

Comedy of Deviation: On Tamar Getter's *Hēliotropion* Cycle

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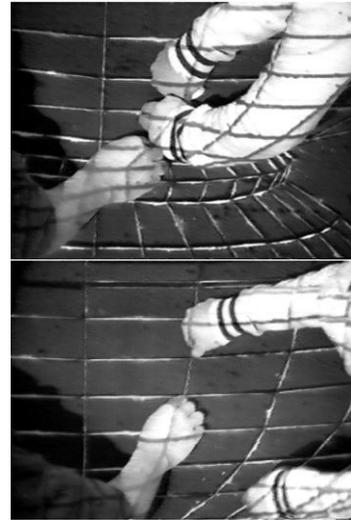
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“Beauty is a system of transition, a passage or a state of what is not chaotic just yet, an approximation to chaos and a deliberate exposure on the part of the system, but the structure remains intact.”ⁱ (Friedrich Cramer, chaos theorist)

More recent psycho-philosophical theories no longer understand sublimation—described by Sigmund Freud as the “root cause” of art—solely as substitutive gratification or distraction from the sexual, describing it instead as a “higher level of nonresolution.”ⁱⁱ What remains unresolved in it is a permanent conflict between a law or an ideal and its realization, a conflict that manifests itself in any “too much,” “too little,” “too early,” “too late.” When Tamar Getter spends two years drawing wallowing horses and compiling the material in a major cycle, that is at its heart a movement whose performance is propelled by this irresolvability, by the impossibility of final accomplishment, and that keeps displacing the object of depiction (in this instance, primarily horses). It is hard to imagine a work of art more obsessive in its quest for an ideal, a perfect inner logic, or more exuberant, precisely because of this quest, in its celebration of deviations, aberrations, and discontinuities. Getter’s program is to exalt error, discrepancy, distortion as an ideal condition. Hers is the “song of an idiot,”ⁱⁱⁱ as she characteristically describes her work. The motifs are not chosen arbitrarily; they are determined by criteria other than that of representational concreteness. They are occasions to act out this crucial trajectory between mastery and failure, between order and chaos, between structure and event—a trajectory which Getter’s paintings and drawings stage in exemplary fashion, allowing for a manifestation of what, in the world of everyday life, is subject to efforts at avoidance, ritualization, or resignification: the irresolvability of contradictions is neither practicable nor pragmatic, even though their nonresolution perpetually insists. Lapses, slips of the tongue, accidents, dreams bear witness to this insistence. In Getter’s work, however, far from being involuntary, they are methodical. The following reflections are an attempt to probe the dimension of this method.

The necessity of the ideal

Tamar Getter's art has often been preoccupied with ideal bodies that she physically internalizes through rote memorization. She reproduces these bodies wearing a blindfold or using mechanical procedures such as chalk lines—strategies that obstruct any identity of artist's hand and monitoring eye in the pursuit of the correct or adequate. That is especially evident in her studies of bodies captured with geometric perfection such as Paolo Uccello's Communion chalice (1450) or Andrea Mantegna's dead Christ from the *Lamentation* (ca. 1480), two bodies Getter confronts with each other in *Chalices and Corpses* (2010). They are



figures of supreme artistic regularity: In the case of Mantegna's Christ, not only the perspective perfectly constructed, the vantage point the artist has chosen also results in drastic foreshortening that engenders a sense of almost intimate



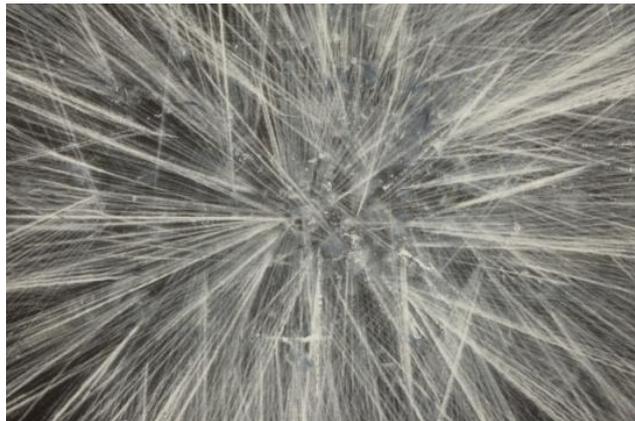
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proximity between beholder and dead body. Uccello's chalice, meanwhile, is not a mere exercise in mathematical construction but, on a symbolic level, implies a glorification of the divine disposition of the world, the "eternal dream of an intelligible, measurable, lucid, applicable and total order."^{iv} Facing the anatomy of such a virtually perfect body ("virtually" because Getter, in the course of her studies on Uccello, detected several imperfections) with her own body, the artist notes, is utterly impossible. And yet that is exactly what she undertakes to do.



