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Countering the Voyage of the Present: Histories Speak Fragmented in 25 Frames Per Second

Vanessa Gravenor

Photography, B.F.A. Thesis

March 21, 2014

My thesis work presents a meditation on what it means to be contemporary. There are many ideas that prefigure this work but are not included in this written investigation. These notions come from Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* and Walter Benjamin's *Illuminations*. In these texts, the authors state that the contemporary is the one who turns his or her back from his or her time and looks to the past. For my purposes, to be contemporary, one has to revolutionize the notion of histories in order to make past materials relevant. Therefore, my videos and photographic works do not invite the viewer into an activity of time travel but into a gaze of looking forward by making histories of the oppressed tangible in a radical form. In this thesis, I have combined Michael Fried's notion of present with different theories of historicity. Among the theories of historicity are Jean François Lyotard, Edmund Husserl, and Giorgio Agamben.

I.

In an age where the notion of contemporaneity flows seamlessly with artist, history might seem to be irrelevant against the pressings of the future. Giorgio Agamben wrote that the contemporary makes a meeting point out of the broken backbone of time or the rupture between two centuries (44). The untimeliness Nietzsche talks about is not to be trapped forever in the eternal past but to be constantly moving with this origin that can only be located in a sort of doubled darkness (Agamben 40). While history might seem essential for any person who deems him or herself to be timely, I would argue that this notion is much more complex as of late. An engagement with histories appear in art works in the early 2000's to the present. The very fact that the past is accepted to be ambiguous place might account for why artists approach the terrain with skepticism and vital interest. Some of this skepticism lies in the fact histories itself is a pixilated terrain where many origins lie: origins of species, origins of ideas, or origins of trauma. Part of the pixilation is due to the fact that these origins are not fixed but travel in a passage parallel to the present sense of reality. This voyaging fragments any sense of continuity, breaks indefinite beliefs in laws, and lands at the feet of any people who are able to grasp the invisible. In my own time-based works, *Crisimoi*, *Decisive Days* and *Death Tourist Rising*, I have tried to contend with the notion of an "origin" in many different ways. *Death Tourist Rising* looks back to a personal voyage to Switzerland and encounters with Right to Die Society Activists. *Crisimoi*, *Decisive Days* pinpoints the Buck vs. Bell trial and Edmund Husserl's Vienna lecture as two different origins to a present legacy of biopolitics. Formally, I have tried to develop tactics that do not include an apparent gazing backwards but rather involve a constant process of forward speculation. I will

analyze how two video artists Anri Sala and Silvia Kolbowski enact the same form of plummeting forward.



Figure 1: Anri Sala, *Long Sorrow*, 2005

II.

Michael Fried exclaims at the end of his famous essay “Art and Objecthood” that presentness is grace. Several decades later he applies this notion to video artist Anri Sala’s *Long Sorrow*, altering his definition of presentness to make room for time based work. The paradox Fried underscores, is that while *Long Sorrow* operates as a time based work the details of its form reveal themselves at any given moment. The video *Long Sorrow*, Fried notes, takes its name from the area in Berlin that was situated near the wall. Sala’s first frame positions the viewer inside an apartment in this area. The apartment is sparse: the focus is a half opened window with an abstract object situated in the center. The camera approaches the window slowly and a sound is heard in the

distance. The viewer begins to understand that the object outside of the window is someone's head. As the camera approaches the window, the viewer comes closer to the source of sound. The camera crosses the threshold and the viewer sees a famous Jazz musician, Moondoc, playing the saxophone.

The viewer never sees Moondoc in his entirety that, according to Fried, heightens the sensation that the scene is being constructed before the viewer's eyes. The precariousness of Moondoc's pose hovering outside of a window which Fried says is the 18th floor of an apartment complex is the first allusion to the fact that reality is being manipulated and that what the viewer is seeing is a product being created in the present. During filming, Moondoc had to be reinforced from behind to sustain his position. In the video, we do not see this reinforcement. Additionally, Fried relays that Sala shot five hours of super 16mm film and edited the film digitally with sound recorded separately. Thus, while watching the video, Moondoc appears to be playing the Saxophone, deeply transfixed, though the sound the viewer hears is not located in the source of the image. Fried says of Sala's work: "The origin of the sound is thus both within and outside the image at the same time" (31). Since the origin seems to hover outside and inside, the music is founded only in the viewer's comprehension.

