

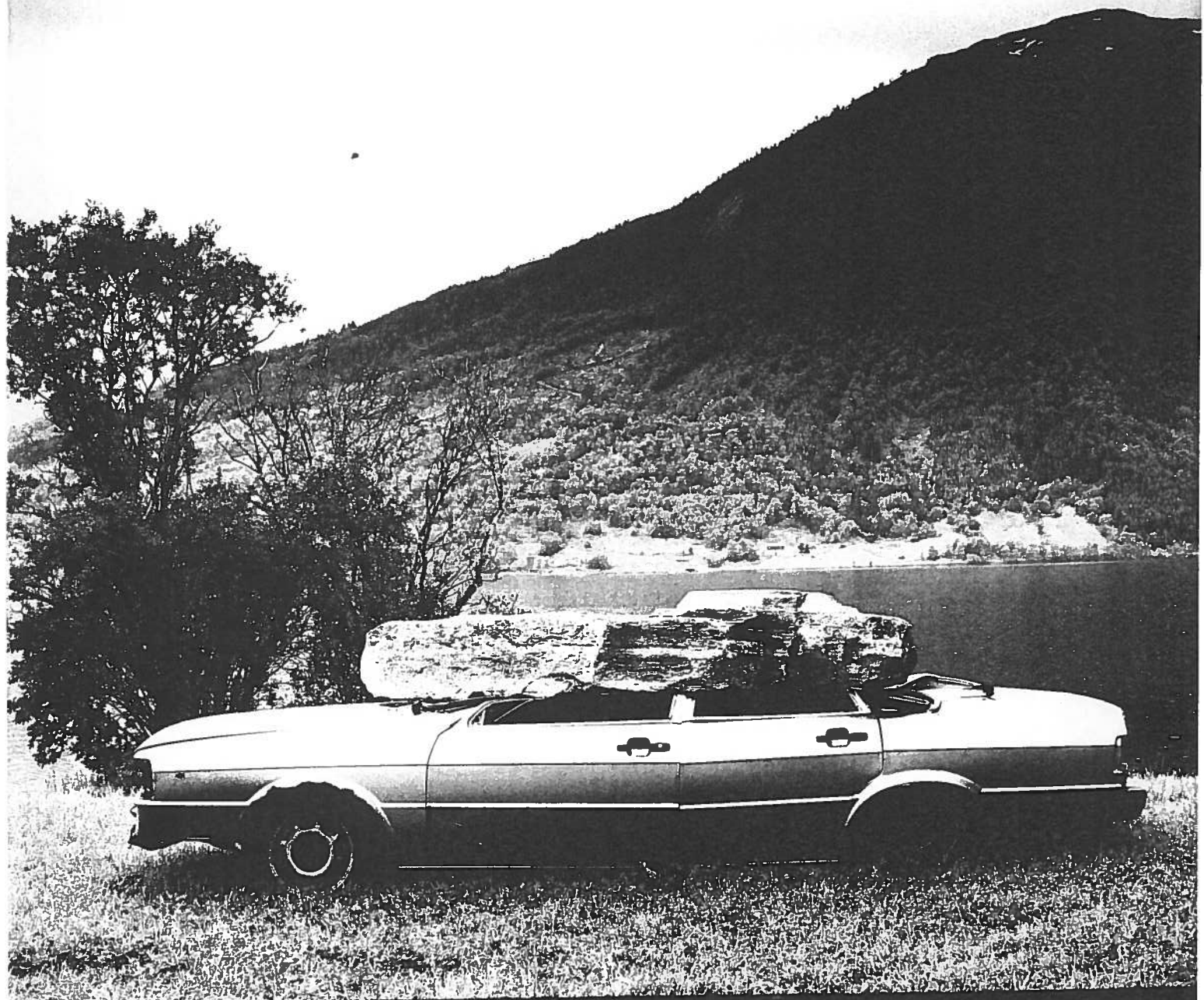
All That Is Solid

Five Reflections on Materialist
Spirituality in Contemporary Art

Vijf Reflecties over
Materialistische Spiritualiteit
in de Hedendaagse Kunst

Melk
Al Het Vaststaande

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A secular prayer

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For my uncle Romano,
who died on Christmas Day, 2008.

