ARNAUD GERSPACHER

TR Ericsson and the Impossible Readymade: 2001–2015

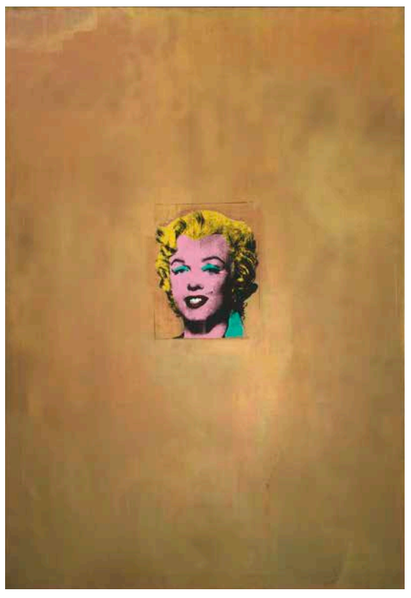
He began as a traditional portrait painter. After a conceptual turn, he briefly carried a suitcase around to show his works, like Marcel Duchamp. He read the complete works of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard in order. He very nearly went professional as a pool player, and very nearly gave up making art altogether. His wife is named Rose and his daughter is named Sue, after his mother who committed suicide. While these facts are interesting and useful in approaching TR Ericsson's work, the limitations of biography dictate that they do not say it all. For an artist who devotes a career to commemorating and working through his past, especially the traumatic passing of his mother, he will readily admit that even those closest to us hold shards of secrecy. It is in this fissure between the most unbreakable connections we have with those we love and the secrecy that nevertheless abides in them that Ericsson's work inhabits.

I only recently fully understood this after rereading the following passage the artist sent me from Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death*: "God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior."[1] Derrida is relating to a Kierkegaardian notion of subjectivity, which entails a singular and unobjectifiable standing before a divine eternity. Do not be thrown off by the theological tone. This incommunicable inside was almost certainly already embedded at the very evolutionary beginnings of consciousness—it may even be its prerequisite, since life as we know it is porous and ecologically entangled, yet we cannot conceive of an existence that does not consist of an inside and outside. This capacity for inner secrecy constituted us well before all religions and theologies—which is why we needed emotive gestures, language, writing, and art—and I suspect that today no amount of bioneural scanning and imaging will unravel it. Martin Heidegger would de-Christianize this secrecy as the individual's unsharable relationship to his own death—death being one of the fundamental existential secrets we carry with us. Roland Barthes would find this in his *punctum*, or that part of the photographic image that bores inside you and communicates its emotional power to you and you alone. But this secrecy can work in quotidian ways. For instance, when your mother turns to you in the car and says, *kid, you don't get me*, an abyssal hairline fracture appears in maternal closeness.

In 2002 Ericsson's public art installation *A Dialectical Verse of Cleveland* quietly appeared along vacant shop windows on Euclid Avenue in downtown Cleveland, Ohio. The work featured full spreads of found photographs and texts facing the sidewalk and street. While many passersby may not have understood what they were seeing, or that it was contemporary art, the installation became a visual companion for the city over the span of two years. The mysterious images were of two kinds: either private and personal family snapshots (portraiture of anonymous faces, the yellowing image of a tinseled Christmas tree, the reproduction of sickly wallpaper) or public and professional (a boardroom meeting, a groundbreaking ceremony for a building, and images of its construction in progress with Cleveland as backdrop).

Tom, c. 1987

A Dialectic Verse of Cleveland, 2002–3. Public art installation at Euclid Avenue across from the Colonial Arcade. Fuji Crystal Archive photo paper with optically clear window adhesive; 406.4 x 2133.6 cm. Photo: TR Ericsson



Gold Marilyn, 1962. Andy Warhol (American, 1928–1987). The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Philip Johnson. © The Museum of Modern Art/ Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY © 2015 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Against one whited-out window pane was a deadpan list in a font those familiar with the work of Marcel Broodthaers would recognize: *Barn swallows, Ax handles, Fish hooks, Flashlights*, and *37506* (in another gesture of homage to the Belgian artist, a banner read *section–literature*). Ericsson was already building a poetic vocabulary of images, objects, and ideas that tells a story not so much through direct narrative but via objects, images, and words that are infused with private emotion, yet also embedded within a shared cultural, political, and economic history.

