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Responding to Existence

Jean-Luc Nancy's video-lecture "The Portrait"

Maria Konta

Jean-Luc Nancy's 2012 video-lecture "The Portrait" is a brief postscript on "formalism". It is my aim in this paper to argue that what in the past struck me as «The Intruder»'s strangest, most scintillatingly masquerade-like, *Full fathom five thy father lies*, autobiographical moment:

... in a similar movement, the most absolutely proper "I" retreats to an infinite distance [...] and plunges into an intimacy deeper than any interiority [...] a sliding into the morphine-induced unconsciousness of pain and fear mixed in abandonment.¹

... re-surfaces in this video-lecture as an immemorial recall of modernist painting.

How does Nancy know how to do this resurfacing by letting it happen? First, by affirming that the model of this video is a lecturer. As such he re-positions himself along the art historian T. J. Clark's fifty-eight A. W. Mellon Lectures on Picasso delivered in 2009, whose main thesis is that in 1932 Picasso, the most visible maker of forms in the 20th century, claimed centrality in the world by speaking autobiographically, that is, doubting and parodying the fiction of subjectivity («*j'est un autre*»), for Clark the only universal that we should be talking about.² It is Clark's argument that Picasso of the 20s and 30s is the artist Nietzsche was hoping for – the one to cure us of our commitment to Truth. Clark's Nietzsche is Nietzsche of *The Genealogy of Morals*, the philosopher who talks about the comedy of existence.

Second and regards the argument of Nancy's lecture, by displacing the American critic Clement Greenberg's formalist motives of *entrenching* the medium of modernist painting in its area of competence, that is, flatness³ towards Maurice Merleau-Ponty's argument of perceptual faith and its obscurity in *The Visible and the Invisible*;⁴ and by proceeding immediately after (and before) neither at random nor according to

1. NANCY 2008a, 169-170.

2. CLARK 2013, 13.

3. GREENBERG 1995, 85.

4. MERLEAU-PONTY 1968, 8.

a project to rewrite this intertwining as «an entrenchment or a retreat of an alterity», the lecture's main thesis on the portrait, or call it the "heart of things". Nancy writes:

In one way or another, however, it is to a distant, unattainable, reality that the portrait is addressed. It is towards the recoil, the entrenchment or the withdrawal of an otherness that is turned and it is exposed to our eyes to show us how it is exposed to this otherness. More precisely, it is the otherness of its "subject" that opens the entrenchment and pulls that carries the withdrawal, the interminable sliding towards a depth whose thin surface in two-dimensions indicates that it is unfathomable.⁵

As such Nancy's video-lecture begins anew the dialogue on painting that in 2001 was stamped by a landmark curatorial effort to monstrate some French painting relatively known in the U.S. within the context of some American minimalist and postminimalist practices and to bring each other into greater visibility, called *As Painting: Division and Displacement*.⁶ Although I notice in the video that Nancy's dangerous because necessary theses on the contemporary revival of the portrait is largely embedded into a visual record of a seemingly arbitrary, whimsical assembly of pictures of him by professional and amateur painters and photographers alike from a broad sweep of European (would this assembly be a reading of what Nietzsche understood as the terrible, questionable, hopeful spectacle reserved for Europe?) and less on reproductions of portraits by famous artists.

Third, Nancy's maneuver "the entrenchment" will come to modify slightly the angle of Stephen Melville's own engagement with Nancy's "formalism" in the 2010 text «What The Formalist Knows» in relation to the art historian Heinrich Wölfflin's formalist distinction "Classical-Baroque".⁷ If, according to Melville, Nancy's text «The Vestige of Art»⁸ struggles to state the previous distinction with reference to art's history, then «The Intruder» reemerging as "The Portrait" finds itself entangled in the same struggle with reference now to art criticism. Melville writes:

5. NANCY 2012b, 3. The translation is mine.

6. ARMSTRONG *et al.* 2001.

7. IVERSEN and MELVILLE 2010, 77.

8. «The Vestige of Art» in NANCY 1996.

There is a rhetoricity deeply at work within our encounters with works of art, and second that this imposes a certain complexity on our imaginations of art's history such that it is always possible to find ourselves standing wrong way round within it, closed to art's *appearing* and so closed against the ongoing work of transformation that is art's historical *being*. We can be insured against such risk only at the cost of our actual object, and we are accordingly obliged to the full difficulty of our modernity.⁹

It is my conviction that Nancy's video-lecture will enrich Melville's careful explication in the same text of Greenberg's scare quotes around the words "purity" and "flatness", modernist painting's two values, and of the generalized polemic on what it means for a work of art or more importantly for a person to have or to fail to have her own experience, her own encounter with art. A failure phrased again by Greenberg as early as 1940 in his text «Avant-Garde and Kitsch» as «kitsch is vicarious experience and faked sensations».¹⁰

