

David Dixon is dead.  
(the text)

by David Dixon

Painting is exquisite as the punishment for the thinker: denied the thoughts of his grave-diggers, his own death-face and his final curiosity, a vision of his bones—the skeleton: of which he was always aware, moment by moment emerging to that static release he, the thinker, cannot joyfully sit, a separated thing, shaking his bones.

– William Gaddis, *The Recognitions*

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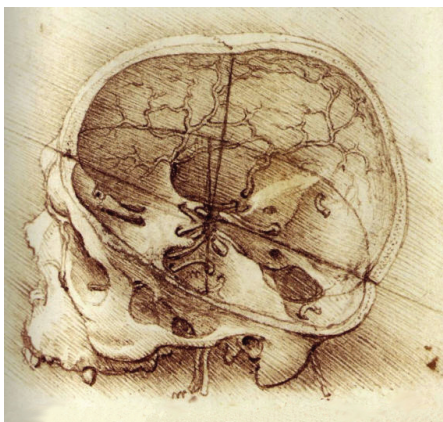
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Kota reliquary figure

## Chapter 1. I Was Born

I was born in 1968, proudly. Not born proud, but proud to have been born in such a year of revolution, change, and important deaths. Along with the famous political murders of MLK and RFK that year, Duchamp died of natural causes (art is a bloodless battle). Also dead that year was *The Author*, whether by murder or nature the jury is out, but Roland Barthes either commits or announces the crime in his essay “Death of the Author.” In 1969, Foucault follows with “What is an Author” to really put the nail in the coffin of the Authorial Subject. One could say that not only was I born in 1968, but that a new concept of “I” was born with the death of the old, that of the *Reading Subject*. This change came to “I” unbeknownst to *me* running around my backyard as a child in North Carolina; little did I know the Artist/Author coming to life in me was, in fact, already dead. Without being aware, I was part of the first generation of authors, paradoxically, born dead. We are the real ’68ers, and for us, since we are already dead, it is essential to re-situate ourselves *vis-a-vis* real, physical death and to prepare, accordingly, our cultural commemorative death ritual. Perhaps this is the one creative act left to the Author before conceding completely to the Reader, before being sublimated and disappeared: the Author is dead, now he must kill his own corpse.



To help in this disappearance we should locate where the Author was born. We do this for two reasons: one, to get an idea of who he is (or was) and two, to root out any relatives that might return to avenge his death. We know that his birth occurred sometime in the early Renaissance, the beginning of the modern era, perhaps when it became, for example, as important to consider who painted a particular painting as it was the subject depicted in the painting. If we wanted to narrow this search further—to try to locate an exact time and place—we would most probably fail, considering this birth (as with this death) is quite mythic. But forced to choose, I would go with DaVinci’s rendering of a cross-sectioned skull with demarcating lines attempting to pinpoint the soul’s location, the *sensus communis*.

This is most likely not the birth *qua* birth of the author but the first clear determination that, yes, in fact, *he is alive*. Nietzsche announces the death of God in the 19th century, but we know God really died back here at the birth of the Author: The soul and its claims to immortality, as judged by the infinite Good God, disappear under the intense scrutiny of the burgeoning scientific, rational man. God dies to birth the Author, but not only the Author, more generally, the Modern Subject, the Author of whom is

only the spokesperson, the rest are *Readers*. Further, the Author and Reader function as a dialectical pair (i.e., Authors are Readers and *vice versa*) comprising, *in toto*, the Modern Subject. *Ergo*, if we kill the Author, the Reader goes with him.

So now that everyone is dead, where shall we bury them? It is no longer meaningful in our secular materialist society to bury individuals with name plates in the holy ground of a cemetery so that his or her soul can be located for possible resurrection at the second coming of Christ, nor is pulverizing the body through cremation an adequate alternative (sweeping the ashes under the rug, so to speak). The appropriate solution, in my opinion, may exist in the use and function of the art museum and in its techniques of memorial and preservation.

Theodore Adorno writes about the museum as mausoleum in his essay titled “Valéry Proust Museum.” He begins by claiming that “Museums are like the family sepulchers of works of art.” A fact of which, he goes on to say, both Valéry and Proust are in agreement, yet “Proust. . . begins where Valéry stopped . . . [because] for Valéry art is lost when [by being placed in a museum] it has relinquished its place to the immediacy of life.” Valéry can only “mourn for works as they turn into relics.” But Proust perceives a level in art that Valéry ignores, “they [art works] are a part of the life of the person who observes them” and “[are] set free only by the historical development of the work, a level which has as its premise the death of the living intention of the work.” In other words, “it is only the death of the work of art in the museum which brings it to life.”

To enrich this discussion let us bring in Foucault and his lecture “Of Other Spaces”, where he names and locates “Heterotopias.” Museums and cemeteries fall within this category, as well as brothels, libraries, and ships, which he defines as “real places . . . which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which . . . all the other real sites that can be found within a culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.” Hence, museums and cemeteries have much in common, specifically, in that they are places that contain objects (art and corpses) preserved in a place that, through reflection, allows for a perspective out of the everyday.

Taking this another step, Boris Groys, in his essay “Immortal Bodies,” describes the Greek/Platonic notion of *Metanoia* as “a transition from an innerworldly to an otherworldly perspective, from the perspective of the mortal body to that of the eternal soul. . . . If *Metanoia* becomes impossible, the individual loses the ability to change perspective. . . . If one is merely mortal, to escape one’s position in the world is impossible.” He continues, “Although we no longer speak of a disembodied soul, still we can and must speak of a soulless body, a corpse. The soul may have no further life after the death of the body; however, the body certainly lives on after the soul passes away. Here we can definitely speak of a *life after death*.”



