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A New Narcissism: Refracting the Self in Contemporary Video

We are familiar with the concept of the narcissistic gaze in a pejorative sense. To view one's self in absolute, to ignore the calls of the nymph Echo, is to flirt with a moral sentence of fossilization. According to the Narcissus myth, as was retold memorably in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, one must be wary of self involvement, lest one perish under the stony reflection of his or her own image. We are begged by the moral of this tale to associate acute self observation with vanity, isolation and fallibility, to understand introversion as akin to a sort of blindness, one which throws a cloak upon the world and leaves us at the water's edge, immobilized. Ovid eulogized that Narcissus "fell in love with an insubstantial hope, mistaking a mere shadow for a real body. Spellbound by his own self, he remained there motionless, with fixed gaze." Further emphasizing the Platonic associations of the myth, the Roman writer then asks: "Poor foolish boy, why vainly grasp at the fleeting image that eludes you? ... What you see is but the shadow cast by your reflection; in itself it is nothing."¹

Independent of myth, this deleterious sense of narcissism's veil has become a trope for the Western mind, manifesting a totalizing responsibility to external phenomenon which has arrived from the empiric persuasion of the classical Greeks. Friedrich Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, lamented upon the turn of Greek thought to the teachings of Socrates: "While in all productive men it is instinct that is the creative-affirmative force, and consciousness acts critically and dissuasively, in Socrates, it is

¹ Ovid, The Metamorphoses, trans. Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin Books, 1955) 85.

instinct that becomes critic, and consciousness that becomes the creator.”² For Nietzsche, Socrates’ “one great Cyclops eye” denied his followers from enjoying “the pleasure of gazing into the Dionysian abysses,” severing art from its initial pre-Classical grace.³ Indeed, under the obscurant scrutiny of the Socratic sensibility, images of the self in art become leveled off at a mirror’s glance, the figural image thus becomes a forthright establishment of the self’s ultimate physicality. This defers to a manner of *dues ex machina* for its ultimate teleology, denying “feeling” in deference to that which “appears” in an optical or physiological sense. Inhabiting solely the realm most tenable by the scientist’s outlook, we are thus veiled from an instinctual sense of ourselves – kept apart from a level of deep introspection for its potential inconsistency with the “facts” of our physical environment.

The self portrait as a strict mimesis of the objective has a direct lineage from Greek culture – we can track its passage through Classical, Renaissance, Enlightenment and Modern ideals in Western art. For Plato, as Nietzsche notes, all art was degenerate, an “imitation of a phantom”, which implored art to strive for greater allegiance to that which could be verified – the ideal, whereby: “*philosophic thought* outgrows art and compels it to cling close to the trunk of the dialectic.”⁴ Despite sojourns by the disaffected, the sway of this veneration of the ideal manifested freshly in each era. Called to mind are Sir Joshua Reynolds’ adulation of the concrete memories of history painting, ongoing even during the height of Romanticism, or Clement Greenberg’s high

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Toronto: Random House, 1967) 88.

³ Nietzsche 89.

⁴ Nietzsche 90-91

Modernist reaction to the “kitsch” of pictorial articulation via a call to stark “opticality.”⁵ More recently, in the Postmodern landscape in which we currently stand, we find a vigorous turn away from the reductionism of the Modern, yet one accompanied by a coterminous persuasion by another sort of empiric veil, that of the culturally coherent. For Pop artists, from Warhol onward, the self is implicit, but always with the specified litanies of our current cultural “grid” (in the Foucauldian sense) as a defining pretext. Here, despite a renunciation and general dissatisfaction with the purely physical, the self remains inexorably entwined with the very current cultural housing which it aims (ineffectually) to critique.

It is vitally interesting that research into the origins of the myth of Narcissus has recently established a potential basis for the myth in the same divinatory practices of pre-classical cultures which informed Nietzsche’s Dionysian, lyric urge. This research offers a view of Narcissus’ past life as a boy-medium for hydromancy, or scrying, and underscores the vast scope of value systems that have been demonized by the Greek pronouncement of the myth. Scrying, which emerged with the divinatory arts of the ancient Chaldeans around the middle of the 4th millennium B.C., was a practice that required “the seer (the priest, the augur, the sorcerer) to stare into a pellucid or reflective object ... until he observes the future.”⁶ As the scholar Max Nelson explains at length in his essay *Narcissus: Myth and Magic*, many versions of the Narcissus myth seem “closely linked to prescriptions for an ancient scrying ritual in which a young ... boy would stare motionless, in a prone position, at his own reflection in calm, clear,

⁵ Ken Carpenter, Greenberg, Clement, Grove Art Online. Oxford University Press, [1/15/07], <http://www.groveart.com/>

⁶ Eric G. Wilson, The Spiritual History of Ice (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 10.

resplendent spring water ... in order to summon an apparition.”⁷ For the water-scryer, it was not the mimetic reflection of one’s image that was pursued, but rather a *refractory* visual experience that revealed divine messages or dream-like visions, at times personifying themselves as deities or ancestral spirits.

