

# Art + Event Australia Horizon

- Lost Horizon | Edward Colless 04–13  
 Benjamin and the Black Hole | Tom Melick 14–23  
 The Androgyne at the End of the Universe: On Angelic Visitors,  
 K-Pop Supremacy and the Final Feast | Thomas F. Moran 24–36  
 This World Is Not Enough | James Tunks 38–45  
 Arcanum | Katie Paine 46–53  
 Looking Back on Earth: Reflections on Utopian Projects  
 and Future Ecologies | Suzie Fraser and Damien Rudd 54–63  
 Circling Actuality and Distortion: Reading the Messier 87 Image Through  
 Ecological Gyre Theory | Chantelle Mitchell and Jaxon Waterhouse 64–77  
 But One Day Smoke Came | Matt Dickson 78–81  
 We Were the Survivors: An Account by Janet Inyika 82–89  
 The Horizon Is Not a Line | Camille Roulière 92–101  
 The Blazing Black Hole | Ursula Cornelia de Leeuw 102–109  
 Dark Fate: The Camera Lens as a Black Hole | Diego Ramirez 110–116  
 Between Nothingness and Infinity | Andrew Brooks 118–127  
 Clubbed to Death | Vincent Le 128–135  
 Are We Coming to an End? | Lynette Smith 137–141



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# EDWARD COLLIER'S

# LOST HORIZON



Tornado near Gothenburg, Nebraska, USA,  
24 June 1930  
Published in *Monthly Weather Review*,  
June 1931, p. 228  
NOAA Photo Library

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Where would we be without the horizon? Look for a moment on the vanishing point, that exquisite epitome of the horizon, as would an artist rendering the illusion of depth after the experiments of Brunelleschi or the treatises of Alberti, Durer or Piero della Francesca. We would, in this classical idiom, treat the vanishing point as the limit towards which, from some fixed viewpoint, all the receding orthogonal lines in an image converge diagonally: an infinitely distant attractor of a picture's projective space, and also the graphic solicitation of proportionality between the lines, angles, surface areas, volumes and motions of everything that populates that pictorial space. This rectilinear geometry notates a proprietorial design of environments and their occupant bodies rigorously exemplified in those customary training exercises in perspective rendering that employ the latticework of architectural floorplans and scaffold elevations, the framing of doorways and windows, the chessboard coordinates for urban planning, and

the landscape's enclosure, appropriation and subdivision denoted by hedgerows, parterres, fenceposts, gates, highways and railway tracks. As the locus of all vanishing points, the horizon is the emblem of this universal spatial tenure. We get our bearings from it, and thus our position in the world-picture—our occupancy of the world along with our orientation to it, scale within it, and our privilege over it.

As the mutual perimeter of earth and sky, the horizon guarantees us this entitlement, but it is also a monument of utterly indefinite magnitude as remote yet present as the monolithic stone face of an unknowable ancient god. It is the unbreachable border wall of *cosmos*, that terminal wholeness to the order of creation as an array of coordinated places and functions. Crucial to any virtue aligned with proportion, ratio or law, and crucial to any community or haven, to any dynasty or empire, the horizon is a diagram of both exponential delimitation and totality. Its encircling, encompassing farness never disappears, never alters, no matter how far and fast you move towards or away from it. Always steady, always over there. But this horizon is the exploit of a fatal secret; it is an hallucination necessary to conserve an exalted cartographic and parochial territoriality of the world. That exploit is a dirty secret that lies coiled within the world's genesis, the worm in the bud: a secret locked away, like Dorian Gray's diabolical portrait, as a charm to sustain a spectacular and stridently scenic world-picture. And like all secrets, the dark secret of the horizon will oblige a fatal strategy, indulging but also misleading the prospects of navigation across a world circumscribed by the horizon's patronising cyclopean monumentality. As much as the horizon radiates a spellbinding promise of liberation or of command, its lure conceals an intensive catastrophe, a lost dimension only envisioned at the cusp of annihilating collapse. In that moment, the tempting horizon line is seen as the crest of an approaching planetary tsunami, a pandemic, a despair that is exhilarating in its inescapability. Darkness becoming visible. 'Now little ship, look out!', warns Nietzsche's aphorism 124 ('In the Horizon of the Infinite') of his *Gay Science*:

Beside you is the ocean: to be sure, it does not always roar, and at times it lies spread out like silk and gold and reveries of graciousness. But hours will come when you realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that had felt free and now strikes the walls of this cage! Woe, when you feel homesick for the land as if it had offered more freedom—and there is no longer any 'land'.<sup>1</sup>

The Biblical book of Genesis, in the stately verse of its fifth-century-BCE priestly authorship, tells the story of creation as a series of measured pronouncements by its serenely imperial God, composing an elemental table of contents and a ritual schedule for their appearance.<sup>2</sup> Sea that is divided from land is the corollary of a division of day from night and Heaven from Earth; the horizon comes into view with the taxonomic decorum and eventuality of divine fabrication. Both scission and suture, the dividing line of the horizon is the seam between complementary scenes and consequential acts that seal providential boundaries to the categories of creation, and that compose the measure of history as the liability of human finitude. The horizon commands veneration as an abstraction of the divine index against which all things created will be measured in their place and scale, and to which all creaturely aspiration or inspiration will defer, genuflect and face up to as the gauge for its own limit. The divine benevolence of creation is inscribed in that contractual signature of the horizon and in the making of a world staged in compliance with that horizon's binding propriety.

The glory contractually forged in the world's horizon disowns the black secret of what the covenant of genesis leaves behind: the uncreated as unspeakable, as omission, afterbirth, error, oblivion; just as it disavows the horizon's treachery: that there may no longer be any land, no mountain peak for the ark to eventually come ashore upon, no homeland or anchorage. Genesis secretes a pathogenesis, with the pathogen a glitch encrypted like dormant malware in the divine source code. When the world-picture contracts this pathogen as an error of creation, the horizon is eclipsed by a miscreant universe. In Edgar Allan Poe's story 'A Descent into the Maelström', a fisherman narrates with dark terror his experience of violent entrapment within the vast and storm-lashed torsion of the Lofoten whirlpool. Exclaiming that the ocean around the boat rose precipitously and 'stood like a huge writhing wall between us and the horizon', he pictures a visionary inundation that usurps the juridical rectification of any divinely archetypal Flood, Fire or Plague.<sup>3</sup> This upheaval of the maelstrom is not the corrective edict or wrathful retribution from an angered or even petulant God (Elohim, Yahweh, Nergal or Poseidon). It comes without prospect of mitigation, redemption or salvation, only as purposeless annihilation and extinction.

Poe's gargantuan, abyssal oceanic vortex not only sucks its victims downwards in an awful consuming gyration. 'Looking about me on the wide waste of liquid ebony upon which we were thus borne,' recounts the fisherman, as the boat to which he and his two brothers are desperately clinging spirals into the black gulf, 'I perceived that [ours] was not the only object in the embrace of the whirl'.<sup>4</sup> As it widens with Miltonic gloom its threatening funnel-shaped gullet, it also vomits up a bizarre flotsam—an obscene inventory of the ocean's voracious appetite like the sundry debris that spills from a dissected shark's gut. As well as observing the ghastly wreckage of ships and tantalising scraps of cargo, the imperilled sailor glimpses with morbid curiosity items of household furniture, building timber and even fir and pine trees surfacing and plunging through the surging torrent as if they were flecks of undigested prey being licked about the rictus of this monstrous entity. This regurgitation of sunken—anachronic, delocated and morbid—assets of sea trade derisively mocks the prospect of the hospitably fertile fishing grounds the sailors would have reached had they been able to hold, like the ship of state, a steady and timely course.

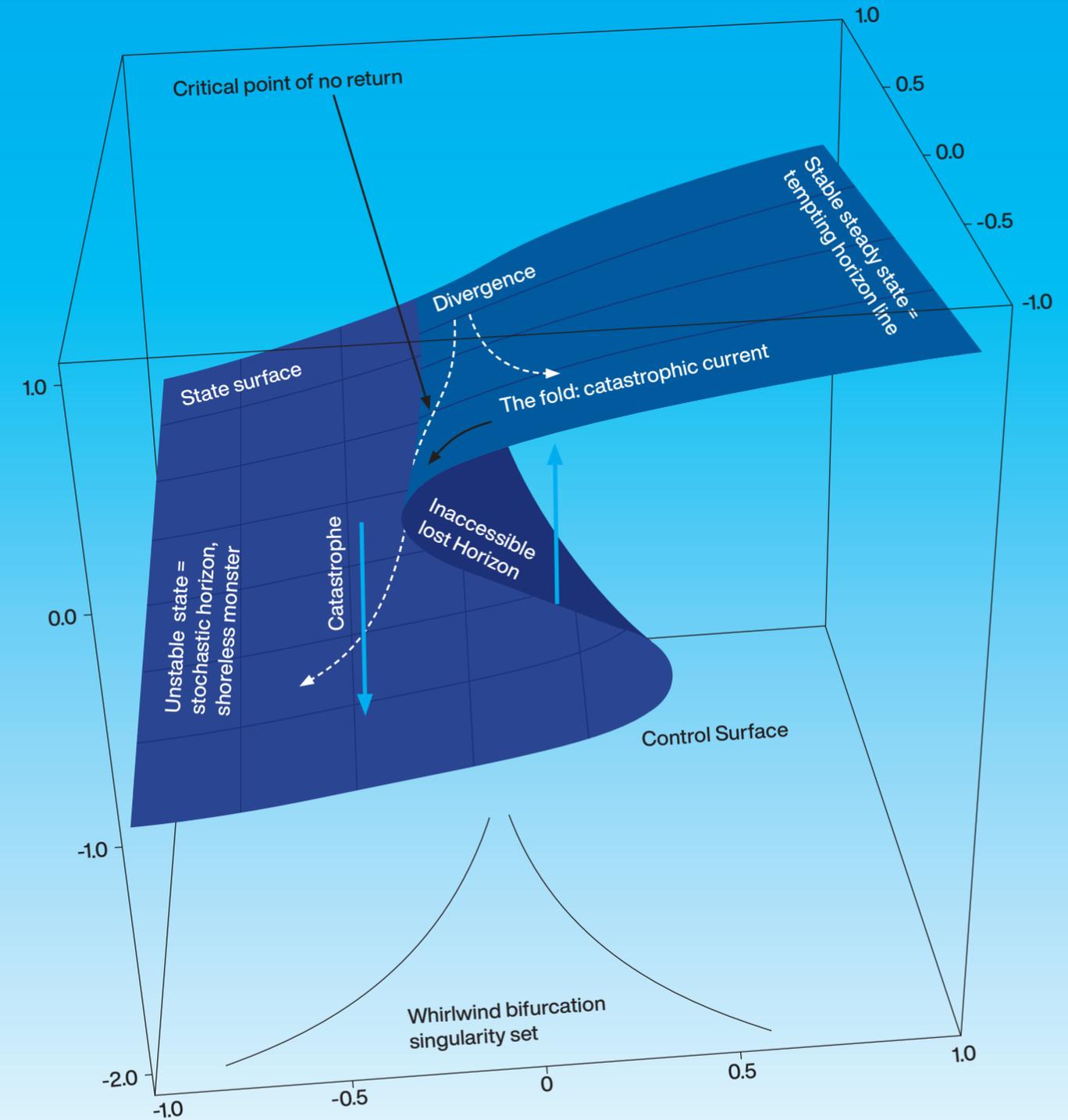


Jean Delville  
*Satan's Treasures (Les Trésors de Satan)*  
 1895  
 Oil on canvas  
 258 × 268 cm  
 Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels

Poe's vortex eclipses the horizon with accelerating, plasma-like convulsions that upend space and warp time. Picture this darkening ecliptic in comparison with the unloosening effect of the twister that arrives out of thin air to lift Dorothy's farmhouse intact from the monochrome Kansas dustbowl up and over the rainbow into the pastoral dreamland and counter-Earth of Oz. This tempest executing Dorothy's ascension shows off its epiphanic Biblical pedigree with the whirl that flashes the red shoes on a dancer's feet under a lifting skirt. A widening gyre extricates Dorothy from a depressive monotony of mundane domesticity to take her heavenwards. Like the rainbow it surpasses, it is a storm radiant with spectral providence—and also with a measure of pubescent eroticism, not too far removed from the ecstatic uplift of Bernini's marble cloud that miraculously levitates the liquefying St Teresa. Surely, we would rightly anticipate, a revelation is at hand. Or an angel with Cupid's arrow. Or at least a memorable and lucid homily, one on the restoration of property rights, the rectification of mistaken identity and the salvation of the wretched. In Dorothy's conservationist and conservative sentimental idiom, unveiling the wizardry of Oz is neither an apocalypse nor a disenchantment but an allegory of faith in a proverbial enlightenment.

Of course, the distinction between Oz's twister and Poe's maelstrom is not just the political polarity of their direction. While the whirlwind's atmosphere is as fluid as the whirlpool's, the wind's embrace is purposeful, decisive and transparent. Even in its vertiginous scaling, the wind blowing towards Oz never loses sight of the rainbow covenant. For all its marvellous metamorphic terrain, Oz is a good-humoured masquerade; and for all its witchcraft, it is a convivially divine place, a limpid celestial allegory of Earth. Oz proves there to be no place like home, in the words of Dorothy's celebrated ultimate reconciliation with the Real. That terrified sailor, on the other hand, who witnesses his own insignificant fall towards an event horizon is shrouded in a voluptuously unedifying tenebrism. Any identification of place or belonging is shredded into cyclonic howling. This is the sort of caustic, relentless black wind of unsatisfied lust that also tosses entwined, illicit lovers in their eternal storm of guilty passion around the circumference of Dante's Hadean second circle of Inferno. From Dante's moral viewpoint, but using the words of another of Poe's narrative personae (witnessing the denouement of the mesmeric zombie Monsieur Valdemar), we could imagine this inescapable, indecent jet stream collapsing into 'a nearly liquid mass of loathsome—of detestable putridity'.<sup>5</sup> Those tremors and spasms pitching Poe's sailor onto the cusp of ecstatic death are archaic and unaccountable, unintelligible and psychic as much as they are the tidal phenomena issuing in tumescent rigidifications and blind colossal dissipative fluctuations. As its substance and form sublimate into an obscure anti-cosmos, holding its passenger in rapt curiosity as much as delirium and fear, the maelstrom becomes as alien and unfathomable as another great visionary loss of the consoling divine skyline: the ekphrastic commentary on hideously titanic, sinewy, fibrous vortices and catastrophic currents within the oceanic planet of Stanislaw Lem's science fiction novel *Solaris*.<sup>6</sup>

The febrile plasmatic architecture of *Solaris*'s ocean also grasps its doomed witnesses in rapt curiosity ignited by hallucinatory horror, compelling them to a kind of prophetic narration that Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh might call a 'halluci-phatic state of explicit, graphic descriptions of properties [of a deity] that are ... previously



'Quasi-magic Incantation in Cusp Catastrophe', diagram generated from a conversation between Azza Zein and Edward Colless as an example of the contour plot of the derivative of the cusp potential function

$$\frac{\partial V(f, u, v)}{\partial f} = f^3 + \alpha u f + \beta v = 0$$

where  $\alpha = 0.4$  and  $\beta = -0.3$  for illustration purpose

For further discussion on catastrophe theory and the variables in this equation see Bin Hu and Ni Xia, 'Cusp Catastrophe Model for Sudden Changes in a Person's Behaviour', *Information Sciences*, vol. 294, 2015, pp. 489–512.

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indescribable'.<sup>7</sup> Like the awe-stricken report of Poe's ancient mariner, the voluble science of Solaris is inadvertently a treatise on errant and necromantic creation as much as it is a prognosis of catastrophic miscarriage. Lem's protagonist on board the orbiting space station conducts an official enquiry into the depositions of scientists who preceded him, filling the novel (like the notorious excursions on whaling and maritime lore in Melville's *Moby Dick*) with transcripts of oceanographic, meteorological, biological and aesthetic observations along with ontological conjectures on the substance and activity of the planet's waves. But the initially dispassionate, objective tone of these research reports increasingly assumes the mania of esoteric, visionary and even apotropaic speculative fragments of a sorcery comparable to the vestiges of H.P. Lovecraft's secret (if inexistent) grimoire, the *Necronomicon*.

Solaristics is the spell for conjuring this volatile thing that streams, surges, ebbs, disintegrates, heaves and subsides across its planet's tellurian crust. It is driven to invent countless alien names for configurations and dissipations so abundantly metamorphic that its astronaut observers see its horizon fluctuating between four instable states: that of an ocean (a fluid with troughs and convection currents and with foam and fog licking its rhythmic wave fronts); the perimeter of an organism (gelatinous, syrupy, chaotic biomass or slimy protoplasm); the profile of necrotic bioplasma (an organised metabolic system collapsing into oncological mutation with an effusion of metastasising blooms); and, most disconcertingly, the emanation of a brain (an electro-chemical system, generating an incomprehensibly encrypted monologue). Solaristics is the seemingly limitless yet pointless annunciation of these fractal insurgences within the taxonomic and isotopic generalities and concordances of the scientific and aesthetic imagery of Solaris. Due to the irreducibility and also incommensurability of its lexicon, the discipline of Solaristics collapses into an escalating whorl of cartographical fantasia, geographical gabble, quasi-magic incantations or spells and testimonials of aesthetic horror captivated and captured within the inspirational depths of an immeasurable, shoreless monster.

The brink of such a lost cause—a lost cause of life and of its world-picture—is the point of no return. No return from the vanishing point. No return of life or its world-picture. No horizon.

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- ① Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann (trans.), Vintage, New York, 1974, pp. 180–81.
- ② Linguistic, palaeographic and archaeological/folkloric studies currently indicate that Genesis is a fifth-century-BCE edited amalgamation of at least three textual traditions: the Elohist or E source (dating from the eighth century BCE); the authorship known as J (for Jahwist), arguably tenth century or sixth century BCE; and the text dubbed P for Priestly work, characterised by the metrical verse formats of the first chapters of Genesis.
- ③ Edgar Allan Poe, 'A Descent into the Maelstrom', in Philip Van Doren Stern (ed.), *The Portable Poe*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, UK, 1977, p. 146.
- ④ Poe, p. 150.
- ⑤ Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', in *The Portable Poe*, p. 280.
- ⑥ Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris*, Bill Johnson (trans.), Wydawnictwo Literackie, Krakow, 2017.
- ⑦ Jason Bahbak Mohaghegh, *Night: A Philosophy of the After-dark*, Zero Books, Winchester, UK, and Washington, DC, 2019, p. 49.

The neologism is not as awkwardly arbitrary as it might sound: Mohaghegh distinguishes 'halluci-phatic prophecy' from cataphatic theology (speaking the affirmative and positive attributes of God) and apophatic mysticism (religious practice for approaching divinity by the *via negativa*, of contemplating what cannot be said or thought of God). On the mania for the dizziness of whirlpools, see Mohaghegh, *Omnicide: Mania, Fatality and the Future-in-Delirium*, Urbanomic, Falmouth, UK, and Sequence Books, New York, 2019, pp. 245–75.



Gustave Doré  
Virgil and Dante encounter Paolo and Francesca, *Inferno*, Canto 5  
From Dante Alighieri, *L'Enfer*  
Hachette, Paris, 1861  
Image from copy of work in the Fiske Dante Collection,  
Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections,  
Cornell University Library, Ithaca, New York

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BENJAMIN  
AND THE  
BLACK  
HOLE  
TOM  
MELTICK

William Eric Brown  
*Caldera I*, 2018  
Multi-layered photograph (C-print and inkjet)  
and acrylic spray paint on photographic paper  
43.2 x 43.2 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

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*The mastery of nature  
(so the imperialists teach)  
is the purpose of all technology.  
But who would trust a cane wielder  
who proclaimed the mastery  
of children by adults  
to be the purpose  
of education?*

—Walter Benjamin, ‘To the Planetarium’<sup>1</sup>

‘Scientists have obtained the first image of a black hole using Event Horizon Telescope observations of the galaxy M87.’<sup>2</sup> This is big news. The real thing. A supposedly unobservable object is now observed; an image to accompany what was known only theoretically or seen as a simulation now exists. But then the image, when I look at it, has a strange modesty, like an ember in a dying fire or the end of a cigarette on its last drag. Why is this image so haunting, so modest? Far from the ‘amorous frenzy’ imagined by Georges Bataille in his indecent text on solar energy, which made use of the Sun as an image of ‘luminous violence’ and ‘scandalous eruption’,<sup>3</sup> this image of a black hole conjures slow and heavy thoughts.

Did I expect more from an image of a black hole? The generic definition tells us that a black hole forms when a massive star exhausts its fuel and collapses under its own weight to the point of infinite density, where not even light escapes. Exhaustion and collapse. The definition could double as a description of what we’re seeing and experiencing today. Or should

we be wary of the impulse to make this image a portrait of the times? Does writing about the first image of a black hole risk overlooking the image itself? Is it the image that tempts this general theory of pessimism, or is fetishising despair and jumping headfirst into the spectacle of catastrophe a normal response to any news from the cosmos these days?

These questions come to mind as I look again at the image, resisting the pull of its metaphoric weight. I resist because I want to understand the physics of it and the technology that has made it visible. That is, I want to understand not only what the image shows but how it has come to be shown. There is something about the scale of the apparatus that brought this image down to Earth, coupled with the simplicity of the black hole’s form, that both clarifies and confuses.

The black hole is really out there. It’s a silly thought, but one that I feel compelled to write down as a reminder of its materiality. But this, again, overlooks the making of the image. Specifically, it overlooks how huge amounts of data were captured over five days using a network of eight synchronised radio dishes positioned around the globe, transforming the planet into a virtual telescope. This data, gathered and stored on half a tonne of hard drives, was then transported to MIT Haystack Observatory to be ‘solved’ by an algorithm called CHIRP (Continuous High-resolution Image Reconstruction using Patch priors). Katie Bouman, the creator of CHIRP, fed huge amounts of images into the computer’s algorithm to teach it how to stitch data together. The food included pictures of cats, dogs and houses. As Bouman commented, ‘Even though there’s a huge variation in these kinds of images, if you break them up into 64-pixel patches [small visual units], there’s a lot in common’.<sup>4</sup> This points to a definition of photography, still emerging, that we need to get used to. A camera no longer ‘captures’ its object but, instead, cleans and sorts through the noise, creating an image based on an interpretation of data that it has learnt to distinguish and associate with past preferences.

But my learning of this technological mastery is interrupted again, this time by the impossible-to-ignore timing of the black hole’s appearance. For here is an image of a bright and blurry ring of light bent by gravity around a hole with a mass 6.5 billion times greater than the Sun, taking its place among all the other images in the news at the time—a US military drill in the Arctic, ruined coffee farmers in Honduras, aerial footage showing widespread deforestation in the Amazon, a stock image of a cracked smartphone for an article on the weaponisation of data, thousands of fish floating belly up in the Darling River, and kids walking out of school with signs that read ‘You are burning our future!’, ‘Only fossils like fossil fuels!’, ‘What we stand on is what we stand for!’, ‘No classes on a dead planet!’, ‘Ocean’s rising, so are we!’

The image of a black hole appears modest, perhaps, because it has come at an immodest time, when each day explodes in a collision of images that transforms what we think is an extreme event into a passing sight, swiped over with a thumb like the rest.



William Eric Brown  
*Ring of Fire*, 2019  
C-print  
31.8 × 45.4 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

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What does it take for an image to focus our collective attention? For me, the black hole image happened to coincide with a class I was teaching on visual theory. That week we were reading Walter Benjamin's famous essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility'. If ever there was an image that pulled Benjamin's thoughts about artistic production towards an extreme point of no return, maybe this was it. An image of the cosmos made possible by training an apparatus with everyday images of the past. An image that shows, in absence, the event horizon, pointing perhaps to what Benjamin saw in Eugène Atget's photographs of the deserted streets of Paris: 'hidden political significance' and the demand for 'a specific kind of reception'.<sup>5</sup> If Atget's photographs show the last glimpse of the old Paris before it was demolished, what might the image of the black hole say of human and natural history? At a time when futures seem to be shrinking all around, the process of representing the black hole confirms the arrival of observational instruments and tools that bring new powers to image production, potentially revealing all sorts of mysterious objects in the cosmos. Recall what the astronomer Michael Kramer said at one of the many press conferences organised around its discovery, 'History books will be divided into the time before the image and after the image'.<sup>6</sup> To my mind, this also (inadvertently) brings Benjamin into the fray since, as he wrote in 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', 'The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.'<sup>7</sup>

Never seen again? Such, they say, is the intense effect of the gravitational field on stars, planets and other celestial objects at the event horizon. Benjamin's thoughts, put down while he was fleeing the Gestapo, raise the stakes of Kramer's claim. What if this image of a black hole, instead of dividing history, offers a moment to seize it? What if this image is the meeting of technology's promise to make the universe known and the universe's insistence that some things will always remain beyond reach? In other words, spurred on by Benjamin, does this strangely modest image of one of the most enigmatic phenomena in the universe—what Stephen Hawking described as a fact stranger than fiction—get at that still unsettled concept known as 'the dialectical image'? That puncture in space and time, a 'cessation of happening' that offers 'a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past'.<sup>8</sup> Is this image of a black hole—bending and absorbing all sorts of memory and technological ambition along with luminous gas and dust—a way of glimpsing 'dialectics at a standstill', where 'what was' comes together 'in a constellation with the now'—but on a planetary scale?

The 'Work of Art' essay is now 85 years old, but Benjamin's focus on the way technology transformed how art is experienced continues to reverberate. Partly, for me, this is because his writing remains open to the interplay between the cosmos and the everyday, merging a deep melancholy over the universe with a fizzing desire to communicate at a time of unprecedented destruction and inanity. I thought Susan Sontag had it right when she wrote that Benjamin read the past as a prophecy for the future and that he 'felt that he was living in a time in which everything valuable was the last of its kind'.<sup>9</sup> But in writing this piece and exchanging in-text notes with the editor of this journal, I've come to see this interpretation as a convenient summary, masking something more complicated. Things gain value in relation to their opposites. Benjamin's essay, like all artworks, gains value (or not) in the way it cradles mystery and clarity, keeping even an ending open to the possibility of renewal. But renewal takes energy and a continuous attention to the images in front of and

behind us. As he wrote in his unfinished collection of quotations and fragments, 'The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are "status quo" is the catastrophe.'<sup>10</sup> (That might easily find its way to a protest sign, or appear as an epigraph for the Green New Deal.)

