

# The Downtown Review

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# The Downtown Review

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## Enter The Downtown Review:

### a few introductory notations

#### What.

Quite simply, a new journal of opinion. A forum for review and for discussion of some of the many events that take place in the Downtown Manhattan area each month. ("Downtown," however, is more a state of mind than a place, since we intend to cover other areas as well, such as screenings at the Whitney and MOMA.) Downtown is where we are located: 270 Bowery, and there is a certain ring to that. Journals of opinion are precarious ventures, to say the least. But we hope to survive by taking as our starting point—as our founding philosophy if you will—that there are many things going on in Lower Manhattan these days and there is just not enough coverage of them. We don't begin by finding fault with the coverage that does exist; we merely attempt to provide more. We do not begin as an alternative. We begin as another.

#### Why.

Work exists to be seen. To be reviewed, confronted, analysed, at times discussed. Work not reviewed is ignored and thus disappears. As Soho has grown over the last few years, there has been an increasing need for more analytical response to the work that has been presented here. Take film as just one example. I happen to be an admirer of the writings of Amy Taubin, Noel Carroll, and Jim Hoberman. But they cannot cover everything, nor are they asked to by their respective publications. More film takes place within the Downtown community than they can seriously review. And the serious work that they do review is often not taken seriously enough by the publication that prints it. At one weekly for instance, the important works of cinematic art are shunted off into a column called "The Other Cinema," as if there could still exist in Lower Manhattan anyone who takes seriously the American commercial film. For us, the "other cinema" is the stuff that the NY Film Critics seem to endlessly argue (and fawn) over. But, you may ask, are there not already a number of journals that speak directly to independent or avant-garde film? Yes, certainly: *Film Culture*, *October*, and the new *Millennium Film Journal* are all important and energizing forces in the field. There are more: *No Rose*, *Idiolects*, *Cinema News* (from California), and *Field of Vision* (from Pittsburgh), to name a few. So why start another? Just three reasons, really:

1. We hope this to be a monthly and therefore a more frequent publication than the others mentioned.
2. While we expect to cover more than just film, we are aiming to concentrate on just the Soho area (again, with a few exceptions). That sort of focus is in some ways less ambitious and in some ways more ambitious than some of the other publications. We'll try to keep that focus sharp: we won't attempt to cover fashion, parties, network television or the disco scene.
3. We hope to provide a real forum. We invite responses to published pieces. We shall attempt to provoke a dialogue. We would like to offer an opportunity for more than a few voices to comment upon Soho in the late 70's and other related topics.

#### Some problems.

Getting started is never easy. While both editors have a passionate interest in American painting, we are finding it difficult to cover the complex and seemingly static gallery arena. Most of the painters we know despair that "nothing is happening." We are not convinced of that. But we still search for evidence. Painting has been a problem. In addition, money has been a problem. Time has been a problem. Labor has been a problem. Getting started is never easy. But as this issue goes to press, we have begun the next. It should be out by the end of February.

