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TRACES OF THE TIME WHICH REMAINS: VIGNETTES ON THE ART AND TIME OF DYING

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Dying is an art, like everything else.
Sylvia Plath

Introductory Notes

Before I present some vignettes inspired by a drawing, I'd like to introduce a theme which runs through this piece². How we've been trained (formed/educated) to think time impacts how we encounter art. In a sense then, this paper asks the reader for temporal disobedience: for a moment the reader is asked to suspend, to the extent possible, the common notions of time she has been trained to rely on. Rather than impose temporal notions, such as chronology or periodization, onto the work of art (WoA) under discussion in this paper, the reader is asked to try to "tune-in-to" the time of the image present.

Influenced by the recent work of art historian Keith Moxey,³ this paper suggests that artwork, particularly images, *can* (there are no guarantees nor prescriptions, only potentialities) form temporal dispositions; art can cultivate ways of thinking, feeling and inhabiting time. Some brief remarks supporting this claim are warranted. Images gather, share, and produce time(s). Another way of describing the relationship between time and images might be to say that time dwells in images, and images are often radically heterochronic: there is often more than one temporality embedded in an image. Time(s) gathered in images can be encountered by spectators. Or in other words, there are moments, albeit seemingly rare, when we are contemporaneous with the time(s) of images; we share time(s)

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² This piece is written in memory of my father, e dedicada a Valeria, quem estava comigo até o fim.

³ Moxey's book: *Visual Time: The Image in History*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), should be consulted by anyone with an interest in some of the themes discussed here. This paper is largely the result of a seminar on the "Time of the Image" I had the pleasure of participating in in the Fall of 2012 with Professor Moxey at Columbia University. I am greatly indebted to Professor Moxey for his classroom insights, questions, and discussion, as well his comments on an earlier much shorter version of this paper.

with the time(s) of the image. When it does happen, this shared time (*coevalness*) with the time of the image often involves a “break” with the chronological linear time which typically orders and governs our lives. In sum then, one of the central claims advanced below is that art reveals temporalities to us; an encounter with artwork potentially permits us to be contemporaneous with another time.

Thus we can propose that in the presence of art our habitual perceptions and experiences of time are often *defamiliarized*. An aesthetic experience with a WoA on occasion grants us an atypical, seemingly atemporal, non-chronological experience of time. Put slightly differently, artwork can temporally displace us from our habitual chronological and linear manners of reckoning and experiencing time. And by *enstranging* us from our common experiences of time, by making habitual manners of experiencing time strange, art simultaneously enlarges our perception and heightens our consciousness of the existence of a multiplicity of times, while provoking re-consideration on the ways in which we live our time.

What follows below are ruminations on time, and what I want to call a “temporal education,” provoked by a drawing made by Paul Klee in the last moments of his life. Klee’s drawing, to borrow wording from Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, puts death “on the table”.⁴ It offers up death and dying to be considered in new manners; death and the time of dying become subject matter for study. Influenced by Masschelein and Simons I implicitly suggest below that Klee’s drawing has the potential to draw us into a deeper attunement to our dying-time (which ultimately means being attuned to the moments we have to live) by producing non-productive free time, or what the ancient Greeks called *skhole*. Such free time is “non-productive” in an economic or utilitarian sense, and it is “free” in that it is time which is not pre-arranged or structured for spectators, or in other words, it has no predetermined *telos*.⁵ Masschelein and Simons argue elegantly and convincingly that *skhole* must be produced. In a sense, the current article contributes to Masschelein and Simons’ work by offering a description of one way

⁴ Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, *In Defence of the School: A Public Issue*, trans. Jack McMartin (Education, Culture & Society Publishers, Leuven, 2013), 40.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-29, 31-36, 134.

the production of *skhole* might happen. Artwork, such as the drawing that we encounter below, can gift time by producing *skhole*.

Ultimately then, perhaps by gifting us death, Klee gifts us a type of *skhole/school*: free-time in which individuals or collective groups can gather around a common thing to dis-identify themselves with their typical everyday ways of experiencing time in order to possibly encounter, and adopt, new ways of experiencing it.⁶ The *skhole*, according to Masschelein and Simons, traditionally establishes an egalitarian timespace (timespace is shared equally, all are equals in this timespace) which is to a degree detached from the time and space of both society and the household.⁷ Klee's drawing brings into being such a timespace by producing a rupture in the chronological linear time which typically structures our lives. This rupture, and the *skhole* which inhabits the "break," is a gift of time which the image below offers us. In the *skhole* which Klee's drawing produces, we can freely question how we live the delay which death gifts us. And perhaps in the end, this is the question with which all education should concern itself.

