

‘Sutures’

The art of Haris Epaminonda is a matter of incisions, splices, folds and pleats; it ceaselessly rends itself along unsuspected lines, then stitches the remnants together in enigmatic and startling ways. It is an art exercised not so much by the venerable theme of the fragment, as by the interstices between fragments: the infinitely svelte horizons, seams or fissures that separate one image from another. (She reminds us, in fact, that fragmentary art has always been about the in-between, that its substance is an excuse for slipping empty spaces into the work.) In Epaminonda’s photographic collages and videos, images abut each other not with the stark insistence of classic montage, but with a sort of sly insinuation: they slowly enfold themselves in one another’s embrace. Collage here is always in movement, suggesting new symmetries, new differences, new gestures and rituals that remain subtly indistinct.

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Collage is traditionally an art of absolute clarity: even the most apparently confusing arrangement of fragments remains readable at the level of the individual image -- the photographic element, for example, is almost never out of focus -- or in terms of the imaginary space that the juxtaposed images propose: a flat plane or a notional hierarchy of figure and ground. The borders between images tend also to be well defined: montage depends precisely on this immediate distinction between fragments. One might advert here, for example, to the photomontages of John Heartfield and Hannah Hoch, or the amazing conjunctions of human and animal in the collages of Max Ernst. Even the mysterious and absurd scenarios of the latter are at once legible as, exactly, mysterious and absurd; surrealist collage remains, at the level of its visual texture, resolutely rational.

Haris Epaminonda unpicks precisely this clean suturing of unmatched images. Her collages are rather scarred by countless tiny incisions, so that each of the disparate parts of the picture appears scattered across the surface, like the shards of a broken mirror. The spaces depicted are composed of so many conjectural horizons between one element and another that perspective quite disappears. The Arch-Duke Franz Ferdinand and his wife are overwhelmed by sinuous glimpses of some other space; a long room in which women are sitting against the walls seems to have exploded with kaleidoscopic splinters of another time or place; faceless children are threatened by vast, looming adult limbs and faces. In such images, it becomes impossible to tell foreground from background, principals from incidental objects or figures. Collage becomes less a matter of juxtaposition or tessellation of discrete segments than the weaving of a kind of web or textile. As Gilles Deleuze wrote of the aesthetics of the Baroque, ‘matter thus offers an infinitely porous, spongy, or cavernous texture without emptiness, caverns endlessly contained in other caverns: no matter how small, each body contains a world pierced with irregular passages, surrounded and penetrated by an increasingly vaporous fluid.’²¹

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Here is Deleuze again, this time on the Baroque taste for drapery: ‘the Baroque refers not to an essence but rather to an operative function, to a trait. It endlessly produces folds. It does not invent things: there are all kinds of folds coming from the east, greek, Roman, Romanesque, Gothic, Classical folds. ... Yet the Baroque trait twists and turns its folds, pushing them to infinity, fold over fold, one upon the other. The Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity.’²² The cuts in Haris Epaminonda’s collages seem somehow closer to folds, to involutions of space and time. *Nemesis 52* (2003), a video composed of seven segments, shows strangely symmetrical folds of fabric that fully reveal what we might call, following Deleuze, her baroque tendencies.

There is first of all the vertical symmetry of the image itself: achieved in camera, not in post-production, so that the artist may direct her invisible, draped sitter in real time, instructing him or her in the art of the fold. On both sides of this central horizon, various veilings, revelations and concealments are enacted: fabric is folded and refolded till it resembles an organic, at times obscurely or comically sexualized, substance. Disembodied hands move with insectal grace. Cloth becomes at once a kind of flesh, writhing and pulsing with a warm pink life, and a purely spiritual, ethereal substance: something like the ectoplasm produced by nineteenth-century mediums (which turned out, of course, to be in most cases a thin fabric hidden somewhere about the body and unrolled in semi-darkness). One is reminded too of the curtain behind which the medium might commune with the dead, its pleats denoting what Deleuze calls ‘the folds in the soul’: a spirited realm that the Baroque denotes by freezing the fall of drapery in stone.

In short, these brief flourishes of fabric conjure an inhumanity out of draped human movement: they remind us that beneath the fabric is the skin, which itself, in turn, is no more than

another costume, a fragile tegument that conceals yet more folds, membranes, tissues and strange symmetries. According to Haris Epaminonda the human body, allegorized in silk and latex, is nothing less than an elaborately dressed stage set.

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The art of the fragment is an art of absence: what matters is the gap, the stitching, the fold between fragments. It is both a border, a limit to the individual image or thought, and an invitation to connect the discrete portion with its neighbour: to make the fragments into a finished narrative or a coherent composition. Haris Epaminonda insists that the fragments she appropriates for her videos are not to be read for their cultural or political significance: it is first and foremost a question, she says, of the image itself 'doing something'. And yet: the fragments themselves constantly snag our attention; they seem to refer to histories and contexts that will make sense of their very fragmentary nature. Thus the suspicion, looking at *Postcard* (2005) – a video in which a shot of a car moving through a tunnel is overlaid on postcards and photographs from what may well be the 1970s – that the history in question is that artist's own, or a familial and national one. This is the paradox of a fragmentary art: we persistently want to give the individual element a significance that the form disallows.

