

WORLD OF DEW

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*This world of dew
is only the world of dew
and yet . . . oh and yet*
Kobayashi Issa¹

I

In 1995, Natacha Nisic began working on a *Catalogue de gestes* [fig. 1 + p. 15–25], which has grown incessantly over the years. It is an open-ended catalogue, made up of a series of films shot in Super 8, each one lasting as long as a cartridge (between one and two and a half minutes). The films show, framed in close up and slightly from above, hands performing a simple task, real or imaginary (peeling, cutting, rubbing, or cleaning), or handling an object (a flower, piece of fruit, pair of scissors, knife), or simply rubbing one against the other. They form a motif within the shot that has neither beginning nor end, that loops back on itself, with no conclusion. The faces never appear in shot: although most of the hands are those of women, marked by time and revealing something of their history through wrinkles, marks or stains, a ring on a finger, they are never joined to a body, performing entirely on their own a function detached from any subject. First projected from film, the films, now digitalized and screened on flat screens, play in a loop, installed

throughout the exhibition spaces in varying number, in open compositions that can be endlessly permuted.

In Natacha Nisic's work, the *Catalogue de gestes* has taken on a character that is ever more openly inaugural, evoking memories of other films devoted to the movement of hands. In 1934, Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, members of the Film and Photo League, a group of radical documentary-makers, made *Hands* [fig. 2], a silent film produced by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) showing the hands of the unemployed, of craftsmen and factory workers, idle or at work. The two documentary-makers, who also did not show faces, used experimental techniques—editing effects, framing, highly expressive lighting—to portray workers' gestures with the aim of revealing their beauty. Like Steiner and Van Dyke's *Hands*, Natacha Nisic's *Catalogue de gestes* displays an interest in social and cultural concerns, but is more than a just a simple repertoire of forms, an archive project or exercise in conservation. Not only is she conjuring up the forgotten by contrasting it with the permanence of images, and conserving by means of photographic prints the trace of ephemeral movements, henceforth without effect, irretrievably erased by history, but she is also representing the very workings of time itself: the anonymous hands tirelessly repeat the same action in a loop, drawing in space the web of duration, like the Fates unraveling and cutting the thread of destiny. Thus in *Nord* [fig. 3], a film made in 2007, presented either as a simple screening or as an installation, the artist, gives her images an apparently documentary slant, focusing first on the gestures of the organizers of cock fights meticulously knotting the spurs on the feet of their animals, and then on the gestures of former

workers at a spinning mill who were made redundant, repeating before the camera their now ghostly actions, lined up side by side, mimicking the production line that they belonged to. The spinning mills, like cock fights, are just relics: the people of the north of France became extras in *Nord*, reproducing the gestures they always used to make before allowing them to be lost as they are forgotten. As performance, the film functions both as description and symptom: it protects a dying gesture at the same time as confirming its disappearance; it knots the thread at the same time as it cuts it.

But the *Catalogue de gestes* awakens another echo, both closer and more enigmatic: in 1966, following an operation that prevented her from dancing for several months, Yvonne Rainer decided to shoot a film in which, defying immobility, she continued to dance with the fingers of her right hand. In her *Hand Movie* [fig. 4], which would inspire Richard Serra, in 1968, to start making his series of *Hand Films* [fig. 5], the movement of the hand, in replacing that of the body, takes on a discreetly prophylactic or incantatory significance, assuming the magical function associated with the gesture, which anthropology has traditionally examined in ancient societies, folk traditions and non-Western cultures [fig. 6].² The gesture is a way of tying things together, invisibly, by bypassing the rule of real causality: let us suggest that for Natacha Nisic, with the catalogue she began in 1995, it has become a way of conceiving of film as a shamanistic operation, using the almighty power of manipulation.

II

In May 1889, Wassily Kandinsky, then a law student, travelled around the Vologda region for almost six weeks on behalf of the Russian ethnographic society to study the religious concepts and legal structures of the Zyrian peoples. Two decades later, in 1913, he recalled his journey: “The other particularly powerful impression I experienced during my student days, which again exerted a decisive effect in later years, were Rembrandt in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and my journey to the province of Vologda, where in the capacity of ethnographer and jurist, I was sent by the Imperial Society for Science, Anthropology, and Ethnography. My task was twofold: in the case of the Russian population to study peasant criminal law (to discover the principles of primitive law) and in the case of the fishing and hunting communities of the slowly disappearing Zyrians, to salvage the remnants of their pagan religion.” Studying the categories of thought of this Finno-Ugric community, the young Kandinsky would discover a distinctive form of the soul known as *ort*, which had a palpable presence in the men’s daily life: given to everyone at birth, “the *ort* appears to the relatives of a person near death and always at night, assuming the guise of the very person who is close to death.”³ At this moment, he was reputed to inflict a pinching so severe that it left a blue mark on the skin, a manifest proof of his real nature. This explains the custom of the Finno-Ugric peoples of leaving a pitcher of water and a towel on the windowsill outside their houses so that the *ort* could wash his face [fig. 7]. Zyrian ideas relating to the mystery of death would shatter Kandinsky’s categories of legal thought and lead him to understand the existence of shamanistic forms of thought capable of

detecting, under the stable surface of the visible, the presence of contradictory forces at work—an experience that would prove crucial in spawning his experimentation with the breaking up of the plane and the divorcing of form and color.

