

# Gesture between Worlds

*The Art of Haris Epaminonda*

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I was dreaming of urinating. My prostate is swollen, so I often wake with a dream of needing to urinate, but it was different this time as it appeared that I was pissing blood, well not only pissing blood but spraying it everywhere. The whole bathroom had marks of blood; the red was glistening in entralling patterns on the white surfaces.

The evening before this I had been reading a book on Fra Angelico by Georges Didi-Huberman in a passage that addressed the fresco painting in the converted San Marco Museum. I was struck by the way that he had introduced the notion of a disconcerting presence of blotches of paint that did not appear to correspond to any sense of a subject and thus stand out as being strangely non-figurative for the period. He says that it “was in the first place a spattering, a throwing of pigment onto the wall, a pure act of subjectum, “subject” in this sense of what is thrown down, directly in front of the senses, but thrown in such a way that it goes right past you, slips beneath your nose and lodges in obscure places below, conceals itself because its very obviousness disconcerts you.”<sup>(1)</sup>

What is striking about looking at those frescoes is the relationship of the radiance of the actual painting in conjunction with the creamy whiteness of the actual cells. At times I felt that I was not really taking anything in, but rather was subject to radiance itself. In the dream I had of urinating blood I was not really able to see because I was not really sure what I was looking at, and the moment I realised, I closed my eyes returning to darkness in order to understand. It was at this point that I awoke.

Anyway I am subjected to the sensation of needing to urinate. It invades my sleep, breaks into the slow comfort it might yield and thus torments the nerves that should instead be soothed. When I was young grown-ups would warn me about “pissing your life away,” but this is like a process of being drained away. In this context, the association of blood and urine is not surprising, but the passage into the art of Fra Angelico is uncanny.

I had wanted to write a lecture on the nature of gesture and at the heart of this desire was the painting by Fra Angelico called “The Mocking of Christ with the Virgin and Saint Dominic” which is in the ninth cell of the Convent of San Marco. The painting depicts fragmentary details of Christ's tormentors. Christ himself is blindfolded, so he appears to be untouched by these gestures of spitting, slapping and beating. The visual isolation of each of these gestures is both extreme and exact at the same time, accumulating in the aura of Christ as a memory trace to be overcome within the process of redemption. The contrast between the animation of the gestures and the static grace of the seated Christ is an extraordinary pictorial innovation in the context of these paintings, which are themselves, sealed within a private space of reception. <sup>(2)</sup>

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle redefines the notion of mimesis, which he identifies with the capacity of art to portray the universal meaning of human existence. Art is an imitation of action, it constitutes a *mythos*, which is able to isolate universal truths from contingent particulars of everyday life and in so doing, it lends existence a heightened sense of unity. Aristotle views the image as being a reflection of the internal activity of the mind mediating the relationship between sensation and reason. In this regard the image is a bridge between outer and inner, assuming a role both as a window on the world and a mirror in the mind. Aristotle believed that the images of our dreams are ultimately derived from our sensible experience. He stated that “dream is a species of imagination, it is therefore a particular mode of experience” and in turn imagination is related to the movement of desire. I am in search of a schema that might link imagination, dream, memory, knowledge, gesture and representation. In this process of searching I feel caught up in a multiplicity of interruptions, seizures of sense, visitations, and ecstatic encounter. An image of urinated blood, the mocking of Christ, scattering of text, these are all in circulation in a process of touching the limits of representation. <sup>(3)</sup>

I remember another dream that I had related to blood. There was this huge cactus with spikes in all directions. At the base of the cactus there were a number of monkeys that then started to climb up the cactus. I felt an intense anxiety about the possibility of the spikes lacerating the eyes of the monkeys. I looked away, as if vision itself was already seeped in pain. I heard several shrieks and in turning back I saw a young monkey covering a bleeding eye.

Sometimes images spike your eyes.

I wonder where this trail will lead me, and then to what end. I was meaning to write about your work, but at this moment it feels as if it might be elsewhere, as if not in view. Then briefly, you appear, showing me photographs of Mexican children prepared for burial, angelic, almost as if raised beyond the condition of life because in a sense they could no longer be touched by the approaching event of death. We just lingered over the surfaces of these images, I do not really remember speaking, which struck me as a form of intimacy. I assumed that you might be Latin and as Latin, Catholic also. I think that this constitutes my first memory of you. My next memory was in a seminar when I had asked everyone to bring a fragment of writing. You read a story about a group of men and women in a desert. One of the women drank a liquid made from the sap of a cactus. After a short period the group formed a human chain and each urinated in sequence into the mouth of the other so that a trace of the cactus sap was able to pass through the entire group. Once this process was completed, they then left this world for another world. There was something matter of fact about the way this story was read, as if this is the kind of event that would happen as part of the course of things. In some ways it was like a reading of a children's story but the aura of innocence contained within the delivery had already passed through orgy. I stayed with the assumption about a Latin and Catholic identity but also added the concept of magical realism. This naming process served to anchor my perception.

