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Beacon*Epistemologies of the Art Object*

ABSTRACT Artist and theorist Hito Steyerl describes our contemporary condition as characterized by the “departure of a stable paradigm of orientation.” In the era of climate crisis, AI, and fake news, as well as bewildering new communications and imaging technologies, scholars across disciplines use the word “disorientation” a lot. As a form of perplexity, even when the conditions that give rise to it are deeply alarming (e.g., climate crisis), disorientation is often prized for its potential to help us know or reimagine the world and throw off destructive ideologies such as those hidden behind the words “nature,” the “human,” and indeed “orientation” itself. Disorientation is therefore epistemological: an experience through which we might understand the nature and limits of knowledge. This article approaches the problem of disorientation for contemporary art through an installation called *Beacon* (2007), by sound and new media artist Abinadi Meza, in which we see a radically slowed, tightly cropped video of a streetlamp during a snowstorm. Examining theories of orientation and disorientation, I ask how we move beyond the modernist logic of conversion through disorientation, away from the patronizing idea that art is a mode of ideological correction that converts the viewer to a different political, religious, or aesthetic belief. I argue that art might be more productively understood as a beacon: a contradictory sign that both illuminates dangers and lures us to foundering; a signal that simultaneously warns and beckons, and that, because we can never be sure which, neither saves nor destroys.

KEYWORDS disorientation, epistemology, Abinadi Meza, Robert Rauschenberg, Hito Steyerl, Santiago Zabala, Leo Steinberg

“In falling, the lines of the horizon shatter, swirl around, and superimpose.”

—Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment in Vertical Perspective”

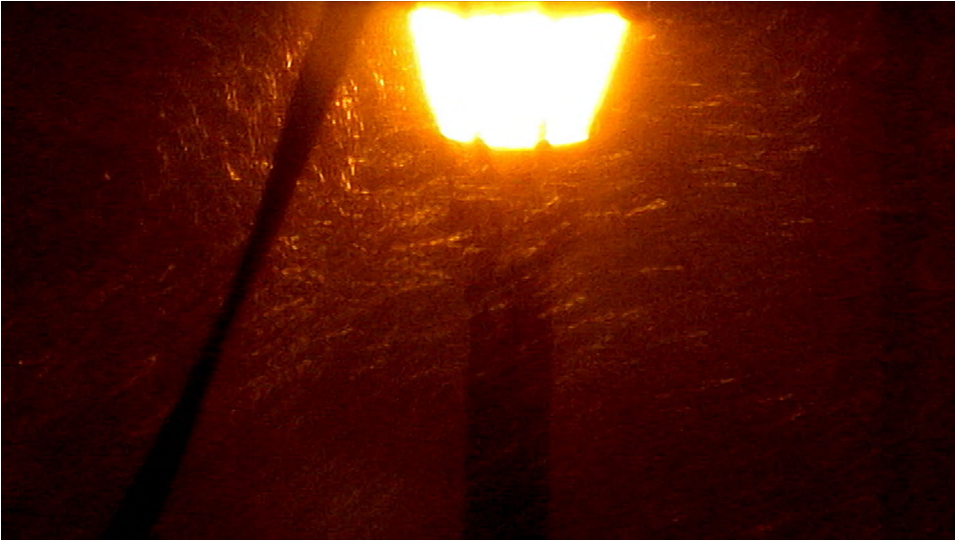
“A bitter cold assailed me. Rare white flakes ever and again came eddying down.”

—H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine*

BEACON

Ever and again. In Abinadi Meza’s 2007 video and sound installation *Beacon*, snow swirls around a streetlamp, a tiny sun, that appears to burn as with a white heat in a viscous, deep orange medium, as though it were glowing inside a lava lamp. The cold wind blows white crystalline flakes in blinding gusts while a cloth banner affixed to the obscure, vertical light post heaves out slowly as though it were the sail of a ghost ship gliding through the dark night. Perched atop its pole like a head on a body, the lamp—as

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Beacon (2007) by Abinadi Meza; © Abinadi Meza; courtesy the artist.

object, as signal, as beacon—both beckons and warns. The word beacon refers to a signal (a form of illumination that acts as a code), a fire (that warns of danger), and a lighthouse (that directs ships away from rocky shoals or guides their course to safety). I invite you to think with me about this light, and of art more broadly, as an object of epistemological orientation in a historical moment when the horizon has been shattered.¹

A light in darkness, a point of orientation in a storm, and a fearsome signal fire, the familiar streetlamp is meant to guide us home. And yet, in its mesmerizing glow, the eddying snowflakes begin to disorient. For all we know, they could be insects circling, dust motes sifting, hot sparks snapping up from a fire, or a school of fish darting under water. Air or water, light or dark, vertical or horizontal, we are disoriented; the vertical object to which we address ourselves knocks the ground from under us so that we wonder which way is up. The beacon—whether it is the streetlamp or the work of art—wrecks us against a rocky shore of doubt, brings us to a state of unknowing. Where are we? What direction are we facing? At what, precisely, are we looking?

There is a ghostly tap, a steady ticking of snow crystals hitting something hard, and the tempest's swirling wind gusts are slowed to long exhalations. Meza, a sound and new media artist, set up a video camera and a contact microphone on a steel plate during a snowstorm. He recorded the streetlamp outside his apartment and the snow falling around it and slowed the video to one-twentieth its normal speed.² Suspended in the small screen's glowing hearth, the participant's gliding dream (a pair of headphones

1. Bruno Latour writes, for example, "To resist this loss of a common orientation, we shall have to come down to earth, we shall have to land somewhere." Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Polity Press, 2018), 2.

2. Chris Roberts, "Art makes noise at St. Paul museum," MPR News, April 3, 2007, www.mprnews.org/story/2007/04/23/soundart.



Installation view of *Beacon* (2007) by Abinadi Meza; © Abinadi Meza; courtesy the artist.

isolating her as though in her own unconscious) is interrupted occasionally by the sound of a passing car or snowplow, the wet tires against the street, the onrush of air in its drag, the Doppler effect as it approaches and drives past. Oddly, it is that immaterial object, that familiar human sound that draws her back to safety, reorients the addled viewer. It is an ordinary streetlamp once again. Gravity tugs the snow down and the heavy world settles back into place. The body stands upright again on the earth's horizontal plane.

