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A State of Anxiety: Artworks at the Edge of Emotion

Since the mid-1990s we live in what has been variously deemed an ‘age of anxiety’, a ‘risk society’ and a ‘culture of fear’.¹ Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman coined the phrase ‘liquid fear’² to suggest the pervading and pervasive sense of insecurity, uncertainty and profound anxiety that has now – in Bauman’s words – ‘settled inside, saturating our daily routines; it hardly needs further stimuli from outside, since the actions it prompts day in, day out supply all the motivation and all the energy it needs to reproduce itself’³. Such self-perpetuating looping is maintained through a privatization of public fears and a projection of private ones into the public sphere by rendering them a blueprint of daily interaction.⁴ Individual anxieties reflect socio-cultural constructs and vice versa: to various degrees we are all participants, observers and complicit in our actions and responses to the dense perpetuation of the current emotional climate. The increase in anxiety-related disorders, racial and social phobias, economic insecurity, political uncertainty, surveillance and terrorism are only some of the overt symptoms of the pervasiveness of anxiety as the affective currency that dominates our lives and the lens through which we read reality. Bauman’s metaphor of liquidity well conveys the angst in which we live, the constant ‘low-level fear’ that, as he argues, characterizes our apprehensive response to circumstances and environments as they are fueled by the politics of fear.⁵

Psychologically, anxiety is fear without an object. This lack of definition is felt as the distinctive encompassing foreboding and disquiet of Bauman’s ‘low-level fear’ which is more akin to anxiety than fear itself. Rather than a heightened state of alert characteristic of terror, anxiety is a consuming feeling which colors the ways we relate to internal as well as to external environments by determining the reading of what we experience as menacing and imbued with danger, uncertainty or insecurity. Other people, objects and places can become the site of our apprehension or worry. Because it is not attached to any specific object, anxiety does not easily subside when the supposed threat is no longer present but rather it continues diffusely clinging to any sign that looms ominously. Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard regarded anxiety as ‘the dizziness of freedom’: the feeling that comes with the uncertainty of choice as the foundation of modern individual subjectivity.⁶ If emotions are, following Martin Heidegger, an ‘open state’ that denotes ‘the way we find ourselves in

relation to beings and thus at the same time in our relation to ourselves',⁷ anxiety can be considered as an *affect of interpretation*. It determines how we see ourselves in the world and within ourselves.

In *Fear and Contemporary Art* (2012), I argued for the critical significance of art in its understanding of the emotional texture of our time, for an art that moves the audience in diverse and even contradictory ways, for an art that provokes, perhaps shocks, mostly that engages and challenges our responses, making us aware of the disquiet of interpretation that is the blueprint of our daily life. Five years on, the deconstruction, provocation and emotional as well as reflective insight that artists working in different mediums develop to decode and interrogate the dominant cultural climate are still pertinent. Their artworks act as an irritant to established interpretations and the affect that dominates them.

The photographic series *Abundance of Caution* (2013-17) by New York-based German artist based, Sonja Braas is an example of such works. The series explores the seamless shifts and the overlapping of private and public fears that renders anxiety so prevalent. Conceived as a reflection on the wilful exploitation of fear for political and financial gain in the United States, the series 'consists of images that are either built, staged or real, creating changing levels of abstraction and detachment from the images and their content'.⁸ The subjects of Braas's photographs are not overtly threatening yet an uneasiness and disquiet are generated by the context of the images and the interpretation to which they lend themselves. Hence, the image of a container that Braas multiplies into an abstract composition becomes a phobic signifier for ecologic contamination, terrorism, illegal immigration, or even economic downfall. The viewer's reading of the image imbues it with meaning displaying the emotional conditioning caused by anxiety as an interpretative affect. Braas does not include people in her photographs, preferring to focus on the indeterminacy of a condition that spins around the abiding assumption that everything and everyone could be a potential threat as fueled by the politics of fear and the media constructions of events. The elusiveness of the images – which Braas leaves intentionally open to interpretation – presupposes the '*indistinction*' that, according to French philosopher Jacques Rancière, results from the nebulous political use of terror and the abiding assumption of threat that underpins it.⁹ Caution thus implies a default endorsement of such '*indistinction*', feeding the spiraling of anxiety into a vicious circle whereby the one enforces the other justifying the implementation of ever-greater restrictions and control.

