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For tambo, willie best, dubois, patrice, mantan

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QS: O.K., I have to say this. I'm afraid I'm still not convinced that "poetics" without the *h* won't do the very same job.

JR: Thank you for your candor. Let me come at this from a different direction. Poetics without an *h* has primarily to do with questions of style. Style is the manner in which your experience has understood, assimilated, imprinted you. How it has transformed you in its Transylvanian cultural laboratories, focusing, even magnifying, the currents that have fed your intellectual energy, passing them on "stepped up," reenergized, but not swerving them into unforeseen collisions that produce new possibilities, that might even blow out a few old fuses. At this point, preswerve, but feeling a distinct surge of power, you exclaim, Ah, I've found myself as a writer! Actually your poetics has you in *its* grip.

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Du Dandysme¹

I take up the word *dandy* for Baudelaire; a singular trait of the *dandy* interests me.

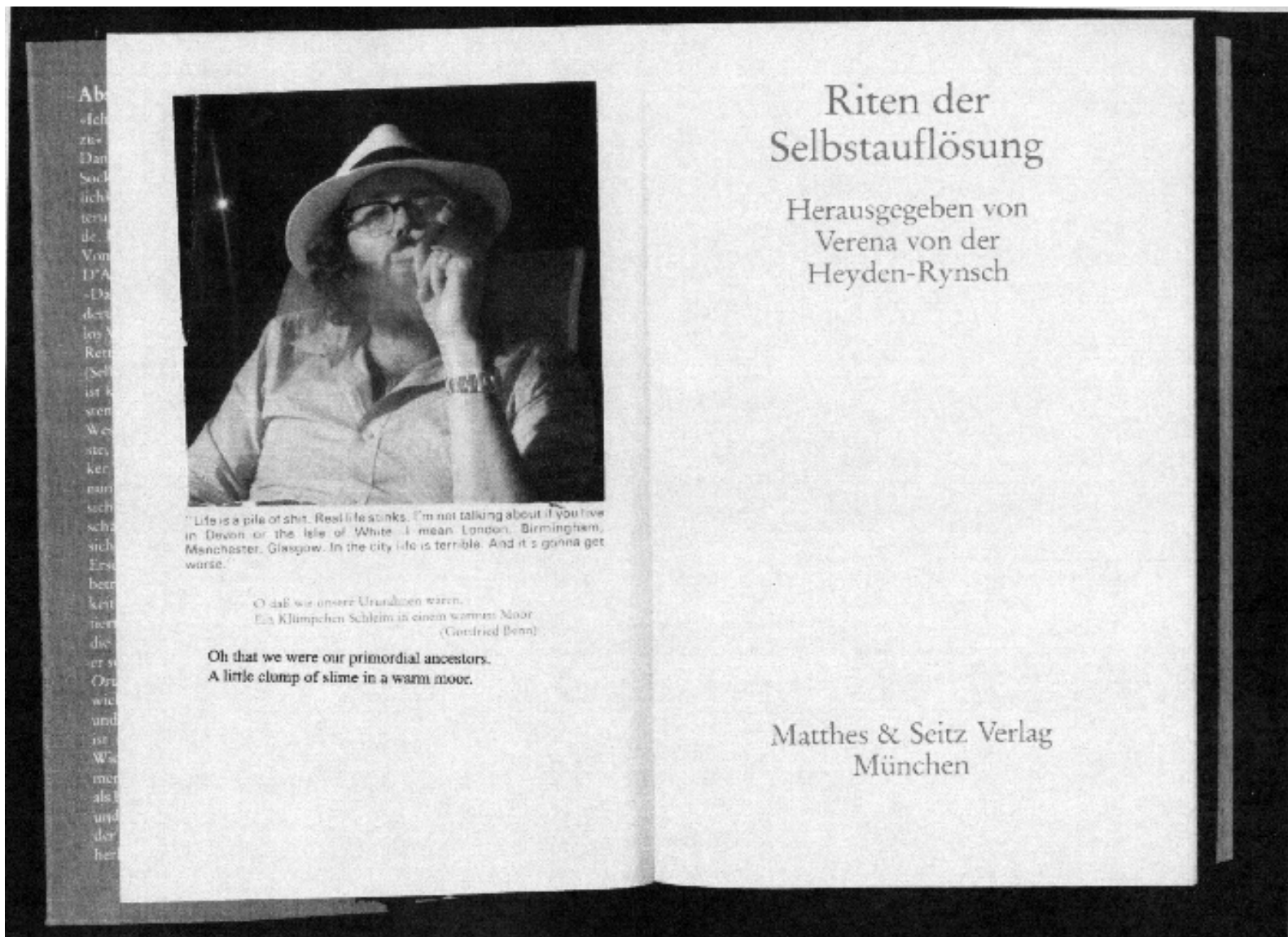
dandies are still metaphysicians. dandyism is an entirely distinctive form of defense of the thought: the human being, up to and including the ultimate features of the life of the soul, can be explained through mechanical principles (*identity*, the younger, presupposes a certain explicability that has various titles, such as education). in the *dandy*, defense assumes the form of a singular struggle, which only entertains occasional alliances. argumentative consensus, of

one's own concrete [*inhaltlich*] experiences can only mean: holding mechanical (in the broader sense) models of one's own consciousness as possible, as unavoidable, as the only satisfying ones: *nihilism*. or one aligns oneself with the standpoint of the observer, meaning that one becomes partisan toward that part of one's own personality that furnishes the respective *contents* [*inhalt*] of inner and outer intuition while itself not being analyzed in experience; that is what I will here name, according to distinctions, the attitude of the *dandy*.

from the standpoint of one who experiences, the nihilist falls prey to convention because he prescribes himself schematic, consensus-building explanations. of course the rejection of subjective

meaning. *The dandy must strive to be great without interruption; he must live and sleep in front of a mirror;*³ "in front of the mirror" means here: to observe what cannot be perceived differently, to know which impression the strange outside will make on the strange eye, to study in oneself the automatism of the strange eye, and to cultivate what withdraws from all of this. also, the emptying of the world is neither paranoid nor schizophrenic; it follows from the study of societal forms. the dandy analyzes present bonds and recognizes his kind; he acts in accordance with an interpretation of reality that cannot be falsified within the parameters of his societal conditions.

-Translated by Ludwig Fischer and Jeffrey D. Gower



philosophizing, is out of the question: at any rate, formal agreement must be fulfilled subjectively with meaning; outside of meaning it is mechanical, contradicts the intention that it calls forth.

the dandy is an exact, sensitive, in the forms of his companionship idiosyncratic observer of his inner and outer surroundings, a theoretician but only *ad hoc* (*maxims, propositions, aphorisms*). he has understood that his emotions follow internal regularities and accordingly are forced upon him in advance. mechanics discovers ever larger parts of that which he had taken for his freedom, right up to an apparatus of desperation. *where is the I?* all the values that convulse him yield a construction, the lever of which points toward the distantiation of these values – the dandy is in an inward spiral; he strips meaning away from all who have become conscious and pulls it into himself: *you are not that*.

