

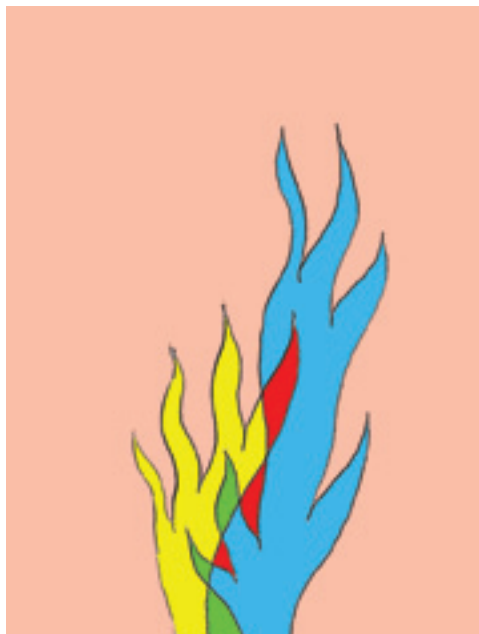
**CRISIS OF MEANING, CRISIS OF FORM**

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## ABSTRACT

### CRISIS OF MEANING, CRISIS OF FORM

The purpose of my research is to investigate the relationship between crisis of meaning and crisis of form in art production, fruition and critique. This investigation is grounded on notions present in historic and contemporary nihilism, materialism and existentialism that state that a crisis inevitably occurs, through enlightenment, in the relationship between self-image and realist and scientific principles.

I want to extract the word crisis from vagueness and pathology, and argue that it can serve to describe a hidden trinity at the centre of art – there is a crisis of meaning, a crisis of form, and a crisis in the relation between meaning and form, each time a new work is set forth.

My understanding of nihilism attempts an extraction from ethics, and puts nihilism against previous roles given to it. The philosophical approach present in nihilism has been used either as a byword for the enemy of reason, or as a dark background against which affirmation (Nietzsche), creative evolution (Bergson), or existentialism (Sartre) can shine. It is my purpose to explore the notion of crisis of meaning as the essence of nihilism (Ray Brassier), and overview its active ramifications in art.

The field of form can be seen as immanently enacting a split between project and world (Bataille) – a split that runs parallel to crisis of meaning in philosophy. It is central to my research to investigate the locus of this crisis, in its relation to contextual crises, be it personal (psychosis), political (revolution), social, and crisis in the very set of criteria brought about in each instance of art.

The written element will consist of twelve short chapters with as many incursions into particular instances where the notion of crisis of meaning is set to bring new clarity to pre-existing fields, from critical terrains to specific media and art history.

The practical element will deal with notions of crisis of meaning and form, as well as with personal crisis, and will take the form of narratives about extreme states of being and the ends of narrative (comic books).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Roxy Walsh and Michael Archer for their support.  
This thesis is dedicated to my parents, wife and son.

I declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own.

Francisco Sousa Lobo .....

Memo to myself

Write not about what you don't understand and isn't yours.  
Write about what you don't understand yet can still own.

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## THE CRISIS SERMON

### CHAPTER ONE

O sermão há-de ter um só assunto e uma só matéria. The sermon will have only one subject and one matter<sup>1</sup>.

Let crisis be the only sermon. Let the trinity be crisis of meaning, crisis of form, crisis in the relation between meaning and form.

Crisis, if understood in the ancient Greek sense, immediately predates decision<sup>2</sup>. If taken as something in itself, something that eludes past and future, as it does in art, crisis is suspension, balance, reverberation and postponement ad aeternum. The work of art exists in the space delineated by the above-mentioned trinity, a trinity that, like all three-legged chairs, is at the same time perfectly balanced yet prone to throw overboard those who sit down too heavily, too confidently. For art is resistant, and there are no invariants<sup>3</sup> – art is defined against. Against critique, against that which appears, against utterance, even against speculation.

What is not meant by crisis? An accusation or pathology. For crisis, even in ancient Greek jurisprudence and medicine, described not a sickness, nor an unsolvable conflict – on the contrary, it evoked openness. It is far too easy to say that the most contemporary thing about contemporary art is its crisis<sup>4</sup>, speculating over half-baked tabloid notions. It is far harder to grasp the variant – that element in art production, fruition and critique that remains forever unsolvable.

It is impossible to know what, in the work of art, is intentional, because of crisis. Even if, in retrospective, retroactively, art discloses something always new, it is doubtful that we should or could say ‘that’s what it was’<sup>5</sup> – for the storm of the present crisis always reinvents former crises. The storm is what Walter Benjamin called progress<sup>6</sup>.

1. page 186, Padre António Vieira, Sermão da Sexagésima, Sermões

2. page 26, Jan Verwoert, Bas Jan Ader – In Search of the Miraculous

In ancient Greek jurisprudence and medicine the crisis is understood as the moment of decision: the moment (i.e. in a conflict) when the situation at hand is understood as too undecided and thus the crisis is a calling for a decision to be taken, or it is the moment when a decision is felt to be impending. So the state of crisis is the experience of the urgent need for – or of the impending arrival of – the resolution of an unresolved situation.

3. page 3, Theodor W Adorno, Aesthetic Theory  
Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined in relation to what it is not.

4. page 17, Sylvère Lotringer, Paul Virilio, The Accident of Art

So don’t let anyone bug me with the crisis of contemporary art. The most contemporary thing about contemporary art is its crisis.

5. page 60, Thierry de Duve, Pictorial Nominalism – On Marcel Duchamp’s Passage from Painting to the Readymade.

It is not incorrect to say, in the manner of phenomenological aesthetics, that the work of art is intentional, but it is an intentionality that only takes its meaning from a retroactive flash: ‘that’s what it was!’

6. Thesis IX page 162, Walter Benjamin, Teses sobre a filosofia da história

Esta tempestade é aquilo a que nós chamamos progresso.

The storm is what we call progress.



Art is not a casualty<sup>7</sup>, but a substitution for sacrifice. By this it is meant: that art is not a limping character, but the limp itself; that war is nothing new; that post-sacrificial societies repurpose enchantment. Art is not a casualty of anything other than itself, art is not symptomatic, it transcends guilt attribution – even when it reeks of guilt and shame to high heaven. Art is not in crisis for it is crisis itself. The word crisis describes better, it is argued, the nature of the artistic condition, than words like disaster, crime and accident. For every artwork is an instant, a suspended moment<sup>8</sup> between the sacrificial scenario and the escape from sacrifice, between what brought about the making of a scene<sup>9</sup> and the quietude expected to come after the scene is finished, between chaos and stability.

What else is not meant by crisis? A vagueness, a floating signifier that absorbs at once the political, the psychological and the aesthetic.

When addressing political crisis, three questions spring to mind. Firstly, the logic of revolution and the suspension of time, for in the revolutionary process people shoot at street clocks<sup>10</sup> and scatter legitimacy, which could be described as the administration of time. Secondly, the problem of crises present in Capitalism's cycles comes to mind, a form of crisis that has been relatively controlled by constant state intervention<sup>11</sup> and converted into precarious balance. Thirdly, there is the crisis in the political subject in contemporary Western democracies, a crisis that has to do with effacement, disempowerment, alienation, and a sense of antagonism become mirrored room.

7. page 17, Sylvère Lotringer, Paul Virilio, *The Accident of Art*

Art is the casualty of war.

8. page 7, Theodor W Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*  
Every artwork is an instant; every successful work is a cessation, a suspended moment of the process, as which it reveals itself to the unwavering eye. If artworks are answers to their own questions, they themselves thereby truly become questions.

9. page 26, Jan Verwoert, Bas Jan Ader – *In Search of the Miraculous*

Making a scene, in this sense, is a technique that preserves the ancient Greek knowledge of the importance of crisis for grasping how things develop.

10 Thesis XV, page 162 Walter Benjamin, *Teses sobre a filosofia da história*

A revolução de Julho comportou ainda um incidente em que uma tal consciência pôde afirmar os seus direitos. Na tarde do primeiro dia de combate, verificou-se que em vários locais de Paris, independentemente e no mesmo momento, se tinha disparado sobre os relógios murais.

The July revolution brought forth an event in which this kind of conscience could affirm its rights. On the afternoon of the first day of fighting, independently and simultaneously, people had shot at street clocks.

11 82, page 53, Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Now that continual tinkering by the state has succeeded in compensating for the tendency for crises to occur, the same type of reasoning takes this delicate balance for a permanent economic harmony.

When addressing psychological crisis, there are immense variables that come to mind, from madness to depression, from Crisis Houses in contemporary UK to the Foucauldian institutions of the past. It is possible that the single one condition with the strongest echo in our time is melancholia. Depression is commonly perceived as the limitation of possibility in the subject, as a dark cloud that, in a single movement, both limits the subject's actions and perspectives. Yet it is possible to establish, if not a link, at least a parallel with nihilism. It needn't be paralysing, it can become a partly active substitution or reintegration of life forces. Melancholia can be stoic, even if stoicism classically rejected melancholia as capitulation<sup>12</sup>. When talking about aesthetic crisis, the ultra-romantic Artaudian vision of Van Gogh comes to mind<sup>13</sup>, as does the pervasive attribute of instability that popular culture bestows on the artist. So does every other form of pathology-finding described above when addressing the so-called crisis in contemporary art. It becomes clear that these three spheres – the political, the psychological and the aesthetic crises – help to blur the term crisis, and give it an excessive quality. If one wishes to circumscribe crisis in the sphere of art production, fruition and critique, it is also necessary to accept that all generalist crises have a reflective presence there. By this it is meant that the specificity of crisis in art is its absorptive quality, and that the political, the psychological and the aesthetic have a double inside that specificity. The nature of this doubling will be explored in the content of this thesis, in its form, and in the possible connections between its content and its form.

12 XI, 18, page 75, Marcus Aurelius, *Pensamentos*  
Quanto mais a atitude for impassível, mais próxima da força se encontrará; e, se o estar triste é sinal de fraqueza, também o é a cólera. Em ambos os casos, é ser-se ferido e capitular.

The more our attitude is untroubled, the closer to strength it will become; and if being sad is a sign of weakness, so it is with anger. In both cases, it is like being wounded and then capitulate.

13 page 611, Antonin Artaud, *Van Gogh – The Man Suicided by Society* (in *Art in Theory 1900-2000*)

Thus it wormed its way into his body,

this society

absolved,

consecrated,

sanctified

and possessed,

erased in him the supernatural consciousness he had just achieved, and, like an inundation of black crows in the fibres of his internal tree, overwhelmed him with one final surge, and taking its place, killed him.



As the capitalist crisis cycles have been muted by a tinkering of the state, so has our post-sacrificial society begun to administer violence and its overproduction through the judiciary, the presence of the police and the primacy of the law in everyday life. One can say that crisis, law and sacrifice are thus everywhere. Through enlightenment, sacrifice is sacrificed permanently, without interruption, in an introverted movement<sup>14</sup>; crisis becomes critique – and critique is also everywhere. When speaking of art, crisis can be said to be its precondition, not in a clinical sense, but in a matter of fact way. For each new work opens up a new set of paradigms of interpolation, a new obscurity (for art can never be fully disenchanted) and a new light (for art always brings forth the promise of revelation or at least the weak form of revelation which is reward).

Artworks delay. What they delay is the subject of crisis, its melodrama, its setting and its function. Crisis is a moment of suspension before resolution, outcome, decision. Art never leaves this moment, for, in leaving this moment, art is in tune with that which is not art, and ceases to exist. If we were to believe that all artworks die, as Duchamp believed<sup>15</sup>, we could still keep our argument of and for crisis. If art achieves a resolution or projects a retroactive flash, it is no longer itself. This is not to say that art lacks empathetic qualities – on the contrary, empathy functions, but it functions in the dark as to how it functions. Art is of the moment, of interruption – art is disjointed crisis. If this was somehow latent in Duchamp and evident in Greenberg and Adorno<sup>16</sup>, it never ceased to be actual – what is postulated here is the contemporary condition of this moment that crisis both circumscribes and opens. It can be argued that the word crisis needs to be rescued from vagueness and pathology – that it describes the new and it describes art, for art is always on the side of the new.

14 page 37, Theodor W Adorno, Horkheimer, quoted in Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound*

The history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice – in other words, the history of renunciation

15 page 67, Marcel Duchamp, Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*

I think painting dies, you understand? After forty or fifty years a picture dies, because its freshness disappears. Sculpture also dies. [...] Men are mortal, pictures too.

16 Instances of contemporary art seen as transitory, question and refusal appear in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*:

Art's substance could be its transitoriness. (page 4)  
Every artwork is an instant; every successful work is a cessation, a suspended moment of the process, as which it reveals itself to the unwavering eye. If artworks are answers to their own questions, they themselves thereby truly become questions. (page 7)  
[...] Through the new, critique – the refusal – becomes an objective element of art itself. (page 29)  
Instances of modern art seen as in perpetual movement appear in Clement Greenberg's *Avant-garde and Kitsch* 1939, *Collected Writings*, vol. I  
That avant-garde culture is the imitation of imitating – the fact itself – calls neither approval nor disapproval. [...] The avant-garde moves, while Alexandrianism stands still.

We can now go back to the beginning, and analyse if any light has entered the trinities.

What is meant by crisis of meaning is a non-pathological and precise condition in which art ceases to function as self-image and refuses disentanglement and clarity.

What is meant by crisis of form is of no relation to the question of immaterial labour, but instead draws something from the question of how to begin a work (instead of how to finish it).

What is meant by crisis in the relation between meaning and form is that all intelligibility lands not on meaning nor on form, but on the shifting sands between them.

As regards the second trinity, which describes three contextual crises, it is possible to ascertain that it exists as a double inside crisis in art. Crisis is suspension, and this suspension that forever eludes decision can be said to be absorptive.

Crisis will be the only sermon, yet this sermon, like Vieira's, will try to remain true to the form of crisis, and accept digression, aphorisms, re-enterings and excursions.



Notes to chapter one:

Crisis of meaning is nihilism, or psychosis, crisis of form is the blind search for a truth, for in form there is always Platonic truth. Yet the search itself is blind, hence our modern distaste for truth.

In high modernism, form was meaning, and meaning form<sup>17</sup>. Crisis brought the two to a curious arrangement, the details of which are yet to be understood. When they are understood, another crisis will erupt, and the previous crisis will become solid.

Crisis is the way of making the ruin. The ruin is all we can bear to see.

Truth is on the side of the unformed and truth is on the side of death<sup>18</sup>. One must write either for dead people or for the unborn. One must write in death.

Some of us live in perpetual crisis. This doesn't incapacitate us. It is a noisy background for purposeful action. It is a norm beyond norm.

17 page 8, Clement Greenberg's Avant-garde and Kitsch 1939, Collected Writings, vol. I

Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything other than itself.

18 page 11, Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace

To love truth means to endure the void and, as a result, to accept death. Truth is on the side of death.

## MEANINGLESS

### CHAPTER TWO

Meaningless?

You mean it's all been meaningless?

Every whisper and caress?

Yes yes yes it was totally meaningless<sup>1</sup>

When the fever hits on your forehead

And trusive mice chew up your bed

And you call on God and God is dead

Love comes to you<sup>2</sup>

How does nihilism equate with the problems specific to art production, fruition and critique?

In order to answer this question I will first engage with the concept of nihilism, and try to extract a sense of purposefulness from this overexposed term.

In popular culture, the nihilistic standpoint – that all things are meaningless – is commonly perceived in a dual relation to nature and culture, and it stands as tabooed truth – a truth too corrosive to be part of human exchange. In its relation to nature, nihilism determines abandonment<sup>3</sup>, recreation<sup>4</sup> or utter passivity. In its relation to culture, nihilism is seen as triggering numbness, wit and suicide, or inversely, as symptom stemming from these actions or states of being. Again, we find a rush to determine pathologies where perhaps none exist for, even if the mass murderer appears nihilistic, it is perhaps only because he embodies our bad conscience about what to do with the overproduction of violence, now that we have abandoned all openly sacrificial modes of life<sup>5</sup> (the realization of the implications of this abandonment of sacrifice stems from my readings of René Girard and are developed further in chapter four – Bad Manners).

1 Magnetic Fields 1999

2 Bonnie 'Prince' Billy 2006

3 page 25, Sade, *Diálogo entre um padre e um moribundo* 1782

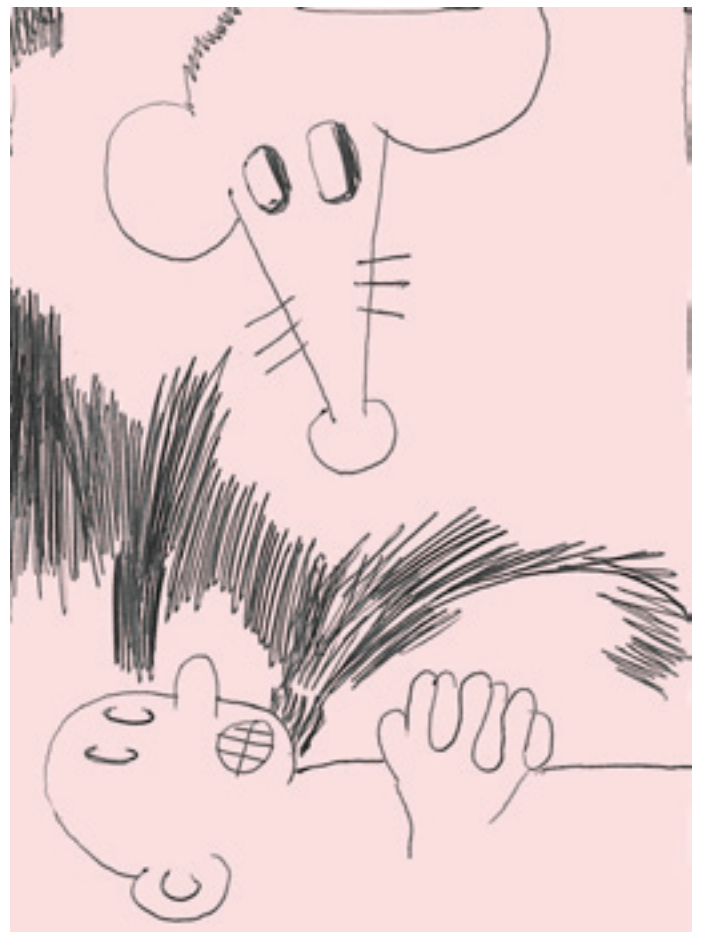
Só me cumpro pelo abandono.

The only I can fulfil myself is through abandonment

4 Sade, *Panegírico fúnebre de Marat e Le Pelletier* 1793

See the notion of revolution recreating nature that is the main theme of this text.

5 pages 85-86, René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*  
Our rationalist bent [...] leads to an innocence of outlook that refuses to concede to collective violence anything more than a limited and fleeting influence, a 'cathartic' action [...].



Nihilism is seen as pathology not only in popular culture, but in psychology, philosophy, art. The depressed person is deemed to stand too close to the truth, the nihilistic philosopher is judged as a threat to the survival of hope and articulation, and the nothing artist is brushed aside as being too existential. Yet if it might be true that one cannot dance without hope, it is even truer that one can float better without it, as Karen Blixen once wrote<sup>6</sup>. Nihilism needs to be extracted from pathology, and given the chance to be considered a plain prerequisite for intellectual maturity and honesty. Nihilism will not lead us into crime and sin; nihilism is purification<sup>7</sup> against cheap consolation; nihilism does not presuppose the destruction of all societal and cultural constructions (how could a system that knows itself to be a construction advocate the abolishment of all construction?); nihilism is the historical and contemporary assertion that there are two crises associated with meaning – one external and one internal. The external crisis in meaning has to do with historical nihilism, and the internal crisis in meaning is a more contemporary affair<sup>8</sup> – meaning has become itself a centre focus of philosophical enquiry. For what is meaning, and how do we attribute it to an object or process? The difficulty resides in meaning's dual nature – meaning is at once circumscription and movement beyond itself – meaning is at once to and fro. Meaning has become obscure, enigmatic, deeply elusive, in a form of internal crisis.

6 page 11, Karen Blixen, *The Diver, Anecdotes of Destiny*

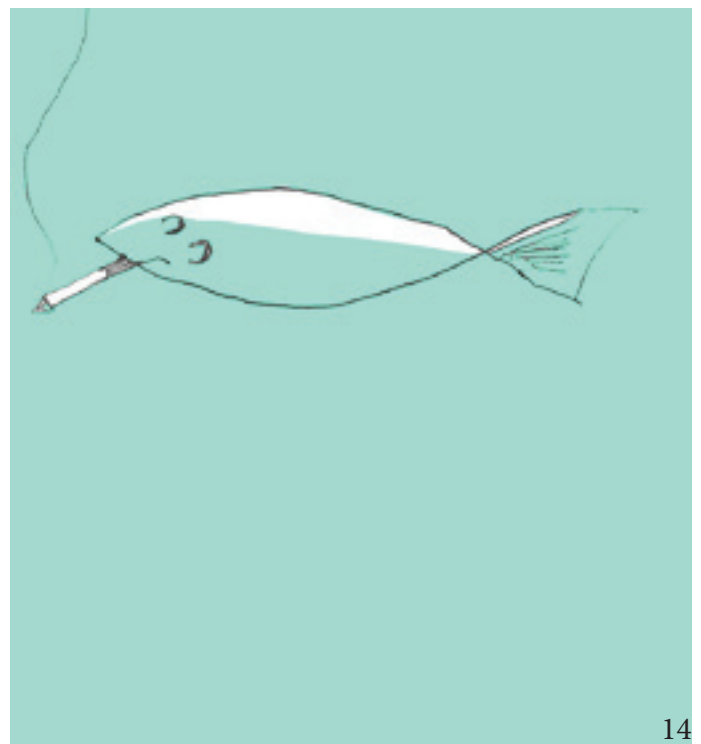
For without hope one cannot dance. [...] Our experience has proven to us, as your own will some time do it to you, that one may quite well float without hope, that one will even float better without it.

7 page 115, Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

Atheism is purification

8 Ray Brassier, Interviewed by Marcin Rychte

Very simply, nihilism is a crisis of meaning. This crisis is historically conditioned, because what we understand by 'meaning' is historically conditioned. We've moved from a situation in which the phenomenon of 'meaning' was self-evident to one in which it has become an enigma, and a primary focus of philosophical investigation.