Asmat man with ancestral skull

If we take these four principle texts: Barthe’s “Death of an Author,” Adorno’s “Valéry Proust Museum,” Foucault’s “Of Other Spaces,” and Groys’s “Immortal Bodies,” we begin to get a picture of a possible new cultural practice where museums become the reliquaries for the historic dead, literally, not only of the dead’s cultural production but of their mortal remains. Of course, quickly, there would be a space issue, existent museums would fill up with bones pretty fast, and I am not proposing to build more museums just to locate the dead, effectively making museums nothing more than catacombs. Rather, as Groys suggests, we should reverse our view and begin “to observe the world from the perspective of the museum, that is viewing the world as a corpse.” In other words, turn the museum inside out so that the world becomes the museum and

we, *the soon to be dead*, the objects in it, gaining perspective on life “by thinking during [this] lifetime of [the] body as a corpse.” To get to the point, I’m suggesting we keep our dead in the home.

Foucault would balk at this conclusion, he does not locate Heterotopias in private spaces but rather in spaces that are publicly accessible, shared spaces where we can gather as a people, as a culture, to reflect individually and collectively. Yet public spaces (that are not virtual), in the forty years since his paper was presented, have atrophied, especially in America. He describes the cemetery, for example, as a space “that is connected with all the sites of the city, state or society or village, etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery.” This may be true, to a degree, but it describes a provincial situation where families live together in a single city, their family dead located in the local cemetery; it does not describe our contemporary far-flung family dynamic. (My mother is buried over 300 miles away; it is true that I rarely make it there to reflect.) No, our cemeteries are forgotten places on the outskirts of town, no day-of-the-dead celebrations bring us there; in fact, we never go there. It follows that the kind of reflection Foucault is asking for is increasingly absent from our culture; hence, it is time for us to consider updating his Heterotopias. Again, keep the dead in the home, take them with you when you move, keep them where you sleep and dream. Hopefully, by doing so, we can gain perspective and develop sensitivities, begin to imagine alternative, impossible to predict realities that only the *immortal body* can provide.

Yet patience, before this revolution of and for the dead can begin I first must get *Museum/Mausoleum* exhibited. I think of the work as a proposition, but it is also an art object, so where to exhibit, and when? The Author/Reader in me may be dead, but physically I am not yet; therefore, currently, the piece is in its model form, hanging in my studio, with artificial stand-ins for skull and ashes, but where should its (my) permanent resting place be?

Up to this point we have been discussing museums basically as defined by the universal survey museum. Museums that preserve objects collected from other times and cultures; bringing the past of far away places into the viewer’s present. The contemporary “living” art museum does not try to do this; it is a place designed to speak to its cultural moment, and the work exhibited there is made with the museum itself in mind—unlike, for example, Iberian sculpture or, even, Caravaggio, who labored for the church. Therefore, it is arguable that contemporary art in a contemporary art space does not qualify as Heterotopic because it does not produce a transference: an object moving from one condition to another and in the process taking on new meanings. The Duchampian readymade performed this function perfectly (manufactured commodity into art) and informs the notion of Heterotopia. Yet, the readymade’s original alchemy has become a cheap trick. Indeed, the readymade is the *status quo*, the current contemporary art climate having been built on its premises, its market now solidly established, its transference expected and predicted...

This is where *Museum/Mausoleum* enters: Behind the portrait and framed by the box with mirrors, my skull will sit as a readymade; but, unlike Duchamp’s readymade, it is not a manufactured object. Rather, it is one made by “nature” and is the ultimate in rarefied objects, there can be only one. In this sense it contradicts the manufactured multiple, bringing new life (with its death face) to the genre of readymade. For these reasons I have altered my original intention for *Museum/Mausoleum*: In the “Pre-mortem, Post-mortem Declaration,” I state that I would like my piece to be bequeathed to a universal survey museum like New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in order to be amongst its death reliquary brethren like Fayum mummies, Asmat skulls, and Kota figures. But I am a contemporary artist and *Museum/Mausoleum* is a contemporary art piece (despite its ancient pedigree); therefore, it should be exhibited and maintained in a contemporary (possibly alternative) art space. In addition, at which time that this space were to become dated in its approach, i.e., historicized, *Museum/Mausoleum* should be removed to the newest, latest kind of art space, bringing always its silent death face to the living, socially vibrant, wherever it may be, contemporary scene.

## Chapter 2. God's Secret Room

### I.

*From the point of view of the peak-experiencer, each person has his own private religion, which he develops out of his own private revelations in which are revealed to him his own private myths and symbols, rituals and ceremonials, which may be of the profoundest meaning to him personally and yet completely idiosyncratic, i.e., of no meaning to anyone else.*

—Abraham H. Maslow  
*Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences*



*Wailing Wall, Onement (Painters Painting)*  
David Dixon, 2009

The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is the last remaining wall (the western wall) of the Herodian temple built in 19 BCE and destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The wall itself is massive, the exposed sections measuring 187 feet wide by 62 feet high, and composed of 28 courses of solid rock, most of which weigh between two and eight tons. Behind this wall is the Holy of Holies, the room that contained, in its original manifestation, the Ark of the Covenant, but in its later Herodian version was left empty, being filled only by the invisible presence of God. After the temple and its inner most sanctum are destroyed, an interesting theological/architectural question ensues: Now that the room is gone, is God still there? At the time of the temple, Jewish belief had already, in theory, moved away from idol worship through the prohibition of graven images, i.e. Moses destroying the golden calf. Yet, the temple itself was really a large architectural (rather than sculptural) idol meant to contain and locate the power and mystery of God. Like the Pagans, the temple required annual rites and sacrifices, and once a year on Yom Kippur a properly sanctified Rabbi entered into the Holy of Holies and into the presence of God, keeping open the cyclical and reciprocal relationship between God and his people.