Unlike these earlier works, *Hēliotropion*, a cycle of six large-format panels and almost three hundred drawings, starts with the polar opposite: under the aegis of history painting and the artistic representation of political might (from Leonardo da Vinci to Eugène Delacroix), horses were conventionally rendered as such “ideal bodies,” but the bodies of Getter’s animals are far from ideal. The horses in *Hēliotropion* are unsuitable as accessories of power; they are neither noble companions nor tortured creatures, instead allowing themselves to be seen in an instant of abandon in which, as flight animals, they are defenseless and vulnerable—though to characterize them in such terms is surely already to anthropomorphize them. What the works show, then, is not horses (in the representational sense sketched above) but the moment of an animal *jouissance*: horses wallowing in the mud that are losing their composure, their contours. Gaunt legs are suspended in mid-air, heavy bodies look gauche, genitals are exposed. This moment of ostensible awkwardness, which precludes any relationship between man and animal, is an expression of absolute self-enjoyment. Getter cedes the pictorial space to, and seeks to reproduce, the momentum of this abandonment. The black grounds in *Hēliotropion*, executed in opaque tempera, are flat surfaces and yet possessed of a peculiar depth, defining a distinctive pictorial space, a placeless place out of time. It lets depicted objects encounter each other that, by classical principles of order, have nothing in common: horses in careening outlines, sunflowers in altogether sixteen different variations, vintage school desks floating in the pictorial space. The interrelations between them hew to no naturalist logic, no “natural” regime of scale, no nomenclature, no narrative, but solely to the logic of an organization immanent to the picture. Six large panels varying this constellation form a closed space, seemingly severing any contact with the outside world. The panels establish their own internally fractured time-space: on the one hand, a black infinity opens up; on the other hand, the black bears too many traces of painterly treatment, is too overtly a fabricated space, to be misread as a transcendental dimension.^v The pictorial spaces of the individual panels, meanwhile, are not governed by any unifying principle, hybridizing different artistic modes of representation and spatial orders; this implies not the dismantling of all laws of construction but merely their dissemination. Tables depicted in perspective construction, for instance, are exempt from gravity, floating upside down or tilted to one side, and about the ornamental flatness of the spiraling flowers. The horses are rendered at the moment of the dissolution of all contour, whereas their

counterpart, the sunflower, bears the imprint of a strict regularity: the organization of its disk is governed by the Fibonacci series, a principle of natural growth that may be found in many plants, including thistles, which appeared in Getter's previous cycle, *Horse's Tail* (2012). There, one object



the thistle's pattern was combined with was a 16-foot tangle of lines no longer recognizable as a horse's tail, another case of an excessively sprawling painterly and graphic logic that had edged out all representation. In



Hēliotropion, too, it is not the sunflower as a motif that is of interest but its specific organizing principle, which Getter transforms into a different order. On one of the panels, colors selected more or less at random—rather than the superimposition of concave and convex lines—accentuate the spiral shape of the arrangement of buds on the disk. Elsewhere, the sunflower was fabricated using a chalk line, emphasizing the tectonic quality of its pattern. In yet other versions, the flower has dissolved into a vaguely identifiable spiral eddy. One and the same object, that is to say, undergoes a series of painterly, graphic, constructive, technical treatments.

The body's standpoint

The visual chaos of colliding elements is inspired by the contemporary world. For *Hēliotropion*, Getter spent weeks studying YouTube videos and video stills of wallowing horses and made herself watch footage of tsunamis, disasters that claim lives and whirl

objects around. The school desks are a reference to the barricades that figure in street fighting between the Israeli military and Palestinians. The artist is interested in scenes of turmoil and chaos, but not as a challenge to mimesis, not with a view to their political significance, not even as an expression of a personal worldview. Nor is the concurrence between these objects—horse, table, sunflower—a surrealist conceit. It is, rather, a kind of chaos that nonetheless remains determined by rules; it is “chaosmotic,” to use the term the philosopher Gilles Deleuze coined to describe the conjunction of extremes: chaos and cosmos.

