

BOOK REVIEW
CLINT ENNS



MANUEL DELANDA: ISM ISM

Edited by John Klacsmann and Andrew Lampert
(New York: Anthology Film Archives and J&L Books,
2018), 152 pages.

Based on the 1979 film of the same name, *ISM ISM* is both an informative study of artist Manuel DeLanda's film and an extensive photographic archive of his street art constructed by treating the film as a sequence of still images. DeLanda is better known today as a writer and philosopher; however, his impact as an underground filmmaker cannot be overstated. For instance, DeLanda is considered one of the "underground invisibles" by Nick Zedd in *The Cinema of Transgression Manifesto*.¹ He was also interviewed by Scott MacDonald in the early 1980s, leading to his inclusion in *A Critical Cinema*,² and the 1981 Super 8 version of his film, *Harmful or Fatal If Swallowed* (1982), was chosen by J. Hoberman as one of the ten best of that year.³

The first half of the book is a photo series consisting of the entire film "represented in chronological order, beginning with the opening credits and moving sequentially through the final shot."⁴ As a photo series, the book extends one of the functions of the film itself: to document the street art that DeLanda produced under "ISM ISM" between 1976-1981.⁵ As DeLanda explains, he originally began the film to simply document his street art; however, it later transformed into a work beyond mere documentation when he edited the footage for a course taught by film scholar P. Adams Sitney.⁶ The second half of the book consists of a too brief, two-page essay, and an interview with DeLanda by John Klacsmann and Andrew Lampert. The interview, which focuses specifically on *ISM ISM* and the context in which it was made, is a strong companion piece to the MacDonald interview.

The film itself moves at a breakneck pace consisting of frenetic editing (which was assisted by filmmaker, artist, historian, and mystic Harry Smith, who had simply stopped by DeLanda's apartment to get weed)⁷ and frantic pans and zooms. These techniques create an exciting visceral experience, but do not provide the viewer with enough time to contemplate the images. By using these techniques, DeLanda captures the ephemeral nature of his street art while at the same time documenting the ways in which most people will experience it: as a fleeting glance out of the corner of one's eye in passing. By presenting the film as a series of high quality, full-colour stills, Klacsmann and Lampert's book provides an archivist's intervention into the work. By recognizing the film strip as a sequential series of photographic images, the film is transformed into a photo series that both provides photographic documentation of these ephemeral artworks and allows those with interest the opportunity to become absorbed by the artworks themselves.

The frames selected, and the layout of the images, maintain the integrity of the original film while functioning as a form of Smith-like anthropological

study. This is not surprising given that Klacsmann and Lampert worked together to edit a two-volume set based on the collections of Harry Smith, namely *Paper Airplanes* (2015) and *String Figures* (2015).⁸ The book provides full film frames, which provide details of both the works themselves and their original site-specific installations. DeLanda's intent was not simply to document his street art—he also wanted to capture the reactions to the work. He explains that he would use his “Super 8 movie camera to shoot people's reactions.”⁹ As such, Klacsmann and Lampert also choose stills that document people's reactions to the work, even when they obstruct the work itself. Finally, the frames are placed in a way that alludes to the kinetic movement of the film.

The artworks documented in *ISM ISM* consist primarily of large-scale cigarette advertisements with humorously deformed faces produced using collage techniques and spray-paint, and text-based works consisting of phrases that both poetically and philosophically examine subconscious desire and transcending the status quo. For instance, consider the following: “SUBCONSCIOUS DESIRE / EXPRESSES ITSELF / THROUGH GAPS / IN THE FLOW OF LANGUAGE / SLIPS OF THE TONGUE / LAPSES OF MEMORY / DREAMS / JOKES / GRAFITTI / TRANSGRESSIVE ERUPTIONS OF HUMOUR,” or “UNPLUG YOURSELF ORGASM / FROM THE MACHINE.”¹⁰ Each of these lines of text exist separately from each other but the film and the book provide a linear way of navigating them, thereby forming a cartography of the text.

Despite abandoning independent filmmaking in 1983 “in order to pursue computer programming, writing, teaching, and philosophy,”¹¹ DeLanda has left behind a strong body of film work including the colourful and bizarre underground films *Raw Nerves: A Lacanian Thriller* (1980) and *Incontinence: A Diarrhetic Flow of Mismatches* (1978). In addition, he also co-directed what is “probably the most widely distributed feminist video ever made”¹²: a piece of “stand-up theory” by video artist Joan Braderman, *Joan Does Dynasty (A Neopagan, Postsituationist, Socialist/ Anarcho/Feminist Expose)*

(1986). In this video, we observe Braderman's signature “‘post-scratch’ chroma-key ‘text and effects’ style”¹³; however, there are also strong similarities between the ways in which DeLanda isolates, emphasizes, and distorts facial features to create his composite faces, and the ways in which Braderman's facial features are isolated through chroma keying techniques.

