

BOOK REVIEWS

REVISIONS – ZEN FOR FILM, HANNA B. HÖLLING

New York: Bard Graduate Center (2015), 100 pp., Paperback,
ISBN: 978-1-941-79202-5, US\$20.00

Reviewed by Judit Bodor, Aberystwyth University

The challenges of collecting, conserving and exhibiting new media art are pressing, given the neo-avant-garde's arrival at the threshold of the museum from across ever-broadening platforms of contemporary art practices it augured. In *Revisions – Zen for Film*, Hanna B. Hölling outlines the inherently changeable nature of these artworks as opportunity and obstacle, citing 'aging materials', 'changing interpretations', 'technological obsolescence', media hybridity and assumptions of art as 'fixed and static' in particular. Her critically driven and 'expanded' curatorial discourse offers a response through a close reading of Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1962–64) to accompany her own 2015 exhibition of the work at Bard Graduate Center Gallery, New York. *Zen for Film* is considered an 'anti-film', consisting of a projection of a transparent 16mm film leader of approximately twenty minutes' duration. The artwork's simultaneous existence as object (Fluxfilm edition and filmic relic), cinematic event, installation and process (projection) at once reveals an always incomplete state emblematic of Zen itself. Though changeability – as Hölling demonstrates – is fundamental to Paik's aesthetic logic, it is not currently embraced within the context of museums where art is often valued and collected as a permanent, static, single-authored object. The dilemma of identifying appropriate exhibition and preservation strategies for *Zen for Film* is the starting point for Hölling's multifocal analysis of the work's unique materiality.

This analysis unfolds across ten thematic chapters (or 'revisions', hence the title) through which the author overviews, on one hand,

the 'theoretical–historical context' of the artwork and, on the other, its 'afterlives' ('the time after the work "happened"') within exhibition and archival contexts (83). Beginning with her own encounters with the work as canned film reel (Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2009); as analogue film loop on an old projector (Museum Ostwall, Dortmund, 2010–11); and as digital video projection (Tate Liverpool, UK, 2011), the inquiry focuses on comparing different modes of display. That *Zen for Film* is subject to continual re-materializations – and so also audience engagements – underpins Hölling's curiosity and legitimacy in exploring the question, 'What is *Zen for Film*?' (x). Throughout the book, she adopts changing standpoints of viewer, scholar and curator to expand her discourse across philosophies and theories of aesthetics, musicology and semiology, which she brings to bear on redeveloping approaches to curating and conservation.

Each 'revision' offers a point of entry into a developing argument that the only viable approach towards the apparent irreconcilability of new media artwork and current collection-based practice is to encourage plurality and hybridity of approaches, embracing changeability and impermanence as the condition of the artwork's survival. Hölling's multi-perspective approach aligns the format of the book with the indeterminate, non-linear nature of its subject to support her argument that the work should not be interpreted in a fixed, single way or through the perspective of one chosen aspect. She persuasively argues that *Zen for Film* continuously generates its own archival materiality and should thus be considered as the sum of all of its transitions over time. Throughout her analysis, Hölling also seeks to overcome the existing duality-bound categorization in art such as ephemerality/permanence and materiality/visuality, proposing instead fluid consideration and coalescence of these dualities. She affirms for example that all artworks should be accepted (whether conceived through 'old' or 'new' media) as impermanent and of 'relative duration', some slow (often longer than one's lifetime) others rapid. This change in perspective towards relative impermanence allows a common analysis of artworks through an 'aesthetics of change' (80), opposed to an inferred impermanence of new media art in relation to a permanence of works in traditional media, such as painting and sculpture. Similarly, Hölling resituates any pre-eminence of theories of visuality over materiality, proposing instead to understand their inter-relationship. Engaging with the artwork from the perspective of its 'material condition' (its apparatus and behaviour) rather than its visual representation (what is seen) is more helpful in ascertaining appropriate curatorial and conservation strategies for the future. In discussing the artwork's materiality, Hölling convincingly shifts focus from the artwork as object to the artwork as a 'thing', including its 'production process' and 'aesthetic-technical infrastructure' (7). She argues that *Zen for Film* (similar to many post-Cagean artworks) needs to be understood, documented and studied as intending exposure of its own materiality to ensure its future archiving and continuation alongside questioning its visuality. Hölling's proposal to embrace changeability in conservation and curating attempts to counterbalance traditional institutional practices that tend to develop

a 'residual history' of artworks by valuing the 'material authenticity' of remains (relics and documentation) over the 'inherent logic' of their behaviour.