In 2007, Natacha Nisic was given permission to film the daily life of the Carmelite nuns of Lisieux. In *Carmel* [p. 26–32 + 36], she recorded the gestures of the recluses, the preparation of the meals, the work of sewing and gardening, the pastimes, prayer, in the somber, unadorned space of their cells and communal spaces, far from the sparkling light that bathed the convent where Robert Bresson had filmed the Carmelites transfigured by grace in *Angels of Sin*. Natacha Nisic's nuns do not change the world; they reproduce it in its prosaic reality by gliding over its surface, as if grazing it with their gestures. Similarly, the Korean shaman in *Princess Snow-Flower* (2011) [p. 37 + 72–78], living in the middle of the countryside in a place propitious for revealing the good or evil forces that rule the world, in a makeshift shack amid a mountain of consumer products, performs ritual gestures as if doing the cooking and makes contact with the dead (“Maybe the spirit of a suicide makes his presence felt in my body,” she says, or again: “You are buried so deep that you have become transparent”). She is gripped by the tremors of the trance while continually moaning about her lack of money and dreaming of a new life in Seoul. As Mircea Eliade has remarked, illnesses, dreams, and ecstasies, more or less pathological, are all ways of attaining the status of shaman: “They succeed in transforming the profane man of before ‘the choice’ into a technician of the sacred.”⁴ This is how the young Bavarian who Natacha Nisic had asked to tell her story (*Andrea*, 2012) found

herself reluctantly initiated, without ever having imagined it, following a series of trials that would affect her health and her sanity [p. 36–37].⁵ Shamanistic power is transmitted from afar, from generation to generation, like a predestination: the shaman is the descendant of that witch described by Jules Michelet, reborn from its ashes throughout history, under different names, like the incarnation of a principle of life: “The witch is ended forever but not the fairy. She will reappear in this form, which is immortal.”⁶

III

“If the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945, respectively, are a surpassing disaster then beyond not only the immediate death toll and the manifest destruction of buildings, including museums, libraries and temples, and of various other sorts of physical records, but also the long-term hidden material effects, in cells that have been affected with radioactivity in the ‘depth’ of the body, and the latent traumatic effects that may manifest themselves *après coup*, there would be an additional immaterial withdrawal of literary, philosophical and thoughtful texts as well as of certain films, videos, and musical works, notwithstanding that copies of these continue to be physically available; of paintings and buildings that were not physically destroyed; of spiritual guides; and of the holiness / specialness of certain spaces.”⁷

Natacha Nisic’s works systematically set out to reveal the erasure that Jalal Toufic identifies as both the effect and symptom of a disaster he calls “excessive” because it escapes quantification, and subsequently

description, an excess that the artistic or literary work can only mimic. *e* (Japanese for “image”; 2009) consists of sequences shown on three screens, exploring a region in the north of the island of Honshu ravaged by an earthquake in 2008 [p. 138 + 156–184]. One of the island’s inhabitants describes having experienced, during the catastrophe, a feeling of vertigo, as if the earth, under his feet, was charged with conflicting forces: “The shelves and objects moved in opposite directions.” He re-enacts his terror at the time of the quake, how he ran out of the house: in reality, he can only show the impossibility of repeating the disaster (at a certain point in his account, the image goes blank). Aerial shots, reproduced on three screens, then scan the devastated countryside, showing the land upturned by a visceral force, of which, after the event, the image can only capture surface signs. *f* [p. 143–156] was also shot in Japan, in 2013, on the contaminated site of Fukushima, a landscape of affliction across the surface of which the camera glides in a series of tracking shots that do not “fictionalize” reality, but on the contrary reveal its opacity. Mirrors positioned in the space, extending from top to bottom of the frame, render more inaccessible the background, which is a fragment of reality both visible and erased, situated beyond the mirrors, where people continue to live and work. The surface of the image is reversed and becomes reflective: by repelling examination, she introduces a moment of unreality into the imaginary space of this reversed image. The landscape elements and the doomed beings who inhabit it dissolve in the limbo of the image, creating a spatial vacuity, an echo, perhaps, of the landscape paintings of the Edo era that were split across several panels of a screen.

IV

“The image carries within it its own contradiction”: this is Natacha Nisic’s explanation of how she arrives at her representational devices for the objects, bodies, and landscapes she films and photographs. The image, fixed or moving, is not a description, but rather reveals a state of tension pervading things, a demonology for which the “track and zoom shot” could well be a model or the final figuration. Associating a zoom in and a track out (or, on the contrary, a zoom out and a track in), the track and zoom shot produces a contradictory movement born from the meeting of two forces, one optic (that of the lens) and the other physical (that of the camera), which act in opposition, without the possibility of continuity or resolution. Alfred Hitchcock gave this stylistic device its pure construction in the final scene of *Vertigo* (1958), as a representation of the cause of the vertigo: a stairwell, reproduced in a model and framed in a 90° high-angle shot, is hollowed out by the effect of the zoom, forming a bottomless well that draws the gaze inexorably in, while being simultaneously brought back to the front of the image by the backwards force of the tracking out. The image becomes both elastic and static, its surface dilating without breaking, like a bridge hit by an earthquake, as a result of forces that act and form within it without cancelling each other out.

