

Something Other Than Lifedeath

Catalyst: S.D. Chrostowska



Edited by David Cecchetto
Catalyst Book Series

Something Other
Than Lifedeath

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Gerhard Richter
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Catalyst

The twenty-first century is a time of prodigious creative and intellectual experimentation, with many thinkers, artists, and makers engaging in a range of practices that are foundationally speculative yet nevertheless transformative. The Catalyst book series aims to represent this space of possibility by coupling theorists and artists in ways that galvanize logics, spaces, politics, and practices that are not yet mapped ... and perhaps never can be.

Catalysis instigates processual differentiations over a space of exchange; it is eventful, unpredictable, and generative. To chart a catalyst is to bring attention to the critical and creative processes that reveal hidden perspectives upon the event of their becoming. Thus, contributors to the Catalyst books think *alongside* the catalyst, edging and forging implications, connections, atmospheres and weirdnesses. The essays do not review or critique the catalyst's work but rather sound points of contact in pursuit of resonances, enacting gestures of performative solidarity through intellectual and creative engagement.

Catalyst books build speculative communities, inviting a wide range of perspectives into conversations about shared artistic, political, and intellectual values while privileging the unique, distinct and personal insights that characterize any single voice of engagement. Each volume in the series provides an in-depth look at an active thinker or artist—seeking after the full relevance of their work. The series focuses in particular on voices that have not already been widely featured but who have unique and relevant perspectives to share on questions of art, theory and culture.

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Catalyst: S. D. Chrostowska

S.D. Chrostowska teaches humanities and social & political thought at York University in Toronto. She is the author of *Matches: A Light Book* (punctum, 2015), *Permission* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2013), and *Literature on Trial* (University of Toronto Press, 2012), as well as coeditor of *Political Uses of Utopia: New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives* (Columbia University Press, 2017). Her essays/fiction have appeared in *BOMB*, *The Believer*, *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, *Europe*, and *The Hedgehog Review*. She has also contributed to *diacritics*, *New German Critique*, *Public Culture*, *New Literary History*, *SubStance*, *Telos*, *boundary 2*, among others, with new articles forthcoming in *Common Knowledge* and *Constellations*. A French translation of *Matches*, prefaced by Alexander Kluge, will be published by Belles Lettres/Klincksieck (Critique de la politique).

Introduction

David Cecchetto

It is with dreams as with fragments of meteors fallen to Earth. One thinks, quite wrongly, that just because they have landed they are up for grabs and can be fashioned at will.

— S. D. Chrostowska¹

First a joke of sorts, though not the one I discuss below:

There is a stonemason who possesses an uncanny ability: he can, prior to laying a single stone, intuit precisely and with total certainty how many bricks will be used in the task at hand. Neither design changes, nor breakage, nor the obscurities of working in Canada (where metric and imperial measurement systems comingle) have ever interfered with this.

As the stonemason is nearing completion of his last construction before retirement, his daughter entreats him to do just one more: she is getting married, she announces, and would love for him to build the home in which she and her fiancé will begin their life together. The man is concerned—he feels the exhaustion of a life of hard labour—but acquiesces, and begins the job at once.

After many hard hours working on the home, the man stands atop his ladder and lays the final

brick ... only to realize that he has miscalculated, and has one brick extra. His despair is total. Not only does this catalyze a crisis pertaining to his own mortality, but it equally fills him with the guilt of a father who has disappointed his progeny. This latter is devastating for him, as it stands in for all of the other ways that he has let her down without her ever knowing; indeed, these are the disappointments that she carries in and as herself rather than as adscititious elements of knowledge, since she in fact is the product of such failings as much as any successes. Thus, beset with frustration and anger and loss and a future anterior resignation, the stonemason—still standing atop the ladder—lets out an agonizing scream and hurls the extra brick skywards with all of his might, railing at once against the past, future, and present. The slab hurtles upwards with great speed, and is lost to visibility as it pierces the clouds. The stonemason waits and waits for it to fall back down, but it never does. Confused by this unnatural turn of events (but not necessarily more so than he was by his equally unprecedented initial miscalculation) he descends the ladder and, with total conviction, pronounces the matrimonial home complete.

There is a joke—and it is not the one above—that has held my attention for the past twenty- some years (see Appendix A). I have told it widely at social gatherings large and small; I've also shared it reverently in moments of intimacy, its secrets bequeathing a place to me and my interlocutor that

will have already been there. These tellings, after all, are the twinned fate of all good jokes: to carry a room in the first instance, and to craft one in the second.

Additionally though, this particular joke has procured other expressions from me: I've written about it as a theory of media, inserted it (by innocuous allusion sometimes, but usually with flagrant literality) into artworks and musical compositions, sent it to sea in a bottle, inscribed it on the undersides of school-desks, mashed it up with other texts in order to mine its secrets, and even—more often than I can recall—had it visit me in and as the stuff of my dreams. Through all this, the joke has grown to function for me as something of a koan, though in lieu of enlightening me through the provocation of doubt it instead folds the unceasing meaninglessness of my doubting into its enlivening situation.

In all my machinations with it—in all the aesthetic, drunken, existential, and oneiric conflagrations through which this joke and I have been pleached to one another—I have always supposed it to be a joke. I am not wrong in this supposition, though I make it despite it manifestly also being the case that something of the joke's jokiness comes about from it being something else as well. Certainly, every joke is something beside itself—what is a punch line if not a sudden reconfiguration of contingent relations? And are not these relations precisely outside of the joke proper, even as they are its purported content?—but the outside in the particular bowels of this joke is never anything general like an “outside.” The “something else” that it might be never, for me, quite puzzles things properly.

But maybe it is the opposite, also? Maybe it is the case that most jokes deal in the absurdity of such particularities, in the psychodelia of adjacencies, and my joke works in

the opposite way. The fact that “having something to say is, first of all, having someone to speak to” is as much an observation of the general nonsense of any particular and specific saying—any having said—as it is an assertion of the importance of a special interlocutor.² Put two folks together and madness ensues, with speech simply acting (sometimes in advance) as a recording medium (and as an alibi). Moreover, there is always someone to speak to, and thus something to say, and thus nothing in particular at the heart of the particular something that is said from one to another. Generally speaking, that is.

What makes this joke—*my* joke—different is, in part, that it is reconfigurable, with every line capable of acting in the place (temporally) of the punch line precisely because none truly deliver a punch. (We find something similar in the grammar of the triadic poem “every waking moment/in my peripheral vision/I see my nose” which, however its lines are ordered, speaks the same situation.) So, maybe, the joke that has held me holds me because it doesn’t so much make an argument—which is always something of an historical form, in the sense that the ordering is as important as that which is ordered—as presents a field. Or both, because it makes an argument in precisely this way; which is why it does and doesn’t work as a koan.

To be clear, there is nothing funny about much of S. D. Chrostowska’s work. She is by no means a humourist, nor does she (to my knowledge) aspire to be. Delight, however—that processual affect through which, in part, humour humours—is often proximate to her work, and charts a prime vector of its catalytic potential: to my ears,

Chrostowska profiles as much as any author I know the strange terrains that connect generalities and particularities, and does so in a way that somehow sustains and even amplifies the qualitative differences between the two (even while, paradoxically, demonstrating and performing their points of enfoldment). In this precise sense—and only in this sense—her work is a joke: because Chrostowska crafts convictions—“nontranscendent, immanent criteri[a]”³—more than certainties, every new line of thought is a departure that is also “a new way of arriving where one already is.”⁴ That is, her work justifies the criteria that justify it and is in this sense *firstly* creative,⁵ even and especially when it appears most sober. What better way to characterize a joke well joked? The magic—of a joke, of an argument, of a rabbit pulled from a hat, of a poem, of a painting, of a piece of music, or of a clear night sky—is always in the setup, but Chrostowska teaches us that this setup is itself also in the trick. From reading her work I have learned, some two decades after my initial coupling with my koan-joke, that the coupling is part of itself.

One can thus understand something of Chrostowska’s oeuvre—as a whole—by attending in particular to the way that she grapples with the relationship between criteria and creativity, arriving convincingly at a position that disassociates conviction from certainty precisely so as to demonstrate the necessity of the former in any creative act (be it artistic, conceptual, or otherwise). Conviction, in short, “casts its lot with (inwardly) transformative politics ... *while* standing at the antipodes of science’s pursuit of truth in general laws.”⁶

This understanding bears on Chrostowska’s oeuvre at a number of levels. There is, firstly, a formal conviction that mobilizes her writing—or at least one’s reading of it—in

Permission and *Matches*; the former an epistolary novel and the latter a book of aphorisms, ephemera, and fragments. In both cases, a certain conviction about how the books will formally proceed pushes the contingent particularities further to the fore in a way that reflects back on the initial criteria (not unlike the setup of a truly good knock-knock joke). It is in this tenor, for example, that I hear the decision to withhold the addressee of *Permission* from the reader: the conviction of the process crafts a particularity that subtends and even in some senses obsolesces the certainty of identity, a decentering that reconfigures the epistolary form in the process. Indeed, knowing that *Permission* was written “in an illegitimate literary dimension outside the frame of book authorship”⁷—i.e. that “it was principally a literary effort subordinated to communication”⁸—only demonstrates this further, suggesting an affordance for inward transformation in conviction itself. Similarly, the formal conviction of *Matches* unfolds an unusually diverse—by any standard—degree of variation in the aphoristic form that reinterprets just what the criteria of that form *are* as the book unfolds ... so much so that it isn’t even really correct to call it a book of aphorisms, except insofar as it manifestly is that. To say it is a book of aphorisms composed of short and sometimes fragmentary pieces seems redundant, but the redundancy is necessary for accuracy.

Likewise, what is it to write art criticism of the type that Chrostowska engages if not to amplify the richness of a work precisely by throwing one’s lot in with it? Thus, when she opens her reading of Gabriel Garcin’s photograph *The Future is Not What it Used to Be* by requesting that the reader not yet look at the image under consideration, the implication is that to do so—as Chrostowska has obviously

done—will be to have been changed by the act. Postponing that intervention thus intensifies the structural integrity of the shared territory (of viewer and image) that underwrites it, an integrity that is precisely the reflexive world- and criteria-creating force of aesthetics—a force that acts before and after *in and as the present*, and therefore never in the certainty of a simple presence. And indeed, if Chrostowska’s most recognizably scholarly contributions interrogate utopia (including its politics, and its use for politics), they do so to my ears in precisely this mode: “*a utopian politics*,” she writes, “cannot be done without imagination,” and the product of this imagination is temporary precisely “by virtue of its constitution in the present (rather than in a fantasized future state).”⁹

Experimental literature needs experimental publishing—publishing that, like it, can afford to fail completely. In this it differs from experimental science, which recognizes the principle as self-evident without presenting an actual liability to scientific publishing.

— S. D. Chrostowska¹⁰

Something Other Than Lifedeath is catalyzed, more than anything else, by the textures of Chrostowska’s convictions, and the title itself reflects this in various registers. On its face, it indicates an emphasis on qualia that is vital to this book, as well as to the Catalyst series as a whole. Chrostowska is a consummate catalyst because her work demands from readers the transitional and contingent spaces it commands

for itself. So much of Chrostowska's work works, to my mind, in two complementary directions: the vitality of its jests, plays, gambits, and feints continuously aggregate in ways that seem always on the edge of breaking differently, while these aggregations themselves are of such solidity that they can't but be felt as having always been fated to be exactly what they are. The complementarity of these forces—the thing that in their being together as one makes it impossible that they are the same—is the work proper of Chrostowska's oeuvre, and what makes it irreducible, unabstractable, unrepeatable, and—yes—catalytic. That is, Chrostowska's work doesn't simply stage another freedom/fate conundrum, but also constitutes the conundrum itself in and as it is enacted in a process that (like every enaction) is productive of excesses that can never themselves quite be observed; it is a process that is productive of things other than lifedeath.

Thus, if “something other than” describes a trajectory of Chrostowska's work, the “lifedeath” component of the title is of equal importance. That is, if Chrostowska is sensitive to qualia, these circulate around an abiding interest in themes of survival, history, inheritance, futures, and (most prominently) nostalgia; each of these latter exert their own particular gravitational forces, often conceptualized around embodied figures and/or figures of embodiment. These themes all, in the hands of lesser thinkers, risk temporalizing that which falls under their purview in a manner that would suggest a line of temporal continuity between the past and future, and ultimately between life and death. For Chrostowska, though, it is precisely the irretrievability of the past—experienced as such—that is a “precondition for insight” whereby we might “re-sensitize ourselves to the

vertical dimension of past phenomena” so as to cultivate “meaning without language, ... interiority without self.”¹¹ The point is, the title of the collection could not have been “something other than” just anything even if it is in the nature of qualia that they are in some senses just that, because this would miss the (philosophically subtractive) force of Chrostowska’s work in which the “other than” to a life-death continuum is not a supplementary “outside” but rather an internal opening.

Additionally, the judgment of history—the production of contingent and immanent criteria—is never far from Chrostowska’s work. As she writes:

The tension arising between judgment and opposition to it is constitutive of creative motion, which brings into being new criteria. (The establishment of these new standards distinguishes what is [re-]made, *sensu strictissimo*, from what is, or has been, created, with re-creation as a contradiction in terms.)¹²

Reading her work emphasizes the ways that part of the historicity of creativity—part of the historical changes in its concepts, practices, and materialities—comes about by virtue of its being always entangled in something that at once exceeds and conditions it. In the course of preparing this collection I have more than once encountered one of Chrostowska’s works the second time I encountered it. Genuinely. Chrostowska’s thinking tends to procure that sort of observation, which is to say it catalyzes the types of experiences that—if there is still a world to speak of—make the world the strange, multi-causal, obscurity that it is.¹³

The first two chapters of this book each, in very different ways, meditate on precisely such worldly incoherence by limning mediating forces that are at once constitutive and in excess of that which they connect. Gerhard Richter works from “a syntactical and conceptual relationship between the problem of inheritance and the figure of the worm” that he finds in *Matches*, which occasions his consideration of the “impossible possibility of inheritance itself” through the figure of the worm. The Derridean term “survivance”—to which the title of this collection directly refers—plays a key role for Richter in this.¹⁴ Writhing patiently through his argument, Richter unearths the implications of this inheritance-worm, which is to say the implications of a figure that would at once devour our last remains and simultaneously, in the totality of this very act, constitute us as our own inheritance. As a result, the inheritance-worm troubles the very constitution of the “us” that it implicates: the worm “is *there* . . . , beyond my life, yet already preparing its work within that life, simultaneously a figure of excess, decay, and futureless futurity.” Moreover, it demands that one “affirm life precisely by affirming the looming shadow of its radical finitude and the ghostly realm of a future inheritance from which it cannot be separated” in a process that enlists “oneself among the other or the others who will dispose of one’s inherited remains.”

In Chapter Two—“Mirrors”—Anita Chari assembles a series of decidedly poetic reflections around the figure of the mirror; or rather, mirrors in the plural, as the chapter side-steps the mirror’s oft-remarked tendency to bi-directional infinite regress in favor of highlighting reflection’s affordances as a technology of refraction. To this end, the chapter engages several artworks, but does

so not so much by reading them *per se* as by intervening in (and also, perhaps, diffracting) their trajectories. In this sense, “mirrors” names less a technology of reflection and more the multiple and multivariant relational forces of mediation; it names something of a “social metabolism,” to use Chari’s phrase. As is a recurrent theme in Chrostowska’s work, “Mirrors” specifically extrapolates a distinctly material and embodied rendering of this quintessentially visual technology: the efficacy of a mirror that would be the “precondition for love and revolution,” for example, is undermined not by that which is reflected but rather by a break in the mirror itself. In this sense, Chari charts—in a manner that echoes Chrostowska’s tendency to write of and from a position that is not isomorphic with itself, and is in that sense embodied—alienation as “not just a cognitive phenomenon, or an economic process [but also one that] ... saturates bodily experience.”

If Chapters One and Two each feel out the textures and timings that mediate relations—including the inters of every intra, and vice versa—Chapters Three and Four offer complementary approaches that consider the ways that sensibility is constituted and sustained. In Chapter Three—“The Aging Sisyphus”—Patrick Seniuk contrasts Chrostowska’s reading of Gabriel Garcin’s image *The Future is Not What It Used to Be* with a phenomenological one built from the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. For Seniuk, the (tacit) operative concept at work in the Garcin image lies in an implied erasure in the titular “not”: the future both is and isn’t—i.e. it is $\pi\alpha\tau$ —what it used to be, and this ambiguity is precisely the “flavour of mortality.” That is, Seniuk reads Garcin’s image as indicative of the phenomenal ambiguity that comes with being embodied subjects, which is to say of

“the fact that we can no more give up on life (as sense-laden) than we can make it wholly our own (thrownness).”

