

An Insane Reflection _ Doug Ashford

As fascistic political power re-emerges around the world, and most alarmingly here in the US, the effect of art on democracy is again being considered. The recent conditions imposed on us by repression and authoritarianism have caused many artists, at least in my circle of friends and colleagues, to pause and question what we do. And surely this is a good result, as we seem to live in a time of little reflection. While much of political life is trying to inspire us to be more than ourselves, paradoxically, many of us are looking with indifference as power takes away the freedoms and enlightenment we have gained.

The reflection of artists is surely part of the work we have to do. Everything that happens in culture happens for reason—even us! And reflection is, of course, an overwhelmingly present characteristic of what we understand as a necessary result of an experience of a work of art when we are in the audience.

When an artwork is displayed and someone is asked to regard it, or when shopping for clothes someone looks at the cloth that makes up a suit, that person might step up very close to the painting or the suit. In the latter instance the person might actually take the fabric in her hands and feel it, sensorially getting as close to the desired thing as possible. Similarly, when approaching a work of art at first a person might stand away but at some point, when excited, she will want to examine the work closely to try to know exactly what it is.

In this action of getting closer, the person goes quite out of herself, she gets away from herself—forgets herself. At this moment of regard there is nothing to remind her that it is she who is looking at the fabric or the artwork, and not the cloth or the picture that is looking at her.

In other words, through reflection I enter into the object (I become objective) and I also go out of, or away from, myself (I cease to be subjective).¹

This process can happen through a range of experiences. For instance, as we near the end of our lives we lose sensibility in many ways. The pressure of our blood in our veins becomes more than we can bear, the presence of memories in our minds begins to slip away, the oncoming diseases in our organs turn our physical self into an adversary, and the ability of our desires to seek out love becomes isolated. In short, the insight that we soon may no longer be ourselves becomes undeniable.

This anticipated loss of our body begins before death actually arrives. And with such a rehearsal comes the frustrations of many lost connections. We are undone by our emotional urgencies and failures, the concept of the future as a shared site of

¹This last concept is in fact a statement lifted directly from a book called, *Training in Christianity* by Soren Kierkegaard, a text not so much about religion per se but a set of ideas that use religion to try to understand the relative insignificance of the self in thinking of larger conditions of empathy and action.

progress, and crucially, a loss of connection to the facts of life that surround us—the contingencies and conditions of the built social world.

I would like to propose that art activates reflection. Art allows us to temporarily reject reality and to refuse to partake in its coercive vicissitudes and structures. This refusal is active, a kind of movement—a departure from constancy and practicality. In the loss of care for facts I am then able to invest in the possibility of creating a fiction to replace them. The political concerns I have can then emerge as a creative, or an aesthetic, struggle.

For many artists this has been a very productive possibility. It allows for invention outside of practicality and permits an invented innocence. Such artistic speculation then allows ideas that have been incorporated into technologies of control and domination to return to sites of liberating speculation. Or said differently, it allows for a response to injustice with beauty.

The “taking-on” of innocence is well within the artificiality of the figure that we can find historically as the “artist.” This is a figure who asks too many questions at once, who refers to contradictory perceptions and experiences as constant, and who insists on terms that are, as of yet, not useful to an adult and humanized world. This is like performing the innocence of children, and asking questions that fail to be as answerable by the authority of state and family. What is a child but a kind of failed human?

Perhaps when the artist joins with the child and the old person, **they can take a position of asking unreasonable questions about what is truly sinister about modern life—the need to homogenize all objects into consumables that will never be close to us, become us, or be reflected upon by us.** After all, it is an act of adopted innocence that insists that what is outside us can be somehow incorporated inside us, brought into the corpus (the body), and into the self. When I consider the failed humanity of a child or the rejection of humanness in proximity to death, I am not trying to be eerie or dark. I am trying to see how the relationship we have to art asks us to address the restrictive context of human subjectivity that we have been taught. And taught for a reason.

At the same time, I want to be careful not to re-invigorate the long profitable and complacent proposition that artists are always innocent. The image of the artist as a creature capable only of instinctive thinking is a caricature crucial to the current economic system of managed consumption. The financialized context of displaying and selling art today (or of showing and selling anything today) is an expression of a system of non-reflection. This system is less about what art actually is, or what things actually can be, than it ever was before. Artists know that the auction houses and art fairs and lectures halls demand a relentless fealty. But as much as all of us pay homage to this system, we often try to undermine what it does to our work.

