Baseline

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Heart is like the ground.

Not due to their obscurity or the parallels between the interests of anatomy and archaeology. Heart is like the ground in that the workings of its chronometry are as persistent as gravity. In a sense, this makes them both conductors of time: the ground operates towards its endless capture, and the heart towards its gradual release. What they embody is effort versus time.

The likeness of the center and the foundation doesn't end here. They both exert the gravitational force as their innermost depths remain unknown. In effect, much like the ground can evoke a sense of irrefutable belonging, the heart can be felt as the very epicenter of foreignness; and vice versa. – Inhumation of one, unearthing of the other.

What Alphonso Lingis came across when he visited the monolithic churches in Lalibela[1], Ethiopia, was not "a mound in the wood"; no one was buried there. There was no pyramid, no soil piled up. Instead, there was indentation, there were gaping pits from which the earth had been removed and, in place of a body, another kind of interior was laid. It could seem a site of excavation, rather than of interment – if the two were not, in essence, the same.

The churches that he talks of are carved earthwards and straight out of living rock, reachable through descending stairs, and interconnected with underground pathways and tunnels. Some of them are freestanding, which makes them a rare and unique example among their kind. The beginning of their construction is dated to the 12th century and attributed to the ruler of the same name, King Lalibela, but in truth, many facts regarding their coming into existence still remain unresolved, including as to how exactly they were built, and why.

The aim of situating them in the ground might have been a quest – as pragmatic as idealistic – for protection, durability, indestructibility. What one experiences there is quite the opposite: all-encompassing degradation, a result of a variety of natural and anthropogenic factors. In Lingis' account, despite the exposure to the processes of the transformation towards a ruin, the place makes you want to stay, as it evokes "an instinct for the depths of rock, a sensibility for the stillness, the silence, the inexpressibility, the separation from all explanations and understanding, all the cross-wires of meaning."

These rock-cut inward erected structures seem to belong undeniably to the very same ground they are made of.

1 The text "Lalibela" appears in two Lingis' publications, with slight modifications:
Lingis, A. (2000). The return of extinct religions. New Nietzsche Studies, 4(3/4), 15–28.
Lingis, A. (2004). Trust. Minneapolis & London.

Marianne Skaarup Jakobsen, Untitled (2019–2020), clay and porcelain

However, if there was anything that distinguishes them from, say, the Tower of Babel, the epitome of erection and dissimilarity, could it be found solely in their subterranean constitution? Does constructing them of dust to which they will indefinitely return (because, after all, that's where they already are) make them any truer, any less posterior and less prosthetic? If the leveling attempts to perform the equalizing, does it succeed to annul difference and deferral? Or, is it all just a towering reversal?

The spatial and temporal inversions as well as standstills of such a site are captivating. But whether it was time or space that fascinated Lingis upon his visit is beside the point (although not entirely irrelevant). Lalibela is hard to reach. After a several-days' journey, previously done on a mule, now in a jeep, one has to climb the heights of Ethiopian mountains to set foot on this remote, steep-cliffs surrounded place. What brought Lingis there is therefore of true intrigue: effort and desire. Effort, quite literally, as oxygenated blood was pumped through his vascular system against the backdrop of his body's weight; and desire, quite literally too, as the affective determination, gravitating towards the goal. Both generated and propagated by means of the same pulse.

Once there, exposed to the extent of this difficult-to-get-to, difficult-to-conceive architectural accomplishment, while witnessing a progressive and relentless decay of its material structure, Lingis echoes the beliefs of a certain half-past time when recalling that "the sacred is in decomposition." Hence, the inclination towards the penetrating proximity to the earth: the deeper, the more consecrated.
Not unlike the heart.

Buried in the depth of a rib cage and within the dense network of enveloping tissues, it is the solid, inaccessible reference point of one's being: the motor of the vital functions, the sentient capacity to know 'heartfelt' and 'deep-down', a firmly rooted unifying element. – And yet, one that can be substituted. A heart deteriorates and can be replaced with another.

Considering the possibility of such prosthesis: is it stranger to receive a stranger's heart, or a strange heart? The mere act of receiving a heart is strange in itself. And, what to make of one's own heart then, if you think about it well enough? Once you sense its location, its beating, its life … can you really tell what makes it precisely yours, what makes it belong to exactly that place there, the inaccessible inside which, most probably, you will never know?

