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After Motherwell, after Manet and after Goya: the performative power of imaging and the intensely present

Abstract:

In a post-appropriative or remix culture, what is at stake in ‘borrowing’ from historical images that have at their core an outrage at an injustice being perpetrated on a people? What are the implications of such acts of borrowing for rethinking an ethics of appropriation? This essay draws on an analysis of the dynamics of the image to argue that the ‘effect’ or ‘empathic suffering’ that we may experience when viewing an appropriation do not merely arise from representation alone, but more significantly emerge through the forces and ghosts that lie beneath and structure representation. Through this approach it argues that the work of art may enable the ghosts to speak. In giving voice to these ghosts, the work may just do justice to the histories to which the work is indebted.

Biographical note:

Barbara Bolt is a practising artist and art theorist at the Victorian College of Arts and Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne. She has two monographs, *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image* (I.B. Tauris, 2004) and *Heidegger Reframed: Interpreting Key Thinkers for the Arts* (I.B. Tauris, 2011) and four co-edited books. Her publications exhibit a strong dialogue between practice and theory. In 2008-9 she was part of a BBC World Service/Slade School of Art project *A View from Here*, which led to the production of the DVD production *Neon Blue*. Her website is: <http://www.barbbolt.com/>

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“Experience” of the past as to come, the one and the other absolutely absolute, beyond all modification of any present whatever. If it is possible and if one must take it seriously, the possibility of the question, which is perhaps no long a question and which we are calling here justice, must carry beyond present life, life as my life or our life. *In general*. For it will be the same thing for the “my life” our “our life” tomorrow,” that is, for the life of other, as it was yesterday for others: *beyond therefore the living present in general*. (Derrida 1994: xix)

Introduction

At 3.30 am Eastern Standard Time, on Wednesday 29 April 2015, two Australian citizens, Myuran Sukumaran and Andrew Chan were executed on the on island of Nusakambangan in Indonesia, along with six other convicted drug smugglers. The beginnings of their journey was not heroic – the apparent ring leaders of the so-called Bali Nine, a group of nine young Australian citizens who were caught attempting to smuggle heroin from Indonesia into Australia in 2005 – but their execution has proved otherwise; it has become the flashpoint for a renewed energy in the opposition to the death penalty.

On Thursday 5 March 2015, as the Indonesian government transferred Sukumaran and Chan from Bali’s Kerobokan prison to Indonesia’s ‘execution island’, Nusakambangan, in ‘paramilitary vehicles with a helicopter overhead and elite guards’¹, I began a series of ink studies that formed the basis for the drawing *At 3.30am: After Manet’s Execution of Emperor Maximilian*.



Fig. 1. Barbara Bolt, study for *At 3.30am: After Manet’s Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, March 2015, sketch book study 21cm x 588cm, photography Christos Crocker.

The studies and subsequent drawing are directly indebted to and acknowledge Edouard Manet’s painting the *Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (1868-9). Lurking beneath the surface, however, there is a second homage that needs to be acknowledged at the outset. The works are an elegy, a lament for the dead, conjuring the spirit of Robert Motherwell’s abstract series of paintings, drawings and lithographs, *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* (1963-1975). The title *At 3.30am*, refers back to Motherwell’s first painting in his elegy series, a painting originally titled *At Five in the Afternoon* (1949). The drawings also draw on and ‘borrow’ the abstract

rhythms in his *Reconciliation Elegy* (1978), to invoke the insistent and claustrophobic force that came to bear on the bodies of Sukamaran and Chan.²

What lessons can we learn from *At 3.30am: After Manet's Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, a work that is a remix of both historical figurative paintings and Motherwell's abstract series *Elegies to the Spanish Republic*? In a post-appropriative or remix culture, what is at stake in 'borrowing' from historical sources that have at their core an outrage at the injustice at what is being perpetrated on a people?³; What are the implications of such acts of borrowing for thinking about the ethics of appropriation?; and can we draw on the spirit of the 'original' work to make a (political) difference or does this restaging remain numb and dumb, a vacuous parody of previous images that no longer has any connection to the 'real'? The essay will proceed in three movements: firstly it will set out the stakes in the appropriative gesture, secondly it will examine re-presenting the unimaginable and un-representable 'event' of the execution through the work of Goya and Foucault; and, finally, it will draw on an analysis of the dynamics of the works to demonstrate how the 'effect' or 'empathic suffering' that we may experience does not arise from representation alone, but more significantly emerges through forces and ghosts that lie beneath and structure representation. It is this 'suffering' at the site/sight of the work that takes us beyond the spectacle of looking and it is here that we may come to be moved beyond ourselves. This is not any dissociated general sensation but one that is specifically located in the relation between the artist, the event of work and the viewer.