"I think as you begin watching," Meza reflects on this work, "you immediately want to know where you are, and you become very aware of this wanting."³ What Meza describes as a "wanting" is perhaps our instinctual need for orientation, the will to find the surface of the deep pool into which unknowing throws us. He describes the piece as oceanic—an aqueous world where movement slows and vision floats. The eleven-minute digital video appears on a small glass screen that makes of the piece a snow globe, and the continuous loop by which it plays means the snow is ever falling in a miniature world, shaken and re-shaken, stirred up and pulled down. Thus, *Beacon* may be understood to stage a scene where the very task of orientation and the means by which it is accomplished are continually undermined, which is to say that the work takes the problem of knowing and wanting to know as its object. It seems to ask, "To what light is knowledge directed, and how can we be sure that we aren't looking at it upside down?"

3. Abinadi Meza, email correspondence with the author, June 6, 2019.

To the extent that the conditions in Meza's microenvironment never resolve themselves, the work takes on a somewhat traumatic quality, made all the more disturbing by the video's quietude. The unendingness and mundanity do not depict weather (a single, passing snowstorm, for example), but rather a pervasive condition. Weather typically only functions as what environmental humanist Timothy Morton calls a "backdrop" for human activity, a pictorial device that reflects the mood of human dramas, a scenography before which we perform self-delusional stories about a concept we name "nature." Meza's work—with its tempestuous darkness and unnatural orange glow, its sonic reference to cars and carbon fuels—does not function as, in Morton's words, this "neutral, peripheral stage set," but rather as an instance of the "very visible, highly monitored, publicly debated climate."⁴ It asks us to make sense of a meteorological and sensory environment and to consider the extent to which our sense-making depends on false points of orientation.

LOST HORIZON

Etymologically, "horizon" refers to a boundary, a limit, a line. By pointing to this line, I point to the act of drawing—that is, to art and philosophy. Jacques Derrida, in his essay for an exhibition of drawings at the Louvre, considers the drawing of a line to be a form of blindness, which lies at the heart of Western thought. We draw the line in order to see, but our drawing blinds us, supplants our seeing. Sky and land, above and below, heaven and earth, good and evil, magical and mundane, light and darkness, past and present, sameness and difference (you get the idea). In order to think, to orient ourselves to thinking, we draw lines. And yet the line, Derrida says, withdraws from sight. Like ideology, the line orders without being seen. "The limit is never presently reached," he says,

but drawing always signals toward this inaccessibility, toward the threshold where only the surroundings of the *trait* appear—that which the *trait* spaces by delimiting and which thus does not belong to the *trait*. *Nothing belongs to the trait*, and thus, to drawing and to the thought of drawing, not even its own "trace."⁵

The horizon is this kind of impoverished line—a limit we cannot reach, a mark to which we point, and in relation to which we move, but that *has* nothing, *is* nothing in itself. It exists only to be other than that which it separates. To the extent that it is divisive, the line (and art and thought along with it) is performative: it brings into being the binaries that it names and arrays on either side of itself. It inscribes difference, orders,

4. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 104.

5. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (University of Chicago Press, 1993), 54. In typical Derridian fashion, the word *trait* constellates a rich variety of meanings and images. It derives from the French verb *traire* (to mark, draught, or stroke) while also recalling the verb *tracer* (to trace or mark out) and the idea of the remnant. In addition, it suggests the English verb "to trace," meaning to discover and to mark, as well as the noun trace—a mark or indication of something passing, a small amount.

and hierarchizes. It lies down so that we can know what it is to stand up, and thus it forms the conditions of possibility for knowledge. The beacon intermittently reveals and conceals that line, hauntingly drawing attention to both its magnetic power and phantasmal nothingness.

Close by the horizon is the sun, the inaugural light of philosophy, its first and most enduring metaphor, and the origin of art. As Cathryn Vasseleu writes (parsing Derrida), “Light is not just one metaphor used in philosophy, but the metaphor which founds the entire system of metaphysics or metaphoric truth.”⁶ It is also, in the mythologies of art history—the shepherd who outlines his own shadow in the dirt, Butades’s daughter who traces her lover’s silhouette on the wall—that which grants vision and delineates forms. Art not only shows us things or tells us what the world is, it shows us what art is as a form of knowing. And as a form of knowing, it is important to remember, the artwork as light has the capacity both to grant sight and induce blindness, bring to vision and bedazzle. As we set our compass and gain our bearings in relation to the question of art and epistemology, we must acknowledge that our points of reference are as illusory and ideological as they are necessary.

Despite that fact, the history of modern and contemporary art has tended to be overconfident about art’s orientational and moral rectitude, its capacity to know in periods marked by epistemological, environmental, spatial, and temporal disorientation. As against the image of art as a stable horizon, a new and better world toward which we have been instinctively and smoothly moving since the emergence of the avant-garde (the very name implies forward motion), I want to advance the notion of art as a beacon. By this I do not mean a “beacon of hope” (although some will seek to find hope in it), but rather a contradictory sign that has the potential both to illuminate dangers and lure us to foundering—a signal that simultaneously warns and beckons—and that, because we can never be sure which, neither saves nor destroys.⁷

Put another way, this essay wonders aloud about whether it is time that we moved past the modernist doctrine of subversion, a word that means to overturn. Under the conditions created by disorientation’s contemporary givenness, I ask, is art an object through which I can know the place I inhabit and my relation to it (if only, perhaps, by an experience of unknowing)? In a period when snow falling has become a hyperobject such that, as Morton explains, “you can no longer have a routine conversation about the weather with a stranger,” is a video like Meza’s (one that produces wanting and wanting’s awareness) an experience through which I can know a world at “the end of the world” threatened by environmental annihilation?⁸ The only affirmative answer to these questions is for us to be willing to accept, truly accept (not just for

6. Cathryn Vasseleu, *Textures of Light: Vision and Touch in Irigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty* (Routledge, 1998), 7.

7. Santiago Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us: Aesthetics and the Absence of Emergency* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 123.

8. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 99. Morton defines the hyperobject as something that exists independently of human thought, something that, by virtue of its being “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans,” brings about the end of the world (1).

others but for ourselves), perplexity as an aesthetics and a radical politics, as well as an episteme.

