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Vancouver's Place for Progressive Politics

The Vanishing Cause of History

By Andrew Witt On November 2, 2011



At the top of the entrance to the Georgia and Granville skytrain station, the actor who played the former chief coroner of BC and mayor of Vancouver, Larry Campbell, lies in state. Elongated on a polished mortuary slab, the body patiently awaits inspection. Firmly planted at the centre of commerce in Vancouver, actively conflating power, politics and death, the whole scene is disorientating, uncanny, if not outright confrontational.

Spanning the entire north wall of the station, this work by local artist Althea Thauberger is massive both in size and scale. Slightly larger than a typical city billboard, the body is monstrous. The photograph, subtracted from the slogans and brands of commercial imagery of its surroundings, exerts a dramatic austerity. For the passengers moving to and fro on the Skytrain stairwell, the picture appears at first out of place. The billboard both dwarfs commuters and exerts a definitive presence without them. Viewing the work from the Skytrain stairwell, your eye acquires a CSI spectacality and magnifies the body's intense physiognomy. In the excessive attention to detail, the body's part-objects take hold of the image: yellow-mangled toenails; sparse leg hair; a few flesh wounds (bed-bug bites?) — each atom asserts an iconic clarity. Within these moments of distraction, it becomes difficult for your eye to stake claim on the image's totality. In the passengers' movement,

the picture demands a contradiction: a probing gaze onto the photo's extreme minutiae yet also a skill for the fleeting glance conditioned by the stairwell's tempo. In a matter of seconds, Campbell's body unpacks itself piece by piece as we whirl downward to the depths of the platform.

Mounted on transparent glass, the image is a mirror onto itself, and the audience is permitted to view its reverse from the TD Plaza. From this angle, the eye is able to relax and ease into a sedate, plodding study. If it were not for Campbell's face and stubborn hand, you could almost say the rest of the body was silently composed, patiently awaiting its public with a globular paunch, its legs elongated as though they were just there, sunbathing on a beach.

Once we are confronted with Campbell's face, however, a different presentation unfolds. Campbell's gaze is irreverent. As it turns out onto the plaza, and with a gesture that is more aggressive than the rest of his body, his head rejects its placement. With a wide-eyed, brow-raised, mouth-slightly-open glance, Campbell's face is punctuated with a theatrical exclamation and an eagerness to vocalize something. Sharing a similar glance to Nicolas Poussin's 'running-man' in *Landscape with a man killed by a snake* (1648), the body wishes to declare itself, yet it is without the same horror and torsion. The hand, too, is eerily similar to the elegiac shepherd in Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1640), raised as though it is about to gesture to the presence of an unexpected tomb. In both pictures, *Ecce Homo* and *Et in Arcadia Ego*, the hand operates as the picture's anchor. It is the site for the body's own contemplative absorption — a means to trace out a pensive, melancholic thought both inside and outside the frame.



Nicolas Poussin - "Et in Arcadia Ego" (1640)

We have to ask ourselves however, is this the same 'sight of death' that Poussin announced, or even an image 'of death' as one might assume? Is it not more ludic, aloof and underhanded? Without the knowledge that Campbell was the chief coroner of BC, or even the presence of a mortuary table, there are no clear markers of death.

But Thauberger is clear at this point: both work and death are conflated in the picture. As chief coroner, death was once Campbell's work, but now death works on Campbell. But it also works on

Larry Campbell's body double, Nicholas Campbell — the actor who played the former coroner on the TV series *Da Vinci's Inquest* (1998-2005) and later in *Da Vinci's City Hall* (2005) — especially now when the former actor is out of work. In a weird set of intersections, the camera too assumes the perspective of the coroner, and by detaining the eye, the body appears as though it awaits dissection. But still, the picture remains unconvincing, the body is certainly more alive than dead; or in its own manner just undead, barely hanging on — a body set at the threshold of life and death.

If anything, death has its clear signs: discoloration, rigor mortis, decomposition, putrefaction, coldness. It may be all of these things, but also none of them, since death is also *nothing*.

No doubt, the twentieth century has innumerable images of suffering: bodies bagged, crumpled and collapsed onto themselves. The last decade alone has its fair share of arresting images: Abu Ghraib, RCMP taser-related homicides, BART executions, to name just a few.