A number of images from this public installation can be found in *Thirst*, Ericsson's magazine spanning the years 2000 to 2009. The sixteen issues of *Thirst* are meaningful objects in their own right and helpful sources for tracing Ericsson's intellectual and artistic development. As for the textual component of the installation, a prominently placed quotation by Kierkegaard stood out. It read, "[A]t any given moment a living person could look at life as if he himself did not exist. . . ."[2] This enigmatic quote resonates in paradox. For how exactly might this be accomplished? What type of out-of-body experience would it require? One would either need to be a transcendental god-like entity or some sort of voyeuristic ghost. In more tragic poetic terms, by claiming you can imagine the world without yourself in it, Kierkegaard's words point to existential enervation and suicide (like the common fantasy of witnessing your own funeral). This reading would amount to an ominous premonition, as Ericsson's mother would take her life in 2003, less than a year into the run of *A Dialectical Verse of Cleveland*. This dark premonition even had a visual analog: in one window his mother's portrait appears as a small thumbnail image against a large wallpapered background. If one made an art-historical comparison, it would be with Andy Warhol's *Gold Marilyn* (1962). Both the painting and the photograph/mother are from the early sixties, both are now haunted by pills and suicide, and both have their portraits presented in the venerative typology of icon painting. Yet where the film star is engulfed in gold, the young would-be mother is stuck to a middle-class staple of wall décor. Where one is bathed in golden rarity, the other sticks to industrially reprintable and outmoded wallpaper partially coming unmoored from its adhesive.

In more socioeconomic terms, Kierkegaard's quote can also serve as a brutal reminder of a post-1960s United States embracing neoliberal economic policies that increasingly allowed the market to dictate all aspects of life. After all, the preprogrammed economic machinery of our states and cities functions just as smoothly when this or that individual ceases to exist. The loss of anonymous anyones is barely registered beyond those personally impacted. In certain ways, quite the opposite is true: personal failures, economic debt and loss, stigmatized employment or unemployment, bodies cramped together in physically or psychologically stifling conditions all form the very basis of a competitive (and therefore *sacrificial*) market economy that feeds on the bodies of the less powerful. Taking the quote and *A Dialectical Verse of Cleveland* in this way, one begins to understand what "dialectic" is operative here: between the individual who loves and suffers on the one side, and on the other the sociopolitical container that occasionally upholds the individual in dignity, though if we are true to the numbers, overwhelmingly runs her into the ground. Think of Harmony Korine's film *Gummo* (1997) and its incredible scenes between mother and growth-stunted son, when she feeds him milk and spaghetti in a dirty-watered bathtub with bacon taped to the tiles. Or in the poverty of a hoarder's basement, when she tap dances madly in his absent father's shoes as her son lifts kitchen utensils as makeshift weights (not without holding a gun to her son's head in order to crack a smile). There is great horror here, not to mention the realism of a largely unseen contemporary poor Americana. But possibly more uncomfortably,

Gummo (film still), 1997. Harmony Korine (American, born 1973). Licensed by: Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc. All Rights Reserved

there is grace and beauty in this dilapidation and insanity. There is a world of closeness, identification, and warmth, even if the limitations of the situation only allow for affection and development to come out warped. Through an especially acute fiction, Korine points out a far-ranging truth that is operative to various socioeconomic degrees, from which some transcend and others do not.

I note this conjunction between the coercions of the sociopolitical container and the individual to recall that families, daughters, sons, mothers, and fathers are all forced to navigate their diffraction. Consider one of many photographs of the artist's mother reproduced in this catalogue, this one as a child. Sitting on the stoop of her home, she has a Toby jug that belonged to her father and holds it with both hands on her lap. The effect of this image is almost anamorphic, as if the face on the jug expands from another plane of existence unknown to the sitter. Smiling at the camera, she seems to be clawing away at the face protruding from her lower body, whose smile remains unperturbed. Ericsson is struck by this image as the jug's face bears a resemblance to his mother's father. The jug also bears an uncanny resemblance to Ronald Reagan. In truth, we might well be dealing with two fathers in this image who wield formative powers in both public and private spaces: the conditioning of the *political* paternal on one level, and the formation of the *domestic* paternal on the other. These are the private and public phalluses that have the power to inform and discipline you if you are not a good girl, a quiet citizen, or a happy consumer striving to get ahead. The psychosocial adhesive that keeps all this going is *desire*: the desire for recognition, compensation, affection, security, or the desire for desire itself, all of which seem to remain tantalizingly out of reach for so many. One should note that Ericsson's choice of *Thirst* as the title for his magazine was, in part, an allusion to the myth of Tantalus who, like so many damaged citizens or venture capitalists today, was perpetually stuck between an unreachable apple above and an inaccessible pool of water below.

