

LAURENCE A. RICKELS IL CORPO DELLA SUA OPERA THE BODY OF HIS WORK

If we had not welcomed the arts and invented this kind of cult of the untrue, then the realization of general untruth and mendaciousness that now comes to us through science – the realization that delusion and error are conditions of human knowledge and sensation – would be utterly unbearable. *Honesty* would lead to nausea and suicide. But now there is a counterforce against our honesty that helps us to avoid such consequences: art as the *good* will to appearance.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 1882

In the 1995 horror film *The Addiction*, the philosophy Ph.D. candidate, who has overcome her writing block (which was grounded or ground up in the ethical crisis her graduate studies sought to contain) largely by becoming a vampire and doing a good job sucking at it, too, defends her dissertation before the faculty. As we and the camera pass the room in which the candidate holds forth, we only overhear, every third word lost in the mumbling passage of our sensorium, her words of wisdom. This approximates the dream of highly intelligent or specialized discourse: in the dream one hits all the high notes, just like our candidate, and aces the oral test. But if we were to remember and transcribe our words to the wise we would fail to capture it again, the gist of them or the triumph they represented, all of which, since now fleeting, can only be found missing. Afterwards the new Ph.D. invites the faculty to a small celebratory reception. Now the static clears. It is time to put her inheritance to the test – or to rest. Her words of welcome are as is to be expected. But then she offers that she would like to share with her guests and mentors another set of insights and incisors. The reception turns into a vampiro-sadistic blood bath.

Within this unfolding of the transference in an institutional setting, the scene of the test of the candidate's discursive intelligence (together with its interpretation, as in a state of awakening, via vampirism), I find the inside view of the critical reception that has accrued to the

works of Renato Meneghetti or, in other words, that of the artist's own relationship to institutionalization. What has been missed, symptomized, and registered all down this receiving line is that Meneghetti is in the first place, a place of overlap between art and technology (and science), an experimenter or tester who also always tests himself. His own institution, Meneghetti has a lot of grounding to cover. This is the close-range significance of the test for and inside his self-collecting work. As in *The Addiction* where the dream of the test one passes effortlessly into institutionalization comes in loud and clear only in the transference setting and thus becomes available for interpretation only as vampiric allegory, Meneghetti's art of testing finds and founds an institution away from institutions but with an inside view opening onto institutional life at large. Is it possible to 'awaken' or raise to the power of interpretation (or reclaim as projection) Meneghetti's critical reception? Duccio Trombadori's identification of Meneghetti as 'mutant' would be an exemplary test case.¹

1.

In *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger contemplates the essential (in contrast to the technical) setting of technology: various German verbs of standing up, placement, ordering are collected in the noun *Gestell*, which, according to Heidegger, means both apparatus, appliance, or device and skeleton. Heidegger admits that at first or second sight this semantic double occupancy in *Gestell* is bizarre, even horrible. But extraordinary juxtapositions in a single word come down to us since Plato as habit of thinking. The skeletal essence of technology belongs to a ready positioning that precedes any machinic externalization. What is thus 'enframed' is readiness or availability for all that technologization will manifest and supply. The *Gestell*, and I now paraphrase Heidegger very closely, is the collecting of standing up or placing that challenges man to discover or uncover reality as reserve in the manner of ordering. *Gestell* is the

German repetition or rehearsal of the Greek *techné* that bound both art and technology (or science) within one 'frame'. Heidegger ultimately works this double trajectory of *techné* to open up art as the realm within which technology can be contemplated and encountered essentially (rather than, again, merely technologically).

