
Theses and Dissertations

Summer 2017

Art unto death

Stephen W. Evans
University of Iowa

Copyright © 2017 Stephen W. Evans

This thesis is available at Iowa Research Online: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/5750>

Recommended Citation

Evans, Stephen W.. "Art unto death." MFA (Master of Fine Arts) thesis, University of Iowa, 2017.
<https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/5750>.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd>

 Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#)

ART UNTO DEATH

by

Stephen W. Evans

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Art in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

August 2017

Thesis Supervisor: Laurel Farrin, Professor

Copyright by
Stephen W. Evans
2017
All Rights Reserved

Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Stephen W. Evans

has been approved by the Examining Committee for
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree
in Art at the August 2017 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

Laurel Farrin, Thesis Supervisor

John Dilg

Sue Hettmansperger

Susan C. White

To my wife, Lauren, whose support and encouragement over the years has been invaluable. I would not be who or where I am today without her.

*Everything dies baby that's a fact, but maybe the things that die
someday come back...*

Bruce Springsteen

Doppelgänger

noun dop·pel·gāng·er \ˈdä-pəl-,gāŋ-ər, -,geŋ-, ,dä-pəl-\

Definition

1: *a ghostly counterpart of a living person*

2a : DOUBLE

2ab : ALTER EGO

Merriam-Webster Dictionary

*That night Mylo went right to sleep and dreamed he was
wandering out in the wild dark. He came to a sort of window,
and all at once the Something was there, climbing through.*

From Natalie Babbitt's The Something

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give a special thanks to the faculty of the University of Iowa painting department, as well as my fellow grad students, for their nurturing attention over the past few years, and their dedication to my flourishing.

ABSTRACT

As people living in 2017, what, if anything, have we come to know about art as a whole? What can we say about the artistic impulse? What is art for, and what does it stand to show us about ourselves today? In this paper, I try to address these questions, from the standpoint of both an artist and a human being. Examining art as ancient as the prehistoric cave paintings, as well as art of the present day, I discuss certain ontological traits that art-making has both lost and maintained over the years. Through Heidegger's philosophy of Being, Tillich's theology of New Being, and Stephen King's depictions of the uncanny, I explore the idea that all creative acts ultimately point us back to our own mortality and finitude.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Much of what we have come to understand to be “art”, in this day-and-age, is somewhat confused. At least this has been my sentiment over the last few years as I have dedicated myself to the act of making art, namely paintings, sculptures, and videos. Lots of folks have different ideas as to what is art, and what is not; the artistic “elite” think one thing, which usually has to do with whether something is more conceptually well rounded; and the view point of the “layman” seems to be more concerned with how something looks, and whether there has been masterful skill involved.

What I hope to do in this paper is to help raise some of these questions as to the nature of art, both from the standpoint of an artist, and as a human being merely thinking about it. I wish to tease out the characteristics of art and its making, so as to create a more holistic and universal picture of what art is. Some of the ways I will do this is by looking at the subject through the eyes of art history, philosophy, theology, literature, and science. I explore the idea that all creative acts may ultimately point us back to our own mortality and finitude.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	viii
THE BODY, PROSTHETICS, AND EXTENSIONS	1
THE PROBLEM	4
ANTICIPATION: BEING-TOWARDS-THE-END	8
DEAD BODIES, PILGRIMAGE, AND NEW BEING	13
BIBLIOGRAPHY	19

PREFACE

My work is guided by the bony discolored hand of my own death, which, like a Ouija board, thinly points to my ultimate ending. Through making, I've been able to tangibly work through my fears, as a way of getting a good look at them. The work deals with transformative experiences and what they have come to reveal about myself through my recollection of them. (The first time I saw a dead body, I was thirteen years old.) Many of these experiences include, involve, or were brought about through cultural mediums (i.e. movies, TV, books, paintings, etc.). What interests me most is where the two overlap, and are, by this point, inseparable. In this sense, certain narratives from culture become entwined with the experiences and narrative of my own life. They are part of my lived reality. The American landscape becomes a trope that holds all the cynicism of a Bugs Bunny cartoon, while at the same time is unabashedly romanticized. My sentiment is one that conflates certain images and ideals of America that is critical, while at the same time is in love with them as a kind of "believer". I try to tow the line between the dumb and the sophisticated, the optimistic and the dismal, faith and doubt, life and death. I believe that art in general takes a certain kind of listening - if not entirely - a kind of call and response. In my case, I am merely responding to what I have heard throughout my life, what I have grown up with, and, in part, what I anticipate for the future.