It is this dialectical tension between the individual and society, between the private and the public that *A Dialectical Verse of Cleveland* pointed to with poetic brilliance. You did not have to be an art connoisseur to feel and understand the bittersweet contrast between yellowing images, the economic optimism of groundbreaking ceremonies, and the drag of a daily commute along an avenue of buildings that, in 2002, were largely carved out and crumbling. As I turn to interpreting Ericsson's more recent body of work I want the reader to keep this introduction in mind, as this malfunctioning dialectic will always be operative, like white noise in the background. Where one might read Ericsson's work as somehow self-involved, myopically focused on his mother, or limited to purely private concerns, one forgets this sociopolitical frame (which also conditions the reader in the act of reading). Moreover, as the artist will say, it is hard enough trying to tell his own story, let alone the convoluted and complex stories of other people. His work is an individual provocation for the viewer to understand her own past with similar acumen and sensitivity, and if a generalization exists here, it is to universalize the struggle to come to terms with the singularity of existence.

THE IMPOSSIBLE READYMADE

Everyday Is Like Sunday (2005) is a pristine ax cast in porcelain, resting upright on its head with the handle leaning delicately on the wall. There is an all-over blue decorative design on a pale cream background. Although upside down, one can just make out the contents of the design: picturesque trees and foliage, traditional *animalier* representations of lambs, two pairs of human legs cut off just at the head of the blade, and a romantic ruin where one might grip the handle. The pastoral design is transferred from a toile de Jouy belonging to the artist's mother, a pattern that marked the artist in boyhood. Ericsson recalls this toile as an ambiguous domestic presence rendering an idyllic scene mixed with a sense of sacrilege, sexuality, and violence.

At the level of artistic strategy, *Everyday Is Like Sunday* seems to fall under the heading of the readymade. In the canonical understanding of this Duchampian gesture, a useful object is reoriented toward aesthetic ends through exhibition. In other words, an object not conventionally understood as art is nominated as having artistic significance (as Duchamp stressed, its importance lies not in the fact that the artist *made* it, but that she *chose* it). It is crucial to note that these readymade objects—be it a urinal, a snow shovel, or a bicycle wheel—were industrial objects that could be endlessly reproduced. Their critical thrust rested on exchange value and interchangeability, and not the auratic singularity of an irreplaceable object. Moreover, it was a question not of making a banal object beautiful but of challenging the institutional conventions of how art is framed and who gets to dictate what is worthy of display in the first place. As an aesthetic strategy the readymade is an antiaesthetic conceptual provocation, and ever the instigator, Duchamp was one of the cheekier characters in Western art history.

At first blush, it seems that Ericsson has faithfully followed the logic of the readymade. For here is a useful industrial object, an ax, recast toward aesthetic ends as an art object. Even more than a urinal that can no longer be used, or a bicycle wheel that can no longer be ridden, this ax's use-value has been negated by the inherent fragility of its porcelain composition. Were one to use this tool for its archetypal intended purpose, one would only destroy it. In this way, the readymade gesture of making a useful object useless via aestheticizing is operative in *Everyday Is Like Sunday*. It would be an impoverished interpretation, however, to leave it there. For in truth, Ericsson's work sends the readymade into something of a paradox. While the porcelain ax could theoretically be reproduced, its delicate presence is more akin to a priceless and irreplaceable vase in a museum. It is the singularization of a formerly generalizable object. As a readymade tool, this ax has had its usefulness negated not through any physical impediment of its use-value (for one could still pick up this porcelain ax and use it, however callously and stupidly) but through aestheticizing an object whose breakable beauty now blackmails any would-be user into thinking twice about wielding it. It is as if by its own delicateness *Everyday Is Like Sunday* wards off its destruction in the perpetual tension of this possibility. Animistically, the work is imbued with psychological power whose strength lies in its fragility, which both relies and preys on the sensibility of its audience.