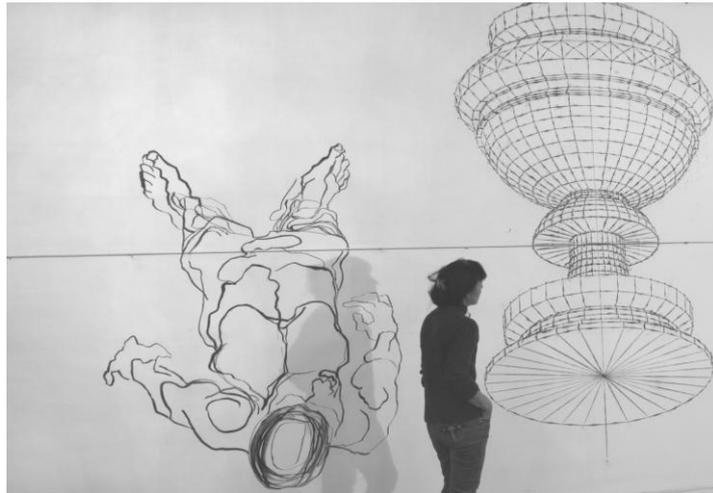
Metamorphosis is generally regarded as an optimistic trope; chaosmosis, by contrast, is a figure of nonresolution. Metamorphosis lets a victim of oppression or persecution escape danger at the moment of greatest plight by undergoing transformation. Elias Canetti has labeled this trope of eluding distress and turning into someone or something else—familiar from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, but also from Walt Disney films—“flight transformation.”^{vi} In chaosmosis, on the other hand, no transformation takes place; instead, something is exposed in its irresolvability. To think in chaosmotic terms means to reduce “forms to relations of forces and processes of concatenation and re-concatenation.”^{vii} Getter’s panels engender such relations of forces and concatenations of elements—encounters between extremes in a pictorial universe that balances on the verge of chaos, its lurching lines ultimately reined in by an order. “While there is no golden mean or proper balance between extremes, still one is enjoined to find the missing measure within measurelessness itself, and to affirm not chaos but an order-within-chaos or an equalized disequilibrium, what Deleuze calls, after Joyce, a ‘chaosmos.’”^{viii}

Many of Getter’s works arrange precisely this instant of confrontation: an order, divine or cosmic, clashes with chaos and dissipation. Similar moments recur in *Hēliotropion*, prompting Getter to conceive of painting and drawing as “feats,” as the persistently repeated attempt to draw this one “thing”: wallowing horses. The point is to demonstrate that the one “thing” does not exist, cannot exist, however insistent the pursuit of it. Repetition reveals that the objective is not perfection but the pursuit itself and its event quality: not one panel but six, not one drawing but three hundred, articulating the continually renewed endeavor to grasp this one thing, an endeavor that never succeeds and structurally *cannot* succeed. Psychoanalysis has given the name *object a* to the thing that is this movement’s destination. That is why Getter’s creative process has nothing to do with serialism as an artistic category; rather, it grows out of the movement of repetition. The latter, Deleuze has argued, “belongs to humour and irony; it is by nature transgression or exception, always revealing a singularity opposed to the particulars subsumed under laws [...]”^{ix}

So repetition whose objective is perfection, i.e., virtuoso mastery and accomplishment, as in acrobatics and other fields, is not repetition in the Deleuzian sense. As the highest form of body control, it addresses itself to a potential admirer, an applauding other; the acrobat seeks to please by putting perfection on display in the performance of a feat he or she has rehearsed. That is a mode Getter is familiar with; as a child, she trained as a ballet dancer. In her visual art, by contrast, she resolutely implicates the standpoint of her own body with all its materiality, its capacities and limitations. The body is the crux where the ideal is refracted, where all attempts at accomplishment founder, opening up an insight into the comical or comedy. What Deleuze wrote about Francis Bacon, Samuel Beckett, and Franz Kafka is true also of Getter: “In the very act of ‘representing’ horror, mutilation, prosthesis, fall or failure, they have erected indomitable Figures, indomitable through both their insistence and their presence. They have given life a new and extremely direct power of laughter.”^x

Comedy, then, does not mean that something or other is especially funny, that there is a joke hidden in the picture, or that Getter’s pictorial figures are droll—although many of her works do feature grotesque figures. It is, rather, a matter of the structural constitution of comedy, of the insight into fundamental questions of desire and enjoyment that comedy vouchsafes. The philosopher Alenka Zupančič has argued that comedy is defined not by an individual’s coming into conflict with a structure—that would be the schema of tragedy—but, rather, by “subjectivized points of the structure itself. They are the sensitive, problematic points of the structure running wild [...] This is why exaggeration and intensification are such important comic techniques.”^{xi} A structure running wild: the phrase aptly describes what is “going on” in Getter’s pictures. The subjectivized points of a structure are those aspects in which an individual incorporates a law, an ideal, and is helplessly bound to misapprehend it in acting it out. Such action cannot be avoided simply by relinquishing ideals: idealization, law, and structure underlie the socio-psychological premises of human life—if we think of language, or of any process of psychological idealization—a life that is tossed about between finitude (body) and infinity (law). Zupančič has framed this in the paradox of a physics of the infinite: “It is precisely this physics of the infinite that situates comedy on the ground of true materialism, exempts it from all forms of spiritualism, and also gives it its contrareligious thrust—not in any simple sense of static opposition, or of mocking the infinite Other, but, rather, by deploying this infinite Other as the very material Real of human life as such.”^{xii} That is why it would be a mistake to contend that Getter is simply mocking mastery. That form of irony would amount to a mere reaffirmation of the infinite and unattainable other. It is to the latter that acrobatics is addressed. Getter’s artistic practice, by contrast, consists in a

