

Death Work in Venice

In memoriam Khadija Saye

MIGNON NIXON

A man sits down in the seat across from me in the Underground train and begins to cry. I look up from my book, J.-B. Pontalis's *Frontiers in Psychoanalysis: Between the Dream and Psychic Pain* (1981), chapter fourteen, "On Death-Work," the week's assigned text for my reading group in the Psychoanalysis Unit at University College London. My attention pivots from the theoretical proposition that "the movements and defenses generated by the death instinct have superseded the conflict between the claims of desire conveyed by sexuality and the forces of suppression and repression" to the middle-aged man before me whose tears have escalated to stifled sobs.¹ As the train moves off, the man uncovers his face, closes his eyes, and appears to fall asleep. At Russell Square, my stop, I tiptoe out across pillows of newspaper, discarded copies of the morning commuter paper, the *Metro*. There, the news is of the attacks on the Manchester Arena two nights before, on the 22nd of May, in which a twenty-two-year-old local man killed twenty-two people with a suicide bomb concealed in a backpack.

In the reading group, we begin our discussion of the death-work with Freud's theory of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). "What is concerned here?" muses Pontalis: "The desire for death, or the death of desire?"² Death is in us from the beginning, Freud has it. The prominence of sexuality in Freud's theory, Pontalis contends, is devised to conceal death. Death is hidden, but drives us. A drive makes us work. The death-work is "negative-work," an unbinding process having "no aim but its own accomplishment"—but it is work.³ The talk turns to suicidal fantasy. I remember the suicide bomber in Manchester. I have been not-thinking about suicide bombers since 2005, when a fellow resident of north London boarded a Piccadilly Line train with a bomb hidden in a backpack and detonated it, committing mass murder in the car my husband, Greg, was riding in on his way to work. He was uninjured, and I make a point of not-thinking about this daily when I board the same train, sitting, if possible, near the driver's com-

1. J.-B. Pontalis, *Frontiers in Psychoanalysis: Between the Dream and Psychic Pain* (London: Hogarth Press, 1981), pp. 191–92.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

partment in the front car, the seat Greg occupied when he was not-damaged by that bomb. “Every psychoanalyst talks about death insinuated into life,” Pontalis observes. One “cannot evade the antagonistic work of death” but must “go out to meet it.”⁴

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“Something has happened in London,” a scratchy voice announces near me, as a bedside lamp clicks on. The three of us are lying on narrow beds in a close, dark room. Venice. We are here with students on a field trip to the Biennale. Yesterday, the Giardini; today, the Arsenale. Text messages begin to ping, and my roommates fill me in over breakfast. Late last night, three men drove a van into a crowd at the Borough Market near London Bridge before launching themselves on bystanders in a frenzied knife attack. The snap election campaign, called in April by Conservative prime minister Theresa May, is suspended for a second time. I call home. My father, lying in the hospital and watching the news on television, asks if I am safe. My sister reminds him that I am not in London, but he does not retain this information. I send him a picture postcard, this one handed to me outside the Giardini. Doing this, I affirm, as On Kawara distilled the essence of all remote communication in his telegrams, that *I Am Still Alive* (1970–2000)—and so is he. Kawara’s *One Million Years (Past)*, “for all those who have lived and died,” and *One Million Years (Future)*, “for the last one,” are being read during the Biennale.

The day before, entering the central pavilion in the Giardini, we halted in a tight space near the entrance to consider the show’s sleepers. In the chorus of derision that has greeted *Viva Arte Viva*, the photographic self-portraits of Mladen Stilinović sleeping, a series from the late 1970s titled “Artist at Work,” displayed alongside Franz West’s psycho-iconic chaise longue, have been picked out as emblems of an enervated art-politics for bad times. Was this curatorial conceit, we wondered, an appeal to the dream-work or a blind eye turned to a mad world—or both? Driven to hypervigilance by a madman’s predawn tweets, our insomniac culture, tuned to the alarums of news feeds and text alerts, craves—but eschews—a good night’s sleep. Rehearsing for doomsday, those who still have beds to sleep in, or couches to lie on, refuse to use them. Those who don’t—refugees, the homeless, the dispossessed, the incarcerated, the desperate—long for sleep, the unbroken, unmolested sleep of the perchance-to-dream kind. But in *Viva Arte Viva*, refugees do not sleep. Instead, they are put to work, by Olafur Eliasson for one, whose workshop producing lamps for sale to visitors occupies a spacious atrium in the Giardini. The dignity of work, rather than the dignity of sleep, is showcased here. I think of Yayoi Kusama, who in 1966 also turned the Giardini into a market,

