

The Fire Still Burns: Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub at MoMA



Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub's "Une visite au Louvre (A Visit to the Louvre)," 2004.
(Jean-Marie Straub)

At the opening of “Machorka Muff” (1963), the first film credited to Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, a title card reads: “A metaphorical dream, not a story.” The beginning in a series of direct, polemical statements that the pair, who made films together until Huillet’s death in 2006, would frequently attach to their films, it also serves as an easily digestible and familiarly terse maxim for their body of work as a whole. But it’s also, rather unfortunately, why their films have been routinely overlooked by anyone outside the margins of cinema. Described as impenetrable and rigorous — a criticism that is only half-true, but one that the filmmakers, through public statements, did little to reverse — much of their work has screened only sporadically, in festivals and on the repertory circuit, if at all, especially in North America.

“They are sui generis — there is no way in replicating the passion to the point of obsession that they devote to each of their films,” said Josh Siegel, a curator in the department of film at the Museum of Modern Art. Siegel organized a complete retrospective of their work at the museum, comprised of 46 films — including films they made together, work Straub has made since Huillet’s death, and a documentary about the pair by Pedro Costa — opening on May 6. Many years in the making, the series coincides with an exhibition at the Miguel Aberu Gallery, where you can find stills from many of their films along with fascinating ephemera, and the publication of two new books dedicated to their body of work. “The idea that somebody could agonize over the place of the camera as if it had the gravity of a moral decision is not something most artists are vexed by today.”

For Huillet and Straub, those decisions are both moral and ideological confrontations with history and reality. Despite the literary sources of much of their films — Friedrich Hölderlin, Bertolt Brecht, Cesare Pavese, Arnold Schoenberg, Franz Kafka, to name a few — they bear no

mark of adaptation, little concern for the original's narrative elements or signs of conventional cinematic illusion. Every film is not just a film of the text, but *about* the text, holding it at equal importance to the natural environment as it's captured — the sound of the waves or the wind in the trees. "In a dubbed film, there is not the least rapport between what you see and what you hear," Straub once said in an [interview](#), outlining his position. "The dubbed cinema is the cinema of lies, mental laziness, and violence, because it gives no space to the viewer and makes him still more deaf and insensitive." To break apart these elements of the material world as they are being recorded would be to strip the image of its layers of conversation, of its ideas and emotions and its connection to the world. "For them, it almost takes on the level of an act of crime," Siegel said. "It's a way of killing what it was that they saw as so vibrant in the real world."

It's this shared conviction that drew Huillet and Straub to the work of Cézanne, first in "Cézanne. Conversation with Joachim Gasquet" (1989) and later in "A Visit to the Louvre" (2004). Both films use the words of Cézanne taken from Gasquet's 1921 memoir of the artist and are compositionally similar, although the earlier film, alongside the paintings that are filmed in their frames as *objects*, also includes clips from Jean Renoir's film adaptation of "Madame Bovary" (1933) and their own "The Death of Empedocles" (1986). "I think that [Huillet and Straub] believe profoundly in the idea of a miraculous transformation, a kind of awe at the way in which nature lives and one can, through art, capture that sense of vitality," Siegel said, mentioning something Cézanne once wrote that the pair were fond of quoting: "Painting from nature is not copying the object. It is materializing one's sensations."

In "Cézanne," according to Richard I. Suchenski, the founder and director of the Center for Moving Image Arts and an assistant professor of film and electronic arts at Bard College, there "is an attempt to circle around the various meanings of 'Cézanne' to arrive at a fuller understanding of his practice, to cut through layers of interpretation and affirm bedrock truths of representation and perception that they identify as paradigmatic of his art." Huillet and Straub attempt to cut through the layers of meaning, to "reconnect it, in the deepest possible way, with the natural world," by revisiting some of landscapes Cézanne painted with their camera, most notably in two shots filmed at Aix-en-Provence that, according to Suchenski, "ask the viewer to consider the impact a gap of a century can make in one's reading of a landscape." This gap also creates a tension that is present in both the work of Huillet and Straub and Cézanne, found in the gap between different ways of looking and its transformation into art.

"They also don't suffer fools gladly," Siegel added, "and I think they gravitate toward Cézanne because he is almost virulent in his opinions toward various painters." This is clear in "A Visit to the Louvre," a companion to their first film about the artist and whose words are taken from the chapter in Gasquet's book that details a visit to the famous museum with the artist, and what the writer Sally Shafto has called a "catalogue of opinions." He is critical of Jacques-Louis David, but almost fervent about the work of Paolo Veronese and Tintoretto. And many of Cézanne's opinions could double as those of Huillet and Straub, as when he says: "One paints bodies; and when the bodies are well painted, damn it all! The soul, if there is one, of every part of the body blazes out and shines through!"

"What I think Cézanne's getting at, and it's something [Huillet and Straub] gravitate toward, is that there is blood in the veins of certain painters just as there is blood in the veins of certain volcanic rock," Siegel said. "The sense of life and vitality in certain works that they find otherwise lacking in others, something static or inert." Or, as Straub once said, expounding on a famous quote from Cézanne about the landscape of Mont Saint-Victoire: "Films have no interest unless one finds something that burns somewhere within the shot." And the fire continues to burn.