After a long line of disputable philosophers of the machine, who are nevertheless to be taken seriously, a psychology is emerging, which threatens to become scientific; the modeling of the spiritual [*des Geistigen*] on the automaton finally begins. naturally, self observation suffices, so long as it is sufficiently harsh. two developments are possible: one overcomes oneself or arrives at the point of no longer holding one's own consciousness as a value *sui generis*. seeking verifiable explanations for the being and effects of

meaning is precisely what constitutes the nihilist, but this is not the place for that discussion. the attitude of the dandy is much more ambivalent. he sees no motive to find, in a second attempt, ensouling reasons for what is once understood – one is not systematic. just do not lose the souls of things – that would be to linger in the natural understanding, emotions as contents, like the child, the naïve one,² the religious one, the personalist. the dandy knows full well that he, too, he himself, and also precisely in his sensing, functions for the most part automatically. as much as possible he will want to understand in an idiosyncratic and original manner, that is, to *construct* contents, to become singularly conscious. yet he gives up everything that he understands about himself, none of which he can love as a component of his own personality; he yields that which has been understood about himself over to that which has been understood about the other. the other indemnifies him through his exposure of the mechanical meaninglessness of his life's course; he is the bearer of all the hopelessness that has been perceived in his own life.

This character is no narcissist. he *experiments* and for this needs society, which he divides into machines and those who have ensouled them [*mitbeseelte*]. it is not important that he love himself – not many dandies do – but that he protects something that would give love

¹From the essay by Oswald Wiener, "Eine Art Einzige" [A Singular Manner] in *Riten der Selbstauflösung*, ed. Verena von der Heyden-Rynsch (München: Matthes & Seitz Verlag, 1982), 36-38.

²Wilde: god and nature bid the same [in English in the original]; in Milton, this author of superhero comics, one already finds the identification *consciousness-Satan*; *Satan* the constructor of machines for the fight against nature; *Adam's* physics questions to *Raphael* already prowl about with sin. – *Satan* ... one day let my soul sit near you under the tree of science [*Wissenschaft*] ... (*Prière, Fleurs du mal*). – only among the wild ones would there still be hope, that is a tenor of Chateaubriand, to be supplemented with the following: hope in immediate, naïve experience, revocation of consciousness, a feeling of worth, just as in Milton's paradise. one might compare the current boon in ethnography: the heirs of a sin, which they no longer like, unconsciously long for a museum of consciousness in the jungle.

The child: Women is the opposite of the Dandy.
Therefore she is horrifying
Woman is hungry and wants to eat. Thirsty,
she wants to drink.
She is in heat and wants to be fucked.
Deserves it!
Women is natural, which is to say
abominable.
Also she is always vulgar, which is to say
the opposite of the Dandy.

--Baudelaire, *Mon cœur mis à nu, III*. [Charles Baudelaire, *My Heart Laid Bare*, trans. Ariana Reines (Mal-O-Mar Editions, October, 2009)].

³*Mon cœur mis à nu, III*.

The cruel intimacy of looking inward

Matt Mullican's performances under hypnosis produce a crude public exposure of a man's attempt to look inward, intensely trying to turn his back to a stable form of consciousness in order to enter its inhuman¹ double. Inhumanity could here be understood in different ways. In Mullican's words, hypnosis creates a "super-theatre"² in which the character that he embodies in the time and space of the hypnotic trance has become a model or cartoon character, and an iconic brain. But "inhuman" could also point to the nature of hypnosis itself and its intricate relationship to death in the work of the artist. In this second proposition, "inhuman" would then designate a state of being that is no longer certain or stable. Mullican describes hypnosis as a "floating situation". In this transient state, he affirms that he has become other to himself, moving toward the inside of his own psyche, which has repeatedly been identified by the artist as "That Person". This impulse to position himself at a distance from the subjective "I" through hypnosis shows his strong-minded will to explore the functioning of a complex association of emotions, ideas, desires and obsessions. Yet the acute estrangement that takes place under hypnosis seems to bring to the surface the question of the irresolvable ambiguity between the conscious and the unconscious, fiction and reality, the body of the corpse and the one of the doll or of the sleeping body.

In a current project that takes place at Hedah³ in Maastricht, Mullican has put on display the complete pages of nine of his notebooks, which were photocopied and installed using the walls of the space and over thirty boards. While apparently releasing the content of his research and working process, Mullican has crammed the space to a point of saturation, leaving many pages buried behind the large number of bulletin boards. The quasi-architecture produced by the installation takes over the content of the pages, placing the emphasis on an irreducible spatial exteriority in contrast to an otherwise temporal experience of reading. According to Mullican, the selected notebooks bear witness to the intricate relationship between the work of Matt Mullican and the work of That Person. On the page I chose to discuss here, Mullican writes about a work that he was planning to realize, at a time when he had not yet started, or was just about to start, performing under hypnosis.

On this page one can read the following: "*Last night I thought of a piece that would use a dead person, photo of a dead person next to a photo of a mannequin or doll. These pieces would be done while visiting this dead person.*" Thanks to a friend who was at medical school, Mullican had access to a dead body used by medical students in an anatomy class. During his visit on the 14th December 1974, Mullican performed a number of actions on the dead body, conceiving these gestures as part of a performance piece. On another page of his notebook, Mullican described what he did: "*Pinched his arm, yelled in his ear, put my finger on his eyes, put my hand in his mouth, put my hand under his nose. Then when I slapped it what happened was I realized the only thing I was doing was making a sound. Then with my hands I gestured different emotions. My hands were around him and created the mood of the photo. I did one being frightened, being happy, being confused and being angry. Then I did stuff with his skin, pulled it and put my hand in his torso and all that other stuff.*" Mullican mentions being interested in performing the same actions with the doll, and placing photos of both the dead person and the doll on a wall. He further adds: "*It's strange because the dead body can be called the ultimate sculpture, because it implies all the projected ego and is at the same time non functional.*"

Mullican's crude encounter with the dead body, and the piece consisting of both photos – which has been included in many of Mullican's exhibitions since

the seventies, including his most recent shows – discloses an unsettling ritual that invokes the shared concerns of the figures of the scientist, the artist and the shaman. The gesturing of emotions and the production of sounds, on which Mullican insists, produce the image of an incantation that brings to mind Antonin Artaud's pleading manifesto for a chaotic theatre in which spoken language would be supplanted by a "compact mass of gestures, signs, postures, and sounds"⁴ that constitute the physical and poetic language of the stage. Nevertheless, Mullican's involvement with the dead body, or in a similar way with hypnosis, does not aim at qualifying art as a mystical and transcendental experience. As Mullican explains, "when I work with That Person, I am unearthing a part of me almost as if it were a found object."⁵ The earlier reference to the "ultimate sculpture" as non-functional also points in that direction. Mullican's work is deeply preoccupied with zones of indeterminacy where material and immaterial aspects of our perception of reality become confused, touching upon our deepest desires as well as our deepest fears. His staged encounters with the dead body and with his own psyche through hypnotic suggestion are experiences in which his determination at understanding the functioning of the human mind is inextricable from his aesthetic and poetic productions.