Everyday Is Like Sunday is not simply a play on the 20th-century staple of the readymade. More profoundly, this porcelain ax thematizes the very moment of an irreversible decision. Almost unbearably, the tension between its phantom tool-being and the fragility of its singular existence remain in perpetual conflict—and far from resolving this tension, one swing would only destroy both. Physically and symbolically, its presence is evocative of another Kierkegaardian claim: *the instant of decision is madness*. In *Fear and Trembling*, the philosopher focuses on such a decision, namely, on the mad suspension of ethics entailed by the Old Testament story of Abraham sacrificing his only son, Isaac. The vaguely sacrificial undertones of the toile pattern resonate with this biblical tale that comes complete with a surrogate lamb. *Everyday Is Like Sunday* distills this moment of decision to its purest by suggesting whatever the outcome might be, it is final and irreversible. This is what makes it maddening, as these moments confront us with the finitude of our actions and, ultimately, of life itself. What sort of irreversible decisions are of the highest stake? The moment of plunging an ax into an old woman's skull (Dostoyevsky was required reading in the Ericsson household). The decision to be an artist (and make such a work for public display). The decision to have a child. The decision to end your life on a Sunday.

THE BODY AS INDEX

From Byzantine icon painting to Norman Bates's fruit cellar in *Psycho* (1960), preserving the auratic traces of the mother's body seems to be a nearly universal impulse. These two examples are respectively mystical and pathological. Yet the more socially acceptable forms of burial and keeping ashes belong to a similar impulse: to preserve the physical uniqueness of a once-living maternal form in order to avoid pure oblivion. It maintains a connection, a communion, and a mediation with a nonarbitrary and irreplaceable motherly substance that generated one's own nonarbitrary and irreplaceable substance. Since reanimation can only be pathological, the only remaining option is repetition—memory, commemoration, and adapting the nonliving for the still-living. Even after death the body does not cease to be a locus of desire. This is something that is underlined in a mournful and possibly menacing way by the once-irreverent pin owned by his grandfather reading "I want your body" that Ericsson has cast in bronze.

While *Everyday Is Like Sunday* holds the readymade in a delicate balance between possibility (as a reproducible object) and impossibility (as an irreplaceable object), some of Ericsson's subsequent work incorporates substances that are inherently irreplaceable: breath, ash, handwriting, and the voice. These materials point to the uniqueness of an individual, and it is telling that they are all traces of the body. It is here where the readymade comes to its impossible limits. Like the photographic process itself, these materials are all instances of the index in that they function as a physical sign and remainder of a now-absent presence—a sign that can be erased but never repeated in pure equivalence.

Ericsson's *Nicotine* drawings (2007–present) represent one of the first uses of these bodily traces in his work. When selling his mother's home two years after

her passing, he came to find nicotine-stained walls in the bedroom and the dining room that could not be cleaned. The tobacco's pale yellow residue clung stubbornly to the home. These were not, however, just any smoke stains. While the cigarettes themselves might be endlessly replaceable as consumer goods, the breath that expelled the smoke and mingled with its vapor make these stains noninterchangeable and auratic traces. These toxic frescos slowly accumulated from an untraceable mix of molecules that both poisoned lungs and kept one alive. It is strange that a chromatic toxin would be necessary as carrier for what otherwise are invisible—and therefore unmarkable—traces of healthy breath in oxygen and carbon dioxide. In a sense, these residues of his mother's breath irrevocably suffused in nicotine stains are a form of automatic writing, and the crackle and drag of cigarettes left their mark and can now be read: slow burning, diffusion, time passing, daily habits, crutches, nerves in need of calming, a mother known in the neighborhood to be cool and permissive of teenage smoking, and so on. This can also describe Ericsson's recurrent inclusion of handwritten materials from family members in his work: while the pen could have been any pen, the gestural idiosyncrasies of the writing itself can only belong to the person using it in irreversible singularity. Not even the most precise computer simulation or copying machine could repeat this writing, for the simple fact that even if similitude can mimic and translate *form* to purported perfection, it can never recover the *time* that upholds the writing in its irretrievable past.

These cigarette-stained walls became the genesis for Ericsson's *Nicotine* series. The artist takes on the toxin himself, possibly as a form of immunization. Through a silkscreening process with smoke as its medium, he recast a number of family photos, including an image of himself as a child on a swing dressed as a cowboy, a dining room table, and his baby boots cast in bronze. What they lose in clarity they gain in poetic haziness. It is as if the mother and the home are the ones redeveloping these images and the memories they hold for the artist, and that the slow death indexed by nicotine-stained walls is a more honest medium for visual memories that might range from love, violence, degradation, grace, sacrifice, escape, and a whole range of domestic emotions.

