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INTERFERENCE STRATEGIES

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Interference Strategies

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LANFRANCO ACETI & PAUL THOMAS

EDITORIAL MANAGER

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The book editors Lanfranco Aceti and Paul Thomas would especially like to acknowledge Su Baker for her continual support of this project and Andrew Varano for his work as conference organiser.

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Interference Strategies: Is Art in the Middle?

If we look at the etymological structure of the word **interference**, we would have to go back to a construction that defines it as a sum of the two Latin words *inter* (in between) and *ferio* (to strike), but with a particular attention to the meaning of the word *ferio* being interpreted principally as *to wound*. Although perhaps etymologically incorrect, it may be preferable to think of the word *interference* as a composite of *inter* (in between) and the Latin verb *fero* (to carry), which would bring forward the idea of *interference* as a contribution brought in the middle of two arguments, two ideas, two constructions.

It is important to acknowledge the etymological root of a word not in order to devalue or strike academic exercise, but in order to clarify the ideological underpinnings of arguments that are thematically and characteristically defined by a word.

This book, titled *Interference Strategies*, does not (and in all honesty could not) provide a resolution to a complex interaction—that of artistic interferences—that has a complex historical tradition. In fact, it is impossible, for me, when analyzing the issue of interference, not to think of the Brechtian *Maker* (also known as *Daniela Wolferra*) and the coverings that the painter followed in 1959 on commission from Pope Paul VI to ‘reorder decent’ the naked bodies of Michelangelo to Buonarroti’s fresco in the Sistine Chapel. That act, in the eyes of a contemporary viewer, was a wound inflicted in between the relationship created by the artwork and the artist with the viewer (*intentional*

intentional *caution* with *intentional* *caution*), as Umberto Eco would put it. Those famous breasts appear to be both a form of censorship as well as interference with Michelangelo’s vision.

Interference is a word that assembles a multitude of meanings interpreted according to one’s perspective and ideological construction, a disturbing force, and an alteration of modalities of interaction between two parties. In this book, there are a series of representations of these interferences, as well as a series of questions on what are the possible contemporary forms of interference—digital, scientific and aesthetic—and what are the strategies that could be adopted in order to actively interfere.

The complexity of the strategies of interference within contemporary political and aesthetic discourses appears to be summed up by the perception that interference is an necessarily active gesture. This perception appears to exclude the fact that sometimes the very existence of an artwork is based on an interfering nature, or on an aesthetic that has come to be as non-conscious to and, hence, interfering with a political project.

Interfering artworks, which by their own nature challenge a system, were the artworks chosen for the exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (1937). The cultural and ideological underpinnings of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party could solely provide an understanding of aesthetic that would necessarily imply the defini-

tion of ‘degenerate art’ produced by ‘degenerate artists’. That was not a direct hymn to the grandeur of Germany could be seen by the Nazi regime as anything else but ‘interfering and hence degenerate,’ since it questioned and interfered with the ideal purity of Teutonic representations, which were endorsed and promoted as the only aesthetic of the National Socialist party. Wilhelm Heinrich Otto Dix’s *War Cripples* (1920) could not be a more critical painting of the Body Politic of the time, and of war in general, and therefore had to be classified as ‘degenerate’ and condemned to be ‘burnt.’

Art in this context cannot be and should not be anything else but interference, either by bringing something in between or by wounding the Body Politic by placing something in between the perfectly constructed rational madness of humanity and the subjugated viewer. A statement that interference, obstructs and disrupts the carefully constructed and carefully choreographed itinerary that the viewers should be expected to follow. In this case interference is something that corrupts, degenerates and threatens to collapse the vision of the Body Politic.

In thinking about the validity of interference as a strategy, it was impossible not to revisit and compare the image of Paul J. Goebbels viewing the *Entartete Kunst* (*Degenerate Art*) exhibition to the many images of pompously sitting corporate CEOs and billionaires in museums and art fairs around the globe, gazing with pride over the propaganda, or—better—over the breast that they have commissioned artists to produce.

Today’s contemporary art should be interfering more and more with art itself, it should be corrupt and corrupting, degenerate and degenerating. It should be producing what currently it is not and it should create a wound within art itself, able to alter current thinking

and modalities of engagement. It should be—to quote Pablo Picasso—a instrument of war able to *interferir*: “No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.”²²

If art should be a strike or bring something apart of what has been a long aesthetic conversation that preceded the Avant-garde movement or the destructive fury of the early Futurists. In this particular volume the issue of art as interference and the strategies that it should adopt have been reframed within the structures of contemporary technology as well as within the framework of interactions between art, science and media.

What sort of interferences should be chosen, if one at all, remains a personal choice for each artist, curator, critic and historian.

If I had to choose, personally I find myself increasingly favoring art that does not deliver what is expected, what is obvious, what can be hung on a wall and can be made to tapstries. Nor can I find myself able to favor art that should propagate or business under a veil with the name of art repeatedly written in capital letters all over it. That does not leave very much choice in a world where interference is not longer acceptable, or if it is acceptable, it is so only within pre-established contractual cooperative frameworks, therefore losing its ‘interference value.’

This leaves the great conundrum—can interferences still possible? There are still spaces and opportunities for interference, and this volume is one of these remaining areas, but they are interesting spaces and are shrinking fast, leaving a overwhelming Bauhausian descent produced by the conspirators of art and made of a multitude of dresses.

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If art should either strike or bring something is part of what has been a long aesthetic conversation that preceded the Avant-garde movement or the destructive fury of the early Futurists. In this particular volume the issue of art as interference and the strategies that it should adopt have been reframed within the structures of contemporary technology as well as within the frameworks of interactions between art, science and media.

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In this introduction I cannot touch upon all the different aspects of interference analyzed, like in the case of data and waves presented by Adam Nash, who argues that the digital is in itself and *per se* a form of interference: at least a form of interference with behavioral systems and with what can be defined as the illusory realm of everyday's 'real.'

Transversal interference, as in the case of Anna Munster, is a socio-political divide where heterogeneity is the monster, the wound, the interfering and dreaded element that threatens the 'homologation' of scientific thought.

With Brogan Bunt comes obfuscation as a form of blurring that interferes with the ordered lines of neatly defined social taxonomies; within which I can only perceive the role of the thinker as that of the taxidermist operating on living fields of study that are in the process of being rendered dead and obfuscated by the very process and people who should be unveiling and revealing them.

With Darren Tofts and Lisa Gye it is the perusal of the image that can be an act of interference and a disruption if it operates outside rigid interpretative frameworks and interaction parameters firmly set via *intentio operis*, *intentio auctoris* and *intentio lectoris*.

It is the fear of the unexpected remix and mash-up that interferes with and threatens the 'purity' and sanctimonious fascistic interpretations of the aura of the artwork, its buyers, consumers and aesthetic priests. The orthodoxical, fanatic and terroristic aesthetic hierarchies that were disrupted by laughter in the Middle Ages might be disrupted today by viral, amorphological and uncontrollable bodily functions.

My very personal thanks go to Paul Thomas and the authors in this book who have endeavored to comply

with our guidelines to deliver a new milestone in the history of LEA.

As always I wish to thank my team at LEA who made it possible to deliver these academic interferences: my gratitude is as always for Özden Şahin, Çağlar Çetin and Deniz Cem Öndüğü.

Lanfranco Aceti

Editor in Chief, Leonardo Electronic Almanac
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Interference Strategies

The theme of 'interference strategies for art' reflects a literal merging of sources, an interplay between factors, and acts as a metaphor for the interaction of art and science, the essence of transdisciplinary study. The revealing of metaphors for interference "that equates different and even 'incommensurable' concepts can, therefore, be a very fruitful source of insight." 1

The role of the publication, as a vehicle to promote and encourage transdisciplinary research, is to question what fine art image-making is contributing to the current discourse on images. The publication brings together researchers, artists and cultural thinkers to speculate, contest and share their thoughts on the strategies for interference, at the intersection between art, science and culture, that form new dialogues.

In October 1927 the Fifth Solvay International Conference marked a point in time that created a unifying seepage between art and science and opened the gateway to uncertainty and therefore the parallels of artistic and scientific research. This famous conference announced the genesis of quantum theory and, with that, Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. These events are linked historically and inform interesting experimental art practices to reveal the subtle shift that can ensue from a moment in time.

The simple yet highly developed double slit experiment identifies the problem of measurement in the quantum world. If you are measuring the position of a particle

you cannot measure its momentum. This is one of the main theories that have been constantly tested and still remains persistent. The double slit experiment, first initiated by Thomas Young, exposes a quintessential quantum phenomenon, which, through Heisenberg theory, demonstrates the quantum universe as a series of probabilities that enabled the Newtonian view of the world to be seriously challenged.