In class I click to the next slide and there it is: the image of the black hole. One student proposes, 'The changes to the work of art that Benjamin is concerned with are brought about by photos and film, but for us it's big data and algorithms'. Benjamin's famous diagnosis of the artwork is that it loses its aura, its 'here and now', with the changing conditions of its reproduction. But, queries another student, 'Is the aura a feeling or a thing?' While the class pursues what Benjamin meant by the loss of aura—a 'tremendous shattering of tradition'—I scroll through my notes on my laptop, trying to find a memo I wrote to myself about how new technologies move art away from the magic of the 'here and now' to that of politics. But I've lost my place. I look up from the screen. The discussion has become about the way Benjamin isn't so much concerned with radical content as he is with technical production—oddly, a point so easily overlooked. The means by which art comes to be *is* political—for this is, after all, a materialist theory of art. And on the back of this, after a moment's silence, a student asks, 'Is Benjamin hopeful or pessimistic about the future of art?'

And this is how it continues to play out, all of us figuring out a way through Benjamin's intensely dense lexicon, where aesthetics is theorised in the midst of a battle over art (and life) taking place between the forces of destruction *and* creation, fascism *and* emancipation. Or as Arne Melberg helpfully writes, Benjamin's treatise on the work of art 'appears to vacillate between the apocalyptic and the pragmatic: he expresses a strong expectation that decisive things are about to take place, or perhaps have already taken place, at the same time as he provides concrete and constructive observations on the technology, institutions, and functions of art'.<sup>11</sup>

But, conspicuously, still no-one in class has specifically mentioned the image of the black hole, looking at us from the projector. What would Benjamin think of it? There's no doubt Benjamin spent some time gazing up at the stars in search of some kind of prehistorical data. The experience of looking up at celestial objects, he said, should not be dismissed as unimportant, since we are in 'ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally'.<sup>12</sup> I'd call this a kind of cosmic communism, an awareness of seeing where the part has to reckon with the whole, where everything seen must reckon with the unseen.

Weeks later, after talking about the image of the black hole with a friend, I receive an email from him with some of his photographs attached: a suggestion of a mountain, a glimpse of a palm tree, some rocks. I look up the image of the black hole again and place each of his pictures next to it. His photographs were taken in the Volax valley on the island of Tinos in Greece, he tells me. 'The valley is a phenomenon where all these granite boulders appeared millennia ago from either a volcanic eruption or meteor, no one's quite sure.' In the last image the sky is streaked with light like a cosmic event. Is this just an error in the file or the print? A picture of the past flitting by, like a lens flare. But then that rainbow wheel appears on the screen and my computer freezes. The files are too big, and I need to restart.

- 1 Walter Benjamin, 'To the Planetarium', in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (trans.), NLB, London, 1979.
- 2 Ota Lutz, 'How Scientists Captured the First Image of a Black Hole', *NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory*, 19 April 2019, [jpl.nasa.gov/edu/news/2019/4/19/how-scientists-captured-the-first-image-of-a-black-hole/](http://jpl.nasa.gov/edu/news/2019/4/19/how-scientists-captured-the-first-image-of-a-black-hole/); accessed 25 April 2019.
- 3 Georges Bataille, 'The Solar Anus' (1931), in Allan Stoekl (ed.), *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr (trans.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985, p. 8.
- 4 Katie Bouman, quoted in Sara Latta, *Black Holes: The Weird Science of the Most Mysterious Objects in the Universe*, Twenty-First Century Books, Minneapolis, 2018, p. 82.
- 5 Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility', in Michael Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin (eds), *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings*, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, Howard Eiland et al. (trans.), Belknap Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2008, p. 27.
- 6 Michael Kramer, quoted in Erin Winick, 'This Is the First Ever Photo of a Black Hole', *MIT Technology Review*, 10 April 2019, [technologyreview.com/s/613301/this-is-the-first-ever-photo-of-a-black-hole/](http://technologyreview.com/s/613301/this-is-the-first-ever-photo-of-a-black-hole/); accessed 19 April 2019.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1942), in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), Harry Zohn (trans.), Schocken Books, New York, 2007, p. 255.
- 8 Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', p. 263.
- 9 Susan Sontag, 'Introduction', *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, p. 27.
- 10 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (trans.), Belknap Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1999, p. 462.
- 11 Arne Melberg, 'Artwork in the Age of Ontological Speculation', in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and Art*, Continuum, London and New York, 2005, p. 103.
- 12 Benjamin, 'To the Planetarium', p. 104.

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William Eric Brown  
*Caldera 2*, 2018  
Multi-layered photograph (C-print and inkjet)  
and acrylic spray paint on photographic paper  
43.2 × 43.2 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

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THOMAS F.  
MORAN

THE ANDR  
OGYNE AT  
THE END  
OF THE  
UNIVERSE:

ON ANGELI  
CVISITORS,  
K-POP  
SUPREMA  
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THE FINAL  
FEAST



BTS x Mattel Doll Collection, 2019  
BTS Love Yourself: Speak Yourself world tour  
pop-up store, Paris  
Photograph: Naumova Ekaterina

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The first photograph ever taken of a black hole appeared to contain a disturbing anomaly. What was initially dismissed as a photographic blunder was in fact a gathering of aberrant energy, which, when converted into pixels, was revealed to be an image. It appeared to be a smudged photograph of a heart-shaped pool. A figure lurked at the edge of the frame, just out of focus. It seemed to be dressed in an elegant white three-piece suit, but we couldn't be sure. There was something deeply unsettling about its pose. Its head tilted sideways, long tresses of hair falling across its face with the barest hint of a smile playing across its lips. Its left hand rested gently on its breast and the index finger of its right hand pointed upward to the heavens. We looked again, and the finger seemed to be pointing down to what

we once called Hell and now affectionately referred to as the Earth's molten core.

Our preliminary scan of the image revealed a number of disturbing correspondences to images stored in the digital Mnemosyne Atlas.<sup>1</sup> The posture had appeared before in a painting of Saint John the Baptist by Leonardo da Vinci. Another search suggested a resemblance to a fourth-century-BCE engraving of the Greek deity Hermaphroditus found on a ruined temple wall on the slope of Mount Ida. But it also bore an uncanny resemblance to Jimin the singer from the K-pop group BTS (*Bangtan Sonyeondan*). Scientists were puzzled. What to make of these curious resemblances? Had some troll merely been leaving their calling card in the telescopic system? I was called in to examine the image. But as I shook my head the room began to dissolve around me and I felt my lips moving against my will ... 'It comes to stalk the human realm / angel or devil we cannot tell / observe only that it's at the helm / the Androgyne spectre of Heaven and of Hell ...'

The androgyne is a figure cloaked in mystery that recurs repeatedly across the ruinous landscape of anthropic history. While androgyny seems to be a thoroughly contemporary phenomenon, like much of what operates within modernity, its archaic origins are occluded by forces of reification and a planetary epidemic of historical amnesia. What follows is by no means an exhaustive account of the history of the androgyne but a preliminary genealogy. I will draw out a number of different notions of androgyny—mythic, Christian, aesthetic, secular and biomedical—all of which converge within modernity. Through this lightning tour through history, I will locate what I term the 'powers of the androgyne' in order to speculate upon the return of this enigmatic figure in an epoch where chaos reigns and civilisation slides ever closer to the abyss.

The legend of a creature that is both male and female returns repeatedly in pre-Christian religious thought and practice. The most famous ancient textual account of the androgyne occurs in Plato's *Symposium*, in which Socrates prompts a drunken debate on the nature of love. In these revelries, Aristophanes, the great comic playwright, tells the story of three different races who originally inhabited the Earth.<sup>2</sup> The first was an entirely male race descended from the Sun. The second was entirely female and sprang from the Earth. But the third race was a spherical people possessing both male and female characteristics, who originated on the Moon. This lunar race attempted to overcome the gods, and their insolence was punished in a suitably macabre fashion with Zeus tearing them in half. Aristophanes suggests that this primal rending is the origin of desire, which is propelled by the longing to be reunited with one's missing half. While this may appear kitsch to us today, what is essential to note is that while the other sexes were content to walk the Earth, the androgynous lunar race sought to threaten the gods. *The Androgyne as cosmic threat*. The other essential point is

that the androgyne prefigures human sexual differentiation. Gendered humanity is a devolution from primary androgyny. *The Androgyne as original perfection*. It is these two principles, of danger and perfection, that will recur in future attempts to harness the power of the androgyne.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, we encounter another origin story for the androgyne in the legend of the god Hermaphroditus. The child of the union of Hermes and Aphrodite came upon a glittering forest pool, where he met the nymph Salmacis. After refusing her advances, the beautiful youth disrobed and began to wade in the water. Salmacis leapt upon him. Ovid writes, 'she entwines herself face to face with his beauty, like a snake ... and entangles his spreading wings in her coils. Or as ivy often interlaces tall tree trunks. Or as the cuttlefish holds the prey, it has surprised, underwater, wrapping its tentacles everywhere.'<sup>3</sup> This combination of outstretched wings and a coiled serpent is a representation of the *caduceus*, the rod of Hermes, familiar today as the symbol of pharmacies and of the medical profession more generally. Ovid's description of the process of transformation provides another intriguing augury of the androgyne to come: 'Now the entwined bodies of the two were joined together, and one form covered both. Just as when someone grafts a twig into the bark, they see both grow joined together, and develop as one ... they were not two, but a two-fold form, so that they could not be called male or female, and seemed neither or either.'<sup>4</sup> This notion of grafting as a metaphor for transformation will come to dominate biological and medical discourse in modernity. Indeed, in Ovid we witness a prophecy of the material process of androgynisation to come. *The Androgyne as a grafted and created being*. But Ovid's tale has another ending. Hermaphroditus, now fused indissolubly with Salmacis, prayed to his heavenly parents to turn the pool into a site that would transfigure anyone who entered it into a being 'neither or either' and that would afflict them with sterility. And so the notion of the infectious spread of androgyny enters history. *The Androgyne as infectious force*. One can sense already a whiff of contemporary paranoia around the transgender body and the related conspiracies around post-industrial civilisation's sexual infertility.

Now one can gather thousands of stories from myth that expound upon the notion of the androgyne. As Elémire Zolla notes, the androgyne is hardly a Western phenomenon, with Hinduism, Taoism and Islam all containing stories of androgynous beings.<sup>5</sup> But for fear of collapsing esoteric traditions into a gluttonous monomyth, I will turn to the androgyne as it appears within the early modern period. The rediscovery of classical texts was one explanation offered for the return of the androgyne as a representational ideal in Renaissance aesthetics, with Bernini's *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* (1620) modelled on a Roman statue unearthed near the Diocletian baths. But of more interest is da Vinci's *Saint John the Baptist* (1513-16), in which the artist transforms the traditional representation of John as a withered ascetic into an image of a handsome young androgyne. There is an allegorical resonance between Christian baptism, a process by which ordinary worldly distinctions are washed away, and the hermaphroditic plunge into Salmacis's pool. Paul notes that in baptism, 'there is no Jew nor Greek, there is no slave nor free, there is no male and female'.<sup>6</sup>



Illustration from a 15th-century manuscript of *Aurora consurgens*  
20.4 × 13.9 cm  
Zentralbibliothek Zürich, Switzerland,  
Ms. Rh. 172, f. VD-2

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But while Paul's doctrine established baptism as the washing away of difference, a number of occulted Christian traditions suggested instead that baptism was a unification of the masculine and feminine principles. Hence, it was not merely the return of Grecian ideals that prompted the androgynisation of Renaissance representation but a flowering of syncretic Christian traditions, particularly mystical ones, which had long maintained an androgynous character for the Godhead. As Wayne Meeks notes, in early Christian Gnostic doctrines God was not so much the Father but a sexless androgyne.<sup>7</sup> In this vision Adam, who was made in the image and likeness of God, was originally androgynous. Being cast from the Garden of Eden is therefore the second fall, with the first being the division of the sexes. *The Androgyne as prelapsarian condition*. As Mircea Eliade notes, the androgyne is thus understood as a fragmentation of primordial unity,<sup>8</sup> hence its place within later aesthetic representations as a 'universal formula for the expression of wholeness [and] the coexistence of contraries'.<sup>9</sup>

The attempt to return to a unified state became a kind of mania in the later work of spiritualists and theosophists who sought to engage in a process of spiritual androgynisation. This was particularly present within German spiritualism, a movement whose influence on both German romanticism and philosophical idealism in the 19th century cannot be underestimated. The ideal of the 'Universal Hermaphrodite' was a means of representing eschatological totality. One of the most prominent advocates was Franz von Baader (1765–1841), who drew heavily on the work of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Baader's idealisation of the androgyne was linked to the sacrament of marriage, which he believed was 'the restoration of the celestial or angelic image of man as he should be'.<sup>10</sup> Sexual love was a process of divine reintegration, which echoes the myth of the lunar people outlined in the *Symposium*. But there was another crucial element within Baader's cosmology. Primordial androgyny would make its return to the world stage as the Earth approached the Final Judgement. It was one of the signs that would reveal the imminent completion of anthropic eschatological destiny. *The Androgyne as the sign of the end times*.

We must note that these idealisations of spiritual androgyny were accompanied by the very real annihilation of what were once termed hermaphroditic, now intersex, bodies. Indeed, Baader, for all his adoration of the 'Universal Hermaphrodite', saw actual hermaphroditism as an aberration. But his manner of expressing his horror gives us a crucial insight into the manner in which the androgyne begins to transform as we reach our own time. While Baader's ideal hermaphrodite was a harmonious fusion of the sexes, the actual hermaphroditic body juxtaposed the male and female 'in an enflamed opposition'.<sup>11</sup> Hence, a counter-androgyne begins to emerge. *The Androgyne as the confusion of categories*. Michel Foucault investigates this in his study of the French 19th-century hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin. His investigation uncovers the intersecting savagery of the medical and legal institutions, including the barbarous practices of forced gender reassignment surgery, incarceration and sterilisation.<sup>12</sup> Thus, we can see that another power of androgyny emerges to counter the harmonious dreams of primordial wholeness and divine perfection. *The Androgyne as pre-individuated chaos*. Instead of harmony we have division, and instead of an angelic being we are presented with what Foucault describes as a medical discourse of 'monstrosity'.<sup>13</sup>



Leonardo da Vinci  
Saint John the Baptist  
1513–16  
Oil on wood  
69 × 57 cm  
Courtesy of Musée du Louvre,  
Paris

The clash between the ideal androgyne and the material androgynous body can be seen in two short stories by Honoré de Balzac, who was a keen reader of Swedenborg. In *Seraphita* (1834), the androgyne is a Swedenborgian angel who appears to the characters Wilfrid and Minna as a woman and a man respectively. The story concludes with the angelic Seraphita ascending to Heaven and revealing, in the process, the *celestial arcanum*, Swedenborg's theory of a harmonious correspondence between the earthly and the divine.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, in *Sarrasine* (1830), the opera singer La Zambinella, who has become the object of the protagonist Sarrasine's ardent desire, is revealed to be a castrato. Sarrasine, full of horror, attempts to murder his beloved but is instead stabbed to death by the singer's entourage.<sup>15</sup> Here the material androgyne casts a spectre of seduction and death, made all the more alluring by this fatal association. It is no wonder the great poets of decadence such as Baudelaire were entranced by the androgyne, or that the figure of the dandy was referred to by Jules Barbey d'Aureville as the 'androgyne of history', combining grace and power.<sup>16</sup> So by the late 19th century, the angelic androgyne would no longer stand in opposition to the malefic one. *The Androgyne as principle of reversibility.*

From this vantage point, the culture of the 20th century appears as a battlefield over which the androgyne constantly hovers. Once the androgyne has been unleashed, there appears to be very little that can be done to rein it back in. Marlene Dietrich in a top hat and tails, Claude Cahun's harlequin make-up, Radclyffe Hall's immaculate suits—these images are merely the most visible expressions of a teeming androgynous cultural production that defined almost every artistic and social milieu of interest in the last century. One could assemble an artistic pantheon in which to be modern was to open oneself to the potential of androgynisation. Virginia Woolf aligned androgyny with creativity, quoting Samuel Taylor Coleridge who had noted, 'The truth is, a great mind must be androgynous'.<sup>17</sup> While art critics continued to associate formal tropes with gender categories, what this betrayed was a fear of the fundamental truth that within creation proper, identity of any kind loses all claim to legitimacy. One could speculate that in an increasingly androgynous cultural milieu, formal ambiguity becomes a defining virtue of modernist aesthetics, in which artworks that collapse existing divisions are praised for their formal radicality. In this light, avant-gardism can be understood as an androgynous exercise in the dissolution of generic difference, whose ultimate project to erode the distinction between art and life itself is a secular mask for a spiritual reintegration of divine and earthly pursuits.

These breakdowns within culture were predictably accompanied by a political counter-reaction, a reassertion of gender divisions and a hunting down of aberrant androgyne angels. The Soviet superhuman fades into the Stalinist family, Weimar slides into Hitlerism, wartime chaos into 1950s conformity. Of course this is a gross simplification, but nonetheless, as the last century wore on, androgyny came to be increasingly associated with counterculture as such.<sup>18</sup> Hippie hair and sharpie mullets; glam rock make-up and ballroom drag; all were defined by their resistance to the careful distinction between the masculine and feminine. While these looks may have been understood as new expressions of gender division (for example, the hippie male as pseudo-primitive 'wild man'), these were in fact masks for an unstoppable current of cultural androgynisation.

Hair, make-up and fashion all became parts of a new arsenal, micro war-machines with which the androgyne could sow the seeds of chaos within a society of order and control. But a problem emerges for such a reading because, while androgyny remains suspect in its material manifestation in the streets, it is simultaneously employed by capital as a tool of spectacular consumption.

Over the course of the last century, the spectacle has increasingly tended towards the marketing of a post-gender body and ideal. If the catwalk model is understood as the purest expression of consumption—a degree zero of the commodity form—then we can track capital's process of androgynisation through the erosion of distinctions between male and female models and between masculine and feminine fashion. That is not to say that commodities no longer target specific demographics but, rather, that androgyny becomes a technology of mass seduction. For what is seduction, erotic or commercial, but a perpetual play of ambivalence and ambiguity? Most recently, K-pop takes this dynamic and radically intensifies it with its most prominent stars all embodying a post-gender appeal.<sup>19</sup> The *ggot-mi-nam*, or 'flower boys', are praised by Western commentators for promoting a 'soft masculinity' but are simultaneously the vector of a billion-dollar male cosmetics industry that is now sweeping through China, the largest consumer culture of our time. We can read this in a predictable manner as a ramping up of Guy Debord's notion of 'recuperation', in which capital is understood to absorb and market all attempts at resistance. Or, more controversially, one could suggest that capital itself is responsible for the breakdown of old divisions, that transgression is in fact a motor for capital's endless ability to create new markets, new identities and new forms of life.

But neither theory seems capable of understanding the androgyne of today, which is simultaneously a biotechnological reality and the expression of a fervent desire for self-transformation. Techno-scientific discoveries in biological research—the mapping of the human genome and the ability to generate hormones in the laboratory—have made androgyny a material reality. Paul Preciado, who experimented extensively with testosterone gel, argues that to be androgynous today is to be 'both the terminal of one of the apparatuses of neoliberal governmentality and the vanishing point which escapes the will to control ... I am the future common artificial ancestor for a new species.'<sup>20</sup> The material androgyne appears as a black hole in the history of human evolution, opening a pathway out of biological necessity and into the unknown. Hence, we reach a crossroads—whereby an archaic figure of myth becomes simultaneously an avatar of hypermodernity. The hysteria around transgender bodies—including neo-traditionalist assertions of the masculine and feminine, the conspiratorial fears around the testosterone-sapping potential of the modern diet, and the notion of the progressive sterilisation of the human species—echoes the fears that have accompanied the androgyne for centuries. Simultaneously, the utopian potential of overcoming gender, the annihilation of sexual difference, the end of the sexual division of labour, and the ability to produce children without copulation all echo the theosophists' pursuit of the 'universal hermaphrodite' and its promise of a return to wholeness, plenitude and balance.

The fate of the androgyne is to exist at the border between hope and despair, in what was once conceived as the *coincidentia oppositorum*, or union of contraries, which accompanied its earliest mythic elaborations. The androgyne is much like Nietzsche's demon of the eternal return, who appears as a horrifying devil to those who fear cyclical repetition and as 'nothing more divine' to those who can affirm the eternally recurrent character of history and cosmology.<sup>21</sup> Even if the androgyne is an augur of the annihilation of our species, is it not our duty to embrace this angelic visitor? Judaeo-Christian tradition is full of such guests, angels disguised as strangers who are invited to the table to share in whatever meal the host can provide. Indeed, hospitality itself is predicated on the notion that any stranger could be the return of the Messiah. This essay is an invitation to the mysterious androgyne that appeared in the photograph taken by the black hole telescope. It is our duty to welcome the androgyne to a seat at the table of the end times for one final feast, where distinctions dissolve and we become, if only for one night, truly divine ...

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<sup>1</sup> The first analogue Mnemosyne Atlas was begun by the German art historian Aby Warburg in 1924 as an attempt to map 'the after-life of antiquity' in image and symbol. Warburg sought to trace the recurrence of these images by gathering examples of paintings, prints, maps and photographs, etc. which conveyed what he described as *bewegtes leben*, or life-in-motion. In particular, Warburg was concerned with images which showed the struggle between the Apollonian gesture of form-giving and the Dionysian gesture of form-destroying. Unfortunately, the project drove Warburg mad as he soon began to observe these curious symmetries everywhere, and at the time of his death in 1929, the project remained unfinished. The digital Mnemosyne Atlas was completed by the Warburg Institute during the Plague of 2020 through generous funding from donors who, for reasons of security, have chosen to remain nameless. But the military application of an image bank that can recognise the reappearance of archaic threats should be obvious.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, M.C. Howatson (trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 22–23.

<sup>3</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Anthony Kline (trans.), University of Virginia Library, Book IV, [ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph4.htm](http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph4.htm); accessed 20 January 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Ovid, Book IV.

<sup>5</sup> Elémire Zolla, *The Androgyne: Fusion of the Sexes*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1981, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Paul, Letter to the Galatians 3:28, *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, Thomas Nelson & Sons, Surrey, UK, 1966.

<sup>7</sup> Wayne Meeks, 'The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity', *History of Religions*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1974, p. 185. In particular, he cites Simonian Gnosticism as quoted in Hippolytus in the *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* and the Valentinians, in particular the *Gospel of Philip* discovered in the Nag Hammadi library.

<sup>8</sup> Mircea Eliade, 'Mephistopheles and the Androgyne or the Mystery of the Whole', in *The Two and the One*, J.M. Cohen (trans.), Harvill Press, London, 1965, p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, Harper and Row, New York, 1960, p. 174.

<sup>10</sup> Eliade, 'Mephistopheles and the Androgyne', p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> Wayne Dynes, 'Androgyny', in Wayne Dynes (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, Garland Publishing, New York, 1990, pp. 56–58.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, Graham Burchell (trans.), Picador, New York, 2004, p. 55.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *Abnormal*, p. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Seraphita*, Katharine Wormeley (trans.), *Project Gutenberg*, [gutenberg.org/files/1432/1432-h/1432-h.htm](http://gutenberg.org/files/1432/1432-h/1432-h.htm); accessed 22 January 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *Sarrasine*, in Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, Richard Miller (trans.), Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1974.

<sup>16</sup> Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, *Dandyism* (1st in English 1897), Douglas Ainslie (trans.), PAJ Publications, New York, 1988.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, quoted in Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Vintage, London, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Routledge, London, 2002, p. 62.

<sup>19</sup> 'Redefining Masculinity the BTS Way', *The Daily Vox*, [thedailyvox.co.za/redefining-masculinity-bts-way/](http://thedailyvox.co.za/redefining-masculinity-bts-way/); accessed 23 January 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, Bruce Benderson (trans.), The Feminist Press, New York, 2013, p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882), Walter Kaufmann (trans.), Random House, New York, 1974, p. 101.



