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*Notes on Art and Transcendence*

by Miriam Atkin

1. *Techne*

The course of my life thus far has been externally mapped by a number of forces. After finding my first captain and cartographer in the God of the old testament, each new transcendent figure who served as point of focus by which my identity could settle into balance had traces of its original precedent, to whom I was taught to pray as soon as I could speak. His sanction could substantiate the whole lot of them because, as the most abstract, he was also the least arguable. Death, too, was inarguable, yet proved an insufficient image of transcendence because, when I pictured my life from death's perspective, I found myself still beholden to divine vision, as death's absolute negative turned positive when situated as life's constitutive power. To really believe in death, I would have to forget transcendence. The sciences—intended for the extension (medical technology), amelioration (industrial technology), and fortification (military technology) of human life—offered little help. If I were to acquiesce to the wisdom of these instrumental modes, I might guarantee for myself a longer, easier, and safer life, but in a logic so invested in mitigating mortality, I recognize a kind of death drive where the fixation upon eliminating evil became an inescapable immersion in it.



Medicine asked me to believe in a better life that was only attainable by the wholesale sacrifice of my native-born sense for what “better” might feel like. Soon enough, the absurdity became apparent of a life in which “improvement” felt increasingly uncomfortable, invasive, and disorienting. By abandoning the promise that my body might attain a final *correctness* by mechanical (medical) means, I am forced into the homelessness of a world without any ideal of the right body. This new world was marked by chaotic pain and a nagging fear of death. Under these conditions, there appeared a kind of magic in the notion of pure work—difficulty for its own sake—which might break the sadomasochistic spell of God-deprived self-subjugation. *Techné* represented for me the belief in an irrefutable somatic reality; if I could resist the evaluative impulse and simply call my material present true, I might finally rest into the tender friendship of proximate things.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jay DeFeo labored for eight years on *The Rose*. Here, her efforts anchor the center of the image she makes. Alone in her apartment, the center radiates outward, stretching toward the daylight.

## 2. Des Nombres et Des Êtres

*I fear sleep as one fears a great hole, leading one knows not where;  
I see only infinity through all my windows,*

*And my mind, always haunted by vertigo,  
Is jealous of the insensibility of the void.  
—Ah! I will never be free of Numbers and Beings!<sup>2</sup>*

Baudelaire as one who remembers lying in bed at night with the door slightly open and falling asleep to the sound of the mother or the maid moving in the house. Now he is awake, ears attuned, ready for the slightest sound of her. He seeks hints of her gentle surveillance and so enacts his own, limbs and torso keyed to the internal commotion of their organic processes. In bed, he remembers the sun, and the way his own vision was humbled and dissolved by light. He lies stationed in a turret with many windows. There is space all around. Worms and ground moles swarm the walls of his tower and creep into the room. Phrases march through his head in search of an author. Their numbing senselessness is not that of music, but of math; the vague feeling of some problem to be worked out.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (New York: Dover, 1964), 114.



