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Under the Sign of Regret

# Under the Sign of Regret

Alejandro Cesarco



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION  
by due permission of the Malmö Faculty of  
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*Faculty opponent*  
Dr. Doreen Mende

# Under the Sign of Regret

Alejandro Cesarco



**LUND**  
UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Supervisors: Dr. Sarat Maharaj and Dr. Gertrud Sandqvist

DOCTORAL STUDIES AND RESEARCH IN FINE AND PERFORMING ARTS

MALMÖ FACULTY OF FINE AND PERFORMING ARTS


LUND UNIVERSITY, SWEDEN

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Alejandro Cesarco, *Dedication, Takes/Outtakes (Layered)*, 2019  
screenshot, dimensions yet undecided

## ABSTRACT

*Under the Sign of Regret* focuses on aesthetically mediated responses to regret. It interrogates the qualities of the feeling of regret as well as what is produced under its influence (as objects and as experiences). These two aims—considering regret as a mode and as a tool—hinge between two complementary definitions of aesthetics: on the one hand, the quality of feelings or the “distribution of the sensible”; and on the other hand the specific regime for identifying and reflecting on the arts.<sup>1</sup>

My research looks at regret as an aesthetic mode and as a methodological tool. It recuperates the positive qualities of regret without overvaluing it as a great gain. This hovering between loss and gain sets up the research as a tactic against the achievement driven and production principled art-field.

The hypothesis is to consider regret as a generative force (one that seeds and propels forward), as a bittersweet drama of adjustments (between who we are and who we aspired to be, or between what we make and our shortcomings), and ultimately, as a way of questioning perspective itself (distance, visibility, point of view, and, most importantly, time).

My inquiry traces regret as a form of memory and as a way of narrating oneself—which in some cases may amount to the same thing. This particular way of storytelling organizes our relationship to the world. The feeling of regret casts a particular hue through which our story is imagined and constructed as it is retold.

After setting up a conceptual map of regret in the introductory chapter (its marginality in psychoanalytic discourse, it being relegated to a minor form of depression, the general ambivalence of the feeling) I turn my attention away from the psychological and sociological origins of regret towards its effects in the world, namely the effects it has as a creative force in the arts. I am arguing, on the one hand, that regret, as a sub-category of depression, is at the core of how the contemporary individual operates socially. And, on the other hand, I am making

1 These definitions of aesthetics are derived from Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).

a distinction between feeling regret and using regret as a methodological drive. That is, I am focusing on how art making occurs under the sign of regret and what the characteristics of the forms and experiences it produces might be.

Reading artistic forms and experiences through a lens of regret does not mean that the works analysed are about regret, or narrate a story of regret, but rather that they embody and thus help exemplify some of the traits, characteristics, and modes that emerge from considering regret conceptually.

I have identified two particular characteristics of producing under the sign of regret: suspended agency and ghostly haunting. Each of these characteristics are taken up in individual chapters that define and ground these modalities of production (principally through the methodologies and tropes employed in my own artistic practice as well as other selected examples), while continuing to mull over the different shades of meaning of regret as a generative force.

## A NOTE ON THE TITLE AND METHOD

The title, *Under the Sign of Regret*, is an acknowledgement of Susan Sontag's essay "Under the Sign of Saturn" in which she analyses the work of Walter Benjamin.<sup>2</sup>

As with most Sontag texts, she starts with a personal anecdote where she locates herself and the place from which she writes. The first person narrative is at the core of her essay writing. In this instance, the personal anecdote is the first time Sontag sees a photograph of Benjamin and she goes on to describe four other of his portraits. Mid-way through the essay she justifies her approach by saying, "One cannot use the life to interpret the work. But one can use the work to interpret the life".<sup>3</sup> In my text I do not speak about my life (in a biographical sense) but I do use my work to ground my thinking. I think through and alongside my work: my art-work is used as case study and as complementary or counter-argument to my textual exposition. In many ways, this text and the exhibition that accompanies it are engaged in parsing out the specificities or types of knowledge production each practice (or institution) enables and withstands.

In "Under the Sign of Saturn", Sontag opens the essay with a generalization about the way Benjamin appears in photographs, "[H]e is always looking down" (she means physically and emotionally). She proceeds to describe three photographs of Benjamin in chronological order from "youthful almost handsome" to "no trace of youth or handsomeness" in a decade. (Benjamin would have been thirty-five to forty-five years old during that period.) By forty-six, Sontag sees him as an old man, she says, "he is what the French call *un triste*". And continues, "He thought of himself as melancholic, disdaining modern psychological labels and invoking the traditional astrological one". She quotes him as saying, "I came into the world under the sign of Saturn—the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays..."<sup>4</sup> (Sign is both astrological and semiotic.)

2 Susan Sontag, "Under the Sign of Saturn," in *Under The Sign of Saturn* (New York: Picador, 1980), 109-134.

3 Ibid., 111.

4 Ibid., 109-111.

Sontag makes the claim that Benjamin's work, and most specially his book, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), cannot be fully understood unless one grasps how much it relies on a theory of melancholy. In her essay Sontag unthreads three main characteristics of the melancholic from reading Benjamin's work (slowness, blundering, stubbornness). In what follows, I argue for two particular characteristics of producing under the sign of regret: suspended agency and ghostly haunting (perhaps in themselves different shades of slowness, blundering and stubbornness).

A Saturnine detour of my own: W. G. Sebald wrote lovingly of Robert Walser in an essay titled "Le Promeneur Solitaire",<sup>5</sup> in which he too starts by analysing photographs of the author. The commonalities between Walser and Benjamin (and Benjamin and Sebald) have frequently been highlighted. More recently, and under a different context, Roberto Bolaño reads a photograph of the Tel Quel group in his short story "Labyrinth".<sup>6</sup> Around the same time that photograph was being taken (Bolaño dates it to "1977 or thereabouts") Roland Barthes was elsewhere making the claim that it is through digression that thought enters the novel.

"Digressions," we also know from *Tristram Shandy*, "incontestably, are the sunshine:—they are the life, the soul of reading:—take them out of this book for instance,—you might as well take the book along with them".<sup>7</sup>

The abundant uses of "digressions" throughout my own text is meant to model a way of writing under the sign of regret. Digressions and distractions introduce day-dreaming into the text, pulling it outside of its solemnity and allowing it to perform differently. Digressions allow for odd-angle questions. Digressions, as used throughout this text, synthesize both a form of suspension and a type of haunting.

In his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France (January 7, 1977), Roland Barthes proposes that he will set out to teach a course that would itself be a form of literary style, based on the complementary forms of fragmentation and digression (*excursion* he names it). "For Method,

5 W. G. Sebald, "Le Promeneur Solitaire" in *A Place in the Country*, trans. Jo Catling (New York, Random House, 2013), 126–164.

6 Roberto Bolaño, "Labyrinth", trans. Chris Andrews, printed in *The New Yorker*, January 23, 2012.

7 Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, (New York, The Modern Library, 1950), Book 1, Chapter 22, 73-74.

too,” he states, “is a Fiction”.<sup>8</sup> This paraphrasing of Stephane Mallarmé could mean that method is to prioritize a certain path towards the arrival of an objective. To pick a path eliminates the option of others (or at least their actualization). That silencing and framing is what constitutes fiction. In outlining his first course, *The Neutral*, Barthes claims, “all conflict is generative of meaning: to choose *one* and refuse the *other* is always a sacrifice made to meaning, to produce meaning, to offer it to be consumed”.<sup>9</sup> Meaning, not unlike regret, is produced at the expense of a loss. Choosing is at the genesis of fiction, meaning, and regret (understood as a retrospective view of a path not taken). Choosing, and the risks associated with it link, from the outset, fiction and experience (or at least its retelling).

Barthes concluded his inaugural lecture on what would be his teaching method with a personal observation: “At fifty-one, Michelet began his *vita nuova*, a new work, a new love. Older than he (you will understand that this parallel is out of fondness), I too am entering a *vita nuova*, marked today by this new place, this new hospitality”.<sup>10</sup> For a practicing artist to embark on writing an academic dissertation is also a form of beginning a *vita nuova*: working and thinking under the hospitality of a different methodology and institution, a different history and expectation of how knowledge is conceived and transmitted. It is my intention that by threading the main text, shadowing it, with different voices and modes of address, in other words, by allowing for the proliferation of different types of fragmentations and digressions, that I will be able to braid different registers and methodologies of thinking. This mode of writing is proposing that thinking happens collectively. Or, to say it quickly once again, these seemingly in-parallel digressions and the extensive use of citations are meant to exemplify, in practice, the two traits of regret that I elaborate in the chapters to come: suspended agency and ghostly haunting.

8 Roland Barthes, “Lección inaugural de la Cátedra de Semiología Literaria del Collège de France”, in *El placer del texto y Lección inaugural*, trans. Oscar Terán, (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2003), 146.

9 Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, trans. Rosalind Kraus and Denis Hollier (New York: Columbia University, 2005), 7.

10 Barthes, “Lección inaugural”, 150.

## **A DIFFERENT WAY TO BEGIN (A SHORT HISTORY OF WORRYING)**

**Let's set the scene.** Interior, domestic space. Late afternoon, soft warm light. An intimate conversation between two people who are aware they are being listened to. A conversation that could well be a monologue. The couple take turns using words they like. Their tone is intimate but in the sense of intimation. The camera watches them and can't help but judge them. The camera is, to a large extent, their consciousness or witness. What we see is more of a landscape than a portrait; the camera charts a field, a scenario, it maps out a dynamic. The hand-held camera documents a theatrical, rehearsed, ceremony depicting a complete and ideal love, or its breakdown. What is seen is the attempts of sustaining desire over a long term. What is negotiated is the difference between who we are and who we were.

The scene is seemingly asking; how does our self-image differ from who we really are or have become? How do we deal with this difference? And what is the role of the other within this process? Can intimacy, with oneself and with another not be based on narcissistic projections? In other words, and to paraphrase Leo Bersani, can we accept difference as a non-threatening supplement to sameness? Must we reduce differences to an absolute sameness? Is this not the central query, or the political dimension, of being under the sign of regret?

The scene follows a couple that looks back on failed expectations and unfulfilled promises. The tone of their conversation is highly personal, but also somewhat artificial. As noted, a question the scene poses is whether desire for the other is sustainable in the long term. Another question the work hints at is whether the pursuit of the other's desire can avoid becoming a crisis of self-identification.

**Cut. Another scene.** Another way of thinking. Interior. Evening. Artificial light. A male character sits at a desk and writes on a laptop computer. It is the same actor as in the previous scene, but it is yet unclear whether it is the same character.

He says: *Why not think of the story the other way around? Why not let the characters make things up about us?*



She replies: *The story begins when someone wants something and someone else doesn't want them to have it.* She would later say things like: *Isn't every story a story of betrayal?*

**Over the shoulder close-up of the man typing.** We see him type: “*One function of art is to bequeath an illusory yesterday to men's memory*”. This he quotes from Jorge Luis Borges, from a book that compiles the Argentinean author's prologues. The quoted text was written in 1962 the book published in 1975.<sup>11</sup> (In 1985 Jacques Derrida visited Borges at his home in Buenos Aires. He had met the blind writer once before a few years earlier while both were visiting Cornell University. In 1996, Derrida curated a show at the Louvre titled, *Memoirs of the Blind*. For Derrida drawing is itself blind; as an act rooted in memory and anticipation, drawing necessarily replaces one kind of seeing (direct) with another (mediated). This is perhaps not a digression but a methodological clarification. The writing that follows is permeated by two kinds of “seeing”: artistic and academic. It is, however, at this point premature to determine which of the two is “directed” and which “mediated”, which is blinded by what and why.)<sup>12</sup>

**Voice-over.** A woman's voice with a foreign accent. A voice that is older than that of the man in the scene. A voice that is looking back through time, remembering. Through her narration we quickly learn that the man is writing an article on “The Aesthetics of Regret”. She tells us that his dwelling on this particular affective state is due to his interest in feelings that have the capacity for duration. Feelings that linger; that unfold, or re-fold onto themselves. He is interested in the ongoingness of the feeling of regret as opposed to the suddenness of other aesthetic categories. Something akin to what Sian Ngai in her book, *Ugly Feelings*, characterizes as a “suspended or obstructed agency”.<sup>13</sup>

The woman's voice-over tells us that the Borges quote, although it will be later discarded, is the beginning of his thinking about regret as a form of “illusory memory”. She explains: *regret, to his mind, is also a way of idealizing the past, embellishing it through fiction.* In trying to better articulate this, she continues: *we think we had that option and the tools to make that decision then, but we only have them now.*

11 Jorge Luis Borges, “Martín Fierro”, in *Prólogos con un prólogo de prólogos* (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 1975), 94.

12 Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).

13 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3.

**He stops writing.** Cut to a medium long shot of waves crashing against a stone pier. Sun sets on the green ocean. We do not see the horizon. Flickering golden lights on the surface of the water. It is only after the scene cuts to this that we realize that music, *A Lullaby for our Losses*, had been playing and has now stopped.

**Voice over. His voice.** A sense of nervousness in his voice. However, it is clear that what he is saying has been rehearsed and is not being delivered for the first time. While he is delivering his speech his mind wonders. He thinks to himself: What is the relationship between art and reheating left-overs? Where does one project end and the new one begin?

*This evening I'd like to take a different approach and allow myself to indulge in some wallowing and introspection. Which is of course yet another form of narration. I think my wallowing, or my taking pleasure in rumination, is not aimed to be therapeutic but to perhaps model a way of speaking close to one's core. To me that has always been the heart of the mystery, the heart of the heart, the way people talk about loving things, which things, and why.*

*The artist Moyra Davey often cites Rainer Fassbinder as saying, "The more honestly you put yourself into the story the more the story will concern others as well". I'd like to put aside the question of honesty or sincerity. I believe that at this stage, we would all pretty much agree that any manipulation of the material being presented or documented (be it through framing, editing, omissions, etc.) already turns it into a form of fiction or at least a half-truth. I'd like however, to test out the idea of starting with the personal as a way to enable us to speak about larger things. This is a strategy expressed in different ways by a wide range of artists and writers and one that particularly interests me. Tonight I'd like to test it out as a working hypothesis through the artwork that I will be showing you. Some of the questions I'm asking are: How far can the personal take us and what form can the personal take? What are the conventions of the first-person narrative and what does it help us think? Does it help us know how to feel? Does it help us know what to feel? How does it help us manage or apprehend the full range of possible emotions?*

(One of the questions that runs through this text is the relationship set up between the individual and the collective, or between the personal and the political. In other words, the text is querying, through different angles, the ways in which regret, as an individual experience and an artistic practice, can have a collective or political effect. That is, what consequences does

assessing the present through the lens of regret have on our projected futures? Or, what consequences, what kind of conversations, does producing under the sign of regret enable?)

*I am thinking about the lure of the confessional as an important component of narrative. The confessional seemingly promises that a secret will be revealed; that somehow trust has been gained and something will be shared. However, I am interested in what happens when this promise becomes frustrated. When not very much in fact is revealed, what happens to the narrative form or structure and to our relationship with it? What happens to the viewer, what happens to you, once you have been seduced by this promise, once you have entered the mood or ambiance in which some kind of intimacy is expected, but is ultimately not delivered. What happens when that promise is not kept? In other words, I am thinking that perhaps my work leads you somewhere, proposes something, and then abandons you. But, what does this tension produce? What does keeping a latent intimacy at a distance expect you to feel or think? What are the clues that guide you to the problems the work is trying to address?*

*Perhaps, all that the work is ultimately asking is “how is meaning felt?”*

**Cut. Interior. Daylight.** A psychoanalyst’s office. Books, flowers, some archaeological replicas, a couch. A space that at one point was modern-looking but has not been well maintained. Medium over the shoulder shot. The camera partly shows the man that was previously typing interviewing an older man. Of the older man we see his thinning grey hair and tweed suit jacket. He occasionally rubs his chin with his hand as he speaks, or combs the sides of his hair as he listens.

The older man says: *Emotions tell us what we care about or what we should care about.* He pauses and then continues. *The what ifs, the should haves, could haves, all those maybes take up a lot of space in our psychic-life. The absence of what was once a possibility lingers and haunts.* Again he pauses. *Regret is associated with counterfactual thought, or imagining states contrary to fact, especially what might have been. Regret is about a life never experienced, or experienced differently than what we imagined.* He asks: *Is that image of what is imagined a still photograph or is it a moving picture—does it remain constant or does it change over time?*

**Cut. Extreme close-up.** A yellowed page of a book. Functioning like an inter-title the text reads: “The subject of that chapter is memory; the last words were *ut nihil non iisdem verbis redderetur auditum*”.<sup>14</sup>

**Cut to over the shoulder close-up of the man typing.** Same scene as before. Camera arcs clockwise until, for the first time, we see the man’s face. The woman’s voice-over continues.

She says: *In brief, regret has to do with the allowance and tolerance of diversion from our ambitions and imaginings. Regret, in some ways, bridges the life we have (or tell ourselves that we have) and the life we wish we had. Camera slowly tracks backward. In this sense, is regret a form of memory? Is it a form of narrating ourselves? Is regret an imaginative act?*

14 [so that nothing having been heard can be retold in the same words]. Jorge Luis Borges, “Funes el memorioso” in *Artificios* (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 1994), 126.

*So the question arose, why had it not been possible to think out such ideas directly in words? This raised the more general question of thinking in the private language of one's own subjective images, as against thinking in the public language of words. It also brought to the fore the problem of the academic and over-linguistic bias of traditional education.*

— Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint*

*I can't quite explain myself how I could allow myself to reach the age of thirty, thirty-five, thirty-six. I don't understand how I could have failed to try to prevent catastrophe ... A reverse metamorphosis: I became a caterpillar. Whatever became the person I was, the person I must still be, the frail child, the brand-new being? ... Where have I disappeared to? ... The only thing I have left is my regret at being someone else. It is regret that makes me continue to be myself, or the child that I was, that I am.*

— E. Ionesco, *Present Past, Past Present: A Personal Memoir*

*In mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish.*

— S. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

In the above quote by Ionesco, regret links between self and other or, as Ionesco says, between self and “someone else”. Importantly, regret for him is not only a negative state; it is also a site of possibility. Negativity connotes both a bad or uncomfortable experience and an opposition to the actual or that which is existing. Although perhaps both these definitions are present in regret, it is the latter that starts to outline the utopian dimension of regret I am trying to recuperate.

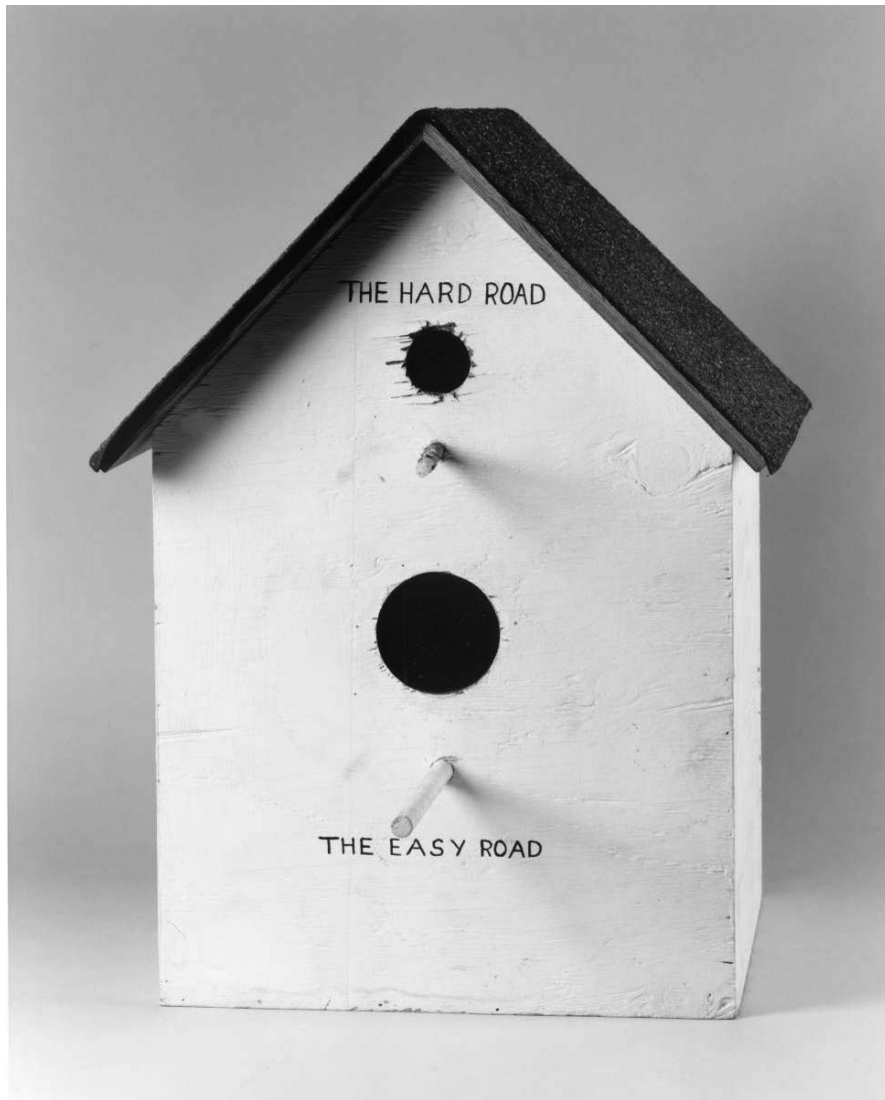
“It is regret”, Ionesco says, “that makes me continue to be myself”. In this statement, regret appears to propel forward or at least maintain continuity. It is not stuck-ness, at least, not only. Another aspect of Ionesco’s statement I find compelling is that regret muddles the past with the present. It “makes” him “continue to be” himself “or the child that I was, that I am”. The child as past-present both haunts and endures. Regret structures subjectivity and its time.

Freud, seemingly says that once something is formed it cannot be lost. And yet, if I can read his sentence literally, it also expresses something else. The “nothing” that he uses negates or undoes the action. I could also read this statement as saying, “nothing or not doing is a way to avoid loss”. If one does not form something, then that something cannot be lost. Regret, in Freud’s iteration, is somehow also an averse site of possibility. The not doing may lead to regret; yet, on the other hand, the not doing protects against loss or failure. In both Ionesco and Freud, regret protects against loss. It is in this double function of regret as a negative state and also an idealization that my project intervenes.



Louise Lawler, *Portrait*, 1982  
cibachrome print, 49.1 x 49.1 cm





Mike Kelley, *Catholic Birdhouse*, 1978  
painted wood and composite shingles, 55.9 cm x 47cm x 47 cm

## INTRODUCTION

### THEORIZING REGRET

#### EXIGENCY

Freud did not speak of regret, there are no entries for regret in the *Standard Edition* of his collected writings (as translated by James Strachey). However, Freud did speak of remorse. Significantly, in German the root for the verb “to regret” (*bereuen*) is *reue* (repent). Remorse and regret both relate to the past and to the wish of undoing a past experience or decision. The principal distinction between regret and remorse is that remorse involves feelings about how one’s actions have influenced others (so questions of morality and the law are important, as is guilt) while regret relates to how one’s actions affect oneself (there is a narcissistic quality to it, and hence shame).

Regret is a holding onto that is contrary to the all prevailing modes of detachment that could well describe our contemporaneity. Regret allows for a moment of doubt and nuance in a polarized world (measured by likes on social media, political correctness, “snowflakes”, us and them, economic and moral monopolies). Regret is a way—perhaps a perverse way—of questioning the cruelty of the now.

The categories that provoke sadness, to somehow broadly name one of the possible responses to the “cruelty of our contemporaneity” are quite universal (and trans-historical). These include: break-ups, losses, or deaths of intimate attachments, declining social status, or the failure to achieve desired goals. What these responses are ultimately a measure of is our abilities to manage a misalignment with achieving certain social (and interiorized) ideals. Regret measures our capacity to relate to and deviate from a particular story of success.

The ways we conceptualize and measure success is subjective, at best, and difficult if not impossible to quantify. However, in fields, such as finance or medicine, where outcomes are measured and compared in more objective terms, regret theory as it relates to decision making also finds an application. Classical theories of decision making have maintained that we make (or should make) decisions in order to maximize our expected utility (profit, pleasure, or other favourable outcomes). Modern decision theorists have begun to recognize the importance of

future regret in decision making; regret theories assert that choice depends not only on the probability and the value of the chosen outcome but also on the amount of regret for alternatives not chosen.<sup>15</sup> According to regret theories, the expected utility of choice N (the alternative chosen) is a mathematical function of the probability of N times the value of N minus the amount of regret for not -N (the better alternative not chosen). This function, often theorized as regret aversion or anticipated regret, proposes that when facing a decision, individuals might anticipate regret and thus incorporate in their decision making process the desire to eliminate or reduce this possibility. This is at stake in the way we purchase a car, the way a doctor decides to operate or not, the way investments are made, loans granted, or the way insurance policies are calculated. The larger questions at stake would seem to be whether the idea of “rational choice”, transferred from the domain of economics, has been glorified as the only kind of choice we have. And whether or not this may ultimately stem from a misleading equation of the idea of success with the idea of happiness.

