

# FORMA VITAE

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## s e n s e l i k e b l u e p l a c e

22 November 2014—17 January 2015, Trianon Gallery, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada

Dagmar Dahle | Mary Kavanagh | Annie Martin | David Miller

You are on Earth, *here*.

To marvel firstly at how an image (any surface or surficial treatment meant to be seen or touched) is always a *feitura* or fabricating of light and time. It is a play with *light* while time is passing or while “some” “thing” “passes”: what we have been taught to think of as time.

What is time? What is this passing? Time only makes sense in the human body, and in terms of light's changes as the sun passes over a singular point on earth, that point where a human body is standing. As such, time is endemic as corporeal matter

As such, all art is already light, already time, and the artist—body—is one who strives for readings of this passing light, “readings at the limits of signification.”<sup>1</sup>

Canvas and light make noise, a pen's trace as noise, not entropic but amplificatory

>>as ash is, an atmospheric history or sketch in Kavanagh: its condensate

>>and cyanide  
its condensate  
from the vapour of Zyklon-B to the stoney monuments of Berlin  
a colour Dahle draws in,  
light and time

>>a pen's trace as noise in Martin's makings (thread of light, a pen's thread repeated to reconstitute a-new)

>>the mute flower of Miller, its lip buttoned

“here” being  
the inoperative-at-work, *in opere*, at work, working and unworking; and all of these words are not opposites but a continuum. The inoperative *is* to be at work

mute flower

light

<sup>1</sup> This is also one way of describing what poetry is and does.

“The highest poverty,” says Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, writing of the medieval monastic rule that marks but does not legislate a life, for the essence of monastic life is that its form remains outside of law and possession and ceremony. Such a life, that *is* its form, lies outside of the society of consumption and of consensus. It—this life—creates as well a sense of troubling for the law and for ceremony, and for the parts of beings that cling to law and ceremony. In the act of *looking*, too, I think, we can find that vitality of being in which life coincides with its form. It is almost redundant to add that *looking* marks what cannot be eaten, or worn, or said. It is not relational, it is embedded. *Looking* is not countable in the way that objects are countable, for it is a febrility of an act acting out its actions, slowly, in time.

I feel compelled to read the works and acts of the four artists now in the Trianon Gallery through the words of the philosopher Agamben, trying to work my own way through his exploration of the relation between life and form in medieval monasticism, and trying to understand the meaning of a “rule,” of a “life,” of a form of life *today* that is a form-of-life, wherein the two terms are inseparable. In monasticism's beginnings, Agamben finds: “l'invention d'une forme-de-vie, une vie qui reste inseparable de sa forme, (...) précisément en vertu de son caractère radicalement étranger au *droit* et à la *liturgie*.”<sup>2</sup> GA: 143

It's the “précisément en vertu de” that catches me (time passing). I crave a life that cannot be thought of in terms of Law, Right (the so-called international order; for example) or in terms of Liturgy, Ceremony, Habit. A life whose form is radically foreign to all these condensations of meaning.

You are on *Earth* here.

To think of art itself as concomitant both with making art and looking at art, is to think art as a verb, as “un acte en devenir,” GA: 157 and not as *dispositif*—which is to say, an act in the process of becoming act, and not as a mechanism. Art as a “forme-de-vie” wherein its form is inseparable from its life. And its character (here, in movement, the character of art is also a verb) is “radicalement étranger” to law and to liturgy. Radically foreign, then, to rule and to pageantry, to the gavel and to the sceptre. And it is a fact and task, a *feitura*, art is, that we can call—echoing Agamben—a poverty of the highest order as, for art, *cette pauvreté est un seuil où la perception est toujours opérative à travers le corps et ainsi il est nécessaire de vivre la pauvreté (d'une pensée, de ses matériaux), afin de continuer.*<sup>3</sup>

The profession or “office” (of making art, of seeing art) is co-terminous with life, as art is the form of life and life's form, thus is *vital* form, is *forma vitae*.

<sup>2</sup> Trans: “the invention of a ‘form of life,’ a life that remains inseparable from its form, (...) precisely by virtue of its radical extraneousness to law and liturgy.” Trans. Adam Kotsko. I would have said “precisely by virtue of its character that is radically foreign to law and liturgy.”

<sup>3</sup> Trans: “...this poverty is a threshold where perception is always operative through the body, and thus it is necessary to live poverty (of a thought, of one's materials) so as to go onward.” My translation.

## Sense

To see art, therefore, as something (*res* in Latin, and the relation of *res* with *rien!*) that can be used but not possessed. As such, the line and light of Annie Martin, the dust of Mary Kavanagh, the material textural relations of David Miller, the relation of colour and gesture to monument in Dagmar Dahle, all these are a usage and not a possession or a thing destined for possession.

The fact of making use in this simple way puts the making of art (and its reception by a looker) on the same plane of *forma vitae* as are eating, drinking, wearing clothes. It is something which is not a thing. In fact, *res*, the Latin word for thing, is also *ren* or *rien*, *nothing*. As it is the spacing of a thing between moments, hesitations, and not the presence of that thing, art is likewise something that cannot be renounced, or given up.

A sense paradigm. To sense is to perceive but also, in medieval terms, the *sens* is the mind actively at work, as if sensing and making sense are linked through the mind and through the body's cavities that activate the mind.

mute flower or door

## Like

Pleasure. We can link two unlike things using the word “like.” To like is to link, to make links, in order to have these links bring pleasure to the *sens* or mind. To like is to feel pleasure. We like art!