4. Ibid., p. 191.

filling the lawn of the Italian pavilion with one thousand five hundred mirrored balls and selling them, under the title slogan “Your Narcissism for Sale,” for the price of two dollars (before the authorities put an end to the performance, objecting to selling works of art “like hot dogs”).⁵

Whatever “pulls us away from the world of dream, keeps us awake,” also “stops us from being able to paint,” Jacqueline Rose observes in her essay “On Not Being Able to Sleep” (2000).⁶ Ironically, given its opening nod to sleep, this is the defining problem of *Viva Arte Viva*. The unconscious—political unconscious, optical unconscious—is as elusive as slumber is conspicuous. For this is an exhibition so affirmative, so insistently art- and artist-positive (“designed with artists, by artists, and for artists”), that it is also, in Leo Bersani’s term, “antiartistic.”⁷ Resisting (as I read it) the instrumentalization of art by politics, curator Christine Macel protests too much: “In a world of conflicts and shocks, art bears witness to the most precious part of what makes us human,” she writes.⁸ And so, turning away from the scene of politics, which is also the scene of the unconscious par excellence, *Viva Arte Viva* does not so much evade as embrace the “messianic task” allocated to art “in the face of the failure of politics,” as Briony Fer has aptly described the predicament of contemporary art.⁹ In its humanist bombast—witness the Pavilion of Joys and Fears, the Pavilion of Colors, the Pavilion of Time and Infinity—*Viva Arte Viva* invokes an aesthetic of redemption in which art’s claims to be “a correction of life” are predicated on a “negation of life” that, as Bersani has argued, “must also negate art.”¹⁰

In Venice, if there is a draw, it is not *Viva Arte Viva* but Anne Imhof’s *Faust* in the German pavilion. Outside, Dobermans pace in a glass cage. Inside, visitors traverse a vertiginous glass floor that spans the space, below which soiled towels and metal bowls, among other, more sinister-looking props, lie abandoned. At appointed times, performers appear, enacting a drawn-out bondage-themed scenario, their movements cued by the artist via text message. One of the dancers is a friend of someone in our group. A few of the students excuse themselves to queue for the performance. I think back to Pontalis: “The movements and defenses generated by

5. Quoted in Rachel Taylor, “Walking Piece, Narcissus Garden and Self-Portraiture 1966,” in *Yayoi Kusama*, ed. Frances Morris (London: Tate, 2012), p. 109.

6. Jacqueline Rose, “On Not Being Able to Sleep,” in *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), p. 121. The title is an homage to the British psychoanalyst Marion Milner’s autobiographical narrative *On Not Being Able to Paint* (London: Heinemann, 1950).

7. The term is used by Bersani in *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 2.

8. Christine Macel, curator’s statement, *Viva Arte Viva*, exhibition brochure, p. 3.

9. Briony Fer, “Little Exercise,” conference paper, “Lifework,” Centre for the Study of Contemporary Art, University College London, June 10, 2017.

10. Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption*, p. 2.

the death instinct have superseded the conflict between the claims of desire conveyed by sexuality and the forces of suppression and repression.” So it seems. I think about Carolee Schneemann receiving this year’s Lion d’Or for lifetime achievement. The movements of the small troupe recall the pairing of dancers in “holds” and “falls” in Schneemann’s kinetic theater. *Faust’s* devices are perversely reminiscent of *Snows*, the piece Schneemann presented at the Martinique Theatre in New York in the winter of 1967, for the week of the Angry Arts, a mass artistic protest against the American war in Vietnam. In *Snows*, six performers, three women and three men, circled and grasped one another, wrapped one another’s bodies in tinfoil and painted one another’s faces, grappled with and stroked one another, their movements evoking, without mimicking, the contorted postures imposed on bodies in war and under torture.¹¹ The sensual grace of lithe bodies exposed, shackled, hung upside down, as documented in the photographs of atrocity Schneemann obsessively collected, provided a lexicon of movements in which sadism fused with eroticism, not slickly and photogenically, as they do in *Faust*, but in raw contingency. *Faust* takes a leaf from Schneemann’s notes for *Snows*, in which the artist expressed her horror at a culture “mechanical in its emotions and insane with cold lusts.”¹² For Schneemann, however, there was a political imperative to confront, to take on, the dynamic of desire in a culture of cold lust:

The performance imagery is finally ambiguous: shifting metaphors in which performers are aggressor and victim, torturer and tortured, lover and beloved. . . . We set each other on fire, we extinguish the fire, we create each other’s face and body, we abandon each other, we save each other, we take responsibility for each other, we lose responsibility for each other, we reveal each other, we choose, we respond, we build, we are destroyed.¹³

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In the reading group, on the day of the election, we discuss laws. Where do they come from? What do they do? What counts as law, covenant, regulation, and how to distinguish them? This is a matter of dispute for the group, but as the discussion breaks up, there is agreement on one point. The Conservatives’ threat to bring in more draconian anti-terror laws if, as anticipated, they are returned to power in a landslide is a strategy of escalation that is dangerously oblivious to the

11. Carolee Schneemann, “Snows,” in *More Than Meat Joy: Performance Works and Selected Writings*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston, N.Y.: Documentext, 1979/1997), pp. 128–49.

12. Carolee Schneemann, *Correspondence Course: An Epistolary History of Carolee Schneemann and Her Circle*, ed. Krstine Stiles (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 114.

13. Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy*, p. 131.

imperatives of the death instinct. Pontalis again: Anyone seeking “to specify the present social *forms* assumed by the death instinct” is confronted “by the burden of the choice!”¹⁴ He names “the atomic threat, the cycle of violence and counter-violence, pollution, and bondage” among these forms and concludes: “It is as though the metaphors of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* have become . . . those of our culture.”¹⁵ This jeremiad seems laced with death-excitement. There is no escaping the death drive. We must “go out to meet it.”

At ten o’clock, the exit poll is revealed, projecting a hung Parliament. I lack the nerve to sleep, trusting the forecasted reversal of Conservative fortunes only to the apotropaic logic of an all-night vigil. The prime minister’s political advisors coolly account for the shock result: “The Conservative election campaign . . . failed to notice the surge in Labour support, because modern campaigning techniques require ever-narrower targeting of specific voters, and we were not talking to the people who decided to vote for Labour.”¹⁶ This not-talking strategy, a campaign of cold lusts in which May refused to debate her opponents and avoided unscripted encounters with voters, contriving to not-talk by repeating slogans with a mechanical regularity that would make a robot blush, proves a turn-off, even in the wealthy seat of Kensington, which for the first time elects a Labour MP, the architectural historian, journalist, and housing activist Emma Dent Coad.

“The burnt carcass of Grenfell speaks for itself,” Dent Coad would tell Parliament a week later in her maiden speech.¹⁷ Inferno. Crematorium. Hecatombe. Grenfell Towers, a tower block apartment building clad in a new, shiny skin to redeem a blot on the skyline of west London, is now a charred monument to the violence of austerity government, privatization, deregulation, racism, xenophobia, and structural inequality. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn’s promise of a politics “for the many not the few,” lingering on abandoned campaign placards, acquires an eerie resonance as the still-unformed minority government—May now in negotiation with the hard-right Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland—reaches its Katrina moment. May visits the site of the fire without meeting a single resident or grieving relative. The official explanation for this, “security concerns,” draws an unfavorable comparison with the nonagenarian queen. In the coming days, we learn about flammable cladding, plastic insulation, exposed gas pipes, about the dearth of sprinklers, fire escapes, fire doors, and secondary stair-

14. Pontalis, *Frontiers*, p. 192.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

16. Nick Timothy, quoted in “May’s Abusive Top Staff Removed As Recriminations Grow over Poll Failure,” *Observer*, June 10, 2017, online edition, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/10/theresa-may-top-advisers-quit-nick-timothy-fiona-hill-tory-recriminations-grow>.