The stakes involved in the appropriative gesture

In his essay, 'From appropriation to invocation in contemporary art' Jan Verwoert addresses the question of the stakes involved in appropriation NOW. Starting with its most basic premise, that appropriation and its related forms (parody, quotation and remixing) involve the borrowing of 'objects, images or practices from popular (or foreign) cultures' and their restaging within the context of the artist's work (Verwoert 2007: 1), Verwoert is concerned to demonstrate that the stakes have changed since appropriation became a critical strategy used by postmodern artists in the late 1970s and early '80s. Whilst citation and copying has always been used by artists, it was the strategic use of citation by such postmodernist artists as Sherry Levine, Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince that appropriation became, what Verwoert has described as, 'the reshuffling of a basic set of cultural terms through their strategic re-use and eventual transformation', that characterized the very distinct political and critical focus of appropriation in postmodernism (2007: 1). Through the influence of contemporary critical theory on art, art became meta-aware *and* invested in art as a form of cultural critique; a form that took into account of the operations of power, the death of historical meaning, the impossibility of originality, the death of authorship and the role of spectator in the production and the multiplicity of meaning. In this pluralist postmodern epoch, where photographically-based mass media undid notions of origin and copy, images became, as David Evans has pointed out, a 'resource to be raided and re-used' (2009: 12). This anti-aesthetic drive saw artists 'quoting' in its various guises – appropriation, parody, allegory and bricolage – in, what Evans calls,

a 'double-voiced' strategy through which art could offer a cultural critique of consumer society (Evans 2009: 13-14).

The digital revolution and the rise of neo-liberalism have evacuated the political potency of postmodern appropriation. In its place we have become entrenched in a remix culture, which, as Lev Manovich points out, provides a logic that 'appears to be so firmly in place that it can't be challenged by any other cultural logic' (2007: 169). In this culture, Evans' observation that images, objects and practices are a 'resource to be raided and re-used' becomes a truism' (2009: 12). Against this view, however, Verwoert proposes an alternative conception of the post-appropriative act, one that has consequences for the artist who employs such cultural borrowings and for the viewer who comes to engage with the work. This hinges on a recognition of the performative power of the image.

The term performativity and 'the performative' have become commonplace in the arts, where they have tended to become synonymous, and used interchangeably, with the term performance. The slippage between performance and performativity has led to an assumption that all artworks – theatre and dance productions, performances, installations, paintings and the like – are 'performative' (Bolt 2009: 3). However, this is not how Verwoert understands or activates the term performativity in his essay. He returns to the 'original' understanding of the term elaborated by J. L. Austin, in his 1955 lecture 'How to do things with words', published as *How to Do Things with Words* (1975). According to Austin, certain speech utterances or productions don't just describe or report the world, but actually have a force whereby they perform the action to which they refer. The performative utterance (as opposed to the constative or descriptive utterance) does things in the world. Against the postmodern concerns with revealing the arbitrary nature of language and the constructed nature of words and images, came a recognition that, as arbitrary or constructed as they may be, performative utterances produces real effects in the world. Thus, in its capacity to be both an action and to generate consequences, the performative utterance inaugurates movement and transformation. As Verwoert notes:

The shift in the critical discourse away from a primary focus on the arbitrary and constructed character of the linguistic sign towards a desire to understand the performativity of language and grasp precisely how things are done with words ... how language through its power of interpellation and injunction enforces the meaning of what it spells out ... binds that person to execute what it commands (2007: 6).

This engages the appropriationist artist or writer in what Verwoert calls a practical ethics.

