

“Short Circuits of Desire:” Language and Power in Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* Clara Escoda Agustí

In *Attempts on Her Life*, Martin Crimp’s most experimental play to date, a series of actors try to represent a woman called Anne, and by so doing, they engage in a process of constructing and recreating a contemporary subjectivity. Anne is both the central figure and the absent figure around which the play centres, insofar as the audience does not have a referent against which to contrast the actors’ verbal constructions. Neither are the actors defined as characters, since their lines do not offer any glimpses into their personalities. These structural devices are employed so that language and its ideological representations of human beings and social relations may be foregrounded.

The actors, then, construct the mystery of Anne’s identity verbally, through improvisation, and in so doing, they lay bare the different discursive possibilities contained in the telling of a story. They make visible the different ideological twists and turns that discourse and representation can take, and depict how speakers activate and choose among a set of ideological positions as they construct meaning. Anne is fragmented into seventeen different aspects of herself, or into seventeen different women (a terrorist, a suicide artist, a porn actress) and things (a car, an ashtray). The ultimate aim of such a multiplicity of perspectives is, I will argue, to unfix discourse and to prove there is no single way of telling a story, a thesis that stands in sharp opposition to the context of global politics the play directly challenges. In this sense, the play is not the story of a character, as the title at first suggests, but the story of a process of identity construction. Indeed, the play not only encourages the audience to think that Anne might be more than one character, but also to conceive the absence of any specific “real” subjectivity at the heart of the play, reducing “Anne’s” real identity to that of a linguistic artifice, with no external “reality” or fixed subject position. This article argues that the

play dramatizes the construction of a fictitious subject through the regulatory and sanctioning role of language. At the same time, however, the play responds to the creation of archetypes through specific strategies of resistance (by dramatizing an actor's collapse, for example), and through deconstructive, linguistic disruptions that appear throughout the play.

These strategies aim at making evident the social mechanisms of subjectification or of the creation of subjects in and through discourse, exerted through disciplinary devices. As Miguel Morey affirms in his introduction to Michel Foucault's conversations on power, *Un diálogo sobre el poder y otras conversaciones*, repression and ideology are only power's most extreme manifestations: "the constant of power is that it is exerted through a technical transformation of individuals ... In our societies, the technical transformation of individuals—this production of the real—receives the name of normalisation. It is the modern form of bondage" (11).¹

In the same vein, Foucault affirms in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that discourses are not mere "groupings of signs, of signifying elements which remit to contents or representations, but practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak" (81). If discourses which fix significations (and thus, exert power) are socially accepted, then we can speak of institutionalized forms of power and of identity construction. When the actors talk about "Anne," every register they use in order to do so (song, Shakespearean quotations, the mythologized language that turns her into an icon, the list goes on) is a form of power through which her fiction is created. The subjective fiction the actors create is, therefore, an assemblage of different layers of affectation, and the supposed subject that emerges is the conjunction of these layers.

In this context, "Anne," the absent protagonist, is a registering surface on which processes of identity construction are inscribed, both when these processes are successful and when they enter into crisis, which is expressed through various forms of collapse. Collapse represents, in this case, a refusal to accept the masking of deep class and gender divisions by the neo-liberal ideology, particularly through the objectification and exploitation/violation of women. The appearance of the irrational, which is socially considered in terms of loss of lucidity or mental clarity,

is a political strategy in and of itself. Working, as it were, like a chemical reaction in a stable system, collapse breaks the code through which ideology and language are allied in order to normalize individuals.

Other, perhaps more marginal strategies, are a series of lines of flight, or contradictions, that appear at key moments in the actors' discourses and that manifest the crisis of discourse—the actors' inability to be tutored and moulded by an overriding view. These disruptions, which Crimp presents under the form of linguistic “ready-mades,” unveil meanings within the actors' discourse aimed precisely at occluding and keeping veiled, making explicit the disposition of language to act as a tool for domination. These “slips of the tongue” give the play its character of literary pastiche; they are a device to express, precisely, the fragmentation of the subject into layers of subjectification and to show that it is not an essential subject, but that it is constituted in and through language. Crimp takes these ready-mades from the field of the plastic arts and places them in the context of the theatre, introducing crises within discourse, manifesting it as a device of control, normalization and discipline. Finally, Crimp introduces instances of Concrete Poetry, as in the episode “Untitled (A 100 Words),” which includes a listing of concepts and images that work like a liberated flow of expression. Concrete Poetry delineates a type of subjectivity that is non-attributive, and which is typographically situated at the margins of the page/discourse. Through it, Crimp suggests a minimal, alternative, ethical code of values that subverts the canon of the liberal humanist subject which has been discredited by the processes of crisis and indeterminacy that are disseminated throughout the play. These openings into poetic language bring issues such as honesty, authenticity and social commitment to the fore, engaging the audience with the possibility of change.

