

# Fiona Annis and The Wound Incarnate

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By Matthew Hall

The most enveloped and consequential threat to the ontological is the fear that death dominates the primacy of life. Spatial and emotive trajectories exist in flux, a patterment discernible to desire, a lived topography of the apprehension of life, as leaving itself bared out and open to a minute but enveloping ritual. And it is with the rituals of life in mind that one takes to following the trace of life, through death, in which, as French Philosopher Gilles Deleuze argues in his work *Plane of Immanence*: “A wound is incarnated or actualized in a state of things or of life; but it is itself a pure virtuality on the plane of immanence that leads us into a life.” It was with this quotation in mind that I took to thinking about Fiona Annis’s recent work, *The After-Image: Swan Songs*. Annis presents to the reader a series of Romantic Conceptual artifices for the exploration of the trace, the evidence of ritual in life, and in the landscape. Her work depicts, with a syntactic vibrancy and precarious estrangement, the death sites of a number of authors, philosophers, and artists, from Walter Benjamin to Virginia Woolf, from Bas Jan Ader to Tom Thompson. In beginning to contemplate the act of transfiguration that the photographs propose, it is in quietude and silence where the phenomenological act comes to stand in relation to a truth, by enacting the rituals of, by walking solemnly behind these figures, and by engaging with the performative force of their work. It is from here where we witness the disappearance of the subjective. To Annis’s acts of meditation, I would like to propose my own set of meditations on her work, which seek to recover the force of trauma which has transfigured the life of the author or artist depicted, and which seeks to reflect on the iteration of morality and the ruthlessness of social violence. If, as Camus famously stated, “The only serious philosophical question is that of suicide,” it is in the contemplation of social violence that this author hopes to find the solace and solemnity of a life lived, as an incarnate wound.

The force of estrangement, for Annis, is redemptive, for the viewer might only know the consequence of the violence (that Virginia Woolf famously drowned in the River Ouse) and have no familiarity with the works which inform Annis’s photography. But the photograph is secular, it renounces the theology of words by enacting the experiential as testament to the ritual of life. The experience of moving towards the site of death is the point at which the life of the person engenders and inscribes itself upon the landscape. For Annis this means that the photographs, “seek to record echoes etched in landscape, and act to engage the physical locations of these swan songs as a point of departure for a sustained meditation on final acts and their sites of articulation.” As Annis writes, the images have a resonance inscribed in the landscape, a correlation of death inscribed on the physical plane. Therefore it will serve to consider the landscape as a repository of imaginative creation, in which the acts of humankind envelope a response of sensation particular to the past, to lineage, and to continuity in space. The representation of landscape is the making visible of culturally constructed knowledge, of an incorporative, personal consideration of human history, deepened, projected, and made corporeal by our experience. It is, in consideration of our belief, an act of transfiguration detailed in the photographic.

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**Virginia Woolf’s** most seminal work on writing, *A Room of One’s Own*, detailed what she thought to be the emancipatory necessities for a creative life: financial freedom and a space in which to create. In making her argument the metaphoric space to write widens to entail a space for women in literature to stand and find active a creative freedom often enclosed by a patriarchal literary milieu. In Annis’s four photographic works on Woolf certain patterns appear: place is engrained with a sense of isolation, yet the physical never sublimates the moral, the landscape is populous, torrid, verdant, and cresting with natural elements. In the first work on Woolf, the title *Swan Song* resonates. The image details grace, agility, and despite the tributary to the River Ouse being overgrown with wildgrasses and suffuse with an algae bloom, the swan’s white plumage speaks to presence, to voice; its head cusped forward, forever searching. In the image the state of overgrowth speaks of abandon, but the swan’s presence signifies an awareness to a spectrum of experience in which the inner and outer are unified, speaks of a unity with nature, to providence — even solitary providence — amongst the natural. It retains a contemplative, surety of belief. The photograph

plays on this immersion with Romanticism, and signifies the connection of Romantic phenomenology in the secular wild.

The second image in the Woolf series, which is split through the centre by the River Ouse, which, bound by trailing hills, arcs to the right towards a darkening horizon growing faint with distance. The river, which embodies little colour, functions as pure refraction, and in this instance signifies the death site of the author. In reaching to the right, the river entails a striving towards the transcendent, and speaks of the engendered condition, in that the body of water is a metaphoric rib. An anchor through which Woolf finds peace in death, in inclusion, a movement towards the transcendent. In the third Woolf image, that of the sky, the photographer encompasses the ekphrastic, leading the viewer to what might have been the last landscape Woolf bore witness to. Annis writes:

In Virginia Woolf's essay, *On Being Ill*, she suggests that perhaps, in illness, we fall from the army of the upright: 'irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up – to look, for example, at the sky.'

In this quotation I find both duality and longing, an attempt to find an intermediary for our existence, and to placate our desire for the answerless call. For, in her last moments, the uncertainty and answerless questions find compellingly yet fractured resonance in the image of the sky, in the possibility of a thereafter. Whether Woolf would find consolation in religion or not, the darkening cloud cover entails an awareness of landscape which speaks to the condition of the experiential, and situates Woolf as grasping with the secular, the atheistic. The final Woolf image, shot flush with the river, gives a graphic shape to the heart. Just as *Swan Song* (Lennon), *The Dakota – NYC* creates an allusion to form from a closely detailed landscape, the river at the centre of Woolf's story becomes corporeal, its ebbs and currents, its motion and its depth, embody wilderness.