If the measurement intra-action plays a constitutive role in what is measured, then it matters how something is explored. In fact, this is born out empirically in experiments with matter (and energy): when electrons (or light) are measured using one kind of apparatus, they are waves; if they are measured in a complementary way, they are particles. Notice that what we're talking about here is not simply some object reacting differently to different probings but being differently. 2

In the double slit experiment particles that travel through the slits interfere with themselves enabling each particle to create a wave-like interference pattern.

The underlying concepts upon which this publication is based see the potential for art to interfere, affect and obstruct in order to question what is indefinable.

This can only be demonstrated by a closer look at the double slit experiment and the art that is revealed through phenomena of improbability.

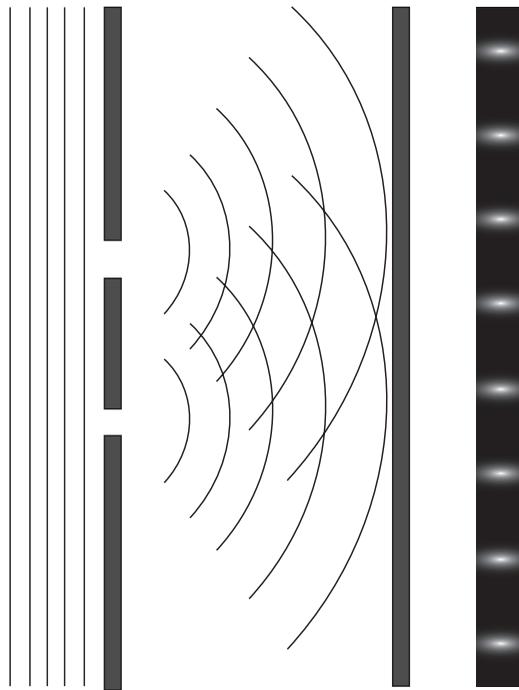


Figure 1. Diagram of the double slit experiment that was first performed by Thomas Young in the early 1800's displays the probabilistic characteristics of quantum mechanical phenomena.

When particles go through the slits they act as waves and create the famous interference pattern. The concept is that one particle going through the slit must behave like a wave and interfere with itself to create the band image on the rear receptor.

Interference Strategies looks at the phenomenon of interference and places art at the very centre of the wave/particle dilemma. Can art still find a way in today's dense world where we are saturated with images from all disciplines, whether it's the creation of 'beautiful visualisations' for science, the torrent of images uploaded to social media services like Instagram and Flickr, or the billions of queries made to vast visual data archives such as Google Images? The contemporary machinic interpretations of the visual and sensorial experience of the world are producing a new spectacle of media pollution, obliging the viewers to ask if machines should be considered the new artists of the 21st century.

The notion of 'Interference' is posed here as an antagonism between production and seduction, as a

redirection of affect, or as an untapped potential for repositioning artistic critique. Maybe art doesn't have to work as a wave that displaces or reinforces the standardized protocols of data/messages, but can instead function as a signal that disrupts and challenges perceptions.

'Interference' can stand as a mediating incantation that might create a layer between the constructed image of the 'everyday' given to us by science, technological social networks and the means of its construction. Mediation, as discussed in the first Transdisciplinary Imaging conference, is a concept that has become a medium in itself through which we think and act; and in which we swim. Interference, however, confronts the flow, challenges currents and eulogizes the drift.

The questions posed in this volume, include whether art can interfere with the chaotic storms of data visualization and information processing, or is it merely reinforcing the noxious nature of contemporary media? Can we think of 'interference' as a key tactic for the contemporary image in disrupting and critiquing the continual flood of constructed imagery? Are contemporary forms and strategies of interference the same as historical ones? What kinds of similarities and differences exist?

Application of a process to a medium, or a wave to a particle, for example, the sorting of pixel data, literally interferes with the state of an image, and directly gives new materiality and meaning, allowing interference to be utilised as a conceptual framework for interpretation, and critical reflection.

Interference is not merely combining. Interference is an active process of negotiating between different forces. The artist in this context is a mediator, facilitating the meeting of competitive elements, bringing together and setting up a situation of probabilities.

In response to the questions posed by the conference theme, presentations traversed varied notions of interference in defining image space, the decoding and interpretation of images, the interference between different streams of digital data, and how this knowledge might redefine art and art practice. Within that scope lies the discourse about interference that arises when normal approaches or processes fail, with unanticipated results, the accidental discovery, and its potential in the development of new strategies of investigation.

In "[t]he case of Biophilia: a collective composition of goals and distributed action",³ Mark Cypher highlights the interference in negotiations between exhibit organisers, and space requirements, and the requirements for artist/artworks, resulting in an outcome that is a combination generated by the competition of two or more interests. As part of the final appearance of *Biophilia*, the artwork itself contained elements of both interests, an interference of competing interests, comprising a system in which the artist and the artwork are components, and the display a negotiated outcome. Each element interferes with itself as it negotiates the many factors that contribute to the presentation of art. In this sense the creation of the final appearance of *Biophilia* is the result of the distributed action of many "actors" in a "network."⁴ (To put this in another form all actors are particles and interact with each other to create all possible solutions but when observed, create a single state.)

In summing up concepts of the second Transdisciplinary Imaging conference, particularly in reference to the topic of interference strategies, Edward Colless spoke of some of the aspirations for the topic, entertaining the possibilities of transdisciplinary art as being a contested field, in that many of the conference papers were trying to unravel, contextualise and theorise simultaneously.

The publication aims to demonstrate a combined eclecticism and to extend the discussion by addressing the current state of the image through a multitude of lenses. Through the theme of interference strategies this publication will embrace error and transdisciplinarity as a new vision of how to think, theorize and critique the image, the real and thought itself.

Paul Thomas

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Interfering with the Dead

1. CORPUS CHRISTI

Jesus said, "Whoever has known the world has fallen upon a corpse."

— Logion 56.1, *Gospel of Thomas*. ¹

by

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To be worldly is to be dead. Falling upon something that you know: this is not like making a stumbling discovery; it is more like a plunge, more like leaping onto something than being accidentally tripped up by it. The corpse in this image is not the victim in a crime scene awaiting investigation, identification and justice. It is the sex object bidden by, succumbing to, and complying with necrophilic ravishment. Worldliness is a matter of life and death, of knowing that they will embrace, in a consummation devoutly to be wished. It might at first sound all too dour, but one can force a crazy twist of logic out of the timeworn death-drive in this odd remark of Jesus's. If to be worldly is to be dead, then to be unworldly is to be undead. But being undead is the most one can hope for by way of resurrection or salvation in this petulantly, huffy, pessimistic warning from a character who will later, in other venues, claim to be the Christ.

A B S T R A C T

An ancient library of what has become known, if contentiously, as the "gnostic gospels" was accidentally exhumed in 1945 from a monastic graveyard in Nag Hammadi in Egypt. Among these esoteric texts, most of which were lost to history since their hasty burial in the fourth century, the Gospel of Thomas has an especially piquant pedigree. Cited throughout early Christian literature as an exceptionally heretical and prohibited text that had been purportedly composed in the first century CE, its cryptic (when not incomprehensible) apothegms are claimed to have been secret knowledge written by the twin brother of Jesus Christ. This claim, even taken as figurative, poses a modest predicament for the archaeology of Christian theology. However, taken as an artifact of media archaeology, this text – one of its verses, in particular, which proposes an equation of knowledge and death – extends a dark perspective on our own contemporary cultural imperatives with embodiment and performativity.