Nina Sanadze  
*Monumental Shift*  
 2019  
 Studio archive of Soviet Georgian monumental sculptor  
 Valentin Topuridze (1907–1980): plaster models, plaster moulds  
 and clay fragments  
 100 × 400 × 400 cm  
 Photograph: Christo Crocker  
 Courtesy of the artist

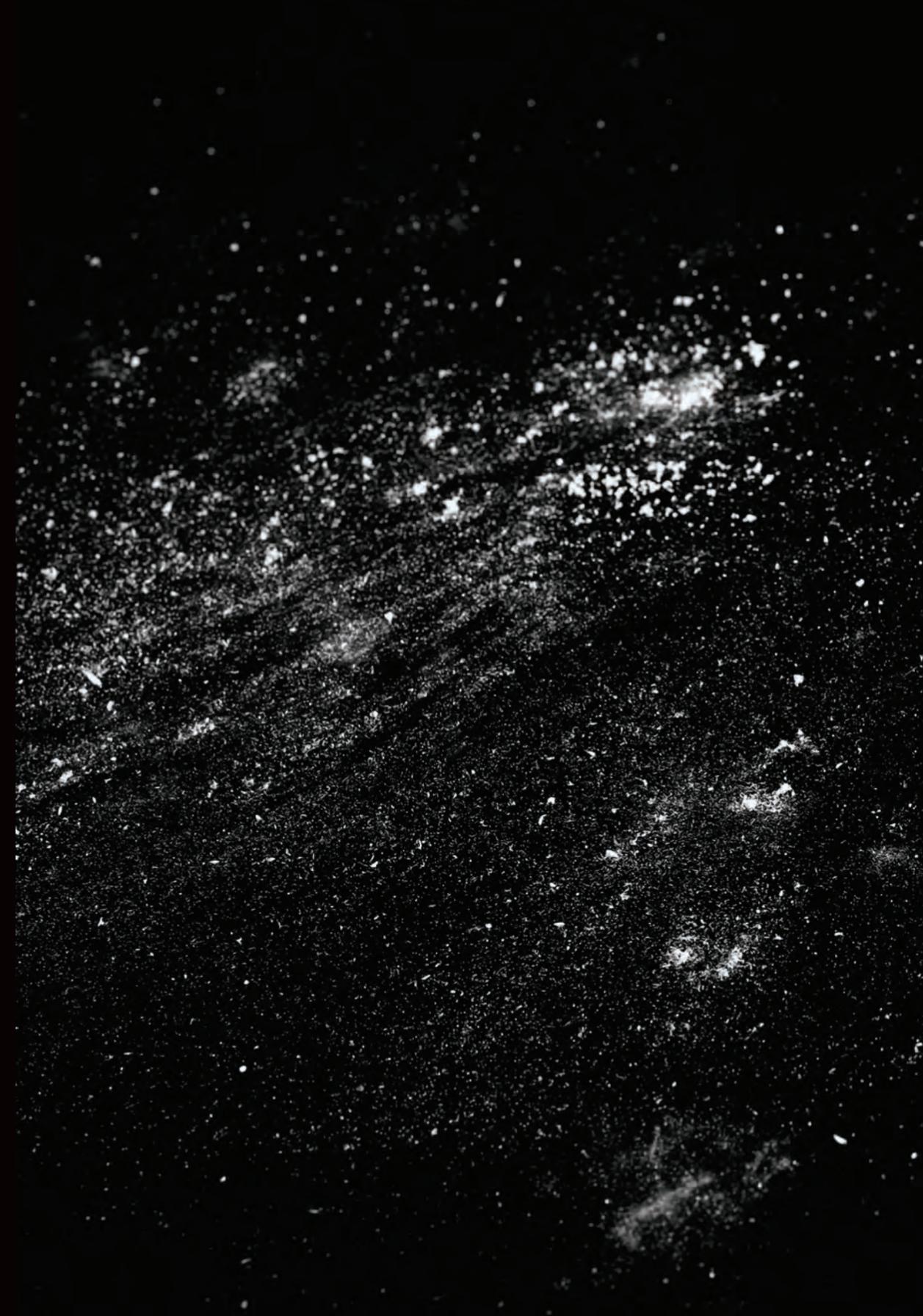
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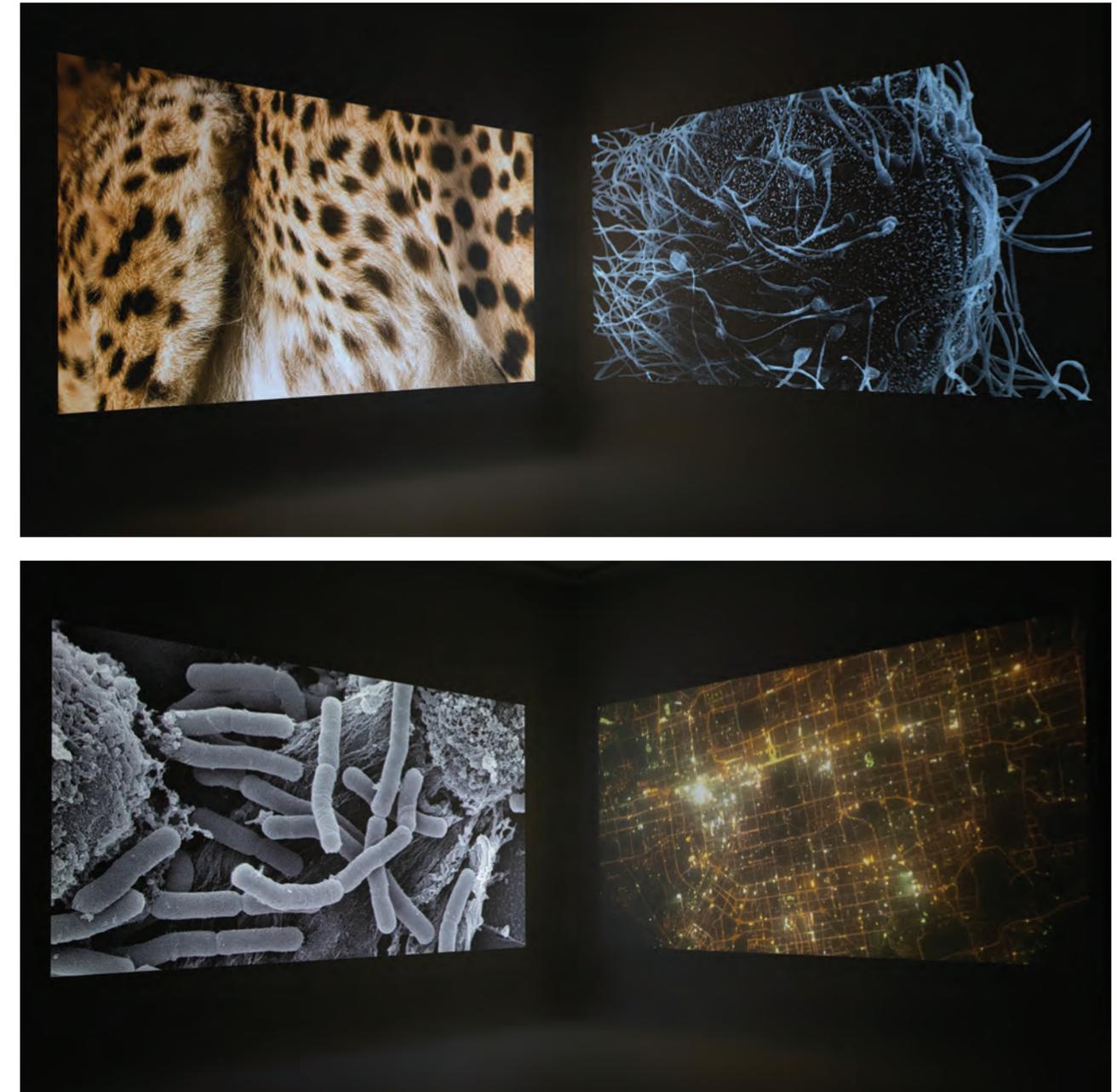
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prism,  
paperback  
cover  
of  
Jorge  
Luis  
Borges'  
Labyrinths,  
found  
hunting  
arrow,  
Icelandic  
flag  
sew-on  
embroidered  
patch,  
ground  
espresso,  
page  
from  
François  
Laruelle's  
The  
Concept  
of  
Non-Photography,  
pistachio  
husks,  
photograph  
of  
lion  
paintings  
from  
Chauvet  
Cave,  
dried  
hibiscus  
2017*

Black-and-white  
inkjet  
print  
130 x 85 cm  
ed. 1/5  
Courtesy  
of  
the  
artist



The first fragments of the theory that life on Earth has been a result of ancient microbes or bacteria arriving from outer space emerged from the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaxagoras, who during his cosmological ruminations mentioned swarms of particles or ‘seeds’.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars have interpreted this as meaning life has come from elsewhere, and far from being a fringe theory today, panspermia has become a leading topic of scientific debate among biologists and immunologists.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, as the Earth has been heating up, a new collection of ancient microbes have been revealing themselves from the ice. A recent discovery of 3.7-billion-year-old microbes in Greenland has pushed back the evidence of life on Earth by 220 million years.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Eric Lewis, 'Anaxagoras and the Seeds of a Physical Theory', *Apeiron*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2000. <sup>2</sup> Stephen Fleischfresser, 'Over our Heads: A Brief History of Panspermia', *Cosmos Magazine*, 24 April 2018, [cosmosmagazine.com/biology/over-our-heads-a-brief-history-of-panspermia](https://cosmosmagazine.com/biology/over-our-heads-a-brief-history-of-panspermia); and Edward J. Steele, 'Cause of Cambrian Explosion: Terrestrial or Cosmic?', *Progress in Biophysics and Molecular Biology*, vol. 136, August 2018, [sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0079610718300798?via%3DIihub](https://sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0079610718300798?via%3DIihub); all accessed 14 February 2020. <sup>3</sup> Marc Kaufman, 'On the Ground in Greenland', *NASA Astrobiology News*, 10 September 2019, [astrobiology.nasa.gov/news/on-the-ground-in-greenland](https://astrobiology.nasa.gov/news/on-the-ground-in-greenland); accessed 15 May 2020.

James Tunks  
 Stills from *This World Is Not Enough*  
 2020  
 Multi-channel HD video  
 9 minutes, looped  
 Courtesy of the artist

Since entering a new era of environmental change, the melting glaciers, permafrost and polar ice caps of the world have been revealing things trapped deep, and thoughts and assumptions trapped deep in our unconscious too. Among the plethora of things that have been revealing themselves: extinct prehistoric megafauna, anthrax, ancient rainforests, arctic hyenas, islands in Greenland, ice-age wolves, alpine soldiers, viking swords, victims of Incan sacrifice, iron-age horses and primordial bacteria. A taxonomical list of things; unsettling, ancient, and some even contagious. In its surface, the Earth itself has become a form of photographic emulsion, soaking up its various histories and events. A multiplicity of epochs overlap in layers of ice and time: freeze frames of life.

Claire Denis' *High Life* tells the story of a spaceship's crew of convicts and social outcasts, who, in lieu of their sentences on Earth, undertake a one-way mission towards a black hole in order to harvest its energy. En route they are also subject to scientific experiments with isolation, reproduction and disease, which chart but also induce a social breakdown like that of the desert island castaways in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Although in deep space beyond the solar system, the ship occasionally receives transmissions from Earth, which prompt a caustic observation from the film's protagonist, Monte: 'These images from Earth. I can't believe they still make it here. After all this time. Just like viruses chasing after us.'<sup>4</sup> If the digitised photograph and video can 'go viral', can we deduce that images and their messages are contagious? Does the captured image, both photographic and cinematic, act as host to a multiplicity of ideas, narratives, philosophies and beliefs in the same way life forms carry a virus? As the spaceship finally approaches the black hole's event horizon at the end of *High Life*, the only survivors of the expedition are Monte and the daughter he fathered and raised on board. The situation they confront becomes parallel with the ecological cataclysm facing humankind in our own time. Will they stay alive at this brink? 'Staying alive' becomes for Denis, not merely a subtext, but the driving life force of the cinematic narrative.<sup>5</sup> So what does it mean to stay alive? Can we propose that the production and dissemination of images is also a means of keeping ourselves alive? Or at least Undead?

<sup>4</sup> *High Life* (motion picture), Claire Denis (dir.), Alcatraz Films, Paris, 2018. <sup>5</sup> I thank Claire Denis for this conversation, Städelschule Frankfurt am Main, 2017.

One wonders if the 115 images encoded in the Golden Record, a copy attached to each hull of NASA's Voyager I and II deep space exploration vehicles, may go viral among other worlds. As the first human-made object to leave the solar system, the Golden Record was intended to communicate a story of our world to any advanced distant civilisation that may intercept it. Launched in 1977 as a kind of deep space photographic time capsule, the LP record contained a selection of images and sounds of life on Earth. The record and the 115 encrypted images contained on it were created to remain intact for more than a billion years, potentially rendering it the longest-lasting object ever crafted by human hands. The photographs, intended to outlive humanity, may become the last traces not only of human civilisation but also of life on Earth.

Coincidentally, the record was launched at the height of the Pictures Generation.<sup>6</sup> While artists were adopting new strategies of photographic appropriation and montage, the Golden Record adapted similar techniques to address an *inhuman* audience, appropriating found imagery as a diagrammatic illustration of our existence.<sup>7</sup> DNA helixes and Antarctic expeditions, human reproductive conception and string quartets, the Golden Record assigned photographic purpose to an auto-narrative of *life itself*.

With the intention of the record being found by future life forms (human, extraterrestrial or otherwise), NASA's selection of photographic images constructed a holistic yet positive self-image of humanity. NASA conscientiously avoided depictions of warfare, disease or catastrophe, to avoid suggesting hostility or provoking forces malevolent to human existence.<sup>8</sup> Through a careful and strategic selection of images, NASA painstakingly constructed the idealised self-image, or Freudian ego-ideal,<sup>9</sup> as a strategic gesture to reveal humankind through its best side. In their self-constructed fashion, these images operate as a kind of anthropocentric selfie. As Isabelle Graw writes, '[the selfie's] core purpose is to authenticate a presence, along the lines of: I was here; I still exist'.<sup>10</sup> So what could we infer the Golden Record may authenticate to the non-human viewer long after we have vanished or evolved into another species altogether? Aside from the depiction of our existence and our location in the cosmos, it is hard not to read the images today as a prelude to potential ecological cataclysm. Furthermore, the Golden Record raises the question of how one experiences a photograph from another world, a photograph from outside, or what we might call the 'exophotographic'. There are two steps that NASA has clearly followed in the process: 1) an inflection of the photographic gaze to what constitutes human; and 2) a reversion of that gaze, as we can only speculate how a living entity entirely anterior to our understanding would perceive life on Earth.

<sup>6</sup> The term Pictures Generation was spun from the title of Douglas Crimp's *Pictures* exhibition in New York's Art Space gallery in 1977. The exhibition addressed artists who manipulated the means and products of mass-media imagery through photographic and filmic image appropriation. Beyond the exhibition, the 'generation' notably included Sherrie Levine, Robert Longo, Richard Prince, Dara Birnbaum, Cindy Sherman and Louise Lawler. <sup>7</sup> Megan Gambino, 'What Is on Voyager's Golden Record?', *Smithsonian Magazine*, 22 April 2012, smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/what-is-on-voyagers-golden-record-73063839; accessed 14 February 2020. <sup>8</sup> NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory, 'What Are the Contents of the Golden Record?', voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/golden-record/whats-on-the-record; accessed 14 February 2020. <sup>9</sup> The ego ideal, as deployed in Freudian psychoanalysis, is an internal and chimerical image of the perfection of oneself, which one targets in self-love and aspires to become. See Sigmund Freud, *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, Routledge, Milton Park, Abingdon, UK, and New York, 2018. <sup>10</sup> Isabelle Graw and Benjamin Buchloh, 'Lost Traces of Life: A Conversation about Indexicality in Analog and Digital Photography', *Texte Zur Kunst*, vol. 99, September 2015, pp. 42–43.

### We have no need for other worlds, we need mirrors <sup>11</sup>

NASA's modus operandi of image collation for the Golden Record is a form of photographic self-portrait as self-narrative, or auto-narrative, condensing the blue marble Earth with its Earth-bound human species. Self-portraiture as auto-narrative in the photographic medium has two modes: centripetal and centrifugal. Both are features of the Golden Record. The centripetal self-portrait accumulates images existing in circulation ('found images'), clustering these around an individual as if by gravitational attraction towards their centre or focus, affirming the individual through a sort of mirrored display or echoed narrative. These mirrors form a constellation, surrounding the self to reveal—within their multiple perspectives—a feature that defines the self in auto-narration. We can see traces of this mode of self-portraiture in Michel Foucault's analysis of the mirror at the rear of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, in which we see King Philip IV and Mariana de Austria. The sightline created by the mirror located in the centre of the picture, in the middle ground, proposes a predicament: who is the actual subject of that painting? Or are we looking at ourselves looking back at ourselves? Foucault argues that 'we, the spectators can easily assign an object, since it is we, ourselves, who are that point'.<sup>12</sup> The gaze upon an image or photograph creates an inward dialectic of tracing one's self-image through the image upon which is found and gazed upon. *Las Meninas*, according to Foucault, provides a metathesis of seeing oneself.<sup>13</sup>

In a basic form, we see ourselves in those carefully selected pictures or graphic displays on our bedroom walls or notebook covers in childhood and adolescence, when seemingly disparate image constellations fabricate the developing image of oneself. We selected, appropriated and arranged these according to our tastes, what we felt they said about us, and in order for these images to narrate our identity—rather than that of their own authorship. The centripetal auto-narrative, or self-portrait, is exemplified in contemporary artistic practices that use the anti-authorial acts of trawling and sampling: video art made from ripped YouTube footage, low-res Google images enlarged to large-scale photographic prints and so on.<sup>14</sup> This activity is indexical and hyper-textual, insofar as it appropriates any subtexts, backstories and histories associated with any image for its own purpose of promoting the Freudian ego-ideal in its construction of the idealised self-image. But at a certain scale, this centripetal force can become implosive. Such an implosive self-image is NASA's ideologically driven representation of how it determined us—as a species identified with Earth—to be narrated and perceived.

Counter to this, the centrifugal self-image portrays the dissemination of self, whether libidinally or ideologically driven, constructed or real. This broadcasting of the self can form into collective groups, identified through the propagation of selfies, image feeds, live feeds, YouTube channels. In the case of the Golden Record, the centrifugal force takes form in a taxonomical photographic archive. The centrifuge drives an *outward*

*projection*, a libidinal broadcasting of the narrated self-image, or Freudian ego-ideal. Also exemplified in the images chosen by NASA, the explosive self-image can be deceptive in its capacity to depict a true self. It is a stark reminder that identity is essentially malleable, partial and fragmentary. Driven by our preoccupation with an encounter with the unknown, NASA attempted to fabricate the contours of what constitutes the 'us' that it narrates. Another significant consideration for NASA's Voyager mission was for photographs' and the records' capacity to exist in the future. The Voyager images are, in Jacques Derrida's sense of the term, spectral, as they render a moment, or event, for humankind that no longer belongs to time. Our time, according to Derrida, becomes a spectre for the lives of others.<sup>15</sup> Deferred to a viewer-ship billions of years in the future, the Golden Record provides a spectral snapshot of life on Earth, all contained in an encrypted golden fossil.

We can only speculate how receiving a photographic message from billions of years in the past would unfold for humans—a golden interstellar fossil, arcane and difficult to decipher, from a timescale anterior to our own experience. (The record's technology of encryption seems ancient even by today's standards.) Whatever life form may hypothetically intercept the Golden Record, it would receive a relic of our existence, a depiction of an ancestral reality that is life on Earth. As Quentin Meillassoux addresses: 'The existence of an ancestral reality or event ... is one that is anterior to terrestrial life'.<sup>16</sup> With the Golden Record predicted to last more than a billion years, well beyond when we have vanished or evolved into another species, its non-human observer would be unlikely to recognise the world in which the record's photographs were made. To reiterate Isabelle Graw's formula: 'I was here; I still exist'. The ancestral relic or arche-fossil of the Golden Record photographically suggests something more fatalistic: We *were* here; we *once* existed. From the viewpoint of a future non-human observer, the record depicts the ancestral event that was life on Earth.

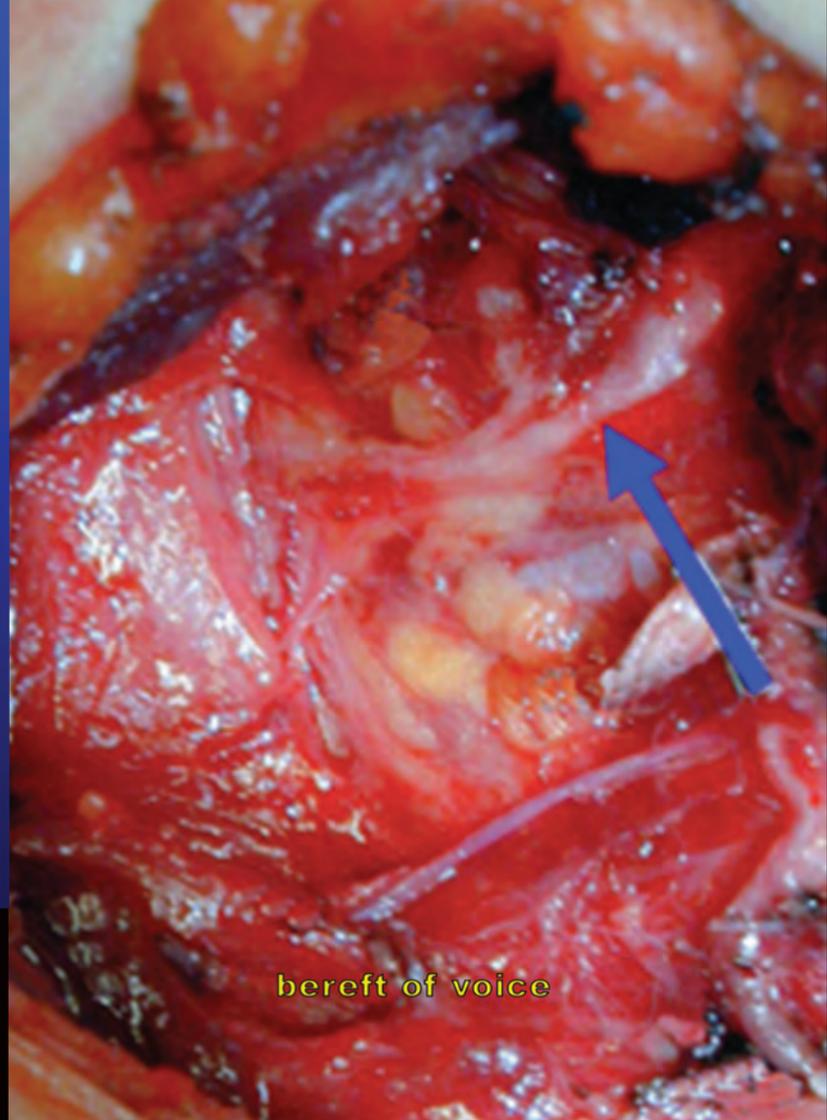
Can one examine this photographic ancestral event through the photographic term used by Henri Cartier-Bresson, 'the decisive moment'? For Cartier-Bresson, this refers to an event that is ephemeral and spontaneous, at which moment (of the camera shutter) the image represents the essence of the event itself.<sup>17</sup> Let's suppose that we are currently in the decisive moment, and that photography itself represents a turning point for humankind. Born in the era of the industrial revolution, we note that the technological development of photography occurs at the same time we began to dramatically alter the Earth's environment, in what is now called the Anthropocene. For the last 200 years, photography as a medium has mimicked the advancements of the world, providing a mirror to the economic growth, urbanisation and the cultural developments that have brought us into the now. Its reflexive capability allows us to look back on how the world has altered—socially, environmentally and politically. My proposition is that the implosion of the Golden Record auto-narrative is symptomatic of a crisis of the Anthropocene, its 'event horizon' and the decisive moment for *life itself*.

<sup>11</sup> Stanislaw Lem, *Solaris*, Faber and Faber, London, 2003, p. 75. <sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, Routledge, London, 1966, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, p. 9. <sup>14</sup> See Thomas Ruff's *JPEGS* (2004), for example.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. xix. <sup>16</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, Bloomsbury, London, 2008, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> James Estrin, 'Henri Cartier-Bresson, Whose "Decisive Moment" Shaped Modern Photography', *The New York Times*, 3 August 2016, [nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/obituaries/archives/henri-cartier-bresson-photography](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/cp/obituaries/archives/henri-cartier-bresson-photography); accessed 16 April 2020.



From left to right:

**Katie Paine**

*Unforeseen Portal after Polanski's Chinatown –  
Blue Void*  
2020  
Inkjet print  
40 × 40 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

+ + + + +

*To Learn a Latent Language  
(Larynx Reconstruction)*  
2019  
Inkjet print, vinyl, enamel  
42 × 29 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

+ + + + +

*A Guest in What Cannot Be Terrestrial Space  
(Dead Sea)*  
2019  
Photograph  
42 × 29 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

+ + + + +



ARCANUM

KATIE  
PAINÉ

We have looked out through the night to gaze upon that which we thought to be unseeable. The event takes place as a flattening of perspective, like some kind of deranged medieval tapestry. Episodes of time arrange themselves into islands within this unbroken expanse—an entirely senseless trajectory. Nanoseconds and analogue minutes litter the pathway like the most delicate of millefleur. Time might pass like a series of stanzas in a libretto, or something staggering from one hour to the next across a precipitous outcrop, only to step off the edge of the known world.

The Queen of the Night commands the far reaches of the heavens. She sits encircled by her celestial attendants, the brightest being Icarus (MACS J1149+2223 Lensed Star 1).

Archived fragment, journal of First Light expedition

A telescope protrudes from The Centre's facade, mimicking the luminous orb-like organ an anglerfish dangles to lure its prey, its gruesome visage hidden in the lightless aquatic depths. Or, perhaps it is like the outstretched arm of a curious child intent on grasping towards some new object of desire. Each day, I dread descending the fluorescent-lit route to the observation deck and accompanying laboratories. I dread lowering my lashes to the eyepiece of the telescope. The glass disk reminds me of the day I first witnessed a dissection: a cornea, pale and frosted, peeled from its jellied flesh. I dread peering through this device to discern the foggy demarcation of the event horizon—only just perceptible—rupturing the unblemished picture plane of the surrounding space.

I am a scientist participating in the third study of the nearby planet, which sits in perilous proximity to this Hadean phenomenon. It is a macabre exercise: to spend one's days deciphering the dubious logic in a series of seismic signals emitted by the planet in order to ascertain the effects of the black hole. Hieronymus Bosch may have imagined an inferno, pitch darkness sickeningly illuminated by lurid flames and populated by cavorting ghouls and unhinged men, but this seems almost endearingly infantile compared to this very real, crushing oblivion. Black holes have been conceived of as deformed regions of time. Certainly, they seem to impose an entirely irrational temporality on all that surrounds them: confounding and collapsing. At The Centre, captured information is transmitted to the laboratories in unintelligible sequences. Years of translation and analysis are required before any of us can build concrete knowledge of the impact the event horizon has on the planet.

Though officially named by its astronomical code, the planet is known by all who work at The Centre as Gehenna. It received its name from a valley near Jerusalem, referred to in the Old Testament as a cursed place of judgement and purgatory where children were sacrificed to fire. A long-running joke insinuates that anyone hapless enough to find themselves co-opted into the study must have committed some crime or misdemeanour in their youth. It is not just the act of witnessing such chilling circumstances that unsettles me and my colleagues. For a decade now, rumours of the threat of an inscrutable malaise that plagued the first two studies have circulated in heated whispers. It is said that anyone deviating from the study's protocols by incorrectly handling the accumulated data fell ill.