Within this distinctive territory of death and its shifts, no image has historically been more evocative, say, than Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ* (1521), a picture that in its compositional likeness resembles Thauberger's *Ecce Homo* (2011).



Hans Holbein "The Dead Christ in the Tomb" (1521)

Unquestionably, Holbein's *Dead Christ* is a painting of a dead body. What is more haunting though, is that it is a corpse that has recently expired — a body recently taken from the cross. Rigor mortis and decomposition have not set in, and there appears just the hint of life — warmth barely remains and the corpse is still feeling pain after spending hours on the cross. It is a painting of a body that has just surrendered to its defeat, collapsing after hours of torture and terror. What is most distressing about the image is that it lies motionless. As we place our gaze on it, the body transforms into an ordinary thing.[1]

In this sense, Hobein's *Christ* is a direct challenge to more traditional types of Christian figuration: it is neither a Franciscan adoration of the dead Christ in all of its sexualized and glorified luminosity, nor is it a fantastic exaggeration of the paroxysm of suffering as seen in Matthias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, for instance.

Holbein's *Dead Christ* is demystified. Absent are chromatic and compositional euphoria. Holbein is a product of the joyless austerity of the Counter-Reformation, and the image sides with a direct negation of Christian transcendence. It is a picture hovering around the traumatic Real: not 'too hot,' but 'too cold to touch.' As Julia Kristeva has extraordinarily shown, it is an image of melancholia — a picture of "hopeless grief" — an image withholding the promise of resurrection:

Holbein, proposes another vision, that of man subject to death, man embracing death, absorbing into his very being, integrating it not as a condition for glory or a consequence of a sinful nature but as the ultimate essence of his desacrilized reality, which is the foundation of a new dignity.[2]

Similar to Thauberger's *Ecce Homo*, the linch-pin of the image is Christ's battered face. His face is beaten to a pulp, smashed to smithereens, and with its eyes squinting ever so slightly, they emit a "dead glassy dint," as Kristeva says. As Christ's face is set within the shadows of the tomb, it is as though it were eroding from the absence of light. In this sense, the shadow is the picture's threat to figuration, the advance of a formlessness that creeps ever so slightly from the present. Nonetheless, there is nothing lyrical or sentimental within this picture: it is clearly disenchanting, subtracted from the transcendental promise of resurrection.



Thauberger's image, on the other hand, does not contain the same melancholia of Holbein's. It is less the work of loss, but a weird reversal. In its extreme attention to detail, coupled with a declared support of figuration, the picture is an adulation of the State's official corpus. Unlike the warmth that remains in Holbein's *Dead Christ*, *Ecce Homo* is not even holding on for grim life. There is little resistance. Every limb and piece of flesh is intact, as though the body was reconstructed in some heavenly, photoshopped realm of corporeal perfection. The bleak, stark, chilly image of death is replaced with a warm, ludic representation: an image of Vancouver from an auratic, undead bliss.

Within the realm of photography in particular, there is a danger of lapsing back to traditional, albeit adapted forms of portraiture. "Cult value," as Walter Benjamin warns, "does not give way without resistance. It retires into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance." Advanced forms of modern photography throughout the 20th C. have historically displaced the unified, humanist individuality of bourgeois portraiture, in favor of a more anomic, anonymous, uncanny form of representation. The eerie doubling of Claude Cahun's self-portraiture, El Lissitzky's masses in his *Demonstration Rooms* (1927), or the seriality of Allan Sekula's *Untitled Slide Sequence* (1972), are fine examples of photography's resistance to the universal regime of traditional portraiture that invests itself in the accepted countenance of the ruling classes.



Allan Sekula - "Untitled Slide Sequence" (1972)

With *Ecce Homo*, the danger of politics is effaced from the image as the viewer is repositioned to the heavenly realm of contemplative spectatorship. Even if death is in Arcadia [*Et in Arcadia Ego* – “I, Death, is even in Arcadia”], as Poussin is never tired of reminding us, it seems to confront its limit in Vancouver’s studios, uncovering an illusory perfection in the form of a two-bit actor playing a populist mayor.