Fourth. The video-lecture "The Portrait" is a brief postscript, I think, on "formalism" in one more, unusually complex and serious, way. What Nancy has to say about «the dissemblance of resemblance»¹¹ as the figuration of the glory of the model on the grounds of such glorification's participation in a projection and a symbolization¹² is precisely an extension of the previous thought on the enactment or betrayal of one's own experience. I recognize it in Stanley Cavell's terms «crime or deed of glory»; in his interlocutor Michael Fried's qualifications on Greenberg and Minimalism in his 1967 seminal essay «Art and Objecthood»; in Clark's «The Unhappy Consciousness» chapter from his 1999 book *Farewell to An Idea*; in Theodor Adorno's "dissonance"; in Maurice Blanchot's "glory or disgrace".

In what follows I will try to prove, and hope to persuade you, the above claims by offering a close description of Nancy working in his study and of his portraits, all shown in the first part of the video-lecture. They are all I can see, all I can trust.

Some time in late summer 2012 the director Safaa Fathy, widely

9. IVERSEN and MELVILLE 2010, 88.

10. GREENBERG 1988, 12.

11. NANCY 2006, 229.

12. NANCY 2012b, 3. The translation is mine.

known for the 2000 film *D'ailleurs. Derrida*, filmed Nancy in daylight in his study in his apartment (a prison? a dream-house? a private mental phantasmagoria?) in Strasbourg, France. The 41 minutes 41 seconds video is cut, divided, one would say, compartmented in two irregularly timed sections, on the surface utterly incomparable to each other, with two borders of unrecorded tape in the video's beginning and end (in the tradition of painting, perhaps a modest editing) that heighten the viewer's pleasure in looking and remind her that what she is about to see is a "video" in the strong Nancean sense, as "penetration". The first part, which from now on I would like to title 2'45", not in reminiscence of John Cage's highly abstract, atypical, curious composition of uninterrupted silence, the «nothing is going on» 4'33", but more in line with a sense of "duration" as this sense is linked to a true poetics of secrecy, discretion, sobriety and ellipsis, consists of two time brackets, two opposites confronting each other like tragic opposites, of 32" and 2'03" respectively. 2'45" is a pointed and poignant invitation to the viewer for absorbed perceptual attention to the play of spatial differentiation (the suggestive play of proximity and distance where self-consciousness and self-loss are intertwined interminably), a test in remaining silent, or better yet, a "lesson" in dis-covering the capacity of silence before the inevitable singularity of an experience that appears to me to be exemplary, an exercise in seeing what is there to be seen by caressing the image (in fact Fathy's images, promised, taken, virtual, kept, and excluded), seeing the video in slow motion, and scanning it backward and forward,¹³ a luminous resistance to interpretation, deciphering, decoding and owning of the undecidable cipher of the bodily, the sensual, the liberated, a final succumb to an irreversible and public use and abuse, misseeing and misreading, acquisition and appropriation, Baudelaire's ennui or Fortino Samano's nonchalance, and to my desolation talk and walk out of the room.

In the 32" Fathy's camera is placed at a fixed distance from the philosopher seen in profile from the right in white shirt, sleeve rolled-up, back aligned to the back of the chair, neck bent, in front of (how far in front of?) his computer screen («transparent reader screen before the screen face reflecting white vibrating glimmer») and from

13. NANCY 2008a, 46-47.

his bookcase, his wooden and metallic stools and his metallic lectern; making sure that she gets in a vestigial manner all the grace and look of the scene without making any sustained effort to go three steps closer to see what the philosopher is keying in single-handedly, thus interrupting, or better renouncing from the start any desire to mastery, appropriation, fusion: is Nancy writing an e-mail to an unknown friend, which might stray from its intended message, goal and destination, therefore accidentally, unintentionally denuding himself or making public what had to remain private from the ghosts this destinerrance will have invoked when he will have departed?;¹⁴ is he re-opening the document containing the text on the Heideggerian interpretation of schematism,¹⁵ a re-opening which amounts to a re-deciding of what comes to this specific text from far outside itself, from far ahead in thought and in experience («Heidegger does not explain this “like an image” as I am doing – but he does explain it by going back to what is shown by all these conjoined or dislocated *images*, images of images that always show a general *Aussehen*, a “seeming-and-outward-looking”, which the text relates, in parentheses (and in Greek), to “*eidos*, idea”»);¹⁶ is he typing the following lines from the «Preface to the English Language Edition» of *The Pleasure in Drawing* dated August 2012, a preface/self-portrait, which announces and projects in itself a desire, an elan, a mode of feeling, a disowning that opens within the impossible the possibility of relating with the text through reading, a possibility that Nancy treats in an autobiographical mode in «The Faraway: Death» in *Adoration. Deconstruction of Christianity II*:¹⁷ «When I read *drawing* in English, knowing that I ought to be thinking of *dessin*, I feel myself carried far away on a sea of complexity, all the while knowing that there will be something to discover, an island of sense, or even just a current or turbulent zone»?¹⁸ Or am I just seeing him *reading* between his lines and paragraphs and understanding not

14. On Nancy's attitude to the e-mail and its relation to the open as affective-comprehensive, see AESCHIMANN 2011. On letters and destinerrance see HILLIS MILLER 2009, 28-54.