Ironically, perhaps the most famous art historical example of the inscription of the horizontal occurred in 1972, at precisely the moment when modernism and the horizon along with it were coming undone. It was then that art historian and critic Leo Steinberg published in *Artforum* a talk he had given four years earlier at the Museum of Modern Art titled “Other Criteria.” In this now canonical text, he asserts art’s radical reorientation. Citing the work of artists such as Jackson Pollock, Jean Dubuffet, and Robert Rauschenberg, Steinberg describes an artistic trend (as he puts it, “something happened in painting around 1950”⁹) that reoriented the art object to the horizon. “What I have in mind,” he remarks, “is the psychic address of the image, its special mode of imaginative confrontation, and I tend to regard the tilt of the picture plane from vertical to horizontal as expressive of the most radical shift in the subject matter of art, the shift from nature to culture.”¹⁰ Pointing to Rauschenberg’s assemblage *Bed* (1955), Steinberg explains that, “The horizontality of the bed relates to ‘making’ as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane related to seeing.”¹¹ Like the dazzling apparition beheld by Saint Paul, the critic avers, postwar art knocks us over, converts us, and realigns us.

To be sure, Steinberg is a modernist who believes in the avant-garde’s capacity for overturning, and his essay is an attempt to trace a phenomenon that he considers to be aesthetically radical. “Every generation of American artists subverts the given art situation,” he declares.¹² At the same time, however, his writing betrays a bit of anxiety about the state of knowledge at mid-century. The realignment he notices, away from nature and toward making and culture, expresses a fundamental disillusionment with what had been understood to be, prior to that moment, art’s obligation to represent objective reality. Even prewar abstraction still oriented itself vertically as though it were a window facing the horizon, but that all changed, according to Steinberg, around 1950. Simply put, art began to doubt its capacity to know. “American art since World War II is unthinkable without this liberating impulse towards something other than art,” he explains, continuing, “Not art but objects, and these objects touted as things beyond art, though they were conceived with a legitimate esthetic objective: to keep the thing made unarticulated, its internal relations so minimized that nothing remains but an immediate relation to its external environment.”¹³ In its emphasis on relationality (art as a mere object with a specific orientation to what exists around it), as well as its concern for what is beyond art, Steinberg’s argument wrestles with the problem of epistemological crisis.

Although he does not directly engage the fearsome consequences of the massive mobilization of military technology in the world war that preceded his writing, let alone the global climate crisis that followed it, Steinberg’s own thinking seems to be colored by

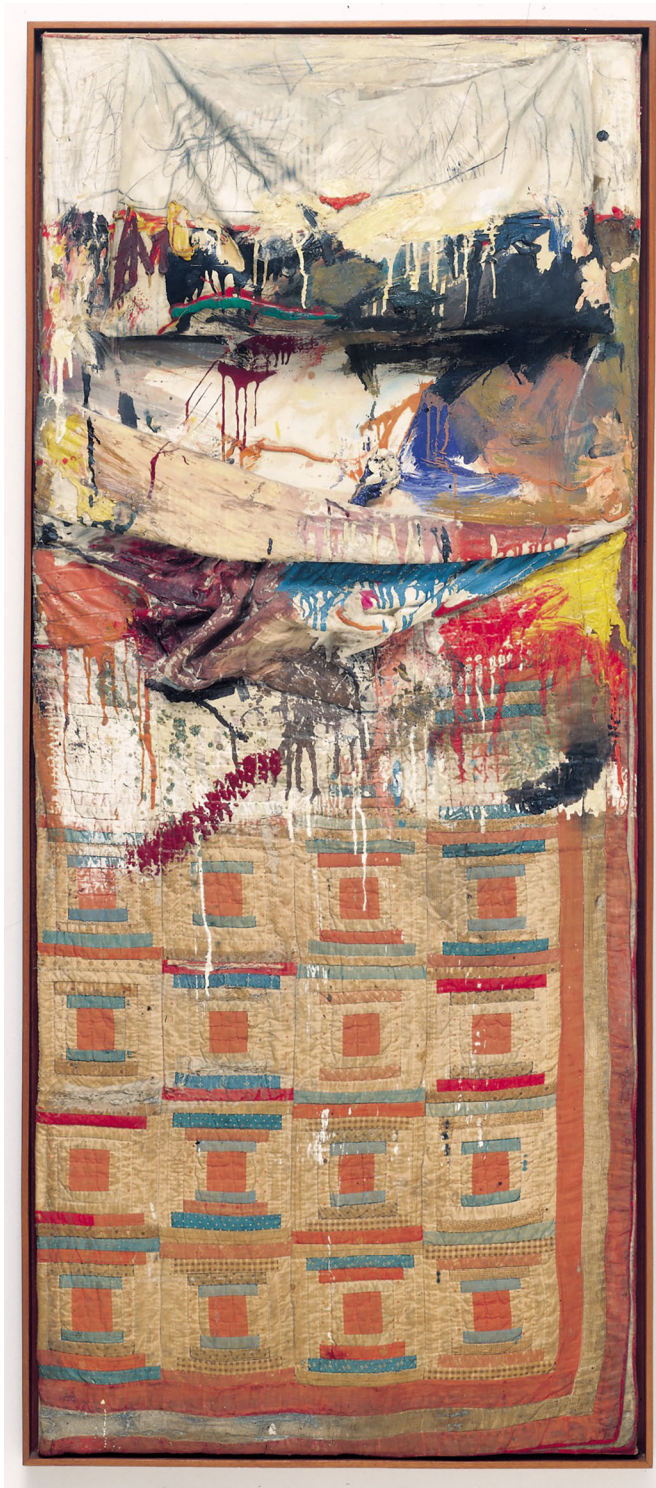
9. Leo Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” in *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford University Press, 1972), 84.

10. Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 84.

11. Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 90.

12. Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 63.

13. Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 62, 63.



Bed (1955) by Robert Rauschenberg; Museum of Modern Art, New York; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation.

such phenomena and thus heralds the era of disorientation.¹⁴ He describes the contemporary world as one of charts and maps, radio signals and radar screens. It is a world of nascent digital communication (what Paul Virilio would later call the “vision machine”¹⁵) in which we no longer look for “weather clues out of the window; but the world of men who turn knobs to hear a taped message, ‘precipitation probability ten percent tonight,’ electronically transmitted from some windowless booth.”¹⁶ Here knowledge is not derived from empirical observation—we no longer bother looking out the window—but data and predictive statistics. I am reminded of course of *Beacon* with its small glass screen and electronically transmitted imagery of precipitation as climate, for it is in the period when Steinberg wrote his essay that computer technology advanced to the point where local weather observation could be turned into the massive data sets needed to track climatic phenomena. In this sense, the snow that the video records and the electronic noise or snow to which it relates, the streetlamp as signal and the television signal, are brought into productive tension.