The Body, Prosthetics, and Extensions

In Stephen King's novella, *The Body*¹, a group of young boys, in the summer before they enter junior high, set out through the wilderness of Maine to find the dead body of a young boy that has gone missing a few weeks prior. Vern, the somewhat dopey and dumpy one of the group, is looking for a lost penny collection beneath the porch, when he overhears his older brother talking with one of his friends, as they discuss how they should handle their recent findings on the Back Harlow Road, a number of miles outside of town. They boosted a car, and drove out to the Royal River where the road dead-ends at the train tracks, and there they discovered the dead body of Ray Brower, the missing boy. Vern, in a frenzy of panic and excitement, runs two miles in the middle of a scorcher to the tree fort where his friends are smoking cigarettes and playing cards. Panting and sweating, he prepares his friends for their own disbelief, and then asks the question: *You guys want to go see a dead body?*²

Art making, as far as we know, is as old as history itself. Dating back to some forty thousand years ago, starting with megalithic carved rock formations, underground dwellings with painted walls, drawings and paintings of prehistoric animals on the interiors of caves, small statues carved from ivory and bone, as well as one of the earliest known instruments: a flute made from the arm bone of a prehistoric bird. All of these are contemporaneous with the known tools of prehistoric man, namely, hunting tools like the spear (a stick or reed with a shard of sharp rock fastened to the end), similarly, the hatchet, as well as the discovery and domestication of fire. Since the beginning of his existence, man has been a resourceful coping creature, intelligently utilizing his surroundings to survive, creating tools and devices to help him negate his death. But any history of man, must also be a history of his body, as man lives out his life as an inherently embodied creature. Elizabeth Grosz says, “[The] body has and is a history and under the procedures of testing, the body itself extends its limits, transforms its

¹ Also adapted into a film in 1986, titled *Stand By Me*, directed by Rob Reiner

² Stephen King, *The Body*

capacities, and enters a continuous process of becoming, becoming something other than itself.”³

The artistic tool (a burnt stick, colored pigments), in the hand of the cave artist, is also a prosthetic limb like the spear, that becomes an extension of his body, but moreover an extension of his understanding, both of the material in which he creates with, as well as an understanding of his body in relation to his materials. (“[The] origin of art is the very exploration and use of the body.”)⁴ In this sense, the work of art is not imposed on the world, but rather it uncovers it.

Martin Heidegger suggests that the way in which art is art is that it illuminates the world for human beings, and in turn, illuminates man’s Being for him as well.⁵ For the act of art making is not only an ontic bodily function or gesture, but an ontological investigation as to the nature of the world as experienced. *It is a looking out at the world and then interpreting it.*

I envision prehistoric man going through life, hunting, praying, eating, sleeping, reproducing, walking, traveling, seeing, feeling, touching, smelling, tasting, holding that which is the world; and then going into the cave, where he reflects, represents, interprets, his experiences. In doing so his vision of the world and the things in it are changed. Bison, mammoths, deer, all are seen now in reference to the representations of them.

What was once ordinary and banal life for prehistoric man, what was ordinary and banal matter, had become thoughtful and extraordinary. In other words, a cave is no longer just a cave - a cavernous *space* - but becomes a *place*, a dwelling and pathway of lived experience; a place that is no longer only measured in footsteps, but by the markings on the wall; and the cave wall is no longer just a cave wall, a support for a cliff, hill, or mountainside; but it is transformed, and becomes a support for the work of art. I of course do not suppose to say that there is some ontic alchemical change or transformation happening here in the material, but that the way in which the world stands relative to man does change.

³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Naked*

⁴ Ibid, Elizabeth Grosz

⁵ Martin Heidegger, Hubert Dreyfus, *Heidegger’s Ontology of Art*

The spear, however, remains a stick of wood and sharp stone, an artifact at best, as it remains in the realm of the ordinary animal, of hunting and utility; but the work of art transforms that which is ordinary, or banal, and elevates it to being unfamiliar and extraordinary.⁶ It becomes something that articulates and illuminates man's Being. Man now sees himself, as if in a mirror, as both a part of the world, as well as separate from it.

But I have gone on in a scientific, evolutionary way so far that presupposes that the tools for survival, the mere crudity of man's trifling, came before the artistic gesture. The painter Barnett Newman suggests otherwise. For Newman, the first man was undoubtedly an artist; the stick drew a line in the mud before it became a spear; man's first speech was an address to the unknowable, his cry a song; and the myth came before the hunt.⁷ He says:

“Man's first expression, like his first dream, was an aesthetic one... Original man, shouting his consonants, did so in yells of awe and anger at his tragic state, at his own self-awareness and his own helplessness before the void.”⁸

And why not? Heraclitus, the Pre-Socratic philosopher, posited that there was a universal element that linked all of mankind. This was fire, the element of change, and ultimately, of potential. (Similarly, in Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, a father and his little boy brave the wilderness of a scorched, post-apocalyptic earth, when one would normally be reduced to mere animal survival, and the one thing that keeps their humanity intact is their mission and mutual interior understanding, that they need to continue to carry the fire.) Newman's expression brings out the inevitability of art, that it is inseparable from man's Being.