This bizarre epigram is from an anthology of one hundred and fourteen non-narrative *logia* or sayings, allegedly direct from the mouth of Jesus, called the *Gospel of Thomas*. Almost two millennia after being written, this gospel – which evidently did not make it into the Christian *New Testament* canon – was discovered among a hoard of ancient manuscripts (twelve complete ones and the remains of a thirteenth) that was fortuitously unearthed in late 1945 by a goatherd, Mohammed al-Samman. He was poking about in among the clefts of the Djebel el-Tarif cliff, which skirts the farming fields of a hamlet called Nag Hammadi, on the west bank of the Nile near present day Luxor in Egypt. The manuscripts are fourth-century CE Coptic translations of what would have been formerly Greek

and possibly Syriac texts. Although until this find they hadn't been seen for ages, many of these writings are mentioned in other authenticated literature of the early Christian Church; in fact, vociferously so in a famous diatribe against heresy by Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, written around 180 CE. ² From these citations and cross references, it seems likely that the original versions of this Nag Hammadi library had been composed two, if not more, centuries earlier than their exhumed Coptic versions. This would place some of these texts – notably the *Gospel of Thomas* with this oddity from Jesus – in the latter part of the first century, and thus as close to the historical Jesus as the putative biographical accounts in the gospels of *Mark*, *Luke* and *Matthew*. Indeed, if not closer. ³

Throughout the history of their various authoritative translations (from 1956 to 1988), the Nag Hammadi codices have collectively if contentiously become characterised as “the Gnostic Gospels” or “Gnostic Scriptures,” the Gnosticism of which identifies a miscellany of purportedly separatist mystery cults dispersed across the eastern Mediterranean in the first to fourth centuries CE (Christian, Jewish and Graeco-Roman Pagan). The Nag Hammadi texts are pungently placed within the orthodox landscape of early Christian church doctrine, indicating sects in open or clandestine conflict with an emerging institutional apostolic Christian authority. ¶ The *gnosis* featuring in many of these sectarian texts is a type of learning associated with initiation into an unspoken mystery distinct from philosophical wisdom (*sophia*) or intellectual comprehension (*sunesis*), and in this respect a learning distinct from the *logos* that provides an accountable ground of knowledge or, according to the famous opening of the *Gospel of John*, the ground of divine inception and incarnation. In the milieu of, for instance, the Hellenic Judaism of the Biblical *Proverbs*, *gnosis* (from the Hebrew *da'ath*) is identified, in chapter 2 verse 6, with the face of God. That's a pretty solid grounding. Many of the Gnostic sects acknowledged that such an exceptional exposure to *gnosis* would be a redemptive illumination, igniting an otherwise forsaken but soulful atom of divine light within the dark matter of the world and the bodies blindly banging around in it.

But the advent of the *gnosis* testified to in this Nag Hammadi literature had little to do with the more common godly smiley-face benefactions, which might involve the reception of grace and the occasional epiphany, or to do with godly intercession, such as an Annunciation. The setting for a Gnostic illumination is too dark – and in the most creatively perverse cases too weird – to be accommodated within the relatively user-friendly devotional agonies and ecstasies of

saintly visions. This is the sort of recondite and professionally specialist “learning” more suited to analyses of cloud chamber scans produced at the Large Hadron Collider than the sumptuous, illusionist quadratura painting that miraculously hoists a Baroque dome off its drum. One fine example of the quirky and vexing theology that Gnostic asceticism might lead to can be extracted from a hyperbolic doctrine developed by Marcion of Sinope, who – although from a modern viewpoint doesn't quite meet the Gnostic membership criteria – in 144 CE was excommunicated as a heresiarch. Ironically, Marcion was more doctrinaire than the bishops that judged him deviant: if he had his way, only Paul's writings would have qualified as true scripture.

The God of the Marcionist heresy was utterly alien to the creator God or demiurge who appears throughout the Hebrew Tanakh, the body of scriptures including *Proverbs* that will become known by Christians, when incorporated into their canon, as the *Old Testament*. This God, who permits no graven images of itself, is incongruously not only anthropomorphic in personality but tyrannical in temper: stubborn, conceited, jealous, and vengeful. For all his protestations that he is supreme and thus intolerant of competition, this God (who, in Marcion's tenacious anti-Judaic rage, is an inflated tribal Hebrew God) was a deceptive, indeed an abominable mask – just like the world he created, and like its creatures – obscured the true God who had disowned and retreated from the arrogant sordid theatre of creation. Marcion's dualistic doctrine bears only slight affinity with the vertiginously complex cosmogonies of contemporaneous Christian Gnostic religious systems, such as those of Valentinus, but is congruent with them in its insistence on the derogation of the created world. The redemptive *gnosis* offered by Christ in such religious topography would need to be pledged to an utterly faceless God: not an omniscient and omnipresent entity but an estranged absent divin-

ity, both awfully remote to and alienated from the created world. And the world it has abandoned is not an illusion so much as it is a dreadfully real, terminal slave colony and abattoir: in short, death row. If there can be a Gnostic mystery extorted from Jesus's gnomic dictum told to Thomas, it would be that the created world is not just a dark world, but a dead world.

Today, when Gnostic spirituality is buoyantly promoted with the facile enthusiasm for New Age lifestyle therapeutics that include Wicca and Tantric sex and Kabbalah as a Hollywood hobby, the spiraling and even abyssal negative theology of these antique mystical schemes can be hilariously trivialized or trivially romanced. Popular Gnostic revivals are straw figures that deserve the ridicule brilliant polemicists like Slavoj Žižek hurl effortlessly at them. However, the liberty I am taking here with by this epigraph from *Thomas* is not to précis, revise or critique (let alone defend) Gnostic tradition (in some respects *Thomas* also eludes characterization as Gnostic), but to provoke the perverse trajectory of this particular motto as a morbid inversion of enlightenment. This provocation is not only a wanton wish to embellish *logion 56* with Gothicism, with a Doom House or a Death Metal timbre, even if it would wear each of those genres stylishly. It is also a reprimand against neutralizing the venom spat with each historical accusation of heresy and monstrosity delivered against it. (And just this sort of acquittal, or at least pacifying dismissal of those charges, accompanies the diplomatic, pluralist inclusion of the Nag Hammadi library into postmodern Gnostic exegeses of early Christianity.) ¶

So let's take Irenaeus at his word when he levels against the *gnostikoi* the charge that their speculative cosmogonies and cosmologies are “an abyss of madness” and “a blasphemy against Christ.” ¶ We might well deduce that this particular “Gnostic” cache which included *Thomas* was being hidden as a precious

object when evacuated hastily from an archive in the desert monastery to be sunken into its graveyard; and that this provenance endows the Nag Hammadi artifacts with the patina of secret, forbidden literature interred for its own protection and clandestine preservation, with expectation of its eventual salvage and restoration. It was buried as treasure rather than as waste, but nonetheless it would have been hazardous material. Evidently, too, this library was not the exclusive testimony of a single cell or sect: the scope of metaphysical and mythographic speculation, as well as apocalyptic pronouncements, are too diverse and contrary to suggest anything other than that this was a miscellany of enigmatic heretical arcana. An illegal, underground, collection of prohibited knowledge. And the strange urgency to conceal these tracts back in the fourth century as much as the story of their twentieth-century discovery and passage into scholarship have the tantalizing drama – in the now idiomatic phrase – of a Dan Brown novel.

Illiterate and uninterested in his own Egyptian history, Mohammed al-Samman had hardly any idea of what he had discovered inside the large red earthenware jar in a cave that he had stumbled onto while digging for a natural fertilizer (known as *sabakh*) on the edge of the desert. Bitterly disappointed not to find any palpably recognizable treasure in the jar that he had broken open (despite the promising adjacency of a human skeleton), and regarding these old papyrus documents bound in leather as having negligible immediate value, the story goes that he tore a few up to trade for cigarettes with the camel drivers who were passing by at the time. Suspecting that objects of that vintage might sometimes be sold to city traders, he took the rest back to his house, although negligently throwing them onto a pile of straw in the open yard, where his mother resourcefully used some of them as kindling for the household clay oven. In addition to this archaeological fiasco, Muhammed himself was embroiled in an aston-

ishly gruesome family vendetta at the time. Shortly after the fertilizer expedition, he and his brothers attacked a man from a neighbouring village whom they believed responsible for the murder some months before of their father, dismembering the culprit, tearing the man's heart out of his chest and eating it!⁷ Needing to lie low from police, Muhammed entrusted the remaining papyri to a local priest who, twiggling to their possible historical significance passed a sample to a local Egyptian historian, who then contacted Cairo's Coptic Museum, initiating a consequent black market narrative of theft, extortion, curatorial ineptitude and smuggling involving postwar antiquities markets in Egypt, the United States and Europe (Zurich's Jung Institute, notably). Juicy as all this anecdotal intrigue is, and alluringly esoteric as much of the theological content and attribution of these codices has been, there is no fantastic conspiratorial history to their heresies, just as there was – despite Muhammed al-Samman's qualms at breaking open the jar with the mattock kept sharp to use on his father's murderer – no *djinn* let loose, no diabolical curse to carry away.

Well, not entirely.