For some reason I organised a series of lectures on the theme of "Foreign." I think that I had read this poetic fragment of Holderlin:

"We are sign, without meaning  
Without pain, and we have almost  
Lost our language in foreignness"

I thought it might be possible to enter into that remote zone in which everything was not only strange, but also unsettled by loss of essential belonging. The question on my mind related to the notion

that this world has already passed over its threshold of representation, or if such a passage is not possible we have an apprehension of an edge that oscillates between a piercing, almost crystalline darkness giving rise to visions of an elsewhere and a leaden, dulling rhythm of time that we name as reality. The reason why the theme of metamorphosis has become such a compelling figure of thought, or aesthetic reflex relates to this sense of a threshold. The point, at which the world can be looked on as strange, is the point at which modulation of this threshold is becoming manifest.

We can understand ways in which art itself is a foreign country that has always been subjected to processes of mental colonialisation in order to tame and control its resource. Perhaps art no longer understands its task, or its relationship to freedom, or even reason to resistance. I read the following words of Giorgio Agamben in a book called "A Man Without Content". "Inalienable and yet perpetually foreign to itself, art still wants and seeks its law, but because its link with the real world has grown weak, everywhere and on every occasion it wants the real precisely as Nothingness: art is the annihilating entity that traverses all its contents without ever being able to attain positive work, because it cannot identify with any content. And since art has become the pure potentiality of negation, nihilism reigns in its essence." (4)

If there is a turn toward notions related to metamorphosis, then it relates in some way to a desire to escape the circularity of art and nihilism, without recourse to a rhetoric of re-enchantment. As a mode of expression, this tendency is a refusal to play out a dulling endgame. If art is to be aligned with the common world, then perhaps it will also share the fate of this world, and thus caught within a struggle of finding and losing itself without end or seeming purpose.

I visit a friend who makes his living as a commercial photographer. He likes all the latest electronic gadgets. When I enter the house I notice that his 36-inch TV is on his living space, but no one is watch-

ing. I think that it is switched on when the children come home from school and then just stays on in case someone wants to watch, like a chair waiting to be sat on at all times. Signifying a presence as you enter and perhaps an absence when you leave, it is perhaps something that does not attend and is not really attended to in turn. The original producers of the TV declared it as the entry of a miniature theatre into the home but now it is more like a fact, which is both important and trivial at the same time. We might say that it merely symbolizes the fact that the world continues to happen. The light emitted by a TV screen is cool, even smooth, like a caress without bodily sign, so it is able to comfort itself into domestic space without unwarranted disturbance.

In the film “Dancer in the Dark” by Lars Von Trier, Selma finally acknowledges that she cannot see. The film is about a society that cannot see her as an immigrant and in turn her inability to see leads as a consequence to her own death. In looking at the film it is as if our own eyes are leant a sense of impotence, and perhaps as Selma realizes her approaching death, we close our eyes because we cannot absorb the logic of seeing no more. She has died so that another (her son) might see and somehow we become implicated in this sacrificial exchange. <sup>(5)</sup>

I start to think of issues of vision in relation to Narcissus falling in love with his image because he cannot see that it is his self-same reflection that he views. Then the image of Oedipus casting out his own eyes, because of what he has been unable to see. Lacan's statement “in the matter of vision everything is a trap” resonates here as it mobilizes a force that is contained within of our (mythic) origin. <sup>(6)</sup>

So as I start to write about your work, I am thrown across a field of encounters, blind spots, interruptions, constellations and intensities. I think that I need your work close at hand, rather than adrift in the space of memory. I also would like proximity to conversations we have had that barely seem to move away from their starting point, but as I start to think these things I also understand that writing is a lonely

activity, always underwritten by insecurity and doubt. I still have no substantial schema to guide me, so I am not really sure about what will come next. In this respect it is a theatre of the imagination, like your drawings, which just follow the impulse of the line and then gradually emerge as form and in turn as world. I think that each of the drawings is in fact both a body and a world simultaneously, or more accurately a becoming-world and a becoming-body. They are both conditions, because they reside in a state of uncertainty, and as such they resist being named. As drawing, they appear to evolve out of an automatic arena and as such have an affinity with biomorphic surrealism. Yet rather than reaching back into some lost reserve contained within surrealist practice, they point instead towards a post-human world, in which the syntax of life has become hopelessly dissembled, scattered, and reorganised, thus enabling the morphological features of biological organisation to become scrambled into new configurations. The organisation of a coherent pattern of space and time is rendered inoperative within the newly emerging process of becoming in such a way that habit, repetition, recognition, mimesis are no longer features of organisation. This is not to claim that this represents a form of primeval soup, or chaos, but rather an immanent order without the assumption of a hierarchy of form.

