

Felix Ensslin

Between Two Deaths: From the Mirror to Repetition

“It is not the two that recompose in one, but the one that opens into two.”
Chinese revolutionary slogan¹

Most of the art criticism that has been informed by a reading of Jacques Lacan’s -“return to Freud” has focused in one way or another on what one might call the classical Lacanian notions, such as the mirror stage and his theory of the gaze. This kind of criticism was put forth mostly by writers from *October*, especially Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster.² Krauss placed video as a medium in general and the video experiments of the likes of Vito Acconci and Linda Benglis in particular squarely within the narcissistic imaginary; and Foster defended neo-avant-gardism as a form of potentially- resistant repetition holding to a dimension of a social real. However, this essay and the exhibition *between two deaths* will show that they — like most other current criticism, whether deriving from Jacques Rancière’s valuation of the “aesthetic regime” or from the many forms of poststructuralist or post-critical theory — miss a crucial point. There is more to Lacan than meets the eye. This “more” is to be found in the later Lacan, the Lacan of *Seminar XX: Encore, On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, or of *Seminar XVII: The Reverse Side of Psychoanalysis*³, though not exclusively, for in the light they shed, familiar concepts bear new fruits as well. However, it is not the task of this essay to argue with Lacanian scholarship. Rather, such scholarship might inform a reading of contemporary art and — in the spirit of inviting debate — shed light on the reasons for putting together the exhibition *between two deaths*. Arnold Gehlen has called subjectivity the “stigma of man.”⁴ He does so with disgust and even despair. The exhibition and this essay argue, rather, that this stigma should be borne and borne out in confrontation with the dimension “between the two deaths.”

In what follows, I want to give a brief overview of the dialectic between the issues of the mirror-stage and the dimension *between two deaths*. For the purposes of the exhibition, we took out Lacan’s definite article in order to indicate- the many ways in which the “second” death — symbolic death — appears within life. I will then present by what one could call a theoretical fairy tale in order to situate the art presented in *between two deaths*. It is a fairy tale because, with its references to history, like all narratives, it is in danger of bringing closure to what opens itself up or makes itself questionable and, if successful, gives the reader and viewer a chance at a new “misunderstanding.” It is also a fairy tale because, like the folk-heritage once collected in the romantic age for the consumption and edification of a class that recently, after revolution, had witnessed restitution clothed in nationalist, or even vernacular mantles, the insight it can offer, while connected to a dimension of truth, provides no solace or wisdom, but having been written, remains non-determinative and preparatory. To think that writing produced in one place and sent off into a more or less anonymous world of reception can have, all by itself, an effect on or of the real is a “magical superstition” (Arnold Gehlen), and both art and analysis belie that superstition. Rather, if writing is effected by the real itself, what one can hope for is that it can be a cause for repetition in — and for — those who are able to stay open to this effect.

1. The Discourse of the Mirror Stage: Behind the Double Lurks the Real

Sigmund Freud thought of the “immortal soul” as the “first double of the body”⁵ and of the double in general as a defense against death. “Between two deaths,” on the other hand, is a metaphor first introduced by Jacques Lacan in his discussion of Antigone in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* that refers to a dimension of undeadness.⁶ It connotes that which is not “immortal,” but a-mortal—that which, though mortal, cannot die.⁷ Hypostasizing the experience of this dimension as something “immortal,” the Aristotelian Christian tradition formed it into the soul as the living principle of the body. With this movement—from the subject to the undead “double” to its transformation into the immortal soul—one can see the circular movement into which the metaphor “between two deaths” is trapped, or which it itself in turn traps. The “undead” is a-mortal, cannot die, thus it keeps insisting. It cannot be given a place in the order of the living, thus it returns. In Lacanian terminology, this is the real. At the same time, while it is a-mortal, it is also the opposite of the living—of that which exists—even more so than that which is actually dead. It thus is both: that which insists-, does not cease, never comes to an end, and, as such, is in some sense the *cause* of the living; yet, at the same time, it is its opposite, at least from the point of view of the ordered representations we ordinarily call reality. Here we can see the connection of the real to reality—in the final analysis it is as cause. We can also see why it is its opposite: because the real, lacking representation, never appears in reality as such. It neither is given nor finds itself an order; it has no symbolic existence, that is, no name that remains, no space that persists, no place in the calculable and countable.

The “double” and its subgenres—such as shifting identities, referencing art-historical greats as the other of one’s artistic “I,” playing roles in performances, taking figures of popular culture as points of reference—have reappeared in contemporary art, particularly in the work of many of the artists in this exhibition, including Sue de Beer, Jutta Koether, Javier Téllez, Rita Ackermann, Brock Enright, and Aïda Ruilova, to name a few.⁸ This can be read as a symptom of being locked in a space between symbolic inscription—the subject is named such and has this place in reality—and the real as cause, as exclusion, as non-existence.

