

AND THE GOLD OF THEIR BODIES – REFRACTIONS OF
FUKUSHIMA

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Poets, artists and the entire human race would be most unhappy if that absurdity, the ideal, were to be discovered. What would each of us do thereafter with his poor ego, his broken line?

Charles Baudelaire ¹

After living through or undergoing catastrophe, we can no more emerge unscathed than we can leave paradise undiminished: from the latter we emerge fallen, from the former as a miraculous survivor.

It is the same in matters of representation. To represent an Edenic place, to depict a catastrophe, you have to come at it from the side, to shift the frontality of the indescribable, take a step to one side, open up to an oblique approach that in fact stems from the subject itself, in that it forces us to look aside.

Refraction—*refringere*: to shatter or break—would thus be inherent in the representation of catastrophe: a necessary shattering that offers the gaze a change of direction, that calls into question our vision of the world: a critical escape that, as Natacha Nisic engineers it, allows us to see from an odd angle, from the margins, what a strict reflection would leave as unbearable, unrepresentable.

When refracted, the implacable nature of catastrophe is delayed, slowed down, disrupted or deviated by a kind of latency that removes its

authoritarian violence and readies it for apprehending, for the grasp of the understanding which, with the support of the imagination, recomposes what in a raw image would be obscene, suffocating.

Redoubled by means of expression, this capture after-the-event is the act of the artist, a passage into a medium of refringency, of different resistance, which displaces the original vision and reorients the gaze: representation is peeled away from the event itself, allowing, with other works, at other times, and in other places, for possibilities of dialogue freed from the smothering grip of topicality.

Witness this wash showing Denis-Auguste-Marie Raffet [fig. 1], where aftermath becomes a series of mutilated bodies, chunks of burned human beings assembled after the first ever railway disaster on 8 May 1842. Refracted, the montage of “uneventful bodies” becomes the foretelling of future disasters, a mind-twisting sketch in which the inaugural event of the mortal marriage of technology and mass transport already contains its most fatal prolongations.²

“Uneventful bodies”—bodies without history—is what Paul Gauguin saw in the men and women he painted on the rough canvases of his last stay in the Marquesas, when he left what, for him, was the overly controlled island of Tahiti and took refuge there in September 1901. Ten years earlier, he said he was leaving for Polynesia “in order to have peace and quiet, to be rid of the influence of civilization” and “to do simple, very simple art” in the midst of virgin nature³

There he depicted exotic Eves and paradisiacal evocations of “delicious days” [fig. 2]. The standard trope of the decline of the West is accompanied here by a withdrawal to an island of happiness, and in

gluing under the binding of his manuscript on “The Modern Spirit and Catholicism” a woodcut titled *Paradise Lost* he was directly identifying “colonization with original sin, the West and the corrupting tree of knowledge.”⁴

This was confirmed in his acerbic exchange with August Strindberg, who told him: “You have created a new earth and a new heaven, but I don’t feel at home in this world of yours . . . And your paradise contains an Eve who isn’t my ideal.”⁵ Gauguin replied that the rejection of his painting revealed “the conflict between your civilization and my barbarism. Civilization from which you suffer; bar-barism which is for me a rejuvenation.”⁶

One month before his death, isolated and sick, he still insisted on his voluntary remoteness from civilization as meeting the need to unlearn, as a savage, a history that had become burdensome,⁷ constantly hindering him from instinctively grasping the superior grace that he observed in his insular hosts.

This would explain why the bodies painted by Gauguin were so precious to him, why they were the bodies of a golden age that he dreamed about, but even more tangible than that: the living trace of a lived Eden summed up in the title of a painting from 1901: *And the Gold of Their Bodies* [fig. 3].