Among the texts of this Nag Hammadi Library, the *Gospel of Thomas* has a particularly piquant genealogy. This gospel, thought to be lost until it appeared at Nag Hammadi,⁸ is frequently cited (or at least its existence is testified to) in ancient literature from the early third century CE well into the early fourteenth century.⁹ Since its modern discovery, *Thomas* has been placed among the *apocrypha*, those putative but suspicious sacred books which the early Christian councils considered to have dubious provenance, attribution, authenticity or authority and which were rejected from inclusion in canonical scripture. But the prototypical church historian and shrewd Constantinian publicist Eusebius, writing in the early fourth century, provides a singular warning that this judicious

exclusion isn't nearly enough of an appropriate way to treat *Thomas*. Eusebius provided scriptural editors with a tripartite categorization of texts. Firstly, there were the “recognized books” (the undisputed new testament of Christian *evangelion*, which then contained the gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke* and *John*, with the *Acts of the Apostles*, Paul's correspondence, *1 Peter* and the *Revelation* of John the Divine); secondly, the “disputed” or apocryphal literature; and lastly, the “bastard” texts – outright counterfeit, fraudulent or spurious, that's to say illegitimate, works. Despite an initial effort by orthodox dogmatists to dispel it as an archaeological forgery, modern judgment since the Nag Hammadi discovery genially places *Thomas* into Eusebius's second category of apocryphal literature. For Eusebius, however, not only doesn't *Thomas* fit the designation of *apocrypha*; it doesn't even warrant the designation of being a bastard text! He needs to create a fourth category beyond the capacity of correction or expurgation, a sort of *oubliette* exclusively reserved for *Thomas*: a dark pit of prohibition and proscription, a sarcophagus like that around the Chernobyl nuclear reactor that sullenly entombs something too hot to handle...too contaminating even for alert, devout scholarship to cope with. Something poisonous, wicked, impious, evil.¹⁰

Some twenty-five years later, heeding the warning expressed by Eusebius, Cyril of Jerusalem in his *Catachresis* (possibly around 348 CE) predictably and generally declares false gospels to be harmful, but especially insists, “Let no one read the *Gospel of Thomas*.”¹¹ In 367, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria issues one of his *Festal Letters* with an inventory of the twenty-seven books which he asserts authoritatively constitute and foreclose the content of the Christian *New Testament*. (*Thomas* is markedly not among them.) It's a list later deemed canonical by the synods of Hippo Regius (393 CE) and then at Carthage (in 397 and 419). This ruling would not have

been treated lightly by any officers of the churches and monasteries who came within the orbit of Athanasius's correspondence. He had some serious clout. At the Council of Nicaea, called by the converted Emperor Constantine back in 325, Athanasius had won a momentous victory against a faction led by a bishop of Alexandria named Arius. The Nicaean dispute had been over the ‘substance’ of Christ. Arius proposed that Christ was similar but not identical in substance to God the Father and thus Jesus, as the incarnate son of God, was son of Man with a mortal body. Seeing both a profound ideological scission looming from this disagreement as well as spotting a political opportunity, Athanasius countered that father and son were indeed identical in substance, and thus eternal. Suddenly, by denying what ought to be an incontrovertible belief in the divinity of Jesus, Arius sounded Satanic.

Athanasius's strident success in theological battle meant the denunciation of Arianism as heresy – a term derived from the Greek *airesis*, initially indicating a choice to disagree or dissent, but among early Christian apologists it assumed the judgment of a dangerously incorrect and misleading position on Church doctrine. Corrupted and corrupting. Arius lost his job (into which Athanasius stepped) and he and his followers were exiled. And Athanasius, during a checkered career with the church characteristic of an ideologue (requiring occasional flight from disfavor into the desert monasteries of North Africa), conducted further campaigns to clean up the speculative curiosities in Christian dogma: indeed, with a rhetorical style that would gain currency over the next thousand years as his legacy, heresies were regarded not only as misconceptions of doctrine but as unclean deviations, perversions, infections, which if not lanced and purged would spread like poxy contaminants. In one intriguing acerbic outburst in his thirty-ninth *Festal Letter*, Athanasius confirmed

that “...we have made mention of heretics as dead, but of ourselves as possessing the Divine Scriptures for salvation...”¹²

Only those vigilantly compliant with the divine authority of orthodox scripture would be saved to live again. Unorthodoxy induced ontological doom as well as professional disaster: its perpetrators were already “dead,” lost and rotting while yet living and spreading their filth. Heresiarchs were not only regarded as leprous outcasts, pollutants, carriers of contagion, but as the walking dead. It's a reasonable conjecture that – when delivered to a small monastic compound near Nag Hammadi, five hundred miles south of Alexandria – it was Athanasius's vitriolic letters that prompted the furtive, stealthy and secret burial of what must have seemed a damned or accursed book: the *Gospel of Thomas*. And the black mark against it persisted down the years. By the late tenth century, to read *Thomas* incurs anathema. Those who would dare open and respectfully scrutinize this by now legendary book, whether by deliberation or out of folly, are beyond redemption. Excommunicated, they are thus cursed by the church. The *Synodicon Orthodoxiae* pronounces that, “To whomever who accepts or has affection for [*Thomas*]...and does not abominate [this book] and spit upon [it] as being worth only to be burned: anathema.”

Why did this book – which we now know to be so slim and terse and such a puzzling volume – incur such animosity and contempt from orthodoxy for so many centuries? In part, this was due to a belief initiated by Cyril of Jerusalem that the gospel had been written by a Manichaean sect. That misconception was a boon to its notoriety. We owe the preservation of the citations of Thomas and their persistent sedition into the European Middle Ages largely to this guilt by association with the third-century CE Babylonian prophet and artist Mani and his heretical vision,

steeped in a millennium-old Zoroastrian legacy, of an irreconcilable cosmological dualism: a good God of spiritual light in fierce battle with its evil twin God of material darkness. A contrived joke against Mani's followers was how orthodox Christians referred to them as "Maniacs," spinning on the Greek words *maniakos* or *mainesthai*: to be mad. Delightfully inspired as this madness might sound, there is only a slim and opportunistic relation between *Thomas* and Mani. Given the probable date of *Thomas* as a late first-century CE composition, it's improbable to think of it as having a Manichaean origin. And it is this putative date of origin that injects the *logoi* of this gospel with scintillating scandal, disclosed in the short prologue on the book's incipit or title-page: "These are the secret [or hidden] words that the living Jesus spoke, and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down." Two momentous dares accompany this parvenu's arrival, and it's little wonder that the guard dogs at the gates of canonical orthodoxy would fiercely rear up.

Firstly, were these esoteric, condensed "secret words" intended to be read only by the initiate? Well, not entirely. Almost half of the text, in the form of parables and more comprehensible maxims, correlate with passages in the canonical, synoptic gospels and which are hardly meant to be obscurely reserved for an inner circle. But other sayings manifest a mystifying and beguiling novelty and have little equivalence with the sentiments of the Christian *Testament*. *Logion 42*, for instance, laconically declares: "Be passersby." *Thomas* is often described as a sapiential text, yet this strange directive conveys no Confucian-like or proverbial wisdom, and also has nothing of the paradox lurking in Zen riddles. There's little consolation or ethical guidance in such a pithy admonition either, and so it doesn't accord with the rhetorical mode of the formulaic beatitude favoured by more familiar Christian moral aphorisms: "blessed are the meek," etc. Could the injunction in *logion 42* advocate for the virtue of

an ascetic, itinerant, and presumably impoverished life? Not quite. In its curt economy, it doesn't sound pious so much as an almost slacker encouragement to be uninvolved, disconnected from the world, no matter how embroiled in its traffic. "Disengaged," notes one commentator, and distinct from the bonds of a community or *polis*.¹³ One could add that, soliciting Jean Baudrillard's gyration of the libertine scenario of seduction, the passerby is also a spectator seductively "diverted."¹⁴ The passerby cannot claim a mission: not as a pilgrim, not as a wandering mendicant sage, not even as a tourist. A passerby may be an onlooker, perhaps, but not an accredited witness, since they will have moved on. If anything, this *logion* has the rhetorical style of an invocation in a *memento mori*. Bentley Layton observes that the Greek verb *paragein* (to go past) was often used in epitaphs on graves, saluting the stranger who passed by (*parodites*) and petitioning "as though in the words of the corpse in the tomb."¹⁵ As Jesus says, when one finds the world one finds a corpse; but if that corpse of the world speaks to you in secret words then it is no longer dead. But it is a corpse not saved from death, either. "Be passersby" is the motto of an unholy resurrection. The salutation of the undead.