The relation between the corpse and the doll reappears further down on the notebook page with the drawing of a dead stick figure over the one of the dead body. Mullican has superimposed the two drawings as if he was trying to visualize the differences that would exist between the two entities. Their relationship is ambiguous and Mullican would often wonder about the different intensity of our feeling of empathy toward one or the other. This question runs parallel to Mullican's repeated questioning of human ability to invest objects and images with a sense of reality, and of empathy, through an act of personification. The stick figure or doll embodies the fictional character, of which we know that they are not real. Yet the dead body poses a different problem. Through death, the body of the corpse has left the reality of the living and seems to be closer to the world of objects and to raw matter than to the fictional character, therefore rousing feelings of fear and abjection. The doll undoubtedly belongs to the framework of representation. However the corpse sits at the limit of a different phenomenological reality. It seems certain that once he had performed the actions and gestures described earlier, Mullican could not easily go any further in his exploration of death through the phenomenon of the corpse. Thus his shift toward hypnosis might be understood in the continuity of an investigation in which death is a privileged site of speculation.

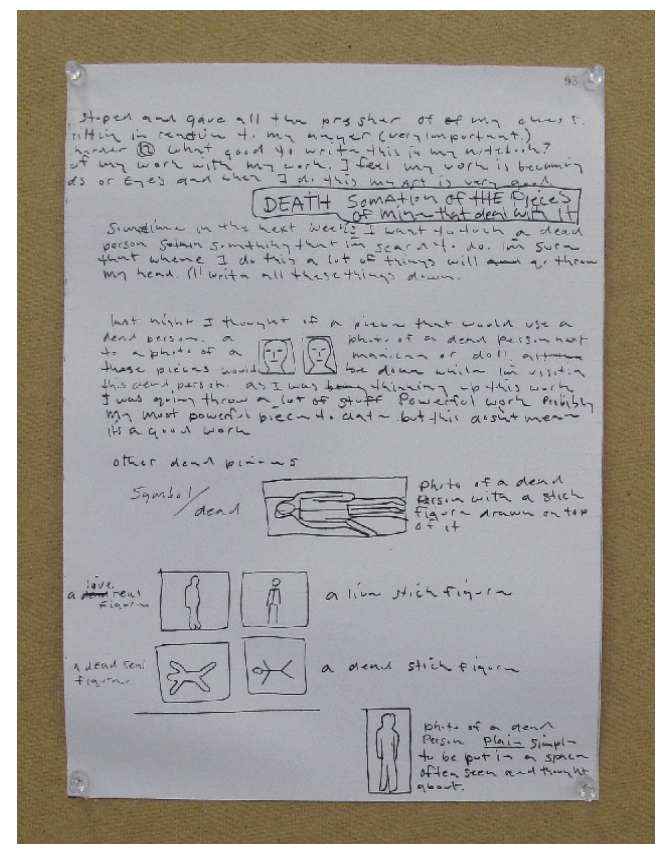
In his contribution to the publication "Hypnosés", which brings together essays by Jean-Luc Nancy, Eric Michaud and Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen who collectively propose to take a distance from the therapeutic dimension of hypnosis and to rather consider it as a possible limit of consciousness, of individuality, of power and of pathology, Nancy poses the question of the relation between identity and difference in regards to the philosophical subject. "Where does a different identity come from? From where can B come to A? Or again: what can make A shudder?"⁶ Nancy stresses that the subject (A) has her death as a "gaping difference". This horizon of death as difference points toward the unknowable and a "mode of knowing" characterised by Nancy as "sleepwalking" (somnanbulique) – a "sleep-walking mode of knowing" as the horizon of hypnosis. In Nancy's essay, the distinction between the conscious mind and the soul is essential to consider the nature of hypnosis. It is through the awakening of the soul at the time of the birth that the subject accesses consciousness, which is a "state of wakefulness". Yet, sleep –through a cyclical passage from day to

night- will continue to allow the conscious subject to temporarily retrieve from this state of wakefulness, immersing again his soul in the night of subjectivity, in what Nancy calls the "torpor of affective life". Hypnosis is thus positioned in the field of the conscious subject, as a state of differentiation.

"*Through death the eyes turn back, and this return is the other side, and the other side is the fact of living no longer turned away, but turned back, introduced into the intimacy of conversion, not deprived of consciousness but established by consciousness outside it, cast into the ecstasy of movement.*"⁷

The movement from Matt Mullican to That Person, time and time repeated, produces a continuous tension within the work and the artist's own body. In his crude hypnotic theatre, Mullican embodies Artaud's ideal actor who abandoned scripted dialogue in favour of a physical language that differs from speech, a language that summons the unarticulated and the exceptional in the verbal, a language in space and in movement that makes use of the body's "emotional organism"⁸. Artaud's emphasis on the actor's physical use of his emotions, which he compares to the athlete's mastering of his muscular structure, echoes Mullican's constant learning from That Person's work, studying his modes of acting and behaving – singing, screaming, crying, yelling... Mullican seeks to stand outside of himself, turned away from his objective world to look more and more inward, inside the intimacy of the consciousness of a model character, converging toward the unknown space in which there would be neither an inside, nor an outside. His eyes are as if reversed; in front of our eyes he is fully, sometimes embarrassingly, exposed.

