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RIFTS

NYFF60 CURRENTS

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Riccardo Giacconi, *Diteggiatura (Fingerpicking)* (2021), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

Installation view of Charles Atlas: *The Mathematics of Consciousness* at Pioneer Works, September 9 - November 22, 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Pioneer Works. Photo by Dan Bradica.

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Philipp Fleischmann, *Film Sculpture (3)* (2022), installation view, Lyon Biennale Lugdunam. Courtesy the artist.

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PETER GIDAL, THE AUTHOR AS PRODUCER OF NOTHING

The Author as Producer of Nothing by Peter Gidal
Edited by Sezgin Boynik and Diego Bruno
RAB-RAB Press, 2021.

This new publication brings forward an unpublished essay by Peter Gidal from 1978, which was written for the students at the Royal College of Art in London while he was teaching there. The book also contains a new Introduction by Gidal himself and an Afterword by the editor Sezgin Boynik contextualizing Gidal's theoretical positions and his radical film practice. Highlighting the book's interest Sezgin states, "the reason we publish this book is to give our version of Gidal, which is not obscured by mystified opaqueness, art-world ambiguities, and theoretical mediocrity."

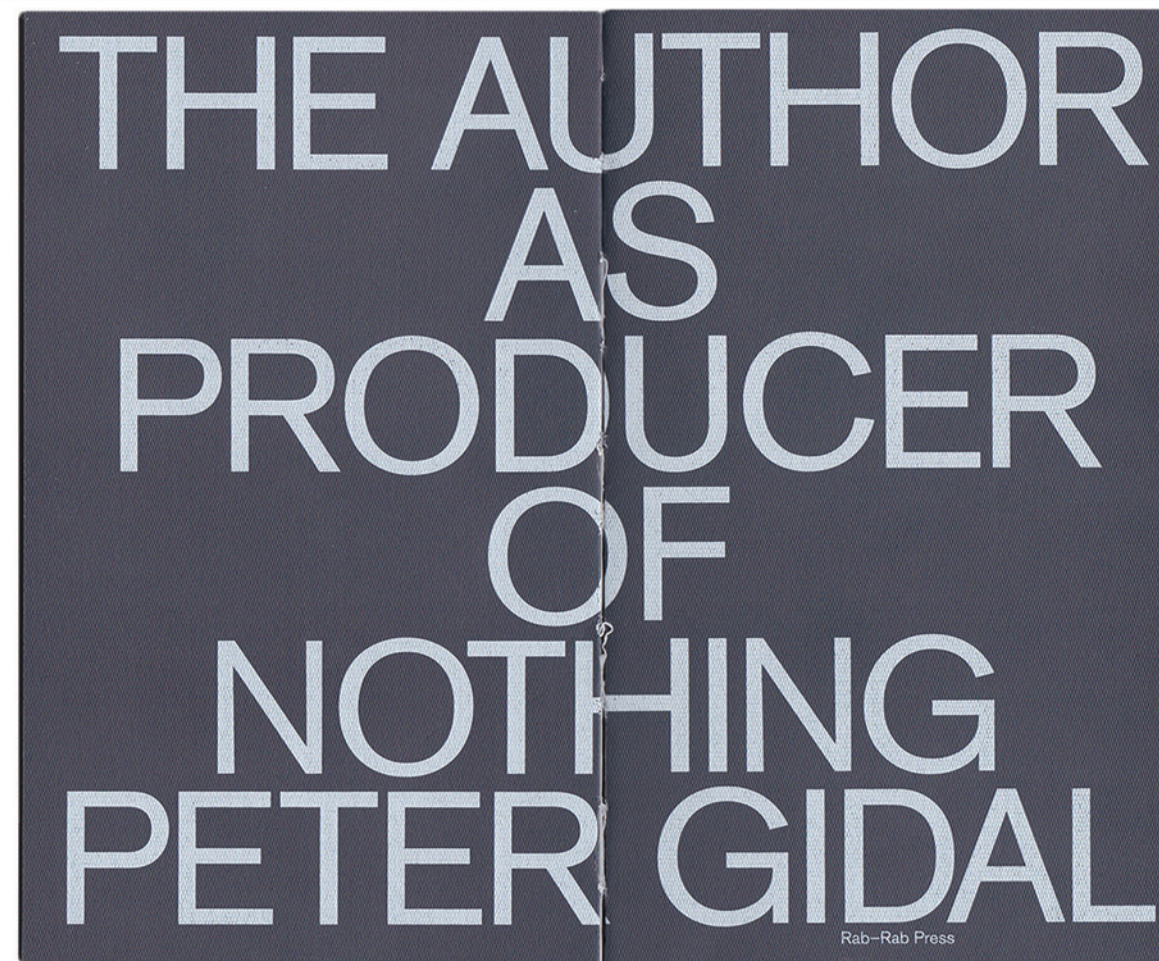
Gidal is among the most important filmmaker-theorists in the second half of the twentieth century. His filmmaking fed off theorisations without being determined by them. Though not explicitly dealing with film, this dense and enmeshed theoretical text is an important addition to his more widely known writings. This text simultaneously revitalizes and elaborates Gidal's polemics for which he uses *negation* to modulate the internal contradictions of different art works and theoretical stances.