The expedition First Light was the long-anticipated investigation in which a drone, launched from a nearby vessel moored in orbit, was to take images of Gehenna. After several months, the drone and its vessel returned to their mooring point and spent several weeks undergoing rigorous tests. A researcher at The Centre was then to cautiously study the material retrieved by the drone's cold eye. Within a few days, a change came upon the man studying the material. We were dismayed to observe that his logs became more and more densely coded and ultimately nonsensical. I, who had been riveted by every morsel of news of First Light, was bemused to find that a kind of sickly lethargy cloaked my colleagues. No-one wanted to talk about the

researcher's delusional rambling. Most pretended his research had never occurred. Though I could not glean any useful details, my curiosity persisted. Not a single colleague joined me in my endeavour to find out more. The process of analysis was shrouded in that special kind of secrecy only achieved by a veneer of bureaucratic procedure so tedious that no-one can bear to look into a matter further. Submitting enquiries for additional research was like trying to request information from Dickens' Circumlocution Office.

Gehenna's illness had left the researcher an abhorred, wretched modern leper in the eyes of those who treated him. No-one truly understood the nature of this illness; no-one knew how it might spread or if it might be fatal. All that was certain was that this fabled sickness had reared its sly head, and so the victim was relegated to an isolated infirmary deep in the bowels of The Centre. This place, The Centre, lies so far from the territories of Sun and Moon that we are exiled from the domain of clock-time, yet we cling to the comfort of a terrestrial chronology of minutes and hours. In the night-time of the ship's cavernous recesses, I find myself called towards the image of that miserably ill figure, like a sleepwalker is called by some moonlit apparition.

Despite being separated from him by a screen of waxy plastic, I can tell he is tall and sinewy, with high cheekbones, hooded eyes and a closely shorn head. Shrouded in sheets starchy with disinfectant and attached to a tangle of plastic tubing, he resembles the exhumed body of an Egyptian mummy, preserved but lifeless. Tiny bruised capillaries blossom over the sockets of his eyes, and crusty abscesses have formed about his lips. Despite the steady thud of his pulse and the sporadic opening and closing of his eyes like the aperture of a camera, he certainly does not seem alive. His patient report reads, 'Indicators of response to auditory and visual stimuli are evident; however, there are no signs of comprehension'. Indeed, he cannot comprehend his mother tongue, nor English—nor even the most basic of gestures. Members of his department believe him to be a lost cause, more animal than human.

I lie awake, acrid dread congealing in my stomach as I think of him adrift in an ocean without meaning. What existence might be left for him? Gehenna and her obstinate grasp on the researcher preoccupy my waking thoughts, leaving me clumsy and muddled. Gehenna seems to have taken on the mantle of an extra-terrestrial Pied Piper, enchanting those who would look upon her. The unfortunate children from that legend were never returned to their village, whereas Gehenna may return her victims. But she leaves them so fundamentally changed that they are rendered unrecognisable.

The disturbances occur a week or so after my first covert visits. I sleep feverishly, and tableaux from my childhood visit in cunning flashes and hysteric visions. A curtain rises to reveal the silhouette of a buxom soprano. Next arrives a chortling, stumbling man, his livery abundant with feathers. A quintessential fool, he is a foil for his master's earnest heroics. He is visited by a trio of exquisite women—attendants of the Queen of the Night. Entranced by their loveliness, he lies and boasts. They mock his deceitful speech with their cruel and glittering smiles, casting a spell as he wanders into a garden. A chain padlocked tightly across his lips bites sharply into his cheeks. He is unable to utter any words of sense.

Sequestering myself in the ward, I wander through virtual chambers of files and databases from the first two studies. This disease, it may have something to do with the nature of the images captured of Gehenna or the patterns within the language used to describe it. Perhaps it is retribution for an ill-gotten knowledge, Gehenna imposing a form of justice for a trespass we were not aware we had made. For images and words rising from doomed worlds like Gehenna have long infested us with their malignant voices, their poisonous tendrils capable of a terrible corruption. Why else were books burned throughout history? paintings confiscated from public display? image dissemination ruthlessly regulated?

Over the next few weeks, I keep my watch over him, sporadically conducting tests in a desperate quest to find any remaining cognition. Only members of First Light are allowed to study the researcher. Why I risk my career, my health, my reputation, I cannot say. Perhaps I am naively optimistic, deluded or somehow smitten with this pitiful man, possessing the kind of infatuation born of tragedy.

*artichoke \* symphony \* folly \* statue*

Occasionally, while I am reading aloud test cards, his feathery lips open to utter a strange raspy mew. Repeated—repeated again—and the word begins to take form. | *Fol-ly* | There is a moment when I am sure understanding is taking place; but the sinking feeling follows as the utterance reveals itself to be mere repetition, a vacant mimicry.

Papageno, the parrot, wittering: 'Pa-pa-pa-pa-pa'.

One night—for my secret undertaking still forces me to keep canonical hours—I sit in the damp green light of the ward. It could be an irrational fancy, but I sense the first brush of the illness's grasp, the faint sensation of precarity, like a patient learning to walk after surgery, stumbling as they try in vain to reacquaint themselves with the world. All uttering becomes a tentative negotiation with unfamiliar syllables. *How very married to this cerebral existence we have become. This language was once a home.*

Painfully close to the computer screen.

Letters and numbers tussle and scatter like maggots, burrowing beneath a vast blank screen upon which no words can be read, where no lines converge to form coherent images.

Salmon-pink gums are wrenched open by a dentist's plastic clamp, manipulating the wearer's face into a contorted, perpetual grimace. One by one, the small kernels of bone we call teeth are prised from the fleshy mess. The tongue is sluggish and struggles to commence its dance that would deliver sensible sound.

*Tamino and Pamina enter the hall of the Temple of Ordeal. Their romance will undergo three trials.*

Desperate, fumbling blindness. The plastic wall that separates me from the researcher is perforated. I stretch out my fingers to the edge of the makeshift bed. Feeling for his shoulders and elbows, I lie down and bury my face in his throat. We lie beside one another, cradled in a mutual fog.

### Epilogue

The scientist does not arise, and in the following days, she too becomes an object of study by the occasional curious colleague. If these observers would only think to look closely at the scans of the couple's brain activity, they might have a considerable shock. The pair may have been rendered mute, but some new kind of speaking is taking place, their peaceful sleeping faces belying a flood of neurological activity—one that corresponds with the signals emitted from Gehenna. The pair may seem to inhabit a temporal void, but perhaps it is a place of the faintest distortions—like a mirror's small tricks—a secondary world, internally consistent but with a logic outside our grasp.

The scientist's babbling notes are archived along with the rest of the material relating to First Light. One legible fragment reads:

Gehenna calls out through the darkness for its kin to come home, asserting its love through some unknown jargon. The planet acts as a mouthpiece, a benign translator, emitting a call for some kind of return. I'm now sure its disease, if that is the correct term, does not usurp all communication, but hollows out the space in which human language resides in order to make room for something else.

Papageno: Are you completely given to me now?

Papagena: Well, I am completely given to you!

Katie Paine  
*To Learn a Latent Language (For Papageno)*  
2019  
Inkjet print, vinyl, enamel  
42 × 29 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

+ + + + +





LOOKING  
BACK ON

REFLECT  
IONS ON  
UTOPIAN

EARTH

PROJECTS

AND FUTU  
RE ECOLO  
GIES SUZI  
E FRASER  
AND DAMI  
EN RUDD

As we wandered among the dusty, curious lanes of Arcosanti, in central Arizona, we learned from our tour guide that the city's leader, the Italian-American architect Paolo Soleri, had just left. Well, he'd left somewhat recently. He had died six years earlier, abandoning his flock—the city's population of about 80 residents—to the indecisions and mundane turbidity of a leaderless society. Standing in this concrete theme park of high modernism, basking in its austere aesthetics and hushed reverence, we imagined what it would be like to live with a visionary, in a city of their making.

Previous spread:  
Damien Rudd  
*Biosphere 2*  
2019  
Digital photograph  
Courtesy of the artist

+ + + + +

As cities go, Arcosanti is one of the smallest and most unearthly ever built. Its infrastructure and local economy are remarkably pre-industrial, and yet the city's architecture lends it the feel of an intergalactic command post. This is, of course, no coincidence; Soleri's designs for Arcosanti were conceived at a time when space exploration was at the forefront of people's imaginations, particularly in America.

On Christmas Eve 1968, the year before Soleri began work on Arcosanti, the first photograph by a human being of the whole Earth was captured by Apollo 8 astronauts as they came around the far side of the Moon; this image came to be known as *Earthrise*. From the novel perspective of 384,400 kilometres, the Earth appeared for the first time as a single, living organism. As biologist Lewis Thomas noted in 1974, 'Viewed from the distance of the Moon, the astonishing thing about the Earth ... is that it is alive'.<sup>1</sup> Never before had our planet, a radiant blue disc silhouetted against the hostile void of space, appeared as beautiful, and as vulnerable.

NASA's Christmas gift to humanity entered the cultural imagination at a timely moment in history. *Earthrise* became the screen onto which the industrialised West projected its fears and anxieties. Several books, such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1968) and the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* (1972),<sup>2</sup> as well as a number of high-profile environmental disasters, such as the Santa Barbara Channel oil spill, brought the environment into the spotlight while reviving Malthusian predictions of imminent overpopulation and mass famine. Meanwhile in Europe, the 1972 United Nations' conference in Stockholm centered on the theme 'Only One Earth'. Western society's potent ideology of growth and expansionism had led to an unstoppable program of natural-resource depletion and the occupation of Earth's open spaces by a tangled vascular system of built structures and thoroughfares. A number of public figures—from environmentalists to politicians, scientists and engineers—argued that our planet was near carrying capacity and soon the depletion of natural resources would send civilisation spiralling towards social and environmental collapse.<sup>3</sup>

*Earthrise* also visualised the emerging concept of Earth as a spaceship. A few years earlier, the economist Barbara Ward published *Spaceship Earth* (1966).<sup>4</sup> She proposed that we should think of our planet as a craft travelling through space, one with interconnected systems and limited resources that needed to be protected and managed. When *Earthrise* appeared, there was Spaceship Earth, our small, fragile and finite craft poised against the hostile void of space. While fears of overpopulation and depletion rippled through society, a group of innovators and engineers—inspired by *Earthrise* and the new frontierism of space exploration—believed we had simply outgrown our planet.<sup>5</sup> We should, they argued, instead exploit the unlimited possibilities of this new cosmic frontier. For these hopeful space pioneers, the image from Apollo 8 represented a nostalgic backwards glance at our small-town planetary home.

As this dialectic of growth and limitation became an *idée fixe* in the cultural consciousness, Paolo Soleri came to believe, much like the high modernists of the early 20th century, that the solution to both the environmental crisis and growing social inequality was a radical overhaul of the modern city. Inebriated with intellectual hubris and a moral elitism, these 'overhaulers' of urban space, such as Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius, believed that through 'good design' and rational engineering they could achieve social reform, making the dysfunctional, unequal and inefficient cities of the past obsolete. By the 1960s, many of the elitist urban design projects of high modernism had already begun to collapse under their own moral weight, yet Soleri surged on with unflinching enthusiasm.

Soleri was convinced the cure for the insidious condition of expansionism was implosive shrinking. A city should be a 'highly integrated and compact three-dimensional urban form that pursues the opposite of urban sprawl'.<sup>6</sup> Soleri believed that the modern city was an 'inherently wasteful consumption of land, energy, and time, [which tended] to isolate people from each other and community life'.<sup>7</sup>

In 1969, Soleri published his book *Arcology: The City in the Image of Man*.<sup>8</sup> Brimming with philosophical musing and pages of elaborate and audacious urban designs that resemble cities from a futuristic sci-fi novel, Soleri introduced, for the first time, his idea of 'arcology' to describe the fusion of architecture and ecology. On the first page of the book is the cryptic statement: 'This book is about miniaturization'. For Soleri, miniaturisation is at the heart of arcology, describing the 'shrinking of organic and inorganic processes at any scale'.<sup>9</sup> Yet, it is not simply the act of making things smaller, 'but rather maintaining the interactivity, complexity, and circuitry of a system while reducing the amount of space and time required for them to function'.<sup>10</sup>

We left Arcosanti and headed south down the I-17, taking an extensive detour in order to circumvent the endless suburban sprawl of Phoenix, to keep an appointment with another ambitious attempt at miniaturisation. Now that we had descended the mountains to the plains of central Arizona, a desert landscape opened up, an endless expanse of bronze-coloured sand punctuated with colossal saguaro cacti, the quintessential kind one will find on any tequila or hot-sauce bottle. Following the road signs, we came at last over a sandy rise to see before us a desert metropolis of towering geodesic pyramids and domes shimmering in the late afternoon sun. We had arrived at Biosphere 2.

Some 30 years ago, it was here, on the outskirts of Oracle, Arizona, that the largest and most expensive experiment in closed-system ecology in history was completed.<sup>11</sup> The origins of Biosphere 2, however, can be traced back to the late 1960s when, in response to Barbara Ward's *Spaceship Earth*, the visionary architect, inventor and futurist Richard Buckminster Fuller published *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*.<sup>12</sup> Building on Ward's notion, Fuller too imagined the Earth as a spaceship, arguing that for humanity to survive, we must understand the planet as an interconnected and holistic system. Fuller rejected fears of societal collapse from overpopulation and famine, declaring 'Malthusian philosophy is fallacious'.<sup>13</sup> For Fuller, the Earth's environmental and population problems were merely technical issues with the spacecraft, which could be solved through radical creativity and design. Yet it would be Fuller's notion of 'synergetics'<sup>14</sup>—essentially the idea that the output of a holistic system exceeds that of its individual parts—that inspired John Allen, with millions in funding from environmental philanthropist Ed Bass, to build Biosphere 2.<sup>15</sup> Shortly after Bass and Allen met in the mid-1970s at the Synergia Ranch (a name clearly inspired by Fuller), in New Mexico, they began to develop the idea of building an experimental laboratory that could replicate, in miniature, Earth's interconnected systems. They would call it Biosphere 2, as they considered the Earth itself to be Biosphere 1.

Some 20 years later, on 26 September 1991, the first of two highly publicised missions began when eight 'Biospherian' researchers, sporting matching cosmic jumpsuits, entered the three-acre glass and steel enclosure. For the next two years the crew would live and work within Biosphere 2, sealed off tighter than the international space station. Beyond maintaining and studying the five expansive biomes—a tropical rainforest, high altitude desert, savannah, ocean complete with coral reef and fish, and mangrove wetland—the crew would need to sow, tend, pick and process all their own food crops. It was as if, in order to trailblaze a new cosmic epoch, they had to first plow their way back to the agrarian age. All air, excrement, waste and water would be recycled back into the living system. While the primary goal was to gain unique insights into Earth's systems and processes, the crew also hoped to test the feasibility of creating miniaturised, artificial biospheres in anticipation of someday colonising space and other planets.<sup>16</sup>

After a year, however, it became clear that maintaining a miniature version of Earth was far more complicated than anyone had anticipated. By early 1993, oxygen levels were comparable to the summit of a 17,000-foot mountain, while carbon dioxide levels were 12 times higher than outside the enclosure.<sup>17</sup> Such atmospheric conditions made it not only difficult to function, but nearly impossible to grow food. On 26 September 1993, exactly two years after the experiment began, the eight malnourished and exhausted Biospherians broke open the airlock and emerged back into Biosphere 1. Global media at the time widely dismissed the Biosphere 2 project as a calamity, and *Time* magazine later declared the project one of the 100 worst ideas of the century, together with 'The Ugandan Space Program' and 'Aerosol Cheese'.

After Biosphere 2's early, highly publicised 'failings', it was sold in 1995 to Columbia University. The sheer cost of operation forced Columbia to give it up, and after a long period of uncertainty, it was handed over, in 2011, to the University of Arizona, which continues to manage the facility. To help make ends meet, the university sells Biosphere 2-themed knick-knacks in a gift store and offers daily tours to inquisitive visitors.

As our tour guide, a chirpy student of environmental sciences, opened a large steel door, a sudden gush of cool air tackled us to a standstill. One by one, we pushed our way down the pressurised passage, into the depths of Biosphere 2. We had entered a dank, cavernous complex—a stark contrast to the lush greenhouse above. Around us was a veritable highway of pipelines, tubes, hoses, vents, vessels and filters; thousands of valves and stoppers, tanks and bigger tanks, containers for air, containers for water, containers for excrement, and perhaps most impressive of all, a monumental rubber disc known as the 'lung', the sole purpose of which is to equalise the air pressure in the various biomes. This labyrinthine network of support systems, referred to as the 'technosphere', is an elaborate and expensive operation, yet essential to keep the miniature Earth alive.

In fact, everything about this closed-system habitat is absurdly complicated, quite simply because any attempt to replicate the Earth requires innumerable synthetic processes to function in a sophisticated balance in order to support life—processes that are ordinarily provided for free by the planet. In a 1996 review of the first experiment, titled 'Biosphere 2 and Biodiversity—The Lessons so Far', ecologist Joel Cohen concluded that 'Despite its mysteries and hazards, Earth remains the only known home that can sustain life'.<sup>18</sup>

The lessons available from Arcosanti and Biosphere 2 advise that the creators of these sites underestimated the magnitude of inventing habitats through miniaturisation. Cities and the Earth are analogous in several respects: they support human life through a nuanced and interconnected system that has evolved over a long period of time. At the very least, attempting to fast-track the creation of either a city or a replica Earth from scratch is absurdly uneconomical; after 50 years of development, Arcosanti can only support 80 residents, rather than the projected 5000, while Biosphere 2 cost a reported \$150 million to support just eight humans for two years.<sup>19</sup>

Aspirations for radically different societies are often styled as *utopias*, which by their very nature are unable to exist: they are 'no place'. But in manifesting some form of a utopian project in a real environment, the creator of that project is able to realise a tangible experience of the *utopia*—one which we might term, drawing on Michel Foucault's concept, a *heterotopia* or 'other place'.<sup>20</sup> The creators of and participants at Arcosanti and Biosphere 2 faced challenges in the execution of their respective projects, but rather than these sites serving as examples of failure from a contemporary perspective, they stand as repositories of learning and guidance in a new phase of ecological uncertainty. As Fuller notes in his own book *Spaceship Earth*: 'Every time man makes a new experiment he always learns more. He cannot learn less.'<sup>21</sup>

During our final day in Arizona, we found ourselves in a dusty second-hand bookshop, every surface coated in ochre powder blown in from the desert. In the back, among a stack of obsolete lifestyle magazines and guidebooks to microwave cooking, was a faded copy of *Whole Earth Catalog* from spring 1969. There on the front cover was *Earthrise*. It's ironic that the colonial expansionism of the 20th century, which led humans away from the planet, allowed us to look back to see the Earth in an entirely new way—to see our planet as a fragile and finite planetary craft. In this century, we again need a new vision of the Earth from a distant perspective—this time not spatial but temporal—to combat the myopia gripping our imaginations. The looming climate crisis requires us all to be visionaries, to some degree. In this century, we must undertake experimental

projects that measure successes and failures not by financial outcomes, but by their creative ambition to imagine and actualise new ways of organising our social and environmental relationships on Earth.

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Damien Rudd  
*Arcosanti*  
2019  
Digital photographs  
Courtesy of the artist

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CIRCLING 87 IMAGE  
ACTUALITY THROUGH  
AND DISTO ECOLOGIC  
RTION: REA AALGYRET  
DING THE L AND OJAX  
MESSIER ON WATER  
MITCHELL HOUSE

An orb hangs in a darkened expanse



NASA/Apollo 17 crew  
*The Blue Marble*  
1972  
NASA

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Capturing the Earth in its entirety, the *Blue Marble* image presents to us the planet—suspended. A flash of light onto film, time suspended. We see a whorling white mass in the bottom-left quadrant, off the African coast. This is the 1972 Tamil Nadu cyclone two days after it had made landfall in southern India, touching and tearing terrain, lasting a fortnight at most. It lives on in this frozen image, a permanent reminder of disruption both atmospheric and terrestrial on Earth. This image, arguably the most widely circulated of all photographs, became a symbol for the Whole Earth movement—a symbol for unity and an optimistic green future. The belief was that this image of the world would radically alter human capacity for the ecological interconnectedness that Donna Haraway would later call ‘becoming-with’,

and thus for planetary coexistence, a mobilisation of ‘whole Earth thinking’.<sup>1</sup> Macroscopic empathy. Nothing hidden, obscured or gestured at behind a horizon line—just present, like a marble held in the hand.

# Clear-eyed



A selection of glass eyes  
from an optician's glass eye case  
Wellcome Collection.  
Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

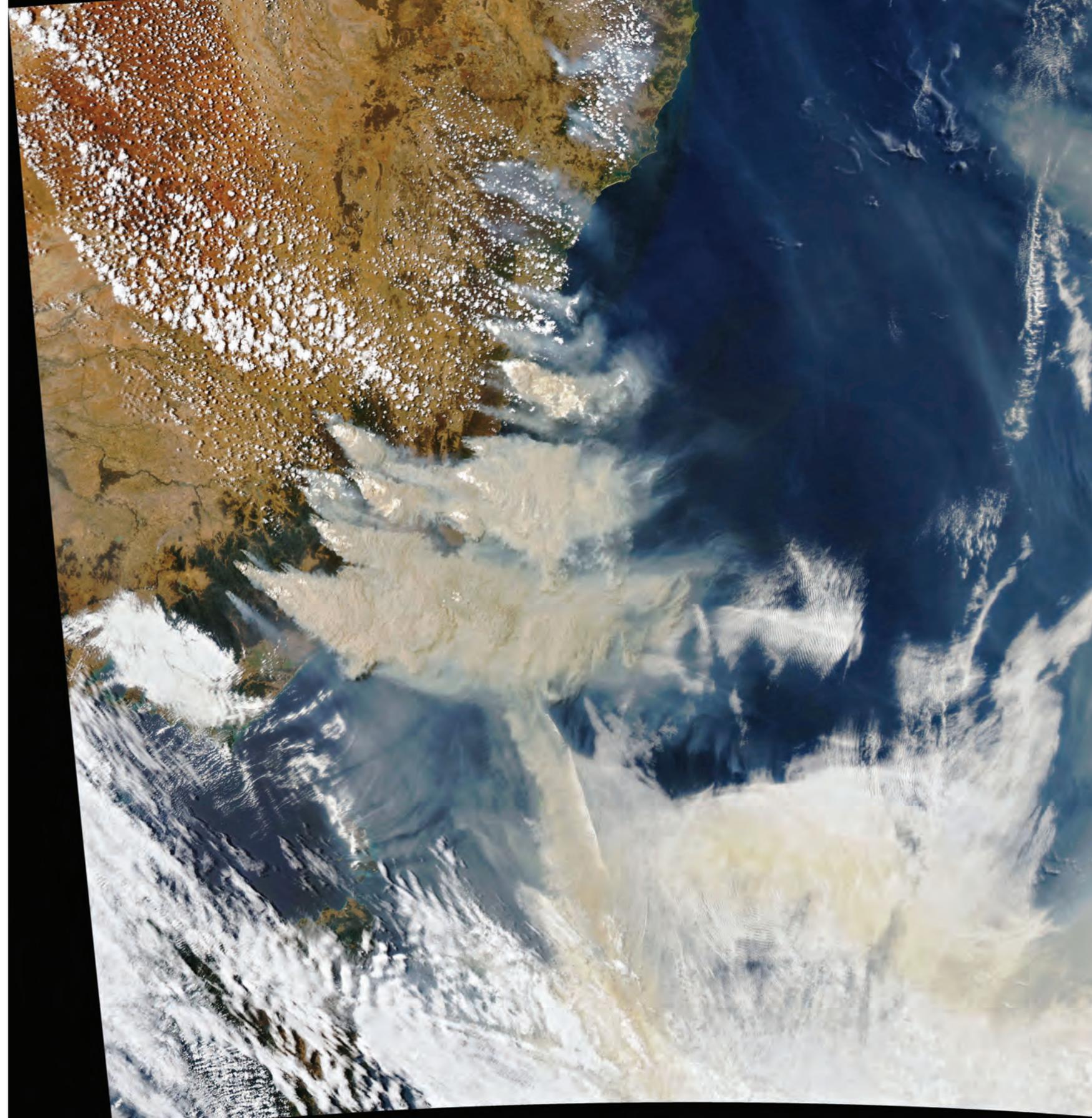
Our eyes, both biological and technological, are a companion to that act of holding, a way of measuring and verifying the affective and sensible. However, as we look into the eye of the Tamil Nadu cyclone there is also obscuration: a clouding, a veil-masking and hiding tangible, bodily and structural devastation. Peering behind the veil is to apprehend the spiral as a vortex, as having both depth and volume, a realisation of a gyre. In a meteorological and oceanographic framework, a gyre is a system of circulating flows and/or currents: a whirlpool. To map the gyre is to track both its vortex (the whirl) and its volume (the pool).

In our research project, Ecological Gyre Theory, we treat the ‘ecological turn’ as a gyre, or ‘vortextual’ re-worlding, manifest in the rings, circles and cycles that tighten and slip off kilter as time accelerates non-human temporalities. Through this lens we read the Messier 87 (M87) image, becoming attentive to the emergence of these concentric, orbicular and rotational presences. Anthropocene living is an understanding of geological time, Paul Klee’s angel glancing back to our interjection into the geological record. Modernity enables us to travel beyond the terrestrial, in an inversion or a vertical counterpoint to looking down through strata, that which makes visible the Anthropocene as hyperobject, as Thing.<sup>2</sup>

What does it mean to perceive the whole Earth? But also, is there futility in asking: What does this mean in the face of galactic time?

A true colour image of south-east Australia,  
taken on 4 January 2020 from the MODIS instrument  
on the Aqua satellite  
NASA Worldview  
[go.nasa.gov/307pDDX](https://go.nasa.gov/307pDDX)

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### Global glaucoma

A ring of satellites encircle the Earth in perfect orbit: a machinic Saturnalia. Geosynchronous, they follow and transmit—conduits for rapid circulation. Light waves filter down through the atmosphere, through skies reddened and then darkened by ravaging fire. The smoke shares these skies with waves of data: signals, codes and computations. Our satellites are in orbit, silent witnesses struggling to transmit and receive, as the smoke from the catastrophic bushfires joins them in circumnavigating the globe.

Enveloped in smoke, hundreds of thousands of online accounts circulate a viral video of a magpie, *Gymnorhina tibicen*, mimicking the sound of a fire engine. Technological responses and reactions to human-initiated climate collapse infiltrate and spread rapidly—feedback loops grow tighter, accelerating. Fire-retardant materials flood into the water table. The air tastes like charred remains. Carbonised particles embed in soft and sensitive respiratory and pulmonary tissue, like cinders falling, flaring briefly and then burning out, leaving scorched traces. There is a run on protective masks, as lungs, human and non-human, are decimated by fire.