In contrast, today, the destroyed temple and its remaining Wailing Wall stand as a powerful symbol of separation between God and humanity. No believing Jew will go behind the Wailing Wall for fear of stepping into the space, unsanctified, that was (and still is, although not precisely locatable) the Holy of Holies. One might describe most religious holy sites as welcoming, as *attractive*, yet the Wailing Wall does all it can to turn one away, to push one back into the world. The cracks in the wall the only meager hope that one might squeeze through some slip of paper with a prayer, a new ritual based on separation rather than a coming-into-the-presence-of. A hard existential truth: You are on your own. This new truth is discovered with the temple's destruction, in essence the Romans pushing the Jews closer to their own monotheistic ideal: a removed God that only exists in his believer's belief. The Wailing Wall, then, is a *functioning* "broken" idol that has power because it speaks of lack, loss, and disappointment, of a god that can only be known in absence, his believer's belief filling his void.

This destruction by the Romans in 70 CE gives rise to the Diaspora, the spreading outwards of the Jewish people from the center located in the absence of the Holy of Holies. Contemporary with this destruction and dispersion is the birth of (Jewish) Christianity, and its *catholic* notion of inclusion. In

the absence of the Holy of Holies, both actions disseminate a new de-centered belief in spirit and community: the temple for believing Jews is now located in the rituals of home and hearth, for Christians it is in the heart of a personal god made man, in the body as the new temple.



*Madonna de Parto*

Piero della Francesca, 1460

## II.

*My lover is like a gazelle or a young stag. Look! There he stands behind our wall, gazing through the windows, peering through the lattice.*

—Song of Solomon, 2:9

With God no longer locatable—released and unbound by his broken idol, the temple—his spirit now one and the same (indistinguishable from) matter, how to locate his guiding truth? How to seduce him out? How to measure perfection and harness its power for guidance in human community? If God is made flesh, spilled out by the temple's entropy into matter, how do we reverse the effect, opening up, once again, the reciprocal, cyclical relationship between *noumena* and *phenomena*? Or is this desire quixotic, do we just quit searching (give up hope) and simply agree that the noumenal is (and always was) a fiction embedded in phenomena?

Within the methodologies of art and philosophy how one approaches these questions may differ. For Art, its purpose is accomplished when it has successfully touched, moved, or transformed a subjective other: A singular subject (an artist) creates an object (poem, novel, painting) that sits in the material world. Another singular subject (the reader) encounters this object and is transformed by some notion of the artist's subjectivity that remains in the object. The truth (and validity) of this transaction is in the reader's response, and if accomplished the artist has achieved her goal. It is understood that for this transference to occur the art object cannot be arbitrary, it has to be in some relation to a shared truth of experience to make sense to another. Truth is drawn out (delimited) through the shared experience. This is, it may be argued, an effective means of communication; yet, with philosophy, which also purports to communicate truths, this equation is different...

Philosophy is accomplished when a subjective writer writes a text/object that sits in the material world in order to describe, map, or model that same material world. The subjective reader is left out of the equation of veracity. In fact, the reader comes to the text to confirm some truth outside of herself, one that both she and the writer explore together, both equally excluded from, and curious about, the truth they attempt to understand (come in contact with) through describing, mapping, and modeling. The final distance left between the map/model/description and the thing it describes is one of contemporary philosophies primary problematics. The methodological history of logistical argumentation, as inherited from Aquinas, seems to have failed its goal. Ultimately, with Aquinas's method, a reader places her faith in logic more than in the god that the logic is attempting to prove, leaving a gap between the logic and god. As a result of this failure, and to close the gap, philosophy has turned to the poetic. This poetic approach to truth is more aptly represented by Augustine's text *Confessions*. With this book the reader believes as Augustine believes not because of proof, but rather because of Augustine's seductive and persuasive voice; one wants to believe as Augustine believes because of Augustine's loving

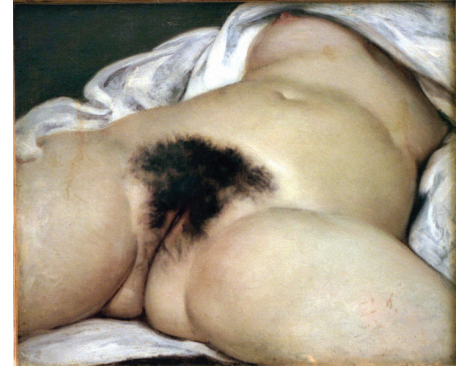
example, a validating subjective exchange more like that of art than philosophy (indeed, annoyingly, the last three “philosophical” chapters of *Confessions* are often left out of publications). This move toward the poetic on philosophy’s part has seriously complicated notions of truth. To make matters worse (or better), art has deferred to the philosophical; for example, beyond 1970’s conceptualism, a major movement in the 1990’s was that of ‘model making’ (good friend, Michael Ashkin, being a major proponent), where art stepped down from its special status as object in, and equal to, phenomena, to say that art, like philosophy, only models experience, it is not experience itself.

