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The Sphygmograph and the Apple Watch: Jena Osman's Historical Poetics

Motion Studies, by Jena Osman. New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2019.

In three books published over the last decade, *The Network* (2010), *Public Figures* (2012) and *Corporate Relations* (2014), Jena Osman has explored an astonishing range of subjects: doomed nineteenth-century polar voyages, the early history of New York City, drone warfare, public statuary, the development of corporate personhood. *Motion Studies* (2019), her latest, widens this already wide gyre: over the course of three essays, Osman explores phrenology, contemporary neuroscience, the biology of brain coral, the collecting practices of nineteenth-century naturalists, and Étienne-Jules Marey's early experiments documenting human and animal motion. This list is by no means comprehensive. Osman has a networked imagination, which thrills in the juxtaposition between historically disparate materials and discovers deep connections between apparently divergent disciplines.

She does not always mark the paths that lead her between these variegated fields. Instead, she practices a kind of parataxis: laying them side by side, asking the reader to develop their own understandings of the relationships between the materials she deploys and the fields she explores. For instance, in "Popular Science," the second essay from *Motion Studies*, Osman offers "Illustrations"—prose poems which collate language from phrenological handbooks and popular accounts of contemporary neuroscience:

Situated on each side of Concentrativeness, higher up than Philoprogenitiveness, just above the lambdial suture. The medial prefrontal cortex signals someone of value. Frontal systems lined with limbic circuits facilitate love of friends. Coping with frenemies.

It is not immediately clear how to make sense of these abrupt phrases, collected from a nineteenth-century phrenology text book and articles in *Science Daily*, *Journal of Neuroscience*, and *Scientific American Mind*. Phrenology is a debunked racist pseudo-science; neuroscience is a prestigious and well-funded field of university research. Indeed, it would be easy to imagine, triumphally, that neuroscience has vanquished phrenology, moved us toward a more exact and objective understanding of the brain's anatomy. But Osman's juxtapositions suggest that the history of science is less linear and less triumphal: that racist assumptions and pseudo-scientific beliefs continue to shape the way that research is performed and reported on.

In this sequence, Osman's use of parataxis is molecular: the juxtaposition of individual sentences and clauses. Elsewhere in her work, it expands to encompass paragraphs, genres, essays, entire books. In both its expanded and molecular iterations, Osman's parataxis is telling: it places her firmly in a tradition of language-oriented writing. She regularly acknowledges the importance of figures like Leslie Scalapino, Susan Howe, and Ron Silliman to the development of her own poetics: in an interview with *Bomb*, for example, she notes "[language poetry] taught me to appreciate the cultural dramas (and tragedies and ideologies) that words hide and reveal."

Though she comes from the tradition of language writing, Osman's generic engagements are as expansive and transgressive as her research interests. *Motion Studies*, for example, encompasses eerie speculative fiction, polished non-fiction reportage, precise, objectivist poetic excursions, and collage. She even rewrites dialogue from the 2002 film *Minority Report* with a bird taking on Tom Cruise's role. Her work is invested in the documentary, the careful excavation of lost histories. Yet it also soars into the speculative, taking on science fiction's freedom to imagine the future—and, in so doing, transforms the reader's understanding of the present. Osman's work since *The Network* is thus unusually ambitious. Reading through the books she has published this decade, one encounters a capacious and resourceful poet working at the peak of her powers. Indeed, Osman has done much to expand the category of poetry itself, translating it into a space of generic and intellectual permission.

Yet for all the vectors and feints that mark her writing, her juxtapositions of genre, material, and method are rarely disorienting. Osman's project is fundamentally consistent: she is a historian of the present, dedicated to documenting the structures of power and violence that mark—mar—the contemporary world. Reading her work in the aggregate, one thus has the sense that her interests are not dis-

