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James Coleman's Endgame : at the Limits of Vision and Speech

*Beauty is a fruit that one contemplates without having one's hands reach for it,
but it is also an omen from which one does not recoil.*

Simone Weil, Gravity and Grace

It would seem difficult in the present moment not to contemplate two relatively recent works by James Coleman as a form of conclusion, a closure both in the objective historical sense of Barnett Newman's famous claim that truly great works of art will not open doors for the future but decisively close them, and in the subjective sense of a work of *Altersstil*, i.e. a work made late in the life of a great artist that seems to sum up and conclude the artist's greatest aspirations and promises (like Beethoven's *String Quartets*). Even though Coleman had been working on the two LED video projections, one called simply *Untitled* (2011-2015), the other more enigmatically named *Flower* (2013-2016) for several years since 2011, they were only exhibited for the first time in 2016 in London and shortly thereafter in the Spring of 2017 in New York. Viewed and reviewed together on several occasions by this author, the two works have acquired the status of an inextricable diptychon, even though the artist has not officially identified them in this manner, nor has he titled them accordingly. Yet neither has he refused a comparative discussion of the two works as dialectical halves, nor has he resisted an installation that inevitably engendered a sense of a simultaneously foundational and conclusive opus, one which opened a seemingly inexhaustible suite of future questions for spectators to enter.

To consider these two works as a diptychon would be an interpretive experiment that allows us to contemplate them as contradictory propositions interrogating the current

conditions of constructing visual, acoustic and textual representations, operating simultaneously at the threshold of painterly visibility (in a high modernist lineage that originated with Paul Cézanne), and at the threshold of audibility and legibility (in a literary lineage that concluded with Samuel Beckett). Since Lessing's authoritative differentiation of the spatial arts from those of linguistic enunciation and temporality had sustained the Modernist doxa deep into the second half of the twentieth century, to forge the oppositions of visuality and textuality into a new hybridity of genres and media was one of Coleman's wagers since the early 1970s, and it has remained one of the foundation of his lifelong project.¹ The artist had learned from modernist painting that the radical telos to fracture all painterly conventions of visual representation in order to initiate new forms of spectatorial and readerly competence could only be achieved by strategies that demanded and enacted enormous sacrifices of these conventions. For one, these were evident in the modernist painters' continuous labours to leave behind the age-old strategies of specular seduction and to betray the gratification which painterly skills had provided for centuries.² Thus painting worked its way towards ever expanding patterns of collective enlightenment and emancipation from myth, towards tactile and perceptual rationalization to induce spectatorial self-determination and participatory competence. These ethical and aesthetic ambitions, after Cézanne, would engender and sustain some of the great moments of the avantgardes of the twentieth century, finding a first culmination in the invention of abstraction leading to de Stijl and

¹ Of course there are, as always, perplexing predecessors for these unlikely constellations that would invite a comparison with Coleman's own approach to such a dialectic of the impact of Cézanne's painting on film, and the importance of Beckett's writings for painting. For the former see Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's two films on Paul Cézanne, *Cézanne* (1989) and *Une Visite au Louvre* (2004), and for the latter Jasper Johns' *Foirades / Fizzles* (1976), a volume for which Beckett, following the painter's invitation translated his pre-existing French text into English in order to collaborate with Johns on this project.

² Inevitably, the literature has fallen into the various traps that the painter set out for his spectators, to confront them with their proper projections of conventions of experience and expectations. One example would be T.J. Clark's magisterial misreading of Cézanne's nudes as originating in the painter's deeply troubled psychic formations and phobic relations to sexuality and the body at large.

Constructivism in 1913-1925. The painterly ascesis of these projects was extended and intensified throughout the twentieth century, leading from modernist abstraction marked by an ever more rigorous reductivism all the way to the confrontational strategies of a complete withdrawal of any kind of iconic visuality. Eventually these were even incorporated and operative in the technologically mediated forms of phenomenologically structured cinematographic works emerging out of American Minimalism in the mid to late 1960s. In the hands of filmmakers such as Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, or Andy Warhol, and even in the early film work of Richard Serra, these strategies withheld all forms of narrative and negated even residual forms of iconicity, aiming to reach extremes of a structural self-referentiality and temporal self – reflexivity, bordering on visual and virtual tautologies. And while the suspensions of narrative and representation were originally motivated by these very same political claims to induce collective specular competence and radical phenomenological legibility, these works became de facto invisible and inoperative within the enlightenment process they aimed to initiate and to expand.

