

*Not for distribution

Here's shit in your eye

(Gareth James)

In 1991, I was on the verge of completing the installation of my first solo exhibition, at a gallery in Amsterdam. The gallery was closed for installation, but as I took a break for a beer in the bar behind the gallery, a stranger, an older man, walked in, sat down, made himself at home, and asked me if I wouldn't mind telling him about the show. I gladly did so, barely suppressing my pride, and he listened attentively and enthusiastically. I explained to him that the front doors to the gallery would remain closed throughout the exhibition, that visitors would only peer in through the street windows before, in all likelihood, becoming distracted by the extraordinary display in the condom shop next door (the gallery was in Amsterdam's Red Light district, and as such, any exhibition of art faced stiff competition in capturing a share of the visual attention of the city). Only the more determined spectators, I suggested, might realize that they could enter through the side door into the gallery's offices, wind their way through the desks, telephones, computers, printers and the staff that operated them, that is, a spectator would enter the space of display from the rear and only after having navigated the space of administration. The stranger explained that he was moved to ask about the show because he himself was also an artist, one that had made an exhibition in that same space nearly two decades prior, and that he too had deployed the same gesture, spoke in the same architectural rhetoric of cancelling the liminal function of the front doors and diverting the spectators through the side entrance. Beyond this shared preamble, the stranger went on to provide a description of his exhibition that I've never recovered from, never want to, or intend to recover from.

It's too late, always.

He had turned the entire front gallery into a darkened, light-proof room. The windows facing the street had been blacked out, and the audience (once they had passed through the gallery's offices) had to then pass through a corridor that zig-zagged 180 degrees upon itself before leading to the rear entrance to the gallery, conveying the spectator into complete darkness. At the end of the corridor, small low-wattage orange lights offered the only guide for the blind spectators as they anxiously moved into the large gallery space. Gradually, as the spectators' eyes acclimated to the low light levels, they would begin to dimly perceive framed photographs mounted conventionally to the walls, in addition to other stymied human bodies similarly undergoing the

physical and optical effort of reacquainting themselves with visual spatial coordination. Comforting old habits of looking at visual artistic works on the wall of a gallery, that is, the comfortable old habits of being a spectator, ultimately reasserted themselves despite the unusual viewing conditions. Soon enough, the social habits of exhibition openings returned too - certainly *not* habits of looking at art, but of looking at each other, peppered with chit-chat and flirtatious conversations. As the opening reception reached a critical mass of excitable bodies mingling in the darkness, the stranger flipped an electrical switch connected to a bank of floodlights he had installed around the gallery. Sudden brilliant bright light expelled the previous intimate obscurity, and as the spectators recoiled from yet another test of their adaptability, they would gradually become aware that the photographs were newly adapting themselves too: turning darker, a swelling blackness came to occupy the frame, swallowing the images whole. As the stranger explained, the photographic paper had been exposed in conventional fashion, but pulled from their bath of developer without the fixative wash to carry away the developing chemicals that now, after what turned out only to have been a pause in activity, now continued its instinctive metabolic trajectory towards the annihilation of the very images that it had made possible. From camera obscura to camera lucida, the gallery was now the scene of a special type of image - the cadaver - of images consumed by the blind metabolism of the photographic process lining the walls and surrounding the no-longer developing bodies transformed into images and awash in a toxic fixative.