Verwoert identifies the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 as signalling the historical moment that enabled the shift that allowed us to comprehend that, even though words and images may be arbitrarily constructed, they may also 'produce unsuspected effects and affects in the real world' (2007: 6). The speed and impact of the fall of the wall signaled a shift from the death of modernism and a 'general loss of historicity' and impotence to 'a ... sense of an excessive presence of history' (Verwoert 2007: 4).⁴ No longer was the appropriated object a dead commodity fetish to be re-used for political critique, but rather it was recognised as having its own history that needed

to be attended to by the artist or writer. This new political reality, was supported by an intellectual environment – led by writers such as Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Julia Kristeva, amongst others – that recognized and argued for the performative power of language in its many and various guises: literary, bodily, visual and aural.

Evans draws on Verwoert's essay, 'Apropos appropriation: why stealing images today feels different' (2006), to argue for this changed context, which he terms the post-appropriation era:

One of the most fundamental distinctions between appropriation art in the 1980's and post-appropriation art today revolves around history itself. A recurrent theme in postmodernist debates of the 1980's was the supposed death of historical meaning, but major events like the implosion of the Soviet Union resulted in the 're-emergence of a multiplicity of histories in the moment of the new 1990's. The challenge for the appropriationist artist now is to discover new ways of dealing with these 'unresolved histories' (2009: 22).

For Verwoert, the unresolved histories are the 'ghosts' that lurk within the object of appropriation, and dealing with these ghosts raises new questions and consideration for artists, theatre makers, musicians and writers. Verwoert argues that appropriation is an active and ethical encounter that needs to take into account the ghosts that hover within. It requires that the artist take responsibility both for the 'practicalities' and also for the 'material gestures' that one makes in performing what he calls a 'ceremony of invocation' (2007: 6). For Verwoert, this means invoking something that lives through time and accepting the responsibility that comes with our utterances; 'facing the consequences of what is being said' (2007: 6). Thus, in appropriation, parody, allegory and citation, we are not re-using a 'dead' commodity fetish but are compelled to work with the life within.

Here Verwoert draws on Derrida's book *Spectres of Marx* (1994), to unpick what it means to borrow (or steal) and re-work images/objects/figures into a 'new' work under one's name, and to offer a practical ethics for working with the life within the appropriated object. For Derrida, working with the ghosts of the past is an event of struggle, one that demands we take responsibility, acknowledge their presence and, in the name of justice, 'learn to live with ghosts' (1994: xvii-xviii). More than learning to live with them, the task is learning how we might give them back speech in a way that allows the ghosts to be present in the work. Thus we should:

grant them the right, if it means making them come back alive, as *revenants* who could no longer be *revenants*, but as other arrivants to whom a hospitable memory or promise must offer welcome—without certainty, ever, that they present themselves as such. Not in order to grant them the right in this sense but out of concern for *justice* (Derrida 1994: 175).

It charges the artist with a responsibility for avenging justice.

The event and the circling spectacle

How does one proceed to enact a practical ethics? What ghosts that lurk in the studies and the drawing, *At 3.30am: After Manet's Execution of Emperor Maximilian* and how might one call them forth? Verwoert's call to acknowledge the performative power of the image and take responsibility for our re-use of objects of appropriation and Derrida's concern for justice has implications for both the practicalities and material emanation of the appropriative gesture.

The reference to Eduard Manet's painting is stated upfront in the title—*After Manet's Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, and it is from Manet's painting the *Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (1868-9) that the representational structure of the drawing is taken. However, we know well that Manet's painting drew on an earlier work, Francisco de Goya's revolutionary *The Third of May 1808* (1814), a painting that portrays the execution of Spanish civilians by Napoleon's army during the Peninsular War (1807-14), and that this painting also provided the model for Pablo Picasso's *Massacre in Korea* (1951).

Kenneth Clark has been less than charitable about Manet's re-use of Goya's work, commenting that while he was a 'great painter' and had 'honesty of purpose', he 'lacked the consciousness of tragic humanity' or the empathy required of the subject. In his opinion, Manet did not do justice to the spirit of the event, commenting:

how little he has recognised, or at least tried to emulate, the point of Goya's picture. An historic event painted in this flat and inexpressive way really is as pointless as Manet maintained it to be. ... Manet, who was usually well aware of what he was doing, must have realised that by turning this figure away from the central focus of the scene he would lose the dramatic concentration which animates the Goya. Why did he do it? Was the bland indifference of this rifleman intended as a kind of irony? I doubt it. More likely he thought the pose pictorially self sufficient (1960).