crete and that her books are not independent from one another. They are a single, extended project, discrete *and* serial, linked together through occult nodes of poetic and scholarly possibility. At times, Osman signals the ligatures between her books quite explicitly. *Corporate Relations*, her 2014 inquiry into the history of corporate personhood, concludes with a quote from the nineteenth-century French scientist Étienne-Jules Marey. "Motion Studies," the titular essay and centerpiece of her latest book, offers an extended consideration of Marey. As Osman notes, describing his research, "Marey knew that every function of the human body, no matter how hidden in the folds, creates movement; he simply needed to find a way to transfer those movements to paper, to turn them into data to be analyzed." Marey constructed elaborate instruments to transform motion into data—like the sphygmograph, a device that measured the human heartbeat, as well as harness and shoes that charted the movements of a bird's wings or a trotting horse. As Osman documents, Marey's experiments inaugurated a new attention to the body, a new hunger for biometric data. That hunger expressed itself in the early twentieth-century in "scientific management," which carefully monitored workers on the assembly line, attempting to eliminate unnecessary motions and accelerate production. Marey's work is thus an important chapter in the development and expansion of biopower: power that, as Foucault writes in *Security, Territory, Population*, adheres to "the basic biological features of the human species"—births, deaths, diseases, the body itself. Marey's instruments allow biopower to focus on ever more mundane, microscopic elements of embodied life. Though his early devices were complicated and ornate, assemblages of tubes and wires that often hindered the movements they were supposed to measure, his devices gradually became less and less invasive. In the 1870s, for instance, he created a photographic "gun" that, when "fired," would take twelve pictures a second, digesting any movement into its component parts: "There was no more need for tubes and harnesses—all that was required was light." Marey's work tends toward a form of surveillance so discrete that the birds, horses, and humans he studied may not have been aware that their bodies were subject to its exacting documentation.

Quoting Marey at the end of *Corporate Relations*, anticipating his emergence as a major figure in *Motion Studies*, Osman invites her reader to read backwards: to think through the relationship between corporate law—the way that it creates a creature that is not quite human and yet possesses the legal protections accorded to human beings—and Marey's experiments, how they strip living creatures

of their particularity, reducing them to data, abstract traces of living motion. One begins to wonder about the strange historical confluence between these phenomena. Both corporate personhood and biometric data collection began to develop at the end of the nineteenth century. And both seem to reach their apotheosis in the present: with the 2010 Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United vs. Federal Election Commission*, which explicitly awarded corporations free speech protections, and the more or less concurrent proliferation of wearable devices that measure, as Osman writes, "skin temperature, galvanic skin response, steps taken, stairs climbed, distance travelled, calories burned, sleep quality, and sleep cycle, water consumption . . ." The body adorned with such devices realizes, at last, Marey's dream. Each of its functions is subject to persistent, ubiquitous surveillance; it yields itself, offering itself as data. These historical developments seem evidently distant from one another: even opposite in their principles. As Osman writes in *Corporate Relations*, corporate personhood is a legal fiction: "the courts . . . gave birth to / corporations as persons." But in doing so, they ignored the complexity of actual persons: "few of us are only our economic interests / we have beliefs, we have convictions, we have likes and dislikes." This is just the opposite of Marey's ambition, which attends with exacting precision to the physicality of the human person, the fleshy tics and jolts that no corporation possesses (and which, under scientific management, corporations sought to suppress). But perhaps the distinctions between these developments are only part of the story. Osman encourages her readers to look deeper. Reading *Motion Studies* and *Corporate Relations* in paratactic juxtaposition, Osman challenges her readers to ask searching and otherwise unlikely questions: what if these—apparently discrepant developments—are symptomatic of an underlying structure of power?

Osman investigates these questions in a resolutely anti-disciplinary fashion. She does not present a thesis, situate her work in the field, bolster it with an elaborate armature of footnotes—though one imagines that the questions she poses would make for fertile territory for researchers in critical theory or cultural studies. But Osman refuses the polite standards of academic research—and, in doing so, her work asks us to ponder the limitations of such research. She wagers that her own method, with its juxtapositions between genres, materials, and methods, will allow new questions and new forms of knowledge to emerge. More fundamentally, Osman is committed to the idea that poetry itself can—and should—serve as a form of knowledge production. And with its wild profusion of generic engagements, her work

suggests that poetry's capacity to produce knowledge emerges from the frisson and collision between different kinds of language. This frisson is on display in "Motion Studies." Alongside its detailed consideration of Marey's experiments and devices, it contains a piece of speculative fiction, in which a woman and an invisible man ("in an earlier moment in her life, she might have described him as a ghost") attempt to escape from some form of ubiquitous and onerous surveillance. It is never clear who is surveilling the main characters—it might be a big brother state or a corporation. There is simply a sense of threat, some indominable, disembodied power that watches and waits to strike. The story is fragmentary and disjointed: following the example set by avant-garde speculative novels like Leslie Scalapino's *Dahlia's Iris* and Joyelle McSweeney's *Flet*, it invests in language and ambiance, rather than plot. Further, the story appears in short bursts, a page or so at a time, interrupting an otherwise sober discussion of Marey and the history of biometric data collection. The story punctuates the essay with a dose of dread and political pessimism. The characters' attempt to evade the surveillance they live under turns out to be an incitement to surveillance, not an escape from it:

