

NORMA COLE'S POETICS OF THE HOLOGRAM
BY MICHAEL CROSS

[Introduction for "Poetics Plus," SUNY Buffalo, 26 April 2005]

In "Mystery of the Holograms, or Asterisme," poet, visual artist and translator Norma Cole writes,

Move the Anarchy, there is a Sky musing on us. Performing
letters. This is vision image couldn't hold. Radically negative
dread. It's not about degrees.¹

Since reading Cole's *My Bird Book* many, many years ago (the volume from which "Mystery of the Holograms" is derived), this image of excess has exceeded even me, the reader, as I find myself pushed beyond the bounds of image, an experience that serves as an apt objective correlative for Cole's body of work as a whole, a work I'd dub a "Poetics of the Hologram" if I still employed such monikers (and I don't!).

But still, the hologram: a dimensionalized image reproduced from a pattern of interference by a split beam of radiation (usually a laser), or the pattern of interference itself. In the same poem Cole writes "*sublime=excess*," and of course she's right.

For Kant, the sublime is a product of excess that promises to overwhelm the conditions of the body. This excess is the remainder of phenomena resisting reason's domination—or in other words, it's that which refuses to correspond to name. Cole's work is the apotheosis of a vision image can't hold, a vision outside of inscription as re-presentation. Her vision dimensionalizes the image, escapes its arbitrary, settled thresholds through a pattern of language interference that splits phenomena from presentation. It's the interference of any one-to-one correspondence, whether it be the thrall of idea to form, or memory to remembrance. In short, Cole's poetry is a reanimation of lyric—lyric *as* interference.

Throughout *My Bird Book*, one of Cole's earliest collections (published by Littoral Books in 1991), memory is tested by the present—the image is duplicated, doubled, made a palimpsest of mimetic inscription maximized to the threshold of impotence; the figure of the phantom as the trace of "memorance," speaking for a present that doesn't quite correspond to its past:

your Memorance of Me package
stand stage deliver²

The interference between the inscription and its past leads to the apparition, appearing as the truth of vision unbounded by image:

separation is the first fact

Happenstance wrote how a letter became a body of forgetfulness flaring³

Apropos of Levinas, Cole quotes Deleuze in her collection *Mars*:

“Your secret can always be seen on your face and in your eyes.
Lose your face. Become capable of loving without remembering,
without phantasm, without taking stock.”⁴

To do without phantasm, to love without remembrance, becomes an ethical imperative—“one-self—the spacer,” she writes, placing the lyric squarely between the object and its re-presentation.

This directive is certainly put to the test in Cole’s aptly titled prose poems “Artificial Memory” in her newest collection, *Spinoza in Her Youth*, but perhaps is most evident in the title poem from that volume, a homage to the blind photographer, Evgen Bavcar.

Afternoons in cities have colors as do voices and faces. Individuals
sitting for their portrait seek their subjectivity in the objectification
of the gaze of the photographer “How do I look.” Here is
the camera’s inanimate lens, and here is the operator whose gaze
is of an unprecedented interiority. What to “present” to this
circumstance. He tells her to look at his hand, an oblique vertical,
doubt’s exclusion.⁵

How to present interiority without relying on what is “present,” known, foreclosed. The lyric lens acts for the other by acting “out of memory,” out of what is known. Later in the same poem she writes:

One lived within the portrait of the other, an intimate brace,
thus time’s contraction (shaping). One awoke in the dream in
the dark, traces of objects on the surface, and reference and
frailty. One’s interest in birds and dogs, discomfort remembering
the toys, adjacency with randomness as reference, not knowing
how to end things, not ending.⁶

Finally, in her extraordinary little poem “The New Arcades: A Pocket Guide,” she neatly summarizes her process:

E “intervals,” we are the shape memory alloy, ultra-resilient, available and lit up

[...]

H room for difficulty, complexity, resistance, as in “please let me be misunderstood”

I in terms of the generation of a new system’s generations of systems

[...]

K the glass roof’s suspension of disbelief

[...]

S Hey sis, is freedom from memory freedom from sociality?⁷

As both poet and painter, Cole makes presentation of interiority an ethical injunction, and through hologram, dimensionalizing images, Cole doubles the resonance between inscription and its other through a kind of imbrication, drawing images on the surface of images. This doubling points to how vision—desire—escapes the arbitrary limits of inscription: “When I read Dasein, I see Desire.”⁸ And in the poem “Desire and its Double,” Cole quotes Mondrian, “I think the destructive element is too much neglected in art.”⁹

Please help me in welcoming Norma Cole.

NOTES

1. Norma Cole, *My Bird Book* (Los Angeles: Littoral Books, 1991), 10.
2. *Ibid.*, 14.
3. *Ibid.*, 39.
4. Norma Cole, *Mars* (Berkeley: Listening Chamber, 1994), 78.
5. Norma Cole, *Spinoza in Her Youth* (Richmond: Omnidawn, 2002), 38.
6. *Ibid.*, 42.
7. *Ibid.*, 28-30.
8. Cole, *Mars*, 79.
9. Cole, *Spinoza in Her Youth*, 90.