However, these artists do not merely show us social or individual role-playing, or the fact of the difference between a role and its performer or a role and its social significance. A certain popularity has been enjoyed in art (and, in Germany, in theater) by the process of showing the gap between subject and “role.” Nothing, of course, was gained by that alone: showing that one plays a role means nothing. We all constantly play roles and know it. What is important is the excess within the role I play, that cannot be reduced to a “role.” Another way to say this is that the Ego is a real object. It also isn’t enough to show the comical difference between those who are able to play their role and those who aren’t, or to show that difference in the same individual between two moments. It’s the very split in each moment which matters and which opens up a horizon of universality.⁹ Thus, it might be much better to assume a role and “mean” it, actually take the embarrassment of being it, rather than reproduce in the audience a sophisticated gaze, splitting role and bearer as if together they produce a whole. The audience owns this gaze already, for it always already knows that roles are just roles. To show this simply reproduces a fantasy, not democracy, as some claim. It merely reproduces the status quo. The bar between sign and signified is real. Even if it is in the imaginary, as object it contains that which insists, which cannot be pacified. In a curious

combination, the work of American artists like Vanessa Beecroft, the recent video of Doug Aitken projected on the walls of the MoMA showing rich celebrities playing the role of working-class New Yorkers, cutting-edge theater in Germany (Marthaler, Schlingensiefel, and to an extent Pollesch), and the sociology and social-philosophy of the Habermas or Luhmann schools all share this less than innocent misunderstanding.¹⁰ Simply producing enlightenment about the contingency of roles reproduces the stuff of contemporary capitalist fantasies, not resistance against it.

Why is the mirror stage so decisive? Because it thematizes the fact that narcissism cannot be outstripped precisely because it forms a *real* obstacle to and functions as a civilizing agent for the real. The mirror stage functions as an exit from the horror of undifferentiation, of fragmentation, and as a defense against being helplessly at the mercy of what emerges, or beckons, as it were, from both within and without the subject. It saves us from anxiety. It does this by taking another of the same kind as an already existing self-image, as a *Vorbild*, as it were, and recognizing in it the possibility of forming the fragmented body and its drives into a unity, or into the possibility of self-control and mastery. Of course, this is, at the same time, an alienation, because the image of myself is “another,” as the already clichéd poem of Rimbaud has it. I and the “other” who is “I” is what Lacan calls the Imaginary. But— and this already leads beyond the usual focus on the mirror stage—this can only work because the “other” who is “I,” in whom I read the “anticipated certainty” of self-control and mastery, is already symbolically mandated him or herself, inscribed as a “one” into the whole of the order in which it can be counted. This is what, after all, the symbolic order, or the “Other,” is: a machine that counts everyone and puts them in their place.

However, to focus on the mirror stage has led to the lazy mistake in theory that one talks about “commodity fetishism”—understanding the fetish as the function of the double—and refers it to objects, artworks, and their value and place.¹¹ In a form of ideology-critique, one assumes that once this lie has been understood, then, with a bit of good will, the whole edifice should crumble. Thus critique becomes moralism. But “fetishism” is not a property that falsely is ascribed to objects. The fetish is real as an object, and it is real precisely because it is inscribed into a social order, into social relations, into a discourse. The fetishist object is a fetish, because in the very split caused by the real, the symbolic and the real merge into a kind of union. Thus, as such, it only appears in the split the real opens up, locating itself where the symbolic collides with the real. Thus, the subject itself, as object, i.e., as Ego, can become a -fetish, just as God can become a fetish, or rather, as the place of the Other can be taken up by the fetish. This is what narcissism in its extreme form is, if the object it produces no longer really counts symbolically. It has nothing to do with being trapped in the imaginary alone. It is what happens in the place where the symbolic hits the real. It is the object that fills the space between two deaths. The subject is real, the individual is imaginary, and discourse is symbolic. But the space “between two deaths” opens up precisely when the circle closes—when the real, the subject, appears in the discourse as impossible, and when the discourse produces the real as effect. As we will see, the contemporary subject’s “new maladies of the soul,”¹² its melancholy and exhaustion, its irony and displacement, must be located within this circular movement and the stops, the “stuckness,”¹³ it produces.

2. A Theoretical-Historical Fairy Tale (I): Nobody and Death

Jacques Lacan reconstructs why the discovery of narcissism was decisive for Freud: because it made obvious the status of the Ego as an object.¹⁴ Between the partial drives of autoeroticism and the possibility of loving an object via genital love—which Lacan has called the “myth of psychoanalysis”—an object was established: the “I” as “another,” which together, in their undifferentiated yet alienated state, form the Ego.¹⁵ The Ego is an object which, on the side of the Real, functions as a bulwark against the dangers of drive, of decay and chaos, and on the other, symbolic side, precisely as an object, because as such it is the condition for the subject’s representation or existence in a given order. The Ego as object is the condition for the subject finding its place in the world, as it were.

Towards the real, the Ego serves as the agent of mastery, keeping at bay the multiplicity of excitements by uniting their loci in one object. This, however, implies of necessity the possibility of getting stuck on only one part as all, of mistaking one of the many for all. Already a contradiction appears. As object, the Ego is one, the master of the many. However, to fulfill that function, it has to privilege one over all others—its self or “I”—thus performing exactly what it is meant to avoid by introducing with itself an excess into the smooth workings of the symbolic order. In this way, the imaginary, i.e., the Ego, carries a real Trojan horse inside the well-ordered symbolic city. And Troy will fall each time. This happens because of the split in the function itself. The Ego as object is both a part of the series of objects and the exception to that -series, a status which, in turn, founds its claim to mastery.¹⁶ This claim is issued in the direction of the “city,” as it were—the city as the Other as discourse, its structuring norms and laws, but also its ordinary speech. This “Other is given its other,” its imaginary double, in this very operation, thus opening up for the subject the possibility of testing—or rather, constructing—reality. This enables the subject to be safely represented in the place it is offered by the order that Other is. This is existence for the subject. It exists like this, or it is nothing.