In this historical context, Rauschenberg’s painting 22 *The Lily White (White Painting with Numbers)* (1949–50), with its eponymous monochromatic surface, becomes for Steinberg a beacon. It rehearses the disorientation of knowledge at mid-century, activates and makes visible the relationality of orientation, and stages wanting. The canvas is divided vertically with a series of dentilated lines, hand drawn in pencil, the square and rectangular voids of which are filled with seemingly meaningless numbers, words, and shapes written right side up, upside down, and sideways. Despite its vertical orientation, the painting begins to look to Steinberg like a top-secret diagram of bombing sites, an aerial view of military facilities or concentration camps, a computer algorithm. It is, as Steinberg puts it, a “flat documentary surface that tabulates information,” though of course what exactly that information is remains a mystery.¹⁷

With its snow-white surface, seemingly random orientations, and the word “FREE,” which appears upside down in the canvas’s top right corner, the painting seems both to beckon and warn. Like a puzzle, it offers itself to deciphering and points the viewer toward knowing, but we cannot tell whether the small red five-pointed star in the lower right indicates the starting position in a child’s board game or a military target. In this, the art about which Steinberg writes puts forth a new disoriented military-industrial knowledge, or “visionics” as Virilio names it, a sightless vision from a “windowless booth” in which a video camera is controlled by a computer, and the computer analyzes the visual information and interprets the meaning of events. As though echoing Derrida, Virilio concludes, “Blindness is thus very much at the heart of the coming ‘vision machine.’”¹⁸

Geographer Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg provides a detailed history of disorientation as a condition of modernity—a symptom of nineteenth-century industrialization, urbanization, and expanding capitalism. The concept of disorientation is, as she

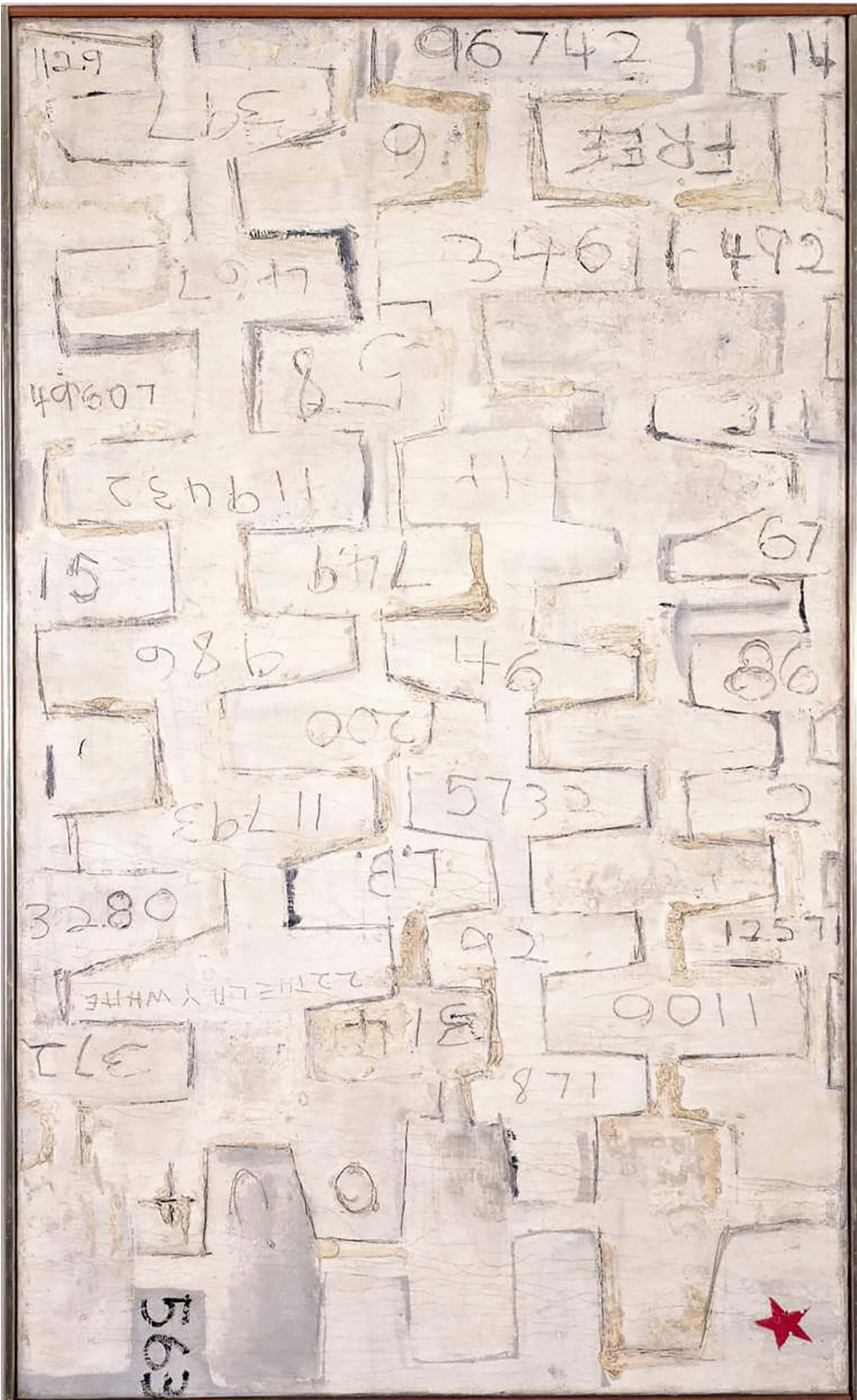
14. Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, 5.

15. See Paul Virilio, “The Vision Machine,” *The Virilio Reader*, ed. James Der Derian (Blackwell, 1998).

16. Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 90.