I.

In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* we come across an exchange between Prometheus and the Chorus of the daughters of Oceanus in which we discover the origin of our blindness to the fragility of our temporal existence. One of Prometheus' greatest offences is that he removed our capacity to perceive our own deaths.

Chorus: Did your offence perhaps go further than you have said?

Prometheus: Yes: I caused men no longer to foresee their death.

Chorus: What cure did you discover for their misery?

Prometheus: I planted firmly in their hearts blind hopefulness.⁸

⁶ For more on *scholē* and how the *scholē* is a site where individuals and groups share a timespace in which they examine "common goods" see Masschelein and Simons op. cit., The introduction to this work gives a succinct summary of the how free-time is time in which people can explore and renew the world together.

⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁸ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound, The Suppliants, Seven Against Thebes, The Persians*. trans. Philip Vellacott (New York, Penguin Books, 1961).

The chorus will remark that Prometheus has gifted man a great blessing. But is this so? We of course are not immortal; we live on borrowed time. If anything, Prometheus gives us a task not a gift: we must learn, in spite of our hopes, the lesson of our finitude.

II.

We like to forget that from the moment we are born we begin to die. We die, just as much as we live, in time, and our dying/living time unfolds in a *delay*. Death delays in ending our lives. The delay of death is for some prolonged, and for others short lived. The duration of our dying-time depends on how long death will wait.

III.

Sometimes we are notified that the delay is coming to an end. A doctor told my father he would die in 3 months; death decided to delay for only three weeks, proving that no one puts a time-table on death's delay other than death itself. In such cases the delay of death becomes a type of "sentence". And all of a sudden dying-time becomes palpable in ways that it wasn't before. We taste death as death consumes us.

IV.

Everyone reacts differently to this taste of death. When he was told that his death would be delayed until the end of a festival, Socrates made music (*Phaedo*, 61a-b).⁹ A celebration to a god delayed Socrates' impending execution. Within his delay Socrates followed the order of a dream which told him to make a hymn to a god who, according to Derrida, "while giving him (Socrates) death, thereby grants him the time of death, the delay or the reprieve as well as that which puts an end to the reprieve."¹⁰ Socrates, who made "music" with philosophy, took advantage of knowing how long his dying-time would last to make one last hymn before death would delay no more. This last hymn preserves and presents to us Socrates' last moments before dying.

V.

⁹ Plato, *Phaedo*, in *Plato: Complete Works*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Athens Still Remains: The Photographs of Jean-François Bonhomme*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (New York; Fordham University Press, 2010), 55. Derrida's comments on the delay of death in this work written shortly before his own delay would end have greatly influenced my ruminations in this current work.

It appears then that the recognition of dying-time can sometimes inspire us to live more poetically; we begin to live a temporality of *poiesis*: in the delay before dying we bring something new into being. Socrates knew his delay was closing, and in his dying-time he made poetry: he brought into being a song that had lain dormant until awakened by the knowledge that his delay was nearing its end. Here then we have an example of dying-time's ability to be a creative time. How often in the moments before dying a man or woman makes a gesture, offers a word, or creates a work that would have never been possible had they not realized that very soon they would be running out of time, and into death.

VI.

Poetry is just one of many ways to gather and preserve moments of dying-time. Paul Klee discovered that his delay was coming to a close the day he was diagnosed with an incurable form of scleroderma disease. Towards the end of his delay he made a drawing...



The image before us is hauntingly simple. It consists of thick black chalk lines on beige cardboard. Merleau-Ponty once stated that according to Klee, “the line no longer imitates the visible; it renders visible; it is the blueprint of a genesis of things.”¹¹ Black chalk lines render an apprehension of death visible here.

VII.

We benefit from not immediately knowing the name of this drawing. While looking at a pipe of Magritte, Foucault once pointed out that, “Either the text is ruled by the image or else the image is ruled by the text. In one way or another, subordination is required.”¹² If we give away the name of this drawing now, the name will become a commentary on the image and it will dominate the picture. If we are to let the drawing do what Merleau-Ponty says art uniquely can do: “scramble all our categories” and spread out before us “mute meanings,”¹³ we should resist the urge to name for the moment. Klee, if we have confidence in Merleau-Ponty, would probably approve of the decision to delay the naming here. “The painter may, like Klee, decide to hold rigorously to the principle of the genesis of the visible, the principle of fundamental, indirect, or –as Klee used to say—absolute painting, and then leave it up to the title to designate by its prosaic name the entity thus constituted, in order to leave the painting free to function more purely as a painting.”¹⁴

VIII.