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The fold and the dividing line between fragments are the invisible lines by which certain symmetries are achieved. Doubles are everywhere in Haris Epaminonda's art: in the collages, in the peculiar machinery dreamed up to manipulate various objects and fabrics, in the identical twins who turn to look at each other in the middle of one of the videos. Mirrors, doubles and excessive symmetries are also part of the Baroque: they suggest an aesthetic that has outrun itself, become hypertrophied and unreal, and begun to reflect upon itself. This is not exactly what one finds in Haris Epaminonda's practice: her art is too considered and subtle to be fully Baroque. But she shares this interest in reflective surfaces and ramifying forms.

More precisely, what she seems to be interested in is a form or surface that appears both reflective and transparent at the same time. In a series of architectural fantasies, various buildings appear to have had walls or windows replaced by mirrors. Or are they rather portals to some other realm, and the clouds that are reflected there the clouds in another, alternate reality? The mirror, we might say, is yet another fold: not after all the copy of its twin, but the one half of a whole that remains obscure.

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The artist's appropriation of moving images is of a piece with her interest in the fragment, but constitutes also a reflection on the nature of gesture. A woman's face fades into view on screen; her hair, makeup and earrings suggest the 1960s or 1970s, though the texture of the image might place her in any soap opera of the last few decades. She speaks, silently, and lowers her eyes or looks away: always a slightly different enactment of the same gesture, here saved by the artist from the garbage heap of dead images and made luminous, ravishing and alien. Similarly, in a scene filmed by the artist herself, two dancers appear, spinning in slow motion before the pleats of a stage curtain. The occasion is unknown, the context unseen: all that remains is the beauty of their blurred gestures, edging slowly in and out of the frame.

In an essay entitled 'Notes on Gesture' the philosopher Giorgio Agamben remarks that 'gesture rather than image is the cinematic element'. For Agamben, the entire history of the moving image is an effort to reconstitute an aspect of human experience – the gesture – that has been eroded by modernity. The gestural realm – that is to say, the combination of bodily movement and stasis – has been obliterated by the speed and chaos of the twentieth century; we no longer recognize ourselves in the profusion of random or mechanical movements to which we have been condemned. In fact, says Agamben, the urge to capture fleeting gestures has always exercised Western art: even the *Mona Lisa*, even Velázquez's *Meninas*, can be seen not as timeless static forms but as fragments of a gesture or as frames of a lost film, solely within which they regain their true meaning. For in every image there is always a kind of *ligatio* at work, a power that paralyses, whose spell needs to be broken; it is as if, from the whole history of art, a mute invocation were raised towards the freeing of the image in the gesture.ⁱⁱⁱ

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Cutting, folding, doubling, dancing, stitching and composing: all of this looks as though it must constitute some kind of ritual. A ritual is in part the embodiment of knowledge: the means by which that knowledge is passed on. In that sense, it is the performance of an experiment whose outcome is always assured. Time and again in Haris Epaminonda's work, one has the sense of rituals being repeated without, perhaps, the assurance that they will yield the proper conclusion. In one of the videos, a doubled, gloved hand hovers like a sluggish bird above two comically phallic objects; it touches them gingerly several times before slowly ascending to the top of the screen. Something has perhaps been accomplished: but what? Like a gesture, a ritual only makes sense once completed, and it is not always possible to say when the end has come. Will the hands that furl and roll the fabric obsessively ever come to a rest? What is the fate of the children who approach a building from which huge women's faces glare? Or of the child who lies in a pool of light at the centre of a family group which is in turn surrounded by more eager children and their smiling mother? What exactly is the nature of the embrace being examined by four faceless eighteenth-century gentlemen? Each of these scenes hints at a collective undertaking of some sort of inquiry or adventure whose nature remains wholly enigmatic.

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How does one know when a gesture has been completed? Or when a ritual has ended? At what point the last fold has been made before matter will not fold any longer? What is human and not human? Where, precisely, the edge or suture between two images may be traced? When exactly a faded photograph or few seconds of television footage has outlasted its meaning? What was 'then' and what is 'now'? Haris Epaminonda, in her sedulous attention to the nature of limits and outlines, invites us to ask such questions of time, space, matter and image. Hers is an art of dissection and layering, an inquiry into the in-between, a careful anatomy of the life of forms.

Text by Brian Dillon

ⁱ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (London, Continuum, 2006), p. 5.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on Gesture', in *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London, Verso, 1993), p. 139.