

FOR
ART

“Who Is Me Today?” • DANIEL BIRNBAUM

“WHO IS ME TODAY?” (The Construction of Self in Stan Douglas “Der Sandmann”)

Much art from other centuries - Baroque allegories or religious motifs from the Renaissance, say - demands a tremendous amount of knowledge to be fully appreciated; why should today's art be any different? Canadian artist Stan Douglas's most complex installations can certainly be appreciated on a straightforward level, but for the viewer who's willing to delve deeper, the pieces take on much more significance. Douglas is no obscurantist: His writings are crystal clear, and so is his work. At times it's just so multilayered that the ideal viewer - one who comprehends all the parameters involved as well as the artist himself - hardly exists. Is that a problem? Take the video installation *Der Sandmann*, 1995, an elaborate meditation on the mechanisms of recollection and temporal awareness, and, I think, the most sophisticated work of contemporary art I've come across in recent years. A poetic, visually perplexing attempt to come to grips with the German situation a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the piece can be viewed and enjoyed simply as a dreamlike scenario about the childhood memories of three people from the small, formerly East German city of Potsdam. But to really appreciate the installation requires a familiarity with numerous sources: the German Romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann's story "Der Sandmann"; Freud's essay "The Uncanny" and its theory of repetition; certain aspects of German city planning, particularly the Schrebergärten, small plots of land that the poor could lease from the city to grow their own vegetables. These gardens were named after nineteenth-century educator Moritz Schreber, whose son Daniel Paul Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* would play a crucial role in the development of Freud's theory of paranoia. All this is relevant to Douglas's installation, even if it's not ultimately what the work is "about."

Der Sandmann is a double video projection, each screen showing a 360-degree sweep of a Schreber garden. Staged in the old Ufa studios just outside Potsdam and shot on 16 mm film, the sets are re-creations of the gardens, one as they might have appeared twenty years ago, the other a contemporary version, partly transformed into a construction site. The most curious aspect of this double projection is the vertical seam that simultaneously sutures and separates the halves. Initially the line appears to be only an irritating distortion, and even if you concentrate on the seam, it's not easy to understand what it represents or how, technically, it's produced. The gardens occupy their respective spaces to either side of the cleft in such a way that, in Douglas's own words, "as the camera passes the set, the old garden is wiped away by the new one and, later, the new is wiped away by the old; without resolution, endlessly." Thus the seam is a time fissure, keeping zones of temporality apart and yet letting them touch via an ultrathin "split" that marks a kind of syncopation. The two sides are woven together by a story delivered on-screen by Nathanael, the tragic hero of Hoffmann's tale, who reads aloud from a script but moves his lips in a way that doesn't match the words - or so it seems. On closer inspection it becomes clear that his lips actually do fall into sync at exactly the moment when Nathanael himself passes across the fracture.

As the cameras rotate, the cleft seems to widen so that the objects that enter into it disappear for a moment. Time is eating its way across the screen: Things are consumed by the hungry gap but reappear a second or two later on the other side. If the line itself represents the present - the conspicuous yet evasive Now of perception - then this work seems to make a philosophical point about the temporality of experience. Is the present ever present? In fact, everything seems to start with deferral, difference, and delay - in short, with what Jacques Derrida gave the name "difference." The presentness of perception is not the firm foundation it has been held to be, but an effect of a play of differences - and not just temporal differences. Hoffmann's story is full of doubles, uncanny repetitions, and puzzling

correspondences. Given the abundance of optical metaphors in the tale as well as the central theme of the eye and the fear of losing one's sight, it's perfect material for cinematic experiments. But rather than illustrate the story, Douglas puts the central concepts into motion. There are no sliced eyes à la Bunuel or Bataille but a vertical cut that gives rise to a disharmonious cleft right through the field of vision. Yet *Der Sandmann* questions more than the traditional hegemony of vision; it also effectively stages a theory of temporal awareness - a chronology - that represents a threat to the understanding of the self as a subject fully present to itself. The work seems to propose a form of temporal awareness that comes close to what Freud understood as *Nachträglichkeit*, deferred action. Events that have never been given as fully present are experienced only after the fact. In "Freud and the Scene of Writing," Derrida sums it up nicely: "It is thus the delay which is in the beginning."

