

## Displacements of Shadow by John Chilver

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Somewhere, somehow there is a parallel universe, a world fairer and wiser than our own. In that world I am an all-powerful curator soon to open *Displacements of Shadow*, a show about the ascent of the cast shadow in art of the nineties and noughties. Although ticket sales will be thin, the show will garner critical acclaim and look good on my resumé. Think of what follows as a possible catalogue essay for the show...

Shadow is what gets subtracted from a field of light. Cast or projected shadows are gaps in light. If these words are eternal, they are also banal. They can, however, be phrased with a historical accent. To think historically of the shadow as subtraction from light, consider the inverse: what if light is the subtraction from shadow? Take Caravaggio's images as example. In his era, shadow for his era was environment. Into that environment light erupted. It interrupted the continuity of the shadow environment. Today's reality is the opposite. Too dirty cheap and cleanly plentiful – and just too *everywhere-all-the-time* – light is the given environment, shadow the interruption.

You needn't imagine light as total environment because George Lucas has already visualised it for us in *THX1138*. In this 1971 film, humans – Donald Pleasance, mostly – inhabit a realm of whiteout, of an endless, featureless, shadowless, and horizonless whiteness. An optical hell, to be sure, it is only at a small remove from the white cube art space or densely supermarkets and malls. Although this hell depends on the snowblindness that the glare produces, the absence of shadow is no mere product of the sheer quantity of light. It results from the multiplication of light sources to infinity. *THX1138* stands for an apparatus central to the aesthe-technics of our time. It emblemizes the forceful light regime that pervades civic spaces, malls, art spaces, and departure lounges. In these public arenas, shadows – and with them, times of day registered in their course – are banished by massively proliferated light sources. Immutable yet eminently practical, bright, shadowless space is seen to be clean and hygienic. What's more, it's a stage for the supermarket's theatre of colour enacted by packaging, product design and labelling. As the human eye requires strong light to perceive colour, falling light levels amount to colourblindness.

Junichiro Tanizaki's 1933 essay *In Praise of Shadows* presents a counterpoint to *THX1138*. There the novelist anticipates the worldless world that *THX1138* will later flesh out. He writes his portent in the mode of a valediction, a farewell to the shadowy Japanese interior architecture he loves and which, as he knows too well, awaits annihilation at the hands of Westernization's homogenising modernization. With considerable pessimism, *In Praise of Shadows* addresses a vital question for Japanese intellectuals of the 1920s and 30s: how can one become modern while remaining Japanese? "White foods [like the tofu that floats in a bowl of miso soup] ... lose much of their beauty in a bright room.... Our cooking depends upon shadows and is inseparable from darkness."<sup>1</sup> In *THX1138*, humans are born into displacement – a usurpation of belonging enacted by the very erasure of shadows. By contrast, for Tanizaki and his generation, immersion in their habitat's shadowspace binds and interpellates the subject as Japanese. Over and over again, Tanizaki stresses Japanese life's dependence upon shadow: "lacquerware decorated in gold was made to be seen in the dark; and for this reason were the fabrics of the past so lavishly woven of threads of silver and gold."<sup>2</sup> And "Of course, the Japanese room does have its picture alcove, and in it a hanging scroll and a flower arrangement. But the scroll and the flowers serve not as ornament but rather to give depth to the shadows."<sup>3</sup> Where the space of *THX1138* is endless, worldless and uninflected, the Japanese interior beloved by Tanizaki is discontinuous, opaque, clustered around scarce light sources. As such, it constructs sequences of intimate pockets of distinct space. As Tanizaki demonstrates, the interiors of Japanese restaurants and houses are calibrated to maximize the play of affective resources – light and dark, texture, taste and scent, clothing and cosmetics – which dovetails into a unity of effect. The ubiquity of electric light will dissolve all of this into the glare of the non-place.

*THX1138* and *In Praise of Shadows* are two faces of the same coin. *THX1138* simply acts out what Tanizaki fears. It does so by multiplying the light sources. Artificial light sources long ago ceased to be single light points. The fluorescent tube stretched the point into a line. These lines now crisscross the mall's and the supermarket's vaulted ceilings, building a homogeneous network of luminescence. At night in brightly lit sports stadiums, players cast about a multiplicity of weak shadows that quickly dissolve into brightness – like melting petals. Similarly, customers cast no full shadows in the

supermarket, where intense cold light bathes and all that chilled meat. Ultimately, Tanizaki and *THX1138* are both concerned with dwelling. They seem to agree that the place of habitation gains its worldliness, its sense of intimacy from shadow. Anthropologist Marc Augé also considers place - as opposed to non-place - in his book *Non-Places*. He cites “[t]he Kabyle house with its shade side and its light side, its masculine part and feminine part,”<sup>4</sup> where dwelling is symbolically and socially marked through shadow.