In the “Dialectic of Enlightenment,” Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer situated the origins of modern subjectivity in Homer’s epic novel, the *Odyssey*, because its hero Odysseus performed the very contradiction just described.¹⁷ Adapting to the real of what the authors call “nature” by cunning, Odysseus names himself “nobody,” thus precipitating his flight from the terror of the monstrous cyclops. But it also facilitates enjoyment, as in the case of the siren’s call: his trust in cunning rationality enables him to listen to their song while keeping safe at a distance. Odysseus performs these deeds in order to affirm with the negation “nobody” the very world to which he, Odysseus, belongs. His goal is to return home to Ithaca. This is exactly what the Ego can do, if one grants the condition that once one has eluded the cyclops—the fragmenting drives—there in fact is a world one can join, no matter how much one is all over the place, *polytropon*, or “thrown about,”¹⁸ before getting to one’s home. One can argue that something else happened on the road to today namely, that it became impossible to rejoin the world after—cunningly or not—becoming “nobody.” For the world to which one could return has ceased to exist. When the symbolic itself becomes real, short-circuiting the circle between the subject, the individual, and discourse, the world into which the subject could return—having used its cunning and adaptive skills—disappears. Ithaca has sunk. Now, the subject, emerging from the real, is all dressed up imaginarily, but has no stable place to go. Or it has to produce its own symbolic. As individual, this is evidently a contradiction. Aesthetics inhabits this contradiction, this side of a collective new world.

The signifier of this short circuit is death, the abyss, night. Here the gap that forever will separate certain kinds of “poststructuralism” and Lacanian psychoanalysis becomes obvious. Rei Terada has summed this up quite well in a way that also can inform the reading of the return of romantic topoi to which we will turn later:

Poststructuralist theory’s imagination of emotion differs from the decentered psycho-logy offered by Lacanian psychoanalysis, since Lacan identifies certain discontinuities of experience with subjectivity itself. Thus Slavoj Žižek presents his reading of Lacan as an extension of classical thought. This orientation appears clearly in Žižek’s recent conversation with Judith Butler: to Butler’s assertion that subjectivity begins in the coerced attachment of a child to adults—“passionate attachment”— Žižek replies that the subject consists in a “primordial abyss of dis-attachment that precedes attachment”: the need for “passionate attachment” to provide for a minimum of being implies that the subject qua “abstract negativity”—the primordial gesture of disattachment from its environment—is already there.¹⁹

For Lacan, this gap appears as a short circuit of the real and the symbolic. It is the event or the emergence of the subject itself, it is the gap, the empty place of subjectivity. Here we have Gehlen’s “stigma of man.”²⁰

In art, the break, which no longer allows a safe return to a given order or one’s “passionate attachment” to it, has found expression in many periods following the disintegration of the “great chain of being.” We can find it already in the *vanitas* representations—and the anamorphic spots—of the Baroque, or in a painting like Caravaggio’s *The Decapitation of St. John* (1607–08). It is the only painting we know of which the artist signed. He did so with the red paint of St. John’s blood, the letters of the name emerging from its pool. Salome holds a golden plate, ready to receive her prize. The whole image pulls towards this plate, even though it is far to the left— the lines of the gazes of the prisoners behind bars, the pointing fingers of the second man, and the brutish back of the executioner all point to the empty space on the plate. The only object which can fill this place, fulfill the desire it embodies, is a dead object. A real object, but a dead one: St. John’s severed head. It seems as if the artist identified with St. John, with his having to die in order to fulfill the function in the symbolic world to which he was no longer automatically assigned.

That even the Counter-Reformation, a driving force in Baroque art, was unable to hide the event which was taking place, the “decentering” of the subject and its world, can be seen in another Caravaggio painting. When he paints St. Jerome, the creator of the Latin vulgate Bible, the ideological purpose is clear. Against the vernacular, against the translations and interpretations of the Reformation, the holy book is meant to be re-inscribed into its status as enigmatic speech emanating from an un knowable place, the place of the Other. But when Caravaggio performs this task (*St. Jerome*, 1606), he paints St. Jerome as a humanist scholar, replete with dictionary and absorbed in the task of interpretation and translation. On the left corner of this scholar’s desk stands a skull, a signifier of the short circuit of the symbolic in the discourse with its real. Knowledge and Truth, the book and the skull, are separated, never to be merged again, or rather, merged only in the fetish.²¹ While the cunning of Odysseus functioned on the basis of his truth being unconsciously inscribed into the world, its name being Ithaca or Penelope, here the cunning knowledge of the scholar only serves to highlight the separation from his truth.

3. A Theoretical Fairy Tale (II): Signifying Emptiness — Art's Place and the "Stigma of Man"

Already this model can serve as an image for contemporary subjectivity. If the appellation-, the imperative issuing from the place of the Other, its call to order, no longer sounds like "This is your place!"—"Take it!", "This is your task!"—"Fulfill it!", "These are your means!"—"Use them!" then the object Freud discovered, the narcissistic object, blows invisibly in the wind like a flag without colors. It derives its energy from decay and chaos, blowing to this side or to the other, sometimes stopping to stubbornly assert itself and at other times humbly crawling into a resting place temporarily afforded by some master.²²

We may leave aside the issue of whether the order which no longer existed had ever truly existed before, beyond being a contingent historical formation. We don't need to discuss that its demand to be eternal and God's will, to issue from the metaphysical order of things, was always already a fiction. Rather, we should focus on the lack within the fiction, once it no longer can be believed. What we cannot leave aside—should not leave aside—is this: through the dissolution of this fiction, a potentiality opened up, one which had remained invisible and now insists, forces itself, again and again—a potentiality which might be named equality. Without a believable fiction—and what makes a fiction believable if not the fact of its being believed?—there is no reason to put one insistence, one drive, one demand before any other, to separate the right from the wrong, the good from the evil. What forces itself and insists is simply identical with itself, no matter how and from where it issues forth, and in which moment or place, or by which means. While the Ego still has the task to "run from fear" it has no reason to avoid "fun from rear." It is confronted with its own contradiction: on the one hand there is the insistence of equality, from the region where it is "nobody," and on the other, there is its position as exception, where it is not just somebody, but "the one"; where it is king in the only world it knows: its own.