Fried remarks offhand that the video reminded him of Orpheus. On the myth, Maurice Blanchot states:

Yes, this much is true: only in the song does Orpheus have power over Eurydice, but in the song Eurydice is already lost and Orpheus himself is the scattered Orpheus, the 'infinitely dead' Orpheus into which the power of the song transforms him from then on (101)

I first would like to focus on the notion of Eurydice as a placeholder for history that Blanchot describes as being: the depths of the night, the depths of hell, an infinite

darkness. Although this image does not necessarily appear in *Long Sorrow*, I would argue that the depths of hell is the situation Moondoc finds himself in. Fried tells us: “He (Moondoc) himself has spoken of the need he felt ‘ to be totally drawn into the music to forget my situation,’ which is surely apt, as long as we understand that forgetting his situation was at the same time and by its very nature a matter of converting that situation into music” (45). It is significant that Moondoc never turns around or looks down. A direct gazing back would fix history (Eurydices) or allow for an interpretation that would make the spatial histories non-relevant and encapsulated in the past. Moondoc gazes forward in a way in order to take what is behind him and below him into his present moment through song.

III.

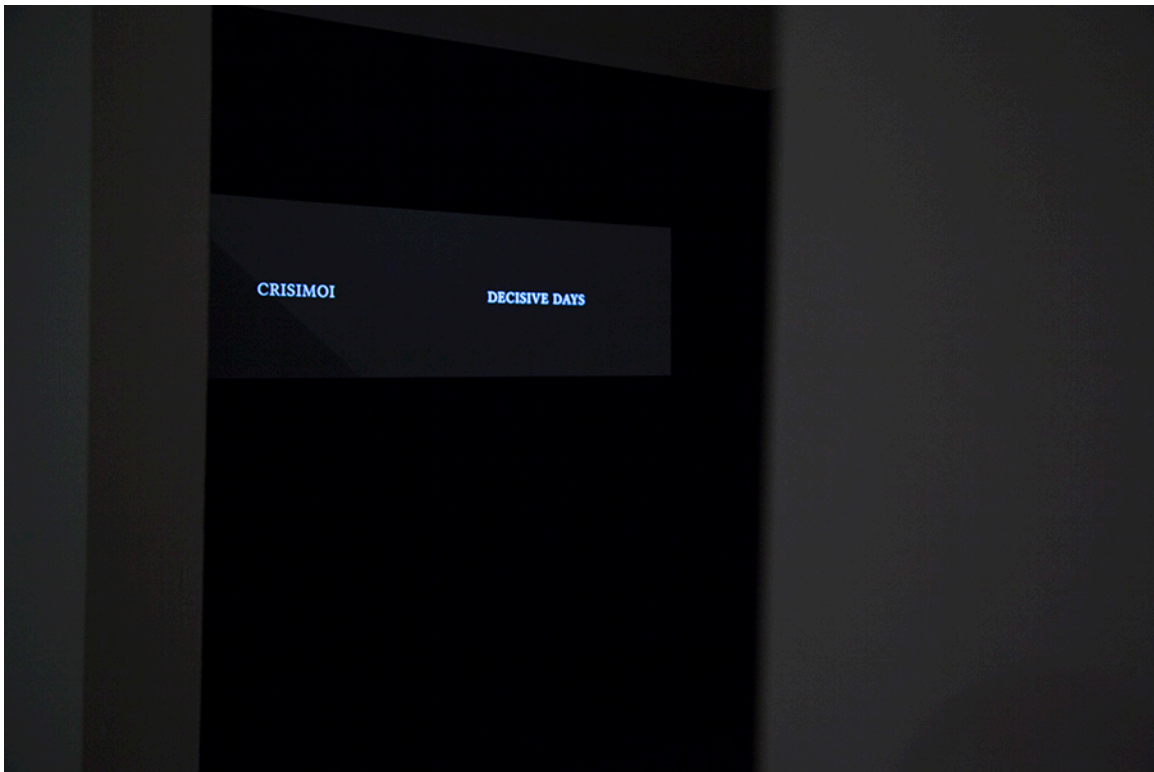


Figure 2: Vanessa Gravenor, *Crisimoi, Decisive Days*, 2014

In my work *Crisimoi, The Decisive Days*, the origin I am considering does not so much appear in the spaces I show, but in the ideas and sounds I reference. Like Sala, I am interested in the relationship of image to sound and how this might complicate the viewer's understanding of a historical origin. The video contains two sequences, two stories. The first sequence is about the Buck vs. Bell court case that was a significant case in the era of eugenics in the United States. Two women's voices decipher the complex narrative of the trial. The