One way of clinically distinguishing between normal suffering (feeling sad, for example) and a pathological disorder is to consider the context or source in which the suffering occurs.<sup>16</sup> Suffering is site-specific, to extrapolate into art terminology, in the sense that its occurrence, its display, puts in question the larger framework that allows for its intelligibility (meaning is always dependent on context). In other words, clinically suffering is considered normal if it relates to a specific cause, a break-up, a prize not obtained, or a missed opportunity, for example; but it is deemed a disorder if that suffering lasts longer than the context within which it occurred.

But, who is to judge our individual tolerance for pain, or our education to coping with problems, the reliability of our support group, etc.? Or, is the averaging of these conditions what sums up the contemporary individual?

Or more to the point, what happens with feelings that in their very constitution tend towards becoming chronic, that necessitate unfolding over time, that depend on time and perspective?

15 Regret theory is a model in theoretical economics initially proposed by Graham Loomes and Robert Sugden in "Regret theory: An alternative theory of rational choice under uncertainty", *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 92, No. 368 (Dec. 1982), 805–824.

16 Alan Horowitz and Jerome Wakefield, *The Loss of Sadness: How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sorrow into Depressive Disorder* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

How can we understand regret in relation to the normal/disorder binary? Since regret by nature exceeds the event does this mean it falls into the category of disorder or does this mean that regret helps us to question this binary itself?

Both clinically and in everyday usage, depression has become the contemporary designation for the spectrum of (mental) problems characterized by sustained suffering that prevents us from achieving our ideals (as if obtaining these ideals depended solely on our doing). Depression is an umbrella term that characterizes the different facets of our unhappiness.

In his sociological account of the history of depression, Alain Ehrenberg locates this turn towards depression in the post-war period. “After the Second World War, depression separates itself from melancholia. Depression travels between two versions of the difficult task of being well: (1) *anxiety*, which indicates that I am crossing into forbidden territory and am becoming divided, a pathology of guilt, an illness of conflict; and (2) *exhaustion*, which tires me out, empties me, and makes me incapable of action—a pathology of responsibility, an illness of inadequacy. These two versions of wellness accompany the emergence of a new era of the self, who is no longer either the complete individual of the eighteenth century or the split individual of the end of the nineteenth century; rather, she is the emancipated individual. Becoming ourselves made us nervous, being ourselves makes us depressed. The anxiety of being oneself hides behind the weariness of the self”.<sup>17</sup>

The widespread epidemic of depression is a result of changes in the constitution of the self. The socio-economic and technological consequences of the war began to loosen the guidelines for individual behaviour and the right to “choose” the life one wanted to live began to be democratized. The relationship between public and private changed drastically. Ehrenberg summarizes: in place of discipline and obedience (imposed limits and destiny to which one needed to adapt), there was the idea that everything was possible. Traditional bourgeois guilt and struggle to free oneself from the law, was replaced with the fear of not measuring up and its ensuing emptiness and impotence (a distorted form of Narcissism) prevailed. New accomplished freedoms tasked the contemporary self with the responsibility of becoming fully oneself. From the moment everything was possible, different inadequacies came into sharper

17 Alain Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self: Diagnosing The History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*, trans. under direction of David Homel (Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2010), 44.

focus, making it clear that not only was not everything allowed, but most importantly, not everything was attainable. This new constitution of the self was significantly accompanied (if not catalysed) by the development of a new language of suffering (how feelings are articulated in the culture allows us to recognize and name the predicament—popularize it) as well as by new clinical responses (the development of antidepressants in 1957 is a key example).

Throughout his account, Ehrenberg posits the emergence of a new and emancipated self, but somehow his definition of how depression emerges as a consequence of this new constitution eventually folds onto itself. He seems undecided whether anxiety and exhaustion are two markers in a historical progression or if they, unavoidably, occur simultaneously. “Becoming ourselves made us nervous, being ourselves makes us depressed”. The end station is depression, granted. But, are we not being ourselves as we try to become ourselves? “The anxiety of being oneself hides behind the weariness of the self”. Is weariness then a symptom of anxiety? Are we exhausted, immobile, because we are afraid? Is inhibition, our response to a threat? Or, rather, is the perceived threat that produces anxiety, precisely our inability to act (our exhaustion) in face of the need to make a choice, to signal out an option, to move.

Byung-Chul Han, on the other hand, and while basing his analysis very much on and against Ehrenberg’s, does not waver to claim that what characterizes the current pathological conditions of the emancipated individual (its tendency towards depression) derives from an “excess of positivity”. To his mind, our (western) present society is no longer a disciplinary one but rather one based on achievement. “Prohibitions, commandments, and the law are replaced by projects, initiatives and motivation. Disciplinary society is still governed by *no*. Its negativity produces madmen and criminals. In contrast, achievement society creates depressives and losers”.<sup>18</sup> The changes brought about by “emancipation” (by the loosening of a common grounding of morality, law, tradition) creates depressives and losers because, as noted above, the self is no longer delimited by what is allowed or forbidden (guilt and discipline) but rather by what is possible and impossible (responsibility and initiative).

This positivation of the world (where achievement is always seemingly possible) speaks for Han of the passage from an immunological subject to a neural one. Neurological illnesses are not infections but infractions: “they do not follow from the negativity of what is immunological

18 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 9.

foreign, but from an excess of positivity”.<sup>19</sup> It is seemingly no longer about the fear of external authority but the threat of the law within us. Something he later categorizes as “a terror of imminence” (terror produced from within the system itself). This insistent “terror” from within (namely the self-inflicted pressure to achieve) arguably produces, rather than emancipation, a more perfected form of disciplining where there is no-one to blame but yourself.

I am using these arguments to not only justify the relevance of my interest in the subject of regret, but perhaps to also address why my exposition assumes the modality that it does. The thinking and writing that follows is a conscious decision to take hold of an introspective discourse as it relates to the social. To take hold, to hold onto, unavoidably creates distance; both physically (from the self to the collective, or from private to public if such distinction still exists) and temporally (a disjointed or untimeliness as later elaborated), but it is perhaps that prising open of space for introspection that allows for critique.

As noted, regret is, in many ways, a feeling that goes against the grain of some of the generalized conditions of our contemporaneity: acceleration, hyper-connectivity, multitasking, information saturated, performance driven, to name but a few. Kathleen Stewart phrases it as, “Sometimes you have to pause to catch up with where you already are”.<sup>20</sup>

As previously stated, regret—in opposition to remorse—is something one does to oneself. However, considering the aesthetics of regret and the application of regret as a methodological lens clearly carries social and political consequences: it describes, among other things, how it feels to live and produce under our current regimes.

This violence from within, this terror of imminence (characterized as an *illness of responsibility*), to my mind, privileges regret as a typically contemporary affect. The feeling of regret occurs somewhere between a form of depression and a type of narcissism. Depression is characterized as the pathological expression of the contemporary human being’s failure to become oneself.<sup>21</sup> (As if becoming were ever fixed). While Narcissism, that ongoing relationship we maintain with ourselves, turns pathological (debilitating, paralyzing) when our experience of

19 Ibid., 1.

20 Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2007), 63.

21 Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self*, 4.

being captive to our own self-reflected-image becomes idealized to an extent that it may never be fulfilled and hence becomes dependent on the ongoing need for reassurance from others.

The double bind we are caught in is the expectation of living one's life on one's own terms while pursuing the constant approval of others.

## THE SAME BUT DIFFERENT

The theorization of sameness—be it via Gilles Deleuze's *Repetition and Difference* (1968), or via Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981)—was most commonly used in art and art history to contextualize the practices of artists associated with what came to be known as the Pictures Generation (1974-84, as historicized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art's survey exhibition from 2009). The uses of appropriation as a methodological tool while meaning to question or destabilize traditional notions of authorship, inevitably always signalled back or reinforced the hand (and context) of whomever was displacing, citing, appropriating (a veiled form of narcissism, perhaps). While pillaging through art history, using art as a form of art history (to use Robert Morris's phrase) in some way is a productive form of mourning the "end of art-history" and hence something akin to a depressive position. (Position of concern, rather than depressive, was Winnicott's preferred terminology).

Agency (or lack thereof) as it relates to the arts and elsewhere poses a line of promises and threats. Regret is, in this sense, and ultimately, a mode of attending to the possible (or what was possible) and the threats of it not becoming possible (now or never). Living under the sign of regret is a way of amassing the resonance of possibilities.

Regret is an elastic designation whose dominant feeling is that of failure. When everything is possible and we have no one else to blame but ourselves we are left with little room to succeed—in the sense that there is always a better possible outcome. The regretful individual is unable to measure up; and is, as we have seen, tired (and fearful) of having to become herself. Regret is a haunting reminder of the myth of our potential (or the knowledge of it met with our incapacity to pursue it). Or rather more bluntly, regret is the ghostly presence of the people we have failed to be.

Regret, in this sense, is both a reminder and a remainder. It is both temporal and spatial. It is a movement in time, a slow choreography, and an archive in search for a place to be stored. Regret is the cohabitation of the double life we cannot help but lead. To be regretful is to be haunted by our parallel un-lived yet imagined lives. These are lives (fantasies) played out in our minds, projected, like a film that has been scripted and rehearsed many times; a film that we watch from the projectionist's booth, as the audience (our contingency, our geography of affinities, our other self) watches in fascination.<sup>22</sup>

## ETYMOLOGY

By beginning to trace the etymological root of the word regret signals to Sigmund Freud's essay on "The Uncanny", which, in many ways, inaugurates the field of investigating the aesthetics of "ugly feelings". For Freud, "aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty, but the theory of the qualities of feeling".<sup>23</sup>

As parsed out below the etymology of regret starts to outline its function or mode (how the history of the word works is not dissimilar to the feeling it names). The word regret includes the double function of lament (backward facing) and greeting (forward facing). This particular way of being in the now, of attending to the present, is a central thread throughout this text.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the etymology of the word regret refers to a Scandinavian origin, being akin to the old Norse word *grata*, to weep. It comes to English via the Anglo-French *regreter*, therefore also alluding to greeting, encountering, or something appearing to the perceptions. The prefix *re-* makes it clear that this is something that is being encountered again, it is something that is being revisited, and which produces us to weep, again. Towards the end of "The Uncanny", Freud states that "*unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*,

22 I am recalling here Delmore Schwartz's story "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" (1935). Additionally, Nanni Moretti in his latest film, *Mia Madre* (2015), also employs a similar trope. The main character encounters friends, family, and a younger version of herself as she walks past a queue of people waiting to see, not coincidentally, Wim Wenders's, *Wings of Desire* (1987).

23 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London, The Hogarth Press, 1957), 219.



homelike, familiar; the prefix 'un' is seemingly hence the token of repression".<sup>24</sup> By the same token, one might ask whether the prefix "re" in regret signals that which is precisely uncovered from repression.

Etymologically, then, to regret is to revisit an encounter that makes us weep. But, to quote Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse*, "Who will write the history of tears?"<sup>25</sup>

To return to the *OED*, the noun regret means pain or distress in the mind at something done or left undone. The verb form, is to look back with distress or sorrowful longing, to grieve for on remembering. Its first usages date to the late XIV century. What word or combination of words did people use before then? How does not having this word in one's vocabulary alter one's conception of time and memory? How do we understand the past and the future without regret? How does life expectancy play into this? How does our notion of free will change our conception of time?

Both weeping and the act of looking back gesture towards a feeling that has to do with visuality, with the eye and with perspective. Surprisingly, regret is generally about something that is absent or hidden, or, in any case, about something presently not available, so, in this sense, what is seen is not the thing but its sign (or mental image).

Meanwhile, and in contrast to the above, etymologically regret also stems from "greeting." The Old English *gretan* "to come in contact with" (to "attack, accost" as well as "salute, welcome," and "touch, take hold of, handle"). The sense (as faculty and meaning) of touch relates regret to a different scale or distance separating us from the object being greeted or regretted.

In English, German, and Dutch, the primary sense of greeting has become "to salute", but the word originally had much broader meaning and included "to resound" (via notion of "cause to speak"), to "weep, bewail", or "to call out". This might already start signalling towards a therapeutical (talking cure) dimension of the word, or at least towards the idea that regret may need an audience.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 245.

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, *Fragmentos de un discurso amoroso*, trans. Eduardo Molina, (Buenos Aires: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2002), 174.

Curiously, the word regret, in spite of its partial French roots, is not found in other Romance languages. In Spanish, the word is expressed primarily as *lamento*. In turn, when translated back into English, “lament” means to mourn aloud. Lament is a passionate expression of grief or sorrow. The word comes directly from the Latin *lamentum*, “a wailing, moaning, weeping”. In Spanish, the feeling is more auditory than visual. A form of greeting, of calling out. (This is how cultural stereotypes are born.)

## POP DEFINITIONS

The pop understanding of regret generally goes as follows: “Simply put, regret involves blaming ourselves for a bad outcome, feeling a sense of loss or sorrow at what might have been or wishing we could undo a previous choice that we made. For young people, regret, although painful to experience, can be a helpful emotion. The pain of regret can result in refocusing and taking corrective action or pursuing a new path. However, the less opportunity one has to change the situation, the more likely it is that regret can turn into rumination and chronic stress. [...] Studies show that over short time periods, people are more likely to regret actions taken and mistakes made, whereas over long time periods, they are more likely to regret actions not taken. [...] Younger people have shown that regret was rated more favourably than unfavourably, primarily because of its informational value in motivating corrective action. Interestingly, regret was rated highest of a list of negative emotions in fulfilling five functions: (1) making sense of the world, (2) avoiding future negative behaviours, (3) gaining insight, (4) achieving social harmony, and (5) improving ability to approach desired opportunities (presumably because we regret past passivity). [...] Regret can have damaging effects on mind and body when it turns into fruitless rumination and self-blame that keeps people from re-engaging with life. This pattern of repetitive, negative, self-focused ruminative thinking is characteristic of depression”.<sup>26</sup>

To continue down this pop route, journalist Kathryn Schulz in her TED talk on regret (a short video titled, *Don't regret regret* watched by 2,081,408 people since it was posted in late 2011) identifies that regret requires agency (a decision needed to be made) and imagination

26 Melanie Greenber, “The Psychology of Regret,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-mindful-self-express/201205/the-psychology-regret> (Posted May 16, 2012).

(an alternative outcome needs to be imagined).<sup>27</sup> She further states that the more we possess of either of these traits the more acute regret will be.

Janet Landman, author of an early study of regret, principally as it pertains the literary field, claims that “regret is a form of inductive reason in that it proceeds from the given to the not given, comparing what is (a particular ‘given’) with what might have been”.<sup>28</sup> Being under the sign of regret is about actively participating in a perpetual act of comparison. Although what we might be comparing is of different kind, apples and pears, real and imaginary, yesterday and today.

I think of regret as a self-reproach for having gotten it wrong. A nagging irritation for not living up to our ambioned potential. That is to say, through the term regret, I am thinking of the ways in which our imagined self does not align with who we really are and the psychic energy that is used to leverage the difference. Throughout my research I question the function of regret in navigating between these two selves.

In this view, regret has to do with the allowance for diversion from our ambitions and imaginings. Regret, therefore, bridges the life we have (or believe that we have) and the life we wish we had. (Both constituting different forms of fiction.) Regret becomes both a form of memory and a way of narrating ourselves, which is always at least partially an imaginative act; regret is both a narrative and an aesthetic mode (a way of telling that narrative).

Regret, under this more idiosyncratic and introspective definition, becomes a record of how needs and wishes are unmet. Like other practices of memory, regret carries a particular mode of retention and distortion; which begs the questions, how is it managed, mediated, what is its genre?

27 Kathryn Schulz, *Don't regret regret*, [https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn\\_schulz\\_don\\_t\\_regret\\_regret?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/kathryn_schulz_don_t_regret_regret?language=en) (Posted November, 2011).

28 Janet Landman, *Regret: The Persistence of the Possible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 257.

## REGRET AS A NARRATIVE MODE

In lay terms, a genre is a perspective from which to read. The regularities we find in each genre are hence a consequence of a way of reading. Borges states it as, “One literature differs from another, prior or posterior, less because of the text than because of the way in which it is read: if I were granted the possibility of reading any present-day page—this one for example—as it will be read in the year two thousand, I would know what the literature of the year two thousand will be like”.<sup>29</sup> And some 60 years later Robert Fitterman in his introduction to *Notes on Conceptualisms* confirms, “Conceptual Writing, in fact, might best be defined not by the strategies used but by the expectations of the readership or *thinkership*”.<sup>30</sup>

However, genres not only play into our expectations as readers, but they also organize our experiences, in the sense that each genre is meant to explain or model how to make intelligible a certain aspect of our lives. For example, *melodrama* organizes the experience of love, misfortune, sorrow, abandonment. *Crime-fiction*, organizes our relation to the law, truth, and money. *Science-fiction* is seemingly about alternative models of the present; and thus about controlling the advent of time, of predicting possible outcomes and also very much about how society negotiates difference and the other.

For Lauren Berlant, “genres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold”.<sup>31</sup> Like regret, genre involves visibility and time. Like regret, genres involve the illusion of controlling an outcome. In regret one’s present experience is measured up against an idealized image of an alternative one. Regret, like genres, are thus the conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life.

Furthering the relationship between genre and the filmic experience and to continue thinking of how fantasy relates to the real, I am reminded of Jean Luc Godard’s apocryphal quote of

29 Jorge Luis Borges, “A Note on (toward) Bernard Shaw” in *Labyrinths*, ed. by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, trans. by James E. Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964), 214.

30 Robert Fitterman, “Foreword” in *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman (Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Press, 2009), 10.

31 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 6.

André Bazin in the opening credits of *Contempt*: “The cinema, said André Bazin, ‘substitutes for our gaze a world more in harmony with our desires’”.<sup>32</sup>

Following this articulation, we could make the leap to considering fiction as, among other things, the means by which people hold on to and perpetuate idealizations. Regret under this typology is a style of managing a narrative, a mode of address, and a tone that narrates. Regret is a tendency that is subjunctive and propositional. It is basically, the drawn-out action of losing access to sustaining a fantasy. And this drawn-out action involves, in turn, much imagining and fantasizing. It involves, ultimately, becoming competent at a certain way of living, by which I principally mean a way of coping under the threat of loss. (Loss of an ideal, of a lover, of stability, of success, of happiness, of opportunity, of time; however they may be articulated and experienced.)

Regret, as a narrating enterprise fictionalizes the loss of an object (namely a form of our imagined, idealized self) with which we identify a version (or even the best version) of our continuity (what could have been our happy ending).

How might these idealized notions of the self relate to D. W. Winnicott’s notion of the false-self?<sup>33</sup> For Winnicott the false-self develops when the child takes in too much truth from the other at the expense of their own emerging capacity to know themselves. “Force-feeding” is the metaphor he uses. In regret, are we “force-feeding” our expectations of an idealized self to ourselves?

An idealized-self perhaps functions, among other things, as an object of desire. Berlant distills an object of desire as “a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible to us”.<sup>34</sup> Regret functions as a promise that directs us towards certain objects; even if these objects are seemingly no longer attainable.

32 Jean-Luc Godard, *Contempt* (Rome Paris Films, Les Films Concordia, Compagnia Cinematografica Champion, 1963), film.

33 D. W. Winnicott, “Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self”, in *The Maturation Process and the Facilitating Environment* (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), 140-152.

34 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23.



Jean-Luc Godard, *Contempt (Le Mépris)*, 1963  
film stills

Regret has a specific kind of directionality, a specific kind of intentionality, it is a goal-oriented feeling. Regret reminds us of our shortcomings, of what could have been, what should have been, and what, at the moment, is (perhaps) still yet possible.

Theodor Adorno considered art as a promise not kept, yet not forgotten. Not kept, I think, because what art reaches towards is always unattainable. Is therefore art, or any creative enterprise, hence always regretful? Does it always presuppose a quality of this particular mode of disappointment we have been calling regret?

Regret, in its imaginary mode is, among other things, promising a representation of subjectivity that is in focus, whole, intelligible. In other words, an ideal. Perhaps an outdated ideal. And to continue with Berlant, and not unlike how she defines “cruel optimism,” regret projects this promise onto an enabling object that is also disabling. Berlant elaborates that “what’s cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world”.<sup>35</sup> Regret, in this sense, involves a commitment to another. The promised futurity of regret, its reparative and transformative quality, is taken up again in *Chapter 2: Ghostly Haunting*.

A promise implies a belief structure (in whomever is promising, and on the material conditions that make it a likely probability). This trust or reliability further implies that regret is partly optimistic because it trusts that what is wanted (desired) is, generally, (still) possible. To paraphrase Søren Kierkegaard, one would have no anxiety if there were no possibility. “Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom”, he claims.<sup>36</sup>

A promise also implies the passage of time (a deferral between the time of making said promise and its realization). Regret includes waiting and endurance, a lag and a catching up with. In this sense, regret is also a way of time-keeping; it is a particular disposition towards time

35 Ibid., p. 24

36 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, ed. and trans. Reidar Thomte (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 61.

and attention. To be regretful is to experience under the influence of a different chronology; it is a mode of suspended time and agency. Regret is perhaps a transitional moment, an in-between stations (although not always a moment of stagnation). These transitional moments of active-inaction are the subject of *Chapter 1: Suspended Agency*.

This slowing down (of action and of time) could at the same time be understood as a holding operation. Regret, in this sense becomes a storage of possibilities: a particular way of holding onto time. Sianne Ngai speaks of “ugly feelings” as those that are “a-moral and non-cathartic, defined by flatness and ongoingness (as opposed to suddenness of fear, for example) [...] Feelings that have capacity for duration”.<sup>37</sup> Or, to locate it in a more cinematographic/performative realm, they are feelings that include a soundtrack. Regret drapes over a scene, it sets a mood, a specific colouring. Regret lingers, it ripples, it takes time for it to reorient. It dwells and nags. It is both a noun and a verb. It inhabits, it situates, it assumes a position. I am interested in the ongoingness of the feeling of regret, something that Wendy Tronrud in writing about my video, *The Inner Shadow*, characterizes as oceanic.<sup>38</sup> The depth of this hauntology, the ongoing presence of the past in the present, is theorized more closely in *Chapter 2: Ghostly Haunting*.

If we consider regret as a feeling that unfolds as a process, its relation to time is not only determined by duration, but also by directionality and chronology. For example, and as stated previously, the age of who is bearing regret is significant as is the fact whether there is or not time for repair or generativity. Likewise, it is significant whether the regretting is related to actions taken or not taken in the past or if it is related to a projected impossibility of its accomplishment in the future? The irrecuperable passage of time is at the core of regret. Regret seems to be telling us, on the one hand, time may not be regained, and on the other, there are manners of slowing it down. And this is neither inherently good nor bad.

In other words, regret as a genre is teaching us a way to manage time: to negotiate our desires in relation to time. Regret is a narcissistic and distorted mirror. Regret mirrors forward a distorted image of an absolute past (one that is never actualized as present).

37 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 7.

38 Wendy Tronrud, *Personal Pronouns*, pamphlet for the exhibition Alejandro Cesarco, *The Inner Shadow* (A Tale of a Tub, Rotterdam, September - November, 2016), unpaginated.



Famously, Walter Benjamin's counterintuitive argument is that it is precisely by dwelling on loss, on that which is past or has failed, that one may side-step a depressing and cynical relation to the present. Placing too much weight or hope on the future, he claims, is ultimately a way of breeding complacency.

## SHADOWED BY POSSIBILITY

The link—the gap—between what we want and what we can have (who we are and who we aspire to be) is our relation (our correspondence) to the world. Freud famously theorized this as “the Reality Principle”.

These expectations of different forms of satisfaction eventually, and necessarily, leads to disappointment. The way we make choices is informed by the way we manage the threat of this risk. As a form of memory, regret is the past that was never actualized as present. Regret, or at least the way I am considering it, could be regarded as a genealogy of expectations. My interest lies in thinking less about where these expectations may come from (what caused or triggered them, to use a fashionable term) but more so towards where may they direct us. In other words, what might the generative mode of regret be? Or, what form can disappointed expectations take (rage, hate, shame, fatigue, disengagement, empowerment, creativity, resilience?).

The field of queer and affect theory have worked to rethink that which is ugly, failed, behind, etc. Sara Ahmed points out there is “[a] normative cultural distinction that assumes that bad feelings are backward (oriented toward the past) and conservative and good feelings are forward (embracing the future) and progressive. [...] One could however argue that there is something affirmative in pointing (exposing) these unhappy feelings. It is in this signalling out that an alternative imagining of what might constitute a ‘better life’ is possible”.<sup>39</sup> The two senses of negativity present in regret, and previously described as bad or uncomfortable experience *vs.* a negation of the actual, in Ahmed are somewhat intertwined, as it is seemingly the acknowledging of the bad feeling that allows for alternative imaginings.

39 Sara Ahmed, “Happy Objects” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gordon and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 50.

