

Directives from beneath the surface.

PART 1. chapter 1. Other platforms for being... being touched by the vibrant surface. (8 mins)

The fire in the water,

The air in the earth

The water in the air,

And the earth in the sea.

(Antonin Artaud – from: the new revelations of being, 84)

We stand here, and seem to have no choice but to view this moving material, constrained within this space, with all its distractions and interruptions; peering into these screens, these vessels of folding and unfolding light. How the scales of the fish vibrate and flex, sensing the slightest touch or movement in the liquid air – as the breeze touches the skin, so the fluid currents – tingle and pulsates. This envisioned waking dream spills outwards, into the limpid artificial light. But is it in fact ‘we’ – the distracted audience outside the frames – that are trapped, **in between** the glass walls of this aquarium, chattering among the easy chairs and marbled tables? Before us, drowning in this luxury, this pampering exile – the *Sisters from another Mister* – drenched, but free, glissade and turning in their own effervescent element, their hair juxtaposed with the tales and fins of real fake hair with its visceral presence, have returned to the sea, to swim and to swirl... to breath in and out... to be.

2. An Aesthetics of Dis/play?

The faces of the artists now, pressing close against the screens mirrored facade, seem to speak and sing of this other lost realm, *with its innocent bubbling play*. Catching sight of the fish, and taking pleasure in the effortlessness or serenity in the artists’ balletic drifting, where all that energy to perform fish is concealed. Yet sometimes we witness all that hard work, in a slight clumsiness, a difficult turn, a thrash of kicking legs, a surfeit of expended air. As if the human is learning anew to be: how to move, how to speak, or sing, how to

swim in this novel habitat, even that hardest of tricks, of how to remain under water, without moving and not refloat? The high heel shoes, that delicately dance on the pool's floor, or grip the mosaic wall propelling the body forward, mimic real actions, but with another quality that is real in itself.

And yet there is something deeply uncomfortable in this mimicry, these two humans being fish, a process in the theatrical destabilizing of any aesthetics of display. Are these hermaphrodite fish willingly trapped within this fictional frame, playing and singing or are they like Dante's damned, slowly drowning out – with some eternal fateful call – in soundless babbling suspension, what existence might be without meaning, without any understanding of a beginning or end? Eternally looped, art becomes a rapid rethinking, in its own process of making over and over again in front of an audience, an apparatus for remixing and recreating the meaning of **dis/play**. Within the field of post-production, the primary process of film-making – *the* essential art of desire – creates an arena in which editing, cropping, layering, become ways to heighten and enhance this visible. Not only cutting out limbs but adding them and multiplying presences. The floating limbs, now like curtains or foredrops advance across our field of vision, disrupting our sense of space; their flesh strangely layered like cut outs from some near promised future, a new experience in human engineering where *experimental behaviour* is to be encouraged¹. This new 'situation' of water transformed to air. It is a *Real* thing that exceeds the borders, that appears outside the parameters of the artwork but which is suggested and given concrete form in a vision that is beyond representation, another space of being and knowing. How the artist's figures disappear and reappear across the portals, materialising and dematerialising in the frame, always with the suggestion that there is something else hidden out there, existing beyond the ritual border of the sculpture. Our visual senses are easily shaken by these rituals - but are we touched, can we feel the rustle of the wind on the surface of the water, how the quality of light radically changes our perceptions?

(Pause)

In ritual - improvisation takes centre stage, - just as in all performance as “an improvised synthesis” (Benjamin, 2005: 204). The question always then is how should the distracted audience synthesize this 'improvised' anti-display. What do we recognize or fixate on in these 'rituals'? Do we take note of the little things, the incidental or accidental as much as the intentional: a wristwatch and cloth band on a forearm, leather shoes, scars on the skin, the seams in the flowing clothe. Have these human fish just slipped into the water,