17. Steinberg, “Other Criteria,” 88.

18. Virilio, “The Vision Machine,” 147.



22 *The Lily White (White Painting)* (c. 1950) by Robert Rauschenberg; © Robert Rauschenberg Foundation; collection of Nancy Ganz Wright.

explains, a “powerful and frequently recurring metaphor in art, philosophy, and literature” and one that seems to apply with special force to the contemporary era where it is used “to express the difficulty of finding points of reference in the world we live in.”¹⁹ In Schmidt di Friedberg’s account, modernism is a period in which philosophers, writers, and artists could toy with disorientation as a site of experimentation without its posing any real existential threat to the belief in the “objective representation of empirical space.”²⁰ Citing the famous surrealist film *Un chien andalou* (1929, directed by Luis Buñuel) as an example, she claims that “Even the editing of the film to produce a rapid sequence of continuously shifting images and free associations that disorient the viewer, becomes an instrument of subversion.”²¹ The bourgeois subject is effectively overturned by the force of what Grant Kester calls an “orthopedic aesthetic” (more on this in a moment).²² Today, however, under the pressures of climate crisis and a “continuous stream of new communication tools” and advanced imaging and AI technologies, the vestiges of modernism are, Schmidt di Friedberg says, “giving way.”²³

In spite of that epistemological crisis, Schmidt di Friedberg keeps the sun on the avant-garde horizon firmly in view and argues that, although

contemporary artists are faced with a continuous stream of new communication tools, advanced technologies in every field and the need to express themselves and win visibility in a global world[,] they find themselves playing a leading role in the richness and contradictions of multicultural scenarios, which provide space for a diversity of voices, challenge patterns of Western assimilation, and foster the emergence of local identity as well as the drama of war and migration.²⁴

Instead of Buñuel tripping the viewer with shocking surrealist imagery (e.g., the infamous moment in which it appears that a woman’s eye is sliced open with a razor) so that he might see the anti-bourgeois light, the contemporary artist converts him to multiculturalism. That is, the artist disorients not to question orientation itself, but simply dominant culture’s traditional hold on it.

Inspired by new drone technologies, virtual reality, and satellite imaging on one hand and post–foundational philosophy on the other, multimedia artist and scholar Hito Steyerl (whom Schmidt di Friedberg quotes extensively) describes the contemporary moment as one of “free fall,” a condition in which “we cannot assume any stable ground on which to base metaphysical claims or foundational political myths.”²⁵ Without that landmark against which to measure our vertical descent, we fall but no longer take notice

19. Marcella Schmidt di Friedberg, *Geographies of Disorientation* (Routledge, 2018), 1, 2.

20. Schmidt di Friedberg, *Geographies of Disorientation*, 211.

21. Schmidt di Friedberg, *Geographies of Disorientation*, 213.

22. Grant H. Kester, “Rhetorical Questions: The Alternative Arts Sector and the Imaginary Public,” in *Art, Activism, and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, ed. Grant H. Kester (Duke University Press, 1998), 123.

23. “In our contemporary—post-modern, post-human, and post-colonial—era, the very logic of modernity, based on linear perspective and a stable horizon, is giving way.” Schmidt di Friedberg, *Geographies of Disorientation*, 213.

24. Schmidt di Friedberg, *Geographies of Disorientation*, 213–14.

25. Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” *e-flux Journal* 24 (2011), 1, www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective.

of our plummeting. A kind of pure verticality, Steyerl describes a contemporary condition of disorientation, a kind of pure verticality, that is “partly due to the loss of a stable horizon.” “And with the loss of horizon,” she continues, “also comes the departure of a stable paradigm of orientation, which has situated concepts of subject and object, of time and space, throughout modernity.”²⁶ Characterized by the diminished hold of linear perspective on our visual imaginations and the expansion of the God’s-eye view, “traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered” and “new types of visuality arise.”²⁷ Like Schmidt di Friedberg, Steyerl interprets this new vision, which she claims emerged in the nineteenth century with the invention of photography and cinema and developed across the broad twentieth century with quantum physics, the theory of relativity, space travel, and digital surveillance technologies, as offering a “new representational freedom.”²⁸

DISORIENTATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY

With respect to the condition of free fall, *Beacon* is certainly of its time. In the era of climate and climate change, “it is as if humans are losing both their world and their idea of *world* (including the idea that they ever had a world) at one and the same time.” This, Morton asserts, is “a disorienting fact.”²⁹ The disquieting implications of that assertion are more disturbing when we ask, along with theorist Sara Ahmed, what happens “when disorientation cannot simply be overcome by the ‘force’ of the vertical? What do we do, if disorientation itself becomes worldly or becomes what is given?”³⁰ Morton uses “world” to describe both the literal planet on which humans exist and a concept that miniaturizes the non-human as a knowable object, and thus for him climate crisis is also, by definition, an epistemological crisis. (Is *Beacon* a picture of water or air, a deep-sea world where things float to the surface or a terrestrial phenomenon of falling?) Ahmed, coming from a different line of inquiry, uses it more in the sense of the global, that is, a pervasive and inescapable condition (the infinite loop). Indeed, we might say that disorientation *is* the current climate—political, technological, historical, visual, and environmental—even as we acknowledge that its damaging effects are unevenly and often unfairly distributed across bodies and subjectivities.

For Ahmed, disorientation is an ideological phenomenon in which there is a painful and disturbing loss of selfhood and agency to which some bodies, some subjects (those individuals whose racial, sexual, and gender orientations are at right angles to normatively policed subjectivities; those who are, in a word, queer), are more prone than others. The oriented body, Ahmed reports, “follows the vertical and horizontal axes,” bodies that are “upright, straight, and in line”—that is, bodies that face the direction everyone else is facing.³¹ To be *disoriented*, for Ahmed, means both an inability or failure to follow the straight

26. Steyerl, “In Free Fall,” 1.

27. Steyerl, “In Free Fall,” 1.

28. Steyerl, “In Free Fall,” 9.

29. Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 108.

30. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006), 159.

31. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 159, 15.

and narrow *and* to get turned around by the Althusserian hail. “In simple terms,” she remarks, “disorientation involves becoming an object.”³² She means “object” in a few different ways—a being stripped of its subjectivity, one in a state of unknowing, and an inert thing that can be tossed about and thrown down.