"The doubt, that pronounal doubt, doubt of pronouns, doubt of the certainty of an I, is the a priori of my work," Douglas declared already in 1994. The genealogy of the subject is always also a chronology. If the self doesn't experience itself in immediate self-proximity but instead realizes things about itself only belatedly, as the Freudian theory suggests, the implications for subjectivity are significant. With its intricate temporal structure, its perplexing "chronology", *Der Sandmann* provides a working model for the historical repetitions that recur, as it were, from work to work. Take *Onomatopoeia*, 1985-86, in which a passage from Beethoven's C Minor Sonata, Opus III - famously commented on by Theodor W Adorno and Thomas Mann - is performed by an old player piano above which are projected images of textile-factory machinery. What is especially intriguing about the Beethoven fragment is its inexplicable resemblance to ragtime music. This accidental connection seems to transplant the *Nachträglichkeit* of psychological temporality to the stage of history: A few notes by a nineteenth-century genius apparently realize their full significance only retroactively, when the industrial mechanization that emerged during the composer's lifetime finally gained a full grip on artistic creativity.

Douglas's historical explorations are always concrete in their scrutiny of technological changes, and he always seems to be in search of situations in which a particular development could have veered off in an alternate direction, where layers of significance are present but not yet activated. The inquiries into constellations of technology, ideology, and art are never pursued in the interest of achieving some overwhelming, all-encompassing final synthesis. On the contrary, most of Douglas's work displays a tragic fracture, a tension that may appear superable in rare hopeful moments but can never be fully redeemed. In *Nu.tka.*, 1996, another elaborate installation marked by a tormenting cleft, the sound track is kept out of sync and the shot out of focus until sublime clarity finally arrives in the guise of madness. The distorted projections show the gorgeous coastline of Vancouver Island while two eighteenth-century captains, colonialists who claim the land for England and Spain, respectively, deliver a set of delirious narrations revealing their increasing derangement.

Douglas's work explores the position of the experiencing subject in relation to various technologies and systems of representation, but with the awareness that the construction of subjectivity is an open-ended process. The self emerges not as a closed unit but as a zone of friction where antagonistic forces clash. And it's not always a question of tragic tension and agonizing nonidentity: Sometimes what emerges is a joyous form of defiance, a determination not to obey. Douglas's early works made for broadcast on Canadian television are more direct than the elaborate installations, but no less mystifying. In *Answering Machine*, 1988, a short piece belonging to the series "Television Spots," 1987-88, a woman is sitting at a table smoking a cigarette when the phone rings. She doesn't answer. In the series "Monodramas," 1991, the viewer is treated to scenes in which something goes astray. In

each tiny narrative, some small error - a school bus driving on the wrong side of the road or a person suddenly vanishing without explanation - produces a situation out of the ordinary. One has the sense that the story has just begun and that the question marks will disappear momentarily. But it's too late; no explanation arrives. At the core of Douglas's work one finds the problem of the self that is no longer identical to itself, a self that has no natural link to its own voice. It is no surprise that the artist frequently acknowledges the influence of Samuel Beckett, quintessential interrogator of the coherent self and liberator of the voice. The fundamental doubt of pronouns yields awkward and perplexing situations. If the self remains unnameable, then how can we be certain when we name others? In *I'm Not Gary*, 1991, two men approach one another on the sidewalk. "Hi Gary," says one of them, and since there's no response, he adds, "How you doing?" They're standing very close; there can't really be a misunderstanding. Then the reply comes: "I'm not Gary."