As Thauberg’s piece declares, the contemporary juncture is not an episode for the abandonment of the figuration but rather its restoration through relativism, in which the return to the figural corresponds to the return of order [*Le Rappel à l’Ordre*].[3] Modernism was inaugurated by the suppression of the figural, seeking instead to displace it within the realm of abstraction; the formless [*l’informe*]; the uncanny of surrealism; or to dislocate humanist subjectivity through collective modes of spectatorship, encouraging a dynamic, active, anti-contemplative engagement within the unpredictable site of reception.[4]

Within the history of picture making, to figure a body is to form it, and as such, figuration assumes both a mode of alteration of the body itself, but also a modification of a secondary representation. It is here that the *mode* of such re-figuration is important. Since spectacle operates as *Ecce Homo*’s ‘technical support,’ (in Rosalind Krauss’ sense) the culture industry functions as the work’s scaffolding, supporting a realm of apotheosis where humanity returns from the crude realm of the everyday wholly refigured without blemish. This is the condition of the city-state-media fiction, which proves itself by enclosing history within the preeminence of a rational, humanist, individual subject capable of pronouncing the resounding myth of the late late bourgeois world and its supposed “mass” culture: the evacuation of the masses from the realm of history.

According to Thauberg, the inspiration for *Ecce Homo* was not Holbein’s *Dead Christ*, but Jacques-Louis David’s iconic painting *Death of Marat* (1793). David’s painting was planned and completed at the height of the French Revolution, or ‘Year Two’ on the Revolutionary calendar. As TJ Clark points

out in his study "Painting in the Year Two" (1994), the *Death of Marat* was executed precisely during the turbulent September when the Revolutionary government constituted itself, during the very month where terror became "the order of the day." [5] Infused with revolutionary sentiment and temporality, David's picture is less a painting for the salons and more an image to herald the Revolutionary moment in all of its uncertainty. On October 16 1793, the painting was "hurriedly" released to the public, and paraded through the streets in order to honour the murdered Jacobin, three months after his public funeral procession in July. It comes as no coincidence that the picture was marched through the streets the same day Marie Antoinette was guillotined.



Jacques-Louis David "Death of Marat" (1793)

The differences between Thauberger's photograph and David's painting are far too vast. Marat is captured immediately after the moment Charlotte Corday had plunged the knife into his chest, severing his aorta. It is a picture of a recent murder: Marat's blood has soiled the bathtub's water and Corday's knife lays strewn on the floor, covered in blood. As Clark points out, Marat's wound looks half-clotted, still seeping — a "sacrilegious wound," as Baudelaire would avow. His fingers are lean and alive yet his flesh has a colorless tinge. Yet, much of Marat's body is still obscured by the bathtub that he used to ease his skin disease. In David's formulation, Marat is moved to a "state of insubstantiality," even though he is thrown out of the picture plane. [6]

Indeed, not unlike *Ecce Homo*, with Thauberger there is a closeness to the image that speaks to a figural immediacy, except that Campbell seems more alive and on display, and there are no clear references to murder. Similarly, Campbell's face tumbles out of Thauberger's picture, but it is also confrontational and assertive, in contrast to Marat's more saintly downcast and surrendered gesture.

As a staunch Jacobin, Marat was an ardent defender of the Convention, dedicated to the new parliamentary system and a champion of the Revolution at whatever the cost. Most notably, Marat was a declared enemy of “l’accapareurs, l’agoteurs, et l’ouvriers de luxe,” (monopolizers, speculators and workers of luxury – artists among them).[7]

Vancouver’s former Mayor, on the other hand, was nothing of the sort. Larry Campbell sold the city at whim to monopolizers and speculators, most notoriously with the Woodward’s development. Coupled with the Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, Woodward’s has today transformed the entire neighborhood into one large floor-to-ceiling window display for over-priced restaurants, bars, and work-out facilities. Here, the alliance between state-art and real estate has acted to guarantee the forcible consent for the redevelopment of entire neighborhoods instigated by the onslaught of monopoly capitalism – expelling affordable housing, social services and studio space under the guidance of city policy that makes no mistake in indicating its support for social cleansing.