### III.

*Spirit is a bone.*

—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel

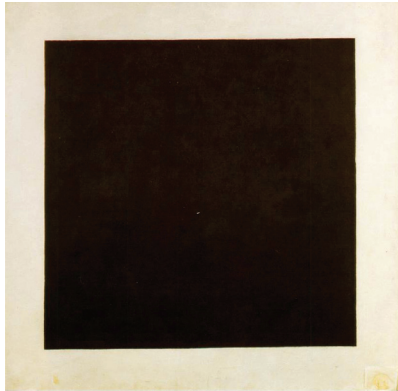
The pop singer Prince was an early influence of mine. One might even say that he was, if not a salvation, at least a release from my Southern Baptist fundamentalist home. Prince’s struggle to unfetter *agapé* through the strains of *eros* was a struggle a young pubescent Christian boy could understand. Many hours were spent trying to resolve, intellectually and physically, seemingly contradictory songs like “The Cross” and “Darling Nikki.” Nikki, as portrayed by Prince, is pornographic flesh *en route* to the divine—in his lyric, she is caught “masturbating with a magazine.” Pornography, like the Christian icon, has obligatory formal properties that are drawn out only so far as to achieve their affect in the mind/body of the viewer, nothing more or less, no embellishment beyond divine necessity. In both, phenomena is only a conduit to noumena, and it is for the noumenal *affect* that the icon exists, otherwise it is nothing more than meaningless material. Indeed, the cross is a display for Christ’s “nasty” materiality, and in Prince’s songs *agapé* is attainable through orgasmic flesh (backward masked at the end of “Darling Nikki” is “The lord is coming soon, coming, coming soon”); opposites are dissolved in the dialectic of boy inside girl (GBIORYL), a common (and biologically convenient) celebration of pleasure toward genetic reproduction. But having had prolonged contact with people who “believe,” actually and with commitment, in ways that mark them as other and condition their behavior and life choices, the fleeting pleasures of the flesh never seemed to quite measure up to the demands of eternal *agapé*. Besides, being Protestant, ours was the cross of the risen Christ, so there was never any body on it. For us the body was disappeared, made spirit; it had escaped from phenomenon. Therefore, one focused on belief in the spirit over and against the body, resulting in many (unfortunate) prohibitions. Yet, over the years, I have concluded, there is much to be learned from Southern Baptists, in that, at their best, fundamentalists do not locate “the pursuit of happiness” in phenomena, rather, they locate it in duty and commitment to noumena. They actively sacrifice phenomena, and its temporal pleasures, to noumena; in the process generating (sometimes perverse) noumenal pleasures that contradict all reason and locate happiness in places that, to all appearance, seem equivalent with despair.



*L'Origin du Monde*  
Gustave Courbet, 1866

The movie *Hunger*, by the artist Steve McQueen, should be instructional in this regard. *Hunger* is a film about the struggle in Northern Ireland between the Catholics and Protestants, a political film that is embedded in theological valuation. The film follows several prisoners, who are behind bars for political crimes, and their guards. It graphically depicts the appalling conditions of their incarceration, and how,

given the choice for gentler accommodations, the prisoners choose the horrendous, even going beyond the degradations imposed by the prison to degrade their situation further to spite, resist, and confuse, beyond all reason, their captors. Yet, their seeming madness exhibits a higher form of reason in that it goes through and beyond the (mortal) body and its vicissitudes to a more powerful (immortal) spirit that cannot be touched, incarcerated or destroyed. The film's ultimate focus is on Bobby Sands, whose hunger strike to the death in 1981 has since become legendary. It has become so not only because of his politics, but because Sands succeeds in showing, in the most graphic way possible, that happiness is more than having a good time; rather, that it is living, until the death, in line with a defining belief.



*Black Square*  
Kazimir Malevich, 1915

#### IV.

*If you believe it until you die it was true.*

—David Dixon

The space behind today's Wailing Wall, whether empty or filled with God's invisible presence, amounts to the same thing, an icon of separation. This separation pushes the modern subject back into herself, creating the internal solipsistic space that Abraham Maslow describes so well in the above quotation. Similarly, on the road to Damascus, Paul has his own highly personal visionary experience, one that causes him to reverse

his life course and follow the teachings of Christ. Paul never met Jesus the person, his mission is solely validated by his transformative vision. Paul (formerly Saul) is transformed by his vision and is remade in the image of Christ (the godhead). Paul is the same physical man as Saul, but he is now infiltrated with a transformative spirit. The spirit fills the man, is one and the same as the man, and cannot be separated from the man. (As stated above, this filling up of the body with spirit is a result of God being released from his containing secret room, the Holy of Holies, and becoming one and the same with phenomena.) Therefore, the only proof of the presence of spirit is in the life lived through the spirit, and if the validating proof of the transformation of spirit is evident only in the life lived, the meaning of the life transformed can only be assessed once the life lived has ceased (the Last Judgment). It follows, then, that one cannot fully enter the truth of one's own experience because it is only determined in retrospect. In this sense, in the absence of an all-knowing god, the truth of one's life only exists as a remembered event read by others as a fiction. The life of Jesus can certainly be understood in this regard; he is a fiction read and experienced by his believers in the present. (Properly speaking, when discussing a novel or film, characters should be referred to in the present; one does not say Jay Gatsby *loved* Daisy Buchanan, one says Jay Gatsby *loves* Daisy Buchanan.) Jesus is then eternally present, his fiction built on the destroyed, entropic, and disseminated temple's empty Holy of Holies. Following in this tradition, truth is a fiction that is not quixotic; rather, it is a fiction that we enter into the presence of in the present (like the Rabbis of old) by ritually, cyclically and reciprocally *reinventing the wheel* of hope: Belief in belief is belief enough.

### Chapter 3. The Grave is Empty

*A Burial at Ornans* was painted by Gustave Courbet in 1848; seven years later, in 1855, he paints *The Artist's Studio: A Real Allegory Summing up Seven Years of my Artistic and Moral Life*. These are both mammoth paintings and important statements in Courbet's *oeuvre*, hence, as the complete title for *The Artist's Studio* indicates, it is important to read these paintings together...



*A Burial at Ornans* is twenty-two feet wide and parades forty-five people across its surface. There is no hierarchical ordering through composition or attention to painterly detail: the dog is painted with as much attention and care as the church parsons. Jesus, who has been the center of so many paintings, is attached to a cross on the parson's staff; he is small, artificial, off-center and in the sky, separated from the other elements and people in the

painting by a distinct horizon. Rather than Christ, there is a dark, empty grave at the center. Next to the grave is a skull that allegorically points to the black pits meaning: This is empty death, a void at the center of living. Because of this void, there is no longer an orchestrating principle with which to hierarchically organize people. The void liberates while at the same time emptying meaning. This double action leads to Courbet's non-hierarchical composition, and defines the existential, modern subject.



