NATASHA LUSHETICH:

ON THE PERFORMATIVITY OF ABSENCE

Death no longer has a stage. [1]

Jean Baudrillard

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Much like Monty Python's chartered accountants / pirates in the 1983 film *The Meaning of Life*, the employees at the Progressive Corporation, Cleveland, Ohio, lead an exciting and multifaceted life as they perform their daily insurance brokering and managerial activities amidst the second largest non-musea affiliated art collection in the world. Lagging only slightly behind the German Deutsche Bank, the Progressive collection prides itself on the fine balance between some of the biggest names of contemporary art, such as Andy Warhol and Joseph Kosuth, and new and daring work by emerging artists in a variety of media. In the words of Toby Devan Lewis, the founder of the Corporate Art Programme, the purpose of the 6,000 artworks on display is to 'challenge and inspire people's creativity and originality while serving as a visual reminder of the importance and necessity of risk-taking and innovation. Artwork in the collection is often provocative and has fostered discussion and passionate controversy through the years'[2]. The word 'collection' may be slightly misleading in this context as it usually refers to a clearly delineated museum or gallery space, separate from the rest of life, in which the visitor finds him/herself only if he/she intends to view the collection. In contrast to this, the artwork on display at the Progressive has a pervasive, live-in function. Rather like a live-in au-pair, it can be encountered in the kitchen, corridor, drawing room or in the garden.

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1 Baudrillard, J., *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. S.F.Glaser, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, Minnesota, 1994, p.163

2 art.progressive.com, site accessed 20/1/2008

Indeed, the masterfully architectured Progressive campus in Cleveland is much more than just a work place, it is an effective extension of both domestic / private and public spaces. I use the word 'space' here as derived from Michel de Certeau's The Practice of Everyday Life in which he defines space as '[P]racticed place…[T]he street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers' [3]. Similarly, the frequently visited on-site restaurants, shopping malls, mini town squares adorned with fountains, libraries, gyms, tennis courts and swimming pools, are transformed into a fusion of publico-private spaces as the same employee can, for example, be spotted in a dressing gown on leaving the sauna in the morning and wearing a smart business suit during lunch in the afternoon. This fusion of the private and the public is further amplified in the part of the Progressive campus designated as the work place, where the insurance consultants' cubicles abound in personal paraphernalia, ranging from little furry animals and photographs to personal mottos and snatches of poems. A tour of the Progressive collection is therefore just as much a tour of the artworks, found in offices, corridors, restaurants, the library and the gym alike, as it is a tour of the Progressive amenities, and also a tour of the company's extremely friendly employees, ever ready to share an anecdote or crack a joke. In other words, a tour of the Progressive is a tour of the company's corporate culture, its ethos as exemplified by the provocative and innovative nature of the artwork; its material components, exemplified by the luxurious amenities; its ideology as practiced by the fluid and fused business-public-private spaces; and finally – the practitioners of the corporate culture, the Progressive employees. I don't think I will be too far off the mark if I say that this combination of staunch and passionate work ethic, a 'mens sana in corpore sano' attitude to the psycho-physical growth of the individual, and, a dedication to continuous education, (although bizarrely reminiscent of Lenin's 888 formula which proscribed the daily dose of 8 hours of work, 8 hours of rest and entertainment and 8 hours of education to the proletariat [4]) is to a significant degree representative of what the media refers to as 'core' American values. And that - if we borrow a visual simile from Achbar's, Abbott's and Bakan's 2004 documentary *The Corporation* where the stars on the American flag are replaced by the leading corporations' logos [5], thus referring to the growing irrelevance of

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[3] Certeau.de, M., *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. S. Rendall, University of California Press, Berkley, 1984, p.

[4] Lenin, V. I., *Collected Works*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1960, p.182

[5] Achbar, M., et al, *The Corporation* DVD, MTD5178, 2004

geographical and political mapping and the growing importance of corporate power mapping - the Progressive may well find itself among the chosen fifty, not in terms of its turnover or assets, but in terms of its exemplary embodiment, or incorporation, of 'core values'.