How do we see through smoke? How do we reconcile Whole Earth unity with our myopic vision? Atmospheric supercomputers allow us to overcome our human shortcomings—their omniscience provides a wider lens, a sense of effect and scale. But in this instance, it is hazy; a glaucoma spreads.

Physicist and philosopher Karen Barad recontextualises and redeploys the scientific phenomenon of diffraction as a research methodology. Diffraction—the becoming, coming together and intermingling of light beams—when used in this manner becomes a ‘synecdoche of entangled phenomenon [*sic*] ... enacting new patterns of engagement, attending to how exclusions matter’.<sup>3</sup> We turn to Richard Whiteley’s *Event Horizon*, housed at the National Gallery of Australia, a foreign object (as objet d’art) lodged in the soft and paunchy centre of Australia’s hard power. Viewed from the side, the coloured glass becomes an angled lens, a vessel, like a clouded atmosphere—looked at and looking upon—the glaucomic eye under inspection.

Whiteley’s *Event Horizon* sits in a window box between rooms, a micro-monumental slab—like a tamped-down glass obelisk, cast and now hovering in interstitial space. To look through the darkened glass darkly, we see the open corridor behind; however, in the vertical horizon formed by the work—this bisection of glass into darker and dark—we see synchronicity between the interior, frozen sky and the smoke-filled sky outside, and the uncertain present and unknowable future. Are the dark clouds of the approaching fire line darker than the scorched earth left in its wake? In following this thinking, we strike the angled glass like light bent by space-time—the conflux of inside and outside, imaged and imminent, past, present and future. The reflections and refractions within the glass become entangled, implicating an acceleration of climatic events. Out of this



Richard Whiteley  
*Event Horizon*, 2000  
 Glass: 45% lead crystal, cast and polished  
 75 × 62 × 11 cm  
 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra  
 Courtesy of the artist and National Gallery of Australia

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confluence, akin to the intermingling of minerals required to make glass, the image of our heat-death comes into sight. Time no longer linear; it is bent and swept up in a turning and tightening, past and future becoming closer and more indistinguishable. It is these muddied waters that subsist within our gyre, a confluence of temporalities and meaning-making necessarily refigured as a continual turn and turning—endless circular multiplicities.

In looking through the coloured lens of Whiteley’s *Event Horizon*, into an open corridor, we see in the object the horizon, turned vertical and bisecting the coloured glass into dark and darker. Particles within the glass object float, and a correspondence occurs between this interior sky, frozen in glass, and the smoke-filled sky outside. In this we encounter a temporal confluence, the object’s interiority speaking at once to the persistence of the past and the emergence of futures foreshadowed by our climate realities. Our temporalities strike the angled glass like light bent by space-time, entangling out of view on the other side of the horizon. This tangle contains within it a narrative of our impending heat-death, at once both mimicking and captured by the fusion of liquid matter into solid form.



Illustration of various types of cataracts  
Wellcome Collection.  
Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

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### Clouding as wound as myopic vision

As our Earthly home becomes tinder, with the burning of fossils fuelling catastrophic megafires, we are engulfed by *waves of heat, dread and distorted light, torrents of real-time destruction and devastation materialised through algorithms and news outlets*. Sight is obscured and distorted by this influx, climate grief traumatises; the sun begins to set upon us. Like the Tamil Nadu cyclone passing over the blue orb, our vision is clouded. The glaucomic eye darkens before it is blinded. The circulation of images accelerates beyond what an eye can hold. They make less sense, become harder to interpret—moving too fast to accumulate context, devolving into numbers and figures, adding to the data encircling the Earth. The flood of image and information becomes difficult to see through, to differentiate. Our ocular senses and empathy become overloaded, like circuits powering generators and computers processing algorithms, the fatigue that comes with overexposure to scenes of human and non-human loss forcing a reliance on affective sensations. The eye blinks before it closes for good and the face turns away. This manifests as nostalgia, but also through non-anthropocentric mourning, solastalgia.<sup>4</sup>

The defining image of our time is no longer the Whole Earth, with its promise of ‘becoming-with’. Instead, we turn to face the M87, looking into the past and simultaneously feeling the future. The past here is a presence, an affect—something felt and entwined with existential dread of the future. We look to the horror (in)version of the Whole Earth; the resultant feelings of dread are geo-traumatic reverberations of shared matter through cosmic time. The vertical omniscience of our satellites—a marker of modernism and the future

entwined with the emergence of the macro-view and the beyond-human beginnings they enabled—are rendered redundant by the immensity of time scales beyond the mechanic: galactic, solar, planetary. We turn outwards, seeking something *more*, something *new*, something *else*—an interstellar yearning for understanding what drives our non-visible transmissions. This desire for knowledge and understanding that propels humankind’s search for meaning in space is, at its core, the terrestrialised counterpart of the same impulse or desire propelling our endless scroll—this search for comprehension and subsequent unmet desire feeding our algorithm and perpetuating a feedback loop. Eventually, though, our impulses and the waves of light that constitute both the pulses of our transmissions and the algorithm are swallowed up, either by the vast indifference of the universe, as light and matter flow towards and into the event horizon, or by our blue-lit faces, as we keep searching.

### Agential abyss, or cosmic Krakatoa

The M87 image of the event horizon is an ouroboros, ignited. A red, glowing ember in the dark, this document is celebrated as evidence of humankind’s advancement. A spark in the almost immeasurable past, and a future waiting to engulf us. Reading this *guros* as gyre, we face our reflection. This portent of our becoming is reconfigured as the dark half of the Whole Earth, this hyperobject becoming a cipher for destruction and the undoing of matter. Under the weight of this knowledge, our blue marble is shattered. We read our unmaking through acceleration and circulation, a process of unmooring and un-mattering. We accept our heat-death as absorption into the melancholic Black Sun of M87—the oppressive rays of the event horizon reach us from a distant galaxy and sink into the porosity of our bodies. Rather than embrace a euphoric unity and luminous blue and green biospheric future, we lie down and submit to the mercy of forces beyond us, repenting in the face of interstellar reversion. No longer descent into the maelstrom, but an ascent *towards*. The M87 commands reverence—an interstellar mirror returning our gaze and restaging the creation of the Earth, showing us traces of fire and cosmic eruption that will de-create in due (galactic) time, to continue cycling, gyrating on without us.

<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Morton’s concept of the hyperobject frames an entity when it is of such vast spatial and temporal immanence and scope that it seems limitless, beyond our frames of human comprehension. An object, item or event of such weight and presence exerts a form of gravitational influence and refraction upon understanding and apprehension, becoming its own multiplied and expanded version of itself, unable to be held in the mind or the collective consciousness. See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Barad, ‘Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/Continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come’, *Derrida Today*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2010, p. 243.

<sup>4</sup> Solastalgia was coined by Glenn Albrecht to describe the sense of loss and distress that accompanies the negative transformation or desolation of a home environment. As the deleterious impacts of climate change upon mental health begin to bleed into discourse, solastalgia is a term that has gained currency outside academic circles, one of a growing number of neologisms emerging to facilitate a necessary recontextualisation of being in the Anthropocene, factoring in the impacts of climate change.

# BUT ONE DAY SMOKE CAME MATT DICKSON

Janet Inyika was an artist who lived in two worlds: the traditional culture of her Pitjantjatjara family and the hegemonic white Australian culture. She was born at around the same time as the Australian government invited its British counterpart to explode nuclear bombs in outback South Australia.

British nuclear weapon testing in Australia in the 1950s was the expression of a hubristic imperial mindset in step with colonial compliance, stoked by Cold War fear and loathing. Nine atmospheric nuclear explosions were detonated at Emu Field (1953) and Maralinga (1956–57), followed by so-called minor trials until 1963. This was an area selected for its remoteness from cities and towns. The interests of traditional owners of that land had already been formally excluded from the national polity, and they were not granted any recognition within the prospect of top secret weapon trials. The so-called remote area was, of course, not at all remote from Country still occupied by Aboriginal people living either near the test site itself or on the vast swathe of land over which the consequential plumes of wind-blown radioactive dust settled. This impact was presumably assessed to be an affordable collateral damage.

Janet Inyika grew up on Country and at Ernabella Mission, about 300 kilometres south-east of Uluru, in the shadow of the bombs. At Ernabella Mission school, the young Anangu girls were encouraged to draw and paint. In 2012, Janet, senior law woman, was still painting, by then with acrylics on Arches paper at Maruku Arts (the Anangu-owned art centre at Uluru's Mutitjulu community), alongside other women artists who shared her Ernabella experience.

The group of Maralinga paintings she made there—and which is published here for the first time—brings to light for the wider world a personal account of the effects of at least one of the British atomic blasts. All the Anangu of her generation know the story.<sup>1</sup>

Nearing death in 2016, Janet recorded the oral history of her Maralinga experience for Ara Irititja, the Anangu digital cultural archive. It was transcribed from Pitjantjatjara by archivist, translator and friend Linda Rive because Janet wanted her story to be known—not because her story is unique; in fact, precisely because it’s not.

Aboriginal visual and oral histories challenge official histories and subvert the dominant document-based discourse—probably not a phrase Janet ever used, but she was nonetheless a politically driven woman. She was a leader in a number of key Aboriginal organisations, including Maruku Arts, where she painted, and the Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (NPY) Women’s Council. In particular she was honoured for the successful campaign she fought to introduce low-aromatic Opal fuel in remote and regional Australia, which radically reduced the scourge of petrol sniffing in Aboriginal communities. She was dedicated to reducing violence against women and promoted cultural reinvigoration through art-making. A *ngangkari* (traditional healer), she tended the open physical, emotional and spiritual wounds of dispossession in her community.

As do her paintings, Janet’s words sing in an elegiac key, but remarkably, amid loss and great sadness, there is no self-pity. Yet, who would blame her if there were? As Linda wrote of her translation:

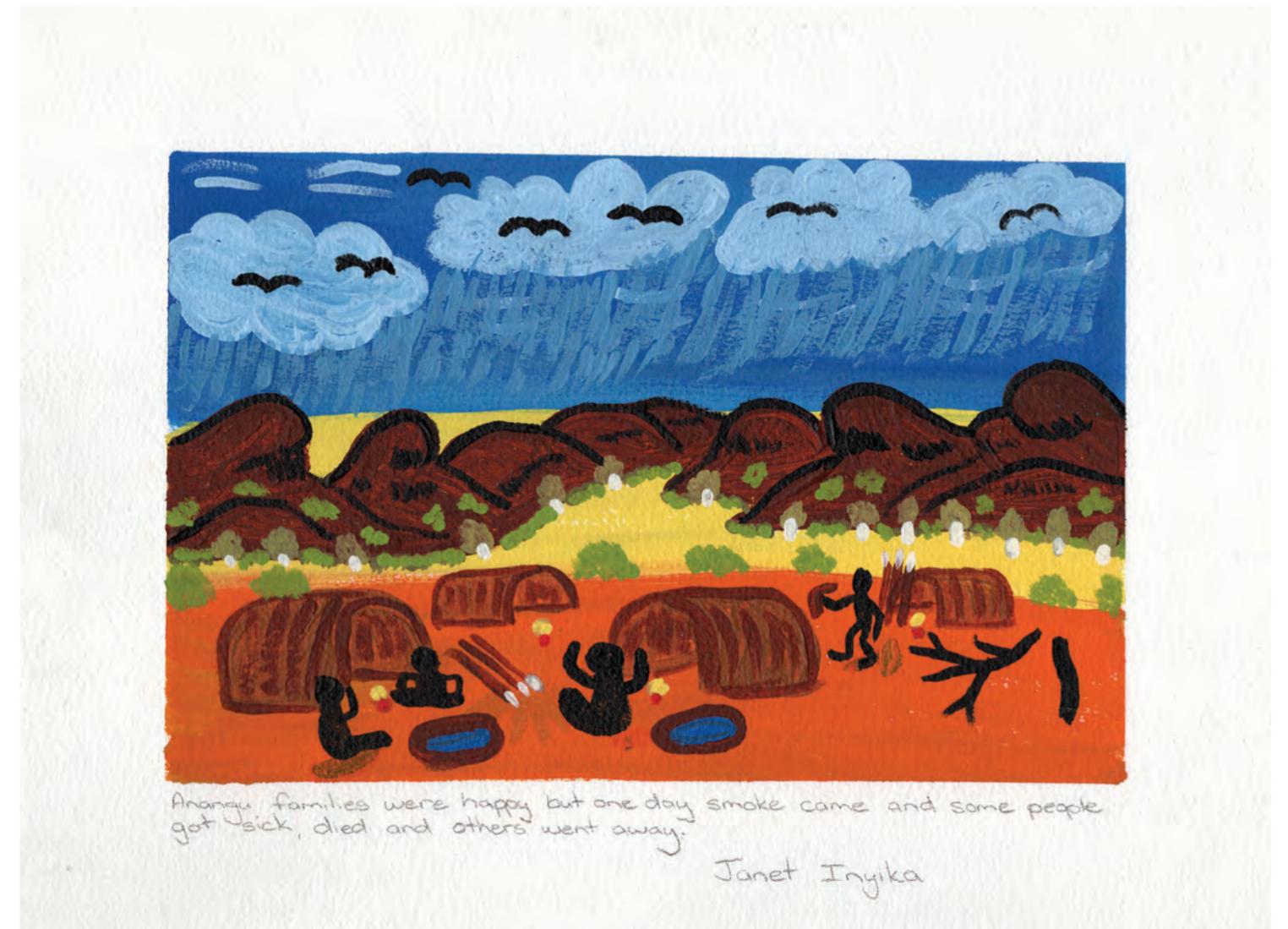
It is hard to quite get across just how freaked out everybody was, and how much trauma has been inherited from those days of mass deaths. Some people have never got over it, how could they?

It has been questioned why there are so many cancer deaths these days, including Janet’s. I’ve heard it said that they didn’t really escape, they only bought themselves some time. Her death by cancer was caused by Maralinga. That’s what people say, and she’s not the only one. Thanks for reminding people of the story. ‘Lest we forget.’

Special thanks to Linda Rive and the Ara Irititja Archive

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<sup>1</sup> Anangu nearly always use the term Maralinga when referring to their bomb experience, rather than the separate place names Emu Field, where tests occurred in 1953, and Maralinga, where tests occurred between 1956 and 1963.



Janet Inyika  
*Anangu families were happy but one day smoke came and some people got sick, died and others went away*  
2012  
Acrylic paint on Arches paper  
Painted at Mutitjulu, Northern Territory  
28.5 × 38.5 cm (sheet)  
Sims Dickson Collection  
Photograph: Deborah Sims

WE WERE



THE SURVI  
VORS: AN  
ACCOUNT  
BY JANET  
INYIKA (c. 1952-2016)

Opposite:  
Janet Inyika  
*We were sleeping in our wiltja  
when the smoke from Maralinga woke us up*  
2012  
Acrylic paint on Arches paper  
Painted at Mutitjulu, Northern Territory  
28.5 x 38.5 cm (sheet)  
Sims Dickson Collection  
Photograph: Deborah Sims

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Spoken by Janet Inyika from her hospital bed, with contributions by her younger brother Wally Jacob  
Alice Springs Hospital, 30 June 2016  
Recorded, transcribed and translated from the original Pitjantjatjara by Linda Rive  
Courtesy of Linda Rive and the Ara Irititja Archive © Ara Irititja

**Janet Inyika:** Hello. I'm here in hospital as a patient. I am in bed. I want to tell a story about the olden days. Linda and I have talked about recording this story for a while now, so this is a good opportunity to do so. I have already painted this story, but to recap, *iriti*, a long time ago, many years ago now, I remember, we were camping at a place called Bob's Well, on the edge of the Musgrave Ranges. We were with a large group of Anangu, with lots of new babies and little children and toddlers. I was there with my mother and father, as a tiny little girl.

In 1953, a nuclear explosion occurred. A bomb had been detonated, and, because of that, Mum and Dad had to make a dash for [the mission at] Pukatja [Ernabella], taking me with them ... I was one of the luckier ones. Many of those little children lost their parents during that exodus. They died en route to Ernabella, poor things. The mothers and fathers were dying and children were being orphaned. Some children died too. A bad cloud pervaded the area and the fallout chased us across the country and killed at will. Many people died in a huge area across the country. Telling this story upsets me still. I feel a deep sadness towards the beautiful relatives we lost at that time. They were simply dying in droves. I feel terrible thinking about how those parents did everything they could to protect themselves and their children but ended up dying ...

The grown-ups were aware of the fallout, the cloud, the *puyu*, but they didn't realise how deadly it was. If it didn't kill, it made people very sick, and affected their eyes. People were going blind and losing their sight. I think everybody was affected in some way.

In order to escape, Mum and Dad put all our belongings onto our donkey and we escaped during the night, by the light of the full moon. We were on the back of the donkey. Others didn't make it. They died before they could get away. Young children, the same age as me, died.

**Wally Jacob:** I got terribly sick myself. I nearly died. I was so sick that when we got to Ernabella I had to be sent to Adelaide for treatment ... A lot of boys my age were sick ...

**Janet:** He was sent away from home as a little boy. He was sent to Adelaide, to a place called Warrawee. He was there with a lot of other sick children ...

We had been walking around the country, hunting and gathering. We were over on the other side of Turkey Bore ... Anangu used to spend a lot of time there, going hunting and spending time in that lovely place, hunting kangaroo and enjoying a holiday [from the mission]. Other families went to Wami Kata ... People stuck together in their family groups, living off the land.

I started to get sick. I wasn't well. Dad quickly went and got the donkey, put our stuff on its back. Mum mounted, holding me, and we started cantering towards Ernabella. We were with three other families.

We left behind people, the living and the dead ...

This story affects all Anangu. There are no Anangu families that were not affected. Mine is just one little story out of many. Other people walked as best they could to escape. We were lucky to have a donkey.

In one of my paintings we are riding on the back of the donkey, my father in front, mother behind, and I am the little baby squashed in between. I was being cuddled. My mum always told me this story, and other people have told it too.

**Wally:** There were people all over the land, living on the land, married couples and larger extended family groups, people were dotted all over, spread out right across the country, and they were all affected in some way. People right up to Haasts Bluff, Areyonga, Ernabella and Warburton Ranges were affected.

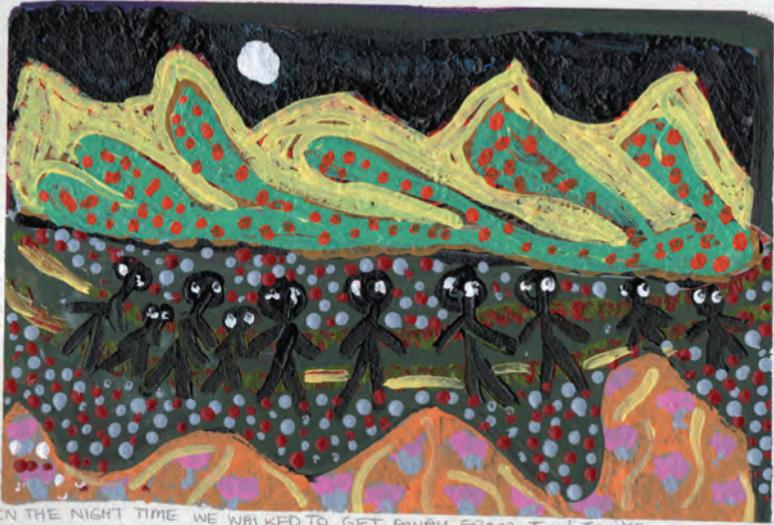
**Janet:** Everyone was affected by that fallout. Like a bad smell, it went across us all ...

Little children died or were orphaned. Young married couples with their new little babies died ...

People were lost and their names were lost. We were the survivors, and in years to come we regrouped and relationships were reconfirmed among us.

In the night time  
we walked to get  
away from the smoke  
of the Maralinga bombs

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"IN THE NIGHT TIME WE WALKED TO GET AWAY FROM THE SMOKE OF THE MARALINGA BOMBS" Janet Inyika



Janet Inyika and her family escaped from Maralinga to Pukatja.

Janet Inyika

Janet Inyika and  
her family  
escaped from  
Maralinga to Pukatja

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My family escaped  
the smoke  
of Maralinga  
on donkey

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"MY FAMILY ESCAPED THE SMOKE OF MARALINGA ON DONKEY" Janet Inyika



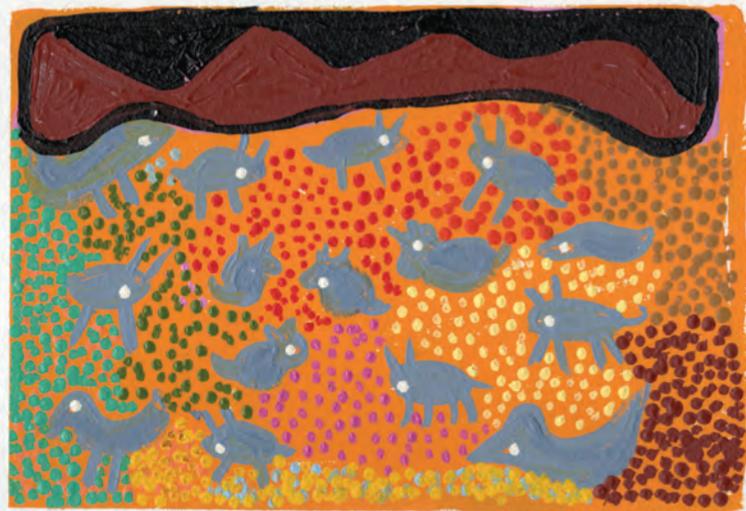
"SOME PEOPLE LIVED BUT MANY DIED AT MARALINGA" Janet Inyika

Some people lived but  
many died at Maralinga

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Kuka Tjuta died from the bomb smoke at Maralinga

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"KUKA TJUTA DIED FROM THE BOMB SMOKE AT MARALINGA Janet Inyika

White fella was looking for people to help and send to hospitals, some to Adelaide, some to Port Augusta after the bomb at Maralinga

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"WHITE FELLA WAS LOOKING FOR PEOPLE TO HELP AND SEND TO HOSPITALS, SOME TO ADELAIDE, SOME TO PORT AUGUSTA AFTER THE BOMB AT MARALINGA Janet Inyika



"AFTER THE BOMB AT MARALINGA ALL THE FLOWERS AND ANIMALS CAME BACK NEW Janet Inyika

After the bomb at Maralinga all the flowers and animals came back new

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All images:  
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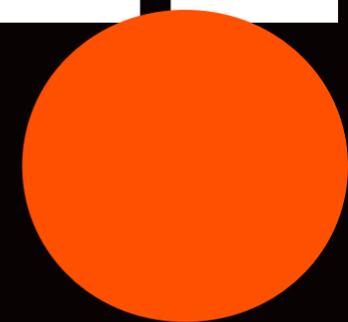
Andrew Vukosav  
Aerial photograph, taken while  
flying between Esperance and Forrest,  
Western Australia  
2019  
Location coordinates:  
32°00'14.5"S 125°59'42.6"E  
Courtesy of the photographer

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THE HORIZ  
NOT A LINE  
ROULIERE

ON IS  
CAMILLE

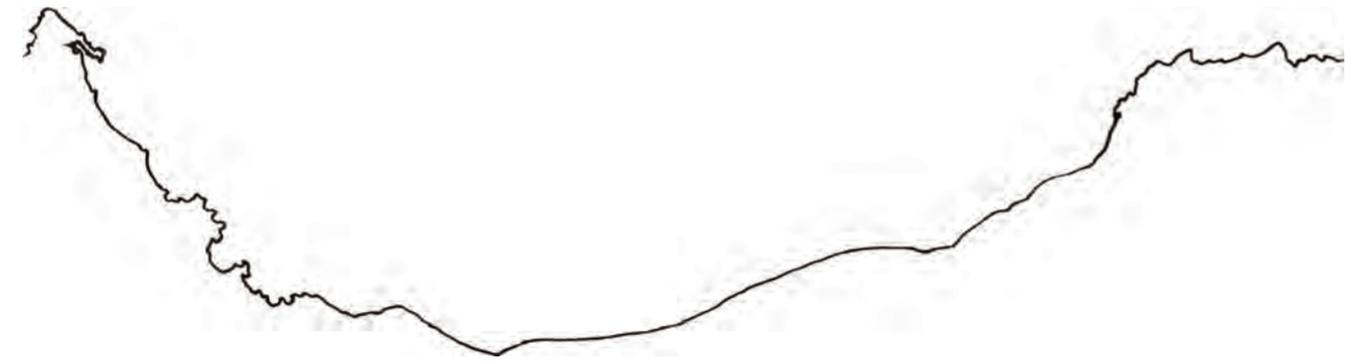


There is a space on the horizon where the ocean blurs with the sky. I try not to lose sight of it as I travel along the mummified coast of the Nullarbor Plain. Once upon a time (some 3.5–5 million years ago), these plains hosted a lush forest. A rise in ocean temperatures created that ecosystem; stalagmites and stalactites hidden in the many caves dotting the area carry a distant memory of it. As temperatures get warmer again, a similar forest might once again cover the Nullarbor Plain. At a time at which water mismanagement has created a future of dust and blood for Australia, climate change could turn this desert wet.

Gum trees progressively replace saltbushes and scrubs on the limestone bedrock. Rain falls heavily, hiding the traces of the Maralinga and Emu Field nuclear tests. Dust settles as mist. Stars twinkle above and the extensive meteorite deposits preserved by the formerly arid climate start to disappear, blending with the limestone. The dead, dehydrated horses of the first European explorers float away. Horizons collapse and everything dissolves into particles of rain. Flatness continues.

There is a safe space of humidity, somewhere out there, where the ocean meets the sky. This space makes it possible to read wet ontologies in the red dirt. I close my eyes, dive outside the car, stretch my arms and start moving. Dust coats my skin. I disappear. I don't walk on the Nullarbor Plain—I swim.