James Coleman had undoubtedly studied, if not internalized this ethos of the structuralist cinematographic legacies to never concede even a single frame of the image flow to solicit attention, let alone to induce any incendiary narrative or somnambulant myth. As a theoretical challenge and a formal arsenal these strategies of negation would serve as one of the foundations of his evolution as an artist. Yet the insight that these strategies of a rigorous self – referentiality paradoxically also implied the loss of any communicative potential was one of the motivations leading to Coleman's dissenting departure from the structuralist premises when he shifted from painting and sculpture to variants of the moving image (film, video, digital projection) that have formed the technological, the textual and the scopic scores of his oeuvre since the mid – 1970s. In fact we would argue that Coleman's work begins as a critique of those late modernist Minimalist sculptural and structuralist cinematographic practices which had still assumed that a regime of techno-scientific enlightenment should also rule the parameters of artistic abstraction at the expense of a total defiance of language and communicative action. Thus, it was certainly not accidental that Coleman -- at the height of an almost obsessive European

preoccupation with American Minimalism in the period from 1962-1973 -- signalled his scepticism towards those techno-scientific parameters. First of all by manifestly stating a counter – identification when organizing an important early exhibition of *arte povera* in his native Ireland, and subsequently by literally situating himself outside of these modes of sculptural and cinematographic production when relocating his residence to Italy -- a geographical and geopolitical space where *arte povera* formulated the most fervent opposition to the master discourses of American Minimal art.

Another historically motivated ethos of extreme self – referential reduction as one of the essential features of a modernist ethics, which dramatically differed from Minimalism's techno-scientific reduction had been defined by Coleman's countryman, Samuel Beckett. His aesthetic ascesis, however, while not any less rigorous and demanding than Cézanne's, did not originate in the utopian aspirations to conceive and induce forms of cultural practice as an ever expanding enlightenment project. Rather Beckett's position departed from the historically inflicted condition of an already delivered totalitarian effacement of subjecthood, a condition in which the annihilation of the bourgeois subject had been already accomplished by historical catastrophies of mythical dimensions, rather than by a continuously expanding self determining emancipation from myth. If in Cézanne's increasing sparsity of means the very act of the subject's discovery of the perceptual world is enacted at every step of the spectator's bewilderment of the losses encountered in the field of conventional visual representation, Beckett's antinomy to this historical promise of the perceptual constitution of self determining subjectivity literally allows only for the emphatic linguistic re-enactment of these historically already annihilated promises.

Thus – situated between the oppositional extremes of utopian anticipation and melancholic loss -- the hermeticism of Coleman's critique of the reigning late modernist concepts of visuality and representation in structuralist film, formulated its dialectical counterpart in an equally contradictory staging of performative and linguistic enunciations and symbolic forms of communicative social interaction, previously the domain of dramatic culture. Once again, it was the dialogue with some