I visited the Progressive collection in autumn 2007. Towards the end of a very exhaustive and truly impressive tour, my guide, Kristen Bly, took me to a spacious office where apart from artworks exhibited on the walls, I could also see the Progressive Year Report, a curious cross-fertilisation between art and business, for which the Progressive commissions a different artist every year. While chatting to the employees in the office, my attention was drawn to an object inconspicuously situated in the corner behind me, next to a glass wall. Placed on a white plinth, approximately the height of a bust plinth, the object reminded me at once of a funeral urn and Aladdin's lamp, the magic lamp from The Book of One Thousand and One Nights which, when rubbed, summons a genie capable of fulfilling every wish on earth. On closer inspection I noticed a few drops of condensation on the object as well as an inscription from Little Gidding, a poem by T.S. Eliot:

> 'The only hope or else despair
> Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –
> To be redeemed from fire by fire…'

The inscription went on but I was too perplexed to read on and turned to my guide with question marks in my eyes. Kristen said it was hand-blown glass containing human breath, the breath of somebody who had died in a fire. Containing breath of a dead human being? I couldn't quite wrap my brains around it. Here is the full story: In spring 2007, John Crews, an Injury Operations Manager at the Progressive for more than thirty years died in his high rise condominium in Long Beach, California, when a fire broke out. John Crews was seen helping other residents evacuate the building but did not survive the fire himself.

Wishing to create a special memorial for John Crews, the Corporate Art Curator of the California branch contacted T.R. Ericsson, a Cleveland-born artist whose several works were already in the Progressive collection, to create new work. Drawing largely on the legacy of Pop and Conceptual Art, T.R. Ericsson uses *objets trouvés* (found objects) as well as insignificant, throwaway materials to explore what he calls

'the private or hidden life of an individual'[6]. He creates works whose nascent intermediality stems from their performativity as well as from the implied temporal duration inherent in either the process, or the materials or objects used. Suffice to look at *Waiting II*, created by applying layers of nicotine / smoke to paper, or *I just Want to Go To Sleep* which insinuates temporally cumulative grief or desperation, or, *Memorial Day* consisting of phone messages the artist's recently passed-away mother left on his answering machine in the 1990s, messages engraved in marble where the solidity and the durability of the material reverberate with the ephemerality and the transience of the voice that once uttered the messages. T.R. Ericsson's work operates at the level of the residue of time and actions performed within this time, and *And All Shall Be Well*, the work he created as a memorial portrait of John Crews, is no exception in this respect.

When commissioned to make the work, T.R. Ericsson contacted John Crews' colleagues and family in order to, in his own words, 'try and get a sense of the person John Crews was' [7]. A young colleague of John Crews' showed the artist a huge inflated toy, a deer head with antlers, something John Crews had purchased in jest to decorate his office. The same colleague told T.R.Ericsson how while packing John's office he was about to deflate the toy when he remembered that it was John's breath inside and instead chose to preserve it. The breath was thus an *objet trouvé*. The artist subsequently transferred the breath from the balloon to an air-tight glass vessel by means of a specially designed fitting that allowed the vessel to be filled with water in such a way that the air released into the glass displaced the water coming out. Silicone was used to seal the vessel once the air was caught inside and in this way the work was made air-tight, which is what produces condensation. Depending on the changing room temperature, the work 'perspires' making the inside of the glass fogged over and thus creating precisely the trace that warm breath of a living human being leaves on a glass surface. The breath captured inside the vessel, although technically no longer belonging to a living being, appears to be mimicking the motions of life, performing the illusion of presence. Much like Robert Rauchenberg's early assemblages in which living plants figured as structural elements of permanent change whilst at the same time demanding caring viewer interaction in the form of