Man, from the very beginning, is a being that is intrinsically one that *pictures* the world. A fallen tree limb is pictured as a stick, as something to pick up and use, as well as pictured entirely as what it is, as a fallen tree limb. Similarly, the stick, simultaneously a

⁶ Ibid, Dreyfus

⁷ Barnett Newman, *'The First Man Was An Artist'*

⁸ Ibid, Barnett Newman

stick, fallen tree limb, a spear, a hatchet, or drawing tool, are all pictured in their potentiality, as something potentially over-and-above what it is ordinarily. (Even the utilitarian tool is artistic in its nature, though it is not an art, its beginning comes from the same place as the work of art in that it is something pictured.) This notion of picturing has to do with instinct, like a kind of muscle memory, a reaction on one's own inherent potential, and its relationship with one's self and the world in which one lives.

Newman's suggestion not to put the cart before the horse (man's creative potential before the brute animal), is a challenge to both scientists and artists alike, to realize this distinction of question-asking in the light of man's own nature. "[It] is the poet and the artist," says Barnett Newman, "who are concerned with the function of original man and who are trying to arrive at his creative state."⁹ It is this "state" that is the issue, and it is the task of, not aesthetics, nor science, but of metaphysics, phenomenology, and ultimately ontology, to arrive at an answer, or rather, the right *question*, as to the nature of art.

The Problem

If man is extending himself, then we might ask what he is extending himself towards (a bridge always links one mass to another), and what, if any, transformation takes place? Much of this question lies within the comportment of the ontic and the ontological. Today, we do not ask these questions, and subsequently the real sense of the nature of art has been mostly lost and debased. Heidegger, in his *Being and Time*, was re-raising the question of Being, or "existence", if you will, with the conviction that most of the history of philosophy had misunderstood the idea of Being, ever since Plato. But how do you talk or even name a subject whose definition has become so normalized and debased that to use the name of the thing is more misleading than helpful, and does more harm than good? This was Heidegger's sentiment about Being at the time, and his solution was to invent a term for human Being, which he called *Dasein*. *Dasein*, literally

⁹ Ibid, Barnett Newman

translated, means being-there, or there-being, and is the structure of man's existence in the world and how he relates to the world. His aim was to re-ask the question as to the nature of Being in a way that included man in his questioning, as part of the enigma itself, rather than as a purely objective observer.

This is also the state of our understanding of what we call "art" today. What does this word even mean? Does the word "art" help or debilitate our understanding of the artistic act? Much of what we might refer to today as art comes from a highly normalized understanding that is unthinkingly meant to be taken at face value as something we've all got the upper hand on, or as something that is undoubtedly resolved by definition. This misunderstanding can be attributed to the layperson, whose overwhelming sentiment for "beauty," highly skilled renderings, and the overly canny, makes for a narrow gate for which only the classically romantic and ideal may pass for art. However, it is also due to the artistic elite, whose concerns have been so heavily shrouded by commerce and the market, that even its theory and over theorization, becomes influenced by dollars and fashion, as opposed to the core issues concerning what art really and truly is.

This is mostly due in part to the institutionalization of art, reaching all the way back to ancient Greece, when art had become a trade, and something that could be commissioned, or solicited, making works that would reflect and represent the ideals and priorities of a culture at large; namely to honor and extol the gods, alongside man's knowledge and philosophy. In addition, after Rome had become a Christian state, the church would go on to pioneer the rest of art history in the west through its iconography, architecture, and commissioning of artists as patrons, and therefore, acting as determinators of the outcome of production. (The earliest Christian art, however, was done in secret, for those for whom it concerned, namely the persecuted third-century Christians living in and around Rome at the time, painting gospel stories and early Christian symbols on the underground tombs and burial sites of martyred Christians. Similarly, the Jews around this same time had illustrative paintings of Old Testament stories on the walls of synagogues as teaching tools. Both of these examples relate closely in practice to that of the cave painters of prehistoric times. It was a practice that came out of a desire of and for understanding, as well as need for expression, to represent that which cannot be said.)

Today's man may not be extending himself for the same reasons as early man, but he extends himself nonetheless, and with the same primordial impulse. However, I'd like to propose that today we do this with much less clarity and understanding than prehistoric man. Much of what can be said for this distinctive shift throughout history is the subverting and redirecting of this notion of, what I've called, man's *picturing*. The source of this confusion stems from our misunderstanding of this picturing, in that we have understood it to be something other than what it is: that is the living out and exercising of our mortality through picturing as potential in our being-towards-the-end.

As the tool is an extension of the body, and the work of art an extension of understanding, we must come to a conclusion as to the nature of this act in its essence, which is the coalescence in picturing as potential, and potential as Being that is a potential-towards something. That something, ultimately, being our death. We must come to see the roll that death plays in both our actions and the way in which we understand those actions. We must understand the notion of, what Catherine Malabou calls, "explosive plasticity", with the death in us serving as a ticking time bomb, "[That] houses itself beneath an apparently smooth surface like a reserve of dynamite hidden under the peachy skin of a being *for* death."¹⁰ (Italics mine.)

