

The Ambiguous Archive: An Interview with Michelle Citron

Brian Price and Meghan Sutherland

Meghan Sutherland: One of the things that strikes me about your work is that it feels deeply caught up with theoretical ideas, and philosophical explorations of those ideas—which is to say, open-ended explorations—and it's also very personal and intimate. Obviously, a lot of it deals with life experience and personal histories, with autobiography. I wonder how you understand the relation between theory and personal life in general, and in your work.

Michelle Citron: There's a strange tension in my work, because I'm driven by these intellectual issues and the work has such a strong affective component. And sometimes I think that the intellectual is a defense against the emotional. Or it's a way to hold it, so that the emotional doesn't become sentimental—it doesn't just flow over everything and suffocate it. But even though I say that, there's always some strong emotional or body motivation for everything that I do. I don't believe that art is an intuitive process. It's a mode of inquiry. But even that has an intuitive component to it....

Brian Price: It seems to me that your work comes out of a really important moment in the history of feminism and film theory, one in which theory and practice seemed much more allied than they are today, for some reason. It strikes me as relation, or a practice, that has not really been able to sustain itself.

MC: In the 1970s, feminist theory was really critical. There were two realms. There were people who were doing work in the academy, and there were independent scholars. The theoretical arguments were also being spun out in art, though. And a lot of the work that was being spun out in art was really connected to people's lives because art usually involves some kind of object, and you bring it into a room and you show it to people and you get feedback. So here, theory entered into a dialogue with the community through the object of film. The dialogues taking place tended to involve intellectuals and academics. So at some point they became unanchored, while the films themselves stayed anchored. But there were also bad films made. I really don't want to idealize [this period], all those films. But what was going on intellectually, in theoretical writings, directly fed into the films, and fed into *Daughter Rite*, too. What's a progressive aesthetic? Without it, the films wouldn't be as rich as they are, and thanks to the films the theory had a way of being grounded in the social world outside of itself, which kept it more lively. And that's about the body. And I think about the body as a social body. I talk about my work as being theoretically driven, but it's also attached to the body, which is in the affective realm. These films were attached to the social body. It's a more complex level than just the theoretical one.

MS: Is that why you don't write theory? Your films, and your online interactive work, feel very much like rigorous theoretical work. In some way, you seem to do that kind of work, but you do it through your filmmaking. Is it the aspect of art involving communal reception that's important to you here?

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MC: It is. It's so complicated. Part of it is that there's an ambiguity to the art object; there's an ambiguity to the images. And that ambiguity is very productive for me. When you write, there's less of it. You can write in an ambiguous way, certainly.

MS: A lot of people have tried it!

MC: Or not tried it—been successful at it! But I think what you're doing is analytically working through something, which comes out of my work as a scientist, I think. I have a hypothesis—which is a theoretical hypothesis—and I'm exploring and experimenting with it, and I might come to some conclusions but it might also open up five other areas that are unanswered. There's something about that ambiguity: it's easier to get to that place through art than it is through writing. Writing comes with more expectations about what writing should do. But also, the mediums are so different. Images are ambiguous. That's the whole point of the first chapter in my book [*Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions*]. There are these images running down the center and then there are these two discourses that dialogue with those images and they illuminate the images, and they open up those images to reading, but ultimately the images cannot be confined by either of the texts. That ambiguity seems very important to me. I wish had another language to talk about lived experience.

BP: I wonder if your concern with ambiguity is what draws you to work on CD-ROMs, with more interactive digital media. Does medium matter to you?

MC: I'm having very complicated feelings about working in digital right now. I just had a conversation with another artist about doing an exhibition on durability. The fact is that the interactive material is not durable. I've always been really attracted to film because it's always been concrete and tangible; you could hold it in your hand and smell it. To find out which side is the emulsion you would taste it with your tongue. It's very physical in a way that is very appealing to me. The only reason that I went to digital is not—I actually hate digital, including the fact that it's so ephemeral—is that after writing the book I became so interested in the idea that we construct our narratives. Where does the narrative take place? I'm trying to create these works that live in fragments, in pieces, until they enter the audience's mind—the narratives are constructed in the space between the art object and the audience. And I'm trying to get the audience to reflect on the construction of our narratives, and I have this idea about how this process of fragmentation and narrative cohesiveness is really fundamental to the way we move through the world and the way that we understand our existence, our memory, and all sorts of things. The digital seemed like the only way that I could do it, but there is something very dissatisfying about it.

MS: It's funny that you mention that because I was looking back at *Home Movies and Other Necessary Fictions* and I was thinking about how it makes the book, and the traditional book format itself, into a kind of prefiguration or paraphrase for what you do with the Internet. You might read some of one page about your childhood, and then open up another page and read a narrative about Kodak and the social history of home movies, and then go back into this very intense personal story, these heartbreaking passages. It actually does all of the things that the infrastructure of the Internet, as a medium, is supposed to do.