Fig. 2. Eduard Manet, *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, 1868-9, oil on canvas, 252 x 302 cm. Kunsthalle Mannheim.



Fig. 3. Francisco de Goya, *The Third of May 1808*, 1814, oil on canvas, 266.7cm x 406.4cm, ©Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

In his analysis of Goya's *The Third of May 1808*, on the other hand, Clark sees the performative power of imaging at work. In his initial encounter with the painting, Clark had registered the work as 'a kind of superior journalism, the record of an incident in which depth of focus is sacrificed to an immediate effect' (1960). However, as it did its work on him, Clark came under the a/effect of Goya's picture of a firing squad; it transcended its character as a 'record' and became in itself 'an event' that palpably registers on us the indignation and fury of injustice. For Clark, it is one of the few artworks in which 'the shock of a sudden revelation' survives and transcends the mechanics by which the painting was composed.⁵

Clark's reference to Goya's painting as a kind of superior journalism, as a record of an historical event is a significant one for us, particularly in the light of the reportage of the execution of Sukambaran and Chan through all forms of media in the most spectacular fashion. Michel Foucault points out, that once the public spectacle of torture and execution was a theatrical forum, which played an important role in the maintenance of public order and provided a mechanism through which the sovereign deployed power (1991). Now punishment is hidden from view, but its spectre circulates around the event endlessly with the leakage of eyewitness accounts to create an image for the unimaginable. And so the story has it, that in the still night air of Nusakambangan Island, the condemned prisoners refused to wear blindfolds and, staring their executioners down, they sang *Amazing Grace* and *Bless the Lord O My Soul* just after midnight (Jennett and Brown 2015). As Foucault notes, this produces a dangerous unstable moment (1994).

Goya's painting, completed in 1814, eight years after the brutal execution of Spanish citizens by the French, came midway between the public torture and execution of Damians the regicide in 1757 and the implementation of the disciplinary regime of the prison in France in 1837 (Foucault 1991: 3-7). Goya did not 'see' the execution, yet his capacity to create something unimaginable yet precisely 'true-to-life'; return the

ghosts of the dead to us alive, so that they can, in Derridean terms, ‘present themselves as such’, was his contribution to *justice*.

Imag-ing the unimaginable

How then, does one go about achieving the event of picturing where we will be able to produce something true-to-life, rather than merely a re-presentation, in order to do justice for the *revenants*? Clark is clear that, where social indignation, and other such abstract emotions are concerned, art is ‘not a natural generator’ (1990). It is so difficult not to illustrate an event, even an event that is an exercise of conjuring or a re-mix of many different sources – paintings, press photographs, web images, etc. It is Clark’s view that artists fail in their quest to do justice to such events through trying to ‘reconstruct events, as remembered by witnesses, according to pictorial possibilities’, instead of instead of ‘allowing their feelings about an event to form a corresponding pictorial symbol in their minds’. In his view, the result is ‘an accumulation of formulas’ (1990).

We need to return to the question, or rather the possibility of producing something true-to-life. In Katherine Atkinson’s 2015 novel, *A God in Ruins*, a story about rebuilding lives in aftermath of the World War II, the protagonist’s (Teddy’s) mother, Sylvie, tells him that the purpose of art ‘is to convey the truth of a thing, not to be the truth itself’ (5) By the truth of the things, Atkinson suggests that this is not the ‘truth’ as understood as the correspondence between things as in representation, but rather it is to engender the ‘feel of things’.⁶ What Sylvie, and in fact Atkinson, is referring to here is the capacity of art to create something intensely present. The artist Arthur Russell concurs with this this view, suggesting that it is the responsibility of the artist to analyze the underlying forces in nature through the work in order to create something ‘intensely present’ which will allow (new) worlds to germinate. When this happens, says Arthur, we ‘will be able to live’ the work.⁷

The idea that an image is alive, an intensive presence that insinuates itself into our world so that we live it, challenges the Kantian notion of the disinterested observer and suggests that empathy is not only engendered though the representational form of the work, but through its dynamics as a work of art. As Russell, observes, the function of art is never merely representational and we are not safe. It is not the task of art to illustrate the world, tell a story about the world or take a programmatic political stance. Rather, art is an expansive force that undoes representation and creates something unimaginable, yet precisely ‘true-to-life’. His observations beg the question: what are the conditions through which an artwork works to create something true-to-life?