narrative has been derived from a detailed study of the historical record. The women appropriate similar diction from the defendants, from the judge, from the witnesses from the 1924 and 1927 cases. However, narrated in the present above the technological image, the phrasing seems out of place: anachronistic. Visually, the video uses poetic juxtapositions to build and then break institutional spaces.

Between the two sequences lies a resting point: a mirrored image of water. The image counters the logic of the previous sequence that showed two videos side by side. The mirrored image prepares the viewer for the second sequence, which is narrated through subtitles. Edmund Husserl's 1935 Vienna Lecture entitled "The Crisis of European Humanity" inspired the content of the subtitles. Husserl was critical of the increasingly destructive notion of community in the West. His ideas can be seen parallel to those of philosophers Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Derrida who have claimed that the West uses the politics of the camp to concentrate and eliminate citizenship by creating "states of exceptions." The use of text is essential to forming a double with the sound of the woman's voice.

The viewer is first instructed in an act of listening. When the sound is no longer present, the viewer is engaged through a reading and turning the image sequences into a

sentence. All images return in the subtitled sequence. This is evocative of histories themselves that always return no matter how much they get buried.

While the video focuses on two different individuals, Carrie Buck and Edmund Husserl, the project is making a statement against the broader political tendency for governments and boards of power to reduce individuals to degenerates, criminals, or simply feeble in order to retract human rights. By altering the temporal index, reversing the split screen, repeating the images, the artist shows how the echoes of the past project into the bowels of the future ad infinitum.