Our reconstructions of the past are inspired by our desires for and fears about the present and the future. (Again Barthes: “What right does my present have to speak about my past? Has my present some advantage over my past?”)<sup>40</sup> Regret is perhaps a symptom of how we imagine our future. It is a backward facing forward movement. The image of Walter Benjamin’s description of Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus* comes to mind. However, I wonder if in that scenario regret is the angel or the storm (which for Benjamin symbolized progress). There are of course other iconic figures that turn backward, for example: Orpheus turning back toward Eurydice at the gates of the underworld, Odysseus looking back at the Sirens as his boat pulls away, etc.

To state it differently and quickly, as symptom, regret may well be the past of ourselves that will not let us settle.

## THE FRAGMENT AS SYMPTOM

Classic psychoanalysis defines a symptom as occurring where there could not be words, where words were forbidden or unavailable. In many ways, the psychoanalytic project is to enable the patient to speak the feeling. So perhaps it would be worthwhile to consider my artistic (visual) work as symptom, and if so of what? Of regrets?

Words, however, do appear prominently in my work, and the characters in my videos do quite a bit of talking. But they are words that articulate (speak) a discourse through discontinuity rather than continuity. Narrative in my work is constituted by what is left out or silenced. It is precisely this fragmentary quality (the list, the index, the citation) that makes it possible to consider the work as symptom—a part taken to represent a whole. But what is this symptom signalling towards? And can, or should, it be diagnosed?

Upon first glance (and viewed generously), the work is seemingly an expanded form of literature that at its core alludes to the inherent limits of language: its traps and confinements, as well as its mediated and mediating nature, in other words, our inevitable existence in translation (a reckoning with our experience through the words of others). Perhaps this explains my

40 Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), 121.

usage of the cliché, citation, and even plagiarism (a fine line between appropriation and the “cover,” to borrow a term from the music industry). Appropriation as a distorted doubling effect (by mere repetition) is clearly associated with modalities of regret where meaning is assessed by comparison, correspondence and in relation to a previous moment or decision.

Sturtevant’s work and thinking as regards repetition and appropriation has been instrumental in the development of my own thinking. In her own words, “The brutal truth of the work is that it is not a copy. The push and shove of the work is the leap from image to concept. The dynamic of the work is that it throws out representation”.<sup>41</sup> Appropriation, and its different modalities, helps us think about the ontology of art: what is it and how is meaning possible and by what means. It also points towards an economy of gesture where a minute (at times imperceptible) alteration creates difference.

Additionally, I have relied on Jorge Luis Borges’s writing around questions of translation (both in his fiction, non-fiction, and his work as a translator) as a way to theorize different uses and modalities of appropriation. For Borges to write and to translate was an almost inseparable practice of creation, hermeneutic investigation, and aesthetic and ethical reflection. Through his writing, he questions the notion of translations as being inferior to the original, and favors an irreverent (unfaithful) practice of (poor) translation, allowing translators from the “marginal” South unforeseen freedoms to create and position themselves in relation to a Northern/Western center. His theories and practices destabilize notions of a definitive text in favor of conceiving translation as multiple perspectives on an unstable object. The original becomes a mobile event.<sup>42</sup>

In an artistic sense, both translation and appropriation—as exemplified by Borges and Sturtevant respectively—can be regarded as an extended form of citation, where one text is dis-

41 Sturtevant, *The Brutal Truth* (Frankfurt am Main: Museum für Moderne Kunst and Hatje Cantz, 2004), vol. 1, 19.

42 An incomplete selection of his writing on translation might include: the preface to the 1935 and 1954 edition of *A Universal History of Iniquity*, “The Translators of the Thousand and One Nights” (1935), “The Homeric Versions” (1932), “The Library of Babel” (1941), “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” (1939), “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” (1945), “On William Beckford’s Vathek” (1943), “The Enigma of Edward Fitzgerald” (1952), “An Examination of the Work of Herbert Quinn” (1941), “The Argentine Writer and Tradition” (1951), “Kafka and his Precursors” (1951), “The Aleph” (1945), “Funes the Memorious” (1942), and “A New Refutation of Time” (1946).

placed and put to different use. As it pertains regret, translation is but one strategy of loosening the grips of a master (original) narrative—a narrative that in our case we have synthesized as the aspirational, idealized image we judge our current circumstance against.

Speaking through someone else's words (as if words belonged to or originated in someone) is a form of economy, of extending the applications of the ready-made, while also being a way of concealment, of masking, of hiding, of displacing or sharing authorial responsibility—of assuming a different persona.

Further hiding occurs in my work through the masking of feeling. This “covering” (a musical term that both connotes the action of concealment and the versioning of a previous iteration of a song), and the muted melodrama it produces, is in itself a way of silencing, or self-repression, but it is also a methodological move. It is a way of keeping intimacy at a distance, of staking out a comfortable place from which to speak.

This rhythm of withholdings creates a pattern of repetitions employed to clarify and rectify the work through insistence, stubbornness, and slight variations. This austerity of means and topics further stresses that the emotion is in the tone. It is this tone and tempo, and the particular way of looking and attention that it demands, that communicate equally as much as what is narrated.

The work fetishizes the (apparent) loss of possibility as a means of eroticizing it.

In the following chapters a selection of recent works will illustrate and exemplify different modalities of “applied” regret.

## MOURNING

“Mourning and Melancholia” (1915) is perhaps Freud’s most cited essay, and one that has been contended with and expanded upon by the likes of Melanie Klein or Julia Kristeva.<sup>43</sup> I reference it here again as a kind of baseline understanding for modern (and arguably contemporary) theory of melancholia and to tease out the overlap and differences with regret. I am very loosely referring to the contemporary as an experience where modes of post-disciplinary control, as previously described, have become a central feature of everyday life in a way that has fundamentally affected the constitution of subjectivity and its modes of relationality.

In “Mourning and Melancholia”, and with war on his mind, Freud is seemingly working through the loss of belief in the redeeming power of the modern project. Following Silvan Tomkins statement that “between great hope and catastrophic disappointment, is the paradigmatic “depressive script”,<sup>44</sup> one could argue that it is perhaps ultimately the utopian promises of modernity that put the modern subject in a precariously (vulnerable and omnipresent) depressive position to begin with. This is because the promises of modernity are (by design?) never fulfilled. Jonathan Flatley helps us conclude, “Modernism would refer not to any one thing in particular, but to the wide range of practices that attempt in one way or another to respond to the gap between the social realities of modernization and the promises of the project of modernity”.<sup>45</sup> Regret is one of the ways in which the modern individual navigates between promises (as possibilities) and the actual. The idealized, aspirational image of the self, is like modernity, unattainable. (Which does not mean to imply that reaching towards it is all together futile.)

In Jacqueline Rose’s view, Freud’s text on mourning is a way of working through this (systemic, engrained) loss. She writes, “So when Freud goes on to insist that mourning is something to be worked at, completed, got over—already strange for a psychoanalyst that maintains that

43 Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 243–258.

Melanie Klein, “Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States” (1940), and Julia Kristeva, “Psychoanalysis—A Counterdepressant (1986), for example.

44 Silvan Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 221.

45 Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 32.

nothing ever goes away—I think it is fair to assume that a drive for political, or cultural, as much as psychic self-protection is at stake”.<sup>46</sup> In her view, mourning must come to an end so we can believe in ourselves (and our culture, if that is still possible) once again. Freud’s paper is seemingly an attempt at getting mourning done with, or at least to provide a narrative for it (with a classical beginning, middle, and end).

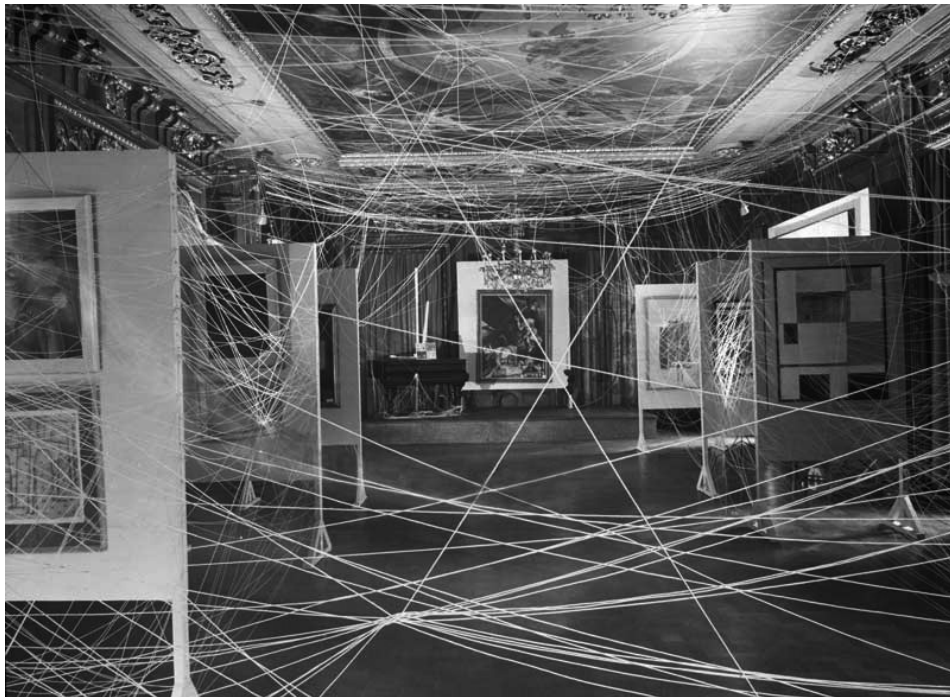
Famously, Freud opposes the economy of mourning (the work of mourning, as packaged and narrativized as hinted above) with the pathology of melancholia. The general affect corresponding to melancholia is that of mourning—in the sense that it longs for something lost. However, in melancholia, as opposed to what occurs in mourning, the ego fails to detach from the lost object and identifies with it instead.

If libidinal attachment in Freud’s view is something like a set of sticky strings attaching us to the object, then mourning involves the laborious process of disattaching and carefully repairing “each one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object so that the strands of attachment can be used again”.<sup>47</sup> This rather science-fiction like image recalls, to my mind, Marcel Duchamp’s installation design—come art work—, *His Twine*, 1942, for the *First Papers of Surrealism* exhibition in New York. Duchamp’s web-like construction, the criss-crossing of twine between the exhibited artworks, on the one hand, prohibited engagement with the art, it almost obliterated the view of some of the works, while, on the other hand, it spatialized affinities, connections, free-associations. The spider-web-like construction also places the art work in the past. As if abandoned in someone’s attic, the work looks like it had been taken over by time. (Or at least in the black and white documentation of the show, it appears as such.)

The exhibited work’s validity, its social role had been apprehended, by the string, by the culture, consumed and digested. To heighten this not-so-subtle negation, Duchamp organized that for the opening and among the guests, six young boys dressed in sports uniforms play ball while six young girls jump rope and play hopscotch. Hence, the question of play and childhood seems central to the exhibition design and to Duchamp’s comment on the show. It

46 Jacqueline Rose, “Virginia Woolf and the Death of Modernism” in *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Vintage, 2004), 73.

47 Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, 245.



Marcel Duchamp, *His Twine*, 1942  
installation view of *First Papers of Surrealism*, Whitelaw Reid Mansion, New York

is as if upon arriving in America, the work and the recently exiled European artists, the preoccupation of the past needed to be put to rest (mourned and forgotten) and a new start (a new childhood, in a “new” world) encouraged to emerge.

## MELANCHOLIA AND REGRET

In his effort to make sense of melancholia, Freud, in that same paper, outlines its unique features: “The distinguishing mental features of melancholia”, Freud writes, “are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment”.<sup>48</sup>

Regret, however, operates slightly differently. As previously stated, the psychic landscape of regret is haunted by the selves we have failed to become and whom we yet continue to identify with (or attach to). This unwillingness to let go (to detach) from the failings of missed opportunities, failed ambitions, unfulfilled promises, in relation to *what could have been* is a perfected form of (interiorized) disciplining where there is no-one to blame but oneself and hence the “delusional expectation of punishment” Freud speaks of has perhaps become the delusional expectation of escaping this logic—in the sense that punishment in regret is already taking place.

Later in the essay, one of Freud’s most beautifully poetic turn of phrases, could be turned to describe the regretful condition: “the shadow of the object falls upon the ego”.<sup>49</sup> By which, if in fact allowed to be related to regret, this may mean, that the shadow of our past (idealised) selves drowns our current selves in darkness. However, if we are to stick closer to the text (to shadow it more intimately), I think that with the word “shadow” Freud is seemingly speaking of the negative aspects of the libidinal attachment: the constellation of ugly feelings about the object that have been re-directed toward the ego. And following the metaphor of the shadow further still, it implies that the lost object has not been identified with the ego but that it has

48 Ibid., 244.

49 Ibid., 249.



somehow gotten between the ego and the light. (Light in turn as metaphor—or symbol—for life, growth, energy, etc., or in Freud's terms, the outside world, the capacity to love, productive activity, and healthy self-regard).

To summarize and clarify and clarify Freud's understanding of melancholia: in it, identification and object-loss is transformed into an ego-loss. “[I]n mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself”.<sup>50</sup> Freud sees at the source of this self-critical, devaluing of the ego an internal splitting: “one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object”.<sup>51</sup> He argues that the criticism of the self is really a criticism of the lost object that has been transferred, or as we have seen, projected onto the ego “The free libido [freed up from the abandoned object-attachment] was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego”. “There [withdrawn into the ego], however, it [the libido] was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object”.<sup>52</sup> What Freud identifies as “identification” is a phantasmagoric play of shadows (with connotations that go from Plato's Cave to the allure and fascination of the cinematic image and the ways in which spectacle creates identification and hence identity construction and fashioning) in which a certain portion of the ego has been dimmed by the shape of the lost object. In cinematographic terms, we could re-translate this as the libido projecting onto the ego the image of the lost object. The ego hence does not become the lost object but assumes its shape or outline. In other words, the ego is seduced by an illusion and becomes aesthetically attached to a copy (a representation, or in the case of regret: an ideal).

Regret involves an ego, and a lost or yet un-obtained alter ego. Yet regret involves doubling and identification in a different way than common melancholia might. Melancholia is not generative, and hence deemed pathological, because it does not allow or it fails to imagine a difference between the image of how things are and the way things might be. It is, in a sense, not goal-oriented. (Granted that in melancholia we might wish for the return of the lost object, but as clarified above, we “know” we do not deserve it.) Contrary to this, regret (in its

50 Ibid., 246.

51 Ibid., 247.

52 Ibid., 249.

utopian, generative, flexible dimension) encourages us to expect something other to appear (or work towards) that is slightly other than what we have lost.

In regret the lost object is not a loved person but an aspirational image of oneself. A version of oneself that would have been better. The work of consciously facing regret entails coming to terms with the decision of whether or not to deviate from this ideal. Regret therefore demands a certain capacity for adaptability.

Or, to illustrate this graphically, under regret the idealized image is stamped twice over onto the ego: once as aspiration and then again as failure. A kind of feedback loop of unrequited libido. This overlap is a way of reading Andy Warhol's silkscreen, *Double Elvis* (1963). In this work, a larger than life-size portrait of Elvis appropriated from a publicity shot for the 1960 film, *Flaming Star*, is printed twice, his declining career seemingly shadowing (his own) projections of masculinity and success. The silver background conveys a sense of glamour, connoting both the silver-screen (Hollywood dreams and ideals) as well as the walls of Warhol's own studio (factory). An aspiration that recedes in time, the doubling or repetition signals both to its insistence and to it becoming outdated (or becoming outdated because of its insistence).

Working through regret operates in the delicate tension between, on the one hand, maintaining that an aspirational image is the drive that propels forward, and, on the other hand, or simultaneously, maintaining that the drive forward is only possible when a deviation or redefinition of that ideal emerges.

### **TURNING AWAY: THE QUESTION OF SHAME (AGAIN)**

Continuing along Freud's essay lays a key distinction to be drawn between melancholia and regret. Freud describes the melancholic as being oddly without shame. Unlike most people who are "crushed with remorse and self-reproach, and who are filled with shame in the presence of others, he [the melancholic] does not behave in a normal fashion. Feelings of shame in front of other people, which would more than anything characterize this latter condition, are lacking in the melancholic, or at least they are not prominent in him. One might emphasize the presence in him of an almost opposite trait of insistent communicativeness which finds



Andy Warhol, *Double Elvis*, 1963  
silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 210.8 x 134.6 cm.

satisfaction in self-exposure”.<sup>53</sup> The melancholic is endlessly communicative about their misery, almost boastful. Mortification becomes a matter of pride. (Figures like Hamlet or young Werther spring to mind.)

Freud seemingly offers two reasons why melancholics are shameless and “still proceed from a mental constellation of revolt.” [...] He writes, “They are not ashamed and do not hide themselves, since everything derogatory that they say about themselves is at bottom said about someone else”.<sup>54</sup> And it would seem that they act in this way because, ultimately, as we have seen they are engaged with “a delusional expectation of punishment”. They are not ashamed but are seemingly looking to be shamed.

Conversely, shame is at the core of the operation of regret. Regret is not something people are in a hurry to share. Regret is hidden and secret. Regret produces shame because there is no one else to blame but ourselves. And the shame that it provokes is manifested inwardly, as described below.

Bernard Williams in his book *Shame and Necessity* (1993), describes shame as a moment in which we realize that what we have done or said is at odds with the image that we have of ourselves.<sup>55</sup> In a similar way, we have been conceptualizing regret as the differential gap between who we are and who we imagine(d) to be. Regret is about a life never experienced, or experienced differently than what we imagined.

Freud linked the experience of shame with other feelings of self-reproach. He writes, “The affect of the self-reproach may be transformed by various psychical processes into other affects, which then enter consciousness more clearly than the affect itself: for instance, into anxiety (fear of the consequences of the action to which the self-reproach applies), hypochondria (fear of its bodily effects), delusions of persecutions (fear of its social effects), shame (fear of other people knowing about it), and so on”.<sup>56</sup> Freud’s theorization of shame clarifies and opens up

53 Ibid., 247.

54 Ibid., 248.

55 Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

56 Sigmund Freud, “Draft K – The Neurosis of Defence” in *The Freud Reader* edited by Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1989), 93.

several of the conditions assumed to be at work in regret: namely, that emotion is more a process than a state, that emotions work within constellations of other emotions, and that in the case of regret it is that “other you” that witnesses, judges and provokes disillusionment and shame.

Further, and following Silvan Tomkins’s work, shame can structurally be conceived as a “broken circuit” between the attachment and desire that ought to circulate between the subject and its treasured object. This broken circuit or gap is what produces shame, but also what propels forward. (The structure of shame is not always aligned with the experience of shame, just as works that employ regret as method need not be necessarily about regret as theme.)

“Shame requires an audience. Unlike guilt, which can rest quietly inside you, shame only arises when someone knows, or fears they have been seen. Shame relies on the art of exposure, even if exposure is what it hates most, and most militantly struggles against”.<sup>57</sup>

As noted, the “built in” or “captive” audience for regret’s associated shame is that other person, that better us which we have failed to become. It is “that other person’s” judgement that produces disappointment and shame. (“That Other Person” is how Matt Mullican describes the person he becomes under trance states. “That Other Person” says and produces things that Mullican’s consciousness does not permit or validate.)

Regret produces shame associated to not living up to our own expectations, and shame is a way of telling ourselves that we are letting ourselves down. Shame confronts us with the acknowledgment that we are never, by definition, able to fulfil these (idealised) expectations or roles. Shame is, therefore, among other things, related to the incompleteness of the subject. Shame helps us visualize the gap between actuality and fantasy. That gap or distance is what permits critical reflection and to some extent catalyses the work of mourning (or in our case, the possibility of working through regret). That gap is perhaps another way of conceptualizing ambivalence. Working through regret involves recognizing or negotiating difference, while melancholia is preoccupied with a locked-in image of oneself.

57 Rose, “Introduction: Shame”, in *On Not Being Able to Fall Asleep*, 1.

Simultaneously, shame is also an inhibitor, something that gets in the way of our pleasure. “The shadow of the object”, again. Inhibitions most often than not take the form of rationalizations, minimization, and denial. For example, “I don’t deserve it”, “I don’t really want it” or “It may still occur”. In regards to the shame produced by regret, it could be helpful to refer back again to Tomkins’ writing. He links shame to preventing pleasure or interest, he writes, “[Shame] operates ordinarily only after interest or enjoyment has been activated, and inhibits one or the other or both [...] any barrier to further exploration which partially reduces interest or the smile of enjoyment will activate the lowering of the head and eyes in shame and reduce further exploration or self-exposure powered by excitement or joy.” And then links shame to the visual, to looking or being looked at. He goes on, “Such a barrier might be because one is suddenly looked at by one who is strange, or because one wishes to look at or commune with another person but suddenly cannot because he is strange, or one expected him to be familiar but he suddenly appears unfamiliar, or one started to smile but found one smiling at a stranger”.<sup>58</sup> Is this definition applicable when the other is the betrayal of oneself? What does the lowering of our head and eyes prevent us from seeing of ourselves? What kind of ghosts are we too scared to confront? Perhaps by looking down we are fixating on the idealized image of what we should have become, looking up, towards the gap that separates us from it, may start to outline different potentialities.

Here again, the problem of visibility, as it relates to engagement or withdrawal. Shame pushes for hiding and concealment, while guilt is principally auditory, it pushes for a confession. As previously stated, the concealment as it pertains regret can be explained as not looking beyond the idealised image of an alternative outcome, of not succumbing to its magnetic powers. Looking awry opens up the possibility of acting upon what we have been calling the gap or negative potentialities.

Joan Copjec complicates, or confirms, the potentialities of “the gap” by pointing out: “Shame is awakened not when one looks at oneself, or those whom one cherishes, through another’s eyes, but when one suddenly perceives a lack in the Other. At this moment the subject no longer experiences herself as a fulfilment of the Other’s desire, as the centre of the world, which now shifts away from her slightly, causing a distance to open within the subject herself. This distance is not that “superegoic” one which produces a feeling of guilt and burdens one

58 Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sister*, 134-135.

with an uncancellable debt to the Other, but is, on the contrary, that which wipes out the debt. In shame, unlike guilt, one experiences one's visibility, but there is no external Other who sees, since shame is proof that the Other does not exist".<sup>59</sup> (I am thinking of the other in this case as that person we have failed to or chose not to become.)

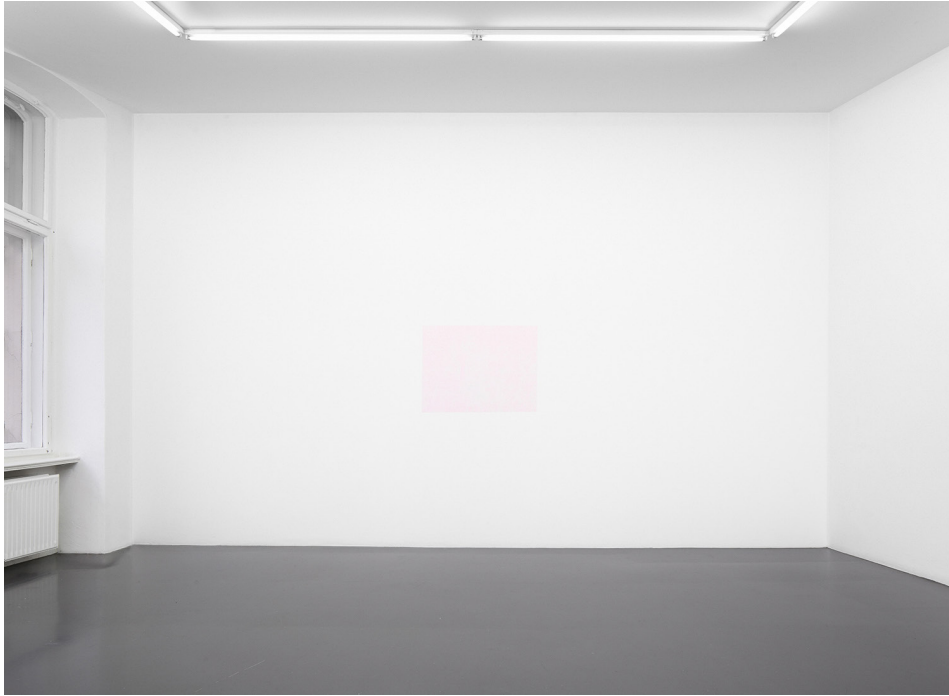
Shame is evidence (a physical indicator) that we are never, by definition, able to fulfil all of our expectations or roles. What we are embarrassed to admit to ourselves (in the eyes of our idealized self) is that which we have not become. What Copjec adds to this scenario is that shame is not only about avoiding the disapproving gaze of the "other" in front of whom one feels to have come short, but rather, by turning away one's gaze we are also trying not to see the fact that the "other" (as idealized image or outcome) is also in-itself inconsistent (a fantasy). That is, shame makes apparent the fragility or precariousness on which we base our continuity.

As an illustration of this, I refer to my work *The Dreams I've Left Behind* (2015), in which a faint image of the wall behind my bed is silkscreened directly onto the gallery wall in a faint pink hue. What appears at first as a dry tautological exercise subtly reveals itself to be a vulnerable and deeply emotional displacement. I think of the use of color in this work as a form of "muted melodrama", a type of silencing I have referred to above. To my mind, in "*The Dreams I've Left Behind*" it is as if the gallery wall were blushing. It is unclear however, if the wall is blushing because of the nature of my dreams or because I have left them behind.

