

Multiple Gravities by Matthew Newton

"You will return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return."



VID: Hal kills Frank, 2001: A Space Odyssey

Space Exploration and Introduction

According to the old testament adage, we are destined to be pulled back into the earth. Knowing it to be our ultimate tomb, we search out ways to flee its attraction. For the astronaut lost in space, for example, there is no returning to the dust. It is a most terrifying idea, to lose any chance of return to the gravity of the known world. And yet, our appetite for exploring outward, for fleeing dependence and submission to our ultimate, seems insatiable.



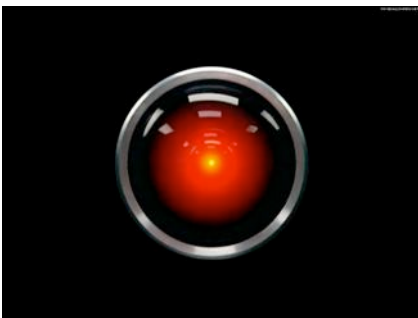
IMG: Earth in foreground, moon in background

Under the influence of the earth's gravity, we sense our smallness and our death and we look outward for another gravity and another home. The moon, that nightly doppelganger and reciprocating neighbor, is close enough to inspire our fantasies.



IMG: First photo of the Earth and the Moon together

Seen together by us, they are a double portrait of the place where we live and die and the possibility of another place, the possibility of escaping gravity's death.



IMG: Hal's eye

But our fantasies of escape are thus far mostly nightmares as no person has ever been lost to space so that accounting for burning in the Earth's atmosphere, every human has returned to the dust. Our expensive and escapist efforts evidence our lack of commitment to either stay completely or leave completely. We are caught between multiple gravities.



IMG: Breast

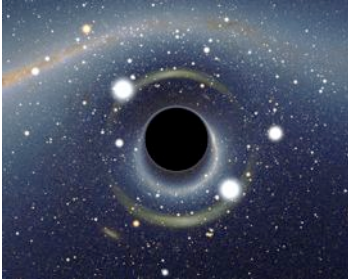
Gravity is a thing assumed. Present to the point of being forgotten, taken for granted, built around, ultimate, god-like. Mostly we ignore the idea of gravity as it is so thoroughly written into the structure of our bodies and daily functions. Indeed, since we are made of matter, we too contain gravity. We understand gravity equally as an actual physical phenomenon and an analogy to non-physical phenomena and desire. We are both physically pulled downward to the largeness of the earth and mentally attracted to ideas that exceed our comprehension. That is, physical matter is known to function on gravity and perhaps consciousness does as well.



IMG: center of mass illustration

In either case, observing gravity requires a split or a doubling. Gravity is equally defined by consolidation and separation. When seen, gravity is a portrait of at least two conglomerates of matter, each substantial enough to be self-defined with their own

gravitational force but simultaneously attracted to one another in a perpetual reciprocity. Functioning gravity is always multiple gravities and its players are always codependent.



IMG: black hole

However, such observable gravity and its relationships of relative equality and codependence are rare, unstable, and ultimately temporary. Eventually, consolidation trumps, matter collapses, and individual identities are lost to total blankness and universal nothingness. Such is the condition of the black hole which allows no matter within its gravitational pull to escape its consolidation.



IMG: Anonymous wedding photo

But even in the micro-setting of our human lives, we understand and anticipate the ultimacy of losing separateness. Our bodies return to the earth, our conscious individualizations disperse among others' memories and are ultimately forgotten, remembered vaguely and temporarily as some part of the general human experience of being self-aware.



IMG: Toulouse-Lautrec, Two Waltzers

But while still living and conscious before death by gravity, we exist in a state of multiple gravities, among which our own bodies are counted. This is a state of possibility where we exercise patterns of deterring, forgetting, or even attempting to escape gravity's coming victory. In this time we celebrate division, multiples, repeating, nuance and specificity for the reason that it will not last.



IMG: still from Mutual Appreciation

We seem to unconsciously and arbitrarily aim at preserving or at least marking gravity's divided equilibrium, if briefly. In these efforts, the condition of doubling occurs, showing us two or more of something and mimicking the generative special circumstance of a temporarily divided world. We divide and double ourselves and things around us in apparently instinctive grasps at multiplying gravity.



IMG: Fayum Portrait

The Portrait

The art object generally – and the portrait most directly – represents one of humanity's splits with itself. We make a thing out of ourselves, step back to look at it, and see ourselves in it. The thing, which on one hand has nothing to do with us, also has a gravity, an attractive force, because it is made of us. Dividing ourselves into a representation of ourselves is an effort at preservation. We supply an observable gravity by splitting and partially displacing ourselves into the new self which looks back at us from across the new divide that we created.