15. NANCY 2003, 67.

16. NANCY 2005, 87.

17. NANCY 2012a, 88-97.

18. NANCY 2013, xii.

what he is writing while he is writing it but seeing him *understanding* the mere fact that *he is writing*,¹⁹ therefore catching and not quite catching him in that precise instant when drowned in the pixelated fever of two digital gestures modeled, curved, recrossing one another simultaneously as deletion and formation of the thing,²⁰ he is tracing the faith in/of his own gesture? A faith, that is, in the capriciousness, impetuosity, swiftness, jubilant naivety in his right hand index finger, (a lacemaker's finger?), and in the wrist, arm and shoulder too, no longer on the keyboard of the computer but maybe on the rosewood bars of a vibraphone, flicking, spattering and dabbing a truth in and as a text of so many throws, knots, twirls and curls of black, white, silver-aluminum and pink, and other, alien, materials, here thickening there trailing, mute music passing away into a pale lavender mist.

Seeing at first sight the video for the second time I was given the impression that 32" is not simply a matter of the one accomplice/criminal, the actor (Nancy, the reader-writer) receiving and accepting suggestions or instructions from the other accomplice/criminal, the author (Fathy's camera).²¹ Instead it demands from me here to think, to sense, up to what point it was shot in the spirit of the two directions index no. 31 from *Corpus*' «Fifty-Eight Indices on the Body» traces out for its reader: one of a seismic body wave creating ray paths refracted by earth's varying density and modulus; and an other of an interstellar probe in orbit around Ceres. By "sensing up to what point" I mean not narrowing the distance between or reconciling Fathy's visual imagery and Nancy's thought/«touching extension», but preserving the figurality of, or the ontological spacing between, the two. In its turn this "preservation" should be understood here as what in *Corpus* Nancy calls complicity, consent and compearance to the visible, «to the ostentation and extension that the visible *is*», a compearance which amounts to a clear, just, accurate relation between bodily existence/exposition/spacing and the visible or else between bodies as «places of existence»,²² bodies as «places of film», bodies as "visual evidence", existences, beings in the world, beings given to the world

19. NANCY 1978, 8.

20. NANCY 2008b, 135.

21. DERRIDA and FATHY 2000, 15.

22. NANCY 2008a, 47.

and a sight «distended and spaced» by these bodies, bodies always fractal not broken, fragmentary not crushed, shadowy not indistinct, aspectual, or to put it economically *as* he does, «bodies seen by bodies». (In light of this, think for instance this statement from *Le tourner les mots* «here the two of us returned to the places of the film...not for starting again, but rather for adding other fingerprints (*empreintes*), with a view to (*en vue de*) cover (*brouiller*) the tracks. They try to mislead the inquiry by multiplying the indices».²³ I quote index 31:

Cosmic body: bit by bit my body touches on everything. My buttocks on my chair, my fingers on the keyboard, the chair and keyboard on the table, the table on the floor, the floor on the foundations, the foundations on the earth's central magma and shifting tectonic plates. If I go in the other direction, through the atmosphere, I reach galaxies and finally the boundless limits of the universe. A mystic body, a universal substance, and a marionette drawn by a thousand threads.²⁴

Index 31 is Nancy's worldview. The feeling that conveys that the pathology (the intertwining of self-absorption and self-loss) is not of an individual, but of a whole age, is here unmistakable. That this pathology is an achievement of the *video* is the general lesson to be learned.

I would like to set the motif of Nancy's touching extension, an extension, which is also the bodies' resistance to and infinite flight from knowledge in relation to the "physiognomy" (severe? variegated? monstrous? molecular? encrusted?) I am being offered, and contemplate, of Nancy's "living bookcase": white, red, green, blue hardback/softback bindings and dustcovers, spine titles maybe decorated with Indian acanthus foliage or Mayan calligraphy, so many punctual identities, beatings, separated and united side-by-side, a chaos (or a chaogito) of memories that is now seeing the daylight; of his book "collection" (philosophy books, dictionaries, novels, books he carried back home from his travels, the Bible perhaps) another body or as he puts it «a collection of collections, a *corpus corporum* whose unity remains a question for itself»²⁵; a collection not as «a pure aggregation of dif-

