties to late capitalist decadence.

So when I heard that Avital Ronell was coming to Berlin to perform, there was a sense of excitement. She had spent two decades in academia, where she had written several books, which were witty and often densely theoretical treatises which riffed on Derrida and Lacan. How would she mark her return to performance? I was reminded of Adrian Piper, who also took time off from her performance career to pursue advanced degrees; when Adrian Piper returned to performance, both the rage and the political critique became more pronounced, but in order to present the work without hysteria, Piper provided frameworks which were highly formalized. And when Adrian Piper returned to performance (she had taken the time to get a PhD in philosophy, and had taught after that), the political dimensions of her work had expanded, as the implications of racism had become overt. To be it simply: when Adrian Piper had started doing performance, no one had ever suggested that her work was “inferior” because she was not white. In the 1970s, when she began her performance career, the network within which performance artists worked was necessarily limited. In the 1980s, the network had expanded, and included Europe, and it became important to be able to tour in Europe in order to have a professional career as a performance artist. For Adrian Piper, the confrontation with European presenters became exactly that: a confrontation, because people meeting her would often question why so much of her work seemed to reference African-American culture, and she would respond with why was it assumed that she was white. And once it was known that she was not white, invitations were rescinded. So she faced racism in a way she had never faced it before, and this tipped her work from anger into rage. But since Piper is very much a formalist artist, that rage was contained in pieces that were always tightly controlled.

I bring up Piper because her career has many parallels to the career of Avital Ronell, except that once Ronell returned to academia, she continued in that arena. Her books have been about her attempt to find out how deconstruction and post-structuralism can be applied in situations of extremity, such as trauma and hysteria, as well as in situations of domesticity. I had no idea what I was expecting from her performance, but what I saw was so enervated and dispirited that I was dumbfounded.

Though there were elements which hinted at theatricality (Tatjana Mesar, the flutist, on stage; the appearance of Laurence Rickels in drag; the usage of projected images), the center of the performance was Avital Ronell's reading from an oversized book. The recondite jokes about German philosophy and post-structuralism suggested the kind of post-graduate humor that is too clever by half. (Ok, I admit it, I started laughing when Ronell's jokes started, but I soon stopped when I realized no one else in the audience was laughing.) It was all so fey and cute, but as Ronell droned on, I began to wonder why she was sitting there. I admired her self-possession as a performer: she's very smooth, and she doesn't seem to ruffle easily. She can read on, very even tempered, and never break into a higher or lower register. The presentation wasn't so much anti-theatrical (which would have suggested an antithetical relationship, and, hence, some emotional impetus) as it was academicized. And, yes, we did learn what she was thinking: delicate little jabs at Heidegger and Derrida, but nothing so serious as to puncture the pretensions of those pundits, and certainly nothing which would up-end the inherent patriarchal bias in their work.

And that's why I thought back to Susan Sontag's career as a novelist: Avital Ronell was presenting a lecture as a performance. That's fine. Many people have done that. (In fact, I've done that.) But there was no emotion in her performance: she presented herself as this dispassionate observer, but she never presented herself as a subject. She told us what she thought about post-structuralism, but she never gave any indication as to why we should care. We knew what she was thinking, but not what she was feeling. Without that, there was no reason to present this work as a performance. Yvonne Rainer once discussed her films, with the preponderance of verbal information (both written and spoken) which was a hallmark of her style; she cautioned that the use of words must be judicious, because if the verbiage is removed from its emotional affect, as Rainer put it, better the audience should stay home and read a book. Avital Ronell was presenting a performance in which she was reading a book. Better we should have stayed home and read a book.