Ambiguity also features prominently in Chapter Four—“Efforts of Ambiguity”—in which Ted Hiebert takes it up in its disorienting profile; a disorientation that is signaled by the “misspelling” in the chapter’s title. In a series of short meditations, Hiebert spins through an array of orienting disorientations/disorienting orientations to take up positions of “poetic leverage” that constitute “an effort of ambiguity designed to circumnavigate the matter of facts in favour of the manners of mattering.” As Hiebert seductively suggests, perhaps “disorientation occurs at a point where sense falls down” such that “one does not fight facts with alternate facts, but by alternating facts such that emergent veracities are ... bound to ... the processes of circling, reversibility and transformation that keep them in motion.” The relation to Chrostowska’s work of this effort is perhaps not so much catalytic—in the strict sense—as combinatoric, with Hiebert working Chrostowska’s work through a machinery of (dis)orientation such that his thinking too is worked over. In the authorially entangled thoughts that emerge from this, something *not* making sense might ultimately be indicative of an operative sense-making criterion.

Finally, the fifth and sixth chapters of this collection are each catalyzed by Chrostowska’s work at a more formal level. In Chapter Five—“Like a Moulting Snake: The Residue Oeuvre as Third Circuit”—Anneleen Masschelein nominates the category “residue oeuvre” to describe the (relatively few) “literary, fictional, [and hybrid] works within a scholarly oeuvre that explore a genre or medium.” Specifically, Masschelein takes up Chrostowska’s *Permission* in this context, demonstrating a bivalent influence between

the epistolary novel's philosophical reflections on creativity and similar questions that arise in Chrostowska's scholarly work. Moreover—and more to the point—Masschelein demonstrates how this shared content crafts a kind of “third circuit” in “an intellectual culture—academic and literary alike—that has all but replaced judgment and critique with quantitative measurements,” namely one that “constitutes a form of resistance ... by withdrawing from [informal] judgment.”

Finally, Chapter Six completes the volume with “Un-Preemptively Yours,” a short epistolary entry written by Louis Bury. Not only does this chapter take up (in a different fashion) the epistolary form that Chrostowska mobilizes in *Permission*, it also echoes something of Chrostowska's tendency (especially in her fiction and criticism, but also elsewhere) to veer towards something like a personal-impersonal. Indeed, that tenor doesn't just characterize Bury's style, but also the content of his entry which, ultimately, engages the question of how to “write about the experience of non-experience, the event of the non-event, the reality of fantasy.”

In conclusion, another joke (though not the one I discuss in the body of this Introduction):

Shortly after an intercontinental flight is underway, a man seated near the wing opens his satchel and coaxes a goose out of it, stroking it in his lap. The smell of the honking bird irritates the man's neighboring passengers, who quickly call a flight

attendant in complaint. The attendant informs the man that he is not permitted to have the bird on the plane, to which the man replies (in a belligerent tone):

“Well, it’s too late to change that, isn’t it? I mean, what are you going do about it now, turn the plane around?”

Flustered, the flight attendant agrees that they will not turn the plane around, but requests that the man please do his best to keep the fowl quiet and contained.

A few minutes later there is a commotion in the cabin, this time resulting from the goose flying and fluttering about the plane. Taking stock of the situation and acting with remarkable commitment, the flight attendant grabs the goose by the neck, carries it back to the man, plunks it in his lap, and lets him know that he must, at the very least, keep it contained. Again, the man replies obnoxiously, mocking the flight attendant and complaining passengers and proclaiming that he (and, presumably, the goose too) will do what he wants and there is nothing anyone can do about it.

Having reached cruising altitude, the plane erupts into absolute pandemonium. Not only is the goose once again wildly traversing the cabin, and not only is it defecating while doing so, but the man responsible for its presence on the plane has reclined his seat, removed his shoes and socks, and lit a pungent cigar (upon which he puffs with

no small amount of smug satisfaction). The flight attendant reaches a breaking point and—with remarkable alacrity and no small amount of rage—collars the goose, yanks the cigar from the man's mouth, bursts open the emergency cabin door, and throws both out of the plane before slamming the door shut again.

Now, the man brought the goose with him in the first place because he loves it deeply and feels a companionship with it that otherwise eludes him; he could not bear to be parted from it on a journey as long as the one he is undertaking. The cigar was also a particularly fine one, and he had long been saving it as a means of marking this particular trip. In short, he is a hostile man, but that isn't all that he is. Having now seen his beloved goose and his precious cigar tossed into presumed oblivion, he is distraught and shaken and immediately takes on the empty calmness of the truly heartbroken. Thus afflicted, with silent tears pooling, he presses his face to his window and casts his eyes outside. He isn't really looking, though, as that would imply at least some small hope of seeing something.

And then, wonder of wonders, he spies the unthinkable: the goose—his goose—is not only alive outside of the window, but is perched calmly on the wing of the plane, tagging along for the ride. The goose gazes back at the man understandingly and confidently with a gaze that assures him that everything is okay. And even more, would you believe what it held in its beak? That's right: the brick.

Notes

- 1 S. D. Chrostowska, *Matches: A Light Book* (New York: Punctum Books, 2015), 436.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 465.
- 3 S. D. Chrostowska, "Criterion Creation: A Metaepistemological Problem in Perspective," *Parrhesia* 20 (2014), 89.
- 4 S. D. Chrostowska, *Matches*, 83.
- 5 S. D. Chrostowska, "Criterion Creation," 90.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 96.
- 7 Edwin Turner, "I Wasn't Writing a Novel (interview with S. D. Chrostowska)," *3:AM Magazine* (December 2013), accessed April 2018. <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/i-wasnt-writing-a-novel/>
- 8 *Ibid.*"
- 9 S. D. Chrostowska, "Utopia, Alibi," in *Political Uses of Utopia: New Marxist, Anarchist, and Radical Democratic Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 291.
- 10 S. D. Chrostowska, *Matches*, 503.
- 11 S. D. Chrostowska, "Consumed by Nostalgia?," *SubStance* 122, 39.2 (2010), 64-65.
- 12 S. D. Chrostowska, "Criterion Creation," 95.
- 13 Indeed, I was unsurprised when a friend responded to my conversational description of one of her short fictional pieces by saying "I think I had a dream about that, once."
- 14 As Richter cites (this volume), Derrida coins "survivance" to indicate "something other than life death." Although Derrida retains a space between "life" and "death" in his formulation, I have omitted it in this book's title both to mark a departure from a strict Derridean reference (since Derrida is not a particularly prominent figure in it, nor in Chrostowska's work), and also to highlight the line of continuity that is crafted by the two terms' deep entanglement (and thus to suggest other paths).

Gerhard Richter

Toward the end of her luminous constellation of philosophical aphorisms, political fragments, and literary thought-images, *Matches: A Light Book*, S. D. Chrostowska opens a particularly surprising can of worms—by forging a syntactical and conceptual relationship between the problem of inheritance and the figure of the worm. As self-conscious heir to a tradition of aphoristic writing that extends from the Friedrich Schlegel of the *Athenaeum* fragments to Nietzsche's *Human, All too Human*, from Walter Benjamin's *One-Way Street* and Ernst Bloch's *Traces* to Theodor W. Adorno's *Minima Moralia* and Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*, this text invites us to confront the legacy of inheritance through the image of a worm. In her thought-image "Default Inheritance," we read: "As below the rock freshly pried from soil, so beneath the death mask of the last man worms will be hard at work. Could we stoop to hate the worm for one day inheriting the earth from us? Not if we also cheered it on to outlast us." And, on the same page, in "Disputed Inheritance": "The worm belongs to the earth alive. We, only dead."¹ What is the nature of the unexpected relationship being postulated here? It would be tempting to inscribe this question in the larger theoretical problem of the category of inheritance by tracing the conceptual significance of worms of all kinds across intellectual and literary history, perhaps from Hume's silkworms via the invocation of man in the eyes of God as "der arme Wurm" ("the poor worm")

in Georg Büchner's drama *Woyzeck* and Nietzsche's gnawing worm (*Nage-Wurm*) in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* all the way to Jacques Derrida's silkworm in his book with H el ene Cixous, *Veils*.² A literary and philosophical "wormology" certainly remains to be written. Without opening that additional can of worms, let us here only reflect on what Chrostowska's particular image of the worm gives us to think with regard to the impossible possibility of inheritance itself. Let us, like the good bookworms that we are, gnaw on it for a while.

At first sight, there is reason to fear, even abhor, the worm because it is poised to eat its way through our bodily remains, already silently at work under our death mask, as the text suggests, preparing to incorporate what remains of us. This fear of being eaten by the worm following inhumation—and the attendant fear of being buried alive and eaten—causes some to prefer the total and immediate annihilation that comes with cremation, as Derrida remarks in his reflections on the philosophical, psychological, and political differences between a body's inhumation and its cremation.³ Yet the act of incorporation by the worm of our earthly remains also evokes a special kind of inheriting—the worm inherits the earth neither from Adam, the first man, nor from some Nietzschean * bermensch*, but rather from an unnamed "last man," the embodiment of the end of man as such. What if the worm were not merely a threatening agent devouring our decomposing bodies but precisely the inheritor of the earth (and, perhaps, our world) that we must leave behind us? The worm would emerge not merely as an object of fear and loathing but also as one of transformed survival, of living on in the mode of a legacy and inheritance. In this sense we could "cheer it on to outlast us," recognizing the unlikely heir of a lived life, a *Dasein* that will have

come to pass and that passes something on, inscribed in a chain of change, of perpetual becoming and demise, that itself cannot change in its very structure of becoming and demise—an unending pattern. If, therefore, we belong to the earth only “dead,” as “Disputed Inheritance” reminds us, we affirm, through the life of the worm, the notion that the worm belongs to the earth alive, that is, it dwells, and finds its lifeworld, in the very domain that for us—and always *after* us—appears reserved only for death and decay. We do not simply pass on this or that inheritance to a worm, bestowing upon it a legacy whose content and future use we wish to predetermine and over which we seek to have a certain jurisdiction, as if by testament; rather, we ourselves *are* the inheritance.

One might think of the work performed by the inheritance-worm in terms of, among other things, the concept of *survivance* that Derrida develops apropos of his surprising conjunction of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* and a small archive of Heideggerean texts—especially *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*—in his final seminar, *The Beast and the Sovereign*. Survivance there is marked by a certain finitude, an “alliance of the dead and the living.”⁴ For Derrida, the term survivance is attractive because it marks a “middle voice” that avoids both the “active voice of the active infinitive ‘to survive’” and the “substantializing substantive *survival*.”⁵ Survivance “is something other than life death,” which is to say that it marks “a groundless ground from which are detached, identified, and opposed what we think we can identify under the name of death or dying (*Tod, Sterben*), like death properly so-called as opposed to some life properly so-called.” As he continues: “It [*Ça*] begins with survival. And that is where

some other has me at its disposal; that is where any self is defenseless. That is what the self is, that is what I am, what the *I* is, whether I am there or not.” As a result, the “other, the others, that is the very thing that survives me, that is called to survive me and that I call the other inasmuch as it is called, in advance, to survive me, structurally my survivor. Not my survivor, but the survivor of me, the *there* beyond my life.”⁶ There can be no survivance that is not marked by the other, conditioned by the other and its otherness, the other whose life, no matter how strange or foreign to me, is intertwined with mine. One might say that, in the act of inheritance, I am at the disposal of the other; my life, without guard, gives itself over to the other to live on. Is not the worm also a figure of that unfathomable otherness that conditions my survivance? Is it not precisely the thing that survives me—whatever that “me” might be—whether I am there or not, whether I am alive or not, whether my body, for the time being, still is counted among the living or not? When the worm inherits me by devouring me, does it not also act as an agent of survivance, even if it can never be my survivor in a narrow, conventional, or anticipated sense? The worm is *there*, one might say, beyond my life, yet already preparing its work within that life, simultaneously a figure of excess, decay, and futureless futurity.

The implications of thinking the inheritance-worm as an agent and figure of survivance are manifold. If, for instance, one comes to view the worm not simply as an abhorrent devouring threat but as one’s secret heir that is to be “cheered on,” even in demise, then the decay in whose very soil the worm is ensconced requires thoughtful preparation. How one thinks about the history of one’s life and, by extension, whatever futurity that life may still possess, is predicated

upon an engagement with the time that has come to pass in relation to the life that now reflects on that time. At stake is not so much a thinking that is in search of lost time, as Proust might have it, or one that would help us to imagine, also with Proust, a time regained, but rather the engagement with an otherness that is –tacitly, as a mute potentiality—already part of what one considers the self, or what has always already been waiting within us to be confronted. Thus, when one looks back, in an autobiographical mode, on one’s life, that is, when one reflects on how one becomes who one is, as Nietzsche would have it, one considers one’s *Herkunft*. The German noun *die Herkunft* derives from the verb *herkommen*, to come from, or, more precisely, to come here from. Despite its apparent simplicity, *Herkunft* is not easily translated into English by any single noun, for its semantic reach is capacious and dependent on context. *Herkunft* can mean origin or point of origin, provenance, background, ancestry, extraction, parentage, birth, pedigree, nativity, root, source, stock, tracing, derivation, descent, or beginnings, among other designations. *Herkunft* itself thus describes an origin that is multiple, a state of affairs or experience that demands scrutiny and reflection.

In his 2014 autobiographical text *Herkunft*, the German writer and dramatist Botho Strauß recalls elements of his growing-up years in the 1940s and 1950s, reviving a time long gone that he culls from a life-long archive of experience and reflection in which these elements had lain dormant. The book seems to ask whether we are able to think *Herkunft* today in its inexhaustible and infinitely demanding senses. While the narrator’s remembrances circle, in tender, non-sentimental, pellucid prose, ever more tightly around the figure of his long-deceased father, they are suffused with

more general reflections on the act of autobiographical recollection and the charged question of *Herkunft* that the act inevitably yet elusively imposes on an examined life. As the author avers in a polyvalent statement elsewhere, “I am a subject of transmission [or heritage, tradition], and I cannot exist outside of it [*Ich bin ein Subjekt der Überlieferung, und außerhalb ihrer kann ich nicht existieren*].”⁷ To be sure, Strauß’s confessions—like Augustine’s and Rousseau’s before—probe the singularity and idiomaticity of one particular life; yet—also like those of his canonical predecessors—Strauß’s confessions likewise contain reflections that far transcend the singularity and idiomaticity of a single life, opening onto concerns that are of universal interest and import, which is to say, opening onto the other, even otherness as such. Here, one’s *Herkunft* can hardly be thought in separation from an other’s *Herkunft*, even if, like the other’s, it remains enigmatic and refractory.

In a key passage, from around the middle of *Herkunft*, Strauß remarks:

Gibt es etwas Besseres, als dort zu bleiben, wo du geboren, aufgewachsen, zur Schule gegangen bist, dich zum ersten Mal verliebt hast? Wo deine Eltern und Großeltern gelebt haben? Weshalb seinen angestammten Platz verlassen? Und wenn es schon sein muß, weil man ja das ein oder andere draußen in der Fremde lernen und zuwege bringen sollte, warum anschließend nicht wieder heimkehren? Es wäre nur die Hälfte des Vergehens zu spüren, wenn man an seinem Ort bliebe. Wenn man gar nicht anders könnte, als immer an seinem Ort zu bleiben.

Wie die Toten, sie verlassen ihre Heimat nicht. Du begegnest ihnen auf den Waldwegen am Talrand,

unten am Fluß, wo Vater und Mutter saßen, wenn sie Sorgen hatten, und auf der Wiese, die über den alten Sportplatz wuchs...[Der Fluß] mag auf und ab transportieren, was immer man ihm auflädt. Er ist und bleibt deine Zeit, dein Zuhause, dein Ort, deine Grenze. Ein Fluß fließt nicht weg. Nur das, was er trägt, kommt und geht.

[Is there anything better than to remain there where you were born and raised, went to school, fell in love for the first time? Where your parents and grandparents lived? Why leave one's ancestral location behind? And if it has to be, because one is supposed, after all, to learn and accomplish something in strange lands, why not return home afterward? Only half of one's decay would be felt if one stayed in one's place. If one had no choice but to stay in one's place.