From the “golden, almost naked body”⁸ of the young Vaitauni to the “golden yellow”⁹ skin of the island people, Gauguin magnified the modest sensuality of the Polynesians, whose sometimes playful innocence contrasted with the civilized rottenness that he execrated and denounced. And yet, in his way, the artist himself maintained a link with this impurity

as an agent of colonization.¹⁰ Above all, he carried it in himself, this rottenness, up to the end of his life, in the form of the wounds on his legs, corroded by eczema and marked by the syphilis he brought with him from Europe, marking him out as a kind of leper. Even worse, what was visible on him, however much he rejected it – this catastrophe called “civilization” which he could not avoid – he also knew to be violently present in this culture that he fantasized as being free of all Western ills:

“Soon the Marquesan will be incapable of climbing a cocoanut-tree, incapable of going up the mountain after the wild bananas that are so nourishing to him. The child who is kept in school, deprived of physical exercise, his body always clad (for the sake of decency) becomes delicate and incapable of enduring a night in the mountains. They are all beginning to wear shoes and their feet, which are tender now, cannot run over the rough paths and cross the torrents on stones. Thus we are witnessing the spectacle of the extinction of the race, a large part of which is tubercular, with barren loins and ovaries destroyed by mercury.”¹¹

Under the gold of their bodies, therefore, rot was at work. A whole people was doomed to extinction, a measureless catastrophe for beings who could now exist only in the imagination.

The first time I saw it, Natacha Nisic’s drawing reminded me of the title of that Gauguin painting, *And the Gold of Their Bodies*.

Was it the sense of a similar decay at work behind the immaculate exterior? An immediate relation between the subjacency of an invisible evil and a representation devoid of direct violence? Or the gold, the gold of their bodies, bodies that are also unhistorical, abstract, and

disindividualized—unless we bear in mind the work’s title: *Fukushima* [p. 127–132 + fig. 4].¹²

This drawing is associated with the title of a painting that is over a century older, but in addition, by objective chance, the title of the earlier work is intimately linked to the contents of the later one: it is, then, a matter of refraction, of the deviated gaze, or even of the untimely refraction of one work through another: resonance or constellation, hospitality or foreign body. An encounter, in any case.

On strong, immaculate white Canson paper, worked on as a roll – the vision of the drawing being executed was thus always sectioned, fragmentary, masked by the paper as it wrapped back over itself – remain only scant marks sketched in pencil: general forms, contours partially erased, corrections here or there. These sketchy forms are the only lines that continue the drawing, the only slender (and soon to disappear) lines, for the drawing itself is made up only of striations and creases, of marks no sooner begun than suspended, stick drawings you might say, not touches, but the scrupulous marks of the pencil returning regularly over the sheet in a beat or pulse, the scattering of parallel traces organized in successive zones and laid out to a changeless, implacable rhythm, propagating and contaminating with its marks the whole expanse assigned to the motif.

This texture with no backing other than the white of the paper, a texture without a weft, therefore, like something floating or emerging, the vibration of a shimmer, is distinctive in that it is made exclusively with luminescent metal pencils amidst the darkness – like fireflies, which are also luminescent.

In the box of twelve pencils, pewter, copper, and silver sit with gold and antique gold. It was the use of the latter that prompted the association with *And the Gold of Their Bodies*.

To understand why Natacha Nisic chose to represent the disaster that occurred at Fukushima on 11 March 2011 we must first look back over a career in which catastrophe and its modes of representation are probed with extreme rigor.

In 2005, Natacha Nisic went to the extermination camp at Auschwitz, where she filmed *La Porte de Birkenau* [fig. 5] using a tracking and zoom shot which leaves an impression of unease, of unresolved tension, as if the stillness had been captured in the very impossibility of its movement and before and after any unleashing of violence. This impression is heightened at the Shoah Memorial in Paris, where the work is on permanent display, projected on two screens separated by a passage, a broken line where life and movement intervene, in the materialization of a refraction, a progression between media of differing refringency.

In this same place, the artist has set out the *Mémorial des enfants* [fig. 6] based on photographic archives patiently collected by Serge Klarsfeld. Nisic wanted to create a subtle luminous pulsation, a detail that in the end could not be achieved but which resonates with the use of luminous pencils for *Fukushima* in terms of the meticulous work on light, on the difference in luminous density characteristic of all refraction.