The language through which Anne is imagined and described derives from institutional and media discourses of television and cinema, since what the actors imagine as plausible, as consensual, is always media-induced. As David Edgar summarizes in *State of Play*, “Crimp's purpose is not only to question whether we can truly know another human being, but whether we can regard other people as existing at all independent of the models we construct of them” (31). By the characters' comments,

it can be inferred that, although the play is a mosaic of viewpoints, a collage, each of these viewpoints is enmeshed in the materialist and unequal values of late capitalist society. This has led Mary Luckhurst, in “Political Point-Scoring: Martin Crimp Attempts on Her Life,” to identify the characters as being, possibly, “a gaggle of art critics, sinister interrogators, border guards and accusers, advertisers, salespersons and corporate executives, showbiz entertainers, inexplicably authoritative narrators, apparent sexual abusers, friends and lovers” (50). That is, they represent a wide spectrum of society but mostly those positions that uphold and perpetuate the present order. In reproducing a neo-liberal ideology and not being able, or willing, to contest it, they repeatedly block out and truncate the disruptive possibilities of discourse, the very openings they had begun to sketch. In this light, Anne’s absence becomes a structural device to represent what each of the episodes that compose the play dramatize individually: the repression or the direct absence of social values that are, instead, commodified.

I. “A Genuine Enough Smile”

In the episode “Faith in Ourselves” Anne, here called Anya, is recreated as, possibly, a Third World woman who lives in a village that represents the inverse of Western society—“life is so *felt*,” and “trees have names” (12). Thus, the actors anticipate the likely invasion and subjection of the territory by Western military forces, as the “soldiers stand by” the atrocities “laughing” (13). In this case, the actors do empathize with Anya, but the feeling of empathy almost automatically finds expression in a narcissistic disposition. Empathy, which implies a relationship between self and other, remains within the self in order to humanize it, but again, is utterly divorced from any act of assistance. Furthermore, it implies not a plurality of individuals but each individual separately: “it’s a universal thing which strangely . . . which strangely restores” (16). This narcissistic attitude legitimizes many Western governments’ attempts to transform acts of colonization and domination into interventions of apparent and supposed “solidarity,” since the civilization that has the power to “look” believes itself to be superior to the one that is “observed.” George W. Bush’s “War on Terror” is founded on this same conceptual confusion. The occupa-

tion of a poor nation is understood from a narcissistic perspective; it is an inherent right of Western civilization in its goal to export "human" and "democratic" values on these territories for their "own good."

Crimp argues that the same narcissism which makes individuals live as though performing for a pervasive camera (which works both to control their most defiant attitudes and to extol their most insignificant ones in order to perpetuate specific social models of behaviour) also shapes social relations at an international level. The aforementioned confusion is sustained and encouraged by mass media itself, which distorts the images and the messages of such a reality. The social context that promotes the structures of domination denounced by Crimp's play is very similar, despite the temporal distance that separates both contexts, to the one described by Guy Debord in his work *Society of the Spectacle*. What Crimp denounces, among other things, is the fact that, "as information or propaganda, as advertisement or direct entertainment consumption, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life" (Debord 6). Indeed, such an affirmation implies that language, subjectivity and social relations exist within the media model of representation, which is based on material accumulation to the point that individuals become a fetish, on "*capital* to such degree of accumulation that [they become] an image" (Debord 34). Debord explains that "the spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation amongst people, mediated by images" (4). And these social relations, according to Crimp, isolate people both from themselves and from other individuals. The actors express feelings of emptiness that derive from these structures. They make "Anne" say as a child: "I feel like a T.V. screen . . . where everything from the front looks real and alive, but round the back there's just dust and a few cables" (24). Indeed, individuals sometimes feel the inability to act for this narcissistic "eye" that governs social relationships, since forcing oneself to do so implies a certain degree of violence. They would like to become pure action, not consciousness, in order to fit in. Evoking Hollywood-movie referents, they suggest that Anne would like to become a machine herself, "like a pistol or a treadle sewing-machine . . . a television/ or a car" (25). Thus, in episode five, called "The Camera Loves You," the actors turn Anne into a commodity, fetishizing her as the object that fills them with all kinds of

narcissistic satisfactions. Such modes of relation are obviously followed by the anxious need for reassurance that the system of relationships the spectacle sets on is indeed solid and real, not just a simulacrum: “we need to feel what we’re seeing is real. It isn’t just acting ... we’re talking reality. We’re talking humanity” (20).

The politics that emerge out of this new context governed by narcissism and the distorted use of the media favours the development of a new kind of power exerted upon individuals. In post-capitalism we no longer speak of disciplinary societies, but of societies of control. The discipline that was applied to bodies in order to make them “docile,” as Foucault has theorized, the systematic violation of identities, is no longer enacted at in individual and silent manner. It now involves the masses and it is becoming increasingly public. Disciplinary societies have become more sophisticated through the emergence of technologies for the control of individuals. Television and the media in general do not just domesticate and produce “docile bodies”; they mostly control their stimuli, their reactions and their movements. In this context, it is no longer useful to prevent a body from acting, but it is useful to control how and where it acts, in order to foresee and mediate its future attitudes. Gilles Deleuze explains the change that has taken place from disciplinary societies to societies of control in his book *Conversations*:

It is not simply a technological evolution, it is a profound mutation of capitalism ... 19th century capitalism is a capitalism of concentration, both regarding production and property ... In the present situation, capitalism no longer concentrates on production, which is often relegated to Third World periphery ... It is a capitalism of products, sales or markets ... A market can be conquered only when one acquires its control, not through a discipline, only when one can set the prices, not through lowering the costs of production. (281–84)

Societies of control, then, acting through software machines and computers, must now face the risks of interferences. The dramatization of collapse, working like an interference that disrupts a tightly controlled machinery of power, allows Crimp to point to precisely the drawbacks

of such a society and economic structure. He destabilizes a system that leaves three quarters of the population in extreme poverty, and produces ghettos of marginality within itself.