Like the dead, they do not leave their home. You encounter them on the forest paths at the edge of the valley, down by the river, where father and mother sat when they were worried, and on the meadow that grew on the old athletic field [The river] may transport up and down whatever one sets onto it. It is and remains your time, your home, your place, your boundary. A river does not flow away. Only that which it carries comes and goes.]⁸

Herkunft here appears inextricably interwoven with *das Vergehen*, which is a substantivized noun deriving from the verb *vergehen*, meaning to decay, to die away, to vanish, to pass by, to elapse (as in time elapsing, *die Zeit vergeht*). If *Vergehen* for the narrator names the experience of the passage

of time as a process of decay and decline, it is by reflecting on the possibility of remaining in one place for the duration of one's entire life—almost like a tree that remains for its entire life-span firmly planted in a single spot—that this decay or decline comes sharply into view. When one returns to one's origins after a long absence, when one revisits the scenes of a childhood and youth long gone, one finds that the place has changed in so many ways as to remind one of one's own changes, the history of one's life trajectory, and, by extension, one's finitude. This sense of one's own *Vergehen*, one's decay, passing, dying away, slow vanishing, would be mitigated, the narrator speculates, if one gave oneself over without remainder to one's *Herkunft*, one's place of origin, planted oneself there like a tree in order to experience life but from a single vantage point. One's experience of decay would be felt only half as acutely, half as melancholically, as there would be no *Herkunft* to which to return, no imaginary homeland that could now be considered lost. Living, one would also share, even before one's actual death, the rich realm of the dead who do not leave their homeland but can be encountered—like the narrator's long-gone father and mother—everywhere as complex and haunting specters of memory. If Strauß employs the image of a river that does not disappear by flowing away but rather carries along whatever one might give over to it, it is because *Herkunft* designates the specific vantage point from which the movements of perpetual change, of becoming and decay, come into view without themselves becoming the object of change. What remains stable in all (recollected or immediate) experience of *Vergehen* is that nothing ever will have been what it is; there is, rather, a stability of instability that gives rise to a *Werden*, a becoming, in every *Vergehen*, a “Werden im Vergehen,” as Hölderlin would put it.

In light of this becoming within decay, one inherits—and passes on as a legacy—one's past and one's recollected experience of that past not simply through an overly passive self-delivery to decay. That would be another kind of *Vergehen*, now understood in its other sense of offense, misdeed, wrongful act, or misdemeanor. Commit no *Vergehen* against your own *Vergehen*, Strauß seems to be urging us. For Strauß's narrator, it is not a matter simply of relinquishing one's decaying remains to the worms. He records the significance of working on, reflecting upon, and influencing one's own decay in the most deliberate ways possible:

Was kann also der abnehmende Mensch, der von einer Stunde zur nächsten immer aufs neue vor einem Rätsel steht? Immer nur dastehen und sich wundern? Das kann nicht alles sein. Man muß an seinem Vergehen mit Methode arbeiten, wie man ja auch beim Werden sich ins Zeug legen mußte.

[What, then, can the declining human being, who, from one hour to the next, must confront yet another enigma, do? Always just stand there and wonder? That cannot be all. One must work on one's decline or decay methodically, the way one also had to hustle in one's process of becoming.]⁹

In facing the enigma of one's recollected and inevitably decaying life, it is not enough to affirm its enigmatic nature or to persist in mere astonishment or wonder (even though the latter, as *thaumazein*, is certainly *also* necessary, as it marks, according to Plato's *Theaetetus*, the beginning of all philosophy). Rather, Strauß stresses the importance

of dedicating oneself to one's decline with method and purpose, taking it seriously in the same way that one once dedicated oneself to one's becoming, to furthering one's ascent and progress in the world when one was younger and still had most of one's future ahead of oneself. But what the narrator has in mind can hardly be reduced to a form of getting one's affairs in order, as they say, a moment of mere estate planning. No, this form of working on one's *Vergehen* implies a deliberate engagement with one's coming to pass, a coming to pass that is inseparable from questions of tradition, handing-down, legacy, and inheritance. It belongs more likely to the order of what Robert Musil might call a *Nachlaß zu Lebzeiten*, the posthumous papers of a living author. One works to design and steer the trajectory of one's decline, to the extent possible, in a way that affirms it *as* decline and decay, without denial and without perpetuating the fantasy that it could be outwitted or even overcome. While one knows about the inheritor-worms that are already waiting in their proper realm, the earth, to consume one's remains, one nevertheless thoughtfully participates in shaping one's own *Vergehen*—not to hasten it along or to do the worms' work for them, but to affirm life precisely by affirming the looming shadow of its radical finitude and the ghostly realm of a future inheritance from which it cannot be separated.

It is as if, through this process of working on one's own demise and decay with method and care, one enlisted oneself among the other or the others who will dispose of one's inherited remains. By attending to the unfolding of one's own *Vergehen*, one takes one's place among the others—as a self that is another other—to whom the decaying one is given over. As Derrida reminds us in his

seminar on Heidegger and *Robinson Crusoe*, “I have to have presupposed that the other, the others, are precisely those who always might die after me, and have at their disposal what remains of me, my remains. The others—what is that? Those, masculine and feminine, who might survive me.” To which he adds that the others are those “before whom I am disarmed, defenseless” because “the other is what always might, one day, do something with me and my remains, make me into a thing, whatever the respect or the pomp, funeral by vocation, with which he or she will treat that singular thing they call my remains.” It is here, therefore, that the “other appears to me as the other as such, *qua* he, she, or they who might survive me, survive my decease and then proceed as they wish, sovereignly, and sovereignly have at their disposal the future of my remains, if there are any.” Derrida cautions, however, that “having my remains at their disposal can also take place before I am absolutely, clearly, and distinctly dead, meaning that the other, the others, is what also might not wait for me to be dead to do it, to dispose of my remains: the other might bury me alive, eat me or swallow me alive, burn me alive etc.” In short, he concludes: “He or she can put me to a living death, and exercise his or her sovereignty.”¹⁰ To the extent to which the other is the one who in principle may survive me—the one who may inherit my remains in this way or that and who will therefore be in a position to dispose of them as he or she sees fit—that other is defined by this very potentiality even before my actual death; the other is the other precisely because he or she or it is endowed with this sovereignty.

This other can be the worm, too, which is to say, the inheritor-worm. Taking part in my own demise or decline, as Strauß’s autobiographical meditations propose, prepares

me for joining the ranks of the others, in this case the worms, who will dispose of my remains after my departure. The worm-others—and I among these other others, which is to say, an other to the others but also just one other among many other others—come into an inheritance that is both a “default inheritance” and a “disputed inheritance,” returning to the terms that *Matches* mobilizes. Implicitly joining the worms as an other among others is a default inheritance because it names something like a structural law, a general truth, or “default setting” of the uneasy act of inheritance; but the act also is disputed precisely because the outcome of this process, the work of the others—and *mine among them*—is anything but settled. Its future remains as enigmatic as its *Herkunft*.

Notes

- 1 S. D. Chrostowska, *Matches: A Light Book* (New York: Punctum, 2015), 422.
- 2 For a sustained consideration of the conceptual problem of inheritance as such, see Gerhard Richter, *Verwaiste Hinterlassenschaften. Formen gespentischen Erbens* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2016).
- 3 Jacques Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, vol. 2, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 160ff.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 130.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 131.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Botho Strauß, “Der letzte Deutsche. Uns wird die Souveränität geraubt, dagegen zu sein.” *Der Spiegel* 41 (2015): 122-124 (123).
- 8 Botho Strauß, *Herkunft* (Munich: DTV, 2016), 54f.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 10 Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, 126f.

Anita Chari

Disorientation

I insist that it all holds together, in a fragmented totality.
I insist that somewhere inside, you understand.
Or that you can pretend to until you really do, which, I'm
convinced, is the only ethical thing to do.
It's what I did, living all these years amidst the
hieroglyphics of metropole.
Now, finally, I really do understand
and so, even though I will not explain
I will insist.
And I will try to get deeper inside
pressing against the shape of you
stretching it, until you no longer recognize yourself
my flesh is the catalyst.

So if you don't know where you are or why you should care
just dwell in your confusion
the way I always have
and don't reject me.
To deny disorientation
is a colonial gesture.
And sometimes we lose ourselves
in the mirror.



Claire Fontaine, *America (burnt/unburnt)*, 2011.
Burnt/unburnt matchsticks, dimensions variable.
Installation view: Claire Fontaine, *Sell Your Debt*, Queen's
Nails, The Mission, San Francisco, 01.12.

Matches

There were thousands of matches displayed on the wall. In the shape of a country. Leading me to find myself in time and space through the absence/potential of fire. These matches tempted me to hold up a lighter to even just one of them, to watch the wall set ablaze, to disintegrate into a passionate flame. And then nothing else would matter but this fire, this room, this wall, this now. I walked toward the wall and my hands grazed the matches. I reached for the lighter in my pocket and smiled at the thought of the spectacle, the satisfaction of an inferno.

And then I turned away and walked out the door. The matches stayed intact. Unburnt. They remained potential energy. Enclosed, waiting for the day that someone would take the chance. They could be waiting for a long, long time.

Mirror neuron

Mirroring is the precondition for love and revolution, you told me.

Not representation. I love you enough to reflect you. To hold the remainder. And to stay all the way in. Remember that if you don't like what you see.

For this mirror
is broken.

Anesthesia

Intensity wants anesthesia
when the synesthesia is too much too bear. It feels like
pain, overloading the synapses. We kill the pain of entering
and exiting life, either naturally or synthetically. Numbing
the skin, dulling the sensations. And who can blame us?
Death, Birth, but more and more, life too. How can I claw
my way to the next moment from this one, through the
pulsing abyss of time?
I ask
Some people ask
with the needle of their choice.

Opioid of the people

Nietzsche predicted the opioid epidemic long before the
Trump era elevated it to the status of the national sickness
of a universal victim. He called it the anesthetization of
pain through affect, pointing out rightly that the substances
are really beside the point. The political hysteria is at least
as much of a drug as the pills. Marx called it too, though
he, unsurprisingly, saw this anesthetic impulse as derivative
of a religious delusion, rather than as a way of mediating
the unbearable physical sensations of modernity. All I mean
is that it's been a long time in coming. In the 1960's they
tripped out on hallucinogens, trying to envision a society
without division. It was delusional but noble, because they
really could see it, feel it, taste it, in that stolen music, in
the exchange of fluids, in the blown out haze of neurons
reaching beyond. In the 70's it was speed and Quaaludes.

To help them move on, mobilize, become economic once again, and then to sedate the frazzled social nervous system, at any cost. Then cocaine and crack in the 80's, to aid accumulation, and to help people for the first time to really enjoy capitalism, even if it landed the darker ones among us behind bars. Then the 90's brought MDMA to rediscover the orgasmic quality of dwelling in a body—we had forgotten—and to reeducate the monads about how to touch. Our longing for contact compelled us to obey, and to enjoy the reality of being just a puppet malleable in the hands of the sovereign, the market, the beat. Perhaps technology was the new drug of the 2000's. And now, among other things, it's prescription heroin. Like I said, it's been a long time in coming, and the psychotropic cocktail of the collective has always been complex. But even if it's just our awareness that has caught up, opiates are definitely the drug of the 2010's. Oh yes, and fascism.

And we may all finally succumb to an overdose.

Cracker

I stared at the photograph, an image of a saltine cracker still in its packaging. Unused, uneaten. Moisture from its desiccated crevices collecting on the plastic film surrounding it. Thousands of fissures, fractures, fragments. They were like an inscrutable, pictographic telegram that I struggled to comprehend. My thoughts turned to the fracturing of white subjectivity, to the hysterical revolt of the “cracker” in 2016. Thinned and hollowed out by its own false universality, with nothing left to hold its structure, it dissolves into filaments of crumbs. A cracker is devoid of nourishment, a white



Claire Fontaine, *Untitled (Cracked)*, 2017.

Digital vinyl print on frameless industrial lightbox.

1,220 × 2,000 × 100 mm (48" × 78 ¾" × 3 ⅞")

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Neu, Berlin.

wafer that seems like it could live on infinitely, wrapped in a prophylactic film, waiting to be eaten, waiting to be used, spent. But even when devoured, it gives no energy, it yields only a momentary surplus. It stands in for a potential that is infinitely deferred and that was never really potential after all. What better symbol for the false promises of capital and the cruelty of its optimism than the hermetic saltine? Pure surface. Shiny. Plastic. Protected from use, from movement, and from contact. The eyes cannot pierce its membrane. It is a reflection of stasis.

We need this reflection, not just of revolution, but of impasse, if we ever want a shot at moving again.

Hysteria

Are we all hysterics these days? Or are we not nearly hysterical enough? To be a hysteric is to be a conversion, to be a translation, between physicality and psyche, and to live it improperly, outrageously, illegibly. And unconsciously, as if the flesh had a mind of its own. As if its quivers were a language, artless, inchoate, and insistent. We need to learn to read the quiver, to speak the quiver, to feel the quiver. Before the hysteria converts to rage. Or scatters the intensities of our flesh into molecules spread too far apart to ever come together again. Maybe it is already too late. Freud said that hysteria is action, not discharge. But is that a proposition or a provocation?

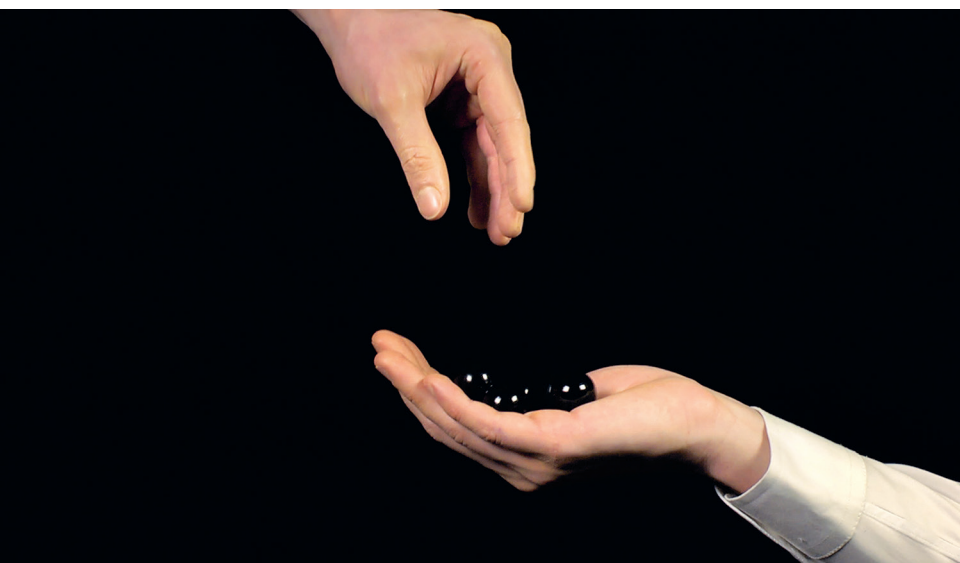
I feel you

I put my hands on you. I hold your shoulder, your left arm. And at first I remain on the outer edges of you, beyond your skin, where sensation whispers. Your body is electric, your fluids quicken, you perceive me there and you do not know whether you like the contact or not. I feel you. I feel your pace, your attraction, your backing away, your need. And then I feel you slowing, as you sense that you are transparent, despite the barrier of skin and flesh, that there is nothing to hide. I feel the holograph of history when I touch you. You are surprised by it, but I am not.

Because this is not pornography, neither soft nor hard. This is not romance. This is not extraordinary. Dwelling in a body, from moment to moment, this is existence. And once you become transparent, I do not feel separate from you anymore. The cocoon of subjectivity becomes soft, and I am no longer so anxious to distinguish you from myself. I am not scared by the way that your past locks into mine, and makes me feel sensations that are both old and new. There is a field, a stream, an opening. We are contained in a new substrate. But it is not emotional. It is not utopian. It is potency. It is what could be. You are not private. I am not I. You are no longer locked in that solipsistic prison, for a moment. We are together, simply together, in a place where things are not defined.

Do you know where potential is?

It is here.



Geof Oppenheimer, *DRAMA*, 2014-15 (digital still)
HD video, presentation carts, electronics.
Total running time: 9:19.

Stasis

If it feels as if things are not moving, it is because they are not, cannot move, as long as we separate representation from sensation. In China there is now a practice of people taking selfies, and then altering them with software to manipulate the image, to make it more beautiful, to make one's face look more like the disembodied vortex of desire floating about in the internet image universe. And then to alter one's face surgically to look like these beautified photos. It is not uncommon for people in China and Korea to have had multiple plastic surgeries by the age of 25. They see this as a form of investment. Making one's face and body more valuable, by increasing its appeal in a world where credibility and success come in the form of likes, going viral, and becoming Internet famous.

Best not to relate to such information as shocking, because it's really just a hyperbolic version of what goes on now, and it is not exceptional. Imagine that when we surgically alter the face, the flesh responds, because it is molded in the shape of a vision of homogeneity. Sensation eludes this molded body. And so the problem is not with beauty, not even with race. The problem is not with alteration. The problem is that the gulf between inside and outside grows, and that the language of the body is stifled. Cognition becomes dominant and hard. And we become ever more subject to the delusion that mind and body are separate. Reality mirrors this delusion. Communication, like the body itself, becomes imagistic, textual, and distanced. The problem is not with what it is, with what we are or with what we are becoming, but with the bandwidth. This estranged experience of the body shapes the physicality

of perception, without us even sensing that we might be missing something.