IMG: Fayum Portrait

The Fayum Mummy Portraits from 1st Century Roman-influenced Egypt supply a well preserved cache of early direct naturalistic representations of humans. The images,

once covering the head area of the mummified bodies, are startlingly present and vivid for having aged two thousand years. It is debated whether the portraits were painted during the lifetime of the deceased or painted from memories and descriptions or perhaps from the corpse itself. The confusion is appropriate for the paintings which communicate a simple aliveness that few other ancient arts achieved even though the paintings, of course, are not alive. They are both dead and alive. The division created between the person and their image continues in the small portraits and draws new living creatures into its orbit, sustaining to some degree the life of itself, its original represented, and those who view it.



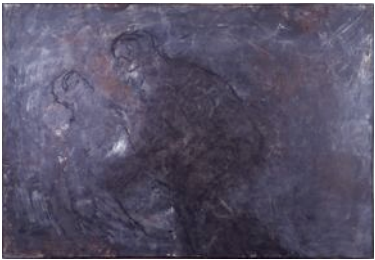
IMG: Nancy Spero, Lovers

In the 1960's, early in her career, Nancy Spero created a series of paintings called Lovers, in which two loosely gendered human figures are seen in some kind of intimate posture surrounded by an encasing swirl of dark paint.



IMG: Nancy Spero, Lovers

The paintings look like capsules for an isolated and detached moment between the two lovers. Spero, who felt the weight of a troubled world particularly acutely, seems to have given her lovers a time out from the regular assault and gravitas of place and circumstance in a non-space. The figures float, as if in a zero gravity environment. Nothing else seems to be happening in the world except for the attention given from each to the other.



ING: Nancy Spero, Lovers

All other gravitational forces disperse and we are left with a very simple sustained non-hierarchical binary. The painting is its own universe with its own dynamic forces and yet we feel the absence of the outer world whose decay we have temporarily neglected. Like the Fayum portraits, the significance of the painting is both buried within itself and also inextricably tied to the idea of something specific existing separately outside of it.



IMG: Chasseriau, The Two Sisters

The Double Portrait

The presence of another gravitational body forces us into a binary relationship. We may either yield to it or work against it. For Spero, that world was full of reasons to push back. The double portrait, however, complicates the binary. Rather than be bound to the attraction of a solitary gravity, we are in a field of multiple gravities in which our attention is constantly divided and we are suspended between multiple destinations: the two portraits, the world that they have excluded, and our own presence which gives the two their meaning.



IMG: Gainsborough, Daughters

The double portrait throughout art is a suspension with us the viewer in the middle. Like the earth and its satellite, the relationship of the two people in the single space is fixed, connected but never merging. And in the case of the art object, the viewer holds them together, forms associations between them, and activates their correspondence.



IMG: Katharina Wulff

The double portrait creates its own new universe, a very simple and approachable context where two things orbit one another symbiotically and all else is pushed outward, including the viewer. The universe of the double is then to their viewer as the space frontier is to the astronaut, a harsh and foreign place but one that contains the empty and alluring promise of escape from our normal surroundings.



IMG: Bess and Dodo

Like observable gravity, the double portrait also implies codependence. In Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*, we face a series of overlapping codependent relationships of which the protagonist, Bess, is always the constant. Bess and Dodo, her sister-in-law, Bess and Jan, her husband, and Bess and God, which may be Bess and her own mind. While Bess is just one person, each relationship is perfectly and separately synchronized within itself pulling Bess and her challenged mind into multiple orbits at once.



IMG: Bess and Jan

The result, as could be expected in a von Trier film, is tragic with Bess' repeated doubling ultimately pushing her into self-destructive actions. Her own gravity is finally completely dispersed among the characters it was in orbit with and oddly, through her collapse, each of her codependent partners spin off into resolution.



IMG: William Morris, Evenlode drawing, 1883

Floral Print

Another type of doubling that points to human effort at escaping gravity is patterning, particularly floral patterning on fabric. The omni-present motif attempts disengagement with gravity in a number of ways, especially when used in fashion applications.



IMG: William Morris, Evenlode print

First, as a pattern, its act of repetition and continual doubling allow it to continue growing infinitely in every direction as its own continuum. It is then its own

gravitational field floating separate from the assumed one around us. It doesn't know the downward pull that we otherwise experience.



IMG: Legs with Floral print tights

Secondly, it is a frozen representation of life detached from decay. In floral prints, like the Fayum portraits, the images seen are never quite alive but also never die. They reference a quiet and stunted eternity. The flowers are perpetually in bloom and not susceptible to wilting back into the earth.



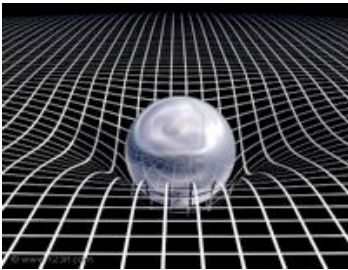
IMG: Floral print dress and stockings, 1964

We wrap our failing bodies in the infinity of floral print hoping and partially succeeding for a transference of its timelessness. When the floral print engages the body, it is a meeting of two distinct gravitational fields. One, the body, is being pulled to earth. The other, the pattern, is continuing indefinitely in every direction, bound only to its infinity.