6 www.trericsson.com, site accessed 18/1/2008

7 T .R. Ericsson in an email interview with N. Lushetich, 18/1/2008

daily watering and tending, *And All Shall Be Well* requires human presence. It 'requires' living human beings to regulate the room temperature and the corresponding level of condensation on a daily basis so as to prevent the vessel from becoming so fogged over as to obscure the inscription, in other words, to prevent the work from suffocating. It is this very summoning of human presence that exposes the absence of that very particular and singular being John Crews was. In this way, by performing the illusion of presence, the breath of John Crews in fact performs its own absence. For, if the work had no overt physical manifestations in the temporal dimension, if it did not 'perspire' and 'require' caring interaction and thereby interfere in the daily routine of those Progressive employees who happen to be sitting in the offices where it is situated, *And All Shall Be Well* would merely evoke rather than perform the absence of John Crews. Such a 'mere evocation' of the tragic and untimely death of a loyal employee would seriously limit the work's semantic scope to an interpellation to communal essence of an Althusserian kind, reverberating with the trauma of 9/11 and calling for solidarity, and implicitly, allegiance to the 'community', which in this case is the Progressive corporation on a micro level, and the entire country on the macro level.

Although it is undeniable that the loss of innocent lives inflicted a gigantic wound on the wider body of all those living in the United States and particularly those who lost their nearest and dearest, and that any death by fire in a high building will for decades be associated with the tragic events of 9/11, I would like to suggest that it is precisely the performative aspect of *And All Shall Be Well* that takes it far beyond an interpellation, a subliminal call to solidarity, common cause and implicitly common essence, be that essence the state, the nation or any particular political profilation. Unlike the social realist films and sculptures of the Soviet era depicting the heroic deaths of known and unknown communists who sacrificed their lives for the benefit of others, or indeed, to take a more recent example, pertinent by comparison, that of Oliver Stone's film *World Trade Center* which portrays the events of 9/11 in an entirely apolitical manner, almost as a natural disaster in which the brave firemen sacrifice their lives for the benefit of others and in this way the film places a very clear message, that of there being no connection between American foreign policy and the attacks of 9/11, *And All Shall Be Well* operates at a very different level. It

operates at the level of the ambivalent where the restorative and the edifying leak into the uncanny and the uncanny into the immensely vulnerable.

In her book *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, Judith Butler constructs a potent critique of the essentialist discourse that spread across the American media after 9/11. Among the numerous examples quoted is the New York Times article which warns that the 'time to reassert not only American values but fundamental and absolute values has arrived'[8]. This and similar rhetoric, basically providing a chorus line to George W. Bush's famous 'Whoever is not with us is against us' [9] was heavily criticised by many intellectuals worldwide, not least Jean Baudrillard who was particularly clear about the consequences of such a rhetoric: '[T]he deregulation (caused by the attacks) has ended in maximum security, in a level of restriction and constraint equivalent to that found in fundamentalist societies' [10]. In her analysis of the violence committed in the name of the 'war on terrorism', both the violence perpetrated outside US territory and the violence perpetrated against US citizens in the form of discrimination and the ubiquitous imposition of maximum control, Butler makes an argument for a politics of vulnerability: 'Violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other is exposed in its most terrifying form, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of another, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another…. [W]e all live with this particular vulnerability… and we must attend to it….., as we begin to think what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself'[11]. Butler goes on to further elaborate this 'corporeal vulnerability' as our proneness to being 'undone by each other' in desire and grief alike. 'One does not always stay intact. One may want to, or manage for a while, but despite one's best efforts, one is undone, in the face of the other, by the touch, by the scent, by the feel, by the prospect of the touch, the memory of the feel.'[12] And equally, when we lose somebody '[i]t is not as if an "I" exists independently over here and then simply loses a "you" over there, especially if the attachment of to "you" is part of what composes who "I" am. If I lose you, then I not only mourn the loss but I