Crimp employs postmodern techniques, like the recourse to collapse, together with other forms of short-circuiting the integrity of the text. However, he maintains a distance from some forms of postmodernism which, as many postmodern authors have been accused, align themselves with neo-liberal thought and *laissez-faire* politics. Crimp's use of irony is related to scepticism, and thus, it can then be considered to be more modern than postmodern, in that it attempts to discriminate right from wrong and to maintain a basic set of values grounded on honesty and commitment.

II. "She can work, she will work, she won't work"

In the episode "The New Annie" one of the actors stands alone on stage and begins to produce a commercial of a car called Annie. Anne is, in this case, reified and portrayed as an object that will satisfy every wish: "it hugs the bends between the picturesque hillside villages ... and the sun gleams on her aerodynamic body" (30). Yet despite the apparent ease in which wealth is conjured in the media imagination, in some stage productions² this discourse is delivered by a woman who loses her temper. Indeed, she senses a context governed by binary oppositions which construct privilege, and which portray women in particular, as bearers of male fantasies of wealth and status, leaving them devoid of any subjective traits.

The speaking female figure thus becomes increasingly nervous, her behaviour increasingly mechanized, as it is made more obvious that she is not identifying with the words: "The back seat is never made slippery by sperm ... slippery by blood ... slippery by beer ... slippery by saliva ... or sticky by melted chocolate" (34). Then she realizes melted chocolate in itself is a marketable concept and feels compelled to exploit it: "melted chocolate. Yum yum yum" (34). The narrator becomes hysterical as she senses the commercial's fascist implications, and her loss of control ironically exaggerates them and brings them to light, exposing "the subconscious of capitalist ideology" (Zimmermann 121).

If the emissary collapses, indeed, so does the commercial, and through the woman's hysteria, the media's own "madness" becomes visible: "there are no filthy gypsies in the Anny ... there is no room in the Anny for the degenerate races ... for the mentally deficient ... or the physically imperfect..." (33). Her increasing loss of control produces a rupture with Western concepts of happiness, luxury and identity, which are intimately tied with processes of exclusion and reification of individuals.

These concepts, such as happiness and family, when defined in terms of exclusion and status imply a certain exercise of violence, which is perpetrated upon individuals, whether they are beneficiaries or victims. From this point of view, these concepts act as a violation, interpellating individuals and forcing them, as in a rape, to become what they are supposed to be (object of pleasure/object of meaning). Thus, the play's seventeen episodes are in themselves examples of how language and interpretation can violate individuals (Leggat 1–7). As we shall see, interpretation and violation are linked in the play's gestures against the integrity of individuals and of women in particular.

The identification between the violence of language and the act of violation reaches a paroxysmal extreme in the penultimate episode "Pornó." This episode seems to be the one to which all others lead, in terms of how enforcement of identities result in extreme power inequalities. The distortions effected on the integrity of subjects which have been taking place in each of the episodes, build up to this final event where a scene of translation/interpretation is directly equalled with rape.

In this episode, the attempts to "mediatize" the subject by making it absorb roles imposed from outside come to a crisis. "Pornó" portrays a resisting body who argues that she "can't" (9) go on interpreting a script supposedly handed down to her by the media establishment. That is, she refuses to assist and participate to her own violation. In the episode, a woman of "fourteen perhaps or younger still" (65) is forced to justify her involvement with porn by arguing it is a feminist, subversive choice—when it is clear that the play uses porn as an example of the objectification that turns women into docile bodies designed to perpetuate established power inequalities.

The studio is technologically very advanced, disposing of a simultaneous translation set which translates word for word what this “very young” speaker is saying. As the stage directions clearly indicate: “*The principal speaker is a very young woman. As she speaks, her words are translated dispassionately into an African, South American, or Eastern European language*” (65). The discourse belongs to an apparently globalized society, where geographical distances are instantaneously overcome. Yet the woman’s discourse is designed to perpetuate the gender, class and racial inequalities that are a product of such a globalized society, since her decision to engage with porn is put down to practical reasons or turned into ‘feminist’ slogans:

-Porno...
-[translation]
-...is actually a way of taking control.
-[translation]
-Porno...
[translation]
-is actually the reverse of what it seems
[translation]
-Because rather than *consuming* the images...
[translation]
-...she is producing them.
-[translation] (67)

It is clear that the discourse attempts to attract young women to porn in order to perpetuate the business of female exploitation in Third World countries. In this context of globalization, exploitation can be transmitted to every corner of the world. The will to globalize should extend to include categories such as “productivity” and “growth”—considered progressive and universal—to poorer countries as well. The text, however, proves that they are, in reality, restricted patriarchal categories that are not being extended. Translation is, indeed, a mode of interpretation. Furthermore, in this case what is being interpreted is a message that has already been distorted and which contains an ideological bias. In the theatrical context, when the audience watches and hears the play, most

will not understand the language of translation, increasing the opacity and the sense of manipulation of what is taking place.