IMG: Breast in floral print bra

However, we see the continuum of the pattern distorted and interrupted as it flexes around the shape of the body. The body's identity is supported against earth's ultimate gravity by the presence of the floral print and the floral print's identity is warped by the gravity of the body.



IMG: Spacetime grid with gravity interruption

Just as in physics in which matter's gravity alters the geometry of a spacetime continuum, so too is the pattern's integrity bent to the gravity of the person who wears it.



IMG: Pregnant woman in floral print bathing suit

Procreation and Conclusion

Lastly, our rupture with earth's gravity is sustained through the doubling of procreation. During the short period of our existence in which we have an independent gravity from the earth, we double ourselves, producing a new cumulating gravity that extends our period of edging beside annihilation for one more cycle.



IMG: Nancy Spero, Mother and Children (2)

It is a kind of two-fold double portraiture, with the child embedded in the mother and eventually both parents appearing in the child.



IMG: Memling, Pieta

This doubling, like the others we have seen is temporary salvation from the ultimacy of dying. We know that our children and our other creations such as artworks will eventually perish like us and yet our urgency to keep them sustained and capable of reproducing themselves dominates the existence of the parent.



IMG: Doubled Jasper swinging

We protect and nurture our creations with the hope that our doubles will double and double and double. We are hardwired to take comfort in our own death with a rich ancestry flowing out of us despite its apparent temporality and futility. All of our doubling, our efforts at fleeing gravity by splitting it and doubling it, follow a distorted reciprocation of swinging up and being pulled down again, and again, and again.

Addendum: The Face of God

If you pluck a special moment from life and frame it, are you defying death, decay, and the passage of time or are you submitting to it?

-from Istanbul by Orhan Pamuk

it is the nature of things to be seen only once.

-from Syringa by John Ashbery

An image of suspended time, of art's efforts to deter movement by making material interventions that seem insubstantial but that convey, in their ephemerality, a buried power.

-Wayne Koestenbaum

We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity, unless there is supernatural intervention.

-Simone Weil

My own artistic practice, employing the mechanisms defined above, is a distancing activity, marking this time of separated aliveness as I proceed to the inevitable consolidation that gravity will impose. Following Tarkovsky's definition, I understand my art as preparation for death, for preparing an image of the world without me. It is an act of concession, conceding that I will not be able to sustain this terrifyingly special ability to open my eyes and observe the world that I have not yet been pulled into.

This is perhaps why the simple act of looking affirms my aliveness more than anything else. In fact, it is a powerful tool, to look. It paves an opportunity for a complete reorientation of matter around the eye of the observer. By simply looking, names and distinctions fade, borders dissolve, meaning subdues, hierarchies collapse, and matter itself can be arranged around a new center of gravity. The eye, when allowed, commands. My eye distinguishes me as a gravitational center with the rest of the world orbiting its dark, bifurcated, and hollow soul.

In this way, observation marks the preservation of my independent body and its small drip of self-gravity. But in a taunt of my physical limitation, the exact moment that observation commences, so too does the first cycle of representation, that concession to death, as the observed is imprinted in a flattened and mediated form on the back of my own eyeballs. At that very place where my authoritative perspective began, it immediately dissolves from definitive to limited and circumstantial.

Left only with fleeting images and never a lasting authenticity, my work as an artist mines impressions to reassemble analogs that might mimic my ultimate authority. Not unlike Francis Alÿs' project "Fabiola," in which he compiled a few hundred portraits of the Christian Saint, all copies of a lost original. I set myself on a meandering search led by shadow clues to define an image of an original that I will never see, and yet that will ultimately draw me into itself. As such, the better my art becomes, the more I'll understand my ultimate, the closer I'll be to seeing the face of God.

But as we are only able to see gravity in its divided state of dependent multiples, the image of my ultimate will always be the face of God covered in a cloud; a cloud of the divided observable world. Like Flaubert's description of a character from *Madame Bovary*: "lost was he, like a god, under the abundance of his attributes."

Therefore, my sufficient containers of the uncontainable become a bra, the face of a woman, two friends walking down the street, a private conversation, a dying flower, an airplane landing. My art objects mark the moment that I tangled with something outside of myself. These moments are born out of attraction. Their representations are the beginning of my consolidation with my ultimate and therefore represent for me the possibility of life even while facing the assurance of death.

I look to these moments in the observable world both as inherently the image of my ultimate and as a mask concealing its true identity. I observe and represent not to document and preserve but to invent a detached familiarity. Or as Melville stated, "It is with fiction as with religion: it should present another world, and yet one to which we feel the tie."

My art may be something of both, religion and fiction. I traffic in subtly fictitious imagery with the hope of communicating with and about something real and much bigger than myself that I have no true hope of comprehending. My only option to communicate with It is to take It as It is, to yield, to concede, to succumb to the gravity. Derrida describes such a relationship in Christian mythology in which "God holds me in his gaze... while remaining inaccessible to me, the terribly dissymmetrical gift of the *mysterium tremendum* only allows me to respond... by making a gift of death" I may finally understand my work as forced pockets of the supernatural, straining to exist, just as I do, against the dominant pull.

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