In *The Artist's Studio*, again, many characters appear; yet, this time, Courbet is at the center of the painting. For years, art historians and everyday viewers have struggled to resolve who and what is depicted in this painting. Not to get bogged down in minutia, we will stick to a simple, fairly common, reading: the painting is a time-line reading left to right with the past of the Romantic tradition on the left and the future of Courbet's Realist compatriots on the right. What is important to our reading is that Courbet is in the center of the painting

and that he depicts himself painting a painting, putting himself in the active present between the past and future, orchestrating meaning through his artistic production. He is in the center of time, filling the void opened by the *Burial's* empty grave with himself. Yet, being a true believer in democracy and a leveler of hierarchies, Courbet does not keep himself in this center for long...

As noted above, in *The Artist's Studio*, Courbet paints himself painting a painting. The painting he paints is set on an easel and is of an empty landscape, a “pure” landscape, one without any recognizable subject other than the landscape itself. In the years after *The Artist's Studio* he goes on to execute



many of these landscapes, basically defining the genre, and changing the direction of his work. Earlier in his career, as a younger man, Courbet painted many self-portraits. In these portraits he posed himself in different guises and assumed varying expressions, even going so far as to proudly designate himself the most arrogant man in France. One might say he was a narcissist, but he is a narcissist in the best possible sense: He is highly self-reflective. Eventually Narcissus *exhausts* his own reflection and falls into it, disappearing. This is what Courbet accomplishes with his landscape paintings, through them Courbet becomes invisible. Hence, the subject of these paintings is not represented solely on the

surface. Indeed, these paintings must have looked incredibly bare to Courbet's contemporaries, in many there are no people or houses, no recognizable subjects, only landscape, like an empty stage. The central issue with these paintings is that when looking we stand in the position the painter once stood while painting. The subject then is the painter seeing and painting and us looking, and while looking we see as the painter saw, standing in the position that he once stood. Indeed, we become the painter painting, embodying the sublimated subject of Courbet as we reconstruct his painting through our own subjectivity. The narrative then becomes us keeping Courbet alive; he steps outside the painting and embodies us (which is kind of creepy). With these landscapes one really gets the feel for the undead nature of art Adorno describes in “Valéry Proust Museum,” and the empathetic exchange of subjectivities that leads to a kind of immortality. But this is not an immortality without pathos, one must disappear to attain it, one must lose oneself to live in others. One does not do this by simply dying, but by becoming invisible, by *finding oneself* outside of time and space in the void of the empty grave.

Before going further into the successes of this “post-narcissistic” subjective transference, I want to first give two examples of failed transference through the characters of Popeye and Iago, using their defining phrases “I am what I am” and “I am not what I am.” Despite the fact their statements about themselves are diametrically opposed, both Popeye and Iago end up in a similarly violent place. Popeye, after eating his spinach, gleefully goes about the business of beating up Brutus and others. He never questions himself, instead uses his “I am what I am” as justification for all action. He makes no apologies and is completely, tautologically free of guilt. In his righteousness, he feels no culpability and no need for self-reflection. He does not doubt. He does not think. He acts, and one can easily see a national trend in this American sailor. Shakespeare's Iago, on the other hand, thinks. He does not slip into tautology, but rather its opposite, a twisted, irreconcilable separation. He is a radically divided subject that reflects but sees no recognizable self there. Unlike Popeye, Iago is not dim; he is highly intelligent, but pathologically so, and his bitter cynicism strikes-out in jealous disgust at the unifying love of Desdemona and Othello, a love of which he knows he is incapable. Although the statements of each are opposite, Popeye and Iago both arrive at a similarly destructive place because neither is capable of thinking the self.

Another Shakespearian character, Hamlet, will help us go further: If we cancel out the equivalent “...what I am” from Popeye and Iago's respective “I am what I am” and “I am not what I am,” we end up with “I am” and “I am not,” statements that come very close to Hamlet's famous “To be or not

to be?" Also, "I am"/"I am not" is practically a graphic illustration of the myth of Narcissus. Yet, when Narcissus looks into the reflecting pool he does not see what he is (I am what I am) or what he is not (I am not what I am); rather, he sees his reflection, his voided, emptied self. This voided self is the self that is seen in the empty grave, the self hollowed out by its potential non-being. Narcissus exhausts the self through looking at this reflected other, falling and disappearing into it, not dying but being transformed. This is Hamlet's conclusion at the end of his play when he answers the question "to be or not to be?" with "let be" and accepts the (tragic) consequences of his (non) actions. The narcissist, after having disappeared into his own reflection, the void of his being, is now open to experience without resistance. He "lets be," and is no longer definable in any common use of the term as *narcissistic*, therefore, we designate this disappeared narcissist *genius*: a person who is positioned to empathetically experience his or her difference in relation to others. In our definition, genius is not quantitative and hierarchical; it is not being really, really smart. It is qualitatively different than intelligence, and precedes intelligence. It motivates thought, and is the animating spirit found in the intensive void of the grave that we all hold in common and empathetically share. Unlike the typical understanding of genius (that of an intelligence in the top .1 percentile) our genius is a leveler of difference. Everybody possesses genius; it is a matter of recognizing one's exceptional desire. Two works-of-genius about genius will help us conclude the chapter...

*Remembrance of Things Past* and *Invisible Man* are two books that have very similar structures in that each ends with its beginning. At the end of both novels, the protagonist, who is the first-person narrator, is sitting down to write the book we, the readers, have just read. In other words, the book we are reading is not yet written when we read it. Oddly, as we finish the book, the author, whose life story we just read, is about to begin writing his life story. We then, in finishing, are as he is at the end of the book, full of the life about to be remembered, and in remembering the book we remember the life the author is forever poised to begin writing. In the logic of the structure, he never writes the book, only we, by reading it, write it. This is a perfect transference of subjectivity, and a complete empathetic leveler of difference; in fact, it is beyond empathy, *we* become *them*, the reader becomes the author. This is genius at work.

