Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift 99 (2023), 21–47
p-ISSN 0039-6761 e-ISSN 2003-6248
DOI: https://doi.org/10.51619/stk.v99i1.25073

The Numinous and the Art of Social Justice

MARGARET OLIN

Margaret Olin is Senior Lecturer Emerita in the Department of Religious Studies, Yale University.

margaret.olin@yale.edu

When imbued with the presence of the divine, evoking rapture or awe, something is said to be "numinous". The word often applies to works of nature: the setting sun, the all-enveloping sky, or the light filtering through the trees; or a creation of mankind: a piece of music, a work of architecture, or a painting. But how is a work of art "numinous"? Does the work of art represent something that evokes the numinous, or does it create the experience of the "numinous" through formal means? Does it comment on the numinous or speak to it in some other way? For the most part "numinous" is applied to works of art that represent natural objects or scenes considered "numinous", or that are thought to evoke the numinous through form alone, often abstract form.

Why does the word "numinous" rarely if ever come to mind before a hard-hitting work of social justice art depicting impoverished denizens of the bowery or precarious hovels in the dust bowl, ruined homes whose residents have fled, or before works of conceptual art that communicate these and other social ills? This chapter considers the history of the concept "numinous" from its initial application to art early in the twentieth century, through its later appearance in mid-century American art theoretical discussions, to the changing implications of ideas surrounding the term as Jewish thinkers take them up in the mid to late twentieth century. Primarily

through the analysis of an influential work of the late twentieth century by Martha Rosler, I argue that the associations that arise from these changes can be applied, perhaps counterintuitively, to the art of social justice in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Rudolf Otto's Numinous Art

When Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) introduced the term "numinous" in his 1917 book *Das Heilige*, it was as much a negative concept as a positive one. "Numinous" was an answer to those who would reduce the Christian religion to a set of rational propositions.[1] The irrational did not only have its place, for Otto, it was at religion's basis. To understand it, one had to clear out the space around it. The numinous served to isolate the idea of "the holy" by thinking away the rational element. The numinous was what was not describable in language or by philosophy. He also had to isolate it from religious ethics: the numinous, in Otto's understanding of it, could not be a set of ethical commandments.[2] Not the ones that were handed to Moses, and not Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) categorical imperative. The numinous cannot be grasped, comprehended, taught, reasoned through, or explained. It is not laid down in law, or, by extension, owned. It is incommensurable to anything we know. The numinous is a kind of non-thing. In Otto's words, it is the "absolute other".[3]

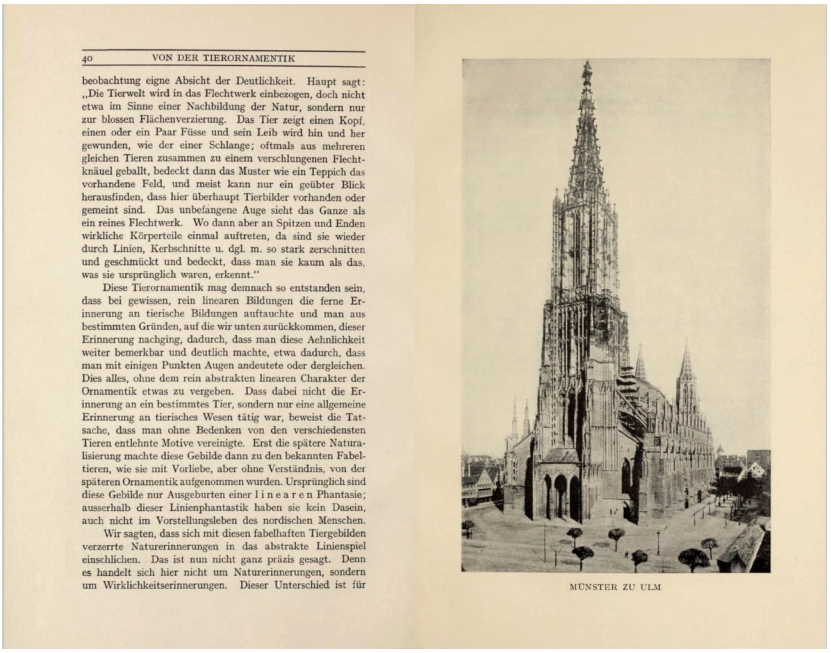
So how do we access the feeling of the numinous? In a sense, we do not. Since it is not derived, like propositions and commandments which can be reasoned through, arrived at, or handed down, it is innate. We already have it within us. As a latent feeling, it cannot be introduced by an outside agent, but must rise to the surface. The numinous, it seems, is the particular kind of experience that can be evoked or awakened but not derived. Otto explores the evocation of the numinous through comparisons. He finds Kant's category of the sublime awe-inspiring much like the numinous, and the feeling of terror is close to the numinous as well.[4]