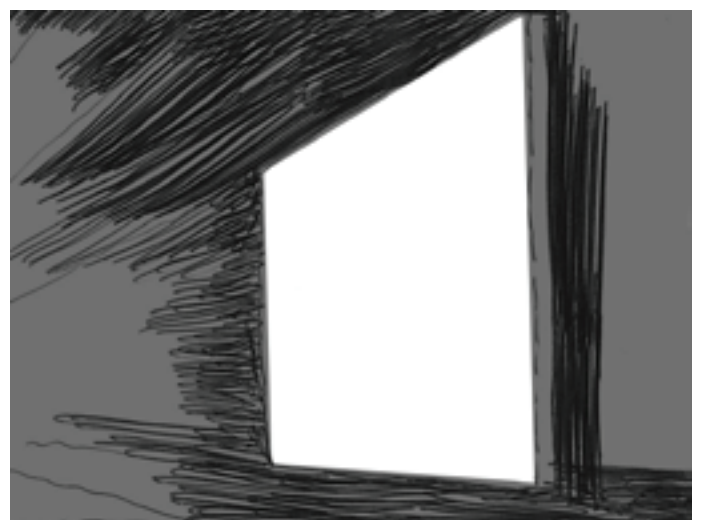


Externally, meaning is in crisis also in two ways – there is a crisis in human beings' place in the universe – a crisis usually associated with enlightenment and suspicion (with Copernicus, Darwin, Marx and Freud as the cardinal suspects), but there is also a crisis in the image produced by philosophy and common sense in the image of man as intentional creature. The crisis associated with the universal will probably continue for as long as man is conscious of the inevitability of extinction and the void that predated what was once called creation – no matter how banal we deem this to be, brushing all postmodernist ideas to the back of our minds. The crisis associated with man's image of himself as an intentional being has become clearer only recently, and is sometimes put clumsily in association with the advent of connectionist neuroscience and the fiction that accompanies it.



Internally, meaning is also in crisis due to the shifting sands of context and definition. By context I mean those things that usually scaffold meaning, and that are made fragile as constructions and superstructures. By definition I mean the problems associated with legitimacy, intentionality and consciousness. We can see that there is a strong link between the crises that are external to meaning, and those which are integral to it.

It can be argued that all these crises have become the substance and the form of art. The crises in man's image of himself as man in the world and as intentional creature have a double inside crisis in art, for from art we always expect, if not a reflective surface, at least refraction, revelation, reward. The crisis of meaning that nihilism articulates is manifested in art through a doubling, then. Maybe this will become clearer if we choose a circumscribed subject inside the sphere of art, one that epitomises blankness and meaninglessness.



An overview of the history of monochromes in painting could give us a glimpse as to where the relationship between art and nihilism lies. Monochromes appeared in moments of the avant-garde when nihilistic concerns were at the forefront, not in the sense that meaninglessness was sought, but in the sense that meaningless was found. In revolutionary Russia, monochromes can be seen as icons in reverse. In Malevich's own words, the Black Square was a royal infant<sup>9</sup>, and here we can see a mirroring of Orthodox aesthetics and ethics of presentation. We can see that what was in process was not a substitution, but a reversal and an erasure. Monochromes, in Russia, can be seen as the back of the sacred image – they can also be seen as censorship and iconoclasm in the true sense of the word, but what seems most pertinent is the notion of monochromes as extinction of images. In this latter sense, monochromes predict the extinction of all images, and through a subtractive operation they run parallel with nihilistic denial, obliteration, and above all, affirmation. Monochromes – whenever they are relevant and timely – reappear as emblems of suspicion and inadequacy of all cultural self-representations of the human.

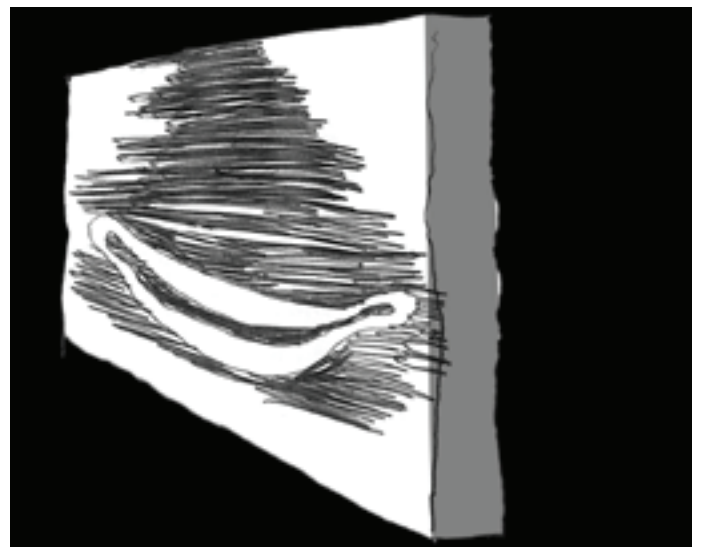
Monochromes are very close to theism and atheism (in heaven, the two are often confused), hence they are close to the idea of God. They do not answer back, their language is that of flat transcendence, a transcendence that is both completely material and completely abstract. In this sense, monochrome paintings can be deeply ambivalent, with the kind of ambivalence described by Marx when writing on commodity fetishism<sup>10</sup>. Monochromes can be all about the material qualities of the surface (Ad Reinhardt), they can be about the absolutely transcendent (Rothko), or about rupture and liberation (Oiticica).

9 Malevich, Collected Writings

10 On Karl Marx's view on commodity fetishism and ambiguity, see Capital:

Therefore they only appear as commodities, or have the form of commodities, in so far as they possess a double form, i.e. natural form and value form. (page 138)

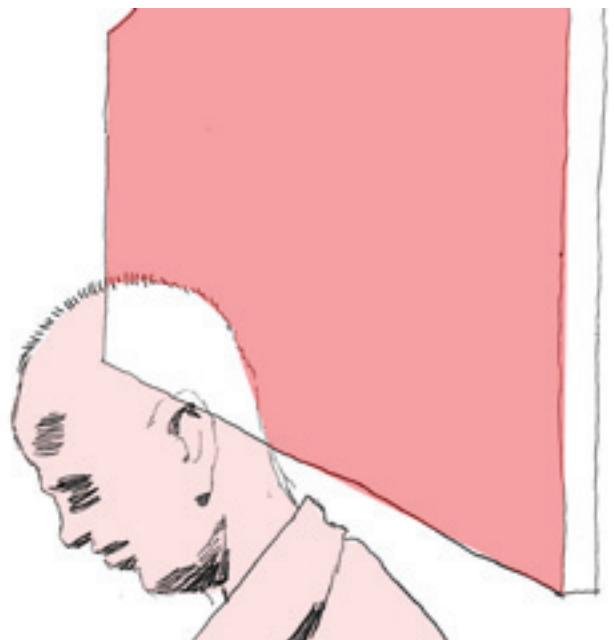
The riddle of the money fetish is therefore the riddle of the commodity fetish, now become visible and dazzling to our eyes. (page 187)



Through this elusive nature, monochromes are at once the most immediately commodifiable and the most radical of artistic gestures. They bear a relationship to what the grid meant for Rosalind Krauss or abstraction for Adorno. In Adorno, we can also find a warning against the threat of harmlessness, which is the threat of the monochrome.

As with the monochrome, so can nihilism fluctuate seamlessly between threat and sleep of reason, for nihilism is often perceived as: an idle giving up on meaning; a complete and rigorous effort to absorb crisis of meaning into intellectual life; a potent threat to human psyche, thought and action.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that, after producing colourful monochromes, Rodchenko advocated a giving up on art, and a collective move on the part of artists towards the graphic arts and architecture – the narrative arts and the stable arts. Monochromes are final gestures, endgames, a sign of the perishable nature of all images, and an opening up of art to the void beneath it. It seems natural that, for Rodchenko, monochromes represented at the same time a jumping off point, a suicide of art, and an affirmation of concept, colour and the matter of life. Nihilism can serve as the background for these kinds of affirmative stances, be it in Nietzsche or Sartre – an affirmation of life against a sullen colour, a crisis of meaning.



We can now venture back to our question. How does crisis as present in nihilism relate to the crisis specific to art production, fruition and critique? Art adheres to a moment that is always in the passing – through crisis, it predates decision. Monochromes predate the image. Art cannot help but to confront the limits of meaning and form, and the elusive nature in the trinity of crises embedded within them. Monochromes confront extinction, be it with a depressed, quasi-religious bowing down, or with a vital surge. Art is not the production of meaning, but a rearrangement of the structures that cannot help but to obstruct meaning – these structures are at once art historical, speculative and, yes, formal. Monochromes confront the extinction of images. Monochromes are poor, they stand in for the image.

According to Nietzsche, there were eternities during which the human intellect did not exist. And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened<sup>11</sup>. The fact that nothing will have happened seems particularly pertinent to a philosophy concerned with truth and its own ending. Again, Nietzsche points out that the living creature is simply a kind of dead creature, only a very rare kind. All is death, and life is merely a rare kind of death. Nihilism does not completely overcome transcendence, but bypasses it, renders it archaic, transfigures it. Thought becomes detached from knowing<sup>11</sup> for truth is too terrible, too sublime for immediate and engaged understanding. Truth acts, thus, in a manner against itself, and the philosophical will to truth mirrors the mysterious will to nothingness. Also in Nietzsche, Christian dolorism and stoic endurance find a continuation<sup>12</sup>, in the praise of resilience to suffering.

11 page 205, Nietzsche, quoted in Brassier, Ray, *Nihil Unbound – Enlightenment and Extinction*

There were eternities during which [the human intellect] did not exist. And when it is all over with the human intellect, nothing will have happened.

12 page 212, Brassier, Ray, *Nihil Unbound – Enlightenment and Extinction* '[...] The affirmation of recurrence is the moment when finite lunar joy eclipses boundless solar pain'. 'Either one ascribes a redemptive function to suffering itself, as does Christian dolorism, or one reintroduces a spiritual economy of means and ends [...]'



Art has to confront extinction in each instance of its production, both in terms of its means and its ends. Universal extinction seems to relate to art's preoccupation with the end of culture as such, and the means through which culture can or cannot validate its existence. The prospect of extinction does not necessarily lead to morose purposelessness but, for example in Nietzsche, it can lead even to Dionysian dance.

Monochromes are, for instance, concerned with that extinction which follows the image in cultural and material form. Monochromes are already extinct, both as cultural affirmation and as a prediction of the death of all intellectual life.

The first recorded monochrome can be said to have appeared in 1759, in Tristram Shandy, as a black page that interrupts the book. It happened in the context of illustration, as an etching plate without image. The monochrome in Sterne's book served as a page of mourning for a lost character, and it has sometimes been seen as a funereal page, a tombstone. It is my contention that it represents nothingness, and inaugurates a moment of extinction – extinction of language and extinction of form. The black page is at a loss. It is also hilarious, and this hilariousness makes it confront nihilism and the void with the wisest of tools.

Notes to chapter 2:

If monochromes represent anything, they represent this: the sacrifice and recuperation of images.

Aphorisms are suicide notes without a suicide to refer to. Nihilism isn't suicidal – suicide is imaginary<sup>13</sup>, nihilism tries to handle burning truths beyond the imaginary.

The monochrome is the purest confrontation between art and that which is not art. It is the simplest form of dialectics.

13 page 225, Lyotard quoted in Brassier, Ray, Nihil Unbound – Enlightenment and Extinction

But the death of the sun is a death of mind, because it is the death of death as the life of the mind.

see also page 8, Lyotard, The Inhuman

But that 's not the question. While we talk, the sun is getting older. It will explode in 4.5 billion years. It's just a little beyond the halfway point of its expected lifetime. It's like a man in his early forties with a life expectancy of eighty. With the sun's death your insoluble questions will be done with too.

Voltaire said that God is a comedian playing to an audience too afraid to laugh. I guess that God does sign all his letters with an LOL. The terrified receivers don't know if he is laughing out loud or sending his only asset, lots of love. Either way and other than that, the letters are blank.

Come down from the cloud of unknowing and take a look at this crap.

Lust then dust.

GIVE THAT OLD TIME RELIGION  
CHAPTER THREE

Lacking any form of liturgy, people were already moving in a vast slaughterhouse<sup>1</sup>.

During the Great War, Wittgenstein saw consecrated bread being transported in chromium steel boxes. This struck him as ludicrous. In the midst of sacrificial crisis – where millions were being massacred for no apparent reason – this old, archaic form of sacrifice struck him as ludicrous, for indeed it was, and indeed it is. There is nothing more intolerable than sacrifice in an age that denies it<sup>2</sup>, for we can, in sacrifice, have a clear reflection of the ludicrous, tabooed lengths that men go to in order to contain violence inside the sacred.

The magic bread inside chromium steel is profoundly sad, a bit like a child being told by an older friend about what really goes on during Christmas eve.

1 page 9, Roberto Calasso, *The Ruin of Kasch*  
Lacking any form of liturgy, people were already moving in a vast slaughterhouse.

2 page 18, Roberto Calasso, *The Ruin of Kasch*  
But nothing is more intolerable than sacrifice in an age that denies it [...].



Lacking liturgy, we move in a vast slaughterhouse. The contemporary state has ways of soothing this – war happens in crisis countries far away, slaughterhouses are unidentifiable and nondescript even more so than factories, and the administration of violence becomes one of our largest enigmas. The machineries of war, slaughter and violence disappear from sight<sup>3</sup>. Through the military, the apparatus of animal production and through the judiciary, vengeance and violence – like sacrificial logic before them – are concealed. For sacrifice was never explainable for those involved in it as celebrants or devotees<sup>4</sup> – or the explanations were too varied and secret for us to make a general sense from these voices. Yet one recurring theme is that of creation as God's amputated limb<sup>5</sup> – sacrificial logic re-enacts the binary act of destruction and birth involved in these narratives of creation, in a ceremony that not only returns to God what is God's, but does so through mimicking God himself. We can view this mimicking act as: a secret overthrowing of the God<sup>6</sup>; a polarity that ends up separating the eternal being from the bloody mess down here<sup>7</sup>; a powerful manifestation that involves not the expiation of guilt, but guilt itself<sup>8</sup>.

Not only does the sacred contain violence, but violence seeks containment in the sacred<sup>9</sup>. Yet if the bond between violence and the sacred is structural, as Girard argues extensively, what happens now, that these are decomposed or weakened? What happened to sacrifice? Should we believe Adorno, when he wrote that the history of civilization is the history of the progressive introspection of sacrifice<sup>10</sup>? And, more importantly for our concerns, what does art have to do with that obscured and archaic sacrificial logic?

3 page 28, Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*  
As soon as the judicial system gains supremacy, its machinery disappears from sight. Like sacrifice, it conceals – even as it also reveals – its resemblance to vengeance, differing only in that it is not self-perpetuating and its decisions discourage reprisals.

4 page 7, Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*  
[...] The sacrificial process requires a certain degree of misunderstanding. The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act.

5 page 135, Roberto Calasso, *The Ruin of Kasch*  
The Creation is the body of the first victim. In the Creation the divinity amputates and forsakes a part of itself. Thereafter the divinity can only observe the amputated limb in the hands of necessity.

6 page 49, T W Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

If barter is the secular form of sacrifice, the latter appears as the magical pattern of rational exchange, a device of men by which the gods may be mastered: the gods are overthrown by the very system by which they are honored.

7 page 146, Walter Burkert, *Religião grega na época clássica e arcaica*

Em relação ao deus o sacrifício encontra-se numa situação de polaridade: por meio da morte que inflige, ele confirma a contrario o poder superior do deus, completamente diferente, imortal, 'ente eterno'. In relation to the god, sacrifice is placed in a position of polarity. Through the death that it inflicts, it confirms a contrario the superior power of the god as completely different, immortal, eternal being'.

8 page 134, Roberto Calasso, *The Ruin of Kasch*  
Sacrifice does not expiate guilt, as the textbooks say. Sacrifice is guilt.

9 page 25, Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*  
Religion shelters us from violence just as violence seeks shelter in religion.

10 page 37, Theodor W Adorno, Horkheimer, quoted in Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound*

The history of civilization is the history of the introversion of sacrifice – in other words, the history of renunciation

Art can be seen as an escape from sacrifice<sup>11</sup> – but if sacrifice is now almost fully introverted, where does that escape take place? It can be argued that, in romanticism, that problematic reached a kind of deadlock, a deadlock that has deeply marked our idea of what an artist is. That idea, no matter how many times it has been refuted and battled against, is still there, running wild in popular imagination and hovering like a ghost over every artist's studio, gallery and critic's pen.

We can say that romanticism is the tangible proof that sacrifice has indeed been turned outside in, it has suffered a powerful process of introversion. The romantic artist is indeed the sacrificial victim who, escaping the verdict of annihilation, ventures into the woods and confronts nature for the first time – a nature that has always known sacrifice – for it maintains itself through its own destruction<sup>12</sup> but now more keenly so, by human hand, through industry. Witnessing disaster, the romantic artist invites sacrifice back to a new home – that which the artist calls his heart. The altar may be bare, but sacrifice is still going ahead, according to plan, in the recesses of the romantic soul.

How does the romantic artist find his balance amid this sort of sacrificial crisis? Like Duchamp or Kierkegaard's Abraham<sup>13</sup>: being an individual<sup>14</sup>. The faithless Duchamp and Kierkegaard's Abraham have this in common – they are absolutely nothing but the individual, without connections or complications. They maintain an economy of crisis and they are prepared to let go – abandoning painting or a much-loved son – through the introversion of sacrifice.

11 page 161, Roberto Calasso, *The Ruin of Kasch*

In art speaks the voice of the victim who, in extremis and forever after, has escaped being killed, when ritual had already channeled all sacrality back into that killing. Art has a light step because it wanders in the forest. The altar is now bare.

12 page 18, Fernando Pessoa, Alexander Search, *Um jantar muito especial*

Dela [da gastronomia] poderia dizer o que Schopenhauer diz do mundo, que se mantém pela sua própria destruição.

Of gastronomy he could say what Schopenhauer argues about the world – that it maintains itself through its own destruction.

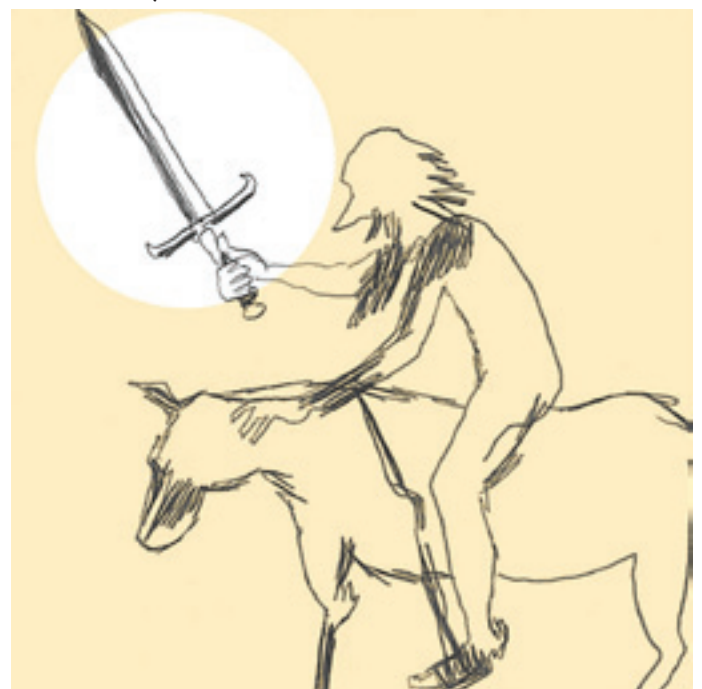
13 page 56, Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

He will never forget that, in one hundred and thirty years, you got no further than faith.

14 page 21, António Olaio, *Ser um indivíduo chez Marcel Duchamp*.

Coincidindo, em Duchamp, a noção de artista com a fruição de ser um indivíduo, ser um artista é mais do que ter a faculdade de criar obras de arte: é ter a capacidade de, através delas, intuir a dinâmica do que é existir.

In Duchamp we find that the notion of artist and the fruition involved in being an individual coincide, so being an artist amounts to more than having the faculty of creating artworks: rather, through the creation of these, the artist intuits the dynamics of what it is to exist.



With the advent of modernity sacrifice becomes even more corrosive and even more introverted – the ultimate sacrifice becomes that of subjectivity<sup>15</sup>. By focusing on a world that excludes the subject, the modern artist, like Manet or Cézanne, sacrifices integral subjectivity in the pursuit of objecthood. It's not only subjectivity that is sacrificed, but the very image of sacrifice itself. The very cliché about all the necessary, little sacrifices, seems to hold true. Indeed we have nothing but little sacrifices. Contemporary, immaterial practices thus seem the natural continuation of the introversion of sacrifice. Even the sacrifice of subjectivity is sacrificeable. Even form. Even objecthood.

Now we can go back to those immense questions. Where is violence and where is the sacred? Where is their bond in sacrifice?

Maybe we can go back to that host inside steel. In Christ we can see a powerful shift in the role of sacrifice, and the beginning of what is still our process, which is the process of civilization, and with what Adorno called the introversion of sacrifice and renunciation. Christ is the last victim<sup>16</sup>, a sacrifice to end all sacrifices, a God that lays himself down upon the altar to be slain. We are already miles apart from the classic sacrificial logic where one of the elements was that the victim is already slain by God<sup>17</sup> even before the sacrificial act, for it is mortal. Christ is God himself, he is immortal, so his sacrifice destroys the whole logic of externalized sacrifice.

After his death comes the host, and the re-enactment of that ultimate sacrifice on a daily basis. Violence is contained in an internalized way, violence is permanently remembered. One can say that this strange form of sacrifice, the eucharist, is a weak form of sacrifice that needs and is contemporary with the rise of roman law. Its preventive<sup>18</sup> force is weakened because there is no communal shedding of blood, therefore it is privatized sacrifice.

Christianity seems indeed like a religion that bears in itself, from the outset, the seeds of its own privatization.

15 page 77-78, Thierry de Duve, Pictorial Nominalism

[...] I agree to sacrifice my subjective unity and allow the plural significance of my self-image to appear, but to the benefit of an unalterable pseudo-object, the self-sufficient epiphany of a world that excludes me.

16 page 169, Roberto Calasso, The Ruin of Kasch

The extinction of sacrifice. The victim gradually loses its power. We become detached from the animal – it is no longer considered so close to us that it can be substituted for us. Humans, now protected by the law, are rejected as victims. Thus, the last victim will be a god condemned by the law.