transformed half human half fish, or have they been there all the time, gliding up against, and through the thin sliced skin of these aquarium portals. So imbedded in a language of visual perception, wrapped in our habitual experience of the world, we appear before these moving tableau suddenly and entirely undone, disarmed; only to be assaulted by the artists' tranquil impudence, their humour and playfulness, captivated again by some strange mischevious beauty. We look intently at the lips of the fish, these shapely orifices outlined with red. Mouths abstracted, isolated, turned upside down. From their bubbling lips a faint hissing and cooing emerges, altering this viewer's experience. A muffled soundtrack **dis/plays** in my head: (slow) *the play of water on light, the tinkling of bubbles, the gentle caress of breath, other sensations, enervations directed toward that sixth sensation, trapped deep in the cortex of the body*ⁱⁱ. These:

'Excitations (that) are not properly "sensations", that is, sense data, givens of meaning and orientation, information bits that would be fed into the inner functional body. They are flows of energy that ripple, irradiate, intersect, and condense. The infant intensifies its surplus energies in extending surfaces; discovers the pleasures of surfaces; and discovers the pleasure of having surfaces, of being outside, being born.' (A. Lingis – Transformations: 61)

Now unexpectedly we observe, drifting out towards us, a puppet. Floating head down, like a reversed Ophelia, eyes half closed, eyelids fixed, the cascading hair billows out and rests in the liquid air. The perfection captured in this moment, is not just apparent as one frozen image but given life through the elemental fabrication of this strange instant of existence. This puppet human manifest through light, controlled by the camera's operations and directed by the editing, floats, *momentarily fixed*, holding our attention. Skill and technique in the filmmaking is melded with the unconscious intentionality of the performance movement and gesture. How time stands still in the flow of imagery - in this instant, and in countless other arresting or incongruous instances within the three film loops - we are called then to observe, with the intensity of von Kleist's forensic interlocuter Mr. C, from 'On the Marionette Theatre'. We look with envy into the exotic paradise beyond the glass of the aquaria: "But Paradise is locked and bolted and the Cherub is behind us. We must make a journey around the world, to see if a back door has perhaps been left open" (von Kleist 1810).

And so it is that we peer through into the world created for us beyond the thin veil of the mirrored screen and wonder, at the images:

‘...in a concave mirror turns up again right in front of us after dwindling into the distance, so grace itself returns when knowledge has as it were gone through an infinity. Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or consciousness without limit. That is, in the puppet or in the god.”

(von Kleist from 'On the Marionette Theatre' 1810)

This conception of Kleist’s, of the graceful puppet, the human yet to become, where self-consciousness and thought no longer disturbs our ‘natural grace.’ Where might this lost state be conjured but in such a matrix, where for an instant flitting before our speeding lives we are witness to a moment complete, connected and indivisible, in a total artwork entire in and for itself – a liquid dream bathed in undisturbed ‘natural grace’.

How the artist appears lost for this instant, unthinking, floating gracefully in a bliss of unconscious being-doing, seemingly unaware of self or surroundings. This drawing out of the grace and otherness that already exists in the performer’s unconscious gestures, recalls Walter Benjamin’s observation in his ‘Scheme of Tension’ from the essay “Programme for a Proletarian Childrens Theatre”. In this article, written some one hundred years after Kleist’s musings on the graceful marionette, the child’s action and gesture becomes another form of grace, a secret signal ‘from another world’ (Benjamin 2005: 203). Not only does this deathlike figure now (an angelus novus) - emerging unexpectedly from the molten light and the thrashing bodies, turning and floating, rising out of an efflorescence of bubbles - the vision of a fallen angel prefigured, arrest us, it seems to offer that revolutionary premonition: “... the secret signal of what is to come that speaks from the gesture of the child.” (ibid. 206)

ENTR’ACTE – an interval story:

A point of view.

“What do you make of it?” said Peter the diplomat putting down the teacup he was sipping and looking up at the flatscreen monitor.

His friend, Jack attempted an answer: “Is that really meant to be art?” staring up at the moving images on the screens.

Peter turned his head onto one side: “There appears to be someone drowning down here.”