The skin must begin to sense what it lacks.

Alienation

Alienation is not just a cognitive phenomenon, or an economic process. It saturates bodily experience. It impacts what is possible for us together. It freezes our social metabolism.

Cell

When I drive home from the prison on Tuesday nights, I feel so lonely. I feel a depth of isolation that plunges me into my darkest fears. That I am alone and will always be alone. I remember this feeling from childhood, it hung over me, around me, like a murky cloud. I felt untouchable, trapped in my soft, brown body, and I longed, always, to reach my hands into infinity, and to find warm skin there to meet me. I don't often feel that way anymore. But after I saw John and Terrence there, for the first time in many months, I remembered. It was their loneliness I felt, indistinguishable from my own. They smiled, they were happy I was there. But they also could not hide that things only got worse in that place and never better. And no matter how much they changed, how much they learned, they would be swallowed back into the maw of an institution that told them they were less than human, and that they were untouchable. Legally even, they could not touch or be touched. Could not hug

or be hugged. Could not fuck or be fucked. Except by the justice system, who could fuck them without ever touching them. The state turned their bodies into a cell.

It was always uncomfortable at first for them that I could see. The humiliation, the desolation, the despair. And especially the love. They had to love each other to get through. They felt shame and pride in their fierce love, that they could still love even these circumstances. That they had to. They had to care. And that was why I loved them so much. They knew I could see that every handshake, every glance, was significant to them, and at first they could not bear it. The wild honesty of their need was my mirror.

They are warriors. I see them that way, without glorifying them. They know blood. They are violence under erasure. And by erasing them, society represses the slow violence of every single moment that I avert your gaze, that I turn away from you, that I lock myself hermetically in the prison of a screen, that my tissues become hard and dense, that my fluids cease to quicken, that I am in paralysis. This too is violence. Invisible violence that is its own senseless punishment. And my dear friends, you are the sacrifice. But sometimes I feel your bodies as I feel my own.

Geof Oppenheimer, *The Embarrassing Statue*, 2014
Electroplated steel Husqvarna 150BT, Brooks Brothers
pants, plaster bandages, and MDF. 101 x 33 x 33 inches.



Social research

Sex is social research, for the philosophers. Especially when it's not particularly bad or good. And then I notice the touch. The connection of skin to flesh, outside to inside. The parameters of contact. The contract. Notice whether pleasure does or does not link with emotion. Notice the gestures and their origin. The rhythm. The orientation. The mother and father. The isolation and tribe. The rush or the leisure. The lush or the business. The duration. The space in between. The desire for more or less. The ability to dissolve. The surface and depth. The fear of ecstasy. The abstraction of pleasure. I notice.

Intellectual

I will not remove myself. I will not trade sensation for power. Not for any reason.

Embarrassing

It was a prescient statue, for many reasons. Masculinity is embarrassing these days, I suppose. The expensive pants have fallen down, exposing what is underneath, a phallic machine that performs menial labor. And both the labor and the enjoyment of it are embarrassing. Embarrassing whether you are performing it for survival or just for fun on the weekends. Embarrassing whether you are wearing Brooks Brothers or rags. It's an impossible situation.

But I envied this statue, because I too want, perversely, to exhibit my embarrassment. Want you to consume it. A millimeter beneath my intellect lies the unspeakable embarrassment of my body. And yours too.

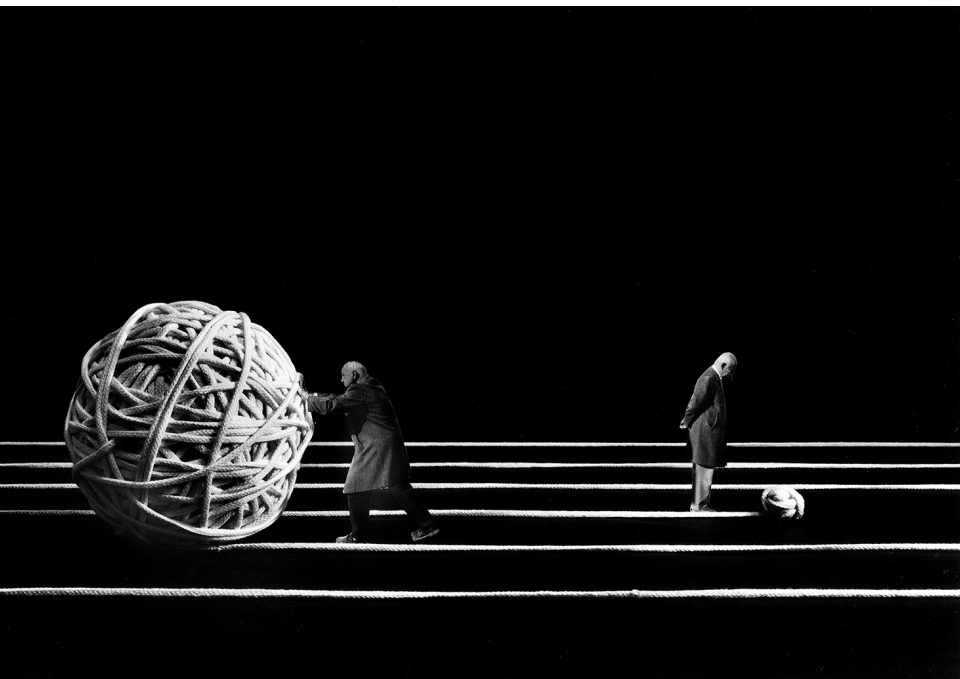
Patrick Seniuk

I can only get up from the chair by making a monstrous effort, but I have the impression that I'm carrying the chair with me, and that it has grown heavier, because it is the chair of subjectivity.

—Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*¹

Despite the suggestive title, “Anti-Sisyphus: *The Future is Not What It Used to Be*,” Chrostowska’s article on Gabriel Garcin’s photograph is neither a meditation on Camus nor Sisyphus, per se. Then again, Chrostowska tells us that “Some titles ... are conspicuous, but once attended to, prove of no great consequence. Not so in the present case.”² The same holds true for her *Anti-Sisyphus*. Yet what I find most striking about her reflection is what remains unarticulated, or perhaps following Fink, the operative concepts (unreflective) at work.³ In particular, her short piece tacitly dances around themes such as contingency and necessity, life and death.

I begin by briefly iterating a basic point about Camus’s absurd hero as a springboard into Chrostowska’s interpretation of Garcin’s photograph. I want to contrast her interpretation of Garcin’s *The Future is Not What It Used to Be* with a phenomenological interpretation using the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty. This is not to say that Chrostowska is a furtive phenomenologist—something she



Gabriel Garcin, *L'avenir n'est plus ce qu'il était - The Future is Not What It Used to Be*, 2006. Gelatin silver print.
image © Gilbert Garcin.

would undoubtedly find humorous, to put it euphemistically. However, since I have been “raised” in this tradition, it may prove fruitful to consider Garcin’s photograph phenomenologically, as a means to highlight in what ways our thinking converges or diverges. The point is not to hold her interpretation to a phenomenological standard—which would be unfair—but rather to complement her already perspicuous account of Garcin’s photograph.

The photo under study is a fascinating case. One is immediately struck by the horizontal orientation that stretches outward toward the edges. As Chrostowska rightly notes, the figure of Garcin, who appears twice (one on the left and closer to the foreground, one on the right and situated further toward the background), signifies traditional Western narratives of time that unfold spatially from left to right. Additionally, the photo, which is black and white, presents a stark contrast between figure-background that cuts across the horizontal plane. The vertical plane (or dimension), by contrast, appears compressed, portraying a lack of depth. Should this be surprising? After all, representations are inherently two-dimensional. Unsurprisingly, traditional representational models of the mind fail to make sense of depth, or deny the very possibility of depth.⁴ Because representations or pictures give us an image of a moment in time that is no longer present, surely memories, then, must *ipso facto* be re-presentational. I want to deny this thesis and provide an alternative account of memory that is grounded in the relationship between body and world (otherness).

It is both curious *and* laudable that “memory” does not figure explicitly in Chrostowska’s interpretation of Garcin’s photograph. Of course, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to discuss temporality without at least implicitly attending

to memory, which I believe is the case here. The challenge is to specify precisely in what way memory is operative. In the most obvious sense, Chrostowska characterizes the medium of photography as always already belonging to the past. At the risk of stating the obvious, representations are, by definition, re-presentations; a present that is crystalized as something past, but visually available to *this* present. Then again, memory is not a necessary condition of the re-representation. My first glance at Garcin's photograph, for instance, is not predicated on a previous experience of the photograph. The picture itself depicts an experience had by someone. In this sense, the representation has an air of generality, an atmosphere of memory.

But let us look more closely at what Garcin and Chrostowska have to say. Permit me, if you will, to begin by drawing out a psychoanalytic theme that underscores Chrostowska's conclusion, "*one must imagine Garcin nostalgic*":

Before, not knowing what the future might hold made it seem to hold more, much more. It was a burden then, but had he not also more strength to unravel it? ... To have at one's feet a future the size of a ball...is the universal anti-climax.⁵

We could take this to mean (roughly speaking) that what we think we desire is not what we actually desire; we think we want *x*, and after much effort to attain it, we realize that it was not, in fact, what we longed for. Consequently, we would never know what we desire, evoking a quasi-masochistic dialectic, where the object of desire is a mere specter. Undoubtedly, an eternally unfilled desire is a heavy

burden to carry. It would motivate in the same way that a desert mirage of an oasis compels a thirsty traveler to traverse vast distances only to discover an illusion.

The psychoanalytic account is arguably not without some truth, and Merleau-Ponty is generally sympathetic to the analytic endeavor insofar as the latter attempts to make sense of traumas that have stultified one's ability to master situations in adult life. Where it fails, however, is through an inability to do justice to the structure of conscious (or lived) experience, namely since our motivations are structured perceptually at the level of operative intentionality (unreflective awareness), and are thus invariably dependent upon our being-situated-in-the-world. Even though motives do not take shape within the domain of explicit (reflective) awareness, this does not preclude the possibility of disclosing motivations tothetic consciousness (reflective awareness). On this point, let us consider the way Merleau-Ponty characterizes the epistemological dilemma confronted by empiricism and intellectualism:

Empiricism does not see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not go looking for it; intellectualism does not see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or again we would not go looking for it.⁶

In between the space of reasons and causes, which present their own set of epistemic problems, Merleau-Ponty introduces motivation as a third term that offers a way to extract ourselves from this dilemma. Because motivation is internally related to the conscious body *vis à vis* motility, our desires or motivations are affective sensitivities to the

manner in which things in the world “call us.” So, while we may sympathize with psychoanalysis, conceding that our actions and desires very often elude conscious awareness, our sympathy cannot be absolute:

The love that worked out its dialectic through me and that I have just discovered is not from the outset a hidden thing in my unconsciousness, nor is it for that matter an object in front of my consciousness; rather, it is the movement by which I am turned toward someone, the conversion of my thoughts and of my behaviors—I was hardly unaware of it, since it was I who lived through the hours of boredom prior to a date, and I who experienced the joy when it approached; this love was lived—not known—from beginning to end.⁷

If we return our attention back to Garcin, we will see that his future was, all along, in plain view, not as something known, but as something in “*the making*.”⁸

If we take Garcin to be nostalgic, we do so only by artificially de-situating him from the horizon structure of temporality, which is what permits the sense-laden world of things to unfold within, and stand out (*ekstase*) for, our perceptual field. Instead of a nostalgic Garcin, I suggest that we leave Garcin aware, all too aware that his future is a shrinking sphere of capacities and possibilities—physical and temporal. Like all our lives, Garcin recognizes life is lived “within an atmosphere of death in general, there is something of an essence of death in general that is always on the horizon of my thoughts,” and Garcin’s future (as well as our own) has the “flavor of mortality.”⁹

Let us turn our attention more closely to the picture itself. First, as Chrostowska notes, Garcin stands in two distinct postures. On the left, Garcin is active and engaged with the large ball of rope. On the right, Garcin's feet are planted and his hands are clasped behind his back, the typical art gallery "pondering" stance. We have an ambiguous Garcin: activity (left) and passivity (right); the past is (being) *done* and the future before him *waits*. How is it possible that his future is so diminutive in contrast to the expansive past? Where does the acquired past go, if not into the future?

In Merleau-Ponty's early work, he characterizes the body-subject's existence is characterized by a double movement, of sedimentation and spontaneity. Put another way, subjectivity unfolds through a determinant and indeterminate dialectic; an active taking up of what is acquired, habitual, or given to us as "thrown," which becomes the basis for further expressive articulations according to the demands made upon us by the indeterminate situations we find ourselves in. We can say, then, that from the present we carry with us a sedimented past (or history) that we project (throw in front) into the future. The past will always entail sediments of one's culture that give each body-subject an extended pre-history. To borrow from Heidegger, we find ourselves thrown into this or that situation, one we had no part in making, yet one that is the inalienable perspective from which all our capacities to deal with the world must unfold.

We can extend this into the phenomenological context of horizon structure. A crude and cursory characterization of horizons is that they refer us to our future possibilities. Perceptually speaking, horizons are similar to a *Gestalt*, insofar as horizons are structured according a foreground-background relation. It makes it possible for me to perceive

the cup on my desk, all the while maintaining the other things on or near my desk such that I *could* turn to or focus on something else, if I were so motivated. Now, none of this would be possible without a perceiving body. The physical make-up of my body will determine my perceptual capacities, such that no matter how hard I try, I could only ever be a mediocre painter, marathon runner, or...take your pick. The point, however, is that our ability to contact otherness is already established before I act in the world. Over time, as we further articulate contact with the world, we sediment, or carry with us, familiar ways of acting. If we consider the dual nature to the horizon structure, we realize that it is equally a burden as it is open. The burden of our past (Garcin's large ball), especially the traumas, are enacted in the present; they already somehow haunt our future. With respect to the in case in question, the representation of Garcin's future is radically diminished when compared to the overwhelmingly large past. Should not our future necessarily hold more possibilities if we are characteristically the aggregate of our experiences? How are we to make sense of this, especially if the past is interwoven with the future?

To answer this, we must draw attention to the nature of embodiment. Consider, for instance, Chrostowska's point that there is "no return, no retracing of steps."¹⁰ While it is true, in principle, that there is no return to the past, or for that matter, the future as it once was, we would be remiss in ignoring the extent to which the present is a host upon which past and future are parasitic. When Merleau-Ponty says that the body-subject inhabits the world,¹¹ we must take in-habit to be literal. In doing so, we acknowledge that our primary contact with otherness (the world) is an expression of a sedimented history (or past) enacted in the

present. To some degree, all our actions are structured by previous experience. When I reach for the glass in front of me, of course, it is an action unfolding in the present. Yet, my ability to reach for the glass is, itself, an expression of memory; I have no need to explicitly thematize the act of grasping, for the “grasping” situation is one I have dealt with successfully in the past. Then again, the movement takes place within the general atmosphere of the open future, of what I can or cannot do next. Thus, it is true that there is indeed no “return,” and yet, it is not the case that we have entirely left:

When I recall a distant past, I reopen time, I place myself back at a moment when it still included an horizon of the future that is today closed off and an horizon of a recent past that is today a distant past. Everything sends me back to the field of presence, as if to the originary experience where time and its dimensions appear in person without any intervening distance and with a [final] evidentness. This is where we see a future slipping into the present and into the past. These three dimensions are not given to us through discrete acts: I do not represent to myself my day, rather, my day weighs upon me with all of its weight, it is still there.¹²

Except for limit situations, where we find ourselves unable to adequately deal with the situation that confronts us, our everyday mode of being-in-the-world is an expressive re-tracing of contours of the past in anticipation of the future.

When we consider Garcin in the past (on the left), it would be proper to suggest that he is actively taking up

his past. We should view the large ball of rope, or better still, of thread, as an accumulation of sedimented capacities (and experiences) that are equally a series of intentional threads. Merleau-Ponty often characterizes the situatedness of embodied consciousness as a relation to the world established through “intentional threads.” These threads, he says, are interwoven with our “projects [that] polarize the world, causing a thousand signs to appear there, as if by magic, that guide action, as signs in a museum guide the visitor.”¹³ Projects, here, means a world orientation whereby things that concern us or have *sense* are laid out (or projected) before us:

[My apartment] only remains around me as my familiar domain if I still hold “in my hands” or “in my legs” the principle distances and directions, and only if a multitude of intentional threads run out toward it from my body.¹⁴

Because Merleau-Ponty’s theory of perception is developmental, our expressive behaviours are bodily expressions that are, in part, acquired from previous experience. Our engagement with otherness is not passive, but rather is active, which means that our intentional “threads” carry our concerns toward the world. Accordingly, the structure of our temporal horizons (or possibilities) orient our indeterminate future without being severed from our past.