of the most significant figures and strategies emerging from the trajectory of American post – minimalist and Conceptual performance practices, from Bruce Nauman and Dan Graham to the cinematographic works Lawrence Weiner, that initiated Coleman's transition towards his own increasingly complex engagement with the performative and the linguistic enunciation. While Coleman recognized these artists as historically central figures of a progressive aesthetic practice, he formulated his own project in manifest opposition, directing his work towards fundamentally different genealogies of staging the performative and enacting the communicative dimensions of language. Even though Coleman had both internalized and sublated the principles and procedures of structuralist film, the artist now revised and transfigured the apparently decisive modes of the bodily and the linguistic performative this generation of post – minimal artists had initiated. Consequentially, Coleman now differentiated his projects even further from post – minimal video and film recordings of elementary bodily and gestural enactments (like in the video work of Bruce Nauman), or from the physiologically performed and linguistically mediated social interactions, in the performance and video work of Dan Graham, one of Coleman's closest friends since the mid 1980s. Again, in the same manner that Coleman had counteracted the American's neo-positivist compulsions in the medium of cinematography by re-introducing the speaking and the acting subject, explicitly drawing on the theatrical conventions of diction and drama in the European theatrical traditions, he now responded to Nauman's and Graham's rigorous reduction to the mere phenomenological activation of the performative body with a programmatic recovery of the theatrical origins of the gestural and linguistic constructions of social space and intersubjectivity. In this ostentatious, almost polemical reversal of paradigms (whether it might have been the scientific and positivist ascesis of late modernist self – reflexivity or the equally reductivist definition of bodily and linguistic interaction to its most elementary principles), Coleman chose -- in certain aspects comparable to strategies developed by his European peers Gerhard Richter or Marcel Broodthaers -- a different set of allegorical mnemonic procedures. It appears easier to read Coleman's differentiation from the work of his American peers than to actually understand his allegorical inversion of theatrical traditions, since these were

never redeemed as though they could be redeployed in the present as retrospective trophies from a more heroic past of the history of the subject's historical formation. Apparently resuscitating those epistemological frameworks by returning to diction and gesture, speech and performance as unique and historically specific conditions of socio-linguistic relations and interactions once embedded in theatrical culture, Coleman literally brought those back to the stage, yet that stage was now the technologically advanced medium (ranging from initial slide projections to ever more differentiated digital projections in the present).

It is precisely in the confrontation with this question of the status of theatrical remains in the present that our initial proposal to situate Coleman in the lineage of linguistic critiques of dramatic literature at the thresholds of legibility embodied in Beckett's writings seems potentially productive. Comparing Coleman's relation to the traditions of plasticity that had governed the culture of Modernism to Samuel Beckett's relations to the traditions of drama and theatrical culture, allows us to recognize that both artists insisted on the continuation of the specific epistemological challenges of their respective domains, yet at the condition of making the irreversibility of the fundamentally transformed parameters of their practices to become their very center. Thus if for Beckett the evacuation of action and performance, and the fracturing and reduction of the linguistic articulation down to its most elementary forms of enunciation had become one of many insuperable conditions outside of which theatrical performance was not any longer thinkable, we could say that (in an almost positive inversion of these principles), it became increasingly impossible for Coleman to conceive of an artistic practice that would not emphatically foreground its desolate losses that it had to inflict upon itself as much as it had internalized the prohibitions on traditional forms of representation necessitated by cultural and historical realities. Admittedly, this comparison suffers from a tremendous paradox since it equates reductivism and negation in Beckett's dramatic tracings of the loss of language with Coleman's equally critical inversions of adding language and dramaturgy, of adding speech and performance to figuration, of supplementing the vacuities of Modernist plasticities with a seeming wealth of cultural legacies that had been obliterated. But the paradox is resolved when we

recognize that the presumed wealth of Coleman's recoveries always ultimately emphasizes -- and in that regard the comparison to Beckett seems indeed productive -- the utter inaccessibilities of these forms that have to be invoked and inserted all the more into the present to the very degree that they have been historically and methodologically excluded if not prohibited. That comparison would allow us to recognize that as in Beckett, so in Coleman, the theatrical forms of speech and dramatic performance could only be considered as a rehearsal of the allegorical *membra disiecta* of what once were the models in which theatre had enacted the linguistic and performative traditions of European dramatic culture, its exemplary embodiments of the formation of the subject and the social interactions within which the subject was constituted. The consequential radicality of Coleman's allegorical reflections on the loss and destruction of the dramatic modes of speech and performance as skills enacting the social constitution of the subject in theatre thus attains a precision of decisive epistemic doubt comparable to Lawrence Weiner's doubts regarding the historical legitimacy of language as poetry. Both artists are equidistant from poetry and drama to the very extent that they have made it their project to precisely undo the distinctions that had previously distanced the languages of poetry and the performance of drama from the actual or potential collective access to the subject's linguistic, performative and political self - constitution in the everyday life of the present.