Because I do not hope to turn again
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn
T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*

Although I knew, I never believed it would actually come to this. To this perfect stillness in the shade of the cypress trees I remember from my youth. Will you draw comfort from their familiar presence, I wonder? Will their austere solemnity see you through?

Because I did not dare to hope, I did not believe you would turn to this. From one moment to the next, all warmth exited the confines of your embodied self. You turned to stone, frozen in the dead heart of a Northern Italian winter. Those who could endure, came to mourn; the others just turned inwards and shut their sensorial systems down. This is no country for the faint-hearted, not here, not now, in the soul-wrenching stillness that lingered behind, after you were gone.

This is my prayer for you, a singular and silent plea for you, from the desolate dream-crossed landscape where I now stand alone. Mine is a secular prayer, though you were a man of God. It is just a radically immanent prayer. What else could that be, but an extreme amount of attention paid

to you, to your lived existence and all the affective and conceptual forces you stood for? Nothing can ever alter what you have been, or erase the traces of all you enacted upon the world. Your deeds will endure: even dust can burst into flames.

A secular prayer, for a nomadic materialist, is an intensification of the inner and outer gaze — a renewed focus one applies to cumulated existence, the joys and sufferings of another. It expresses a threshold of sustainable kinship, but also a public acknowledgment of that kinship, of the bond that ties us together. Our connection rested on the fact that we did not agree on everything and needed to work at finding common ground, a plane of consistent presence that cut across the differences of space and time and made a dialogue between us possible. Sustaining and rejoicing in that bond turned into a life-long project of affirmation through joint action.

A prayer is a line of flight, an outstretched hand that connects us at the speed of light across the infinitesimal distance of the heavens. Speech without words, my prayer is an acceleration that makes time stand still.

The crystallization of a deep affinity, a secular prayer enacts a magical refraction of the sky-light even among these frozen stones, in the growing darkness under the cypress trees. They will listen, I know, in the twilight between the no longer and the not yet. So much to say and yet, no, I never thought it would come to this.

II.

'I meant to write about death', writes Virginia Woolf in her diary (of 17 February, 1922), 'only life came breaking in as usual.' Thinking is also a way of increasing the intensity of life. The brain engineers its own acceleration, a quickening of one's perception. Thinking is like being-there with and for other entities, forces. You — a trained philosopher and an ordained priest — took your thinking seriously and did it with humility and care. The result was the same: intense thinking cracks open the shield of tedium and predictability in which we wrap ourselves in order to get through the day. Philosophy-at-work gives us a measure of the possible, a taste for intensity, and a flair for the virtual: it throws us into the generative chaos of life. Life is cosmic energy, simultaneously empty chaos and absolute speed or movement. It is impersonal and inhuman in the monstrous, animal sense of radical alterity: *zoè* in all its powers. Nomadic philosophy loves *zoè* and sings its praises by emphasizing active, empowering forces against all negative odds. However, *zoè*, or 'life' as absolute vitality, is not above negativity, and it can hurt. It is always too much for the specific slab of enfleshed existence that single subjects actualise. It is a constant challenge for us to raise to the occasion, to practice *amor fati*, to catch the wave of life's

intensities and ride it on, exposing the boundaries or limits as we transgress them. We often crack in the process and just cannot take it anymore. If philosophy teaches us anything, it is that the sheer activity of thinking about such intensity is painful because it causes strain, psychic unrest and nervous tension. It also disconnects us from others in a semi-misanthropic manner. However, acceleration or increased intensity of the intellectual, is what most humans of our kind are fatally attracted to. You, my teacher and mentor, showed me how to dare, but also to endure. You taught me the golden rule: brilliance requires great depths of compassion.

Death is the ultimate transposition, though it is not final. *Zoè* carries on, relentlessly. Death is a conceptual excess: the unrepresentable, unthinkable, the unproductive black hole that we all fear, as well as a creative synthesis of flows, energies and perpetual becoming. Because humans are mortal, death, or the transience of life, is written at our core: it is the event that structures our time-lines and frames our time-zones — in so far as it is ever-present in our psychic and somatic landscapes, as the event that has always already happened. Death as a constitutive event is behind us, it has already taken place as a virtual potential that constructs everything we are. The full blast of the awareness of the transitory nature of all that lives, is the defining moment in our existence. It structures our becoming-subjects and the process of acquiring moral awareness. Being mortal, we are all 'have beens': the spectacle of our death is written obliquely into the script of our temporality. We think to infinity, against the horror of the void, in the wilderness of non-human mental landscapes, with the