Consistent with my conceptualization of regret, leaving one's dreams (wishes, aspirations) behind does not mean that they are over. Freud argues that "if one has lost a love object [in this case, if our dreams, wishes, aspirations are not met], the most obvious reaction is to identify oneself with it, to replace it from within, as it were, by identification".<sup>60</sup> This replacement from within preserves the attachment and allows it to live on. This nagging shadow either does not allow us to form new attachments (forcing us to live in the past or in a present that perpetuates the past) or we form new attachments that stem from this dimly lit place (reinforcing ambivalent feelings towards ourselves—including, notably, regret).

59 Joan Copjec, *Imagine There Is No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), 128.

60 Sigmund Freud, "An Outline of Psychoanalysis" in *The Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Philips (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 48.



Alejandro Cesarco, *The Dreams I've Left Behind*, 2015  
silkscreen on wall, 65.5 x 88 cm, installation view Tanya Leighton, Berlin



Consequently, and to state it again, how does one work through the loss of who we aspired to be, of who we wanted to become, in a way that enables us to reroute course and become someone different? In other words, is working through regret the same as working through the death of what we could have been? If so, what does the mourning process in which we let go of our regrets look like? What must be accepted, sacrificed, sublimated, replaced? Is this process different if one is regretful about what we have done or not done?

In contrast to Freud, my writing is asking not how mourning or melancholia can be completed, but what might the loss of an attachment, of remaining within the ghostly presence of said attachment, permit or produce. In other words, one might have to consciously inhabit or face regret in order to avoid a paralyzing form of it.

### **READING: DOUBLES, SHADOWS, AVATARS**

I find an interesting parallel between the coexistence of a fictitious construction (the person we could have been or hope to become) and, for lack of a better term, a real self (the person we are today) and the act of reading. Reading, like regret, is also a way of splitting off. It involves, among other things, finding one's way into the voice of a writer, and inhabiting that voice so that you speak to yourself from outside yourself. This is also true when we attempt to read our own selves (psychoanalysis, diary writing, autobiography are forms of this unfolding). Reading is an act of openness and submission, it involves giving yourself up to the voice of the text. As one of the characters of my video *If in Time* (2012) states, "Reading is seemingly also the art of constructing personal memory based on someone else's experiences and remembrances. Reading, then, produces a false memory. Remembering with an unfamiliar memory or inhabiting a borrowed voice might be variations on the theme of the *double*, but they are also a good working metaphor for the literary experience more generally".<sup>61</sup> This understanding of reading as a generative act (as a form of writing) is taken up again more explicitly in relation to my applied "ventriloquism" in the series of video portraits, *Learning the Language* (*Present Continuous*) as analysed in the chapter "In Practice".

As regards the parallel un-lived lives that link reading to regret, Avery Gordon expresses some-

61 Alejandro Cesarco, *If in Time*, 2012, HD video and 16mm film transferred to video, colour, sound, 9:40 min.

thing similar in defining haunting as, “that extraordinary moment in which you—*who never was there* in that real place—can *bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else*”.<sup>62</sup> The *rememory* that Gordon alludes to is the trauma of slavery, the word itself is a reference to Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987). The trauma regret alludes to (banal perhaps by comparison) is that we are not approximating our idealized image of ourselves. In Morrison and Gordon’s treatment of *rememory*, it is a doubled act located in the past and present. We discover the memory a place contains; the place helps us remember. In the case of regret, the doubled act is less about the negotiation between past and present, with the past containing the original act of violence, and more to do with an imagined future which emerges from our present disappointment with the self we are. Thus, regret as mode insists that we navigate between our real and imagined selves to such an extent that our imagined self becomes like a fictional character, one with his or her own past, present and future. Our lacking present selves are trying to approximate this fictional version of us that we continue to imaginatively create and add to.

And again Freud linking literature to psychoanalysis, “The ‘double’ was originally an insurance against destruction to the ego, an ‘energetic denial of the power of death,’ as [Otto] Rank says; and probably the ‘immortal’ soul was the first ‘double’ of the body. This invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction has its counterpart in the language of dreams ...”<sup>63</sup>

This of course begs the question, what forms of preservation does regret take? Freud, after discussing an incipient notion of the super-ego as a modern form of the double, offers an enigmatic response to my question: “There are also these unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy, all those strivings of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed, and all our suppressed acts of violence which nourish in us the illusion of Free Will”.<sup>64</sup> Without naming it, he is seemingly speaking about regret. He footnotes this with “In Ewers’ *Der Student von Prag*, which furnishes the starting-point of Rank’s study on the “double,” the hero has promised his beloved not to kill his antagonist in a duel. But on his way to the dwelling-ground he meets his “double,” who has already killed his rival.” Versions, or ripples of this plot abound. Amongst them, Edgar Allan Poe’s “William Wilson,” Patricia

62 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 166.

63 Freud, “The Uncanny”, 235.

64 *Ibid.*, 236.

Highsmith's "Ripley" series or many of Borges's *cuchilleros* stories. Our other self, Freud seems to be saying is always more valiant, more prone to action, less afraid: in other words, an improvement.

As I was working on this text, the Argentine author Ricardo Piglia, crippled by a neurodegenerative disease and aware of his imminent death, was revisiting and rewriting the over three hundred notebooks he had kept routinely from 1957-2015. Published posthumously in three volumes, Piglia in the diaries displaces himself from his own life and narrates it as if it had been lived by Emilio Renzi, his recurring character and long-time alter-ego.<sup>65</sup> Piglia witnesses his own life (recalls it through reading) and chooses to retell it as if it were being lived by a character. ("It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel," warned Barthes some time ago.<sup>66</sup>) Piglia fictionalizes (frames, embellishes, improves) his own life and puts into question the possibilities of autobiography and other forms of self-fiction. His published diaries become an anticipated (controlled) form of memory (of how one wishes to be remembered), and a document to the delusion of living in the third person. They present a text and its shadow; the artifice of the double used to historicize (complicate or re-write) the past. "To write with the sincerity of someone I do not know and who only appears—peeps out—when I write".<sup>67</sup> It is not only that he is "played" by Renzi, but the lens of time allows Piglia to re-write his past as a form of fiction. In doing so, he comes to terms with his own life, squares it off, sands its edges through what could have beens, should have beens, narrating it as if the ideal had actually happened. Among other interesting revelations, and witty literary and historical analysis, the "diaries" grant a glimpse into the construction of the writer's persona: the aspirations and anxieties of Piglia before being Piglia (or Renzi before being Renzi).

65 Ricardo Piglia, *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi I: Años de formación* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2015); *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi II: Los años felices* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2016); *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi III: Un día en la vida* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2017).

66 Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, n.p.

67 Piglia, *Los diarios de Emilio Renzi II: Los años felices*, 105.

*Personally of course I regret everything. Not a word, not a deed, not a thought, not a need, not a grief, not a joy, not a girl, not a boy, not a doubt, not a trust, not a scorn, not a lust, not a hope, not a fear, not a smile, not a tear, not a name, not a face, no time, no place, that I do not regret, exceedingly. An ordure, from beginning to end.*

— Samuel Beckett, *Watt*

*Memory, especially as one grows older, can do strange and disquieting things. Though we would like to live without regrets, and sometimes proudly insist that we have none, this is not really possible, if only because we are mortal. When more time stretches behind than stretches before one, some assessments, however reluctantly and incompletely, begin to be made. Between what one wished to become and what one has become there is a momentous gap, which will now never be closed. And this gap seems to operate as one's final margin, one's last opportunity, for creation. And between the self as it is and the self as one sees it, there is also a distance, even harder to gauge. Some of us are compelled, around the middle of our lives, to make a study of this baffling geography, less in the hope of conquering these distances than in the determination that the distances shall not become any greater. Chasms are necessary, but they can also, notoriously, be fatal. At this point, one is attempting nothing less than the recreation of oneself out of the rubble which has become one's life.*

— James Baldwin, "God's Country"

## CHAPTER 1

### SUSPENDED AGENCY

*Experience teaches that for most people there is a limit beyond which their constitution cannot comply with the demands of civilization. All who wish to reach a higher standard than their constitution will allow fall victim to neurosis. It would have been better for them if they could remain less 'perfect'.*

— Sigmund Freud, “Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Neuroses”

*This is what I think now: that the natural state of the sentient adult is a qualified unhappiness. I think also that in an adult the desire to be finer in grain than you are, “a constant striving” (as those people say who gain their bread by saying it) only adds to this unhappiness in the end—that end that comes to our youth and hope.*

— F. Scott Fitzgerald, “The Crack-Up”

One of the traits of producing under a sign of regret is the slowness or lingering of suspended agency. Agency refers here to the ability to act or perform an action. This ability hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and autonomously initiate action, or whether the things we do are in some sense determined by the ways in which our identity has been constructed or networked (by ideology, language, or discourse). Agency hinges on the differences between subject and subjectivity.

I first came across the term “suspended agency” in Sianne Ngai’s *Ugly Feelings*. Ngai locates the term between two seemingly opposed philosophical claims: “Hanna Arendt’s claim that ‘what makes man a political being is his faculty of action’ and Baruch Spinoza’s description of emotions as ‘waverings of the mind’ that can either increase or diminish one’s power to act”.<sup>68</sup> The stage set by these two definitions locates “suspended agency” somewhere between forms of

68 Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 2.

dissent and what we more generally refer to as depression (“a mood disorder that turns all feelings grey and, for that reason, affects movement”<sup>69</sup>).

However, I am referring to “suspended agency” as a step within the creative process of producing under the sign of regret. Of course this more introspective (and generative) version of suspended agency occurs within a social dynamic that informs it and preconditions it (ambitions, performance anxieties, insecurities, etc.) My understanding of suspended agency is also informed by Joseph Vogel’s conceptualization of tarrying. In an interview, Vogel is asked to differentiate between doubt and tarrying: “When in doubt, reasons and motives have become weak, frail or hard to recognize. When doubting about actions or situations, a lack of argumentation manifests itself. With hesitation, on the other hand, an excess of (good) reasons and motivations causes the delay. With hesitation—and this makes it so uncomfortable—the question presents itself of having to make a choice between choosing and not-choosing. And while doubt tests an existing world on its internal consistency, hesitation brings us to the edge of an emerging world whose possible histories and futures have not been decided yet”.<sup>70</sup>

That hovering (drone-like) quality while considering the excess of reasons in relation to possible outcomes is perhaps what actually defines creativity. The capacity for allowance or withstanding (of living with) what exceeds the possible (the un-known, the un-thought) is perhaps what constitute “good” creativity and a therapeutic solution out of a debilitating or paralyzing state of regret.

The artist’s task carries a long history of accepted disillusion behind it. As Marion Milner explains, “In fact I saw now that disillusion, opening one’s eyes to what are called the stern facts of life, meant recognizing that the inner dream and the objective fact can never permanently coincide, they can only interact”. Milner calls attention to the gap (between dream and fact, or between what one makes and what one imagines, or what one is and what one expected to be) because “if one could bring oneself to look at the gap, allow oneself to see both the ideal and the failure to live up to it in one moment of vision [...] the ideal and the fact seemed

69 Ehrenberg, *The Weariness of the Self*, 167.

70 Joseph Vogel interviewed by Maaïke Lauwaert, [<http://maaikelauwaert.com/articles/interview-joseph-vogl/>] (Posted January 17th, 2010). See also Joseph Vogel, *On Tarrying*, trans. Helmut Muller-Sievers (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011).

somehow to enter into relation and produce something quite new [...].<sup>71</sup> That particular watching capacity of the mind (suspended between ideal and fact) is at the heart of the creative process and of regret.

Still, suspended agency describes moments of the creative process in different ways. For example, “suspended agency” is also a form of active-inaction. Just as “we must refuse the idea that music happens only when the musician enters and picks up an instrument; music is also the anticipation of the performance ...”<sup>72</sup> we must also refuse the idea that creativity only happens once thought or affect assumes a form. Creativity tolerates the in-between moments where nothing is seemingly happening; to inhabit a practice of detached attentiveness, to give in to that form of delay that energizes and creates the free circulation of ideas and affects.

I am referring to suspended agency as the chronic circlings, the back and forth, between frustration and inertia. Inertia both to not make a decision, to continue to stall, simmer, sink, and at the same time to continue to cling to what we have referred to (following Berlant) as *cruel optimism*: “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing”.<sup>73</sup> Not only a way of being stuck, this form of suspension is also a mode of production.

Inertia is commonly defined as the tendency to do nothing or remain unchanged. In physics, inertia designates a property of matter by which it continues in its existing state of rest or uniform motion in a straight line, unless that state is changed by an external force.

Both definitions seem to point out that continuity is different from sameness. And that which tracks continuity (the one inevitable and always present external force) is time.

Consequently, doing nothing is never doing nothing. The figure described by inertia is not that of a circle but a spiral. Things move (whether we like it or not) and reappear at a different place, at a different level, with a different value. Clinging to an optimistic attachment is to

71 Marion Milner, *On Not Being Able to Paint* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 104.

72 Jack Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond” With and For The Undercommons”, in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 9.

73 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1.

place our trust in a different algorithm of continuity. The expectation being that somehow either you or the situation will next time be different in just the right way. (But, experience tells us that it, of course, rarely just is.)

Perhaps, in a different context, this deadlock situation might be diagnosed as co-dependent, where, basically, one depends on the other's need to depend on us; and that dynamic, although perhaps harmful, is also reassuring. (Cruel optimism is also a version of this.)

Frustration is both a cause and consequence of this inertia. The temporality, or trajectory of this paring (does frustration produce inertia or vice versa?) is analogous to Anne Carson's attempt to set straight the trajectory of *eros* via her study of Sappho in her book *Eros, the bittersweet*. In that book Carson argues for a more accurate chronology of *eros* by rephrasing the term to "sweet-bitter".<sup>74</sup>

The back and forth between these two emotions (frustration and inertia), the friction it produces eventually ignites something. Even if that something is the realization that thwarting satisfaction may be harder work, than the thwarted work itself.

Suspended agency is characterized by indecision and stalling, by not moving forward. Suspension grants us the power to decelerate, to pause, to inhabit a place where reexamination and the act of questioning are given a central position. To be suspended is like being stuck in neutral.

Roland Barthes's last course at the Collège de France was titled "The Neutral" or "The Desire for Neutral" as he self-corrected on the first session of the course on February 18, 1978. Barthes defines the neutral as that which escapes ("outplays" is his term) or undoes ("baffles" is his term) paradigmatic binary oppositions.<sup>75</sup> In our case of suspension, some of the binary paradigms at stake are active/passive, productive/wasteful, attentive/distracted. Barthes adds that to reflect on the neutral is to be "looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time".<sup>76</sup> In this sense the neutral is both a way of experiencing and a way of appre-

74 Anne Carson, *Eros, the Bittersweet* (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998).

75 Barthes, *The Neutral*, 6.

76 *Ibid.*, 8.



hending the present. When attempting to justify his choice of subject matter for the course, Barthes proposes that a desire for the neutral is a desire for suspensions. “Suspension of orders, laws, summons, arrogances, terrorisms, puttings on notice, the will to possess. Then, by way of deepening, a refusal of pure discourse of oppositions”.<sup>77</sup>

To suspend is also a form of protestation, a way of saying no, of cancelling, of delaying, of not giving up.

One is usually suspended from here to there, like in a hammock. Suspension is perhaps a way of being held captive between a past and a future. The sociological reading of this may point towards the fact that the binds by which we are held in suspension (advertising, religion, lifestyles, etc.) are actually leading us someplace. Within the creative process the aforementioned binds are somewhat loose (or can be loosened) and suspension, just as when one is floating (rather than swimming or sinking), allows for drift, distraction, and a specific mode of attention that has more to do with wonder and less to do with busyness or stuckness.

This particular mode of inertia or of seemingly not moving forward (along the expected route) is also a way of being in the present. Of sustaining the present. Of holding on. Of stretching time. This hyper-presentness involves, in turn, a sense of hyper-attention to an array of (internal and external) signs that may help (if decoded properly) to clarify things and aid in finding justification for decision making, and hence movement forward.

Byung-Chul Han describes our current attitude towards time and attention, namely, multitasking, as a form of regression. Wild animals, he claims pejoratively, are forced to “multitask” as a way of survival in the wild.<sup>78</sup> However, attention and focus could also be conceived as a form of censorship, as a way of narrowing the mind. Hence, at least as it pertains to the creative process, a kind of free floating attention, one which liberates the mind and allows for wondering and wander, would be seemingly what is required. Therefore, what constitutes good or bad distraction or attention eludes generalizations.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, 12.

<sup>78</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 12.

This makes clear that suspension is also a way of defending oneself against the rapid pace (and ongoing crisis) of contemporaneity. It is a stalling of productivity, a private form of strike, a response to the demands placed on the production of newness.

Enrique Vila Matas's book *Bartleby and Company* (2000) comes to mind as a synthesis of writers that have stopped writing, writers that are involved with different forms of negation and are attracted to silence as a way of furthering literary creation. Earlier still, Susan Sontag's essay, "The Aesthetics of Silence" (1967) catalogues modernity's uses of silence as a creative methodology.

While in a state of suspended agency time must suddenly be endured rather than traversed, felt rather than thought. The distinction between these two temporalities, one thought and one lived, follows Henri Bergson's distinction between time and duration.

"In other words," Bergson writes, "our perceptions, sensations, emotions and ideas occur under two aspects: the one clear and precise, but impersonal; the other confused, ever changing, and inexpressible, because language cannot get hold of it without arresting its mobility or fit it into its common-place forms without making it into public property".<sup>79</sup>

## DURATION

Time, according to Bergson is clear, precise and impersonal. Linked to the public and to property. Time is common (shared) and commodified (ownable). Duration, on the other hand, is out of sync with time, outside of the "moral" and economic community of those whose time is productive and synchronized or whose time need not be experienced at all. Duration escapes the grasp of language: it is an affect. Insofar as, like an affect, it resists systematization and structure, and uncovers, discovers, recovers notions of contingency, possibility and play.

To endure duration, to be suspended in time, estranges us from the culture of capital and productivity. Although, I am here making the case that suspended agency (a form of duration) is

<sup>79</sup> Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, trans. F. L. Pogson (Mineola and New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 129.

also a necessary step in being creatively productive. The creative act demands that we be available to time, to letting time pass, to spending it without keeping count, to know how to waste it. Because we know, from experience, that waste and excess eventually, over time, fertilizes and blossoms.

“Let us then go down into our inner selves”, Bergson declares, “the deeper the point we touch, the stronger will be the thrust which sends us back to the surface. Philosophical intuition is this contact, philosophy is this impetus”.<sup>80</sup>

Delving down into our inner selves takes time, and one does not often find a place from where to thrust forward. This place from which we kick up and propel to the surface that Bergson refers to, is the moment in creativity in which we deal with the potential of the unknown—he calls it intuition, but it is perhaps more than that: inspiration, hope, anticipation, impatience, futility, despair, haunting, are some of the words that describe my own process. It is through the ways in which we give shape to this unknownness, and the trust that there is something in its potentiality worth wrestling with that something is articulated (through feeling or through language).

It remains however ambiguous to me whether Bergson refers to philosophy (or in our case art) as the impetus downwards or upwards. Some of the works discussed in this chapter argue for the case that art may be both: the search and the discovery.

This all starts to hint at the fact that the experience of art is only deceptively initiated by the work of art. And this occurs in two directions: on the one hand the created, finished object seemingly remains in a state of suspension—and hence is never really finalized as it waits for an encounter with an audience, a context, etc. to be activated or put to use. And then, once this encounter occurs, another form of delay or gap takes place: the difference between experiencing and apprehending the work. On the other hand, it is often the case that it is the methodologies by which said object is created that constitute the “art”, and the consequent object (whatever form it may take) simply functions as a document or *souvenir*, to use Daniel Buren’s terminology. The works analysed below represent a desire to blur the division between

80 Henri Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle L. Andison (Mineola and New York: Dover Publications, 2007), 103.

(indefinitely in flux) studio work in progress and finalized work. Suspended agency can be seen as the active gesture of questioning and ruminating in which work takes shape not in its completeness but in the process of its becoming.

To summarize and conclude, in a state of suspended agency, time is slow and thick; it is more than merely an inconvenient delay. It is more than a matter of time. While suspended agency may be usually recognized as a form of stuckness or halt, it is generally not understood as generative, as an opportunity for something else. As I have theorized it, however, what prompts this suspension may itself be useful, may contain valuable information and may motivate other imaginings and iterations of possibility. But, how does this lingering hesitancy, this tendency to drift, translate formally in works of art? How does it take shape, assume a form? Where does that seemingly “wasted time” end up? How is it “regained”? Is there a trace of it in the work?

## **I HAVE TOYED WITH SOME BEGINNINGS, BUT THEY LED NOWHERE**

*Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?*  
—T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

Producing under the sign of regret is exemplified “by a state of suspended anticipation in which something is started but nothing begins”.<sup>81</sup> Between hope and resignation, boredom and desire, fulfilment and futility, suspension is a diffuse feeling of restlessness which contains the expectation of something to come. A feeling that is tasked with the responsibility to somehow trigger sufficient desire to offset fear or ignite action.

In this sense, it seems worthwhile to question what are our preconditions for desire, or, what are our dispositions for letting feelings of desire develop? In other words, what are the situations we organize or devise to make desire possible? In each moment of hesitation or suspension, we are in fact returning to these questions. Berlant, (through the lens of object relations

81 Adam Phillips, “On Being Bored” in *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 68.

and affect theory) summarizes desire as, “describing a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object’s specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it”.<sup>82</sup> This working definition outlines the flow between “reality” and “fantasy” we have been reckoning with since the introduction (in other words, and in regards to regret: who we are and who we imagine[d] to be). Following this idea, we could say that to pursue one’s desire is an attempt at perpetuating a fantasy. This, while not being wrong, is only half right.

A bit of history: The psychoanalytical story of desire starts with Freud (as it all does) and involves his category of “drives”, which refer to a flow of sexual energy that is said to put pressure on the individual to move from sensual autonomy to a relation with the world. Desire hence has to do with how we negotiate with the exterior world. For Lacan, however, desire tells a different story. For Lacan, desire appears in the rift that exists between need (directed towards a specific object and satisfied by it) and demand (formulated and addressed to others). “Desire is a relation of being to lack. [...] This lack is beyond anything which can represent it. It is only ever represented as a reflection on a veil. [...] Desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for nothing nameable. And at the same time this desire lies at the origin of every animation. If being were only what it is, there wouldn’t even be room to talk about it. Being comes into existence as an exact function of this lack. Being attains a sense of self in relation to being as a function of this lack, in the experience of desire”.<sup>83</sup> According to Lacan’s version of desire, desire is non-representable, it is unnameable, there is no image that sustains it. In other words, if you can imagine your desire, if you can name it, then it is not what you really want. Desire depends upon not fully knowing what one wants. This notion of desire puts the whole idea of regret in checkmate. If that idealized image of what we should have or could have become is not what we desire, what is it then? What is it veiling? This also loops us back to the beginning: If we do not know what we want, how can we move towards it? What instigates movement, if not desire? Is the unknown at the “origin of every animation”? Does desire connect us with animality, with movement? Is desire a form of curiosity? Or is desire, literally, connected with the process of making the illusion of motion and the illusion of change by means of the rapid succession of sequential images that minimally differ from

82 Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2012), 6.

83 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: WW Norton, 1991), 223–224.

each other? It seems that if we can conceive of desire as a story we tell ourselves (a set of rules or grammars to narrate it), then in Freud's version that story includes an ending and for Lacan it doesn't (there is a reflection, an alluring phantasmagoric projection of it on a veil, but what is hidden from it—on the other side of the veil—is never attainable). One story of desire is a mystery (it is solvable; it has a conclusion) the other is an enigma (it is built around something inaccessible).

The questions being raised here have to do with our relationship to the unknown (uncertainty, surprise, risk, etc.) and our needs for satisfaction (our goal-future-oriented-productivity-minded selves *vs.* process-presentness-experience-based beings). Guiding these questions is a larger one relating to our conflicting understandings and relationships to time. Regret intervenes in this context by setting up a lens through which to reflect on the intermingling of desire and time. For example: how does one perpetuate the desire for what was not obtained? Or, are aspirations a form of desire or a form of wish-making? What constitutes the difference, if any? Is it a difference in kind or of degree? Is one more backward-facing and the other more forward-facing?