In the still waters of the hydromancer, reflections of the self and the environment would mix with surface patterns, expounding an integrated abstraction that could be used for divination. This was not self absorption, but rather an act of looking that was ultimately embarked upon to reveal deep meanings and truths about the outside world, cutting through a *reflective* sense of self to instead find an *immersive* one. This action incorporates one’s environment and subjectivity as one, with each having equal recourse over the other. A solitary state was often a requisite for scrying, but with the distinct aim of communication with a mystic sense of the other – this was less an act of meditative isolation than an active reach toward inter-subjectivity. As Nelson notes, in Ovid, Narcissus “is not always still. He speaks about having stretched his arms to his image and it having reached back among other reciprocal movements.”⁸ Psychologically speaking, it is this reciprocity that becomes key in the divinatory practice of the scryer, granting an animistic sense that the universe at large is not merely inert and mechanistic, but rather causally tied to one’s own perceptions and mental agency. The world then becomes, as William James intoned in his writings on pragmatism, “a world in which personal forces are the starting-point of new effects”⁹

⁷ Max Nelson, “Narcissus: Myth and Magic,” *The Classical Journal* Vol. 95, No. 4. (Apr. - May, 2000) 383.

⁸ Nelson 377.

⁹ Horace M Kallen, ed, *The Philosophy of William James*. Selected from his Chief Works. (New York: Random House, 1953) 206.

In contemporary art, particularly in the mode of video, the narcissistic act has been established as a primary mode of discourse. Rosalyn Krauss pointed out the early narcissistic bent of the video genre, from its very inception, in her seminal 1976 essay *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*, appealing to Freudian and Lacanian psychological takes on the condition. For Krauss, videos like Vito Acconci's *Centers* (1971) highlighted the reflexive nature of the medium of video, and led her to dub narcissism "the condition of the entire genre."¹⁰ Krauss' narcissism is one that leads to an "unchanging condition of a perpetual frustration" and undergoes a "bracketing-out [of] the world and its conditions, at the same time as it can reassert the facility of the object against the grain of the narcissistic drive towards projection."¹¹ Inherent in Krauss's read of the video art of the 1970s is the period's pervasive urge towards Minimalism, which channeled narcissism to attempt to find an eminently concrete stillness. This was true in this period even when faced with the effusive inertia of video, a medium where the "object" at hand was little more than a gathering of electron charges.

The tranquil reflection of 1970's video artists which Krauss pointed out seems to have been but a passing vision. Released from the minimalist aesthetic, a number of today's video artists are engaged in a form of narcissism irregardless, but one that seems much closer to a divinatory, "refractory" narcissism than to the "reflective" myth of the Greeks and Ovid. Called to mind in this vein are Mathew Barney's "Cremaster Cycle" (1994-2001) and Sue de Beer's "The Quickening" (2006), both works of complex esoteric and personal myth by contemporary video artists who were influential to the two younger artists, Jason Kendall and Alex McQuilkin, that I will focus on in this essay.

¹⁰ Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism", *October*, Vol. 1 (Spring, 1976) 50.

¹¹ Krauss 58-63

Like the hydromantic Narcissus, these artists use the abstractive lens of their own subjectivity to find a handle on their social environment, letting empiric certainty fall by the wayside in deference to an immersive, potentially animistic, sense of the subject and the external world that are intimately intertwined. While this work follows from a Postmodern commandeering of the self, it has emerged in the last decade as a mode of art making that is not fettered by any objective role within an established cultural archetype, but rather one grasped with a full realization of the plastic omnipotence of the irresolute mental “flaneur.” Within this work, by undergoing an act of narcissistic distension from the everyday, these artists establish their control over a flux of nuanced cultural, personal and mythopoeic artifacts in defiant acts of reframing, costuming and montage.

In Jason Kendall’s performance-for-video “Blitz” (2007), the artist created a scenario of narcissistic sport, testing his physical limits in confrontation with an inanimate object of his own making. Entrapped in his studio, which he had transformed into an AstroTurf covered stadium, Kendall attempted to destroy a dummy adversary clothed in a vinyl sheath that matched the colors of the antagonist’s football-by-way-of-bushido uniform. The combat spectacle ensued for over two hours while onlookers observed from a scaffold outside the studio. Multiple cameras within the studio captured the battle from every angle. The artist was cast in “Blitz” as a present-day Narcissus in struggle with his past, as a college football player, turning away from the peripheral to struggle with the interior. Kendall established himself, in this act, as a titanic figure against the “indestructible object” of the tackling dummy. By the end of the performance, the artist lies splayed out on the AstroTurf amongst the eviscerated remains

of his indestructible materials, exhausted but not defeated, having destroyed the object and letting only his self remain.

