

Art in Solvency and Exhaustion: notes

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The theorist Jack Halberstam quoted Nietzsche from *The Gay Science* when discussing the idea of cultural exhaustion that appears to define our current moment in which systems and demands are at odds and everything appears about to come crashing down. It appears the moment of solvency and exhaustion made manifest in daily life. Nietzsche:

Living in a constant chase after gain compels people to expend their spirit to the point of exhaustion. Virtue has come to consist of doing something in less time than someone else. Hours in which honesty is permitted have become rare, and when they arrive one is tired and does not only want to "let oneself go" but actually wishes to stretch out as long and wide and ungainly as one happens to be... Soon we may well reach the point where people can no longer give in to the desire for a *vita contemplativa* (that is, taking a walk with ideas and friends) without self-contempt and a bad conscience.

Halberstam observes:

Even writing about exhaustion tires me out. Here I sit at the rag end of another day, a day filled with details, bureaucratic obligations, demands, requests, meaningless electronic messages that accumulate without saying anything, a day when I am tired not of life but of the forms of "living" that are required of us institutionally. How do you counter exhaustion? Where does energy come from? Caffeine? Sugar? Exercise? The unexpected?

He asks: “What is this exhaustion that saturates both leisure and work time in an era of collapse?”

It is within this context that I return to ideas I have been discussing about art, its ability to come undone and undo, destroyed art, and an idea of solvency. Trying to make the moment permeable, the art impulse yields forms that are likewise solvent. It is this intersection of permeability that the destroyed object prompts most overtly. Crossing an expansive moment when form is most solvent, to be here and yet it is not, solvent in terms of capable of undoing (dissolving) yet also in the sense of solvency, to make secured and firm. Therefore, in this an art object points to itself, as well as what is imperceptible and distinct, ensnaring both in the cascading of the moment and in prolonging this attempted crossing and touching. To recognize the instability of the art object, we can return again to its solvent form, or in an ability of art to posit something that at the same time is an undoing, which both Bataille and Nancy suggest. In art’s occasion, there is a struggle to make (or if not make then reveal as) the moment permeable—something capable of being returned to, as well as set apart. If we approach this understanding with solvency, as an operation, akin to an object that Scheherazade attempts to hew with her stories in *One Thousand and One Nights*—as a method for forestalling a verdict¹ and extending her moments against foreclosure and maintain their permeability, or likewise with Sarah Winchester’s task of attempting to build a metaphorical house that never ceased with her construction of the Winchester House.² We might better perceive this conjunctive impulse that

¹ In *One Thousand and One Nights*, each day a king marries a new virgin only to behead her the following morning as unfaithful. Scheherazade was able to stay her execution by stretching a story each night and ending in the middle so that it had to be continued into the next night’s installment, thus extending her own life.

² The Winchester Mystery House is located in San Jose, California, USA. It was under constant around-the-clock construction by Sarah Winchester for thirty-eight years, beginning in 1884 and until her death in 1922.

behaves in peculiar ways, finding it again in the large melting wax candle sculptures of Urs Fischer.

However, first, to understand a work of art and its capacity to recapture the moment that counts, making the moment permeable, as something that can be returned to and evading the foreclosure of what appears set, we can begin with the attempts of Scheherazade. One in a long line of brides, each sentenced to death after her wedding night to the same king, Scheherazade steps forward, attempting something other with her dispelling of conclusions. Misstep and her moments end, but walking nimbly, and art hovers and erupts from this impulse, stretches out and yawns. She constructs her nest in the moment of Bataille's fissure, playing with the rupture between its passing and the moment itself. Caressing and crossing between the finality where the cut takes hold and everything becomes fixed (the king's death edict) and the fissure of that moment when it is made permeable—assumptions regarding outcomes collapse—in an extension of the moment that counts. Attempting to suspend while renewing constantly, to give form but also reach intimacy in something that cannot truly be made fixed in its changeability (passing moments). With the forms she posits, she ruptures a foreclosure, recapturing the moment and expanding this rift, inhabiting it and unfixing it and creating something permeable that might be returned to night after night. Taking us each evening back into its midst, and this is what art attempts. If an image is worth one thousand words, as the cliché goes, then the action of Scheherazade is about what exceeds in its one thousand and one-ness, through this act of fissure and breaking of an existing pattern or expectation to return us to here.

With the first night, a king lays awake and hears Scheherazade's story, which enlarges and draws out until it meets the morning where it leaves him each night, again in the middle. Thus the king spares her that first night, undoing an edict (in which dawn equals death, but also dawn and the next day) if only temporarily, yet each night the story expands until it is a second story, other

stories, each capturing and recapturing the moment in the rupture between the concluding edict (her death sentence) and its setting aside in this collapsing of the moment. Night after night her story continues, and each night a foreclosure is forestalled, set apart, put aside, unfolded into new shape, yet is also a crossing of this separation of that which falls away in the action of the storytelling. The moment is expanded in the midst of falling away and stepping forward, and this is perhaps what art attempts through its solvency in form to consummate.