## THE BOOK TO COME

The cultish Argentinean writer Macedonio Fernández perhaps best represents a creative state of suspension in his novel *The Museum of Eterna's Novel (The First Good Novel)*, a pre-post-modern novel written in Buenos Aires, began in 1925, worked on until the author's death in 1952, and published posthumously in 1967.<sup>84</sup>

Rumours and anecdotes about the life and works of Macedonio Fernández (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1874-1952) abound. Macedonio was a writer, a humourist, a philosopher, an extraordinary conversationalist, an eccentric and utterly original character, that developed one of the most influential and experimental artistic projects of Latin American literature. In fact, Borges made a point of naming Macedonio as an early influence whom he had imitated "to the point of plagiarism". Later Borges thought it better to deny that Macedonio possessed any literary

84 Macedonio Fernández, *Museo de la novela de la Eterna (Primera novela buena)*, ed. Adolfo de Obieta, (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Corregidor, 2007).

talent or importance, reinforcing the long-held perception of the older man as a kind of local Socratic philosopher, constitutive of an Argentinian myth. At one point, it was even popularly believed that Macedonio had simply been a fabrication, a character created by Borges. If Macedonio's work was profoundly eclectic and idiosyncratic, perhaps the way in which he led his life was almost even more so. He graduated as a lawyer but never practiced. At the turn of the century he and several friends attempted to found a socialist community in the Paraguayan jungle. The experience failed. (It lasted one day because there were too many mosquitos). He returned to Buenos Aires, married, and had several children. He published almost nothing at this time. In 1920, his wife died and this event would radically change his life. His writing in many ways appear to be efforts directed at somehow surviving this loss (*The Museum of Eterna's Novel* is a case in point). He placed his children amongst family and never again reconstituted a home. Until his death he lived at friend's houses and cheap hotel rooms. During his lifetime, only three books were published.<sup>85</sup>

*The Museum of Eterna's Novel* is half made up of prologues, between fifty-seven or sixty prologues—depending if one counts or not the dedications, the post-prologue, and the blank page dedicated to the reader's indecision. (The last of said prologues reads, “Were those prologues? And is this the novel? This page is for the reader to linger, in his well-deserved indecision, before reading on”.<sup>86</sup>)

Included are prologues of salutation, prologues introducing the author and the characters, prologue-letters to the critics, prologues about characters who were rejected, a prologue of authorial despair, prologues about different types of readers, and prologues about prologuing.

In some ways, *The Museum of Eterna's Novel* is a novel that does not want to begin. Or perhaps it is actually a novel that does not want to end. Eterna is a character in the novel, or rather the

85 These brief biographical notes are compiled from: *Jorge Luis Borges, Arturo Jauretche, Leopoldo Marechal, Francisco Luis Bernanrdez, Manuel Peyrou, Gabriel del Mazo, Enrique Villegas, Federico Guillermo Pedrido, Lily Laferrere, Adolfo de Obieta, Miguel Shapire, Germán Leopoldo García hablan de Macedonio Fernández*, edited by Germán Leopoldo García (Buenos Aires: Carlos Pérez Editor, 1968); Ricardo Piglia, “Notas sobre Macedonio en un diario” in *Formas Breves* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 2000); Tomás Guido Lavalle, “Prólogo” in *Manera de una psique sin cuerpo* (Buenos Aires: Tusquets Editores, 2004); Adam Thirlwell, “A Preface for Macedonio Fernández” in *The Museum of Eterna's Novel (The First Good Novel)*, trans. Margaret Schwartz (Rochester: Open Letter, 2010); Andrés Di Tella, *Macedonio* (film, 1995).

86 Fernández, *Museo de la novela de la Eterna*, 135.

justification for why Macedonio writes the novel, but it is also, of course, the eternal: the absence (or infinity) of time.

Macedonio through the proliferation of prologues is seemingly saying: Only that which has not begun cannot end or die. And death is Macedonio's greatest fear, and it is fear where he writes from. This sentiment is not entirely dissimilar from Freud's statement used to preface this text, "In mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish".<sup>87</sup>

The wish to outwit time (death) is at the core of the novel. Macedonio's principal technique in this regards is to attempt to turn fiction into reality. Macedonio questions the possibility of a true, eternal love under the threat of death. "How can we give ourselves fully to love in the face of the certainty of death? ... You believe that death awaits us, a termination of our persons and our love, and I don't believe that *totalove* can flourish in beings who believe that they are fleeting".<sup>88</sup> For Macedonio, transience invalidates true happiness. That is the centre of the experiment-come-novel. The dream is that love may conquer death, and the strategy through which this is achieved is by making the reader doubt his/her own reality.

The proliferation of prologues are waiting rooms for the novel to come. And in these waiting rooms, in this purgatory, one is left with the open decision of either marching on ahead towards an inside (the text itself, or the expectation of one) or to step back towards the outside (the discourse that surrounds the text, frames it and enables it). The prologue, as site, seems to be an area of unclear delimitation of inside and outside. It is something that is becoming, an unfurling of potential, a kind of promising, a kind of pact, a reading guide, etc.

The prologues in Macedonio's case work as a methodological explication of what is at stake. The prologues outline that the "museum of the novel", as museum, that is, as institution, exhibits and collects the limits and ruins of the genre, while simultaneously from within tradition opens up a new beginning (*The First Good Novel*). The prologues outline certain conditions of reading (expectations and responsibilities) of chiefly two types of readers (one that respects linear narrative sequencing and one that does not care for it), the prologues also

87 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 32.

88 Fernández, *Museo de la novela de la Eterna*, 84.



announce that the novel will also forgo other classical narrative structures (there is only a brief skeletal anecdote that ties together the text), it will borrow and cast characters from other novels, it will not reflect reality but intervene in reality, etc. etc.

The kind of obstacles these prologues produce, the hesitancy to allow one to access the work, the necessity to surround the text with more text, the seemingly insecure chattering, is perhaps not dissimilar to strategies of silence.<sup>89</sup> Speaking from or to that silence is a way of uncovering inhibition. Stalling, trying to find the right words, questioning one's choices, hesitating to move, waiting for the ideas to ripen in just the right way, to assume the right form, is familiar territory for a shy person. The creative process of searching, that apparent floating, takes a lot of effort to endure. As Rainer Maria Rilke points out, "Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage. Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love".<sup>90</sup>

A somewhat related approach to writing, a kind of writing that stalls or ends before it begins, is taken up as method in the series of *Indexes* I have made for books I have not written and most probably never will. These indexes are an ongoing project that map the development of my interests, readings and preoccupations and thus have become a form of self-portraiture that unfolds over time.

The *Index* series is printed on photographic paper, directly acknowledging the indexical quality of photography but also photography's ability to construct an archive or preserve (fabricate) memory. Each one of the indexes includes A-Z entries that through a specifically considered page structure loosely outline or hint at a possible storyline. Each index is laid out in page formats designed to correlate to the subject matter at hand. The first index I composed *Index* (2000) was an attempt to produce a book that would include all books, a sort of library in a book, or a meta-book. This index reads as half way biographical and half way theory text; it is extremely personal, at times even hermetic, yet full of clichés. In 2003 I made *Index (A Novel)* that follows the structure of a romantic novel, repeating romantic and melodramatic

89 Susan Sontag, "The Aesthetics of Silence" in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Picador, 2002), 5 and 12.

90 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Mark Harman (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 78.



Alejandro Cesarco, *Index (With Feeling)*, 2015

framed digital prints, A-Z in 9 double page spreads, 76 x 102 cm each, installation view at Parra-Romero, Madrid

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- Tiresome contemporaneity, 84-87.
- Tolerance, 190.
- Tone: as affect-bearing orientation, 18; and affect-emotion split, 26; as *affective a priori*, 153; and attitude, 100, 148; and ideology, 133; in Melville, 135; as objectified emotion, 217; unfelt but perceived feeling, 140, 196.
- Trace (*indexical sign*), 2, 30, 44.
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- “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (Eliot), 125.
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- Vanity, 15, 132, 287-90, 294.
- Varda, Agnès, 243, 285.
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archetypes. In 2008, I made *Index (a Reading)* that self-consciously addresses the idea of what constitutes an index, dealing with, among other things, what is its relation to reading, writing, memory, history and forgetting. In 2012, after the death of my father, I made *Index (An Orphan)* that addresses the experience of mourning, the loss of childhood, and becoming an orphan as an adult. The most recent and largest in the series is *Index (With Feeling)* (2015), that addresses particular states of weak affects: aesthetic categories grounded in ambivalent or even explicitly contradictory feelings (including regret).

Counter to Macedonio's prefaces and exemplifying regret as method in my practice, the *Indexes* constitute a text for which the reader has seemingly arrived too late. If Macedonio's prefaces produce a sense of anticipation, my indexes provoke or demand an act of reconstruction. An elusive text or narrative can be recomposed by putting together the fragments or clues that have been left behind. An "allegorical impulse" meets an "archaeological turn". The topography of a text has been outlined (to use a Benjaminian term) but it is yet to be described.

The way information and knowledge is organized and presented, as well as a preference for para- texts has been an ongoing concern throughout my work. The entries listed in each index enable its navigation and use—they outline or promise a narrative—but, they simultaneously signal towards that which is excluded or silenced from it. (Michel Foucault's famous opening paragraph in *The Order of Things* comes to mind. In it he recalls the joy of reading a passage from Borges in which the limits of categories and systems of thought is elegantly ridiculed.)

This ongoing series of indexes are a form of writing that constitutes an archive of my reading. What this form of writing perhaps suspends is me testing myself as a writer. The indexes could thus be regarded as a stand-in for me not wanting to face my own limitations. This is a strategy of writing that aligns itself with (anticipates) a form of failure. However, it is not a glorification of existential failure or defeat (as in Beckett, for example), but failure understood as being contrary to mastery.

Again, a lot is promised and not much delivered. Or rather, what is delivered is not that which is promised.

Yet another way of conceptualizing suspension in relation to this project is that, in fact, agency is not so much suspended but reallocated. Agency is transferred to the viewer/author, and

to the indexes themselves, conceived now as technology or machine (namely, the alphabet and the sequential progression of page numbers).

## STAMPING IN THE STUDIO, FOR EXAMPLE

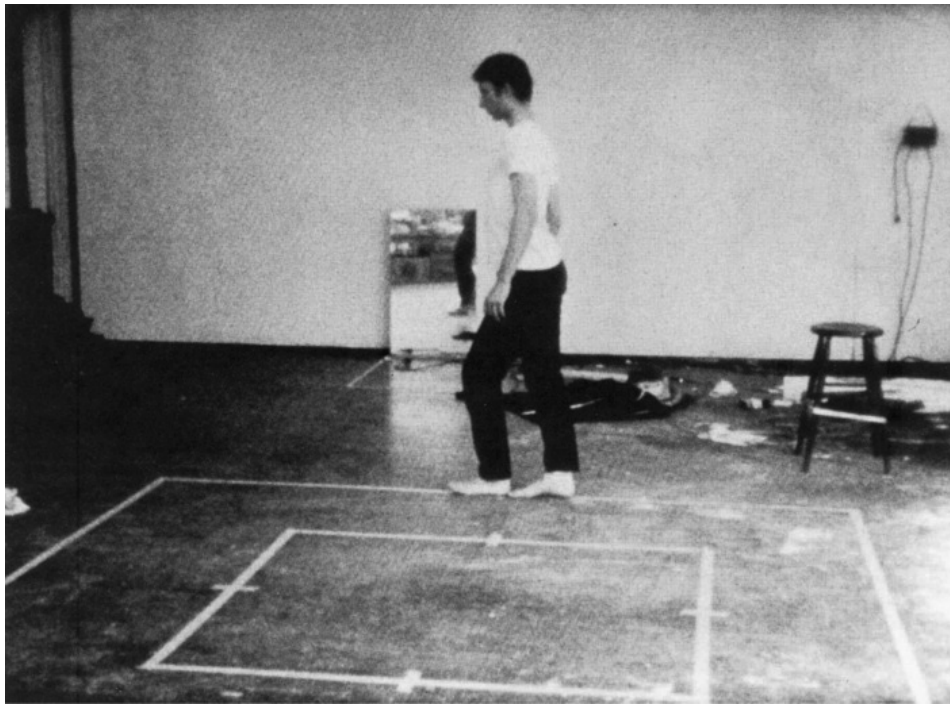
By the mid-sixties, and shortly out of college, Bruce Nauman focused his attentions inward onto the sparse landscape of his nearly vacant studio, and onto his body. Working with a 16mm camera, and later video, Nauman documented, in different ways, his banal, everyday, and mannerist performances. In the film works, the camera records the artist from fixed positions that speaks to surveillance footage. In the video works, and thanks to the new technology, a different dynamic emerges. In the video works, the camera moves in closer, measuring and situating the artists body against the space of the studio.

Throughout these early works, Nauman used the studio (and his body in it) as a means to question art and his identity as an artist: “Because I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever it was I was doing in the studio must be art. And what I was in fact doing was drinking coffee and pacing the floor. It became a question of how to structure those activities into being art, or some kind of cohesive unit that could be made available to people. At this point art became more of an activity and less of a product”.<sup>91</sup>

In works such as *Stamping in the Studio* and *Slow Angle Walk (Beckett Walk)* (both 1968) Nauman videotaped himself pacing around the studio for 60min. Nauman’s concerns in these early works are principally twofold: to move art from an end-oriented to a process-oriented endeavour and to signal or communicate artistic intent (what he identifies perhaps as “structure” in the above quote).

Nauman’s work highlights the (physical) labour involved in studio work—putting in the hours, one might say—; as if inspiration has less to do with talent than with perseverance. Influenced by the contemporary dance scene of the time (Anna Halprin, and later Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer, most notably) Nauman somehow re-rarefies ordinary everyday

91 Bruce Nauman, interviewed by Ian Wallace and Rusell Keziere, October 1978, in *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman’s Words*, ed. Janet Kraynak (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 194.



Bruce Nauman, *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, 1968  
film still, 16mm black and white film, silent, 10 minutes

movement into sculptural form through video (quantifying and measuring time and space). Nauman's exaggerated, repetitive, and drawn out postures and gestures hold a suspenseful balancing act between movement and falling (between use and waste, production and non-production, sense and non-sense).

Does walking vigorously, exaggeratedly, exhausting your body communicate artistic intentionality more than a casual pacing up and down the studio? Nauman's work, like Beckett's, represents a circular form of reasoning that implies entrapment in circumstances, generally of one's own design. (A direct relation to feelings of regret is not coincidental.) The duration (and banality) of the performance in turn occasions tension and frustration in the viewer. It is this frustration that perhaps signals to the work being an in-between stage, a rehearsal, a form of suspension, something marking the anticipation of something else to occur.

## THE CRACK UP

F. Scott Fitzgerald's autobiographical three-part essay, first published in *Esquire* magazine in 1936, opens not with the first-person voice, but the second: "Of course all life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work—the big sudden blows that come, or seem to come, from outside—the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don't show their effect all at once. There is another sort of blow that comes from within—that you don't feel until it's too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again".<sup>92</sup>

These opening sentences encapsulate the ongoing hopelessness of the dark side of regret. "[...] until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again". Blows that seem to come from the outside and blows that come from within. What is being lamented here is not only aging (which would be banal if not vain) but the incapacity to sustain creativity, literary excellence, fame, and fortune. Blows that seemingly come from the outside could refer to shifts in taste, in trends, or world events (the financial crash of 1929, for

92 F. Scott Fitzgerald, "The Crack-Up" in *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions Books, 1993), 69.



example). Blows that come from within are in this case most notably the exhaustion, the drying-up of one's creative well.

In these first sentences, Fitzgerald is seemingly reluctant to disclose too much personal history and opts instead to make a rather generalized diagnosis (the middle-age crack-up is widespread) and begins a cautionary tale of sorts. He hardly establishes his subject—the mysterious but decisive breakage of his sense of self-(worth)—before he backs off to “make a general observation” in the second paragraph. “The test of a first-rate intelligence”, he famously says, “is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function”. The two ideas he has in mind are “to see things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise”. To continue living with a sense of defeat (regret being notable one such example), or in spite of defeat, or to overcome defeat is dependent on the strength of one's determination, he claims.

“This notion”, he continues, “fitted on to my early adult life, when I saw the improbable, the implausible, often the ‘impossible,’ come true”. Fitzgerald refers here to his phenomenal overnight stardom with the publication of *This Side of Paradise* at age 24, when he became not only a best-selling author, but a model for the man of his age—a condition he later called “the bitch goddess” of success. “Life was something you dominated if you were any good”, he concludes.<sup>93</sup>

“As the twenties passed, with my own twenties marching a little ahead of them, my two juvenile regrets—at not being big enough (or good enough) to play football in college, and at not getting overseas during the war—resolved themselves into childish waking dreams of imaginary heroism [...]”.<sup>94</sup> Life (and its long casting regrets) were “dominated” by the fleeting sparkles of success: “childish waking dreams” whose significance, or wish fulfilment, lay elsewhere.

J. G. Ballard reviewing a biography of the late Fitzgerald comments, “Fitzgerald's best work is about the failure to recapture past emotions, and one feels that the series of calamities that form his later life was almost consciously set up to provoke that poignant regret. During the

93 Ibid., p.69

94 Ibid. p. 70.

endless champagne party of the twenties this seemed touching and romantic, but far less so in the thirties against a background of real failure and despair”.<sup>95</sup>

The suspension taking place, in Nauman and in Fitzgerald, the postponement of work (what traditionally constitutes work, i.e., a finished product) and the representation (Nauman) and justification (Fitzgerald) of its forthcomingness and shortcomingness respectively responds to opposing ways of handling a projected disappointment with its actuality. The two strategies, although of seemingly opposite value (utopian and dystopian to put it crudely) adhere to the same famously worn out Samuel Beckett refrain: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better”.<sup>96</sup>

The two poles of a spectrum of acceptance of failure (as represented by Nauman/Fitzgerald) exemplify the attempts to bridge the gap between the impulse that gives rise to work (the idea) and the actual work (its reality). In some sense, the work is always a failed copy of an ideal (beyond our reach).

## **A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST APPROACHING FORTY**

*A Portrait of the Artist Approaching Forty*, 2014

three framed archival inkjet prints, 13 x 18 cm each.

“In a previous article this writer told about his realization that what he had before him was not the dish that he had ordered for his forties”.<sup>97</sup>

*A Portrait of the Artist Approaching Forty*, consists of three framed archival inkjet prints, 18 x 13 cm each and produced in 2014 when I had not yet turned forty. As evidenced by the extended title of this work, it directly references the Bruce Nauman and F. Scott Fitzgerald works discussed above:

95 J. G. Ballard, “Legend of Regret”, in *A User’s Guide to the Millennium* (New York: Picador, 1997), 109-110.

96 Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, in *Nohow On* (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 77.

97 Fitzgerlad, “The Crack-Up”, 75.

*A Portrait of the Artist Approaching Forty I, Walking the Studio”, or “Of course life is a process of breaking down, but the blows that do the dramatic side of the work—the suddenblows that come, or seem to come, from the outside—the ones you remember and blame things on and, in moments of weakness, tell your friends about, don’t show their effect all at once”.*

*A Portrait of the Artist Approaching Forty II, Pacing the Studio”, or “There is another sort of blow that comes from within – that you don’t feel until it’s too late to do anything about it, until you realize with finality that in some regard you will never be as good a man again”.*

*A Portrait of the Artist Approaching Forty III, Mapping the Studio”, or “The first sort of break age seems to happen quick – the second kind happens almost without your knowing it but is realized suddenly indeed”.*

The approaching fortieth year of life does not bring about a true caesura but indicates that the category of the young, up-and-coming artist will no longer be applicable, neither as self-image nor as external description. Again, this exceeds notions of vanity in relation to aging and describes something akin to an economic category of suspension within the art-world. The sustained interest or attention span (fashion) of the art-world tends to be short, and it is difficult for artists to remain in the spotlight (both critically and financially) for the twenty odd years between the phases in which they “emerge” and are later rediscovered for “retrospective” or “mature” work exhibitions.

The three photographs, much like Fitzgerald’s use of the second person, rather than present myself, they depict the floor of my studio. A literal translation of “cracking-up”, Fitzgerald’s plate metaphor is transposed onto the floor (an opaque narcissistic surface that no longer reflects back a clear, seductive image). The three small photographs demand that you move in close to study their structure and surface. The random cracks and punctuations of what is depicted are witnesses of past struggles and achievements and evoke expectations of works still to come or texts still to be written.



Alejandro Cesarco, *A Portrait of the Artists Approaching Forty I*, 2014  
one of three framed digital prints, 18 x 13 cm each



Alejandro Cesarco, *A Portrait of the Artists Approaching Forty II*, 2014  
one of three framed digital prints, 18 x 13 cm each



Alejandro Cesarco, *A Portrait of the Artists Approaching Forty III*, 2014  
one of three framed digital prints, 18 x 13 cm each

## Chapter 2

### GHOSTLY HAUNTING

*Please don't remind me of my failures.*

*I have not forgotten them.*

— Nico, *These Days*.

#### A MEMORY FOLDED UP INSIDE

A memory folded up inside or a dream folded up inside or finding ways to survive disappointment.

If the previous chapter described an aimless sense of wandering (or, the oscillation between possibilities) this chapter is preoccupied with a story of enchantment, possession, and haunting. “Suspended Agency” encouraged us to be patient with the moods and temporalities of regret. It encouraged us to understand its narrative arc (to call it something) and, through engaging with its particular temporality, find ways to invent forms of hope and creativity. “Ghostly Haunting”, on the other hand, deals with the way the past makes demands on the present, and the difficulties we (in the present) have in satisfying (or disregarding) said demands.

Building from Jacques Derrida’s and Avery Gordon’s work on ghosts and haunting, this chapter investigates the ways in which what appears to be invisible or in the shadows (repressed or absent) announces itself, and what consequences these apparitions or announcements may have.

For Freud, quoting F. W. J. Schelling, “Everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light”.<sup>98</sup> In “The Uncanny”, Freud plays across the field of literature in order to develop an argument about this particular phenomenon, challenging Enlightenment-era notions which separate rationality from animism. He writes, “All supposedly

98 Freud, “The Uncanny”, 241.

educated people have ceased to believe officially that the dead can become visible as spirits, and have made any such appearances dependent on improbable and remote conditions”.<sup>99</sup> (For Hélène Cixous, this is a text dealing with the nature of incertitude.<sup>100</sup> Haunting hesitates or “suspends” on a different register.)

In this chapter I make the assertion that one such improbable condition of ghostly appearances may be regret. As we have been defining it, regret is a form of fixation and obsession with a precise image of ourselves: an outcome we aspired to, a pre-defined projected future, that drags on from the past. The desire to forget this image (or fetish) may in itself be a symptom of how “spirits” become visible, of how they haunt.

In relation to the above, another possible way of reading Freud’s statement is that “educated people” (by which he means rational ones) believe that reality is without a double. Reality does not produce or provide an image of itself; it is un-splittable. However, we know that what creativity (and imagination more generally) does, and is inherently tempted to do, is to produce alternatives, mirrors, distortions; hence transforming reality into one among multiple modes of existence. Being under the sign of regret is to exist in one of these alternatives. Regret is very much about obsessing about a counter-factual image, a possible becoming that is never made present, something that lives over there, within the real, but on the other side of it. Regret is perhaps not rational, which does not make it any less real.

Rediscovering (or the returning) of one such alternative of reality is a form of haunting. The shadowing of a possible other reality is what haunts in regret. What is not actualized festers as ghosts (in whatsoever shape they may take). As Derrida claims in Ken McCullen’s film *Ghost Dance*, “To be haunted by a ghost is to remember what one has never lived in the present, to remember what, in essence, has never had the form of presence”.<sup>101</sup>

99 Ibid., 242-243.

100 Hélène Cixous, “Fiction and Its Phantom: A Reading of Freud’s *Das Unheimliche*” (New Literary History, Vol. 7, No. 3, Spring, 1976).

101 Ken McCullen, *Ghost Dance*, (Channel Four Films, Looseyard Productions, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, 1983), film.



## THE ECONOMY OF A LONG CITATION

Derrida, in the wake of the Soviet Union and the emergence of globalization, re-vindicated hauntology in his influential lecture-turned-book, *Spectres of Marx* (1993). According to Derrida, hauntology and spectrality work deconstructively as critique in order to interrogate the limits of dichotomies (the differential *différance* of presence/absence: namely the death and afterlives of Marx and Marxism). Haunting, Derrida writes, “is a thinking of the event that necessarily exceeds a binary or dialectical logic, the logic that distinguishes or opposes *effectivity* or *actuality* (either present, empirical, living—or not) and *ideality* (regulating or absolute non presence)”.<sup>102</sup> If only somewhat misreading the quote, it outlines one of the ways in which I am interested in thinking about ghosts: ghosts and haunting force a coexistence of two forms of perception, “actuality” (reality, facts) and “ideality” (a paradigm that regulates and against which we measure the former and our relationship to it—the possible and its potentiality).

In this drift haunting includes a regulating function; “corrective” and “utopian” Avery Gordon would add. She claims, “To be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost that never existed, really. That is the utopian grace: to encourage a steely sorrow laced with delight for what we lost that we never had”.<sup>103</sup> But it also, or because of this, rearticulates a conceptualization of time (its chronological progression, as well as the linearity of progress more generally). The way we understand time, or the way we allow it to act, is a central characteristic of regret as well as of its application (as a mode of production in the arts). While experiencing regret the past does not conform to the present. The present should have been different. It is the way the past attempts to “regulate” the present with its “ideality” that creates conflict, disappointment, anxiety, etc.