Finally, Otto derives the numinous from the experience of visual art.[5] He has in mind, however, only specific kinds of art characterized by abstraction or expressionism. Both of these were significant recent developments in his milieu, the early-twentieth-century Europe of literati and intellectuals.

---

1. Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, Munich 1963, 1–4; Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, London 1958, 1–4.
2. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 1–6.
3. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 25–37.
4. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 62–65, 81–85
5. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 65–71, 87–91.

Art historian Wilhelm Worringer (1881–1965) and other thinkers provided some of the secular scriptures that inspired symbolists, German expressionists, and abstract artists such as Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), who himself inspired artists through his book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.[6] Otto found the numinous in several art forms, beginning with the monoliths of Stonehenge, the mastabas, pyramids of Egypt, and the Sphinx. He also cited the Gothic art extolled by Worringer in his 1912 book *Formprobleme der Gothik*, especially what Otto calls Worringer's magnificent plate of the Cathedral at Ulm.[7]



40 VON DER TIERORNAMENTIK

beobachtung eigne Absicht der Deutlichkeit. Haupt sagt: „Die Tierwelt wird in das Flechtwerk einbezogen, doch nicht etwa im Sinne einer Nachbildung der Natur, sondern nur zur blossen Flächenverzierung. Das Tier zeigt einen Kopf, einen oder ein Paar Füsse und sein Leib wird hin und her gewunden, wie der einer Schlange; oftmals aus mehreren gleichen Tieren zusammen zu einem verschlungenen Flechtknäuel geballt, bedeckt dann das Muster wie ein Teppich das vorhandene Feld, und meist kann nur ein geübter Blick herausfinden, dass hier überhaupt Tierbilder vorhanden oder gemeint sind. Das unbefangene Auge sieht das Ganze als ein reines Flechtwerk. Wo dann aber an Spitzen und Enden wirkliche Körperteile einmal auftreten, da sind sie wieder durch Linien, Kerbschnitte u. dgl. m. so stark zerschnitten und geschmückt und bedeckt, dass man sie kaum als das, was sie ursprünglich waren, erkennt."

Diese Tierornamentik mag demnach so entstanden sein, dass bei gewissen, rein linearen Bildungen die ferne Erinnerung an tierische Bildungen auftauchte und man aus bestimmten Gründen, auf die wir unten zurückkommen, dieser Erinnerung nachging, dadurch, dass man diese Aehnlichkeit weiter bemerkbar und deutlich machte, etwa dadurch, dass man mit einigen Punkten Augen andeutete oder dergleichen. Dies alles, ohne dem rein abstrakten linearen Charakter der Ornamentik etwas zu vergeben. Dass dabei nicht die Erinnerung an ein bestimmtes Tier, sondern nur eine allgemeine Erinnerung an tierisches Wesen tätig war, beweist die Tatsache, dass man ohne Bedenken von den verschiedensten Tieren entlehnte Motive vereinigte. Erst die spätere Naturalisierung machte diese Gebilde dann zu den bekannten Fabeltieren, wie sie mit Vorliebe, aber ohne Verständnis, von der späteren Ornamentik aufgenommen wurden. Ursprünglich sind diese Gebilde nur Ausgeburten einer l i n e a r e n Phantasie; ausserhalb dieser Linienphantastik haben sie kein Dasein, auch nicht im Vorstellungsleben des nordischen Menschen.

Wir sagten, dass sich mit diesen fabelhaften Tiergebilden verzerrte Naturerinnerungen in das abstrakte Linienspiel einschlichen. Das ist nun nicht ganz präzis gesagt. Denn es handelt sich hier nicht um Naturerinnerungen, sondern um Wirklichkeitserinnerungen. Dieser Unterschied ist für

MÜNSTER ZU ULM

Figure 1. Cathedral at Ulm. From Wilhelm Worringer, Formprobleme der Gotik*, 1912.*

Otto often reached for the word "emptiness" to describe the numinous in art. Like many of his European contemporaries, he was attracted to the art of the Near and Far East, where he had traveled in 1911–1912.[8] Scholars of Buddhist art such as Osvald Sirén (1879–1966) and Otto Fischer (1886–1948), both of whom Otto cites, contributed to concepts of modern art

6. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, London 1963; Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Garden City, NY 2021.

7. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 67–68.

8. John W. Harvey, "Translator's Preface to the Second Edition", in Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, London 1958, ix–x.

and to Otto's conception of the numinous, as exemplified in Buddhist and Taoist arts of China, Japan, and Tibet. The "numinous itself" is achieved "in the sweeping lines and rhythm" of the spare Chinese landscapes "of emptiness" made in the classical period of the Tang and Sung dynasties.[9] Through painting "almost nothing" with "the fewest strokes", Chinese painters conveyed the feeling that "the void itself is depicted as a subject".[10] Islamic architecture dispenses with figures, images, and ritual implements and works solely with light and space, he wrote, conveying "the mysticism of emptiness".[11] Otto also quotes loosely from Fischer's essay on Chinese landscape painting, which opened a 1920 issue of *Das Kunstblatt*.[12] In this essay, Fischer extoled the spirituality of Chinese landscape, and ended with the thought that these landscapes "are born from a state of the soul that is still foreign to us Europeans. Who knows whether we can find our way to it?"[13] This issue of *Das Kunstblatt*, a mainstream art journal, contained more articles about Chinese art, but also included essays by famous art critics and illustrations of the work of the German Expressionist artists August Macke (1887–1914) and Ludwig Meidner (1884–1966), the fauve, Maurice Vlaminck, and other contemporary artists. The cumulative effect was to trace the steps by which European landscape painters sought to find their way to this longed-for state of the soul.

Otto used secular metaphors drawn from aesthetics to describe the numinous, but artists and critics had long been searching for similar words to describe works of art. In his 1899 essay, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der modernen Kunst", Alois Riegl (1858–1905) was already trying to express a feeling like that of the numinous. *Stimmung* was a "mood", a feeling of being in tune ("gestimmt"), which one sometimes feels in nature. Otto used the same term *Stimmung* and varieties of it to express the feeling of the numinous. His phrase, "Eine stetige fliessende *Gestimmtheit* der Seele" ("a steadily flowing mood [or harmony] of the soul"), recalls the words in which Riegl introduced the feeling of *Stimmung* in 1899 as "ein unaussprechliches Gefühl der Beseeligung, Beruhigung, Harmonie" ("an inexpressible feeling of blessedness, comfort, harmony").[14] *Stimmung* would become a catchword in the work of popular German language art critics.[15]

9. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 67.

10. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 69.

11. Rudolf Otto, *Autobiographical and Social Essays*, Berlin 1996, 191, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110814767.

12. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 67.

13. Otto Fischer, "Chinesische Landschaft", *Das Kunstblatt* 4 (January 1920), 6.

14. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 12, my italics; Alois Riegl, "Die Stimmung als Inhalt der moderne Kunst", *Graphische Künste* 22 (1899), 48, https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.4071.4.

15. Hermann Bahr, *Secession*, Vienna 1900, 50.

19. *Hui Tsung* *Herbst*

Figure 2. Hui Tsung, Herbst *(Autumn), twelfth century. Illustrated in Otto Fischer,* Chinesische Landschaftsmalerei, *1921.*

AUGUST MACKE: WEG AM RHEIN. AQUARELL.

Figure 3. August Macke, Weg am Rhein*, n.d., watercolor. Illustrated in* Das Kunstblatt *4 (January 1920).*

If these expressions suggest religious feelings, some of Otto's expressions recall the outspokenly mystical propensities of literary figures such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929). In his 1903 "Letter of Lord Chandos", a fictional letter written by an early seventeenth-century English lord to the famous proponent of the scientific method, Francis Bacon (1561–1626), Chandos despairs of the limitations of language. Words are simply too general to encompass any thought. Some simple, usually visual events will create "a shudder at the presence of the Infinite, a shudder running from the roots of my hair to the marrow of my heels". One might feel this shudder "on finding beneath a nut-tree a half-filled pitcher which a gardener boy had left there, and the pitcher and the water in it, darkened by the shadow of the tree, and a beetle swimming on the surface from shore to shore".[16] This highly visual image could easily have been inspired by some of the Chinese landscapes that Otto admired.