I am thinking about the way that we say “world” and observe what kind of gesture is contained within such an enunciation. We might feel that gesture itself is an attribute of the body, for instance pointing a finger or raising an eyebrow, but equally we can also think that there is a gesture within the heart of language itself. Gestures appear in general to linger on the edge of representation and at times might be even the flavour within representation. Gesture in this respect exists on the threshold of visibility pointing us to the reserve of the symbolic realm. We are lead between lines, enunciations, or figures in order to find those points of excess that cannot quite be spoken, a lingering in the not quite articulated, or the slippages in determination that might reroute the mapping process within the space of presentation. Yet another thought following from this, is that they are the leakage within in the sense of the elsewhere. All of this starts to point me in a direc-



tion of an in-between of visibility and invisibility, that exists within the interfacing of the self and the world. Normally this might be ascribed to the work of language itself. (The process of making art contains gesture, but this is difficult to discern). Perhaps we might advance the idea that gesture is the discharge of being itself, or even its essential animation. Looking up at the sky can be immediately acknowledged as a gesture that has run throughout the entire course of time, and as such, is a universal gesture, even though its connotations might vary. We are reminded that philosophy, or at least the impulse to philosophise, begins as an account of the wonder that is experienced looking at the starry heavens. Such a spectacle induced a feeling that we are looked upon beings. By extension the whole of space and our orientation within it, are articulated through the way we assemble gestures within its matrix. In so doing we are dispersing with our powers or vulnerabilities, throwing ourselves into continual interchange in order to affirm our being that otherwise might be overwhelmed by the abyss. Gesture in this regard secures for us ontic reversibility. When Merleau-Ponty said that through “other eyes we are for ourselves fully visible” he touched upon the nature of this collaborative project of reversible subjectivity and this by implication leads toward a state into which our landscapes interweave. We are given over both to perception and to gesture. Philosophy attends or even circulates around the gesture of that which cannot yet be thought. In an essay “Notes on Gesture”, Giorgio Agamben says that what “characterizes gesture is that in it nothing is being produced or acted, but rather something is being endured and supported. The gesture, in other words, opens the sphere of ethos as the more proper sphere of that which is human.” For Agamben, gesture breaks with “the false alternative between ends and means” and is instead the exhibition of the “process of a making a means visible as such.” Gesture serves to communicate that communication is possible, without it passing into language proper and in turn as either an end or a means. (7)

There is a story about Alexander the Great, who on finding himself in the distant lands of India, sought out an audience with a holy or wise man. Perhaps his tutor, Aristotle had spoken to him of the notion of

Sophia and how there were beings in India that possessed such a faculty. Eventually such a man was discovered and brought to his camp. Alexander was thus able to ask what constituted wisdom in beings. He looked intently at Alexander, holding the entire audience in expectancy. Finally he replied that wisdom in beings was to be found in those who evaded visual contact with men. Alexander was left speechless. "Is that all?" he exclaimed. "That is all," he replied, and then left the camp to return to the remoteness of his cave abode. I repeat this story constantly as it contains within it a kernel of perception capable of opening our world to a change of view.

This story of course raises the question about a transition that had occurred from viewing the world as wonder, to a new form of viewing in which seeing was related to inspection and in turn to an attitude of appropriation. What is it to see something and in seeing it, name it, and then in naming it to embrace the sense that this is a sign that opens that which is other to the process of appropriation? What occurs in the transition from being looked upon beings, to aggressively surveying and inspecting the world within a representational frame? Structurally a position of an imagined third person from which all things are seen is secured within this frame of representation, which insures that a spectatorial position can underpin a contemplative remove from the world.

As I write I am occasionally catching a glimpse of a postcard reproduction of a still image from the video work "Nemesis 52". It is such a strange form, because it neither appears as an object, nor a being properly speaking. Rather it seems to hover between a form of virtuality and actuality. The video projection mesmerises because of this unsettling of distinct boundaries. In some passages it seems to be a mode of eroticism liberated from the human sexual dance, secured instead within the movement of folds and shadow. Then the tone might shift into something that is so other, that we might repulse the inward pull of the work and instead shift into more abject corners of perception. Next we might feel we are looking at some lost masterpiece of surrealist art in a search for its indexical origin within the spacing afforded by history. This con-





