[8] Butler, J., *Precarious Life The powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, New York, 2004, p.2
[9] Ibid., p.3
[10] Baudrillard, J., "L'Esprit du Terrorisme", *Harper's Magazine*, trans. D.Hohn, February 2002, p. 18
[11] Butler, J., *Precarious Life The powers of Mourning and Violence*, Verso, New York, 2004, p.29
[12] Ibid., p.24

become inscrutable to myself. Who "am" I, without you? When we lose some of these ties by which we are constituted, we do not know who we are or what to do. On one level, I think I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well. At another level, perhaps what I have lost "in" you, that for which I have no ready vocabulary, is a relationality that is composed neither exclusively of myself nor you, but is to be conceived as *the tie* by which those terms are differentiated and related.'[13] This might initially make one think that Butler is talking only about a very narrow circle of one's lovers, friends or relatives as the people who have the power to 'undo' one. But her analysis extends to the 'various forms of rupture and subjection that formed the condition of one's emergence as an individuated being' [14] whereby she terms individuation to be 'an accomplishment, not a presupposition' [15]. This means that our proneness to being undone by the other is shaped by a much larger quantity of sources than we could ever hope to account for, as our predisposition to creating affective ties with others is influenced by those primary others encountered in early childhood who 'impregnated' us but who were in turn 'impregnated' by many others and so on ad infinitum . Individuation through impregnation by others is in this sense a slow and precarious process of crystallisation made possible by the sedimentation of relationality or betweeness. This is why Butler concludes that 'I find that my very formation implicates the other in me, that my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with the others'[16]. Another very important thinker of relationality and betweenness, Jean-Luc Nancy, goes as far as to deny the possibility of there being any pre-supposed community consisting of a number or of masses of individuals gathered around a pre-supposed essence such as a country, nation, brotherhood or even generic humanity. In *Inoperative Community* Nancy designates no more than a residual place for this crystallisation of individuation Butler identifies to be the process leading to the formation of the individual, and asserts that 'the individual is merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community. By its nature, as its name indicates, it is the atom, the indivisible – the individual reveals that it is the abstract result of a decomposition'[17] Instead, Nancy uses a different qualification, that of singularity and suggests that that

[13] Ibid., p.22
[14] Ibid., p.27
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., p.46
[17] Nancy, J.L., *The Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2004. p.3

the question of singularity 'lurks not behind the theme of the individual but beyond it. What is a body, a face, a voice, a death, a writing – not indivisible, but singular……Singularity never takes the place at the level of atoms, those identifiable if not identical identities; rather it takes place at the level of the *clinamen* which is unidentifiable'[18]. The *clinamen*, as defined by Nancy is 'an inclination from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other' [19] This is linked to ecstasy, to the state of being beside oneself with grief, rage or desire, to a state of not longer being contained by the boundaries of one's singularity, but being outside oneself. What death reveals is this existence outside of oneself, and this existence outside of oneself is community. However, Nancy clarifies that this 'does not mean [that] my existence is reinvested in or by community, as if community were another subject that would sublate me, in a dialectical or communal mode. *Community does not sublate the finitude it exposes. Community itself, in sum, is nothing but this exposition*'. [20] Community is therefore nothing else but the presentation to its members of their mortal truth and it appears only fleetingly in the ecstatic space of in-betweenness, thus creating the 'you *and* I (between us) - formula in which the *and* does not imply juxtaposition, but exposition' [21]. Nancy condenses this formula even further to: '*you shares me*'[22].

If at this point we decide to go along with Butler's and Nancy's ideas which, although coming from very different angles seem to converge on the point of relationality and betweenness as having their roots in death, the next question we may want to address is that of the status of death in our present society. Sogyal Rinpoche, an eminent Buddhist scholar and the author of the 'Book of Living and Dying' opened his 2004 Amsterdam lecture on questions related to death by describing his first arrival in Europe forty years earlier. 'I was struck by the absence of the dead from the public sphere. The dead lay tucked away in graveyards, surrounded by high walls, far away from the main roads. And as far as I could see the situation was no better in people's homes, either.'[23] Indeed, unlike in Tibet, Rinpoche's country of origin, as well as in

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[18] Nancy, J.L., *The Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2004. p.6
[19] Nancy, J.L., *The Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2004. p.3
[20] Ibid., p.26
[21] Ibid., p.29
[22] Ibid.
[23] Rinpoche, S., in the Amsterdam Lecure, RAI, Amsterdam, 30/3/2004

many other countries such as China and Japan, where homes have ancestral altars, alcoves or even whole rooms dedicated to the dead and where it is customary for a guest to greet the dead before greeting the living, to have a room in one's home entirely dedicated to a dead relative would be considered to be strange, if not verging on disturbing in the Western world. This is because in a society preoccupied with, or we could even say obsessed with, accumulation and consumption, death has no value, as it can be neither accumulated nor consumed. Worse still, death is that final consumption which puts an end to all possibilities of 'having fun'. Consequently, the dead are seen as a class of the 'less fortunate', a 'bunch of losers' and any association with them is regarded as better done in private.

