

‘Dynamic Stillness’: Imaging Stillness @ The Dead Sea. A Bringing Together of Performance and Heideggerian Philosophy

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Abstract

The Dead Sea project of imaging stillness involves digitally capturing Martin Heidegger’s concept of ‘stillness’ which in ‘The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,’ becomes the ‘stilling of stillness’ and the ‘place of stillness.’ (Heidegger, 2002b, 68) To image dynamic stillness I dwelt forty days and forty nights (June3-July13, 2007) in the Judean Desert, the place of the Dead Sea; this dwelling was hosted at Metzoke Dragot, a desert guesthouse high (11 meters above sea level) in the Judean Mountains. The crucial and enduring part of this dwelling is three daily visual and audio recordings of sunrise, high noon, and sunset. The recordings deploy Gilles Deleuze’s key technique of the time-image (the crystal-image) and three film techniques of the movement-image: the perception image (gaseous perception and liquid perception) and the affection image (any-space-whatever).

Key Words

Stillness, digital philosophy, walking, water-on-in-water, presencing

Dynamic Stillness Resting

The Dead Sea project of imaging stillness involves digitally capturing Martin Heidegger’s concept of ‘stillness’ which in ‘The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,’ become the ‘the stilling of stillness’ and the ‘place of stillness.’ (Heidegger, 2002, 68) I went to a geographical heart of stillness to practice and document the dynamic of stillness. Inspired by Australian aqua artist Sarah Jane Pell’s bringing of deep aquatics to artspace, I retool Heidegger’s action of ‘thinking’ taking it to the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth reaching 417 meters (1,373 feet) below sea level. The Dead Sea is also one of the oldest places in the world.

Time slows in the Judean Desert/Dead Sea. In this resting resides stillness. Rest, ‘the stilling of stillness’ ... is always more in motion than all motion and always more restlessly active than any agitation.’ (Heidegger, 1971, 204) The ‘stilling of stillness’, like ‘the place of stillness,’ ‘gathers in itself what grants unconcealment.’ (Heidegger, 2002b, 68) Unconcealment is ‘thought as the opening of presence’ (Heidegger, 2002b, 69) ‘The quiet heart of the opening is the place of stillness from which alone the possibility of the belonging together of Being and thinking, that is presencing and perceiving can arise at all.’ (Heidegger, 2002, 68) In his mature work ‘Time and Being,’ written as a lecture three and a half decades after Heidegger’s signature work *Being and Time*, ‘Being means the same as presencing.’ (Heidegger, 2002a, 2) ‘To let presence,’ ‘to unconceal,’ ‘to bring into being’ are interchangeable. (ibid., 5)

Art, for Heidegger, is the highest form of techne, that is, of bringing forth. What is brought into being is a truth as something new. In Heidegger’s own words: ‘The truth that discloses itself in the work can never be proved or derived from what went before... What art finds can ... never be compensated for and made up for by what is already at hand and available.’ (Heidegger, 1971, 72-3)

To image the dynamic stillness I dwelt for forty days and forty nights (3June-13July, 2007) in the Judean Desert, the space of the Dead Sea; this dwelling was hosted at Metzoke Dragot, a desert

guesthouse high (11 meters above sea level) in the Judean Mountains. Metzoke Dragot is located on the only entrance to the Judean Desert from the Dead Sea area.

The crucial part of this dwelling is four performative activities: daily video visual and audio recordings of sunrise, Dead Sea water at high noon , and sunset and the action of walking on water in the water of the Dead Sea. The later action is a homage to the performative work of Aquanaut Dr. Sarah Jane Pell.

Philosophical Methodology: Taking Deleuze and Heidegger

‘Dynamic Stillness’ combines the *techne* of digital photography with the handicraft of philosophical thinking, allowing the artistic endeavor to bring into being a materiality of the concept of stillness. *Techne*, as used by Heidegger via the Greeks, refers to ‘letting something appear, within what is present’ (Heidegger, 1971, 157).

It is my commitment that radical new theory must operate in fidelity with previous thinkers work redefined, rethought and reworked on a number of planes at once in order to produce a new singularity. Taking, then, is used as developed by Gilles Deleuze, that is, taking a philosopher from behind, relocating his/her philosophical concepts in a way that does violence to the original thought but not so much violence that it eradicates a connection with the original thought. (Deleuze, 1991, 8)

Philosophy, says Deleuze, is the activity of creating concepts; its aim is to take us from the perceptible to the imperceptible. Deleuze holds that a concept is always signed by its philosopher-creator. In his works on cinema, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze shows that philosophical concepts are like sounds, images and colors. These are the images of thought.