During the last year in particular, the City of Vancouver, for its 125th Anniversary, has attempted to develop an enormous apparatus of public culture, burnished as a modest act of urban ornamentation – a form of production entirely dependent on state and corporate sponsorship, entirely aligned within the space of power. In a bid to become a ‘World Class City,’ the State’s support of public art has taken the form of an alibi: an insincere effort to protect public space from the onslaught of hyper-development while desperately searching out a new monumentality: to become another kind of utopian city altogether. At this juncture, the slogan, ‘World Class City,’ is the misnomer for ‘World Class War.’[8]

Our contemporary predicament of increased unaffordability, precarity, and a developer-run city council, has its roots not only with the NPA, but with the new regime of Larry Campbell, which persists to this day. In 2002 Larry Campbell led the city to a resounding victory with the first COPE Mayor and COPE-controlled council since the party formed in the 1960s. But almost immediately, Campbell divided councillors over a handful of issues: support for the 2010 Olympics and the public-private partnership (P3) that would build the Richmond-Airport-Vancouver rapid-transit line (Canada Line). At the time, Campbell broke with the promised COPE policy of defending public services. In specific, Campbell refused to sign for public transit, choosing instead P3s and the privatized Translink regime. There is nothing ironic or coincidental in *Ecce Homo*’s placement on the Canada Line, a monument to the degradation of a collective politics and back turned to the sharing of a common stake.

Of course one of Larry Campbell’s notable contributions to Vancouver politics was advocacy for Vancouver’s safe-injection site (InSite), and this alone is commendable. Even here, though, we should never forget that the true origin of Insite was a grassroots, user-run safe-injection site operating outside the state’s ‘law’ – a law which everyday sought to kidnap and terrorize the masses of users.

Throughout his tenure, Campbell in his conservative-populism would rarely side with the oppressed, lashing out at protesters and progressive critics and calling his COPE colleagues “ideological and inflexible.” The main contribution of Campbell was to experiment with using progressive language to pursue reactionary, centre-right policy goals – a formula that defines our city to this day. Campbell and councillors Jim Green, Raymond Louie and Tim Stevenson went on to form an independent caucus within COPE, and later broke off from the party altogether to form Vancouver’s current ruling party, Vision Vancouver.

Today, not unlike the counter-revolutionary Thermidorians[9] who claimed power after the Jacobin Terror and replaced Virtue with a statist mechanism for upholding the tyranny of wealth and privilege, Campbell, like all charismatic mayors of Vancouver, reinstated inequity at the heart of the city-state. Their resounding fictions, which at times speak to equality, affordability and sustainability, instead construct an artifice in its place – this is the illusory means through which power in Vancouver consolidates and perennially reconstitutes itself.

In opposition to today's conjuncture and the long-Thermidorian moment, what was novel about the French Revolution was how it transformed the terrain of picture making. As T.J. Clark convincingly argues, it is at this phase in history (Year Two) that the masses entered the space of power, as well as space of picture making – two spaces formerly occupied by the sovereign King. At this juncture, the recently murdered Marat functioned as this contradictory figure.

As “L'Ami du peuple” (the Friend of the people), Marat laboured tirelessly as incorruptible writer and republican, denouncing his enemies at every turn. And as Alain Badiou has recently recalled in his writings on the Arab spring, the principle that Marat never stopped recalling was: “when it is a matter of liberty, equality, emancipation, we all have to join the popular upheavals.”[10]

The Death of Marat was a unique image in so far as it attempted to figure an image of the people, both in its austerity and poverty – within Marat's bare study – as well as figuring the people as an vanishing cause of history. The latter is represented in David's picture by the dark void above the bath. In particular, the masses are this absent cause of history, in the sense they are and make history, but operate at the level of pure presentation, and remain unrepresentable within the discourse of the state and its realm of visibility.

The Jacobin concept of the people was precisely this: empty. As Clark further argues, the Jacobin's concept of the people was defined in contradistinction to the aristocracy, who were characteristically idle, unproductive and rich.[11] The upper-half of the image embodies the concept of emptiness in this sense, as an exhaustive purification of the people as a spectral image of pure force.

Contrast this image with the dark screen that surrounds Thauberger's piece. Here, the picture's dramatic non-surrounding only serves to accentuate Campbell's body as such, in order to distinguish the image from its surroundings. In other words, the masses are not figured as a vanishing revolutionary cause, but are disavowed, erased from our own moment in an act of figural perfection.

Moreover, as Clark also posits, *The Death of Marat* is a painting of the act of writing. Not only is it an image of the revolutionary Jacobin labouring tirelessly, even in pain and to the point of death, for the good of the people; but also, through the use of illusion, Marat's own discourse inextricably becomes part of our world. The two pieces of writing depict two worlds: the old order of the monarchical status quo, and the new revolutionary moment.