In late modernist art, the outstanding lover of shadow is Ellsworth Kelly. The artist often apprehended the shadow by photographing it, and then reducing its forms to create paintings. In one well-known instance, which led to the 1951 *La Combe* painting series, he photographed a shadow falling on steps. The steps resemble a concertina that folds the shadow lines across the sequence of planes. Kelly worked like a zoologist of shadow, tracking the shadow to its natural habitats under sunlight, where it was crisp, dense and perfectly formed, clear and distinct: “The things I’m interested in have always been there... like... a rock and its shadow. I’m not interested in the texture of the rock, or that it is a rock but in the mass of it, and its shadow”<sup>5</sup>. In the aesthe-technics of the *THX1138* regime, however, such habitats of shadow are long gone. Whereas Kelly’s photographs fix the single, whole, and clearly defined shadow, the post-*THX1138* realm of brute, imperious light extinguishes these domains. In the mall and the supermarket, as in *THX1138*, shadows are not to be observed. They have to be contrived, staged, and inscribed into the field of light.

With these things in mind, it is striking that art of the last decade has been so preoccupied with the cast shadow. The work of artists as diverse as Tim Noble and Sue Webster, Francis Alÿs, Eulalia Baldosera, Pippilotti Rist, and Lucy McKenzie - to name only a few - upholds a recurrent interest in the projected shadow as such. In their work, these artists rely on a shadow that differs significantly from its casting figure or object. No less importantly, these artists typically present the shadow and its source simultaneously, so that the viewer is compelled to contrast the two. This last point might seem too obvious to warrant critical attention: after all, aren’t shadows and their sources always given simultaneously in experience? Maybe so, but evidently not in art. For instance, the cast shadow in Surrealist and Expressionist imagery is usually separated in time and space from its source. Take Dali’s 1931 painting *The Old Age of William Tell*, or Giorgio de Chirico’s classic paintings of the 1910s, like *The Departure of the Poet*, 1914, or *The Mystery and Melancholy of the Street*, 1914, where the shadow has been uncoupled from its source. Likewise, in F.W. Murnau’s film *Nosferatu*, 1922, the shadow’s drama depends upon its spatial-temporal separation from the vampire. Clearly, something distinct is happening in the shadow art of the 1990s and 2000s, where we find a blunt insistence on the simultaneity of the object and its shadow.

In works like *Instant Gratification*, 2001, Noble and Webster place varied assemblages of abject stuff in mounds and clumps to project shadows that turn out to be silhouettes of the artists themselves. Here, the forthright simultaneity of object and shadow is especially important because their discrepancy is so loud. These shadows are icons without remainder. They have none of the weight or expanse of Kelly’s shadows. Noble and Webster’s trash-mound-shadow-casting device effectively answers certain critical demands made of art now: in particular, the demand for a knowing and manifest performativity, and the bracketing off of substantial materiality. The shadow image’s inherent theatricality fulfils the demand for performativity: the shadow paints us a picture while we wait - and even when we don’t wait. It provides a heightened sense of the image’s contingency. Noble and Webster’s shadow works also organize the viewer and the light regime spatially. The distribution has everything to do with the image’s inherent contingency. The light source has to be located *right here and nowhere else* and the viewer has to stand *roughly here and nowhere else* to view the shadow image. Displaying imageless raw matter - the abject stuff - and pure immaterial icon - the shadows - simultaneously, Noble and Webster manage to both confront us with substantial materiality and to drain it of its materiality in the same gesture.

In Pippilotti Rist’s *Apple Tree Innocent on Diamond Hill*, 2003, a video projection covers a portion of wall with images of a sea’s surface filmed erratically with a roving, and sometimes stumbling hand-held camera. Various objects, including plastic bottles, hang from it, casting shadows upon the projection. This piece relies on two strong contrasts. First, the video image’s expanse and depth stand out against the shadow’s blunt, flattening subtraction of light. There’s also the difference between the intensely chromatic video and the rather achromatic objects and their shadows. Much of what’s at stake here, as Noble and Webster’s work, is what you might call ‘primalism’ - or even (faux) ‘naturalism.’ Charles Sanders Peirce defined the shadow image as an indexical sign. Supposedly, this separates it from other kinds of signs that owe their power to symbolic conventions: the shadow falls where it falls, convention or no convention. The Surrealists’ enthusiasm for shadow images was hinged on its ambiguity as an index. The shadow is ambiguous because it is both a physical event in a causal chain and an icon - both a natural effect and a cultural token. In artworks of the last decade, the shadow

image cuts through the conventional hype the contemporary image's thorough mediation. Sure, our eyes are choking on endless imagery, and every image is always already mediated optically, technically and ideologically... *But* – the shadow image reminds us – there are causal chains beyond culture. Some of them make images in the guise of the shadow. In other words, the shadow offers a trope – the hope – of an image that is not itself mediated. This image depicts what it depicts in a pictorial state of nature. Stop now. Harness those horses. Of course, any claim to determining a sign outside the realm of ideology is itself most likely ideological sleight-of-hand *par excellence*. Nonetheless, if we look at art as symptom rather than emancipation – and if we allow that the symptom holds regardless of its root in the false belief in a natural sign – we then accept that it is precisely this longing to dream dreams of unexpected clearings in the ideological forest that empowers art. Dreaming the dream of the unmediated image, the shadow silhouette is awoken, sooner or later, and no doubt rudely. With *Apple Tree Innocent on Diamond Hill*, it's hard to avoid this terrain of interpretation because, as usual with Rist, the buoyant video image stream is rich with sparkling multicolour pixels. This chromatic excess fetishizes the image's aesthe-technical mediation. Here, cast onto a video image that emphasizes mediation, the shadow is indeed a throwback, a primal depiction: not *immediacy*, but a kind of anti-mediation.