Supported by years of experience studying Paik's practice and handling his works as curator and conservator, Hölling displays impressive depth of knowledge of *Zen for Film* throughout the book, supported by an extensive bibliography, which makes *Revisions* an invaluable addition to scholarship on Paik's practice. Revisiting the work's historical world in terms of re-emphasizing the influence of John Cage's notions of 'indeterminacy' and Zen principles of incompleteness upon an era of emerging intermedia sensibility is also useful. It is refreshing to follow how Hölling makes these links through aesthetic concepts without fixing the artwork to a linear chronology based on its identification within a particular media or style. The close attention she devotes to such an emblematic artwork also makes a very important contribution to curating and conservation more broadly. For example, establishing *Zen for Film* as indeterminable suggests that its conservation and exhibition has to do more than lock the work into a static historical moment. It is through embracing and affirming changeability that collection-based curatorial and conservation practice might be able to expand from professions of caring for objects linked to the past into 'temporal interventions' (85) regarding an artwork's present life with additional responsibilities of 'distributed authorship' in its re-installations (71).

Hölling's non-linear, circular discourse aesthetically parallels how *Zen for Film* engages with duration, systems, process, media and time. The book's attention to *Zen for Film*'s afterlife seems an important addition to existing historical analysis of the artwork, as it maps out a critical territory on which complex issues of conservation and curation of both 'old' and 'new' media unfold and intersect to develop new methodologies, sensibilities and strategies. It is thus a significant contribution towards a growing body of discourse, practice and research focusing on the afterlives of 'new' media artworks, and should be read by both conservators and curators engaging with such issues in the context of museums and galleries.

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***FAMILY TIES: LIVING HISTORY IN CANADIAN HOUSE MUSEUMS,*
ANDREA TERRY**

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press (2015), 248 pp.,
Hardcover, ISBN: 978-0-773-54561-8, CAD & US \$110.00/Paperback,
ISBN: 978-0-773-54562-5, CAD & US \$44.95

Reviewed by Erika Ashley Couto, Université du Québec à Montréal

Family Ties by Andrea Terry is a pithy and insightful examination into the ways that history is constructed and retold in house museums in Canada. Using Dundurn Castle in Hamilton; the Sir George-Étienne Cartier National Historic Site of Canada in Montreal; and William Lyon Mackenzie House in Toronto as case studies, Terry's book illuminates the politicization (or, at times, depoliticization) of national identity through the exhibition programmes created by Victorian homes in Canada. As the author explains, house museums are arranged and interpreted by staff and interpreters in such a way that they allow for a 'communal identification with and appreciation of Canada's past' (10). Throughout the case studies, Terry suggests how nationalist agendas and, more recently, multiculturalism, have come to shape the way in which living history museums tell the story of their owners, and of Victorian societies in both Upper and Lower Canada.

Terry uses the common programming period of the houses' annual Victorian Christmas celebrations as the basis for her analysis. According to the author, the Christmas programmes and their concomitant political and social agendas are validated through what she calls 'artifactual accuracy' or 'the calculated deployment of historical objects designed to sanction the site's period representation' (5). In other words, guided visits during the Christmas season are afforded a greater sense of perceived legitimacy and factual 'authenticity' through the careful arrangement of objects within the home that serve to validate or prove the interpretations provided by tour guides. Artifactual accuracy is then a tactical strategy employed by house museums to establish the authority of their narratives, despite little evidence that the original owners celebrated Christmas in the manner suggested by the interpreters. According to Terry, the goal of these displays is to allow the viewer's memories of their visit to a living history museum to 'foster physical, mental, and emotional connections with a larger (ancestral) community' (15) in order to make 'the present station of the nation appear natural (or inevitable)' (22).