This is expressed in the contrast between the two letters that are found in the painting: a letter written by Charlotte Corday held in Marat's hand (above), and the other note written by Marat resting on the Jacobin's writing table (translation below).[12] For Clark, the acts of writing "swallows up the figural," where the objects of writing in their illusion becomes part of our world.[13] Marat served David's purpose, in so far as he was an image of the "becoming-image of power." It is for this reason alone that T.J. Clark nominates the *Death of Marat* as single-handedly inaugurating modernism. In his essay "Painting in the Year Two," Clark claims that the politics of modernism lay with this form of inconsistency:

Politics is the form par excellence of that contingency which makes modernism what it is. Politics not only is obliged to make form out of politics, but also leave the accident and tendentiousness of politics in the form it makes — not to transmute it, in other words.[14]

In Clark's formulation, the picture shows us that politics is precisely this: *an inconsistent form of our world*. Within Thauberg's world on the other hand, it becomes clear that a picture wishes to ward off the contingent nature of politics, and instead replace it with an image of a fictional myth, an *artifice* devoid of terror. What is missing in Thauberg's recreation are these points of contingency: the dark void above Marat's bathtub; the masses as the absent cause of history; the two worlds depicted in Corday's letter and Marat's; the impossibility of transcendence; as well as the revolutionary consciousness at the very core of the image.

Indeed, *Ecce Homo* is a photograph of 'politics and power,' but it is an image exclusively aligned to representations of a city-state fiction that seeks to fix power to the realm of the few — speculators, bureaucrats, monopolizers, celebrities — instead of forming the perspective of the masses, the 'vanishing cause,' who *are* and *make* history.

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[1] This is a similar reading that T.J. Clark gives to the twisted corpse in Poussin's *Landscape with a man killed by a snake* (1648 in Clark's *The Sight of Death* (2008)

[2] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 106 - 138

[3] Benjamin Buchloh "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting" *October* Vol. 16, *Art World Follies* (Spring, 1981), pp. 39-68.

[4] I am thinking of El Lissitzky's *Proun Rooms*.

[5] September 1793 is the crucial point for the formation of the Revolutionary government. September 9, the *armee revolutionnaire* is founded. Two days later it fixes the maximum prices for grain and flour, and later, the price of all commodities; on the seventeenth, the Law of Suspects is passed and the state's committees draw up lists of the Revolution's enemies.

[6] T.J. Clark, "Painting in the Year Two" *Representations* No. 47 Special Issue: National Cultures before Nationalism (Summer, 1994), 39

[7] Clark, 24

[8] This point came out of a conversation with Graeme Fisher.

[9] An excellent account of the counter-revolutionary Thermidorians can be found in Alain Badiou's *Metapolitics* (2006). Badiou points to three articles in the Thermidorian programme that demonstrates their anti-Revolutionary, conservative, restorationist function: Article 366 proclaims, "Every unarmed gathering shall be dispersed"; Article 364 states, "No association may present them collectively, except the constituted authorities and then only for matters of their jurisdiction"; and Article 361 states, "No assembly of citizens may call itself a popular society."

[10] Alain Badiou, "The Universal Reach of Popular Upheavals," *Lacan.com* (http://www.lacan.com/thesymptom/?page_id=1031) 2011.

[11] Clark, 51

[12] Corday's note reads: "July 13 1793: Marie-Charlotte Corday to citizen Marat / It is enough for me to be truly wretched to have a right to your kindness" [du 13 juillet, 1793." (The Revolutionary calendar only started in October.) "Marie anne Charlotte / Corday au citoyen/ Marat. "il suffit que je sois/ bien Malheureuse [capital M] / pour avoir Droit [even more formal capital D] / a votre bienveillance."] Marat's letter, on the other hand reads: "you are to give this assignat [a bill issued as currency during the Revolution] to this mother of five whose husband dies for his country] ["vous Donnera [or 'vous Donnerez,'] cet / assignat 'a cette / mere de 5 enfans / et dont le mari est /parti [or is it 'mort'?] . . . pour la deffense ...]. Then there is David's scribble, "To Marat, David. Year Two. "

[13] Clark, 41

[14] Clark, 20