MC: It actually does. When I finished the book I thought, "there's really something going on here and I have to explore it." I was really glad to take it back to images. So the interactivity

[of *Mixed Greens* and *Jewish Looks*] made sense, although most of what is in those pieces was shot on film and then put onto the Internet. But I know that you can do it in books, and I'm thinking that the next thing I want to do is a book again. But to explore the same issues about fragmentation and narrative within the context of a book in a different way.

MS: How do you see images fitting into that? It was really interesting to me that you mentioned you think images are more amenable to the openness of thought, that their ambiguity is a more hospitable environment for your thoughts. For philosophy this has been regarded a most horrid prospect, at least historically.

MC: Because they can't explain them?

MS: Because images are too elusive. Images have always seemed very dangerous. There is a very short tradition of philosophy that's not scopophobic, at root. So what you're describing here is really interesting to me, and I wonder if you could say more about how you understand that capacity of images to carry your ideas in their ambiguity.

MC: Can I say more? You'll have to ask me another question.

BP: Well, for example, Alexandre Astruc, in "The Birth of the Camera Stylo," imagined that with the advent of the 16mm camera, the Descartes of today would lock himself up in his bedroom and record his philosophy on film—which has to do, in part, with an idea that one could record an idea in movement rather than translate that movement, which is itself an idea, into language.

MC: How does one create work that opens up a space for the audience, or the reader? I think that images do that in themselves. They allow for a dialogue between the viewer and the creator of that image, or between the spectator and the image itself. I'm not trying to make an argument. I'm trying to make an experience that has a strong intellectual current so that people will think about not only the experience but the ideas behind it and how they relate to their own lives, which is different from making an argument in order to convince somebody of something.

BP: I'm wondering if we might come back to the question of durability and ambiguity, which is also a question about the archive. In *Mixed Greens*, you're interested in creating an archive—or archives. The archives that you create are clearly meant to document, but how do you reconcile this desire to document—to understand the life of someone by the objects that they've left behind—with your mutual interest in the preservation of ambiguity?

MC: Well if you look at the screen, there are these stories that are told by different characters—my father, my cousin, my other cousin—that contradict each other. In *Jewish Looks* (www.barnard.edu/sfonline/cf/jewishlo.html), there's a mythic story that my father tells but it's a totally different story when my father tells it, from when my aunt tells it, or when my cousin tells it. You can't ever know exactly what happened. In *Jewish Looks*, I explicitly point that out, whereas in *Mixed Greens*, I present these different stories, and there are forty-eight stories, so if the right juxtaposition occurs, you'll get it, and if it doesn't occur you might not get it. So I try to put the impossibility of full understanding into the piece, to

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literally inscribe it into the work. And the hope is that people will see that and realize it, but that doesn't mean that you stop searching for it.

BP: It's an interesting problem because we tend to think of the archive as a stable environment.

MC: It's totally unstable. There's this thing that I talk about in *Mixed Greens*. Like anyone who does genealogies: how do you find your family? So I find this archivist who has been keeping a massive genealogy of the 5,000 Jews in Ireland; 500 families, maybe 700 families. And he tells me to go to the records office in Dublin—where the birth and death certificates are—and look for alternative spellings of my name. It never occurred to me that there would be alternative spellings. During the Irish War of Independence, the IRA burned down the building where all the archives were taken during the civil war that happened after the English were thrown out. And so all of these archives were burned. So, I finally go and I find out that my grandfather's name was Zitron, spelled with a Z. His birth certificate says Aaron Zitron. I found a report card from 8th grade when he was kicked out of school and it said Aaron Citron. And then his marriage certificate in America said Abraham Citron, so there's no consistency. Lives are so inconsistent, so why would we assume that archives wouldn't be the same? It goes back to this idea of how theory and life are totally entwined, and how archives and life are totally entwined. I'm trying to create work that is talking at a meta-level about ambiguity in these different spheres.

BP: I was struck by the icons of vegetables in *Mixed Greens*—the menu options—by how playful they are and yet how serious it, *Mixed Greens*, is.

MC: It's totally playful. Here's what I found out. So there are these eleven siblings. My grandfather was one of eleven children, and they all had different last names for very complicated reasons. I have one uncle who used Zitron with a Z in Ireland, but every time he went to England he used Citron with a C because he was a gambler and he didn't want to get caught. I also think that he had a woman in Dublin and a woman in London and didn't want to get caught. Then I had another uncle who, during World War II, changes it from Z to C because it meant that stand closer to the front of the line during rations. So, how do you sort all of this out? It is funny. It inherently has wit or something. It's also interesting to me the way that identity was marked in my grandfather by his name, his constantly evolving name. I pulled together all of these pieces—a birth certificate, a marriage certificate, a death certificate, my father's birth certificate, his marriage certificate, my birth certificate. You know, I finally get this stream of paperwork and I send it back to Ireland and I create a note explaining why this name changed all over the place, and I include this photograph of my grandparent's tombstone in Ireland, where their name is Citron with a C, even though their child's name is spelled with a Z. And somehow, that narrative is acceptable to a bureaucracy and they give me the passport. So how do you explain something that *is* about ambiguity?