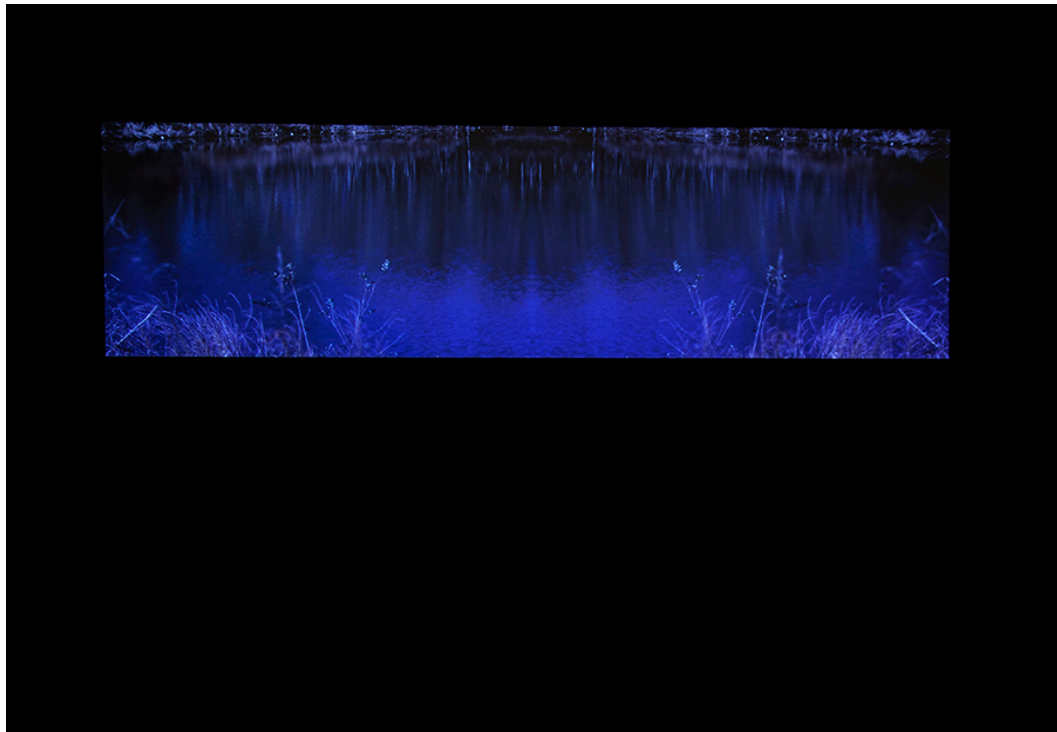


Figure 3: Vanessa Gravenor, *Crisimoi, Decisive Days*, 2014

My photographs follow this same logic. They do not gaze directly into the past, but present materials that are transformed by digital archives. I have selected figures from the Buck vs. Bell case and re-presented them under a new light. The viewer always gazes between the paper, between the configuration, into the eyes of the only hinted at subject.

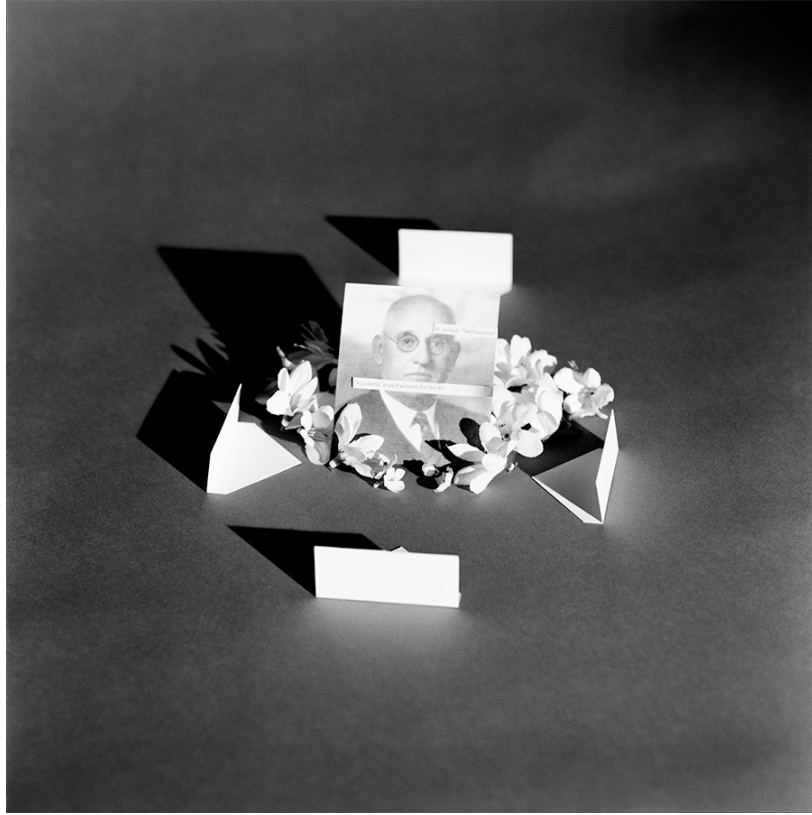


Figure 4: *Expert Witnesses*, Vanessa Gravenor, 2014

IV.

Silvia Kolbowski's work *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* uses the form of the seminal French avant guard film. In the original film, a French woman spends the night in Vietnam with a Vietnamese man, and they talk about WWII and the differences in their experiences. Something that is repeated by the man is: "you saw nothing." The woman recounts how she visited museums in Vietnam and understands the situation—to which the man replies "you do not understand." In comparison with the original film that makes use of pop-y music swells in order to narrate the story, Kolbowski's version, a version that instead talks about the conflict in the Gulf and the evacuation of New Orleans, is almost silent. Instead of focusing on a French woman and Vietnamese man,

she focuses on different lover pairs that change depending on the scene. In one, the woman is black and the man racially ambivalent.