Already in 2003, Columbian artist Doris Salcedo built a brick wall inside one of the galleries of the Museum of Contemporary Art at Castello di Rivoli near Turin. The work alludes to the separation between center and margins, pointing to the ideological polarization underpinning the many social, political, economic, racial and cultural divides that foster today's 'state of anxiety'. *Abyss* invites the viewer to position herself in relation to the wall thus taking on an emotional stance in relation to its double connotation as a means of protection but also of separation, a symbol of safety as well as of imprisonment. Such a stance, as in the case of Braas's photographic series, concerns our reading of an object and its ambivalent relation to the exploitation of terror as a means of surveillance and control. Salcedo's work resonates with the prominence that walls and borders have increasingly acquired and points to the kind of engagement of the audience that art's critique of the politics of fear invites to.

A reflective glance at this year's 57th Venice Biennale suggests that, beyond the specificity of the artworks presented, angst is the prevalent undercurrent and a recurrent motif across the Biennale, looming as symptomatic of our time and how we experience the world we live in. In Anne Imhof's *Faust* at the German pavilion, for instance, the artist has built a clinical glass structure on which the audience stands. Underneath young men and women lie in the fetal position or crawl among sinks, cakes of soap, and dog bowls. Some escape out of the structure, others climb up ropes to then fall back into it. They exchange menacing glances with the audience and chant at the top of their voices over a loud soundtrack. Outside the pavilion Imhof has dogs patrolling the perimeter whose barking intensifies the sinister effect of the work. The hour-long performance resonates with feelings of entrapment and violence. Echoes of Germany's twentieth-century history merge with allusions to contemporary geopolitics and today's normalization of fear, making one wonder whether the title refers to Thomas Mann's modernist analysis of power relations in his homonymous novel, rather than the classical character. Los Angeles artist Sharon Lockhart's *Rudzienko* (2013-ongoing) at the Polish Pavilion includes a film installation and photography related to her extensive collaboration with 47 girls (aged between 13-18) resident in the Youth Socio-therapy Centre in the Polish town of Rudzienko. Lockhart's work is inspired by the pioneering work with orphans of the Jewish-Polish pediatrician, author and educator Janusz Korczak who saw the therapeutic potential of creativity for psychological well-being. Migration and the refugee crisis feature prominently in Candice Breitz's and Mohau Modisankeng's evocation of narratives of slavery and enforced migration at the South African Pavilion as well as in many of the other pavilions and events as the defining artists' response to today's state of anxiety.

This is evident in Tracy Moffat's show at the Australian pavilion, *My Horizon*, which features the photographic series *Passage* (2017) and *Body Remembers* (2017) as well as the video installations, *Vigil* (2017) and *The White Ghosts Sailed In* (2017). Characteristically, the artist draws on the history of film and photography to construct implied narratives of horror and disquiet. Hinting at 1940s film noir posters and storyboard clips, the photographs in *Passage* reference the current and highly debated problem of asylum seekers in Australia through a format which, through its overt fictional and constructed scenarios, reminds us of the media's appropriation and collision of time-based mediums with the politics of fear. The migrant and refugee crisis is also the subject of *Vigil*: here close-up stills of Elizabeth Taylor, Julie Christie, James Stewart and other Hollywood stars are juxtaposed to manipulate news shots of a boat crowded with refugees. With their exaggerated expressions as they peer through blinds and binoculars, the actors are the unlikely bystanders of the real drama that fills our screens. The implicit voyeurism of Moffat's work exposes the emotional dynamics that fuel the media exploitation of tragedy for our consumption. Such overt coalescing of fantasy and reality also denotes *The White Ghosts Sailed In* in which the artist addresses the collision of colonialism with Australian indigenous culture as a traumatic wound of history that haunts the present. However, in *Body Remembers*, which alludes to the artist's life and family history, Moffatt suggests the enduring legacy of trauma as an affect that disrupts narratives and is imbued with suppressed violence. Alert to the reciprocity of private and public, in this series Moffatt typically merges fictional and biographical elements through compositional condensation and manipulation of the images to reflect the processes of knowledge making and memory construction. In so doing, she weaves past and contemporary scenarios of trauma which, as the title of series suggests, are embodied.