All I will tell you then about this drawing is that it is of a sick man who knows that his life is slowly slipping away, and of the wife that took part in the slipping with him. The drawing is done in the slippage. Klee makes this drawing knowing that death will not delay in taking him from this world, and his wife, much longer.

IX.

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, Op. cit., 143.

¹² Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe*, trans. James Harkness (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 32.

¹³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” *The Merleau-Ponty Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 141.

¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 144.

One is almost embarrassed to share in the intimacy of two lovers living one dying-time. In the drawing, Klee the hunched, frail old man looks as if he has managed to make it out of bed but has been humbled by his condition. He floats in the image looking as if he is sorry that Lily must see him in such a state. Lily finds Paul in this saddened state, and the two float in sadness

X.

As I contemplate this drawing the couple appears to remain totally unaware and unconcerned with my melancholy gaze. I feel like I should give the lovers their privacy, because after all, the invasion of privacy is an invasion on someone's private time. This couple's moment should be left alone. Maybe I should look away?

XI.

But the drawing looks out at me and hence keeps me engrossed. Klee was aware of the ability of objects in pictures to do this: "The objects in pictures look out at us serene or severe, tense or relaxed, comforting or forbidding, suffering or smiling."¹⁵ I look at the drawing and the drawing looks at me. In our looking we create co-temporality. The drawing and I share time, that is, I "leave" my everyday chronological time to share time with the drawing. This drawing creates a rupture in the flow of my chronology and it thus creates a moment for time to be shared between the drawing and I. My personal chronological unfolding ruptured, I take part in the unfolding of Klee's dying.

XII.

Sharing time with the drawing, what do we see? The couple is so incredibly alone. Floating there in beige space as if the world around them has evaporated, and as if time external to their encounter has stopped momentarily, the couple embraces. A solitary embrace in timeless beigness; a gesture which marks a shared moment. Paul and Lily stand in place, slowly embracing each other in the delay before/of death. They have no desire to flee this moment.

XIII.

¹⁵ Klee, Op. cit., 33.

Paul's eyes seem to ask for pardon and clearly Lily is tired, but delicately she responds to Paul with a kiss of her lips on Paul's cheek, and with her right hand gently rising to caress the back of his neck she lets Paul know that, "You are not alone in this." In an instant, Lily restores the sick man's dignity. Small touches, these gestures make dying-time somewhat livable.

XIV.

*You are not alone in this...*perhaps the appropriate title for this work?

XV.

This drawing is a monument of preserved sensations of a gesture made in a time of dying. Deleuze and Guattari once remarked that art erects monuments which are sensations set to stand.¹⁶ Following Deleuze and Guattari, we can say that Klee has set to stand a monument of a bloc of sensations (percepts/affects)¹⁷ which we are touched by. Till his death Klee remained an inventor and creator of affects; in this drawing he passes on to us temporal affects for us to experience.¹⁸

XVI.

Writing on the gift of time, Derrida once stated that, "Time gives nothing to see," it withdraws itself from visibility, and so ultimately, "One can only be blind to time, to the essential disappearance of time."¹⁹ We might follow Derrida further and suggest that time *is*, without ever being present. But in front of this drawing it seems that while time itself has not, and could never, give itself to see, and therefore in essence remains invisible, Klee has traced his own time disappearing.

XVII.

This work traces time's eternal disappearance and our disappearing in time. But it also "freezes" it to reveal a singular shared moment between Lily and Paul: the *coevalness* of dying. Lily takes part in Paul's fading away in sickness as Paul becomes a phantasm. His clothes cover a body that is dissipating and Lily will

¹⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Percept, Affect, and Concept," in *What is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlison and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 199.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁸ According to Deleuze and Guattari artists are presenters, inventors and creators of affects. Might temporalities preserved in works of art allow beholders to participate in affects past? See *Op. cit.*, 175.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money Vol. I*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 6.

accompany him till he fades away completely. She keeps vigil over Paul's dying-time. But she cannot die *for* him. This Paul must do alone. One cannot, Derrida reminds us, die for the Other, in the place of the Other.²⁰ We will never deliver the Other from her own death.²¹ And maybe this is why the death of a loved one is so painful for the one who survives: we realize the limits of the power of love. Love gifts much, including the force to accompany the slow death of our loved ones, but it cannot grant us the ability to die for the Other.²²

XVIII.