shadow of death dangling in front of our eyes. Thought, however, is also a gesture of affirmation and hope for sustainability and endurance, of immanent relations and time-bound consistency. Moving beyond the paralysing effects of suspicion and pain, working across them was the key to your ethics. It did not aim at mastery, but at the transformation of negative into positive passions. This was your main ethical injunction — you taught me to put the 'active' back into activism. The qualitative leap necessary to induce a positive ethics of sustainability is a creative process, a praxis, an activity. As such it simply needs to be enacted. Your order-word or maxim was simple: 'Just do it!'

A maxim is just another word for a secular prayer. It is a statement or expression of our shared desire in the sense of *potentia*. It is also an act of faith in our capacity to make a difference and as such, it is an expression of generosity and love of the world. It is also a plea, an open question, a reaching out, or an invitation to the cosmic dance. It is an imperative, an injunction to endure in the sense both of lasting in time and of suffering in space, but it is also a spiritual gesture, a declaration of love. It is a political act of defiance of social norms and resistance against the inertia of habits and settled conventions. More importantly, it is an act of politics as autopoiesis, or affirmative self-creation, not of an atomised self, or a separate individual, but rather as a collective, multi-relational nomadic subject open to different speeds and intensity of becoming. 'Do it!' is an utterance where endurance and sustainability intersect in producing an impersonal or collective mode of singularity; the stark tone cuts down the sentimentality of dominant visions of the

philosopher, as well as the overstated authority of the master whose dogmatism and narcissism become sources of veneration. In this respect, the ethical injunction to 'just do it', to be active in the world, is the opposite of the *mots d'ordre* or the political slogan. There is no ideological assurance here of a teleologically ordained trajectory, just the humility to get on with the task, though the final destination may not be very clear. All that matters is the going, the movement.

III.

Teach us to care and not to care
Teach us to sit still
T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*

At least, that's what you taught me, when you introduced me to philosophy, soon to become my discipline of choice. Your favourites were not always mine: you lived by Plato, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Saint Augustine. I, however, tended to gravitate round Spinoza, Nietzsche and Freud — those masters of suspicion my generation fell in love with. You, on the other hand, found them wanting in generosity and power of action. Your full attention was always turned towards real-life people and you demanded of philosophy some practical help to assist and serve others. Politics for you was multi-directional *poesis*. Ascetic and generous at the same time, you defied cynical reason by compassion and concrete action. *Vita contemplativa* was always for you nothing more than an intensified version of *vita activa*. A people's person, praxis was your prayer, unbroken and flying onwards. Quick in supporting but reluctant to judge, you let the singularity of each and everyone shine gently of its own true light. You had

harsh things to say about the wild impatience that often inhabited me and my generation, but you also taught me never to trust anybody who loudly claimed to do anything for the love of God.

We did, however, agree on some key points: vitalism and the longing for eternity, to mention just two. Our vitalism — and hence our spirituality — was of the Pre-Socratic and post-modernist kind respectively. We agreed that as life is desire which essentially aims at expressing and hence extinguishing itself, by reaching its aim and then dissolving, the wish to die can consequently be seen as another way to express the desire to live intensely. The corollary is even more cheerful: not only is there no dialectical tension between Eros and Thanatos, but these two entities are really just one life-force that aims to reach its own fulfilment. 'Life', or *zoè*, we both agreed, aims essentially at self-perpetuation and then, after it has achieved its aim, at dissolution. It can be argued therefore that it also encompasses what we call 'death'. As a result — and here comes the point about eternity — what we humans most deeply aspire to is not so much to disappear, but rather to do so in the space of our own life and in our own way. It is as if each of us wishes to die only in our own fashion. Our innermost desire is for a self-fashioned, self-styled death. We thus pursue what we are ultimately trying to avoid: we are existential suicides, not from nihilism, but because it is our nature to die. Of course, this is a paradox: while on a conscious level, all of us struggle for survival, on some deeper level of our unconscious, all we long for is to lie silently and let time wash over us in the stillness of non-life. Like this perfect moment here and now, with the cypress tress casting their shady

form on the frozen ground you now inhabit — at the still point of the turning wheel. Self-styling one's death is an act of affirmation; it means cultivating an approach, a 'style' of life that progressively and continuously fixes the modalities and the stage for the final act, leaving nothing unattended. Pursuing a sort of seduction into immortality, the ethical life is life as virtual suicide. Life as virtual suicide is life as constant creation, life lived so as to break the cycles of inert repetitions that usher in banality. Lest we delude ourselves with narcissistic pretences, we need to cultivate endurance, immortality within time, that is to say death in life. Gently and productively.