17 XI, 33, Bhagavad-Gita

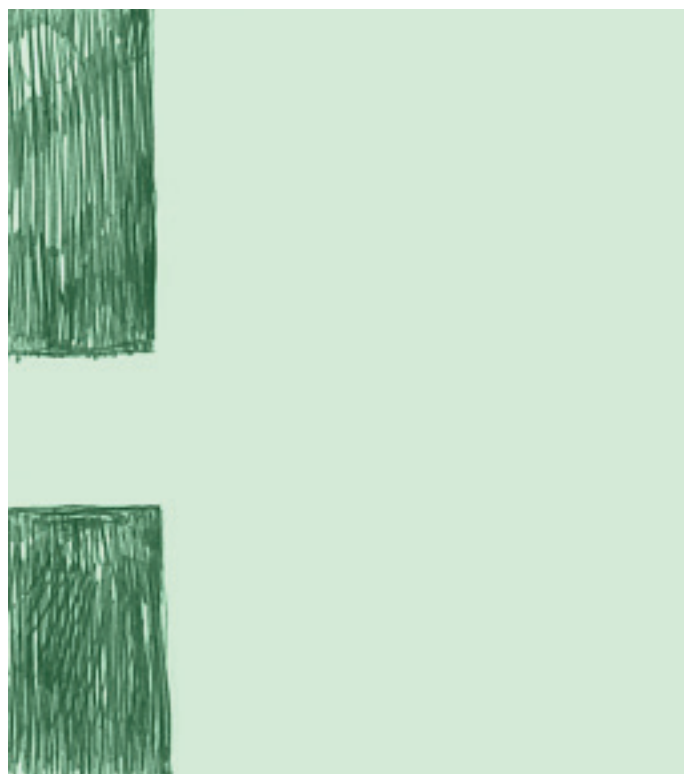
And so arise, win glory,

Conquer thine enemies and enjoy a prosperous kingdom.

Long since have these men in truth been slain by Me, Thine it is only the mere occasion.

18 page 19, Rene Girard, Violence and the Sacred

In primitive societies the risk of unleashed violence is so great and the cure so problematic that the emphasis naturally falls on prevention. The preventive measures naturally fall within the domain of religion, where they can on occasion assume a violent character. Violence and the sacred are inseparable.



What is the contemporary condition of the subject's relation to the law, now that sacrifice has been duly privatized? Can the law truly be seen as a blind lady with benign intentions, to meet in special occasions? Through Kafka we learn that, no, that law is, on the contrary, a perversion of sacrifice, it is sacrifice abstracted. Of course Joseph K is under arrest, but that doesn't prevent him from going to work and lead a normal life<sup>19</sup>. K is the sacrificial lamb and the surrogate victim of our time – through him we learn what the law really means, and circumvent the taboo. The law is the administration of vengeance in a way that covers its tracks, through the taboo composed of trust in justice and belief in society. K is no Christ, but more like a Cain before the crime, his primal curse is not having a sacrificial outlet<sup>20</sup>. Violence becomes immaterial and abstract, and will choose a random victim, an interchangeable victim, like it always does. K embodies what it means to be emancipated from ritual<sup>21</sup>.

We need to go back to art one more time, in order to escape this nightmare. For art manages to be heard, and violence is the condition of that which isn't heard<sup>22</sup>. Art knows that there is no origin for beauty but the wound<sup>23</sup>, even if it is an immaterial wound, even if it just the curse of being able to think. The problem with modernity is that we have been left bereft of a belief in a defining narrative of our condition, civilization, and culture<sup>24</sup> – the good news is that the belief has only shifted places, it now persists in what can be called weak contracts of faith. Art is one of these contracts.

19 page 18. Franz Kafka, *O Processo*

Com certeza que está preso, mas isso não impede que vá ao seu trabalho nem que faça a sua vida normal. Of course you are under arrest, but that doesn't prevent you from going to work and lead a normal life. 20 page 4, Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* Cain's 'jealousy' of his brother is only another term for his one characteristic trait: his lack of a sacrificial outlet.

21 page 88, Walter Benjamin, *A obra de arte na era da sua reprodutibilidade técnica*.

[...] A reprodutibilidade técnica da obra de arte emancipa-a, pela primeira vez na história do mundo, da sua existência parasitária no ritual.

The work of art's technical reproducibility emancipates it, for the first time in the history of the world, from its parasitic existence in ritual.

22 page 152, Roberto Calasso, *La Letteratura e gli Dèi* Violento è innanzitutto ciò che non ha trovato ascolto.

Violent is the status of that which hasn't found a listening party.

23 page 307, Jean Genet, quoted in Miguel Ángel Ramos, *Quizá la distancia sea duda, Estratégias del dibujo contemporáneo*

No hay para la belleza más origen que la herida. There is no other origin for beauty but the wound.

24 page 124, Arthur C. Danto, *Shapes of Artistic Past, East and West, Beyond the Brillo Box*

I think that modernity begins with the loss of belief in the defining narrative of one's own culture.

Notes to chapter 3:

Art is religion without protocol. Protocol without religion is Kafka.

Christ didn't pray for the world, Weil noted<sup>25</sup>. Saint Paul helped us forget that basic trait.

Religious art is no longer possible, yet all new art proposes a weak contract of faith. Religious art is the only one possible.

God is a promise we make ourselves of being better than we already are.

Religion is circumscribed, but there is no outside to faith. For faith is a tiny spec, a nothing that lingers.

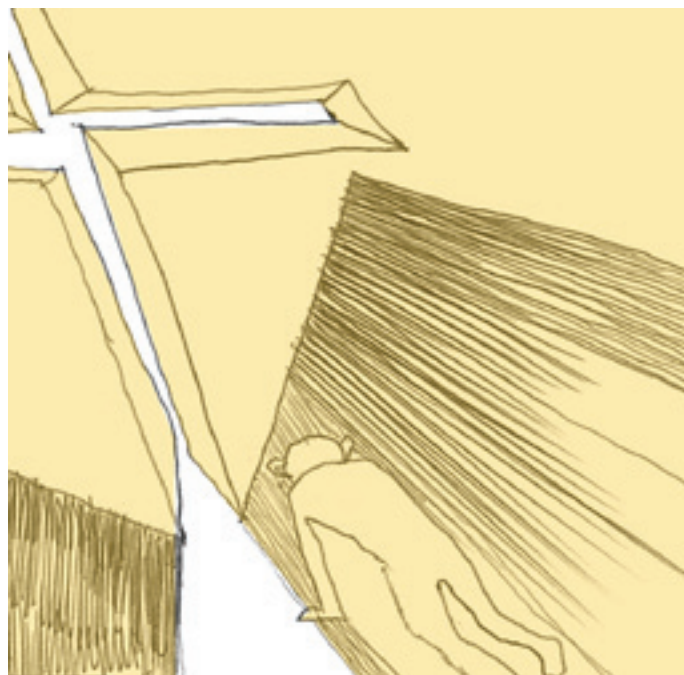
What a terrible image, the all-seeing eye of God, what a neurotic construction. I much prefer the seeing ear in Paul Claudel's Psalm – *Il n'y a que ton oreille qui soit capable de me regarder*<sup>26</sup>.

25 page 165, Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*  
Christ redeemed the vegetative, not the social. He did not pray for the world.

26 Paul Claudel, *Psaumes*

*Il n'y a que ton Oreille qui soit capable de me regarder.*

Only your ear is capable of watching me.



BAD MANNERS  
CHAPTER FOUR

They are coming to teach us good manners but won't succeed, because we are gods<sup>1</sup>.

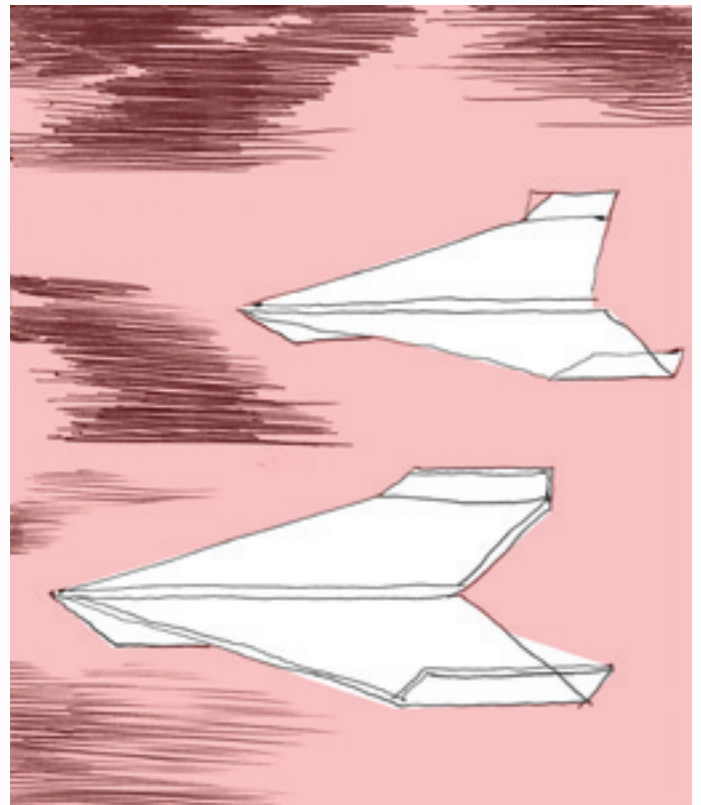
We are still soiled and darkened<sup>2</sup> by sacrificial mentality, even in an age where sacrifice has lost articulation. To prove this point one needs to look no further than the common glossary attached to terrorism. Suicide bomber, we say. We say suicide, then bomber. This is because we still believe in the narrative of martyrdom, in its clauses close to spiritual blackmail, in its sacrificial logic. For suicide is but a detail, and a vaporous one – the mass murderer knows he needs it to be 'lucky like Saint Sebastian'<sup>3</sup> (and lucky here means to have a martyr's glorious exit), and to prove his point, all the while condemning the victims and survivors to silence. The killer who immolates himself in or after the act of killing knows full well that we still respect heroes, even though we know that these are no longer possible. We have all become Sebastianists, not in the martyr's sense, but in the Portuguese mythology around the young dead king. Sebastião trapped the Portuguese imagination, even though – or because – he led his country into ruin, Spanish invasion, dissolution, while dying in the process. As long as you die in the midst of the horror that you yourself have created, you escape clear judgment, accountability, sanity. You enter the sacrificial domain and can spiritually blackmail a whole nation, a whole world. For the world expects the return of the hero, it expects El Rei Dom Sebastião to come and deliver his people from the real. In this sense, each time we say suicide bomber we are partaking in an obscene religion, which is that of sacrifice.

1 page 136, Giuseppe Tommaso di Lampedusa, *O Leopard*

2 page 205, René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*,

If we can rid ourselves of the vestiges of the sacrificial mentality that soil and darken the recesses of our minds, we shall see that we now have all the elements at hand for understanding that the death of Jesus takes place for reasons that have nothing to do with sacrifice.

3 Momus, *Lucky Like Saint Sebastian*, *Circus Maximus*.



It is under this light that we can look at Karlheinz Stockhausen's excitement about September 11<sup>4</sup>. 'What happened there is, of course – now all of you must adjust your brains – the biggest work of art that has ever been'. His arousal at the televised sight of mass murder is explained very bluntly by sacrificial logic and Sebastianism. If the killers hadn't died in the process, there would have been no Stockhausen press conference. Terrorism has very little in common with art, for art seems indeed to be the semblance of what is beyond death's reach<sup>5</sup> – art is guided by a faith that there will be a – momentary – solution, and that in the end things will be better<sup>6</sup>. The contract of faith that art establishes is subtle, obscure as to how it operates, yet is akin to friendship. The spiritual blackmail that terrorism engages with is also obscure as to how it operates, and its blackmail stems from sacrificial logic. One could say that, through obscurity and the sublime, terrorism mimics art, and never the other way around.

'Every work of art is an uncommitted crime'<sup>7</sup>, Adorno wrote. Its uncommitted, undetermined nature is mimicked by contemporary terrorism through the destruction of the perpetrator, who is willing to engage himself, and engage us, in sacrificial logic and in the sacrificial knot.

To expose the fallacy of this logic is to go beyond violence and into the domain of the weak. In this sense, the destiny of Christianity has always been to end sacrificial logic, to end a strong sense of the sacred, to end a strong sense of what religion is and should be. The Judeo-Christian narrative is one of progressive destitution of the sacrificial logic. God progressively lets go of sacrificial logic and learns to do without it, in alliance with the human counterpart. The stories of Abel, Abraham, Job and Christ, if put together and sequentially, should be enough to elucidate this point.

4 Stockhausen, quoted in page 29, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Heroes – mass murder and suicide*.

5 page 35. Theodor W Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*  
6 page 20, Jean-François Lyotard, *The inhuman*  
That's the hope sustaining all writing (painting, etc): that in the end, things will be better. As there is no end, this hope is illusory.

7 page 111, Theodor W Adorno, *Minima Moralia*  
Every work of art is an uncommitted crime.



The return of a strong sense of faith is but the curtain that prevents us from seeing a possible future, one in which religion can be fully privatized, and the Gospels can become a form of honeymoon once again<sup>8</sup>. This is not to say that Christianity is the global answer, but precisely the opposite – Christianity should be the first to acknowledge the fallibility of all global, conquering answers, and settle on the side of weakness.

We are in what Girard would call a sacrificial crisis<sup>9</sup>, our age is one where we can no longer tell the difference between purifying violence (sacrificial in essence) and contagious, impure violence (sacrificial in appearance).

Girard presents us two avenues, two possible answers to sacrificial crisis – one pragmatic (acceptance of sacrificial logic), the other radical (transcendence of sacrificial logic through Christ's example). René Girard posits that 'the best men can hope for in their quest for nonviolence is the unanimity-minus-one of the surrogate victim'<sup>10</sup>, and presents religions as inherently pragmatic systems of containing violence inside the sacred. What is meant by Girard is that the universality of sacrificial acts reveals an anthropological function that has practical ends. On the other hand, when asked to elaborate on the Christian meaning for sacrifice the author argues that there is none, and that Christ's death was non-sacrificial<sup>11</sup>. For Girard, the essence of the gospels is the essence of Christianity – and this essence can be boiled down to an announcement of the Kingdom. Christ's role is to teach whoever wishes to listen on how to transcend both sacrificial logic and reciprocal violence. Accessing God directly – in secret – transcends the need for collective murder; giving the other cheek bypasses the participation in the contamination associated with violence.

8 page 235-6, René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*

People who believe that they can defend transcendence while retaining sacrifice are misguided in my opinion. The sacrificial definition, which has always been sedulously preserved by anti-Christian critics, facilitates today's atheism and all the talk about the death of God. What is in fact finally dying is the sacrificial concept of divinity preserved by medieval and modern theology – not the Father of Jesus, not the divinity of the Gospels, which we have been hindered – and still are hindered from approaching, precisely by the stumbling block of sacrifice. In effect, this sacrificial concept of divinity must 'die', and with it the whole apparatus of historical Christianity, for the Gospels to be able to rise again in our midst, not looking like a corpse we have exhumed, but revealed as the newest, finest, liveliest and truest thing that we have ever set eyes upon.

9 page 51, René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*

The sacrificial crisis, that is, the disappearance of the sacrificial rites, coincides with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When this difference has been effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads through the community.

10 page 273, René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*  
The best men can hope for in their quest for nonviolence is the unanimity-minus-one of the surrogate victim.

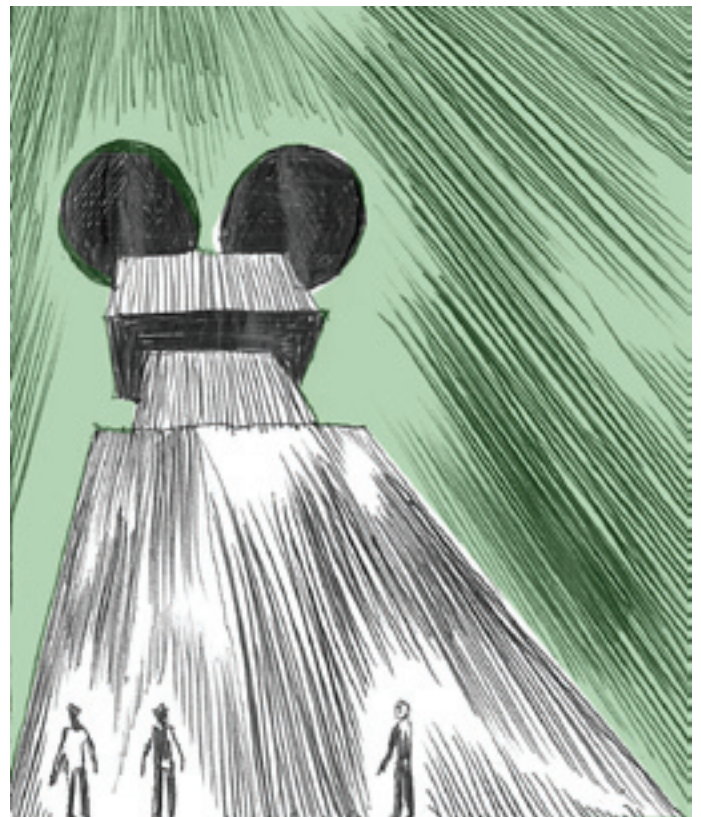
11 page 205, René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*

All that remained unclear in the non-sacrificial reading should have been clarified in the most comprehensive way.

And yet, Christ has died. His early, violent death and the meaning of the Passion have grown to be considered the very core of Christian dogma, even more so than the non-sacrificial announcement of God's Kingdom. Girard wants to liberate the Gospels from Pauline Passion, and go back to Christ as an example and as a teacher. In a way, he wishes for the Judeo-Christian logic – of progressively dissolving the need for sacrifice – to reach its conclusive point. In the Christian Credo we jump from the birth to the death of Christ, as if – to announce His divinity – we needed only point to a special kind of birth and a special kind of death. As if this would suffice to make us welcome the Gospel. The Kingdom was truly Christ's Creed. He didn't invite awe and worship, but proposed a new alliance, as they say, through the actuality of the Kingdom of God.

And yet, as Girard points out, we can no longer know where the sacred has disappeared<sup>12</sup>. We look for it, we know that it is at the source of art and beauty, but we can no longer grasp it, or recognise it. The sacred, both in art and politics, can only be forgotten (at one's own peril), or misused (at society's peril). Examples of the misuse of the sacred in art are extremely popular and well accepted (Bill Viola). Examples of the misuse of the sacred in politics mark the history of despondency, which is our history. Yet the particularity of the suicide bomber is what should drive this text forward.

12 page 225, René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*  
Yet they can no more reply to the question “where did the sacred disappear”?



We say suicide. Then we say bomber. We are confused by sacrificial logic, for we deny it constantly, without intermission. Because we deny it, we are prey to it. Franco 'Bifo' Berardi's argument – that Capitalism's logic is one of dehumanisation and leads inevitably to mass murder and suicide<sup>13</sup> – seems particularly unfounded and trapped in its own politics. It falls prey to the common misunderstandings surrounding nihilism. It uses nihilism as the ultimate enemy, and finds it lurking in Capitalism. In one sentence and for Berardi, Capitalism is nihilism – mass murderers are the instrument, the oracles, and the logical conclusion of Capital.

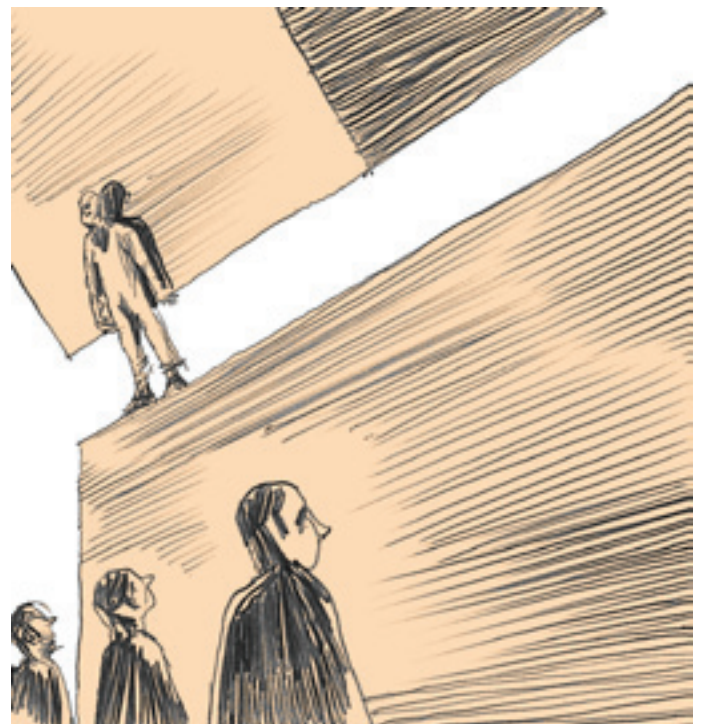
Nihilism is also seen by Girard as a contemporary problem, a threat to all intellectual life<sup>14</sup>. There is a more than easy parallel between mass murder and nihilism that seems to be taken for granted following on certain misunderstandings around September 11. Yet all this guilt attribution could be just an illusory projection, and a romanticising of evil based on an ill conceived sacrificial logic. We respect the martyr, even if he dies and kills at the same time. We respect his logic, because we do not understand it. We respect the contract that emerges from self-sacrifice, even if – or because – it is a form of spiritual blackmail. We want to side with the strongman, the bully, the visionary, the butcher. This seems to have fascistic undertones. This seems to point to ill-advised sacrificial logic at the heart of our collective and shady dealings with terrorism.

If we think of suicide in the specific lines of Camus, Durkheim, Zizek and Simone Weil, we find very little that can be applied to the nature of the suicide bomber, for the suicide bomber wears the cloak of the martyr, and from the martyr he draws his authority.

13 Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Heroes* – mass murder and suicide.

14 page 261, René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*

What is really frightening today is not the challenge of this new meaning, but the Kafkaesque rejection of all meaning. What is frightening is the conjunction of massive technological power and the spiritual surrender to nihilism. A panic-stricken refusal to glance, even furtively, in the only direction where meaning could still be found dominates our intellectual life.



We can respond to this self-effacement that kills with two other types of self-effacement – one that accepts the authority of the martyr, or one that denies it and replaces it with another, radical type of self-effacement. This last response, of radical love, is what Weil called the destruction of the 'I'<sup>15</sup>. This path is of course not without its pitfalls, as Girard points out when establishing a relation between masochism and self-sacrifice<sup>16</sup>. Was Weil a moral masochist? And is the suicide bomber a sadist? For our purposes, this is irrelevant. For ours is the chance to go beyond the sacrificial framework without forgetting its lessons.

Art can easily circumvent the sacrificial logic – it can even be argued that this is art's major starting point – the evasion of sacrifice.