Translating can be understood, consequently, to be a form of violation in cases where it forces a specific perspective of events that is considered to be politically or strategically fitting. It implies a forcing of the cultural and linguistic intimacy of the country to which translations are sent. This form of violation is, however, more institutionally established than the one that implies a physical action upon bodies, even though a process like the symbolic violence in Crimp's play also affects bodies.

Class restrictions and material determinants are being masked and erased. As Luckhurst puts it, the episode functions to denounce, "market economies which represent woman's sexuality as a commodity. ... The exploitation of women, both institutionally and internationally, with corporate mentalities implicated before anyone else" (54–55). Indeed, in her discourse, the girl is made to sell porn as a valid way of life: "That is for her one of the beauties of Porno" (67):

- Everything is provided for her needs. Including a regular education.
- [translation]
- By age twenty-one the best years of her life will still be ahead of her...
- [translation]
- ...*and* she'll have money in the bank from Porno.
- [translation]
- Not everyone has this start in life.
- [translation]
- Or her opportunities.
- [translation]. (69)

Foucault explains how subjects are produced through discourse from a series of relationships that are established between

institutions, economic and social processes, modes of behaviour, systems of rules ... modes of classification, modes of characterisation. And these relations are not present in the object

... they don't define its internal constitution, but only allow the object to appear juxtaposed to other objects, to situate it in relation to them, to define its particular difference, and ... in short, to situate the object on a field of exteriority. (*Archaeology* 63–64)

Just as physical violence objectifies the victim through direct aggression upon her own body (as it is understood merely as a tool for pleasure) symbolic violence also objectifies its victims. Yet it does not accomplish this by having a direct effect on their flesh and skin, but rather on their behaviour, which is understood as a representation of their social identity. These symbolic “marks” discourse produces on individuals are dramatized in the text as acts of violation, because they are characterized by imposition and enforcement, and they are a unilateral action of interpretation and subjectification aimed at creating social roles, and therefore, identities. Physical violation is a unilateral act, a “masturbation” inside the body of another individual—the deposition of the aggressor's identity on the body of the victim. Such an act, however, seems to acquire meaning only after the victim has been “marked” by a lesion. As Foucault puts it: “violation is not orgasmic. It is a kind of fast masturbation on the body of another. It is not sexual. It is a lesion” (qtd. in Morey 128). In the same manner, an act of power “marks” individuals leaving its own register. It is a linguistic type of violation and it creates discourses through language, through interpretation. For the aggressor, a non-subjectified identity is like a non-interpreted text. In the same manner, for a sexual aggressor, a body that has not been forced is like a body without sexuality.

Even though the episode seems at first to develop just as the previous ones, that is, as a reassertion and superimposition of the dominant ideology, this woman's tightly controlled and prepared discourse begins to fall apart, to encounter interferences. The dislocation that is being performed on this woman's identity produces a collapse of meaning. The weakness of such a system—constructed from appearances, demonstrations of power, and make-believe—manifests itself at the moment when it feels compelled to prove its veracity, its truth. At this specific

moment, the whole setting experiences an unpredicted response, a line of flight, in which this woman's language reaches collapse, unable to sustain the masquerade: "It's actually far more exacting than acting—for the simple reason that it's really happening. [translation]. *A pause. She seems to have forgotten what to say and looks for a prompt*" (66). Through her verbal collapse the woman's need for a prompt becomes more and more obvious, producing a disintegration of the carefully crafted discourse: "(*prompt*) She enjoys her work./What?/ (*more emphatic prompt*) She enjoys her work ... *Momentary confusion. But then another voice takes over ... It should not be clear whether she's suffering stage-fright or true distress*" (68–69).

In this scene, Crimp himself, as the dramatist, challenges the audience to abandon the kind of society he is recreating. It is as though he would voice, through this woman, his disagreement with what he is portraying: "I can't" (69). In this light, Anne's absence throughout the play comes to embody the need for alternatives that are being suppressed, which "can't" actually exist and find a road towards expression.