The Numinous in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Art

The discourse of the numinous in art developed throughout the twentieth century, even though the term "numinous" itself only rarely appeared in the context of what is more commonly called the "spiritual in art".[17] Landscape is at its basis. But by the 1960s, the term "numinous" became associated with abstraction. In 1961, when Mark Rothko's (1903–1970) paintings were first shown in London, the word "numinous" along with the connotation of emptiness, appeared in reviews of the exhibition:

> This emptiness is – and remains – the central phenomenon. Nobody has seen anything like it. The resonance, the radiance, the way that the paintings continue to arrive anew on the retina every time one blinks: none of this has been experienced before. These oblongs and bands in glowing colours that blend and merge have appeared out of nowhere, numinous and strange. But most of all, the works are transcendently empty.[18]

16. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Selected Prose*, New York 1952, 129–141. Quotation from p. 137.

17. The phrase is adapted from Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, for an influential exhibition of 1986–1987: "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985", curated by Maurice Tuchman and first shown at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986–1987. Catalogue: Maurice Tuchman et al., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, New York 1986.

18. Laura Cumming, "Rothko in Britain – Review", *The Observer*, 11 September 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/sep/11/rothko-in-britain-whitechapel-review, accessed 2023-01-22.

Figure 4. Mark Rothko, Untitled*, 1951, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Gift of The Mark Rothko Foundation, Inc.*

Much of the discourse of the numinous in the art of the later twentieth century falls within this same discourse of emptiness and abstraction. While not using the term itself, Michael Fried's classic exegesis of "presentness", in his essay "Art and Objecthood" is probably one of the best-known examples of secular religiosity in abstract art in the mid-twentieth century. Fried deployed this concept in opposition to another artistic movement of the period, "Minimalism", which Fried called "literalism". It sought its artistic effect in the uncanny "presence" of an object that confronts the viewer. For Fried, "presence" leaves the art object inert, a "thing" that just takes up space. A work that imparts the feeling of presentness, however, remains completely in the temporal present: it arrests you; it stops you. Fried's tone was explicitly religious. Presentness was that feeling one has that God creates the world afresh at every moment – like the Rothko painting that arrives anew on the retina every time one blinks. Fried's essay ends with the words, "presentness is grace".[19] By "grace" Fried surely meant something of what Otto meant by an experience of the "numinous".

One logical path to follow from here would be to watch the numinous spread into media art, as it did in the late twentieth century, with the intense beauty and mystery of Nam June Paik (1932–2006) and some of Bill Viola's work.[20] Viola, who was fascinated by the Buddhist regard for emptiness, famously said that "cameras are keepers of the souls".[21] But instead I want to follow a different path, to find the numinous in an unexpected context that may push against its meaning, or perhaps against its power.

A "Dialogic" Reading of the "Numinous"

"Literalism", or minimal art, suggested to Fried spatial "presence", rather than temporal "presentness". Still abstract, minimalism whittled the art

19. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood", in Gregory Battock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, New York 1968, 147.

20. On these artists, see Jungu Yoon, *Spirituality in Contemporary Art: The Numinous in Art*, London 2010, 78–94.

21. Bill Viola, "Cameras are Keepers of the Soul", Interview by Christian Lund, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, London 2011, https://channel.louisiana.dk/video/bill-viola-cameras-are-keepers-souls, accessed 2023-01-22. On the numinous in Viola's work, see also Rina Arya, "Bill Viola and the Sublime", in Nigel Llewellyn & Christine Riding (eds.), *The Art of the Sublime*, Tate Research Publication, January 2013, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/rina-arya-bill-viola-and-the-sublime-r1141441, accessed 2023-01-22.