We can now look at God not as something to be used or refused, but in an etymologically Greek sense – God as something that happens<sup>17</sup>. God is an independent verb. This verb doesn't only hover above us, this word, this God. This word can be seen as the source of all our grammar, our joys and our problems. This verb is only the precise description of what happens.

The Kingdom that Girard announces as one of the possible destinies of Christianity is not a denial of the destructive in favour of becoming. Rather it is steeped in wisdom and reflection, self-knowledge and compassion. We can go back to Vedic philosophy<sup>18</sup> and try to conjointly know becoming and destruction. Only then can we go beyond death's reach and dominion<sup>19</sup>.

Only then will we wise up.

Isn't this a form of illusory hope? Even if it is, let it be weak, faint, passive and open.

15 page 26, Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace

There is absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish – only the destruction of the 'I'.

16 page 236, René Girard, Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World

[...] Self-sacrifice can serve to camouflage the forms of slavery brought into being by mimetic desire.

'Masochism' can also find expression in self-sacrifice, even if a person has no knowledge of this, and no wish to reveal it.

17 page 19, Roberto Calasso, La Letteratura e gli dèi  
Ma come si manifest ail dio? Nella lingua greca non si dà vocativo per théós, 'dio', osservó un illustre linguista, Jacob Wackernagel. Théos ha innanzitutto senso predicativo: designa qialcosa che accade.

But how does the god manifest himself? [...] Théos designates something that happens.

18 page 41, v.14, The Vedas, A Source Book of Indian Philosophy

Becoming and destruction –

He who this pair conjointly knows,  
With destruction passing over death,  
With becoming wins the immortal.

19 Saint Paul and Dylan Thomas are the source for the use of the word dominion here.



Notes to chapter 4:

All these philosophers are coming to teach us good manners but won't succeed, because we are becoming God and destroying God. We are gods.

As for grammar, it is not enough to drop the word 'suicide' before 'bomber'. But as they say in so many jokes, we could call that a good start.

Through the fear of horror, horror is fed. This is why our worst fears will definitively become true, if they haven't already.

## THE BEGGING PROBLEM

### CHAPTER FIVE

The sculptor, and also the related figure of the epic poet, is absorbed in the contemplation of images. Bereft of images, the Dionysian musician is himself wholly pain and original echo of that pain<sup>1</sup>.

Bereft of images, for images have become phantasms, the contemporary creative condition is one where the author is split between pain and its original echo. Pain is a force beyond what is strictly human, yet one that pushes the human further into itself. There is no originality in pain, for pain is but a prelude to the numb absolutes leading to death. Pain is universal, abstract and achingly contingent. Compassion and art are possibly counterweights, compensations. For Nietzsche, non-contemplative art has to preclude an original echo of pain – it echoes pain, rather than portraying or revealing it. Here we find the begging problem, for the beggar has to speak in echoes rather than conveying genuine pain. And here we find Pessoa, the Portuguese Modernist poet for whom faking it was the only possible form of sincerity.

The beggar is an ironist. He can't be serious. Without irony the beggar would collapse under the weight of shame. He acts from necessity, but has to convert the specificities of necessity into a story, through irony. For Kierkegaard, there is a double hiding game taking place in irony. The two materials of irony, jest and earnestness, are interchangeable and each one hides the other<sup>2</sup>. The beggar is an autobiographer. Autobiography is perhaps a deeply problematic endeavour, for there seems to be no possible reconciliation between shame and irony.

1 page 35, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*  
2 page 74, Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, Failure, Whitechapel*

The ironist hides jest in earnestness, and earnestness in jest.



We are all suckers for the impossibilities of autobiography. It is less important to ask ‘should we believe these wild stories?’ – than to strategically avoid the pitfalls associated with suspension of disbelief. Crisis, for Artaud, can only come through belief itself<sup>3</sup>, enthusiasm, abandon. It might be argued that there is an incompatibility between crisis and presentation<sup>4</sup>, but crisis can be enunciated, developed, argued, represented. The beggar delays resolution and stretches out his hand, he prolongs crisis, dwells in it.

It always appears problematic to speak about intentionality and sincerity in irony-heavy worlds, but the beggar seems to point towards a resolution through the juxtaposition of jest and earnestness, and the play between the two. Only through irony can the beggar escape the pressure of shame, its loop, its contingent nature.

There is a freedom in autobiography that makes it radical fiction. The guiding principles of that freedom reside in the obscured link between spontaneity and artificiality<sup>5</sup>. The play around notions of what it is to have a public persona and how these diverge from the private sphere should be at the heart of autobiographical accounts. Of those tales, we cannot guarantee a single word<sup>6</sup>, and yet we cannot help but believe that Augustine actually wept.

We believe that the agitation that we feel while stumbling upon the beggar’s account has a source in his presumed inner agitation. The form of agitation that is more pertinent to our begging story, though, is the one that is present in speech itself, in the beggar’s account.

Between life and death<sup>7</sup>, the nature of the beggar’s account – its agitation – is also the source of our new triangulation, composed of ‘real beggar’, ‘beggar’s account’, and ‘reception of beggar’s account’. In Nietzschean terms, the first means ‘pain’, the second ‘original echo of that pain’, the third fruition and possession.

3 page xxxiii, Antonin Artaud, *On Theatre*, Brian Singleton Introduction

Crisis can only be achieved through belief and not through the general *modus operandi* of western theatre spectating: the suspension of disbelief.

4 page 53, Mark Prince, *Failure*, Whitechapel [...] An apparent incompatibility between crisis and presentation.

5 page 73, Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*  
Can it be that the freedom to feel is greater when one’s personality and one’s identity in society are quite clearly separated? Can spontaneity and what we have learned to call “artificiality” have some hidden and necessary relationship? They do; that relationship is embodied in the principle of speech as a matter of signs rather than symbols.

6 from the title of the MA in Curating exhibition, Royal College of Art, 2007

7 page 100, Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman*  
Thanks to art, the soul is returned to the agitated zone between life and death, and this agitation is its health and its life.



## THE LITTLE SACRIFICES

### CHAPTER SIX

Tutto è già una citazione nel momento in cui appare<sup>1</sup>.  
Everything is already citation from the moment it appears.

We are left with nothing but little sacrifices. We no longer know what they meant by hero. We go about our normal lives, until sacrifice explodes in our face. You have to go on, you see? You have to endure the littleness of things, the minuscule scale of what is asked of you. You have to go down in humbleness and shame, and visit your little world, which is full of trash.

If all post-Auschwitz culture is garbage<sup>2</sup>, this means that all of us are condemned to recycling. Few of us get to handle the sordid material, though.

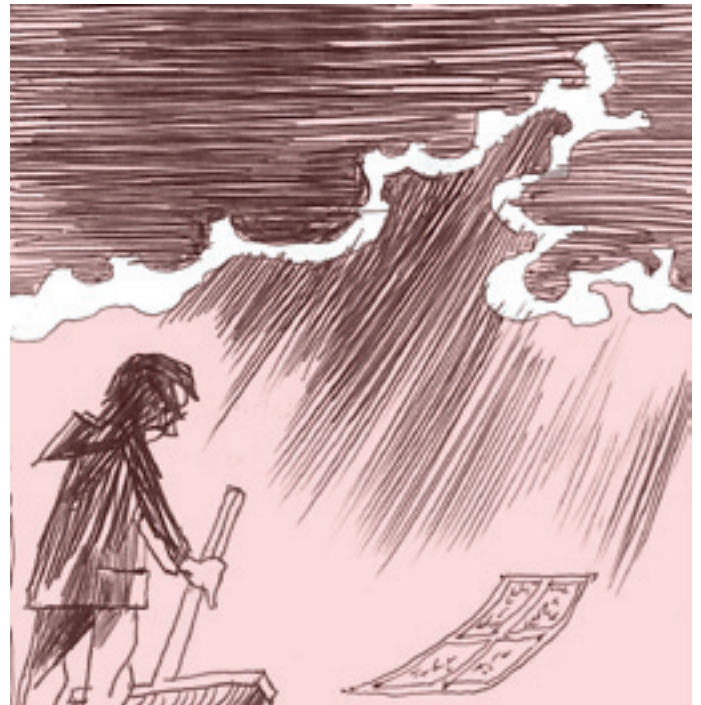
Few of us actually sweep the streets and fewer even get to write about sweeping.

Even God is part of this pile of post-Auschwitz refuse. Even the word holocaust. We are left with nothing but little sacrifices.

We are left with nothing but tiny enigmas. Each enigma is a work of art, each event destroys the previous one, endlessly pulling you into the future. Contemporary art is myopic. We have to focus on the tiniest of things, the smallest of events, in order to gather sense. We gather it, but we do not make it. Contemporary art is rubbish. Recycling, ecology, waste, it exceeds the limit of the sensible, it ventures into the stuff of life and the stuff of life is leftover crap, crass, amalgamated, reused crap. Forget about the blank paper magic thing, there is no longer virgin white canvas, there is no virgin white paper. Through its whiteness, the paper already lies, and the best that you can long for is an enigma. All else is meaningless. We are left with nothing but tiny enigmas.

1 page 77, Roberto Calasso, *la Letteratura e gli dèi*.

2 page 2, Theodor W Adorno quoted in Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Vestige of Art, The Muses*.



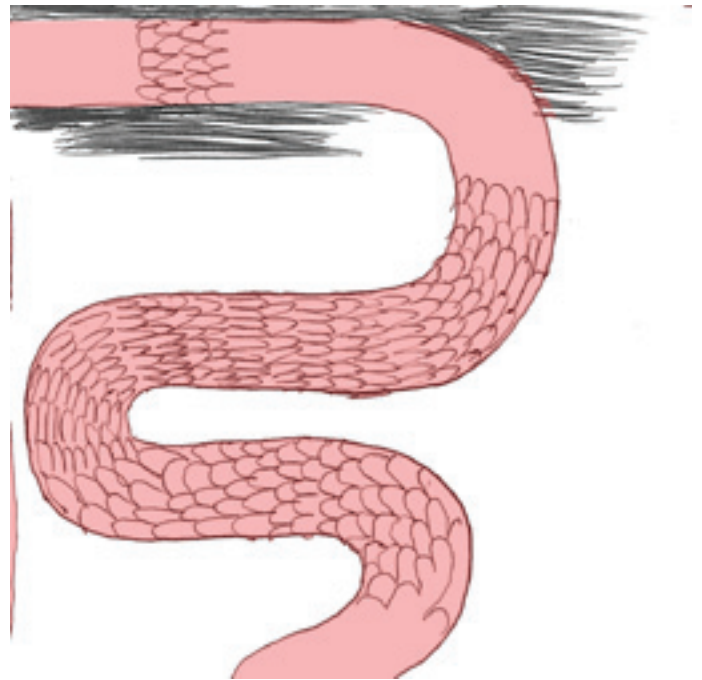
We are left with nothing but old love. Old love is riddled with nostalgia for what is beyond the text, underneath the text. If you write your love down you write it away, you write it off. This happens because the text starts loving other texts, engaging in spiritual intercourse, and dreams your love away. Then you return to the real and realise there is no love left, except inside the text, except in the infinitive. Your love and your text escape you, and you go about your daily business. You go into a church and find your text praying there, hands clasped in pathetic mumbling. You pass by an advertisement and see your text in absolute promiscuity. You see a passing stranger and realize she is the one you left everything behind for. Old love and old texts, lurking behind everything that is the domain of the sensible, leaving you with the impression that the whole universe is but an aftertaste. We are left with nothing but old love.



We are left with nothing but gardening. This plant here stands for plant. Flower stands for flower. And all this garden is about to die and is about dying. Once I dreamt, love, that you had given up on art, and given up on drawing. When I asked you, love, why you had abandoned art you pointed to the garden, love, and said the plants draw for me. Once I read a beautiful Tagore book in French, love, when we read French poetry together, and I haven't recovered dear. *Le jardinier de l'amour*. We are left with nothing but gardening.

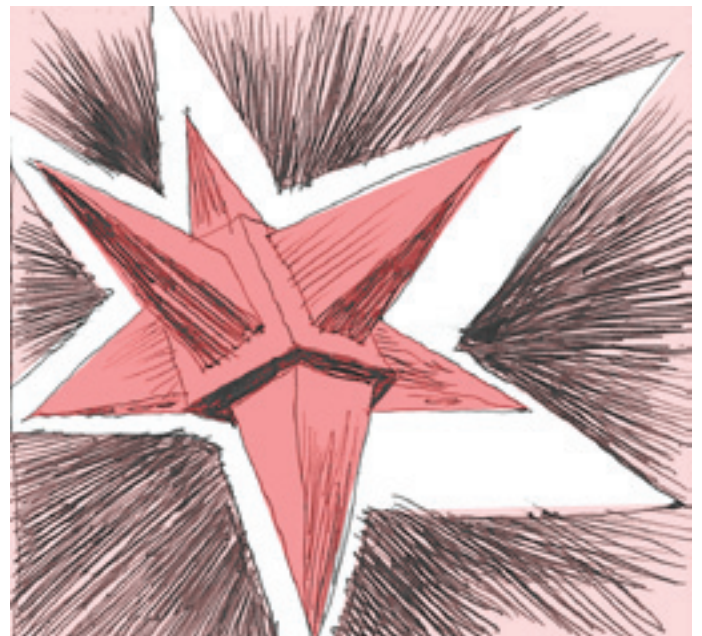


We are left with nothing but desire. Desire is composed of arrows piercing us piercing the lover. Don't go all Lacanian on me, my only faraway friend, I have had my share of Lacanian paranoia bullshit with its aversion to permeability to suffering. He would only mark my mistakes, like some nightmarish teacher on an old Leonard Cohen song. Desire is the superstition of the body. It always puzzles me, my only faraway friend, when I realize that people don't make the distinction between religion and superstition anymore. As if it didn't matter. Well it does. Their whole philosophy depends upon it. And so does desire, for we need the universe to walk right through us, and leaves us blank. We are left with nothing but desire.



We are left with nothing but nothing, but nothing is boring. Having nothing better to do we ask nothing to deliver us from nothing so nothing bad can happen to us. When we cease to believe in nothing we go back to the nothing that surrounds us in order to escape the thought of the big nothing in the sky. Then we say that nothing is dead, and that nothing is deaf, and that nothing is blind. We boisterously pronounce the dawn of a new nothing, closer to the ground, and get depressed on how enmeshed in the big nothing the dark peasants still are. We are left with nothing but nothing.

We are left with nothing but crisis of meaning, but we choose to talk about things less coarse. Each PhD dissertation is either a spiked thing or a conceptual cloud that looks like a bulldog. Spiked things are adorned with quotes, by which it is meant that each spike is a quote. Conceptual clouds are ever shifting, but work through intimidation. War defences and intellectual intimidation – they work because we understand danger and we respect that which we don't understand. What we don't understand fills immense voids. Political voids, through authority. Spiritual voids, through production. We are left with nothing but crisis of meaning.

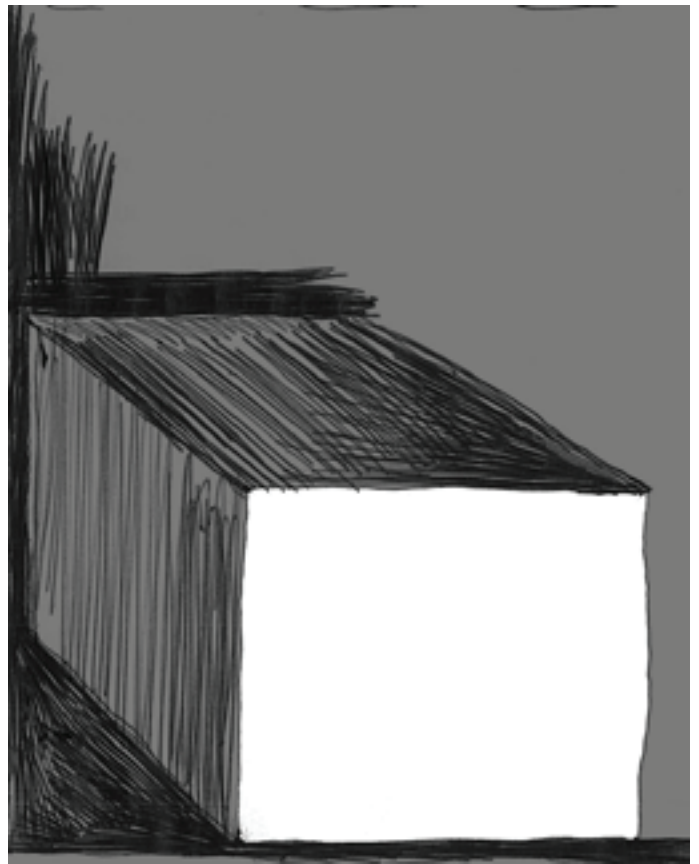


We are left with nothing but crisis of form, because form is a metabolism with an unknown life of its own. Form is the enigma and the trophy of modernism. We think we can avoid modernism by renaming it, yet that renaming is what modernism always demands from us. Form is an enigma because we have no god upon whose lap we can drop it. Form is a trophy because we want to avoid the phantasm lurking behind it, and raise it high onto a plinth. A plinth shaped like a Platonic solid. We are still sitting on Plato's lap. We are left with nothing but crisis of form.

We are left with nothing but project. In this sense, all is project, and all is drawing. Until the 1980's, projects were for architects, processes for scientists. Now everything is a project, as if we had no need for decision and materiality. We are left with nothing but project.

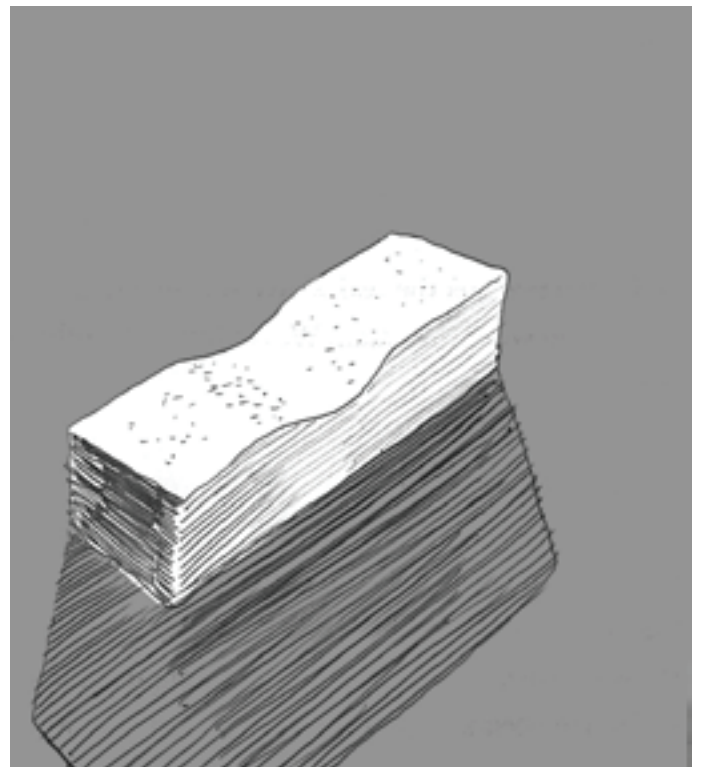
We are left with nothing but extinction. Old age pessimism permeates the young, who then choose not to believe. The ears of youth choose not to believe in extinction, politics, terrorism, journalism, global warming and moon landings. It's all a hoax. Through choice, the arms of the young navigate the real and prefer the real. Yet the real is precisely that which is threatened with extinction. We are left with nothing but extinction.

We are left with nothing but sacrifice. We refuse to understand the logic of sacrifice hence we are prey to it. We go about our daily business, and accept the logic of capital, which is a form of uninterrupted, relentless sacrifice. Because it is uninterrupted, capital is also guarded against attack. We are left with nothing but sacrifice.



We are left with nothing but ritual. Without ritual there is no threat of beauty. We are left with nothing but ritual.

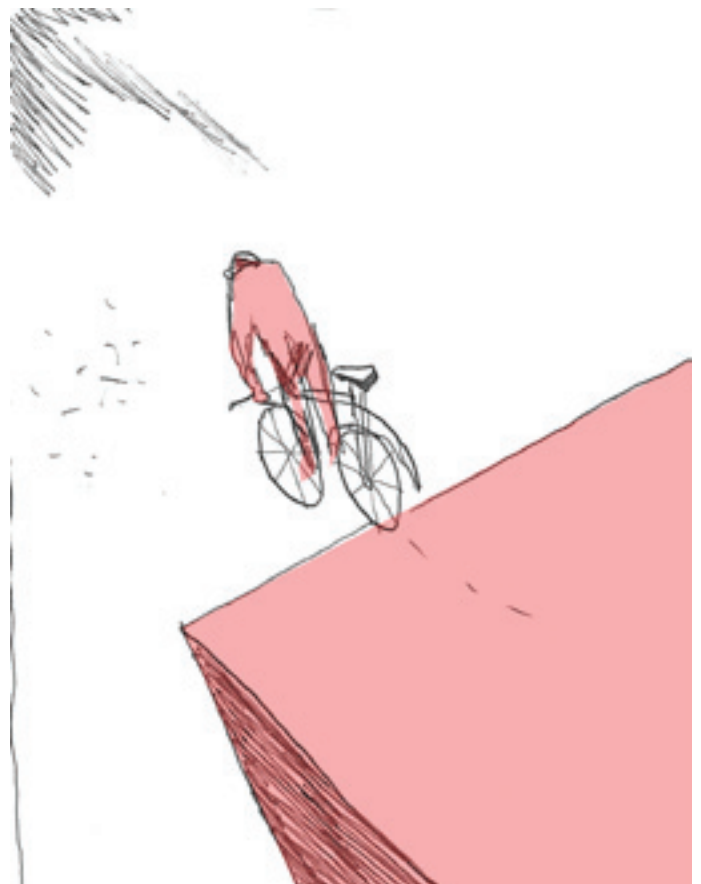
We are left with nothing but little sacrifices. We are all sorry saints, performing minuscule miracles, offering tiny sacrifices as the day unfolds. We have tiny wounds, tiny towns, tiny churches, tiny popes. We are left with nothing but little sacrifices.



In the film I silently elucidate everything concerning falling<sup>1</sup>.

There is a simultaneousness between Bas Jan Ader's works and Simone Weil's reflections on spiritual physics that I wish to explore further. Ader's interest in simple physical forces echoes with Weil's sense of gravity. There is also a deeper parallel, spiritual in essence, that I wish to bring light to. The two main sources for this comparison are Simone Weil's *Gravity and Grace* and Bas Jan Ader's video *Fall 1*, and the hoped for outcome will be a clarification of how the romantic artist still plays a central role in the contemporary conditions of art.