In 1979 the first X-rays to pass before Meneghetti's concerned gaze were those of his daughter whose injury had to be identified before it could be cured. Following the child's successful treatment, Meneghetti began his hallmark work on the X-ray image. He picked up those inside views of his daughter and transformed them into paintings. In this way he left a mark that cited or summoned in advance a new genre of image in the arts as well as in the mass media. His earlier phagocyte works already focused on the technologically viewed body, inside and out, suspended between danger and rescue. The phagocytes offer the first line of defense of the body against that which could threaten it: they contain and flush foreign bodies, often waste matter. If Meneghetti named himself at one point after the phagocyte, then he thus reinforced his identification with life at whose disposal service he saw himself as licensed to kill: to put to rest what is already at rest. What's in a name is in the title of the 2000 superhero film *X-Men*. It turns out that the 'X' that marks the spot 'mutants' are in – the spot of the unknown – and that marks Men thus as 'over' or 'ex' in the wake of transformations and other mutational upgrades was in fact a positive designation pupils came up with for their professors. In contrast to the monsters of nihilism who wage war against total enemies, the overmen who bear the transference-gift name X-Men situate the question of superhumanity inside a school, within a setting of reading and interpretation. As mutants, however, once and future X-Men must find their own school away from school. The mutants who seek out the transference setting are as embattled as their nihilistic cousins within the precincts of institutionalization.

Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen's study of invisible rays put him back on the transference tracks to and through institutionalization (the tracks across which he had been strapped and run down in secondary school). Before he could graduate from secondary school he was caught holding the caricature of his teacher (which, as point of pride, he would not disown even though, so the story goes, he was not the artist).

2.

Roentgen discovered and made the first X-rays of the human body's live skeleton at a time when scientific testing was everywhere pressed into the service of peeling away the layers of invisibility. The X-ray was however recordable only and immediately as photograph. The earlier inventions of photography and train travel – the two alternating tracks of technologization that both Freud and Kafka saw as bringing closer that which, on

the other track, had already been phantomized as long distant – ultimately hitched and stitched their innovations together as new way of seeing to the format or industry of motion pictures. Walter Benjamin (allegorically) personified the new relationship to the visible or visualizable world brought to us by cinema in terms of surgery. Just as the surgeon skips the interpersonal relationship with the patient to penetrate directly and deeply inside the opened up body, so the cameraman (with the moviegoer in tow) enters the new visual field of *Zerstreuung* – at once 'distraction' and 'dissemination' – as examiner or tester without or beyond the mediation of interpersonal difference or distance.²

The skeleton is an age-old allegorical figure of Death. It precedes the corpse, the bottom line or sign of allegorization on the stage of the Baroque mourning play. According to Benjamin's consideration of Baudelaire as modern allegorist, the nineteenth century lays bare (again) the inner corpse. Meneghetti's art occupies the diverse stations of the crossing of the body with its disclosures. Consider, for example, his two self-portraits from 1989: around the X-ray image we find restored the trace work of the cuts of hands-on anatomical research. Like today's plastic models or books with transparent pages, Andreas Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* of 1543, the primal anatomical manual to which Goethe still made recourse, starts with the whole stripped body and then begins stripping away the layers of that body until the reader ends up with a final cross section: the skeleton with ligaments. Dissection of human bodies was forbidden in Vesalius's day: more than desecration it was heresy. Vesalius's secular findings did inter certain Christian redemption values at their allegorical points of overlap with pagan or occult allegiances to reanimation. It was believed, for example, that there was an incorruptible bone in the human body that served as the nucleus for the resurrection body. Once opened up, the body inevitably, in time, would reveal that there was no resurrection bone to pick with us. But rather than replace eternity with finitude, it is eternity itself that has thus been immersed in finitude. The functional thus slips inside the allegorical. Vesalius represented not only the scientifically illuminated body but also, by no default of his own, the allegorical creature that can neither live nor die because (like Kafka's Hunter Gracchus) it is the immortal soul that has died without dying.