Further, Proust and Ellison (and their writing protagonists) must sequester themselves from their respective normative societies to find this genius that allows for the subjective transference (Proust in his bedroom and Ellison in his underground room of light). In other words, they must make themselves invisible to their present in order to discover themselves through their work. This is especially moving when one thinks of the great cultural differences between them, yet both must enter the same classless (and genderless) protean void to discover themselves in us. They must become dead to themselves in order to live in others. This is difference beyond culturally ascribed labels; rather, it is difference that depends on the inherent genius of every individual.



1. *David Dixon (the space where my skull will be)*, 2009
2. *Museum/Mausoleum*, 2007
3. *Coffin*, 2009

## Chapter 4. Santa Teresa aveva un sorriso molto ampio. (Saint Teresa had a very big smile.)

David Dixon is dead. This is truly an end. The piece is sent off to Hamza.<sup>1</sup> If he doesn't respond, after such a good interaction, who ever will? And how could I do better? So just end it. It's the best way to continue the narrative, frankly, by ending it, the work, the artwork. The film makes a claim that some transition has occurred, so prove it by ending it, the artwork. "David Dixon" then would be the personage that made art; now dead, the rest of him is free to move on, to reproduce, marry somebody, be a good husband, a good man. Put the revolution down. Accept one's lot. Just live and die, stop the commentary. Give up the need to participate in some large historic, pseudo-heroic narrative. A vain notion to begin with, both 'vain' as in *conceited* and 'vain' as in *futile*. "If you believe it until you die it was true,"<sup>2</sup> my rallying cry, unassailable. But what if I stop believing, what then? You re-imagine yourself, retire, start anew, really, *anew*. New priorities, ones without art, or invest in someone else's art for a change...

I could start again with new work; there are plenty of ideas. But now that Hamza has finished my last piece,<sup>3</sup> the last piece for my skull, I could just stop. If there is no public or context for the work, does it actually exist?<sup>4</sup> The film was meant to assume this responsibility. It was meant to contextualize *Museum/Mausoleum* since the likelihood of exhibition was remote, and, indeed, it certainly hasn't been exhibited. But now it exists in the context of the film, a film made by me. So maybe it doesn't need the institution, art's institutions. I made my own contextual institution, the film, which situates the singular work, *Museum/Mausoleum*, within a personal and historic narrative. Therefore, no need for institutions and their representatives to contextualize it. But then the film needs to be contextualized; who's going to do that? That's where Hamza comes in. He's been co-opted into my narrative,<sup>5</sup> the story of my work. Not the movie's narrative, but the life that is a context for the movie. The life narrative that produced the art.<sup>6</sup> We'll see in a couple days.<sup>7</sup> He needs to play out the next scene and circulate the film along with the related artwork. I died in my creation (the film),<sup>8</sup> now it's up to him to deal with it. I've passed the baton. It's his work now. Besides, it was his idea anyway. I'm no longer available to maintain and promote. I'm gone...

If you're gone then prove it, put down the art. Put down the ideals, the identity. Lose the assertive self, the one who needs recognition, confirmation, acknowledgment, accolades. Love just one.

Who needs the world and all its time and history? Isn't this what you're asking for? The nerve. You are already positioned in the present between the past and future, no need to insist, no need to be in constant dialogue with the phantoms of past and future. Talk to, be with, one love, now. That is more than enough. That's all we want from you. It is a noble cause to silence the 'world-man,' the one who craves everything, too much. It's nothing but Western hubris, really. The bourgeois individual is all. Pathetic. Put him to rest in the *Museum/Mausoleum* he created, or in *Coffin*, or in *David Dixon (the space where my skull will be)*. Three pieces for one skull!<sup>9</sup> Truly megalomaniacal. His voice is not needed, or wanted. Wake-up, to go down. Hamza will deal with it. The curator, the art dealer, the historian, the critic, the collector, the slave trader, the ones in charge, the ones who control circulation, the market, the press, the economy. You've got to fit their narrative, man, not the other way around. Naive, dangerously naive. Leave it. Make your own narrative, which you have, but I mean really this time. Leave it and their expectations that have become yours. Their economy, their world, step away; let them have it. Retire, like Duchamp, give it up for chess, but without the accolades, even more noble that way. Still looking for nobility? As if somebody is watching. Leave it, the whole author/reader dynamic. Leave it to somebody else. Let them have it. Concede defeat. Truly, David Dixon is dead. It is over, move on. Give it away to no one. Stop willing it to live, a meaningless expense of energy. You've failed to create the need in others. No big deal, just no fertile ground there. Hoe a different row. There's no need except for yours, so change needs. No reason to fight, or get upset; just let it go, "let be." It will be like it never happened. David Dixon will be dead. The film will still be around (in closets somewhere) but David Dixon will be dead, as the film confirms (if it is ever watched), so do it. You yourself are demanding it. It is best this way. The art economy is corrupt anyway; everybody knows this. Why soil yourself through participation in its discourse, down in the trenches, bottom-feeding in Brooklyn? Forty-two and never been kissed.<sup>10</sup> Hiding out in grad school, in exile. Exiled from what? From somebody else's narrative? That's my point; you can't be exiled from your own narrative, so escape from the romantic, arrogant dream to which you have succumb: the celebration of self. How vulgar. Way too expressionistic. I mean, listen to you...

The Slave Trader, yes, OK, there is this critique, the colonialist insight. The film's admittance of complicity to trade in exploited commodity, to trade in human value, i.e. the art market.<sup>11</sup> The Dutch West India Company and the valuation of the Enlightenment individual in collusion with the genocide of slave trade (winners are losers with duplicitous noble ideals); but we're learning, apologies all around. And the film's father/son relationship, the father's love for the son, the father as hero (love trumps belief, the true Christian message), and the avant-gardist, progressive son as victim, as martyr. But victim of what? His own vanity, no doubt...