Among other things, haunting is a way of blurring the distinctions of how we understand and narrate time: present, future and past coexist in a different way. (The past that is in the present, the childhood that is in adulthood, the dead that are in the living.) Hauntology disrupts the conventional structure of chronology: there is neither forwards nor backwards, events are neither reversible nor irreversible. (The living traces of the past, the memories of what is lost, what was not attained, what was disappeared or repressed.)

102 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 78

103 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 57.

Referencing contemporaneity, Peter Osborne places emphasis on its prefix con-temporaneity: “coming together of different but equally ‘present’ temporalities or ‘times,’ a temporal unity in disjunction, or a disjunctive unity of present times”.<sup>104</sup> Which seems to be saying that actual contemporaneity is a mode of being that is particularly attentive to the co-presence of different temporalities and cultures (geo-politics is Osborne’s word).

Perhaps this conceptualization of time is a self-preserving response to an increasingly fractured yet globalized world. As I have noted in the Introduction, this availability of options (the “tyranny of the possible”) encourages certain ways of thinking about the self and its shortcomings. Regret in the form of foiled ambitions can be the consequence of the dreams bred by capitalist culture (or a response to how it feels to live under its regime). As Ann Cvetkovich writes, “depression, or alternative accounts of what gets called depression, is thus a way to describe neo-liberalism and globalization, or the current state of political economy, in affective terms”.<sup>105</sup>

Avery Gordon follows Derrida’s lead and creatively applies hauntology to the field of sociology in her important book, *Ghostly Matters* (1997). Gordon builds on Derrida’s concept in order to argue that the presence of a ghost signals to, what she calls, a something to be done. There is an injustice from the past that needs attention and reckoning with. To this effect, Gordon examines the relationships between knowledge, experience and power. To be haunted, in Gordon’s terms, “is to be tied to historical and social effects” and “it is a process that links an institution and an individual, a social structure and a subject, and history and biography”.<sup>106</sup> Haunting is a way of knowing, a way of locating oneself, as well as a way of apprehending the structure of feeling we are experiencing. I am arguing that regret (and the image of “what could have been” which is associated with it) is the sign that haunting is taking place: the insistent image depicting a different outcome takes the place, replaces, the figure of the ghost.

To inhabit that old (outdated—“out of joint”, Derrida would say) representation (story, image, project, scene) to exist in it, whether we like it or not, to be in it because, for whatever reason, we feel we lack the capacity to be elsewhere, is to be haunted by regret. In this regard,

104 Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), 22.

105 Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression A Public Feeling* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 11.

106 Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 190 and 19.

to attempt to understand the conditions under which certain images of the future were made is to attempt to understand what forms of representation a particular context allowed and enabled, championed even.

The other query we are left with in this scenario is to attempt to understand how that counter-factual (ghostly, yet felt) memory produces attachments and how it may be projected forward, that is, how may it be actualized by change (necessarily transforming, adapting, translating) the very ideal, representation or perverse form of memory we have been calling regret. What is seemingly at stake are degrees of flexibility or divergence from an ideal goal (ambition, desire, memory, dream). In other words, how may an alternative story be spun convincingly, seductively enough—in Baudrillard’s sense of “diverting us from our truth”<sup>107</sup>—that may allow the goal to take new routes without (necessarily) changing course completely. (Let’s not forget that one possible definition of happiness is the capacity to make desire and reality coincide.)

### **MOURNING AND INHERITANCE (THE QUESTION OF TIME)**

“[E]veryone reads, acts, writes, with *his or her* ghosts, even when one goes after the ghosts of the other”.<sup>108</sup> Artists are constituted through other artists, we define ourselves in relation to each other. Similarly, artworks expand, and sometime complete, other artworks. The whole field is haunted.

Our ghost story goes something like this: Borrowing from the past, we become indebted to the past, and hence the past accumulates credits; it becomes rich and amasses power. However, with the newly created work we generally do not tell the story the past wishes be told, and hence the past comes back in the form of a demand. Often, a haunting occurs when a past is unjustly and purposefully silenced, be it because of race, gender, etc. Even when it remains unconscious or disavowed this debt remains structurally at play as *Ghostly Matters* makes a case for.

107 Jean Baudrillard, *De la seducción*, trans. Elena Benarroch (Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1998), 79.

108 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 174.

Using (correcting, retelling, erasing) the past to serve our needs seems to be our right. After all, it is what we have inherited. (To refocus the discussion within the art field, and to paraphrase Borges, let us not forget that originality, or plagiarism for that matter, is not an aesthetic debate.) Derrida places a great deal of importance on the concept of inheritance throughout *Spectres of Marx*, and I think he defines it best when channelling Friedrich Hölderlin: “it is through language that we bear witness to having inherited what we are”.<sup>109</sup> A different way of stating this is in the title of Audre Lorde’s 1984 speech, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”.<sup>110</sup>

What we inherit are not only the tools but the ways (and histories) in which they have been used. This, which may be perceived as a structural limitation (the “prison of language”, among others) is also ripe with possibilities. The past simultaneously limits and enables change. The Master’s House may not be dismantled easily (or ever—its foundations run deep) but its walls may be rearranged and moved, and this displacement creates changes (in meaning and in what and who is allowed inside). Haunting, not unlike translation, forces a displacement. The master’s house/narrative/authority is reconfigured and at the same time enlarged (which is usually taken to be a good thing) through different applications of the inherited tools (languages). For example, The Art Worker’s Coalition or Institutional Critique, did not radically change the nature of art institutions, but they arguably did make a significant dent or correction in the ways art institutions serve their publics.

Derrida helps us bring inheritance back to regret by pointing out the obvious, “like all inheritors we are in mourning”.<sup>111</sup> However, ghosts are that which mourning cannot get rid of, hence the emergence of melancholia (or our particular strain of it: regret). It is the returning of the ghost that most clearly describes the feeling of regret (to weep again). “[I]t is a proper characteristic of the spectre, if there is any, that no one can be sure if by returning it testifies to a living past or to a living future”.<sup>112</sup>

109 Ibid., 68.

110 Audre Lord, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 110- 114.

111 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 67.

112 Ibid., 123.

For now, let's keep the emphasis placed on the recurrence of returning. In regards to regret, it is the expectation, the insistence of the return (its inability to be satisfied) that links haunting with desire. Haunting is a reminder of our desire. What haunts, in regret, is what we reach towards, aspire to, wish for, etc. There is a future implicit in regret (even if it is a future that is identified with the past). The return of the ghost (or in the case of regret, of our better self) in itself signals towards a movement in time (in whichever form it takes, be it linear or spiral). Derrida helps us clarify, "the thinking of the spectre, contrary to what good sense leads us to believe, signals towards the future. It is a thinking of the past, a legacy that can come only from that which has not yet arrived—from the arriving itself".<sup>113</sup> The *revenant* (invoking what was) *vs.* the *arrivant* (announcing what will come). The future may be anticipated in the past. Granted. But, to imagine beyond the limits of what is already apprehended or understood or accepted lays the utopian possibilities of haunting. In other words, and to paraphrase the early Barthes, our task is to problematize the meaning we automatically confer or assume.

In many ways, the utopian dimension of haunting is perhaps best expressed in Derrida's opening lines of *Spectres of Marx*, "Someone, you or me, comes forward and says: I would like to learn to live finally".<sup>114</sup> By this he means, to learn to live with ghosts. It is a question that is forward facing, one that is hoping for a better future. Like regret, it holds an ambition, a target. "Learning to live finally" implies the belief in the future, in *a* future. It includes within its utterance the notion of the project. The project, as it regards regret, is to redo something that has failed, something that was not accomplished fully (no matter how wonderfully it was accomplished there is forever an aura of insufficiency, of failure, of having fallen short of what was ambitioned, imagined, or idealized).

The future promise of regret starts to outline a way out of its pathological form: a correction that involves a recalibration in its conception of time. Up until now I have articulated non-linearity in order to put forward the argument of regret as creative force, however and simultaneously I seem to now need the linearity of time to speak of regret's futurity. These divergent temporalities need each other in order to apprehend a fuller picture of the workings of regret as method.

113 Ibid., footnote 39, 245.

114 Ibid., XVI.

One way to illustrate this is to return to Freud, again. Very basically: consciousness, we would be quick to agree, is inseparable from time (consciousness exists in and through time); the unconscious, on the other hand, proposes a more complicated relationship to it. For Freud, the unconscious is timeless or a-temporal, it exists outside the flow of time.<sup>115</sup> Unconscious processes defy causality and chronology (they are seemingly not ordered temporally, they are unaffected by time). However, and parallel to this, Freud elsewhere introduces a sense of time in the unconscious that he describes as the repetition compulsion. It is this compulsion to repeat that leads Freud to suggest the existence of the death drive. The death drive is incompatible with linear progress, it is associated with a “perpetual recurrence of the same thing”.<sup>116</sup> (The ghost of Friedrich Nietzsche is not far behind.) The time of the unconscious (and of the death drive) is a perpetual present with neither future nor past. The unconscious (like suspension or haunting) breaks the linearity of time. Although regret is not necessarily unconscious, at least not at first glance, it seems to share with the unconscious its temporal characteristic: which is, an insistence to control the present, for it to look identical to a fantasy or ideal of itself. Regret, as suspension and haunting, is stuck in an eternal return, in an ever ending loop.

Contrary to Freud’s clear-cut distinction in which he identifies melancholia as “related to an object-loss that is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious,”<sup>117</sup> regret appears to be a hybrid form. Without getting into the possible manifest or latent (unconscious) contents of regret, it is worth noting that its repetitious, haunting-like quality, signals to some form of resistance. Namely, the resistance to be re-inserted into consciousness (worked through) and therefore re-inserted in the flow of time (past, present, future.) It is worth noting that Freud, defines the task of psychoanalysis as, among other things, making temporal the a-temporal content of the unconscious.<sup>118</sup>

115 Perhaps the most complete study of the concept of time in Freud is André Green’s *Time in Psychoanalysis: Some Contradictory Aspects*, trans. Andrew Weller (London: Free Association Books, 2002).

116 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 23.

117 Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, 245.

118 Sigmund Freud, “The Dissection of the Psychological Personality,” Lecture XXXI in *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 92.

In turn, and to loop back to Derrida's quote, "no one can be sure if by returning it [the ghost] testifies to a living past or to a living future". Haunting, as it pertains to regret, seems to be caught in a double bind with time: on the one hand, regret sets up a different chronology that breaks the linearity of time (the past that is not past, the future that is intended to be a replica of an idealized past, identifying the future in the past, etc.); and on the other hand, it needs linearity (forward progression) to fulfil the discourse it sustains, in other words, its potentiality or future promise.

## **RECOGNITION MAYBE, MAY NOT BE USEFUL**

In 1990, when asked to submit a portrait of herself for the cover of the art journal *Artscribe*, Louise Lawler instead submitted an image of the actress Meryl Streep and overlaid the phrase, "Recognition maybe, may not be useful".

This gesture is telling of the artist's methods in two ways. In the first place, an actor, not unlike Lawler's practice, is someone that takes on the role of someone else, that plays the part, that embodies another. (Playing out in one's mind what it would be like to be someone else, to be living a different life, is obviously also related to a state of regret; which is not to imply that Lawler is regretful.) The performative aspect of Lawler's practice was first flagged up by artist Andrea Fraser in her essay, "In and Out of Place" (1985). In that text Fraser identifies three roles played by Lawler: "that of an artist who exhibits in galleries and museums; that of a publicist/museum-worker who produces the kind of material which usually supplements cultural objects and events; and that of an art consultant/curator who arranges works by other artists".<sup>119</sup> The negotiation between collaboration and complicity between artists and hosting art institutions is one of Lawler's central concerns. What Lawler appropriates are enunciation positions, places from where to see and speak. (Previously, in *Portrait* (1982), Lawler had depicted the sideways glance of a parrot, a bird known for its ability to repeat decontextualized phrases. Double-voicing, speaking through someone else is brought up again more centrally in my analysis of my own work later on.)

119 Andrea Fraser, "In and Out of Place," in *Louise Lawler*, ed. Helen Molesworth and Taylor Wash, *October Files* (MIT Press, 2013), 2.

In the second place, the *détournement* gesture of the magazine cover, succinctly describes Lawler's ethos towards her own practice. In one of a handful of interviews the artist has granted in her forty-plus-year career Lawler says, "My reservations are about wanting to foreground the work and not the artist. The work works in the process of its reception. I don't want the work to be accompanied by anything that doesn't accompany it in the real world".<sup>120</sup> This seems to allude primarily to one definition of recognition: as in, identification, that is how we identify the work with the artist, how it is read through the artist's biography and so forth. In that same interview Lawler further states, "My pictures present information about the 'reception' of artworks".<sup>121</sup> This is seemingly referencing a different meaning of recognition: as in, acknowledgement. Acknowledgement refers to how artworks fit or are read through its art historical context or references and through one's past body of work.

Recognition as acknowledgment links with one of Lawler's most recent bodies of works, line tracings of her own previous works. A press release from a 2014 exhibition at Sprüth Magers gallery explains: "tracings are black-and-white line drawings that are converted to a vector graphic and printed on a vinyl that is adhered directly to the wall. Each edition exists as an adaptable digital file that can be printed at any size".<sup>122</sup> These tracings extend what the magazine copy anticipated or fore-warned, "Recognition maybe, may not be useful".

Produced to coincide with the unconditional market and critical embracing of Lawler's work (and the general expansion of the art market into a clearer field for financial speculation), the tracings self-consciously, or self-mockingly, hollow out the picture. As if "recognition" (under such circumstances) compromised the content. The works reframe and reposition Lawler's work in the present. Only the skeleton or ghostly presence of the work remains. The previous iteration of the work reverberates and haunts at different levels. In some ways the works are also playing themselves, performing themselves, with a different value, and hence also signaling towards recognition as identification.

120 Louise Lawler in conversation with Douglas Crimp, "Prominence Given, Authority Taken," in *An Arrangement of Pictures* (New York: Assouline, 2000), unpaginated.

121 Ibid.

122 Louise Lawler, *No Drones*, Sprüth Magers Berlin, November 15, 2014 – January 17, 2015.





Louise Lawler, *Still Life (Candle)*, 2003  
cibachrome, 33 x 27 cm



Louise Lawler, *Still Life (Candle) (Traced)*, 2003/2013  
adhesive wall material, dimensions variable

The new series opens a new chapter in Lawler's practice-based "theory of reception". It forces a re-examination of how individual and institutional legacy and inheritances are entangled. It is as if the pictures were being muted while talking back, resisting, reformulating themselves through the artist's telescoping effect through time.

A quick note to reference Lawler's almost concurrent "stretch to fit" series, in which the artist tackles the use of space in relation to self-historization, general market expansion, and self-and market -imposed demands on productivity and scale.

## **INHABITING A SENSE OF SELF IN PUBLIC, OR, THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD ON MY SHOULDERS**

*Revision*, 2017

16mm film transferred to digital video, colour, sound, 3 min.

A remake of the first chapter of *Everness* (2008) with the same actor, now almost a decade later. The characters in both videos recite a monologue on the meaning of Tragedy. The principal difference between the two is a linguistic shift from present to past-tense. The presentation of these videos together invites close reflection on the passage of time, the demands on productivity, the potentials of re-reading, and the contingencies of meaning.

As with Lawler's tracing series, this work also involves some kind of shadowing of time past, of the past looming or haunting, making claims or demands. In contrast to Lawler's work the re-deployment of past work, the gesture of self-appropriation, involves less a comment on the work's reception than an attempt at updating or amending. In our everyday, when aspiring to remake, redo or undo a decision or its consequence (a particular circumstance), we may do so in relation to an occasion of regret.

By repeating and slightly amending the script to be performed *Revision* is haunted by its predecessor in *Everness*, but it also returns the latter to the condition of manuscript or draft and

so, in some ways, suspends (or rather frames) its agency. It does not negate it, but locates it in a condition of dependency.<sup>123</sup>

Craig Owens in his 1980 essay, “The Allegorical Impulse” suggests that Walter Benjamin’s writing “forces us to think in terms of correspondences”.<sup>124</sup> Owens, a well known Francophile, is perhaps thinking of correspondences in the way the French use the word: as in, connections or points of contact. Correspondence is another form of dependence. They both reciprocate and relate. They act as an acknowledgement of complicity, but what do they add to what is already there? Correspondences or dependencies set in motion fundamental questions of originality and autonomy, as well as uses and resignifications of the past.

Previously I have argued that spectrality, like translation, is as a form of displacement: the return of, or the calling attention to, of one time in another. Being haunted is equivalent to being looked at, spoken to, judged, encouraged, guided, chastised, made fun of, etc. In short, being haunted is a form of surveillance. But “[t]he spectre is also, among other things, what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects”.<sup>125</sup> I have tried to make a case that producing under the sign of regret transforms that threat into a promise. This shift is what constitutes the utopian dimension or imagined futurity of regret.

Regret, as seen through suspended agency and haunting, is a way of waiting for what one no longer expects, but still feverishly clings to. An attachment, that, as we have seen, is considered cruel yet optimistic. However, a less dramatic way of conceptualizing this is that regret’s promise is also a condition of possibility. The possibility to produce, or appropriate, not necessarily a reinvention but a shift in perspective.

Through repetition a doubling effect inevitably occurs. This opening up to two different ways of seeing the same thing sets up the possibility of a choice, and this, as we have seen, is an element that distinguishes regret from general melancholia. Under the sign of regret, one

123 *Everness* is the title of a poem by Borges. Its first line is: “Only one thing does not exist—oblivion” (*Sólo una cosa no hay, es el olvido*).

124 Craig Owens, “The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism” in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, ed. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 64-65.

125 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 125.

simultaneously entertains two different images of the same thing. And even if the choice or preference is clear, following that preference is not easy (or immediate) and hence suspension and haunting. Regret, in many ways, is a way of questioning our certainties. Or a way of seeing the same thing differently. And, as with most acts of appropriation not necessarily an aspiration to newness but to change.

The character of the two videos (*Everness* and *Revision*), who remains unnamed and described only through appearance and surrounding, in attempting to define tragedy claims that, “Usually, the hero does not understand, or understands poorly, and that is why he ends up the way he does. Tragedy dramatizes, in the sense that it puts into action, it dramatizes an interpretation”. Perhaps regret, in its tragic perspective, is also a dramatized interpretation: a (perceived) mistake played out as a form of self-punishment.

(At this point, a therapist may warn, “Don’t escape into pathology”. Sometimes escaping into a depressive place is a choice, often it is not. Fantasy (be it life-affirming or life-negating) plays a defensive (escapist) role by producing feelings of gratification that are independent from reality. But fantasy is also a way of gaining insight into reality, in the sense that it tells us or reminds us how we want our reality to look like.)

Time passes and that can be tragic. But tragedy is the silencing of conversation through loss, misunderstandings, and misrepresentations of experience whose memory is solid but whose recollection is fractured. Tragedy is the silencing of opportunities, of paths not taken, of risks not taken. Yet silence is part of every conversation. This is how we recognize the other, by yielding to silence.

What silence ultimately allows is perhaps what the aged character in the newer version concludes, “We could perhaps understand that problem of deciphering, that problem of reading I was referring to earlier, as the confrontation of two codes or two apparently incompatible value systems. However, it’s also possible that what’s ultimately dramatized by tragedy is the inflexibility or inability of reaching a consensus or agreement. Therefore, what’s dramatized is our inability to live together. Our inability to learn *how* to live together”.



Alejandro Cesarco, *Everness (Excerpt)*, 2008, video still, 16mm film transferred to digital, black and white, sound, 3 min, and *Revision*, 2017, video still, 16mm film transferred to digital, color, sound 3 min

## SUBTITLES

### EVERNESS (EXCERPT)

*What he is saying is that it's literature that produces readers. That great texts change the ways in which we read.*

*That would be the first issue. Then there's an element that's more intrinsic to literature itself, which is how to possibly define tragedy.*

*I define tragedy as the arrival of an enigmatic and supernatural message that the hero fails to fully and timely comprehend.*

*Tragedy is a dialog with a voice that's usually connected to the gods, to the shadow of the dead. It's the voice of Hamlet's father, or the voice of the oracle, for example.*

*That's to say, there is on the one hand, a hermetic phrase, written in a language that is both familiar and supernatural, and on the other hand, there is a problem deciphering it. And, the person who has to decipher that phrase has their life at stake in that very act. Something like understanding a text under a death threat. A private and paranoid hermeneutic. Like reading in a state of grace, but also reading in a state of exception. I think there is something interesting there ...*

*Usually, the hero fails to understand, or understands poorly, and that is why she ends up the way she does. Tragedy dramatizes, in the sense that it puts into action, it dramatizes an interpretation.*

*There seems to be an interesting issue there, in those games with the truth, in those messages that arrive and that are personal warnings, enigmas, coded messages. Messages that are related to the future and that someone under siege attempts to understand. That situation, which I think is the situation of tragedy, puts into play a certain use of language, and of passion, that is of course pre-modern, but that at the same time is very current and is constantly renewing itself.*

*On the other hand, tragedy sets up this problem of reading in terms of decision-making and therefore, it establishes a strange relationship between language and action, between deciphering and being in danger.*

*These would be a series of fairly attractive issues for a writer ... The terrifying presence of a hermetic and true word. A word that changes one's life, a word that has the power to change one's life.*

## REVISION

*What I said was that it's literature that produces readers. And that great texts change the ways in which we read.*

*That was the first issue. Then there was an element more intrinsic to literature itself which is how to possibly define tragedy.*

*I considered tragedy as the arrival of an enigmatic and supernatural message that the hero failed to fully and timely comprehend.*

*Tragedy is a dialog with a voice that is usually connected to the gods, or the shadow of the dead. It's the voice of Hamlet's father, or the voice of the oracle, for example.*

*There is on the one hand, a hermetic phrase, written in a language that is both familiar and supernatural, and on the other hand, there's a problem deciphering it. And, the person who's deciphering has their life at stake in that very act. Something like understanding a text under a death threat. A private and paranoid hermeneutic. Like reading in a state of grace, but also reading in a state of exception.*

*Usually, the hero fails to understand, or understands poorly, and that is why she ends up the way she does. Tragedy dramatizes, in the sense that it puts into action, it dramatizes an interpretation.*

*In other words, tragedy sets up this problem of reading, of interpreting, in terms of decision-making and therefore, it establishes a strange relationship between language and action, between deciphering and being in danger.*



*The terrifying presence of a hermetic and true word. A word that changes one's life. A word that has the power to change one's life.*

*It's also the case that at the moment of deciding, the tragic hero is confronted with an apparently impossible option. On the one hand, she has her own moral code, a series of convictions she will not betray. And, on the other hand, a code that's being imposed onto her and that she will not accept.*

*We could perhaps understand that problem of deciphering, that problem of reading I was referring to earlier, as the confrontation of two codes or two apparently incompatible value systems. However, it's also possible that what's ultimately dramatized by tragedy is the inflexibility or inability of reaching a consensus or agreement. Therefore, what's dramatized is our inability to live together. Our inability to learn how to live together.*

## IN PRACTICE

The following section prefaces a conclusion, and rounds up further illustrations of how modes of regret are strategically present in my own work. The selected work serves to perform a mode of embodied (immanent) knowledge; a complementary and at times counter argument to what preceded. What follows is not a work necessarily about regret, or that speaks of a regretted circumstance, but rather one that helps exemplify some of the traits, characteristics, and modes that emerge from considering regret conceptually. This work exemplifies different dimensions of regret as an aesthetic mode. It is work driven by regret as an applied method, a method that functions in different registers: cliché, ventriloquism, haunting, inertia, suspended agency, and different forms of appropriation.

### *Learning the Language (Present Continuous II)*, 2018

4k video, colour, sound, continuous loop (15:25 min cycle)

*Learning the Language (Present Continuous II)* is part of a series of video portraits in which I borrow the vocabulary of the person portrayed to address some of my own recurrent concerns (memory, repetition, and of course, regret). In this case, the work recreates a scene from Jean-Luc Godard's film *La chinoise* (1967) in which a professor, traveling on a train, engages in conversation with one of his students. The same scene was recreated by Claire Denis in her short film *Vers Nancy* (2002). In my work the professor's role is played by Brazilian psychoanalyst, critic and curator, Suely Rolnik, the student's role is played by her assistant, Josy Panaó. The conversation centres around, among other things, the role and uses of repetition within psychoanalytical practice.

*Learning the Language (Present Continuous II)* opens with a view through a window of a moving train. The train is outdated and the greenery outside is lush and somewhat tropical. Very quickly we are situated in a country that once would have been described as developing or on the periphery. The scene belongs to another time and to another film. In fact, as stated above, it is referencing at least two other films. The trope of the moving train is one of the "standards" throughout filmic history: time, progress, and the film strip itself are somehow embodied by the archetypal industrial machine. The train symbolizes the arrow of time, its linearity, the productive uses of standardized and regulated time. Like a trajectory, it endures

termination. The notion of time the train advances already forwards that perhaps the work does not conform fully to my understanding of regret, but perhaps is a way of searching out for a counter argument; a complement, something that complicates my understanding of it. Repetition and the cliché are positioned front and centre from the get-go, both visually and through sound. What we hear is the voice-over of a woman we will soon learn is traveling on said train and that is Suely Rolnik. She speaks of repetition, of “endlessly repeating the same scene”. Rolnik’s words are appropriated and re-contextualized in a few ways: a scene from a film is appropriated a third time, a mode of address is also appropriated—characters that are philosophizing or seemingly speaking lines from books is likewise a reference to the early Nouvelle Vague—the casting of Rolnik, appropriating her persona, which she has lent for other art projects—principally Manon de Boer’s *Resonating Surfaces* (2005) and Tamar Guimarães’s *Canoas* (2010)—(lovingly) turns the character into a bit of a cliché or caricature.