Listening to this description, an uncared-for memory of pubescent end-of-year discos in the school cafeteria came to mind: feelings of exhilarated dancing in dark rooms, of ecstatic, gregarious sociability bought to a sickening end as the rows of fluorescent lights flickered and hummed into action, of the palpable sense of being captured and exposed by the renewed visibility of my sweaty spotty teenage face, the return of desperation in assembling my best effort with cheap, disharmonious or passé clothes and hairstyles that were more of an ego-ideal than an achieved expression, of the sudden rebounding contraction of my juvenile libido, of losing a precious extension with others, of retreating back into the lonely isolation of the impoverished confines of an individual but unremarkable body separated from all others. It felt cruel, as banal as it was - the ritualistic return to order of each shamed back into their place - and I was simultaneously relieved (not to have been in attendance at the stranger's exhibition as the memory — a series of looping images and affects his description awoke — threatened to renew its terror) and yet gratified for its belated illumination. In revisiting this memory today, prompted by thinking about Ali Ahadi's exhibition and its similarly disquieting extension of the photographic apparatus, it becomes hard to avoid the

conclusion that I was receiving a certain kind of bodily and semiotic training: I was a dancer, like anyone and everyone, in the *Goh Ballet Academy*.

These opening anecdotes establish something like an art historical and psychical lineage within which I place Ahadi's *Shit Yes Academy*, but identifying the conditions in which his work departs from the stranger's exhibition opens onto the key conditioning element of his exhibition. Unlike these virtually wordless zones of intensity in which images and bodies circulate precariously within a primarily optical economy trading on the basis of the suspension of language, in Ahadi's exhibition a delirious linguistic economy arises to disorganize everything that the optical economy is so intent on coordinating. The topology of this disrelation is a complex historical affair, and it is Ahadi's reformulation of the category of the audience and of the spectator into the subject position of the *visitor* through which we must approach it.

In a lecture about his work in Vancouver some years ago, Ahadi remarked of an image taken of himself at the airport in Tehran on the day, the hour, the moment that he relocated from Iran to Canada, his open hand down pulling [*raking*¹] at the right hand side of his face and eye in a gesture that we suspect is wiping away a tear, perhaps of exhaustion or doubt-ridden resignation, as he says goodbye to members of his family: *I've been becoming the audience of this image, of myself, myself*. Poised at an inflection point between two modes of life, this image becomes for Ahadi a representative of the splitting of his subject position between Iranian citizen and foreigner (or stranger) - that is, it stands as the sentimental proxy for other inaccessible photographic and bio-graphic forms of capture of the splitting of Ahadi between two distinct and asymmetrically overdetermining forms of state subjectivation. It was this revisiting of this image of himself, about to embark on a plane to visit Canada, from Canada, this image of himself with which he was no longer able to maintain a simple indexical identity (*look there - I am*) that led him to elaborate the consequences of this quotidian but nonetheless disaggregating experience for art in general: *I've begun to use the term visitor in place of the spectator, because the visitor is more linguistically capable of registering the aspect of "having an encounter."*

¹ I struggled to find the right word to convey the activity of Ahadi's hand in this image, unhappily settling on the fairly innocuous "pulling." However, I found a better word in another text after completing this one: *raking* is the word Matt Browning employs in his essay, *Taking a signifier, making a signifier*, to describe a vector of attention required by Ahadi's screened photographic objects which is no longer the contemplative optical attention conventionally given to images, nor yet the vector of reading with its serried row and column discipline. It brings with it a host of interesting etymological connotations in both its noun and verb forms.

It will become clear that when Ahadi talks about the visitor, he is not employing the same rhetoric of the institutions of art whose legitimacy are so often now asserted on the basis of the quantification of the collective noun, *visitors*. The visitor, in Ahadi's formulation, bares more relation to the stranger. The competence of the one who attends to art is not here judged in terms of *familiarity*, knowledge and insight - the figures of the expert, the connoisseur, the sensitive spectator or detective - but in terms of a constitutive and non-negotiable *de-familiarization*. In a brief excursus on the question of the stranger, Georg Simmel declared that the status of the stranger is not one that can be exhausted by and overcome by a gradually increasing familiarity. Rather, what provokes Simmel to consider this apparently banal figure is not the popular notion of *the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather ... the person who comes today and stays tomorrow*. The stranger, in modern societies, has a radically and ceaselessly perturbing effect on the social groups into which the stranger ventures. Regardless of how long the stranger stays, regardless of the degree to which he might be accepted into the group, the stranger expresses an internal difference that Simmel describes in a dialectic of proximity - *he is near and far at the same time* - and moreover, this distance transforms the group: *his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself*.