-Vanessa Desclaux



Matt Mullican, Residence #3, the notebooks (detail)

¹ The notion of an "inhuman reality" in theatre refers to Antonin Artaud's text "La mise en scène et la métaphysique", in *le Théâtre et son double*, Gallimard (1964)

² Interview of Matt Mullican by Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau, *Wiite de Raaf*, issue 143, January-February 2010, <http://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/3497>

³ <http://www.hedah.nl/lost/>

⁴ Antonin Artaud, *For the Theatre and Its Double* (1931-36), in *Antonin Artaud Selected Writings*, edited by Susan Sontag, University of California Press, 1976, pp 237

⁵ Interview of Matt Mullican by Koen Brams and Dirk Pültau, *Wiite de Raaf*, issue 143, January-February 2010, <http://www.dewitteraaf.be/artikel/detail/nl/3497>

⁶ Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, Eric Michaud, Jean-Luc Nancy, *Hypnosés*. Galilée, Paris, 1984, pp 30

⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, University of Nebraska, 1982 (Gallimard, 1955), pp 135

⁸ Antonin Artaud, *For the Theatre and Its Double* (1931-36), in *Antonin Artaud Selected Writings*, edited by Susan Sontag, University of California Press, 1976, pp 260

Preface to Pendulum

I have often dreamed of the perfect decapitation. There is nothing peculiarly macabre about such ruminations. It has nothing of the ghoulishness of crushed skulls, eyes dislodged from their sockets, or limbs crudely cleaved from their mooring by a hatchet blow. Nor is it sadist in impulse. The only head that I am thinking of lopping off in the end is my own. If I am to die, as we all must, then I prefer an elegant, considered demise.

If, however, the mind turns from suicide to murder the reflection should proceed with the same refinement. Murders do not fall outside the realm of aesthetic judgment and the rules of good taste. As De Quincy has written, "Murders have their little differences and shades of merit, as well as statues, pictures, oratorios, cameos, intaglios, or what not." A man who no doubt knew the utility of a handsome blade sheathed in one's cane.

If I were to kill, it too would have to be artful. I am, after all, no imbecile. Here would be my instrument of choice: a sword made of ice. It could not, of course, be just any sword of ice. As a dilettante of science, its specifications would have to be exact. The precision of the blade would have to be ideally matched to the dexterity of the blow struck. So in this case, the blade would have to be thick enough to handle the requisite force necessary to cut through the neck cleanly and yet thin enough to dissolve precisely on the point of its exit. The variables could no doubt be calculated: the speed which the blade must travel, its thickness, the resistance of the neck's tissues and bone, the warmth of the blood, etc. Whether such a weapon is physically possible leaves me utterly indifferent. Just imagine the exasperation of the detective responsible for the case!

It is thus, with a particular pleasure, that I introduce the reader to Evan Calder Williams' *Pendulum*, a work hewn on the lathe of the New Pessimism. As a work of art it speaks for itself. It certainly needs no lengthy introduction. Suffice it to say that it is composed for those who know the feeling of having slush in one's boots. In our derelict age, the pessimist provides wise council, and even perhaps a way of avoiding trench foot.



-Ludwig Fischer

PENDULUM

Artists: The New Pessimism

Dimensions variable. Height: three inches to one mile in length. Width: one centimeter to three inches. Total field of interaction: 2.0943951 cubic miles, plus spray zone (indeterminate)

Materials: Titanium, linear cold generator, magnetized oxide, lubricant (pivot); water, soot, blood, marrow, plastic, feather, excrement, milk, tobacco, glass, bile, wood, pork, sucrose, urine, brick, rubber, ice (pendulum)

Pendulum is, in essence, a simple work. It was

first installed off-site, approximately 18 miles from Head Gallery, thirteen years ago, and it remains off-property. (That is, it cannot be said to "belong" to the gallery. The gallery legally owns the small assemblage of material that constitutes the pivot point, but through the ingenious use of some lesser-known Intellectual Property Statutes introduced with the Geneva Convention, the "concept" of the work is excluded from status as either common or private property. It literally belongs to *no one*, although in an accompanying audio tape, the artists stated that "it belongs, as it always did, to the flabby futility of binding science to thought.")

The work is best described as falling between an inconstant object, a process piece, and a performance without subjects involved. Floating one mile above the ground without tether, a single graphite lubed pivot point hangs in the air: an assemblage of small magnets keep it perfectly centered over the installation site. To this pivot is attached a rather crude early version of the linear cold generator, swaying free and pointing its pin-sized beam toward the ground below. A certain quantity of water is gathered around the pivot, where it remains frozen hard. However, temperature differentials in the surrounding air cause the outer surface of this small ice lump to melt slightly. Given the force of gravity, this condensation drips downward, bead by bead, where it immediately freezes around the line of the cold. What was a blob starts to resemble a short icicle. This process continues, and *Pendulum* begins to deform into a thin ray of ice extending toward the earth. Naturally occurring wind currents, augmented by the disturbance of the ultra-cold beam cutting through them, exert pressure on the pendulum, and it begins to swing. The momentum of the swing drives the moisture further toward the tip, where it refreezes. Hence, with every swing, the pendulum grows longer and longer. It describes a wider and wider arc, whistling over the heads of the city. It comes closer and closer to the ground, and to the marked zone directly one-mile below the pivot point. One of two outcomes occurs: either the combination of wind pressure and unstable freezing causes the pendulum to break loose during one of its swings, or it grows downward until, with an oddly delicate and splintering crash, the pendulum strikes the earth and shatters into thousands of shards, droplets, and, given the combined effect of friction and ground temperature, bits of melting slush, all accompanied by a hiss of steam.

Pendulum has remained a controversial work since its inception. It has killed numerous spectators (the current total stands at 241), although such death, common to most works of our period, has little to do with the controversy. Rather, a brief consideration of its history, including some of the deaths incurred, give a useful point of entrance to discuss the accusations made against the piece.

First and foremost, the piece has been attacked as a work of neo-Nazi propaganda. Such an accusation derives from the obvious fact that it is based on the *Welteislehre* ("World Ice Doctrine") of Hans Hörbiger, which claimed that the solar system had its origin when a dead wet star smashed into a larger star, its scattered vapors condensing into ice that became the fundamental material of the solar system. (Ice planets, ice moons, ice ether). An Austrian steam engineer, Hörbiger's "glacial cosmogony" found favor with the Third Reich as a counter-theory to the "Jewish science" of Einstein, for the rather simple reason that despite being entirely unfounded, it nevertheless provided a seeming accordance: white northern tribes from the frozen north and a solar system founded upon frozen white material. (Moreover, its lack of accordance with observational phenomena only bolstered its intransigent truth-claims, at least according to Hörbiger, who told Willy Ley: "Either you believe in me and learn, or you will be treated

as the enemy.") The origin of such a theory came from two moments in Hörbiger's life: first, when he looked at the moon and realized that it looked rather like ice and, second, when he dreamed of an ice pendulum swinging through the emptiness of space, growing longer and longer, until it broke free. It is from the latter that *Pendulum* takes its essential determination.