It took an actual transplant to install quite viscerally the thinking of otherness within the core of selfhood. When Jean-Luc Nancy had to give up his heart, extracting it from the chest, and having another one inserted, he would later write *L'intrus*[2], the intruder. There, he voices the unsettling prospect of disowning something central and vital to his existence, now gradually detaching: "If my heart was giving up and going to drop me, to what degree was it an organ of "mine," my "own"? Was it even an organ?"

It was not the new heart, its unknown origins or existence of a previous life in another body that was foreign. At least no more than that which was revealed as the greatest stranger, impossible to ever grasp, know or appropriate: the self. Not due to the scale, size, depth or complexity of its structure and organization, but precisely due to the inclusion – or, intrusion – of the other within. This intruder can only remain there as intruder, and its designation implies at least two things: it was not invited and - it is already inside. The tension between solipsistic fantasies that resist making the outsider an invitee

2 Nancy, J. L., & Hanson, S. (2002). L'intrus. CR: The new centennial REview, 2(3), 1–14.issues/29/lessons-in-cruising.

and the realities of the trespass having already occurred without one's knowing is partially amended by the necessity of this intrusion: only by means of the other can I ever utter a reflexive 'me'. To be able to acknowledge the self, to relate to oneself, a detour through the other is required. Without the presence of exteriority that is ramified around and into everything interior, there would be only an endless territory of the latter, unable to reflect on itself in the absence of the possibility of taking any other perspective but the one of the same contemplating the same. In the light of this, the longing for continuity appears as futile as the quest for indestructibility and invariable endurance.

Marianne Skaarup Jakobsen, Untitled (2019–2020), clay and porcelain

As Nancy writes, it is "neither logically acceptable, nor ethically admissible, to exclude all intrusion in the coming of the stranger, the foreign". The strangeness must be preserved, for ontological and ethical reasons, which makes the continuity of selfhood fundamentally interrupted. Saying that the inside must contain the outside is as paradoxical as it is inevitable, but their pairing can lose some of its contradictory load if not conceived in terms of strict dichotomy. Exteriority and interiority are defined by mutual contamination, and the persevering line of difference that binds them is not a simple linear one.

Being at the same time bound and differing is less of a restraint than a potential: it multiplies rather than limits the possible courses of direction in relating. There are several angles to take. Lines turn, break, cross, twist, split, and bend outward or onto themselves. A heart is buried and it can be dug – not only out, but also inward, into its hollows, cavities and passages. The cardiac underground is subject to a further spacing: its chambers are as many, as vital and no less sacred as those in the grounds of Lalibela – or any other underground. In such space, in the absence of light, there persists a concealed, remote and ungraspable quality to the expanding rooms that keep unraveling during any excavating process. Then again, what is the outside and inside of the ground? Is it marked by the line of the horizon; implied in the vertical trail of magma expelled from ground's core; or does it reside in the felt resistance of corporeal mass against the floor? In all the parallel, curved, perpendicular, and oblique layers that compose the matrix of the perceptive field, lines make the contour but not the actual distinction. Lines represent. Yet, never independently of the coordinates that set up the framework for their possibility; there is an outside of the line as well.

There are fissures and there are veins. Provided that the line is the domain of a relation, either division or connection, it is here where the relevance of openings begins to take shape. Any sort of opening – a crack, a hole, a cut, a crater, a break, a wound, a dig, a puncture, a tunnel, an incision – is an exposure that permits the passing and the merging between sides. Exposure connotes vulnerability. It is manifest in the acts of contracting and dilating, taking in and letting out, in interventions in the places of decomposition.

Finally, what outweighs the risks of cutting open either a living body or a solid rock, in order to construct another space within, is the prospect of new time being built. The issue has never been that, by setting up a new interior (however coinciding or distant in regard to what it replicates), exteriority gets established in turn. Rather, the matter in question is the time. No less than spatial, the proliferating differences are temporal. Prosthetics as extensions to and of life take effect beyond the three dimensions.

Ultimately, it is difference that forms the basis for construction. A distance to be overcome between two surface points, an earthward vector, an electrocardiogram: it is effort that is depicted in a baseline.

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