DeLanda's texts and images, like his films, disrupt a perceived highbrow/lowbrow dichotomy by merging postmodern philosophy and punk aesthetics. For instance, one of his signature images is a ZAP-Comix inspired penis with two breasts in the shape of a scrotum, which ejaculates ISMs, an image which appears at the beginning and end of the film, as well as the book. Although this might seem like a strange incongruence for a philosopher who serves as the Gilles Deleuze Chair and Professor of Philosophy at the European Graduate School, and has written books such as *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (1991) and *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (1997), it is perhaps these various character traits that have allowed DeLanda to transcend/transgress the limits of conventional thought. Moreover, as is apparent through his film work, DeLanda explains that “tripping got me into philosophy.” He continues, “psychedelic drugs are a philosophical question.”¹⁴

Through the collage and text in *ISM ISM*, it might be possible to trace one of the methodologies of DeLanda's philosophical work: a neo-materialist philosophy that is non-linear in nature and focuses on various layers independently existing but that interact to form a new entity. For instance, by examining DeLanda's collages and texts, it is possible to find one of the bases for his conception of assemblage theory: an idea sketched by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), and which DeLanda extended to apply to social assemblages. DeLanda succinctly summarizes the theory as follows:

Today, the main theoretical alternative to organic totalities is what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze calls *assemblages*, wholes characterized by *relations of exteriority*. These relations imply, first of all,

that a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different. In other words, the exteriority of relations implies a certain autonomy for the terms they relate, or as Deleuze puts it, it implies that ‘a relation may change without the terms changing.’ Relations of exteriority also imply that the properties of the components can never explain the relations which constitute the whole, that is, ‘relations do not have as their cause the properties of the [component parts] between which they are established...’ although they may be caused by the exercise of a component’s capacities.... Relations of exteriority guarantee that assemblages may be taken apart while at the same time allowing that the interactions between parts may result in a true synthesis.¹⁵

DeLanda’s collages and texts can be read in these terms, and provide a physical demonstration of these concepts where the individual components are literally detached and plugged into different configurations creating unique iterations. Following Deleuze, DeLanda explains that “despite the tight integration between its component organs, the relations between them are not logically necessary but only contingently obligatory: a historical result of their close coevolution.”¹⁶ Carrying this idea slightly further, DeLanda’s collages can be seen as a speculative, alternative evolution of the face, one in which we all look like the ‘monsters’ depicted in his collages. This also functions as an alternative reading to the one supplied by Scott MacDonald, who suggested that “when I see the distortion of the face, I read it as a comment on smoking—as if smoking makes you a monster.” However, as observed by DeLanda, “I probably helped them sell cigarettes.” He continues, “my monsters would definitely call people’s attention to the ads.”¹⁷

Klacsman and Lampert’s book provides ample space for the contemplation required to further understand DeLanda’s philosophy. Moreover, this book should be of interest to a wide range of cinema scholars and enthusiasts. In particular, it should appeal to those

interested in DeLanda’s films and philosophy, underground cinema, the cinema of transgression, NYC in the late 1970s and early 1980s, street art, and collage.

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NOTES

- 1 Nick Zedd, “Cinema of Transgression Manifesto” in *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Scott MacDonald (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 88-89. First published under the pseudonym, Orion Jericho in *The Underground Film Bulletin* 2 (1985).
- 2 Scott MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 334-352.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 339.
- 4 John Klacsman and Andrew Lampert, eds. *Manuel DeLanda: ISM ISM* (New York: Anthology Film Archives and J&L Books: 2018), 127.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 129.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 137.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 139.
- 8 John Klacsman and Andrew Lampert, eds. *Paper Airplanes: The Collections of Harry Smith, Catalogue Raisonné, Volume I* (New York: Anthology Film Archives and J&L Books, 2015). John Klacsman and Andrew Lampert, eds. *String Figures: The Collections of Harry Smith, Catalogue Raisonné, Volume II* (New York: Anthology Film Archives and J&L Books, 2015).
- 9 Klacsman and Lampert, *ISM, ISM*, 131.
- 10 For a full list see: *Ibid.*, 147.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 128. DeLanda has recently returned to filmmaking, stating that we have “reached an inflection point in technology, a point where your desktop machine became a full post-production house and your cellphone a high-resolution camera. It was then that I realized the visual effects I had dreamed of in the early 1980s were now possible, and that the ridiculous fees you were charged in those days for editing and sound mixing were now gone. Everything was now doable and cheap: an irresistible combination.” (*ISM ISM*, 145-146).
- 12 Quote attributed to DeeDee Halleck in “Films by Joan Braderman,” *The Heretics*, http://heresiesfilmproject.org/wp-content/uploads/braderman_filmography.pdf (accessed 17 May 17, 2019).
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 337.
- 15 Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (London: Continuum, 2005), 10-11 (emphasis in original).
- 16 *Ibid.*, 11-12.
- 17 MacDonald, *A Critical Cinema*, 339.