What follows is an attempt at a pataphysics. It speaks of dust drownings, of living in the blurred space at the horizon, of melting in the singularity of the Nullarbor Plain. Or, as poet Paul Celan writes in *The Meridian*: 'Please consider even that which will come now, as attempts to swim on dry land'.<sup>1</sup>



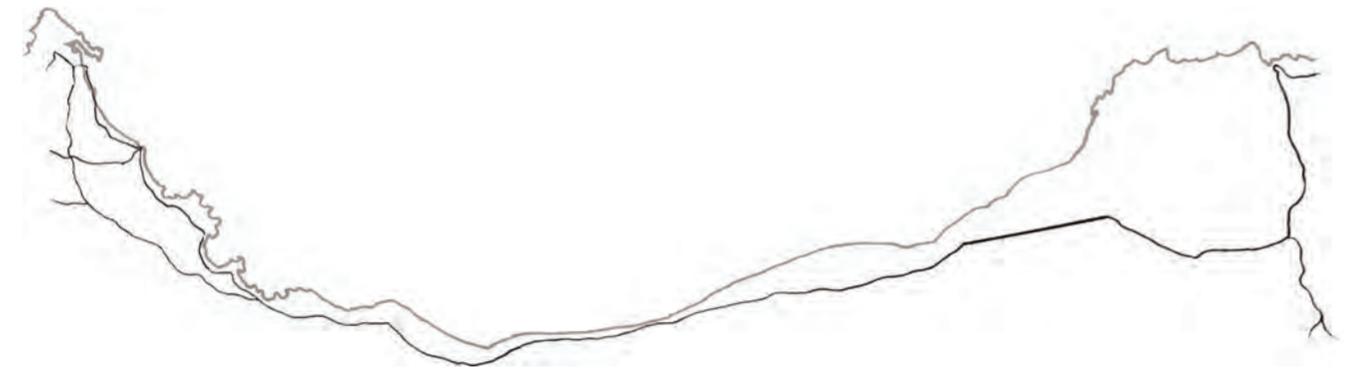
Nullarbor means 'no tree'. The name is Latin. Nowhere else in the world is there a larger single exposure of limestone bedrock. Some 200,000 square kilometres of karst unfold under my gaze; a network of caves spreading over 100,000 square kilometres lies under my feet. My boots have long lost their original colour to the powdered earth, and wear clouds their leather. Large cracks smile at me like crow's feet as I move through the heat. South Australian government surveyor Edmund Alexander Delisser named the place in 1867. He described what he saw. He was a pragmatist. It is flat. It is shrubland. What mattered was clear-cut potential for pastoral expansion. The Nullarbor Plain receives on average less than 250 millimetres of annual precipitation. It is hot. It is dry. Livestock graze. I miss the gurgling carolling of magpies at home—the sound of water running through their feathers and filling their throats with the sweet melody of blithe holidays. Nullarbor means no tree.

Rain falls. Trees grow. Bursts of pink, yellow and red drip from tall eucalypts and banksias. Birds feast on nectar; insects gorge on pollen. The plain is buzzing. I am told that animals regularly seek refuge in the caves crisscrossing the plain's belly. They rest underground and some of the pollen they carry gets trapped there. Slowly, progressively, over the 2.5 million years of the forest life, this pollen fossilises. It hides in the precious, crystal petals of stone flowers that feed on water circulating under capillary pressure through the pores of the rocks. The earth perspires. My palms get clammy and my camera slips from my grip. Fear builds in the air.

At 10 minutes to midnight, a mushroom-shaped cloud rises over the horizon to the north. Anticipation sends shock waves down my spine. It disarticulates my mind pre-emptively. I lose my words. The silence is terrifying. Even the water seems to stop pounding on the cliffs. And then the racket comes rushing. The plain crumples and rattles. Untuned percussion unnerves its fabric; voices deconstruct its texture.<sup>2</sup> Five, four, three, two, one ... The horizon curves. It closes around me: there is no escape. I am immersed. I am trapped. Many members of the Indigenous community refused to evacuate and military personnel were stationed near the sites to study the effects of radiation poisoning. Centre stage, a silhouette wearing a gas mask and a scientific coat scrutinises the audience. The cloud approaches. It travels fast. It sucks the horizon dry. It makes it a line. Tick tock go the clocks on the 360-degree screen. Doomsday is near. At 10 minutes to midnight, smoke billows on the plain. It runs. It cuts it up. It cuts it off. I see faces in the dust. They fall, sharply, on the ground. Glass shatters. *Thunder Raining Poison:*

a whisper arrives. two thousand. two thousand or more. did you hear it?<sup>3</sup>

I hear it. I hear broken sound ripples pulverising bones on Maralinga Tjarutja Country. I hear it cutting through skins and souls. Torn bodies cry. Thyroids swell and turn to ash. Stars retain a silhouette of their projected death and red dirt swallows cancerous blood stains. I stand still and I hear it. Waves roll over the plain with fury. They bounce off fences and rocks. They uproot the shrubland. They echo over the dry-lake craters left by meteorites. They fill the space. I watch them speed past me and shoot millions of projectiles at the horizon. Objects start falling from above again—sky meets Earth. A small US space station called Skylab lands near Balladonia. As it crashes in the dust, its burnt umber shell turns into a burnt ochre coffin. I hear people say that the name of the town means 'big red rock'. The flat plain is immense; the flat plain is endless. It is endlessly flat. The horizon twists and bends in uncompromising, relentlessly hot spells. It tries to dance its way out. I am reading Oscar Wilde, and at dusk I see a woman resembling Salomé attempting to cut free from the bonds of her destiny in the dying light. But nobody ever escapes. NASA satellites show that the global sea level currently rises by 3.3 millimetres every year. The dancing continues. Darkness falls and heads roll. The road from Balladonia to Caiguna is a straight line of 146.6 kilometres—the longest in the world. The flooded horizon capitulates. Waves roll over the plain with fury.



3

I drown. Everything around me drowns. We become dust. We are memories erased from official records. Bluebush and mulga scrub feed on our remains. The desert blooms after the morning rain. Wildflowers cover its surfaces, undulating gently in a mild breeze. Red takes on shades of purple and yellow. Blood dries and washes away like bruises. The weeping myalls encircling the plain venture in its midst. Mourning is unending. In the Pliocene epoch, there was a rise in ocean temperatures. Rain fell. A cave system formed. Then, we drifted into aridity. Water retreated, and in darkness, secrets were preserved. I spot a doline and plunge into the heart of the desert. Caves act as time machines: by offering us glimpses of a past that matches the predicted warming scenarios, they serve us visions of our future on a platter. Salomé is still dancing on the horizon. Her veils are explorers' sails swirling in the gale. Geologists become fortune tellers. As they look up and blow on their brushes to send dust into the Great Australian Bight, they foresee our fate in her movements.



4

Some say that good writing should be atemporal. They say that it should not denote a period (a fleeting, passing moment in the short life of one being), but speak to its audience throughout the ages, especially the dark ones. That is what good writing is. Good writing should remain above the present, but how can it when the present is all there is? In the Nullarbor Plain, it is stuck. Its raw surface is continually scratched by the wind. It stays, on the page and in the world; in hearts and inks—like a tattoo of a maritime knot.

Waves retreat and their constant, imposing noise fades away. Perpetual movement does not exist on the plain. Heat bogs it down. Some of the traditional custodians of the region, the Mirning Nation, might have called this part of Country Oondini. It means ‘The Waterless’.

Crossing the Nullarbor plain is a rite of passage; it makes those who dare attempt it Australian. Edward John Eyre was the first non-Indigenous person on record to succeed in this endeavour. It cost him dearly. Three of his horses died of dehydration. Oondini means The Waterless. Two of his Aboriginal guides mutinied, killed his overseer, John Baxter, and left with the few remaining supplies. He carried on, helped by his remaining Aboriginal guide, Whylic. Bushcraft and a chance encounter with an anchored French whaler meant that they survived. It took Eyre eight months to cross the plain.

It took him eight months to emerge from inside Australia,<sup>4</sup> a barbed-wire shadow of the man he used to be. Feet rooted in a crispy salt crust, he stands rusted—an explorer hero figure of school books. Wave Rock casts a far-reaching spectre over the plain. As the transient last lights of the day caress the land, 14 million years of lifting come to an end. I feel the seabed eroding. It grows restless. Suspended particles of dust absorb water. The Nullarbor Plain is liquid and crossing it turns me into a surfer. Off the shoreline, I fly, high in the sky. Sea levels rise. I look down and smirk at Australia’s coveted inland sea. I had always known. I had always hoped.



The initial sense of awe is long gone. The plain oppresses me—it is too flat, too large. It is unbearably omnipresent. Everywhere I look, it imprisons my gaze. I see its reflection in the ocean. It flattens the sky into its folds. Atemporality is a myth. All presents collide. Dust storms are forming on the horizon. They sweep the plain. I want to run away, but I cannot. I am forever stranded in place and in time. The plain is cut. Imminence acquires boundaries. Fire closes it. Fire closes in. Deep Purple is blasting on the radio and I am starting to understand their lyrics. I smell ‘smoke on the water, fire in the sky’.<sup>5</sup> How vain are we? Thinking we could make a difference; believing, once again, that everything revolved around us. This is not the Anthropocene but the Pyrocene. Particles released by burning worlds accelerate global warming exponentially. Fire cuts off the plain. Waves roll over it. They are furious. *Thunder Raining Poison:*

a whisper arrives. did you hear it?  
two thousand. two thousand or more<sup>6</sup>

It is now sunset and thousands of red will-o’-the-wisps twist and dance on the horizon. Telescopes capture the last light; cameras seize the first. A black hole is observed and Australia burns. This is modern art. The smoke frees itself and reaches the stratosphere. It merrily goes round and round. Towering above the world, pyrocumulonimbus and flammagenitus unleash their mighty diva voices. They create aftershocks which ripple through the collapsing plain. They shine so bright that fire is all that seems to be left. It is what is remembered; what scarifies the bodies, the glossy papers and the tired skins, feathers, scales, carapaces. The horizon shatters and obliterates burrows and bunkers. Fragile speleothems explode. Shards of salt glass pierce everything in their way. They shroud the buried earth; a thin, pleated fabric of mineral draped over the remnants of a forest long gone. I see the last light as the sun tips over the horizon; the last hope before darkness. The fume plumes plummet down.

Camels gallop frantically. Helicopters appear on the horizon. Their blades kick dust in the air and drown the camels’ bellows under a chorus of staccato rotations. ‘Ritorna Vincitor!’, gloriously orders Maria Callas through my headphones.<sup>7</sup> The first mass cull of camels has been authorised in South Australia. It seems the Great Emu War did not teach us much. I contemplate the sun’s reflection in the puddles left to evaporate in rock pools that provided water to cameleers and their flocks near Balladonia. The camels were rapidly deemed useless and often abandoned. More than 100,000 feral camels now roam the Nullarbor Plain. They flock, mingle and compete with dingos, emus and wombats. Marsupial lions are long gone; aridity and fires induced by climate change are presented as a probable cause of extinction. These lions are dinosaurs of sorts. Rogue fossil collectors in search of riches plunder caves to sell their megafaunal remains to unscrupulous collectors. I guess skulls from the mid-Pleistocene epoch make for brilliant dinner conversation. After a few glasses of champagne, the past spirals out of control. The marsupial lion’s aggressive, powerful, square cheek teeth rip through the fabric of chronological tapestries with ease. Temporalities merge—we are on a verge of a turn that sends us back to the future. Sub-Saharan-like dunes rise like a mirage on the horizon. Dust storms are approaching. I swear sand is moving on the ocean’s oily surface.



6

Drilling is about to start in the Great Australian Bight. Surveying never stops. Petrol spills and coats the glassy water. The horizon becomes clock calm. I can nearly entangle sky and ocean. The strings and ribbons of halite that dot the caves look like upside-down corals, like tentacles of the plain which reach far into the atmosphere and infuse it with ancient memories of water dripping like milk. I feel dizzy; I have inverted vision. The plain disintegrates. Salt flakes fuse. *Thunder Raining Poison*:

did you see it? in the fragments. it's there in the glass  
two thousand. two thousand or more<sup>8</sup>

There is a woman running on the plain. Her hair is dishevelled and she has lost her wings. The wild woman of the Nullarbor Plain is an illusion. She is born from the dust mist. Shifting appearances for the camera, she dances elusively on the horizon of the Australian psyche. The woman runs. There is a monster pursuing her. The woman runs. The monster burnt her wings. I run. Lightning strikes twice, thrice. Lightning lightens the blurred space at the horizon. The woman is running towards it. The dream of Avalon resides in the fumes. I see destiny when these refract light and shape a future as fragile as a hand-blown glass teardrop. The plain breathes. Dolines are blowholes. Southern right whales turn into giant birds. Mother and calves dive in and out of the sky. They play around and above the island. Travelling fluidly between air and water, they transform their callosities and barnacles into shimmering armours. Their blubber shivers. They glow as bright as the moon.



7

Molten metal runs as wild as white water. It creates gorges that scar the red dirt. The mining potential of the Nullarbor Plain is immense. Bulldozers pummel its guts. Its entrails are exposed; it is haemorrhaging. The monster shrinks and divides. It shape-shifts. Tears shine like blades as they flow down my cheeks. Ten minutes to midnight. I become nothing but a handful of raindrops. Meteorites impact the horizon. They erode under the pounding of the rain, and the craters they leave behind fill with water. The skull of a marsupial lion chatters its teeth. The beast strides across the plain once more. The horizon is a circle.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Celan, *The Meridian: Final Version—Drafts—Materials*, Bernhard Böschenstein and Heino Schmall (eds), Pierre Joris (trans.), Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, 2011, p. 168.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to *10 Minutes to Midnight*, a 24-minute immersive installation, with 360-degree video projections and 7.1 surround sound, responding to the nuclear tests at Maralinga and Emu Field between 1956 and 1963. Director, Teresa Crea; producer, Paul Brown; sound designer and composer, Luke Harrald; set designer, Nic Mollison; visual artists, Jessie Boylan and Linda Dement.

<sup>3</sup> Ali Cobby Eckermann, 'Thunder Raining Poison', *Poetry*, May 2016, line 1, poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/89017/thunder-raining-poison; accessed 24 April 2020. Eckermann wrote this poem in response to visual artist Yhonnice Scarce's *Thunder Raining Poison*, an installation of more than 2000 glass yams, which addresses the impact of the nuclear tests.

<sup>4</sup> This is a nod to visual artist Sir Antony Gormley's work *Inside Australia* at Lake Ballard, an installation of 51 metal sculptures, derived from laser scans of residents, dispersed over the west portion of the gigantic ephemeral lake.

<sup>5</sup> Deep Purple, 'Smoke on the Water', *Machine Head*, 1972, Purple Records, side 2, track no. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Eckermann, lines 24–25.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Callas, 'Ritorna Vincitor!' (*Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi), *The Very Best of Maria Callas*, 2002, EMI Classics, track no. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Eckermann, lines 31–32.

Image 1: Camille Roulière, *Untitled*, 2017, photograph, courtesy of the artist

Images 2–4 and 6–7: Camille Roulière, *Untitled*, 2020, permanent marker on paper, courtesy of the artist

Image 5: Camille Roulière, *Untitled* (detail), 2020, acrylic and sand on MDF, courtesy of the artist



URSULA  
CORNELIA  
DEHEEUW  
BLAZING  
BLACK  
HOLE

Opposite:  
Karl Blossfeldt  
*Delphinium*, 1915–25  
Gelatin silver print  
29.7 x 23.8 cm  
© Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen.  
CC BY-SA 4.0

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In Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, the 'convolute' on 'Photography' opens with the following quote from a 19th-century vaudeville about King Dagobert of the Merovingian dynasty:

If one day the sun should sputter out,  
'Twill be a mortal who rekindles it.<sup>1</sup>

Those who may illuminate the world are not gods or kings, but photographers. However, this suggestion is not to be confused with a mythic history of humankind's march towards perfection, of its enlightened elevation to the height of the Sun. On the vaudevilian stage, such industrious divinations partake in their own parody. The order of photography does not deal in teleological myths of progress but in the catastrophe of death as it necromantically returns in the photograph. History is not marked by monuments to victory but by a cemetery in a darkroom, produced

by automatons. In the eye of the camera lens, light is engulfed by a gaping black hole. To fly towards the Sun is to plunge into the darkest night.

These technologically reproducible death-images were full of revolutionary potential for Benjamin. Rising from the depths of collective memory, photographs disrupt the linear teleology of history-as-progress along with capitalism's thirst for the new and fascism's master-race mythology. During his time in Paris, Benjamin crossed paths with another figure seeking to dispel the myth of progress: the librarian and poet-philosopher Georges Bataille. While one should not conflate the positions of Benjamin and Bataille it can be said that both found the world most invigorated when arrested by an *image*. And across his lifetime, Bataille obsessed over the image of the Sun. More precisely, he obsessed over its parodic inversion as performed by the Sun's terrestrial consumers. Benjamin and Bataille both understood that communication occurs less in speech than in physiognomic gestures, in the fertile silence of a caesura or an ellipsis ... in the innervating moments of recognition that precede explanation. And it is for this reason that both felt compelled to explore the close-up plant photography of Karl Blossfeldt. Looking at these two encounters with Blossfeldt—Benjamin's 'News about Flowers' (1928) and Bataille's 'The Language of Flowers' (1929)—one may delve into the camera's inverted sun-gaze.<sup>2</sup>

#### Benjamin and Blossfeldt's Vegetal Theatre of Death

In his 'Small History of Photography', Benjamin proclaims: 'Photography makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious, just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious'.<sup>3</sup> But unlike the psychoanalytic focus on the individual, the optical unconscious lies outside the order of the single, naked eye. Rather, it harbours the desire of an outside, collective image-world disseminated by modernity's new means of production.<sup>4</sup> At the heart of mass media and commodity culture are traces of utopian impulses, left 'in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions'.<sup>5</sup> These forms, in which 'the new is permeated with the old', are the 'wish-images' of the dreaming collective, which simultaneously engender its desire and seek to overcome the inadequacy of the social product that expresses it.<sup>6</sup> But dreams are just that. They lie beneath capital's novelty of the new, always wrapped up anew as the tides of fashion ebb and flow. Thrust into capitalism's simultaneously *homogeneous* and *empty* time of progress, these image-traces require a redemptive awakening. For Benjamin, this is the task of photography.

Through magnification, Blossfeldt's photographs penetrate the most minute details of the Earth's flora. Veins ripple through a plant stem. Shadows play upon fine wisps of hair sprouting from a flower's core. Benjamin suggests that from this close-up perspective, the primordial physiognomy of plants makes visible the collective history of *style*:

Thus Blossfeldt with his astonishing plant photographs, reveals the forms of ancient columns in horse willow, a bishop's crozier in the ostrich fern, totem poles in tenfold enlargements of chestnut and maple shoots, and gothic tracery in the fuller's thistle.<sup>7</sup>

Benjamin continues these comparisons in his lengthier review of Blossfeldt's 1928 photobook, *Urformen der Kunst: Photographische Pflanzenbilder* (Originary Forms of Art: Photographic Images of Plants), in 'News about Flowers':

One senses a gothic *parti pris* in the bishop's staff which an ostrich fern represents, in the larkspur, and in the blossom of the saxifrage, which also does honour to its name in cathedrals as a rose window which breaks through the wall. The oldest forms of columns pop up in horsetails; totem poles appear in chestnut and maple shoots enlarged ten times; and the shoots of a monk's-hood unfold like the body of a gifted dancer.<sup>8</sup>

The ornamentation of Gothic architecture is returned to the curl of a leaf. Trunks make totemic statements. In religious images, people stretch their hands to the heavens like flowers growing towards the Sun. The continuum of history-as-progress is uprooted by the stylistic daydreams of human history that trace, and repeat, the primal alphabet of plants. Wish-images are arrested in the messianic *Jetztzeit* (now-time) of photographic recognition, where the past is not closed off in the assumed linear progression of the new, but open to the flux of return, possibility and redemption.<sup>9</sup> This collective image-memory is thus perceived as the new *dies out* in the photograph.<sup>10</sup> The mechanic gaze demystifies the phantasmagoria of fashion through the staging of its afterlife, which is also its rebirth in another form. The eternal return of desire expressed by Blossfeldt's image-imperatives obliterates past, present and future tenses. The utopia of style exists in its own time-spiral of pure potential. The myth of uniqueness dissolves as images return from the optical unconscious where, as Benjamin declares, 'memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theatre'.<sup>11</sup> Technological reproduction dances with exaggerated vitality upon the theatrical stage of collective memory. As the image-world falls into the abyss of the camera lens, photography performs an act of creative destruction.

Photography is not the *reflection* of the dead, nor merely their resurrection, but an instrument for their enduring presence as 'dialectical images' of theatrical revelation. The communication of the image, unlike the coded syntax of words or speech, suspends the historical dialectic of progress as 'the Then and Now come together into a constellation like a flash of lightning'.<sup>12</sup> That is to say, Benjamin's dialectical image communicates revolutionary potential in the silent space of death-shock. Fashion makes leaps into the past, but it's in its photographic entombment that the potential of its trace flourishes as 'never anything other than the parody of the motley cadaver ... whispered between shrill bursts of mechanical laughter'.<sup>13</sup> And what a potent death as the perennial desire of style erupts into a fit of hysterics! Photography stages the vaudevillian death of progress, and the black hole laughs as it swallows the Sun.



Karl Blossfeldt  
*Papaver orientalis*, 1928–32  
 Gelatin silver print  
 25.9 × 19.4 cm  
 Digital image courtesy of  
 the Getty's Open Content Program

### Bataille and the Laughter of Blossfeldt's Flowers.

The image of the Sun engenders Bataille's *general economy* of excess, wherein consumption and expenditure are not limited to utility or productivity but, rather, are spent unto death.<sup>14</sup> The Sun expels energy without reciprocation, a wastefulness echoed by the extravagant activities of life on Earth in sacrificial moments of excessive loss. Eroticism, love, war, madness, poetry ... these are just some of the excesses that are expended with the exuberance of the Sun. In other words, it is in moments of transient death that desire luxuriates in the enflamed excesses of life. Thus it is in contrast to the Enlightenment ideal of humankind's elevated, Promethean brilliance that Bataille perceives the image of the Sun. Instead, he claims, its power is illustrated by the Icarian fall:

... the summit of elevation is in practice confused with a sudden fall of unheard-of violence. The myth of Icarus is particularly expressive from this point of view: it clearly splits the sun in two—the one that was shining at the moment of Icarus's elevation, and the one that melted the wax, causing failure and a screaming fall when Icarus got too close.<sup>15</sup>

The power of the Sun is not discovered in light beams from a distant heaven but in the enflamed, physical body as it falls into darkness. Desire finds its ignition in the abyssal 'solar anus' of violence, ecstasy and disgust.<sup>16</sup> The inverted, blinding Sun, as opposed to the idealist aspirations of solar vision, recurs in 'The Language of Flowers'. Alongside the magnified, anthropomorphic erotism of Blossfeldt's plants, Bataille explicates the way language stands against itself as soon as it extends its roots into the soiled flowerbed of poetic symbolism.

Romantic poets, psychoanalysts, philosophers and art historians have forever read flowers through a language of ideals: 'Many things can be altered in human societies, but nothing will prevail against the natural truth that a beautiful woman or a red rose signifies love'.<sup>17</sup> But Blossfeldt's plants defy this description; the magnification of phallic stems and twisting tendrils quickly taints such floral idealism with a base desire. As Bataille puts it, 'even the most beautiful flowers are spoiled in their centres by hairy sexual organs'.<sup>18</sup> Ever since anthropomorphic metaphor first appropriated these vegetal beasts, the language of flowers has corroded the stability of its own meaning. Upon closer inspection, the purity of the rose is resisted by the exposure of its nectary. The delicious inner node points the angelic ideal towards the labyrinth of writhing flesh. The bodies that flowers may represent are not elevated objects of possession and exchange but autonomous and luxurious detours into the bowels of libidinal excess. In the attempt to make meaning from nature, humankind has entered the crypt where reason goes to die. The medieval mystics who lost themselves in ecstasy at the touch of the sacred would agree when I reiterate that love, it would seem, 'smells like death'.<sup>19</sup>

As in the flight of Icarus, the Sun is not felt in the rise towards it but in the fall of solar annihilation. Far from a language of ideals, poetry is a base communication. Blossfeldt's photography partakes in the staging of this 'tragicomic' 'death-drama', where language gestures towards its own slippage—its excess and its parody.<sup>20</sup> As Bataille writes in the opening lines of 'The Solar Anus', 'It is clear that the world is purely parodic, in other words, that each thing seen is the parody of another, or is the same thing in a deceptive form'.<sup>21</sup> Mechanical

laughter ignites the world with parodies upon parodies, dissolving into the darkness of a mouth thrown back in a cackle (or a scream). The rug is pulled out from underneath as the slapstick routine of philosophising and form-making gives way to laughter. Unfortunately, the academic ruins the art of the gag. So, an abrupt end is necessary.

- <sup>1</sup> Laurencin and Clairville, *Le Roi Dagobert à l'exposition de 1844*, Théâtre du Vaudeville, 1844, quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (trans.), Belknap Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1999, p. 671.
- <sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'News about Flowers', in *Selected Writings, Volume 2 Part 1, 1927–1930*, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (eds), Rodney Livingstone et al. (trans.), Belknap Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1999; Georges Bataille, 'The Language of Flowers', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, Allan Stoekl (ed.), Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie Jr (trans.), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1985.
- <sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (trans.), NLB, London, 1979, p. 243.
- <sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, Michael W. Jennings (ed.), Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone and Harry Zohn (trans.), Belknap Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2006), p. 32.
- <sup>5</sup> Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', p. 32.
- <sup>6</sup> Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', p. 32.
- <sup>7</sup> Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', p. 244.
- <sup>8</sup> Benjamin, 'News about Flowers.' p. 156.
- <sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), Harry Zohn (trans.), Schocken Books, New York, 1968, p. 261.
- <sup>10</sup> Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', p. 32.
- <sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Berlin Chronicle', in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, Peter Demetz (ed.), Edmund Jephcott (trans.), Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1978, p. 25.
- <sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'N [Re the Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress]', Leigh Hafrey and Richard Sieburth (trans.), in Gary Smith (ed.), *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1989, p. 50.
- <sup>13</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 63.
- <sup>14</sup> See Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure', in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, pp. 116–30; Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume 1: Consumption*, Robert Hurley (trans.), Zone Books, New York, 1991.
- <sup>15</sup> Georges Bataille, 'Rotten Sun', in *Visions of Excess*, p. 82.
- <sup>16</sup> Georges Bataille, 'The Solar Anus', in *Visions of Excess*, pp. 5–10.
- <sup>17</sup> Bataille, 'The Language of Flowers', p. 12.
- <sup>18</sup> Bataille, 'The Language of Flowers', p. 12.
- <sup>19</sup> Bataille, 'The Language of Flowers,' p. 13.
- <sup>20</sup> Bataille, 'The Language of Flowers', p. 12.
- <sup>21</sup> Bataille, 'Solar Anus', p. 5.