To capture and endlessly recapture in the middle or midst of its otherness and intimacy, returning us again to the moment that counts. Bataille shed happy tears for a cousin he does not know, whom he thought dead on a ship sinking, only to discover he still lives, to be here yet not, *impossible yet there it is*, in that moment when what we know collapses yet we are still here.³ What art attempts, beyond the device of a cliff hanger (for to see it as cliff hanger misses its subtlety), this ability to catch us unawares in the moment that counts, here yet other, never finished but always caught up somehow here, and that is the trick of art even in its destruction. Halfway through at dawn, the ability to carry forward into the dawning moment; there is art to this forestalling, and with its tallying, sparring amid the permeability of the moment. Scheherazade practiced an art of deferral, attempting a maneuver to postpone closures and undo what appeared fixed. Hewing in order to unwrap (like Perec's sentences that read both ways),⁴ she implemented a process of undoing through creation—in a manner that appeared inescapable—and in the process uncovered creation in the form of deferral of its final architecture (against form and through form). For each of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, she gathers sinews from a previous night's tale—creating an undoing in what was foregone—unraveling its apparent resolution, and thus folding the king's edict, expanding the moment and space of her life.

³ Bataille, G. *The Accursed Share. Volume II, the History of Eroticism. Volume III, Sovereignty*. New York: Zone Books, 1991. p 205.

⁴ Perec, Georges. *Le Grand Palindrome*. 1969. <http://homepage.urbanet.ch/cruci.com/lexique/palindrome.htm> (accessed March 13, 2015).

And here is the rub: how is something that posits and is aimed towards assertion (the statements of art and the image), at the same time solvent? Nancy describes the operation of the image that sets apart in its attempt to cross, which exposes a dual nature. It simultaneously houses “a withdrawal and a passage that, however, does not pass”⁵ and which causes the distinct or otherness to come forward. With the image:

The distinct bounds toward the indistinct and leaps into it, but it is not interlinked with it. The image offers itself to me, but it offers itself as an image (once again there is ambivalence: only an image / a true image . . .). An intimacy is thus exposed to me: exposed, but *for what it is*, with its force that is dense and tight, not relaxed, reserved, not readily given.⁶

Thus, what exerts a solvency in ambivalence as Nancy notes, with its status as, “only an image / a true image” also exposes an intimacy, which Bataille might term *the intimacy encountered in his moment that counts*. It is this operation of putting forth, but what is also withdrawn, which undoes through the moment of intimacy.

Solvency is seen as a solution and antidote for dissolution, yet the two are intricately joined in solvent. To think in terms of an antidote is to make things other to how they are. In this sense fixing (making fixed) undoes, which again draws attention to the doubling in this word *solvency*. Something hides in this word *solvent*, where solvency means further layoffs, selling off of cultural artefacts, privatization, austerity, and extracting finances from individuals where none exists for

⁵ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Ground of the Image*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. p 3.

⁶ Ibid.

the sake of imposing a formal idea of solvency as an image of solvent State. Moreover, perhaps this is the legacy of treating people like an image. However, art and the image also house this tension, which while giving form, likewise, it undoes through its ability to draw out, focus, and collapse. This solvency in the form exerts as a force, which Nancy sees as other to form: “It is what does not show itself but rather gathers itself into itself, the taut force on this side of forms or beyond them, but not as another obscure form: rather as the other of forms.”⁷

In this, art and the operation of the image become the cohabitation of form with its other, and that gives insight into its instability, as well as to its force and tendencies. This gathering taut force is akin to what Scheherazade hones through her ability to capture and recapture us with the moment that counts, this fissure between the thing before us and something other, which for Nancy, draws its tension through “a setting apart and keeping separate which at the same time is a crossing of this separation.”⁸ Solvent form is art’s facility to reveal an Other of form through this attempted crossing. Further, this is the moment that counts for Scheherazade, the gathering and ability to set apart the foreclosure of a king’s death edict, putting what appears fixed and foregone aside, and instead expanding the moment and crossing what is beyond with what is here. Moreover, this is what solvent form does, this Scheherazade-like deed that plays with the moment and its ability to be here, attempting to posit it and reveal it in its solvency, while drawing us back into this moment of intimacy.

⁷ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Ground of the Image*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. p 3.

⁸ Ibid.