In 2005, with *La Porte de Birkenau* [p. 137], a work now installed in Paris at the Mémorial de la Shoah, Natacha Nisic reinvents this figure of immobility to produce an image of what cannot be shown: the camera,

fitted to rails, physically (and imperceptibly) approaches the gates of the extermination camp, whose form stands out ever more clearly in the distance and optically resists the mechanical movement that pulls it toward the foreground. This dialectical construction is clearly a response to the famous tracking shot in Gilles Pontecorvo's *Kapo* (1959), of which Jacques Rivette commented scathingly in *Cahiers du cinéma*: "See, in *Kapo*, the shot where [Emmanuelle] Riva commits suicide by throwing herself onto the electrified barbed wire: the man who decided, at that moment, to do a tracking shot to reframe the corpse from below, while taking care to place the raised hand right in the corner of the shot at the end, this man deserves the deepest disdain."⁸ Representing the ineluctability of an absolute limit, and yet at the same time the impossibility of transgressing that limit, the track and zoom shot thus becomes the very embodiment of the resistance to *mise-en-scène*. By preventing the lyrical resolution of the scene, that is to say its transformation into fiction, Natacha Nisic uses the image not for its power to reveal but as a symptom of the forces that, having been removed from sight, continue to act here.

The surface is not that which reveals the abyss, but that which conceals it: it is the place where it is forgotten, and this manifests itself in the form of a sudden appearance. "The first time that I took the time to wander around the camp, I found the wandering around very strange, because the weather suddenly turned fine, the birds began to sing . . . The image was very picturesque. I asked myself if I had the right to feel an emotion close to joy, to lightness. I went up to a pond situated right by the tracks that I had never heard about. It didn't correspond at all to the image I had of

Auschwitz. The surface of this pond filled with water formed a perfect image, a reflection of an almost archetypical world, like a 19th-century painting . . . The image was very disturbing. When I got closer I heard a very strange noise, that of a toad sitting on the steps of the pond. I photographed it.”⁹ In *Effroi* (2005) [fig. 8], the tracking shot is thus in a way vitrified into the image: on the expanse of gray water, which is both disturbing and calm, reflective like a metal mirror, the landscape is doubled and inverted in the glare of a clear refraction, preventing the gaze from venturing into its depths, while at the bottom of the image, in the gray water, the ectoplasmic form of a toad rises to the surface [fig. 9]. Like the image floating to the surface of the world without touching it, it is the hallucinatory sign of something stubbornly, endlessly returning.

1. *The Spring of My Life and Selected Haiku*, Boston and London: Shambala, 1997, p. 65.
2. In historic literature, see for example Andrea de Jorio, *La Mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano*, Naples: Dalla stamperia e cartiera del Fibreno, 1832, or Garrick Mallery, *Sign Language among North American Indians Compared with That among Other Peoples and Deaf-Mutes*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881.
3. Wassily Kandinsky, “Notebook of Voyage in Vologda,” 1889, quoted in Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia. The Artist as Ethnographer and Shaman*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 23.
4. Mircea Eliade, *Mythes, rêves et mystères*, Paris: Gallimard, 1957, p. 106ff.
5. For the exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in 2013, the artist produced a second version of the work entitled *Andrea en conversation* [p. 41–72], in the form of an installation consisting of nine monitors, in which the increased number and redistribution of the images perhaps reproduce the shamanistic displacement of the function of the subject.

6. Jules Michelet (trans. A.R. Allinson), *Satanism and Witchcraft*, New York: Kensington Publishing Corporation, 1992.

7. Jalal Toufic, *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surprising Disaster*, n.p.: Forthcoming Books, 2009, p. 11

(http://www.jalaltoufic.com/downloads/Jalal_Toufic_The_Withdrawal_of_Tradition_Past_a_Surpassing_Disaster.pdf.)

8. Jacques Rivette, “De l’abjection,” *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 120, June 1961, p. 54–55; reprinted in Antoine de Baecque (ed.), *Théories du cinéma*, Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2001, p. 37–40.

9. “The pond is situated to the left of the tracks (when looking in the direction of the ditches, back to the gate); midway between the gate to the camp and the gas chambers, which were demolished by the Nazis. There is little documentation about these ponds. They might have been used to clean the latrines or in the event of fire. One image has haunted me for a long time and almost held me back from publishing mine: that of young people—soldiers—bathing in one of these ponds. This light-hearted photograph was used by revisionists to prove that the camp at Auschwitz was a holiday camp. I haven’t found other pictures of these ponds,” Natacha Nisic, email, May 4, 2013.

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Translated from French by Natasha Edwards