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It Is Not a Screen. It Is a Page

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Recently, in a lecture for the conference *Digital PTSD*,¹ held online by Castello di Rivoli during the COVID-19 pandemic, Bracha L. Ettinger spoke of *Digital Stupor and Gaze-screen: Deceleration and Resistance*. She addressed subjectivity in the age of the digital—a fluid world of hyperconnectivity—and noted how social-media produce forms of digital stupor, rather than trauma. This psychic narcissistic disorder or numbness is caused by the voiding of the time with which trauma engages. Digital stupor collapses psychic time, and thus our ability to process and work through experience in time. We are in a state of “lack of lack,” a state of immediacy. There is a fusion “between the eye, the phantasmatic screen-gaze and the virtual-real gaze-screen” that creates a “gaze-screen-eye condensation.” In this time of loss of what could be processes of individuation through *copioiesis* with others, awareness and resistant mechanisms can, however, be set in place. “Narcissism promotes addiction to hyper-connectivity nourished by visual devouringly immersive hyper-infiltration in mediatic digital acceleration,” Bracha said. She then added the Lacanian observation: “Subservience to the soul-draining exhausting inundation of the *objet a* gaze-screen, leading to phantasmatic screen-gazes, computed to dehumanize the human, is nourished by the human desire for inflated and ideal mirroring. The surface-gaze-screen subject-like agency might turn us into its objects even when we master its tools and analyze its mechanisms. But awareness of these new desiring-machines and awareness of this level of consciousness serve as humanizing resistance.”

The digital is an age of the archive. We suffer from an archive fever,² and collect all possible documentary material produced behind the scenes, in a quest for forms of truth and depth able to counter the surface-space of our digital times. It is the copy-it-and-put-it-in-a-folder-for-reading-at-a-later-time syndrome, although the later time never seems to arrive. “The artistic goes beyond creativity. It takes attentive care, it does not archive but carries; it opens the dimension of deceleration,” Bracha argued in her lecture. Yet this hoarding impulse of the archival field also allows us to produce interruptions in the flow of superficial experience. In particular, notebooks allow this to happen.

A notebook is full of words, doodles, intimations of images. It opens the possibility for decelerating and increased attention. Because of its cryptic and hieroglyphic nature, beyond image and words, it interrupts the flow that causes digital stupor, while creating a new time-space. It is opaque, on paper, rather than luminous like a screen, and it is small, just the right size for a pen and the mechanics of handwriting. We use our fingers to write by hand, but unlike the digital gesture, they do not scroll up or down, nor right or left. Handwriting is the result of micro-circular muscle gestures of the folded fingers while the palm of the hand lies in repose on the table on which the notebook is placed. Whether the left or right, only one hand of the writer is at work, combining rest (the palm curved on the table) and action (the fingers curled and moving with the pen or pencil).

When dealing with our smartphones to produce social media and messages, on the other hand, total performativity is required: while one hand holds the phone, the other types or scrolls, and no muscle of either hand is in repose. The smartphone hijacks our entire body, even in the case of audio messages, when we hold a button down for the duration of the recording. There is apparently no pain.

“In the feminine-matrixial sphere, alliance-in-difference with-from the other is primordial. Just as primordial as narcissism. Its potentiality for response-ability rather than reactivity, and for care-full affective webbing of the several, is a resistance to the hyper-webbing inundation in the accelerated multiple. The psychic human space-time- body entails a dolour that the digital stupor denies.”

Aesthetics and ethics are never separated in Bracha’s work and so creativity alone is not art. The time needed for care offers the possibility of an ethical creativity, which is how she defines art. She speaks of jointness and *copoiesis*—rather than symbiosis, which is based on a lack of interval and of the time-space needed for caring—which allows us to go beyond the phantasmatic screen of the un-caring digital. Caring is connected with listening and to note-taking. Bracha thus sees in, she listens to the Other even when she is alone, and draws lines connecting words, weaving them into a web and texture of life. These lines ultimately manifest as layered paintings, often small and thus in relation to our bodies; in them, drawing and painting are formed in continuity through the gesture of rubbing. But before the paintings, or rather in parallel, there is the intimate and personal time of the note-taking and of the noting down, the space- time interval of the notebook, the annotations:

“to listen to you / is art, is the ‘משך’ / is captured in the line / whoever I meet / wherever I go / becomes the studio / if the meeting / is captured by its / vibrations in the / lines” (1984).³

“0051 0056 0059 0101 0104 0105 0105 0108 0110 0118...” (1967).

“What is that?” I asked.

“Keeping time, organizing, telling the helicopter where to go. I’ll tell you later about all that.”

¹ Held in the context of the exhibition *Espressioni. The Proposition*, Castello di Rivoli, organized by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in collaboration with e-flux, December 12, 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/video/366458/digitalptsd-nbsp-the-practice-of-art-and-its-impact-on-digital-trauma-nbsp/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5nzmnrFhE>.

² Not by chance, the rise of digital technology went hand in hand with the rise of the importance of archives and the reflections on this by intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida, who published *Mal d’Archive. Une impression freudienne*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1995; English translation by Eric Prenowitz, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996

³ BLE.NB.1984.1.007, p. 4 of this notebook.