All the works of Bas Jan Ader deal either with falling or with self-inflicted crisis, a crisis that enacts a link between meaning and form. Crisis of meaning is made manifest through an emptying of the romantic model, and crisis of form is played out in a similar vein, through a juxtaposition of meaninglessness and spirituality, nihilism and purposeful gestural utterance. Christianity as a reference has been barely explored in Ader's critical tail, yet the modes and archetypes present in Ader can be seen as equally indebted to romantic models and Christian ones. The sacrificial crisis enacted in Ader is a deeply modern one, though, extracted from the narrative safety of the Passion, and from other forms of socially attributing meaning to suffering. Yet Kierkegaard and Weil seem to speak directly to the tone with which Ader treats sacrifice, a tone that is both desperate and matter of fact, linked both to physicality and to the life of the spirit.

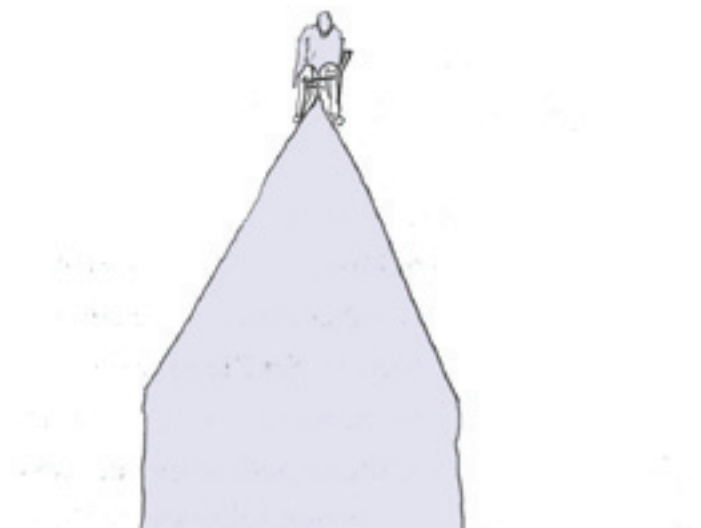


Ader worked primarily between 1967 and 1975, mostly in Los Angeles, and was lost at sea in 1975 while performing a transatlantic journey on what would have been the smallest boat to ever cross the Atlantic. The piece that took his life was part of a conceptual cycle called *In Search of the Miraculous*, a cycle that was to include a recorded night walk in LA towards the ocean, a show featuring sea shanties by an amateur choir, an ocean crossing and an exhibition in Amsterdam upon arrival. This last exhibition never took place and, because it never took place, is a ghost that has begun to haunt art history since the late 1990's.



His previous work dealt with, in his own words, gravity, but can be seen as a bridge between theological fall and the physical or circumstantial notions of falling. 'Gravity is the force which above all others draws us from God. It impels each creature to seek everything which can preserve or enlarge it and, as Thucydides says, to exercise all the power of which it is capable.' In Ader, this notion of gravity is inverted, and the creature submits to a force that can only belittle it.

Ader's first video dealing with falling, *Fall 1 Los Angeles*, is perhaps the most potent. Shot in super 8 black-and-white film, it shows a suburban house with a pitched roof and a man, Bas Jan Ader, sitting on a chair at the very top of the roof. He slowly rocks the chair to his right and loses balance, and then tumbles and falls from the rooftop on to a bush. The film ends. It is perhaps the most powerful of his works, together with *I'm Too Sad to Tell You* (a film in which the artist cries for the camera).



The power of Fall <sup>1</sup> perhaps springs from the relation to the burlesque films of Buster Keaton and to popular culture's weekend depiction of accidents and curious events, but also to notions of the artist as sacrificial vessel for society, and to archetypal figures in Western culture such as Ulysses and the difficulties he encountered upon returning home. Fall has therefore a most simple and direct articulation, and is there for us to see. Bas Jan Ader falls on nothing other than himself, he also serves as a bodily sign for fall in its widest sense. Gravity and grace are presented as enmeshed, bound together in the artwork. As fall happens, our attention increases and is driven to a sort of abstract empathy which can be called grace. Bas Jan Ader courted modern mysticism not least in the title of his last piece, *In Search of the Miraculous*, a title derived from a mystical book by Petyr Demianovich Ouspensky<sup>2</sup>. It can be argued that he stood in relation to Sol LeWitt's tenets on conceptual art in the same way as modern mysticism stands against scientific rationalism – adopting its basic rules and vocabulary, but rejecting its social form. In this it shares a tone with *Gravity and Grace*.

Simone Weil's book *Gravity and Grace* serves as a powerful tool to investigate the relationships between Bas Jan Ader and a background of Catholicism and Greek Tragedy.

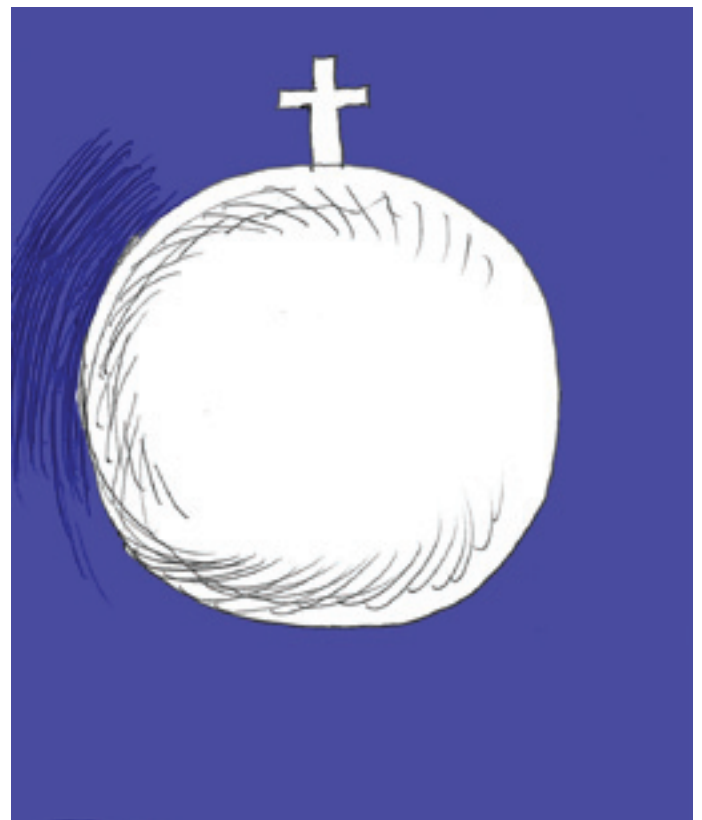
For Simone Weil, the forces that act upon the soul are gravity and grace, and the soul can either move forward towards necessity or backwards towards the stability of sin<sup>3</sup>. 'All sins are attempts to fill voids'<sup>4</sup>, but the only force that can truly fill the void is grace. Simone Weil establishes a physics of the spirit that is only apparently conservative. She repeatedly stands in open contradiction to the Catholic tradition, for example in situating God decidedly outside creation, in accepting atheism as a positive form of purification, and in rejecting all manner of consolation and social idolatry (for example in the Church's hierarchy).

1 page 143, Wolfs, Rein (2006), Bas Jan Ader: Please Don't Leave Me

2 page 43, Verwoert, Jan (2006), Bas Jan Ader - In Search of the Miraculous

3 page 4, Weil, Simone (2003), *Gravity and Grace*

4 page 24, Weil, Simone (2003), *Gravity and Grace*



Bas Jan Ader also 'openly contradicts'<sup>5</sup> his own tradition inside conceptual art, for example in his use of reward, emotion, and critique through representation of the romantic figure of the artist as sacrificial vessel.

Weil advocates a sense of perpetual crisis in the service of necessity, and this connects to Ader's particular use of crisis in the service of determination, for example in *Fall 1 Los Angeles*. Weil has generally a negative view on falling – 'one does not fall into good'<sup>6</sup> – yet it can be argued that her discourse on necessity and gravity leaves a space for a flat metaphysics, a view that suffering can have spiritual significance and use. Weil uses grace as her central theme, and posits the loss of self as the way towards good and clarification; Bas Jan Ader extracts the sublime from its romantic surroundings, exposing its innate grotesqueness, and uses the loss of self as the very subject of his art. Simone Weil argues that one must become the subject of necessity, and that happy decisions come about in a physical way, obeying a simple force; Bas Jan Ader pushes things towards a tipping point, where he lets, in his own words, gravity act upon him. Crisis is the moment of decision, the particular moment where the subject surrenders to gravity, grace or necessity, and this is true both for Ader and Weil. Yet for Weil, one can only trip or fall into sin – walking towards necessity involves purposefulness. For Ader, fall and rise fold on themselves – through watching him fall from a rooftop, attention and empathy rise. One can also find similarities between Simone Weil and Bas Jan Ader in the way they stood against social prescription. Weil stood against all forms of 'social idolatry'<sup>7</sup>, an expression that included all manner of political submission and also discourses that used the social as a foremost value.

5 page 12, Verwoert, Jan (2006), Bas Jan Ader - In Search of the Miraculous

6 page 77, Weil, Simone (2003), *Gravity and Grace*,

7 page xxix, Weil, Simone (2003), *Gravity and Grace*



Ader stood against the social validity of the very romantic model he extracted from its context, and he also stood against the formal and purist dictates of conceptual art. In Simone Weil, theology is released from the political constraints of Catholicism; in Ader, the sacrificial role of the artist is set free from the romantic belief system. 'Suffering without sense'<sup>8</sup> is perhaps the very core of tragedy, and it is also at the core of Weil's amateur theology and Ader's amateur performances. For Weil, one of the central wisdoms of Christianity is to recognize suffering as a tool with a 'supernatural use'<sup>9</sup>; for Ader, suffering is most clearly seen and thought about when it is extracted from tragic or romantic uses, until it becomes a thing in itself. The question of how to deal with the image of suffering affects both Weil's thought and Bas Jan Ader's works. For Weil, one must be cautious when dealing with the imaginary, lest one falls under the spell of idolatry. For Ader, idolatry can be transformed and emptied of its common use in tragedy, religion, romanticism and popular culture – it can become pragmatic. In Weil's writings, the search for equilibrium is bad because it is imaginary – this also resonates with Ader's own search for imbalance, risk, and fall, a search that is both fictional and absolutely real. Learning to fall is perhaps the very subject of art for Ader, as learning to die is the subject of philosophy for Weil. The theme of the destruction of the 'I' in Simone Weil also has a parallel in Bas Jan Ader's films and performances – Ader finds that there is no other way to tackle the social expectations surrounding the role of the artist except through a direct contact with the romantic cliché, and this also has to do with the destruction of the subject. Humility and frailty also unite the two – for Weil, 'humility consists in knowing that there is no source within ourselves by which we can rise'<sup>10</sup>, whereas for Ader frailty and concept feed each other.

8 page 32, Verwoert, Jan (2006), Bas Jan Ader - In Search of the Miraculous

9 page xxviii, Weil, Simone (2003), Gravity and Grace

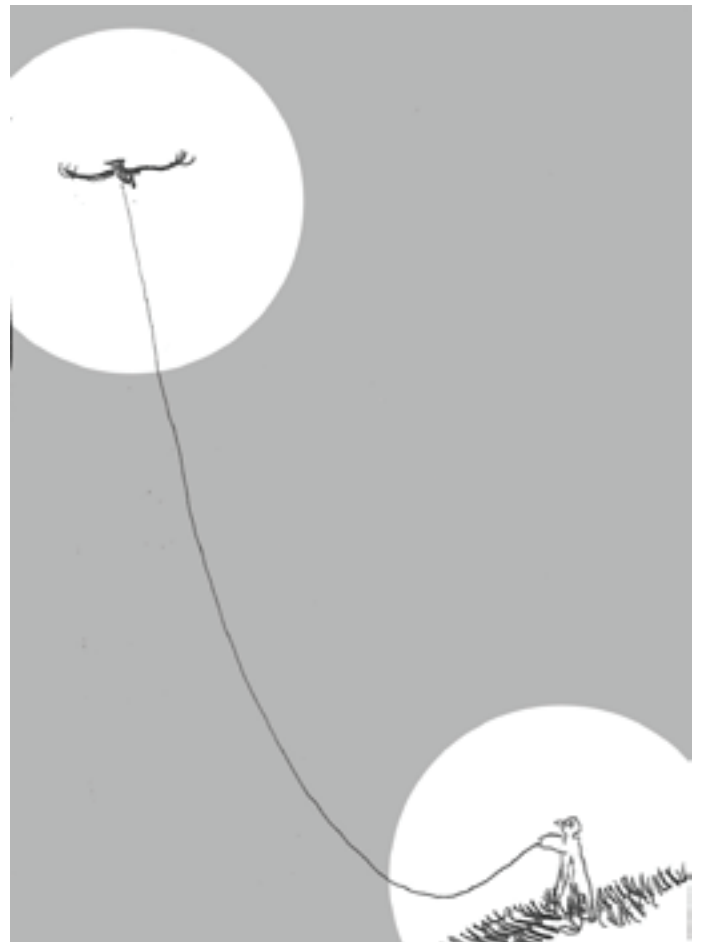
10 page 31, Weil, Simone (2003), Gravity and Grace



Simone Weil praised the status of the intermediary – she wrote that one should be a simple intermediary between ‘the data of a problem and its solution’<sup>11</sup>. Bas Jan Ader took conceptual art’s notions of taking a concept to its inevitable and logic conclusion and put his body as intermediary between concept and act. It is easy to mythologize Bas Jan Ader, and project onto his accidental death a sort of retrospective sacred glow, a glow that warps all his works with tragic tones. Yet this glow can obscure the very fact that Ader’s work was not only an extraction of the romantic model, but also a critique of the same model. This happened because his last work was ‘about the idea of the tragic and became itself a tragedy’<sup>12</sup>. Ader’s work used risk and falling as ways to reflect on our primal relationship with nature and thought; it was not merely a stunt, nor a flirting with suicide. Simone Weil understood that ‘suicide was probably never anything else but imaginary’<sup>13</sup>, by which she might have meant that it is a disease of an imagination trapped in itself. Bas Jan Ader reduced the imaginary until it became necessity, as a way to connect concept and emotion, and his work is not about giving yourself over to death, but more to do with a sort of intermediary notion of being. For Weil, necessity is a stranger to the imaginary. For Ader, the two can be conflated and enacted in their purest form, to elucidate everything concerning falling.

One other question that can link Weil and Ader is a preoccupation with the beautiful in modernity. Weil has a more or less traditional approach to the beautiful – for her, ‘the beautiful is the experimental proof that the incarnation is possible’<sup>14</sup>, and that all art of the highest order can be seen as religious in nature. For Ader, it is the art of the lowest order that can be the key to a contained sense of the beautiful. In slapstick, melodrama, farce and popular music, Ader finds the sublime enclosed in pre-existing structures, and extracts it from these contexts to reflect on our enduring longing for the miraculous.

11 page 46, Weil, Simone (2003), *Gravity and Grace*  
 12 page 8, Verwoert, Jan (2006), Bas Jan Ader - In *Search of the Miraculous*  
 13 page 52, Weil, Simone (2003), *Gravity and Grace*  
 14 page 150, Weil, Simone (2003), *Gravity and Grace*

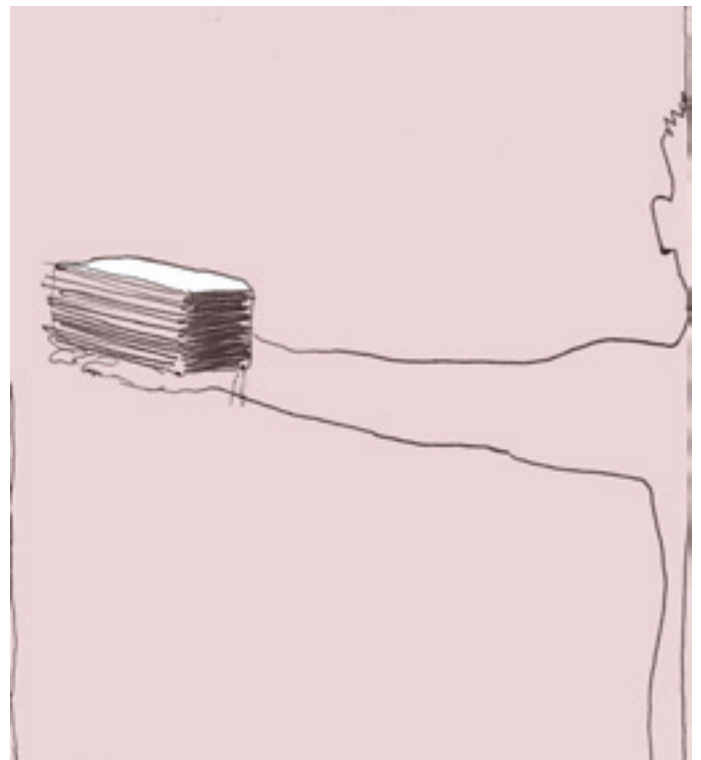


In Fall 1 Los Angeles, falling is extracted from political, theological and symbolic orders. Fall is locked in itself as a tragic act without context, hence without the didactics of tragedy that were so criticized by Brecht. Conceptual romanticism thus becomes also a way out of the prescriptive, medium-specific and formal dictates set out in the beginnings of conceptual art by Sol LeWitt<sup>15</sup>.

Falling is what is expected from a spectacle, secretly – the performer can trip, the tragic figure can have a real breakdown, the funambulist can fall from his rope. In slapstick and circus acts these potentialities become central, evident; in melodrama, the breakdown becomes a point from which everything irradiates. Bas Jan Ader chose these central acts and put them at the service of concepts. These concepts were simple orders – ‘a man falls from the rooftop’, ‘a man cries in close-up for the camera’, ‘a man crosses the Atlantic ocean’, ‘a man falls from a tree’, yet their enactment, devoid of context, becomes something odd and beautiful, an emotional concept. All falling is present in that man that falls from the rooftop, falling becomes a figure both for necessity and grace, passiveness and action, fear and fearlessness.

It is the notion of necessity that seems highly pertinent to performance as it has been understood in romantic conceptualism, and especially in the work of Bas Jan Ader. It is a form of necessity that is both personal and universal, artistic and beyond the conscripts of conceptualism, physical and spiritual, heroic and fragile, self-inflicted and general in its ramifications, performative and absolutely real (the man actually falls). One should then expect that falling, for Ader, was bound both to necessity and to a sense of grace, a sense of grace that can be described as secularized transcendence. In this it echoes with Simone Weil’s version of theology, a theology written after God ceased to be philosophically mentionable. Weil’s writing recuperates fall through gravity and blessedness through grace. It is also a potent framework through which to analyse performative fall in the case of Bas Jan Ader.

15 page 12-13, Verwoert, Jan (2006), Bas Jan Ader - In Search of the Miraculous



The notions of crisis of meaning and crisis of form seem also to link Simone Weil's fragmentary work with Bas Jan Ader's conceptual gestures. For Weil, meaning seems to be extracted from meaninglessness, or as she puts it, the void<sup>16</sup>. In Ader, meaning and form are superimposed in a careful and distant consideration of modernistic tropes. In *Gravity and Grace*, idolatry is considered a vital necessity 'in the cave'<sup>17</sup>, a statement that links Plato's image from the Republic with notions of idolatry which are definitively Judeo-Christian. Idolatry, the worshiping of images rather than ideals, connects to Ader's flat metaphysics, and to his determination in using sources from popular culture. The cave is re-enacted, as a means to reflect on its specificities and contingencies. Meaning is at the same time absent and overly familiar in its presentation. In Simone Weil, meaning is a careful extraction from the void, and has to be put to the test of its own crisis, much like faith has to be purged through atheism<sup>18</sup>. The virtues of weak faith are presented in both cases as instruments towards clarification.

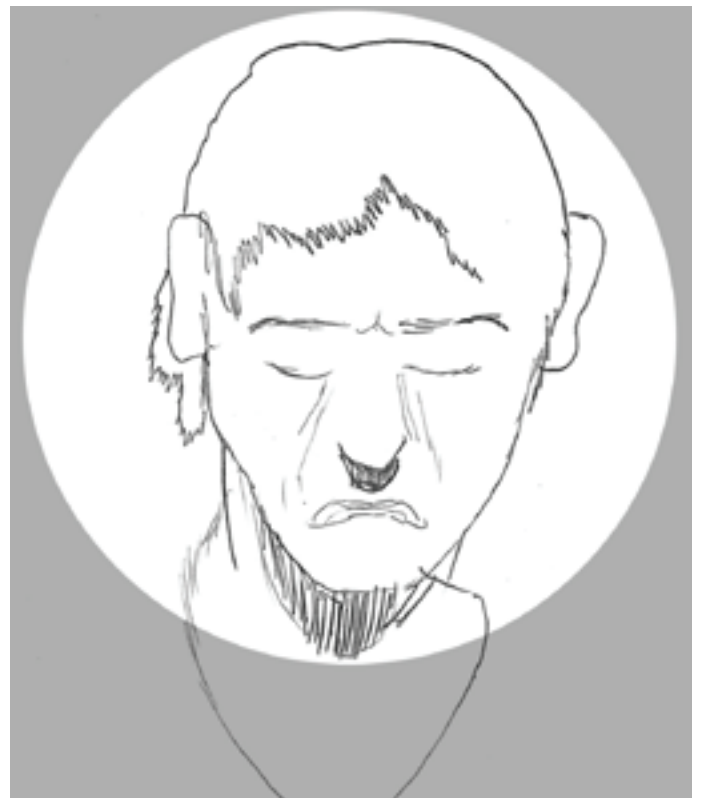
Pathos in Bas Jan Ader has been extensively studied, but, as we mentioned before, not in its relation to the Passion or to sacrifice. Both Adorno and Bataille point out the artistic locus as one of sacrifice, both as the sacrifice of enlightenment and the sacrifice of sacrifice itself. In Ader, the usually hidden status of sacrifice (the need of its hidden status has been pointed out by Girard) is reversed, and sacrifice loses its power as knot of being. Sacrifice becomes its own justification, not in the classical sense pointed out by Girard, but in the sense that Bataille gives it, as energy expended without profit<sup>19</sup>. The profitless nature of sacrifice is explored to its ultimate consequences, not in the sense of a masculine radicalism as in Chris Burden, but in a problematical masculinity that has, in Christ, a reference to deny or play with.

16 page 10, Weil, Simone (2003), *Gravity and Grace*  
 Grace fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void.

17 page xxix, Weil, Simone (2003), *Gravity and Grace*  
 Idolatry is a vital necessity in the cave.

