Gertrude Stein:
There is no such thing as repetition.
Only insistence.

Notes to accompany Martina Schmücker’s
Dead Cast Collection
at Home Front
-
9th June – 1st July, 2012
I grew up in a very white, very Catholic suburb of Nottingham, where people attend church coffee mornings, and drink down The Irish (fig.1); and, consequently, when I first heard of Gertrude Stein, which was during my GCSEs, she was mentioned merely in relation to Matisse – an artist whose painting *The Romanian Blouse* (fig.2) I was already familiar with via a calendar that my mother termed ‘bohemian’.

I remember too that her name prompted an allusion to a different religion – “Stein sounded Jewish” (fig.3). Knowing only one Jew, my Auntie Ruthie (not really an aunt, just a friend of my parents), and being unaware of what Gertrude Stein actually looked like, I formed a mental image of the author that resembled Mrs Goldberg, a man’s woman who dressed accordingly and whose elaborately upholstered living room also housed a bar . . .

Later, at Sixth Form College, and reading all the writers that my then projection of my then self would read, I came across Stein again, through Hemmingway (fig.4). Here, amongst the elegant and bitchy prose, I learned she was a lesbian (fig.5), and so perhaps did not look like Auntie Ruthie after all. Despite a mature awareness that at least ten per cent of my acquaintance must be gay, I had yet to unearth anyone specific who was; and so continued to perceive of her as glamorous by dint of these illicit and mysterious associations.
The end of the nineteen-nineties *(fig.6)*. Finally living away from home, finally living in London, and playing Le Tigre’s *Hot Topic*, a seven inch single in which the group attempt to list all of the artists, musicians, activists and so on who have influenced them – one of whom is Gertrude Stein. I enjoy the way it, quite literally, sounds, the melody and their voices, but, conclude that, although these ideas *should* continue to exist, I would rather that they did so with a quieter (and more poetic) style of insistence.

My feelings are compounded *(fig.7)* by two incidents that occur shortly afterwards. One takes place at an indie night organised by King’s College Students’ Union, where I have arranged to catch up with friends from home. I spend the majority of the evening listening to their new classmate however, a girl in a t-shirt that states: Bikini Kill (or Kathleen Hanna’s cooler band), and who is all too eager to lecture me on modernist feminisms and feminist modernisms – clearly related, but sometimes opposing, fields of discourse.

The other involves a conversation with a visiting tutor whom I believe that I would find appealing as either a literary or an historic figure, but whose reality proves irksome. During the course of our discussion she exclaims that she is “totally turned on by Gertrude Stein”, an expression not intended to imply sexual arousal, but rather as a way of saying that she admires, and is inspired by, the author’s work. *(fig.8)* Her words call to mind a recent art review in which one piece referencing another is described as ‘riffing on it’ - and hence also provoke distaste.
No longer a student, I begin working in a second-hand bookshop and clinging to paperback novels (fig. 9). On the cover of one a pretty, moody-looking young woman’s image is repeated until she turns into a pattern, above which the title hovers in a gothic font. I turn it over and, on the back, read the following: “This is the story of Ida, whose life consists mainly of resting, because she is always tired; of talking to herself; and of—” but the rest is obscured by a stain.

I buy it, thinking that it can sit, ‘face-out’, beside my Vintage Books copy of *Three Lives* (fig. 10) – based, stylistically, or so I am told, on a painting by Paul Cézanne – and *Picasso* (fig. 11), one of Stein’s many essays concerning her friends, the dustjacket of which depicts a large, stooped figure with an impersonal mask-like face, or “the only portrait of me that will remain forever me” according to its model.
Over the coming years I will tweak this display with the addition of *The Alice B Toklas Cook Book* (fig.12) (a slip-cased silver version published by Folio), *Disjunctive Poetics* (fig.13) (from the series *Studies in American Literature and Culture*) and an equally pale and interesting stack of Gallimard editions (fig.14), all of which likewise remain untouched - although in their case for different reasons, these being namely that I need to learn French.
As the anxiety of not-yet-having-done-something-with-my-life increases I start entering competitions. My proposal for the 2009 Hayward Curatorial Open is entitled *Golden Dawn* (fig. 15), and focuses on artists from different periods who have employed occult(ish) methods (such as Hermetic Colour Theory (fig. 16), Mystic Alchemy (fig. 17) and Jewish Mysticism (fig. 18) in order to compose their works. The opportunity to view these paintings together would, I argue, “create a web of constant, overlapping allusions, whereby one becomes aware that certain rules are being adhered to and yet remains unsure as to what they are exactly, an experience not dissimilar to first encountering the poetry of Gertrude Stein.”
I am unsuccessful, and yet, by this point, unafraid of failure, which I have come to regard as an integral part of a romantic sensibility. I therefore try again with a new idea called Feature Creep (fig. 19). Originally a design term for the process in which the addition of extra features (fig. 20) results in the over-complication of a (what should be) simple product, my tender is concerned with contemporary artists who appropriate ‘clutters’ of modernist motifs (fig. 21), and thus explores the ways in which modernism and post-modernism actually exist as two aspects of the same movement.

Unsure how to end this latest proposal, I find myself returning to last year’s efforts and Apple + C, Apple + V (or Control + C, Control + V for the Protestants among us) a suitable conclusion appears: “The opportunity to view these works together would create a web of constant, overlapping allusions, whereby one becomes aware that certain rules are being adhered to and yet remains unsure as to what they are exactly, an experience not dissimilar to first encountering the poetry of Gertrude Stein.”
Being older, I make a conscious decision to move to a less fashionable, less expensive area of London. While boxing up my possessions (books, clothes and a set of six champagne glasses) my eyes flit once again to the stained but stylish Ida (fig. 22). Thinking that I really should find out more—or at least something—I compose an email to Nancy. As the founder member of Hampstead Women’s Croquet Club (fig. 23) (as well as the only full-time poet ever to have made my acquaintance (fig. 24)), I determine that she might, somehow, be ‘in the know’ (fig. 25).
Nancy’s answer is a weighty tome - *Helene Cixous (fig. 26) and Gertrude Stein (fig. 27): New Directions in Feminist Criticism*. Cixous she tells me, was a big influence on her while reading English at Lady Margaret Hall. She is a Jewish (fig. 28) poet, playwright and philosopher, born in Algiers but now living in Paris. She was also a great friend of Jacques Derrida (fig. 29), who is also the subject of one of her books.
Yet instead of reaching for my glasses, I resort to Youtube, where continental thinkers now occur with frequency. The first clip shows a beautiful (and, to me, other) woman who speaks in careful English. She says: “I write with my hand and never using a computer, and I used to say that I write like a painter. I have a large table about this size on which I have hundreds, no thousands, no tens of thousands of pieces of paper - all dimensions, small ones, large ones, thick ones, thin ones, notebooks, all kinds of things. And, I don’t know, maybe twenty, thirty, fifty different types of pens and pencils. *(fig. 30)* And that’s one thing.”

Susan Finlay, 2012

*(fig. 30)*