“Well, what’s that supposed to mean?” Jack replied, making Peter the diplomat a touch uncomfortable. Nevertheless unperturbed, he adjusted his seat and tried once more: “Rather nice but I can’t work it out.”

Jack now somewhat irritated interjected: “Do you mean that it’s meant to be a swimming-pool or a video screen?”

Peter ignored his friend’s question and carried on: “I do understand the emotional significance in music but in…”

“For fuck sake Peter”, Jack interrupted, frustrated with the way the conversation was going. His face was red and his dark eyes had begun to bulge.

Peter, ever the diplomat continued, oblivious to his friend’s rising anger: “It’s certainly Art, but art at a level I don’t understand.”

But at this point Jack no longer listened to Peter’s speech. He stood up and let out a neighing laugh. “Mi Ya, Mi ya, ya ya, ya, ha, ya”, then pushed the astonished Peter so hard that he tipped back out of his chair.

“What the…” but before Peter could even finish, Jack had kicked him right in the stomach. “Thud”, Peter bent double, groaned, and rolled back and forth across the carpet.

“Is that what you really think!” Jack shouted at him, looking down at the floor.

His eyes watering, Peter tried to convince him one last time, deploying his considerable diplomacy: “It’s only a point of view, Jack’, he whimpered.

Now Jack looked down at him, with even greater level of disgust, raised his right leg, and gave Peter another swinging kick, right to the side of his jaw.

“Phud”.

“That’s what I think of your point of view” he cried triumphantly, and left the hotel lobby without a single backward glance at his now prostrate friend.

The truth reader: Is it better to hold to your point of view, or onto your friends?

The End of this Entr’acte

3. Textural Material - being touched by the vibrant surface.

The portals draw in a luminescent light, natural or not, it streams into the water and is magnified, spread-eagling into a myriad of patterns and permutations shimmering on the water's agitated surface. It speaks immediately of sunlight, its caressing touch: of the perception of surface through other senses than the optical. In the altered gravity of the pool there is a constant alternation between weighted or weightless mass that speaks of another depth concealed or revealed through this play of light and surface texture. This light that streams into our bodies, that our eyes capture, then translates simultaneously into other non-visual sensations. The liquid as light, light as material, dark hair fills the screen, turns into the filagree of seaweed and blocks out the sun. We are suffused with this synaesthesia, a 'reunion of the senses', where light manifests as a feeling of being touched, agitated, caressed, or even as a musical rhythm: in gentle pulses of energy and occasionally in moments of assault, when a different translucent colour saturates the screens – in a sensation where the fluid cloth suggests '...the silk of the seas and the arctic flowers;'ⁱⁱⁱ or in the form and movement of the middle monitor as it slices upwards, blocks of abstract colour appear, the swimming pool reduced to a pillar of pure airy light.

PAUSE

'Ah the banner of bleeding meat, on the silk of the seas and the arctic flowers (that do not exist)'

This vertical space that travels up and down horizontally, allows for a different sense of this movement, flowing up, drifting upwards and slipping down, the cloth moves with the tendrils of some delicately hewn seaplant, flooding the screen in a rippling acidic green, as the waters flow, pushes it from side to side. Then in another disc, the bright glare of the pool lamp searches for some point of contact, distributing halos and sparks of light that filter like threads through the viscous colour: bubbles of sweat, beads of light, particles of air.

'Finally, O reason, O happiness, I cleared from the sky the blue which is darkness, and **I lived as a golden spark** of this light Nature.' (Rimbaud - from Season in Hell)

What is this material and surface fused together but light, manifest as a material of texture. The floating saturated cloth that both clings to, wrapping the body in this other texture, and which transmits; the surface on which light, touch and feeling pass through and play. This is a texture that is beneath the surface that permeates the transparency of a translucent skin,

a texture of light, swirling on the tense surface of the water, filtered through to us through the veil of thin cloth. The stretched skin of water, a parchment of ever flowing energy as reflected light waves, refracted and distorted by the momentum of the body. How the mysterious qualities of light, its wave-like pulse mixes with the agitation of particles creating these syncopations, melodies and rhythm.