Figure 5: *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Silvia Kolbowski, 2008

For Kolbowski to make a film about her present predicament, she had to reference a past conflict. Her sources are controversial, steeped with trauma, and bear moral uncertainties. Through a semi-narrative video format in *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, she is able to disturb the original source by speeding up sound and removing frames (Deutsche 16). In this way, she not only melds times but also places.

To Kolbowski, the notion of a concrete origin might be altogether problematic. This ambivalence can be seen within the image itself as sometimes the image is high definition video and sometimes the video is extremely pixelated. In a scene, the viewer sees a woman drawing in the sign of the Red Cross. The Fuzzy image suggests that the image has been taken from somewhere and not filmed by Kolbowski herself. Rosalyn

Deutsche argues that for Kolbowski, the notion of an origin is always in a state of becoming (16). This is evident in her video that combines many historical points together in order to create a new access point. However, in *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, while Kolbowski has used historical source material, the statement she tries to make within her video is not historical at all. She is not restaging *Hiroshima Mon Amour*—although her use of images may suggest this. She uses these images in order to craft a larger political claim against her time. Kolbowski’s point is not that the same problems exist in Vietnam as they do in New Orleans, as they did in the occupation of Iraq or as they do in present day, but there is a trend developing that seems to dictate the state of the “now.” In the words of Jean François Lyotard: “Before is not yet now, after is an already no longer now, now is a now between two nows, that is passing from the one to the next” (73).

Both Kolbowski’s and Sala’s works speak to the viewers on the plane of the present. The viewer isn’t going back in time or being transported through time but only grasps aspects of histories through the fragmented nature of each work. The artists have altered the temporal index of their works in order to create a critical consciousness. Rather than invoking past, present, future in a traditional sense, Sala imposes this index onto architecture. The imposition ruptures the sensation of time so that the different histories are able to meld. Kolbowski’s temporal sequence is complicated by her source videos that are either based upon histories or sourced from the Internet. Since the viewer is not able to place the origin of each image or video, there is a perpetual instability that generates a state of anxiety within the viewer. In my work, the dual images combine two different geographies together. The forward gazing of eugenics is countered by the

backward gazing of Husserl's lecture. Since the time is mirrored, the sequence plays on an infinite loop suggesting that the machinery of time is also infinite.

VI.