Quickly the outside view cuts to the interior of the train. An establishing shot; two woman speaking on a train. One older than the other. A classic pedagogical hierarchy, someone lectures and someone listens. Learning is already flagged up in the title of the work. Learning, most often than not, occurs through mirroring and repetition. In some ways, the work documents a way of learning; which, to some extent, is also a mode of appropriation. The work, like an act of citation, shows my reading and pillaging through other people’s words.

Mirroring is also made explicit by referencing Dan Graham’s *Present Continuous Past(s)* (1974), a seminal work in which perception, time and subject formation are addressed through the use of a mirror, a closed-circuit camera, and a monitor, reflected in the mirror, and receiving the filmed material with an eight second delay. The viewer/participant in Graham’s installation sees herself in the mirror (in the present), in the monitor (with eight seconds delay), and in the monitor within the monitor (with sixteen seconds delay). It is as if the work were proposing that we can only know ourselves in retrospect, projected back to us, mediated, with a delay.

The camera position and framing in *Learning the Language (Present Continuous II)* works to heighten the interiority of what is spoken. There is an economy of shots, very few cuts and a limited number of frames. The train moves but the camera does not. There is an attempt at being straightforward, direct, sincere, letting the person being portrayed and her words shine fully, without artifice. In spite of these feigned indicators of transparency, Rolnik is however,

always kept in profile, with her eyes censored by her fashionable glasses. And, more significantly, the authenticity of her words are questioned by the “formal-recitation-like” affect of her interlocutor, making one doubt the spontaneous nature of the scene. Rolnik only once, towards the end of the piece, makes eye-contact with the camera/viewer. She glances and nods knowingly; as if content with her performance and confirming that the viewer has understood and is also satisfied or convinced.

Repetition, the haunting of the same as difference, as analysed in the previous chapter interlocks a need for control, the death drive, and a conception of time that does not include a future, a time that is stuck in a continuous present. *Learning the Language (Present Continuous II)*, although seemingly improvised—of the moment, off the cuff—is, as hinted above, heavily scripted and rehearsed. It is, by all accounts, a work of fiction. The characters portrayed resemble reality, but they are composed from fragments, bits and pieces parsed from their own writing and my own. I have asked them to speak, and have fed them some of their own words back to them. A form of ventriloquism, they speak for me, through their own words, now hybridized with mine.

This muddled form of appropriation achieved through scripting (and the particular way of constructing—collaging—the script), allows me to address my recurring themes or concerns but from a different angle and perspective. It is a way of conjuring up ghosts, an invitation for haunting. If there is a larger program to my work perhaps this is it: to construct a spiral form of narrativity where things reappear, clothed in a different form, assuming a different voice, taking on a different value, etc. The question, as it relates regret to repetition (or forms of appropriation—as a specific kind of repetition—more generally), is how to go on with the anticipated knowledge of a disappointed actuality, as in, whatever form the current disappointed expectations take (I am referring to art objects) we already know, from the outset, they will never measure up to their ideality. "Try Again. Fail again. Fail better".<sup>126</sup> Again.

There is an unbridgeable gap between the impulse to make and what actually gets produced. Art under the sign of regret becomes a record or archive of failed copies of an ideal. In an oblique way this is perhaps not unrelated to Winnicott's concept of the “good-enough

126 Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, 77.

mother”.<sup>127</sup> Broadly, and according to Winnicott, it is when the mother fails that the child recognizes itself as a subject. The mother’s task is to gradually disillusion the child; it is disillusion that transitions between the Pleasure Principle to the Reality Principle, and teaches the child, among other things, how to tolerate frustration, in the sense that there is (generally) a time-limit to it. Producing under the sign of regret, or being an artist under the sign of regret, is accepting the “good enough”. The mother figure shape-shifts, it takes on the form of history, tradition, our own prior work, etc. Failure, in the form of disillusion, when it is associated with risk, and not laziness or complacency, presupposes a desire to succeed (a reaching towards an ideal). Accepting “the good enough” is a hopeful belief in second chances and perseverance. The “good enough” places emphasis on the process of art: conceived as a continuous draft and not a finalized masterpiece. To conform is to fail in a different register.

In cinematic terms, an ideal is often first translated into a script. A script is a form of control. In concrete terms, a script could be defined very simply and very broadly as a constructed scenario to be put into action. As a form of writing, scripting acts both as a descriptive and a predictive tool. Descriptive in the sense that a script—whether or not it explicitly sets out to do so—describes an experience or a set of actions which will occur, or an event or figure or system. In this descriptive function, scripts facilitate a process of reading the particularity of a set of relations. But scripts also have a predictive function, in that once written, a script assumes the role of a source text, and thus becomes a precursor to the experience or set of actions or event or figure or system that it attempts to describe and unavoidably control. In this broad sense scripts are utilized in processes of regulation, routinization, and normalization in various cultural, social, political and ideological fields: education, history, media and politics.

Scripts are foundational to the medium of film and video. As a form of writing that is endlessly compliant, impressionable, and accommodating, the script, in its enactment, is equally capable of producing something expected as it is of producing something wholly surprising or unforeseen. The potential of a script to be critical or visionary or resistant is in this tension between the anticipated and the unpredictable.

Rolnik’s performance intervenes precisely in this tension between the anticipated and the unpredictable. In relation to regret as method, it is here that she begins to undo my proposed

127 D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 13.

framework. It is in the slippage between script and what (and how) she actually performs for the camera that difference is produced and one is able to, as she says, “break free from this repetition of eternal sameness”. I borrow her voice, script it, and then give it back to her. The person that speaks is her but it is simultaneously not her. It is this distorted giving back, this returning of her own voice that produces discomfort and rifts or slippages on both a semantic and somatic level.

My proposed script, composed of an amalgamation of her writing and my own, assumes in this scenario the figure of the ghost. The script becomes an aspiration, a rigid blueprint of what the work can or should become. Not entirely dissimilar to the rigid image of a projected/idealized outcome in regret. And it is precisely this which Rolnik acts out against. However, and to my defence, by casting a “rebellious” actor, one could assume that I was already wishing for a surprise, or for a way to undermine the authority of that which haunts, in other words, to undermine control, to undo regret. To voice through another voice the thoughts of the person voicing them is an appropriationist technique, but it is also a way of working through someone that does not mirror me completely. It is a way of assuming a different persona. As a justification for appropriation, one could say that it is choosing that wakes things up, re-signifies them.

As the video progresses it becomes clear, from what Rolnik enunciates and the way she enunciates it, that she distrusts regret and is adamant to not give into inertia, suspend her agency, nor dwell on hauntings that may not produce difference. On a somatic (performative) level, there is a contagious vitality and vivacity that undoes the stereotypical malaise one associates with feeling regretful. This vitality is a form of hope that links Godard’s film and Rolnik’s biography through political activism. On a discursive level, her words circumvent the drift of what has been my argument up to know. To say it quickly and briefly, Rolnik does not believe in the redemptive or generative potentials of regret. She would much rather not even consider regret as a possibility. Her final response is telling, “[W]e must never forget, we must always remember in those moments, to escape that melancholic tone of lamentation that is part of the repetition of that ghostly scene and recall that the germs that were interrupted from becoming something and never did, they don’t die. They aren’t dead. They’re just blocked from germination, waiting for the adequate moment, the adequate conditions, to germinate again. And then, in that present, other futures are produced”.



Alejandro Cesarco, *Learning the Language (Present Continuous II)*, 2018  
video stills, 4K video, color, sound, continuous loop (15:25 min cycle).

## SUBTITLES

### LEARNING THE LANGUAGE (PRESENT CONTINUOUS II)

PROFESSOR

*Repetition... repeating the scene. Endlessly repeating the same scene. As if it were ghosts repeating themselves in a play. Our own character also repeating itself in a kind of relationship with the character of the Other, right?*

*It's as if it were a ghost train—I don't know if that's still a thing—that terrorizes us and keeps repeating itself indefinitely as if we could never disembark.*

*We are always struggling to get off this ghost train, trying to open the window and let in the air of the times, to rise to the challenge and break free from this repetition of eternal sameness.*

STUDENT

*What I see as the threat, the horror of the ghost, is that it returns: it never dies. It always tends to repeat the same result. It always tends to repeat the world in its current configuration.*

*But it's also true that to insist in being among spectres may also be understood as an attempt at memory construction, be it of our own existence or of the heritage of previous generations.*

*I think that that insistence of dwelling among ghosts may actually be a way of breaking off from the character portrayed in this theatre of ghosts. I also think this may have to do with an attempt at disrupting the linear progression of time.*

PROFESSOR

*That makes sense. The repetition of this theatre of ghosts is truly terrifying.*



*It's terrifying but it protects us from a greater threat: the memory of an experience that has traumatized us, that was impossible to absorb. If we dwelled on it we would be completely helpless, life would come to a standstill. So the theatre of ghosts is a construction of a possible narrative that's shielded from that.*

*And it's true that it's passed down from generation to generation in a kind of chain, in both meanings of the word, a sequence, and a shackle.*

*And it's recently been proven that this kind of thing is even embedded into our DNA.*

*But that also can be undone.*

*You spoke of breaks or cuts. They're very important. They can also be broken in our DNA sequence.*

*They disappear. And when do they disappear?*

*When there are conditions, when we seek out conditions to come into contact with what has been encapsulated, this traumatic experience, but no longer terrified that it might cause paralysis, but rather, in order to regain this vital impulse, the drive.*

*And what happens when you regain this vital drive?*

*You open the window in the ghost train, let in the air of the times, and this drive is able to construct a new character based on what's going on.*

*The possibilities expand. And that's actually what matters. It's as if we went through life trying to do that.*

*But you're right. The first narrative of this phantasy theatre exists to build a possibility of a memory, including that of prior generations, that will protect us. But what we really want is to break away. To stop re-enacting the scene of the ghost train.*

## STUDENT

*But what would be the clinical analogy of these ghosts and these cuts? Repetition as the impossibility of remembering? Or repetition as what we are unable to remember?*

## PROFESSOR

*Repetition, the loss of this memory, this ceaseless repetition, is not due to a natural, neurological process of forgetting. Rather, it's related to a strategy of shielding ourselves from what we're unable to recollect, as you said, because it exceeds the limits of what we can absorb, an experience that has been traumatic to this point, and life terrorizes and paralyzes us.*

*The clinical analogy seems evident to me, you're right to bring that up. In clinical practice, we repeat this ghostly scene in the relationship with the analyst. We re-enact the scene there. I repeat my character and project the other character onto the analyst. I also repeat this theatre of ghosts in the words that I find to describe my past and present experiences.*

*And then you asked about the cut. What's the clinical analogy of the cut?*

*The cut is what matters, because it's when a ritual is created, a ritualistic space, a space of such trust that it's possible, little by little, to re-approach the experience that was encapsulated, less fearful that it might completely paralyze you. And little by little you also search for words that might express that which couldn't be absorbed. And this allows for our vital drive to escape this risk of paralysis and germinate once again.*

*The Guarani's have a very wise way of referencing this. To them, the terms "word" and "soul" go hand in hand. It's "word-soul", or "soul-word", because disease, to them, be it physical, emotional, or mental, which are actually closely linked, is when one separates from the other: When the word loses its soul—in the theatre of ghosts the word is without its soul— or when the soul can't find its word, is bereft of its word, or lives in conditions where it will be unable to recover its word, to find it again.*

## STUDENT

*Isn't the psychoanalytic project related to this? Wouldn't the psychoanalytic process be the very means by which the patient may unite word and soul, soul and word?*

## PROFESSOR

*Absolutely. I think it's exactly that. And once again the Guarani help us describe that. The term they use for "throat" is "nest of words".*

*Why? Because they know that humans, in our condition as living beings, as with any other element of the biosphere and the ecosystem, are constantly under the effect of the forces of the great body, the biosphere, the ecosystem, the forces of life, which inseminate us to generate the embryos of future, which lie in these nests. They also know that this nest needs to be tended to, so that these embryos may germinate.*

*What takes place when we're overwhelmed by these embryos in the nest is that it generates an experience of destabilization as if we were out of focus, because the way things are shaped in our lives and in the world are losing their sense, because there is another configuration of forces calling for the creation of other forms of existence.*

*And then this is a lump in the throat. The nest is experienced as a lump in the throat. And this lump in the throat works as a kind of alarm, a vital alarm, life is shouting, "Hey! We can't go on like this!" "Warning! Something must be created!" And this alarm, when it sounds, it summons the desire to act in order to reclaim a vital balance, which, for human beings, is indissociably an emotional, existential balance.*

*If this germination runs its course, it creates something so that this new configuration of life force may find a way to start breathing again.*

*Now, what happens to how our subjectivity works in a colonial-capitalistic regime?*

*We're completely dissociated from this nest of words or from this experience of forces. That is, we're dissociated from our condition as living beings. So when this alarm rings, it distresses us greatly,*

*because we interpret this experience of destabilization, being out of focus, as if the world itself were dissolving, and we along with it. When in fact it is a world that is being dissolved, a world where we are temporarily performing a role.*

*What happens then? Desire will be called to action to regain its balance any way it can, and it will have to do so in haste so we can get away from this fear, from this threat that is completely imaginary.*

*And how does it do that?*

*It regains a balance that is illusory, through the consumption, repetition, imitation, or identification of elements that are already part of our repertoire. And the result of this action of our desire will be the repetition of the same, a reproduction of the status quo, which is quite different from when the germination process is completed and something other is created. This produces change. A transfiguration of reality, which is the ethical destination of life.*

*So when this lump is interpreted as something bad that makes you act quickly to pretend everything is fine, it becomes a nodule. And that's what the Guarani mean when they say that disease is when the word separates from the soul or the soul loses its word.*

#### STUDENT

*To cite these two film references before even starting the conversation might have the purpose of setting a tone, a timbre, through the resonance of certain words. It's as if the conversation had already begun with this reverberation, in each one of us. As if I were seeking, with these questions, to capitalize an ellipsis, to make visible a certain economy of citation that is made through reverberation. It would thus seem to me that admiration is a false form of memory.*

#### PROFESSOR

*Interesting. And let me tell you, these tones and timbres present in the referenced film have inhabited me since much earlier than the beginning of this conversation, long before the tones and timbres of having re-watched this film now, because the tones and timbres of *La Chinoise* have inhabited me since that time, 1967.*

*And they have a strong presence, they reverberate within me, because that was the very moment when my generation was afflicted with a terrible lump in the throat and the presence of the Chinese Revolution in our imaginary germinated to create different scenes, different from the horrible scenes we were witnessing at that time, the dictatorships in Latin America, but also, worldwide, the circus of horrors that is the bourgeois family, the notion of gender, the kind of sexuality we were forced to have, that was a huge lump in our throats.*

*And what ensues, in *La Chinoise*, the tones and timbres, are the tones and timbres of the onset of that germination of a future.*

*And that's what resurfaces in memory. So it resurfaces, and when it does, evidently from that reverberation these tones and timbres, what is to be germinated from them are other words, other gestures, other possibilities for the world, given the huge lump in the throat we have today.*

*Then when you mention the economy in citation through reverberation, that's very interesting and much different, as you say, from a relationship with a work that doesn't listen to these tones and timbres and is too attached to forms, in a kind of idealizing admiration, and what will be produced is the mere repetition of those forms, that is, the germination has been aborted.*

#### STUDENT

*And what happens to a past that is never actualized as present? I am referring to what could have been but never was, and yet lingers in the shadows. I am also referring to those instances when we regret a decision, due to having made a decision, or not having made one. What happens in those cases?*

#### PROFESSOR

*Well, that's one thing that might happen, to wallow in a never-ending melancholic lamentation of what never was.*

*But what I can tell you, at the height of my 70 years of age, is that we must never forget, we must always remember in those moments, to escape that melancholic tone of lamentation that is part of*

*the repetition of that ghostly scene and recall that the germs that were interrupted from becoming something and never did, they don't die. They aren't dead.*

*They're just blocked from germination, waiting for the adequate moment, the adequate conditions, to germinate again.*

*And then, in that present, other futures are produced.*

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

*Under The Sign of Regret*

September 13 – October 4, 2019

Malmö Art Academy Gallery KHM 1

Friisgatan 15, Malmö

*Learning the Language (Present Continuous II)*, 2018

4K video, color, sound, continuous loop (15:25 min cycle).

*Revision*, 2017

16mm film transferred to digital video, color, sound 3 min.

*Everness (Excerpt)*, 2008/2017

16mm film transferred to digital video, black and white, sound, 3 min.

*Long Casting (A Page on Regret)*, 2019

framed archival print, 83 x 57 cm.

## CONCLUSION

*I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was Constantin and Socrates and Attila and a pack of other lovers with queer names and offbeat professions, and another fig was an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet*  
—Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

*The present is nothing other than this un-lived element in everything that is lived. That which impedes access to the present is precisely the mass of what for some reason (its traumatic character, its excessive nearness) we have not managed to live.*  
—Giorgio Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?”

## SOME THINGS ARE MORE SUBJECT TO TIME THAN OTHERS

*Under the Sign of Regret* is pierced with different modes of retrospective thinking. Regret is a perspective through which to look, a particularly tinted lens. On the one hand, one could make the general claim that regret is, at its most basic, a retrospective assessment of wishes and outcomes. On the other hand, the conceptual framework used throughout the text is in some ways revisiting a field opened up by Affect Theory in the mid-nineties. In both instances there is a feeling of arriving too late, of treading over remains, of making meaning of what is left behind (as well as, and importantly, the (negative) potential that persists within broken promises and unrealised plans). Regret in its double function, as I have argued, is not only a way of looking back, but also a way of looking forward, of reassessing what drives us; this is regret's



utopian potential. In either case, what this particular form of looking back, or what retrospection in general results in is giving the subject (person or topic) an appearance of continuity. This, the question of continuity, locates the theme of time, and temporalities, and the fiction making that they require, at the core of this project. At its broadest, *Under the Sign of Regret* is involved with different ways of enduring time. (It now seems clear that the place where we think we are going is not necessarily where we end up. Or at least not entirely.)

There is a tactical doubling that occurs between my recurring methods of appropriation, as applied throughout my artistic practice, and the application of what could be called “the affective turn” to rehabilitate the concept of regret as a non-negative force. To turn towards the past is not in opposition to the future, it is not a negation of it, or of the present for that matter. If anything, to look at the past as something living (haunting or suspended) is to attempt to avoid its instrumental usage in the name of progress. The past, under the sign of regret becomes a form of usable knowledge still in formation. Regret swings between functioning as repressive or imaginative, and it is this hovering, its inability to congeal, to assume a finished form, that is its achievement.

In the first pages of *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Ann Cvetkovich casts a wide and useful net to define the affective turn as “evident in many different areas of inquiry: cultural memory and public cultures that emerge in response to histories of trauma; the role of emotions such as fear and sentimentality in American political life and nationalist politics; the production of compassion and sympathy in human rights discourses and other forms of liberal representation of social issues and problems; discussions of the politics of negative affects, such as melancholy and shame, inspired in particular by queer theory’s critique of the normal; new forms of historical inquiry, such as queer temporalities, that emphasize the affective relations between past and present; the turn to memoir and the personal in criticism as a sign of either the exhaustion of theory or its renewed life; the ongoing legacy of identity politics as another inspiration for the turn to the personal; continuing efforts to rethink psychoanalytic paradigms and the relation between the psychic and the social; the persistent influence of Foucauldian notions of biopower to explain the politics of subject formation and new forms of governmentality; histories of intimacy, domesticity, and private life; the cultural politics of everyday life; histories and theories of sensation and touch informed by phenomenology and cultural geography”.<sup>128</sup>

128 Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 3.

To recuperate the concept of regret, to depathologise it, aligns itself with these tendencies. *Under the Sign of Regret* is soaked, marinated, in all these references and modalities. To work “belatedly” within a field is a way of enacting what Giorgio Agamben questioned in his short essay, “What is the Contemporary?”. In that essay he ponders the question, “of whom and of what are we contemporary?”<sup>129</sup> In his attempt to define the untimely nature of contemporaneity, Agamben states, “Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands”.<sup>130</sup> Or, something like being “caught in a present that began some time ago”.<sup>131</sup>

Agamben’s formulation, although with a different directionality, is not entirely dissimilar to the modern avant-gardist notion of being ahead of one’s time (or being of a time that is not distributed fully equitably). Hence, his articulation of untimeliness (the provenance of the term comes from Barthes via Nietzsche), produces some tension with Peter Osborne’s conceptualization of the co-presence of multiple times as a geo-political question, as seen above. For Agamben, to experience a disjointed relationship to the now enables the space for awareness and criticality (to perceive the darkness of one’s time is how he states it).

The way we understand time, or the way we allow it to act, is a central characteristic of regret as well as of its application (as a mode of production in the arts). As we have seen, being under the sign of regret is being both somewhat out of time and in the co-presence of multiple times. Regret both employs and undoes the linearity of time to fulfil its potentiality. It both endures and traverses time. It endures and projects, or projects because it endures. It is both a straight line and a spiral. The way time is opened up in regret (slowed-down and distanced) is precisely what allows for reflexivity and a different way of understanding the now (grasping both its light and its shadow).

The re-evaluation of the state of “lesser than” acts in resistance to an achievement society characterized by the “excess of positivity,” as described previously. Regret, as a state of in-betweenness, forces the re-evaluation of a self-incorporated and broadly generalized aesthetics

129 Giorgio Agamben, “What is the Contemporary?” in *What is an Apparatus*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39.

130 Ibid. p.40

131 Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 1.

of success. Regret, in its particular relation to time, functions as a form of grit in the assembly line of happiness.

Regret is a mode of resistance while also being a mode of production.

Regret is the form fatigue (depression, etc.) takes in relation to aspirations which cannot be mourned.

The generative aspect of regret either enables a negotiation—and maybe a reconciliation—between the actual and the possible, or at the very least signals to the gap between the two. It either leads towards some form of acceptance of the actual. At its most “accepting” (and generally counter to regret’s potentiality) is perhaps Nietzsche’s embracing of one’s fate (theorized as *amor fati*). And at its most “negotiating”, regret is a striving for an image of oneself, that although it may not reach an ideal, it approximates “good-enough”. Or, to say it with different words, regret attempts to negate the actual by striving for an unexpected, unimagined, formless potential.

Through my engagement with Berlant (specifically her concept of “cruel-optimism”) I have emphasized an interest or curiosity in the ambivalence produced by straddling the two poles described above—that is, the insistence of inhabiting an inhospitable social structure (as a potential site of reflection and transformation). Throughout the text I have engaged with two aspects of regret—its disciplinary quality and its potential to be a site of utopian possibility. However, I have wavered in arguing both that regret’s potential to maintain an aspirational image is utopian, and that the utopian aspect of regret emerges from the ability to deviate or redefine this ideal. A generative mode of regret need not choose only one of these options, but rather navigate tensions between them.

It is perhaps in and through fantasy (through our wishes and ideals) where the personal intersects more directly with the socio-political and where future studies on regret could pick up where this one leaves off.

Working through regret (as aesthetic mode and artistic method) is generative when it embraces regret’s utopian futurity as it links to possibility rather than attempting to normalize the gap

between what exists and how it could or should be. As discussed, what is at stake here is our relationship to difference: between actual and ideal, self and other (or self as other).

The questions persist: Can we accept difference as a non-threatening supplement to sameness? Must we reduce differences to an absolute sameness? Can we accept that facing regret, working through the mourning process it entails, will produce something different (not necessarily lesser) than an ideal, or at its best, something altogether unforeseen? This is perhaps the central query, or the political dimension, of being under the sign of regret: what forms of the present does facing regret allow us to imagine and enact?

At the conclusion of *Anywhere or Not at All*, Peter Osborne traces the history of the concept of “horizon of expectation”, from Edmund Husserl via Martin Heidegger to Reinhard Koselleck.<sup>132</sup> Osborne critiques the notion of “horizon of expectation” for ultimately falling on the side of a progressivist notion of history—the truly unexpected cannot be a horizon, but only the unexpected that is appropriated after the fact constitutes the new. Regret in its negotiating, reconciliatory aspect may actually reinforce thwarted expectations as horizons. In its most utopian, negative, aspect, regret strives for something altogether different (un-thought, un-articulated, a pure form of desire). “It is the concept of the new as the *unexpected* that transforms the relationship between expectation and experience; and it is thus, in the part, the *unexpected* that we come to expect and also value”.<sup>133</sup>

Apparently contrary to this, I have programmatically insisted that through different uses of appropriation, citation, translation, revisiting, retelling, regretting, one strives for difference and not newness. “Creative infidelities”, as Borges would claim, rather than spectacular gestures.<sup>134</sup> However, and simultaneously, I would argue that art (that its function, even) gestures towards potentiality by negating the given (even when it is in direct reference to it).