According to Benjamin's rereading of allegory (in *Origin of the German Mourning Play*), which is as much about the Baroque theater as it is about post-World-War-I Expressionist drama, or, for that matter, about all the words and worlds between or since, the allegorical mode has one context: it comes after the catastrophe. It is the mode that still links our survival as mourners and readers to what's missing. Allegory, according to Benjamin, signifies the non-being of what it at the same time represents. As with the corpse, which Benjamin refers to in

passing as the primal or ready-made allegorical emblem, allegory is realized within the perspective of the melancholic. The object becomes allegorical under the melancholic's gaze; all the life is gone out of it; it remains as dead, but as eternally preserved. Benjamin has one openly psychoanalytic analogue for this double reading, which he uses not once but twice. Sadism attends allegory, the only pleasure, but a powerful one, allowed the melancholic. "It is indeed characteristic of the sadist that he humiliates his object and then – or thereby – satisfies it."³ In the same way the allegorist secures an object melancholically as dead but preserved and thus as "unconditionally in his power" (p. 359). In his later work on nineteenth-century Paris, for example, Benjamin follows this sadism to the penetrated frontiers of the techno eye (or I). "The sadistic fantasy tends toward machinic constructions. When he addresses the 'élégance sans nom de l'humaine armature,' Baudelaire perhaps recognizes in the skeleton a kind of machinery."⁴

The 'stall' was addressed in 1933 by psychoanalyst Hanns Sachs (in his essay *Delay of the Machine Age*). Sachs derived from cases of psychotics the psychic conditioning all of us undergo before we can invent or face technology on the outside. In other words, the external machinic aspects of technology are, as in Heidegger's later argument, secondary to a certain psychic ready positioning that lies at the origin of technology. In the extreme cases of psychotic delusional formation, all too-close and ultimately uncanny relations with the (missing) body must be escaped through the hatching of paranoid plots of machine and mummy control. According to Sachs, the advent of external technologies maintains the necessary safe remove at which the (missing) body must, via projection, be kept. The delay Sachs theorizes is also *in* the machine age, where it functions like the gadget connection Benjamin was making, keeping the shock of the techno and the return of the mummy on a schedule of control release.

Sachs argued that although the know-how had been available for development of machine technologies already in Antiquity, the Ancient Greeks and Romans restricted their inventiveness to the production of playthings. Sachs thus set up this Golden Age as the one time in history (or in the history of development) that primary narcissism could be maintained as norm. Primary or body-based narcissism in Ancient Greece and Rome apparently was not constrained to observe the law that every psyche since then has had to follow: either advance to secondary narcissism, where the bodily proportions of self love (or mother love) must be abandoned and replaced by relations of power, or prepare for the psychotic break. Through the ego's relations with its own mastery, a certain relationship to primary narcissism is nevertheless preserved in 'normal' development in the perfect tense and tension of self-criticism. If divestment from the stage of primary or body-based narcissism can-

not be made, the psyche is afflicted by a crisis of uncanniness: the body as measure of all things, dead or alive, turns on the zombie movie of unending decay and unlife. This introduces the psychotic break. But the only break the psychotic gets is the emergency projection out of his bodily narcissism of a new machine world, the emergency projection, in other words or worlds, of the body as machine, as media technology, as some form of connection (or disconnection) across long distance. Without the station break of projection of a new techno-delusional order in place of the world that was lost to repression, the psychotic goes quietly: fade out, catatonia, crypt death. Thus, as Freud already underscored in his reading of Daniel Paul Schreber's 1903 *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, a double reference that Sachs calls on for support throughout his essay, the formation of a techno-delusional system must be interpreted on an upbeat as the onset of a phase of 'recovery'. Both Schreber's autobiography and Freud's analysis of this *corpus* also attended Benjamin's conception of the allegorical stage or range of the Baroque mourning play.

How, then, to understand Benjamin's theory of the allegorical mode of post-catastrophic reading? We can begin with our own setting, the mass media Sensurround, which simply reverses while retaining the melancholic link but in the mode of catastrophe preparedness or what Benjamin analyzes in terms of shock absorption. The collected work-in-progress of Renato Meneghetti can be interpreted as preserving this association between the allegorical treatment and its mass-mediatic reversal or revival by moving between pictorial works bearing recognizably allegorical signification and works that engage the identifiable conditions and contexts of our own media technologization, and on and in terms that only appear to have departed from the allegorical mourning pageant. It would moreover be possible to argue that all Meneghetti's works, one by one, are traversed by both revalorizations of allegory.