DARK FATE  
: THE CAM  
ERA LENS  
AS A BLAC  
K HOLE  
DIEGO  
RAMIREZ



DEAD MEXICAN BANDITS.

*Las Norias Bandit Raid: Dead Bandits*  
c. 1915  
Glass negative  
12.7 x 17.8 cm  
Robert Runyon Photograph Collection, RUN00103,  
The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History,  
The University of Texas at Austin

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The latest iteration of the Terminator franchise, *Terminator: Dark Fate* (2019), is captivating for the sheer amount of Mexican bodies liquidated on screen. Set in Mexico City and Texas, the film showcases a Rev-9 Terminator (played by Mexican-American actor Gabriel Luna) that arrives from the future to persecute Mexican protagonist Daniella Ramos, across the USA and Mexico. Unlike earlier films, in which Sarah Connor is under threat for birthing the future leader of the resistance, John Connor, Dani Ramos is herself to become the head of a future rebellion against the machines. This revision of the reductive Madonna archetype (where Connor's only purpose is to deliver the Messiah) in tandem with diverse casting, proves the film is aggressively seeking to appeal to a progressive zeitgeist of inclusiveness. Yet, abysmal contradictions quickly

tear this textual space, as if mimicking the portals that fracture space and time to bring the Terminator's slaughter in the film. This is because the Terminator eradicates myriad Mexicans with pornographic recurrence in its quest to dispatch its target.

The 'dark fate' of these Mexicans is the murderous threshold of the camera lens: a black hole that drags them into the event horizon of an annihilating frame. The iris reveals itself as a pulverising pull that manifests with gory astonishment to rip the other apart, until its particles become exotic dust. The plot of the film suddenly becomes irrelevant as a void emerges from the utter darkness of the cinema to make time collapse onto itself. It is as if these bodies have fallen into a hole where an 'ethnic singularity' is making time curve to infinity. The Rev-9 Terminator mimics this liquidating eye by morphing into the appearance of its Mexican sufferers, swallowing their lives with the desperation of a cosmic pit. Like its victims, the Terminator does not survive this film; brown bodies are destined to oblivion.

A totalising fiction is suctioning these hollow Mexican stereotypes (sexualised, family oriented and musically inclined) until they become ethnic debris. This is because *Dark Fate* codes Mexicans narrowly as either labourers (Ramos is a factory worker) or as undocumented, as shown in a prominent scene in which Ramos crosses the US with ease (even though it is an excruciating journey) and Border Patrol captures her (proving the might of the US). Casting a Mexican-American as the Rev-9 Terminator is reminiscent of the imperial nuisance described by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, in which he analyses a magazine cover showing a soldier of African descent saluting the French flag—signifying that France brought a great empire to those gratefully colonised.<sup>1</sup> *Dark Fate* offers a similar myth by positioning a Mexican-American as the Terminator that demolishes its 'own kind' to save the US from a future rebellion led by a Mexican labourer, as the former is superior to the latter.

Since the Terminator arrives in the present from the future through an inexplicable portal, the idea of an opening in time and space curses this film. The Terminator is a harbinger of dystopia, carrying an urgent message about border anxiety, like an accelerated postcard from the future. Its main purpose is to terminate insurgents, and, in the process, it fulfils a second function, which is to extinguish Mexicans while asserting the future's dominance. The film is like early 20th-century postcards shot during the Mexican Revolution, which depict American soldiers alongside Mexican corpses for entertainment. Like *Dark Fate*, this served the purpose of dehumanising Mexicans and keeping control of the border in the public imagination.

Ken Gonzales-Day explores this photographic genre in his work *Erased Lynchings* (2002–17), appropriating late 19th- and early 20th-century postcards showing Mexican lynchings in the US. In this body of work, the artist erases corpses and leaves behind only 'purposeless' mobs gathered around trees. *Erased Lynchings* brings to the fore what arguably lies in the background of the latest *Terminator* film: a repressed desire to make Mexicans disappear. The play with elimination and absence makes *Erased Lynchings* a profitable space to explore the notion of an ethnic singularity in photography—an opening in time and space where subjects are typecast.

Gonzales-Day looks at this singularity by appropriating photographs of lynchings and seamlessly erasing the corpses, bringing attention to the white crowds that surround the murderous scenes. The outcome is an image that shows a mob mysteriously gathered around a tree, allowing us to focus on their body language and to interpret their stance towards this moment (which generally seems to fill them with pride). The evaporation of the victim speaks to the disappearance of these images from the collective imagination, where historical hangings of Latinxs in the US are often overlooked. It also foregrounds the desire to eliminate these people from the American population, framing lynching as an act of ethnic cleansing. However, a stranger effect occurs when one approaches erasure as a consequence of the original image—where the subject is already experiencing physical extinction (the killing) and semiotic vanishing (the anonymous typecasting). According to this premise, it would appear that Gonzales-Day is simply showing us what happens in the event horizon of the American frame: Mexican bodies disappear.

Gonzales-Day makes a large-scale reproduction of one of these postcards in his *Erased Lynching Series*, allowing for a greater appreciation of minute details by facilitating a more spectacular viewing. In *Disguised Bandit, Unknown Victim, c. 1915* (2006), we encounter seven armed American soldiers joyfully staring at the camera in an arid landscape where a lone tree stands. Three of them are pulling at an invisible rope (the most explicit trace of the hanging in the original image) while the rest are posing candidly to express victory for the camera. The postcard bears a caption at the bottom, which reads 'DISGUISED BANDIT', with handwritten letters typical of the style found in autographic cameras of the era (such as the Kodak 3a, a popular camera



Ken Gonzales-Day  
*Disguised Bandit, Unknown Victim, c. 1915*  
 2006  
 From the *Erased Lynching Series*  
 Chromogenic print  
 177.8 x 101.6 cm  
 Courtesy of the artist and  
 Luis De Jesus Los Angeles

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designed to allow amateurs to mass produce their own cards). The picture is characteristic of the times, in which necro-mementos from the Mexican Revolution circulated as triumphant postcards. The dead 'bandit' is in fact a popular trope, as it reinforces America's perceived success over the Mexican Revolution and de-humanises Mexicans in the battleground.

While the untouched version of this artwork doesn't seem to be readily available, there is a plethora of postcards from the same year that also feature bandits. These reveal the victims are also invisible in the originals, as they are represented with butcherous anonymity. Indeed, these Mexican corpses are in a process of liquidation, where the reductive typecast of the 'bandit' is erasing their identities. For instance, in *Las Norias Bandit Raid: Dead Bandits* held in the Robert Runyon Photograph Collection in Austin, Texas, we see four corpses lying in a barren landscape, with a caption that reads 'DEAD MEXICAN BANDITS'. They are lying on their backs with their faces positioned away from the camera to make their features unrecognisable, and their attire has been mangled beyond recognition; the bodies simply look like abandoned bundles. (It is as if these Mexicans were never alive.) This stands in sharp contrast to how US Americans are represented in the same collection, or in Ken Gonzales-Day's image, in which the soldiers' faces are legible and their rank easily identified.

These cadavers are embedded in a similar system of representation to the latest *Terminator* film, in which the dark fate of many Mexicans is termination. While postcards and cinema may seem a disparate union today, they share an intimate history. William Nericcio proposes, in his *Tex[t]-Mex: Seductive Hallucination of the 'Mexican' in America*, that postcards precede the Latinx stereotypes found in early Hollywood, as they were reference material for greaser films such as *The Mexican's Revenge* (1902), *Chiquita the Dancer* (1912) and *Cowboy's Baby* (1910).<sup>2</sup> He uses the first episode of the popular cartoon 'Speedy Gonzales' as a case study, analysing key scenes to show how they resemble postcards shot by American soldiers stationed in Veracruz during the Mexican Revolution.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the foundations of the stereotyped Mexican we often find in cinema are informed by a history of conflict and a desire for military obliteration—the latter of which becomes manifest in some examples of contemporary film, such as *Terminator: Dark Fate*.

To step into this filmic universe seems akin to stepping into an event horizon, where the Latinx subject is quickly engrossed in a stereotype designed for dissipation. To be seen is to disappear in this vacuum of misrepresentation, a state of non-presence in the wake of total eradication.

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', *Mythologies*, Paladin Books, London, 1973, p. 125.

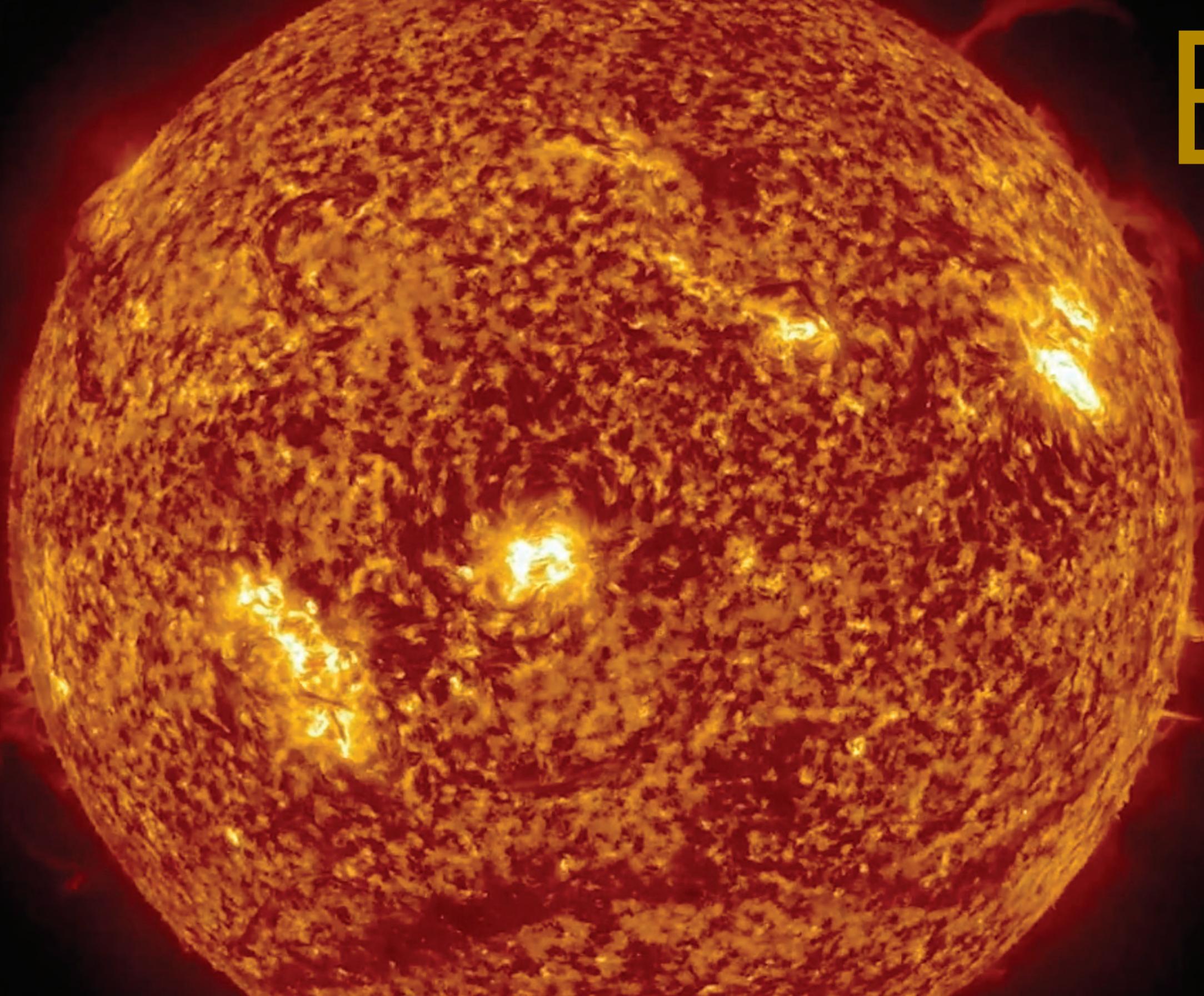
<sup>2</sup> William Anthony Nericcio, *Tex[t]-Mex: Seductive Hallucination of the 'Mexican' in America*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 2007, pp. 25–27.

<sup>3</sup> Nericcio, pp. 126–28.



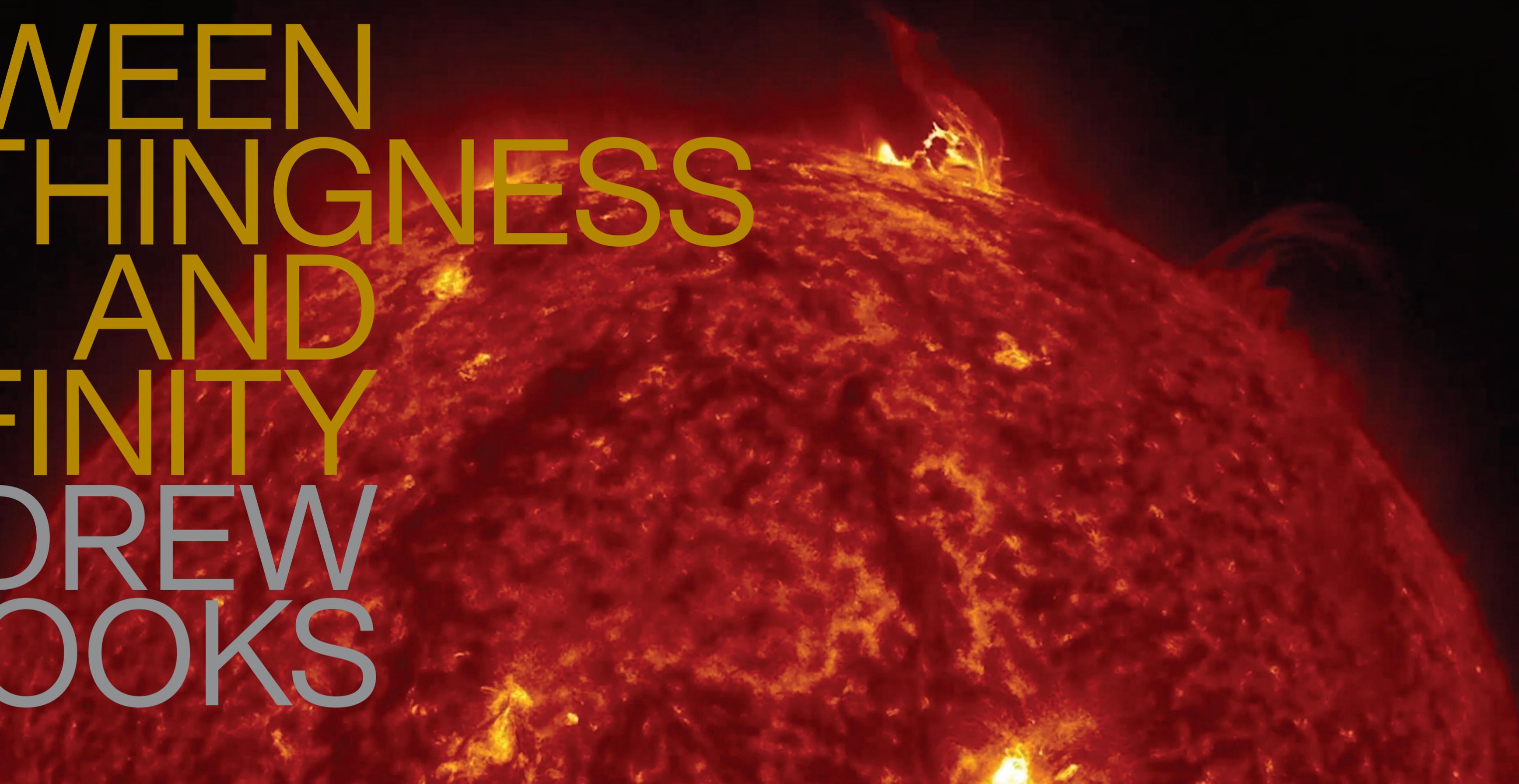
Tori Stolz  
*Aura*, 2019  
Oil on board  
30 × 41 cm  
Courtesy of the artist

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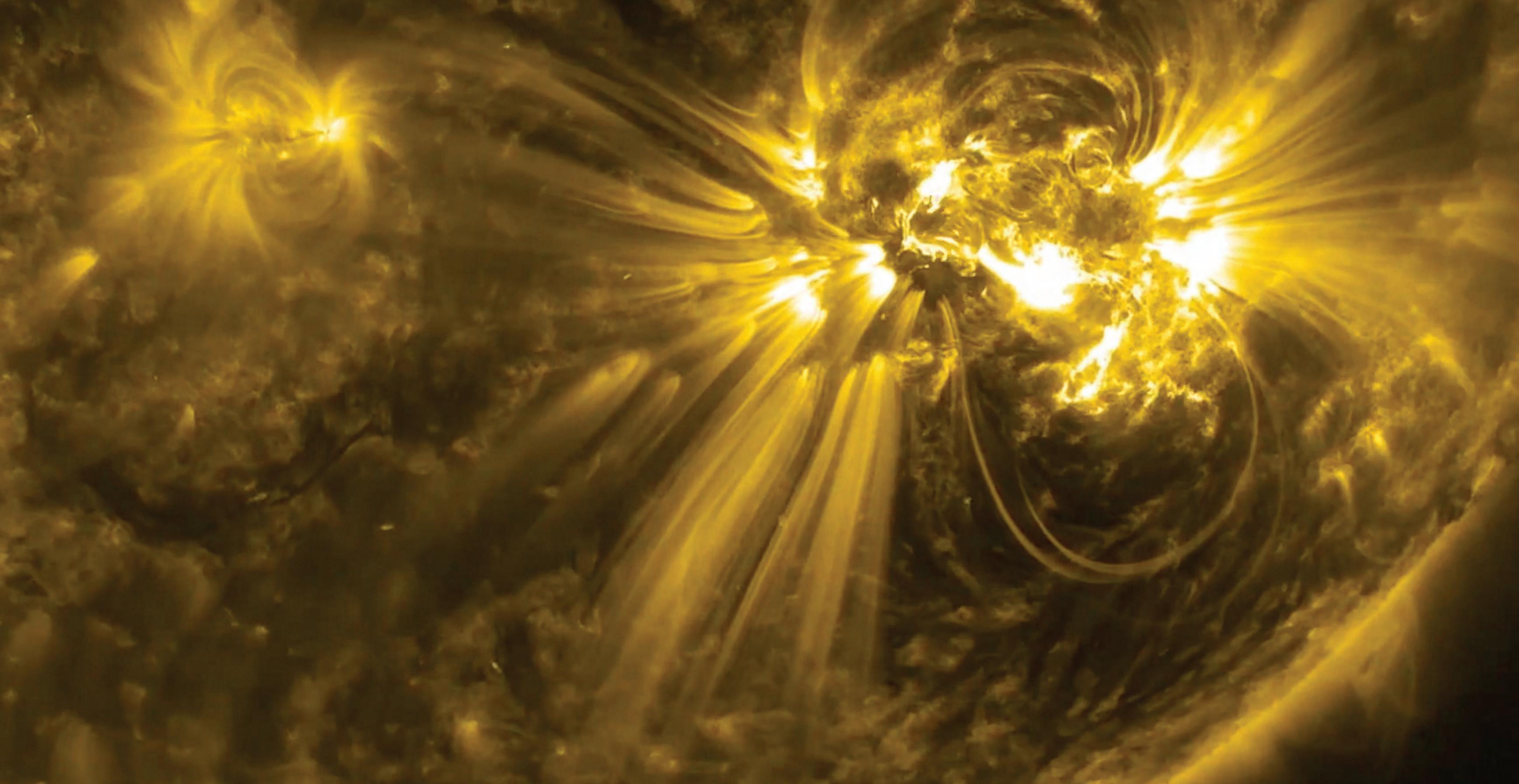
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BETWEEN  
THINGS  
AND  
INFINITY

DREW  
BOOKS



*Yesterday,  
awakening to the world,  
I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly  
and wholly.  
I wanted to rise,  
but the disemboweled silence fell back  
upon me,  
its wings paralyzed.  
Without responsibility,  
straddling Nothingness and Infinity,  
I began to weep.*

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*<sup>1</sup>

Previous spreads:  
Arthur Jafa  
Stills from *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*  
2016  
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise,  
New York/Rome

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A black hole forms when a star collapses under its own gravity, producing an unrepresentable void—a dense space of nothingness that exceeds capture. The void that emerges from this moment of intense exhaustion can only be known by the event horizon that extends from it, a boundary that contains the paradoxical possibilities of nothingness and infinity that is implied in the endlessness of space and time. Can an abyss index multiplicity rather than absence? Can nothingness be a beginning rather than ending?

The void is also central to the conceptualisation of Blackness that emerges from the traditions of Black radical thought.<sup>2</sup> In this genealogy of thought, and as the epigraph opposite suggests, Blackness can be understood as a metaphysical condition straddling nothingness and infinity, a principle of irreducible difference that exceeds the grammar of racialisation and cannot be reduced, as Fred Moten tells us, 'to a specific set of things that are called black'.<sup>3</sup> Yet despite opening towards infinitude and possibility, Blackness also indexes the violent and entangled histories of settler colonialism and slavery. The violent processes of dispossession that are integral to colonial expansion—such as invasion, occupation, expropriation, enclosure and enslavement—produce a negation that brings both Blackness and anti-Blackness into being. For Hortense Spillers, such violence transforms the body into

flesh, stripping its capacity to signify (gender, subjecthood, humanity, for example) and rendering it undifferentiated matter: ‘before the “body”’, writes Spillers, ‘there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography’.<sup>4</sup> This disavowal of Black and Indigenous people comes to structure the universalising concepts of the modern subject and the body politic that such a subject belongs to. The liberal social, political and economic order is foundationally anti-Black, and at the same time structured by Blackness. As Fred Moten writes, ‘normative subjectivity is precisely that which moves by way of the exclusion of black possibility ... In the context of this world, we are literally nothing.’<sup>5</sup> The void that is Blackness can be understood as a relation of (non)existence, an event horizon that structures post-Enlightenment subjectivity.

But this is only half the story: the void, as Fanon reminds us, straddles the antithetical states of nothingness and infinity. The abyss is also a beginning. To understand the dislocation, dispossession and death that comes with the arrival of the colonial order and the Middle Passage (which refers to various routes that comprise the transatlantic slave trade) as a trauma with no precedence is to acknowledge that such events rupture the master narratives that encode history. The void—an expression of irretrievable and unknowable loss—forces us to consider the problem of beginning anew. Put another way, this void calls Blackness into being only for Blackness to constantly trouble the ontological paradigm that organises the world. Spillers shows us that the flesh is not simply a relation of subjugation but a precondition for the emergence of life and sociality. That the flesh precedes the body marks it as potentially liberatory, something that offers a way outside the grammar of what Sylvia Wynter calls ‘the coloniality of being’.<sup>6</sup> Blackness arises in the resistance, affectability and sociality of the undifferentiated matter that is flesh. The void that brings Blackness into being in all of its multiplicity is not only a site of irretrievable loss, trauma and negation but also one of beginning, rebirth and excess. Moten elaborates:

[It] is not (just) that blackness is ontologically prior to the logistic and regulative power that is supposed to have brought it into existence but that blackness is prior to ontology ... it is ontology’s anti- and antifoundation, ontology’s underground, the irreparable disturbance of ontology’s time and space.<sup>7</sup>

For Moten, it is not simply that Blackness exists prior to anti-Blackness, thereby establishing a ‘pure’ ontology of Blackness outside of the political, but rather that the relation of precedence establishes Blackness as that which is always already in excess to ontology and therefore that which contains the possibility to disfigure and disrupt ontology itself. Blackness is an event horizon that displaces the order of things in its entanglement of constraint and escape, nothingness and infinity.

Arthur Jafa’s seven-minute video collage, *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death* (2016), shows us the void as a space of both trauma and generativity. One can trace the metaphoric chain that I am elaborating in this short essay within Jafa’s remarkable video, which stitches together an encyclopedic collection of moving images, indexing

Blackness as both an object of white supremacist violence and a force of endless creativity and beauty. Set to an elongated mix of the gospel-inflected Kanye West song ‘Ultralight Beam’, the work jumps between NASA images of solar flares on the surface of the star at the centre of our universe, YouTube clips, archival footage of civil rights leaders and actions, helicopter views of the Watts and LA riots, dash-cam footage of extra-legal police violence, clips of Black entertainers and athletes, moments of intimacy and erotics in the club, voguing, snippets of movies, archival footage of historic anti-Blackness and footage Jafa shot himself. Specifically, we see, and this is just a small sample: protestors in Ferguson, Missouri; Fred Hampton’s widow the day after his assassination; Beyoncé; Earl Sweatshirt; the dancers Storyboard P and Okwui Okpokwasili; the scholar Hortense Spillers; the 2015 murder of Walter Scott by a police officer in South Carolina; a clip of the alien from the Ridley Scott film of the same name; Michael Jackson; Martin Luther King Jr; footage from D.W. Griffith’s 1915 white supremacist film *The Birth of a Nation*; the artist Martine Syms; Barack Obama singing ‘Amazing Grace’; the Notorious B.I.G.; archival scenes of police beating and fire-hosing Black protestors; the scholar Saidiya Hartman; Michael Jordan; Louis Farrakhan; Mahalia Jackson; Kevin Garnett; Miles Davis; Black people wading through the rising flood waters of Hurricane Katrina; and scenes of dancing in the club.