Simmel adopts a sociological perspective whose focus falls on the history of mercantile exchange, and briefly but importantly on the manner in which diasporic Jews occupied the position of stranger within the Medieval Christian economies of Europe - a matter of relevance to Ahadi's concern with the dialectic between shit and gold - but there is additionally a psychical dimension to Ahadi's semiotic repositioning of the spectator as visitor that is not accessible from this perspective. For this we ought to turn to Julia Kristeva's literary and psychoanalytic investment of the notion of the stranger and the foreigner. Freud, Kristeva insists, *does not speak of foreigners: he teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves*. Without doubting or downgrading the reality of processes of identification and abjection that operate frequently with the greatest violence at the level of group subjects based on ethnicity, gender, religion, geography or political structures, Kristeva insists that every speaking subject encounters a foreignness that, far from being a matter of external distance to another subject, is an unfathomable distance within the subject herself, whose symptoms and cause are given in the subject's encounter with their use of language. Like all poststructuralists, Kristeva rejects the notion that we are self-evident to ourselves, that language is a tool with which we simply and successfully communicate our intended meanings to other selves, and that poetry represents the highest form of the expression of the self, either for its self or others. For Kristeva, the semiotic fecundity of

poetry is the quality that enables the drives to discharge all manner of unfathomable unconscious material into language. In Kristeva's view, the semiotic dismantles rather than upholds the symbolic order, of which the 'I' is every subject's point of adhesion. *It is not simply—humanistically—a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of being in his place, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself. Rimbaud's Je est un autre ["I is an other"] was not only the acknowledgment of the psychotic ghost that haunts poetry.*

There can be little doubt that *Goh Ballet Academy* is also *not only* the acknowledgement of the psychotic ghost that haunts poetry. Rimbaud's violent unworking of French grammar was not only directed against the insipid and moribund state of academic French poetry, but equally the concretion of the violence of the effort to establish the *propre* of the French language across large parts of Africa and the Middle East for whose subjects French was not a mother tongue, vainly seeking to guard it against the incursion of strange and foreign qualities that could not originate from within. Rimbaud would have had ample direct experience of this, having himself taken an active role in the colonial project as a trader in Africa. We can see from this how *Shit Yes Academy* is *not only* the logical production of poetry's psychotic ghost, nor is it *only* a farce of technical questions of translation. Adorno wrote that *It was Stefan George who said, correctly, that the task of a translation of lyric poetry is not to introduce a foreign writer but to erect a monument to him in one's own language, or, in the turn Benjamin gave the idea, to extend and intensify one's own language through the incursion of the foreign literary work* but it is Ahadi's achievement to recognize that Adorno's salutary description of the task of the translator is not the same as the task of his visitor. Ahadi's predilection for linguistic error as a source of semiotic opportunity is an acknowledgment of the haunting of the social and the historical by the linguistic activity of the stranger and the foreigner implicit in his conception of the visitor that overlaps with, but is not identical to translation. That is to say that the successful achievement of translation, notwithstanding Stefan George or Benjamin's xenophilia, sublates the contingencies of the encounter between different linguistic systems into new formal consistencies, whereas Ahadi's visitor proposes a new formalization of contingency itself, as the aesthetic reality of the stranger and the foreigner, exerting pressure not only within the linguistic and discursive operations of art, but on the photographic apparatus and the optical space of the gallery.