A second, equally intriguing predicament, ensues with the attribution of authorship through a tripartite name which induces a cryptographic spin on the piquancy of this figure's connection with Jesus: Didymos Judas Thomas. Judas was a common name in the era of early Christianity, stigmatized among Christians through its association with the story of the betrayal of Jesus to Roman authorities by Judas Iscariot. Converts to Christianity born with the name of Judas usually added further names to mitigate this connotation. But the supplementary names of this gospel's author – who is, of course, in all likelihood a pseudonymous syndicate of scribes – hardly reduce or distract from the stigma. Instead they forge a multilingual, allegorical *nom de*

plume that perversely overstretches the pseudo-apostolic relation with Jesus. The Greek component of the name, Didymos, means 'twin' and appears in the *Gospel of John* describing the apostle who, refusing to believe in the resurrection of Jesus until he places his fingers into the wounds of crucifixion, gains subsequent fame as Doubting Thomas. In the Greek version of *John* he's called 'Thomas the Twin,' as if it were a commonplace nickname, like Eric the Red. – The Syriac version of that gospel names this character as Judas Thomas; but in Syriac (or Eastern Aramaic) *t'oma* or *tau'ma* (transliterated in both Greek and Coptic as Thomas) also means 'twin.' Moreover, in another apocryphal if less problematic text, *The Acts of Thomas*, the apostle Judas Thomas is named as the twin of the messiah.¹⁶

The signification of the authorship of the *Gospel of Thomas* is convoluted and abstrusely intertextual, perhaps deliberately to encrypt the author's prestigious but also audacious claim on being the twin brother of the "living Jesus." As with a nun's vow to become a 'bride of Christ,' Jesus's twin brother cannot be contained within a purely spiritual allegory. In Irenaeus's words this opens onto an abyss of madness: no longer a relation of apostolic deference, nor of mentorship, but of doubling. Entertain the dazzling blasphemy of this metaphor for a moment! Was Thomas conceived at the Annunciation at the same time as Jesus, and then disowned by the father as illegitimate, as his bastard progeny? Does this figurative illegitimacy shadow the spiritual imitation of Christ? But there may be another view onto this quandary that offers it as a negation rather than as a digression of parental accountability. It would take a strange adjective to describe this annulled relation, one that slurs categorial distinctions and invokes a mode of exclusion in the sly way that the word 'undead' does: the twin of Jesus Christ is 'unfathered.'

Salvation – the ultimate therapeutic treatment – comes to the world, it's announced in another Nag Hammadi text, the *Gospel of Philip*, "when the two become one and the outer become as the inner." This also is described in a ritual or ceremonial practice central to Valentinian Gnostic Christianity as the 'bridal chamber': an allegory of salvation in which spirit and physical matter are married into one (recycling the therapeutic union of opposites into an original unity, derived from Platonic philosophy). But the twinning of Jesus invoked by *Thomas* goes the other way. What happens to a world that turns against this pacific reconciliation of opposites; when, to use an odd recurrent autobiographical declaration of Nietzsche's, "the one becomes two"? Mani claimed to receive his Gnostic revelation from his suddenly manifested divine twin: in effect, what was revealed to him was a simulacrum of the divine, and with that the duplicity of his God who also was not one (the monotheistic persona of Abrahamic religions) but two (antagonistic but identical rivals). The heresy in Mani's prophecy – from which we derive any combative, destructive duality as Manichaean – was not just that there were twinned Gods (one, the substance of light; the other, the material of darkness) but that any God that divided from itself, who reproduced like this, would have to be a suspicious character and any world created by this God would be at best dubious, and more likely evil.

To understand such a world is to find a corpse. Not just a material, fleshly, down-to-earth world, but a dead one. But this is to be understood in the manner that the heretic is dead: living dead, anathema – in distinction to how the pious, the saved, live through the promise and provision of divine scripture. Let us think of this strange maxim uttered by a living Jesus as though it were in the words of the corpse in the tomb. A prophet speaking on behalf of the undead. Think of it as a defiance of the *logos* as holy word and in the Annunciation: of word made flesh and disowned by

God in the way that Didymos Judas Thomas must be disowned. Not orphaned or cast out, but ‘unfathered,’ ‘unmade.’ To understand the world is to rot with it, to be its leper, be its grave; to be its black *gnosis* and black mass. Dead to the world.

2. CADAUER CHRISTI

Jesus said, “Whoever has known the world has fallen upon the body.”

– Logion 80.1, *Gospel of Thomas*.¹⁷

What can we make of this tiny scribal alteration between *logion 56* and *logion 80*, which are identical other than for the substitution of “the body” (in Coptic transcription: *p-soma*) for “a corpse” (*-ptoma*)? Perhaps it was a slip of the pen, or of the ear. One commentator suggests that *logion 80* should be taken as the original because it implies a divine primordial body, and thus a far more positive image: “Whoever ‘recognizes the world’ in the Thomasine sense, a world permeated by the primordial light of the kingdom of God, finds the body and those who find the body are highly commended: they are superior to the ordinary world.”¹⁸ This would be uninterestingly pious stuff, except that it portrays *logion 56* as an astonishing impropriety and compelling corruption of the original, and thus far more interesting than its imputed correct version – particularly if it is indeed the result of a symptomatic slip. One should note that while *p-soma* could at a stretch be interpreted as the “corpus” (or proper scriptural body), *-ptoma* could readily be not only a “corpse,” but also a “cadaver” or a “carcass.” With such a tantalizing profile, this exquisite corpse – *symptoma* of the corruption of a Jesus-corpus – deserves more of our attention.

Corpses are not simply dead bodies. Corpses are problematic, reticent, and obstinate. The corpse may

epitomize the entropic processes of self-digestion or autolysis, bloated decomposition and putrefaction in the steady, fateful slide into dank manure, slime and sewage; but the corpse also is paradoxically a ghastly icon of arrested rigor and ceremonial rigidity. As the problematic “stiff” in crime stories, the corpse has a colloquial phallic exhibitionism and obduracy, associated with awkward practical problems of disposal and with concealing guilt. And, of course, “stiffs” keep popping back up in these stories with the discomfiting if not horrifying homecoming of a disavowed secret: floating to the surface in a black lake, exposed by accident in the boot of a car in transit, roused from a fetid tomb or clawing their way from an unholy grave. And sometimes, too, with blackly comic impropriety. Hitchcock’s 1955 movie *The Trouble with Harry* plays wry sport with the embarrassing persistence of the guilty secret embodied in the well-dressed and forever immaculately neat male corpse lying in a meadow, whose death every member of the nearby tiny New England community separately believe they must have somehow caused, and whose corpse each person furtively drags from view in repeatedly failed attempts to cover up their complicity. The corpse in Ted Kotcheff’s *Weekend at Bernie’s* (1989) has a similarly stubborn and unspoiled conspicuousness. Bernie is the unscrupulous head of a corporation who has been murdered by a Mafia colleague at his beach house retreat. Two young innocent employees who have arrived for a weekend party at Bernie’s witness the crime, and must keep the pretence of Bernie being alive in order to escape death themselves. Bernie’s corpse is handled like a puppet, much to the maddening bewilderment of the hit-man who, despite repeated efforts, cannot put Bernie down.

Why insist on the implacable designation of ‘corpse’ for the protagonist in this sort of *danse macabre* rather than the more supple and chic term ‘body’? It’s not pedantry. The corpse is a residual indecency of life

that remains paradoxically unincorporated; that’s to say, resistant to embodiment even as decay. A corpse is the atrocity, or perhaps the expletive of a body: the curse that diverts an oath from a pledge into a swearword, but it’s also something that ludicrously or offensively sticks out of the form of the body. Stiff with erotic concentration but without the motivating surge of tumescence, the corpse stands spastically and forever at attention as a zombie soldier guarding a memorial flame of animate life or vitality, and attending this memorial in a hideous formal pantomime or pageant of the death it commemorates. Or, in another scenario, the corpse is the cadaverous ‘lich’ sustained by a curse, like the damned sailors of the legendary Flying Dutchman or Hector Barbossa’s skeletal crew on the Black Pearl in *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End* (2007). Mummified or desiccated in a golden reliquary and in rotting lace or linen, the corpse is an enduring and magical artifact fabricated and maintained by a priestly caste or cult; an article so potent it must be locked away in secret; unseen, but guarded by spells and repeated rituals for the eternity it survives. Corpses are exquisitely blighted by an exclusion from both life and death. In the current popular jargon of vampiric and zombie fantasy, we would call this exclusion the protocol of the undead. Yet, as we intuitively acknowledge, corpses – certainly those farcical mannequins like Harry and Bernie – are worse than undead, more pathetic, less romantic. In comparison with any kind of corpse however, bodies are infinitely more flexible and inclusive, informal and mobile. They come and they go without ceremony.

