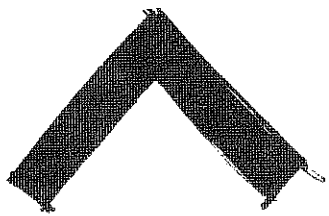


The crisis at UNESCO is symptomatic of a general global crisis that can be read in a number of ways. Most obviously, it's part of a challenge to US hegemony by most of the rest of the world. Secondly, it's a function of the contradictory mission of the organization: independent institute and intergovernmental agency. It's also to do, I think, with a struggle around how to interpret post-war history. The balance of power at the UN shifted in the 60s as a result of decolonization. It was the moment, in Sartre's words, when the natives became human beings. A new politics of resistance emerged everywhere in the world, not least in the very colonial nations themselves. The attack on UNESCO today ought to be read, in part, as a trashing of the 60s, and as an attempt to reverse the cultural and political gains made here and elsewhere in those years. To be fair, those liberatory moments were often accompanied by systematic corruption and militarization, as well as by the entrenchment of neo-colonialist institutions like the International Monetary Fund. UNESCO by no means stands outside of this ambiguous and paradoxical history. It is a centralized, hierarchical and bureaucratized institution too often committed to large-scale projects that do little other than reinforce dependence on first world capital and expertise. There's not much attention given to what's sometimes called the fourth world—nations within nations, tribal and indigenous cultures. Neither is there, as far as I can tell, any recognition of the limitations of development and growth themselves.

But then again, UNESCO is probably not the place to look for the kind of autonomous politics I'm talking about. I still think it's important to defend the tatters of liberal institutions (and states) that remain, to refuse the language of the marketplace (if only, Reagan must be thinking, UNESCO could be made to turn a profit, like the Los Angeles Olympics). At the same time we have to continue to invent other public sites of political struggle altogether. What I liked about the information and communications debate at UNESCO was that it named a terrain of resistance that doesn't recognize national boundaries—just like capital itself.

Alexander Wilson is a Toronto journalist, broadcaster and horticulturalist. He works on the collective at **borderlines**.