23. DERRIDA and FATHY 2000, 13. The translation is mine.

24. NANCY 2008a, 153-154.

25. NANCY 2008a, 155.

ferent pieces» but as a «whole that makes sensible an insistence or an obsession in a certain mode of thinking»;²⁶ or from a Romantic point of view (that is Schlegel's/Novalis') no longer a collection but a metaphor, among others of mining, industry, fabrication and commerce, of the multiplication of the books that reorganizes the seeds that disseminates;²⁷ or I would say so many lines, planes, and other formal features/configurations abstracted from their descriptive purposes now functioning as exonomous entities along the limits of the bookcase's cramping grid that delimit and present this image; of the stools and of the metallic lectern with all the folders, leaflets, prospectuses, printing paper, the newspaper; as this physiognomy of an exposed substance, as a subject that shows and presents itself to me, regards me, situates and envelopes me bears the distinctive/characteristic trait or the invisible imprint of the philosopher's touch, gaze, mind, thought, talent, genius, sensibility, or to recollect from *The Literary Absolute* a physiognomy of a thought that by offering/delivering itself to me in fragments, therefore perfect and self-sufficient, «it also offers its character, ready-made, as it were, for the characterizer»,²⁸ Lacoue-Labarthe's and Nancy's re-inscribing and ex-scribing of *Athenaeum Fragment 302 critical imperative* for an exemplary ontological fragmentariness over a Cartesian self-announcing and self-appropriation as a ground: «Jumbled ideas should be the rough draft of philosophy. It's no secret how highly these are valued by connoisseurs of painting. For a man who can't draw philosophical worlds with a crayon and characterize every thought that has physiognomy with a few strokes of the pen philosophy will never be an art and consequently never a science».²⁹

If following Nancy's claim in *On The Commerce of Thinking* that it is in a library or in a bookstore that «the book pronounces its *ego sum ego existo*, and in consequence, also its *cogito*»,³⁰ then what value does the same statement receive in a 2012 video about/on the portrait? It is well-explained in the secondary bibliography³¹ that in the 1979 book

26. NANCY 1993, ix.

27. LACOUÉ-LABARTHE and NANCY 1988, 127.

28. LACOUÉ-LABARTHE and NANCY 1988, 116.

29. FIRCHOW 1971, 205.

30. NANCY 2009a, 32-34.

31. JAMES 2006, 11-64.

Ego Sum the cogito's pronunciation stages the non-coincidence, the impossibility of co-presence of the representation (Descartes' *Discourse on Method* offered as a picture, a fable, or the author's portrait) and the instance of thought it tries to represent (the Cartesian cogito) by invoking and evoking "the" figure of the portrait, the speaking "mouth" (*la bouche*), in whose opening the subject springs forth, traces itself in a double movement of passing and spacing performed in, as, by the counterthrusts in the syntax between subject and subjective/objective genitive, of adverb and substantive: «The mouth is the opening of *Ego*, *Ego* is the opening of the mouth. What happens there, is that the there spaces itself». ³² In *Fantastic Phenomena*, ³³ a re-tracing of «The Image – the Distinct» ³⁴ steps, "as well as" a further entrenchment of the mouth's primordially/différance (mouth as the image through which everybody finds herself exist/exposed), Nancy is driven to imbue the "ego sum" with the energy, pressure or intensity that "distinguishes" any portrait/image/Thing from a ground or from what is not a thing («What does the *ego sum* do? It distinguishes itself»). The 2011 article's main aphorism the Thing «is *the* thing of things», ³⁵ Nancy's re-unfolding of Husserl's «thing in itself» invites me now to sink deeper, to lose and open myself to what the 1999/2000 article's aphorism «portraits are the images of the image in general» says to its reader, a "saying", which she would be trained to remember that in *The Birth to Presence* Nancy designated as a "blotting out". ³⁶ If, before seeing the bookcase's crooked image on the metallic surface of Nancy's lectern, I could easily associate the word "distinguish" with what Nancy means in *The Fantastic Phenomena* by "split", that is, a reflexivity or autonomy of the thing in itself, where the Thing is shown as always already divided and self-differed («[creation] imagines the split from which splits that which of itself is not» or «the thing in itself splits itself»), ³⁷ after seeing it the verb list with which he explains the word "distinguish" in «The Image – the Distinct» (pulling, drawing,

32. NANCY 1979, 162.

33. SENTESY and NANCY 2011.

34. In NANCY 2005. It was published in French in 1999/2000.

35. SENTESY and NANCY 2011, 234.

36. NANCY 1993, 90.

37. SENTESY and NANCY 2011, 233.

extracting, subtracting, removing, distracting, detaching, casting forth) incited in me a renewed interest in the postminimalist Mel Bochner's late 1960s phenomenological bracketing and unbracketing of sculptural gestures which, in the absence of painting, took place «in the *space of painting*» (Image 1 and 2).³⁸ To this paragraph's opening question I would affirm in anticipation that the bookcase's *ego sum*, split and distinguished, takes the value of a creation that imagines the bottom ... «the form of this formless bottom».³⁹ Where "bottom" read "support", life support, motor, clutch, or heart. Or K. P. Kavafis' 1924 poem «He Had Come There To Read»:

He had come there to read. Two or three books lie open,
books by historians, by poets.
But he read for barely ten minutes,
then gave it up, falling half asleep on the sofa.
He's completely devoted to books—
but he's twenty-three, and very good-looking;
and this afternoon Eros entered
his ideal flesh, his lips.
An erotic warmth entered
his completely lovely flesh—
with no ridiculous shame about the form the pleasure took...