Once the one that stood for all, the king, was decapitated, the fight between truth and reason, between the real and the symbolic, and the effect of their short circuit in social formations and in the experience of the subject showed themselves more forcefully. The Baroque and Neoclassical periods had tried to shape the gap that had opened up into form, or to form it with reason. Now, with the king's head rolling off the guillotine, the gap seemed open and threatened with disintegration. Through Romanticism, this gap showed itself in the form of a critique of the Enlightenment. At its heart, it was less an attempt to fight the excess of reason with reason— a dimension more present in the twentieth century with Modernism and its successors or repetitions— here it is more the recognition that reason itself always produces its other in its very heart. In the attempt to grasp it wholly, to fulfill its rationally formed commands, reason produced the real of terror and the terror of the real.²³ In the heart of every law there is a place that opens up in the moment which can be described in the words of Schiller's Karl Moor: "The ties that bind with nature are broken."²⁴ There no longer is any possibility of deciphering the course of one's own development, the order of the state, or the tasks of art. The paradigm of excellence and virtue has lost any applicability. It becomes obvious that these ideas themselves are but historical, contingent possibilities. Two contradictory moments merge here from the same place: on the one hand there is the need to project one's self, to create one's self, to be a genius, and on the other hand, a nostalgic look back, as well as a turn to the vernacular. In a certain sense, these are two sides of one coin, a coin which is still valid currency today. Both are romantic topoi.

In art, there is Schlegel's attempt, after his "return" to the catholic church, to make the *Nazarener* a paradigm for painting. This happens against the background of his experience that self-creating genius is, in fact, a kind of madness. Thus he affirms a kind of normativity, which brings with it a tendency towards kitsch and conservatism. At the same time this remains tied to a strongly charged concept of the individual, which demands that the genius inject himself normatively into the world by means of his subjectivity, by isolating himself from the decay of the world as it is. On the other side, there are painters like Caspar David Friedrich who try to accept the moment of the gap which opens up, to affirm its impossibility through art, by denarrativizing the image. One can also think of Turner, in his movement towards abstraction.

Every system produces its exception. Donald Judd, or even Joseph Kosuth, or John Cage in music, make the same discovery 150 years later once again. Today's reevaluation of artists like Bas Jan Ader owes itself to the fact that he most clearly exemplifies this in the realm of conceptual art.²⁵ But the limit that is experienced here is too quickly understood as the limit which the emotional draws for the rational, or the expressive for the conceptual, or the subjective for the objective. It is not simply the "regress... that impedes the closure of subjectivity," as Rei Terada says in relation to emotion.²⁶ Rather, it is subjectivity itself. It is important to see that both movements issue from the same place, that they emanate exactly from the point at which the "ties that bind with nature are broken." It is the space between two deaths, the space where subjectivity as such is produced and is productive. It is outside available possibilities of meaning or of making sense: this is its impossibility. When there are discussions today about the return of the Romantic in contemporary art, it is important to remember this: neo-Goth, neo-Romantic painting, melancholic moods, or whatever names and phenomena one could list, all appear, whether they know it or not, in the gap here described.

God removed into absence, the king beheaded, what happened to the many, now each newly "ones," was that they were always caught in the middle and had to choose between newly farming the ground, working the firm, or tending the books as one's own so as to become somebody again, and staring the abyss in its one eye, or even, at times, surrendering to its siren call. And others, increasing numbers of others, counted only through their production, never even receiving these options, notwithstanding hundreds of years of sending millions overseas to farm, to build, and to keep books, mostly for others, but also on their own new ground.

Of course, in this situation, too, the subject is confronted with an appellation or, rather, the repetition of its appellation from a place which, while it does not exist, is nevertheless real. This place is never represented simply as one—the State, the Nation, - God, the Party, the Environment, or whatever—even if such attempts are often made. Thus, in permanence, it shows itself only through its absence. In the increasing openness of the situation, death becomes the signifier for this place, again, from the Baroque period onwards. In religion, God was now the *Deus absconditus*, revealing Himself only through speech and writing, filling in the place of His absence. Death and God joined, both present in the effect of appellation. Here the merging of the symbolic and the real again either opens up as a gap or shows itself as fetish. After the Reformation, God is dead, a gap in the Other, or he is an object as a fetish. Yet, since there was nothing to do, as it were, other than repeat the attempt to fill the gap that had opened up right in the middle of the place that the Ego as an object was meant to fill, the appellation, while effective, increasingly sounded as its own faint and empty echo. Thus, deprived of its certain place, the Ego as object rolls in the desert of the real like a tumbleweed in a road movie.