It remains for me to address the indebtedness of my own ‘borrowings’ to Motherwell and to test whether it is at all possible to create something intensely present. At the outset of this paper, I proposed that *At 3.30am: After Manet’s Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, is an elegy, a lament for the dead, that summons up the spirit of Robert Motherwell’s *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* (1963-1975). The title, *At 3.30am*, refers back to Motherwell’s first painting in his elegy series, a painting originally titled *At Five in the Afternoon* (1949). It also draws on or ‘borrows’ the compositional

structure and abstract rhythms in his *Reconciliation Elegy* (1978) to invoke the insistent force that came to bear on the bodies of Sukamaran and Chan.

At Five in the Afternoon was the title of Motherwell's first work in the series that has become to be known as *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* (1963-1975). This painting is indebted to the Spanish poet Lorca's *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*, an outpouring of grief by Lorca for the death of his friend, the bullfighter *Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*, who was mortally wounded in a bullfight in 1934. The poem uses the insistence of the refrain 'At five in the afternoon,' as both an incantation of mourning and a force that relentlessly drives home the finality of death:

The Goring and the Death

At five in the afternoon.
It was just five in the afternoon.
A boy brought the white sheet
at five in the afternoon.
A basket of lime made ready
at five in the afternoon.
The rest was death and only death
*at five in the afternoon.*⁸

In Motherwell, this insistent and mournful refrain is felt as the slow and suffocating march of heavy black shapes across the canvas. However, *At 3.30am*, also 'borrows' the compositional structure and abstract rhythms of Motherwell's *Reconciliation Elegy* (1978). Motherwell has written that the inspiration for this work was 'the tragically missed opportunity of Spain to enter the liberal world in the 1930s. And for its tragic suffering then and for decades after' (Motherwell 1980: 77).



Fig. 4. Robert Motherwell *Reconciliation Elegy*, 1978, acrylic on canvas, 304 cm x 914.4 cm, © Dedalus Foundation, Inc/VAGA. Licensed by Viscopy, 2015.

Reconciliation Elegy offers us more physical and psychic space than does the claustrophobic *At Five in the Afternoon*: The possibility of the missed opportunity? Through its asymmetrical composition, *Reconciliation Elegy* activates a space of action and drama; an event in the process of becoming. The painting creates a tense encounter and counter-movement between the dark massing shapes on the right of the canvas that push out towards the rigidly held lone black shape on the left. Whilst we

enter into the frame through the priority of the insistent and repetitive large black shapes on the right, we are simultaneously pulled to the black shape on the left by its isolation. At a size of 304 cm x 914.4 cm, we would have to be standing a long way away from it to be distanced from its dynamics. More likely, we become caught up within the shallow space of abstraction, oscillating back and forth between the shapes and becoming caught up in its dramatic action.



Fig. 5. Barbara Bolt, study for *At 3.30am: After Manet's Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, March 2015, Japanese ink on Arches 350 x 935cm, photography Christos Crocker.

At 3.30am: After Manet's Execution of Emperor Maximilian mirrors the long frieze-like composition of *Reconciliation Elegy* with its asymmetrical composition and groupings of shapes in tensions with each other. Held within a shallow space, there is no escape from the relentless march of the massed figures from right to the left as 'the figure' is pinned to the picture plane by the assault from the baton and shield. The 'action' is not achieved by representational means alone, but by the operations of the abstract forces operating in the image. The beating rhythm is created by repetition and oscillation between dark shapes and white space that marches us across the space; the lack of perspectival depth holds us in this close space with the protagonists and the anticipation of the blow that will be struck. It is such abstract forces that have been put to work in Manet's *Execution of Emperor Maximilian* and in Goya's *The Third of May 1808*, so that we may 'live the work': The active asymmetrical composition that activates the space, the claustrophobic inescapable space and the repetitive and directional vectors that move us rapidly across the space so that we 'hear' and 'feel' the 'report' of gunfire, rather than see it.