Taking the radical claim of Deleuze that concepts are like sounds, images and colors as offering a possibility for performative philosophical practice and taking Heidegger’s repeated claim that the artist functions ‘almost like passageway ... for the work to emerge’ (Heidegger, 1971, 39), the project of dynamic stillness simply allows the camera as tool and the *techne* of digital photography to let stillness appear.

‘Dynamic Stillness’ deploys the key technique of the time-image (the crystal-image) and three film techniques of the movement-image: the perception image (gaseous perception and liquid perception) and the affection image (any-space-whatever). Each repetitive time duration shot (between 2 minutes 40 seconds and 3 minutes 10 seconds) of sunrise and sunset captures the same with a difference crystal-image of the sun’s singular daily movement. The actual image is the recorded daily event that recalls the virtual image of past and future sunrise and sunset. The direct image of time captured again and again over a duration of time, 40 days to film the repetitive shot, shapes time as a two-way mirror that splits the present into two directions, ‘one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past. Time consists of this split, and it is ... time, that we see in the crystal.’ (Deleuze, 1989, 81) What is let presence in the time-image of the two events of daily singularity is stillness as the actual/virtual core of time.

Sunrise and sunset are shot stationary from two selected vantage points high in the Judean Mountains above the Dead Sea. Sunrise is shot from a mountain cliff at Metzoke Dragot; sunset from the top of a mountain at Wadi Darga. Sunrise and sunset are perception images ‘from the point of view of another eye ... the purest vision of a non-human eye, of an eye which would be in things.’ (Deleuze, 1986, 81) This is the anonymous, unidentified viewpoint of the camera, what

Deleuze calls gaseous perception, the pure vision of the non-human eye (ibid, 80-82) in which the videographer and the camera function as a medium for the object, facilitating the vision of matter. The daily high noon shot of Dead Sea water, 90 seconds in duration, combines the key feature of the affection image, 'any-space-whatever,' with a second defining aspect of the perception image, liquid perception. Images flow together in liquid perception. '[W]ater is the most perfect environment in which movement can be extracted from the thing moved, or mobility from movement itself.' (Deleuze, 1986, 77) The shot of Dead Sea water is taken from 'any-space-whatever' in the water of the Dead Sea. A handheld camera 30 second motionless shot of the water's stillness (extracting non-movement from the thing, water, moving) is combined with a 60 second walking-in-water meditation shot. The latter mobility from movement juxtaposes the motion of the Dead Sea with the movement of the camera capturing what Heidegger identifies as the resting of stillness.

These film techniques developed from Deleuze are used to reveal Heidegger's unsigned concept of stillness concealed in his signed concept of Being. Human beings experience Being in time and in the stillness of time. The resting of stillness in the repetitive events of sunrise, noon and sunset brings forth the simplicity of Being.

Heidegger says, 'Every thinker thinks one only thought.' (Heidegger, 1968, 51) The thinker's body of work 'thinks the thinker's one only thought.' (ibid, 51) Heidegger's one only thought recurrent through his body of work is obvious: 'What is Being?' What is less commonly emphasized in Heidegger's work is his invitation to pursue the unthought: 'What is unthought in a thinker's thought is not a lack inherent in his thought. What is *un*-thought is there in each case only as the *unthought*. The more original the thinking, the richer will be what is unthought in it. The unthought is the greatest gift that thinking can bestow. (ibid, 76)

What is unthought in Heidegger's signed concept Being is the unsigned concept of stillness. Heidegger, borrowing from Taoist thinking, hints at a way to think the unthought in his reformulation of two lines of chapter fifteen of the *Tao Te Ching*: 'Who can be still and out of the stillness, through it, bring (move) something along the way so that it becomes manifest?' (Heidegger, 1964, 441) Perhaps it is Heidegger's way of doing philosophy that more clearly provides insight into stillness as the way in which some thing or thought can show itself or be unconcealed.