At first glance, it might seem commonsensical to assume that the optical space of the *Goh Ballet Academy*, and of the works within it, would be impervious to the derangement of semiosis which would remain safely sequestered to the periphery of the exhibition, operating in the epiphenomena of titles and interpretations, and

incapable of disrupting the rational, and natural stability of the spatial distribution of the gallery and its artworks. The overwhelming use of metaphors of vision (rather than linguistic metaphors) to attribute certainty to knowledge in the Western philosophical and scientific traditions - from popular expressions like *seeing is believing* to the etymological roots of words like *evidence* [from *videre* "to see"] - is symptomatic of this belief. Art, and picturing, have been willing accomplices ever since Alberti offered a systematic methodology for linear perspective based in mathematical precision, laying the claim to a degree of objectivity of man-made truth claims in picture-making by proving its correspondence with an external world governed by the unbending laws of Physics. But space itself, since Alberti, has become far too unreliable an agent to serve as anything like an objective ground for knowledge, metaphorically or not.

In 1600 CE, Johannes Kepler was working as an assistant to the astronomer Tycho Brahe. Though they correctly assumed that the moon did not change size nor move further away, they were troubled by the fact that the measurements of the lunar diameter they obtained through the use of a pinhole camera were different during a solar eclipse. It was Johannes Kepler's insight that the inconsistency was not a feature of the celestial body's movement but of the instrument of observation itself. As Svetlana Alpers has described, what was at issue was the way in which the aperture of the pinhole camera interacted with the rays of light. Kepler's radical answer, Alpers stated, was to build distortion into our understanding, an answer that required turning our attention *from astronomy to optics*, and in separating *the physical problem of the formation of retinal images (the world seen) from the psychological problems or perception and sensation*. In placing optics at the centre of empirical knowledge, Kepler was directly following the work of Ibn Al-Haytham who successfully corrected and integrated the emission and intromission theories of optics centuries earlier. But it is with Kepler, and his advancement of the structure of the retinal image, that the specifically artistic problems of the retinal image, conceived as a picture, determine core artistic questions. As Alpers writes, *Two things are clear here: a definition of sight as distorting, and an acceptance of that fact. ... Kepler seeks to give an account and to take the measure of its deception or artifice. ... deception here engages not a moral but an epistemological view: the recognition that there is no escape from representation*. Exactly how humans respond to this insight that an inhuman representational process, intervened between human knowledge and the external world was not of concern to Kepler: *I leave it to natural philosophers to discuss the way in which this image or picture [pictura] is put together by the spiritual principles of vision residing in the retina and in the nerves, and whether it is made to appear before the soul or tribunal of the faculty of vision by a spirit within the cerebral cavities, or the faculty of vision, like a magistrate sent by the soul, goes out from the council chamber of the brain to meet*

this image in the optic nerves and retina, as it were descending to a lower court. What matters, as Alpers points out, is that the *power of his strategy is that he deanthropomorphizes vision.* Where Kepler declines to venture however, is where Ahadi picks up. We could put it like this: added to the psychotic ghost haunting poetry, we can now conceive of the psychotic magistrate haunting picturing, a stranger in the field of vision.

Without his ceasing to persist as a stranger, at some point in our conversation in the bar in Amsterdam (I can't recall when) the artist introduced himself as Ulay. Of all his collaborative performances with Marina Abramovic, none left such an indelible mark on the galleries of modern art as their *Imponderabilia*. Created a year after Ulay's photographs were swallowed up by the darkness, Ulay and Abramovic famously stood immobile, naked, and facing each other, backed up against the door jambs of a makeshift entrance to a gallery, forcing gallery goers to shuffle sideways between them in order to enter into the gallery, their bodies inevitably pressing up against those of the artists. Not only did their action make Freud's allocation of art's role in sublimating libidinal energy explicit, tangible and utterly unavoidable, it also forced each spectator into a decision that revealed how that sublimation was riven by the full complications of sexual difference. The ostensible heterosexual resolution of the spectator would be to *face* the member of the opposite sex, but such decisions were inevitably vulnerable to the proximity of the same sex brushing the heterosexual spectator's unguarded rear and thus vulnerable to sexual difference within their own bodies.