18 page 115, Weil, Simone (2003), *Gravity and Grace*  
 Religion in so far as it is a source of consolation is a hindrance to true faith: in this sense atheism is a purification. I have to be atheistic with the part of myself which is not made for God. Among those men in whom the supernatural part has not been awakened, the atheists are right and the believers wrong.

19 See Bataille who repeatedly talks of sacrifice as energy expended without profit, for example in *Inner Experience*.



In Simone Weil's life and work, the notions of suffering and sacrifice verge sometimes on the pathological, without losing their power of dissolution into clarity and purpose. Here again, we can make a link between purposefulness and purposelessness or the status of sacrifice in Weil and Ader.

Christ is no romantic hero, as has been thoroughly explored by Kierkegaard<sup>20</sup>, but a companion or complement to that hero. In this sense, Christ is an absolute tragic archetype that eludes tragedy, because the knot of his sacrifice still lasts as long as Christianity lasts too. In this sense, Christ is neither Dionysus nor the pathetic hero in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. Christ is still beyond representation, in some sense, yet in Bas Jan Ader, he is present as an archetype of the lonely Man of Sorrows, but also as the figure that, while going into the desert, exposes himself to an artificial challenge that precipitates a crisis where grace and gravity play a central role. Christ can be viewed as a serial crisis producer, someone who, in every situation, provokes a moment of truth or lie. The fabric of this crisis production can best be described as antisocial. As Simone Weil points out, he didn't pray for the world<sup>21</sup> (although he also advocated collective prayer, even in secret). His antisocial stance resounds with Ader's take on the romantic hero, in that Christ, if viewed as a human as in Russell<sup>22</sup>, is utterly detached from conversation, argument, or reasoning. He spoke in parables.

20 Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*

21 page 165, Weil, Simone (2003), *Gravity and Grace*. Christ redeemed the vegetative, not the social. He didn't pray for the world.

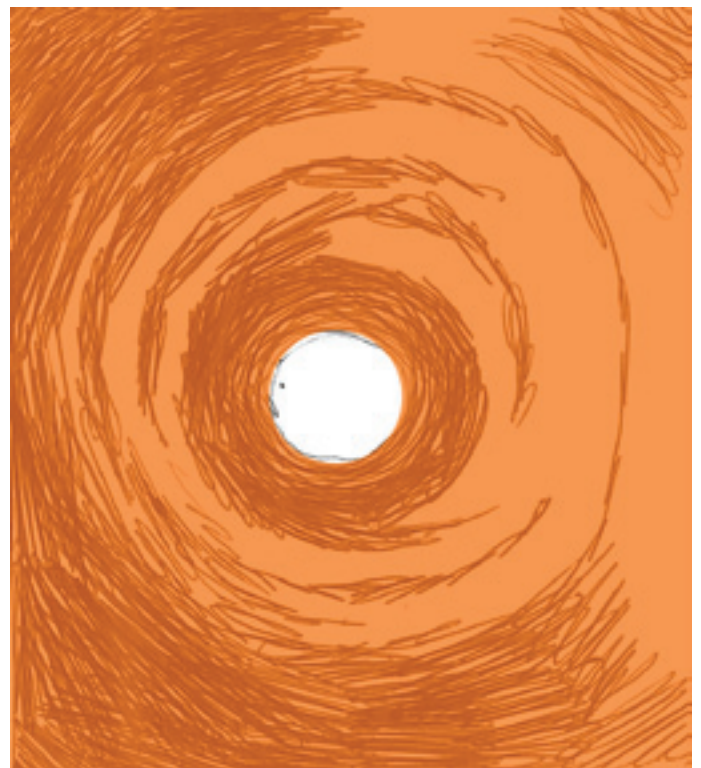
22 Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian*



It is a particularity of Bas Jan Ader, the fact that he was little known in the two decades that followed his death at sea. He has been recently recuperated and shown in important retrospectives, and is now recognized as someone who infused conceptual art with a sort of energy that refuses to die out.

It is also a particularity of Simone Weil, the fact that, although she is a major thinker who converted to Catholicism, she is almost unknown in Catholic circles.

The two were concerned with gravity, risk, falling and frailty, and there seems to be a returning interest in these issues in contemporary art and performance. Their works still talk to each other, and to other past, present and future works.



## THE POEM IS A FAKE

### CHAPTER EIGHT

The poet is a fake, he feigns so completely that he even fakes that it is pain the pain he truly feels<sup>1</sup>.

There is something deeply camonian in this verse by Pessoa, and also something of universal value to all forms of art production, fruition and critique. Camonian is the term used in Portugal to address that which steals from or addresses Camões, the greatest XVI century Portuguese poet.

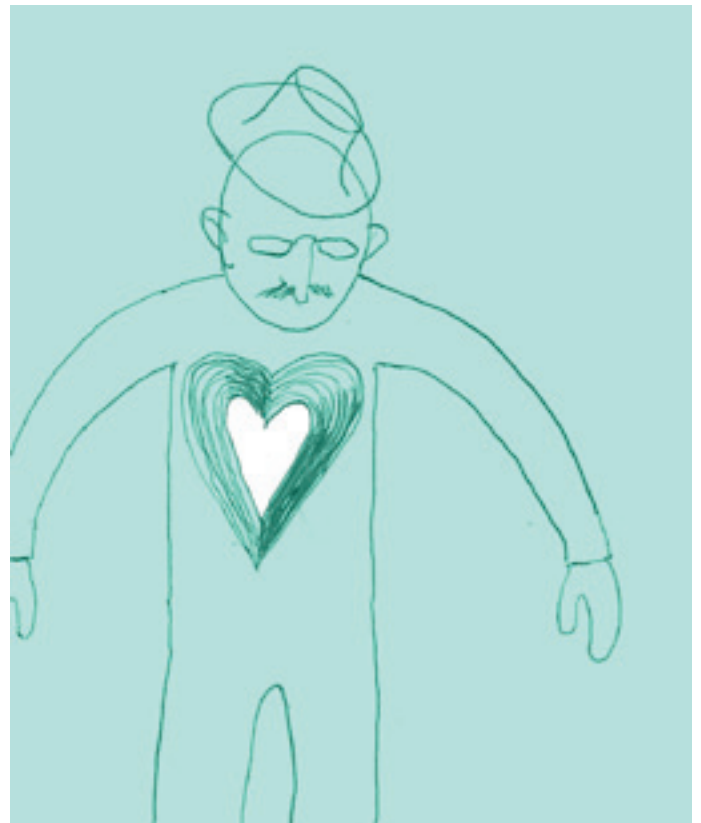
It reminds us of one of Camões' sonnets via its circularity and accuracy of form. Should one substitute faking with loving one would end up with pure Camões: 'the poet is a lover, he is bound to love so completely, that he even loves in pain the pain he truly feels'. Camões was usually a stranger to irony and humour (never made me laugh) – Pessoa is faking to be himself while simply adding a modern concept in substitution for love. Faking is sincerity articulated. Faking is love articulated into the modern. Faking is materialized through an act of theft and concealment that deals with concealment itself. The poem performs itself in infinite mirroring. Like sacrificial logic, the poem conceals and reveals at the same time.

Despite or because it is an act of concealment itself, the verse discloses something enormous about the nature of artistic production – it exposes the double layer of falsity in the object and the double layer of falsity in the mirror, at work in the making of a poem. The poem, if seen in the light of the Camões reference, is itself a form of faking it, historically, critically, poetically. It performs what it says. Its circularity keeps it from falling or vanishing into meaning<sup>2</sup>. The poem is a fake.

1 Fernando Pessoa, Autopsicografia

2 Paul Valéry, Poems

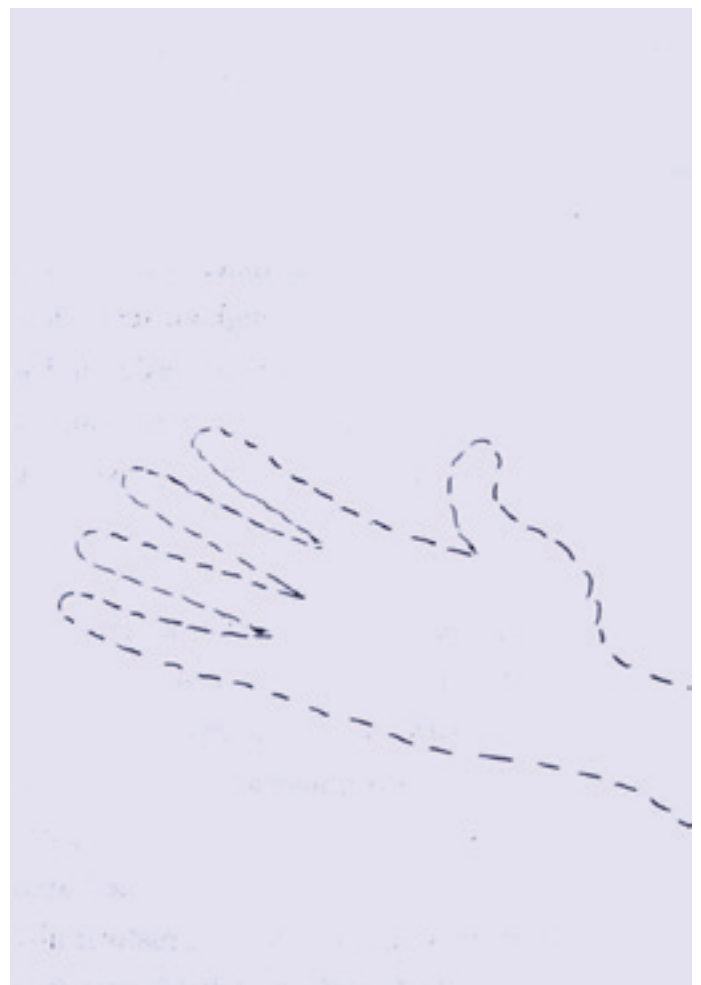
A bad poem is one that vanishes into meaning



How are we to understand the importance of faking it in modern and contemporary instances of art production? More importantly, can we do so without getting trapped in overused economies to do with the grotesque, the carnivalesque and masquerading? I believe we can, just as I believe that the verse's operation remains intact, despite ninety years of separation, ninety years of faking it. I would like to explore three forms of heteronymity in the works of Kierkegaard, Philip Guston and Bas Jan Ader, searching for answers about the two layers of falsity proposed by the poem.

Prior to that engagement, let me elaborate on what I mean by doubling. It has to do with actuality and representation in their correlation. Consider the beggar with his hand outstretched, murmuring a tale of misery. He might have had his moment of sincerity – or he might not – when he first had to beg. Now he is perpetually condemned to re-enact that moment over and over again. The beggar has to fake the misery he truly inhabits, he has to perform autobiography and see that autobiography fall into a kind of loop (the loop of shame). The two layers of the heart mimic each other, forming a sort of mechanism, an automaton.

For autobiography is shameful, uncomfortable, Augustinian to the bone. It might represent nothing when put against an artist's work, yet it is a nothing that first set things in motion through the loop of shame, deceit and concealment, and continues to do so throughout an artistic life.



What was Philip Guston concealing before he put a hood on himself and reinvented his practice through concealment itself? What was he concealing? His erasure of history through changing his name from Goldstein? The fact that his father was a poor junkyard man, ashamed of his humiliating trade, a shame that might have been connected to his suicide? Was Guston concealing concealment and perpetual crisis? When he painted *The Studio* and started his third incarnation, this much was true – Guston became pathetic, ridiculous, in crisis, and managed, through this, to have a non-messianic practice in the prophet-infested New York. Guston survives because he too is a faker exposing the tools of his trade – his father's trash, art history's trash, the trash that comes with the guilt of concealment itself, plus his brushes, easels, cigarette butts and propensity for Russian morbid depression. Philip Guston, through open concealment, began faking it.

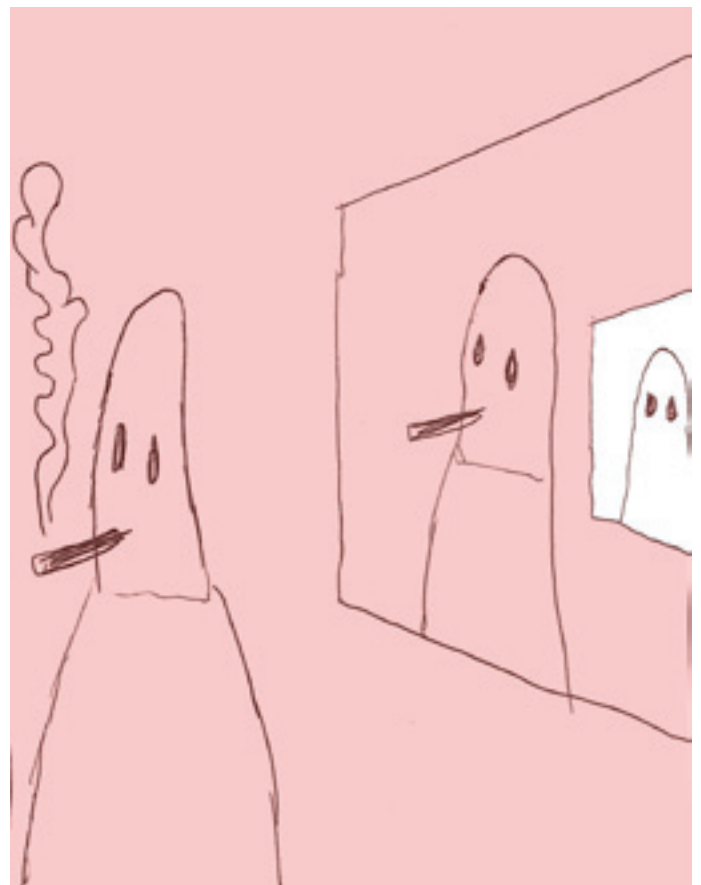
Philip Guston was a painter of all things forgotten, not only in the sense of his subject matter (shoes, junk, trash), but also in a methodological sense. He scavenged not only art history, but also Kierkegaard and his childhood fascination with cartoons. Unlike Picasso, who digested everything with carnivorous masculinity, Guston preferred not to know what he was doing, and sustain a sense of anxiety and pathetic crisis, the likes of which can also be found in Manet and *Les Demoiselles* – a sense of not known knowledge emerging. Kierkegaard was gloriously misread by Guston – he basically substituted God and faith with painting. 'The paradox of painting is this – that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with the exterior', he could have read in *Fear and Trembling*. And, unlike the so-called abstract expressionists (who all wanted to be the last painter in perpetual, heroic endgames), Guston 'got no further than painting'<sup>4</sup>.

### 3 Soren Kierkegaard on Irony

The ironist hides jest in earnestness, and earnestness in jest

### 4 Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

Abraham got no further than faith.

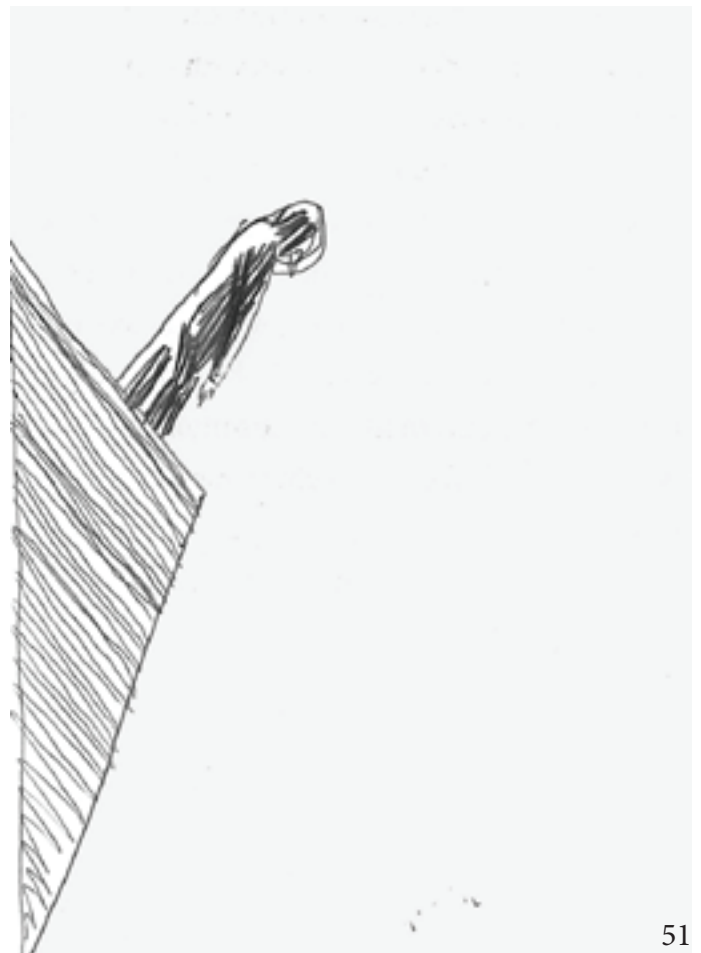


This does not mean that Guston ignored the impasse of painting and the ruin of painting, but, after the end of the world, instead of becoming a prophet late for class he chose to be a nobody, smoke and scavenge. In Kierkegaard (as he could also have found in Pessoa), Guston met a fellow heteronymic self, a companion in anxiety. And, against Ad Reinhardt's prescriptive stance, Guston would argue that the artist should not want to be right.

In a 1931 John Barrymore Hollywood film, Philip Guston appears in the background as a young painter, with beret and beard. Guston worked as an extra intermittently throughout the thirties, an activity that must have blended well with his taste for cinema and the dramatic arts. Philip Guston is the extra painter in both senses of the word: firstly, reinventing himself radically three times throughout his career, making the impossibility of painting something fruitful, falling outside all canons and classifications; secondly, using his own effigy as sign for painter – not only in Hollywood movies (with beret) but also in his later paintings (with hood). He faked it and lived it at the same time.

Now we can proceed to Bas Jan Ader, and see how the double layer of falsity and sincerity applies to his work and life. It is important to isolate Ader's work from the posthumous martyrdom hues that serve only to obscure the very nature of his works. In Ader, the issue of intentionality and forgery is contentious, for Ader actually cries and actually falls. Yet even suicide would have been imaginary, using a term both from Weil and Žižek to describe that act. The actuality of physical involvement on the part of Bas Jan Ader owes as much to the burlesque as it owes to the begging problem described above. Ader reaches out his hand, not unlike the beggar.

Ader, becoming an instrument of gravity, and enacting these simple actions, became another kind of instrument as well – that of open concealment. Again, we can link this operation to the tabooed nature of sacrifice and to matter-of-factness of Pessoa's verse.

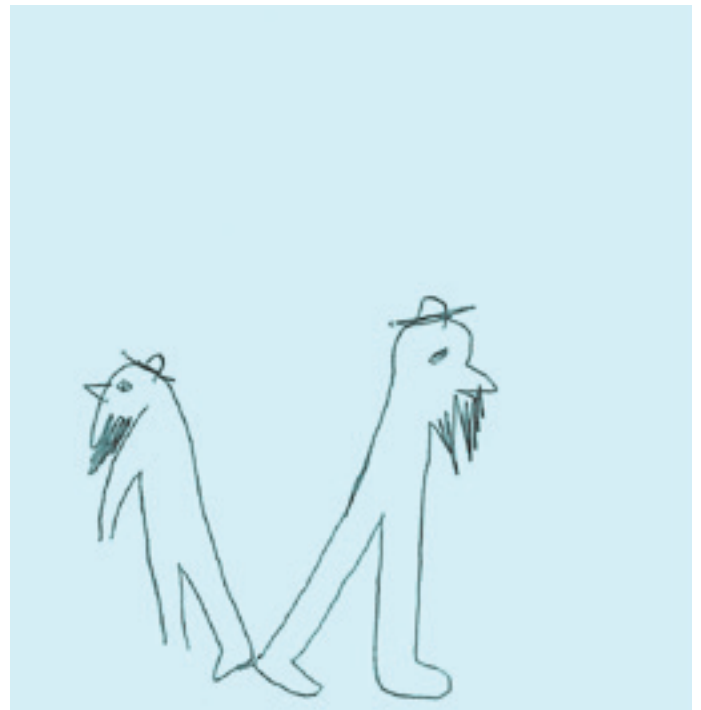


Kierkegaard was Philip Guston's favorite writer, alongside Dostoyevsky. They shared the same kind of monomania – Kierkegaard with regard to heteronymic, twisted theology, and Guston with regard to painting. They also shared a sense of perpetual crisis, with anguish as the motor for it all and irony as the only redeeming quality. Kierkegaard, like Pessoa, is nowhere to be found. Does he even believe in God? He decomposed himself into specific voices for specific problems, incarnating character, deceit, forgery, in order to recuperate something long lost. What that something was isn't clear – it might have been love, faith, God, or unbridled humour.

Kierkegaard, like Pessoa, divided himself into two legions: outmoded characters, and characters that seemed to be freer than themselves. Pessoa never left Lisboa, yet his heteronyms had to travel quite frequently. Kierkegaard had a complex faith, but he could speak both from agnosticism and against it, both from a position of dread and one of doubt.

Perhaps the secret of heteronymity, as Pessoa once suggested, is that of amputation. We are multitudes, and can choose to create character and voice through subtraction. Again, we see a link to psychological crisis and sacrifice, for they both work also through amputation and subtraction.

Let us return to the fake verse about faking it. Let us acknowledge that crisis of meaning and crisis of form are deeply connected in these four creators – Guston, Pessoa, Ader and Kierkegaard. A bad poem, Valery once wrote, is one that disappears into meaning. A fake verse about faking it seems to continue its journey into actuality, eluding definitive meaning.



## DRAWING AFTER DUCHAMP

### CHAPTER NINE

Não fez Deus o céu em xadrez de estrelas, como os pregadores fazem o sermão em xadrez de palavras”<sup>1</sup> Before he devoted himself to the beauty of chess, but already when his interest in painting was starting to dwindle, Marcel Duchamp spent a season in Monte Carlo, trying to outwit the roulette. He was convinced it was possible to devise a method to predict its whims, a system to enter chaos. ‘You see’ he said, ‘I have not ceased to be a painter; I am now drawing on chance’<sup>2</sup>. A gambler is a creature that is overtaken by a drive, and possessed by it; Duchamp, on the contrary, observed the spinning with perfect detachment. His posture was a purely modern one, with what Roberto Calasso called the ‘godless gaze of which only mystics are capable’, in which the eyes ‘are not unduly alarmed’ by chaos, but are instead ‘thrilled by the prospect of inventing some strategic move within that chaos, a new game that makes all previous ones seem Ciceronian’<sup>3</sup>. It is clear that Duchamp began to abandon painting through drawing – on his way to ‘The Large Glass’, and that drawing continued to be for him a site of experimentation throughout his life. The reasons for his abandonment of painting were sensorial and historical – he confessed feeling revulsion for its sensuous features (as well as for the filling-in of painting<sup>4</sup> and for the function of ‘la patte’ in the whole process) but he also questioned the ability of painting to speak directly to the ‘grey matter’ like the masters of old. ‘Mechanical drawing was the saving clause’<sup>5</sup>, he later explained. By resting outside the available codes of painting, technical drawing provided a means to escape both the families of modern painting and the ‘danger of the hand’. By stressing that he wanted ‘to unlearn how to draw’ while drawing, Duchamp was also acknowledging the wealth of drawing – its capacity to dodge habit, regenerate, be faithful to thought and, later, to appeal to the mind alone.