Fiona Annis, (*Benjamin*), *Cross-border route – France/Spain*, 2009 – 201, c-type print, 100cm x 100cm, courtesy of the artist.

## Jamieson and Benjamin

Two images which strike a note of incongruity within the collection are *Swan Song (Jamieson)*, *Eglise du bon-pasteur – Lyon*, which documents the site where the Montreal-based visual artist Shannon Jamieson created her final work *The Distortion of Light* (2005) shortly before her early death in 2006, and *(Benjamin)*, *Cross-border route – France/Spain*, which documents the border crossing that literary critic Walter Benjamin made, fleeing the persecution of the Nazis, before eventually taking his life in Portbou, Catalonia. The photograph titled *Jamieson*, in its stark phanopoeiac horror, is a gripping continuation of the work that Annis, with artist Jamie Ferguson, created in their collection, *The Post-Amen Project* (2007), which combined Jamieson's final body of work with selections of the artist's correspondence, sketch books, and suicide note. In both images, Annis provides the viewer with a glimpse at inescapable horror. In the Jamieson piece this is an urban horror; the photograph shows the shadow of a disembodied and disused cathedral, the acute core of homelessness in the apse of halcyon light. In the photograph on Benjamin, the fear of persecution is resolute, and collapses into the ontological, leaving the viewer stranded — the tress arbitrating the carnivorous distance to safety. This was a safety neither Benjamin nor Jamieson was to find, bridled as it was to their incarnate experience. In the pairing of these two images, what I hoped to stress was the waged incompleteness of the photograph. That each image is accompanied by a certain absence, an inherent loss without which it cannot exist. In that regard, the photograph is a testament to an undisguised history, a witness where no witness could exist. A history which is inaccessible to us, except in the form of the image.



Fiona Annis, “*The After-Image (Swan Songs)*” installation view, courtesy of AKA gallery.

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### No Horizon

In tracing the final act of conceptual artist Jas Ban Ader, Annis seeks to recover the trace of Ader, whose ship “Ocean Wave” was found ten months after his attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean. The crossing was undertaken for Ader’s piece *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975) — Ader’s body was never recovered. Annis’s piece performs a type of contrafact following from Tacita Dean’s *No Horizon* (2000) which was created with Ader as its subject. In *No Horizon*, the engrained, darkened image is scored with asemic writing, a scrawl of unknown intents, the only legible words “no horizon” are etched onto the photograph’s top left corner. In contrast to Dean’s *No Horizon* with its Baroque fulsomeness and torrid eclipsing of the horizon, the waves in Annis’ work are calming, in that her meditation speaks of the ephemerality of the physical, the omniscience of myth. Ader’s disappearance in search of the transcendent centres the aesthetic work on the issues of belief. In Annis’s photograph, tessellated wild grasses bend in the foreground, stretching out over the meditatively calm rhythms of the Atlantic, and reach towards a grey luminous horizon. At the centre of the piece and to the perpetuation of the legend, is the gravid wake of a sunken object: the viewer is witness to loss. The focal point of Annis’s ‘150 miles off the most westerly tip of Ireland’ is the torrid rip of a body vanquished under the waves, the circles undulating out in a collective belief in the legend. Yet the image is grounded by a connection to the land and, in counterpoint to its title, suspends the reader in a current of disbelief, at the edge of a precipice, daring the viewer to imagine Ader’s voyage. Because the image connects the viewer to the cliff-side it provides a tether; the aesthetic work Annis requires of the viewer is an imaginative act, where the passage towards the miraculous is marked by a determined bondage to the earth, facing an end of which we cannot conceive. The photograph attests to the sustained belief in legend and to the landscape as a silent witness, to the inscription of the mythic onto the land. An undifferentiated space in rural Ireland becomes a mythic place when endowed with the value of a life. The land is inscribed and gives visibility to the intimate experience, to the imaginative potential of belief.

The rhythmic sequencing in the image is such that the viewer is required to uphold this belief in Ader’s death at sea, while the pattern of waves which undulate from the sunken object conscript the individual into a succession of events, unimaginable, mythic and eventual. The consequence is that the sullen whorl beneath the swim is a matter of transposition. The punctum is demonstrative of the finality of Ader’s act, yet the photograph reveals the relation between the cause and the long-delayed consequence, a meditation on death instigated through passing time. As a landscape, the image reveals a passive retrospection, in that it calls for the viewer to belatedly establish the moments of time between death and the sea, an enveloping weight punctuated by the elemental trace, the resistance, levity, and displacement of the body of Ader. Annis’s work is contemplative in that it asserts that disbelief compels our understanding. Subtending the image is the question of alterity; where the body is inscribed by the landscape, sculpting its rhythms, the object of our inquiry, the Other, sinks and slowly vanishes. In this way the viewer is abraded with the theos of landscape, in which we view our condition as a contingent release. This is a disappearance which enacts the viewer’s concession to accept disbelief as fundamental to an understanding of the miraculous.

Annis’s work is a testament to loss. It extends to our perception the knowledge gained through the contemplation of death, that life itself is the miraculous. Through Annis’s quietude and solace the viewer becomes a witness to the incarnate world.

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