Figure 5. Tony Smith, Die, *1962, steel, oiled finish, 6' x 6' x 6'. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC.*

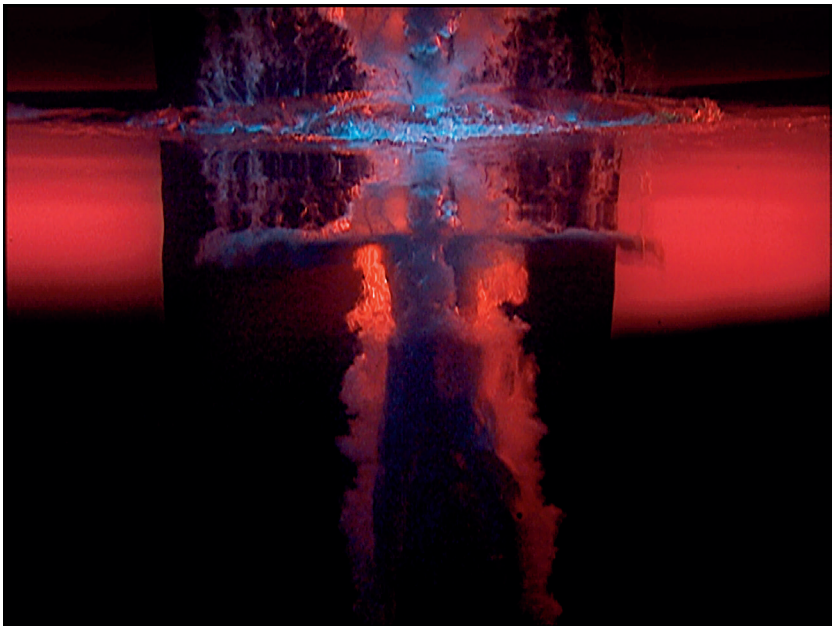


Figure 6. Bill Viola, "Fire Angel", panel 3 of 5 from Five Angels for the Millennium, *2001, video/sound installation. Photo: Kira Perov. © Bill Viola Studio.*

object down into a presence in the world whose whole existence would consist in its relation to the viewer; a pure relation, an object with no parts within in it that could relate internally to each other and distract from the primary relation to the viewer. "Relation" was a goal gaining traction among many artists. In fact, some thought that in "Art and Objecthood" Fried unintentionally made a convincing case for the value of minimalism. But philosophers of relation were already writing in the orbit of Rudolf Otto. Their writings included traces of numinous discourse. Two Jewish philosophers notably detected and argued for a dialogical element in something like the "numinous": Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Emanuel Levinas (1906–1995). Both were inspired by or inspired, artistic practices.

Buber's 1923 book *I and Thou* was a significant early example of the dialogical turn that came into its own in the middle of the twentieth century. In it he analyzed two fundamental word-pairs ("Grundworte"), *Ich–Du* (I–thou), and *Ich–Es* (I–it). Whenever one says "I" it implies a relation that will be one of these two. Speaking either of these pairs informs the relation of man to the world accordingly, or in Buber's terms, brings about man's existence in the world. I–it is the I-centered relation that perceives and knows "it". I–it designates whatever "I" encounters as a thing. Through I–it, I experience the world. This *Grundwort* enables action. I–thou is the *Grundwort* of pure relation. At first glance, there is nothing numinous in Buber's dialogic philosophy; his I–thou relationship might seem to exclude the numinous. It is, after all, not an experience in Otto's sense. Furthermore, in Otto's exposition of the numinous there is nothing exactly dialogical or even relational. The numinous is not found in other people, but alone, in moments of isolated intuition. Yet something outside must evoke it: Otto's "absolute other". Conversely (or perhaps reciprocally) Buber's *I and Thou* does find something like the numinous in interpersonal relations. Regarding I–thou, Buber wrote: "It does not help you to survive, it only helps you to have intimations of eternity."[22] That is, to say "Du" is to have an intuition of the infinite.

Like the numinous, the "thou" is ungraspable by reason. "Not that scientific and aesthetic understanding is unnecessary", writes Buber, "but it should do its work faithfully and immerse itself and disappear in the truth of the relation which surpasses understanding and embraces what is understandable."[23] Unlike Otto, however, Buber envisioned the spirit not as inside the I, evoked by the other, but as in the relation itself. The spirit is between

22. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, New York 1970, 84.
23. Buber, *I and Thou*, 91.

people, or more precisely, the spirit is not within man; rather, man lives within the spirit.[24]

