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## MIMESIS AND *GRACE NOTES*

“So long as it is I who paints my own portrait, nothing daunts me.”

—*The Force of Circumstance: The Autobiography of Simone de Beauvoir*, 1963

Through selection and cropping, the photographer creates, as the writer Susan Sontag noted in her seminal 1977 book *On Photography*, a new relationship between image and reality. “The earliest experience of art,” she wrote in an earlier essay, “Against Interpretation,” “must have been that it was incantatory, magical; art was an instrument of ritual.”<sup>1</sup>

In the seemingly banal rituals of Carrie Mae Weems’s vernacular photography, one experiences the soft positioning and glower and glare of the subject, whether belonging to past, present, or dystopian future. One sees the female figure, head tilted up, smoke curling from a lit cigarette held between supple fingers. Or that figure appears engaged in the ritual of breathing, of walking, of admiring a reflection of herself. The ordinary existence of an African American female body becomes the framework for circular structure and translation, creating functional beauty from the scraps of everyday life. Who is she gazing at and do we know which “self” is reflected in her mirror? Is she an “ordinary brown braided woman” ready to begin herself? Or is she Correggio’s Jupiter, cloaked in a dark-gray cumulus cloud, walking among the ruins of ancient aqueducts through monumental arches, moving pointedly toward a lectister-nium, growing from a humilis cloud form to towering congestus?

In Weems’s work, the dream is the image. The substance of the dream is the character placed within and drawn out of its context: surrealism as mundane practice intersecting boundaries of the commonplace and ancient landscapes. Nothing is ordinary about the image, and nothing can be assumed. The photographs are anti-realist, nonlinear, and phantasmagoric as the historic black female body bearing the



*Grace Notes:*  
*Reflections for Now,*  
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 William Struhs

consequences of being, recognizing herself continuously and bearing the weight of being unrecognizable. The image is the handiwork of a consecrated dream unveiled as female insurrection or independence, both apart from and within the company of other bodies—be the other bodies a suggested representation of maleness, an invisibility of whiteness, or the reflective presence of a prepubescent African American female body.

The writer Simone de Beauvoir, in speaking about the “womanly state” of her work as an existential philosopher, political activist, and social theorist, proclaimed that she wanted to realize herself, noting in her autobiography that she wanted to have her contemporaries “hear and understand me . . . myself in relation to life, to death, to my times, to writing, to love, to friendship, to travel.”<sup>2</sup> This is not the self of autobiography restricted to the complexity of original occurrence, but the self as protagonist of a background, tragic or serene, against which her experiences are drawn, giving them mean-

ing, constituting their unity. Similarly, playwright Adrienne Kennedy, drawing images from dreams and memories, asserted in her 1964 play *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, “It is my vile dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my statue of Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano and oriental carpets and to eat my meals on a white glass table . . . at the same time appropriating figures from a mythical and historical past.”<sup>3</sup> Both writers pronounced themselves in a passionate exploration of the recesses of the American conscience, psychologizing the act of dreaming the female body into existence, in much the same way that Sontag’s antinovel, *The Benefactor*, introduces us to Hippolyte, who has dreamed his way through an ambiguous life with the primary purpose of solitary speculation. Hippolyte lives only on the periphery of other lives, making the great decision to use his life to interpret his dreams as opposed to using his dreams to interpret his life, thus fancying himself self-invented within a fresh dream instead of the exhaustive repetitions of the old ones.

As Descartes asserted in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, everything we currently believe to be true could be false and generated by a dream. That process is the work of the marginalized body, and the lens through which we must view the images of Carrie Mae Weems.

The image on which Weems focuses her lens in the multidisciplinary performance work that is *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now*, regards the ritual of mourning the dead. More accurately, the work was initially inspired by President Obama’s eulogy for Reverend Clementa C. Pinckney, a victim of the mass shooting at Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, a remarkable moment not only because the president, in memorializing Rev. Pickney and the eight other parishioners killed by a white gunman, broke into a seemingly spontaneous familiar African American rendition of the eighteenth-century Christian hymn “Amazing Grace” (aired on live television), with words written by the English poet and clergyman John Newton. It was in fact a remarkable moment because it almost seemed to occur at the end of an em dash, when the spoken word failed to continue to speak to what needed to be said in a moment of national devastation, and the contemplation of “grace” (in song) seemed the only rational articulation of grief, hope, spiritual reach and collective renewal. The German psychoanalyst Carl Jung once said, “I am not what happened to me, I am what I choose to become.”<sup>4</sup> In the performative contemplation of “grace,” the president delivered his ninth speech in the wake of mass shootings and senseless death in the second term of his presidency and, without knowing it, would deliver six more such speeches in the wake of similar events.

The Black Lives Matter movement, in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of African American teenager Trayvon Martin, had emerged two years prior to Charleston. The national campaign would continue to protest the deaths of black people at the hands of law enforcement officers, and the broader

issue of racial profiling. Weems's work in the current climate of civic and political unrest, asks and explores complicated questions about the meaning of grace and its role in the pursuit of democracy. It is also a contemplation of death. Death has always been to many a forbidden topic of discussion. However, in the African American community death is very much an important aspect of culture, and, historically, African American rituals of mourning the dead borrow their theatricality from the ancient Egyptians, who not only embalmed the bodies of the dead, but laid them to rest with elaborate processions; as well as African American slaves, who, long denied the right to commemorate the dead of their own community or mark their graves, developed rituals of song, celebration, and jubilation. These rituals, past and present, may seem abstract to those who choose to define abstraction as existing in thought or as an idea not having a physical or concrete existence dealing with ideas rather than events, but they are not abstract. They are in fact, nonlinear; just as Weems's *Grace Notes* is nonlinear in conception and execution. It exists not as a traditional play, but functions almost as a contemporary abstract art installation of live bodies engaged in rituals of music, video, song, conversation, and dance. Dutch painter Piet Mondrian reminds us, "Just as pure abstract art is not dogmatic, neither is it decorative";<sup>5</sup> and Weems, working outside of the realm of gallery walls in *Grace Notes*, again places herself in the center of a non-decorative inclusive self-portrait. This time she appears as a daughter, sister, mother Antigone figure, trying to secure a respectable burial for innumerable bodies who, not unlike the body of Polynices, seem to suffer a decree in which the dead are not to be buried or properly mourned. Each scene is, in fact, constructed like a conceptualized photographic portrait: a woman seated at a typewriter; a man running; a woman standing alone beneath a tree as snow falls from the sky; a trilogy of women singing; a man imprisoned in a translucent bubble as he is sung to by a female figure who safeguards his trapped existence. Ultimately, *Grace Notes: Reflections for Now*, attempts to allow what cannot be contained in a play, a speech, a song, or a photograph, but rather what can be expressed in an amalgamation of performativity and artistic disciplines; thus contemplating where we are now, what has happened to us, and perhaps who we will become as a result of our collective experiences.

## NOTES

1. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 3.
2. George Stade, ed., *European Writers: The Twentieth Century*, vol. 12 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990), 2.
3. Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro: A Play in One Act* (New York: Samuel French, 1969), 15.
4. Ernest Dempsey, *Recovering the Self: A Journal of Hope and Healing* 4, no. 1 (2012): 97.
5. Piet Mondrian, Harry Holtzman, and Martin S. James, *The New Art—The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 224.