Renunciation

> The [Rothko] chapel's renunciation of its visuality allows us, paradoxically, to see a mode of consciousness wholly at odds with the enforcing of ego boundaries. Under the pressure of that blinded seeing, the viewer's self can momentarily be reduced to the cognition of consciousness and the world—of the self and nonself—as nonoppositional, as boundary-free fusions or, in other terms, the cognition of being as incommensurable with identities.
>
> —*Arts of Impoverishment* 139–40

In taking up the challenge to escape modern dualism (Stengers), one could do worse than to respond to the provocation offered by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit. Indeed, the quotation I will subject to close reading throws into sharp relief themes that Bersani was at pains to elaborate across his authorship. We find the matter of artistic impoverishment explored first in *The Freudian Body* and the potential for the bounded ego's dissolution more recently developed in both "Psychoanalysis and the Aesthetic Subject" and the late, great speculative essay "Far Out."

If Bersani was looking for ways to unmoor the experience of subjectivity grounded in post-Cartesian dualism, he certainly picked idiosyncratic ways to go about it. His turn to canonical modernists—Freud, Rothko, Beckett, Proust—seems somewhat shocking. That he would find within them the potential for undoing naive, destructive bifurcations seems even more so. Bersani drills down into Euro-American modernism to undermine its heroic subjectivity from within. He finds in impoverished aesthetic praxis an identity solvent as powerful as zazen for undoing autonomous selfhood. Yet in encountering such claims for modernism and its self-shattering

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potential, one shrinks back slightly with bemused interest. Is a trip to the Rothko Chapel like gay sex?

Returning to *Arts of Impoverishment* after my first engagement with it in *Saving Abstraction* (2019), I am struck by how Bersani and Dutoit's excavation of the Rothko Chapel is isomorphic with the ego-dismantling possibilities Bersani values in queer fucking. We might understand both as deliberate acts of impoverishment—giving up masculine dominance when bottoming for a partner or relinquishing visibility to blind both artist and viewer. These acts of subjective deflation are paradoxical; in giving up part of ourselves to art or to sex, we open to the world, experiencing a Ferrantean dissolving of the margins (Ricciardi 14–16). It is precisely this sense of conscious expansion-through-negation that gets lost in the rhetorical bluster of "shattering" that Bersani and his critics have focused on. What I hope to develop is a more refined sense of shattering. What is shattered in moments of intense aesthetic-ontological experience is the fiction of a closed-off self, and what coalesces is participation in something more than individual identity. Such nonoppositional experience proffers a loosened sense of being of which art makes us conscious. Flying in the face of paranoid critiques of modernist aesthetics, Bersani provocatively insists on the agency of artworks to unmake ourselves. In doing so, he celebrates the ineffable inconsistency of art (Gallope 23) and its power to bring us into nonidentitarian relations with others. That is, if we are willing to give up.

The guiding question of *Arts of Impoverishment* is this: What is to be gained by giving up? That is, what do acts of renunciation—aesthetic, identitarian, subjective, sexual, political, and so on—make possible? What nondual relational modes become possible when we refuse to accept conditions of world-making imposed on us as second nature? Bersani and Dutoit argue that renouncing a sovereign state of aesthetic-subjective affairs might open us up to homo-ness (see Bersani, *Homos*)—a nondual ontology in which identitarian antagonisms are paradoxically resolved by their multiplication. Rothko, by deliberately making his work unseeable and rejecting modernist medium specificity, analogously shows us another way to be. I cannot make a distinction between subject and object in my relationship to the chapel paintings. This ambiguity gives rise to a "nonoppositional" or "boundary-free" experience. Such ontological confusion arises from this instant of undecidability. In failing to make distinction between self- and aesthetic-consciousness, we might work to maintain an apophatic instant and renounce the very conditions enforcing phenomenal bifurcation. Our precarious arrival at a sense of nonself comes not from the appropriation

of the world into us through sovereign mastery, but through our blurred distention into it.

In the remainder of this brief theoretical excursus, I build on the renunciative gestures that Bersani and Dutoit offer and show how they give us tools to experience artworks as expanded models of consciousness. My comments begin by reflecting on the deliberate cancelling of aesthetic parameters that leads in turn to a novel understanding of pseudomorphosis. In conclusion, I'll argue, how such blockages model—and our phenomenological encounter with them provokes—"the cognition of being as incommensurable with identities" offered by musical experience.

Bersani and Dutoit's recognition of blocked visibility in Rothko's painting opens to a much broader potential for modernist art, one where pseudomorphosis operates by means of deliberate impoverishment. Pseudomorphosis, the figuring of one art by means of another, is achieved precisely through acts of aesthetic renunciation that Bersani and Dutoit evocatively detail throughout *Arts of Impoverishment*. Rothko's dismantling of his paintings' visuality moves them toward tragic drama, flying in the face of Michael Fried's tired critique of theatricality as something somehow distinct from modernism. In Resnais's static tableaux of attenuated movement, film moves toward sculpture. Beckett's renunciations of narrative, textual intelligibility, and conventional syntax translates his work from literature into music. The sonorous sensuality of his words reterritorializes the mouth as a site of vocalic pleasure (as in *Not I*) and refuses a form of consciousness organized by and through language. In these examples, pseudomorphosis is realized apophatically—through deliberate acts of negation.