In Derridian terms, we might think of such bodies-made-objects as having been bedazzled, blinded, punished. “How,” Derrida asks, “can blindness *overturn* the subject or *bowl him over, turn him upside down or turn him around*?”³³ He is looking at art historical depictions of Saint Paul’s conversion (such as Caravaggio’s famous painting), where Paul is overturned by a vision of God, forced to repent, to convert, to be disoriented so as to realign toward a different light. That story of blindness and vision, so fundamental to aesthetics, illustrates the stakes of orientation, which Ahmed’s book enumerates: the violence of rectitude. “Moments of disorientation,” Ahmed explains, “are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground.”³⁴

AESTHETICS OF EMERGENCY

Given the potential for violence, how do we think about the work of art—the primary virtue of which has been understood for quite some time now to be its intentional and revolutionary disorientations—in this disorienting moment?³⁵ Philosopher Santiago Zabala asserts that in the Anthropocene—the era of man-made climate, refugee, and technological crisis—*only* art can save us. “An aesthetic force is needed,” he urges,

to shake us out of our tendency to ignore the “social paradoxes” generated by the political, financial, and technological frames that contain us; the “urban discharge” of slums and plastic and electronic wastes; the “environmental calls” caused by global warming, ocean pollution, and deforestation; and the “historical accounts” of invisible, ignored, and denied events.³⁶

32. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 159.

33. Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, 110.

34. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 157.

35. I understand disorientation in art to be a contemporary inheritance of nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernism. For example, to the degree that the term “avant-garde” implies social, artistic, and political revolution, it contains, at the very level of etymology, the notion of turning, overturning, subversion, and disorientation. More overt examples of that connection abound in art criticism and aesthetic philosophy from the turn of the twentieth century to the present day. Perhaps the most famous is Tommaso Marinetti’s “Manifesto of Futurism,” first published in Italian in 1909, in which he narrates the origin story of the movement as involving a motor car being overturned (disoriented) in a ditch and its occupants emerging to feel “the red hot iron of joy” that accompanied their artistic rebirth. One also sees the notion of subversion (the effort to disorient others) at work in the very conception of the avant-garde as a collection of dynamic “movements.” As Renato Poggioli explains, “If the avant-garde has an etiquette, it consists of perverting and wholly subverting conventional deportment.” Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Harvard University Press, 1968), 31. More ubiquitously, these concepts appear today in countless catalogs and didactic wall texts that accompany exhibitions of modern and contemporary art. See also Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Harvard University Press, 1990), and Denise Ferreira da Silva, “Reading Art as Confrontation,” *e-flux Journal* 65 (2015), www.e-flux.com/journal/65/336390/reading-art-as-confrontation.

36. Santiago Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, 5.

From this perspective, it is as though, in a moment of great upheaval, we find that the face of the compass was only painted on, the dial pointing always to a non-existent horizon, and art is the only thing that can reveal the illusion.

Notice how, in Zabala's mind, we need an art that shakes us (in many other passages, he uses the word "thrusts"), an art that tips what we mistook the horizon to be and makes us stumble. For him, the disorientations of the moment (which ultimately mean the loss of Being, that is, the sense of existence in relation to the world) require, oddly, a push that by "overturning" will right us.³⁷ Because art is, in his words, a "realm where the remains of Being are disclosed, that is, where existence takes place," he calls for an "aesthetics of emergency" through which we will be awakened to the bizarre contemporary phenomenon of an utter absence of a sense of emergency, "an absence that seems to constitute the condition of our globalized world."³⁸ "Although the media," he continues, "are full of 'events' and 'emergencies,' the dominant impression of citizens in industrialized countries, whether at their centers or in their postcolonial slums, is that nothing new happens: reality is fixed, stable, and secured."³⁹ In other words, he marvels at the fact that we are not *more* disoriented than we seem to be.

Zabala's amazement at this paradox and the condition of disorientation that seems to produce it (whether psychological, environmental, political, or philosophical) is matched by that of other recent scholars, such as Morton, whose writing presents disorientation as a uniquely contemporary phenomenon. These include (among others) writer Amitav Ghosh, who chronicles a lifetime of extreme, upending weather events; feminist philosopher Donna Haraway, who describes our discomfort with and eagerness to move past "the trouble" of climate crisis; and theorist Bruno Latour, who describes America as "floating in dreamland," from which climate catastrophe is quietly excluded.⁴⁰ Ghosh, for example, expresses little faith in our capacity to face our disorienting global reality and describes the present moment as a period in which the state sanction of "the bourgeois belief in the regularity of the world ha[s] been carried to the point of derangement."⁴¹

By derangement Ghosh means not only a kind of insanity, but also the undoing or upending of order. "The experience of New Orleans, in the days before Hurricane Katrina, or of New York before Sandy, or of the city of Tacloban before Haiyan," Ghosh explains, "tells us that despite the most dire warnings large numbers of people will stay behind; even mandatory evacuation orders will be disregarded by many."⁴² Ghosh is not talking about the people who "stay behind" because they lack the financial means to escape or have nowhere to go; rather, he takes aim at those who have the money, the information,

37. Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us*. Zabala uses the word "thrust" repeatedly to describe the effects of artworks. For example, he claims that they thrust us into social (32), political (33), and financial paradoxes (38). See also pp. 32, 33, 38, 41, 42, 47, 57, 61, 66, etc. "[Art] shocks us, it overturns us, and sets up a world of its own, into which we are drawn, as it were" (123).

38. Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, xi, 4.

39. Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, 4–5.

40. Latour, *Down to Earth*, 7.

41. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 36.

42. Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 49.

and the means, but who choose to deny climate science, build glass skyscrapers on oceanfront property suddenly made available by hurricane devastation and rising seas, continue drilling for fossil fuels, and erect multimillion-dollar homes on cliffsides or near forests that are tinder just waiting for a match. The present crisis, in which climatic events “are the mysterious work of our own hands returning to haunt us in unthinkable shapes and forms,” is, as these scholars suggest, characterized by emergency that is met only with somnolence and madness by politicians and capitalists who are disoriented to reality.⁴³

In response to this condition, Haraway urges us to “stay with the trouble”; that is, to exist and work diligently in the present moment rather than indulging in either prelapsarian nostalgia or utopian, futuristic projection.⁴⁴ Like Zabala, for whom the unveiling or disclosing of our condition of emergency is paramount, Haraway situates her readers in and implores them to hold tight to trouble, which “requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”⁴⁵ Her insistence that we turn our eyes from imaginary temporal horizons and stay where we are, the better to confront our immediate dire surroundings, shares both the suspicion toward salvation and the suspension of movement that characterizes the figure of the beacon as I want to delineate it here. Each is animated by a wanting (of knowledge, safety, solutions) manifested ironically in an aqueous suspension, an inability to move toward or away from the light because it signals only epistemological crisis.