While the *Nicotine* series points to the mother's breath symbolically, Ericsson's *Breath* (2007–present) pieces utilize breath itself. Like Duchamp's *50 cc of Paris Air* (1919), which is a suspended "ampoule" or pharmacological vial containing what its title describes, Ericsson collects an individual's breath and seals it within airtight glass (like a see-through urn housing the invisible prerequisite of a living pulmonary body). Unlike Duchamp's work—or the French artist Yves Klein selling his "zones" of air—Ericsson's breath pieces contain a diaphanous substance that cannot be exchanged or replaced by just any other breath. There is a reason why the Greek etymology of the word *soul,* or *psyche*, which in the history of Western thought constitutes individuality, is a denominator of breath as life: breath, soul, and lungs as the bodily index of existence. Ericsson's more recent *Ash* paintings (2013–present) take the logic of the body as index even further. The artist has literally in*corp*orated his mother's remains in the images by mixing the ash with graphite on panel to make images of his mother's home, a still life of daffodils, and a staged photograph featuring the artist as a young boy modeling for American Greetings. In the case of an image of his mother's legs, one of which is bandaged, the implications are almost emotionally and theoretically unbearable: the light that once touched her legs, which made the photographic trace possible in 1980, is now being framed by a darkness that includes her charred remains. The absent-presence of the photographic index is delimited by the presence of cinders, which themselves point back to a once-living body. It is a form of restitution, not only to the photographic image and its impossible sustaining of life-death, as Barthes would say, but to the individual being represented and remembered. If the photograph can be thought of as an open crypt, a cryptic image both there and not there, then it seems a natural choice for a resting place.

In this sense, Ericsson's *Ash* paintings are evocative of Derrida's theory of the cinder. The philosopher was fascinated with the phrase *Il y a là cendre,* which depending on the inclusion or omission of the accent over the *a* can either denote the presence of cinders or the absence and loss of a being reduced to ashes: "Cinder remains, cinder there is, which we can translate: the cinder is not, is not what is. It remains *from* what is not, in order to recall at the delicate, charred bottom of itself only nonbeing or nonpresence."[3] This polyvalent spoken phrase thematizes the paradoxical being of cinders or ashes as traces of what *is no longer,* but in certain respects, of what also *still is*. It may be the most mad of indexes. In the *Ash* series, the cinders are no longer the artist's mother but nevertheless are what remains of her. They are just ash, but they also represent the only auratic physical remainder of what continues to be what it was before. As material, it is no longer embodied, but it is still body (or the trace of the body, or the body become powder and fragments that nevertheless is still this body as material, however ashen). The fact that one can become burdened by cinders, or that they involve ceremonial gestures, or are contained and kept on mantles, points to the fact that while indiscernible from any other incinerated body, they are as irreplaceable and nonarbitrary as the person they were and the memory they sustain. The *Ash* series is difficult to write about; one gets the sense of treading on sacred ground. They may even make the viewer uneasy, as if Ericsson is not so far from the fruit cellar after all. This may, however, be part of the point, for the bureaucratic features of the death industry should make us uneasy. The certificates, ceremonies, and autopsy reports that are so inadequate for representing the emotional impact of the event they refer to make the event fall into absurdity—that very thing that gave you life and supplied you with a world is now just an inert powdery substance and a formula on a report. In short, it's an impossibly readymade body for funeral industries and bureaucratic filings.

Photo by Denise Brown Hare of *Étant Donnés* in the Eleventh Street Studio, 1968, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Archives. © Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2015

ÉTANT DONNÉS/BEING GIVEN

In the *Nicotine* and *Ash* series, Ericsson uses photographic images as a starting point and redevelops them with nonphotographic materials that are nevertheless as indexical as the photographs—nicotine, breath, cinder. Ericsson's *Étant Donnés* series (2009–11) also manipulates the photographic image by altering it with graphite (that, comprised almost entirely of carbon, represents the molecular prerequisite for nicotine, breath, and cinder). What is striking about this body of work is that Ericsson's disarming poetic directness makes way for a certain amount of ambiguity. In both title and subject matter, the work refers to Duchamp's shocking final work done largely in secret, namely, his installation *Étant Donnés: La Chute d'eau* 2. *Le Gaz d'éclairage* (Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas), 1946–66. While differences exist between the two, both works depict a faceless and naked female body spread out in the woods—one is a mixed-media diorama and the other is a photograph-drawing. If above I describe the influence and complications of the readymade in Ericsson's work, here Duchamp *himself* returns as a possible readymade pseudonymous mask. Yet judging from Ericsson's œuvre, it would be surprising if all

of a sudden the artist presented us with a straightforward art-historical pastiche, parody, or homage. Complicating such a facile reading, I offer a number of interpretations that open up different, more interesting possibilities. My gambit is that seeing past Duchamp (or seeing before him in a patient way that does not automatically run to the familiar) is almost posed as a challenge, as something the artist is daring us to do.