3.

In Goethe's *Faust II* "paper money ghosts" introduce and drive onward the allegorical exchange of vows with this world in sickness and in death.

It is at the border between Christianity and allegory (and inside both) that Meneghetti's various didactic interventions unfold as the limit concepts wherein his work risks sui-citation in order to affirm its allegorical recalcitrance. *Optional*, which in title bears reference to the language of contracts, features a monumentally magnified anatomical model of the human brain that regularly inflates and deflates. The brain monument is captioned of murderous conflict together with their body counts. These losses are commemorated. But they are also administered as shocks or shots of inoculation against first or direct contact with traumatization. A certain distance is reclaimed as didactic act: we would prefer not to be crushed by the

deflating brain. Optional: either worship at the Mass of murder (Christian and/or Satanic) or impress upon 'the masses' a measure of instruction and control release. The latter, the modern syndication of allegory (according to Benjamin), seeks the techno-mutation of every consumer into expert and examiner.

In *Indifference* fragile ceramic human heads litter the exhibition floor. The ceramic relics refer to the human body (count) via the doll realm of toys, in which the miniaturization and fragile simulation of everyday life in the absence of functional vital signs picks up where the prehistoric production line of such artifacts left off: namely, in the mortuary palaces that mass media culture at once represses and represents. Thus the counterpart to 'indifference' is 'commemoration'. Once you enter the exhibition space, whether you carefully step over the heads or carelessly stomp on them, it is done with indifference to these representations of missing bodies. The following day, each day, the body count of the day before is announced. Thus the didactic phase of the exhibition shows the current (technical) difficulties we face in embodying the losses that are counted each day in news reports. Only as bodies could the ceramic relics count as objects that we can identify (with) and thus put to rest in or together with that part of ourselves that, via identification, already crossed over into or toward the other.

The exhibition itself proceeds as an ongoing experiment in which the viewers are put to a test they cannot pass but only pass through. As test it defers its outcome also by flashing back, making the multiple choices only after the fact, and thus, in a sense, starting over as starting to take the test, to take the time it takes to pass into the test.

Like Benjamin's surgical and sadistic (allegorical) interventions, so, too, are the metabolic phases of Meneghetti's *corpus* situated in contradistinction to the 'medical nihilism' to which they can otherwise lead. Benjamin comments on this nihilism as symptomized by Carl Jung, Gottfried Benn, and Ferdinand Céline: "This nihilism stems from the shock that the interior of the body gives to those who involve themselves with it".⁵

Renato Meneghetti's work is open to the tension that is with us of testing: the tension of the attention span doubling back and taking back, of being taken by surprise in the midst of our assumptions. He thus also works with shock and with trauma. First contact with the shock of what's new in the mass mediatic *sensorium*, which can always only be renewed, doubled and contained, is suddenly back (surprise attack) but is also always after the fact, is just a test. Thus through contact with Meneghetti's work the viewer begins to pass (into or through) the test or, if you prefer, the viewer gets a rise out of consciousness that we live under conditions of testing. This double take that gives pause for thought at the same time takes time – the time it takes to re-enact and defer, both as in postponing the end or deadline and as that

coming after the fact that moments of recognition can keep on coming and keep from coming together.

Not to take the test, therefore, but to submit without trying it in turn, is another way of passing. I am indifferent before the other. This radical passivity, in turn, fulfills – without trying – a condition of being tested that ultimately lets the other come (or go).

¹ *La Musa sofferente*, in Renato Meneghetti. *Pittura e altre arti. 1954-1999*, Skira, Milano 1999, p. 51.

² *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, Hermann Schwepenhäuser, vol. I, part 2, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main 1980 [1936], pp. 495–96.

³ *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels. Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. I, part 1, 1974 [1928], p. 360.

⁴ *Das Passagen-Werk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, vol. I, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1983 [1927-1940], p. 447.

⁵ *Ibidem*, vol. I, p. 590.