Along with *La Porte de Birkenau*, at Auschwitz Nisic also shot and photographed what would become *Effroi* [p. 11 + fig. 7], a cathartic walk along the edges and on the inside of the extermination camp, among its ruins, where the violent contrast between the peaceful setting and the

knowledge and memory of what happened there, of what the place continues to contain, takes the form of a kind of death mask emerging on the surface of an artificial pond, an amorphous chimera, a dreadful specter that refraction – at work here once again—and the disorientation of the juxtaposed shots make even more enigmatic. Although the artist photographed a reflective surface—“a watery surface where the sky and scenery are tranquilly reflected with an indecent beauty. The pond surrounded by birch trees has the appearance of a serene landscape, a peaceful natural setting. The pond is located just below the gas chamber. Not pure water. It contains the ashes of bodies, and yet it is a perfect mirror of the world”¹³—her desire to “capture even more intensely the density of the water” as the sudden appearance of a death mask, half-emerging and half-drowned, and the visual distortion that results from it, displace her action from the field of reflection to that of refraction: from the straight line, the unbearable straight line, to the broken line.

A detail in the *Effroi* catalogue indicates this, when the artist points out that, after the discovery of that aqueous specter, she returned to Auschwitz to “attempt to exorcise the play of fate,” and originally thought of filming the action:

“The action consists in going back close to the reservoir (I originally thought of wearing a kind of translucent mask guaranteeing the anonymity and universality of the action, a surface, a distance between the body and the elements), and immersing my face, covered by the mask, in the water. Life restored to the surface of the water and to what it contains.”¹⁴

Between the masked head plunged underwater and the body remaining outside the liquid element, reality is deviated, refraction is at work, vision overturned.

And how can we not associate the death mask of the Auschwitz reservoir with the translucent one that the artist wanted to wear in response to the fear, how can we not associate these confounded and commingling masks – anonymous death, dreadful death – with the ones worn by the men in the drawing *Fukushima*?

In June 2008, Nisic travelled to that same region in Japan where a violent earthquake had wrought havoc among the superb mountain scenery. With that now forgotten, already exceeded catastrophe, it was the virgin nature evoked by Gauguin that was impacted at its very heart. The artist's installation *e* (image in Japanese) returns after the event to what occurred as if in secret, not without affecting men, their structures and ways of life, but at such a distance from the densely populated zones that the disaster went almost unnoticed, leaving here and there only a few broken lines, tangible traces of a seismic refraction deep down [fig. 8 + p. 156–184]. As *Le Monde* noted at the time, “according to official statements, the activities of the nuclear power stations have not been affected. Nevertheless, in Fukushima Province, a ‘small quantity of radioactive water’ did escape from the storage tanks of a nuclear site after the seism, ‘but with no danger to the population,’ announced the Tepco electricity company, which manages the nuclear reactor at Fukushima.”¹⁵

Metallic pencils to represent the catastrophe of March 2011, golden, bronze, or moiré tints, a shimmering, a luminous pulsation surrounded by

an outline with no real edges, but no spreading or overflowing, no tangible distress—the simple brightness of uneventful, unhistorical lines?

And yet *Fukushima* refracts our gaze toward the great archive of images of past catastrophes: from the sublime brightness of the nuclear sun to the colored fields of exploding napalm, Nisic gathers the trace of past dazzlements, which here have become fragments, beaded in an infinity of visual stridencies – shards of memory grafted onto the open eye, onto the prohibited pupil [fig. 9].¹⁶

If, as she points out with regard to representation of the Shoah, her sensibility leads her to approach things “from the side rather than frontally,”¹⁷ that is also because the catastrophe cannot be contemplated face-on, because its incidence must be deviated, placed against a denser refringent medium, with a historical or sensorial density that does not relativize its present singularity but, on the contrary, makes it absolutely distinct by confrontation, by the traversal of epochs and events.