An idea that Malabou is exploring is that we ought not to think of destruction always in terms of *de*-formation, but that *destruction too is formative*. The example given is that dis/refigured things are still things in and of themselves: a smashed up face is still a face, a stump still a limb, and a traumatized psyche still a psyche.¹¹ The very strong and compelling distinction made here, and echoed by Heidegger, is that the destruction of life is not a contradiction to it, but an affirmation of it. This is to say, to recognize one's death is to realize one's life. And yet today, in our digital age, we run contrary to this intrinsic fact, chasing immortality, and in fact, almost assuming it, in the way we go about in the world. Everydayness, as Heidegger calls it, is the thing that takes us out of or away from an authentic way of Being. Everydayness is the banal, the ordinary and menial day-to-day tasks, projects, and busy work we do that stops us from stopping to realize our life and

¹⁰ Catherine Malabou, *Ontology of the Accident*

¹¹ *Ibid*, Malabou

death. These things are the everyday, repetitious acts that insinuate cyclical re-happening, and in some cases, suspension of time altogether, which covers up our Being, veiling the towards-which¹² that lies beneath the skin of our very life.

Busy work is the epitome of distraction, and is what keeps us from any kind of embodied experience. In fact, busy work creates a disembodied experience of life and Being as a way of misunderstanding itself in the moment, as something almost platonically metamorphic. Part of this misunderstanding comes from our ideas of how the human mind works through different metaphoric models. In our age, there has been the assumption that the metaphor of Information Processing (IP), that the mind is essentially like a computer, is the most likely model on which to base our understanding of the brain. This suggests that the human brain processes, through a series of algorithms, experiences as information like a computer that can be stored, like in a file on your computer desktop, and later drawn upon for reference when needed.

Contemporary scientific research in neuroscience, as well as psychology and speech pathology, are putting this metaphor to rest, in suggesting that the human brain is nowhere near the likes of a computer. In fact, the human mind does not store or represent anything, but rather it pictures things through visual experience as it encounters them. As an example, the difference between the way in which a computer would catch a fly-ball, in comparison to how a human would is as follows: the computer would asses the situation through pre-given representations of programed algorithms, as to how fast the ball is moving, the trajectory of its flight plus velocity, create a number of possible outcomes, then move to the most likely spot that the fly-ball would land, and then do a similar process for how to catch the ball and so on. The human brain does not compute, nor consult programed algorithms. The human's ability to catch a fly-ball comes from his visual relationship to the world around him as an instinct. As Robert Epstein, a senior research psychologist at the American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology in California, puts it, intelligent behavior is a *direct interaction* between organisms and

¹² This concept will be discussed more in the later section, *Anticipation*

their world.¹³ The mental act of picturing has to do with potential, and not representing, or re-representing, something as it is or was. Robert Epstein also states:

“This is why we’re much better at recognizing than recalling. When we *re-member* something (from the Latin *re*, ‘again’, and *memorari*, ‘be mindful of’), we have to try to relive an experience; but when we recognize something, we must merely be conscious of the fact that we have had this perceptual experience before.”¹⁴

Anticipation: Being-Towards-The-End

Susan Sontag, in *On Photography*, talks about the way in which vacationers, predominantly American and Japanese, live most of their vacation experiences through the lens of a camera. They feel the need to continue to work despite being on vacation, storing their experiences away on film or a memory card, like a computer, gathering information to be reflected and drawn upon later as proof of an experience. In turn, Sontag says, these photographs become a kind of *momento mori*, a memorial to dead time, or a dead experience.¹⁵ Modern man is more concerned with the *presentation* of things, experiences, the world, rather than *picturing* for himself the world. Instead of living his experiences, he takes a picture of it; and now with the widespread use of smartphones, one’s “experiences” can be instantaneously uploaded to the internet and stored, readily available for others to see online.

Social media has become the platform for the meta-self, the extended self directed into cyberspace via representations of ourselves, an immortal self that can be stored indefinitely. Whether we’ve bought the IP metaphor or not, the question must be raised: what model of the self and reality do we consider to be our prime self and reality, and which is getting modeled after which? Society now almost requires you have an internet presence of some kind, as well as a smart phone, in order to function in day-to-day life.

¹³ Robert Epstein, *The Empty Brain*

¹⁴ Ibid, Epstein

¹⁵ Susans Sontag, *On Photography*

(Just the other day I went to use a rewards card at an establishment, and the clerk informed me that they were no longer using cards, which they had just issued only months prior, and that in order to use your rewards you must have the company “app” on your phone.)