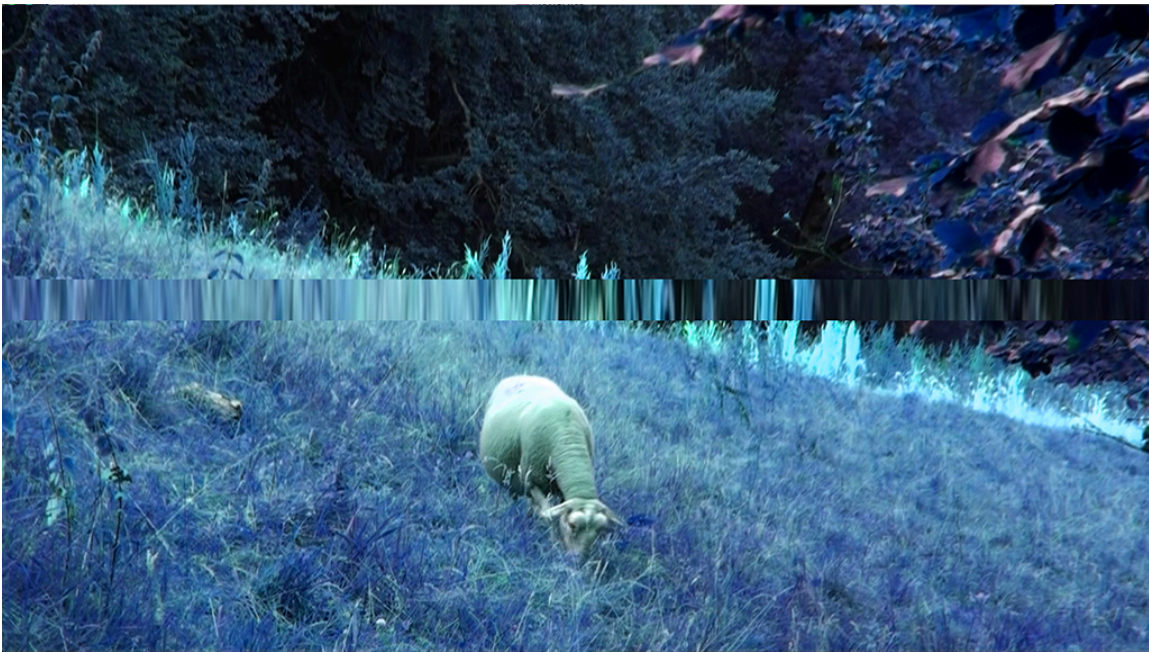


Figure 6: *Death Tourist Rising*, Vanessa Gravenor, 2014

In *Death Tourist Rising*, there are a series of discussions with Assistant Suicide workers in Switzerland that occur over technological images. As a third witness of this traumatic occurrence, my vision will never reach or be positioned in the actual event of assisted suicide. Thus, the image presented on the screen reflects this blockage and divide twofold: one because the fragments of speech never directly include this death tourist in the dialogue, two the image represented is a tourist non-local perspective of the Swiss Alps. In regarding this “other” human, the video intends to reconstruct a space. The project seeks to excavate the memory of this death tourist that can only be found in the minds of the living workers who have shared intimate experiences. While this co-shared

experience might seem unique, the memory of this death tourist becomes like any other human memory: embedded in the living and symbolically cannibalized.

Superficially like Kolbowski's project, *Death Tourist Rising* creeps up upon "revolutionary" action. The people involved in the societies engage in democratizing the medical system by giving more power to the people. This power would dramatically change an individual's relationship inside the system of biopolitics. Some of the workers have been involved in the profession of the medical industry. From a point of power, even the powerful feel indentured to a system of ethical precedent: a hypocritical Hippocratic Oath that constantly becomes breached by the intervention of human decisions but always gets invoked to bar changes in practice.

The workers intend to create a new order that will categorize people as rational or irrational. Being rational means having the free will to kill oneself and being irrational means not having the mental capacity to make such decisions. This new form can also create a "remembering in the future tense" to quote Stanford citing Winnicott. In other words, the new form would remember biopolitics in a revolutionary counter-part as being more oppressive than the predecessor. In content, the workers vision is radically emancipatory, but their words are full of jargon and assimilate to a bureaucratic future system. My photographic series *40 Degree Tilt* explicates this understanding by creating landscapes of paper pamphlets under gel lighting. The paper speaks to the body of the death tourist while the different lighting underscores how industries have fetishized the

notion of the “death tourist.”



Figure 7: *40 Degree Tilt*, Vanessa Gravenor, 2014

VII.

In my work, I have been mindful of the ground I rest on and that I narrate from a particular position. My subject has been biopolitics. In order to understand the complexity of this arena, it has been necessary to destabilize the present. My tactics have been to insert the past into the present through video and photography: to weave in other times in order to form new grounds, new matter. I view my works as new artifacts generated by this activity. They neither belong to the past nor fully belong to something I would call the present. While eugenics isn't necessarily a philosophical movement, it still very much has roots in the terrain I occupy. In terms of the right to die, it was necessary to examine a different medical system in order to bring light to precedents that some masses never question. It is for these reasons that I think of my practice as dislodging rather than

building, destructing rather than constructing. I form intricate videos and photographs to ultimately break apart dense topics that can be flattened by a hue of controversy or erased from public thought because of the after affects of trauma.

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Figure 1: Anri Sala, *Long Sorrow*, 2005

Figure 2: Vanessa Gravenor, *Crisimoi, Decisive Days*, 2014

Figure 3: Vanessa Gravenor, *Crisimoi, Decisive Days*, 2014

Figure 4: *Expert Witnesses*, Vanessa Gravenor, 2014

Figure 5: *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Silvia Kolbowski, 2008

Figure 6: *Death Tourist Rising*, Vanessa Gravenor, 2014

Figure 7: *40 Degree Tilt*, Vanessa Gravenor, 2014