The apparatus chosen for *f* implicitly illustrates this [p. 143–156]. In this piece shot in the Fukushima region in 2013, Nisic uses a seemingly elementary play of mirrors to expose us to a series of confrontations, less with the landscape of catastrophe than with the world that it has hollowed out. Cross references and repercussions—visual loops like Moebius strips leading to an eternal return—the echo of the world comes to us only when we turn our backs on its movement: the direction of our reading is disrupted, visions are off-kilter, the present is suspended like an enigma, and both time and space hover, like those threads, those ropes with nothing hanging from them swaying in the wind.

Here, refraction echoes reflection, or that toward which, outside the frame, the artist displaces our gaze and opens it via the gap thus created—not a gaze petrified by strict reflection (of the catastrophe), but its other, disquieted, agitated by this un-centring, this disjoining.

A source of errors, refraction has its vices that distort observation,¹⁸ deform vision, and provoke lateral deviations¹⁹ that are topographically deceptive. In *Le Problème de la réfraction dans l'histoire du cartésianisme*, the author notes that “knowledge of the fundamental law of refraction” alone was enough to allow improvement “of the manufacture of the lenses used in telescopes. At stake here, from a speculative viewpoint [was] the triumphant confirmation of heliocentrism by means of observation.”²⁰

By observing these errors or flaws of refraction separating the normal from the pathological, the direct from the deviant, what is at stake is thus our vision of the world.

But art resists, just as artists are refractory. They play on gaps and broken lines in order to overturn triumphant heliocentrism or, here, the nuclear sun that nothing and no one, if we are to believe the contemporary doctrine, should be able to avoid.

And yet, Fukushima, Fukushima repeated: a bustle of men in boiler suits, a genuine *danse macabre* of reprieved beings beneath their meager projections. As in the 14th century, the chain of the living and dead is unbroken. But it is not limbs that ensure the contact, but the very organization of the graphic material that color and the density and intensity of the line distinguish as forms and figures. The drawing is like a bas-relief,²¹ an interpretation reinforced by the uprightness of the hieratic

poses. Looking closely, though, we see that this compactness is crumbling, but only in the background, which goes from an assemblage of hard, geometrical forms to their gradual dissolution, archipelagic forms gradually absorbed by the white of the sheet. Likewise, if the fixed forms are rendered by orderly lines, the more organic ones are woven by more shifting strokes, a shimmering or teeming rather than an alignment.

As for the figures, they hardly vary. The bodies are nearly all of the same height, as if leveled by the format of the drawing propped by their verticality. Nevertheless, this symbolic equality is factitious: the masks worn here protect those who are still alive, standing for what may be a limited time, the least fortunate being already on the ground, no doubt dead. Whereas a cataclysm produces a form of perfect equality, when none can obviate its suddenness, industrial or technological disaster reinforces social and economic hierarchies. At Fukushima, where the initial death count was 30,000, the populations were left alone to escape the disaster zone, with government leaving them only the liberty to be rich and evacuate or poor to die without a fuss. The liquidators, indeed, came from an ancient sub-proletariat, that of “Japan’s most despised castes. Descendants of the *eta*—literally ‘dirt-ridden’—and *hinin*—‘non-human’ communities, the *burakumin* . . . are traditionally outsiders who perform tasks related to death, blood, and impurity.”²²

Behind these six vibrant, shimmering masks, behind these cramped figures, these eyes that we cannot see and these stares aimed we know not where, there is, then, a knowledge, knowledge redoubled by power, overhanging it, specters flitting by at the mouth of a modern Platonic

cave, where the sun of ideas seems to have been replaced by nuclear fire and its morbid reality, its mendacious truth.

This general mirage orchestrated by Tepco and passed on by the narcotic power of the media, the accomplices of a failing state, is addressed by Nisic's drawing not only in the form of a silence, but also as an autism, a blindness in some ways reminiscent of the name of the Polynesian atoll where the French nuclear deterrent was tested—Moruroa: “great secret” in Maori.²³

Paul Gauguin was in French Polynesia when, in Paris, Marie Curie coined the term “radioactivity” (1898), and it was exactly when Jean Perrin pictured atoms as solar systems that the artist painted *And the Gold of Their Bodies*.