Most of my artistic life was centered on my participation in the artists' collaboration Group Material (1979–1996)² producing exhibitions and public projects organized around, and in response to, the political repression of our time. Group Material's notion of an ongoing public design of art's display and discussion through making exhibitions, meant that we could visibly position the principles of democracy in the museum as a struggle that never ends. The showing of art could become a template for the social forum, the parliament, or the agora. It could become a dialogic process. In juxtaposition and conflict, art can then reject the false consensus of pluralism and replace it with a sense of temporary confusion and inquiry.

Group Material's inventions of display and activism assigned democracy's unpredictability and inclusivity into a changing shape through exhibition design. We wanted to give public dissent a "form"—a shape that was always irregular and fluctuating: an abstract but still recognizable proposal for the politics of real life. It was also a demand, one that insisted engineered certainties of contemporary life be reconsidered and be replaced.

But what is the nature of this irregular shape? And if it is abstract, implying a separation from the real, what does it remove itself from? What is it showing outside and away from depiction? One thing that became recently clear is the degree that the "abstractness" of this irregular proposal re-determines time's effect in the world. It insists on a comparison between the political attitudes of a period to other times, other experiences, and proposals. There is a shift of seeing beyond real time, and its references, when entertaining the capacities of abstraction.

Abstraction suggests another possibility, perhaps more psychological, for intervention into the conceit of subjectivity by suggesting a context for overflow. How can the core sensations of psychic life be represented in all their recognizable referents, if the life-world we experience eternally is so managed? We know that the affective life we experience internally, and theoretically all share as we develop personalities and characters, is often hidden beneath the stories, images, and references we dictate to the world as our "experiences." We also know that those who have power over us often form this dictation without us. We are taught what it means to be either a "man" or a "woman," to believe in either Yahweh or Allah, to be either an American or not, etc. To reject these distinctions is in some places, to risk one's life. And both the emotional and philosophical implication of this violence means that we all share a sense of never truly being "ourselves" in this particular world. **Meanwhile, each of us shares with everyone else a memory of the self, reflected in artifacts that when re-considered have no boundaries.**

Thinking about these questions many years later I painted the series, *Six Moments in 1967*. It consists of six small colored compositions put together against six photographs of political street demonstrations that all took place in that resistant year. Around, behind, and adjacent to these photos are colors and shapes that

² I joined Group Material in 1981.

attempt to replicate this optimism in a re-organized grid. The grid, refracting subjective experience into an objective measurable form, is re-measured in relationship to a memory of a political event.

These paintings are made with egg tempera, with which I can create a depth of color through layering but maintain a surface quality that is extremely flat. I find this deep flatness implies a position of looking carefully at something that is denying any kind of particularity, and is withdrawn from direct reference but inspires looking. It is a possibility that for me is strongly embodied by the medium of paint—calling for attention, and opening an exposure to emotion but veiling any teleological sense of present time. In a way then, I am painting over, or painting through, supposedly “real” conditions to propose the possibility of remaking those histories—to cover or uncover them as they are re-articulated or re-colored.

Encountering the conflict between inventive memory and historical archive in the presentation of painting might be seen as equivalent to viewing oneself through another body, and putting one’s self in this stranger’s position of address and identification. It allows one to look through another’s eyes toward another event, or even inwards. The Renaissance notion that one can occupy the eyeballs of another through a position offered in a work of art, proposes that through transubstantiation “I am in an encounter with a view previously unknown.” But the true formal and physical presence of a stranger is difficult to discuss rationally as simply a point of view. The idea of another person (not myself) is so much more than the strict diagramming of corporeal perspective or the agreement/disagreement with a position. Instead one needs to adapt to a re-arrangement of sensibility that verges on the rupture of the self into another. This idea of feeling “into” another, either object or person that we previously understood as outside us, is clearly a clue to how we understand abstraction as a value in visual thinking. In artworks, this distinguishes the sense we have of the emotional life of art by separating it into two opposing senses: abstraction as a place of removal and proximity.