Let us look at Garcin again, but this time with a phenomenological eye. We can indeed acknowledge that the past is a burden to be carried forward, and that it certainly dilates our present and future. However, we need to qualify

the sense in which Garcin's ball of thread is a "burden." Might we say that the double structure of "sedimentation and spontaneity"¹⁵ is itself a burden? Garcin's ball of thread is burdensome insofar as it is a reflection of what he can and cannot do. His ball is an expression of what has past and of what has yet to come. Garcin in the past depicts a body-subject with an abundance of intentional experience and bodily capacities, and arguably why we find him actively engaged with his ball. Now, Garcin in the present is stationary, and pensive. His thread has become "a future the size of a ball (a ball to kick around, but for what sport?)"¹⁶ Indeed, his future is not what it once was, but is this not the burden of finitude? The static Garcin ponders his reduced intentional capacities, and even "pondering" or thinking is itself an expressive behavior that is typically a casualty of age. He is no longer able to engage with the world seamlessly or operatively, nor will his (aging) body permit it.

The inexhaustible openness of the future is dependent upon our ability to take up the world through our bodies. That said, the movement of existence is not dependent upon "clock" time. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, while the movement of existence should certainly be understood as temporal flow, it is not exclusively a designation of temporality, as such. It is in equal part the double-movement of sedimentation and spontaneity that I introduced earlier. These two aspects are interdependent, and thus it can seem somewhat odd to speak of them nominally. The solution is to characterize the "flow" or movement of existence as the *taking up* of the world *through* time.

As we age, there is a sense in which we become "experts" in our contact with otherness. Our initial contact with otherness is highly generalized: perceptual structures that

open us to the world during infancy develop from extremely general outlines (e.g. an infant's first perceptions) to highly specified articulations of the perceptual field (e.g. a skilled adult artist). To use a crude analogy, a sports car has certain qualities that make it unfit for transporting a family of four, while conversely a mini-van is poorly suited to racing on a track. The point is that even with more and more experience, though our future is infinitely open the phenomenal (transcendental) field is delimited. It is certainly the case that the future no longer appears as it once was, but it is also true that our bodies are no longer what they once were. For many of us, as we age our bodies become less reliable, less resilient, and generally, sites of atrophy. If we grant that the world is the correlate to embodied existence, then so too does our world "shrink." Climbing a flight of stairs, which one could previously bound up two steps at a time, may appear to the aging body as a mountainous task. What, then, does all this mean for Garcin in the present (right-side)?

Contemplating his narrowed future, one appearing *not what it used to be*, we might re-characterize Garcin's situation as: *the future is not what it once was*. Why? First, the phenomenological structure of temporality permits one to stipulate that the future is parasitic on the past, insofar as the past—through the present—structures the horizons of the body-subject. Hence, the future is always, in some way, a trace of what came before, of what it once was:

my present transcends itself toward an imminent future and a recent past, and touches them there where they are, in the past and in the future themselves. If we did have the past in the form of an explicit memory, we would be tempted to recall it at each moment in order to verify its existence.¹⁷

Going one step further, it is not unreasonable to posit that nostalgia is neither an orientation toward the past, nor is it a solicitation to reflect on times past:

The things of the world are not simply neutral *objects* which stand before us for our contemplation. Each one of them symbolises or recalls a particular way of behaving, provoking in us reactions which are either favourable or unfavourable. This is why people's tastes, character, and the attitude they adopt to the world and to particular things can be deciphered from the objects with which they choose to surround themselves, their preferences for certain colours or the places where they like to go for walks.¹⁸

What does Garcin's ball of rope tell us of Garcin? And why is Chrostowska's "nostalgic" Garcin not looking *back*? "The source of his nostalgia—if I read him right—is not that the long past has proven too heavy to bear, but that the brief future now left to him ends up too light."¹⁹ Garcin is ostensibly nostalgic for what can no longer be, or better still, what he can no longer become. Alternatively, perhaps Garcin is troubled by the realization that we never fully catch up to ourselves, a predicament that is deeply dissatisfying, but nonetheless an irrevocable consequence of being. Paradoxically, who we are is always anterior to ourselves—and therefore somewhat elusive—yet always entirely open to the possibility of being otherwise than who we are. In other words, we come to realize that we are not who (or what) we thought we were, all the while in possession of a future wherein it might be possible to become who (or what) we want to be:

Theoretical and practical decisions in my personal life can certainly grasp my past and my future from a distance; they can give my past, along with all of its accidents, a definite sense by following it up with a certain future of which, *après coup*, this past will be said to have been the preparation; and they can introduce a historicity into my life. But there is always something artificial to this order.²⁰... My hold on the past and the future are precarious and my possession of my own time is always deferred until the moment when I fully understand myself, but that moment can never arrive since it would again be a moment, bordered by the horizon of a future.

If we imagine Garcin nostalgic, we can do so only if we imagine him inert. That is, “only of *thinking back* to how great the future once was.”²¹ In this way, we would be resigned to accept the order of artificiality implied by Merleau-Ponty. Garcin has always carried his past and his future with him, or better, through him. If his future has narrowed (and it has), then it is the expressive space between his body and the world that has truly narrowed.

The tragedy of aging can be read on the body. It is, I believe, a mischaracterization to distinguish between a lucid mind and an aging body, which is a euphemism that is commonly ascribed to persons who, despite physical deterioration, remain “with it.” Lucidity should be taken to be *ekstase*, such that a lucid mind (or lack thereof) cannot be distinguished from one’s comportment toward the world or otherness. Likewise, we can implicate lucidity in temporality by virtue of a necessary relationship to

movement. Movement and time are structurally dependent on the body, and ultimately make the phenomenon of touch possible. The deteriorating body, which is less and less able to carry itself ahead of itself, loses its grasp on the world. We lose touch with ourselves, but more crucially, with others. And what is death, if not the obliteration of otherness? And this is the second reason we can say that *the future is not what it once was*. It was once, in fact, nothing.

Garcin's future, as all futures are, is aimed directly at the shrinking space between him and the world. His future is the encroachment of death on his world. Garcin's future reveals to him (and ourselves) what he has always known, and yet knew only indirectly. Life is ambiguous: like a sheet of paper, no matter how hard we try to experience both sides simultaneously, the appearance of one side necessitates the disappearance of the other. All failure is successful, and all success is failure, and it is this, perhaps, what is absurd about existence:

There is no way of living with others which takes away the burden of being myself, which allows me to not have an opinion; there is no 'inner' life that is not a first attempt to relate to another person. In this ambiguous position, which has been forced on us because we have a body and a history (both personally and collectively), we can never know complete rest. We are continually obliged to work on our differences, to explain things we have said that have not been properly understood, to reveal what is hidden within us and to perceive other people. Reason does not lie behind us, nor is that where the meeting of minds takes place: rather,

both stand before us waiting to be inherited. Yet we are no more able to reach them definitively than we are to give up on them.²²

This is not to say, like Heidegger, that we are always already toward death. Garcin comes to recognize, as we said before, the “flavor of mortality.” If there is a burden to be found in the photograph in question, it is that which is woven into the fabric of embodiment. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, we can no more give up on life (as sense-laden) than we can make it wholly our own (thrownness). What could be more burdensome than taking up an existence “forced upon us because we have a body and a history” when these two irrevocable poles of our life deny us the possibility to ever “know complete rest.”

How should we leave Garcin? Unlike Sisyphus, we are all condemned to death. Ultimately, we express ourselves as body-subjects upon whom otherness makes demands for clarity beginning with first perception. We can no more ignore the call than we can accept it. And so, in the end, we must imagine Garcin ambiguous.

Notes

- 1 Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet*, trans. Alfred Mac Adam (Boston: Exact Change, 1998), 81.
- 2 S. D. Chrostowska, "The Anti-Sisyphus: The Future is Not What it Used to Be – a photograph by Gilbert Garcin," *Photography and Culture* (July 2016): 163-166 (163).
- 3 Eugen Fink, "Operative Concepts in Husserl's Phenomenology," in *Apriori and World: European Contributions to Husserlian Phenomenology*, eds. William McKenna, Robert M. Harlan and Laurence E. Winters, Martinus Nijhoff Philosophy Texts, vol. 2 (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981 [Original edition, 1957]).
- 4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (Abingdon Oxon Routledge, 2012), 266.
- 5 Chrostowska, "The Anti-Sisyphus," 165, emphasis in original.
- 6 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 30.
- 7 Ibid., 400.
- 8 Ibid., 400.
- 9 Ibid., 382.
- 10 Chrostowska, "The Anti-Sisyphus," 165.
- 11 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 140.
- 12 Ibid., 439.
- 13 Ibid., 115.
- 14 Ibid., 131-132.
- 15 Ibid., 131.
- 16 Chrostowska, "The Anti-Sisyphus," 165.
- 17 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 441.
- 18 Ibid., 63.
- 19 Chrostowska, "The Anti-Sisyphus," 165.
- 20 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 361.
- 21 Chrostowska, "The Anti-Sisyphus," 165.
- 22 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (Oxford: Routledge, 2004), 66-67.

Ted Hiebert

Thought hurling itself into the abyss and coming up with nothing is not necessarily a performance of extinction if treated as an exercise in feeling its limits.

— S. D. Chrostowska¹

This is an attempt to exhaust a certain matter of fact, by which I really mean the facts of a matter of fact since what matters most is that facts impact matter without any reason for that to be the only version of the story. I'm interested in the opposite rendition—how matters impact facts, what philosopher Johnny Golding eloquently calls “radical mattering,” which in my case isn't that radical but is nonetheless still a matter of mattering facts.² But it's perhaps worth noting that facts aren't really required for this kind of mattering. That is, the matter of mattering—while related on a certain commitment to matters—does not require that what matters be a matter of fact. That is, mattering matters more than the facticity of what matters.

If the logic begins to sound circular, that's on purpose—an effort of ambiguity designed to circumnavigate the matter of facts in favor of the manners of mattering. Circling leads to a process of questioning, which is really the point since the questions are what keep the circling from becoming merely a circle. What matters is not the circle but the manner of circling since that is what anchors its materialized perpetuity

("Questioning builds a way," as Heidegger put it.³). The mattering of facts is in fact what matters. And importantly, at a certain moment of circularity, it begins to look like mattering matters more than the matters themselves. A reversal of direction, like the way that car wheels sometimes seem to be spinning backwards even while moving forwards. For what matters most—perhaps even more than mattering itself—is that mattering resists becoming a fact of the matter. An altering of direction is required, a perception of movement that refuses to correspond to the actual motions in play. An alternating facticity that sets mattering against itself such as to avoid mattering becoming alone what matters. It doesn't matter if mattering falls down. For one does not fight facts with alternate facts, but by alternating facts such that emergent veracities are less bound to structures of fact and more to the processes of circling, reversibility and transformation that keep them in motion. In this sense, questioning is catalytic in a way that answering can never really be. Don't be fooled that it doesn't make sense. That might be its criterion.

In "Criterion Creation: A Metaepistemological Problem in Perspective," S. D. Chrostowska argues that conviction is a more important component of establishing criteria than certainty—taking on theories of knowledge in order to distill the metaepistemological nuances of criterion formation.⁴ After the fact, I realized that I had misread the title, conceptualizing the idea of the criterion as a problem of perspective: thinking that the manner and mattering of a criterion might shift depending on how it is looked at. Rather

than putting the task of establishing a critical perspective, my mistake was to do just the opposite: to forego the search for cohesive singularity in order to establish what I assumed would be a relational theory of metaepistemological engagement. The misreading catalyzed a questioning, which is kind of the point of the article anyways, even in its non-misread form: to misread but still understand, or perhaps to misunderstand productively, to which an essay is still due credit even if that wasn't its point at all.

Catalysis is especially interesting when seen epistemologically, since catalysis—being generative of a reaction it does not itself yet contain—might be thus considered a fundamentally creative process.⁵ But the idea of creativity as a process is rather opposed to the idea of creativity as an act of mattering since the “art coefficient” in creative matters (as opposed to creative processes) is directly tied to a dialogical episteme rather than to an individual actor. As Duchamp put it, “All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”⁶ Creative mattering has no proper subject and no stable definition, being dependent on relational constellations of engagement rather than determining factors of mattering facticity. It nonetheless manifests but eschews the romanticism of creative genius by acknowledging the metaepistemological condition of relational constitution. Creativity, from this perspective, is a (post-authorial) social process. Or—perhaps better stated—a pataphysical pedagogy in which “the defining moment of pedagogy occurs when one who speaks doesn't know what was said but those who listen nevertheless understand.”⁷

But it's all a little too neat. Romantic, even. It is a position that makes perfect sense, an inspiring amount of sense, so much sense that I wonder whether it isn't worth trying to push the argument right off the creative edge in ways that will inevitably fail to meet the metaepistemological challenge but might, in thus failing, add certain performative perspectives to the criterial debate. Or, in other words, socialize criteria, even if such a conceptualization risks tipping into a spiraling form of generative nonsense rather than cleanly orbiting the aspiration towards perspectival lucidity. Does catalysis have a criterion of sense?

Drawing attention

I place my pen at the center of the page and begin to draw a line, spiraling outwards as slowly as I can. Always in a circle—or a close approximation thereof—around and around until the pen falls off the page. The circling can be loose or tight, it doesn't really matter. But what does matter is that it is purposeful—it matters that I am not doodling, for instance. Doodling in fact is the enemy of this exercise since its context is absent-mindedness. Not that there is anything wrong with being absent-minded (there are other great methods for that!) but that's not the current goal, which is focused engagement, and in focused engagement the cultivation of an ability to tune out to the noise of the world. To spiral is to attune—to tune into the act of circling, certainly, but more importantly to tune out to the rest of the world. Negative attunement: white noise as earworm. But to tune out to the world is not to tune the world out. Specifically, the distinction I am trying to draw—literally—is an act of suspension, not of rejection.



Ted Hiebert. *Spirograph*, 2017. Ink on paper.

Circling creates—under most conditions—an element of centripetal or centrifugal force, depending on how the circling relationship is enacted. Drawing is no different.

One of the exercises in Marina Abramovic's method for attuning to the lived performance of presence is to write one's name on a piece of paper, as slowly as possible.⁸ The goal is to take a full 60 minutes to write one's name, with the condition of continual movement (of the pencil or pen) and focus (of the writing intention). It's a big ask in a technological era that disrespects time that could be spent more efficiently—if one is to dedicate an hour to writing one's name why not see how many times one could write it, turn the process into something more virtuosic, and in the process construct a competitive platform for the comparative assessment of performance? Who could write their name the most times in an hour? That seems like a challenge. But to write it slowly? "Painful" is how one student of mine described the process—a full-on perception of time being purposefully wasted. Or, perhaps better stated, of productivity being suspended. The spiral, then, as a symbol of suspension.

Alfred Jarry's 1896 woodcut *Véritable portrait of Monsieur Ubu* depicts a costumed Ubu with a large spiral on his stomach—a scarlet symbol of pataphysical shame that is also an icon to the scientific insistence of an imaginary movement. The spiral is an intestine but it is also a failed circle—or perhaps more pointedly, an insistence on the ridiculousness of the circle as a biological form. Circles deride process by pretending to be self-contained. In other

words, circles are self-justifying and as a consequence neither criterial nor particularly social. Heidegger claimed that a technology only really reveals its metaphysical conditions at moments of failure. But what Heidegger didn't realize was that technological success is meta-failure. Or, a technology that does not reveal its edges fails in advance to actually be itself. Existence is failure (this is the natural extension of Camus's "I rebel, therefore we exist"), an idea built into the idea of the idea itself. Failure thus becomes the criterion of existence (or ideas), at least when conceived technically, which is to say metaphysically. Graham Harman's "withdrawn objects" notwithstanding, the failure of technological metaphysics reveals the relational structure at the core of pataphysics. Jarry claimed that pataphysics extends "as far beyond metaphysics as the latter extends beyond physics"⁹ but perhaps more accurate would be to nod to Paul Virilio and say that pataphysics is the accident of metaphysics (just as metaphysics is the accident of physics), noting that with the invention of any technology comes the invention of its accident.¹⁰

But the argument is slippery. If a spiral is an imperfect circle then it must also circle imperfectly. A spiral must fail to spiral in order to maintain its criterial contour. A perfect spiral is imperfect. Otherwise it lacks identity, and with identity, recognizable markers of difference. Or, differently put, a perfect spiral fails to differentiate itself from the idea of the spiral, thus foreclosing on the possibility of being recognized as itself. A spiral must fail to spiral perfectly in order to become a(n imperfect) spiral.