Ericsson's *Étant Donnés* is a series of about thirty variously sized drawings derived from silkscreened photographs. They show his wife's inert and naked body resting in various poses along a ravine in Ohio. In a couple instances, Ericsson has photographed her body in such a way that recalls Duchamp's diorama: pale skin with full frontal pubis brushed by weeds with arms and legs akimbo. Others show her body from further away—Pietà-like and hanging off a cascading waterfall, positioned with bare chest next to a fallen tree trunk, or aerially in a fetal position. In others she seems to be gliding along the surface of the shallow creek as nothing more than a watery reflection, or in up-close detail as a slender wrist and passive open hand resting gently on a rock framed by foliage. To varying degrees, Ericsson has reworked the image with graphite and erasure, which lends the images an effect of selective overexposure in certain places on the drawings' surface.

One of the fundamental ambiguities of Ericsson's *Étant Donnés* is deciding whether or not this body is alive or dead. The initial impulse is to read these images as showing some obscene crime. In the lineage of the Black Dahlia and Laura Palmer, the cynical conditioning of our contemporary vision is to file these images under homicide and likely sexual violation—a disrobed body left to die in the woods. It is clear, however, that these images cannot come from crime scene photographs for the simple reason that her body *keeps moving positions and locations*. Nor can they be reimaginings of Duchamp's diorama from multiple vantage points in some easy postmodernist gimmick. Since her body is continually dragged and posed during the unaccounted-for ellipses of time between shots, the perpetrator can only be the photographer or some unseen accomplice. Does this point to psychological complicity and guilt? Might this be a reimagining of his mother's body through his wife's body, one where the artist is playing a role in her death? Or, somewhat less morbidly, is this a visual form of mourning or melancholia, one that incessantly repeats her death so as to finally get it right, to set it straight, to frame or efface it in more livable distance? This might offer an explanation for the photographic real being ciphered through the silkscreen process and then distanced even further by the artist's hand intervening with graphite and erasure. One might even note the inherent eroticism of these images and venture into the territory of some voyeuristic Oedipus. Perhaps.

In this scenario of the body as dead, however, I prefer to elaborate on a biographical detail the artist has confided that may connect his *Étant Donnés* to one of the last times he saw his mother's body. After driving overnight from Brooklyn to Ohio, Ericsson recalls seeing his mother's body for the last time at a morgue, then at a funeral parlor. Later in life, it was common for her to dye her hair a reddish color. He would often chide her for this habit of turning her hair a different color than her natural dark brown. In this final instance in the morgue and parlor, however, it was not dyed red but recolored to dark brown. Lodged in his mind as a latent memory, this seemingly innocuous detail would only occur to Ericsson later, though not without great significance: it was the very detail that convinced him not only that her death was a suicide (initially, the circumstances of her death were clouded in mystery and foul play) but that she was letting him know through this oblique gesture. In *Étant Donnés,* his wife's thick and lush dark hair is often prominent as a tousled mass that hides her face, and this hair memory may very well be entangled. This would be hair dye as suicide note, which only Ericsson could pick up and read—*a secret only visible from the inside*.

Besides the inimitable and solitary memory locked inside his head, how might one prove this singular form of communication from mother to child? Without a certain faith in a maternal intention that can no longer respond for itself—that can no longer answer for itself in the present—how can the artist be sure of its significance? Here we return to Kierkegaard and to the solitary call of God to Abraham whose murderous intent the father was at pains to keep from his own child. Kierkegaard equates Abraham's merciful silence to weaning: "When the child is to be weaned, the mother blackens her breast. It would be hard to have the breast look inviting when the child must not have it. So the child believes that the breast has changed, but the mother—she is still the same, her gaze is tender and loving as ever. How fortunate the one who did not need more terrible means to wean the child!"[4] Formally similar to the section titled "Exordium" in *Fear and Trembling*, which hypothetically reimagines the psychological complexity

of Abraham's decision from different vantage points, *Étant Donnés* reimagines the lifeless body of a loved one at a funeral (it should be noted that the artist eulogized his mother by reading passages from this very text). It must be painful for a mother to support a son in a career that takes him away from the provincialism, rootedness, and even violence of the home—and even more painful to recognize their limitations in self-sacrificial weaning. After all, in quoting from one of her many letters in this book, Ericsson singles out the following incisive phrase encapsulating this self-sacrifice: "stay out of here son, Hicksville USA." And what if, in the darkest way possible, the mother starts to think that she herself is what needs to be weaned, as a necessary sacrifice in order for her son to escape or thrive? Not only her breast, but her very being, so that the filial line is not further cracked and dragged down by a difficult family history? What if the mother is the lamb in all of this?