What if anti-mediation did a work of unmasking? You might think that shadow works would enact a deconcealment. In other words, in a spirit akin to Brecht's theatre, they would reveal the image's construction as manifest artifice. With respect to recent shadow works, however, this would be a mistake. Of the artists previously mentioned, only Valldosera works in anything close to this. The business of the simultaneity of shadow and source is important here. Recent art uses the simultaneity of shadow and object not at all in a spirit of Brechtian deconcealment, but more like the rhythmic oscillation of the duck-rabbit figure – “Now it's a duck, now it's a rabbit.” Or in Noble and Webster's work, “Now it's a head, now it's trash.” Neither the duck nor the rabbit has priority: neither is more real than the other. This explains why shadow and source need to be given simultaneously. Valldosera aside, we would have to go as far back as Jonathan Kessler's works of the 1980s to find an artist staging shadows within the dual logic of deconcealment, and of spatial-temporal separation of the shadow from its source.

I began with George Lucas and Tanizaki, who led to the question of the extermination of shadow for the construction of non-places. I propose that we think of the recent art as a response to the shadowless experience of non-place. It seems crucial here that the cast shadow become inescapably bound up with narcissism. We find it – exorbitantly – in Noble and Webster, but also in Lucy McKenzie's portraits like *Keith*, 2001, and *Kerry*, 2001, where centrally placed figures cast vast swollen shadow images of themselves in profile onto the background. Writing around 1914, Freud's then associate Otto Rank argued:

Narcissus is ambivalent toward his ego for something in him seems to resist exclusive self-love. The form of defence against narcissism finds expression principally in two ways: in fear and revulsion before one's own image, as seen in *Dorian Gray*...; or, as in the majority of cases, in the loss of the shadow-image .... This loss, however, is no loss at all .... On the contrary, it is strengthening, a becoming independent and superiorly strong, which in its turn only shows the exceedingly strong interest in one's own self.<sup>6</sup>

While it would be silly to map these ideas neatly onto the themes of my discussion, Rank's words are undeniably suggestive. Isn't it after all rather likely that the experience of non-places as bright and shadowless spaces internalises and mythologizes the shadow? We are far from Ellworth Kelly's strolls through locales whose characters are woven in shadow. For us, the contemporary shadow is a fleeting, almost hallucinatory figure – like a model on a roadside billboard, at once theatrical and fugitive. In the glare of non-place, shadow no longer embeds identities in the way that it did in Tanizaki's interiors. Non-place annihilates the suture of place to identity and history. By the same token, it annihilates the suture of shadow to place. Surviving this alteration is the hysterically narcissistic shadow that we find in Noble and Webster. The same narcissism is present in modulation in Rist's and McKenzie's works.

Francis Alÿs's *Zócalo*, 1999, serves here as a postscript. This video shows the long shadow line cast by a prodigious flagpole in Mexico City's Zócalo Square. A vast Mexican flag flutters above. The real-time video documents twelve hours in the life of the square. While the camera angles do change, the focus remains on the shadow of the flagpole – rather than on the flag or even the shadow of the flag. Beneath a harsh afternoon sun, the pole's shadow becomes a line of refuge. People shelter along its length. Later, at six o'clock, soldiers come, clear the centre of the square, and ceremonially remove the flag. When they depart, the civilians quickly return to re-occupy the flagpole's shadow. This compressed narrative combines the main strands of our discussion. Don't we find here a precise

interweaving of the shadow as dwelling with narcissism? The civilians who hang around in the square dwell in the shadow of the flagpole, in the very subtraction from the sunlight that illuminates the flag. The army removes the flag at 6pm. Why? Because after dusk there'll be no sunlight to fuel its colours. Like a vampire in reverse, the flag must be hidden away before nightfall. For what is nightfall but the earth casting its own shadow on half of itself? Protocol upholds that to leave a flag – especially a flag of state – flying under darkness would be intolerably disrespectful. An even more elaborate etiquette attends the American flag. The narcissism in question is thus the performative, serial narcissism of the institution – in this case the state. In Alÿs's *Zócalo*, it is the shadow that – however feebly – interrupts the domain of state ceremony. It marks the square as a place, and not a pure totem of state. People hang out because of the shadow.

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<sup>1</sup> Junichiro Tanizaki *In Praise of Shadows*, translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker, London: Vintage, 2001, p. 27

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30-31

<sup>4</sup> Marc Augé *Non-Places: Introduction to the Anthropology of Supermodernity*, translated by John Howe, London & New York: Verso, 1995, p. 52

<sup>5</sup> Ellsworth Kelly quoted in Waldman (ed.), *Ellsworth Kelly: A Retrospective*, New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1996, p. 17

<sup>6</sup> Otto Rank *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, translated and edited by Harry Tucker Jr., Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971, p. 73 -74