This is Magritte's "treachery of images," seen as a conceptual claim rather than simply as a painting. The image of a pipe with the words *ceci n'est pas un pipe* written underneath is normally taken as a statement of the obviously complex relationship between objects and their representations. But the title is significant, for if this painting is actually an instance of *treachery* (as Magritte claims with the title) then the insidious element of the painting is not its obvious meaning but actually the opposite. *Ce n'est pas pas un pipe*. Treachery is in the double negative that masquerades as a negation of presence. But images don't fail to represent their subjects. They succeed too well, so well that we confuse the two, ideologically short-circuiting the very difference between them. *Ceci n'est pas un pipe*. But yes it is a pipe! Though, of course, no, it is a painting. But one cannot smoke the painting. Well, one could, but only in the way that kids smoke banana peels under the high school bleachers, which is to say the opposite way from which one smokes a pipe. And in any case, to do so would ruin the painting. The pipe can be smoked without ruining it. The painting, not so much.

It's less a paradox than a harnessing of attention; specifically, that aesthetic form of attention that is not attentive to its own investments of attention. Differently put, attention is an aesthetic mode and because of this it has about it a certain element of treachery. Or, as the artist Andrew Buckles insists: one does not draw images; one draws attention—most often one's own.¹¹ That they look like images is simply the treachery of aesthetic masquerade. Or the failure that makes them a spiral.

Refrain: *I take it back. Or not. In fact, maybe so much not that the act of taking it back becomes the counterpoint to the failed attempt at establishing a criterion. Poetic leverage. It's a little too tidy—but it works. More a circle than a spiral. A failure to fail. Try again.*

Laser Pointer Theory

I sit in a dark room with a laser pointer in my right hand. Facing me is a mirror, which I know because I put it there, not because I see it. I can't see it. The room is dark. So dark that I see nothing. But insofar as I know the mirror is there, I suppose I still do see it, in a certain manner of speaking. But what manner of speaking would that be? It's not really imagining, since my sight comes from knowledge, or maybe from memory, even though it's only been a minute or two since the lights have gone out. But it's also not really knowledge because I can't actually see it anymore, and the idea that it is a memory derides the fact that I put it there on purpose to be part of a present activity. But I did set it there. And a camera too, though I can't see it either. In my left hand, however, I have a remote—for the camera that I can't see but know to be there. I point my laser at the mirror and turn the camera on. It is set to a long exposure so that it will record an action rather than simply an image. In the dark, time and scale shift—knowledge becomes imagination, memories are second-guessed, and different ways of imagining vision become possible. I point the laser at my nose and begin to circle, around and around and around my face until the laser beam falls off.



In Hervé Guibert's *Ghost Image*, a theory of photography is inspired by an image that was never realized—a failed exposure of his mother that did not verify the elaborate details of the situation, but instead, in failing solidified the story as itself the archive of the moment. Baudrillard insisted that the world exists to be photographed, but in Guibert's rendition, the failure of the drive-to-documentation reveals its own haunting persistence.

My father forbade my mother to wear makeup or dye her hair, and when he photographed her he ordered her to smile, or he took the picture against her will while pretending to adjust the camera, so that she had no control over her image.¹²

In response Guibert did just the opposite—inviting his mother to dress herself as she pleased, to put on make-up, to experiment with poses, theatrics, *becoming*. And all the while, he took her pictures. It was designed to be a perfectly redemptive moment, except the film did not expose properly and the images all turned out blank. It was a real world failure, but one that Guibert confesses catalyzed the writing of the book itself: “the text would not have existed if the image had been taken ... this text is the despair of the image ... a ghost image.”¹³ In his mind, the ideas were vibrant precisely because the images failed—perhaps more

Ted Hiebert. *Spirograph*, 2018.

Color photograph, laser pointer.

vibrant than any actual picture could ever be. The idea of his mother exactly as she wasn't—or a memory that refused the camera to insist on the incommensurability of the moment itself. Entirely un-verifiable, but all the more concrete for that ephemerality. *Ceci n'est pas un image*. Much less (there is no image) and much more (there is everything but the image: the memory and the experience!). And out of this complexity, a theory of photography is born.

According to Nietzsche, we only remember what hurts.¹⁴ And while the camera largely now remembers for us, those moments where technological memory fails can sometimes catalyze—as they did for Guibert—a human relationship to memories as living moments waiting to not be forgotten. The trick is to try to find a way to do it on purpose.

A 2018 UK law makes it illegal to “shine or direct a laser beam towards a vehicle which is moving or ready to move.”¹⁵ The criterion for the crime—punishable by a prison term of up to five years—rests on the question of whether the laser beam “dazzles or distracts, or is likely to dazzle or distract, a person with control of the vehicle.”¹⁶ This because a well-aimed laser can actually blind a pilot, “lighting up” the cockpit of an aircraft with an intensity that prevents regular vision from focusing on its surroundings.¹⁷ It's not that surprising when one recognizes that a well-aimed laser pointer can certainly blind a camera—causing intense lens flare to the point of rendering the image entirely unusable. Point one into your eyes and you will find something similar. But a laser-pointer can also light a match on fire, igniting the combustible tip by the same power of focused illumination.

A light that bursts into flames before disappearing forever—causing panic, potential accident, or metaepistemological blindness. It's catalysis of a sort, though its sort feels somewhat violent (a violence that itself is photographic). Illuminated darkness.

There is something about S. D. Chrostowska's book *Matches* that resonates for me with Guibert's photographic story, grounded as it is in a theory of the unexposed. Only, maybe in an opposite direction. For me it's about darkness—not the image as a site of illumination but as representative of a moment waiting to burst into presence and then die. The kind of darkness you don't want to use a flashlight to see but a laser pointer or a lighter. A persistent light would illuminate too much and in so doing fail to actually reveal the dramatic power of the moment itself. And, if we follow Chrostowska and call her vignettes "matches" then this long book of short meditations is designed with combustibility in mind—ideas then worth torching in the process of encounter. Not made to last but made to quickly blind then extinguish, "to stand out and fall flat," leaving an afterimage that inevitably suffers from an ambiguity of memory—though images that also survive precisely because of this ambiguity.¹⁸

Matches are not ambiguous images however. Rather, they make ambiguous the world itself, casting beautiful shadows, dancing images, then extinguishing with dramatic flair. And to make sense of (or to orient oneself towards) such (ambiguous) situations, Chrostowska—in a slightly different context—argues that it is necessary to "overcom[e] ambiguity by an effort of conviction."¹⁹ However, if instead one wanted to preserve this trajectory towards the experiential (or even epistemologically) uncertain, it might

be worth insisting on the opposite: to insist on the lived vertigo of undecidability, or the combustible destiny of ideas and experiences. To overcome conviction by an effort of ambiguity.

Refrain: I take it back. Or not. In fact, maybe so much not that the act of taking it back becomes the counterpoint to the failed attempt at establishing a criterion. Poetic leverage. It's a little too tidy—but it works. More a circle than a spiral. A failure to fail. Try again.

Disorientation Exercise

I walk into a park, raise my video camera to chest-level and start spinning. Nothing fancy, just turning around and around and around. Until I fall down. Along the way I stumble and sometimes catch myself, I look up and around and notice that that does little to the project of staying upright, but that's ok. I know from dance and martial arts that there would be ways to avoid getting dizzy during this activity. It usually involves fixing the eyes on a point in the horizon or spinning the head first and allowing the body to follow. I don't use those methods. I want to fall down. The idea is to mess up the default ways in which the world appears. To see the world differently. The goal is dizziness. The method is spinning. I am searching for the simplest methods. It takes much less time than I expected—maybe 90 seconds at most (see the world anew in only 90 seconds!). Around and around and around. And then I fall down. But what I failed to factor in is that as my vision spins, so too does my body. Specifically my stomach. The world continues to spin after I fall, which is a great revelation, though I would



Ted Hiebert. *Spirograph*, 2017.
Performance. Magnuson Park, Seattle.

be happier with my new insights if my belly didn't feel like it was about to exit my body two ways.

The attempt to share disorientation presents a logistical conundrum since, in a relatively literal way, disorientation cannot be rendered representationally. That is, representation will inevitably fail to convey disorientation precisely at the point where disorientation itself becomes the subject of communication. Put differently, to talk about disorientation (in a way that makes sense) is to betray the spirit of that which is under discussion. This is not to say that disorientation is nonsensical (though it might be) but rather that its relationship to sense is superfluous. In this sense, disorientation might be best thought of as pseudo-sensical (para-sensical?) since it represents a state of mind that fails (and perhaps must) to bind itself to the (infra) structural conditions of sense. It has coherence but its state of being is not indebted to sense nor particularly dependent on any form of radical repositioning of sensical necessity. Disorientation is decidedly unradical and yet it is this lack of ambition that is its most ambitious mattering.

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein proposes the interesting idea that he has “a right to say ‘I can't be making a mistake about this’ even if I am in error.”²⁰ He does not really mean it as an epistemological generalization—the statement is catered to thinking through right and wrong ways to play the game of conviction. But I always wondered whether the inverse of this statement might be made to function with a certain performative cohesion—the idea that I might have the right to say (or even to believe) that “I am making a

mistake” about something, even if I am not in error? There is a certain operant theatricality here, one that Wittgenstein acknowledges too when he says: “The sentence ‘I can’t be making a mistake’ is certainly used in practice. But we may question whether it is then to be taken in a perfectly rigorous sense, or is rather a kind of exaggeration which perhaps is used only with a view to persuasion.”²¹ The claim to certainty, seen in this way, is a social gesture. And my interest is not simply in the theatrics of error and conviction, but in the consequences of theatrics as an epistemological form. For ultimately, like Chrostowska, Wittgenstein’s argument is for the primacy of conviction over certainty—though less provocative (for me) than Chrostowska in that it is also less catered towards creative and metaepistemological perspectives. But both of these thinkers raise for me the question of how to be mistaken on purpose—how to commit to a framework that marks conviction rather than certainty as its epistemological strategy, to the extent that one then knowingly exits a certain form of language game (bound to certainty) by taking games themselves metaphysically.

I always took Derrida as a phenomenologist, thinking that the only really interesting thing about undecidability is its ability to undermine structures of meaning in favor of those of experience. To crash critical distance by overplaying its game. It’s a form of Sloterdijk’s “critical proximity” achieved through a virtuosic acceleration of language rather than a tuning out.²² A hyper-presencing of constructive potential that ultimately fashions a (deconstructed) aesthetic of ruin. What else could be meant by hauntology? A ghost is not

something that appears with any form of certainty but something that one feels with ambiguous but persistent intuition: a cold draft in a warm room, a sudden silencing of ambient noise, a shifting blur moving across an empty room, a crow calling suddenly just as one remembers something about crows calling. It should be apparent that I care little if I am mistaken about Derrida's work, even if—in my being mistaken—there is a certain Derridean indifference to the usual rules of the game. It would be justified to dismiss my thoughts on this basis, which would be to acknowledge the errors as errors rather than as themselves haunted failures to materialize actual interaction.

Motion sickness is a problem for virtual reality for the same reason. The ghosts in the machine are the bodies that fall down when hyper stimulated by technological input—in this case a phenomenological virtuosity that throws ambiguity on the synthetic capacities of the body. As it turns out, the virtual is not informatic after all—at least not in that posthuman sense where information loses its body to the simulacral possibilities of cognitive code. Instead, the body haunts virtual reality and corporeality falls down—on purpose. “Visually induced motion sickness is a syndrome that occasionally occurs when physically stationary individuals view compelling visual representations of self-motion.”²³ Less a failing of the physical than an unmet challenge to the simulations themselves. The (virtual) world keeps spinning even though the body has already fallen down—or perhaps precisely because the body falls down. It's potentially interesting that the virtual can be made to spin by the power of a body alone.

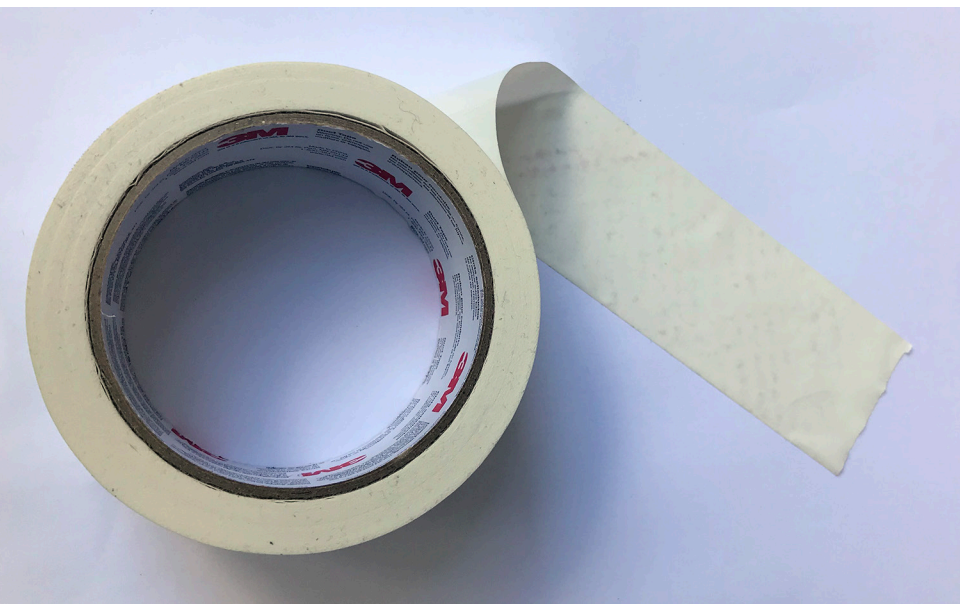
Perhaps disorientation occurs at a point where sense falls down.

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Postscript. Amphib[i]ological reflexivity

For a better disorientation experience, spin the book. Attach a piece of tape to the page and swing it around your head. If reading on a digital device, the challenge is somewhat greater but the strategy remains the same: tape still works for phones or tablets. The idea of tape attached to a desktop computer is funny too. The key here is not to think of this activity as an intervention into the text or device—the only intervention is one targeted at habituated modes of human engagement that assume a text can only be engaged in one way. That is, it is important to try to read the book as one spins—otherwise one is simply undermining the medium on a formal level, which is not the point. To maintain the relational engagement with a particular book, an attempt to read is required. The act can only truly fail, as Nicolas Bourriaud puts it, by “not making enough effort.”²⁴ It might also be differently thought as a particular reinvention of the “birth of the reader.”²⁵

Is it possible to make an idea fall down? And if so would the fallen idea still count as an idea, perhaps even as an example of a fallen paradigm of knowledge? Or counter-knowledge, which perhaps amounts to the same thing? Would a



Ted Hiebert. *Spirograph*, 2018.
Duct tape. Attach as shown.

fallen idea still be an idea at all (according to the criteria of ideas)? To consider it so might take a certain generosity of perspective, a performative acknowledgment of how concepts take on bodies...perhaps a phenomenology. Or a vitalism, a personification, an anthropomorphism: not “cautious” in the way Steven Shaviro describes redemptive anthropomorphism as a counter-maneuver to the problem of anthropocentrism,²⁶ but purposefully reckless in order to transfer agency away from oneself and onto the idea itself. That’s epistemology, after all—isn’t it?

What distinguishes (meta)epistemology, as knowledge of knowledge, is its amphibological reflexivity, as “a knowledge” (self-governing) like any other *and, at the same time*, formally, as “all knowledge” (other-governing and in principle requiring no further justification). In it, the creativity of the philosopher meets its match in the search for a grounding criterion that would encompass the possibilities of knowing: not only what has been and can be known (asserted, justified, verified) within any given cognitive-experiential framework, but also all conceivable paradigms of human knowledge.²⁷

Can a criterion know itself as a criterion, or would such knowledge undermine the criterial nature of the criterion itself? Is a criterion like a technology—something that, if Heidegger, Guibert, Derrida and others are right, can only be understood when it fails? At least one must acknowledge that not all fails are the same—and in this case the differences rely on attentiveness to the information one is distilling in

the circular processes that one engages. That the result may not be sensical in the usual way is not an argument against alternate forms of engagement. For sense—especially as a criterion for engagement—is sublimely disorienting; not only does sense not make sense but its pretense towards making sense makes irritating the sensical pretense itself. Or not. Maybe even so much not that the attempt itself is better thought as a philosophical spelling mistake, or whatever might be the criterial equivalent of a failure to make sense. An exercise in ambiguity.