The woman's collapse represents a sudden liberation of desire; it expresses women's refusal to become a conduit for exploitative ideologies, to become "docile" bodies. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari talk about the objectification of human beings and the irruption that collapse represents within a disciplinary setting in *El anti edipo [Anti Oedipus]*:

Technical machines do not work, obviously, but with the condition that they may not be out of order. Desiring machines, on the other hand, cannot stop being out of order when they are set to work, they do not work but under the condition of being out of order. Art often uses this property by short-circuiting social production with a desiring production. They introduce a function of permanent failure in their reproduction of technical machines. (17)

Indeed, collapse is an instance of a break-through of desire that transforms the reproductive and docile "machine" into a liberated entity.³ The only way in which it can truly function is by subverting the idea of "maximum efficiency" that the dominant, common-sense ideology im-

poses. Collapse undermines the disciplinary setting from within, since the translator “*remains impassive*” (Crimp 69) and keeps translating her collapse; that is, her rejection of the values she is being forced to transmit. As Crimp puts it: “*Pause*. I can't [translation of ‘I can't’] *Pause*. I can't. [translation of ‘I can't’]” (69). This episode liberates the desire that in the rest of the scenes is tightly controlled or made docile. Indeed, “Anne” is either made to interiorize the destructiveness of oppression as she resorts to violence (as it is told, she becomes a terrorist or a suicidal performance artist), or she simply gives in (her body reified as a car).

Foucault emphasizes the political aspects of “madness,” or of loss of mental lucidity, in *Madness and Civilization*. Madness mirrors the process of ideology, its arbitrary construction and assignment of truth-value: “madness is profoundly rooted in imagination, for it consists merely in allowing the image a spontaneous value, total and absolute truth” (94). In *Anti Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari imagine subjectivity as the mechanisms which are hierarchized and attempt to perpetuate privilege and hierarchies—the “body without organs”—or the body which resists being regulated and “opposes its slippery, opaque and soft surface; to the tied fluxes, connected and trimmed, it opposes its amorphous and undifferentiated fluids” (18). They add: “there is no fixed subject but by repression” (34). It is in this sense that Anne’s collapse, in the liberation of desire it implies, confronts hierarchical structures through the absence of production, with an anarchic body for which it does not have a code.

Those in power seek to extract profit from mechanizing individuals. The fact that the translation is immediate and that the discourse reaches all the parts of the world instantly is also a sign of its potency and effectiveness. As Foucault puts it in *Discipline and Punish*, it is “as if ... one could tend towards an ideal point at which one maintained maximum speed and maximum efficiency” (154). Even medical institutions, Crimp states, perpetuate disciplinary control, reaching the innermost parts of an individual. In “Mum and Dad” it is explained that, as a child with incontinence, (suggesting the implications of fear of growing up in a violent society) Anne was taken to the doctor who asked her to “pull down her knickers on the high cold leather ... ‘Let’s take a look

then, Anne, /shall we?” (38). And then she came back home “with a box ... two stiff squares of metal gauze and a number/ of black wires” (38). Crimp’s description contains all the signs of a society that, traversing “all points and supervising every instant ... compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*” (Foucault, *Discipline* 183). And Foucault continues, “the examination is the technique by which power, instead of emitting the signs of its potency, of imposing its mark on its subjects, holds them in a mechanism of objectification” (187). Paradoxically, this is a process of subjectification, equivalent to the one the actors carry out with the child they call “Anne,” as they “examine” her in order to make her comprehensible as an identity. The forms of representation and identification of contemporary society are inherited from a model of clinical examination.

Crimp has similarly dramatized collapse in his later play *Face to the Wall* (2002), in order to question discourses that legitimize violence. In this case, it is not a direct reaction to the violence of exploitation, but it continues to denounce society’s imposition of external, mediated identities; in particular, Hollywood cinema discourses which portray violence as an essential constituent of status and masculinity and which, therefore, glamorize it. In the play, a number of people try to describe a mass murder that has taken place at a school. A man has barged into a classroom in an outburst of violence and has arbitrarily killed the children. Strikingly, however, the characters do not qualify the act as deranged or unbalanced, rather, influenced by video-games and gangster films where violence is a way of manifesting male status, they begin to portray the murderer as a hero. Yet one of them suddenly begins to fail and, being in need of a prompt, he keeps repeating: “you saw what happened to child C—yes—no—*pause*. Don’t help me” (15). The conflict the actor experiences with this type of discourse becomes more and more apparent, until he clearly stops talking, breaking the flow of normal discourse, paralyzing it: “Cunt. Cunt. Little cunt. I said don’t help me. *Long pause*” (15). His collapse creates an indeterminacy that makes visible the possibility that the story might be told otherwise. Indeed, after a void has been left in the conversation, another voice takes over: “so he is not a sympathetic character” (15). By now, the discourse has developed into a

discussion on the limits of empathy. Language has become a liberating medium that is no longer connected with aggression against others or against the speaking subject itself but with ideas of "truth" and "honesty" to the self, leading to the possibility of change:

3-We can't feel for him

1-No

3-Cry for him

1-No

3-He's never suffered ... Experienced war. (15)

Through the questions, Crimp is participating in a dialogue with other dramatists, such as Caryl Churchill in *Far Away* (2000). In Churchill's play, an apparently isolated episode of violence in one part of the world finally appears to be connected with general world violence, in a dystopia where issues of world interconnectedness or division are being set to debate. Both Crimp's and Churchill's plays ask crucial questions about empathy, such as whether it is necessarily limited to geographical closeness, or whether it can be expanded along geographical distances, on the whole, as well as asking how inclusive the term 'humanity' is, or the readiness to identify with the "other."