Refractions, *Fukushima?*

Fukushima, Japanese for “island of happiness.”

1. “The Salon of 1846” in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 77.

2. Cf. my article “Des corps sans histoire—théâtres de l'im-prévisible,” *Recherches en esthétique*, no. 15, October 2009, p. 29–40.

3. Interview with *L'Écho de Paris*, cited in *The Writings of a Savage*, New York: Vintage, 1978, reprint Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 1996, p. 48.

4. Françoise Cachin, *Gauguin*, Paris: Flammarion, 1988, p. 233.

5. *Strindberg, Letters*, vol. 2, selected and edited by Michael Robinson, London: Athlone Press, 1992, p. 348.

6. Letter to Strindberg, quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, p. 82

7. Cf. Paul Gauguin, *Lettres à sa femme et à ses amis*, Paris: Grasset, 1992, p. 339.
8. Paul Gauguin, *Intimate Journals*, New York: Dover, p. 2.
9. Paul Gauguin, *Intimate Journals*, New York: Dover, p. 39.
10. He wore the spotless white garb of the colonizer, frequented the Cercle Militaire in Papeete, refused to be hospitalized with the poor, and for a while worked as a draftsman for the Office of Public Works.
11. Paul Gauguin, *Intimate Journals*, New York: Dover, p. 39.
12. The drawing measures 75 × 315 centimeters and was first exhibited at the Galerie Dominique Fiat, Paris, in April 2012.
13. Natacha Nisic, “Ce qui reste,” in Annette Becker and Octave Debary (eds.), *Montrer les violences extrêmes*, Paris: Créaphis, 2012, p. 147–148.
14. Natacha Nisic in the catalogue to her exhibition *Effroi*, Paris: Musée Zadkine / Paris-Musées, 2005, n.p.
15. Newspaper dated June 14, 2008.
16. Reworked for this text, this article was originally a contribution to the symposium “Penser la catastrophe,” organized by Alain Fleischer and Jean-Claude Conésa (whom I thank) at Le Fresnoy – Studio National des Arts Contemporains in January 2013. It comprised a passage in which the use of gold in certain contemporary works was related to Nisic’s drawing. Here I will simply mention the names Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras, Yves Klein, Robert Rauschenberg, Gérard Deschamps and Jean-Luc Godard.
17. Natacha Nisic, “Spectre,” interview with Nathan Réra in N. Réra, *De Paris à Drancy ou les Possibilités de l’art après Auschwitz*, Pertuis: Rouge profond, 2009, p. 71.
18. Studies have considered the role in defining the originality of certain painters. Cf. the thesis by Aron Polack, *Rôle de l’état de réfraction de l’œil dans l’éducation et dans l’œuvre du peintre* (Paris: Librairie Ollier-Henry, 1900), which considers the vision of Émile Bernard, Eugène Carrière, and Jean-Léon Gérôme.
19. Charles Lallemand, “L’erreur de réfraction dans le nivellement géométrique,” *Rivista di topografia e catasto*, vol. 9, Turin: Bona, 1897, p. 5.

20. Marie-Claire Macris-L’Hoest, *Le Problème de la réfraction*

dans l’histoire du cartésianisme, thesis supervised by Suzanne

Bachelard, Université Paris-I Panthéon-Sorbonne, 1983–1984, p. 18.

21. We know that Gauguin was influenced by photographs of Greek and Indian friezes.

22. Arkadi Filine, *Oublier Fukushima. Textes et documents*,

Le Mas-d’Azil: Les Éditions du bout de la ville, 2012, p. 57–58.

23. The basic etymological meaning is “big net,” but by extension that which is captured therein. Linked with the idea of defense department secrecy, that gives us “the big secret.”

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Translated from French by Charles Penwarden