Rising up, falling down, as the clothes swarm and glide and cling to the smooth feeling body, it is touched by thousands of ripples and agitations in the displaced water. Pushing in and out, the skin of water presses against the sensitive limbs, a textural material made of two surfaces flowing up against each other creating surprising frictions and resistance – it is not all one calm impenetrable reflection. Pressing against the shoulder blades, the sinewy skin quivering with the weight and heft of water. A quiver, a long-drawn-out shudder, as enervation, this painful pleasure is beyond life or death, beyond description or belief, it is fascination.

Now the particles of light are suddenly like dust and everything in this watery world appears to be traveling up – all these microscopic pixels pitched upwards, floating free with the force of the water, this anti-gravity that spins apart, fractures and liquefies. In an effort to keep swimming through the water you need the weight of this liquid mass to hold you down. I feel the effect of water both buoying me, and pushing against my limbs, it is a transferred feeling akin to negative gravity, like the sensation of freefalling. Floating, yet still feeling the affects of gravity, an embodied memory of suspension within the amniotic fluid, being in the free cocooned space of the womb. The artists' bodies' uninhibited movements and contortions set free from gravity's oppressive imperative. I too wish to rise, to be lifted with the lightness of fine silk, rippling in the air.

In the left hand disc a length of spiraled cloth corkscrews, making a solitary slow motion pirouette. It is a dress without a body but an exoskeleton infused with a ghostly absence, a light-motif of the presence that once lived within its surface. It revolves, a delicate skein, as a puffed up inflated form, billowing in and out with a rippling breath. This defoliated skin, lightly drifting debris from the performance that has just passed through us, a 'moving' image somehow escaped from the realm of 'beautiful semblance' (Benjamin 261); that reminds us of the fragility of life and the dead energy trapped within an emptied sea. Then the energy of light shifts again; think now of Ovid, all those Greek myths, those couplings and hermaphroditic transformations. Something else appears from the creative

vortex, two dancing fish balancing between weight and light, brush against each other as they coil and uncoil, somewhat mimicking the turning hollowed exfoliated skin. No words, no signs, no warning – just two idling fish shrouded within their own outer clothes, an exoskeleton of textiles. We watch intently this brief glinting flash, flickering on our skin^{iv}. This moment where they turn together without contact, then that faintest of final touches, as their slow spiral unwinds, two bodies becoming one body through a transference of energy. The sea weed-like clothe, rippling with a green transparent luminosity folds around their arced curves. We feel this touch as we feel the energy of some unbearable light, as that electrical intensity that will alter us – too...
...forever... as it flits.... by.

‘DIRECTIVE FROM BENEATH THE SURFACE’

I will hold ones air ‘...to the wind of the breath by and by’

At night when the hotel sleeps the fish continue to turn and spin, restlessly coiling in upon themselves... Ah these fishtanks, is it not all now become a dream, a sleepwalking somnambulism, that barely disturbs the wearied night staff? Habituated to the hyperreality of flickering screens, we pass through, and in, and by, these other images with a certain ennui, with a listless fixation luxuriating in the excitations of being transported, somewhere out of ourselves; half in, and half out, of actuality. Lulled into this slumber, the only audience now are the memory projections of those who have glanced up and looked into these screens in a previous life, with their distracted attention. Dreamers, breathing into the runes of gesture and light, we inhale a strange savagery filled with allusion, one that crawls just below the skin’s surface. Thinking, doing, feeling, dreaming – this hard work has been transferred to the viewer and whatever the audience’s predeliction there is a ripple of feeling passed across from the constructed veil that beams down upon us. That thin skin of pixels and energy, flesh and impulse. We are equally distracted and arrested, everything seems to be hurtling forward with a pressing homogeneity but then a moment, a fragment wrenched from the flow, re-edits our understanding – an intimacy that pushes us towards a radical empathy: This intimacy that leaves its mark upon us all, with its very own scarifying imprint, in that ‘*stripping of the veil from the object*’ (Benjamin 256). Touch, sense and the surface skin distanced, the screen calibrates different registers of proximity, in intimacy and extimacy, where the objectivity of material dissolves into a layering of