17. Emma Dent Coad, MP for Kensington, <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=2017-06-22a.228.3&s=speaker%3A25706#g248.0>.



Khadija Saye. Dwelling: In This Space We Breathe. 2017.

cases in public housing, about tenants' fears, repeatedly expressed to local government officials, that they, like countless others throughout the country, were living in a "firetrap."¹⁸ We learn that the authorities have "made a corpse of Reason," as Pontalis describes the psychic shocks of the Great War.¹⁹

A photograph appears on the screen. I recognize it, a black-and-white portrait, self-portrait, of a woman in profile, head bent forward, her neck making a shelf on which a fluted cup is placed by an outstretched arm reaching out from the margin. The photograph is from a series of wet-plate collodion tintypes we saw in Venice, at the Diaspora Pavilion. The exacting, antiquated medium takes the image out of time, or projects it more deeply into time. This depth cradles the solid body, the shadowed face, and the wrapped head, concentrated in its bending, holds them in time but also suspends them in the temporal ambiguity of anachronism. I find it impossible not to think of Roland Barthes's observation of being the subject of the portrait-photograph: "I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre."²⁰ From a series entitled *Dwelling: In This Space We Breathe*, the photograph is conspicuously, self-consciously spectral, an adventitious effect of the medium being to deposit ghostly traces in the image and at the same time to "turn" it, like milk, as Barthes also wrote, into something invisible, something that is "not what we see."²¹

"What makes for a grievable life?"²² In Grenfell, being an artist, exhibiting at the Venice Biennale. "Khadija is now missing," the artist Joy Gregory announces the night after the fire, speaking on a panel at the Institute for Advanced Study.²³ Khadija Saye, aged twenty-four, the photographer who created *Dwelling: In This Space We Breathe*, lives with her mother, Mary Mendy, on an upper floor of Grenfell Tower.

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The artist has some prominent friends, including my local MP, David Lammy, who announces her disappearance in a radio interview.²⁴ We are left with a few bodies of work, including this one. I want to resist *Dwelling: In This Space We Breathe* becoming Grenfell. The work attests to a myth of the domestic in which we

18. Grenfell Action Group, <https://grenfellactiongroup.wordpress.com/2017/06/22/grenfell-tower-fire-the-forgotten-forgotten-victims/>.

19. Pontalis, *Frontiers*, p. 190.

20. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 14.

21. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 6.

22. Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 20.

23. Joy Gregory, "Talking Points," University College London Institute for Advanced Study, June 15, 2017.

24. Anny Shaw, "Labour MP Searching for Missing Artist Calls Grenfell Tower Fire 'Corporate Manslaughter,'" *The Art Newspaper*, June 15, 2017. <http://theartnewspaper.com/news/news/labour-mp-searching-for-missing-artist-says-grenfell-tower-fire-is-corporate-manslaughter/>.

all share, as far as we are allowed: Where we dwell is where we can breathe, where there is “oxygen in the air.” The poet M. NourbeSe Philip, in her opening keynote for “Feminist Emergency,” a conference that takes place a week after the fire, offers this suggestion. There are ways, she says, to breathe for another. It’s a start. In London, the community of Grenfell has been showing the way: *I can’t breathe. I will breathe for you.*²⁵

25. M. NourbeSe Philip, “Gasp: Unspeakable Acts,” keynote lecture, “Feminist Emergency,” Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, June 22, 2017. Philip quoted Nina Simone’s lyric for “22nd Century,” which begins: “There is no oxygen in the air.” The lecture’s refrain was: “I can’t breathe. I will breathe for you.”