However, to call such this work "neo-Fascist" is to ignore a) the general incoherence of such a designation for the contemporary moment, and b) the way in which the work points toward the petulant obstinacy and total impurity of such a theory. Regarding the latter points, we should keep in mind that Hörbiger's theory is not a general thermodynamics but a description of a single exception, a regime of ice struggling against an entire universe with which it does not accord. It is the petty flailing of a thought which would like to remain pure and cannot. And as for that purity, it should also be kept in mind that condensation forms around a particle of "other" material: that "pure white ice" coheres only because of the included elements of the "filth" it disdains. This general point, along with the particular fact that *Pendulum* accumulates a range of filth and refuse both in its passage through the air and in its mopping up from the streets below, had evidently been forgotten by the first victims of *Pendulum*. Respectfully keeping their distance from the point of impact yet standing close enough to be splattered by its slushy outburst, they opened their mouths in hope of enacting a sort of ecstatic, sexless money shot. They were rewarded with a combination of frozen material, ranging from atmospheric sulphur compounds and a not insignificant quantity of irradiated bird droppings, that immediately corroded their stomach lining and internal organs. It should be noted the blood and other bodily fluids which leaked from their orifices were among the liquids gathered and frozen into the next iteration of *Pendulum*.

Second, due in equal part to such incidents of "obscene splattering" and the general shape of the work, *Pendulum* has been called a "pathetically phallic" piece, a "fantasy of erection unbound by physiological constraints." The curators would not disagree, except to point out that the "pathetic" inflection is one critically engaged by the piece. Aside from the needle-like slenderness of the pendulum blade and its extreme fragility, it need be remarked only that it cannot be predicted where, when, and how it will break. If it is a manifestation of phallic law, the model it seems to propose is one of inconstancy, instability, and the impossibility of founding any order of pleasure, reason, or meaning whatsoever.

Third, *Pendulum* is often considered to belong, however loosely, to the Inhuman School. The supposed personal connections of some of the artists gives further credence to this, but as we see in how the work pre-engages each of its accusations, nearly posing them itself in order to render them idiotic, it is ultimately a scathing attack on that entire enterprise. The reason for our assertion has to do not with the work itself during its period of descent (which, indeed, has thoughtlessly cut through scores of bystanders with a bloody thwup and decimated nearby buildings, with neither malevolence nor care) or with the "apparent" symbolic weight of the piece (which, indeed, gestures to a clock-less pendulum counting a deep time beyond the scope of human metrics), but with the interim stage of its recomposition. It is the explicit instructions of the artists that after *Pendulum* has scattered its accumulated frozen matter, the process is to be restarted only in one of two ways.

1. It may be left to its own devices, with the chance prospect that enough moisture will gather near the pivot to recommence: the last instance in which such a decision was

made led to a seven year period in which *Pendulum* did not swing.

2. The gallery workers have to do it themselves by means of sponges, buckets, and scaffolding, thereby rendering such an inhuman event dependent on the banal labor of the underpaid or unpaid. No aerial transport or machines whatsoever are to be used in setting up *Pendulum* to swing again. Hence it is has not been uncommon that during the laborious task of recollecting the dirty and toxic water, it is suddenly discovered that the oscillating glint above the installation site is, in fact, a reconstituted *Pendulum*, having gathered enough moisture and smoke in the clouds above to have begun its downward sweep once more.

Fourth and finally, *Pendulum* has been hailed – less accused than acclaimed – as the assertion of the power of speculative thinking after the end of a civilizational sequence, a razor of rationality sweeping through the dark night, as it “cuts through folly and false images of human importance” and discovers “a project for thought after the collapse of all philosophy.” It should be pointed out that a grosser misreading is scarcely fathomable.

If the sprays of stinking slush and the recurrent sloppy, pointless, and humid killings – which point only to the incapacity to *not do otherwise* – were not enough to dismiss this accusation, one of the stranger instances in *Pendulum*'s history should suffice. On its nineteenth cycle, a large crowd had gathered, variously drunken, hushed, rowdy, reverential, and curious, for the predicted moment when full contact with the ground would be made on the nadir of its swing. Some stood close and stared at the scarred point where the scrape and break should occur. Others held back, wisely dressed in oil skins or rubber to stay safe while getting the full visceral brunt of the splatter. Around 11:33 PM, having previously swung through the collected mass, thereby splitting them by default into two sides facing off against one another, *Pendulum* sliced back down, stretched thin and sharp, with a high, keening whistle. The crowd braced and tightened, the suicidal opened their mouths and bared their chests. And it *stopped*: through the rarest combination of rigidity, exact length, weight, inflection, and momentum, *Pendulum* scraped and skidded to an absolute halt, perfectly vertical and unbroken, tracing a radiant, glittering line from the center of the earth out to the pivot. Nothing moved. The crowd gaped. Very slowly, a slight trickle of melt became evident, as the sheer idiocy of pure reason began, once more, to slur into a stream of reeking slush, leaving only a slightly chilled puddle between the fuming earth and the torpid air.

-Evan Calder Williams

Alex Da Corte's

“The Island Beautiful/Mortal Mirror”

I'll let you be in my dream if I can be in yours
-*Talkin' World War III Blues*, Bob Dylan

In “The Island Beautiful/Mortal Mirror”, Da Corte has created twinned concurrent exhibitions in two Philadelphia spaces: Extra Extra, with an installation in bright colors, and Bodega, all in a sinister black. We are ushered into the main room of each gallery by a life-size cardboard cutout. The host of The Island Beautiful (at Extra Extra) is Stevie Nicks, famed lead singer of Fleetwood Mac, while at Mortal Mirror (Bodega), the threshold is guarded by Severus Snape, from the Harry Potter series. Nicks appears as a Good Witch archetype, but her well-known struggles with cocaine, klonopin, and personal relationships complicate this reading, as does the source of the image. The photo of Nicks comes from the cover of her first solo album, *Bella Donna*, a double entendre meaning “beautiful lady”, as well as a name for the toxic plant *Deadly Nightshade*. Snape is her inverted doppelganger, a figure who appears evil but is in fact quite the opposite. This pairing announces the separate installations as two sides of the same coin, and provides a key to that coin's exchange value.

Inside the rooms, Da Corte's “islands” are oddly shaped platforms supported by soda cans, and flooded with colorful soda reductions. Each island is inhabited by an array of small sculptures. The platforms' shapes are derived from basketball plays overlaid on the markings of a court, placing the sculptures into relationship like players on a team. Just as a team's individual members form a coherent and meaningful whole, the sculptures on each platform assemble a language and narrative.