All the more difficult and important then is it for us now to recognize that in the two works under consideration precisely these key principles of Coleman's life -- long preoccupation with the remnants of theatrical culture, with speech and language, with gesture and performance -- have been utterly obliterated, perhaps in a final strategy of allegorical negation. *Flower* -- in an uncanny and almost painfully literal adaptation of *nature morte*, one of painting's most traditional genres, the sole actor now is a single flower, and the singular, almost imperceptible activity, outside of even the last or minute remnants of speech and gesture, are the barely perceivable movements of the roots of a plant, and perhaps, the loss of one of its petals. The melancholic intensity of *Flower* challenges us to observe the life (and near death) of a Papaver Poppy plant which was recorded in situ at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, under the supervision

and the expert care of a botanist who assisted with the temporary exposure of the stem and the sights of the Papaver Poppy's roots to permit the cinematographer to record the filmic time lapse sequence of the movement of the plant's roots craving for soil and water. After the recording had been completed, the botanist carefully reinstated the plant in the site and the soil where it had been previously planted.³

Confronting spectators with a common and a culturally charged plant's changing morphology, if not its uncanny physiological behaviour under conditions of duress and withdrawal, in the present historical moment inevitably triggers immediate associations with the universally ruling and perpetually intensifying conditions of ecological destruction. Yet at the same time, the Papaver Poppy obviously stands also as one of the most poetically invested characters in the universal language of flowers, inevitably calling up a spectrum of complex cultural references, ranging from Charles Baudelaire to Paul Celan.⁴ On one end of the spectrum associated with the flower's integral natural connection to the production of opium, the most celebrated drug of the nineteenth century, the poppy served as an invitation to amnesia, as promised in Baudelaire's cultic celebration of the oneiric redemption from the rapidly advancing conditions of reification under the forces of industrialization and Capitalist control. A hundred years later, the very same botanical phenomenon of mnemonic seduction serves in Paul Celan as a reminder of the utter impossibility to yield to the desire of forgetting and the ethical mandate to remember after the experience of the holocaust. A third symbolic charge of the poppy flower (as James Coleman has brought to my attention), is the cult of British war veterans to wear a poppy flower in their button hole on the Memorial Day for the war deaths of

³ One of the cinematographic sensations of Weimar culture was a film called *Das Blumenwunder (The Miracle of Flowers)* in 1926. Cassandra Guan, in a forthcoming essay on the film states that "Through pioneering use of time-lapse photography, its makers transformed the plodding growth of ordinary plants into a moving drama charged with human pathos. Financed by the chemical corporation BASF (later IG Farben) to promote the use of nitrogen fertilizer, this remarkable film is the living document of a biopolitical regime born of the second industrial revolution, which brought into being, thanks to breakthroughs in chemistry, a brave new world of synthetic matter."

⁴ Paul Celan named one of his major collections of poetry *Mohn und Gedächtnis* in 1952. It has been translated into English by Michael Hamburger as *Poppy and Memory*.

both world wars. This reference, quite remarkably assigns the flower the tasks of remembrance, the actual opposite of the mythical investment of the flower with the desire to forget.⁵

We are thus confronted with a what appears to be a peculiarly incoherent spectrum. Coleman's choice and deployment of a botanical specimen forces us to consider numerous, actually rather contradictory semantic inscriptions, ranging from our first association of taking the image of the wilting flower as an articulation of an awareness of ever growing ecological catastrophies through to the literary references generating utterly opposite inscriptions in the middle of the 19th century and the middle of the 20th, to yet again a totally divergent inscription of the Papaver Poppy as a menetekel of the horrors of war and the appeal to remember. Obviously, given this complex polysemic heterogeneity of symbolic charges, it would be extremely problematic to assume that any one of these would have been intended by Coleman as the specifically and decisively motivating reference. Rather it would appear that the almost meditative contemplation of the process of the dislodged plant's clamoring for soil and water itself contemplates the very condition of utter precarity if not the outright impossibility of asserting the potential of mnemonic experience and its inscriptions in present cultural production .

