

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

The Sounding Silence of Fulya Peker's Sonic Poetics



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Words have killed images or are concealing them. A civilization of words is a civilization distraught. Words create confusion. Words are not the word. . . The fact is that words say nothing, if I may put it that way. . . — Ionesco

Blink: the eye flutters like a hummingbird, flickering like the tongue which articulates and mutters words; fragments and disjoins them; breaks them into syllables, letters, or *pure sound* free of meaning — a borborygmic, aphasiac, bestial stuttering akin to the dismemberment of the body itself. The sacrificial sparagmos. Peker's rendering of the subject, de-subjectified into the void. . .

This is what we see, or are made to experience, in her short video [Nerve Meter: Blink](#) — the depth of the eye; the eye as planet; cornea as cloud, fog, or vapor. It is consciousness fluttering in and out of reality, like radio signals short-circuiting, or the violent static of language, of the body, that is, *of the cosmos speaking in the body*, its manifestation in a sputtering & magmatic lingual assault.

The breath, the expansive void of the eye, the mouth, all spheres that morph into a single mutating sphere as one struggles to hear before her sound assault, to clarify the uttered word. Indistinct language, violent static broken by silence, silence broken by violent static, the terrible vividness of death — thought, Peker whispers, *is liquefied*. Not spoken, but shattered, like the body without organs, and Peker clearly works within the lineage of Artaud and Bene (not to say Dada), those mad sleepless fiends who live with the strain of an abject orality, but, while paradoxically denying the very possibility of clarity, articulate that impossible possibility with violent force, with terrible unsettling precision. It is the absolute refused. Imagine the physicalization of a Francis Bacon painting, as if it were to be animated and speak, or sputter and scream through its spasmodic and spectral body, a body reduced, or rather, *concentrated*, to sound waves. Peker's poetics flare to life in this image, and it recalls the silent emphatic gesture of the sequence she created for David Michalek's *Portraits in Dramatic Time* (2011), a performance displayed on an 85' by 45' screen in the main square of Lincoln Center, which, as each cycle of the film came to her sequence, was infected by the contagion of her sonic poetics. Consider the scale, the immensity at which such a ritual expressionism is displayed, or *etched* into the screen

of consciousness. Pivoting upon a concentrated point, pallid and mercurial in dress and visage, Peker makes a near 360° swivel, her face first blank and expressionless, her eyes never blinking but peering sharply into the beyond, then, upon completing her arc, replete with horror, her hands contorted with the agony of a primal sound, the disquieting *sounding silence* of the stillest hour. . . What did she hear? What must she obliterate? At this moment, when she writes then erases words in the air before her, one realizes that she is behind a sheet of glass, and so, as Bene said of his original stage production (1966) of his novel *Our Lady of the Turks*, which was also performed behind glass, the spectator is forced “to see ‘actions,’ not to have to hear words.” Although Michalek’s work had no sound track, Peker’s choice was deliberate, and the silence of her sequence distinct, devoid of sound, auralities refused but silently articulated, carved in the air like a hieratic gesture, a hand signaling through the flames. . .

In time’s brokenness is narrative’s brokenness. Thermodynamics echoes from the outer reaches of the cosmos to our larynxes. The possibility of ‘story’ no longer exists. To pursue such is anachronistic. The actor as storyteller is the actor out of tune with reality. Ruled by non-knowledge, by the puzzle of possibility, or *puzzibility*, Peker embodies in her body without organs the entropy that pervades the cosmos. Living decay; the decay of the living. Life does not exist without death. Death is not the end of life, but its possible genesis, its actual creator, as chemist Jean-Claude Ameisen has demonstrated. The collapse of onto-theology, of what Peker calls “the grand verb,” echoes through to language itself, just as thermodynamics, which is why language undergoes this trial, why

it has been disemboweled and there is laughter with knives. As one burns, what is there to sense, to smell, to touch? What is breath to a body without organs? It is heard scratching in the void, and this subtle if not haunting event evokes Peker's arresting work with both Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater as well as her numerous turns with Object Collection, particularly her performance in their staging (2011) of the late Robert Ashley's *Automatic Writing*, wherein Peker, again in near absolute stillness, wrestles with the unconscious force of the Ur-realm of the oral, with what is permissible to utter aloud in the polis. In an amorphous cascade of modulated breaths, vocables, whisperings, and half-formed, inarticulate words, as if choked by legal or social impediments, Peker struggles to voice, to articulate, to let involuntary speech flow forth, such as spastic, uncontrollable Touretic utterances. Through transgression, the impermissible manifests, like errant tonalities erupting to strew discord.