MS: That changes the way that I think about *Mixed Greens* as an exploration of database narrative. It makes me think of what you said earlier about how dismayed you are with the ephemerality of the digital right now. While most people think of database narrative as interesting precisely because it gives the reader some freedom or some agency—and in some ways it does, and that is also what you're interested in across much of your work. But what is illuminated here is that *Mixed Greens* stages a kind of a performance of the archive. You do

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perform the work. But also, *as* a performance of the archive—a laying out of things, some items that you can explore, all of them snapshots that can be understood, fictional or not, as documents of people’s personal lives—what comes forward instead is a feeling of how uncontrollable this material is, and the sense that you are just barely missing the connection that exists between these stories, that you as viewer might fail to be able to comprehend a link.

MC: Yes, but don’t you think that that replicates the experience of an archive?

MS: Yeah, I do, which is why it’s changing the way that I think about *Mixed Greens*. It’s not necessarily about agency. It’s about the failure of a certain agency.

MC: You can create that narrative from the fragments, but you can also miss the fragments and not get the narrative. There is an element of failure to it that is really critical.

MS: It’s an interesting problem of the medium—the failure to hold together or to be in one thing, or to last. That’s an interesting problem that the work itself poses.

MC: I know. It’s the issue of durability, which I feel very conflicted about right now—and it’s unresolved. It was always important for me to have these concrete objects, but maybe it’s not important. I have this house in Wisconsin that is on a piece of land that is 450 million years old. It’s really a rare place to be and that seems very durable to me, but it isn’t.

BP: What doesn’t disappear? This is a problem that filmmakers seem to be especially concerned with, since film disintegrates. But of course painting disintegrates, too.

MC: There’s a difference between mutation and disappearance. So, there’s a real problem with the digital: you can’t archive it. The equipment you play it on, the software, the operating system is ephemeral. It’s a theater of performance more than it is like film. In the case of film, the colors might fade but there’s still the shadow of an image that’s there.

MS: But the Internet is not an archive.

MC: The Internet is not an archive. I’m at the beginning of something I’m trying to understand. So I can create this art project about durability. I kept thinking that what seemed really important was like a seed from an heirloom tomato. There’s a kind of durability in biology that has to do with flexibility, as opposed to Teflon and iron. And I don’t know if it is analogous in some way to the Internet, but it might be that the durability there is not about stasis. It might be about fluidity and flexibility and adaptability. If that’s the case, maybe the Internet does have a kind of durability, but in a different way.

MS: Along these lines, I wonder about your metaphors about food, the heirloom tomatoes, but also the metaphors about food in your work more generally.

MC: Food is really important. I need psychoanalysis to understand this. My mother was a horrible cook. I mean, really bad—1950s food. My mother’s idea of food was spaghetti with warmed cheese whiz on top. So I grew up with very bad food, but there’s also something erotic about food. When I was young, and I learned how to bake from my grandmother, I

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would bake things for boys all the time. It's where displaced sexuality goes—right onto food. And it's very physical and it's the body and I cook. This isn't theoretical. It's very real. There's something about growing my food and then making a meal out of it. It's the most nurturing thing that you can do. I think that's so specific to my own psyche.

MS: The emphasis on food in your work is always about mixture, or parsing out pieces. In *American as Apple Pie* you have these slices that you can choose.

MC: It's about sitting down and eating meals. I just had a conversation with someone about computer programming who said that they start with a recipe. It's about ordering. It's about building.

MS: Or mixture, or flexibility. But it changes states, depending on what you do with it. There is a kind of unpredictable alchemy and durability to food. You can preserve it. You talk about canning.

MC: So you think that I have all these different outlets for exploring the same issue?

MS: When you cook at home, there's flexibility and the changing of states.

MC: Well, yeah, that's what cooking is. It's chemistry. It's much more than chemistry. You're right. It's a metaphor that's very similar to the process of fragmentation and narrative cohesiveness. And it transforms itself.

MS: And you. It becomes you.

MC: That's right. You eat it and then you are it.

BP: There's also a different way here of thinking about the durability of one's work—how it gets handed down, like a recipe—stable, in some sense, and yet always modified, not the same.

MC: It's not the same, right. But there's something else about endurance that I have been thinking about. It has to do with the young woman who came and talked to me afterwards [after Citron's talk at Oklahoma State University]. We had this conversation in the context of a class and in some way her life—in a teeny, teeny way—was changed in that moment. And that's what you want teaching to be, right? This makes me very sad. My father died not so long ago and the whole issue of how he endures through me is a way of thinking about the durability of art. When people watch *Daughter Rite* they can go off and talk to their parents. It's not about the object. It's about what the object motivates in the lives of the people who come in contact with it. It's hard for me to talk about—and I don't mean this in a sentimental way at all. It's hard to know what makes work interesting. I think it only happens if it's an inquiry into something that's really critical. It's not about expressing yourself.

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