This performative, allegorical enactment of the destruction of memory as a cultural condition would be confirmed in a second, at first sight even more bewildering strategy introduced by Coleman into the flower's symbolic field, its chromatic definition and identity. As though in an aggressive and decisive act of severing the poppy from its age old -- almost entrancing -- referentiality of red, Coleman adds two artificial variations. a yellow poppy and a third version of a white Papaver poppy by differently tinting the digital images as variants of the presumably authentically red original natural object. This willful denaturing of *Flower (Red)* into

⁵ One of the most poignant reminders of World War I is the poem, 'In Flanders Fields', written by John McCrae, a Canadian army doctor, following the death of his close friend and compatriot Lieutenant Alexis Helmer. Helmer was killed on 2 May 1915 when a shell exploded during the second German gas attack. The poppy acquired the status of a mnemonic device to remind the subsequent generations of the flowers that had bloomed among the corpses of the fallen soldiers in the fields of Flanders in WW I.

its artificial and fictional variations of a *Flower (Yellow)* and *Flower (White)* generates a sudden deconstruction of the presumably natural chromatic order. It challenges the very process of mnemonic and symbolic meaning inasmuch as this process presumes a psycho-somatic and affective contiguity with the material experience of the world. Colors for the longest time until the rise of Modernist critical reflection after Cézanne in 1912 had provided this certainty. Ever since does a reinforcement of the presumably unshakeable natural referentiality of color perform the functions of the industrial mythologies of spectacle in all of its forms. Coleman's allegorical detachment of color from memory, the willfulness of the chromatic exchangeability of the flowers instigates precisely a recognition that even the mnemonic process itself can no longer be situated at the very threshold of a reference to the natural world. And that the psychogenic forms of experience that memory can induce and retrieve are subjected to the extreme opposite of the mass - cultural constructions, the annihilating impact that the mechanically generated image imprints on the mnemonic process. Thus Coleman's *Flower (Red)* and *Flower (Yellow)* and *Flower (White)* can be associated with these questions of how the mnemonic process and the memory image could possibly function under the conditions of advanced technological and industrial culture. After all, one other, equally provocative feature of this work is the condition that it inscribes these seemingly primary and foundational reflections as it is itself suspended within the technological medium (as opposed to the painterly medium, for example, where the very process of recuperation of experience, and mnemonic reconstruction is an integral element of the painterly process itself). Thus one could argue *Flower (Red)* and *Flower (Yellow)* and *Flower (White)* are technological processes allegorically contemplating the history and the functions of painterly desire under the conditions of anomic and mnemonic atrophy.

Once again Coleman draws on strategies first deployed by structural filmmakers like Michael Snow's *Wavelength*⁶ in 1967, or even earlier in Andy Warhol's

⁶ Michael Snow's *Wavelength* was made in 1967. In a 1968 *L.A. Free Press* review of the film, Gene Youngblood describes *Wavelength* as "without precedent in the purity of its confrontation with the essence of cinema: the relationships between illusion and fact, space and time, subject and object. It is the first post-

prognostic *Empire* in 1964 where a provocatively extreme temporal retardation was combined with an almost complete withdrawal of narrative or iconic gratification to force viewers to actually confront duration in extremely extenuated and simultaneously extremely compressed manners and become conscious of the actually ruling conditions in the perception of cinematographic temporality. The strategies of structural film assumed that the mere technical and phenomenological enactment would already induce a fundamentally altered spectatorial awareness. This extreme consciousness of temporality in the cinematographic medium would train the spectator to return to the totalitarian world of industrialized image culture with a sobriety of disaffection for narrative and representation. At the time of the 1960s this endowed the structuralist radicality of the deconstruction of the myth making medium par excellence, the moving image in film and television, with the claim for a political radicality. For Coleman's allegorical critiques of the devastating impact of masscultural image production and the precarity of aesthetic practices under these conditions, the radical purism of self reflexive structural film however is not any longer a sufficiently complex operation.