I took up this theme in *Saving Abstraction*, building on Bersani and Dutoit's argument that the central drama of the Chapel's paintings is their unwillingness to submit to our scopic mastery. With that, I argued, comes an anxiety born of failed sovereignty in one's relationship to art. The anxiety of the chapel hinges on the defeat of self-mastery. We can track this anxiety in the composer Morton Feldman's attempt at overcoming it in his music for the space. In the appropriately titled *Rothko Chapel* (1971), Feldman pseudomorphically restores our sight. By distributing the choir throughout the space in the premiere performance, thus surrounding the audience with sound, the music gives us a way to feel the totality of the Chapel even if our eyes cannot perceive it. Our ears' panoramic perception allows us to sense what our eyes cannot, and this sensation arises in the section of the work that Feldman likened most strongly to Rothko's painting. The middle of the piece comprises a droning "monochromey" soundscape in which time becomes

space (66). For this resolution to work, a deliberate act of aesthetic renunciation is required. Rothko's rejection of his visible medium is matched by Feldman's abandonment of his music's temporal dimension. Feldman blocks the onrushing flow of time so that music might become more perceptible as a canvas or something phenomenologically fundamental—a mood. As such, Rothko and Feldman transform the terms of pseudomorphosis that we find in Theodor W. Adorno's aesthetics. In Adorno's "Some Relationships between Music and Painting," we find this critique:

> *Music that "paints," which nearly always suffers a loss of temporal organization, lets go of the synthesizing principle through which, alone, it assumes a form approaching space; and painting that behaves dynamically, as if it were capturing temporal events, as the futurists desired and many abstract painters attempt to do with circling figures, exhausts itself, at best, in the illusion of time, while the latter is incomparably more present in a picture where it has disappeared among the relationships on the surface or the expression of what has been painted. (67)*

Adorno took a dim view of pseudomorphosis because of the perceived loss of autonomy it engendered. This loss was the unfortunate result of an artist's failure to develop their medium fully. As such, music "suffers a loss" and painting "exhausts" itself in their futile attempts to become other than what they autonomously should be. As I read Adorno, these failures are secondary effects of an artist's positive attempt to transcend medium specificity. Read in tandem with *Arts of Impoverishment*, however, we can gain a view of ego-dissolving pseudomorphosis achieved precisely through deliberate acts of renunciation. They are not secondary effects. Dissolution of medium specificity models the active dissolution of ego-boundaries. This contrasts with Adorno's version of pseudomorphosis, which is the hubristic excess born of an artist's desire to appropriate the nonidentical. Through their impoverished pseudomorphosis, Bersani and Dutoit posit a similarity between the arts that lies precisely in their relinquishment of any aspiration to autonomy. Far from lamenting loss and exhaustion, Bersani and Dutoit celebrate them for the truth they reveal to us: a consciousness without the failed fantasy of ego.

Bersani and Dutoit's aesthetic model of consciousness achieves self-shattering through a dialectic of activity and passivity. Intentional acts of renunciation become strategic abstractions that reduce material, remove secondary qualities, or neutralize identity categories. Less critically camp

than Bersani's celebration of the undoing proffered by sex, impoverished modernism strips away the particulars of art forms and brings into sharp relief their sensuous similarity. Artists, by renouncing medium specificity, and spectators, by giving up the subjective mastery of aesthetic judgement, clear the ontological ground vibrating with the hum of the world. This impoverishment is, paradoxically, a constructivist move in which we give up particulars in favor of our enmeshment in the world. Such consciousness—emerging from an actual occasion of aesthetic encounter—does not exist prior to our experience of the Rothko Chapel or Feldman's *Rothko Chapel*. By directly confronting the abandonment of technical particulars, we come into awareness of already belonging to one another. This paradoxical work of active renunciation—self-abolishment through self-fashioning—is how I understand Bersani and Dutoit's imputation of a "suicidal narcissism" to Rothko (128, 144). We need a minimum of subjective agency to bring about our own undoing.