They are statistics in a sizable population, available as any for abuse. They had been sold a bill of goods in their hope for a better life. They have been sold the possibility of freedom from their digital dossiers and restrictive boxing. In fact, they were just two data points on a long sucker list, part of a teaming horde of suckers on a list called "incoherent narratives."

It is tempting to read Osman's story as a reflection on power itself. Perhaps it stages for her readers the otherwise obscure connections between corporate power and biometric data collection. Indeed, the story's eerie terror does not derive simply from the fact that its characters are surveilled, but from the uncanny character of the corporation or state that surveils them. The characters are surveilled by an entity which enjoys all the benefits of being human—it is intelligent, capable of amassing and analyzing data on enormous populations—and none of the downsides: it cannot be watched back. It exceeds both the characters' and the narrator's ken. Whether it is a corporation or not, the force that surveils the characters in "Motion Studies" occupies the space of corporate personhood—and dramatizes the extent to which biometric surveillance, and the conception of the human that it implies, may come to serve as a tool of corporate power. In this sense, the story presents the dark consummation of the dynamics that

the essay elsewhere traces. It presents a world which is recognizably our own, slightly amplified, so that the otherwise opaque operations of power—and the consequences of those operations—becomes intelligible.

In a sense, this is the broad ambition of Osman's multi-book project: to use the tools of poetry to map the subterranean geography of power, the way it operates and mutates in the present. She asks her readers to consider the diversity of objects to which power attaches, the wide field of its operations. In doing so, she examines the present as a historical artifact: a sediment compounded from past practices, past discourses.* It is no accident that "Motion Studies" juxtaposes Marey's early biometric devices with contemporary tech innovations like the Apple Watch. Osman wants her readers to learn how to read across historical difference, to recognize the genealogical links that bind the past with the present. And Osman also wants her readers to learn how to cross the boundaries that separate disparate forms of power: to learn to recognize the way they nest, complementing and accentuating each other. In this regard, *Motion Studies* serves as a model achievement: it not only clarifies the ambition and scope of Osman's accomplishment, it also supplies a paradigm for other poets to explore.

One imagines—one hopes—that Osman's project is unending: that she will never arrive at a definitive map of power as it manifests in the twilight of capital and American empire. Indeed, the idea of such closure and completion is anathema to her method. She rejects such forms of closure, preferring instead the ongoing, the dynamic, the responsive. In the second essay in *Motion Studies*, "Popular Science," she offers an image of this aesthetic and political strategy, transposed into the dynamic motions of figures at a public protest:

Meanwhile, a figure wandering in convolutions responds with flux, resists the spell of the positron emission, the colorful diagram, the photogenic splice. Behavior colors outside the lines,

*Arguably, it is this interest in tracing the genealogy of power, its historical development, that separates the books Osman has published since 2010 from her earlier books. Books like *An Essay in Asterisks* (2004) or *The Character* (1999) make use of many of the same tools and materials as the later books—*Asterisks*, for instance, anticipates *Corporate Relations* in using court documents. Further, both books are fundamentally interested in naming, anatomizing forms of power. But they do not perform deep historical dives into the genealogies of the powers they interrogate.

always on the lam, falling off the map—an unruly region, messing up the works, merging with other processes. Not a mass action, but interactive, spatially responsive, ongoing.

Osman's work over the past decade is itself "interactive, spatially responsive, ongoing"—each book expanding, challenging, and transforming the parameters of its predecessors. She responds with "flux" to the convolutions of power, merging and blending processes, practices, books. Her aim is not to produce a comprehensive map of power, but instead to generate a mode of thinking which is as adaptable, fluid, and mobile, as the power it documents and challenges.

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