While a figurative image *may* appear immediately recognizable, we are directed beyond the figure to Russell identified as, the 'non-literal abstract frame-work which holds it together and us with it' (1997). While we may feel empathy with, ambivalence or even anger towards the figure, it is not just or even the 'figure' that is critical, nor is it about meaning. For Deleuze and Guattari, art is not concerned with meaning and a work of art is never trying to mean more than it can. This is not its job. Rather, art's task is to summon forth the 'invisible forces of gravity, heaviness, rotation, the vortex, explosion, expansion, germination and time ... make perceptible the imperceptible forces that populate the world' (Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 181-2).

It is the operations of the abstract framework, its rhythms, the tension between contrasts, the weights and the vectors, and the valence of material gestures, that gives the image its potency or not. When it works, we don't just 'see' but also feel and hear the heaviness and clamour of the massing blacks, the impact of the collision between elements in the image; we are pushed off balance by the directional forces and are moved through the image by repetition that creates a fundamental rhythm that builds us into the image so that we become part of the teaming life of it. In the visual field, as in music, dancing and singing, notes Deleuze, 'rhythm and rhythms alone become objects' (2003: 8). It is these objects that provide a powerful force. However there is no predicting whether these will actually come together and transcend the illustrative. This is the ineffable nature of art.

Conclusion

What lessons can we draw from *At 3.30am: After Manet's Execution of Emperor Maximilian*, a work that is a remix of both historical figurative paintings and Motherwell's abstract works? In a post-appropriative or remix culture, this essay has asked what is at stake in 'borrowing' from historical sources that have at their core an outrage at the injustice at what is being perpetrated on a people. Through this address, it has approached the question of the ethics of appropriation and whether we can draw on the spirit of the 'original' work to make a (political) difference. It drew on an analysis of the dynamics of the works to demonstrate that the 'effect' or 'empathic suffering' that we may experience in viewing a work does not merely arise from representation alone, but more significantly emerges through forces and ghosts that lie beneath and structure representation. The artist has a responsibility, as Russell has said, to put into process the underlying forces in nature in order to create something 'intensely present' which will allow (new) worlds to germinate or allow the ghosts to present themselves. Through this one hopes to create something unimaginable yet precisely 'true-to-life' in an act that allows the ghosts to speak and, in doing so, does justice to the histories to which the work is indebted.

Endnotes

1. Sukamaran and Chan's transfer, 'in paramilitary vehicles with a helicopter overhead and elite guards, was a relative show of strength compared to a third prisoner they transferred — an Indonesian drug trafficker who came in a little van' (Jennett and Brown 2015).
2. See, Bolt (forthcoming)
3. Manovich argues that remix is the artistic and political strategy of our time. He suggests that the term is more useful than the term 'appropriation' as it 'suggests a systematic re-working of a source, the meaning which "appropriation" does not have' (2007).
4. Verwoert traces the death of history and its emanation in art, through an analysis of the writing of key art critics of the time: Douglas Crimp, Frederic Jameson and Craig Owens. Through this he suggests that for postmodernism, appropriation 'revealed the ruinous state of the historical language of modern art' (2007: 5).
5. See, Clark (1960).
6. Katherine Atkinson, in interview with Michael Cathcart (ABC 2015).

7. Australian artist Arthur Russell was born in 1927 and lived through the tumultuous changes in the world and the artworld. As an artist studying in the 1960s, Russell's training and his working method were imbued with the spirit of modernism, a spirit that sees the human as pre-eminent over matter and nature. However, in the few fragments of writing he made about his art in the few years before he passed away in 2009, Russell offered views on the world that seem to contradict this modernist view. The quotes used in this essay are taken from notes that Russell made in 1997 in two documents, 'Musings of Arthur Russell about his latest body of work' (1997a) and 'Less Heavy' (1997b).
8. See, Lorca. See also an extended discussion of the relationship between Motherwell's *At Five in the Afternoon*, and Lorca's poem in Bolt (forthcoming).

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