Notes

- 1 S. D. Chrostowska, “Criterion Creation: A Metaepistemological Problem in Perspective,” *Parrhesia* 20 (2014), 87-101 (n. 41).
- 2 Johnny Golding, “Friendship,” in Lynn Turner, U. Selback and Ron Broglio, eds, *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 272.
- 3 Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 3.
- 4 S. D. Chrostowska, “Criterion Creation,” 87-101.
- 5 I am thinking around S. D. Chrostowska’s discussion of the link between creativity and creation. Quoting Deleuze, Chrostowska argues that philosophy and science are just as creative as any other disciplines. I disagree, but my disagreement stems not from a judgment on scientific or philosophical acts of creation, but rather on the difference between creation and creativity, the latter being a social process of mattering more than a constituted transformation of mattering facts. For Chrostowska’s discussion see “Criterion Creation,” 91.

- 6 Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," in Robert Label, *Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Paragraphic Books, 1959), 77-8.
- 7 Collège de 'Pataphysique, *Les 101 mots de la pataphysique* (Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 2016), 75. My translation.
- 8 Marina Abramovic, "Have you got what it takes to follow the Abramovic method?" *The Guardian*, May 12, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/video/2014/may/12/marina-abramovic-method-video>. Accessed July 15, 2018.
- 9 Alfred Jarry, *Exploits & Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1996), 21.
- 10 Paul Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst: An Interview with Philippe Petit*, trans. Michael Cavaliere (New York: Semiotext(e), 1999), 89.
- 11 Interview with Andrew Buckles, January 2014. See also Stacey Soli, "Thirty art works this month? I'll start them tomorrow." *Crosscut.com*, 10/3/2012. <http://crosscut.com/2012/10/stacey-solie-30-day-art-challenge>. Accessed July 15, 2018.
- 12 Hervé Guibert, *Ghost Image*, trans. Robert Bononno (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 11.
- 13 Ibid., 16.
- 14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1989), 61.
- 15 The National Archives, "Laser Misuse (Vehicles) Act 2018," <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/9/section/1/enacted>. Accessed July 15, 2018.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Tim Gavell, "Blackpool Airport pilots call for action after laser pointers target aircraft at night," *The Gazette*, September 27, 2017. <https://www.blackpoolgazette.co.uk/news/blackpool-airport-pilots-call-for-action-after-laser-pointers-target-aircraft-at-night-1-8773939>. Accessed July 15, 2018.

- 18 S. D. Chrostowska, *Matches: A Light Book* (New York: Punctum Books, 2015), xxvii.
- 19 S. D. Chrostowska, "Criterion Creation," 96.
- 20 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 88e.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xxxiii.
- 23 Lawrence Hettinger & Gary Riccio, "Visually Induced Motion Sickness in Virtual Environments," *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 1.3 (1992), 306-10.
- 24 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presses du Réel, 1998), 49.
- 25 This is, of course, Roland Barthes's famous phrase. See Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Books, 1977), 148.
- 26 Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 61.
- 27 S. D. Chrostowska, "Criterion Creation," 91.

Like a Moulting Snake The Residue Oeuvre as Third Circuit

Anneleen Masschelein

Since a long time, I've been interested in how Theory, in the last decades of the twentieth century, has been transformed and processed into something else, not just by artists and conceptual writers—most notably the Native Agents-group of Semiotext(e)¹—but by successful theorists themselves as well. Within various disciplines, scholars have produced what I call a “residue oeuvre”: one or a few literary or fictional works within a scholarly oeuvre that explore a genre or medium. These hybrid texts as a rule are far less-known (or well-received) than the critical work produced by their authors, but are nonetheless part and parcel of that oeuvre, to be appreciated by connoisseurs. To name just a few examples: philosopher Alain Badiou and psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas have written plays. Art historian Michael Fried is a poet. Julia Kristeva turned to detective *romans à clef*, and Jim Phelan and David Damrosch wrote a campus novel. Peter Sloterdijk and Antoine Compagnon both started their careers with a novel, whereas Nicholas Royle wrote one in the midst of his. Still others, like psychoanalyst Jean-Bernard Pontalis, transformed towards the end of their career into a different kind of author, putting out elegant small volumes of short fragments, aphorisms and meditations piled up in large stacks on the tables of French bookstores.

The more I looked, the more I found. I tried to narrow it down. What interested me were the obscure examples:

the literary work as a side-line, as opposed to double talents like Umberto Eco, who has become equally if not more well-known as a novelist than as a semiotician, and whose novelistic work stands on its own and is read by an audience unfamiliar with Eco's other work. But what about writers who in a substantial part of their oeuvre worked on the edge of theory and literature, and who exemplify the kind of writing that I have in mind: Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida? In these cases the residue oeuvre comes close to what Rosalind Krauss has called "paraliterature" or the "paraliterary space":

The paraliterary space is the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation; but it is not the space of unity, coherence, or resolution that we think of as constituting the work of literature. For both Barthes and Derrida have a deep enmity towards that notion of the literary work. What is left is drama without the Play, voices without the Author, criticism without the Argument.²

For Krauss, it is a style of postmodern critical writing and reasoning that is opposed to traditional criticism and one that blurs the boundaries between literature and criticism, or between theory and practice.³ The big difference with the residue oeuvre as I see it, is that the latter is not a stylistic or methodological term; rather, it denotes a position within an oeuvre, held together by the author function as defined by Foucault. This is why I prefer to use a collective noun: although it consists of one or more heterogeneous texts, the residue oeuvre is a body of work that is minor in the

Deleuzian sense—it works with language and concept in a different way.

While the residue oeuvre can be paraliterary or anecdotal or fragmentary, this is not necessarily the case. The plays by Bollas and Badiou, for instance, take on a literary form that cannot be called “postructuralist” or “metatheoretical” even if they do relate to the theoretical work.⁴ Likewise, the novels by Raymond Williams or Nicholas Royle are clearly novels, in the sense that they are fictional and that they have a relatively traditional plot. In the case of Barthes, I would argue that the last phase of his oeuvre, starting with *Roland By Roland Barthes*, is paraliterary in the sense intended by Krauss. But within his oeuvre, some short works like *Incidents* and *Mourning Diary*—and maybe also the notes for his courses at Collège de France—can be regarded as a residue oeuvre, although their posthumous publication raises the problem of agency and permission.⁵ The broad field of memoir, especially the genres autofiction (starting with Serge Doubrovsky’s *Fils*⁶ written to contradict Philippe Lejeune’s famous theory of autobiography⁷), autoethnography (put on the map by Laurel Richardson’s *Fields of Play*⁸), and numerous illness narratives (Jean-Luc Nancy’s “L’Intrus,”⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Dialogue on Love*¹⁰ or Susan Gubar’s *Memoir of a Debulked Woman: Enduring Ovarian Cancer*,¹¹ to name but a few of the most remarkable ones) is also close to the residue oeuvre, as is the *abécédaire*, a beloved form of theorists that seeks to avoid some of the implications of autobiography through random alphabetic entries (besides Barthes and Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, also Gérard Genette, art historian Jean Clair, and Vincianne Despret have written lovely *abécédaires*).

At this point, it's not my aim to delineate, map or categorize the residue oeuvre, for starters because I do not believe such a thing is possible. However, I do want to draw out some noticeable tendencies. Written late in life, during moments of crisis, or at the beginning of a career, the residue oeuvre stands apart within a theoretical oeuvre. It addresses many of the issues that are central within the main oeuvre, but in another voice and tone, yielding different insights. The search for form is central, with a predilection for traditional (popular or nineteenth-century) genres that are knowingly and almost clinically subverted: play, detective, campus novel or epistolary forms. Sometimes, the residue oeuvre uses another medium like video (Mieke Bal) or photography (Baudrillard), or it takes on a combined intermedial form (literature and photography is a beloved combination). When the residue oeuvre occurs at the beginning of an oeuvre, one can imagine that the literary form serves as a spark that offsets the writing, allowing the author to find her voice, even when it is ultimately in a different discipline in which the oeuvre will materialize. Later in life, the residue oeuvre often marks the gradual ending of the scholarly oeuvre, as in the case of Genette. Most importantly, regardless of when it appears in an author's lifespan or of how many texts it consists the residue oeuvre is a *Fremdkörper* (literally, a "foreign body") within a steady, recognizable production.

It attracts some attention—praise but often also mixed reviews—but on a much smaller scale of insiders, people in the know. Both in this sense of the audience and the themes it addresses, a residue oeuvre is not independent of the theoretical oeuvre in the shadow of which it ascends. It spirals around the main oeuvre, sprouts fresh tendrils on

familiar themes and appears first and foremost as a strategy to preserve creativity. The residue oeuvre is not just a sidetrack, or the realization of the secret desire of the critic as *poète manqué* (although it may be that, but who cares about the writer's intention these days?). Nor it is merely a collection of essays that have appeared elsewhere (although it is often that—for instance, Terry Castle's amusing collection *The Professor and Other Writings*¹²) or that were commissioned, for instance by an editor (Didier Anzieu's meditation on Beckett¹³). Most of all the residue oeuvre appears as a sedimentation, as a substance that has congealed and concentrated within the oeuvre, that contains its flavor but that is not consumed by itself. The residue oeuvre fosters the flow of writing by derailing it. It defends creativity against the strains that come with life, against the pressure or drudgery of the quantified, standardized demands of academic production. This last reason especially—along with theoretical and methodological motivations found in feminist, poststructuralist and materialist philosophies—is often cited explicitly, either in the main text or in the epitexts. It explains why these works seem to have become more prominent in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century neoliberal university culture, although some poignant examples—like Victor Shlovsky's epistolary novel *Zoo, or Letters not about Love*¹⁴—date back to the early twentieth century, when literature as a practice and the humanities as research fields started to diverge into different disciplines.

An avid collector of residue oeuvres, I simultaneously became fascinated by what may seem as its counterpoint, by the lowest point of entry into creativity and the literary work: “literary advice” and what I would call “contemporary

writerly culture” that is pervaded by the democratic but highly commercialized (American) promise that “everyone can be a writer.”¹⁵ This often-ridiculed and neglected corpus has been steadily growing since the mid-nineteenth century, dispensing worn-out mantras like Write What You Know, Find Your Own Voice, Show Don’t Tell, or Kill Your Darlings, along with magic formulas to overcome writer’s block, and standardized plots. In various genres—manuals, self-help books, subscription programs, specialized magazines, interviews, blogs, podcasts, *et cetera*—usually in series, different authorities within the book industry (authors, creative writing teachers and gurus, publishers and editors) first and foremost address aspiring and amateur writers. The genre is linked to the rise of professional authorship and usually dated back to E.A. Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” and to the exchange between Sir Walter Bessant and Henry James on the art and craft of fiction.¹⁶

Neither the waning hegemony of the book in the twentieth century, that increasingly has to compete with other entertainment media, nor the birth of narratology¹⁷ and the theory wars that deepened the divide between creative writing and English studies as well as within English departments, posed serious threats to literary advice. Quite the contrary, it has been flourishing since the 1970s into a global industry in the slipstream of the self-help industry.¹⁸ Several factors have contributed to this. The neo-liberal emphasis on permanent learning on the one hand, and craft, self-fulfillment and creativity on the other hand, fostered the notion of the ‘creative entrepreneur’—a flexible, self-managing, self-referential producer of immaterial labor—of which the writer is an example *par excellence*.¹⁹ Add to this the expansion of creative writing programs, in various

circuits, from academic, to commercial, and community-based,²⁰ and the transformation of literary culture into a collective, popular culture of passionate readers who are led to books through various media, distributors and gatekeepers.²¹ Moreover, the creative industries also increase the demand for writers—producers of content—beyond literary publishing, while maintaining their anti-academic stance.²² Finally, the DIY ethos of alternative movements and new possibilities of reaching an audience via the internet and self-publishing foster the myth of the self-made author and empower amateur writers, especially in relation to what is called “the memoir boom,” autobiographical writing with an inspirational or therapeutic slant.²³

It is not a secret that creativity in this form is sold to the masses by neoliberal and post-democratic institutions and entrepreneurs that benefit from individualization and the quiet middle-class contentment that writing as a meaningful activity may provide. Literary advice is maligned because the normative poetics it propagates lead to a sclerotized, programmed literary production. This is certainly the case for advice related to popular genres (like the mystery, screenplay, erotic literature, young adult novel and memoir), but even in middlebrow and highbrow genres—Literature with an uppercase L—standardization is rife in the program era. And yet, in spite of this apparent uniformity, advice also has something to offer. To begin with: a body of practical insight into the mores and customs of the literary world and publishing industry. Although its recipes are seldom innovative, advice makes visible the ve(i)nal circuits through which literary life pulses. Moreover, since the mid-twentieth century, it also speaks of creativity and writerly life. The appeal of this literary lifestyle far exceeds novices

who dream of becoming a writer and has quite some clout in contemporary culture. It is expressed in genres like “the devoutly literary bestseller” and in the literary adaptations of Merchant and Ivory and Miramax.²⁴

It is also the impetus behind the fetishization of books, libraries, reading chairs, and other literary paraphernalia (cups with inspirational quotes), featured on Pinterest and sold in museum and library shops alongside stacks of beautifully edited books about writing and the writing life. Concomitant genres like the “writing memoir” and the “novel of commission” by widely divergent authors from Annie Dillard, Stephen King, and Patti Smith, to Maggie Nelson and Chris Kraus are unexpected, lasting bestsellers.²⁵ Not all of this is simply a triumph of the creative industries. Despite the slim chances of actually being published and being an author, writing is still one of the most accessible of the arts, and literature continues to resist complete recuperation. A residue always remains. Even advice itself can become a form of resistance, a creative form of its own, as in unorthodox “manuals” like *Uncreative Writing* (Kenneth Goldsmith) and *What it is* (Lynda Barry) and in autofictional “writing memoirs” like S. D. Chrostowska’s *Permission*.²⁶

Writing a novel entails having a vision from the outset, no matter how undefined, as well as the passion to continue. *Permission* deals with the necessity of constraints and regular working habits (solitude, walking, observation and the manic-depressive nature of creativity). It explores the relation of writing to death and destruction—writing as creation *ex nihilo* and *ad nihilum*—and the spectral, double-binded relation between a writer and a specific, silent reader. It celebrates the contemplative literary life,

in nature and in imaginary and real libraries, but also in and against the neoliberal university, without concealing its hardships. Nothing is ever resolved. All that is said is simultaneously undone. An exploration of the outer limits of the epistolary form, *Permission* does not come across as a postmodern experiment. A spirit of dark forests and 1980s Polish spleen pervades the novel and the blend of history, philosophy, art writing and fiction is subtly flavoured with Romantic irony. There is a lucid, cool passion looming behind the monstrous—unruly, unclassifiable—form of the project that fascinates and repulses. The narrator’s aloofness, hiding behind the pseudonym Fearn Wren, forecloses the aspirational identification that constitutes the appeal of popular writing memoirs.

A wonderfully comical posture for the twenty-first century writer emerges at the end of *Permission*: that of the “meditating labyrinth walker,”²⁷ who pursues a glorious yet superfluous task of slaying a self-created monster, that requires sacrifice and concentration. The writer pushes along in the illusion of a *fait accompli*, the book is done: “*No shadows. All clear.*”²⁸ Yet we know—having read the book—that the meditating walker cannot just leave the labyrinth or escape the shadows. It’s not a walk in the park, there is no way out. Writing is endless, publication temporarily halts it to transform the wren’s song into the stony remainder of a dead letter (fearn)—as enigmatic as the portrait of an unknown dead infant—only to start wandering anew once the darkness has returned.

To read *Permission* just as an example of a writing memoir, that deals with creativity and writerly life, seems quite reductive and generic. Reading *Permission* as a residue oeuvre offers a way of out of this. It allows us to see how

the many philosophical questions related to creativity in *Permission* are also addressed in Chrostowska's academic work: the permission to write and the difficulty of judgment in creation that gives way to conviction. This does not entail a new reduction of the novel to the other work in Chrostowska's oeuvre, but it provides an entrance into a work that although oddly compelling, is not very inviting to the reader for whom the letters in this 'post-book'²⁹ although published, are *not* intended: not only is it written for one specific, unknown addressee and quite emphatically does not really seek a wide audience. As Chrostowska puts it, *Permission* is 'phatic'³⁰ in the sense of Roman Jakobson: it wants to communicate, but not with regard to a referent, sender, receiver or even a poetic message; what counts is the openness of the medium, of the conduit.