The Sacrifice of Isaac, c. 1527. Andrea del Sarto (Italian, 1486–1530). Oil on wood; 178 x 138 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Delia E. Holden and L. E. Holden Funds 1937.577

It could also be the case that the female form in *Étant Donnés* is not dead or dying but in fact alive. This may not necessarily be a scene of violence but one of organic beauty that integrates bodily flesh with the lushness of the natural world (very much unlike Duchamp's brides and early Cubist nudes, whose flesh is relentlessly prodded and harassed by mechanomorphic and phallic appendages). In certain images, she seems to be slowly rising or simply allowing herself to be taken away by an ecological ambience. This reading of a rising body, one that caresses the world as a lush and fecund envelope, no longer alludes to a dead mother but to a source of life. From here we might note two additional Duchampian references: the waterfall, which also appears in the background of Duchamp's diorama, and the fact that his wife's name is Rose. This proper name resonates in both artists' work and biographies: Duchamp's alter ego is Rrose Sélavy, from the French pronunciation of "Eros is life": "Eros c'est la vie." It is striking to think that embedded in this coincidental reference to Duchamp is a real-life situation of a wife who has given birth to a child, named Sue, after Ericsson's deceased mother. From mother, son, and child, to father, mother, and daughter, with a Rose as bringer of life phoenix-like from the ashes—could one simply chalk this up to mere art-historical play?

Understanding the female body in this tenor is not necessarily to fall prey to some essentialism that feminist critiques may want to point out: that women are inherently closer to nature, psychologically maternal, mere objects of the male gaze or insemination, and so

on, all of which are necessary and important critiques. What if, however, they miss a fundamental ontological truth about what it means to exist at all? What if these worthy critiques skim over the surface of a phenomenological and very real body underneath that resists and resides beyond (or before) what the theorist Judith Butler calls the "constitutive constructs" of gender and sexuality? In this case, the female form in *Étant Donnés* might more fundamentally be understood as a living space from which the potential of life is exposed. This would not be a construct or imperative imposed on the female body but what the female body itself gives in its very being. As mammals and ecstatic life, it is the situation in which we find ourselves. It is being given. It is *étant donné*.

One could bring in the recent work of the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion and his attention to givenness, or what he understands as the experience of a phenomenal world that gives itself to our senses in the form of a gift.[5] The painterly practice of Paul Cézanne falls under this phenomenological theory of givenness, since he tirelessly sought to paint the world as it appeared to him as unmediated by the conceptual impositions and correctives of reason, history, and commonsense. There is what we impose on the world and experience, and there is what the world and experience imposes on us. There is *giving* and *givenness*. Ericsson's *Étant Donnés* thematizes this distinction as well. Inherent in the series is the act of giving, what the artist by mind and hand imposes on the work through drawing and erasure, and then there is the act of givenness that the drawings themselves supply via an indexical body that appears out of the real and through the photographic image. This distinction is relayed to the viewer, who in the act of viewing gives and imposes certain content (art-historical references, feminist critiques, the codes of crimes scenes, and so forth) while being given certain forms that reside beyond or before this content in a realism that communicates itself (light touching flesh and foliage, allowing the body and its environment to materialize themselves in givenness along the photographic apparatus). This formal operation between giving and givenness can be thought of as parallel to the giving of proper names, papers, education on the one hand, and the givenness of nerve endings, consciousness, and life on the other.

THE VOICE/THE CALL

Ericsson's *Narcissus* series of drawings (2008) is a companion series to *Étant Donnés* (already in 2008 with the birth of his daughter, the artist began conceiving of two bodies of work representing her mother and father). If *Étant Donnés* is the scene of at least two mothers, *Narcissus* is the scene of a solitary father or son cut off from the world. The artist is dressed in a suit, holding a cell phone, and pacing in the same forest environs of *Étant Donnés*. While the latter series evokes a lush and humid envelope inside the woods, *Narcissus* opens onto a dry and sun-bleached area just outside. It is as if the artist is unable to enter, pacing back and forth in high grass or just at the edge of some arboreal opening. Ericsson describes himself as Narcissus, who was destined to die from self-involvement at pool's edge. As Ovid's myth has it, he was also destined to only ever receive his own words back at him from Echo, the water nymph who loved him but could never articulate her own response. In both image and speech, Narcissus was separated from that which could have saved him, if only he could have broken his auto-effective spell. In the end, Narcissus dies and becomes a flower, while Echo withers away in the depths of a cave to become the disembodied voice we still associate with echoes, relays, and chambers.