intimacy/subject and extimacy/collective. Distractedly I can no longer think what I want – my thoughts have been replaced by moving images...in the ‘intensive interpenetration of reality with equipment’ (Benjamin: 264). But can we imagine that we still can dream? Like the artists performing their own dream sequence, full of their own plenitude, at peace playing and surviving in their artificial pool? The closed system of the artwork leaks out and sprinkles its infectious vision over the surroundings with a subtlety and unpredictability that confounds the artists’ intentions. Here now, a dream of reintegration, where borders no longer exist and our material and the material of the world we inhabit, dissolve together, forming new constellations, new feelings, by reawakening our desires for another existence. An existence that we might only discover in play and in the **Real**...

‘The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again.’ (Walter Benjamin – On the Concept of History 390)

In attempting to discover truth through a new fidelity to their material the artists, rather than merely disenchanting the future-past, seek to re-enchant the future-now. In literally breaking the surface, and smashing the screen open, to flood the world with new sensation – ‘après le deluge’.

As soon as the idea of the Flood was finished, a hare halted in the clover and the trembling flower bells, and said its prayer to the rainbow through the spider’s web.

Oh! The precious stones that hid, – the flowers that gazed around them.

In the soiled main street stalls were set, they hauled the boats down to the sea rising in layers as in the old prints.

Blood flowed, at Blue-beard’s house – in the abattoirs in the circuses where God’s promise whitened the windows. Blood and milk flowed.

The beavers built. The coffee cups steamed in the bars.

In the big greenhouse that was still streaming, the children in mourning looked at the marvellous pictures. A door banged, and, on the village-green, the child waved his arms, understood by the cocks and weathervanes of bell-towers everywhere, under the bursting shower.

The Sisters installed a piano in the Alps. The Mass and first communions were celebrated at the hundred thousand altars of the cathedral.

Caravans departed. And the Hotel Pullman Splendide was built in the chaos of ice and polar night. (Rimbaud – translated A.S.Kline ed.)

After the flood:

In an artwork that folds into and resonates from under the viewers skin there is always this possibility of sensation returning, an element of unexpected pleasure that either cuts into or caresses the eye^v - these directives that emerge from beneath the surface. Gazing at the central image, in an attempt to follow the history or logic of the film's editing, I re-imagine the three polished limbs pushing against the perspex frame floating away, as they dissolve into the grey surface to leave a shift of cloth. There it billows in the light, an intense exotic green, a veil gliding down the blue colour field, to disappear like some caudal fin, to finally slip its way into the seas... dark, ... deep echoing... void.

ⁱ 'Experimental behaviour' as encouraged by the International Situationists.

ⁱⁱ 'Excitations are not properly "sensations", that is, sense data, givens of meaning and orientation, information bits that would be fed into the inner functional body. They are flows of energy that ripple, irradiate, intersect, and condense. The infant intensifies its surplus energies in extending surfaces; discovers the pleasures of surfaces; and discovers the pleasure of having surfaces, of being outside, being born. This extension of pleasure surfaces to which life attaches blocks the compulsion to return to the womb, the primary death drive.' (Lingis, Transformations: 61)

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Oh! Le pavilion en viande saignante sur la soie des mers et des fleurs arctiques; (elles n'existent pas.) (Rimbaud, 292) from Barbarian/Barbarous roughly translated as 'Ah the banner of bleeding meat, on the silk of the seas and the artic flowers (that do not exist)'

^{iv} 'The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again.' (Benjamin – On the Concept of History 390)

^v 'Materialist historiography is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad.' (Benjamin from On the Concept of History 396)