Zabala, by contrast, writes that it is the aesthetics of emergency that should be brought to bear on environmental disaster, and the derangement, denial, or salvation myths by which we ignore it. This aesthetics is one that unbalances and disorients, one that thrusts its viewers into social and political paradoxes. “The emergency aesthetics I limn,” Zabala asserts, “creates the conditions that enable us to respond to the existential call of art in the twenty-first century. If this call offers any opportunity for us to save ourselves, it does so not by indicating where the danger is but rather by itself being the danger.”⁴⁶ Zabala attempts to distinguish between an art that only indicates (illustrates, straightforwardly represents, or points to) social, political, economic, and environmental danger and art that more radically constitutes it. The former category includes that which is merely “about” such problems while standing its ground, never losing its own orientation. The latter, by contrast (for Zabala anyway), more powerfully disturbs the epistemological basis of orientation itself.

ART AS BEACON

I am hard-pressed to find the distinction between these two categories when I look at works of contemporary art, even the twelve that Zabala himself selects to support his

43. Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 32.

44. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 2–4.

45. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 1.

46. Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, III.

own delineation. These include Wang Zhiyuan's *Thrown to the Wind* (2010) and Néle Azevedo's *Minimum Monument* (2009), both of which, while certainly worthy of attention, are somewhat conventional in their fabrication and modes of representation. Wang's piece is a thirty-six-foot-tall sculpture made of discarded plastic containers composed in the shape of a whirlwind, and Azevedo's is a temporary installation in which hundreds of miniature ice blocks, cast in the shape of seated human figures, are left to melt on the steps of public buildings in various urban spaces such as São Paulo, Lima, Paris, and Berlin. These artworks, like most of the others that Zabala examines, deploy found materials such as garbage and water (which might be understood materially to constitute the environmental crises they represent) in what are otherwise rather straightforwardly representational works. While compelling—Wang's freezes, Azevedo's melts—I don't think either can be productively understood as "thrusting" the viewer.

Whether works such as these or Meza's take up climate crisis as a topic or attempt somehow to constitute emergency, I see little salvation in art, and, like Haraway, I find the concept of salvation itself suspect. Informed by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Zabala's argument partakes in a rather old modernist idea—that successful art is meant to awaken, subvert, question, disturb, and provoke. One still sees such claims everywhere in public discourse today—popular media, arts journalism, museum wall texts, and exhibition catalogs—where art is claimed to shove, jostle, and knock us to the ground. Does art really overturn its viewers, and are all viewers equally susceptible to its disorientation? If so, is it a momentary, vaguely pleasurable phenomenon, what Terry Eagleton once called, in a different context, a "licensed affair"?⁴⁷ How do we tell the difference between catastrophic disorientation (a heat wave in Alaska, a hurricane in Iowa, snow in Texas, an entire Hawaiian island burned to a crisp) and art's presumably productive version, its leading the viewer to knowledge by virtue of its being "an experience we must undergo"?⁴⁸

I have serious doubts about Zabala's claims for art's capacity to shake us from our complacency or shove us into emergency as they are, in the end, based on a tired modernist idea of artistic antagonism and its patronizing assumptions about art's audiences. Antagonism, what Renato Poggioli once proclaimed "the most noticeable and showy avant-garde posture,"⁴⁹ has historically manifested itself in what Kester has called, in an important essay on the culture wars, a form of "paternalism [toward] and benign domination" of the public.⁵⁰ In the contemporary moment, the transcendent, superior posture that dominated artistic practice at the turn of the twentieth century (as described by Poggioli) and at the turn of the twenty-first (as examined by Kester) persists, and one of its traditional features has become even more vivid, more politically divisive. Poggioli notes, with respect to fin de siècle artistic and literary movements, that "the new generation (that of the avant-garde artist) opposes the old generation,

47. Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (Verso, 1981), 146.

48. Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, 122.

49. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 30.

50. Kester, "Rhetorical Questions," 129.



Thrown to the Wind (2010) by Wang Zhiyuan; © Wang Zhiyuan; courtesy the artist; production with support and sponsorship from Judith Nelson, AM and White Rabbit Contemporary Chinese Art Collection.



Nélé Azavedo, *Minimum Monument* (2016); Parco des Artes, São Paulo, Brazil; photograph by Fanca Cortez © Nélé Azavedo, courtesy the artist.

the academy and tradition, by means of a deliberate use of an idiom all its own, a quasi-private jargon.”⁵¹

Today, in a period marked by the dramatic polarization of political thought, art often uses disorientation as what Poggioli called “a kind of secret language,” a shibboleth to determine whether the audience is on the right side of the truth.⁵² If you are willingly thrown off your feet, then (like Zabala) you participate in disorientation as a social corrective, a means of reclaiming Being. If you are unwillingly “thrust” somewhere (or, more likely, are simply unmoved), presumably your “truths” are suspect. Within the context of 1990’s identity politics, what Kester cleverly calls an “orthopedic aesthetic” emerged, “in which the work seeks to ‘adjust’ the viewer’s subjectivity—assumes a singularly naïve and ill-informed audience” that is “incessantly ‘positioned’ and ‘placed,’ and [its] preconceptions ‘disrupted.’”⁵³ Thus there is an intractable contradiction between Zabala’s universalizing claim that we are *all* meant to experience the emergency that art constitutes, and the exclusionary basis of much contemporary aesthetics. Moreover, the notion of salvation is far too teleological to be much good in an era in which knowing and unknowing are utterly intertwined—that is to say, perplexed.

51. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 37.

52. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 37.

53. Kester, “Rhetorical Questions,” 123.

While it is clear that Meza's video installation is designed to disrupt the viewer's perceptions, I don't believe that the work's efficacy lies in the old trope of subversion or that the artist seeks to assume a position of transcendent knowledge so that he can "force" the viewer to experience what American studies scholar Antonia Rigaud repeatedly describes, with respect to land art, as a "sense of loss."⁵⁴ Rather, I find in it an attempt to know the world at the end of the world, where knowing itself, in the form of colonial exploration, bioprospecting, extractive logics, and the thrall of technological discovery, has brought us to the end. In this way, *Beacon* rehearses the disorientation of knowledge.