Moreover, the generative capacity of this life cannot be bound or confined to the single, human individual. It rather transversally trespasses all boundaries in the pursuit of its aim, which is the expression of its potency. It connects us trans-individually, trans-generationally and eco-philosophically. Just as the life in me is not mine or even individual, so the death in me is not mine, except in a very circumscribed sense of the term. In both cases all 'I' can hope for is to craft both my life and my death in a mode, at a speed and fashion which can sustain all the intensity that 'I' is capable of. 'I' can self-style this gesture autopoietically, thus expressing its essence as the constitutive desire to endure. I called it *potentia*; you called it the spiritual soul. What we humans truly yearn for is to disappear by merging into this eternal flow of becoming, the precondition for which is the loss, disappearance and disruption of the atomised, individual self. The ideal would be to take only memories and to leave behind only footsteps. What we most truly desire is to surrender

the self, preferably in the agony of ecstasy, thus choosing our own way of disappearing, our way of dying to and as our self. This can also be described as the moment of ascetic dissolution of the subject; the moment of its merging with the web of non-human forces that frame him/her — the cosmos as a whole. For you, this point of evanescence — call it death — was linked to Christian transcendence. For me, it had more to do with radical immanence, with the totality of the moment, in which we finally coincide completely with our body in becoming at last what we will have been all along: a virtual corpse.

For you, it pointed to the resurrection of the dead in the glorious embrace of their Christian saviour. For you, the outside of the human was the divine; for me, the animal or the technological other. Still, we were steering our respective courses on parallel lines of flight. For me, at the point of their evanescence or dissolution, subjects are enfleshed entities that are immersed in the full intensity and luminosity of becoming. Theirs, however, is the brightness of phosphorescent worms, not the light of the eternal rays of some monotheistic God. This is therefore the glorious expression of the life force that is *zoè*, and not the emanation of some divine essence. Radical immanence as a mode of thinking the subject, and as a philosophical style, deflates the pretence of grandiose eternity that marks the Christian religious values you so deeply believed in. Life is eternal, but this eternity postulates the materialist dissolution of the self, the individual ego, as the necessary premise. That was a minimum point of consensus between us.

We ended up nonetheless sharing an ethics of joyful affirmation and

becoming, opposed to the economy of loss, the logic of lack and the moral imperative to dwell in never-ending and un-resolvable states of mourning. *Vita activa* was our shared passion. We wanted to move beyond both nihilism and the tragic solemnity of traditional morality, to grow to appreciate instead that death is an affirmation of the *potentia* of that life in me which, by definition, does not bear my name: 'I' just inhabits it, on a time-share basis.

We were both materialists, you on the theistic side, I on the atheist side, and we remained mirror images of each other to the end. I owe my secularity to your passionate Christian convictions. We both knew — albeit in different ways — that we simply do not know what an embodied human can do or become. We shared the fundamental passion of wonder at the complexity of living beings, and also shared faith in human progress: you as the expression of our divine essence, I out of respect for the dignity of humans. Even among these frozen stones my heart warms at the thought of such affirmative power, such loveliness of values and liveliness in action.

It is time to go. Life, this mindless force, carries on, relentless and ruthless in its over-flowing *energia*, enduring endlessly. Here then, is my refrain: farewell my body-double, my corpse, my cherished other, myself, forever both more and less than one, in an endless process of becoming other and merging with others. It is time to rest now. Because I knew that I didn't know any better, I had accepted it as evidence and cultivated the art of self-styling death as a life-form. I sat and watched and waited to see how you would do it, how you would style the last act, your final disappearing trick. I am glad I lived to tell the tale. I am so very proud to

say: you did it exceptionally well, so well that it felt real. I was left wondering in the cypress-lined alley, how perfect your exit had been on a sunny Christmas day. And I stood among the frozen stones, trying to reach out for words to speak this parting prayer: suffer us not to forget what we are capable of becoming, 'teach us to care and not to care, teach us to sit still.'