2'.02" bears witness to a grouping-together (a portrait gallery of human religious identity?) of Nancy's surviving portraits executed in different media (photographs, puzzle-picture, drawings, paintings) at different moments in his life and by different friends (Philippe Ivanejev, unknown artist, Miquel Barcelo, Manuela, François Martin), each tableaux not a mimetic representation but a different «observation, selective, reflexive and interrogative» of a facial zone, a figure, a detail, or a local impossibility marked by itself (forehead, eyebrows, bags under the eyes, nose, mouth, pink cheeks, throat, hand), a different pro-duction in the same trace of the figure's propriety and singularity in-itself, a different instance (to use Stanley Cavell's word) tragic and comic, disenchanted and re-enchanted of the *ego sum*'s great paradox, its modulated sameness when it comes face to face with its inexhaustible alterity.

38. ARMSTRONG *et al.* 2001, 199.

39. SENTESY and NANCY 2011, 233.

The set-up is nothing but premeditated or, as I see it, an effort, tender, discreet and slightly ironic, to monstrate what modernism's real pedagogical legacy is: the general lesson, to repeat it myself here, is that there never was in modernist "painting" a language-game that could be learned or spoken by many, only gestures formal and objective which could not have been invented and performed in the past by one person without a certain negligence, a certain recklessness.

What is a gesture? Gesture is what consecrates par excellence; it is also a rule or a form-of-life. In the withdrawal or impossibility of continuation of Modernism's norms and conventions "gesture" is all there is in contemporary art.

On the other hand and in a manner reminiscent of Roland Barthes «culture of the signifier» and his contempt of the «enemies of text», "gesture" is Nancy's own resistance to, impassioned plea against contemporary art's «ready-made, indefinitely repeated significations» "surcharge" or «excess of significations»⁴⁰ as well as against the hermeneutical readings that throttle art today. "Gesture" is, to borrow Jean Paulhan's famous phrase, a glimmer of light; or in line with Maurice Blanchot's writing of the inaugural monstration, gesture is «to make a flint spark in order to make it spark, instead of making oneself a dagger or a razor».⁴¹ Gesture is, to repeat one of Nancy's titles, "the vestige of art"; it is what remains in the removal of the *intuitus originarius* from the world and from experience, therefore neither transcendent nor immanent, but finite; it is a "sensible dynamism", a singular bodily event or a sense always overflowing linguistic signification; it is to sketch oneself (*s'esquisser*) and by way of a double orthography/cadence/interminable gliding of the touch on the computer keys (from 's' to 'x', to 'x' without 's'), to project oneself toward what is always to come (*s'exquisser*);⁴² it is to "exist"; or to fully quote the philosopher's most consistent and most dense definition of gesture which I found in *The Pleasure in Drawing* in the section "Gestural Body", a Schellingian inflection or contagion («the body-*organon* of art») of his thinking of writing/drawing as originary, Greek, technicity («*ars-techné*») and concrete embodiment («coming from beyond its

40. NANCY 2010, 97.

41. NANCY 2010, 97.

42. NANCY 2013, 13.

functional corporeality»), gesture is

an immanent signifi-*cance* in other words, without the sign taking off toward the signified, but a sense that is offered right at the body [*à même le corps*], right at a body that becomes less active, efficient, or operative than the body that gives itself over to a motion—to an *emotion*—that receives it, coming from beyond its functional corporeality. This gestural body is different from the organic body, without being a body without organs. Rather, it becomes the body-organon of art, and thus of the technique (*ars—technē*) that is in play, whether graphic, vocal or colored, tactile or verbal.⁴³

2.02” is filmed so as to elicit an approach local and interminable, an attention to, a tension towards, a dilection and a cherishing of such gestures, all the time wanting to believe that there is a viewer in the faraway willing to slow down in her massive rush to unlock the *récit* and to tune into the work’s tiniest sensuous particular. Here an inventory of gestures:

1 *Demythified prayer*: white-framed black-and-white photographic portrait of the philosopher sitting cross-legged and reading aloud *L’Intrus* with the aid of two microphones. The photo covers/displaces with a lot of finessing the illustrations (colored figurative portraits) of the book *Le Portrait*’s re(a)d cover *as if* it was grafted into the re(a)d cover; or emerged from its re(a)d surroundings; or *as if* some body was out on the look for another support; or it just exists there *as* a cut-out. The camera records the book resting horizontally over a delightful Iranian rose, *ciel* divine, grey and beige textile (a gift) and it is from this perspective that the tension between writing and orality is being tested. The photo was taken a long time ago in the Reid Hall, Paris, on the occasion of the «Texte et voix» organization. Split between addresser (rule text) and addressee (rule life-form) *L’Intrus* recursively refers to itself: «A “proper” life, not to be found in any organ, and nothing without them. A life that not only continues to live on, but continues to live properly, under a strange, threefold *rule*: that of decision, that of an organ, and that of sequellae to the transplant».⁴⁴

43. NANCY 2013, 39.

44. NANCY 2008a, 165-166.

2 *Triangle*: two photographic portraits one next to the other trying for the same thing. To my left, a photo, by Philippe Ivanejev, of a puzzle-picture on top of a stool, the philosopher literally in *Bruchstücke* where the play between obscurity and obviousness of denotation is what immediately appeals to the eye. The puzzle-picture is modelled on a photo of the philosopher without glasses and a shirt with two buttons unfastened. It clearly lords over its neighbour to my right, a black and white photo (from 1978, the year of *L'absolu litteraire* publication where I first evidenced the statement that every philosophy of art should be a «formation of form» and where in the genre of the *Darstellung* of humanity the amorous relation begins to be privileged over friendship) of the philosopher with a scarf around the neck, placed the photo on top of a book from whose title I can only read bending my head to my right the infinitive form of the verb “aimer”. “Gesture” here has to do less with the figure of the forehead, on the left swapping places with the background, on the right salient, pure presence; nor with an ironizing of a Hegelian repertoire of human features (particularly the intellectual brow of meditation, reflection, and the spirit’s reversion into itself, one of classical sculpture’s characters); less with the protruding eyeballs turned to the left maybe emblemizing a physical knowledge about the nature of the soul or the camera lens; nor with the mouth, on the left mute or erased, on the right slightly open, barely smiling, having sense passing through it; but with the inverted triangle (or the axis from the neck to the forehead) where precisely the shirt’s garment gapes and I see on the left indicators of “skin” (a mixture of internal propensities and external influences), while on the right I see indicators of “scarf”, or simply where on the left I recognize the world and traverse it while on the right I stop dead on my tracks. In the *Pleasure of the Text* Barthes calls such gesture I am describing in the left portrait «an intermittence of skin flashing ... between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve)»⁴⁵ granting it with a seductive power to stage an appearance-as-disappearance. Here I cannot but recall Nancy’s own explication in *The Masked Imagination* of the Kantian triangle which the transcendental imagination im-ages as well as the unwinding and unfolding divine triangles in the drapes of Mary and Elizabeth in

45. BARTHES 1975, 10.

Pontormo's *Visitation* (the ternary, feminine schema through which painting is searching for its *subject*) in *Visitation: of Christian Painting*. "Visitation: of Christian Painting". Yet it is in *Adoration* that Nancy calls such triangle, or the hollowing out of triangle formed by faith, belief and knowledge, «the very desire to believe» that a different order of picturing, perceiving, being-in-the-world, that a strange outlandish order of experiencing the world, is possible. I quote from *Adoration*:

In this hollowing out is suspended, undecided, trembling, a category that is not a true category, yet a real and consistent mode of feeling nonetheless: we should call it "belief without belief" or Freud's "disowning" (the translation of *Verleugnung*), but a disowning intertwined with an "as if". I know full well that there is no other world, but I believe, I want to believe, I allow the sketch of something possible, or rather not impossible, to form, of an unheard-of way of making sense, or not even sense but simply a way of conducting oneself and of caring for [de se tenir et de tenir à] – nothing, nothing but this desire or this nothing as this very desire to believe.⁴⁶

3 *Skull* – «What vanity painting is»: Three portraits of the philosopher in the same unbuttoned shirt without glasses: two drawings (artist unidentified), two scarified round shapes depicted on different, asymmetrical levels, side-to-side with an enlarged identity photo/accusatory image; two attitudes towards mimesis, one of inventiveness and enhancement of the image, the other of servility/subordination of mimesis to the model. Under the photograph I am now able to continue reading the book's title «... aimer veut dire»; it is Mathieu Lindon's *récit* «*Ce qu'aimer veut dire*», an interrogation into the relation «father-son» (his father, the editor Jérôme Lindon) and homosexual friendships (with Michel Foucault when he was 23 from 1978 to 1984) amidst heroine and LSD "trips". I quote Lindon:

Homosexuality has transformed the rules, he notes [...]. Affection remained but the intimacy between us has become obscene. This is at the same time circumscribed and extended to my friendly family, this fictive family that has become real, to believe that I have finally found my biological friends.⁴⁷