The question here, as it regards ideality and regret as a mode of production, is how do we work towards maintaining or sustaining the intellectual and affective practice of not knowing?

132 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, 202-211.

133 Ibid., 207.

134 Jorge Luis Borges, “Los traductores de las *1001 Noches*”, in *Historias de la eternidad* (Buenos Aires: Alianza, 1989), 132.

Adam Philips hints at an answer. For him, desire (as it relates to the unknown) can be described as “all the ways we can find of replacing knowledge with hope.” “Desire,” he continues, “is unprepared; it has not been equipped or instructed or even inspired by the past. [...] The past is carried in our expectations, which make our shocks and surprises possible. But the new is anything that by definition modifies such expectations as we have. [...] It [the history of my desiring self] would be a story that would disfigure my wish (or my talent) for coherent narrative. It would be a story about how my stories were interrupted or broke down or didn’t hang together. It would, to all intents and purposes, be a history of accidents and anomalies; all convincingly pleasurable but of uncertain consequence.”<sup>135</sup>

This extended quote could be put to use as a possible description or definition of the creative process and its desired outcomes but also as a way out of thinking beyond horizons. A flight into uncertainty. “Without an irritable reaching”.<sup>136</sup>

I tend to think that with the created object or situation, an artist is trying to work their way out of a previously known territory and attempting to push themselves (and their audience) into the unknown (however infinitesimally short or long that moment of unknowing may be).

To paraphrase Philips, it is not that knowledge is replaced by hope,<sup>137</sup> or at least not entirely. It is rather that knowledge is used (creatively) in a different way, out of context, mis-translated. A certain kind of knowledge is suspended in order to tolerate uncertainty and allow for risks to be taken.

To recap (and conclude once more, *with feeling*): my opening hypothesis was threefold and in turn split into considering regret as an aesthetic mode and as a creative method.

135 Adam Philips, “The Uses of Desires” in *Side Effects* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Harper Perennial, 2006), 179-181.

136 John Keats, in a letter to his brothers dated 1817, introduced the concept of negative capability as he discussed Shakespeare's creativity. “I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

137 Or that, “(1) Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists. They leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach. (2) Rational judgements repeat rational judgements. (3) Irrational judgements lead to new experience.” Sol Lewitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art”, first printed in *0 to 9*, (New York: no.5, January 1969), 3-5.

Firstly, I was to consider regret as a generative force, an inherent stage in the creative process: one that seeds and propels forward. Regret is rather a position, to use the Kleinian term, rather than a stage, as the former connotes a certain back and forth rather than uni-directional progression. Throughout the text I have claimed that regret as applied to the arts has its use, but remained cautious of assigning it too great a value. Regret exemplifies both a certain way of working as well as a particular way of reading, where the “good-enough” is recuperated as a gain or at least not a complete failure. As a mode of production regret is engaged with endings that are seemingly not over: suspended agency and different ways of haunting, as I have described and exemplified via Nauman, Fernández, or my *Index* work.

Through suspension, that is, the slowing down of movement (in itself a defining characteristic of different modes of depression), as well as through haunting, regret enables a critique of the aesthetics of success. Regret opens up the necessary distance or (untimely) delay for creative imagining (both as mode and method). (Imaginations that are not necessarily paranoid but rather reparative, to apply Sedgwick’s terminology.<sup>138</sup>)

The way regret becomes a non-conformist way of resistance to the now ties in to what was the second axiom of the hypothesis: to consider regret as a bittersweet drama of adjustments (between who we are and who we aspired to be, or between what we make and our shortcomings).

Regret as an aesthetic mode gives a different colouring to reality. The colour pallet of regret, its tone of light is, as we have seen, related to the casting of shadows, of shadowing oneself, of nagging inner shadows. (I refer to light or colour here rather than a particular image as I have not been able to identify an iconography of regret; nothing as clear as how Albrecht Dürer’s *Melancholia I*, is identified with the melancholic state. This is perhaps because regret, as a mode, does not take form in the same way as melancholia. Suspension is not the same as complete stasis: there is minute movement in regret, it is, as we have seen, a very particular way of employing time and narrative.)

138 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-152.

Both as mode and as method regret implies an assessment, a way of measuring up, of comparison between two similar yet distinct images. My work with Suely Rolnik, *Learning The Language (Present Continuous II)* is a case in point.

The drama of regret, what it dramatizes, are the consequences and ways of carrying forth an interpretation. In this sense, similarly to tragedy, regret links between language (verbal, visual, fantasy), decoding and action. Its bittersweet aftertaste is, as we have seen, a measure of our abilities to cope with the misalignments (misreadings) of individual (idealized) stories of success. In other words, bittersweet is a different way of naming our allowance for diversion.

The third, and final, axiom of the hypothesis was to consider regret as a way of questioning perspective itself: that is, the place from where we stand and decode, chose, and re-evaluate that decision (distance, visibility, view point, and most importantly, time). Regret as duration, the duration of regret, the time it takes to regret, the time of regret, and the act of reflection or metacognition are threaded throughout the text and the selected art-works analyzed. Telescoping through time (as in the case of Louise Lawler) or revisiting and revising previous works (as in the case of my own work) were meant as illustrations of this. The verb tense of regret (past/present/future) and its implied grammar (linear *vs.* spiral narrativity, for example) has also been central in helping to build my understanding of the different shades of meaning of regret.

The different uses of time under the sign of regret are ways of intermingling fact, fiction, and desire and illustrate the full extent of our complexities: wants, wishes, ideals, and what we are willing to settle for, or not. Regret in this sense is a way of organizing ourselves, of positioning ourselves spatially and temporarily (in the sense that regret is both a dwelling and an insistence: it is both a remainder and a reminder).

How one gives form to that cohabitation (of fact, fiction, and desire), how one endures that form, conforms or insists on its reformulation (the degrees of flexibility or divergence from an ideal, our commitment to change, how we relate with the actual, really) is, finally, what is at the core of being under the sign of regret.

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Alejandro Cesarco, *Long Casting (A Page on Regret)*, 2019  
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**Alejandro Cesarco and Lynne Tillman**  
**Public conversation held at the Renaissance Society, Chicago**  
**December 6, 2017**

The following interview with author and critic Lynne Tillman continues the method employed in the video series *Learning the Language (Present Continuous)*. Tillman is queried about her writing practice as a way for me to speak about some of my own tropes: translation as a form of reading as writing, citation, influences, inheritance, and memory as a form of fiction.

**Alejandro Cesarco:** I kind of over-prepared, but I hope that through my questions you'll understand my interest in your writing and where I think our methodologies and interests overlap.

In your conversation with writer Harry Mathews, you opened with the following question: "I'm intrigued by your idea that reading is an act of creation for which writers provide the means . . . I wonder how this directly affects your writing?" I start with this question because in the videos in the show, in both *Everness* and its remake, *Revision*, the character says, "It's literature that produces readers. And great texts change the ways in which we read," and I wanted to know if you agreed with these statements.

**Lynne Tillman:** Yes, I do. Harry's idea seems right to me, and your idea as stated in the videos—that literature produces the reader—also. An author's interpretation of what he or she has written may have nothing to do with the experience of the reader. Both you and Harry Mathews would concur, I believe, that what we "read" creates us as readers. I think that's true. What you've grown up reading from an early age has enormous influence and impact on what you will read later, even in opposition, and why, and how you will understand it. So, what's

139 Included in Alejandro Cesarco, *Song*, ed. Alejandro Cesarco and Solveig Øvstebø (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 2018), 56-73.

on your shelves as a kid, whether or not your parents have books, or an experience you had when a librarian helped you find a book when you were little—those things affect how you read. And what. In that sense, literature creates you, the reader.

**AC:** One way that I had understood the quote was that writing as such doesn't really exist, that it's always rewriting, that reading always comes first.

**LT:** That's reader-response theory. You are quoting from an interview I did with Harry many years ago [*Bomb*, January 1989]. He was a great American writer who died last January. His idea was that the writer is the first reader of his or her own work, but the text is something open, for which the reader becomes the creator, in a sense. And you, the maker, certainly can't control the meaning of any art you make or any book you write. If you think you can, you're fooling yourself. You might have an intention, but when a reader or viewer sees it and responds to it in some way, it becomes alive—or not. I think Harry believed that, and that's also how I understand Roland Barthes.

**AC:** I want to continue with that Mathews conversation. He says, “Writing is never anything else but translation; ultimately, a translation which cannot be identified.” And for me, that brought to mind ideas of authorship, or collective authorship, but also appropriation and strategies of citation, which, as you know, appear prominently in my work. In relation to this idea of collective or networked authorship, I wanted to also read something you wrote about David Wojnarowicz: “One artist can and often does encourage another. One artist's courage in making, or what another perceives as such, becomes another's space to take up. Courage and encourage have a similar root: in Latin, *cor* means heart. To have a heart is to give heart. To give heart is to embrace and charge others with a kind of love.” This always struck me as a wonderful synthesis of the creative process, or at least my creative process. Could you explain or expand on the idea that “to give heart is to embrace and charge others with a kind of love”? I'm curious about what exactly is being charged, or what definition of “charged” you were you thinking about. Or, what are the responsibilities of participating in this circle of charged encouragement?

**LT:** There are about four different questions there. But going back to translation, I agree that what Harry means is that nothing that you make is the thing itself. If I'm writing something, I don't put that thing on the page, I am interpreting it. Somebody else might write about or



to the same object differently. So, everything is translation, and the artist is making something from something else, whether realistic, figurative, or entirely abstract. It can never be the actual object. It's a question of the Real with a capital *R* not being available. We mediate through interpretation, and so on.

The essay about Wojnarowicz is in the reissue of a book, the first book of David Wojnarowicz's that was published; it's called *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape*. He was still alive while this was being planned and designed, and he was very much part of putting it together. In it, there were interviews with his friends, some of whom talked about him while he was alive and some after he died. The editor of the first book [Melissa Harris] was also the editor of the revised and added-to book. She absolutely thought he was going to live to see the book come out; she was visiting him in the hospital and talking about the book with him one day, and a few days later he died. So, he didn't see the book come out. But that was the way AIDS worked. Somebody would seem to have a little strength, and then they were gone. It was horrible. For the revision, I was asked if I would talk about influence in relationship to David's legacy. I thought of the anxiety of influence, Harold Bloom's idea. That was coming from his notion that poetry was learned by poets reading other poets early on, and that this earlier poetry would always thus be in their poetry—therefore, the anxiety of influence. That seemed to me to be a very negative concept, influence as pejorative. So, rather than thinking about it in the negative terms of anxiety, I thought, well, what if you embrace influence? Many artists have done this. With writing, it happens too. Sometimes differently; people will think in a pretentious way, “I was influenced by Shakespeare.” I always find that hilarious. I say my greatest influence was Ray Charles; that seems much more sensible to me, you know, rhythm and language together. So, I wanted to turn influence on its head. I often take a position in opposition—not in a way that is necessarily clear to the reader, but it's an idea that motivates me. I wanted to take on Harold Bloom in my little way and think about what it is that other writers and artists have done for me. I thought about how people will say, “I was very encouraged by your work, it gave me courage to do my work.” And then, when I looked up courage, and found that the root, *cor*, means heart, that just seemed to make a lot of sense to me. And charging work, charging the mind of someone else with this concept of “with heart,” “with love . . .”

**AC:** But it's also a demand or an accusation, right? It is energizing and charging, in the sense of an electrical charge. But it's also a demand for repaying something, or an accusation: "I'm charging you of *X* or *Y*."

**LT:** When I say "charge," I mean like an electrical charge. See, you can't control this! So, if I encourage you, which is why I'm here talking with you—I was supposed to have influenced you—do you have to repay me for that? How do you mean?

**AC:** There is a dialogue happening, and there is a bouncing off of somebody. And maybe it's not a repayment per se, but there is something like the settling of a debt happening in some ways.

**LT:** But that debt isn't like the federal deficit.

**AC:** Yeah, it's not monetary, and it's not necessarily specific or concrete. You were saying that Harry Mathews thought that he was his first reader. I agree with that, but there's also the idea of working toward somebody else outside of yourself. And in my case, it's often other artists.

**LT:** When you're writing something or when you're making a video, you are your first viewer, you are your first reader. I don't think he meant that one is not interested in others. But the initial reader or viewer is the person who makes it, and then you, and your critical eye, is what's absolutely necessary to produce something, that you think is worthy or interesting. But this notion of debt—that's interesting, because it also is a way of saying that somebody else's influence should be recognized.

**AC:** Exactly. Maybe *debt* is not the right word, but there's an allowance that happens; somebody enables something else to happen.

**LT:** I went to see a Louise Bourgeois show at MoMA, a drawing show, and I realized how many artists had been "using" her drawings, and what an enormous influence she was on so many artists. That was interesting to me. It's not that people were doing what she was doing, but you could feel her mind and hand behind some of it. But then, there are people who think that any influence would make a work merely derivative. That's the problem: if you make something and say you've been influenced by somebody else, will the work be con-

sidered derivative? People are worried about that, and that's what the anxiety of influence that Bloom was discussing is. There are people who are not adding anything to that original source, I think, which is a curious problem, because it's often hard to discern or agree about.

**AC:** I think that is the difference between repeating and duplicating. There's difference in repetition, but duplication is about sameness. For example, in Sherrie Levine's work, there is difference in her performative gestures and reframings. But duplication would be an identical copy of something that doesn't add anything.

**LT:** Right. When Sherrie Levine did it, let's say, with her Walker Evans photographs, you're looking at a gesture. It's highly conceptual. But then there were other kinds of work that don't have that added . . . value, let's say.

**AC:** I want to read something in relation to this idea of citation, which is not unrelated to what we are talking about. It's from *To Find Words*, which is one of your Paige Turner novellas: "To write a story is to be in a state of hysteria. Writers call up from their minds and bodies (I do not make a separation) memories, ideas, fragments of thoughts, images. The fragmented story is symptomatic, and like a symptom of the hysteric, who cannot retrieve the whole, it is stymied by a regrettable and important loss from a particular scene that would make the story complete. But even the narrative that we think of as well-formed, the traditional narrative with a beginning, middle, and end, that too is of necessity a fragment, which the writer, to counter loss, is impelled to produce. All writing is hysterical. The body always speaks." Classic psychoanalysis would define a symptom as occurring where there could not be words, or where words were forbidden or unavailable. So, I'm curious to ask if you could elaborate a bit on this notion of the fragment as symptom or the relation between the symptom and writing.

**LT:** Particularly in relationship to narrative, which is how I was thinking about it. *To Find Words*, I think, is my only work that's about a writer. Maybe I've written a couple of others, but I've mostly tried to stay away from that. The character, Paige Turner, is trying to write something, anything. I have her writing different stories and different voices, different fragments, within the novella. We never get whole stories, if there were any. The classic idea of the hysteric is that whatever the problem is has gotten locked in the body, and the body is somehow replicating it and showing it through certain symptoms. You've seen those Charcot photographs, and other photographs from the nineteenth century of people arrested in

certain poses. I was thinking of the inability to find words more generally as a writer's problem. In that sense, everyone becomes a hysteric. And I was thinking about the fantasies we develop instead of being able to live out whatever it is that we are repressing. Somehow, in writing, you're trying—often not consciously—to find the words that would articulate what it is that you are unable to articulate. And it's a constant process of working-against, or working-through, psychoanalytically. Is that an answer to a very complicated question?

**AC:** Yes, but I was thinking of the fragment in relation to citation; as displacing, transferring, dislocating . . .

**LT:** Right, quotation applies more to *Love Sentence*. That's a Paige Turner novella also. I wrote it many years ago, and it's funny when you hear things that you've written, and you know you would not write them again, because you don't need to write them. One thing has allowed me to arrive somewhere else, to do something else. At that point, I was very much thinking about the notion of a traditional narrative, and my own interest in something that was both narrative and not traditional, to use that term. I was interested in a coherent narrative, but coherent in my terms. I hope that's the case in this new novel, *Men and Apparitions*. I worked very hard to make even what seem like fragments of ideas fold into a coherent structure. It's this guy who is always himself, and whether he's thinking theoretically, or talking about his feelings, or a memory from the past, he's that same character. It seemed to me very important to show how theoretical thinking and one's own biography often move together. That was something I was trying to do. So, the voice is extremely important, how to maintain that voice. At that time, when I wrote *To Find Words*, I was reacting against the idea that you had to abandon narrative entirely, that that was the only way to be innovative. All these terms are horrible, they really are so unhelpful.

Because when it comes to the so-called “experiment” in writing, to me, when it looks like an experiment, it's not an experiment, because it's too obvious, it's a genre called “experimental.” I was trying to think about why people thought that everything had to be fragmented, and that the resistance to narrative was also a great political gesture. Now, there are all different kinds of narratives, and narratology is a huge, very complicated field. When one is writing, it only becomes more complicated. The more you write, the more complicated it gets. There are certain narratives that just shut everything down, in my opinion, stories that have no space in them. And there are other stories that do the opposite, but use all different kinds of modes

to do so. It really depends. This is where I think it has to do with postmodernism: the form is available to you, but it's a question of how you use it.

Speaking of fragments, there is something I want to talk to you about. One of your videos in *Song* that I like a lot is *Interlude*. It's a very curious piece, because it has a retrospective affect, and effects, with which you create the story. First we hear music, and we see what appears to be a blank screen. That's going on, and we're hearing music, and we see the word *interlude*, so now you believe this is some kind of interlude. We see a woman's face for a moment, and then the video returns to this so-called blank screen. A fragment creates a narrative. Because when I see it again, I'm aware, in this loop, that what seemed to me empty space or blank space could have been her imagining something; her consciousness; or an unconsciousness. But seeing her face even briefly had a tremendous impact on what it was I had watched and was watching. I don't know how others felt about it, but it was really almost revelatory to me, and it made me think of the Kuleshov experiments.

**AC:** You've written about that in relation to Joan Jonas.

**LT:** Yes—I love Kuleshov, who was a Soviet linguist, and sort of the daddy of editing. At that time, in the early twentieth century, the interest in linguistics and semiotics was coming together. He was working with film, and he realized that the order in which he placed an image affected its interpretations. So, if it was a woman's face with a smile, followed by a knife, just a picture of a knife, followed by a waterfall, a viewer creates the meaning of those pictures, always in relationship to their order. In a way, that's how I thought of *Interlude*. It's not that there were other pictures, but I'm asked as a viewer, I think, to imagine other pictures before and after. I don't know if you thought of it that way.

**AC:** Hmm. No, I hadn't really thought of it that way. But it's interesting. For me, it's more like a portrait of a memory, or a memory landscape, or something like that. It's more about the inability to repress the memory or the inability to forget. It's about a recurring emotion that is beyond our control, which is very much something that you talk about in your new book, *Men and Apparitions*.

**LT:** But whose memory is it?

**AC:** It's whoever this imagined self is that's making the work, and then it becomes the viewer's memory, which is what you are talking about; you're waiting in anticipation for her to return.

**LT:** And it's interesting, too, because when you're faced with a blank screen for a while, you wonder what it is you are being subjected to. But then, in that brief moment where we see this woman, it all makes sense.

**AC:** Yeah, but it's not quite a blank screen. It's a film leader that's passing, with its grain and scratches and so forth. It's almost like the physicality of time that is passing and that we are witnessing. And then she appears and makes the waiting worthwhile, or not.

**LT:** Yes, it has a narrative payoff, doesn't it? That's interesting. When I used to watch a lot of structuralist film, until I came back to my senses, I would be watching film grain all the time. And finally, I asked myself, Why? Why am I watching all this film grain?

**AC:** Usually people ask of a show or an artwork, "What is it about?" And I'd rather the question be, "What does it produce?" I'd love to get a sense of what you thought this show, *Song*, produced. In your new novel, the narrator quotes Beckett as saying, "All art is the same: an attempt to fill an empty space." So maybe the same question asked differently is: how would you characterize the space being filled in the show?

**LT:** That's a very interesting question. I would say that you're allowing the space to have its own presence. That's one thing. There is a lot of open space in the gallery, and you're not trying to fill it up, which I really appreciated. The elliptical nature of the work is very appealing to me. I watched the videos also at home, so I've seen them several times. And I remember seeing *Everness* installed at Murray Guy ten years ago. I think, Alejandro, there's a kind of lightness in your work, even when it's about rather grave subjects: say, when it's talking about tragedy, as it does in *Everness*, or this sense of memory as something that we can't get rid of, but also can't get hold of. I think of your work as elliptical. I guess that has to do with the fragment. In *Vanitas (From Remorse to Regret)* you use writing from James Salter and others—and although I did not read the original sources, I read about the mother and the father—about memory, and about how an image fosters certain sorts of thoughts. But again, because you're interested in narrative, you're using text on the one side and image on the other. Of

course, the text is also an image. But the flowers, the fruits, the soap bubbles: you could even say they are prosaic images, things that we might associate with memory. One section of *Men and Apparitions* was about imagining a garden. There, I really hoped the reader would imagine walking into a garden. To me, I was writing a film, making it possible for a reader to imagine imagining. I used the garden in the same way that you used flowers. And that's interesting. Why do we take something that is used and try hard not to have it be a cliché? It's more about the availability and the resonance that something can have, precisely because it is often used.

**AC:** It's familiar.

**LT:** Right. And I think you were doing that with that piece.

**AC:** I have no problem with the cliché. I'm happy to go there. I think there's something perverse and economic about the cliché.

**LT:** Well, both those things could be true. But in writing, I would say the use of a cliché has to be very carefully worked with, because it's contextual. Sometimes it can give the sentence a lot of bounce, resonance; sometimes it can just be boring.

**AC:** Let me read one last passage of your work. It's from *Men and Apparitions*, the final section of the first part of the book:

“Some people want to forget, just go on. Not me. My speculation is that never having to remember will be an add-on for future brains. Memory implants will also be available, seem natural. The synthetic knowledge memory servers or providers will first be expensive, then cheap. The ante will always go up. The lobe region of the brain, for memory, will wither, turn into an atavism. Like the appendix, it might erupt with infection. Killer memories. Learning will be mute. Chip in, chip out. Could be a good thing, but depends on who makes the chip and on their uses. Without accrued memory, people won't have a conscience, remorse, or guilt, all of which depend upon memory work. If it's not remembered, no one regrets a past bad or good act. Forget about it. Memorials and monuments will be built for a while, to assure or prick conscience, but there will be more instances of public hypocrisy, since in the future the dead won't be owed anything.”

I chose this section because I'm particularly curious about that last phrase, "the dead won't be owed anything"—again, this idea of debt. To my mind, the work that you were talking about, that used the wilted flowers or the rotten fruits, *Vanitas (From Remorse to Regret)*, has very much to do with ideas of regret, obviously. And I wonder if the . . .

**LT:** That section comes after a lot of other things through which the character gets very involved with death, both in terms of hospice care and other events. I've been thinking a lot about this, and about memory. It's always been important to me to try to remember even people's phone numbers, just as a way to keep my memory going. But now, of course, people don't remember things like that, because they have them in their cell phones. So, absent memory, what will we have in our minds? How can we feel conscience-stricken if we don't remember anything? And are we heading toward that? In a sense, what I'm saying is that if we get to a point where no one remembers anything, and therefore no one has any conscience, then those people who die, who have lived without memory and without conscience, won't be owed anything.

**AC:** I'm wondering if the dead could also be our previous selves. I wanted to tie that idea to some kind of notion of regret.

**LT:** You would have no regret. How could you have a previous self if you would not remember yourself? Let's say you have memory chips—and I'm sure this is going to happen—to remember certain things; rather than having a calendar in Google, it's going to be in your chip. So, you don't have to know. It will get more and more complex as it goes on. I mean, I'm not a visionary, that's for sure, but it seems all of this tech stuff will be very possible. It makes me think about people who have Alzheimer's. A friend told me about her mother recently: her mother is not completely out of it yet, and said to her daughter, "Who am I?" because she couldn't remember anything. To me that's chilling. But if we start not remembering, if we think it's not important to remember and that things can remember for us, what happens to us? What will happen to human beings? What will be "in" there? Will we be clearing our minds, supposedly for other things?

**AC:** It's almost the opposite of Funes, the Borges character who can't forget, and who is paralyzed by remembering absolutely everything.



**LT:** Well, I think in a way this is the answer to that. And I don't mean answer in a positive sense, but in the sense of a response, whether it's good or bad. If you think about how important memory has been to the way we think about the twentieth century, particularly World War II and the Holocaust, the idea that people will forget those events, or that people who never knew of them in one way or another will have no recognition of them, that strikes horror in people. Now, why? What does it mean to forget something that is never experienced? What were the lessons that were also learned from, let's say, Hiroshima? In the mid-twentieth century, there were these horrible events happening that shaped the second half of the twentieth century, and coming generations could have no idea what that really means. Maybe they study it in American Studies. We're afraid of those people, the people who don't remember the things we think are important.