Jafa assembles a chorus of voices that sing a song of Blackness, that which is pulled between subjection and freedom. The relentless juxtaposition of scenes indexing brutality and creativity, pain and beauty, nothingness and infinity suspends the viewer in the space of the void. Jafa shows the cyclical return of structural and systemic violence as an everyday fact of life within racial capitalism. Yet this brutality is augmented by the remarkable resilience and endless generativity of Black life as it finds expression in song, dance, activism, organisation, literature, imagination and athleticism. Eros and Thanatos converge in a dance that disfigures and reconfigures the singularity of being and asks us to reimagine the ground from which we begin. The paradox of straddling nothingness and infinity is that it can only be partially comprehended. This is an event horizon that exceeds capture, and in doing so refuses the given grounds of representation that are continually imposed upon Black life by a regulatory and normative (white) order. And so, with *Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death*, Jafa asks us to feel the complexity of a movement that is simultaneously a beginning and ending. We might, following Tina Campt, try to listen to the images that Jafa assembles in order to look ‘beyond what we see and attun[e] our senses to the other affective frequencies’ that move within the image.<sup>8</sup> The affectability of the flesh is that which might lead us to somewhere outside the grammar of ‘Man’.

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles Lam Markmann (trans.), Pluto Press, London, 1986, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Here, I am invoking a tradition of radical thought articulated by thinkers such as Cedric J. Robinson, Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Fred Moten, among others. This tradition might otherwise be named Black Study, which Moten tells us, ‘might best be described as a location habitually lost and found within a moving tendency where one looks back and forth and wonders how utopia came to be submerged in the interstices and on the outskirts of the fierce and urgent now’. ‘Black Op’, *PMLA*, vol. 123, no. 5, 2008, p. 1746.

<sup>3</sup> Moten, p. 1746.

<sup>4</sup> Hortense Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’, *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1987, p. 67.

<sup>5</sup> Fred Moten, *A Poetics of the Undercommons*, Sputnik & Fizzle, Butte, Mont., and New York, 2016, pp. 19–20.

<sup>6</sup> Sylvia Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument’, *The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 2018, p. 194.

<sup>8</sup> Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images*, Duke University Press, Durham, N.C., 2017, p. 9.

# CLUBBED TO DEATH VINCENT LE

'In a real dark night of the soul it is always  
three o'clock in the morning, day after day'

—F. Scott Fitzgerald<sup>®</sup>



As with a glimpse of a half-forgotten dream on a dewy morning, we commence with a thought that may take us by surprise: in Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, he explains that the multiplicity of things in space and time, including other people and even our own bodies, are phenomenally generated by the concepts of our minds, with no bearing on what things are actually like in themselves, independent of the representational forms we bring to them. At the same time, Schopenhauer insists that we have a mysterious inner sense of 'will', which is not conceptually intelligible or empirically observable, such that it transcends the forms of space and time and the categories of understanding. In Schopenhauer's preferred Kantian parlance, the will is thus what our bodies are 'in themselves', the ground or *noumenon* beneath all

representations or phenomena, that unrepresented thing behind all images and perceptions of the body. Schopenhauer further contends that, since the plurality of individuated bodies is only generated through the subjectivist forms of space and time, the will cannot be unique to each of us but must be one indivisible will uniting us all. 'We have called time and space the *principium individuationis* because only through them and in them is plurality of the homogenous possible ... This plurality, however, does not concern the will as thing-in-itself, but only its phenomena. The will is present, whole and undivided.'<sup>2</sup> Being, as it were, is an unabashed communist.

So, then, how can we rational animals, stuck as we are in our separate phenomenal bubbles, ever hope to merge with the pre-individual will? Schopenhauer responds with all the sickly sweet love of an ascetic: because love amounts to sympathising with the welfare of others, just as we show concern for ourselves, it is through love that we may renounce our self-interest, and with it our individual ego. 'In love we give up the will-to-live, for we see the sufferings of another and alleviate them like our own, with an aggravation of those that are actually ours'.<sup>3</sup> Consider someone who gives away all of their belongings to charity. They are no longer servicing their own will; they are instead treating those they help as if their interests were one and the same. So it is that the ascetic comes to transcend the mind's individuation of the pre-subjective will into the plurality of people in space and time: 'he has a presentiment that, however much time and space separate him from other individuals ... in themselves and apart from the representation and its form, it is the one will-to-live appearing in them all'.<sup>4</sup>

To a lesser extent, Schopenhauer looks to art, particularly music, as another way to elevate things above their everyday use value to our individual will. For instance, we no longer desire to eat the fruits of a still-life painting but come to look upon them in a disinterested, properly aesthetic way, such as for their symbolic, moral significations or for their formal colours, textures and shapes. It is in this aesthetic direction that Schopenhauer's most famous rogue disciple, Friedrich Nietzsche, ventures in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. There, Nietzsche shows how the development of art emerges through a conflictual choreography between the two forces of Apollonian dream work and Dionysian intoxication. The Apollonian is the artist as dream weaver, spinning images, symbols and the whole world of appearances in much the same way as the mind concocts representational forms of space, time and plurality. When the Apollonian image breaks down as we approach the event horizon, all that we are left with is an apophatic, mystical glimpse of primal will as it evaporates the self in communal, Dionysian revelry of desire and excess. Nietzsche says:

If we add to this horror the blissful ecstasy which arises from the innermost ground of man, indeed of nature itself, whenever this breakdown of the *principium individuationis* occurs, we catch a glimpse of the essence of the *dionysiac*, which is best conveyed by the analogy of *intoxication*.<sup>5</sup>

The crazed wine god Dionysus is also intimately connected to community and reconciliation, insofar as it is within his narcotic power to break down the barriers between individuals, as on each and every Saturnalia, leaving only the egoless bliss of pure friendship. ‘Now the slave is a freeman, now all the rigid, hostile barriers, which necessity, caprice, or “impudent fashion” have established between human beings, break asunder ... Singing and dancing, man expresses his sense of belonging to a higher community.’<sup>6</sup>

These two forces of narcotic drink and sensible dream work exist in open struggle throughout the Hellenistic period, giving birth to many an artistic genre, form and style, until they finally form an uneasy alliance in Attic tragedy. It is through the cadence of the tragic chorus that Dionysus is able to break through the surface of Apollonian images and symbols, appearing, if only *negatively, mystically*, as the paradoxical breakdown of those images, the limit concept of those symbols. It is thus through tragedy that Dionysus’s dramaturgical dance of ego death is miraculously rendered enjoyable and enthusiastically celebrated. It is thus through art that the height of civilisation comes to drape itself in furs and revel in its own collective domming.<sup>7</sup> Tragic art is simply the will to transvalue terrible truths, such as the inevitability of our own suffering and eventual demise, into symbolic representations that one might just be able to endure—the attempt to spin some analogical yarn, at the level of appearances, for that which traumatically defies and negates all appearances through the intoxicating fog of temple dance and shamanic tongues.

The tragic myth can only be understood as the transformation of Dionysian wisdom into images by means of Apollonian artistry. It leads the world of appearances to its limits, where it negates itself and seeks to flee back into the womb of the one true reality, at which point it seems to sing, with Isolde, its metaphysical swan song:

to drown thus—sink down thus / —all thought gone—delight alone!<sup>8</sup>

For Nietzsche, the tragic chorus marks a new form of Apollonian knowledge—the *knowledge of our unknowledge*, the negative to all that can be tasted, the excess to all that can be learnt. In sum, the chance to dance with death.

Today is by no means short of its great tragedians. We could speak of the good comrade and the romancer. We could speak much more of them. In the end, though, if the Greeks had their tragedy, we, we *neo-Athenians*, have the club. It was Nietzsche who professed that unquenchable craving strikes moderns like us on each and every weekend: ‘I would only believe in a God who knew how to dance’; ‘let each day be a loss to us on which we did not dance once!’<sup>9</sup> What is the club if not precisely the transfiguration of the pre-subjective

will into the kinds of Apollonian dances, sounds, sights and sensations that threaten to overwhelm sensation itself? The club is a paradox: the experience of non-experience. It is the place where Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is rewritten, repurposed and re-engineered in reverse. The first faculty to go is that of the senses: the music is so loud that nothing can be heard, the bass vibrations so thumping that nothing can be felt, the smoke and flashing lights—both real and hallucinated—so panoramic that nothing can be seen. The categories of understanding, and with them any faculty of judgement, are the next to succumb; try as one might to reason, to argue, to commit oneself to a conversation or to think at all, nothing can be heard as the music launches an all-out assault on any and all means of communication. ‘What’s that? I can’t hear you over the soundtrack to our generation’s collective meltdown!’ No-one is there to listen and respond, as they hop and writhe about you, not least of all your own mind as the ecstasy kicks in. The imagination is the last to go. It loses all ability, and even inclination, to synthesise the sensory overload of sublime colours, faces, patterns, noises, reverberations and movements within the bounds of its parochial schemata. Whether it simply ODs or stands scowling in the corner—in both cases frothing furiously at the mouth—dialectics dies on the dancefloor, as no giving and asking for reasons can be heard above the deafening, deindividuating, narcotic-drenched haze of strobe-lit critique.

When it comes to fertility cults and ritual madness, the modern world has at least one advantage over antiquity: today, Dionysus can be snorted. As the ‘philosopher’s stone’, long sought by alchemists and adventurers risking life and limb, MDMA among other party drugs is often a crucial part of the club experience, and with it the heightened sense of one’s rapidly evaporating ego. It is within this space-time discontinuum of hallucinatory hypersensations that critique is materialised, that one can stand outside oneself, turning back from the alternative dimension of a Friday night out to transvaluate the working week as contingent and parochial, one set of coordinates for seeing, knowing and judging among an eternity-length playlist of others. But perhaps MD’s most awesome effect is the unleashing of the primal will, deindividuating us until we catch a stranger’s eye, making contact as if we were looking in the mirror, until we pass our drink to a friend as if to quench our own thirst, until we lean upon another as if leaning upon ourself. Something, something, ‘I is another’—an esoteric community neuro-transmitted via serotonin syndrome and dopamine overdrive, euphemised as euphoric, primmie oneness. Enlightenment comes in through the nostrils.

It would not be wrong to call what transpires in the club, at the best of times and the worst of times, a kind of communal ego death. What is perhaps more dubious is the fact that this narcotic cult of Dionysian frenzy enjoys this abolition of the self, as the body is attacked with artificial colours, hallucinatory lights and synergistic sounds amped up through the techno-chemical marriage of machinic dance music and dehumanising drugs that have utterly drawn and quartered modernity, opening it up to splattering forms of intuition and imaginative schemata, to new games of begging and pleading for ecstasies in the space of unreason. In *Sonic Warfare*, Kodeg traces a genealogy of the regulation and release of sounds at high frequencies, and how this has regularly been wielded as a not-so-surreptitious means of population control and even all-out

warfare, such as the Israeli air force employing sonic booms with volumes as high as a low-flying jet to break windows, provoke nosebleeds and inflict deafness, panic attacks and insomnia across the Gaza Strip. It is, therefore, surprising that this sonic munition has come to be enthusiastically sought and enjoyed through modern noise, electronic music and dance culture. ‘It brings into the field of power’, says Steve Goodman, ‘the dimension of unsound, of frequencies just outside the periphery of human audibility, infrasound and ultrasound, as well as the nonstandard use of popular music, not as a source of pleasure, but for irritation, manipulation, pain, and torture’.<sup>10</sup> In the illicit black markets of the dancefloor and club bathrooms, death is neither feared nor repressed but *commoditised*. It turns out that hacking your values, beliefs and very sense of self through time-travelling shamanic states of near-voodoo death sells. The club, it would seem, is a perverse BDSM covenant, a blood oath with pain and suffering. Is the grape god Dionysus, too, a deity of war and sacrifice? Never forget that ‘to club’ has a military etymology, which dates back to ‘to lub’, meaning to manoeuvre foot soldiers into a corner from which they cannot escape. Even today it can mean to violently beat a person, to the point where one is *clubbed to death*. Perhaps the finest example of this was the ‘dancing plague’ of 1518, which struck Strasbourg. A hallucinogenic fungus was used in the baking of bread, inciting, as if by demonic possession, hundreds of townsfolk to dance for days on end until they collapsed from exhaustion, heart attack and stroke. The 16th-century Strasbourg club scene has yet to be beaten, even by Berlin’s celebrated club, Berghain. Whether it is addiction to dancing, addiction to substance D or even addiction to addiction itself, there is no going back after one drops by the club. You have passed the event horizon, like a tragic antihero having committed a murderous deed.

Modernity’s integration of technology into culture is often said to have initiated a process of desocialisation and civic decline. But if our culture is neoliberal to its rotten Dorian Gray core, then all that cyberculture decimates is the cult of the individual. Even as it vanishes just as fast as it appeared, the club, as the apotheosis of cyberculture, still has the power to incarnate that moment of Dionysian reconciliation, of the clinamen clinging together atomised individuals out of the void and into the primal rain. Rest assured that this is not some hippy-dippy bullshit, some new-age notion of divine oneness or primmie return to nature; all Unabombers will be refused admission at the door. It is only a matter of serotonin-jacked critique, more brutal than any bloody revolution or suicidal tryst, as ‘impending human extinction becomes accessible as a dance-floor’.<sup>11</sup> As its accelerating speeds and strobe lights, hallucinogenic spectres and ear-domming sonics invade and exhaust the body’s perceptual coordinates, the club is the way that contemporary culture can time travel to a future Dionysian extinction event by way of humble Apollonian sensations. Fatigue, emotional burnout, Monday mornings, bad trips, coming down *hard*—none of this should be forgotten, none of this is any more separable from the club experience than Thanatos is from Eros, than the masochist is from his stiletto, or than Venus is from her furs. If the intermittent betrayal of trauma in his writing is anything to go by, club ethnologist Simon Reynolds learnt this long ago:

There’s always been a dark side to rave culture; almost from the beginning, the ecstatic experience of dance-and-drugs was shadowed by anxiety ... Again and again, the moment of endarkenment recurs in rave subcultures; the nihilism latent in its drug-fuelled utopianism is always lurking, waiting to be hatched.<sup>12</sup>

To will the come up is to will the come down, bear the sweat and taste the drip. If the club was ever a utopia, it is because it was always a dystopia, which is the *only kind* of utopia as far as *critique* is concerned.

To pass beyond the event horizon, to propose an unconditional club accelerationism (or simply c/acc, pronounced *cuck*) is not to theorise the club, but to let the club *theorise you*. It was perhaps while she was drug-fucked at a 1990s Birmingham rave that the same thought struck Sadie Plant, snapping her brainstem into catatonic delirium: ‘trance dancers don’t need Deleuze and Guattari to teach them about bodies without organs and rhizomatic connections: they have learned all this for themselves. Writing becomes a process of software engineering, making connections.’<sup>13</sup> The very same sentiment surges through the planetary primal will before popping up two decades later in the Melbourne club scene, of which Sally Olds writes:

Clubbers and clubbing do not need to be rescued by methodologies that attempt to protect experience from abstraction. To do so is to miss the point of club theory, which is not to force the poles together or lament their division, but to celebrate their inseparability.<sup>14</sup>

To accelerate dark-side club theory is, like critique, to be willingly cucked. Through the pagan mist of synesthetic bliss, the dancefloor bids you with a task, a great task—we might even call it your *life’s* task, or even the *world’s* task, or at least the *weekend’s* task—a task that cannot be revised or struggled against, that requires no giving and asking for reasons, and least of all no commitment: *become what is clubbing you!*

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- <sup>1</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up* [1945], Alma Books, Richmond, UK, 2018, eBook.
- <sup>2</sup> The principle of individuation. Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* [1818], vol. 2, E.F.J. Payne (trans.), Dover Publications, New York, 2016, pp. 331–32.
- <sup>3</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Manuscript Remains, Volume 1: Early Manuscripts (1804–1818)*, Berg, Oxford, 1988, pp. 342–43.
- <sup>4</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, Dover Publications, New York, 2016, p. 365.
- <sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings* [1872], Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2007, p. 17.
- <sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, p. 18.
- <sup>7</sup> Contemporary slang version of ‘dominating’ in an erotic sense popular in BDSM culture.
- <sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, p. 105.
- <sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* [1883], Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2006, pp. 29 and 169.
- <sup>10</sup> Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2009, p. 17.
- <sup>11</sup> Nick Land, ‘No Future’, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007*, Urbanomic, Falmouth, 2012, p. 398.
- <sup>12</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture*, Soft Skull Press, Berkeley, 2012, eBook.
- <sup>13</sup> Sadie Plant, ‘The Virtual Complexity of Culture’, *FutureNatural: Nature, Science, Culture*, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 215.
- <sup>14</sup> Sally Olds and DJ Sezzo, ‘Club Theory: Two Recombinant Texts on the Impossible Space Between Theory + Experience’, *AQNB*, 3 May 2018, aqnb.com/2018/05/03/club-theory-two-recombinant-texts-on-the-impossible-space-between-theory-experience-by-sally-olds-dj-sezzo; accessed 12 February 2019.



LYNETT ARE  
SMITH WE  
COMING  
TO  
AN  
END?

Nina Sanadze  
*Monumental Shift*  
2019  
Studio archive of Soviet Georgian monumental sculptor  
Valentin Topuridze (1907–1980): plaster models, plaster moulds  
and clay fragments  
100 × 400 × 400 cm  
Photograph: Christo Crocker  
Courtesy of the artist

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The event horizon is described as a boundary, and at first I imagined a continuous line. I turned to the left and away it ran. I turned to the right and there it was, running away. However, the event horizon is more accurately conceived as the surface of a body whose interior will never be seen because it is impossible to see, from here.<sup>1</sup> And that body's skin hides something that we are desperate to look at, if not with our own eyes then by some other means.

That means is the image. An image is an instrument, a way of seeing what can't be seen, whether due to the contingencies of the present moment or because that thing can never be seen. Image-making is always an act of pragmatics and imagination.

This comes through clearly in the Event Horizon Telescope project,<sup>2</sup> which sets up a pragmatics of the image, a deliberate *construction* of information provided by the telescopic instruments into a form that resembles something the image-maker has imagined, a form she thinks she would see, if it were possible.

In fact, if the world's matter is information, as some believe,<sup>3</sup> rather than particles or waves, then the Event Horizon Telescope team is organising that matter into new forms. Its image is a *reconstruction* of information into a form that the image-maker is *able* to see, given the kind of body she is, and *wants* to see, given her purposes.

In making the image in this way, the team has moved away from the image as a representation, with a natural semantic relation to its object. Instead, observer and observed are part of the same surface, in a flux of transformation that converges on meaningful forms.

#### **The image as form**

Vast resources were invested in creating this image of a dark star. Human bodies and artefacts configured themselves into a chimera whose purpose was to make a form (an image) that is like another form (the object it is an image of), starting with the sparse and insufficient information collected about that object by the telescope.

I am reminded of epigenesis, a process that constructs a complex form using incomplete information from some other body, in this case a parent. Epigenesis is a series of disjunctive transformations of matter within a body, starting with incomplete information in the linear form of DNA. Each transformation turns one form into another that is different and temporary until finally something appears with a form like that of the body the information came from, but new and enduring and separate.<sup>4</sup>

The algorithm developed by Katherine Bouman and the rest of the Event Horizon Telescope team was designed to reproduce the original form of that dark star—which no observer can see because of the event horizon—by transforming the information about it coming in from their instruments, constructing it into something else, something new, a form of the kind that we call an image.<sup>5</sup>

#### **The image as catastrophe**

To look at an image of the world approaching an event horizon is to witness catastrophe. To observe the development of an embryo is to see a cascade of catastrophes, with each one creating a new stage of development.

These disjunctive transformations of matter within a body and within the living chimera of the Event Horizon Telescope project are identical to each other in their underlying form, as we might say, and also to the sudden changes that shock and bewilder. Like a landslide. Like the sudden switch from fight to flight. Like the bushfire that stimulates new growth. They are all catastrophes. There is discontinuity, but something new appears and it is possible for the living system to go on, from one side of the event to the other.

To speak more generally, living systems are image-making systems. The image is an event of a kind possible in that system. The form of that event is a catastrophe.

Last century, René Thom developed the mathematics of catastrophe. It is topology, a theory of surfaces that helps us model sudden, disjunctive changes while still preserving the form or matter of a body. In fact, according to Thom, there are seven types of catastrophe, which can be modelled in seven topographies of multi-dimensional folds. These folds are how you get both continuity and discontinuity, which looks like a contradiction but is not. It's the fold.

The catastrophe that is easiest to talk about is the cusp, with a triangular fold and three layers of surface, one caught between a top and a bottom layer, out of sight: a pleat. I wonder about that middle layer, which according to E.C. Zeeman is 'inaccessible', though he also writes that it is the 'least probable' and 'unstable'.<sup>6</sup>

### The edge of the fold

In European Christian cultures we have imagined the image in various ways: as the face of God, as an interface between two worlds or as a dirty window.<sup>7</sup> It has always been a surface that we see but cannot see past, a partition between two worlds that we go to but cannot pass through, a surface without a body.

This way of imagining the image produces doubt and anxiety that has sometimes flipped into hatred of the image and a desire to eliminate it because it stands between us and truth. But, as Jacques Rancière argues, this desire to eliminate the image actually maintains the surface as a partition between two worlds, enforcing passivity and making it seem as if it were impossible to *really* know. In doing this, those who think they know better than us and who would save us from the duplicity of the image have enforced an inequality of agency rather than freed us, as they had promised.<sup>8</sup>

But if images are transformations and reconstructions of the world's matter then they do not partition one world from another. We, and our image-making, are not outside nature. Nor can certain people maintain power by declaring something as natural or not.

Without catastrophe there would be no images, and without images there would be no bodies, whether the one forming in the womb or the chimeric system of the Event Horizon Telescope project.

There would also be no art. Nor could there be criticism of a way of life or of art,<sup>9</sup> because if it weren't for catastrophe, the event that changes would be the event that destroys, completely.

Are we coming to an end? We are, because we always are, but possibly the difference now is that so many of us feel the edge of the fold softening. And, now, the Event Horizon Telescope has brought us face to face with the image as transformed matter. An unambiguous construction, pragmatic, imaginary. I hesitate to say what might emerge from this, or has already. But I turn to the possibilities of art. Artists, so often in close range to a dark star, can roll that softening edge over, exposing what is hidden, whether that is the least probable, the unstable, or even what was thought to be inaccessible.

My thanks to Christian Capurro and Melanie Irwin for their thoughtful readings.

<sup>1</sup> Masaru Siino, 'Topological Appearance of Event Horizon: What Is the Topology of the Event Horizon That We Can See?', *Progress of Theoretical Physics*, vol. 99, no. 1, 1998.  
<sup>2</sup> Event Horizon Telescope Project, 'Imaging a Black Hole', n.d., [eventhorizontelescope.org/science](http://eventhorizontelescope.org/science); accessed 16 January 2020.  
<sup>3</sup> Kate Becker, 'Is Information Fundamental?', 2014, [pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/is-information-fundamental](http://pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/is-information-fundamental); accessed 18 April 2020.  
<sup>4</sup> Marcello Barbieri, *The Organic Codes: An Introduction to Semantic Biology*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2003, pp. 245–53.  
<sup>5</sup> Images usually have less information than the things they represent, as artist Jan Adriaans has pointed out to me in conversation. An image may be a projection of an object, like a shadow, or it may be a likeness drawn by someone looking back and forth between the object and the surface upon which she is drawing. The difference is that this image starts with data rather than an object and we have no way of assessing by eye whether it is a good likeness. It is interesting that the practice of science has produced this contrary kind of image.  
<sup>6</sup> E.C. Zeeman, 'Catastrophe Theory', *Scientific American*, vol. 234, no. 4, 1976, pp. 65–70 and 75–83. Zeeman was Thom's fellow developer of the mathematics of catastrophe.  
<sup>7</sup> Lynette Smith, 'An Island', *Art + Australia Online*, December 2018, [artandaustralia.com/online/dispatches/island](http://artandaustralia.com/online/dispatches/island); accessed 18 April 2020.  
<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, London and New York, 2011, pp. 1–25.  
<sup>9</sup> Rancière, p. 29.

## Upcoming

## Art + Australia Eight (57.1)

Guest Editor: Tessa Laird



Artist Peter Waples-Crowe wearing *Ngarigo Queen – Cloak of Queer Visibility*, 2018, at the opening of *A Lightness of Spirit is the Measure of Happiness*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2018  
Photograph: Jacqui Shelton

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## Multinaturalism

*Multinaturalism* grows out of Amerindian thought, via the Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and posits a time when all life was human. Indigenous epistemologies including those of Australia concur that underneath external differentiations, all beings remain connected via kinship. Such cosmological relationality offers a fundamental challenge to European dualism, the supposed gulf between nature and culture that is the inheritance of the Enlightenment. Val Plumwood called this state ‘hyper-separation’, which paves the way for global extractivism, climatic chaos and extinction cascades. Within Western scientific taxonomies, including the neologism Anthropocene, ‘man’ is at the centre, and it goes without saying he is white, straight, cis-gendered and able-bodied. The language we choose is crucial, and ‘Anthropocene’ has many detractors, not least Indigenous communities who have fought to maintain belief systems that don’t support a nature-culture binary.

This issue of *Art + Australia* is dedicated to non-anthropocentric perspectives and practices that exist within a continuum of what Donna Haraway calls *naturecultures*, whether from Indigenous or other epistemologies which de-centre colonial, patriarchal and capitalist agendas.

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Black holes and their event horizons—where space-time warps catastrophically—have captivated the imagination of science fiction writers and filmmakers over the past decades. Until very recently, they were the province of special effects artists trying to picture something that seemed inaccessible. Early in 2019, the Event Horizon Telescope Collaboration published an image of the supermassive black hole at the core of a galaxy called M87. The image we have of this cosmic phenomenon is generated by a breathtaking mathematical and computer interlacing of data from a global network of observatories. What we see is an event 55 million light-years away. The light from this cataclysm has taken 55 million years to reach us. We see this image as we face our own catastrophes of climate change and global pandemic.

In the late 20th century, the philosopher Jean Baudrillard delighted in figuratively using the scientific speculation of an 'event horizon' as the frozen panorama of history, politics and culture in a *danse macabre* silhouetted against the inertial implosion of the myths of progress and revolution that had formerly been driving modernity but were collapsing into a non-event. However, at this moment in the 21st century, history, politics and culture hardly seem stalled in suspended animation but are accelerating like frenzied quarry towards a fatal tipping point: our 'event horizon'.

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