A number of years ago we might have looked at the comparison between the computer (whose technicians rigorously attempted to recreate the human mind via computers) and our own minds. Today, we are attempting the inverse. We are actively trying to immortalize ourselves by making man more and more like a computing machine, rather than a human. As man continues to get lost in the virtual world of his smartphone, seeking transcendence, the more dislocated, displaced, and ultimately, disembodied he becomes. In Deborah Stratman’s film “In Order Not To Be Here”, there is an ominous feeling of premonition that, as the title suggests, resembles the disembodied culture that, while physically present, is psychologically somewhere else. In the film, numerous still shots survey the technological productions of the early 2000s, ranging from drive-throughs at fast food establishments, automated bank teller machines, and the eerie pan of surveillance cameras, all things that seek the convenience of the public while creating a mediating device that separates human beings from each other, with the guarantee of not having to directly interact.¹⁶

The stories, myths, and lore of the doppelganger usually contain a strange tale of seeing one’s phantom double, their ghostly counterpart, which is an omen of terror and death. In Alfred Noyes short story, *Midnight Express*, the main character, Mortimer, faces just these circumstances. The story tells of a young boy who is reading an old battered book in his room at night, who continuously finds himself unable to read past page fifty for fear of what lies ahead on the following pages. This fear arises from the illustration on the fiftieth page, depicting a lonely figure standing on a train platform, with one lamp lit, facing the opposite direction, facing the tracks leading into a dark tunnel. Despite Mortimer’s fascination with the book, and his multiple attempts to read it, he never reached past the fiftieth page; and then he forgot about the book altogether.

¹⁶ Deborah Stratman, *In Order Not To Be Here*

Later, however, in his adulthood, he finds himself waiting for a train on a deserted platform, save for a lamp and a lonely figure beneath it, facing the direction of the dark tunnel. A spitting image of the fiftieth page of the old book, all coming back to him. In this moment, he works up the courage to face the figure; and when he does, he is horrified at what he sees. It is himself, staring back at him in the dim lamp light under the dark midnight sky. He takes to panic and flees. Only the story ends with Mortimer in a house where he takes shelter, having to face the old book again, but this time he has to read the whole story through in order to discover what all this madness is about. Mortimer reads in the book of the inevitability of his death, which begins with a boy reading a book, unable to finish, then as an adult, meeting himself on a train platform, and so on...¹⁷

The flee from death, as Catherine Malabou points out, is the flee from metamorphosis, the flee from transformation, and the flee from ultimate becoming. She likens this to the myths of the Greek gods, in which a god may take flight from danger by morphing into something else (e.g. a tree, a stone, or within the Arthurian tale, the side of a cliff, etc...), a disguise and outward transformation that gives the appearance of becoming other. Only, this metamorphosis is merely one that takes place on the outside. It is the facade of *appearing* other to the outside world. The fleeing god, however, is still the same god internally, only reconfigured externally. The real metamorphosis, the internal one, is the destructive one; the one that does not flee the inevitable, but faces it. It stands on the train platform and stares into the gaping mouth of the dark tunnel that is the void, the unknown, and death.

The mediation of technology in our lives is a form of this outward-flight from the end. In this sense, the self is extended in a form of flight from finitude. Our social media accounts and the screens of our smartphones are the ways in which we morph like the Greek god of old, as a means of outsmarting, outliving our mortal selves - a fleeing into the aether, the spaceless, timeless vacuum - an eluding of the foreboding image of our ruined lifeless selves - the ones that look into the darkness and wait.

¹⁷ Alfred Noyes, *Midnight Express*

The four boys, Vern, Chris, Teddy, and Gordy, in Stephen King's, *The Body*, after an overnight in the woods, s'mores over a campfire, and a near fatal encounter with a train over a trestle, come at last to the final resting place of Ray Brower, the dead kid. They find him in "a marshy, mucky tangle of undergrowth that smelled bad. And sticking out of a wild clock spring of blackberry brambles was a single pale white hand."¹⁸ King's description of this scene, through his main character, Gordy, as the boys discover the dead body of a boy their age, is somewhat Frankensteinian. "Somewhere," King continues, "attached to that hand, was the rest of Ray Brower." Gordy wishes he could have seen the whole body at once instead of that cold, white, dead hand. The dead hand of a dead boy, is as good as a detached appendage, a severed limb, a felled tree branch, a matted mess of roadkill. It's the picture of everything that once lived and now does not. Or as Gordy puts it, "It explained every graveyard in the world." The boys, here, are not only encountering the dead body of another boy, but they are also encountering the image of their own deaths, a mirror of foreshadowing. Each disembodied limb of Ray Brower is one of their limbs. The dead boy, hit by a train, becomes a stitched-together corps, a Frankenstein's Monster, made up of the gathered and collected body parts of the four living boys, peering down at Brower under a lightning storm. They are so close they can taste it. Why else would it be so frightening?

Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, says "Even the objectively present corpse is, viewed theoretically, still a possible object for pathological anatomy whose understanding is oriented toward the idea of life. This something which is only-just-present is "more" than a *lifeless*, material thing. In it we encounter something *un-living* which has lost its life."¹⁹ In other words, the dead thing, though it is dead, shows us our life in that *it* is dead and *we* are not. We know it is dead because we are not dead. We picture life by encounter death. The boys in *The Body* stare death in the face, literally, when they roll the body of Ray Brower over onto his back, as his dead glassy eyes face (not look) up towards the sky. In this moment, the boys are on the train platform, facing their doppelganger, and standing beside it to stare into the dark void of the tunnel; they

¹⁸ Ibid, King, *The Body*

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*

become estranged to themselves, they become other, undergoing a destructive metamorphosis of plasticity, that all at once, brings them to life in a way not yet experienced nor possible.

The powerfulness of a painting of a dead Christ, as opposed to the crucified but living Christ, as well as the risen Christ, lies, not just in the awfulness of his torture and execution, the rosy, battered wounds of His hands, feet, and side; but it is the picture of his destroyed body; the blueish hue of dead flesh. The picture of the One who died, utterly destroyed by wrath to bring life. Life is brought about through this death, and to fully realize the Christ's resurrection, one must, first and foremost, realize His death. After all, one is not raised from life, but from death. The encounter and examination of the dead Christ, the body of Ray Brower, is to experience the death that lies in us all, just beneath the surface.

Paul Tillich writes, the End is more than all the things once lost and not regained. For *the End is in us all*, and it has become our very being.²⁰ This is what Heidegger calls the *Being-towards-the-end*, or the *towards-which*. The idea being that the end is the ultimate stop, the terminal degree of transformation, and that there is always something outstanding that, at some time and place, will need to be cashed in. A potential that has not yet become real. And if we are to be at all, which is to be alive, what else would one be toward if not something other than what they already are? As Stephen King writes in his foreword to the book *Night Shift*:

“We see the shape. Children grasp it easily, forget it, and relearn it as adults. The shape is there, and most of us come to realize what it is sooner or later: it is the shape of a body under a sheet. All our fears add up to one great fear, all our fears are part of that great fear - an arm, a leg, an ear. We're afraid of the body under the sheet. It's our body.”²¹

We do not wish to engage with this thing that is the End, our death. We tell ourselves, “don't feed that mangy thing, or it will keep coming back.” And yet, it is

²⁰ Paul Tillich, *The New Being*

²¹ Stephen King, *Forward for Night Shift*

inseparable from us, and us from it. We are, in fact, *symbols of the End*.²² We are that explosive plasticity, the ticking time bomb. We are the ones afraid to keep reading past page fifty. We are the god in flight, who turns herself into a tree to save her skin. We are the knight of Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*, playing chess with Death, with the hopes of outwitting him, so as to remaining on earth for just a little while longer. But to no avail. In the same foreword, King invites his readers to reach out and touch the figure under the sheet. To touch our own dead body.

Dead Bodies, Pilgrimage, and New Being

In an interview, the painter, Joe Bradley, said that he knew a painting was done when it felt foreign to him.²³ It is not until he is estranged and other in relation to his work, that he feels he has achieved something. The uncanny in turn pushes us toward the canny, the ill at ease toward the homey, but only if we let it. Only if we seek it out, and do not flee.

If our Being is meant for death, is emblematic of death, and is one that is ultimately moves toward death, what then is the art object? The song? The sculpture? The dance? The book and its words? This question, as I have tried to stress, is not a question for science, nor aesthetics; it is not one that belongs on an operating table; but it is meant for phenomenology. Our understanding of the artistic act and its outcomes have been so misunderstood because of our distractions, and the way in which we have carried our Being. We forget that art belongs to us, as Barnett Newman says, *as a birthright*.²⁴ We have misunderstood our picturing as something that is gained from an institution, an art school, from tutelage, as something paid for, or at best, something only the “gifted” are born with.

²² Ibid, Tillich

²³ Joe Bradley, Interview Magazine

²⁴ Ibid Barnett Newman

It is sappy, campy, and sentimental, but it is true, when Picasso *supposedly* said that, we are all born artists, only the problem is staying one when we grow up.²⁵ The cave man was not a compartmentalized being; but he was a holistically embodied man, that was all that he was and at once. As to say that, he was not a hunter only, and his fellow an artist. He was not a gatherer, and his fellow a star gazer. He and she were not only this or that, but all carried the fire, all born into their birthright as picturing beings.

The trouble is, we became afraid of our picturing. We became ill at ease with our own birthright. We grew up and found ourselves unsure of what to make of our questions of the world. It became a separatist binary equipment, that only belonged to those elicited by officials to make representations of the gods, to build the temple for worship, and to craft that which is extolled. This is clearly evident by example of our art museums today. The towering Greek-like temples, adorned with all the finest art man could achieve. They are the secular temples of our age, in homage and in praise of our artistic heroes. Art no longer belongs to man, but the gods; and trying to craft anything less than worthy for a god, is sacrilegious, and is destined for failure. It would be self-deprecating, shameful, and blasphemous.