SOME NOTES ON THE OCCASION OF A PERFORMANCE OF JUDITH DOYLE'S RATE OF DESCENT

Andrew
Payne

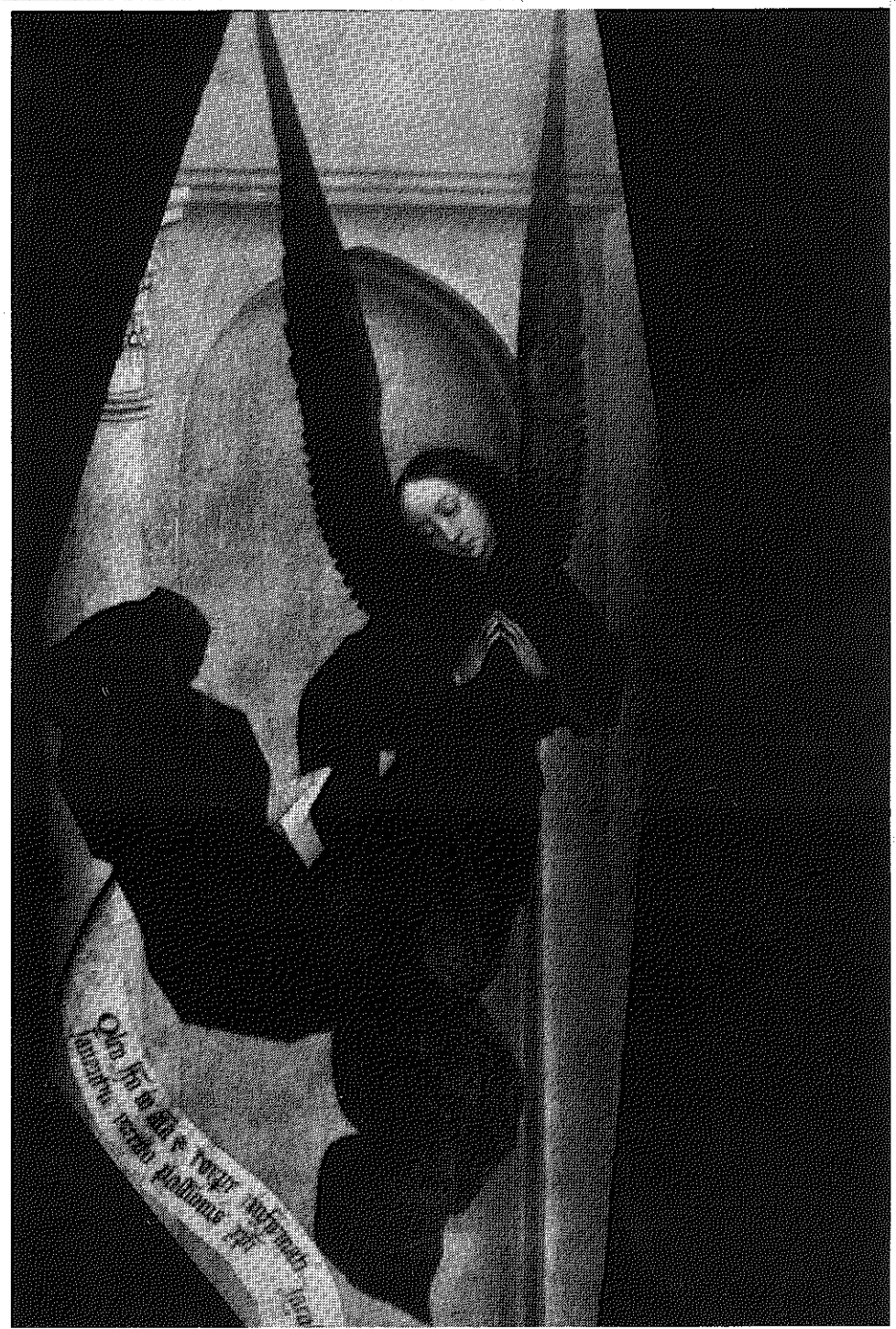


**I felt not myself—but an
example of myself.**

Judith Doyle

Given the

ephemerality of a 'corpus' which has emerged, if not entirely, then at least most convincingly in performance, it might seem presumptuous to insist on Doyle's more 'literary' antecedents. Yet it is to such antecedents that the work sends us, and perhaps never so emphatically as when claiming for itself a certain 'theatricality'. Nor should we be surprised by this: for the question of the Book, of the history and traditionality proper to it, this question has always involved a moment of exemplary dissemblance, a theatrical operation whereby text and event have been made to communicate, but made to communicate across an abyss which forbids any simple resolution of one term in the other. If I will forgo a characterization of *Rate of Descent* as event, I do so then, not in order to minimize the performative aspects of the work, but rather to insist that the problem of the event, of its presence and performance, is never so easily localized. To reduce the question of Doyle's theatricality to proclivities of 'performance', as though the question of that performance were somehow incidental in relation to a task deemed inaugural, a task which would call itself writing, this would be to remain blind to theatricality's most profound demand, it would be to forget that mask from behind which silence, in order to give itself to itself, has already spoken.



Of course for the writer, or perhaps more properly, for the writer of 'modernity'¹, for the one whose 'work' is only ever authorized in the absolute coincidence of text and event, this speech must come as an indictment:

But this exigency which makes the work declare being in the unique moment of rapture—those very words: 'it is', the point which the work brilliantly illuminates even while receiving its consuming burst of light—we must also comprehend and feel that this point renders the work impossible, because it never permits arrival at the work. It is a region anterior to the beginning where nothing is made of being, and in which nothing is accomplished.