Structurally, Terry has divided her investigation into a format that clearly lays out for the reader the issues at odds in each of her case studies. The main corpus of the book is divided into three sections dedicated respectively to Dundurn Castle, the Cartier Historical Site and Mackenzie House, with each section separated into two chapters: the first focuses on developments of the house which have led to the specific Christmas programming put on at the time of the author's visit, in addition to charting how the original house owner's identity has been carefully crafted onto the site to solidify their importance to Canadian history;

the second analyses the Christmas programming and the artifactual strategies employed to perpetuate certain messages or ideas of nationalism or multiculturalism.

Dundurn Castle, for instance, completed in 1835, has transitioned from a private residence to a historic house museum; a Canada centennial project; and a living history museum and national historic site. These successive transformations, from private residence to museum, have all worked to assert a British dominance, from the eclectic, picturesque style of the home (34) to the reinscription of the Castle's original owner, Sir Alan Napier McNab (1798–1862) as a Canadian nationalist hero. Terry convincingly argues that in the 1960s, when Dundurn Castle became a Canada Centennial project, funded jointly by the city of Hamilton, the Ontario government and the federal government, efforts to restore and grow the popularity of the house museum was predicated on re-establishing McNab's importance as a war hero and loyalist and selling Dundurn Castle as a tangible, artifactual representation of that power (43). It is under this 'McNab as national hero' banner that Dundurn Castle has become a local tourist mainstay, driven largely by its Christmas programme. During this period, which accounts for the majority of the site visits throughout the year, Dundurn Castle uses McNab and his elite position within pre-Confederate Canadian society to provide visitors with a homogenized portrayal of how upper-class families would have spent their Christmases, to the point that the Castle has five separate tours and activities that all relate to Christmas (51). During this time, rather than relaying information about McNab and his historical importance, the artifactual arrangement of objects – including a pile of clothing to be donated and the reconfiguration of Lady McNab's sick room to a bedroom for a soldier staying with the family temporarily – instead focuses on the McNab family as benevolent citizens of the upper class and attempts to inscribe a narrative wherein charity, openness and helping the less fortunate has 'always' been a part of the Canadian national ethos.

Moving from Hamilton to Quebec, Terry next examines the way in which Parks Canada has transformed George-Étienne Cartier's former home in Montreal to represent Cartier as a federalist French-Canadian. Cartier was an Anglophile who sought to use architecture as a way to position himself as being in favour of national unity and to advance his political career (81). When Parks Canada purchased the property in the mid-twentieth century following the *Révolution Tranquille* ('Quiet Revolution'), it sought to make the most of Cartier's anglophilism to assert his position as a French-Canadian founding father and important member of the Montreal bourgeoisie (83). However, during the Christmas season, Terry argues that the living history portion of the site, the West House, shifts to a depoliticized interpretation where objects and interpretive performances are deployed to focus on a long lineage of December celebrations, including the winter solstice and Christmas. While the East House retains its factual exhibitions of Cartier the politician, the West House attempts to appeal to the local Montrealers during the Christmas season, reinterpreting the artifactual arrangements 'to portray and discuss the type of celebration that might have been mounted' by the Montreal bourgeoisie and to get a glimpse of what it would have felt like to be a

part of a rich family living in the Victorian era (103–04). Emphasized is not the Cartiers' lives, but rather connections between pagan rituals and Catholic Christmas, including the placement of a crèche and discussion of when and how the tree would have been arranged. Acknowledging the francophone roots of Cartier while using objects such as the Christmas tree to place the house within a distinctly British framework, Terry argues that the Christmas programme helps to deploy Cartier as being a French-Canadian person of importance, as opposed to a Québécois of influence.