The Ego, my I, is an illusion, but as Lacan says, it is not a lie. The same holds true

of the Other. It is not enough to shrug off the declaration “God is dead” with a childish self-assured “Sure he is and it doesn’t concern me” as the discourse of science does, feeling secure in its knowledge, separated from truth.²⁷ As little as it is, it is enough to counter the insistence of the Ego by resolving one’s self to stop the demands- of the Ego, to vaporize them in a cloud of contemplation or activity. For neither the appellation from the place of the Other nor one’s legitimizing stance before it cease repeating themselves. Neither the symbolic appellation nor the struggle of the imaginary for recognition will end, for both receive their energy from a real which both feeds and subverts them. For this reason the contemporary subject, potentially suspended between those two aspects which one could name “restitution” and “repetition,”²⁸ exerts itself immensely, so as not to give up the one side it still feels strong about: the restitution of the image of itself.

4. Dancing in the Gap of the Real: The Art of *between two deaths*

Today, when the imaginary mantle of the symbolic has become transparent, when the emperor is constantly naked, the subject remains consistently close to exactly this sphere of the real. Today, it is in the gap opened between the incipient object—the Ego—and the real of science and technology, as ordered by capital, that art and the question of aesthetics appear. It is—as subjectivity—and is not—in the specific way contemporary social links, or contemporary discourse short circuits the symbolic with the real—the same gap into which Odysseus disappeared, only in order to reappear through the cunning of his wit. Maybe today the task is to resist this cunning, to resist the urge to re-appear. For the only place open to such a re-appearance is the imaginary path of power and fame.

Yet against this fantasy of finitude, to simply refuse to re-appear, stands what we have seen regarding the meaning of the Ego as object.²⁹ For in this, the real of the narcissistic object insists.³⁰ Since the concern of the subject of this Ego always is, if it knows this or not, to get at its fate, at the meaning of its history, to move from its real to its symbolic, it will not stop, cannot stop to heed the call of subjectivation, the appellation from the place of the Other.³¹ Rather, if it is to stop at all, it has to experience that understanding its meaning is not another way of understanding the way it counts or to re-find itself in a place where “everybody knows its name.” Where no order is structured such as to grant this place, but rather, as with capitalism, such as to strip it away in order to offer pay for the use-value left over once the symbolic circulation has been interrupted, the subject will exhaust itself attempting to be a self that counts.³² Or, if it blocks itself from this register, it will constantly fight to not fall into the gap completely, mistaking it for the Thing, an image of satisfaction, hooked to it like an addict, half being drawn, half resisting. This would be the melancholic subject,³³ which today is not so differentiated from the depressed.³⁴

Without the symbolic place guaranteed by the master, there cannot be a good practice, as it were. The “Ethics of Psychoanalysis” points out that any Ethics of the Good is centered around and directed at the Master, the reproduction of a symbolic universe: “Do this and that, it is your task, and do it as excellently as possible, aim at perfection.” All that is left now for the master to do is to issue the command in its naked form: “Carry on working.”³⁵ Such a universe does not exist, leaving in the absence of a good practice only power and fame as practical aims. Only power and fame, the little

compensations of the imaginary, can grant momentary relief from exhaustion. This is also true of that variant which has taken hold of a large part of contemporary art: it turns the inadequacy, the pain and failure produced by the impossible demand, into an object which can be counted in the place of the subject, as artwork, market-value, prestige. Aimed at those goals, it constitutes the affirmative melancholy, packaged and ready for cannibalistic consumption, of, for example, the Berlin Biennial of 2006 or Sophia Coppola's *Lost in Translation*. However, the difficulty arises here also: for there is no other of this situation, or rather, there is "no outside." For the individual, this situation is felt in a constant melancholic mood, which relates to not having a countable, stable self. Like all melancholy, this is a mourning about the loss of its bearer, the individual mourning his/her own non-existence in the symbolic order which produced its subject, or subjected it.³⁶

Another possibility issues from the same place: a confrontation with impossibility as such. Only instead of attempting to reconstitute the Ego as object through objects—which it will do on its own anyway—it holds open the space of repetition, "tarrying with the negative," as it were.³⁷ The exhibition *between two deaths* brings together positions of artists who, while also not able to elude the situation described, offer potentials of different strategies of dealing with symbolic death. There are the strategies of power, fame, and producing valuations of one's own non-existence, as it were, or one's precarious status as individual. But there also are turns, in each artist here presented, towards the other direction, the thematization of symbolic death, of the impossible place, of the subject. Here, this place is not a starting point from which to recover the loss, but from which to lose it, to use a formulation Slavoj Žižek coined. This offers a potential for resistance, or a reminder of its possibility, in opening up, or emptying out the space of subjectivity. It is exactly this space which is framed by Lacan's metaphor of "being between two deaths." But with Lacan, we are reminded of the real insistence it implies. There is no infinite regress into plays of identities. The buck always stops somewhere. Art might thematize a choice of where it should stop, or rather, the universality, or equality, out of which it constantly appears.

Nevertheless, offering this place, situating it thus, remains on some level in the order of a theoretical fairy tale, or a model, in the sense in which science uses the term. For, from the objectivity of the Ego, it follows that the space "between two deaths" is not a place in which to settle down. It is, in some sense, a transitory place, which is probably why in film and theater such places—waiting rooms, airports, train stations—have become such popular sites. Yet subjectivity is precisely not a place with "no exit"—it is not a permanent waiting room. It is always exited. The question is whether it is done in the spirit of restitution—a fantasy re-turn to happiness and desire and self-valuation, or a perverse alignment with fetishes like God, the Nation, or art history's knowledge of exceptions—or in the spirit of repetition, drive and equality. As the exhibition also shows, it is probably not possible to cleanly separate the two within art alone. As Žižek has pointed out, the aesthetic element of an act—one that truly changes the symbolic coordinates from which a subject is called upon—involves itself the aesthetic symbolization of a new order, a new collective³⁸. No single artwork can have this for its goal, and no ensemble of single artworks can either. What art might be able to do is work out the difference within melancholy, or within the topoi of contemporary subjectivity—the difference between affirmation and critique.