In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Jean Baudrillard elaborates the idea of the dead no longer being partners in what he calls symbolic exchange (derived from George Bataille's theories of expenditure economy and Maurice Mauss's writing on the gift, symbolic exchange is an exchange of symbolic values whereby a symbolic value is the value a subject assigns to an object in relation to another subject, a value fundamentally different from the purely functional or economic value of the object): 'At the very core of the "rationality" of our culture….is an exclusion that precedes every other, more radical than the exclusion of madmen, children or 'inferior races', an exclusion preceding all these and serving as their model: the exclusion of the dead and of death….[T]here is an irreversible evolution from savage societies to our own: little by little, the dead cease to exist. They are thrown out of the group's symbolic circulation. They are no longer beings with a full role to play, worthy partners in exchange…'[24] What Baudrillard is suggesting here is that non-industrial or the so-called 'primitive' societies respond to the rupture, horror and uncertainty of death by engaging with it through ritual and sacrificial practice and that within this practice gifts and promises are made to the dead which are just as binding as those made to the living and that this marks the moment when the dead enter the arena of symbolic exchange.

Ritual is an enactment of the symbolic in the temporal dimension characterised by the extreme gathering or focusing of psycho-physical attention. Even if it only involves movement and / or chant as opposed to making incisions on the body, ritual binds the

[24] Baudrillard, J., *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. I.H.Grant, Sage, London, 1993, p.126

body. The more often or the more intensely an activity is performed, the stronger the symbolic bond between the performer, that which is performed, and the purpose the performance is hoping to fulfill, or in other words, performance efficacy. Every ritual is therefore a gift and an asking for a return. This, however, is very different from the purely instrumentally and economically motivated cost-benefit analysis which is the current paradigm for approaching any time expenditure in a technologically advanced society whereby questions such as 'Is this worth my while? What have I to gain from this? Will the result justify the investment?' are deemed to be appropriate. As time becomes increasingly more commodified, any expenditure of time which has no cumulative or consumptive value, such as furthering one's career, one's personal growth or having more fun, is considered to have no value at all. This is why by staging the performance of the illusion of presence in *And All Shall Be Well* and thereby in fact the performance of absence which calls to the presence of another by means of a daily ritual of caring for the pulse of dead breath, T.R. Ericsson manages to stage death. The caring for the pulse of dead breath, in itself a contradiction in terms with no possible instrumental or commodified value is an act of symbolic order in which the breath has the efficacy of a relic. This is because the breath contained in the vessel is an actual remnant of an actual person. However, this does not mean that by this virtue the work constitutes a communication channel (and here I would like to borrow Bataille's definition of communication as contagion [25]) with the singular entity called John Crews. On the contrary, because of the work's performatively calibrated power to engage, affect and undo through presentation (John Crew's breath is presented) rather than to evoke through representation, and because of the amplification of this performativity by the work's ambivalent shape, which is as oriental as it is occidental, *And All Shall Be Well* raises questions of vulnerability, uncertainty and rupture. To those who tend to it on a daily basis it reveals absence of the final sort, which is death. And in this revelation the *clinamen* of community is revealed, to however small a degree and however fleetingly. A very different community from the Progressive Corporation's claim to a quasi-socialist community, or the Bush administration's claim to a worldwide community of those who 'uphold democratic values', a community of those who are no longer there to be communed with.

[25] Bataille, G., cited in Nancy, J.L., *The Inoperative Community*, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, 2004. p.28