Maurice Blanchot

It would be tempting, and as the length of these preliminary remarks ought to indicate, not altogether incorrect, to locate Doyle within the 'epoch' of such an 'impossible work', to understand her performance as an extension of its rigour. Not incorrect, but neither entirely to the point. For rigour is precisely absent here. In its place we are treated to a voluptuous distraction, nervous, forgetful, but for that very reason, subject to surprise, to fortuitous encounters and identifications:

It was a fleeting allegiance, a second of total identification with a sentence, an idea—one I believed for a few moments explained itself completely. It was like seeing a stranger on a late street and making the kind of contact that evaporates in two seconds.²

These are texts which might properly be called 'amorous' and in precisely the sense that Barthes employed the term—given to phantasy, to identification, only reluctantly induced into the labour of the symbolic. Here writing moves away from thought, away from its agonies and labour, and towards the figure's repose:

My thoughts are not thoughts at all. They are images of thoughts. The odd moment of false luminescence, of false clarity.

This 'amorous' disposition depends upon a notion of readership which is antithetical to modernity's utopian impulse (utopia meaning literally *no where*). Its point is always, and prematurely, to render desire's object, to make its other take place, established as the destination of the lover's address. Of course, in order for the lover to read his freedom there, this other, this object of the lover's desire, must prove an other subject. The legal analogue to this amorous expression is therefore the contract rather than law, its goal, persuasion rather than enforcement.



If the modern must reject the terms of this loving contract, it is because s/he recognizes in the Other a demand more profound than that expressed in the relation of subject to subject.³

...the thing is the other, the entirely other which dictates or which writes the law, a law which is not simply natural (*lex natura rerum*), but an infinitely imperious injunction...

Jacques Derrida

Doyle in her own fashion also recognizes this deeper demand, this impossibility of the loving contract's ever fulfilling itself. If her works are about the ease with which the amorous subject avails itself of its imaginary pleasures (and what else are we to understand by that *grace* of which she speaks), they are equally about the disappointment which proves pleasure's concomitant. Hence the melancholy which pervades her writing, the sad inventory of

Capable neither of a belief in the work's ability to escape the exigencies of the social contract, nor of a renewed faith in the innocence of such a contract, Doyle's texts inhabit that space we have come, perhaps too glibly, to call 'post-modern'. If the term still designates for us a space of serious investigation, it will not have been insofar as it announces some definitive end of the modern. Such an end could only prove the most naive repetition of modernism's own eschatological aspirations. Rather its value will have been in raising a question as to what would mark the 'originality' of an 'epoch', in opening the modern up to that operation by which it will always have outlived itself. It is around this moment of decay, a decadence which Jacques Derrida has rightly called 'the period proper to all movement of consciousness', that Doyle's theatre is organized. If the dream (modern-



Photos: Pamela Gawn, S.L. Simpson Gallery

wounds, of places where fulfilment has just failed to find itself:

When I looked at my neck, there were marks all up and down it. I stood in front of a mirror and came to know each mark, the depth of the colour, and was surprised how perfectly I remembered the sense of each one of them.

The manner in which the work characterizes the fact of its own representationality is correspondingly ambivalent. Alongside the appeals to a discourse of love, of grace—what Brother Martin Shea in one of Doyle's transcripts refers to as an 'appropriation of suffering'—there is a keen sense of appropriation's other face, a sense that the amorous gaze must 'grasp at the death or immobilization of the lover' (David Melnik):

At the moment I want you most, you have the least individuality, the least singularity...

I wanted Anna fixed as a magazine picture, always in the same position and sequence. I want this mental picture absolutely clear...⁴

If you can get to know it enough, you can feel comfortable with it. There's a power relationship. You're having it, dominating it.⁵

ist) of an idiom absolutely identical with itself remains the impossible referent of Doyle's 'theatre', this impossibility does not prevent it from making its force felt, from marking the specular space of the theatrical contract as a space of loss:

Thought remains, but it is just thought. Night is anxious, the broken thought of a city. I re-read this city and felt sad, as if I could never write something so beautiful again.

