

## A Brief Note On *Mediate Immediacy*

Presented as a Topic for Discussion in a Graduate Seminar at the San Francisco Art Institute, 2007

In his essay, *On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*, Walter Benjamin claims that while Man's expulsion from the Garden of Eden symbolized the transition into historical knowledge, it also expressed the loss of another kind of knowledge – one that allowed an intimate and true relationship between objects and the words that represent them. Inspired by the Kabala and its interpretation by the Jewish scholar, Gershom Scholem, he was referring to a language that came to Man directly from God, that allowed an essential, pre-historical relationship to the world of things. For Benjamin, civilization is, among other things, a story of the collapse of this essential naming (a mystical relationship between name and object that is participatory and immediate, knowing no distinction between subject and object). In an article that appeared in *Semiotica*, Christopher Bracken writes:

Language is not an act of mediation through representation, but 'a matter of mediation through immediacies' (Benjamin). The form assumed by this paradoxically mediated immediacy is participation. The name 'participates' directly in the thing, while the word participates indirectly in the thing through the name. The name is an immediate mediation, and the word a mediate immediacy. Neither word nor name *represents* (my italics) anything, but together they move matter, as if by magic.<sup>1</sup>

In Benjamin's account, language as 'immediate mediation' has been replaced in historical times by a language that represents. It is the language of judgment in which the objective world is held at a distance as something to be critiqued and analyzed. In my interpretation of Benjamin's paradoxical and, often obscure argument, the problem with the language of judgment is that it can only speak *about* something. While it *communicates*, it is incapable of speaking the thing itself. As a result there are things in the world – I would argue they are those that we care most about – that must remain nameless or beyond the limits of language and, therefore, knowledge. (This recalls the final statement of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus* where he writes, "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.")

Artists are those people whose job it is to close the gap between here and there. One way they accomplish this is by constructing an image-based figuration or poetics in which objects are set into dynamic constellations or collision courses with one another. It's the resulting abrasions that produce the flashes and ruptures that we call insight. It is a moment of deep recognition: an awareness that circumvents the limitations of conventional language by replacing language's descriptive powers with the image's

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Bracken, *The Language of Things: Walter Benjamin's Primitive Thought*, *Semiotica* 138-1/4, 2002, p 324.

revealing immediacy. Much in the way a poetics based on words distorts language's usual meanings through figuration, a poetics of image applies figuration to the objectively familiar so we can access emotions and feelings beyond their representational grasp. These structures give meaning to transitory events in our lives by identifying or naming them. Ironically, it is a non-verbal naming: a recognition that is both concrete – situated in the world of objects – and transitory. I think that all the art that moves us – literature, painting, photography, video, etc – derives its power through this kind of immediacy and the heightened awareness that it allows.

In my interpretation, a poetics based in non-verbal naming has the following characteristics: It is experiential rather than expository and, as a result, is taken in somatically and sensationally before it is dissected intellectually. It is non-didactic and, indeed, it might even be difficult to say what a work composed in this way is about. In other words, such a work might be made up of a single image or combinations of images that are self-referential and defy, even discourage as being inappropriate, linear analysis or judgment. Admittedly, this is an odd sort of naming. It's a naming that refuses to name but provides, instead, a fluid and sentient medium in which to comprehend, momentarily, those aspects of our lives – those most important events or emotional states – that “we can't speak about.” Words like ‘love’ and ‘hate’, for example, attempt to represent our most complex emotions. But such words are expressively dead and inadequate for the task. Representations of this and similar emotions call for another ‘language’ or medium of address – one that is analogical rather than specifically representational. It is a ‘language’ that must compress the gap dividing the objective world from ourselves so that rather than holding experience at a distance, it knows no boundaries. It becomes *us* so that we might become *it* – if even for just a moment. Mediated, the unnamable becomes immediate and, fleetingly, part of us.

My point is that all the art that matters utilizes an image poetics that brings temporary consonance to the disorienting world of dissonant objects by merging the gap between us and them. This is the basis of contemporary art – one it inherited from modernism – that is less concerned with communicating or telling a story *about* something and is most interested in *speaking the thing itself*. It is, I believe, in an attempt to speak the thing itself that the unnamable can be felt and experienced. This is the real politics of contemporary art and what gives it urgency and relevance.