The second digital image projection constituting the dialectical opposite to *Flower* stems from a more or less accidental camera recording made by the artist a few years ago at an open - air funfair in rural Ireland. Depicting a crowd of young people swaying and swinging in hydraulically mobilized seats, rejoicing in the pleasures of the rapid rotations around the perimeters of a carroussel, the projection's vertiginous image rotation, induces a potentially even more discomforting perceptual destabilization for the viewers of the digital projection. As though in yet another tribute to American structural film, Coleman aligns what appear to be four short fragments from his original filmclip and iterates them in a serial sequence, whose quantitative temporal measure and sequential logic – as in the serial repetition of an

[Warhol](#), post-[Minimal](#) movie; one of the few films to engage those higher conceptual orders which occupy modern painting and sculpture. It has rightly been described as a *triumph of [contemplative cinema](#)*."

identical, yet always differently screened photograph in a Warhol painting -- is not easily – if at all -- fathomable.

The aggressively gaudy coloration of the clip is perhaps even more perplexing, since the repetition of the high contrasts of the dominant complementary colors red and green chromatically intensifies the fragment's kinetic mimesis of the carousel's actual rotation to an almost unbearable degree. Fusing movement with rapidly alternating color oppositions, the projection seems to subject us to a review of all those major instances of a radical modernity when painting celebrated its association with technological progress, from the scientific deconstruction and dissemination of color in Impressionism, calamitously misread in Italian Futurism, all the way to the synthesis of technicolor and film technology in recent digital American industrial cinema production.

What might at first sight deceive as an exclamatory allegiance to color's universally affective powers of seduction and trancelike enchantment (one might recall the paradoxical adulation of Richard Wagner among the presumably science-oriented color theorists and practitioners among the post-impressionists), loses at least some of its compelling seduction as one recognizes that the source of the violent chromatic trance and kinetic spectacle is actually a carousel, one of the more archaic instruments to engender the joy of destabilizing motion for children. This sudden descent from the initial heights of a presumed aspiration towards an aesthetic of chromatic and kinetic trance, makes us realize in an exemplary manner to what extent the seductive effects of technological spectacularization actually originate in infantile desires and thrive in the incessant infantilizations of its enchanted consumers. The chromatic and kinetic assault on the spectator is complemented by an equally intrusive, not to say invasive acoustic component, an intense and infinitely repeated stomping beat whose sonic origins are eerily unidentifiable (i.e. the pulses are clearly not the result of an instrument of musical percussion. It would seem more likely that the cyclically pulsing beat might be generated by a machine, the drone of industrial production, its monotonous arrhythmic repetition instantly barring even the slightest desire, let alone any

pleasure to assimilate it in bodily movements. After having been pressed to reveal the source of the monotonous droning beat, Coleman explained that it was actually a recording of the sound of an old gramophone record which had gotten stuck in one of its grooves.

Thus, in a dialectical inversion, integral to all of Coleman's strategies and intensifying the productive hermeticism of his work, spectators suddenly recognize the extreme distance which separates them from what might have been once an originary desire for an aesthetics generating visual and aural pleasure, and somatic gratification, as it had been embodied and enacted in the ludic joys of free motion in space, the very practices which by now all forms of technologically produced and mediated control of spectacle culture have fully abrogated. In exact analogy to the meditation on the conditions of endowing artistic practices with the dimension of the mnemonic in *Flower*, the almost painful kinetic, chromatic and acoustic intensity of *Untitled* suddenly inverts into an allegorical contemplation of the withering possibilities to experience pleasure under the present conditions of total spectacularization. Even a cinematographic clip of a children's carousel can trace and embody a universally menacing hypertrophic intensity, and what was once an utterly benign machine of simple bodily enjoyment can suddenly be allegorized as a ruin of ludic joy. And in exactly the same manner that the mechanically induced vertigo of the carousel loses its attraction upon contemplation, the allegorical eruption of the carousel reveals the intrepid and inextricable entanglement of contemporary cultural practices with infantilizing forms of spectacularization. If *Flower* confronts us with an immense compression of time in a very short process and access to a minute and minuscule process of growth and decay, *Untitled* by contrast confronts us with an immense expansion of time, bordering on the unendurable conditions of a seemingly endless repetition of the same rotating movement, machinic, mechanical, moronic, that seems to inoculate the spectator to the inescapable structures of contemporary pleasures under the conditions of spectacle.