Andrew Payne



Notes

1. We should hesitate before ascribing to 'modernity' something like the originality of an epoch, a significance given to historical circumscription. If the modern will have resisted such a positioning, it is because that originality to which it lays claim—a claim to originality itself, to absolute rupture, revelation, to a voice whose nearness to itself would always be anterior to its having spoken itself, anterior to the distance from itself which is speech—such an originality will always never have occurred. And yet the force of this never, this less than the trivial, a *finest of the fine* as Derrida would put it, continues to leave its mark upon the question of the Book, a question to which we will have claimed some attentiveness. For the moment, a quote from Paul de Man might act as a provisional delimitation of a preface to (nor should we ignore the necessity of such an anticipation), this problem of the 'modern':

The ambivalence of writing is such that it can be considered both an act and an interpretative process that follows after an act with which it cannot coincide. As such, it both affirms and denies its own nature or specificity. Unlike the historian, the writer remains so closely involved with action that he can never free himself of the temptation to destroy whatever stands between him and his deed, especially the temporal distance that makes him dependent on an earlier past. The appeal of modernity haunts all literature. It is revealed in numberless images and emblems that appear at all periods—in the obsession with a *tabula rasa*, with new beginnings—that finds recurrent expression in all forms of writing. No true account of literary language can bypass this persistent temptation of literature to fulfill itself in a single moment. The temptation of immediacy is constitutive of a literary consciousness and has to be included in a definition of the specificity of literature.

2. All quotations from *Rate of Descent* unless otherwise indicated.

3. Gilles Deleuze in his introduction to *Venus in Furs* points to this rejection of a notion of Law based upon contractual consensus as characteristic of the modern:

Clearly THE LAW, as defined by its pure form, without substance or object or any determination whatsoever, is such that no one knows nor can know what it is. It operates without making itself known. It defines a realm of transgression where one is already guilty, and where one oversteps the bounds without knowing what they are, as in the case of Oedipus. Even guilt and punishment do not tell us what the law is, but leave it in a state of indeterminacy equalled only by the extreme specificity of the punishment. This is the world described by Kafka. The point is not to compare Kant and Kafka, but to delineate two dimensions of the modern conception of law.

4. Judith Doyle, 'Fading', from *9 Texts*.

5. *Ibid.*

Artists and cri-

tics tend to assume that meanings and intentions can be simply 'read off' a work or its description. But to ascribe to David Tomas' recent work *Behind the Eye Lies the Hand of William Henry Fox Talbot* such a univocality of intention would be to contradict the work itself. Tomas' exhibition can be understood as marking a moment of uncertainty for such a collaborative position, a position that would leave unsolicited the relation of the work and its 'criticism'. I will therefore consider in some detail the problems and issues that his work raises in order to try and draw out a few of the unchallenged assumptions of the dominant view on art and photography. If I now proceed to do that which I have prefatorially warned against—describe the work—it is because, like Tomas, I too wish to contaminate the very thing that I am dealing with. For after all, to review a work, like reading a dream, is always to try and give it a sense and place—a secondary revision that Tomas' work would seem to want to obviate, or at least to defer. But if I am to move at all, I am, despite my suspicions as regards the interest of such an operation, obliged to employ a descriptive model.

Moving in and out of the gallery is a (child's?) train on tracks: a bridge that joins the inside of the gallery to its fenestrated extremities. There are video and photographic cameras, TV screens, a strobe that flashes intermittently and mirrors that are placed on opposite sides of the gallery. A variety of texts are inscribed on the walls and mirrors and there are others on the window which can be read from the street. Historical characters and anonymous and imaginary personalities mingle freely in this dense intertextual space: on one text Mayakovsky and Vertov exchange views on the *Kino Eye*, addressing me as third term, as cinematic spectator perhaps. There are impossible meetings, not to mention readings: Fox Talbot 'sits' next to Vertov; I read about 'Talbot the man' from a text that is lettraset onto one of the mirrors. This text is taken from a coffee-table book on Talbot by Gail Buckland who took an early calotype of Talbot's hand to a palmist in order to gain some insight into Talbot's personality. Here and elsewhere in the exhibition there seems to be a troubling insistence that the faith we have in our readings of images is problematic and blinding, an insistence that runs