



BERNHARD SACHS
Anathema / Anachronism / Apostasy

VCA Margaret Lawrence Gallery
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Images; front cover, back cover and left: Bernhard Sachs, digital images from *Anathema/Anachronism/Apostasy*, 2008-2009, original photographers unknown.

Inside left: Bernhard Sachs, detail of erased drawing from *Anathema/Anachronism/Apostasy*, mixed media, 2003-2009. Inside right: *Polish Game*, Ocular Lab, Melbourne, 2004. Photo: Julie Davies.

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VCA MARGARET LAWRENCE GALLERY

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The abyss of aestheticism opens up, and this brilliant intuition was finally to see all its concepts disappear into it, so that gods and heroes, defiance and suffering, the pillars of the tragic edifice, fall away into nothing.

Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, 1924.

Anathema/Anachronism/Apostasy is the summary exhibition of a series entitled **Trilogy** concerning history and representation as *theatrum mundi*, an allegorical theatre or opera of the world, after the definitive 1924 text by the philosopher Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. The title 'Trilogy', referring directly to a sequence of films by Pier Paolo Pasolini, is misleading. **Trilogy** is to date, eight exhibitions, beginning with *(Reconstruction of) The Polish Game*, Ocular Lab, Melbourne, 2004, which featured a dinner in a heavily decorated interior and the exhibition of its aftermath, and ending (or possibly not) with a recital, *Oratorio Faust* on 6 February, 2009, and its aftermath, in a heavily decorated interior.

The *mise-en-scene* is resolutely Faustian. Goethe's *Faust* is the legacy, the shadow through the Benjamin text, the bargain that is struck, and the price that is paid in its Mephistophelean pact with the image of history. **Trilogy** advances the proposition that historical determinations are inescapable and compulsive, and that history itself is "not a truth or truths, nor a reality or realities, but an abyss of obsessions seeking objects." Through a reading of Salvador Dalí's so-called *paranoiac critical method* by which images are rendered perpetually duplicitous, and extending this as an ideological procedure, history reveals itself as a narcosis of allegorisation, the deranged opera of time; an opera under the influence, under the sign of Saturn. Saturn/Kronos, the allegorical figuration of time and melancholy, eats its children. In this cannibalistic world picture, history is duplicitous instability – memory is perpetually blurred, even as the repetitive compulsions of histories play themselves out in a frenzy of forms. The incessant re-inscriptions and re-writings of the past are an "hysterical seizure" of representation. According to this vision, history is always an ambiguous proliferation of false histories – the past is continually re-visited but it is never the same twice.

It is always in a type of error, but, as Paul de Man noted, "if truth is the recognition of the systematic character of a certain kind of error, then it would be fully dependent on the prior existence of that error." That is, truth is merely

the supplement to fallacy, and the fallacies we live by are composed of an agitation of representations over a transparency, a sensual, dense and material imaging from the rim into a pit of endless contemplation, a vertigo from cipher to cipher or image to image, as Benjamin described it, an allegorical groundlessness.

By a curious chronological (anachronistic) reversal it is a metaphoric transcription of a current representation in cosmology by which the universe is holographic, a universe of representations in perpetual suspension rimming event horizons, the edge or horizon of black holes by whose irresistible gravitation their substance is irrevocably sucked in and atomised. What we see are the representations of long dead and disappeared substance, the detritus of light years, haunting them. What we see in perpetually suspended animation is the moment immediately prior to their fall. It is a spectral play, an anachronistic complication: in the terms of Mieke Bal, "preposterous".

Played out between remembrance and the erasures of memory, between anamnesis and amnesia, between materiality and transparency, like an x-ray of a painting, this *pictura historica* is, as the philosopher Theodor Adorno said of Surrealism, the "photographic negative" of the "world rubble" which, according to **Trilogy**, is "written somatically as a derision in the body" as traces of the raising of the dead, the "ghosts of painting" by which art "hallucinates politics endlessly."

The theatrical staging, the "set" of **Anathema/Anachronism/Apostasy** comprises large drawings and photography. The drawings are acts of erasure. What is presented is the current state of works that have been "cancelled" by having another drawing done on top of them, a sequence of sedimentations in which the traces of the previous image are both occulted, eclipsed, and in some way persist, variations on a procedure the artist Arnulf Rainer termed "*Übermalen*", "Overpainting". The surface of the works becomes resistant and unforgiving, clogged by material. Their destination is ultimately as a monochrome, as sheer substance at the point where no further image is possible. The erasures are an iconoclasm by representation, not against it. *Übermalen* in this variation is clearly allegory by procedure, the microcosmic rendering of the world by analogy. Histories continually overpaint themselves, *Übermalen* creates history in an image.

The photographs are the apparent opposite. They are the retrieval of images, including the re-interpretation and reworking of corrupt and discarded negatives from the period of cold war migration to Australia, and documentary material from news clippings from the 1978 mass suicide at Jonestown, thematised by the slogan overlooking the carnage "Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it", that is thematised under this banner as consciously historical, an erasure under the aegis of history. The retrieval of this material is, ironically, another erasure of sorts, an erasure inscribed in the fiction of the frozen moment of photographic death, the mortification of what will never be again – as a repetition, a mundane eternal return. Jonestown's erasure was only one of multitude erasures under the aegis of history. They seem to happen every week. Its image is ultimately, like breathing or death itself, prosaic.

From dust to dust. The procedures of **Anathema/Anachronism/Apostasy** all reiterate theological fallenness, the corrupt descent into materiality. The death drive of Sigmund Freud is this compelling propensity towards sheer materiality, towards a primal, originary state, organised around repetition compulsions that underwrite, that "work silently", as he said, "in the clamour of Eros". *Das Fatale*, death and its drive, is the persistent thematic of **Trilogy**, the overriding and ultimate iconoclasm at the littoral of representation.

Anathema/Anachronism/Apostasy is written in unrepentant disbelief, the heretical stance of apostasy, the turning away from faith characteristic of the lateworks of the artists it is dedicated to, Goya, Titian, Velasquez, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Marcel Duchamp, to the violence of those who did not settle for less, a nihilistic aestheticism. Consistent with the sentiment expressed by Adorno in the preface to his last, resolutely resistant and unrepentant philosophic tract, *Negative Dialectics*, the *Schadenfreude*, the weird *jouissance*, of "those who will proclaim that they knew it all along and now he is confessing", it is the remainder – all that is left. **Trilogy**, in the theological register of the 1924 Benjamin text, is rancid with the religiosity of the likes of Pasolini and the filmmaker Liliana Cavani, or the David Lynch of *Lost Highway*, the profound religiosity of their great atheism bound in the degeneracy of a fall from grace, in apostasy, in heresies *contra Deus*, against God, whatever that God, or gods, might be, in the heresy of existing.

Bernhard Sachs, January 2009