Perhaps here is also the danger of art: it reveals the moment in its solvency, and while proposing one approach, at the same time, it collapses. It pulls back from utility with its aversion to conclusions and outcomes through its return to the moment. Louise Bourgeois took inspiration from the story of Scheherazade but observes, “Scheherazade talked to ward off castration (assassination). She talks as a last defense. It is a pretty miserable motive, useless and dangerous, silence is wonderful.”⁹

Yet to step out of silence is to act, to give something impalpable form; however, it is perhaps to mistake the impalpable,¹⁰ in Nancy’s words, for silence. For in absolute silence there is no attempt toward the crossing of this thing before us, with the otherness or impalpability that is distinct yet somehow hovers around, clings to, and inhabits form. Feasibly, Bourgeois doth protest too much in an attempt to distance (it is common to find faults in the traits of others that we also possess), and instead mistakes silence for art’s ability to discretely tuck an activity behind the apparent silence of the thing itself and make the moment of experience permeable.

Therefore, in this sense, art is *miserable* in that it is inadequate, and it is always an attempt, never concluded or foregone even in its putting forth, that must constantly be returned to and permeable to the present moment or fall into an edict of what is foregone and passes away. It might be more accurate to say the impalpability in art is *wonderful, useless, and dangerous*, and that is what is at stake in art and for Scheherazade.

In attempting to allow us access or to cross into the impalpable, art is dangerous in that it achieves its gravity through what is not exactly there or is other (impossible yet there it is). We

⁹ Bourgeois, Louise, Marie-Laure Bernadac, and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923-1997*. London: Violette, 1998.

¹⁰ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Ground of the Image*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005. p 2.

hear murmurs of it with works like Bourgeois's *Couple II*,¹¹ as an attempted crossing between the intangible and what is presented in the moment before us; contact in an attempted consummation. An object grapples with its own inertness and attempts to cross over this to something else. Gaining its influence through a claim to be more than just the tactile thing before us, gathering itself into itself in Nancy's words or housing something that captures and recaptures in Bataille's, it draws our focus to the taut force on this side of forms and strives to reveal something encased within that is rather the other of form. *Couple II* consists of simple things: a glass and wood vitrine encasing two horizontal figures, pillow-like stuffed—a man and woman (or perhaps genderless)—disinterestedly embrace, one atop the other. Their cushioned, potato sack construction in dark fabric emphasizing a childlike perspective on copulation, while the vitrine sets the piece as an object to be studied like a taxidermy specimen more at home in a natural history museum. Objects such as these attempt to capture and vitrify the moment (both literally and figuratively), making it an object to pass light through, a window of sorts, to extend this moment of contact, approach from all angles, and rupture inert through touching what is other and not directly housed in the physical objects. What is it that is not the potato-like construction, the dark fabric or stitching, yet is here? Silently whispering to prevent its own demise and reverting back to simple piles of fabric, stuffing, and a glass case. Art introduces the object with something else, something it is not truly capable of housing, and like Nancy's image, it attempts to become a crossing site for the impalpable or what is distinct from the thing itself.

Like much work from Bourgeois, often playful or naive in its construction, this sculptural object revels in what can only be hinted or pointed to, with often-ominous results. Stressing this is the gasp that the two horizontal objects are indeed headless, and the one underneath (the woman?) has her leg bracketed into a metal brace, and that the feet are connected and contiguous into the

¹¹ Bourgeois, Louise. *Couple II*. Wood and glass vitrine, fabric, stuffing, leg brace. 1996. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo NY.

other's, so that each polyp figure is instead another portion of the same mass bent over itself—not two figures but a damaged whole folded. While plush, there is something densely smothering about these figures, like over-stuffed pillows pressed to a sleeper's face, drawing out this moment that counts that is here before us. As if through depriving it of enough oxygen, without ultimately killing it, we might in fact be able to draw this moment out, perhaps forever, put it in a box, but forever is a very long time. Bourgeois sets aside the forgone conclusion of the object itself through the crossing into something that is other to it, returning and capturing our attention in the vitrified moment, which the art object expands and attempts to defer. Is the silence Bourgeois invokes as a charm against the forgone and closure, instead simply a muffling of the chatter of this permeable moment of rupture in which the object exerts its influence?

Thus in silence one sidesteps—yet still this wind blows, while overlooking something inherent in the creative act—with the tendency to undo and circumvent what might appear fixed; fixed yet not. Less of a last defense than an expanding of presence; it is *useless* in a manner of speaking, perhaps, in that the method draws needless emphasis away from conclusions and the utility of closure. However, through creation an attempt is made to inhabit the space of what may be forgone, the seductive and worthwhile space of extension. These methods are dangerous indeed, having the ability to both challenge and be contested: a cat and mouse with termination. And herein lays its mystery. We spin yarns to exercise our virility, explain away the inevitable, fill space to distance ourselves from demise, but this is only apparent. Presented with knots, we disentangle to undo and make, attempting to circumvent what looms. These are attempted gestures of forming in perpetuity, but perhaps in this they fail if not for the untangling and retangling of the moment that gives art its form. Moreover, this is what Bourgeois's objects say in their silence.