46. NANCY 2012a, 95.

47. BIRNBAUM 2011. The translation is mine.

Before them the red book *Le Portrait* uncovered – I hardly make out its three illustrations. From Claudio Parmigianni's skull in Mary Magdalene in the desert⁴⁸ to the skull that images its empty thought⁴⁹ and from it to «the infinitely intimate stirring of the thing in itself, on itself» so many times (four precisely, «skull, skull, skull, skull»)⁵⁰ that it starts becoming an evacuated thing, an enucleated thing, a collapsed thing, painting *is*. Is the skull here the figure of concentration for phrenomesmerists who conducted certain movements on it like puppeteers without in fact applying touch on it? Or is it the figure of elusion, of resistance, of impenetrable objection? Leaving aside for the moment Georges Didi-Huberman's wonderful discussion of the figure of skull in *Être crâne* (the skull as a case, an onion, a snail, a sensory threshold, a river, an excavation, a fossil, a leaf, a place) an analysis of the skull in this case should combine cues from the *Discourse of Syncope. Logodaedalus* where Nancy discusses the problem of Kant's First Critique's translation in Latin as one of a certain privileging of bitterness over honey, a preference for "brains",⁵¹ together with Hegel's motto cited in *Corpus*: «Or again, Hegel: "the mind is a bone", he says, referring to the conformation of the human skull».⁵² I should try to define skull here with the following etymological explanation from *The Book of Skin*:

In fact, the word "scale" has in it a buried allusion to the epidermal. The scales on the surfaces of fish or snakes derive from the OE -scealu and Teutonic cognates like OHG scala, and Danish and Swedish -skal, all words which mean a shell, skin or paring. The scale in which things are weighed is perhaps related to this in that it has the form of a dish or hollow shell, as in the Danish -skaal, which also yields the word "skull", the brain-pan. Just as we measure the weight of things through the sense of pressure given by the skin, so shells are in requisition for the measurement of things relative to each other. The word "test" has a similar etymology, for it derives from the skull – or head-shaped bowl or teste in which metals would be subject to the proving effects of fire in alchemy. In both testing and scaling,

48. NANCY 2003, 68.

49. NANCY 2005, 72.

50. NANCY 1993, 353.

51. NANCY 2008c, 59.

52. NANCY 2008a, 29.

there is the lingering thought of a head that has been scooped out into a skin, or that which, itself weightless, weighs.⁵³

4 *Liquid irreversibility*: A flat depth of viscous liquidity that seals off the skull. A very liquid white portrait in black blackground on white paper hung isolated on a white wall with the philosopher enframed *as if* within Robert Desnos' nightly bottle, depicted with emptied-out spherical sockets not like pearls and implausibly stretched-out ears, literally anointed as in the rite of baptism in white paint dripping from his bald head, secreted from his eyelids and his earlobes, running from his nostrils, drooling from his mouth in thin and perilous lines of partition. Miquel Barceló's portrait monstrates, exhibits, stages the transformability of the philosopher's skin/shape/membrane, a transformability which requires a physics of the imagination that lies in the conditions of soft and sliding molecules. An inside-out of *Corpus*' index 24: «The head's simple, a combination of alveoli and liquids in a triple envelope»?⁵⁴ A leaking-out of the thing-likeness of the thing from the edges when an unconscious self, which is not truly a self withdraws into itself murmuring and attesting to a con-fused "I am"⁵⁵ («a preverbal stream that deposits on the pillow a barely visible trace, as if a little saliva had leaked out of that sleeping mouth» when precisely «sleep melts into the night»)?⁵⁶ An evidence of a descending of chains of substance according to heat changes as it is when the Cartesian wax melts into translucent oil⁵⁷ and the artist's hands get burned⁵⁸ and become liquid too in touching the melted, extended substance and my mind, I the viewer, and all the fibers of my body, are moved in this very *inspectio*?⁵⁹ It is Ginette Michaud who argues that «when Nancy speaks of painting elsewhere – this time about Miquel Barceló – it is music that gives him the resources to render sensible the malleability of matter, its transformation and mutation as well as its mutism»⁶⁰ that

53. CONNOR 2003, 269.

54. NANCY 2008a, 153.

55. Cfr. NANCY 2009b, 14.

56. NANCY 2009b, 14.

57. Cfr. NANCY 2008a, 144.

58. Cfr. NANCY 2008a, 130.

59. Cfr. NANCY 2008a.

60. MICHAUD 2005, 112.

is to say, an art as a setting down and a coalescing of t(a)ints, liquids, colors, of an intersection of energies and forces, sonorous, visual, and tactile.⁶¹ A portrait that bustles with life, a portrait that blows through its nostrils liquid light that thickens into color, a portrait that is filled with and produces a deep reverberating sound:

Away with biographies and histories, and libraries and museums [...]. I love everything that flows, everything that has time in it and becoming, that brings us back to the beginning where there is never end [...]. The great incestuous wish is to merge the great image of the beyond with the here and now.⁶²