By pairing the violence and momentum of the athletic imperative with an urge toward negation of the objective self, Kendall allows us to glimpse an instance of non-ascetic narcissism in its most contentious state. We are ill prepared by our mythological backgrounds for the viability of this sort of barbaric onanism, to the point where even our most stalwart oppositional thinkers sometimes become dubious. As Nietzsche himself contended: “the rapture of the Dionysian state, with its annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits, contains, while it lasts, a lethargic element in which all personal experiences of the past become immersed.”¹² Kendall’s act of violent narcissism defies Nietzsche’s doubt toward the worth of narcissism’s attempted “annihilation of ordinary bounds,” refusing to adhere to the mythic consequences of immobility and intoning, instead, a revolutionary act of reclamation against external signifiers. Kendall’s ecstatic energy finds cause to meld introversion with impacting action, asserting the immaculate presence of the self in the face of accumulated manifestations of “role” – in this case that of football player, gladiator and samurai. By the performance’s end, Kendall’s prone warrior has nullified the object, exhausted his masculine capability and asserted a nuanced sense of personhood not controlled by the object’s siren call. In this act of narcissism, the immaterial “opponent” by which the warrior is defined is eviscerated, and the self is ultimately freed.

In Alex McQuilkin’s recent two channel video “Joan of Arc” (2007), the artist emulates and considers an idealized image of the 15th century saint through the medium of film, intoning an instance where the narcissistic urge becomes attached to an external

¹² Nietzsche 59.

image, resulting in a conflation that comes to herald its own sense of freedom. As McQuilkin shaves her head in adoration of Maria Falconetti's 1928 Joan of Arc, a narration of self doubt and earnest affiliation with the martyr is spoken in a voice-over by the artist, one that Roberta Smith noted as maintaining a voice of "disarming directness, restraint and authenticity."¹³ As we listen, we are simultaneously transfixed by McQuilkin's implied stare at the mirror of her camera's viewfinder, becoming implicated as viewers into the narcissistic loop of video. While the filmic Joan of Arc burns at the stake, McQuilkin tilts her head in a muted reflection, straining to attain the same postures and expressions as the actress. This is a closed circuit between McQuilkin and her idol, yet one that establishes throughout an acute possibility of escape through the implied nuance of narcissism as an autonomous and destabilizing action. As a montaged clip of Dreyer's film focuses momentarily on the passage of birds overhead Falconetti's pyre, we are reminded that Joan of Arc inhabited fully this sense of autonomy in her own life through her visions, rebellion and, ultimately, in her death.

If we are to imagine McQuilkin's viewfinder as a mirror in the manner of the narcissistic pool, we can entertain the images conjured of Joan of Arc as projections, in the psychological sense. The distant celluloid memory of Falconetti being executed becomes a figment of the artist's desires and subconscious memories, which appear in the screen in a manner so as to become available for mimicry. As Krauss noted, projection is a primary feature of the "mediumistic" aspect of video art, constituted by "the simultaneous reception and projection of an image; and the human psyche used as a conduit."¹⁴ For McQuilkin, staring into the camera's pool of refracted vision, which ties

¹³Roberta Smith, "Art Listings: Last Chance", New York Times, 23 Nov. 2007.

¹⁴ Krauss 52.

self and culture together amid a kaleidoscopic psychic abstraction, allows a spirit to be summoned, in this case that of Joan of Arc, who's legend is one which reinforces the practice itself. Nietzsche might have called this summoned specter an Apollonian dream image, one that grants an inkling of the abyssal mystery of the Dionysian without succumbing to the chaotic lack of form that is inherent in that state of vision. For Nietzsche, the Apollonian remains a necessary companion to the freeing mentality of the Dionysian, existing as the "apotheosis of the *principium individuationis*" -- a stabilizing reminder of our discrete individuality "in which alone is consummated the perpetually attained goal of primal unity."¹⁵

Videographic acts like a ritualized destruction of the materially external, in Jason Kendall's "Blitz", or a projective summoning and donning of silver screen deities, in Alex McQuilkin's "Joan of Arc", lend credence to the worth of the narcissistic action in a manner that escapes the Socratism which has previously made notions of narcissism culturally problematic. This is hardly the "morbid narcissism" expounded by Freud, or the "imaginary order" inhabited by the narcissistic in Lacan, but rather a narcissism with acutely implicit social and political worth. By peering at the self within a refractory lens rather than a reflective one, these artists are exercising their ability to escape the overwhelming catcalls of commercial machinery and cultural imperative, attempting to establish a personalized lens through which to abstract and commandeer the world into which we have been placed. The very self absorption that was established, by the Narcissus myth and subsequent Socratic thought, as a veiling of the empiric has been reclaimed instead today as a "conduit" to renewed clarity. For these artists, the water-lens of the camera becomes multifaceted, retaining aspects of history, culture, memory

¹⁵ Nietzsche 45.

and physicality to be recomposed personally in a manner which grants full license to the pragmatist creative capability. As George Santayana wrote in his 1905 *Reason in Art*, “Life is an equilibrium which is maintained now by accepting modification and now by imposing it.”¹⁶ Through a new narcissistic practice, many of today’s artists are reclaiming their independence from all manner of empiric certitude, and, in their wake, a malleable, self created equilibrium becomes a possibility once more.

¹⁶ George Santayana, “Reason in Art”, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1931) 3.