## Blue

A colour signifying an absence, the absence that is the living correlate of all “things”; insofar as things have matter or substance, they have as well a reversed property of *absence* that keeps their matter in suspension, makes substance possible. Blue is the colour of this absence, Dahle shows. I think here of other colour expressions or tentatives of Dahle in her work: the colours of a Van Gogh painting woven into cloth, for example.<sup>4</sup>

Blue is also the colour of the circadian rhythm of the body: as I noted in the poems of *O Resplendor*, we can shift time itself by gazing at the blue light of evening.

## Place

*Place* is a word that is both verb and noun; a *lieu* or point in space that can be occupied, and the act of setting down carefully. Place is distinct, again, from property, which is owned. A place is inhabited, or, if already inhabited, it is about to receive a substance or matter. This “aboutness” and receptivity, the “about to receive” is what I want to point to, here. The condition of reception “just before.” The line in its making, or dust's

mute  
flow

<sup>4</sup> Dagmar Dahle, “Weaving Van Gogh”, Akau, Toronto, 2006; Moose Jaw Museum and Art Gallery, Moose Jaw, 2008; Stride Gallery, Calgary, 2010.

. The findings also open up embodied response to imperceptible contaminants inhaled and exhaled each living moment and new explorations in glass. The work at the Trianon engages the permeable body, the meeting of internal and external, interconnectedness, non-boundaries, preoccupied with residue, dust, ash and essence. residues of past events, seen and felt. the masses of graves, such as 6,000 Russian soldiers buried in Treptower Park. public markers, monuments and statuary and ruins and unintentional monuments and destroyed markers and the choices to mark and not mark and unmark. And the residue remains in the peculiar spaces, liminal spaces, places nature reclaims.... vacant lots, railroad track, the former wall, and animals, too, Berlin urban wildlife, the large parks. ALL OF THAT pointing to the time of human history even as we continue with our slow suicide, the END of time, unstoppable. Events such as marks, sounds and actions are distanced from their context in an abstraction that frees them from a framework. Representation, figuration and narrative are thus the creation of viewer-perceiver, and the nature of these structures and forms is made available. These projects require my presence, movement in a place to set them in motion using my own body and senses as instruments, colliding myself with the materiality of the site, and then sharing. 42" x 46.5"|106.58 x 118.11cm Inkjet on Polypropylene 62.5" x 47.5"|158.75 x 120.65

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8  
9 0

5 The insert is a visual condensation and re-marking of texts written by all four artists in the exhibition and shared with me to help me write. In an arrangement that is a futura in itself, it honours both the act of making words of art, and the act of making art of words.

How to make of life a form? A *forma vitae*? One strong desire or first impulse is to abolish the opposition between the artist and the spectator. Museums and schools often try to perform this abolishing of distance by encouraging spectators to make art in workshops. We see this art — and it is not a valueless gesture — in various public institutions devoted to displaying art (in a corridor at the National Gallery, for example: “we looked at Dürer” and we “drew” this).

It is a truism, of course, that anyone can be an artist, can make art, but this is not for me what is the truly important thing at stake in the relation between artwork and looker.

First, I like the word *looker*. *Spectator* is a cognate of *spectacle* which invokes both the sense of a swashbuckling larger than life and the use of a mediating lens, whereas *looker* is direct, personal, implicated. The *looker* has her own eyeballs, and there is something before her directly poised to be looked at, something that is on the same scale as the person with the eyes. We share *spectation* (and *expectation*) with other spectators. But we look alone; alone we formulate a materially-grounded relationship with what we see.

Alone, which is to say, from, in and through our life. The artwork exposes us to itself, and not vice versa. There is an invitation. In the best works, this invitation is not in itself troubling, but causes us trouble. It troubles our waters: tints them, clouds us. It's the feeling and sight of our certainties dissolving. And when our certainties dissolve, our vitality is laid bare. Throbs.

I invite you to test this lovely dissolution yourself by standing in front of any of the works in the exhibition—in front of the marked trace-line of a Martin drawing or the blue seep of the musculature of a colour blue in a Dahle, a chemical that is deadly and beautiful, that shrouds and in shrouding reveals. In front of an assemblage of Miller, made and natural. In front of Kavanagh's gorgeous silent silica or dust.

Perhaps you still want to be a spectator? Oh, but let that go, let yourself be unnerved, let yourself shed all pretention to knowing, or to being addressed by the piece before you. Let line and colour find your vitality—the *forma vitae* of the artist (the energy of form) encounter yours. The throb of *déconnaissance*, unknowingness. Which is a trouble, a risk and a joy.

To cultivate this unknowingness in your life everyday is the lesson of art, and it prevents the abuse of power.

I am this person who has looked at a Mary Kavanagh drawing of dust. This is rich data—the data of the person inner and outer where boundaries coalesce and vibrate—and it cannot be mined by Facebook or Twitter. It is governed not by law, or by liturgy, not by prohibition or by habit, or by algorithms and ceremonies. It escapes authoritarian discourse. It is a parliament in and with us, in the very sense that our own governments would have us forget about parliaments as they fool us with rules and ceremonies.

To cohabit, rather, on earth Here. *Sense Like Blue Place*.

silica, lineal, bottleflower, rippleblue

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## Savill Group Architecture