Imponderabilia offers an insight not only into the way in which our encounter with art is always conditioned in advance by desire: it has something to say about desire itself that needs stating less it be overlooked, something that draws a limit to our understanding of *Shit Yes Academy* within the terms of a psychoanalytic presentation of the relation between subjectivation and language. Deleuze and Guattari, writing a few years earlier, put it like this: *desire does not take as its object persons or things, but the entire surroundings that it traverses, the vibrations and flows of every sort to which it is joined, introducing therein breaks and captures-an always nomadic and migrant desire, characterized first of all by its "gigantism" ... we always make love with worlds.* The spectator's quandary in *Imponderabilia* is hardly a matter of private individual agitation, the two artists serving as monuments of a binary choice within the symbolic organization of sexuality, or any other relation between identity and non-identity. The decision, or better, the parade of decisions *Imponderabilia* compelled was frequently chaotic and rushed, a crowded scene in which the question of desire was dispersed across multiple bodies, several spaces, and structures of inscription. But, as Maurizio Lazzarato has more recently put it: *To clearly register the rupture with the classical*

conception of desire, Guattari emphasizes its artificial "nature." Artificial, deterritorialized, and machinic desire means that it is not a "natural" or "spontaneous" force. Desire is not the equivalent of what Freud calls "drive" ... Desire does not come from within the subject, it always emanates from the outside, from an encounter, a coupling, an assemblage. ... A collective assemblage is indeed "a basis of relations and [. . .] a means of assigning agents a place and a function; but these agents are not persons, any more than these relations are intersubjective." Ahadi's visitor, and his willful conflation of shit and gold, needs to be further understood as the result of a process of deanthropomorphization, analogous to Kepler's account of vision, that denatures the body to the degree that it demonstrates how symbolic coherence is misrepresented as biological necessity, rendering any simple effort to deploy psychoanalytic models based on the individual human subject problematic. However, while both *Imponderabilia* and *Goh Ballet Academy* could be said to share in the gigantism of the social distribution of the affects of attending to art (isn't *Shit Yes Academy* characterized too by a gigantism that cannot be reduced to an identity with, or premised on the sovereignty of the individual subject even while it resists being aggregated to the form of the group noun *visitors*?) Lazzarato's elaboration on the critique of intersubjectivity suggests that this continuity may not remain intact beyond a restrictively formal level.

For millennia, man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics places his existence as a living being in question. While Foucault described the historical emergence of the specifically biopolitical conditions that threaten to deprive psychoanalytic praxis of the horizon of the human, Lazzarato's recent reprisal of Guattari's work on signification intervenes directly on the conditions of possibility for the regimes of signification that constitute the *Goh Ballet Academy*. Lazzarato summarizes what is by now a common claim: that in contemporary capitalism, subjectivity is no longer the last redoubt against the dehumanizing processes of contemporary capitalism but its primary and most important commodity. Furthermore, like other post-workerist theorists, language has become the primary mode through which this commodity is produced. Under these conditions, the dismantling of the symbolic order by the semiotic becomes the precondition for an *a-signifying* regime utterly indifferent to it: one in which Capital itself has become a semiotic operator. The subjectivation of the subject under Capital is accompanied now by a *desubjectivation* enacted via a machinic enslavement in which speech is everywhere "assisted" by all kinds of mechanical, thermodynamic, cybernetic, and computer machines that bypass individual subjectivity to act directly on *things* instead of subjects, intervening directly on the speaking subject's body by means of signs that trigger actions and reactions,

set things in motion, rather than produce *significations* for a subject. Signs and semiotics, under the logic of machinic enslavement, produce *operations, induce action, and constitute input and output, junction and disjunction, components of a social or technological machine. On the other hand, as in social subjection, they produce meaning, significations, interpretations, discourse, and representations through language.*