Today's state of anxiety resides in such ambiguous and yet potentially disquieting scenarios in which, as Imhof's *Faust* implies, old biases, ingrained histories and antagonisms are given new forms. The thematic thread of the Venice Biennale thus appears not so much as a sign of political engagement but rather an implicit recognition of the growing response of the arts to an emotional impasse and the politics of fear that generate it, whether as exposure, reflection, or subversion. A work which deals with the refugee crisis and its traumatic reality is the three-channel video installation *Incoming* (2017) by filmmaker Richard Mosse. The work addresses the indeterminacy of the politics of fear into a haunting drama in which the circulation of emotion that past histories of association generate are turned, so to speak, inside out and reversed. The film is shot not with a traditional film camera but with a long-range thermal camera, which as a surveillance apparatus is a recognised military weapon.

Operated by a computer the camera is designed to detect human body heat from a distance of 30 km and can accurately identify an individual at about 6 km. The thermal radiation detection also enabled Mosse and his team to film missiles landing in Aleppo fired from the Turkish border, military actions in the region, migrant boats and rescue operations. The film tracks two flows of migration, both refugees fleeing from the Syrian conflict and African migrants fleeing from central regions of the continent. Scenes in a rescue camp showing a man praying are preceded by harrowing images of combat, migrants at sea, a rescue operation of a refugee boat at sea, close-ups of body-bags and pathologists removing a small segment of bone from the skull of a girl in order to identify her through DNA testing. Because the camera cannot capture colour, the resulting footage is black on white or white on black so that objects and figures are turned into ghostly silhouettes whilst landscapes appear evanescent. Mosse slows down the footage and modulates it across the three screens of the installation so that frames rhythmically recur and dissolve. In the immersive space that this generates close-ups show facial features, such as the eyes or mouth, as hollow cavities; bodies lose their physical boundaries becoming gleaming negatives. Mosse turns the surveillance apparatus that is the thermal camera into a means of documenting the kind of gaze that western governments cast on war refugees and illegal immigrants while making explicit their complicity in the conflicts that caused the exodus in the first place. 'The camera' – as Mosse himself observes – 'is intrusive of individual privacy, yet the imagery that this technology produces is so dehumanized – the person literally glows – that the medium anonymizes the subject in ways that are both insidious and humane'.¹⁰ Mosse exploits this ambivalence of the medium as being both sinister (an overt apparatus of fear) and at the same time capable, in his hands, of revealing the residual trace of an event that haunts today's politics of fear with its traumatic marks by conveying its emotional texture. In the immersive space of the installation Mosse's glowing images acts as after-imageries of the ones that circulate across the media and digital networks of information, the product of an optic unconscious that unleashes its own ghosts. And in this space, we, as spectator, have to take responsibility for our own gaze and emotional responses to the fragmented narratives and images that we are asked to see testifying to an event that is under threat of disappearing under the enormity of its own visibility. But how does the current state of anxiety affect us individually, in our daily interactions, in what is a micro rather than macro scale of events?

The forthcoming *Big Anxiety Festival of Arts + Science + People* in Sydney aims to address this question through a range of art events, installations and performances. The emphasis of the festival is both on the experience of anxiety-related disorders as well as the