But the son wins in the end (he would, he wrote the film), the Malevolent Messiah (or real life Hamza Walker) saves him by coming to put him into circulation, into the art market (the bizarre bazaar), and he gets his real father to watch the film. This putting my dad in the awkward position of wanting to be the hero, like the father in the movie. Cornered, checkmate! He must carry out his son's knuckleheaded scheme if he wants to be a hero, as all fathers do. So now he must take his son's head, upon death, to Oklahoma City in a cooler, like in the film. This is how the father must prove his love. This is how the father must prove his love? The arrogance! The disrespect! Talk about Oedipal struggle. Did I mention the father is a preacher?

Yet, lest we forget, it was meant to be a prototype, *Museum/Mausoleum*, that is. The idea, the "Pre-mortem Post-mortem Declaration," states:

But I imagine this not only to preserve my self (wherever and whatever that is), but also to establish a possible new protocol towards the dead. To be remembered as I have outlined here has to be the antithesis of mass graves and genocide. My hope is

that respect fostered by close proximity to the dead could possibly undermine inhumanity in life.

A prototype for others, a new ritual of remembrance, a return to ancestral veneration through skull preservation, a practice snuffed out by Christian missionaries, but now re-imagined with a secular materialist twist<sup>12</sup> as a preserving of our most permanent parts, the bones: the skull, the empty seat of identity.<sup>13</sup> And an empty box, *David Dixon (the space where my skull will be)*, a piece I will never see completed (something to look forward to in death) or that is only completed once I am dead. Not a self-portrait (the title more label than title) but an empty box filled with an absent presence (intimations of the Holy of Holies), then once I'm absent (dead) it will be filled with my presence (skull).<sup>14</sup> In strict materialist sense, my skull will be me after death; especially if the skull is considered with attached personal history and existing within a living artwork, not as an anonymous specimen for detached investigation as if donated to science. This is not just about the artist's egocentric need for recognition (although it is), because he's not even there; he's dead, or undead.<sup>15</sup> It's the artist as metaphor, the creative example, the re-inventor of hope.<sup>16</sup> That's our job, to explore the self (in social-political context, of course) and to re-invent hope, hence, if you're good at it, the social-political context gets changed, too. But how to do this if not put into circulation, into the economy of meaning that is to be changed? Hamza should be getting back soon. He'll fix everything. He gets it. He gets the empty center of the Cartesian subject,<sup>17</sup> the "you can't enter the truth of your own experience."<sup>18</sup> He gets it; he's going to fix it all just like the Malevolent Messiah does in the film. He's even African-American like the actor. Perfect. He needs to save my white ass. Reparations, indeed. Now he gets to have my skull. Do with it what you will. Circulate it in the art market; see if I care. Why stagnate in the cold earth when the soul no longer moves to heaven? At best, he'll probably store me in a closet...

Which is fine, just leave it be. David Dixon is dead. Silence the voice; silence the desires. Reproduce genes not memes. Do it the old fashioned way, the biological way, spread yourself genetically, the "unselfish" way, give to a child, your child. Give up the metaphoric creation (art) for the real creation (kid). There the inclusion is actual, the economy of family set, the responsibilities clear, the demands evident.<sup>19</sup> Create that. Give yourself over to that. Live that. You don't even have to ask anyone's permission. There's no need for inclusion in any discourse, you include yourself in, automatically. No beseeching necessary, no begging, no convincing, no arguing, debating, proving, persuading, selling... just loving, locally. Narrow your perspective, your scope. Focus on the simple, the immediate. Give up on the 'event' writ large. My god, write the 'event' small.<sup>20</sup> Everyone will be grateful, including you. You want *grace*, there it is. Give yourself up to the present; speak not to the past and future (phantoms). Get out of the studio. Enough of you is there. David Dixon is dead. Leave the carcass behind, and don't even care if it makes it into the damned box. Let somebody else worry about it. But they won't, and that's as it should be. Bury the skull in a traditional wedding, I mean funeral. Let the empty box stand as failed ideation nowhere for all time, not as a new prototype to be exploited and mass-produced like all other ritual. Who needs a new prototype anyway? Let death rituals evolve on their own. Perhaps it's for good reason that colonialist Christians squashed the practice of skull preservation in Central Africa. It's barbaric, could lead to cannibalism and the devaluation of life. Who knows? All I wanted, in the end, was my mother's skull, for that desire to be acceptable. But she wouldn't have gone for that, nor should she have, good god-fearing woman that she was. It's grotesque, perverse. Just leave the skulls alone. They're clichés anyway. Besides, David Dixon is dead, so he doesn't care. He's finished. It is finished. The whole messiah complex is over, thank god. Let us now move on. Amen. No one asked for any of this in the first place. Good. Take me away. I'm going to go open a bar, or maybe a sex shop, perhaps help the homeless, finally.

Notes:

1. Hamza Walker is head curator at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, an institution with a long history of intensive engagement with contemporary art. He visited my studio a couple months ago and in the course of one of the best visits I've ever had (one where not only did he accept the work, but understood its implications) he suggested I make a piece, which he proceeded to describe. He felt this piece would improve upon *Museum/Mausoleum*, which is, in his opinion, too "metaphoric." He told me if I were to make this piece he would "buy it." At first I interpreted this "buy it" as being he would "agree with it" or "accept it" as an idea. But he continued, saying he would have it made to my specifications if I were to draw up a design (fitting current contemporary modes of production). I said, no, no, I would make it myself and send it to him in the mail, and, since it was his idea, I would give it to him. Considering the responsibility that comes with this "gift," it is hardly "free." Understanding this, it was with some trepidation that Hamza took my hand and shook on it. This is how I came to make *David Dixon (the space where my skull will be)*.