Da Corte invited thirteen other artists to contribute pieces, which he then absorbed into his own process of assemblage. His works are composed of mass culture items such as fake fingernails, wigs, plastic swords, Nikes, air freshener, soda, and basketballs. Da Corte's creations encompass the beautiful and the grotesque, revealing his ambivalent relationship with these two qualities. In *The Island Beautiful*, a piece titled “Pink Jackie” consists of an M&M's character with his brains blown out, standing atop a facsimile of Brancusi's *Endless Column* made from plastic trashcans, conflating the Kennedy assassination, art history, mass production, and television advertising. In *Mortal Mirror*, the Brancusi trashcans reappear, this time topped by half a *trompe l'oeil* basketball (an open cranium?). Da Corte's sculptures are Frankenstein monsters. Through abstraction, the formerly utilitarian objects in these amalgams come to life, set free to evoke erotic and violent fantasies, picking up additional meanings as they roam the cultural countryside. One could also imagine the sculptures as

the exploded anatomy of a single body, a corpus of pleasure and pain, with its scars and recollections displayed for analysis. By combining other artists' work, pop culture iconography, and mass-produced materials, Da Corte examines the means by which we collectively constitute each other's thoughts, memories, and dreams.

As in the Nicks/Snape pairing, objects are doubled and mirrored throughout the two exhibits, creating chains of reference within and between the installations. A painted image of a black glove at *The Island Beautiful* reappears as an actual black glove in *Mortal Mirror*, evidence of a crime whose mystery has yet to be solved. The repetitions of image and material are links that can be followed, like a trail of breadcrumbs. But we know what happens next. The breadcrumbs are eaten by birds, and we're lost in the woods. Walking through one installation, it's difficult to remember all the details of the other; signification becomes hazy and confused. And this, in part, is the point: we have access to our own lives, to history, and to each other only through our tenuous ability to harness memory and find meaning in the stories and artifacts of our mutual existence.

In *Mortal Mirror*, a figure lies alone in the back corner. It's a dead cat, a road-kill, with tinfoil head and paws, and a bunch of plastic grapes wondrously transformed into viscera spilling out on the floor. Da Corte suggests that while we struggle to make sense of the past and present, we are stupefied by death. We can only stare at a corpse and butt against the limits of comprehension. The cat is titled *Horcrux (NIL)*, and we know from Harry Potter that being a Horcrux, it stores a piece of our soul. In J.K. Rowling's tale, the Horcrux must be destroyed for good to prevail, but for Da Corte, it's not about good and evil. Rather, it's about the things in which we invest ourselves, and through which we express ourselves. If we reanimate these objects through our attention, Da Corte proposes, they will help us understand our own reflections.

-Daniel Gerwin



(The Copy is) The Origin of the World: Stefan Abrams at Vox Populi

It seems that Stefan Abrams has been reading his Plato. Perhaps this is not the case, and perhaps Plato is right to have Socrates say, in the *Apology* and again in the *Republic*, that artists – poets and painters and the like – need not create on the basis of knowledge but rather from another, more elusive source. Plato, at least a certain Plato, would also have us believe that the origin of the world and the respective origins of each thing are to be found among the ideas, of which the works of artists can only offer a pale imitation. If Abrams' last exhibition at the Vox Populi Gallery, "The Origin of the World," does not consciously and intentionally offer an inversion and displacement of this classical Platonic schema, I would be happy to attribute the resonances I will explore here to that other and more elusive source.

According to Socrates' polemic against tragic poetry in Book X of the *Republic*, what I have called the classical Platonic schema of artistic imitation runs as follows. Truth and being belong to the idea, which is, with respect to each kind of thing, always one. When making an artifact, a craftsman looks to the idea and puts it to work in making manifold particular things – tables and chairs and beds. When making an artwork, a painter or a tragedian looks not to the idea but rather to the manifold particular things in the world, to things made by craftsmen and to natural things, and imitates these. Following the Greek counting method, the artistic imitation or representation is therefore three steps removed from the idea, and thus from truth and being. The origin of the world lies outside the world, in another world, a *Hinterwelt*, using Nietzsche's term: a world behind the world.

There are many good reasons – nuanced textual complexities, the dramatic movement of Plato's dialogues, Plato's own status as the maker of these highly stylized texts – to resist the traditional attribution of this caricatured mimetic theory of art to Plato himself. If we take what Socrates most explicitly says uncritically and at face value, however, the artist is little more than one who carries around a mirror for the sake of promiscuously imitating all manner of things, "for that," Socrates says, "is the quickest way of all" to "make" things (596d).

In the collection of fifteen photographs that constitutes "The Origin of the World," Abrams gladly takes on this role of the mirror-carrier, using his lens to reflect not merely things in the world but reflections of these things. In terms of the classical Platonic schema, Abrams offers reflections of reflections, images of images that fall one step further away than even painting and poetry from the truth and being of the idea. But Abrams hardly takes up this strategy because it is the quickest way of all, and instead of the promiscuity of imitation and image making that one finds in Socrates' account of artistic mimesis, one finds disciplined selection. The exhibition thus constitutes a well-constructed challenge to all those *Hinterweltlern* who would locate the origin in some world behind the world, and offers a provocative alternative: the world first opens up with the image and the graphic mark. Instead of being three steps removed from the world's eidetic origin, the work of art first opens up the world.

The title photograph of Abrams' exhibition, like the exhibition itself, is called "The Origin of the World." The photograph is thus both a

part of the exhibition and also stands, in some sense, for the whole, just as a king is the ruling part of a kingdom and, as such, plays the part of standing in for the whole. Whereas Socrates says that the artist is three steps removed from the eidetic origin and is thus "by nature third from the king and the truth, as are all other imitators" (597e), here the synecdoche serves to invert the Platonic schema. Here the origin of the world is no mighty and masculine king, as it was for Nietzsche's *Hinterweltlern*; rather, the image depicts a figuration of a woman's breasts, torso, and splayed legs, revealing the swath of her pubic hair. Far from a phallic-centric sovereign, one is in the proximity of a fertility goddess, only this time, looking closely, one notices that the lines describing her figure have been carved through an inch-thick layer of snow resting on a car windshield. Abrams thus avoids the stale trap of simply inverting the classical metaphysical model. First, in the place of the origin he does not simply replace the masculine sovereign-god with a feminine principle; with a much more sophisticated gesture he gives us an image of an image of the place, the origin, from which we all quite naturally emerge. The second photograph in the series, "Family," hung next to the title piece as if emerging out of it, makes this quite explicit. Second, though, this continuity between photographs does not simply appeal to nature as the origin preferred to replace the 'otherworldly' or supernatural origins of classical metaphysics. In offering one photograph of a playfully crude found image (one imagines boys pausing on their walk from school to scrawl something scandalous in the snow) and another of a car decal depicting a cartoon family (the black sheen of the car's surface almost disappearing, in the photograph, as the surface that it is), Abrams suggests that the world first opens up through the distorting repetition of the image and the graphic mark. One might even say that nature only becomes accessible as such through the supplement of its repetition and hence through the image.