1 page 185, Vieira, Padre António, Sermão da sexagésima in Sermões

2 page 259, Tomkins, Calvin, Duchamp: a biography, Chatto & Windus, 1997

3 page 40, Calasso, Roberto, The Ruin of Kasch, Cambridge Massachussetts, Belknap Press - Harvard University Press, 1996

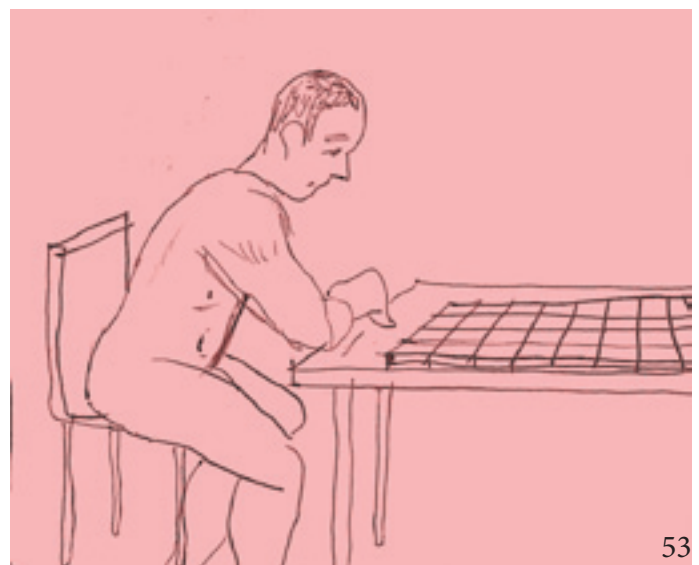
The Modern is born when the eyes observing the world discern in it ‘this chaos, this monstrous confusion’, but are not unduly alarmed. On the contrary, they are thrilled by the prospect of inventing some strategic move within that chaos, a new game that makes all the previous ones seem Ciceronian. It is a godless gaze of which only mystics are capable [...]

4 page 18, Cabanne, Pierre, Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp, London: Thames and Hudson, 1971

When you make a painting, even abstract, there is a sort of necessary filling-in. I wondered why.”; “I think painting dies, you understand. After forty or fifty years its freshness disappears. [...] Men are mortal, pictures too.

5 page 126-7, Tomkins, Calvin, Duchamp: a biography, Chatto & Windus, 1997

Mechanical drawing was the saving clause. A straight line done with the ruler, not with the hand. Forgetting the hand completely, that is the idea [...]. I unlearned to draw...I actually had to forget with the hand”.



It can be argued that drawing had an exceptional role in Duchamp's practice and conceptual maturing – to a point where we can find no rupture, no abandonment of its logic, but a progressive shift in the values and qualities attributed to investigation. In this sense, through Duchamp, drawing was displaced as strategy into the spheres of action, prospective gesture and critical distance embedded in the artwork. We can continue our argument while going through some of Duchamp's more important steps, beginning with the *Grand Verre*. It would be inappropriate to list here all the families of art-historical interpretations for the 'Large Glass' – Duchamp's first major work outside painting – but I would prefer to suggest the hypotheses that it can be read as a drawing. More precisely, that it is suspended between drawing and screen – a drawing delayed<sup>6</sup> in glass by the absence of ground. It also shares with drawing the fact that it is a confrontation of a strategy with the world – except that, in this case, we can actually see the world on the other side of the sheet. It is a drawing stripped to an imagined essence – a thought of drawing – it is bared even of the virgin white<sup>7</sup> of paper, rendered problematic as image. The 'Large Glass' is a phantom of drawing. There we can see how the screen of the ancient perspectivists is put to another use, and how it tries to capture projections that emanate from an imaginary dimension (the ambitions of the anamorphosis are radicalised). We can also see in Duchamp's meticulous collection of every study for the 'Large Glass' (which were later collected in the 'Green Box') as a re-enactment of Da Vinci's dream – drawing as the pursuit of total knowledge, encapsulating the universe through the magic of reduction. But drawing is now condemned to be fragmented, infinitely more 'undecipherable' than Da Vinci's inverted text. Drawing appears in the most disparate scraps of paper, as something disposable and sacred, obsolete and determinant. It is said that he was acting as a Leonardo, but 'a Leonardo who was sick and tired of glue'<sup>8</sup>.

6 page 26, Duchamp, Marcel, *The essential writings of Marcel Duchamp salt seller, marchand du sel*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1975

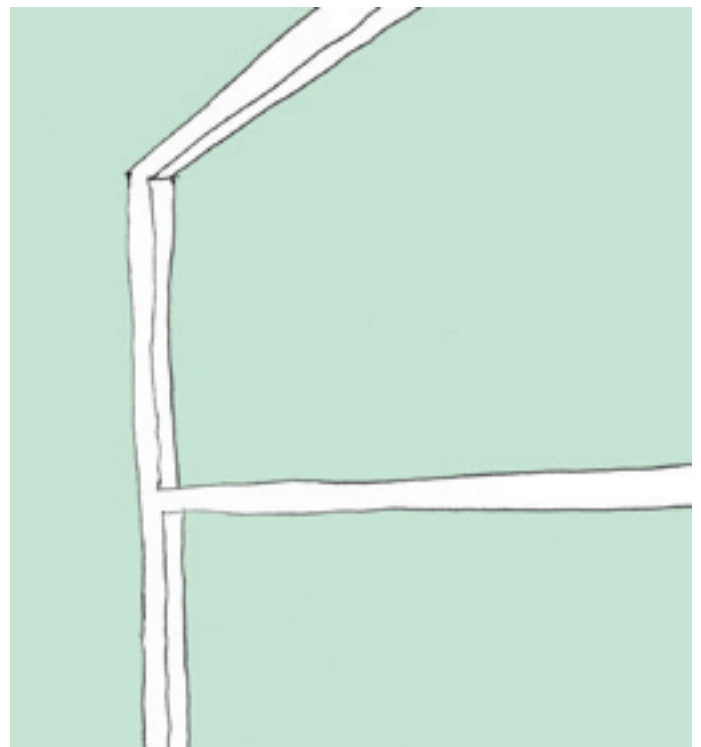
[...] A delay in glass as you would say a poem in prose or spittoon in silver.

7 page 35, Duve, Thierry De, *Pictorial nominalism on Marcel Duchamp's passage from painting to the readymade*, University of Minnesota Press, 1991

Virgin: the virgin canvas, the point of departure for the painter and the initial site in which his desire and his anguish are invested. How to become a painter, how to begin the painting? This was a crucial question for Duchamp, much more important than the completion of the painting.

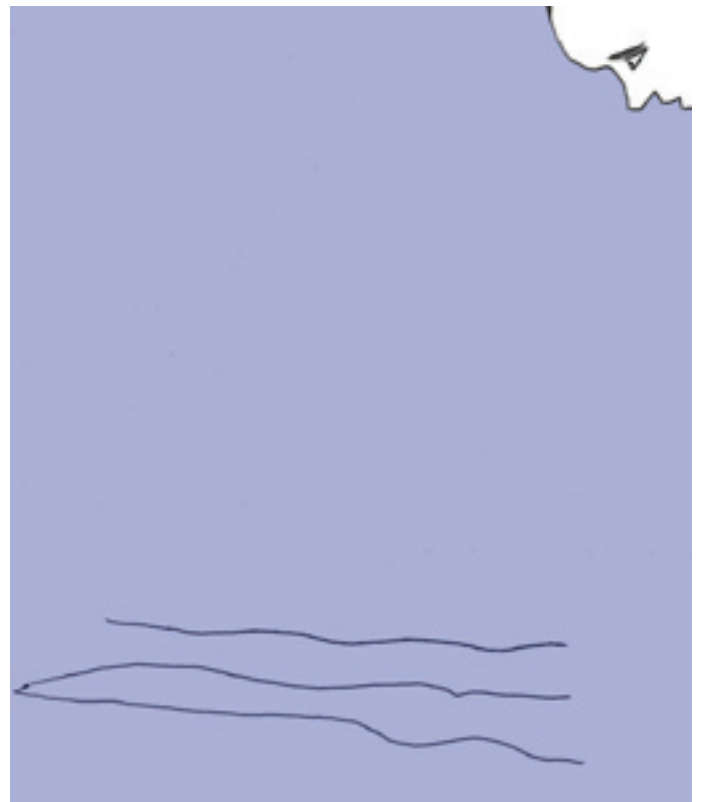
8 page 10, Lyotard, Jean Francois, *Duchamp's TRANS/formers*, The Lapis Press, 1990

[...] Scribblings on bits of paper in the Boxes, ingenious projects in the style of Leonardo; but maybe a Leonardo who is sick and tired of glue.



Here we can follow a sort of disavowal of drawing into its constituents – a process that opened a multitude of trap doors that we sometimes identify with collage, appropriation, and the distance from object to artwork. Hence it seems possible to connect the central role that Duchamp gave to the gap between the Large Glass and the Green Box (interpretation derived from reflecting procedural issues rather than objective features) to the uses of the readymade. In the Green Box's relation to the Large Glass, drawing is used as a place of departure and investigation, relating to an oppositional work. Duchamp's main driving force and interest lay in the distance between the two – in potency or reflection. In this sense, critical relevance is what is gained in the translation between the two poles of reference. Drawing becomes part of the artwork, inasmuch as it leads to a critical engagement outside its immediate constraints as a medium. Therefore it is used as probe and reflective surface. Drawing draws its strength from its imbalance, from a perpetual state of enquiry, and its tendency to reiterate the artwork as a site of procedure or interval. We can connect this emphasis on procedure or interval with the birth of the readymade. After moving to New York, Marcel Duchamp slowly became aware of the potential of these found, signed objects – the readymades. For our purposes it is especially significant that he classified the work 'Three Standard Stoppages' as a readymade – a work that recorded both the distance between drawing and sculpture and a chance event, a found phenomenon. Being his favourite readymade 'Three Standard Stoppages' comprised three drawings and three 'profiles' in wood, and was intended to be a capturing of chance – it documented the distortions of three threads fallen from a height of one meter. Most of the other readymades consisted, more simply, of found and signed objects, with minor interventions or additions. The act of signing, which invested the thing made with the aura of the artist, was radically displaced. Art could no longer claim a position of truth; the 'magic' was 'delivered from the lie'.

9 page 143, Adorno, Theodor W., *Minima moralia*  
Reflections from damaged life, Verso, 1974  
Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth.



Art had been 'thought through to the end'<sup>10</sup>. The way to free this magic from the lie of being truth had something to do with making it face its very construction and origin. Here begins the rise of a certain mood, which implies vigilance not against tricks or theatricality, but against the instrumentality of tricks and the recuperations of theatre as image. There is a shift that puts drawing in the central point of a spinning process, a point where it is no longer recognizable as such. Rather than being irrelevant to contemporary issues in art, drawing has become simply barely visible, like a blind spot. Drawing's attributes as a site of departure and open confrontation of a strategy with the world became independent and loose from their originally strict, academic determinations. We can follow a constant return to drawing throughout Duchamp's life – producing attractive etchings, studies for 'Etant Donées...', relics, sketches. Maybe because he 'dreamt of rarity'<sup>11</sup>, and drawing is one of the fields for the thoughtful search. Even if rarity has to be performed, and is no longer an immanent quality, drawing adapts to this instability, this make-belief. Drawing's failings, its open-ended and incomplete character echoed Duchamp's own sensitivity. The game of chess came to be one of Duchamp's favorite drawing sessions, once he retired from the art-world's chess of words. He too used *disegno* as a «floating signifier»<sup>12</sup>, but in a passive way. The habits of production that regulated most of the artists' days were aberrations to Duchamp. He performed the improbable – not unlike an Adam before the Fall (before work), he waited for drawings to come to him, to be picked.

Drawing is now best defined in conjunction with what it no longer is, instead of by purely medium-specific historicity and focus. That medium-specificity tends to betray drawing's openness and strategic place in artistic processes, in favour of a certain fetishizing of elegance and a forced sense of belonging to an artistic family.

10 page 3, Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Muses*, Stanford University Press, 1996

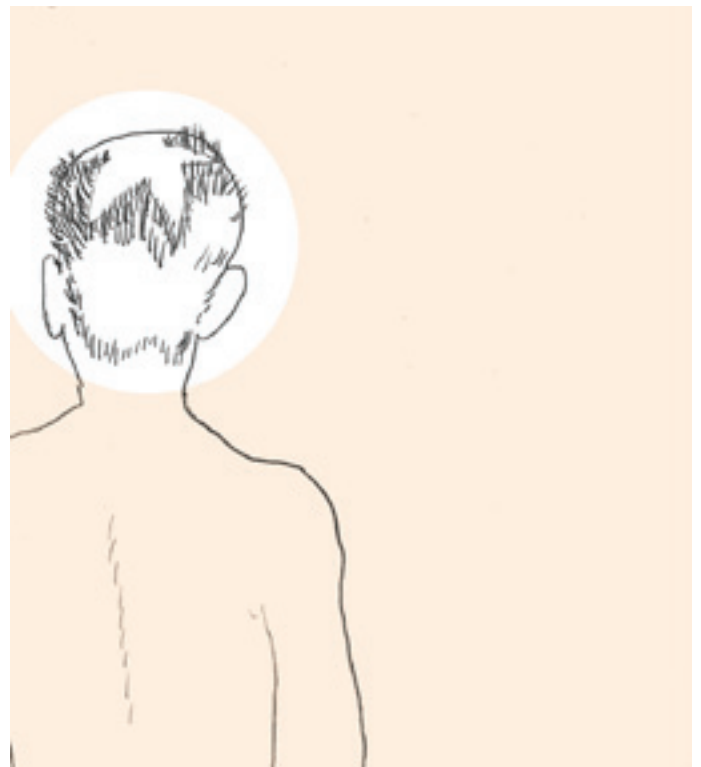
Art has been thought through to the end" (Quoting Marcel Duchamp).

11 page 69, Cabanne, Pierre, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1971

In the production of any genius, great painter or great artist, there are really only four or five things that really count in this life. The rest is everyday filler. [...] I dream of rarity, what otherwise could be known as a superior aesthetic.

12 page 80, Didi-Huberman, Georges, *Confronting Images – Questioning the Ends of a certain History of Art*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005

*Disegno* was effectively a magic word for him, first because it is polysemic, antithetical, infinitely manipulatable. It is almost a floating signifier – and Vasari did not hesitate to use it as such.



What drawing no longer is can help to reflect on strategies and displacements in contemporary practices, as well as to recover from an appreciation of cloistered elegance that is a problematic feature of many reflections around drawing. Drawing used to have a central role as a figure and tool of both instability and recuperation. Having lost this role as a producer of imbalances and collections, drawing shifted elsewhere, while leaving its main features to be transmuted into multiple strategic and procedural approaches of art production. To reflect on how this shift began, Duchamp's example is especially important, as we can begin to identify it at its inception, as a shift that surpassed the bounds of the historical avant-garde and is still active today. It is active and visible in the relational questions posed to the artwork as it reverts to its origins and processes of coming into being.

In the sense that drawing is one of the archetypal, purest forms of appropriation, it gives a privileged perspective and clarity to the ways in which artworks relate to multiple pre-existing dimensions. In this sense, a dual proposition can be inferred.

1. Drawing is best viewed and perceived outside its former constraints (questions of medium and objecthood), and its pertinence coincides with its fragmented condition and relational qualities.
2. The disappearance of drawing as a structuring tool of investigation and determination of the artwork can be connected to the emergence of multiple strategies of enquiry, but nevertheless can illuminate our reflection upon these strategies.

In spite of common perceptions, drawing didn't disappear through the invalidation of obsolete qualities such as preparation and demonstration – instead, its shift was determinant in the creation of major spaces of reflection in contemporary practices. There was an overflow of drawing's constitutive procedures back into the centre of art production, parallel to a scattering of drawing's identifiable manifestations into unpredictable, ever negotiable settings.



Illustration is inherently alchemical, for it is a synthesis of the already synthetic pursuit that is drawing. For drawing is always less than something else<sup>1</sup>, it simplifies through graphic thought, and illustration takes drawing as starting point – as if there was not sufficient thought in it, as if drawing was somehow incomplete and severe. Like drawing, illustration sits at a distance from pictorial convention – this is why it might be helpful to think of Duchamp as a cartoonist. He was indeed an amateur cartoonist in his early teens, but it seems that all his life he wanted to sit at a distance from pictorial convention, thrive in irony, and speak directly to the brain. Duchamp used mechanical drawing – which is illustrative – as an escape from taste, and an escape from pictorial convention<sup>2</sup>, on his way out of painting. Why is this link between Duchampian escape and illustration not recognised for what it is? Because illustration is seen as a conservative island where the questions of art do not apply. But what if they do apply? What if the modernist agony of fiction<sup>3</sup> that stems from Manet was indeed only the liberation of the thought of painting from painting itself? We are left with phantasms of narrative, just like we are left with the ghosts of drawing.

Francisco de Holanda called drawing the knowledge of the science of painting<sup>4</sup>, and indeed that seems to chime with Renaissance ideas of drawing as the ultimate demonstration<sup>5</sup>. For Francisco de Holanda, drawing comes from God, who has the ultimate and eternal knowledge<sup>6</sup>. Drawing turns the invisible into visible<sup>7</sup>. Drawing is everything<sup>8</sup>. Divine grammar, grammar of all that has been created, is, and will be created. It is possible to see the link between Duchamp and Renaissance thought. Duchamp turns away from the Jesuitical adventure, as Malraux called it, only to end up with versions of the Perspectivists' screens, technical drawing, and a collector's colonial occupation of the industrial object.

1 page 65, Vítor Manuel Oliveira da Silva, *Ética e Política do Desenho*

As categorias do pensamento gráfico enunciam a presença visual e a doação sensível como arte da simplificação. Arte coerente, independente e consistente, a qual prescreve esse menos que faz a singularidade do seu pensamento.

The categories of graphic thought enunciate the visible presence and sensible donation as art of simplification. This is a coherent art, independent and consistent, that prescribes that less that forms the singularity of its thought.

2 page 48, Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*

PC – What have you done to escape taste?

MD – Mechanical Drawing. It upholds no taste, since it is outside all pictorial convention.

3 page 89, André Malraux, *As Vozes do Siêncio*

A aventura jesuíta, iniciada com a exploração da ficção dos grandes italianos, acaba, na agonia da ficção, com o triunfo de Manet.

The Jesuitic adventure, initiated with the exploration of the great Italians, finishes, in the agony of fiction, with the triumph of Manet.

4 page 15, Francisco de Holanda

[...] No entendimento da arte e ciência da pintura que é o desenho [...]

Drawing is the understanding of the arte and science of painting.

5 page 24, Filippo Baldinucci, *Vocabolario Toscano dell'Arte del Disegno*

DIsegno / Un apparente dimostrazione con linee di quelle cose, che prima l' uomo coll' animo se aveva concepito, e nell' idea immaginate [...]

Drawing / an apparent demonstration with lines of something that man has conceived with his soul, and imagined as idea.

6 page 20, Francisco de Holanda

E assim como este desenho, criado no entendimento ou imaginativa, é nascido da eterna ciência incriada na nossa: assim a nossa ideia criada dá a origem e invenção a todas as outras obras, artes e ofícios que usam os mortais.

And thus, as this drawing, first created in understanding or imagination, is born of the uncreated science in our own science; so our created idea gives origin and invention to all other artworks and crafts used by the mortals.

7 page 25, Francisco de Holanda

Serve sobretudo o Desenho de levantar o espírito a Deus, pelas coisas visíveis às invisíveis, vendo o mundo e o mar e o céu, com olhos mais claros que outros em sua pintura.

Drawing's purpose is above all to lift the spirit unto God, passing from things visible to things invisible, and seeing the world and the sea and the heavens with clearer eyes than others, regarding one's own painting.

8 page 26, Francisco de Holanda

[...] Que tudo é debuxo [...]

[...] That all is drawing [...]

All this is drawing, all this is illustration.

It might be true that illustration sits at a distance from pictorial convention, but this distance makes it prone to be an integral part of our ongoing modern process, rather than a justly placed anathema field for art studies. In drawing, process and result are and have been equivalent, like logic and art for Wittgenstein and Kosuth<sup>9</sup>. Illustration sits on drawing and takes its procedural modes to an extreme. What this extreme is seems to remain free of the universal, casuistic, and contingent.

Drawing is always an early form of denomination<sup>10</sup>, a project, a materialised process. Illustration can be seen as an addition to project in which narrative concerns are to be expected. Yet illustration can deal with these expectations in several ways – through obstruction, distortion and perversion.

A mere illustration is the thing that artists most despise and run away from, for illustration is imagined to be a kind of conveyor belt, spewing out the objects of bad taste, the obvious and the sincere.

9 page 91, Joseph Kosuth, Exemplar: Felix Gonzalez-Torres 1994, Failure, Whitechapel

What is the character of such 'tests'? As Wittgenstein put it: 'In Mathematics and logic, process and result are equivalent'. The same, I would maintain, can be said of art.

10 page 205, Vítor Manuel Oliveira da Silva, *Ética e Política do Desenho*

Na etimologia latina do nome *designare*, o sentido indiciário do signo que aponta, que assinala, que mostra ser sinal de qualquer coisa e significar qualquer coisa, conjuga o sentido de uma nomeação antecipada, de um projecto.

In the Latin etymology of the word *designare*, the indicating sense of something that signals, points to, and shows itself to be the sign of something else, gathers the sense of anticipated nomination, and of project.

## COMEDIC CRISIS

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Comics aren't composed of text and image, but of time and ether, thought and world. It is more rigorous to say – comics exist in between worlds, in between text and image, and in the folds that lay time and the page together.

The composition of comics is as mysterious as any other composition, and as driven by necessity and doubt as any other composition.

Comics, it is hoped, will always be for kids, as all art forms. Yet the strength of comics comes from an expectation of innocence that is always prone to being duped, and always archetypically present.