The boys in *The Body* set out on a pilgrimage - an epistemic and dialectical journey - as they had aligned themselves with that which waits with inevitability, with the still-outstanding of their Being. They were aligned with their picturing, with their death that made them feel alive, as they hiked down the railroad tracks and across long fields, the summer of their fall from innocents. They knew who they were, and what they were doing. They were going to see a dead body.

I have spoken with numerous people that work with children from kindergarten to twelfth grade, who have asked every grade whether any among them was an artist. In kindergarten, all the hands go up, and as the grade level inclines, the number of hands raised declines. The child with a crayon in her hand wields it with the utmost confidence, and with no fear whatsoever. She is not blinded by the fear of failure, and, ultimately, the fear of fears, her death. Every child pictures freely and without fear. It isn't until they are around eight or nine years-old that they start to feel the pressure of feeling the need to

²⁵ Pablo Picasso, *Peter's Quotations: Ideas for Our Time*

represent in a realistic way. It is a phenomenon, but perhaps this fear arises from our self-awareness as a self that is a part of a collective, a culture, a community, a mob. Our birthright dissolves as it is rationed out for the pressures of the community, and the self is forgotten; and more tragically, one's identity as a self. This leaves no room for becoming other to one's self if the self is never recognized, or merely assumed.

(Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, posits a challenge. He says “‘And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This *is* the first commandment. And the second, like *it*, *is* this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”²⁶ As simple as it may sound, it is much more complex. First there is the commandment that demands an embodied commitment to God. The second is one that turns our understanding as to the living out of the first on its head. As Kierkegaard notes, in the latter commandment, Christ is presupposing that there is a love for one's self that would otherwise go unnoticed.²⁷ That is until you ask how you ought to love your neighbor *as yourself*. It is in the redirecting of one's self away from the self, when one dies to himself to serve the other, when one becomes nothing, becoming other to himself, that he comes alive, truly becoming aware of his self. In losing his life he saves it, and in death he is reborn. Or in Zen Buddhist terms, one must go out to come back in, or *zero=infinity*.)

Stephen King is right: we all grow up knowing about the shape, the body under the sheet (the cave man knew), like Mortimer did with his old book; and in the same way, we forget about it until we are grown, until we find it waiting for us on a lonesome railway platform. Only we do not stay, we flee. Somewhere along the way, like Dante, we awake to find ourselves in a dark wood, where the right path is wholly lost and gone²⁸; and we end up redirecting our picturing towards other things, toward representations. Like TV and “reality” shows, social media, championship games, and competitions. We are all looking for other worlds, only what man needs is a mirror.²⁹

²⁶ Mark 12:30-31 NKJ

²⁷ Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, “*You Shall Love*”

²⁸ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, “*Inferno*”

²⁹ From Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris*

As Thomas Merton writes, “In the traditions of all the great religions, pilgrimage takes the faithful back to the source and center of the religion itself, the place of theophany, renewal, and salvation.”³⁰ The boy’s journey to find Ray Brower certainly brought them to this place, and every person on some level seeks it as well. But the one who chooses his picturing as artistic, like Barnett Newman says, is concerning himself with the function of original man, and is trying to arrive at his original creative state. He is concerned with his own death, with again being emblematic of the end. We are all on a pilgrimage to find ourselves. Because of our picturing, everything man does of his own free will and for pleasure, is art to a certain degree.³¹ Whether that be watching TV and “reality” shows, social media, championship games, and competitions, we are all seeking a fulfilled self, trying to always picture, in some way, our complete selves. Trying to feel alive. We wish to be remade, to salvage our bodies and redirect our Being towards something eternal, towards something that can survive us, even if we expire.

Stephen King says that horror fiction is something that reminds us of the shape under the sheet, and serves as a rehearsal for our own deaths. That is just what the artistic act is. The artistic act is the ontological probing into the unknowable. It is the dialectic pilgrimage, the extension of our understanding and the world’s intelligibility. It is the very encounter of our lifeless selves through the practice of molding and reshaping inanimate material. It is the projecting of our mortality onto material that will survive and represent us as we were in life when we cease to live. It is the act of doing the makeup on your own embalmed body.

In this sense, every painting, every sculpture, assemblage, photograph, is a version of our own dead body; every performance a death march; every exhibition a staged funeral rehearsal to which the deceased may attend; every book ever written a lyrical corps, and “the most brilliantly drawn character in a novel is just a bag of bones.”³² All of these things are the foreboding presence of the doppelganger. A hair-raising reflection of the gaunt blue face of our phantom double.