From the tale told it follows, however, that the task is complex, even roundabout. For simply to form "collectives" or to produce "social environments" or to remain nameless collectively or individually changes nothing. Perhaps as before, through artists like Bas Jan Ader, what is at work is the need to always have one vector pointing back at the

place of subjectivity itself, its empty, pulsating core, for both the artist and the recipient, for the aesthetics of production, as well as the aesthetics of perception. If today there is not just a return of melancholy as a topic, or of death, the gothic, or trauma and dreams in contemporary art, but also the potential to get at their source, then *between two deaths* is an attempt to achieve this end. Nobody lives in the space “between two deaths.” Whoever lives there is undead. But art, even when—or especially when—it takes on the topoi of zombies, ghosts, the undead, and their genres, implies another register through its very practice: the symbolic, being counted, making something else count. It mediates this, as we all do, through the Ego as object, but it has the potential to not fall prey to its mastery. It is no accident that, at first, Lacan opens up the space “between two deaths” with the figure of Antigone. She takes this place and by realizing it, by giving it shape, she dies a living death, trapped in her brother’s grave. *Between two deaths* perhaps takes the metaphor one step further. Or one step back. It steps back and forth over this place, the empty place of subjectivity, thus opening its potentialities.

The artists in the exhibition *between two deaths* move in the rhythm of this gap, between its two moments: the moment of constant restitution of the Ego as an object and through objects, and the undead, a-mortal, insisting place, which gives drive to this movement. It bears repeating that the diagnosis of contemporary subjectivity as mired in depression cannot be denied. It is melancholic on the one hand, and on the other it acts out and reaches for narcissistic restitution, power, and fame; it is deadly afraid of the state in which it finds itself and the other, and is enveloped in the undead state of affairs and affairs of state; it is caught in the repetitive mantras of official journalistic and political ideologies, such as “family values,” “religion,” “virtues,” and “responsibility”; and it is falsely comforted by the simultaneous if contradictory ideology of permanent choice, of reflexive modernity and its leftwing misunderstanding as a singularity that is permanently shifting alliances and identities. However, beyond restitution lies repetition, upon which it relies. If restitution, because it is only ever temporary, necessarily clothes itself in irony (not for nothing a romantic heritage in its contemporary form³⁹) since no object can truly be believed in, unless it becomes fully thetic as a fetish, thus narrowing any possible experience, but offering satisfaction on the cheap. If restitution keeps producing objects precisely for the reason that any object can be counted in the symbolic world, and, once counted, the only call is “*Encore!*” then repetition offers another register entirely, moving from and with “encore” to “Other jouissance.” With restitution, the wounded Ego of the melancholic contemporary subject tries to heal itself—it circles around the “stigma of man.” Re-petition, on the other hand, opens up a gap, or thematizes a gap, which no longer must be thought of as a wound. Desire is substituted by drive, melancholy by the potentiality of the act, and the fetish by the gap it closes. Art, in its contemporary form, cannot by itself be thought of as the place of this act, but neither is it separated from the political in such a way as to be other or indifferent to it. Art is a place in which the subjectivity of the subject, its irreducible but empty real, can be found and re-founded. For this reason, the horizon of art cannot only be imaginary, but always points to the need for another symbolic, a symbolic that is not the imaginary symbolic which capitalist social forms allow. With and through this, it is utopian, not only for its inscription of a future yet to come, but by radically reopening that which, in all the options and normalistic choices available each and every day, is fundamentally closed: the space “between two deaths” out of which any resistance, any creation, any new symbolic order must arise.

If restitution makes love ironic, repetition opens up a new space for play. Not the kind of play which is included as exception to any normal, disciplinary, or controlling social form, and not the spare time afforded to those who labor for other’s surplus value.

It is a play which produces its rules as it goes along, which only starts after nightfall and has no Other to whom it needs to justify itself, for it happens itself in the place of this Other. It is play of the kind Wittgenstein might have had in mind when he asked: "And is there not also the case, where we play and make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them—as we go along."⁴⁰ We can follow the differentiation between restitution and repetition more closely. It has recently been said that the later Seminars of Lacan offer a movement away from the focus on desire—enabled by a proper distance from the maternal (capital) thing, that first image of satisfaction—to a focus on drive—issuing precisely from the place of this lost object, without ever attempting to fill it. A more precise way to correlate the two topics here discussed would be to say that it is a movement from the object, which enables us to keep a distance from the sublime Thing—the beautiful object, the object of desire, or even the good as object—to the object-cause, the dimension of cause. Today, it must be thought of also as the move from the fetish to the cause.⁴¹ It is this dimension in which repetition, no longer having anything to do with the Platonic remembering or re-finding of something once there, is fundamental. The dance between two deaths, thematized in so many ways by the artists here assembled, is structured by this movement from cause to object and back again. Never -focusing on reaching the object, which would settle it once and for all, the movement doesn't stop. The price to pay for this, when it is paid, is to give up, to renounce the restitution of the Ego as object, without at the same time being able to fully let go of it. Without it, there is no world at all, yet holding on to it, there is only the world in which we already live. Thus, it is the move from restitution to repetition which describes—maybe more than its fulfillment in the deadly act⁴²—the space between two deaths.