In "Far Out," Bersani develops his and Dutoit's conception of works of art modelling consciousness. There he finds correspondences with Ibn ʿArabi's conception of divinity, in which God assuages their loneliness by coming into relationship with their creations, through the entanglement with and dissolution into others. Only through relinquishment of an "I" can God experience their own impersonal plenitude (85). Appropriate to this speculative mode, Bersani quickly leaves the realm of the divine for the mundane and gives us his only sustained discussion of music—a reflection on the performance of Vinteuil's septet in Proust's *The Prisoner*. Building on the anti-identitarian modernist ascesis of *Arts of Impoverishment*, Bersani transforms Proust's musical prose into a reflection on impersonal self-knowledge acquired through relations with others. Music does not give a listener insight into the truth of the subject. That is, following the Derrida of *Voice and Phenomena*, we do not come to know ourselves through autoaffective acts of listening. Yet, initially, Bersani latches onto Proust's reactionary notion of music as intentional, egoistic self-expression. He abandons a discussion of "reciprocal striving to be oneself in the Other" in favor of Proust's "concept of art as a document of the artist's authentic self" (86). Bersani dwells momentarily on Proust's assertion that Vinteuil's sounds index his "profundity" and proffer insight into personality: "[I]t is to a single, personal voice that those great singers, the original musicians, always return in spite of themselves, a voice which is the living proof of the irreducible individuality of each soul" (86). Proust continues to recount the ways in which music indexes specific people, excavating individuals from his memory and suturing a musical phrase to Albertine herself (*Prisoner* 245).

In keeping with his speculative aesthetics so expertly analyzed by Mikko Tuhkanen, Bersani swerves away from Proust's identity-based audition and reads him sharply against the grain. Proust notes that art manifests "the intimate make-up of those worlds we call individuals" (qtd. in Bersani 86). Such knowledge of the other's multiplicity constitutes "the communication of souls" (qtd. in Bersani 86). Bersani calls on music's ineffability to undermine Proust's claims for authentic musical self-revelation and homes in on the nonidentitarian, non-self-ontology that sound can make present. Bersani draws out the themes of music's inconsistency and ineffability, of which Proust writes that "[m]usic is like a possibility which has never been developed," a "return to the unanalyzed" (qtd. in Bersani 86–87). Which Bersani interprets thusly: "[T]he abandoned medium of the unanalyzed made possible (and music continues to make possible) a sharing of being distinct from a presumed knowledge of being" (87). With surgical precision, Bersani extracts the impoverishing potential in Vinteuil's septet, which Proust recounts as a struggle between contrasting melodies that gradually dissolve their identities into "a wrestling-match of pure energies" (qtd. in Bersani 87). This gradual collapse of identities returns us to the affective ground of the Rothko Chapel and Feldman's music for it. Proust writes, "[I]f these beings struggled against each other, it was without the encumbrance of their bodies, their outward appearances, their names, and they found in me an inwards spectator—equally indifferent to names and individual character—ready to involve himself in their immaterial, dynamic combat and to follow with passion its vicissitudes of sound" (*Prisoner* 247). Here we're offered a remembrance of self-loss narrated in such a way that Proust's authorship is never in question. Indeed, even the septet gives up on the radical potential of ego renunciation. In the end, one of Vinteuil's musical motifs asserts itself and brings the piece to a joyful, heavenly close. Bersani's optimism for an impoverished aesthetics is tempered by Proust's musical experience. The impoverishment needed to achieve nonoppositional consciousness is fragile, temporary, and constrained by manifold forces of identity that seek to bracket, bifurcate, and estrange. Even as the Rothko Chapel suspends the forces of egoism, Feldman's music for it does not sustain the anxiousness of its tragic structure. Like Vinteuil's septet, *Rothko Chapel* collapses back into thematic identification. Following the pseudomorphic drone comprising the work's middle section that so closely apes the monolithic canvases, the music regains time and spins out a lovely viola melody. The anti-identity impulse of the music is blocked as Feldman not only employs a soft modal tune but does so by evoking his autobiography.

He wrote it when he was sixteen. Impoverishment takes nerve, and Feldman loses it. But he, like Proust, suggests something that Bersani himself was aware of. Acts of impoverishment make immense subjective demands, and the deliberate renunciation of ego boundaries is difficult to sustain.

Yet, Feldman is not the only musician to sonically engage with the Rothko Chapel. His friend and collaborator Joan La Barbara composed her pseudomorphic "sound-painting" *Rothko* for the space in 1986 (see Dohoney, "Ekphrastic"). La Barbara steels herself, relinquishes her claims on time, and creates a static block of sound. The effect is akin to Swann's experience of Vinteuil's sonata; it is like the origin of the world (Dohoney, "Whitehead" 280–81; Proust, *Swann's* 365–66). Reversing Proust's recognition of the worlds contained within individuals, La Barbara makes a world by dismantling her individuality, multiplying her voice on multitracked tape. Undoing the link between a unique voice and an individual site of emission, La Barbara strips away her vocal identity, making it into material out of which she reconstructs Rothko's chapel in sound. Through nearly a half hour of spectral droning, we're drawn into a sonic world that immobilizes us and gives us precious little to hang on. Nor are we given much acoustic space in which to move. We instead are subsumed within the sound and dissolve into its resonant plenitude. But this masterpiece of Bersanian impoverishment also comes to an end, and I snap back into place as silence replaces La Barbara's resonant architecture. Even still, as with Rothko and Beckett, and occasionally with Feldman and Proust, we experience consciousness otherwise. These impoverished modernists, like Bersani, attune us to what remains after the end of identity.

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