³⁰ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*

³¹ Albert Barnes, *The Art in Painting*

³² Stephen King, *Bag of Bones*

Ray Brower's body, though depicted as dead, is activated and animated, like a frog jolted with an electric charge. And in that moment, the book itself is the dead boy's body, our body, Stephen King's body. Dead and disembodied, yet animated by our picturing. In the artistic act, we face our mortality through our dialectic, and through our Being-towards-the-End as our ultimate Being-towards-anything, we see potential in the inanimate materials of our craft. The materials that are stand-ins for our inanimate selves, as we play and experiment with our lifeless selves. Our artworks are extensions, versions, in fact, of our now-selves, representations of our cares, passions, problems, loves and hatreds, that help us to make sense of ourselves and the world.

When my wife was pregnant with our daughter, we would play music and read books to her stomach. One of the books stood out to me ever since. It is called *The Something*. Aside from having fantastic illustrations, the existential dilemma of the narrative is akin to our discussion here. In the story, a young creature (somewhat troll-like in nature, and covered in hair), named Mylo, is afraid of the dark. In efforts to explain to his mother what he is exactly afraid of, the best he can come up with is that he is just afraid of a Something that is out there in the dark, and that it might come crawling in through his window some night. As a way of cheering Mylo up and taking his mind off his fears, his mother buys him a big lump of clay; but the clay does not distract Mylo.

In fact, Mylo decides that he will do his best to make a sculpture of that Something he is afraid of in the night. Mylo works long and hard on it, so much that his parents say to themselves that they never realized how artistic Mylo was. But Mylo was only trying to understand what this Something was, and what it looked like. One day Mylo eventually makes a representation he is proud of, one that fits the bill. He shows it to his mother, and though she is enthusiastic, he knows that she doesn't understand what it is. Then, one night in a dream, Mylo encounters the Something in the wild dark, and it was exactly the Something he had represented with his clay. (The Something in the story turns out to be a little human girl.) Now, Mylo was not afraid, and he spoke to the Something, even introduced himself to it, and declared that he is not afraid of it. After

this, Mylo keeps his statue of the Something next to his bed for a long time afterwards, so as to not forget his encounter with it, so he will never forget what it looked like.³³

Mylo is the child figure of us all, afraid of the dark, afraid of the unknown, and no matter what, most adults will not understand what it is we are driving at when we try to express our fears. But it is his attempt at facing his fears in an external way, despite distractions, through his picturing of the Something, that by sculpting the clay he is able to gain insight, understanding, and, eventually, freedom from his fear. In this sense we may face our fear of fears, and understand our Being-towards-the-End. Perhaps, in our art practice, we may even do what Stephen King invites us to do: reach out and place our hand on the figure under the sheet.

³³ Natalie Babbitt, *The Something*

Bibliography

- Alighieri, Dante (1320) *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Dorothy Sayers, Published 1949, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books
- Babbitt, Natalie (1970) *The Something*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
- Barnes, Albert (1925) *The Art In Painting*, Merion: The Barnes Foundation Press
- Bradley, Joe (2013) 'Joe Bradley', *INTERVIEW Magazine*, Laura Hoptman, May 2013 <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/joe-bradley#>
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. (2005) 'Heidegger's Ontology of Art', *A Companion to Heidegger*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing
- Epstein, Robert (2016) 'The Empty Brain', Aeon, 18 may, <https://aeon.co/essays/your-brain-does-not-process-information-and-it-is-not-a-computer>
- Grosz, Elizabeth (2003) 'Naked', *Encounters with Alphonso Lingis*, Oxford: Lexington Books, pg.119
- Heidegger, Martin (1927) *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Albany: State University of New York Press
- Ibid. Dreyfus, Hubert L. (2005) 'Heidegger's Ontology of Art', *A Companion to Heidegger*, Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing
- Kierkegaard, Soren (1847) *Works of Love: You Shall Love, The Essential Kierkegaard*, Edited by Howard V Hong and Edna H. Hong, Princeton: Princeton University Press
- King, Stephen (1983) 'The Body', *Different Seasons*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books
- __ (1976) *Forward, Night Shift*, N York: Doubleday and Co.
- Malabou, Catherine (2009) *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, Cambridge: Polity Press
- Merton, Thomas (1961) *Mystics and Zen Masters*, New York: The Noonday Press
- Newman, Barnett (1947) 'The First Man Was an Artist', *Art In Theory: 1900-1990*, Edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing
- Noyes, Alfred (1935) 'Midnight Express', *Hauntings: Tales of the Supernatural*, Edited by Henry Mazzeo, New York: Doubleday and Co.
- Picasso, Pablo (1979) *Peter's Quotations: Ideas for Our Time*. Laurence J. Peter. New York: Bantam Books
- Sontag, Susan (1973) *On Photography*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
- Stratman, Deborah (2002) *In Order Not To Be Here*, 16mm Film, Chicago: Pythagoras
- Film
- Tarkovsky, Andrei (1972) *Solaris*, Film, Moscow: Mosfilm
- Tillich, Paul (1955) *The New Being*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons
- The Book of Mark 12:30-31 New King James Version