Of course abstraction has many darker configurations: the geometries of regimentation and efficiency, the brutal leveling of financialization and its debt economy, the corrosive container of normality in how we figure ourselves as families, as “men” or “women”. **We are made to believe that to emotionally function amidst such violence is a mark of our humanity, and to struggle with them means we are insane.** The force and dark implications of these social abstractions: “money,” “consensus,” “reason,” “fairness,” made me struggle with what logic powers them. But reminded by the beautifully perverse students that I teach, I realized that the definitions we carry—of habit, ideology or belief—are all subject to the agreements we make to be included in “humanity.”

Definitions of a human being as coherent and individuated are failing. **In part, this implies the “beingness” of inanimate things, the vitality of categories of life that were previously defined as less than human.** There is a juncture between the mystical idea that things are alive and the materialist idea that the life of things has

been diminished in our lives. Part of the resuscitation of the life of things must begin with art-making as an act of animistic identification—of treating things as if they are beings, treating the useless as crucial, and treating the not human (the monstrous), or the not yet human (the child), or the dead, as always alive and newly relevant.

Many readers of One Event (2012) is an installation of small-scale abstract paintings and photographs placed in a prefabricated structure, which I made for Documenta 13. I began with a photograph I found in a newspaper depicting a group of parents who had just discovered their children dead and they are collapsing in grief into one another's arms. The other photographs in the installation are of actors re-enacting the physical collapse of bodies in grief.

This ensemble of work and its enclosure seek to negotiate how the immersive experiences of abstract form can make the empirical reactions we have to documented history torn from their factuality and re-rendered into affect. I designed the installation to be like a motionless theatre where images can take the place of actors, as in a tableau vivant. But similar to my intention making *Six Moments in 1967*, by painting through the supposed reference to the “real” of a document of trauma and violence, the facts in a photograph are abstracted (both in rendition and relation) and take on multiple stories.

The gravity of an abstraction might create a state of both immediate and deferred identification. “Immediate,” because the lack of objective reference in an abstract form means recognition beyond any rational recognition. And “deferred,” because this pleasure of distance causes us to look elsewhere for definitions, leaves us with less of an anchor tied back to the real, and leaves us in another unexpected state. The works in the room of paintings are between dark and light, suggesting the chance to transport oneself to places where thought can work on history differently. Is it useless to imagine social participation in this abstract way? When I saw the photo of grieving parents in the newspaper I recognized the collapsing body as my own, even though it was of fathers discovering the bodies of their sons dead in the trunk of car at the moment of forming a search party for them.

Amid every abstract form in the room of paintings at Documenta 13 is a group of people photographically depicted in disarray, collapsing and reorganizing themselves within each other. Their previous coherence is exploded into the unstable connections that often grow in the face of grief—an experience hard to know under the social mandate and enforcement of our present “state of emergency.”

The photos of actors are chosen for both their repetition and their documentation: for what motivates the figures depicted, figures that are beautiful because responding to disaster they are moving as if empathy has taken on its own momentum. Disaster creates times of abnormal love because it goes beyond economies of exchange that revolve around getting and paying back.

On July 26, 2011, Anders Behring Breivik placed a bomb just outside the main entrance to a building known as the Highrise, the seat of Norwegian political power in

Oslo. While the explosion was still echoing, he entered an island summer camp nearby and murdered the children and counsellors attending. His motivation was what he understood as the degradation of Norwegian society due to his fantasy of immigration as a corruption.

In 2013 I was commissioned to create a work in Oslo for an exhibition that tried to address this event and the national debate on the social conditions that produce xenophobia and white supremacy. My work for this show, *Bakersfield, CA* (2013-2015), was built from two rolls of found film, a set of tempera paintings, and glass. The work is meant to produce a context for the emotional appraisal of an aspect of American culture that is rarely described because we are always in it—a culture that relates to Brevick’s fascism but with a different history.

The film roll I found in 2005 showed the life of an American family that dressed like Nazis. Between the 1920s and 1960s, the feeling of normality occupied by white America shifted its privileges from stable and legalized states of white supremacy, backed by state violence, to more psychological and mythological positions of aggression and control. As we know, the mundane life of this brutality is still felt on many levels in the United States today: the mass incarceration of African American people, the systemic policing of that same group and others, and the sad and continuous affect of this on all our lives. Dark as mud, like flags left in the attic, it is an old order of American violence.