But where does a book like this belong, then? What is its habitat? An answer is found in the dialogue between the old and the new critic in the postface to *Permission*:

Despite all the unexploded bullets, not many would be prepared to renounce the first and second circuits, the commercial and the independent. To be a writer and not publish—that's a contradiction in terms. I don't blame all those who feel they can make a living writing books people seem to like for wanting to ply a viable and gratifying trade. But in the third circuit I see the potential not only for unsupervised outpourings of verbal beauty, but for binding commitments, gut-wrenching uncertainty, uncanny immediacy, and irresistible candour. *And even a refuge for published authors from time to time.*³¹

In the interview with Kate Zambreno, the notion of the third circuit—or culture as it is called here—is further fleshed out as a form of “semi-self-publishing.” Neither seeking out a great public, nor satisfied in the small circle of the avant-garde of writer’s writers, the third circuit seems uncannily close to what I call the residue oeuvre.

The third culture I am playing with, is the semi-private art of the novel, the essay, the letter, or generic writing, in whatever genre. Minor literature out of major circulation. But by no means fated to be mediocre, by no means low-flying. Literature that makes no obvious compromises, because it doesn’t have to; that values craft and the fulfillment that comes with making something worth communicating, if only with one of several persons; that never becomes packaged as a book. ... This sort of writing has nothing to do with humility, with self-effacement, or with the secrecy of such fellowship, but, instead, with transvaluing the priorities of recognition—even the little of it available to literature in the mainstream media. Not as a protest, but as a withdrawal. As a return to the private. To stop holding one’s breath, to quit checking one’s rank.³²

In this characterization Chrostowska captures something about the residue oeuvre that has haunted my thinking about the residue oeuvre for a long time: why the need to publish it? While I can easily imagine numerous reasons for scholars to explore another genre, style or medium, it has always puzzled me that they also feel the need to share this,

to publish it. Because in spite of their success in one form of writing, publishing a residue oeuvre is not without risk. Indeed, more often than not, it is judged “a failure,” a minor folly but not a serious work of art, nor of criticism.

The residue oeuvre is not just a necessary sidetrack, a movement upstream within an otherwise successful, productive career in order to preserve creativity. It is a conduit, a medium. Its semi-public existence is paradoxically a way to withdraw from judgment: not simply from the internal fears and blockages that the advice industry promises to lift, but from judgment in a more impersonal form. In an intellectual culture—academic and literary alike—that has all but replaced judgment and critique with quantitative measurements, there is a third circuit that co-exists with the markets of great and limited production but that escapes all norms and customary assessment. For this reason, and not necessarily for its paraliterary form, the residue oeuvre constitutes a form of resistance, of disobedience, by circumventing the middlemen and the gatekeepers, by withdrawing from judgment. The result is not intended as an alternative that excludes: it’s not a new path, but rather another turn in a labyrinth. It is a residue that produces an authorship to come, a minor authorship. The oeuvre thus also becomes a fundamentally different concept, like the new critic’s caricature of the credible author: “a moulting snake,”³³ the remainders of a runaway author who is off, into her oeuvre, “expect[ing] to be followed only by rifles and hounds.”³⁴

Notes

- 1 Some of the terms used to describe this kind of fiction are “theoretical fiction” (Joan Hawkins “Theoretical Fiction,” in Chris Kraus *I Love Dick*, new edition, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006, 213), “Lonely Girl Phenomenology” (Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*, 135) or “autotheory” (Maggie Nelson, “Riding the Blinds. Micah McCrary interviews Maggie Nelson” *Los Angeles Review of Books* 4 September 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/riding-the-blinds/#>: Accessed July 23, 2018).
- 2 Rosalind Krauss, “Poststructuralism and the ‘Paraliterary,’” *October* 13 (1980), 36-40. (37-38)
- 3 As Hal Foster points out, the paraliterary is not just found in art criticism, but also in feminist writing. A related term is Jane Gallop’s “anecdotal theory” that takes the anecdote as its starting point. See Hal Foster, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), x; Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).
- 4 See Anneleen Masschelein, “Psychoanalysts Finding Form: (Auto)Fictional Experiments in Contemporary Psychoanalysis,” *Relief* 4.1. (2010), 123-144; and Christopher Bollas and Anneleen Masschelein, “Unconscious Thinking out of Bounds: Christopher Bollas as Thinker and Artist,” *S: Journal of the Jan van Eyck Circle for Lacanian Ideology Critique* 4 (2011): 109-120.
- 5 See Eric Aeschmann, “Désaccord autour des notes posthumes de Roland Barthes,” *La Libération* 1/21/2009. http://next.liberation.fr/culture/2009/01/21/desaccords-autour-des-notes-posthumes-de-roland-barthes_304293. Accessed May 30, 2018; Sondra Bacharach and Deborah Tollefsen, “You Complete Me: Posthumous Works and Secondary Agency,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 49.4 (2015), 71-86.
- 6 Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: éditions Galilée, 1977).
- 7 Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

- 8 Laurel Richardson, *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).
- 9 Jean-Luc Nancy, "L'Intrus," trans. Susan Hanson, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 2.3 (Fall 2002), 1-14.
- 10 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).
- 11 Susan Gubar, *Memoir of a Debulked Woman: Enduring Ovarian Cancer* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2012).
- 12 Terry Castle, *The Professor and Other Writings* (New York: Harper, 2010).
- 13 Didier Anzieu, *Beckett* (Paris: Seuil/Archimbaud, 2004).
- 14 Viktor Shklovsky, *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971).
- 15 I borrow the term "literary advice" from Christopher Hilliard's interesting study of amateur writing in Britain in the early twentieth century. While self-help and literary advice and creative writing as institutions are primarily Anglo-Saxon phenomena, they have by now spread in other writing cultures, where they often merge with existing forms of advice and writing manuals.
- 16 Edgar Allan Poe, *The Raven, and, The Philosophy of Composition*. San Francisco/New York: Paul Elder and compagny, 1906, Sir Walter Besant, *The Art of Fiction*, Boston: Cupples, Upham and Compagny, 1885 and James' response, "The Art of Fiction," *Longman's Magazine* 4 (September 1884).
- 17 Quite strikingly, quite a number of proponents of this scientific project of developing a universal methodology for narrative structure—most importantly, Gérard Genette and David Bordwell—use advice as a starting point for analysis, while at the same time debunking its myths and shifting the attention from writer to reader and from process to product.
- 18 Micki McGee. *Self-Help Inc: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 19 Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 48-52.
- 20 Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University

- Press, 2011); Michelene Wandor, *The Author is Not Dead, Merely Somewhere Else: Creative Writing after Theory* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).
- 21 Jim Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
 - 22 Bridget Conor, "Gurus and Oscar Winners: How-To Screenwriting Manuals in the New Cultural Economy," *Television and New Media* 15:2 (2012/2014), 121-138.
 - 23 Julie Rak, *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013); G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
 - 24 The "devoutly literary bestseller" aka "Lit-lit" are novels that nostalgically celebrate a modernist aesthetics of great Literature that acquire both critical and commercial acclaim, by authors like Michael Cunningham, Alan Hollinghurst and Ian McEwan. See Collins, *Bring on the Books for Everybody*, 221-226. Collins also devotes a chapter to "Miramaxing," the successful adaptation strategy used by the Weinstein brothers that turns high literary, intertextual novels like *The English Patient* into romances that celebrate literature.
 - 25 Michelene Wandor defines the writing memoir as "autobiographical words of wisdom, interviews, aphorisms by famous, successful, money-earning writers They may be anecdotal, be interesting as artistic memoirs, recounting the way work, the imagination and the life may inter-relate." (Wandor, *The Author is Not Dead*, 116). The "novel of commission" discussed by Buurma and Heffernan is something else. It is a novel about the desire to write and the negotiation of institutional constraints and the necessary freedom. They take Barthes's *Preparation of the novel* (which I would also consider a residue oeuvre) as their starting points but see many examples in contemporary American literature: "For Sheila Heti and other novelist writing like her, successfully writing the commissioned work—the

- twenty-first century version of Barthes's "Wanting-to-Write" novel—involves a similar renegotiation of the terms of novelistic realism in order to reconfigure their imagined relations to literature's commissioning and canonizing institutions." Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, "Notation after the 'Reality Effect': Remaking Reference with Roland Barthes and Sheila Heti," *Representations* 125.1 (2014), 80-102 (88).
- 26 Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Lynda Barry, *What It Is* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2008); S. D. Chrostowska, *Permission* (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2013).
- 27 Chrostowska, *Permission*, 189.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 189.
- 29 S. D. Chrostowska, "Seven and a Half Studies," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 33.3 (2013), 66-86 ("The Post-Book," 76-86).
- 30 S. D. Chrostowska, "The Third Circuit: Postface to *Permission*," *The New Quarterly* 130 (Spring 2014), 53-60.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 60, my italics.
- 32 S. D. Chrostowska and Kate Zambreno, "Bomblog" <http://www.bombsite.com/articles/7440>. Accessed July 23, 2018.
- 33 Chrostowska, "The Third Circuit," 59.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 60.

Louis Bury

11/9/17

Dear Emily,

When you became pregnant three years ago, I wrote a series of letters addressed to you that I never sent. I wrote because your pregnancy seemed to me an impossibility: impossible because it was medically uncertain whether you even could get pregnant and carry a baby to term, and impossible because you conceived Tim and Andy at the exact age, thirty, doctors had once predicted you would be dying from lupus. You weren't even supposed to be alive and yet here you were not just living but creating two new lives. A reckoning with my own feelings and beliefs about you was in order.

I never sent you the letters because I hadn't yet begun to reckon with the style of preemptive coping that I refined in my twenties. At and away from the poker table, I conditioned myself to expect losses—including and especially the loss of you—so as to be able to remain indifferent to them when they arrived. It was as though I'd decided to walk through life with my abdominals flexed at all times, in case the world ever suckerpunched me. It was as though I'd decided to self-administer a years-long dose of novocaine to the pain receptors in my heart. Writing you letters and then not-sending them fit this pattern in that it allowed me to

explore my feelings of vulnerability without actually feeling vulnerable and open to you.

Emily, I'm going to send you this letter when it's done, but I'm not sure it's functioning all that different. I remember when I visited you in Rochester this summer and belatedly showed you the published opening chapter of this book I'm writing, the one where I recite a Jack Spicer poem on my way to visit you in the hospital. You said, accurate and perceptive, that it was strange to see yourself being addressed in a piece of writing and yet to know that you weren't the actual addressee. Open letters function the same way, maintaining an intellectual distance even as they posture at intimate address.

Emily, I want to write the letter that collapses the distance between us even as it maintains it. The letter whose head and whose heart would be open, accepting, one and the same. Emily, we're heirs to an emotional withdrawal that, in the person of our father, looks as though it were masculine obliviousness or indifference, but is actually an inherited form of self-preservation against genocide's horrors. Telling yourself that nothing can hurt you won't make it true, but it just might grant you the temporary strength that perseverance requires.

un-preemptively yours,

Lou

11/14/17

Dear Emily,

My first day of sixth grade, a hulking older kid from the neighborhood informed me, his face twisted into a scowl, that it would be “Freshman Friday” at week’s end. The other sixth-graders and I were to expect to receive “free shots,” lots of them, on the school bus that day. To prepare, each night that week I’d close the door to my bedroom, take off my shirt, stare at my lean torso in the mirror, tense my stomach muscles, and punch myself repeatedly in the abdomen. The harder I clenched my stomach, the more pain I convinced myself I would be able to absorb.

The punchline, as it were, is that I never got punched by anybody other than myself. The Friday bus ride came and went without the least bit of recognition on any upperclassman’s face. Somehow, I didn’t feel silly or relieved so much as proud. Nothing transpired but I believed—falsely, of course—that I would have been ready if something had. As if to reinforce the delusion that you can preempt pain by preparing for it, I soon after developed the habit of doing one hundred sit-ups each night before bed.

Emily, in addressing you like this, I’m trying to find a way to write about the experience of non-experience, the event of the non-event, the reality of fantasy. Why you? Why from an intellectual remove? Because even though I had minimal direct experience of everything that happened to you from sixteen to twenty-six—the illness and the drug addiction and the physical and emotional pain—that

indirect experience has been one of the defining experiences of my life.

unclenched,
Lou

11/20/17

Dear Emily,

On the morning of the September 11 World Trade Center plane attacks, grandma walked the mile or so from her job in the fashion district to my NYU dormitory near Union Square. With the subways and bridges closed, she needed somewhere to stay until she could return to her Brooklyn apartment.

When I met her in the dorm lobby, clumped with dazed and sobbing students, she was discordantly effusive. *What a beautiful lobby*, she gushed, *I love this architecture!* Grandma, I admonished her, taking her by the shoulders and then gesturing at the distraught surrounding students to indicate the inappropriateness of aesthetic commentary. *Oh, please*, she cut me off, with a wave of her hand, *After what I've been through, this is nothing.*

The incident's dark absurdity puzzled me for years. Even for a Holocaust survivor, comparing two tragedies' degree of severity seemed trivializing, beside the point. But that was precisely the point: grandma's experience living in the Warsaw Ghetto had instilled in her the value, if not necessity, of dissociation for psychological survival in times of duress. She was as rattled as anybody else in New York

that day, but she expressed it by dismissing the possibility that anything short of genocide could rattle her.

Emily, as I write this letter, I miss grandma like never before. I miss the way she made toughness appear so tender; miss the way that, once you were inside the warmth of her protective shell, snuggled together on the fold-out couch bed, she made it seem as though the world had never blown cold. Emily, I haven't experienced a winter anywhere near as dark as what grandma did, but the memory of its chill remains in my—in our—blood. They say lupus can cause the extremities to run cold on account of restricted blood flow. But even without the disease, my instinct has always been to insulate myself against even so much as the possibility of a shiver.

thawingly,
Lou

11/21/17

Dear Emily,

This year I've let my body grow—like dad's—softer, less defined. Instead of waking up and exercising, I wake up and write. Instead of riding my bike through the freezing rain, I take the subway. I haven't done a sit-up in months, no longer care how loose or tight my stomach appears. What was I preparing for during those years of bench presses and protein shakes, during the year of waking up at 6am to run lonely marathon loops around Central Park? As I conditioned myself to withstand physical pain for no reason

other than to feel it a little bit less the next time, I was secretly proud of my high threshold for self-inflicted suffering.

Emily, the last time we spoke before we became estranged in our twenties, you cursed what you perceived as my perfect life. The irony is that I spent much of those depressive years sitting at a virtual poker table trying not to feel: vacuum sealed perfection. Emily, the softer and less perfect I've let my body grow, the softer has grown my heart. Everybody in our family disapproved of your pregnancy because it was such a high risk proposition. But you made space in your body for the risk. It was a bad bet but a good way to live.

with love and admiration,

Lou

Appendix A: A joke
(told twice, each incrementally and alt-
sequentially ... or perhaps once, repeated
with and for emphasis)

Origin unknown, arr. Cecchetto

I

“Ah yes, the radio,” the second farmer considers.

“Well, the radio is actually exactly the same as the telephone, but without the wiener dog.”

Two farmers, many years ago, are watching the installation of the first telephone lines in their area.

The first farmer thinks about this for a moment, before nodding. “Okay,” he says, “that makes sense to me.”

The first turns to the second and says, “I just don’t understanding these modern inventions, they’re so complicated.”

“Take the telephone,” he continues, “it is just like a really
long wiener dog:
you wag its tail at your house, and it barks somewhere in
the middle of the city.”

“But then, how do you explain the radio?”

The second replies: “They’re actually quite simple, it’s just a matter of thinking of it in the right way.”

||

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The second replies: “They’re actually quite simple, it’s just a
matter of thinking of it in the right way.”

“Take the telephone,” he continues, “it is just like a really
long wiener dog:
you wag its tail at your house, and it barks somewhere in
the middle of the city.”

The first farmer thinks about this for a moment, before
nodding. “Okay,” he says, “that makes sense to me.”

“But then, how do you explain the radio?”

“Ah yes, the radio,” the second farmer considers.

“Well, the radio is actually exactly the same as the
telephone, but without the wiener dog.”

Contributors

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Consisting in historical scholarly work, art-criticism, and fiction, S.D. Chrostowska's writing exhibits a vitality that seems always on the edge of breaking differently, while also limning a solidity that suggests each trajectory has always been fated to be exactly what it is. The complementarity of these forces—the thing that in their being together as one makes it impossible that they are the same—makes Chrostowska's oeuvre irreducible, unabstractable, unrepeatable, and—yes—catalytic. In this, Chrostowska's work doesn't simply stage another freedom/fate conundrum, but also constitutes the conundrum itself in its aesthetic profile.

Contributors

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Ted Hiebert

Anneleen Masschelein
Gerhard Richter
Patrick Seniuk

Catalyst books build speculative communities, inviting a wide range of perspectives into conversations about shared artistic, political, and intellectual values while privileging the unique, distinct and personal insights that characterize any single voice of engagement. Each volume in the series provides an in-depth look at an active thinker or artist—seeking after the full relevance of their work. The series focuses in particular on voices that have not already been widely featured but who have unique and relevant perspectives to share on questions of art, theory and culture.



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