The utopian space it opens up is one of minimal difference. What makes that difference is the acceptance of symbolic death, of renouncing the quest for legitimation, for being inscribed into the symbolic world as it exists. It is a renunciation that must be coupled with the drive which enables it, for if it becomes objectified as the image of the one who renounces, it remains in a melancholic or even masochistic mode—the disciplinary and controlling modes, which both still make up the space in which the subject is produced. What this art thematizes is the possibility for the subject of not reproducing its subjectivization, but instead, of producing itself anew.

1 Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge (MA), 2000), p. 48.

2 See, for example, Rosalind Krauss, "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," in *October* 1 (Spring 1976): pp. 50–64; or Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge (MA), 1996), as two major and influential examples of this school of criticism, basing itself in part on Jacques Lacan. They can be viewed as marking the early and late periods of *October's* dialogue with Lacan, as well as its limitations. After this it went dry. In the German context there is a recent publication which includes some articles that more clearly take into account the split between "cause" and "object" discussed here: Claudia Blümle and Anne von der Heiden, ed. *Blickzähmung und Augen--täu-schung. Zu Jacques Lacans Bildtheorie* (Berlin, 2006).

3 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XVII. L'enverse de la psychanalyse, 1969–70*, ed. J.-A. Miller (Paris, 1991); and idem, *The Seminar, Book XX, Encore, On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, 1998).

4 Arnold Gehlen, *Urmensch und Spät-kultur: Philosophische Ergebnisse u. Aussagen 3*, (Frankfurt / Main, 1975), p. 9.

5 Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche," in vol. 12 of his *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt / Main, 1999), p. 247: "Denn der Doppelgänger war ursprünglich eine Versicherung gegen den Untergang des Ichs, eine 'energische Dementierung der Macht des Todes' (O.Rank) und wahrscheinlich war die 'unsterbliche' Seele der erste Doppelgänger des Leibes." Note that this article first appeared in 1919, while Freud was already writing *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The difference between "Körper" and "Leib" is too complex to discuss here. Let it suffice

to say that *Leib* might be called the body of drive. However, for Lacan, there are no drives that are not already subjected to the symbolic, so the difference, as it appears, for example, in phenomenology, disappears again.

6 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Dennis Porter (New York, 1992), esp. "Antigone Between Two Deaths," pp. 270ff.

7 Cf. Slavoj Žižek's comments on Kant's differentiation between negative and indefinite judgments in "The Emancipatory Potential of the Living Dead" in this catalogue, pp. 86–93.

8 This text should be read in conjunction with the shorter discussions of each artist's work in this catalogue. While neither claims any sense of completeness, together the two types of texts produce the matrix in which the exhibition is placed.

9 See Alenka Zupančič, "The 'Concrete Universal' and What Comedy Can Tell Us About It," in Slavoj Žižek, ed., *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (London, 2006), pp. 171–97. Here Zupančič argues that the problem is not accepting finitude and contingency, but rather accepting that "we are not even finite," but contingent. Also, for the "real" in the role one plays, see Slavoj Žižek's example of the shy man playing a polygamous woman on the Internet. What if he, in his phantasmatic core, IS a polygamous woman, and the shy man he is in his everyday life is only a screen, a defense, against the real of this jouissance?

10 Two very different comedians of the seventies can be thought of as understanding the problems involved here, Lenny Bruce and Andy Kaufmann. One can also think of artists like Mike Smith giving parties only for children dressed in dippers or Adrienne Piper dressing up as a Puerto Rican man as registering this problem. One artist who follows in their footsteps is Brock Enright. In a more complex manner, in its seeming identity with its own narcissism, and through this identity not rejecting it as inhabiting a role, Terence Koh's work also sheds interesting light on the problem.

11 One of the many merits of Sonia Arribas and Howard Rouse's contribution to this catalogue is having worked this out; see their "Art in the Shadow of the Two Deaths: Marx, Lacan, Flaubert, Broodthaers," pp. 74–85.

12 See Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York, 1995).

13 This is a term Eric Santner has coined for the inability to assume a symbolic role.

14 For this, see Jacques Lacan, *Das Seminar. Buch II. (1954–1955) Das Ich in der Theorie Freuds und in der Technik der Psycho-analyse*, (Olten, 1980) esp. pp. 60–61: "Die Hauptsache ist das Umgekehrte, das uns geistig immer präsent sein muss — das Ich (moi) ist nicht das *ich* (je), in dem die klassische Lehre aus ihm eine Teilwahrheit macht. Es ist etwas anderes — ein besonderes Objekt innerhalb der Erfahrung des Subjekts. Das Ich ist buchstäblich ein Objekt — ein Objekt, das eine bestimmte Funktion erfüllt, die wir hier imaginäre Funktion nennen." Obviously, my whole essay is indebted to this reconstruction of Freud's thought.

15 Following English usage, I am using the term Ego even though we are speaking here of Freud before the second Topic, which introduces the triad of Id, Superego, and Ego. This usage might give rise to the temptation of substantializing Freud's discovery. It is important, therefore, to keep in mind that while the Real of this object is material, it is not substantial. It is a materialistic theory of the experience of the subject.

16 It is for this reason that the linguistic phenomenon of a "shifter" is so helpful in understanding the Ego, for it is, like the electron in Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, never objectified in two places at the same time, as reference and as agent. It "shifts" precisely between the real and the symbolic, but still unites the "I" in the imaginary. No side ever is all, but only the real is non-all. This is how, through the very task of mastery over all, the logic of "non-all," the logic of feminine jouissance, is introduced.