This same exigent play with language is an instrumental element of Peker's *Nerve Meter: Blink*. Out of the de-subjectivization of the grand verb, language undergoes metamorphoses and reversals, and Peker turns over and empties out sentences, phrases, words, breaking them down to syllables, to single letters, to mutilated noises in which consciousness itself is made to crack, to be *pressed* to its absolute extremity, to the experience of what occurs in the sleepless second that is nothing less than eternity, the timelessness that only the insomniac knows. In the eye of her *Nerve Meter: Blink* is a cosmos — eye as planet, as galaxy itself, as the surface and image of a planet, or like the blurry but enigmatic, spectral infrared images of

the cosmos. The manifestation of dark matter in the flesh. How can the thirst for tomorrow be nothing but illicit?

Originally instigated by catalyst material Paul Amlehn sent Peker (and others) for a film project, from its general vision to its linguistic mutilations, *Nerve Meter: Blink* is another distinctive incarnation of Peker's aesthetic. The same exactitude and formal rigor in her (dis)articulation of the word was evident in the strenuousness of the exacting and near *microscopic* mise-en-scène of her *Plague* (2011), the figures of which were directed in one sequence *to spell out letters with their eyeballs*. To some this was fanatical; the artist as tyrant; a rigid, stultifying demand. But this viewpoint is blind to the geometrical precision of Peker's stagecraft, which is no less decisive than Beckett's. Peker is not rigid; she is rigorous. This ever rarer architectural sculpting of form is superior to the lazy ineptitude of the improvisatory ethos which infects and largely rules the age, masquerading its maladroitness as 'play.' The ludic buffoons, however, are not true clowns — they lack anarchic force just as much as they lack the wild avid glee of children playing with dirt. And the prevailing view that only the spectacle which involves the viewer, who must in some way be able to directly affect its outcome (video game mentality), is primary and preferable, derides thinking itself, fails to recognize that the mind wrestling before such active rigor as Peker's *is* involved. It is the most exacting form of 'participation,' and it is only intensified and acute perception that will reveal the dramaturgy of the cosmos even in the cornea of her figures. Whether or not such gestures were readily discernible to each and every spectator — it is clear whom (and what) Peker evokes with her "everyone and nobody" — is of no consequence.

What is discernible, what is felt, what is experienced — forget the insistence of understanding, forget meaning —, what the spectator *undergoes*, is palpable, and the extremity of disorientation is discernible, hence, the nerve meter registers the choice. Only the most highly attuned, only the most astute, truly engaged spectator, only the one who participates with rigor through hazarding their own desubjectivization, will know that. This same astuteness is necessary to recognize the spluttering of consciousness in Peker's sonic poetry, which finds its excoriating fusion in each and every frame of *Nerve Meter: Blink*, just as it exists in the sculpted framing of her breaths and the verbs she dismantles to root atom and beyond, to dust, to void, to the most extreme negation, to the splintering knife of chaos and its exacting threshold.

In the brief, lightning-like, terrifying brevity of the blink is the self, the self evaporating like the disarticulated verb sent into a borborygmic spasm. As Mandelstam realized, in the 'inferno,' in the grammar without futures, we literally hear how the verb kills time. It is this death that Peker articulates and animates, but it is a creative death, the sounding silence of a sonic poetics.

If, as Mauthner nihilistically proclaimed, and justly so, it is language that makes it impossible to know one another, perhaps what Peker is seeking beyond its homogenization and sclerosis is a subatomic unity — beyond understanding, beyond meaning, beyond communicativity, by way of the *via negativa*.