In keeping with this classical myth, everything about *Narcissus* connotes separation: the disjunction between formal wear and foliage, the cell phone as distance and removal, the mental absorption read on the artist's face as oblivious to both his surroundings and possible viewers, the atmospheric conditions that seem to be the very opposite of *Étant Donnés,* and most obviously, the solitary wanderer who seems to be out of step with even the romanticism of the traditional figure of the wanderer. The feeling is one of a saturated limit—a zero degree of individuality and solitude, which the myth cautions as unsustainable. Even the act of speaking on the phone has a narcissistic quality: the voice on the other end is immediately internalized as an uncanny voice in your own head shooting straight through the ear and into the brain. Even though it goes unnoticed, the immediacy of this voice on the other end is mere illusion. There is always electronic mediation. In this sense, every phone call is always already spectral—even during a conversation. There is always a delay between living voice and its digital echo, which in the very act of registration and communication turns ghostly and, in a sense, dead. This spectral quality goes unnoticed in "real" time—that is until the phone call is recorded and replayed, which then makes the temporal remove apparent by lengthening the separation between the movement of speaking and its mediated sounds. In the case of a voice that points back to a still-living person, the effect is uncanny. In the case of a voice that points back to someone who has passed away, the effect is truly spectral.

Like photography, smoke, breath, and ashes, the voice is also an indexical trace referring back to a once-present body. The voice may even be the most emotionally direct bodily trace. In hearing Ericsson's mother in various sound pieces and in his film *Crackle & Drag*, one almost experiences being on the phone with her, though of course she can no longer respond in words other than her own echo, nor can we get through with our own. It is communication in separation and delay. This voice's affect is not limited to the words she uses or her turns of phrase, but is in the cracking, supplication, and emotional tugging that elicits our empathy from the way they are delivered. In other words, these are not simply words pointing to a reservoir of a shared language and meanings but a bodily delivery that points back to the interiority of a nervous system that is symbiotic with its flesh, its joy and failings, its history and fragility, much like our own (one simply has to hear a nonhuman animal scream, perhaps a lamb, in order to understand that speech is only one form of communication, and that the voice is something far broader in hermeneutical scope).

While her words, like her dyed hair, hold secrets and meanings that only Ericsson can receive, the emotive contours of her voice offer the viewer/listener something of an opening to her immediacy, situation, and personality. Nowhere else is the paradoxical universalization of an ethics of singularity so acute: we cannot really know her, nor what it must mean for her spectral voice to reverberate in a gallery saturated with potent memories and emotions resonating in the artist's heart and mind. Nevertheless, there is a shared affect between mother, artist, and viewer, a communal fragility of life and its secrecy—its delicateness, the finitude of our breathing, the fleetingness of powder and ashes, the names, documents, technological recordings, and traces that will always outlive us and the ones we love, and the meaninglessness of oblivion. On a separate occasion of writing on Ericsson's personal archive that supplements his practice, I note the concept of the eternal at work—that the loving repetition his oeuvre represents is not only the documentation of an irretrievable past but also of a singular existence and set of relationships that can never unhappen (barring a radical rethinking of time, which means of thought, memory, and death). Eternity is the having been that can never be undone, even by a time before, even by your own death, and even by the solar death we know to be a certainty of our galaxy and the end of all witnessing. This is a strange thought and possibly of little consolation: that our concept of eternity has never come from the future and the infinite but instead from the ontological security of a finite past that was and can never not be. Whether there is another form of eternity—one that goes beyond the finite version we have the power to think of—remains a fundamental question. For now we can only repeat—as Ericsson does in both life and practice—in the form of communication, of images, of empathy, of commemoration, of a dignity that we can only hope becomes more contagious as time moves forward, and in the loving echo that resonates from ourselves to others, be it genetic, in word, or in gesture that embraces rather than corrodes what it touches.

1. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 108.

2. Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing: Spiritual Preparation for the Office of Confession*, trans. Douglas V. Steere (New York: Harper, 1956), 32.

3. Jacques Derrida, *Cinders,* trans. Ned Lukacher (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 21.

4. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling; Repetition,* trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 11.

5. Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).