

Aesthetics and Anaesthetics in Charlotte Prodger's *BRIDGIT*

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Video: smartphone camera, landscape format. Point of view: living room couch, supine shot from head, camera resting on the chest and capturing the body all the way down to the trainers. Motion: static, except for the rise and fall of the breath. Sound: NTS Radio in the background, voice-over in the foreground that concludes with:

It's all about you, /
every part of you. /
But you're not there.

This is the opening scene of the 32-minute film *BRIDGIT*. The establishing shot presents a curiously intimate view. The camera serves as a prosthesis for the artist's self-image: the body at rest. Camera upright, body horizontal. Relinquishing the smartphone's native aspect ratio of 9:16 (the default portrait of the 21st century), *BRIDGIT* is in 16:9, the format of the user's landscape. This is a private cinema that opens onto the artist's body in direct address. 'It's all about you.' Yet the artist goes on to speak in voice-over not about the body's presence, whether hers or yours. Rather, she speaks about the inability to register presence at all – the total absence of self under the effect of anaesthetics.

Shot in 2016, Charlotte Prodger began making *BRIDGIT* shortly after, and throughout outpatient recovery from an elective hysterectomy. The personal choice and detail of this surgery is not explicitly described in the film, but it nonetheless underpins and invisibly permeates the entire structure of the work. Situating ten spoken-word narratives within domestic backdrops and rural environments (isolated spaces of enforced idleness and recuperation), and shot with largely negligible movements on the artist's smartphone camera (a small, light object either held close to the body or

else simply left resting on top of it, because of long periods of restricted mobility), *BRIDGIT* meditates on a rhythmic mapping and remapping of the body. It is an attempt to understand how a body shapes vision.

In this way, *BRIDGIT* is an entirely 'aesthetic' work – one where the word 'aesthetic' is understood as referring to a discourse of the sensorial body. In her 1992 essay on the aesthetics of political modernity (to which the title of this essay is indebted), historian Susan Buck-Morss identifies the root of the word as follows:

Aisthetikos is the ancient Greek word for that which is "perceptive by feeling." *Aisthesis* is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality—corporeal, material nature. [...] The senses maintain an uncivilized and uncivilizable trace, a core of resistance to cultural domestication. This is because their immediate purpose is to serve instinctual needs...

The opening aesthetic of *BRIDGIT* is that of the body as an interior logic – more animal than civil, more personal than social. It portrays the state of presentness in private: of being, breathing, listening and healing (quiet and inconspicuous activities). And, as the film progresses in episodic form, the narrative meanwhile grapples with analogues for altered states: a trancing cat, dropping acid, going under general anaesthetic, the speculative histories of neolithic cults, and the switching of proper nouns and aliases. But like all bodies, the body at the heart of *BRIDGIT* is compelled to occupy a place within society, replete with its bathrooms, care homes, and hospital wards – institutional spaces structured according

to generalised codes that abstract the individual.

Many of Prodger's video works locate themselves in a productive antagonism between the tensions of the self and the communal. They switch from the observation of the body in public space to the self-reflexive body in sites of domestic privacy and environmental wilderness. In *BRIDGIT*, this tension finds further complexity in a different type of withdrawal: disidentification with one's body and the subsequent disappearance of the self under the anaesthetic.

Now we're in the small transition room just beside the recovery room – it's me, her and an anaesthetic nurse. [...] The anaesthetist leans in – I think she's still behind me – and she says 'what you think about now is what you're going to dream about. Think about something nice.' There's not much time, I haven't thought about it. So I think about a field, I've got it in my mind's eye. But it's not quite right, I can't get the right field so I keep changing it. Now this field, now that one, like slides. I never settled on one and that slideshow, searching for the right field, was the last content before nothing.