dislocation of the infinite other, of the ideal, into the material real. The primary scene of this deployment is the body—it is not by accident that Getter’s art witnesses the encounter between ideal bodies and the artist’s own body. The comic element comes into play where the



ideal or ambition is crossed by any materiality. “Comedy is materialistic because it gives voice and body to the impasses and contradictions of this materiality itself.”^{xiii} Nothing proceeds “smoothly” in this world, as the artist demonstrates with the oversized Mantegna drawings in *Chalices and Corpses*, which vastly exceed their physical reach, as well as the incomprehensible movement of the horses in *Hēliotropion*, whose magnification to triple life size necessitates enormous physical strain and contortions before the canvas. If one were to film Getter at work, the footage would presumably show the diametrical opposite of Picasso’s virtuoso technique

celebrated in Henri-Georges Clouzot’s *Le mystère Picasso*.

Zupančič distinguishes between subversive and conservative comedy. The latter, she writes, ultimately leaves everyone and



everything in their places and merely validates our sense of a bad finitude, of ‘bare’ humanity. Conservative comedy, at bottom, is not comedy at all. “If humans were ‘only humans(s)’ (and life ‘only life’), if the human equation indeed added up so neatly and with no remainder, *there would be no comedy*.”^{xiv} Subversive comedy, on the other hand, short-circuits the concrete (the body) with the intellectual (the ideal). The human, she argues, manifests itself not in the avowal of what is “only” human but in those moments when someone, in eruption, extravagance, and excess, seeks to reach beyond himself or herself. Such “beyond-oneself” is indeed constrained by the limitations incumbent upon all materiality, but that does not imply

that it is purely about failure or misapprehension. The latter constitute only one side of comedy: “Comedy as a genre is not simply about failure, about the hero’s ludicrous but stubborn, ‘mechanical’ attempts to accomplish something he is absolutely not up to”^{xv}—or as Zupančič puts it elsewhere, “a subject is confronted with this repetition when an action is absolutely too big for her.”^{xvi} These observations resonate with Getter’s painting. She seeks to capture the horse’s most impossible position and to reproduce this movement several times, to reproduce it, moreover, in triple life size (“when an action is absolutely too big for her”), obstinately insisting on repeating, again and again and in positively mechanical fashion, the same gesture that is never “right.”

The other side of comedy is that it does not, negatively, re-present misapprehension. “Instead, it functions in the background of something that has always-already succeeded, and draws its power from there [...] Comedy moves broadly in the register of success, not in the register of failure [...] It does indeed presuppose a realization [...], and does not consist simply of vain and endless attempts to accomplish it.”^{xvii} If it did, Getter would not fill large to enormous spaces with her work, would not make and exhibit three hundred drawings of horses. The size of the gesture, that is to say, is by no means irrelevant; anything smaller would not do. Her art displays this comedic side of misapprehension, though as an eruption. “If the essential task of the true is to negate, this is because error *affirms* in the profuse plenitude which is its preserve outside of time and in all times.”^{xviii}

Getter does not stop at the negative subjectivation effected by an ideal she cannot but fail to achieve—that would be a relapse into tragedy. Conscious of the law, she endeavors to break free of it. She is the laughing virtuoso of inevitable futility. “Too much,” “too little,” “too early,” “too late”: affirming these, taking this risk—therein lies artistic command as an act of the affirmation of idiocy.

ⁱ Fritz Cramer, quoted in Stefan Hesper, *Schreiben ohne Text: Die prozessuale Ästhetik von Gilles Deleuze und Félix Guattari* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1994), 160.

ⁱⁱ Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass, and London: MIT Press, 2016), 10. This higher level of nonresolution, it should be noted, does not exclude sexuality.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tamar Getter in an email to the author, March 12, 2016.

^{iv} Tamar Getter in “Sarah Breitberg-Semel interviews Tamar Getter about Boulevard Central and The Asiatic Company Building 03”, in *Tamar Getter: Can You Draw a Circle Freehand?* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2009), 33–62, quote p. 59.

^v With regard to the question of the transcendental compare, for instance, the deep black grounds in the seventeenth-century still lifes of Sebastian Stoskopff, which, in the framework of Netherlandish painting, are endowed with religious significance (though one informed by Protestantism).

^{vi} Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (New York: Viking Press, 1962), 343.

^{vii} Hesper, *Schreiben ohne Text*, 187.

^{viii} Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure*, 87.

^{ix} Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 5.

^x Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 44.

^{xi} Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008), 196.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 50.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 47.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 49.

^{xv} *Ibid.*, 158.

^{xvi} *Ibid.*, 157.

^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 158.

^{xviii} Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Original Experience," in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 209–48, quote p. 243.