For Nietzsche's *Hinterweltlern*, the world is a dream and an illusion. But instead of placing his hopes elsewhere, as they do, Abrams revels in the play of illusions. Instead of projecting an occult reality beyond the surfaces of things, his lens skims across these surfaces in a way that distorts them and turns them into something else. At times this distortion presents the illusion of digital-photographic artifice, as in "Eye," when a first glance seems to reveal a painted eye hovering spectrally over a brick wall. My first impression was that this image resulted from the slight of hand of digital overlay, but on closer inspection I realized that the eye is painted on the wall and the photograph simply captures the spectral quality endemic to this found image. Whereas "Eye" foregrounds a photographic artifice that isn't there and thereby marks the artifice that already belongs to the world, "Roller Coaster" uses photography to dissimulate such worldly artifice. What initially appears to be a photograph of three amusement park goers beginning the joyful plummet from a roller coaster's apex to its nadir reveals itself to be a photograph of an advertisement poster for the amusement park; one can barely make out a crease, not in the texture of the photograph, but in the texture of the photograph of which this photograph is a photograph. Somewhere between

these two trajectories – between the photographic accentuation and the photographic dissimulation of photography – the beautiful "Manayunk" presents a black and white townscape either threatened or beatified by a throb of white light. Though we might expect that this light has been digitally imported, it actually results from the flash of Abrams' camera as he captures the image of an old black and white image of Manayunk.

These photographs acquire the depth of a palimpsest by layering image upon image in the construction of a flat surface. The photographs refer beyond themselves without losing a sense of aesthetic completeness, still containing a set of references within their frames and thereby exposing the depth of surface and the surface-character of depth. In "Save," for example, the camera gets in close to the surface of a car, on which one can read the mirror-image of the photograph's title word. The wider world is out there; the photograph refers to the original of which this reflection is a copy, while the tight focus of the shot both allows for this reference and makes it unnecessary. The surface of the car and the distorted legibility of the reflected word are transformed into an image that stands on its own while still highlighting the reciprocal reflectivity and clandestine communication constituting the relationality of things.

By calling attention to this strategy of photographic distortion, however, I do not mean to imply that Abrams aims to produce merely aesthetic objects. For a long time I have been drawn to this artist's aesthetic and to the mastery of craft evident in his work, and past exhibitions – "Doppelgangers," "Insite," "Auto Show," among others – have certainly raised theoretical issues in provocative ways. But here Abrams seems to break new ground in theoretically considering what it means to make art in our age, or at least these considerations have become more explicit. The images (and images of images) in this exhibition arise out of a process of decontextualization that distorts and complicates the legibility of found images and everyday scenes and objects. Despite this distortion, three photographs remain strikingly legible, especially in the context of a gallery: "Van Gogh," "Matisse," and "Lichtenstein," hung in descending order in a clean vertical line on a wall of their own. On the top, "Van Gogh" reproduces part of a sun-bleached reproduction of a painting from the *Sunflowers* series; at the bottom, "Lichtenstein" reproduces the pop artist's "Still Life with Silver Pitcher," from an exhibition at the Gagosian. In the middle, "Matisse" frames a graffiti rendition of the artist's signature, scrawled in white on a reddish-brown wall. The references are unmistakable but the complexities abound.

Benjamin, of course, has shown most lucidly what happens to the work of art in the age of limitless technical reproducibility. The infinitely reproducible work of art extinguishes the aura of singularity because it severs the work of art from the singular, signed art object and hence from the singular event of artistic production, from the hands of the artist. By presenting a distorted reproduction of a reproduction of a Van Gogh and a reproduction of a piece of pop art (which had already exploited the positive possibilities opened up by Benjamin's analysis of reproducibility), Abrams locates the theoretical concerns explored in the exhibition's other images in the question of

the relation of our age – the age of technical, digital reproducibility – to the history of art. The forger-graffitist's Matisse signature underscores the fact that this relation is characterized by rupture, that our images, constructions, and the meanings of our words cannot be tethered back to an originally seeing eye, forming hand or intended meaning.

The historical origin can therefore not be understood in terms of a singular event of production that might be received in its immediacy, without disruptions or distortions. And the metaphysical origin, if this language can still be rehabilitated, cannot be posited in a world behind the world. In this work both of these versions of the original origin yield to their repetitions and reproductions; the model yields to the copy, the truth (and the king) yield to their images and their figurations and the second becomes the first.

The first would have been the king. In Book X of the Republic, Socrates says that all mimetic

art "is likely to distort the thought of anyone who hears it, unless he has the knowledge of what it is really like, as a drug (pharmakon) to counteract it" (595b). Here the drug, the pharmakon, is a remedy and a cure: knowledge of the truth will inoculate us against the dangerous distortions of artistic mimesis. As Derrida has shown, it is this same and yet a different pharmakon that Socrates invokes in the Phaedrus when relating the story of the origin of writing. The father of writing, the Egyptian god Theuth, brings his invention to the king of the gods, Thamus, as a remedy (pharmakon) for memory, and yet Thamus declares it to be a dangerous poison (pharmakon). The image and the graphic mark hover between remedy and poison because they can be reproduced, passed down, and disseminated without relation to their origins. Thus they are dangerous and must be regulated by a god and by a king. God makes an appearance in "The Origin of the World," but not as or at the

origin. Instead God shows up as a graphic mark, written in ink on the broad shoulders of a man by a pool: "Only God Will Judge Me." This still gives the rights of final judgment up to God, but the gangster script carving out these words suggests a different message: none of you will rightfully judge me. I'm not sure if I can wholeheartedly endorse this total suspension of judgment, but I do think that we should be suspicious of those authorities attempting to contain the possibly liberating, free comingling of our images, our constructions, and our meanings. "The Origin of the World" disrupts the logic of containment and control by letting the work of art, the ostensible supplement and adornment of the world, come first, in that fragile and empty place where something might begin.