Corpses may seem to be a subcategory of bodies; but where the corpse is a grotesque mockery, black magical ornament or irony of lifelessness, the body is anything and everything that is opposed to this specific state of the corpse. This is nominally so, because a ‘body’ can name structures of living as well as dead flesh, while also designating any extensive

ensemble of things concrete (organic or inorganic) or abstractions becoming material or tangible. Embodiment involves incorporation: the constitutive formation of complex but unified substance. Compellingly, as a property of substances, ‘body’ always implies a volume if not fullness, a strength if not intensiveness, and weight if not ripeness...even in its morbid connotations. A body of water, a body of work, a body of evidence, even the bodies of plague victims piled in a cart: these have an agency and animation that the corpse – as the *cul-de-sac* of the *corpus* (which in its ancient and modern senses is a mass and massing together of working material, the stuffing of form) – no longer possesses. The Latin locution that the Vulgate *Gospel of John* renders for the dying Christ could be the nihilist slogan for all corpses: “*Consummatum est*,” it is finished, my work is done.¹⁹ But this has to be understood, however, not with the triumphal signification of Biblical concordances that identify this finish as consummation (fulfillment of passion), nor as consummate utterance (perfect in its fidelity to prophesies of the messianic mission).²⁰ Instead, we would treat the *Corpus Christi* as a black magic of the corpse, and the miraculous transubstantiation of the sacrificial body as an interference with death comparable to the putridly voracious, hellishly unfulfilled, unresurrected (unsaved) zombie. The paradoxical reticence of the corpse’s consummation is an exquisite diabolical spell.

Bodies on the other hand are loquacious, even garrulous. They can be vivaciously original, sporting customized and unique aesthetic adornments and modifications, or can be subsumed in anonymous victimization or mass conformity. They can be tossed like debris within the fury of a tsunami; flow in ecstatic rage through streets or stadiums as inspired torrents; submit to masochistic objectification on grandly militaristic and on intimately tender scales of behaviour; they can entwine in rawness, hunger, affection and compassion with seeping volatility or with taut density

and severity. Whatever they get to up or submit to, suffer from or are suffused with, however they may be interned or interred, bodies are garrulous, mutable and performative in ways that corpses are not. This is dramatically demonstrated in the ascendancy of performance art through the second half of the twentieth-century, comfortably aligned with the emergence of the philosophical discipline of biopolitics and also strikingly coincident with the critical and pedagogical eclipse of the genre of the nude. By the mid 1970s the nude and the life classes that trained artists in this genre were politically noxious art historical relics, eclipsed by the bodily acting out of desires, sexual and gender identities, appetites, regressions, transgressions, perversions, sensualities, dietary or exercise regimes, therapeutics, and so forth. By the turn of the millennium, the polymorphous, polysexual, performative and performance-enhanced body had become the commodified core of lifestyle marketing as well as of the cultural studies industry.

It doesn't seem that surprising to encounter the hordes of the undead clamouring for enfranchisement within the liberal social and cultural policy that admits, emancipates or empowers this superabundant morphology and mutability and traffic of bodies. But the corpse doesn't quite meet any criteria for citizenship in a republic of bodies. Ironically, bodies are bound to their prolix properties. They multiply, proliferate and configure populations, demographic clusters, species and genera. Even in death their numbers accrue. In comparison, to this voluble if multifarious kinship of bodies, the corpse is an abhorrently exotic object, unassimilable, wretchedly hermetic. One might even go so far to say that the corpse could be the enemy of the body. Its worst enemy. And it may be time to shut the body up by confronting it with its corpse. But if there is anything timely about putting a case for the corpse against the cultural cornucopia of bodies, it would be the use of the corpse as a means of inter-

ference with the effusive cultural studies of the body. This manoeuvre requires thinking of the corpse as an object that is 'un-embodied.' Yet this term is not as daunting, or as nonsensical as it might at first sound.

Such a weird, unembodied, object appears in Byzantine theology and aesthetics and is known to us by a now obscure Greek term as an *acheiropoieton*. This translates as 'not made by hand,' but its more beguiling meaning is literally unmanufactured.²¹ *Acheiropoieton* were allegedly miraculous, indexical images of divinity, the most famous of these today being the Shroud of Turin: an alleged monoprint left on the funereal shroud of Jesus Christ, stained not by his corpse's blood loss nor by bodily secretions associated with putrescence of the cadaver (which would of course be a blasphemous explanation, since the corpse of Christ did not decompose), but deposited like a photographic print through the action of a divine, immaterial radiance. It's still postulated by stubborn apologists for the authenticity of the Shroud that rather than being a hoax produced with a fabric dye, the image may have been created by a mode of primitive camera-less photography, somewhere between a Rayogram and a Roentgen ray or X-ray. But there is a further point here that makes even this attempted explanation falter, and yet which shifts the theological doctrine into occult speculation. The theology of an *acheiropoieton* such as the Turin Shroud not only demands that the image cannot be made by hand (by human labour) but also it cannot be made by nature.²² It cannot be a natural wonder, for instance, since a meteor shower isn't really an image other than when it is illustrated by hand; and it cannot be a wondrous sign, which can be accounted for as a natural phenomenon such as a burning bush through which a god presents itself. Hence the quasi-photographic technical explanation of the Shroud ends up attempting to be a secular and rather banal demystification or disenchantment of the occulted sign of the *acheiropoieton*;

banal, because what accords the *acheiropoieton* with its weird semiology as well as weird ontology is that it must be an un-made object, and an un-embodied portrait.

Let us treat the *acheiropoieton* as an artifact of media archaeology; granting that it is a provocation to speculate on what the medium of a 'miraculous' image might be and, further, that such an image – if we can call it that – would be an occulting of aesthetics and thus our media archaeology is a consciously fabricated crypto-archaeology.²³ Let us take this back to the complaint against the effusive performativity of the recent aesthetics of the body with a contrast to the aesthetics of the corpse. To do so, we should be just as anachronistic as considering the *acheiropoieton* as a media artifact. The *acheiropoieton* belongs with supernatural phenomena that were categorized as *eidola*, which were not generally or simply 'images' as the Greek is casually translated, but particular types of images that could be called 'double images' or spectres. In the Homeric idiom of pre-classical semiology, there are three cases of supernatural images like this: firstly, the phantom image (or *phasma*) which is a ghostly simulacrum created by a god in the semblance of a living person and which you encounter when you are fully awake (epiphanies or encounters with gods could fit this bill); secondly there is the dream image (*oneiros*), which is the apparition of a real being, perceived when you are unconscious, and sent by the gods as messenger or companion or tormentor (and which could, at a stretch, fit into Freudian and Surrealist topographies); and lastly, and most intriguing, the soul (*psuche*), which is the phantom of the dead – and which has the appearance of the living being but does not have its essential property: life. *Psuche* is the contradictory state of Being-without-essence, in other words of un-being rather than nothingness or non-being; and thus as un-being *psuche* is not a dissimulation or concealment of life but a dissimulation (or perhaps

simulacrum) of nothingness.²⁴ We might say that, as with divinity mediated through the *acheiropoieton*, *psuche* is not non-existent so much as 'inexistent.' And, again comparable to the *acheiropoieton*, *psuche* is an image only insofar as it is a stain or blot that occludes the image of life. Inasmuch as un-being is an unidentifiable macula or blot rather than a hole or absence, we could say, that the corpse is a body seen against the transit of *psuche*. *Sic transit*.²⁵

Obviously, in the Homeric world, *psuche* is not the soul as the animating life-force nor is it cause of the vitality of an organism (associated, for instance, with *pneuma*), such as it appears later in Aristotelian empiricism, and where it becomes a principle of generation or composition, of change, and also of decomposition or compost; and where it is necessary for a being to decay as much as grow in order to be of its own essence. Nor, evidently, is *psuche* in this archaic sense the flourish of an intelligibility of essence: of Being as the possession of an inalienable identity.²⁶ In the legends that are canonized through the Homeric stories, a living being does not possess a *psuche*; once dead they become a *psuche*. However, this becoming-*psuche* is not a process of living but the advent of unbeing and of life being undone, of being other than itself. Thus the Homeric, archaic *psuche* is neither an index to nor a potentiality of life since it plays no role in life and has no relevant relation to it, other than that it is identifiable in its rotting double, the corpse.²⁷ *Psuche* is outside this corpse as an unbeing, yet identified with it in the way that in a morgue a witness is asked to identify a dead body: duplicitously invoking the verb 'to be': "yes, this is so-and-so," but only if one adds "it is no longer this person." What is no longer is not pictured as a divorcing of life and body, or the subtraction of a living essence or ghost from the inert vehicle or machine, but as a wedding of body and corpse, an alchemical wedding in which the corpse is the blackening introduction of the catalytic bride;

in alchemical as well as Duchampian terms, a bride “stripped bare.” This compromised recognition of the corpse could not occur if *psuche* were an immortal entity; what we identify as the archaic unbeing of a body – as *psuche* – is rather an un-mortal image of the corpse. *Psuche* is the image of a death in transit (not a life in transit, not life moving to another state of its being; nor the recurrent consoling benefaction of death as a further stage of life’s way), and we construe this transit as an interference of images by occultation: we might say that *psuche* is a black cloud, and we might dub psychic images as ‘clouding.’