Terry saves her most rich and compelling argument for last, arguing that the use of cultural banners that 'describe various cultural celebrations that take place in and around the winter months, such as Kwanzaa, Chanukah, winter solstice, and Chinese New Year' in the exhibition space of Mackenzie House in Toronto, serves to further reinscribe difference and the dominance of white, Anglo-Saxon values instead of helping to promote the city as being culturally diverse. In 2003, the city of Toronto launched a ten-year cultural plan aimed at celebrating the cultural diversity of the city. While Mackenzie House had previously staked a claim for Mackenzie as being a rebellious figure who belatedly helped to bring responsible government to Canada, for its new programme it had to respect the cultural diversity mandate. During the Christmas programming, the banners are hung in the exhibition pavilion, which is appended onto the house proper to display additional artefacts and a reproduction print studio that are not part of the 'house proper'. Visitors encounter these first, without interpretive explanation, before being taken on the tour, which focuses on how Christmas would have been spent by a lower-middle-class family in the Victorian era. Despite the fact that the Mackenzies did not celebrate Christmas, as Mackenzie saw it as 'just another day' (136), the reality of the owner's life is ignored in favour of a more universalizing portrayal of what Christmas would have been like for someone who did not have a great deal of money. Artifactual arrangements throughout the home are more modest than in the other case studies, and emphasis is placed on the modesty of the family home where the kitchen was the centre and the areas for celebration would have been more 'for show' than for actual use, except for when guests arrived. The normalization of Christmas, even among people of lesser means, and the attention given to the house proper over the exhibition pavilion, inscribes a narrative at Mackenzie House where the only story worth interpretation and mention is the 'collective' British history exemplified by the house owners. Migrant communities are allowed a place on the site, but not within the house proper itself, and therefore, not within the history of Victorian Canada.

Family Ties makes an excellent contribution to the understanding of how historic sites are deployed to promote shifting nationalist ideals across times, from centenary celebrations to the pervasiveness of 'diversity within unity'. Furthermore, Terry's notion of artifactual arrangement has applicability beyond the living house museum – for instance, it adds to the reinvestigation of dioramas and taxonomic displays in museums in general. This book usefully expands scholarship on the role of cultural institutions as agents of myth building and the influence of local communities on the preservation and celebration of national heritage.

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INTRODUCING SUZY LAKE, GEORGINA UHLYARIK (ED.)

London: Black Dog Publishing (2014), 232 pp., Hardcover,
ISBN: 978-1-90896-673-5, US\$34.95

Reviewed by Megan Toye, York University

Introducing Suzy Lake offers in-depth historical, critical and curatorial analysis on the work of the artist, who was the subject of a major retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 2014–15. The book is as diverse as Lake's artistic output, and consists of curatorial essays, artist statements and individual responses to specific works from various artists and curators based in Toronto, Montreal and New York. After first situating her early practice within the historical backdrop of the civil and women's rights movements of the late 1960s, the catalogue dives into the ways in which Lake's shifting contexts (starting from Detroit, to Montreal, and then Toronto) implicitly informed her cultural output. Tracing her movement across these cities, *Introducing Suzy Lake* brings to the fore how the artist's visual practice addresses subjectivity as an embodied process that is transformed through various locations and time frames.

Michelle Jacque's essay, 'Born in Detroit', gives a biographical account of Lake's personal background, pinpointing Detroit as the fertile ground wherein the artist developed her political and artistic orientation. Co-curator Sophie Hackett addresses Lake's time spent in Montreal, drawing the reader's attention to the ways in which her practice became increasingly concerned with bodily experience and corporeal engagement. Of note is the photographic series *ImPositions* (1977). Bounded, Lake is pictured pressed between two walls that seemingly threaten to cave in as she struggles to break loose. Hackett argues that *ImPositions* was groundbreaking for Lake because she developed a new approach to photo-making by heating and stretching the negatives, thus bending their structure and inserting the gestures of her body into the photographic process. By physically altering the negative, Lake effectively married the content of the series with its form, making paramount the corporeal engagement involved. Hackett notes that Lake wanted to 'push against' the limits of the medium in order to manifest the uncontainable aspects of lived, embodied experience (94).

