

# 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