#### Some hopes.

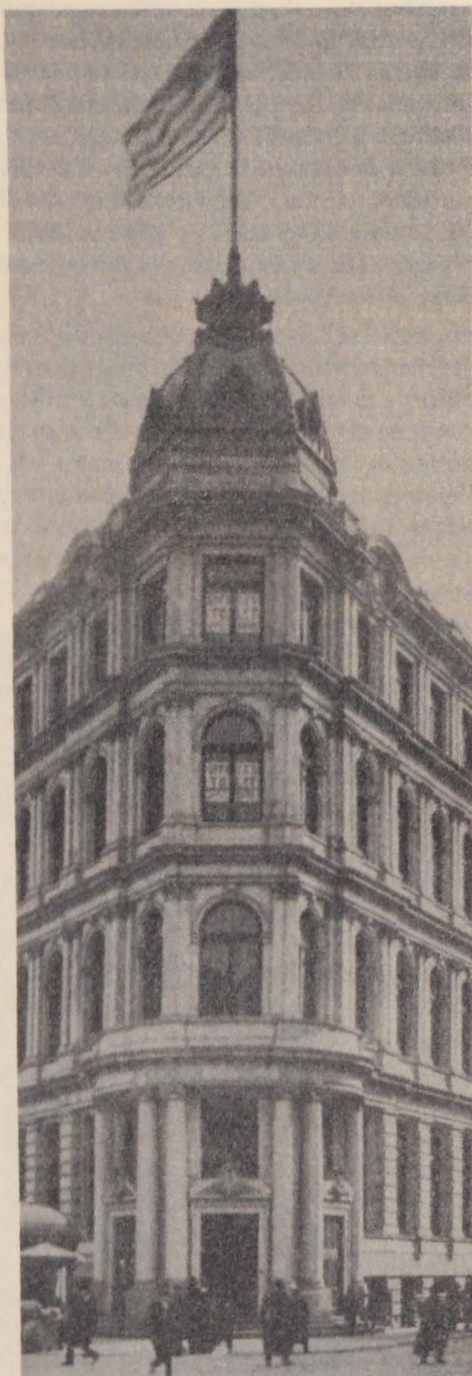
In an age perhaps best signified by the demise of *New Times*, our main hope is, of course, to continue. We also hope to be provocative and thoughtful, accurate and fair. We know there is a lot of worthy work out there. We hope to respond to it.

Raymond Foery

... but today the air has grown so dense that delicate things are literally not recognized.  
Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*

*One Way Boogie Woogie* is both problematic and fascinating. In that it sometimes misunderstands off-screen space, it reflects an artist more comfortable with composition than mise-en-scene. But insofar as it attempts to overcome the tyranny of naturalism in the screen image, the necessity to bind cinema to the real world, it is an important effort. Benning has a wonderful eye for discerning the abstract beauty in areas we normally consider commonplace and allows us to play in an urban landscape which, but for *One Way Boogie Woogie*, we would never have discovered at all.

Joyce Jesionowski



The German Savings Bank, 14th Street and Fourth Avenue, 1872

## Andrew Noren: Adventures Of The Exquisite Corpse, Part IV: "Charmed Particles"

The Collective for Living Cinema,  
Dec. 2, 1978

It was of course fitting that as part of his notes to this installment of "The Exquisite Corpse," Noren chose to include a poem by Louis Zukovsky. It is a set of variations or "ring of changes" on a single line from Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the variations in turn having been taken from Zukovsky's monumental work, *Bottom: On Shakespeare*, a study of one of his chosen masters. As "Bottom" tells it, Shakespeare and Zukovsky share a fascination for the back and forth playfulness of the words "light" and "love" and "eye" and "I," all four comprising a grand quartet of interchangeability. Although he works in cinematic imagery, Noren's interests, taken in a larger sense, are not dissimilar.

The entirely silent film opens with a black screen and gradually a close-up of a woman's eye is introduced as rapidly moving pixilated shadows, most likely formed by fluttering tree leaves, dart across the screen, at times blocking out or "blacking out" the eye. The black and white image has been printed in fairly high contrast tones, a technique which wipes out any shadow detail, thus erasing the sense of three-dimensional space. In this opening shot, the eye solely inhabits and defines the two-dimensional space of the film frame.

If we read this initial eye as a fictional one which "sees" the rest of the film, the work opens up in meaning, for a series of tensions have been brought forth: those between Noren's naked eye and his camera eye; between his own eye and that of his woman friend (who besides himself is the only real human presence in the film) and as a consequence, between his "I" and her "I." As the film moves on for an intense and purposefully exhausting hour and a quarter, these tensions dissolve, the eye's/I's mesh in an onslaught of light and love, namely, cinema.

Most of the film is comprised of similar quickly flashing pixilated shots which animate shadow and light in the same high contrast tones. The bolts of light which charge back and forth are no doubt the titular "charmed particles." The sense of light is so heightened that one comes to think of the world as not being made of matter at all, but of energy—light and movement, which of course, solely in terms of the eye, is what it is made of. Matter has become de-substantiated. Rigid boundaries no longer exist. Parti-

cles (in another sense, material bodies) charm and are charmed, they lure and are lured across an active energy field.