This excess of the body, which fights back and troubles the perceived stability of the frame, is further probed in Lake's series *Pre-Resolution*:

Using the Ordinances at Hand (1983–84). Now working out of Toronto, Lake chooses the home as a subject matter. She is pictured with a sledgehammer, bashing down the red walls that surround her. The photographs literally exceed their frame, suggesting that the content moves beyond the medium. In 'Home in Toronto', co-curator Georgiana Uhlyarik discusses this series by drawing attention to the way in which it not only speaks to a physical frustration but also a psychic one, wherein Lake acts out against the ideological structure of femininity, symbolized in the series by the private sphere of home (144). Viewers are given a captivating image of a strong woman who is not ashamed to feel rage and embody anger. Performing what could be deemed a normatively 'masculine' act of aggression, Lake blurs the boundaries between the feminine and the masculine and powerfully inhabits the ambiguous space in-between.

This feminist aesthetic strategy – wherein the binary structure of gender is pried open through performative enactments – was highly influential and has been taken up extensively in contemporary feminist and queer visual practices. Pipilotti Rist's video *Ever Is Over All* (1997) in particular comes to mind, as the artist also uses a sledgehammer to wreak havoc, in this instance on cars parked along a street. Similarly, Rist bursts the frame of the image by using two projections that overlap and contain no borders. Lake's self-portraits, such as the series *A Genuine Simulation of...* (1974), can also be seen to function as a precedent for Cindy Sherman's work, whose *untitled film stills* (1977–80) are feminist touchstones for notions of performing and masquerading the 'feminine'. Artist Robert Longo comments on the dialogue between Sherman's and Lake's work, noting that when he was living with Sherman in Buffalo, they encountered Lake's work in an art magazine. Sherman was just beginning to develop the *untitled* series, and Longo believes it was Lake's work that gave Sherman a sense of feminist solidarity, prompting her to further develop her artistic vision (51).

As much as there is a connection between Lake's and Sherman's series, Lake accomplishes something quite different. Distinct from performing stereotypical notions of femininity for the camera and calling attention to the male gaze at work within representations of beauty, Lake lays bare the *process* of that very performance and exposes the gaps that make it a farce in the first place. For instance, *Imitations of Myself #1* (1973/2012) and *A Genuine Simulation of...* capture Lake as she slowly paints her face white. The meticulous nature of the gestures as she 'puts her face on' is conveyed through each frame that exposes a gradual progression. The use of white is pertinent here: Lake states that she used the colour to convey the notion of being 'before character' (44). That is, white gave the masquerade of femininity a sense of temporality. Rather than performing and appropriating fixed images of womanhood in order to critique them (as Sherman did), Lake instead opened up these images, destabilizing the male/female gender binary by capturing the performance of 'femininity' as a temporal and embodied process of becoming.

This sense of temporality is highlighted in Lake's later work, particularly the series *Extended Breathing in Public Spaces* (2008–14). Uhlyarik notes that it is this series that made the artist consider her own mortality (162). In each photograph, Lake stands in different contexts: a park,

a garden and various tourist sites (such as the Detroit Institute of Art, Trafalgar Square and the World Trade Center). In each location, Lake attempts to remain as still as possible. The photographic lens, however, captures subtle body movements that blur the images. The attempt to render herself immobile instead reveals the active agency and temporality of Lake's embodied subjectivity: she is moving and is being moved by her relational context.

Overall, what binds the catalogue together is a delicate approach to the tension that Lake's work provokes: between hiding and revealing, exposure and self-determination, vulnerability and power. Her work addresses the various ways that feminine/masculine, self/other, figure/ground become redefined through embodied processes of interpersonal engagement and interaction. Lesley Johnstone, curator at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, analyses this dialogical nature of Lake's work, arguing that it establishes various conversations: between the artist and camera, artist and viewer, as well as the gallery space and the photographic medium (185). What makes these relations so intricate and nuanced is that they are never fully stabilized but shift in each series of works. It is this shifting of subject positions – and the importance of one's corporeal experience within various locational contexts – that *Introducing Suzy Lake* draws attention to, reminding viewers that even in one's stillest moments, the body continues to move and be moved.

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