5 *Copia Conforme* or ἐνέργεια? We know that theories of *enargeia*, invariably a rhetorical device, a figure as in ocular demonstration, a virtue of *narratio* or a power to bring that which is said under the senses by grasping the circumstances⁶³ were first developed in Classical Greece in the context of forensic oratory when the narrator wanted to produce through language the vividness of ocular proof thus turning his audience into a virtual witness or an impossible judge by making them «seem to see» the events described by him.⁶⁴ Aristotle, who never used the term *enargeia*, speaks in *Rhetoric* about a «bringing before the eyes» and a “signifying energy”, emending *enargeia* to *energeia*.⁶⁵ In *The Evidence of Film* Nancy turns to the etymological play of *enargeia* (and its Latin translation *evidentia*) tracing the word’s origin in the ancient Greek αργός, which means both “white”, “shining”, and “fast” (but “slow” in modern Greek) to denote the powerful and instantaneous whiteness of lightning, an instant that is kept in a passage that is both a suspension and a succession,⁶⁶ or a thing that continues to discontinue, it discontinues continuously towards an exposure of insignificance, and in this way, as Philip Armstrong aptly demonstrated, shaking and shifting the presuppositions of Husserlian phenomenology into a thinking of exposure as coming-into-presence⁶⁷ in this case the

61. MICHAUD 2005, 113.

62. MILLER 1934, 141.

63. PLETT 2012, 8 and WEBB 2009, 88.

64. WEBB 2009, 90.

65. PLETT 2012, 99.

66. NANCY 2001, 42.

67. ARMSTRONG 2010, 22-25.

birth-to-presence of the thinker. Brought before my eyes a montage of sequences or, what I would like to call, “(k)not” the last «affair of tableaux» or scenario: two portraits signed and countersigned in magenta and blue by Manuela, the first-last undated, a painting that is an expropriation and appropriation (homage or plagiarism?) of an existing photograph and a concealment of skin’s truth, with the wrinkles, spots, warts, peelings, cracks on the philosopher’s face,⁶⁸ or time’s writing, or writing of/through time on the skin/surface or simply the figure erased by a buckeye palette of dawn colors (light blue, hues of pink and cerise, not a mauve detachment) and the philosopher with eyes tar black encased in black and dark blue “as if” for eternity; I notice that during the filming that portrait changed places; the last-first is dated 2012 – I am sure, meaning that I see here a quite arid or mechanistic intention to re-produce Abbas Kiarostami’s play of logical and temporal priority in *Certified Copy*, that the distance in time between the two was brief; it is a bloodless, clinical evacuation of death in white, pink, grey-blue and pearl-grey hues with the camera gathering at and forging a linking of evidence first with the signature and date on the weave of the canvas (it seems that after this after color is named) and second with a single point/spirit in time situated between the eyes (it could also be «between the ribs, in the middle of the liver» – *Il était une fois, Une marchande de foie, Qui vendait du foie...–*), so «break this point and the body dies»;⁶⁹ in-between and as the camera slides towards not an epiphany of meaning or an achieved presence but in the direction of the insignificant *Le portrait*, a series of ten portraits-monograms-tonalities in profile, by the French painter François Martin; plus one that seems like a caricature. The same Indo-European root of the word *enargeia* – *arg* (both a sign and a sigh) is shared by “silver” (in Greek ἄργυρος), the soft, white, lustrous transition metal with an atomic number 47 used in currency and as an antibiotic coating in medical devices; it also stands for “grey”. It is precisely in this last linguistic possibility overlooked or omitted in *The Evidence of Film* with which the decision of thought not to give way «on the inscription of the absolute in the present without conceding any

68. NANCY 2008a, 159.

69. NANCY 2008a, 151.

treating of the absolute-as-present whatever it may be (past, present or still to come)»⁷⁰ or a rethinking of the following quotation from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* «The teaching of the concept, which is also history's inescapable lesson [...] when philosophy paints its grey on grey, then has a shape of life grown old. By philosophy's grey on grey cannot be rejuvenated but only understood»⁷¹ or a reconciliation of sorts might begin anew:

At the noisy end of the café, head bent
over the table, an old man sits alone,
a newspaper in front of him.

And in the miserable banality of old age
he thinks how little he enjoyed the years
when he had strength, eloquence, and looks.

He knows he's aged a lot: he sees it, feels it.
Yet it seems he was young just yesterday.
So brief an interval, so very brief.

And he thinks of Prudence, how it fooled him,
how he always believed—what madness—
that cheat who said: «Tomorrow. You have plenty of time.»

He remembers impulses bridled, the joy
he sacrificed. Every chance he lost
now mocks his senseless caution.

But so much thinking, so much remembering
makes the old man dizzy. He falls asleep,
his head resting on the café table.⁷²

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70. NANCY 2002, 28.

71. HEGEL 2005, xxi.

72. CAVAFY 1897.

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