The disruptive potential of collapse differs from aggression or violence in that, as Crimp argues, it does not face the dominant ideology with such disorientation, and is not as effective as a mode of resistance. In "The Threat of International Terrorism," Crimp reflects poignantly on how American neo-conservative discourses easily appropriate acts of subversion such as terrorism or suicide, and convey it through an instance of literary pastiche. He sets the TM or "Trademark" symbol at the side of words like "TerrorismTM," "Fantasy KenTM" or even "GodTM," suggesting that, as a consequence of the post-capitalist ideology any concept or notion, no matter of what kind, can be appropriated by virtue of the freedom that capital and market afford. If the market appropriates objects or ideas in order to increase the flux of its own enrichment, artistic attitudes of resistance may use appropriation (a typically postmodern technique) in order to question the validity and the grounds behind all these market strategies. Pastiche, the literary tech-

nique Crimp uses in this, and many other, instances, reveals that any appropriation is gratuitous and arbitrary.

III. “Some meaning?”

Another deconstructive technique Crimp utilizes is the introduction of words and expressions from different languages, which, like short circuits, function as “objects of interpretation” (Zimmermann 117) for the audience, against a disciplinary setting. The ready-made is a de-contextualized object and, as such, it questions the institutional context in which it appears. Indeed, one of the consequences underlying the ready-made is that everything can become art. Duchamp’s ready-mades, such as *Fountain* (1917), *Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy?* (1921), and *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) amongst others, question the museum and artistic contexts from which they emerged. They could for example, present a urinal, which acquired the status of a piece of art just because of the museum context in which it was inserted, as is the case in *Fountain* (1917). The ready-made objects are casual elements and they do not intend to be finished products or complete works, because their condition as such depends both on the process of de-contextualization and on the process of questioning of the new context in which they are exhibited, namely, the museum as institution. Therefore, they depend on the interaction established between object and spectator who assists in this process of criticism, and who is forced to redefine the interpretation of both the artistic concept and the institution in which it is exhibited.

In the same manner, Crimp’s linguistic ready-mades question the political and social context in which they originate. They are not “finished” until the spectator refuses to appropriate them, and “uses” as moments of disruption and indeterminacy. The fact that they are linguistic, not visual, ready-mades makes the audience experience an awareness of the sort of language and social devices in which they participate and to question the extent to which they help institutionalize and fix forms of control. Crimp’s linguistic ready-mades make manifest the relationship between language and institutions as forms of subject construction.

Furthermore, in placing the ready-mades in a theatrical context, Crimp increases their experiential character by making a whole com-

munity complicit with them, in contrast to the more or less dispersed individuals who witness the ready-made object in the museum context. The fact that it is a community of individuals, who react to an event, be it ironically, with pleasure, or with distance, increases the resonance and duration of the subversive act.

As I have noted, in “Pornó,” when the actors construct Anne as a megastar, a heroine, or a redeeming saint, their words suddenly mutate into instructions for a plane crash, offering a de-contextualized catalogue of instructions in case of accident. Crimp suddenly rips the actors’ discourse apart by taking it to its limits, presenting a parodic correlate of the process of externally imposing an identity; that is, the process of subjectification in which both the actors—and Crimp himself as author—are involved as they attempt to unravel Anne’s identity: “head down ... knees drawn up ... do not smoke while oxygen is in use...” (73). Just as the actors construct Anne’s identity, the ready-made language constructs that of a “passenger-victim-of-a-plane-crash.”

Like a slip of the tongue, the actors experience lines of flight, as they suddenly stop participating in the social fictions and assemblages that correspond to the position they occupy in society, without there having taken place a dialectical process. The actors’ discourse, artificial and hardly sustainable in its constructed nature, opens up possibilities. In these situations, what the actors affirm is simultaneously negated, and thus, subverted, without fully aligning themselves with or stabilizing any one point of view.

The recourse to the ready-mades functions as a disruptive device that denounces the process whereby the actors turn the protagonist’s identity into an archetype makes manifest the construction of social power within language. . In the same vein, the Duchampian ready-mades question the institution of the museum and what it considers art to be, the type of subjects it constructs through its space and the codes of behaviour, conduct and expectations that this space generates as it becomes institutionalized.

Another disruption occurs in the episode “The Camera Loves you,” which some productions have staged as a rap song. The song celebrates media-constructed identities and the nagging question “What is Hecuba

to him or he to Hecuba,” (19) repeatedly confronts the audience. The question does not share in the same regime of ideological signs as the actors’ speech. It functions like an *objet trouvé* that directly contests the dominant ideology that compulsively demands “to sympathise, to empathise, and to advertise,” and makes individuals identify with the aspiration to become “a megastar” (19). The question reverts to *Hamlet*, particularly to Hamlet’s complaint about an actor at his court who weeps in interpreting Hecuba’s reaction to Priam’s death. In this scene, Hamlet argues that external signs such as tears should not be taken as a proof of authenticity: seeming, in other words, should not become being. Instead, Hamlet continuously reminds the audience that he distrusts appearances, since he has something “within which passeth show” (Ham. 1.2.85). Indeed, Hamlet complains that the actor has so readily identified with Hecuba, whom he never met: “And all for nothing. For Hecuba! What’s Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba, that he should weep for her?” (Ham.1.2.85) Thus, Crimp seems to be criticizing the identification and complete merging of the “actor” (the individual) with the “role” he/she is asked, or forced, to play in society: “A megastar? The fuck you are” (Crimp 19).