Douglas's doubt of pronouns, his fundamental doubt of the certainty of an I, could be the point of departure for an essay on the "construction of self" in contemporary video installations. Who's speaking, receiving, perceiving? Who's the subject established (constructed, assembled or taken for granted) in the works here scrutinized - these abstract, yet often visceral machineries of time-consciousness, perception and kinesthetic experience? Can we still characterize the positions here in questions through the grammatical "persons" and traditional indexicals of discourse, or are we forced into a kind of neutrality preceding all persons (not yet an I, not a you, not a we, she or a he), an entirely new tense, perhaps comparable to the mode of speaking described by poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti as "the fourth person singular"? For instance, in Eija-Liisa Ahtila's early 90-second work, "Me/We" (1993), the seemingly natural link between subject and voice has been eliminated so that many voices speak through the same mouth (or the same voice through a multiplicity of mouths). What is the grammatical term best suited to describe such a linguistic predicament? Again, who is speaking? Since the aspiration here is not to conceive a new phenomenology of temporal awareness, let alone a general theory of the subject, the reply (or rather, in plural: the replies) to the question of the Who? will clearly be less general than in treatises with such aims. But it will, I hope, be more precise and specific. In accordance with a certain lighthearted nominalism, the reply will vary from work of art to work of art. Why? Because "I" am not the same when inhaling the air of precise indifference of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, when lost in Eija-Liisa Ahtila's inscrutable catacombs of pastness, when trying to assess the transcendental syncopations of Stan Douglas, or when experiencing the polyrhythmic stroll across Doug Aitken's electric earth. Ultimately each work needs its own concepts and its own theory. Or rather: each of these works has already given rise to its own set of concepts and set them in motion. The work of art is this very motion, and to theorize it thus means little more than to follow closely the conceptual itinerary and the modes of subjectivation involved. From work to work, from constellation to constellation, I am - the "I" is - another. Sometimes "I" is not one but many.

However, the old credo of a continuous becoming-other is not a satisfying result in itself. Rather, what has inspired me to write these pages is the optimistic idea that the intense sensations associated with these works of art can be described and, at least to a certain extent, analyzed as different instances of becoming a subject. Is it the intentionality described by phenomenology and the ambiguous flesh of the active viewer who enters the work of art and fully explores its most extreme possibilities that determine the limits of possible subjectivation? Or is the work itself that defines the parameters of new potential forms of subjectivity, perhaps involving forms of awareness that dodge the framework of phenomenology? Such are the questions that constitutes the ultimate horizon of this essay.

Considering the frequent use of phenomenological concepts, it may seem surprising that I suggest a certain form of experimental “constructivism,” one that has found inspiration in Walter Benjamin’s declaration that the human perceptual apparatus far from being a natural given is historically and technologically conditioned. In some of the most progressive and daring essays from the 1930s, Benjamin envisions a new form of subjectivity in sync with the latest technologies of mechanical reproduction - a form of collectivized subject that has left traditional notions of creativity and esthetics behind in order to re-negotiate the function of art in terms of (socialist) politics and new forms of mass-production and distribution. Writes Rosalind Krauss of this “necessary und ultimately liberating” integration of the human subject with the technology of cinema: “Not only was film to release men and women from the confines of their private spaces and into a collective realm . . . but it was to infiltrate and restructure subjectivity itself, changing damaged individual experience into energized collective perception.” She cites Benjamin, who obviously saw this reconstruction of subjectivity as a moment of emancipation and compared it to the act of breaking out of jail: “Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of one-tenth seconds, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly embark on adventurous travels.” Benjamin’s “constructivist” approach toward the question of a future subject - full of optimism and difficult to reconcile with the melancholic gaze and the interest in obsolescence typical of the majority of his writings - bears certain similarities to more recent speculations concerning new constructions of the self, admittedly less collectivistic but carried forward by a similar rhetoric of liberation. Could one even relate them productively to Deleuze’s prophecy of a form of life after Man, a future “fold” or “superfold” dependent upon forces from the outside that are emerging in new technologies and systems of communication. Who, then, comes after the subject?

Who emerges? About Michel Foucault’s critique of the humanist notion of subjectivity, Maurice Blanchot remarks the following, making things at ones more intricate and inspiring for the critic:

The subject does not disappear, rather its excessively determined unity is put in question. What arouses interest and inquiry is its disappearance (that is, the new manner of being which disappearance is), or rather its dispersal, which does not annihilate it but offers us, out of it, no more than a plurality of positions and a discontinuity of functions (and here we reencounter the system of discontinuities, which, rightly or wrongly, seemed at one time to be characteristic of serial music).