In this, I insist on art's radical undecidability with respect to orientation, by which I mean more than simply that art is confusing or inscrutable. Undecidability means that dichotomous terms (such as horizontal and vertical) cannot sustain their binarity, the telos of interpretation or deciding what something means is foreclosed, and perception is impure. The task of orienting always consists of simultaneous states of positioning, being turned around, and wanting to be righted—that is, knowing, unknowing, and wanting to know. As Meza explains,

I think *Beacon* constitutes a kind of hypnotic, magical, dream-like world inside of the ordinary mundane world, however, these poles or coordinates—magic and mundane—have evolved and shifted, even from the time of the creation of this work until now, and . . . the reception of the magical and the mundane is always changing.⁵⁵

Meza's work is just one example of an art that embodies those states as well as expressing an awareness that they exist in relation to a horizon that is drawn and withdrawn, utterly real and utterly imaginary. In other words, we can no longer right ourselves, not necessarily because our contemporary crises have gone too far, but because we have been made aware that the things to which "consciousness itself is directed," such as the horizon, "nature," or weather, have turned out to be utterly illusory.⁵⁶

The beacon, in its simultaneous beckoning and warning, makes vivid the relationality of orientation, the way that it depends, as Ahmed explains, on inhabiting a body and turning toward an object—a horizon, planet, star or sun, streetlight, familiar sound, another person.⁵⁷ The artwork as beacon activates and makes visible that relation, which manifests itself in the viewer's trust, distrust, or indifference, by staging our wanting, our desire to know. Ultimately, by virtue of its undecidability, it resists the distinction (so tinged with Christian theology) between salvation and ruin. It is not, I want to insist, a device for conversion, although (as we have seen) that story still maintains a powerful pull on philosophers and the narrators of art's history.

54. Antonia Rigaud, "Disorienting Geographies: Land Art and the American Myth of Discovery," *Miranda* 6 (2012), 4, 5, 7, 8, 12. "Going to see these artworks is part of the artistic experience; it puts the art observer in a different and unfamiliar situation: the journey there presses upon the viewer's self-reflections about traversing space in order to experience space aesthetically—in so doing it ritualizes space. And this ritual takes the viewer out of the normal way of experiencing space and disorients him, or makes him experience a sense of loss" (7).

55. Abinadi Meza, email correspondence with the author, July 2, 2024.

56. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 27.

57. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2.

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Conclusions are hard, though, without salvation, without hope. For example, despite disorientation's physical upheaval and damaging effects on queer life, Ahmed concludes that, "Moments of disorientation are vital."⁵⁸ Such moments, she says, "keep open the possibility of changing directions and of finding other paths."⁵⁹ That is, she advocates for disorienting what "orientation" means, writing, "We have hope because what is behind us is also what allows other ways of gathering in time and space, of making lines that do not reproduce what we follow but instead create wrinkles in the earth."⁶⁰ In this, Ahmed suggests that disorientation is a productive mode of knowing.

Although I have deep affection for Ahmed's work, I am a little surprised by her discussion of hope—not her having hope, of course, but the way it figures in her narrative, the way in which she reorients disorientation as generative, as a common good. Perhaps it is the profundity of the alienation she describes, the kinds of violence that rectitude wreaks on vulnerable people she catalogs, that makes me wonder at her optimism. But I don't think the problem lies with her. Rather, her narrative unfolds such that I am tempted to think of it as almost instinctual—a body tossed into a deep pool that rights itself, finds its bearings, and swims up toward air.

Certainly that same instinct is visible in other recent texts on the condition of disorientation, particularly those involving art, as we have already seen in our analysis of Zabala's book, in which he states in his afterword that emergency aesthetics not only overturns, but "also disturb[s], agitate[s] into new action by the danger its interventions reveal."⁶¹ The salvation narrative, the story of revelation, is hard to let go of, even in times marked by skepticism. Indeed, Meza himself explains, "I don't think of Beacon as funereal . . . there is an active life inside the work, the sound, the grains of snow seemingly defying gravity, alive with energy and light and movement."⁶² Perhaps this is what Rauschenberg had in mind when he wrote the word "FREE" on his painting.

Steyerl takes the somewhat hopeful yet deeply ambivalent view that, "Falling means ruin and demise as well as love and abandon, passion and surrender, decline and catastrophe." She concludes, though, on a promising note. "But falling does not only mean falling apart," she declares, "it can also mean a new certainty falling into place."⁶³ Here, as was the case in our study of Schmidt di Friedberg, we see Steyerl instinctively move toward the surface of the pool of unknowing to find political rectitude and "a new certainty." All of these authors wrestle with a century or more of modernist aesthetic philosophy that values disorienting experiences and the artist's talent for producing them,

58. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 157.

59. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 178.

60. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 179.

61. Zabala, *Why Only Art Can Save Us*, 132.

62. Meza, email correspondence with the author, July 2, 2024.

63. Steyerl, "In Free Fall," 9.

or, in Gaston Bachelard's words, the ability to give "a gentle push which throws us off balance and sets in motion a healthy, really dynamic reverie."⁶⁴

I recognize in these writers' upward motion (their desire for air) the kind of knowing that art history so often performs, that *I* so often perform. The contemporary artwork disorients, defamiliarizes, upsets, and undoes, throwing the viewer up in a licensed and perhaps pleasant form of disorder, only to return her (once evidence is found, decisions made, meaning arrived at, knowledge secured) safely to the ground. I don't know about you, but I've had enough of that theme park ride, because it turns out to be a distraction from what art needs to be and how we need to think about it in the present moment of crisis. I have tried to tell a different story, and now that I have said what I came to say, my writing at an end, I'm not in a position to offer a revelation. Rather, it is important for me to remain suspended in *Beacon's* aqueous medium, stilled by its undecidability, confronted by my wanting in the face of pervasive disorientation. Ruin and order, warning and beckon, Meza's video, with its blinding light and hypnotic movement, quietly rejoins tales of conversion. It is not a miracle. It is simply always snowing at the end of the world. Ever and again. ■

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64. Gaston Bachelard, *Air and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Movement*, trans. Edith R. Farrell and C. Frederick Farrell (The Dallas Institute Publications, 1988), 3.