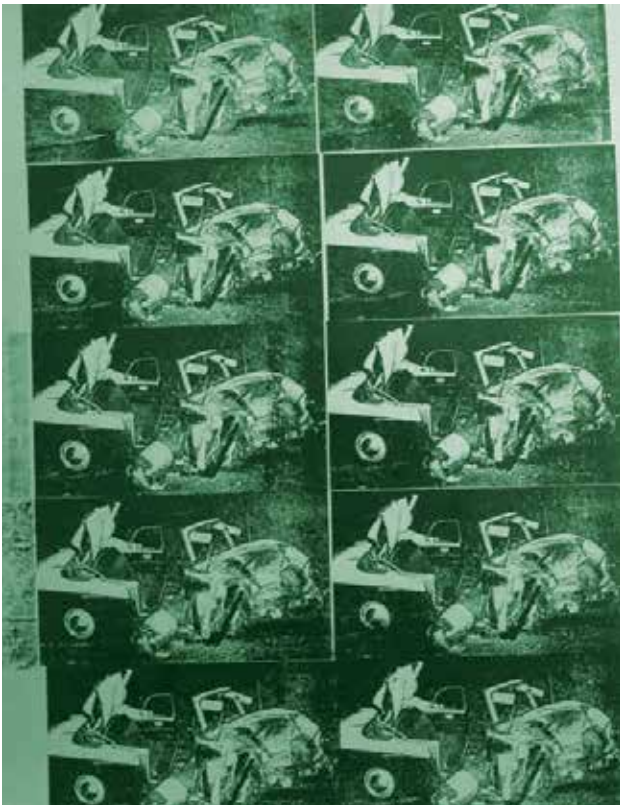
### 3. Intelligence from Above

In Jerusalem, the price one pays for community is the repeated interference of outside voices announcing hostility from those dark city quarters flanking the town center. The black water tanks mounted on enemy rooftops, their doorways decorated with blue Hajj symbols, articulate national identity for the dominant in marking out all points of foreign infiltration. Intelligence from above, which identifies one's neighbor as also an opponent, warns the nationalist to feel frightened by that neighbor's approach. If the two possible responses to fear are fight and flight, and the collective imperial motivation that is the context of one's decision altogether eliminates the second possibility, one is driven to militancy upon the orders of a sovereign God. It is a noble cause, and its violent defense is the very activity that identifies the spatial parameters of a particular belief system. Belief becomes something one can dwell in, as God's watch secures a safe home. Thus, under conditions of imperialism, and because the settler will not leave, God's influence demands that the adversary remain always close by. There is a vague, unsatisfied dream of intimacy; of getting one's hands around the enemy's neck so as to finally see the flecks in his eyes, the subtle hues of his skin that might be foreign to one's own genetic complex; to hold him there and finally be sure of the difference.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Wafa Hourani's *Qalandia 2067* imagines the future of a Palestinian refugee camp in miniature. Inside the barracks-like stone buildings, domestic life is business as usual. What can the hovering eye of the artist know of the private histories he has himself composed from cardboard and celluloid? His perspective ironizes the colonizer's fantasy of perfect vision.

#### 4. Blindness

Carl Schmitt recognized in 19th century America a substitution of the old, towering, monarchical god-figure with the voice of the collective. Activities of the state worked for a deified image of the people. With God's vision thus granted to the earthly domain of democracy, Schmitt contests that we have thus lost our old vantage point, that cosmic masthead from which the approaching evil could be picked out and thwarted. With this heritage, how does a person—as representative of the elevated collective—decide who is the enemy? The response to evil's approach is fear, and to its ambiguity is anxiety.





## 5. Cataloguing

The clear-cut system of signs which I'm asked to use in order to identify the Palestinian—his dark-colored water tank, the special license plate on his car—grants me the comfort of knowing, and immobilizes him in his easy comprehensibility. The imperial West has a history of wishing to expose the Casbah to light. And here in America, when I exercise my buying power, I am invited to enjoy looking down upon an array of well-lit and clearly labeled items that I may scrutinize in order to discern if each are best for my needs. I can approach the merchandise with a captious, distrustful attitude, as any signs of belief on my part would subject my dollars to scamming. This defensive method is my general strategy for communication. The thumbnail picture of the person's face, the postcard image of some wild landscape, eliminate that experience of “follow(ing) with the eye—while resting on a summer afternoon—a mountain range on the horizon or a branch that casts its shadow on the beholder.”<sup>4</sup> No longer forced to either distantly contemplate the mountain's beauty or find myself immersed in scaling its height, I can simply decide whether or not I want it.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hanna Arendt, (London: 1973), 219-53.

<sup>5</sup> For both Warhol and Duchenne, to take a photo was to imagine the unlikely meeting with another proximate body and to look at the photo was always to have just missed the other's death. The trauma of the captured subject was thus imaged for all to see. Benjamin's angel of history invokes Lot's wife in a reversal of the event in which witnessing the spectacular apocalypse meant the splendor of an instant death.