17 See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London, 1979).

18 Homer, *Odyssey*, the first line of the poem; see English translation by A. T. Marry (Cambridge (MA), 1995), p. 13., in which "polytropon" is translated as "(man of) many devices."

19 Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory. Emotions after the Death of the Subject* (Cambridge (UK), 2001), p. 10.

20 For a more detailed discussion of the historical shift in discourse only alluded to here, see Arribas and Rouse's contribution to this catalogue, pp. 46–59. Of course, in order to really write the history of the opening up of this gap, its becoming visible or countable, one not only needs to take into account Marx's theory of surplus value and Lacan's theory of the discourses, but also the history of the Reformation.

21 Here, of course, one can also think of Slavoj Žižek's repeated discussion of Hegel's infinite judgment showing this gap: "The spirit is a bone." One should add that the identity of Subject and Substance, broken in their infinity, but united in the judgment, truly come together only in the fetish. Thus, in contemporary art's turn to the youthful affectation with the "goth," what is addressed is, ultimately, the mourning of one's self, or conversely, the saving of the self as fetish.

- 22** Alain Ehrenberg, "Depression: Discontent in the Civilization or New Style of Sociality," in *Texte zur Kunst* 65 (March 2007): pp. 129–34. **3** This is, of course, the starting point of Friedrich Schiller's *Aesthetic Education*. The aesthetic becomes not only a propaedeutic for a new Law, but the new Law itself. It is here that Jacques Rancière's appropriation of Schiller sets in. See, for example, "Schiller und das Ästhetische Versprechen," in Felix Ensslin, ed., *Spieltrieb* (Berlin, 2006), pp. 39–55.
- 24** From Act 4, scene 5 in Friedrich Schiller, *Die Räuber* (Stuttgart, 2001), p. 124; my translation.
- 25** See, for example, Jörg Heiser, "Emotional Rescue," in *FRIEZE* 71 (November/December 2002), pp. 70–75 and his current exhibition *Romantic Conceptualism* in Nürnberg.
- 26** Terada, *Feeling in Theory*, p. 10.
- 27** For Lacan's discussion of the four discourses, including the university discourse as the discourse typical of capitalism, see *Seminar XVII*. For a quick introduction on this particular point, see Slavoj Žižek, "Jacques Lacan's Four Discourses," at <http://www.lacan.com/zizfour.htm>.
- 28** J.-A. Miller, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, trans. S. Tomaselli (New York, 1988), pp. 88ff.
- 29** See Alenka Zupančič, "The 'Concrete Universal,'" and that comedy can tell us about it in Slavoj Žižek, *Lacan: The Silent Partners* (New York, 2006), pp. 171–198.
- 30** Among others, John Miller's *Corpse*, along with the works of Ján Mančuška, Javier Téllez, Chloe Piene, and Martin Dammann, thematizes this. As with all the artists participating in the exhibition mentioned here, please see the texts on their work appearing in this catalogue.
- 31** In the viewer position it produces, as well as in its subject and art-historical references, Barnaby Furnas's "floods" thematize this. That it addresses the "decentered subject" is reflected beautifully in one particular detail: the sun, or eye of God, appears double; thus the "Copernican revolution" decentering the universe by moving a circle into an ellipse, which has two centers, not one, is inscribed onto the plane of the image.
- 32** See Alain Ehrenberg's essay in this catalogue, and also his book, "The Exhausted Self," forthcoming in translation. In relation to this issue compare the work of, among others, Erik van Lieshout, Ulf Aminde, Nicolás Guagnini, and Dan Graham.
- 33** See also André Rottmann's essay in this catalogue, pp. 40–49.
- 34** Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun. Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York, 1989). Here she characterizes depression as a "denial of negation," i.e., within the context of the present argument, of an always already-performed symbolic death. See also Sue de Beer's video installation, which takes its name from Kristeva's book.
- 35** Stephen G. Rhodes deals with the relation of knowledge, subjectivization, and truth as it is embodied in the discourse of the master in his piece *Instructions for a 16-Sided Barn—Your Shit Is in My Mouth* (2005). The aim of Washington's barn was to get rid of "excess," of the real, in a smooth working of the symbolic, as a working for production. Like the master says to the slave or, the capitalist to the worker, Washington says to his horses: "Let it be clear to everyone that this is on no account the moment to express the least surge of desire." Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (New York, 1992), p. 314.
- 36** See also Laurence Rickels's essay in this catalogue, p. 94.
- 37** A paradigmatic example for a head-on confrontation with this dialectic of restitution and repetition is the work of Jutta Koether.
- 38** Slavoj Žižek, "Das Unbehagen in der Demokratie," in *Zur Vorstellung des Terrors: Die RAF-Ausstellung. Vol. II*, ed. Klaus Biesenbach (Göttingen, 2005), pp. 197ff.
- 39** See Eva Illouz's contribution to this catalogue, pp. 66–69.
- 40** Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1968), paragraph 83.
- 41** This is a tremendous problem for psychoanalysis. Can the "fetishist" be analyzed? Freud says that if he ever even shows up in analysis, it is not because of fetishism. Why? Because the fetish works. It owes this precisely to the real in its core, the real, which embodies a social relation.
- 42** The metaphor originates, of course, with Lacan's discussion of Antigone. However, this essay has tried to show how it can and should be extended with the assistance of Lacan, rather than in opposition to him.

This text is published in:

Ellen Blumenstein and Felix Ensslin (Eds.), *between two deaths*, exh.cat.
ZKM Karlsruhe, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz 2007, pp. 26-39.

ISBN 978-3-7757-2003-8

HatjeCantz, May 2007