2. This quote is mine, but this takes it further: "...in the case of Christianity, the Event (Crucifixion) becomes a Truth-Event 'after the fact', that is, when it leads to the constitution of the group of believers, of the engaged Community held together by fidelity to the Event." Žižek, Slavoj, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Center of Political Ontology*, p.141

3. "...but in an even greater number of cases, a new work is produced by an artist in collaboration with a curator, with a conscious goal to be placed in a certain theoretical, political, or artistic context. And in all these cases, we can no longer speak of the authorial autonomy of the artist because he or she, from the beginning, is involved in a collaborative, collective, institutionalized, productive practice." Groys, Boris, "Multiple Authorship"

4. "The object that is not exhibited is not an artwork, but merely an object that has the potential to be exhibited as an artwork." Groys, "Multiple Authorship"

and

"Economy gives visibility." Mondzain, Marie-José, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, p.25

5.



For Hamza, *David Dixon (the space where my skull will be)*, 2010, photograph, 29 x 41": Photographed a few days before mailing the object to Chicago.

6. "We grasp our lives in narrative." Taylor, Charles, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, p.47
7. According to certified mail, on January 22, 2010, someone at the Renaissance Society in Chicago named D. Gann signed for my package addressed to Mr. Hamza Walker containing *David Dixon (the space where my skull will be)*.
8. "Along the same lines, it was already Schelling who conceived God's fall into time, his break out of eternity, not as a fall proper, but as the resolution of the supreme contradiction, of the divine madness, the overcoming of the divine claustrophobic self-enclosure into the Openness of time: God created the temporal universe in order to save himself from his own madness. . . . God prior to creation (prior to *logos*) is a God caught in infinite pain, and all (possible) particular worlds are so many divine attempts to find peace with and in himself, to create an entity that would serve him as a support of his stability. God is not primarily Reconciliation but the infinite pain of self-tearing-apart" Zizek, Slavoj, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic*, p. 104 footnote 71
9. Yes, I made three pieces that require my skull after I die. This creates complications, no doubt, considering there can be only one. But by having three pieces that need a singular, limited resource, a system of exchange will need to be developed where the owners of said pieces share, in some agreed upon fashion, the skull, creating an economy of exchange that keeps my skull in circulation, in motion, and dynamically alive.
10. I will be forty-two on January 31, 2010 and have yet to have a solo show in New York City (market central). Surprisingly, DeKooning had his first solo show in New York at the advanced age of forty. This should be a source of some hope, but his was a much different art scene, there were approximately two galleries. Besides, I've had an excess of hope, bordering on the delusional, so let's just give up expectations and marvel in a present state of grace.
11. "The (art) installation demonstrates the material of the civilization in which we live particularly well, since it installs everything that otherwise is merely circulated in our civilization." Groys, "Multiple Authorship": This quote accurately describes the function of the Duchampian ready-made which 'delays' a manufactured object by taking it out of its normative economic flow and installing it in a museum gallery or art space for scrutiny. Almost one hundred years after *Fountain*, this action is now a well-worn trope, artists and dealers now regularly giggling to the market to sell their dirty laundry (literally, Büchel's Socks: \$30,000). The readymade, as Duchamp conceived it, has certainly lost some of its criticality. Indeed, arguably, it has created one of the most virulent markets ever known to man. My skull attempts to take advantage of this trend, not by offering a manufactured object that needs 'delay' to be seen, but by offering a natural (not manufactured) one that needs circulation to live, sucking life out of our art market's dark dealings.
12. "Materialism has nothing to do with the assertion of the inert density of matter; it is, on the contrary, a position which accepts the ultimate void of reality—the consequence of its central thesis on the primordial multiplicity is that there is no "substantial reality," that the only "substance" of the multiplicity is void." Zizek, *Monstrosity of Christ*, p. 71
13. "The head is the most noble part of the body, that in which life resides, and it is for this reason that one preserves only the crania of the ancestors." Henri Trilles, missionary to Africa, from *Eternal Ancestors, The Art of the Central African Reliquary*, LaGamma, Alisa, p.194
14. "(The icon is) the space of that which is not in space." Mondzain, p.163
15. "The modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now*." Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author": Therefore,

if I am a 'scriptor' born with the text, and there is no me ("a being preceding and exceeding writing") outside the text, and the text, in this case, is my skull (me, after death) which is to be "eternally written *here and now*," then I am immortal! This is at least as good as the misty notion of eternal spirits in unknown places like heaven. Make no mistake, we are talking here about salvation, about survival. A fight to the finish to avoid ending, ruthlessly played out in public, in front of others, in museums across the land and maintained by a community of believers.

16 "There is a set of ideas and intuitions, still inadequately understood, which makes us admire the artist and the creator more than any civilization ever has; which convinces us that a life spent in artistic creation or performance is eminently worthwhile." Taylor, p.22

17. "The ultimate result of the Enlightenment is thus the absolute singularity of the subject dispossessed of all substantial content, reduced to the empty point of self-relating negativity, a subject totally alienated from the substantial content, including its own content." Zizek, *Monstrosity of Christ*, p.58.

and

"Self-consciousness is portrayed not as life inside a Cartesian representational bubble but rather in terms of its distinctive and paradoxical temporality. . . .To be self-conscious, in Bailly's rendering, is to confront one's own embodied mortal existence as unfolding among things, before others, in time, and toward death." Martin, Wayne M., "Bubbles and Skulls: The Phenomenological Structure of Self-Consciousness in Dutch Still Life Painting"



*Vanitas Still-life with Portrait of a Young Painter*

David Bailly, 1651

"One cannot be a self on one's own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors...a self only exists in what I call a 'web of interlocation.'" Taylor, p.36

18. This quote is mine, or maybe I cribbed it from Zizek; here's another from *The Ticklish Subject*, p.159, "The 'death drive' is thus the constitutive obverse of every emphatic assertion of Truth irreducible to the positive order of Being: the negative gesture that clears a space for creative sublimation."

19. "The institution of the monastic life was seen (by the Protestant Reformation) as a slur on the spiritual standing of productive labour and family life." Taylor, p.21

20. "We thus have two lives, the finite biological life and the infinite Life of participating in the Truth-Event of Resurrection." Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject*, p.147