Finally, in the last episode, “Previously Frozen,” in the middle of a conversation about atrocities and violence against women and children, in which, supposedly, the actors have been bombarded with passive media messages, one of the actors suddenly breaks away from the discourse. Apparently out of context, he/she focuses on the question that obsesses him/her: “What the word ‘fresh’ in a word like ‘fresh salmon’ actually means/ You mean it can mean ‘previously frozen’?/ And can it? ... Mean ‘previously frozen’?” (80). Like riddles, these ready-mades bring themes to debate which the prevailing ideology has commodified or made marginal, such as honesty or social commitment. In short, processes of identification and connection with the other beyond discourses based on sameness, individualism, status, or exclusion. Through these openings, ruling discourses are momentarily challenged, made marginal, as the audience is faced with the expression of a liberated mechanism of production, one that is not tied to external forces of subjection, as the actors are, but is autonomous, pure desire.

These crises or disruptions elicit the audience's interaction, by provoking an active connection of apparently contradictory, fragmented, or irreconcilable elements and ideas. These ideas may be as distant as a scrap of information about a personality, a catalogue of instructions which, in another context, would be considered natural and necessary, or a glimpse into the ways institutionalized language constructs models of identity. By illuminating social modes of identity construction, Crimp shares an interest with dramatists like Churchill and Sarah Kane in producing an experiential theatre. Their theatre is experiential in the sense that they want the audience to experience and recognize subjection, working on its innate desire to make coherence, to bring closure to what is seen on stage, so that viewers may imagine and work out new alternatives. As Phyllis Nagy suggests in "Hold Your Nerve: Notes for a Young Playwright," "analysis during the event itself prohibits communication—by nature a lateral, associative experience. When we can connect the dots while we watch a play that play becomes nothing more than the literal sum of its parts" (128). Indeed, through experience, Crimp makes the audience aware of the processes of subjection involved in shaping the self, and thus, he challenges the audience to ask questions about its limits and possibilities.

In the act of working out new meanings and alternatives by themselves, as Nagy suggests, plays should entice the audience to creatively go beyond the limited sets of identities that are pre-scripted by external instances. What are the limits and possibilities of the self, given that it exists in a "text" of discourses, as an autonomous producer of meaning? For Crimp, what characterizes the self is, primarily, its subjection to a multiplicity of discourses, but he produces a variety of mechanisms to precisely maintain its authenticity at moments he deems to be ethically crucial. By tackling the themes of empathy or honesty, concepts that offer glimpses into the ways in which individuals relate to one another and in which they construct ideas such as human rights and humanity, he prompts a dialogue about the possibility of social change.

Crimp's use of different registers (such as the rap song, the introduction of Shakespearean references, the ready-mades), I have argued, creates a literary pastiche. As in the case of postmodern architecture, it is a

self-referential strategy, an exercise of meta-commentary and of critical reflection on language itself and on its conventions, canons and registers. Élisabeth Angel-Perez has argued that, structured around the dialectics of constructing and deconstructing, “Anne, ‘a non-character, an absence of character’ is at the same time composed and destroyed—blasted—pieced back together and according to an enterprise where ironically, the etymology of the theatre ‘piece’ makes itself transparent” (100). Beyond the character, the atomized and fractured body of the text is made to surface, challenging both the homogeneity and coherence of narrative and linearity and the existence of any fixed subjectivity behind the actors’ words.

Whereas avant-garde and modernist collages seek to encounter a new dimension of language, attempt to bring about a new potential in it through fragmentation and simultaneity, these very same resources, in the case of pastiche, are placed in the service of forcing language to question itself. Through patchwork, Crimp does not intend to show the multiplicity of discourses from an aesthetic point of view—which was the ultimate intention of the avant-garde “collages,” as, for instance, the cubists and futurists tried to create as an experience of temporal and spatial simultaneity. His use of patchwork instead creates a parodic space, which manifests the lack of consistency of its elements. Since these discourses are multiple and they do not come from one single, unifying organism, Crimp also conveys them through a form that mixes various styles and linguistic contexts following the principle of accumulation and stratification. Pastiche does not act like a stylistic resource with the intention to transmit or express a specific content. Instead, it expresses the refusal to see in discourse a phenomenon of expression, seeing discourse as field of regularity for various positions of subjectivity. As Fredric Jameson puts it, pastiche expresses “a disruption of deep time and deep memory, eschewing temporality for space, and has generally grown sceptical about deep phenomenological experience in general, and the very concept of perception itself in particular” (134–35).