Despite evidence of prehistoric herbal remedies, anaesthetics are a relatively modern invention. First coming into advanced use in the late 18th and early 19th century, anaesthetics emerged within an already rich narcotic landscape. In her survey of manipulations to the human synaesthetic system, Buck-Morss adds anaesthetic's 'ether frolics' and 'laughing gas' to a post-Enlightenment list of coffee, tobacco, tea, spirits, opium, cocaine, hypnosis, hydrotherapy, and electric shock treatment. Significantly, Buck-Morss also notes successful anaesthesia allowed doctors to shed empathic identification with their patients so that they might solely concentrate on the details of an inert body. Detaching the need for collective emotional and physical efforts required to restrain an individual resisting pain, anaesthetic created two de-personalised, private modes: nothingness for the patient, and technical focus for the doctor.

For Prodger, this momentary nothingness of the self is the origin of *BRIDGIT*. Her ambivalence about 'the last content before nothing' while undergoing anaesthesia is replaced not with the cohesion between body and self upon waking, but rather with a body that wakes to the traces of multiple selves. There is an implicit awareness that her prior search for the 'right field' (singular) is the wrong activity in the transition room. Even within the codified space of the hospital, multiplicity of vision and self is glimpsed ahead. Following her anecdote on the surgery, Prodger puts in close succession two quotations: first, musician and art historian Julian Cope's reflections on the many names of the Neolithic deity, Bridgit; and second, the artist's own observations of the post-operation hospital ward.

BRIDE, BRID, BRIG, BRIZO OF DELOS, THE MANX BRESHEY and THE CRETAN BRITOMARTIS – it is most likely that the Neolithic form of her name was simply BREE. One of the great difficulties facing anyone who attempts to unravel the problems of the ancient world is that of names. The deities of antiquity have a very great number of names. Not only were they known by different names

in different places, but they often had at least three different phases: old, middle aged and young, which were all known by different names in one place.

Margaret, Deborah, Emeare, Helen. Each are points in a moving grid. [...] The undifferentiated chaos of organs and bodies contained within the infinite time/space rhythm was going on long before I was there. It was going on when I wrote this and when I recorded it and now while you're listening to it.

Here, Prodger reconfigures subjectivity to the point where relationships between bodies, places and things might not be defined by proximity or even the delineation of one subject to another. Rather, this is a transcendental notion of fluid relationships across and through time, and appears as a conscious movement away from the modernist male subject and its over-differentiated emphasis on the individuality and rationality of the singular being. Literary historian Patricia Waugh has noted a similar tendency among women writers of the mid-20th century to find alternative conceptions of subjectivity. She states that these writers' definitions of a relationship '[do] not make identity dependent axiomatically upon the maintenance of boundaries and distance, nor upon the subjugation of the other'. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the writing of Aberdeenshire novelist and poet Nan Shepherd (1893-1981), a frequent touchstone for Prodger's own reflections on landscape throughout *BRIDGIT* and her previous film *Stonemollan Trail* (2015):

To apprehend things – walking on a hill, seeing the light change, the mist, the dark, being aware, using the whole of one's body to instruct the spirit [...] it dissolves one's being. I am no longer myself but part of a life beyond myself.

In *BRIDGIT*, this blending of self with one's surrounding environment is not a loss or confusion, but rather an embrace of correspondence. Prodger uses her camera as an equivalence machine, where everything depicted functions as an alias not simply for the self, but for an endless empathic splitting-off of the subject between times and places. This is the self as supine body and landscape, a lion t-shirt on a radiator and a cat next to a lightbulb, Alice Coltrane and Turiya, hard-drive and desktop icon, patient and deity.

The concluding shot of the film depicts a field of standing stones, out of which a white digital grid dilates into an ever-expanding net. This surreal moment – prefigured in the narrative of the hospital ward – transforms these wilfully mute stone objects into the fulcrum of *BRIDGIT*'s entanglements. While monuments generally exist to preserve the idea of stable memory, standing stones tend to operate in a counter direction. As multipurpose and evolving sites of politics and identity, kaleidoscopic in their historical uses and narrative manipulations, standing stones refer as much to the epic narratives of myth as they do to the privately talismanic. These sculptural abbreviations of history emphatically point towards a closed circuit, a hidden language. Like the titular deity who may be artist or may be viewer, this final standing stone is the obdurate remainder of a hidden whole, perpetually caught between meaning and nothing.