-Jeffrey D. Gower

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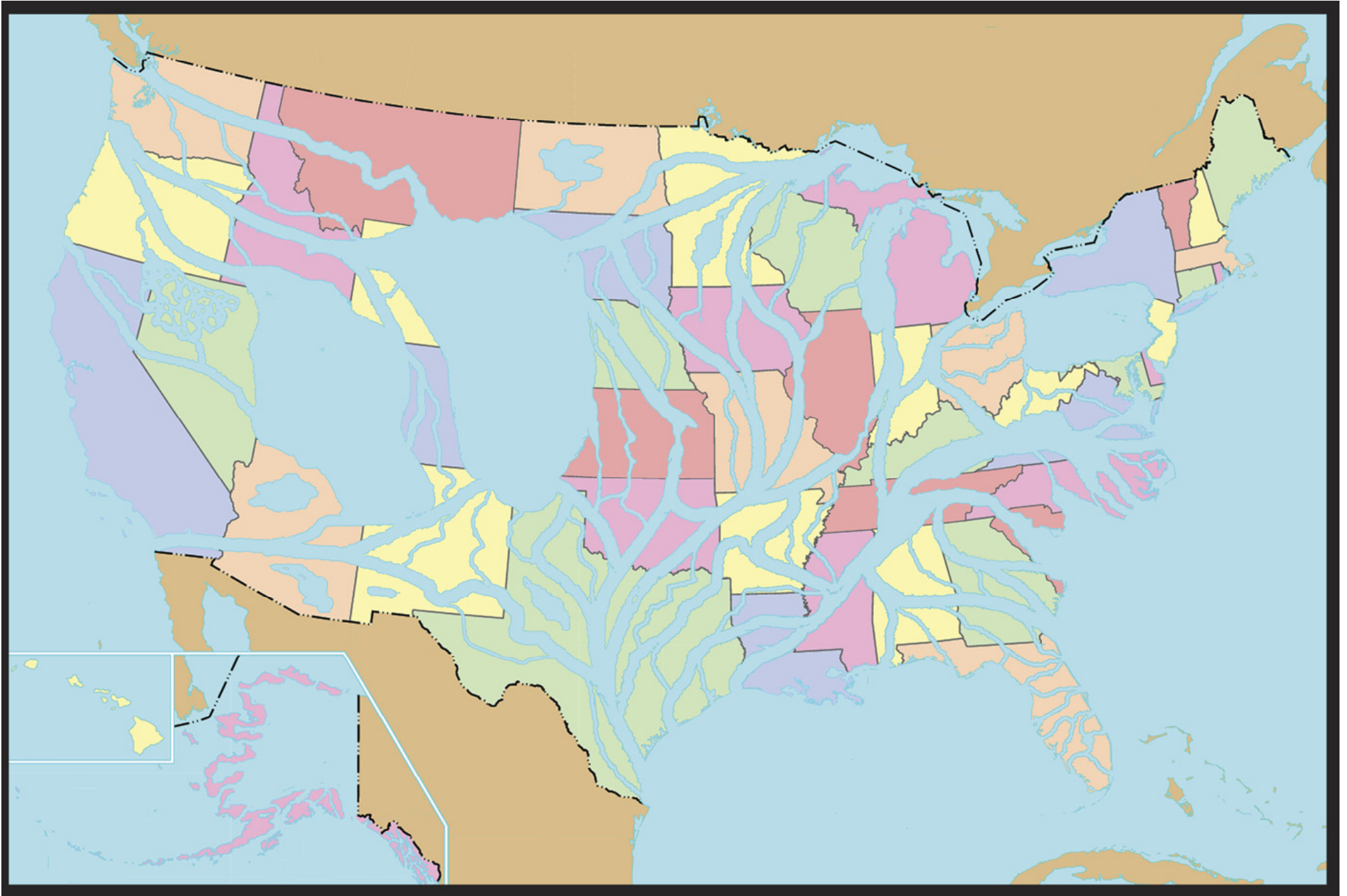
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General Inquiries:

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PROPOSAL FOR THE RAPID LIBERALIZATION OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Since time immemorial, humans who have settled in close proximity to oceans have benefited greatly from the high seas. Whether it was an exquisite fabric from the far east, or the untasted tastes of exotic spices from lands unknown (most likely from the far east as well), or simply a brown body to aid the early settlers of North America in taming the chaotic wilderness of their strange New World, it was always the great coastal cities that were the first to benefit from the new commodities that poured in from the outside world. Better able to deal with the shock of the New, the coastal citizen became more broad minded in scope, able to see the obvious boon not only in the products of foreign lands, but also in the parent cultures that produced said products. The coastal citizen was the first to accept the disparate nature of humanity, that grand old plurality we take for granted today, subsequently making the coastal citizen humanity's first cosmopolitan.

In contrast to the coastal citizen, we have the landlocked citizen. Those brave individuals who pushed civilization into the volatile interior of their country, and though it is undeniably a valiant effort to bring order to what was previously a chaotic mix of nature and animals doing as they please, these frontiersmen allowed themselves to be enveloped in ignorance as if in the grip of a vicious pincer attack. While people on the coasts relished in the New; new clothes, new tastes, and new ideas, the landlocked citizen waited idly as products and ideas slowly trickled in from their more culturally advanced coastal brethren. This doomed the landlocked citizen to progress culturally, politically, spiritually, and intellectually at a rate that is simply nothing short of deplorable.

The state of the landlocked citizen would be a dismissible issue if we lived in a totalitarian society where an oppressive dad-like figure made all of the important decisions which directed the fate of the society, but in a democracy, where important decisions fall under the dictate of consensus, the landlocked citizen poses a great threat to the evolution its society. For in a democracy, it matters not the quality of the argument but rather the quantity of the argument's supporters. And let's face it people, each day more and more conservative dullards are born into the population of the finest nation on planet Earth, my nation and yours: The United States of America.

In order to circumvent this regressive conservatism and bring the rest of the country up-to-speed with the coasts, I propose a tax-payer subsidized program of aggressive irrigation to the central portion of the United States, a program so large in scope that it would make the Panama Canal look like a trail of urine trickling down a toddler's leg. Whole states would be done away with, and in their place would be new aquatic highways and by-ways replacing the old asphalt infrastructure of our country. Where did Tennessee go? Why it's a part of The Great Clinton River! "Mommy, I sure do miss Utah." "Put your mind at ease child! You'll have much more fun sunbathing on the banks of one of the Kennedy Finger Lakes where a majority of Utah used tah (ha!) be!"

With the obstacle of land now removed, the landlocked cities can become cultural centers unto their own, developing distinct identities independent of the New Yorks and Los Angeleses that have hitherto dominated the cultural landscape of the United States. What was once the obscure town of Picabo, Idaho, has the opportunity of possibly becoming as delightfully decadent as Paris. Have you ever heard of Midas, Nevada? Of course not, but as the intellectual hub of the Adlai Stevenson Archipelago it has become home to some of the greatest minds our country has ever seen. The possibility of formerly landlocked cities producing intellectually viable commodities to be adopted by the greater part of the nation will become a reality with this irrigation program, setting the stage for the formerly landlocked cities to become positive contributors to the cultural and political discourse that shapes our nation.

The United States of America is the greatest nation ever assembled by the mind and hand of mankind, but there exists within us the capability to be much greater. To do this, we must proactively court change. We must not cling to old sentimentalities for land that does our country no good. Land that breeds the handicaps that put us behind nations that only a few decades ago we could openly mock for their draconian governments and benighted education systems. Fellow Americans, we mustn't fall behind any further, we must let the water... transform us.