But we must quickly add that this psychic image is not in any way an affirmation of life-after-death, not an evanescence of the animate spirit; nor, indeed, of any spirituality whatsoever. Outside but occulting that decaying and disappearing thing that it identifies, *psuche* is beside itself: sidelined, it is the literal ecstasy of the corpse. I’ll borrow a phrase from Reza Negarestani – admittedly in a cavalier act, out of context – in his brilliant exposition of the mode of execution, mentioned in Virgil’s *Aeneid* among other ancient sources as a practice of the so-called barbarous and piratical Etruscans, dubbed “the corpse-bride” in which a putrefying, blackening corpse is tethered to the living victim in an intimate face-to-face embrace, if not in actual copulation.²⁸ The amorous, sexual embrace of the corpse and living body occasions an exquisitely horrific image, and which desecrates not only the transfiguring sanctity of marriage but also those spiritualizing aspirations of the alchemical wedding recited in hermetic science, in which a blackening of substance in the alembic precedes the revelation of the philosopher’s stone. Exploiting this desanctified miracle, I would describe the interference of the psychic black cloud (abducting the phrase from Negarestani) as “an epiphenomenon of necrophilic intimacy.”²⁹ More bizarrely, if more technically, this ecstatic position of the corpse-bride could be a cypto-archaeological media

artifact: an image of psychic blackening, which could in turn be dubbed, casually adopting a term of diverse mathematical and philosophical currency, a singularity. The singular, in my white-dwarf and perverted contraction of this usage, is a situation of the subject subtracted from any particularities, or from particular knowledge of the subject. A singularity, suggests Alain Badiou, is a situation of the subject as an “upsurge” or advent, an exception, rather than a condition of being or of predicated meaning.³⁰ We might think of this grammatically rather than in the more difficult logical terms of Badiou’s remarks, and say that in a sentence that has a subject and a predicate, such as “the cat sat on the mat,” the singularity is the subject subtracted from its predicated knowledge (that it is “the cat that sat on the mat”). Singularity is an interference with the ontological intelligibility of the sentence. Paradoxical as it sounds, the singularity will be universal since it excludes anything particular about the cat, but this is not the eternal essence of cat we are talking about, not ‘catness’ (since that essence can include the knowledge that “cats are beings that sit on mats”). Singularity (and here the term may have opportunistic coincidence with its use in astrophysics) involves not the revelation of essence but an exceptional disappearance or obscuring of it.

The singularity is the exceptional situation of the cat without its particular identifications that would identify and would make it appear as a being. In other words, that render it as unbeing. The singularity of the subject – and consequently, the image of *psuche* as an ontological interference – is beautifully eventful in the Cheshire’s cat’s ecstatic grin from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*; the grin which importunately and obscenely lingers beyond the disappearance of its predicate. The facetious obstinacy of this grin suggests the incomprehensible predatory unbeing of the living dead who don’t stay within their graves or memorials, or the ghostly persistence of an importunate property

outside its body, as an afterimage with the aesthetic effrontery of a hallucination that haunts and horrifies. The Cheshire cat’s smile is obscenely unworldly. In part, this is because that smile is sinister – in the way all cats’ expressions seem elusively, disdainfully, deceptively enigmatic (captured expertly in Tenniel’s original illustrations of the first publication of *Alice in Wonderland*, but not in any many other versions, such as the Disney animations). Partly too, this smile is also ominous. The Cheshire cat in *Wonderland* is an oracle: it tells the adventurer Alice, with mischievous unintelligibility, what will happen and which way to go. Yet – in a world where one’s size telescopes and inflates like a concertina, where one must run as fast as possible to stay in the same place, where at the Mad Hatter’s table it is tea-time all the time and one must celebrate unbirthdays – this advice about which way to go is not so much less than useful but more than useless. In its ecstatic state, extended beyond and yet subtracted from its nature and its being, does the cat’s grin belong to it any longer? Is not the extent and the exclusion of this smile a hideous intimacy with the cat? Is not such a smile the very emblem of *psuche*, and thus a miraculous unworldly image? This smile is the mischievous horror of the corpse’s un-embodiment and the eucharist of a blackening mass of the corpse. ■

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REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The full verse continues “[...] and whoever has fallen onto a corpse, the world is worthy of him not.” *An Interlinear Coptic-English Translation of the Gospel of Thomas*, 56i, <http://gospel-thomas.net/splith.htm> (accessed June 5, 2013). See also *Coptic Gnostic Chrestomathy: A Selection of Coptic Texts with Grammatical Analysis and Glossary*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leuven: Peeters, 2004). Other translations politely moderate the verbs, but in rendering a more familiar rhythm lose the brusqueness of the source’s compounded syntax, and in some cases editorially enhance the source: for instance, “Whoever has come to understand the world has found (only) a corpse; and whoever has found a corpse, is superior to the world.” Trans. Thomas O. Lambdin, *The Gnostic Society Library*, http://gnosis.org/naghamm/nhl_thomas.htm (accessed June 5, 2013), in which the parenthetical English adverb is an unjustified qualification; just as “worth,” and the lack of it, suggests suitability rather than superiority. The Coptic term translated as “world” here is, appropriately grand and inclusive: “kosmos.”
2. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies) in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2001), 443-824. Two modern studies had in particular, if in divergent idioms, popularized this nomenclature for the Nag Hammadi library: Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958); Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982) with her sequel (focused on *The Gospel of Thomas*), *Beyond Belief* (New York: Random House, 2003).
3. The text authored as by “Mark” is presumed to have been composed between 60-70 CE; those attributed to “Matthew” and “Luke” 75-85 CE. The oldest fragment of the New Testament is the Rylands Papyrus dated at 130 CE (fragment of *John*, chapter 18) in the John Rylands Library, Manchester UK; the oldest extensive papyrus of the New Testament is The Chester Beatty and Bodmer Papyrus, dated between 180 and 225 CE in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, Ireland. Among others, *Thomas* scholar and

translator James M. Robinson has proposed that *Thomas* could be affiliated with the hypothetical *Q source* which, throughout the twentieth century has been theoretically postulated as a sayings compendium (partly oral, partly written but no longer extant) providing the source along with *Mark* for the canonical gospels of *Matthew* and *Luke*. Some suggested dating of the conjectural “layer 1” of *Q*, and by association *Thomas*, even precede the composition of *Mark* by thirty years.

4. The common noun *gnosis*, technical as it is, has a relatively benign and even banal affect compared to its more piquant adjectival use, both in antique testimonia and in modern usage. But the term ‘Gnostic’ as used today in an expedient summary of extremely diverse religious and metaphysical doctrines is an appellation that, with perhaps one exception, those antique sectarian movements would have been unlikely to recognize. The exception may be that of the faction led by Marcellina in mid second-century Rome. Her Christian sect, which allegedly practiced a type of communistic social code, is contemptuously mentioned by Irenaeus as publicizing themselves with the adjective *gnostikos*, although no testimonial of their own survives. (Irenaeus in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, 503.) Irenaeus used the derogatory nuance of this word in the manner of Paul’s usage for a reprimand against false knowledge (1 *Timothy* 6.20), with an evident Platonic pedigree. Modern scholarship has tended to employ this adjective and the proper noun of ‘Gnosticism’ anachronistically: derived from Irenaeus’s derogatory jibe, it entered common English usage with Henry More’s 1669 exegetical commentary on 2.20 of the *Revelation of John* (*An Exposition of the Seven Epistles*, no 99). In his *Antidote Against Idolatry* (which was printed with the *Exposition*), More alludes to “the old abhorred Gnosticism.” See Bentley Layton, “Prolegomena to the Study of Ancient Gnosticism,” in *Doctrinal Diversity: Varieties of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson London and New York: Routledge, 1999, 106-122. (Specifically on More’s terminology, see Bentley Layton, op. cit., 120-121.)
5. In her *Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels rhapsodically portrays

Gnostic Christian communities of the late Roman empire as almost counter-culturally militant or renegade, in both their various ascetic as well as libertarian social and religious principles. In a more recent (1998) PBS education blog on *Thomas*, she associates *gnosis* with a Zen-like *satori* or insight, and also with a mode of Socratic self-knowledge instead of apocalyptic prophecy, situating the Jesus in *Thomas* in the tradition an enlightened religious sage figure rather than the rabbinical messiah of the canonical *New Testament*. “Jesus, in effect, turns one toward oneself, and that is really one of the themes of the *Gospel of Thomas*, that you must go in a sort of a spiritual quest of your own to discover who you are, and to discover really that you are the child of God just like Jesus.” Elaine H. Pagels, “The Gospel of Thomas,” *FRONTLINE* (blog), April 1998, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/thomas.html> (accessed June 5, 2013).