This further sundering of the subject is not yet recognized in *Imponderabilia* (for whose participants art retained its promise of harbouring critical activity in response to social subjection, even though we might now give our attention to its performance differently) whereas something like machinic enslavement is at least asymptotically approached in Ulay's previous work given the relatively central place occupied by the inhuman operations of the metabolism of the photographic apparatus. To the extent that Ahadi has not given up on critical activity, we might assume that *Shit Yes Academy* continues to conceive of language as the condition of possibility for the political, social and aesthetic subject, but it equally observes Lazzarato's injunction that *one must follow Guattari's advice to "exit language" by doing two things: dissociate subjectivity from the subject, from the individual, and even from the human, and cease considering the power of enunciation exclusive to man and subjectivity.* In *Goh Ballet Academy*, Viennese Lace operates between both photographic and retinal objects, and as a linguistic object that entered language as a marker of the shameful complicity of the Austrian population unable to turn away from the transportation of their Jewish neighbours to the extermination camps. One-way mirror is deployed to operate on the spectator, producing the narcissistic recursion of the spectator's visual attention. Viennese Lace appears again, but not as a mediating plane but as a linear semio-territorial marker in *Untitled (Territory of the Semiotic)*. Such things are certainly available for interpretative, discursive and representational activities of attentive subjects, but they also induce actions and reactions in and on the visitor's body. Ahadi has achieved something equivalent to Ulay's profound defamiliarization of the place of visual art, by reasserting the primacy of the body in the field of representation not as a guarantor of a natural order that provides a sensible and coherent horizon for the human activity of meaning-making, but as the principle of a semiotic insensibility, a control point for the distribution of the expressive force of asignifying semiotics.

Roland Barthes (whose writing on photography has been so influential for Ahadi) had the following to say about Kristeva: *Kristeva changes the place of things: she always destroys the last prejudice, the one you thought you could be reassured by, could take pride in; what she displaces is the already-said, the déjà-dit, i.e., the instance of the signified, i.e., stupidity; what she subverts is authority -the authority of monologic*

science, of filiation. I would propose that we ought to appropriate this description to help us understand Ahadi's practice. Ahadi once remarked that the title he gave to a work from 2012 (*Seven Steps to Disentangle the Dilemma of the Common Room*) was a *mouth-feeling title* - a wonderfully accurate description - but now with *Shit Yes Academy*, it would seem that this self-deprecating joke has been given leeway to enact a more serious claim. Kepler's discovery profoundly alienated picturing from the human (even while placing this activity more concretely within the interior of our bodies, whose retinal wall effectively becomes a gallery hosting traveling exhibitions) but I would argue that Ahadi changes the place of the image, so that images tumble around together with words in the dark spaces of the mouth, get chewed up and deformed by a process more akin to mastication than to intellectual categorization. Ahadi makes art as though the mouth were the principal location not just of speech, but of *all* semiotic activity. In *Goh Ballet Academy*, the tendency to guarantee knowledge by vision, and therefore to credit the visual with the authority of knowing, is subject not only to an acceptance of the optical distortions Kepler insisted on, but subject to the types of distortions of language that *Shit Yes Academy* foregrounds too. The mouth is, after all, not so much a space in itself - like a cave from which speech emerges like the echoes of an idea - as much as it is an aperture that lays a claim to being merely the first in a series of apertures and shutters that runs through a two-headed camera obscura on whose other side lies the last of all apertures. Significations leak through either end of this mouth-anus semiotic machine whose products our cultures only belatedly separates into either shit or gold. *Goh Ballet Academy* reminds us that what is seen is also always subject to the linguistic events that precede, accompany, and belatedly *assist* seeing much as speech is assisted in machinic enslavement. In other words, each time we are presented with the cliché that *seeing* is *believing*, our eyes and ears should become attuned to the fact that we are not only confronted once more with the desperate avowal of the natural and unencumbered condition of both vision and belief, but also by a surreptitious disavowal and suppression of the fact that such *seeing* is nothing more than a *saying*.