Gidal confronts Walter Benjamin's 1934 essay "The Author as Producer" (of concrete political action) for attributing romantic/anti-materialist political roles to the author. He criticizes the certainty in Benjamin's argument with regard to the author being the origin of knowledge and the underlying presumption that such an origin can even be traced. He employs prose that is fragmented, divergent, branched and oftentimes obsessive, possibly to imitate the uneasiness readers may have felt when confronted, for the first time, by the style of someone like Samuel Beckett. In doing so, Gidal is perhaps demonstrating how political possibilities of a text may lie elsewhere, within formal parameters that resist the authoritarianism of neatly resolved meanings. Gidal has written extensively on Beckett, along with Louis Althusser; they are two of the most important reference points for his radical insights into a range of topics that would frame his filmic concerns: meaninglessness, interpellation, and the importance of theorization to arrive at a practice that is formally distinguished and politically chiseled.

Although Gidal does not address his filmmaking practice explicitly, he does refer to certain germane ideas in his filmic and theoretical preoccupations. In the opening lines of *Author as producer of nothing*, Gidal quotes the first paragraph of Beckett's *Lessness* ("Ruins true refuge long last towards which so many false time/out of mind...") to hint at how a text can resist the dominant mode of meaning making (for example by disallowing punctuation). Gidal's filmic practice echoes a similar approach with regard to identification of the visual field, "Zooming, panning, focussing to constantly 'redefine' reality and the process of seeing/filming (although the two are not the same)...," he wrote in 1971. Beckett's prose goes beyond typical flirtations with narrative conventions in literature as does Gidal in film, who refuses the idea that one can work in any productive fashion other than by abnegating narrative entirely.

Further in the text, Gidal refuses to collapse the ideology of meaning making to determined identities (of the subject), and he refutes that gender on the forefront could decisively address the tenets of patriarchal repression. This has long been the crux of Gidal's opposition to identity politics: "The un-repression of biology, difference, can be equally in the interests of patriarchy." Gidal implies that the question of (figurative) presence of a woman on screen will mean that the problems of figuration itself would eclipse any emancipatory ambition of feminist politics that such a gesture might possess in the first place.

Gidal is far from toeing the reactionary line of identity politics being a direct compromise on artistic qualities. From his anti-deterministic, anti-empiricist and anti-figurative position, Gidal rendered identity politics problematic (he would consider Materialist feminists like Christine Delphy his ally). Also, while Gidal's (and Malcolm LeGrice's) structuralist-materialist concerns did overlap with those of abstract expressionism and minimalism (by way of a preference for *low-level signifiers* for example), they remained critical towards the romantic roots of those movements where the artist was often perceived as a struggling male genius.



Courtesy of RAB-RAB Press.

One case in point are the writings of Ad Reinhardt. In a text titled *Routine Extremism* (undated), Reinhardt outlines artistic creation's struggle against the creatively vacuous routines of daily life, an articulation antithetical to Gidal, while in another text *On negation* (undated), he outlines the functional basis of Reinhardt's black paintings as non-representational, anti-humanist, and non-objectivist, clearly resonating with Gidal's theoretical concerns.

Gidal is suspicious of individual labor's capacity to both be a source of art and drive direct political action, a posture that he arrives at by relying on Marx's critique of the socialist Gotha program to underscore the perils of fetishizing production (around which collectivist-leftist discourses consolidated in the 1970s, best exemplified in the filmmaking of the Berwick Street Collective and the Dziga Vertov group). Benjamin's notion of the author's *productivity* is critiqued by Gidal on the same lines.

Gidal's theory and praxis have always had formal concerns with the medium at their core. What distinguishes Gidal from

most other artists concerned with form is his insistence on looking at formal problems non-mechanistically through political and ideological systems, never outside of ideology, and never fixating on conditions of production in isolation. His uniquely theorized formalism (more Shklovskian in nature than Greenbergian) is tied to his ultra-leftist position, a politics free from a political subject. Gidal, in the very least, continues to provide a critical means to think and engage with formal avant garde in meaningful leftist terms, far from the syndicates of semiotics or psychoanalysis like in narrative cinema from a certain moment on in the 1970s or those privileging analysis of conditions of production over conditions of illusion in leftist collectivist filmmaking. He is an active practitioner of a form of political modernism that has few, if at all any, parallels in the entirety of the post-68 landscape.

ARINDAM SEN