More than anything, Klee makes time, the invisible, *felt*; his work gathers and presents to us his atmosphere of dying-time. The work permits Klee's dying-time to emerge and unfold years after Klee himself has passed away. Because of this work, we are granted access to the moods and sensations of another's time of dying. We feel the moods both of the one who is passing on, and of a lover who shares in this time of passing. By preserving and passing onto the spectator the moods of a dying-time, this work of art opens us up to past temporalities of dying that we can share in in the present. The drawing gives us contact with a moment of dying-time, and of what it is like for one person to share the time of dying with their loved one.

XIX.

Here then Klee is dying-time's humble mediator. A metaphor articulated by Klee helps make this important point of the painter-as-mediator clearer. We need quote the artist at length here.

"May I use a simile, the simile of the tree? The artist has studied this world of variety and has, we suppose, unobtrusively found his way in it. His sense of direction has brought order into the passing stream of image and experience. This sense of direction in nature and life, this branching and spreading array, I shall compare with the root of the tree. From the root the sap flows to the artist, flows through him, flows to his eye. Thus he stands as the trunk of the tree. Battered and stirred by the strength of the flow, he molds his vision into his work. As, in full view of the world, the crown of the tree unfolds and spreads in time and space, so with his work. Nobody would affirm that the tree grows its crown in the image of

²⁰ Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 41.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²² *Ibid.*

its root. Between above and below can be no mirrored reflection. It is obvious that different functions expanding in different elements must produce vital divergences. And yet, standing at his appointed place, the trunk of the tree, he does nothing other than *gather and pass on* what comes to him from the depths. He neither serves nor rules—he transmits. His position is humble. And the beauty at the crown is not his own. He is merely a channel.”²³

XX.

In his time closest to dying Klee still had the strength to gather, preserve, and pass on something which would outlast him. In his deteriorating state he could still humbly transmit and channel something into art. The sap of dying flowed through him, and he molded his apprehension of dying into a work which preserves his dying-time.

XXI.

This work then both originates out of, and brings us into, the time of Klee’s dying. “Absurd!” you say. “Paul Klee made this drawing in 1940 and died the same year. You cannot take part in his moments of dying because his dying is *history*—an event past. There is no way to experience the past experience of another, so therefore there is no way to share in Klee’s dying time, let alone the time his wife shared with him in his dying.” The objections are very reasonable. And yet...

XXII.

Six or so years ago when I first accidentally encountered this drawing in an exhibition on Klee in Berlin, a sudden and swift epiphany struck me. I immediately made contact with a time long past: Klee’s time of dying. No logic or reason could explain the feeling that I felt: the mood of the gesture embedded in the drawing before me. And rather than try to make any meaning or sense out such feeling, or try to logically come to terms with my experience with the dying past of Klee, I submitted to what the drawing was presenting to me. The temporal distance that existed between myself and the time preserved in the drawing “dissolved”. More

²³ Paul Klee, *On Modern Art*, trans. Paul Findlay (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), 15. Emphasis added.

appropriately, the temporal distance that separated me from Klee's experience of dying was bridged. I was able to take part in the moment of the embrace between Paul and Lily. I acquired temporary access to the time of Klee's dying because the drawing allowed me to feel the atmosphere of a gesture enacted.

XXIII.

Perhaps the Dutch historian F.R. Ankersmit can convince you that my claim of experiencing Klee's dying-time through his artwork isn't as far-fetched as first seems? Perhaps in my encounter with Klee's work I had what Ankersmit calls a *sublime historical experience*? According to Ankersmit, *sublime historical experiences* like mine are rare, but they are not unheard of. There is a long line of thinkers and artists who have had similar contact with experiences of the past. Writers like Goethe, and historians like Huizinga, have shared time with times past; they have had *sublime historical experiences*.²⁴ In *sublime historical experience* there is a collapse of subject (any person) and object (the experience of the past). The subject and object dissolve into experience itself.²⁵ Such an experience is a momentary dizzying experience of sudden obliteration of the rift between the past and present, an experience in which the past for a fractional moment reveals itself "as it is, or was."²⁶ Stated simply, in *sublime historical experience* there is a sudden and immediate congruence of the past-self-and feelings.²⁷ Such an experience is authentic, that is to say that it is complete in itself.