## 6. Sabbath

In the appeal to a higher reality, we are permitted to relax the practical attention that labor for self-sustenance demands, entering ourselves into a different terrain ruled by an enigmatic, other-logic. In Lars Von Trier's *Melancholia* (2012), an immensely satisfying cinematic representation of our present conditions of environmental upheaval and global economic collapse appear in the image of another planet approaching us fast and then obliterating all earthly reality in a flash.<sup>6</sup> It is an image free of Baudelaire's dull anxiety at "the insensibility of the void," instead radiating the edifying religious frenzy of Revelations.<sup>7</sup> With the irreversible adjudication of God looming over our heads, life obligates us to do nothing more than sit in prayer. The apocalyptic emergency absolves us of debt and excuses us from the everyday requirement to keep up with our accounting. Living in agreement with the logic of labor and Sabbath, it is entirely invisible to us that the private means by which we keep ourselves clothed, sheltered and well-fed, might bear upon the health of the greater public in which we irrevocably participate. With the rapid approach of God's final decision, we can neglect our accounting and instead turn to prayer.

<sup>6</sup> F.T. Marinetti saw a future without weekends or holidays. All work would be the work of war, carried out under the light of the moon: *We will sing of the great crowds agitated by work, pleasure and revolt; the multi-colored and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capitals; the nocturnal vibrations of the arsenals and the workshops beneath their violent electric moons...*

<sup>7</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (New York: Dover, 1964), 114.

## 7. Empathy

To imagine that my affections, thoughts, passing pleasures, aches and pains contain information relevant to questions of international relations or global health, indeed requires a leap of faith. At the same time, the activity of living a life does seem to come with a certain undeniable capacity for sympathy, because it is generally true that everything living wishes to continue doing so. The acceptance of a *feeling* as a politically important *truth* would not amount to a selfish assumption that everyone wants what I want, but, rather, it would require a faithful commitment toward rigorously attending to what is most basic and what is, incidentally, what most want. The certainty that I can commit myself to such a thing is where belief perhaps comes in, and this would be a belief in an unquestionable somatic reality. We might ground politics in the individual body, the animal body, our only accessible site of universality.



## 8. The Many in The One

In its elevated view, the all-seeing eye of the camera can locate a shared logic between even the most disparate parts of a landscape. The lens links my world to your world, with the capacity to represent the inescapable totality of a lived life as one point among many on a map. The camera can look down on us and chart relationships where there is no discernible connection otherwise, just as we can look up at the night sky and trace lines between two stars that are millions of miles away from each other. Hence, the real interaction is happening between spectacle and spectator, and not at all between the various elements observed. Our current image of collectivity appears as a network of adjacent individuals, all facing the same direction and wholly invisible to one another. It is an image that can neither grasp the singularity of a lived life nor the possibility of the real interpenetration of two lives. It is a picture that leaves us wanting, as we wish to imagine intimacy as still a possible reality. The camera-image reflects our awe before the quantitative magnitude of reality and also figures our antithetic wish for intimacy. It leaves us frozen, unable to act, while at the same time animating desire. History in the making is thus given to us in our feeling response to that image that substantiates lived experience by offering it up as already-having-happened. Images reconcile the transcendent condition of the seeable or seen world with the immanent event of seeing it. This encounter does not remedy the longing for togetherness, but invokes the prior influence of community in any singular act of perception.<sup>8</sup>

† Miriam Atkin is a writer and performance artist based in New York City. Her work is largely concerned with the possibilities of poetry as an oral medium in conversation with avant-garde film, music and dance. She is pursuing a PhD in English at CUNY Graduate Center.

<sup>8</sup> Kurt Ralske's image series titled *Rediscovering German Futurism* combines into one the many frames that comprise a cinematic gesture. Like Muybridge, he reveals the collective reality undeniably embedded in the single lived body.

*Photograph pg. 8*

Painter Jay DeFeo Painting "The Rose," by Burt Glinn, 1960

Image courtesy of Burt Glinn/Magnum Photos

*Photograph pg. 10*

Wafa Hourani, "Qalandia 2067," 2008

Image courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London.

*Photographs pg. 12*

Guillaume Duchenne, from "Mécanisme de la Physionomie Humaine," 1862

Image courtesy of Wikipedia Commons

Andy Warhol, "Green Disaster #2 (Green Disaster Ten Times)," 1963

Image courtesy of © 2015 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

*Photographs pg. 16*

Kurt Ralske, "Untitled (German Futurist Film Still, 1927)," 2011

Image courtesy of Kurt Ralske

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Image courtesy of Kurt Ralske

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