bigger political picture. A particular focus is the use of technology as a means to enhance positive experience within stressful environments, to convey psychological and phobic conditions through augmented reality (as in the case of *Labyrinth Psychotica* by Dutch artist Jennifer Nakary Nikolova), or to explore the ways in which the technological immersion of the digital age interacts with our well-being for better or worse (*Snoopesphere*; *Group Therapy*). Attention is also paid to individual suffering and anxiety-related conditions among diverse cultural groups, including Indigenous ones, as represented by Vicki van Hout's performance poem, Miyarrka Media Collective's *Warwuyun* and others; and anxiety as experienced among Muslim and migrant communities in *We Are All Affected* conceived by artist Kaleb Sabsabi and Nur Shkembi. Here the intersection of the personal and the political suggests a way into racial discrimination and xenophobia as behaviors and emotions that circulates among bodies, in the relational space in-between them where, as sociologist Sara Ahmed argues, 'past histories of association' influence embedded readings of our encounter with the other. Whilst a discussion of these works would be impossible from my displaced position in the UK writing months before the Festival opens, the encompassing scope of the festival on anxiety as a psychological condition but also as a socio-cultural state – what I referred to as an affect of interpretation – remind us of the complex entanglement of the individual experience with current geopolitics and the related use of terror as an emotional currency.

One of the works screened at The Big Anxiety is Shona Illingworth's film, *216 Westbound* (2014). A filmmaker and sound artist, Illingworth has consistently engaged with trauma and amnesia and their broader implications connecting the scale and interconnectivity of individual experience and local situations to broader geopolitics. *216 Westbound* examines the intersections and instabilities between memory, history and subjectivity as they evolve over time and location. The work is based on the experience of John Tulloch, an Australian survivor of the 7/7 London Bombing in 2005, who developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. In Illingworth's film, the affect of the attack as experienced by Tulloch is mapped onto a topography of latent threats that ensue through the collective memory of the event. Images surveying London's skyline and Edgware Road tube station (where the attack on the 216 Westbound train took place) dissolve in scattered flashes of light to convey Tulloch's fractured feeling of 'assembling and disassembling' sensations during the explosion, whilst the space around him compresses and implodes in a sense of 'taking over of the body'. Tulloch recalls how the explosion altered his perception of time and place. The event oppressively closed down on him becoming embodied and trapped in the fractured memories

of trauma. A professor of media studies, Tulloch's photograph emerging from the Underground with his face and hands in bandages featured prominently in the international media. The Sun newspaper used it to promote the 90 days without charge anti-terror bill that Tulloch strongly opposed. He resists the role of victim and loss of agency imposed on him by the media appropriation of his image to support the institutionalization of State powers and control. Illingworth's film suggests a discrepancy between the embodied experience of the traumatic event and its dispersal in the media's collective reconstruction and exploitation. Animation disrupts the narrative flow of the film whilst the disturbing, jarring soundtrack amplifies the emotional charge of the work. *216 Westbound* points to the intersection of individual anxiety with broader geopolitical scenarios of terror and the impossibility of separating the one from the other, suggesting that our daily reality is also imbricated with histories of association and the affect they generate.

In response to today's 'state of anxiety' art thus poses the question of our own interpretation. If anxiety is indeed an affect of interpretation sanctioned by indeterminacy and uncertainty, art offers us the dizziness of different perspectives and the choice of readings, no matter how disquieting, that challenge the blueprint into which we have been emotionally looped. This affective edge may be worth considering. Answers are for us to find.

¹ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, translated by Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992) Brian Massumi, ed. *The Politics of Everyday Fear* (Minneapolis, MN.: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Sarah Dunant and Roy Porter, ed. *The Age of Anxiety* (London: Virago Press, 1996); Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk Taking and Morality of Low Expectations* (London: Continuum, 2002); David. L Altheide, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2002); Frank Furedi, *Politics of Fear: Beyond Left and Right* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005); Paul Virilio, *City of Panic*, translated by Julie Rose (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Peter N. Stearns, *American Fear: The Causes and Consequences of High Anxiety* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006); Daniel Freeman and Jason Freeman, *Paranoia: the 21st-century Fear* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), pp. 1-21.

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 9.

⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. xviii; Brian Massumi, 'Fear (The Spectrum Said)', in *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 13:1, Spring 2005, pp. 31-48.

⁵ Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*, p. xviii.

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, translated by Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 73.

⁷ quoted in Lars Sveden, *A Philosophy of Fear*, translated by John Irons (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 42.

⁸ Artist correspondence with the author, September 2016.

⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, translated by Steven Connor (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), pp. 110-14.

¹⁰ Barbican Gallery, Press Release, February 2017.