The Way of Doing Stillness (in the Black Forest Mountains and in the Judean Desert Mountains)

Heidegger's way of doing philosophy has been disclosed in the recent work *Heidegger's Hut*. What is particularly relevant for the endeavor of 'Dynamic Stillness' is the relation between thought and place, thinking and dwelling, that constitute the physical landscape of Heidegger's work-world. Heidegger's hut remains high in the Black Forest mountains of southern Germany at Todtnauberg. Heidegger spoke of his philosophical work as a manifest part of the mountains. 'He located himself as a susceptible scribe, suggesting that philosophy suspended the landscape in words through him almost without agency.' (Sharr, 2006, 2) The philosopher, like the artist, functions as a passageway for thinking and writing. In 'Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?' Heidegger explains:

On a steep slope of a wide mountain valley in the southern Black Forrest, at an elevation of 1150 meters, there stands a small ski hut. ... This is my work-world, ... Strictly speaking I myself never observe the landscape. I experience its hourly changes, day and night, in the great comings and goings of the seasons. The gravity of the mountains and the hardness of their primeval rock, the slow and deliberate growth of the fir trees, the brilliant, simple splendor of the meadows in bloom, the rush of the mountain brook in the long autumn night, the stern

simplicity of the flatlands covered with snow – all moves and flows through and penetrates daily existence up there, and not in the forced moments of “aesthetic” immersion or artificial empathy, but only when one’s existence stands in work. It is the work alone that opens up space for the reality that is these mountains. The course of the work remains embedded in what happens in this region.... Solitude has the peculiar and original power of not isolating us but projecting our whole existence out into the vast nearness of the presence [*Wesen*] of all things. (Heidegger, 1981, 27-28)

Heidegger considered the philosophy of Todtnauberg to be that of forest, brooks, rocks, mist, meadows, and winds. In addition to writing, part of his daily routine was mountain walking and drawing water from the well. Water was drawn from a spring which flowed from the Danube. Heidegger had a composite six point and five point three dimensional wooden star fitted to the well. The star possibly combines both Judaic and Christian symbolism. Sharr notes: ‘Whether there was any connection intended between the philosopher’s star and the star of David is a contentious point given [Heidegger’s] political history, not least because the star represented victim-hood in postwar Germany.’ (Sharr, 2006, n57, 121) Heidegger claimed that this star stood for the wandering thinker.

I have chosen place similar and very different from Heidegger’s dwelling to engage his unsigned concept of stillness. The dwelling, Metzoke Dragot, is a rustic guest-house high above the Dead Sea in the Judean Mountains of Palestine. Metzoke Dragot is placed on the edge of a cliff facing the coastline of the Dead Sea. Metzoke Dragot is located on the only entrance to the Judean Desert from the Dead Sea area. The Judean Mountains in this area are just above sea level; the Dead Sea is 417 meters below sea level. The location and place were chosen based on the following considerations: mountains, desert rather than forest, still dead water rather than running spring water; a resting ‘sea of salt’ with significant healing qualities. The physical elements penetrating thought are desert, sand rock, caves, air, high oxygen content, sun, lowness, and salt water. The Dead has ancient geological history being part of the Great Rift Valley formed some three million years ago in Miocene time, and ancient human history that traces back to the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorra in the time of Abraham. Mount Sodom sits on the southeast shore of the Dead Sea. Similar and very different to the five/six point star Heidegger had fitted to the well, I have a large yellow star of David tattooed to my the left chest above the heart; this also is the mark of a wandering thinker.

Heidegger encountered the presencing of Being through the stillness of a philosophy of the mountains; ‘Dynamic Stillness’ encounters the presencing of Being through digital philosophy of the desert and of water. The daily video recordings are complimented with the practice of walking in the desert, half day and full day treks in the desert, an overnight desert trek and walking on water in water.

Walking on Water in Water

The aquabatic work of Sarah Jane Pell in which she thinks, writes and performs a new aqueous philosophy brings forth insights into stillness in Being. Aquabatics translates as ‘walking with water.’ Aquabatics, is proposed by Pell, ‘as a noun and a verb,’ a theoretical concept and praxis; the aquabatic body is a oneness of the human body and a body of water. In a sense, the aquabatic body exists as a being-in-Being and Being-in-being. (Pell, 2005, 168) Pell grounds her performances in the process of becoming aquabatic: a oneness of the surrender and concentration of the human biological body of water as water towards the body of water as water; or simply water as water. (ibid, 83) Heidegger cautions: ‘What is strange in the thinking of Being is its simplicity.’ (Heidegger, 1964, 263) Pell proposes Being Aquabatic in which the aquatic self relinquishes that which drives western philosophy: the desire to know coupled with the impulse to ask, to question, and instead exists ‘like water in water.’ Pell presents an aquatic animality informed and

conditioned by diving techne as the performative state of being for an artist aquanaut. She terms this state of being 'walking with water.'