6. Irenaeus, in Philip Schaff, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, 449.
7. This anecdote is told by the Nag Hammadi scholar James Robinson from direct conversation with Mohammed al-Samman in James Robinson, “Nag Hammadi: The First Fifty Years,” in *The Nag Hammadi Library after Fifty Years: Proceedings of the 1995 Society of Biblical Literature Commemoration*, ed. J. D. Turner and A. McGuire (Leiden Brill, 1997), 3-6; see also Bart D. Erhmann, *Lost Christianities: The Battle for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 51.
8. Fragments of it appear as the text *Sayings of our Lord* in the Oxyrynchus Papyri, discovered in 1897 by the Oxford scholars B. P. Grenfell and A. S. Hunt at an archaeological dig at the ancient Upper Egypt site of Oxyrynchus. Reconstruction and translation, Andrew Bernhard, “The Gospel of Thomas: Fragments from Oxyrhynchus,” *The Gnosis Archive*, n.d., http://www.gnosis.org/naghamm/thomas_poxy.htm (accessed June 5, 2013).
9. Harold Attridge, “Appendix: The Greek Fragments,” in *Nag Hammadi codex II, 2-7, volume 1*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1989). For a much extended itinerary, with commentary, see Simon Gathercole, “Named Testimonia

to the *Gospel of Thomas: An Expanded Inventory and Analysis*,” *Harvard Theological Review* 105, no. 1 (2012): 53-89.

10. Simon Gathercole, “Named Testimonia to the *Gospel of Thomas: An Expanded Inventory and Analysis*,” 57-58.
11. *Ibid.*, 58.
12. Quoted in Joe E. Morris, *Revival of the Gnostic Heresy: Fundamentalism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 9.
13. R. Valentis, *The Gospel of Thomas* (London & New York: Routledge, 1997), 118.
14. Jean Baudrillard, “Please Follow Me,” in Jean Baudrillard and Sophie Calle, *Suite Vénitienne: Please Follow Me*, trans. Dany Barash and Danny Hatfield (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988).
15. Bentley Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures: A New Translation with Annotations and Introductions* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1987), 387.
16. Paul Foster, *The Apocryphal Gospels: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 32.
17. *An Interlinear Coptic-English Translation of the Gospel of Thomas*, 80i, <http://gospel-thomas.net/splith.htm> (accessed June 5, 2013).
18. Stevan L. Davies, “The Christology and Protology of The Gospel of Thomas,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 3, no. 4 (1992): 672.
19. *Gospel of John*, chapter 19, verse 30. The full verse is *cum ergo accepisset leus acetum dixit consummatum est et inclinor capite tradidit spiritum*. (The King James Version translates as: “When Jesus therefore had received the vinegar [sour wine], he said, It is finished: and he bowed his head and gave up the ghost.” The Revised Standard Version translates the last clause as “gave up his spirit.”) The phrase *consummatum est* is derived from the Greek original, *tetelstai*, which invokes a stock term used in the completion of an economic, or financial, transaction equivalent to ‘paid in full,’ and which would in the gospel text would refer to a blood debt having been accounted for.
20. The Vulgate Gospel indicates the genealogy of the prophesied sacrifice in chapter 19, verse 28: *postea sciens iesus quia iam omnia consummate sunt ut consummaretur*

scriptura dicit sitio (“Afterwards, Jesus knowing that all things were accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, said: I thirst.” KJV).

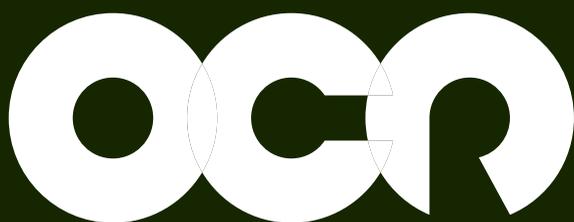
21. The miraculous authority of *acheiropoieta* may have an analogy if not source in material practices such as the use of clay seals for authenticity of imperial proclamations and legal testimonials, or cast images in imperial coinage, as well as the indelible pattern left in dyed cloth after it has been washed. See James Trilling, “The Image Not Made by Hands and the Byzantine Way of Seeing,” in *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation*, eds. Herbert L. Kessler and Gerhard Wolf (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1998), 109-127. A startling extrapolation of the dyed image is the suggestion that the *acheiropoieta* known as Veronica’s veil or the *mandylion*, bearing the face of Christ during the Passion, is associated with menstruation, thus identifying the Christian blood debt and sacrifice with the *mandil* as a menstrual towel. See Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and a Structure of a “True” Image* (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991). And in comparison see Avril Cameron, “The *Mandylion* and Byzantine Iconoclasm,” and Herbert L. Kessler, “Configuring the Invisible by Copying the Holy Face,” both in *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation*; and Jeffrey Hamburger, “Vision and the Veronica,” in *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998). On the signification of the untouched and the impure touch in manufacturing the image, see Marie-José Mondzain, “The Holy Shroud: How Invisible Hands Weave the Undecidable,” in *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2002), 324-335.
22. Archeological and forensic assessments of the Turin Shroud are detailed in Robin Cormack, *Painting the Soul: Icons, Death Masks and Shrouds* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 89-132. On the centuries-long debates, generally called the iconoclastic controversy, over the possible iconolatry or idolatry of *acheiropoieta* in Byzantine

theology and aesthetics, see David Freedberg, *The Power of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 392-399, and Moshe Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1992).

23. For my own contribution see "Iconicity: The Medium of Miraculous Images," in *New Imaging: Transdisciplinary Strategies for Art Beyond the New Media* [special issue Column 7], ed. Su Baker, Melanie Oliver and Paul Thomas (Sydney: Artspace, 2011), 66-75.
24. On the distinctions between these three modes of supernatural imaging, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Psuiche: Simulacrum of the Body or Image of the Divine," in *Mortals and Immortals*, trans. Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 186-192.
25. *Sic transit gloria mundi* ("Thus passes worldly glory") is, of course the keystone to funereal homilies and valediction as well as having a ceremonial utterance in papal coronations, and is likely derived from Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* (1418): *O quam cito transit gloria mundi*. My truncation of the phrase isolates the inevitability of the unpredicated passing as a crossing, an obscuring or an eclipse rather than a passing away or loss.
26. For a new interpretation of Aristotle's *psuche* as the entelechy or realization of essence of a body that "serves as its instrument," see A. P. Bos, *The Soul and its Instrumental Body A Reinterpretation of Aristotle's Philosophy of Living Nature* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).
27. Perhaps the most vivid and lurid manifestation of this bizarre identity is in the recurrent exquisite corpses of Edgar Allan Poe's fantastic premature burials and somnambulant revenants: Madeleine Usher clawing her way out of her coffin; Berenice's unearthly scream from the grave as her lover, in a fugue state, tears her teeth out with dental pliers; or Monsieur Valdemar, when released from his post-mortem mesmeric trance explodes into a puddle of putrescence.
28. " [...] The Lydians, / Renowned in war, in the old days settled there / On the Etruscan ridges, and for years / The city flourished, till an arrogant king, / Mezentius, ruled it

barbarously by force. / How shall I tell of carnage beyond telling, / Beastly crimes this tyrant carried out? / Requite them, gods, on his own head and on / His children! He would even couple carcasses / with living bodies as a form of torture / Hand to hand and face to face, he made them / Suffer corruption, oozing gore and slime / In that wretched embrace, and a slow death." Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York, London and Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf/Everyman's Library, 1992), Book VIII, lines 644-656. The reference to this practice occurs in several lost sources from antiquity: such as the florid oratory of Quintus Hortensius Hortalus (first century BCE), reported by Cicero in his lost dialogue *Hortensius*, and which St Augustine in turn reports on. Cicero also cites a reference to the corpse-bride in Aristotle as an analogy for the amalgam of body and soul; which in later Pauline language becomes the Christian soul shackled to the mortal flesh of the body.

29. Reza Negarestani, "The Corpse Bride: Thinking with Nigredo," *Collapse IV: Concept Horror* (May 2008): 134-135.
30. Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, *Philosophy in the Present*, trans. Peter Thomas and Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 26-48.



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