Of course the conditions of racism’s systemic violence are tied to larger unofficial and judicial levels of repression. They are embedded in both institutional policies (with increased surveillance and excessive sentencing of people of color, etc.) and also the psychological fantasies of purity and nation. This destructive and deeply rooted fantasy, one both psychological and mythological, makes white supremacy a tool to live beyond both law and thought. It allows the racist to live in a dark dream. Without any reason and outside of fact, the politicians who promote racism appeal to things outside of the recognizable. These are not abstractions that lead to questioning, instead they are just projecting the fictitious certitude that was built years ago to keep them in power.

In response to these conditions, the project is trying to show both the sinister mental attachment the United States has to white supremacy and the societal violence it produces. But in a way this series was a failure. *Bakersfield, CA* is part of an attempt to reveal the darkest aspects of abstraction in modern life. These abstractions are the most mundane, more mundane than airports, or malls, or the relentless repetition of commodity. And as such, the interchange between referent and abstraction becomes confusing on an ethical level. It may be the concurrence between what I call the “brightly abstract” (something leading to a generative feeling of failure and inquiry in the face of regimentation) and the “dark abstraction” (those contexts of non-specific identification that manage modern life and continue to generate state violence). Or, it may be the call to arms for us to recognize the non-human is too easily replaced with a broad nihilism.

Brevik, the man who bombed Oslo and assassinated its children, was not less than a human being but he acted in violent reaction to what humanness implies. The family I re-depicted in this work is blind to the reflectiveness that would allow them to think as non-human: as a child, as insane, as a body close to death, as an animal, as a monster, or as an inanimate thing. Instead they live as functional citizens of a historically nationalist project that is always “great,” or as they say now “could be made great again.” Perhaps a distinction needs to be made between an antihuman being (the fascist superman) and the non-human (a person who refuses the hailing of social directives in order to try to invent new contexts for care and responsibility).

In looking for this non-human, I looked at the New York Times. I first used it as an experiment while teaching a seminar on the non-human with students at the Summer Academy in Salzberg, and then as a work of inkjet prints entitled, *Next Day (New York Times, pages A1-A28)*, (2015-2016).

In a strange way present-day economic and technological brutalities seem to make the creation of sharing relationships more imperative than ever. For me the most conflictual moment of such sharing was the inconsistent light of the daily newspaper. As the world we are thrown into becomes more and more “connected” and yet more and more blind to what connection might mean, many of us now realize that only in each other can clues to a liberated present be stolen back. I am in love with the notion of an imaginary present— something that has to be “taken away”—stolen from the relentless management of time, often with the very tools that are producing that system of management. It occurs to me that this process, however socially revolutionary or even practical in the end, is by definition an abstract process: something taken away, or erased, covered over and effaced.

The newspaper edition I chose to work with is one that I had kept, that was produced the day after the bombing of New York City on September 11, 2001. Within it is a kaleidoscope of information and regulatory speech formation, laying out both the probabilities of a warring future and the chance of reflection and care. Sadly—we know which choices were made.

But despite my desire to be able to cease being subjective, it is also true that in art there are no persons separate from the relations built by society. Sometimes though, amidst the colored fictions of a painting, I am faced with the fact that I could become a beautiful anomaly—an anti-person, a non-human. As such, I could have only the memories that are from an anti-family and an anti-state. I could be living outside of the body politic as a kind of “being-in-denial” or a “being-in-death” that would feel the need to overcome the false life reproduced by media and state. This of course suggests a life in disarray, a life torn between polarities of mania and depression, a life that becomes increasingly illegible to the regulatory world that is inflicted upon us, with all of our sciences committed only to profitable control.

Such an illegible person could become more apparent to herself and more unreadable by the progress of deception in official history. This is a disarrangement that might implore us to be more alongside each other, even if we were more unrecognizable to ourselves.

Outside the archive's direction we can become inappropriately joined to those we are not related to. We can have the wrong love-object and find new uses for a body that is no longer anchored to reproduction and its rational future. This might look like being a criminal or like being close to death in life — open to the drive to reject the world and depart from its confinement in official history. Sometimes chronological order can be returned to magic and experienced as merely a formal problem. This formal problem is one that uses beauty to oppose injury, and being against injury we are for justice.

Even deep within the designed apparatuses and storehouses of art this is an effort that seems worth the work: an effort to misrecognize history with a set of malleable artifacts. This replacing of artifacts produces reflection and can put a person on the verge insanity. Or at least insist on an insanely reflective act, an engagement with being close and far away at the same time, beyond the shadow of a failed humanity, in the light of the non-human.