In a number of performance pieces Pell has done variations of walking-with-water. 'Trans>Port' (2004) involved total body submersion in a 12m x 2m x 1 Aqua Super tank filled with 17,000lts of seawater. Pell performed 'Trans>Port' over three movements in one evening; 20:00, 15:00 and 25:00 minutes in duration. The first movement was viewed live with live sound broadcast. The second and third movements were performed live in silence with the sound and vision capture broadcast via live video feed to an internal screen system and projected externally. Pell performed five John Cage performance instructions that included 'Water Walk' and 'Water Music.' (Pell, 2005, 103-113) In 'Hydrophilia' (2004) Pell submerged her head in a custom-fitted oyster diving helmet. The helmet was sealed water tight at the neck and filled with 30lts of saline. Pell's eyes were uncovered and her nose unpegged. Air was drawn through the mouth from the surface via a small umbilical. Her breathing was amplified and filled the artspace. Due to the weight of the oyster helmet, suspended on a wire rope, Pell remained relatively stationary at a perch support. In the second staging of 'Hydrophilia,' which I witnessed, Pell performed 'Hydrophilia' for 111 minutes. (ibid, 114-122)

Pell brings forth the dynamic of stillness in her work, stillness through motion and stillness through breath. Following Pell's way of being as water with water, I daily entered the Dead Sea merging as an active intra-haptic boyant system. For forty minutes submerged to my neck and suspended in liquid space, held by the buoyancy of the water, I Walked on Water In Water 417 meters below sea level.

Time Presencing Stillness

Time: 'It which gives Being, which determines Being as presencing and allowing-to-presence[.]' (Heidegger, 2002a, 10) Time, the unity of past, present and future, is (re)presented in terms of the now. The now of the daily event of sunrise and sunset allows-to-presence 'the no-longer-now' of past sunrises and sunsets and 'the not-yet-now' of future sunrises and sunsets. (ibid, 11)

Taking and relocating Heidegger's claim 'that philosophy suspended the landscape in words through him almost without agency' from the forest to the desert; replacing 'words' with sounds, images, and colors; the imaging of sunrise, sunset and restless sea water brings forth singularity within repetition of color, sound and image. Taking Heidegger's observation that it is 'the place of stillness which gathers in itself what grants unconcealment to begin with' (Heidegger, 2002, 68) and pursuing this through Deleuze's technique of the crystal image, the direct image of time, captured again and again over a duration of forty, simply allows stillness to unconceal and presence itself. Similarly, Deleuze's techniques of the affection image and the perception image put to work in the water of the Dead Sea over a duration of forty 90 second shots, presented as a succession of restless images, sounds and colors, allows to presence a no-longer-now of past stilling of stillness and a not-yet-now of future stilling of stillness, letting appear the in-motion and restlessly active dynamic of stilling.

Presenting Dynamic Stillness

Forty singular 2:40-3:10 minute images, sounds and colors of sunrise are presented in one continuously looping film sequence; forty singular 2:40-3:10 minute sunsets are presented in a second continuously looping film sequence; and forty 90 second images, sounds and colors of the water of the Dead Sea are presented in a continuously looping film sequence. The three sequences are shown simultaneously. The solicited affect is simultaneous stillness and agitated restlessness. For the CADE presentation, the three film sequences are presented at five times the speed of the real time in which they were shot; this will add to agitated restlessness performing a stilling of stillness and presencing a place of stillness in live time and in 'the office of the image,' (Bergson, 1988, 20) or body of the viewers. This performative occurrence is premised on Henri Bergson's understanding of the relationship between the human body which 'acts like other images' in the material world. (ibid, 19) For Bergson the body as image and external images operate as a

movement feedback loop: external images transmit movement to ‘the image I call my body’; this body gives back movement to external images. (ibid. 19)

A real time sample of Sunset June 9-22 can be downloaded from http://rapidshare.com/files/41917449/Sunset_June_9-22.mov. It can also be viewed on <http://blip.tv/file/301597> and it is viewable @ <http://fastbodies.livejournal.com/>

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Biographical Notes

Shannon Bell is a performance philosopher who lives and writes philosophy-in-action.

Her five books include *Reading, Writing and Rewriting the Prostitute Body* (Indiana University Press 1994, Japanese trans.2000), *Whore Carnival* (Semiotext 1995), *Bad Attitude/s on Trial*, co-author (University of Toronto Press, 1997), *New Socialisms* co-editor (New York: Routledge 2004), and *Fast Feminism* (forthcoming).

Bell is currently researching ‘extreme’ science and art for a book *Fast Bodies*; this research is funded by Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

Bell is an associate professor in the York University Political Science Department, Toronto, Canada. She teaches postcontemporary theory, fast feminism, sexual politics, cyber politics, identity politics and violent philosophy.