The world of the comics' author is unlike any other apparatus of production, for the conveying of this world, riddled with lies and direct access to the unconscious, can be unbridled by cooperation and negotiation. It is neither cinema of the poor, nor poor cinema, but form in itself, a form of poverty and labour that cannot help but to be true to poetics.

Extraction of comics for fine art contexts cannot be circumscribed to Pop art, for it is a question of display. Displaying comics is impossible, but in the same manner that all museums are, in a way, impossible endeavours. The museum tries to perform an act of magic, and we are all much too old for all that.



Consider the paranoia of the thought bubble. And the promiscuity of speech balloons. The grammar of comics has very little to do with these little gadgets. It is as if we considered all written language to be characterised by the threat of capitalisation and the overuse of the exclamation mark.

Comics aren't the future for there is no future, in the sense that each individual work of art has to redefine not only its own discipline but all possible relations between disciplines.

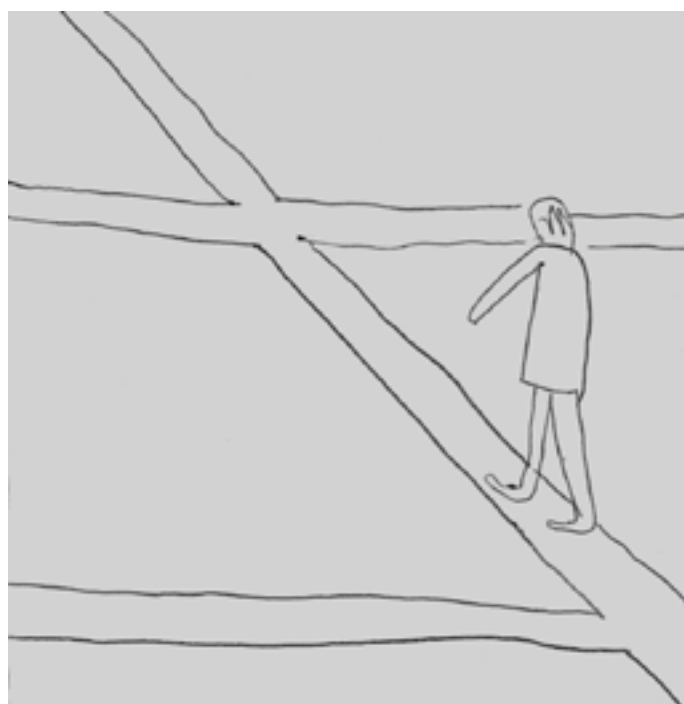
The grammar of comics needn't be seen as coarse, simplified discourse. It needn't be seen as corrupted language or promiscuous image. The grammar of comics is like any other apparatus of production – you always have to infuse it with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Comics are kids' stuff, very much like our inner language is still marked by the distance we encountered between things and names when we were little. Poetry starts when an idiot points to the sea and pronounces a verdict like 'it looks like olive oil'<sup>1</sup>. Comics start when we encounter a specific form of collaboration and negation between images and texts.

Comics are a form of critical reflection on the collaboration and negation that happens in the interstices of text and image, thought and world.

Autobiography and image production have always had a similitude. Harvey Pekar is similar to Augustine, Pekar is an Augustine without the evasion of crisis of meaning that comes through the theatricality of the subject. Joseph Kosuth was always a cartoonist, no matter how much philosophy he throws in your face. His work is primarily concerned with a juxtaposition of thought and world, text and image, definition and thing in itself. All this is the stuff of comics.

1 from Cesare Pavese, *O Ufficio de Viver*



Obscenity is easily reached in comics, for each panel is a little withdrawn curtain onto the world of the author. Obscenity means – what is beyond the scene. Comics are concerned with scenes. Making a scene, developing a scene, showing what is beyond and below the public persona of the author. In this last sense, comics are huge lies.

2 from Bataille

3 from Edgar Allan Poe, The black cat

Comics are a disease that corrupts the young, spreads spiritual pestilence, and is born of the marriage of text and image – a marriage that is as pernicious to the two forms of art involved as it is to the reader. Comics are unwholesome, for they happen in the mind, and they are based on a misleading kind of beauty – a beauty that disguises pure evil. Literature is evil<sup>2</sup>, art is evil, yet comics are hypocritical, layered, lying evil. Be not surprised if you encounter scandal where comics abound. Comics are the spirit of perversion<sup>3</sup>.

There are those who defend that in comics only that which is specific to comics should happen. That means that filmic, literary and artistic influences shouldn't burden the medium with pathologies of adaptation. Even though it seems apparently a good point, it seeks to circumvent the question of the inherent promiscuity of the medium.

Comics are promiscuous. They drink from the fountain of life (truth) as well as the fountain of art (lie). Comics absorb all that is visual and all that is textual, and produce something that is both and that is neither. What influences comics is the cosmos.

Love of comics is a form of lust, for comics do not love you back. This is why some comics bookshops still feel slightly creepy. Forty-year-old men can be found chasing phantasms of youth, quietly, guiltily browsing super beings in tight-fitting clothes. The shop next door sells porn.



God is everywhere in comics, for the comics author is God. The comics author is the puppeteer, the subject and the master of what he does. God is the substance, the origin and the stuff of comics.

A comic is art if it doesn't try to be art. This is true of all art and all comics. The best piece of advice you can give to a young artist is not to try to do art. This doesn't mean they should follow their heart and speak truthfully. Quite the contrary, it is an invitation to betrayal.

Hear this. I am not a comics manifesto, nor a justification for comics to exist, to be produced, and to be read. Here speaks the comedic crisis.

Comics are trash. Like all trash, they are the sole depositories of anything that has any power left in it.

- I do comics.
- So you spend most of your time sitting at a desk?

The whole western world is sitting at a desk, but the comics author is still humorous while being there, he is pathetic.

- I am a graphic novelist.
- Silence ensues. A nod, a moment of respect. Pathetic.

Graphic novels are comics with an aura. Because we can no longer have auratic art, because we recognise the slogan, we can say this specific saint is a scoundrel.

It is as if we had renamed movies Speaking, Moving Literature, as Daniel Clowes once wrote. Which we would have had, if the function of capital had demanded it. Graphic novels are the future. Behold the new bookshelf, with academic studies supporting it, and no misunderstandings in the passersby. That all art is misunderstanding seems to be forgotten.



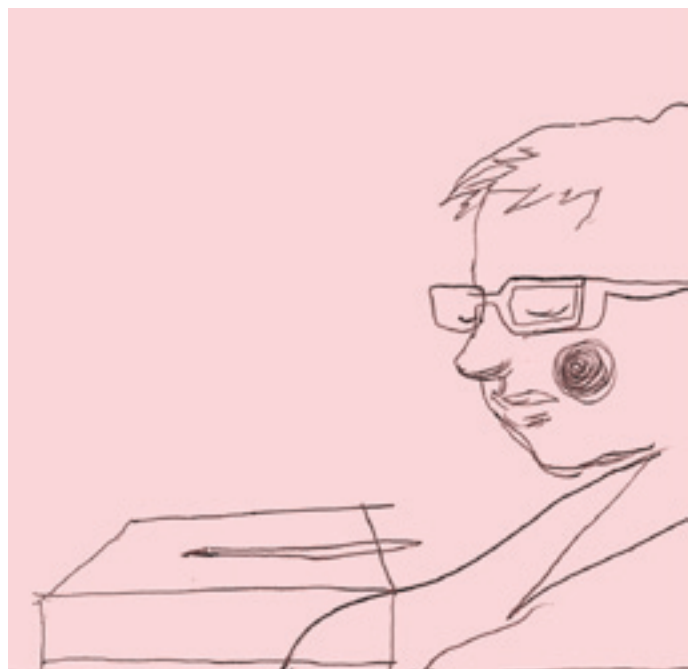
Beware of Ware, for he is the only author that has punctured the Goldsmiths library and made it to the shelf. He is alone there. There is absolutely no other comic book there, believe me. Beware, for they all say something. They all say that Ware is beyond comics, as if the rest was youthful, mindless crap. Beware.

Mind the gap between image and text. What happens there is beyond the visible and yet not wholly invisible. Once I saw psychologists studying the eye movement of comics readers with sophisticated, highly tuned technology. As if we all still believed in maps and studied Deleuze.

Perhaps comics are destined to perish, we just don't know. Maybe they are a clunky operation between drawing and time, to be swept away by another technology. There must have been firm believers in the manuscript, the magic lantern<sup>4</sup>, the stereoscope. There was a grammar attached to all these, a theory and a craft. They are still legible, though – in museums and private homes, somewhere. Perhaps the whole history of comics will constitute nothing more than a curiosity - something that happened between the industrial revolution and something else. What this something else is might have nothing to do with what we now call digital. We just don't know.

If it hadn't been done before, the story of Christ should have been an interesting comic to do. If Chester Brown and Dostoevsky hadn't spoiled the whole affair for the rest of us with the inconvenience of masterpieces.

When I was eight I once sat at a table with a stack of paper, ready to start an enormous autobiography. Then my aunts came in, and asked me what I was going to do. I answered – an illustrated autobiography. They laughed and laughed. I blushed and hid the paper back in the drawer. What I could have done still haunts me a bit. Maybe it is time to go back to that drawer, and see if the paper is still there.



## THE BURNING BUSH

### CHAPTER TWELVE

Consider the burning bush but forget the mystical apparatus around it. Through the burning bush a voice has its place in a fire that doesn't cause destruction, a fire that supports itself without trying to conquer and consume.

Consider a drawing by Adam Chodzko – invitation to describe a fire, for people with stutters.

Art is of course the burning bush and we are all baffled little Moses, trying to describe a fire to people who missed the show.

We show the press release, the Ten Commandments, or whatever pathetic scraps we managed to gather along the way. We stutter. We invent fiery language to do justice to the fire. It is madness, this language.

It was madness in the first place, though. For we saw a fire that did not work properly, it expended no energy, and came with a voice. Our voice cannot copy this other voice, for this other voice was not of this world.

So we stammer, and speak sideways, and say art when we mean fire, and fire when what we really wanted to say was art.

Consider the burning bush. You can either go on and on about it, or stammer. Anyway, it provokes a disease called interpretation, of which we all suffer. Moses tried to kill off this disease, to cut it by the root, with the Ten Commandments, but it was much too late for any of that.



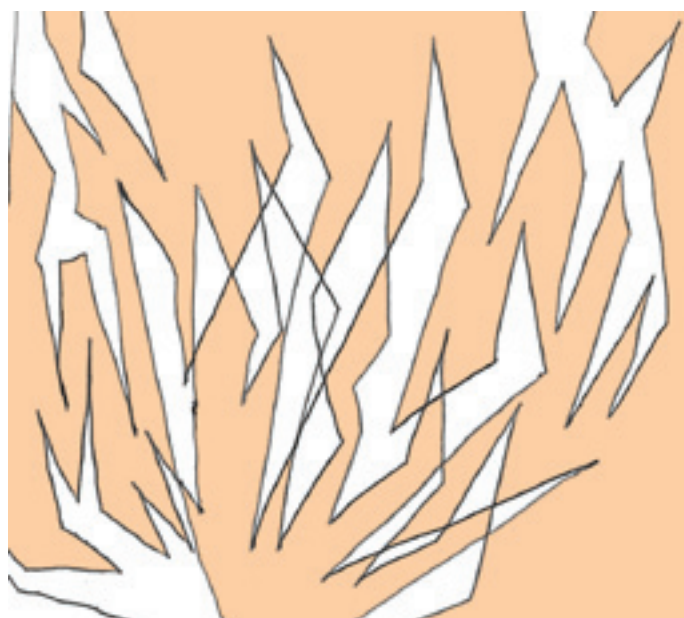
In Moses the figures of the artist, the spectator and the interpreter are gathered, yet meaning was already obscured. Moses was the medium of God, and the word medium is meant both as thing and as person.

Now we have split the work of art into three moments, and each of these three moments has a specific crisis. Production, fruition and critique all have crisis embedded in them, for in the presence of a fire we are left with nothing but stammering. The work of art is this three-legged stool – perfectly balanced yet not exactly built for strenuous use. It's not even an object of contemplation, but more exactly a test. A test so that God can watch us fail.

Moses fails many times in the bible yet we only remember the plagues and the parting sea. Moses returns to a people with nothing more than desert dust and stammers. Maybe he scribbled the Ten Commandments on his way back, pausing in the distance and not wanting to be ridiculed. They are worshipping things, let me give them something to hold on to. A press release.

The figure of the prophet is much maligned, and rightly so. For the prophet has to choose between incomprehension and lie. Usually, and unlike Philip Guston, the prophet chooses and wants to be right.

The artist shouldn't want to be right, Guston said. And indeed, a conquering spirit will get you somewhere, but won't help you when you want to get out of that somewhere. Prophet artists lack the basic skill to leave everything behind and follow art. Let us prefer the crisis artists, the stammering ones. Let us prefer the weak.

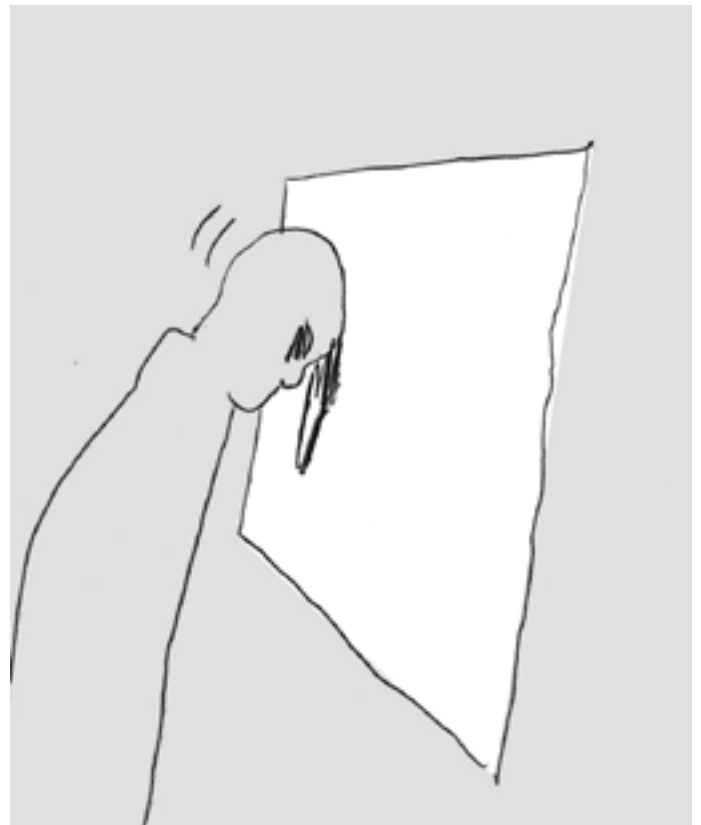


After the death of the sun nothing will have happened. Not even God will have happened. All else is pathetic hope, risible hope, the hope of the condemned, Sisyphean hope, sissy hope, weak hope. The alternatives to weak hope seem even worse, for they laugh in the face of weakness and pretend that all is fine in condemnation. Well all is not fine.

Meaningless is a song by the Magnetic Fields that I have listened to in a loop for ten years, for some obscure reason. The obscurity of the reason might have nothing to do with the soiled comfort you find in depression. Maybe it has to do with mortality, and how often we don't even remember that we have forgotten about it. One has to keep a song playing so everything else falls into place. Then, when you encounter a beautiful dead bird, you can actually see beyond the horror.

What if intrusive mice chew up your bed, and you call on God, and God is dead? Bonnie Prince Billy says that love comes to you, and this might be true. Not in spite of God being dead, but because there is almost no God left, so love can pour down from wherever it comes from.

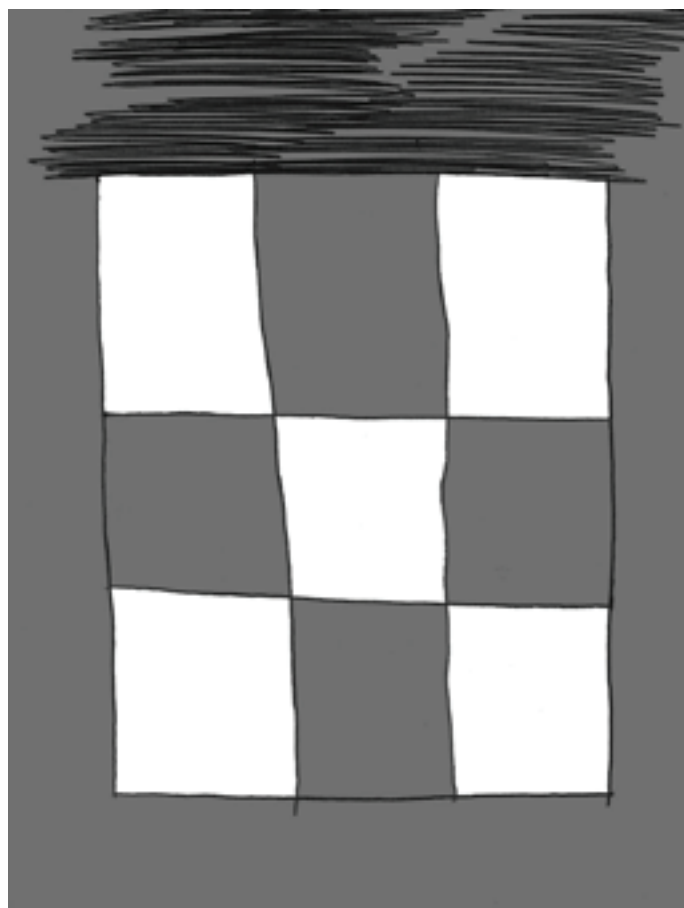
There is no difference in Portuguese between sky and heaven, there are no subtleties there. You go to the sky, my grandmother said, until the very last moment, in which, after a whole life of prayer, regular confessions, and rigorous mass attendance, she no longer knew. We just don't know, do we? – she said to me on her deathbed. It was the only moment, in my life, in which I felt God's presence. Because God, in her, had retreated from a position of certainty, it left space for something else. I understood physically what Simone Weil meant by atheism as purification. Now it's not a revelation I can talk about, for my gospel is risible. The revelation didn't strengthen my faith, it made room for it, and the room is still minuscule.



My grandmother didn't understand all that fuss about Picasso. She preferred more realistic things. With age, I tend to agree, even if my own version of realism would have disturbed her greatly. It was all that nasty Russian literature she was always warning myself against.

She understood very little about religion, my grandmother. Hers was the practice. I understood from her that faith was inscrutable but contagious – it was not a matter of fact but of something else. She would have understood Wittgenstein's assertion that when your own house is on fire it is more reasonable to pray than to sweep the floor. Faith is a practical affair. You have specific saints to call on, even for when you can't find your glasses. You can even recommend it to a child, with a large pinch of salt. My grandmother understood very little about the Old Testament, as it all looked brutal to her. Even the psalms felt foreign, even the eroticism of the Song of Solomon. It is more reasonable to pray if your own house is on fire and you have no means to put it out. It is a language game like all other articulations of speech, even if it is nothing else than delayed hesitation, stammering, pause in the face of fire. Let us go, my grandmother said before she died. I guess she did not want to make that leap alone. Let us go. Maybe there was a lesson there, that we need communality in death.

How can nihilistic intellectual maturity be reconciled with faith? It seems that nihilism is already in tune with faith. Yet we have to imagine another nihilism and another faith – a nihilism and a faith from the inside. Nihilism isn't the source of all evils, nor is faith a sturdy defence against nothingness. They are both weak voices and share a vertical, calm approach to the advent of nothing. They both can happen in place of hope and in the place of hope.



Weak hope can stare at extinction as it can stare at anything else. The monochrome, in this circumstance, is there in place of the sacred image. The monochrome predicts the extinction of all images, their amalgamation and disposable nature. In this sense, Tristram Shandy's black page represents not only the advent of modernity but its ending – it reveals the modern project for what it is, a concern with the end of things.

The modern project is inherently eschatological, for it dwells in the end of time and the limits brought about by the notion of the end of time. The modern project is in constant revision for the end of time is always being delayed, hence the obsession with constant renaming and constant self-definition. In the same manner, Christian times are always apocalyptic, and can be best described as waiting time. Waiting for God, glory, and disaster. Disaster is what keeps the world afloat in endless self-becoming. Glory is what you see if you really open your eyes. Waiting for God is our condition, and is composed of millions of tiny sacrifices.

Sacrifice is one of the secrets of capital. Capital is a spiritual endeavour, an abstracted form of sacrifice. We sacrifice our time, our patience, our hopes and ambitions, for the sake of capital and for the sake of our children. Capital is our fatherland. We accept its twisted logic and its ecosystem. We sacrifice whatever was meant by the human.

Sacrifice is more foreign to us than any Star Trek religion, because we are unwittingly immersed in it. Maybe what God really meant with the Burning Bush was to point beyond sacrifice, towards a relationship without energy expenditure or profit.

Sacrifice is at the very origin of our current contempt for religion. Sacrifice is disgusting, distasteful, like when British expats build a house in a cheap country and watch in horror when a chicken is slain on top of the first stone. Sacrifice is horror because we have nothing but sacrifice all around us, through capitalism, meat and death, and we refuse to acknowledge its brutal logic of substitution.

The privatisation of sacrifice is the story of the bible. Containment, introversion, substitution of substitution – this is perhaps a way to make a narrative out of all our sacred books. The first crime occurs instead of sacrifice, by a farmer who does not know how to channel violence and envy. Envy is perhaps the most obscure, obstructed thing in the universe (we always attribute it to others, as if there was a deep black spot at the heart of our souls). The farmer who slaughters his own brother is Cain, and Cain announces at once the need for sacrifice and the need to transcend sacrifice.

The martyr is perhaps the most problematic invention in the history of religion, for his status is forever linked to trauma's indestructible knot. If the martyr kills as well as dies, he eludes classification and remains unknowable.

Suicide bombers and other mass murderers play on our deep-rooted respect for what is erroneously called the ultimate sacrifice. This is why it is so difficult to talk about Bas Jan Ader. Behind the accident there lies a massive monster lurking, which we have called the martyr's cloak. Suicide bombers, Dom Sebastião, Ader – we pause before them in respect, as if they held some kind of sacred fire.

And yet the fire of art is elsewhere. Diogenes' lamp is perhaps a good image to talk about this fire. It is lit in broad daylight, and is looking for an honest man. Diogenes is a beggar, a failed Socrates, a good for nothing bum. He haunts the marketplace, where he joins the dogs in looking for scraps. And yet he can point elsewhere, to this fire that looks for honesty. What is this honesty but the willingness to become attentive?

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