What interests me here is not so much disappearance as a manner of being, but rather the “system of discontinuities” that represents so many different modes of appearance or emergence. Once we have liberated ourselves from a traditional notion of subjectivity (that of transcendental phenomenology still being the most sophisticated and persuasive), Blanchot’s plurality of positions and discontinuity of functions seem to open up as spectrum of diverse subject constructions, making possible and urgent Claude Morali’s question, Who is Me Today? It has never been my ambition to treat artworks as illustrations of philosophical doctrines. Rather, I believe that the works explored give rise to their own set of concepts. Each and everyone of these works of art (some of which I dwell on, others mentioned only in passing) represents a productive environment - a heterogeneous apparatus which lets a subject emerge and unfold in accordance with a specific distribution of time and space, be it the hollowing out of an imaginary time in the interstices of fiction that Pierre Huyghe talks of, the temporal polyphony of Douglas, or the grand mediascapes of Aitken. That the problems of temporality play a crucial role in the attempts to come to grips with these varying concepts of subjectivity can be no mere coincidence considering the instinct of a long line of writers locating the unrest elicited by time at the very heart of

the subject. Commenting on the Kantian idea of the “self-affection” of time as the most original form of self-awareness, Maurice Merleau-Ponty concludes, “It is of the essence of time to be not only actual time, or time which flows, but also time which is aware of itself.” This turning back of time towards itself, an original temporal fold, traces out an interiority, and represents the very “archetype of the relationship of self to self.” Can this original form for becoming a subject, this “chronological” figure par excellence, ever be captured visually? Is there such a thing as a “time-image”?

The essay that I'm announcing would not be an appendix to Deleuze's Cinema 1-2, nor is it a bold attempt to a third part, a Cinema 3, extending the inquiry into recent post-cinematic experimentation. Why not? Primarily because these sketches break with some of Deleuze's fundamental assumptions, most notably with the explicit Bergsonism that keeps his otherwise rather scattered explorations together so as to constitute one work. The descriptive tools here employed come primarily from a different tradition of thought, that of phenomenology. This does not imply that the point of departure is that of a constituting subject bestowing meaning onto the world. Rather, some key concepts of phenomenological analysis are used independently of the official doctrines of his philosophy, disconnected, as it were, from the general ambitions of his philosophy as a foundational discourse (and thus, one could perhaps say, with as much or as little hermeneutical respect for the original philosophical milieu as Deleuze pays to the historical context of Bergson when applying his concepts to films by Resnais, Mankiewicz, and Wells). Phenomenology offers us a box of useful descriptive tools. It has often been pointed out that there is a tension between Husserl's official program on the one hand, and the concrete analyses of phenomena such as temporal awareness and the problems of alterity on the other. The rigor of these specific analyses and the precision of the conceptual devices employed make the phenomenological vocabulary relevant even if the objective, the general approach, is no longer that of phenomenology as a *Grundlegung*. These devices, for instance the technical terms introduced to describe the flow of internal time-consciousness (impression, retention, protention) and the distinctions established in order to separate presentational forms of consciousness (perception in the widest sense) from various forms of re-presentation (imagination, recollection, anticipation, empathy, pictorial consciousness etc.) are valid as descriptive tools also when freed from their original foundationalist framework. More specifically they are relevant instruments when exploring those modes of appearance that should interest anyone for whom the “excessively determined unity of the subject” (Blanchot) has become suspect. The emphasis on the temporal (what I here call “chronological”) aspects of these modes of appearance of subjectivity will lead us to see the works of art here under scrutiny as so many attempts to capture the very dialectic of time itself, a dialectic that by necessity seems to lead us beyond the temporal - to the “time-less void of an ocean death,” described by Tacita Dean or to the infinite folds of a baroque creation - machine, garden, or textual architecture. At least since Kant, we know that there is no such thing as a straightforward image of the temporal flow (the flow itself being just one of several recurring metaphors). “For all of this, we have no names,” says Husserl about the time-constituting “flow” (Fluß) of consciousness which for him coincides with “absolute subjectivity” itself. There are only indirect ways of speaking of this realm, only more or less successful metaphors (a concepts that becomes problematic once the lack of real proper names is fully acknowledged). More or less effective illustrations: architectural, diagrammatic, symbolic, spatial-kinesthetic, topological. Regardless of what Deleuze maintains, time never crystallizes in a single image. Actually, there probably is no such thing as a “time-image.” There are only more or less riveting analogies: the line, the circle, the cone, the pyramid, the crystal, the network, the fold, the labyrinth . . .

That is the perspective from which the works of art here are to scrutinized. Chronology, accordingly, is

never to be thought of in the singular. One would perhaps have to conclude (in analogy with Wittgenstein's comment on phenomenology): there is no chronology, only chronological problems, and they are related not only to the issue of temporality as such and to our various modes of relating to time, but to the very issue of what it means to be a subject.



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