The nature of the subject matter is, for the most part, not important. As in Noren's earlier work, it is enough to say that the sequences are vaguely diaristic, the seasonal changes of a year serving as a possible structuring device.

Noren works hard at avoiding explicit metaphors in his imagery. Rather, he allows the sequences to infer their own meaning through the pull and exhaustion of prolonged attention on the part of the viewer. The visual dialogue of shadow and light is constantly hammered into us. But the film does have a gravitational center, midway through, a brief self-referential interlude which functions as a thematic core out of which the rest of the film radiates. As they are in a few of the other penultimate moments, the rhythms here are slow and meditative, each shot prolonged. There is a sense of deep space sculpted in chiaroscuro. This central sequence runs roughly as follows: (1) A naked woman (the same woman we see so often and often naked) lies on a bed. Noren's shadow moves across her body, a camera obviously in his hand. (2) Noren's face moves through shadows towards the camera, but actually towards the woman's face and as it becomes half obscured by the back of her head, we see that he is kissing her. (3) Noren's face, camera in hand, moves towards a mirror. We see only one of his eyes, the other of course hidden by the camera through whose viewfinder he is composing the shot.

It seems clear that this particular sequence, as do a few others also brilliant in their economy, comments on the film as a whole. Love and the film medium, catalysts of an attentive consciousness, dissolve identity as a maximum degree on the field of attraction is approached. To draw near the beloved is to draw near oneself. Noren's one eye is his camera eye, his creative one, and the other is that of his loved one, perhaps equally "creative." Tennyson's Ulysses, poet/adventurer, exclaims, "I am a part of all that I have met," and what is a "particle" if not just a frenchified, diminutive "part?" Noren conjures up a province in which all wholes, bodies and identities are "parts"—at the very least part light, part shadow.

As I noted earlier, behind Noren's Zukovsky quote is another text, Shakespeare's. It is Julia's brief address in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to a portrait of the woman to whom her estranged lover has turned. She resolves to get him back. As with so much of Shakespeare, there is a great sensitivity to the paradoxes and ambiguities of identity, deepened during the delivery of the following lines, for onstage Julia is disguised as a page boy:

*What should it be that he respects in her  
But I can make respective in myself  
If this fond Love were not a blinded god?  
Come, shadow, come and take this shadow up,  
For 'tis thy rival. O thou senseless form,  
Thou shalt be worshipped, kissed, loved and  
adored!*

It is possible, though ultimately unimportant, that Noren may have felt something from the text behind the single extracted line in the Zukovsky variations: "Come, shadow, come and take this shadow up." The closing shot of the film shows Noren's eye as it inspects a film strip. The shadows actually formed by the filmic image move across his eye in Noren's own ring of changes. The field of attractions has been reversed. It is the magic lantern effect: the concrete cinematic image now desires him, seduces him—and consequently us, the audience.

I have waxed literary on this most visual, apparently non-literary of films, offered really a mere verbal intersection, for it does live independently as a series of dazzling and well-seen compositions of strong light and shadow contrasts. Most moments are pure visual studies in themselves. Yet for me the literary resonances allow the film to breathe, and as I said, to radiate. I find Noren's visual technique inspired but somewhat self-explanatory. If it is on the plain of words that I meet him, then I should follow the best consequences of the words. Noren quoted three poems as the sole content of his program notes, one of them *his own*. To borrow a phrase of Bruce Baillie's, I have taken these as "archeological digs."

Incidentally, the film is all the more memorable because it towered over most of the quite poor new work shown at the Collective this past fall. *Charmed Particles* proclaimed that in a lackluster viewing season, four notes can make a symphony: "light," "love," "eye" and "I," that is (and here's the trick), if one can get to the center that sets them spinning.

John Pruitt