In “Untitled (100 Words),” through a list of words composed of groups of three nouns and a verb in the infinitive—“head green water to sing” (45)—Crimp expresses a type of language, and therefore, of sub-

jectivity, which is more organic and less mediated. This kind of poetry also represents a new understanding of the poetic that came out of the 1950s avant-garde. It has been labelled “a return to the poem as picture ... picture-writing itself” (Williams v). Eugen Gromringer was the acknowledged pioneer of Concrete poetry. He called his first poems in this new style, written in 1951, “Constellations.” The makers of the new poetry in the early 1950s, however, were not seeking the intermediation between poetry and painting but a return to the simplicity of the wordusing the semantic, visual and phonetic elements of language as raw material: not “‘words, words, words’ or expressionistic squiggles” (Williams vi).

Indeed, the subjectivity expressed through poetry is de-centralized and not hierarchically organized, since the words reflect a direct and non-mediated expressiveness: “ink angry needle *to swim* ... money stupid exercise-book *to despise* ... hunger white child *to pay attention*” (47–48 italics added). All together, they function like the uncontrolled gears of a machine producing liberated meanings. The infinitive form of the verbs represents pure activity without the interference of the action’s specific subject. Instead of reifying character, Crimp opts for presenting the immediacy of a biological rhythm. Indeed, the infinitive is a response to the semantic properties of gender and number (“she” and “her”) through which Anne is constantly referred. As such, subjectivity may be found precisely in the disintegration of opposed dualisms and categories through which one escapes the categorizations and roles one is forced to adopt.

In a discussion with Joseph Danan, Crimp has already pointed out the need to find a language that does not so much reflect ordinary experience but rather seeks to expand and innovate on everyday experience. Contemporary British theatre, he argues, “is interested in illuminating different areas of society but perhaps it is socially conservative ... our plays tend to depend very much on reflecting ordinary, everyday language, and maybe ordinary, everyday experience” (25). In this sense, Crimp’s theatre is linked to Beckett’s linguistic experiments of his later and shorter works, such as *Not I*, where the self is dissolved into an opening (a mouth) from which a flow of words emerges. Beckett, how-

ever, strips his characters of any social subjections and explores them as extreme, isolated entities.

In conclusion, Crimp's proposed subjectivity deviates from the level of abstraction offered by the late Beckett. This subjectivity is firmly inserted within society, aiming to take a stand that allows it to be true to itself. In Crimp's play, the self is not taken in and of itself but it emerges at interstitial moments. It is bound by a sea of discourses, but at the same time it differentiates from them, expressing itself as an opening to a new meaning, as a crisis into any given, established order of things. The poetic instances from the field of plastic arts, such as the ready-mades, or Concrete Poetry, allow him to deconstruct not only the actors' pretensions in creating a social subject, but also his own attempt, just as any playwright's attempt, at being a source of subjectification for his characters. The fundamental "attempt on her life," therefore, is not only that of the actors who try to make the character of Anne comprehensible, but that of the author himself, namely, Crimp's own intention to dictate an identity to his own characters. The play's own structure around an absence that is being filled with all sorts of discourses (exposing the mechanisms of homogenization, subjection and inability to know the imagined other) suggests, precisely, that any play is an attempt at constructing literary identities.

The modes through which Crimp forces both his own text and his own condition as author to "short circuit" itself (through collapse, ready-mades and Concrete Poetry) are fully integrated within a post-modern strategy. However, the goal behind this mechanism, far from conforming to the contradictions of a socio-political system that is directed by the *laissez-faire* of post-capitalism, is to seek a minimal code of ethical discriminations. The combination of irony and pedagogical interest approximates him to the tradition of earlier English moralists, like Laurence Sterne or Jonathan Swift. Crimp's position, therefore, is a hybrid one that defies any strict categorization and which takes those elements he considers to be most productive from different strategies in order to develop an integral criticism of society.

Notes

- 1 All translations of Michel Foucault, except those from *Discipline and Punish* and *Madness and Civilization*, are mine, as are those of Gilles Deleuze and Elisabeth Angel-Perez.
- 2 In this case, as well as in other cases in which the notion of “stage production” appears, I will be referring to the one that took place April 1–7, 2005 in the theatre “Sala Beckett,” in Barcelona, coinciding with the playwright’s visit to the theatre, where he offered a series of lectures on playwriting. The play was directed by Victor Muñoz Calafell and was performed by the company Pànnik Teatre.
- 3 Even though the type of society in which Sarah Kane situates her plays is more related to a disciplinary model than to a post-capitalist model of control, Kane also sets on stage the liberating – albeit also seen as a source of deep anxiety – potential of “madness” in her play *4.48 Psychosis* (2000). The play describes an individual’s seclusion into a mental asylum, where its disciplinary force is seen to be only a slight radicalization of the disciplinary nature of society itself. The patient’s refusal to share in the established concept of “sanity” is portrayed as a liberation: “it is myself I have never met, whose face is pasted on the underside of my mind” (245). The protagonist performs acts of masochism in order to transgress binaries of pain and pleasure and other distinctions upon which disciplinary meanings are built.

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