XXIV.

You are correct in stating that all of this sounds a bit "Romantic". Ankersmit unapologetically stakes a claim to a Romanticist notion of the past. He wants to rehabilitate the Romanticists' world of moods and feelings as constitutive to how we relate to the past, because how we *feel* about the past is no less important than

²⁴ Ankersmit cites the sublime historical experiences of both Goethe and Huizinga in *Sublime Historical Experience*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). For a brief discussion of Goethe's sublime historical experience see pp. 147, 154-155. Huizinga's monumental *The Waning of the Middle Ages* was born out of sublime historical experience according to Ankersmit. See pages 133-137 in *Sublime Historical Experience*.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.

²⁶ Ankersmit in Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 257.

²⁷ Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 278.

what we *know* about it, and probably more so.²⁸ In *sublime historical experience* one *feels* directly addressed by the past, and this *feeling* of the past is accompanied by an atmosphere, or mood of the past which is palpable. For Ankersmit, moods and feelings define the place where the transition from the past to present is enacted.

XXV.

Time past has a mood; it has its' own atmosphere which is felt at times. When I encountered the Klee drawing in Berlin I encountered a mood created by the gesture made by Klee's wife in his time of dying. I knew nothing of this drawing. Its name I could not understand because it was written in German, and the drawing's history was completely hidden from me. The drawing hung on the wall of the Berlin exhibition was free from historical and epistemological context, and perhaps because of this *lack* of context the doors between the past and present were flung open for me. Had I known the name of the drawing, had I been well versed in the history of this drawing's creation, the doors of a shared co-temporality might have remained shuttered to me.

XXVI.

Will I ever have an experience of co-presence with Klee's dying-time again? Is my initial experience repeatable? Can others be in touch with Klee's dying-time the way that I was? The most we can say is, "maybe, or maybe not," and leave it at that. *Sublime historical experience* is something that can never be deliberately produced.²⁹ It cannot be programmed or planned for, and there is no methodological prescription for reaching it. The most one can do is remain open to the possibility of *sublime historical experience* and then submit to it if it happens to occur. If one cannot prepare for a *sublime historical experience*, nor predict when or if it will happen, if it does occur, one must make a temporal gesture towards it: one needs to *linger* with the feelings and moods of the experience before they melt away as quickly as they appeared, or before one makes sense of them.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 283.

XXVII.

Sublime historical experience is a pre-reflective experience. The meaning of such an experience is understood *after* its duration has come to a close. Not surprisingly then, it was not until I was made to experience the dying-time of a loved one that I realized that my experience of Klee's dying-time had formed my own temporal disposition, my attitude towards inhabiting time. The significance of art's ability to instruct me on how to perceive and inhabit time(s) will not soon be lost on me. Klee's work had a deep impact on me, in a deeply personal moment. I mentioned my father's dying-time above. I'd like to re-visit this time for a moment.

XXVIII.

As I accompanied my father's rapid dying after a diagnosis of cancer, first in one hospital, then another, and then another, (the health insurance companies which coldly expelled my father from one hospital after another should perhaps be more sensitive to the fragility of dying-time), an image of Klee's dying-time remained co-present with me. More accurately, I should say that Lily's care for Klee's dying-time resonated strongly. Having inhabited Klee's dying-time through his drawing several years earlier, I felt more prepared to dwell in my own father's dying-time. Lily had already taught me how to care for the one you love in their time of dying

XXIX.

So there I was with my father, but also with Lily, caressing his cold sweated face, holding his large calloused hands, caring for his dying-time, the clock ticking, but time running out, until.... there was time no more for him, and for us....

XXX.

Iris Murdoch once remarked, perhaps hyperbolically, that, "Art is far and away the most educational thing we have, far more so than its rivals, philosophy and theology and science."³⁰ An impossible claim to substantiate, but I know this much: Klee's chalk traces taught me how to attend to my father's transformation into shadow.

XXXI.

³⁰ Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

“Eidola: weland was? (nur noch Schemen)”, 1940.

“Eidola: Erstwhile what? (Only shadows left)”, 1940.

XXXII.

In the shadows of Klee’s drawing, and of my experience of his and my father’s dying-time, this much for me remains: In dying-time we fade away from life like shadows disappearing into the onset of night. Rarely are we aware of this fading; a drawing made me aware of this, and taught me a way to live a delay before disappearance...