Buber emerges from and in turn affects much the same milieu as does Otto: the secular religiosity of early twentieth-century Europe, including its mysticism. Repeatedly, Buber uses the argument that while the "it" is reducible to its qualities, the "thou" is not "a loose bundle of named qualities".[25] Robert Musil's (1880–1942) *Man Without Qualities*, begun not many years later (although never finished), emerges from some of these same attitudes.[26] The emptiness of the Chinese landscapes that Otto cites, barely suggested with a few lines, and devoid of detail, convey a similar sense. Indeed, Buber shares a formal and spiritual affinity with Otto's aesthetics. An art historian by training, and briefly, by aspiration, Buber expressed his early dialogism in visual terms, using the word *Stimmung*, as a form of relation, to describe both Hermann Struck's (1876–1944) distant views of monuments in Palestine and the basic idea of the Jewish people itself.[27] Later, he cited Leopold Krakauer's (1890–1954) sketches of plants in Palestine, which exhibited, like some of the Chinese drawings, extensive empty space. In Krakauer's drawings, Buber saw art as an activity of relation, of forms that wished to come into being, and of an artist who reciprocally wished forms to bring themselves into being.[28] It is not Buber's artistic taste, however, that would come to influence the art of social justice.

To help relate numinous dialogism to social justice art we turn to Emanuel Levinas, another dialogical philosopher who explicitly relates his ideas to social justice. Levinas's notion of the Other has frequently been compared to Otto's "absolute other".[29] Levinas, however, placed the "face to face" relation at the basis of his philosophy. Because of this emphasis on the dialogical, Levinas is also frequently compared to Buber. Yet the relationship to the Other described by Levinas differs from Buber's I–thou relationship, primarily because his interlocutor is not a "thou", the familiar *Du* in Buber's German (*toi* in French), but rather the formal, and more distant "you" (*vous*

24. Buber, *I and Thou*, 89.

25. For example, in Buber, *I and Thou*, 59.

26. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, London 1979.

27. Discussed in Margaret Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art*, Lincoln, NE 2001, 118–124, where Buber's art historical training, under Alois Riegl, is also discussed.

28. Olin, *The Nation Without Art*, 124–126.

29. For example, Henning Nörenberg, "The Numinous, the Ethical, and the Body: Rudolf Otto's 'The Idea of the Holy' Revisited", *Open Theology* 3 (2017), 546–564, https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0042; John Caruana, "'Not Ethics, Not Ethics Alone, but the Holy': Levinas on Ethics and Holiness", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 34 (2006), 561–583, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9795.2006.00285.x

einiger prächtiger Palmen ab. Kein anderer Baum wirkt doch wie dieser. Er verleiht sofort der ganzen Landschaft den Charakter! Die Kolonisten empfingen uns herzlich. Sie sind unabhängig von Zuschüssen und zahlen bereits Schulden ab.

Vor Wad el Chanin.

Figure 7. Hermann Struck, Vor Wad el Chanin, *etching. Illustrated in Adolf Friedemann & Hermann Struck,* Palästina, *1904.*

Figure 8. Leopold Krakauer, Ancient Olive Tree. *Illustrated in Martin Buber, "The Anguish of Solitude: The Art of Leopold Krakauer",* Ariel *9 (Winter 1964–1965).*

in French).[30] This difference is central to Levinas's placement of ethics in the form of responsibility at the center of the dialogical relation.

Levinas differs from both of these thinkers in placing the transcendent explicitly in a social context. He views the face's essential revelation as its potential for speaking. Revelation, he writes, is discourse.[31] This revelation is not euphoric, or at least not only euphoric, for the speech of the Other consists in a command. It is possible to wonder, while reading Levinas, whether pain is a necessary component of revelation, somehow associated with the terror that Otto finds analogous to the numinous. But even terror is terror of something, and the particular nuance of the idea of terror differs, in Levinas, from that suggested by Otto. The Other who commands us in Levinasian theories is not only above us, but also below us, soliciting us "by his destitution in the face of the Stranger, the widow and the orphan".[32] The Other, is, in short, fragile. While our terror, in Otto's terms, is for ourselves, any terror that Levinas suggests is at least as much on behalf of the Other as for ourselves. When the Other approaches us through the defenseless stranger, what she immediately commands is that we not commit murder.[33] The horror, or the pain of seeing the other and realizing one's responsibility and one's inadequacy to that responsibility, is comparable to Otto's numinous even while it translates the numinous into an ethics, an infinite ethics.

Levinas did not intend his ideas about the face to apply specifically to the visual encounter with a human face, especially as a representation. He can seem to have rejected the phenomenal altogether because he distinguished his notion of infinity as noumenon from a numen, an argument that referred to Kant's notion of a noumenon beyond the sensory, and distinguished from a "phenomenon".[34] He generally seemed skeptical, at best, of visual representation, even when he wrote sympathetically about art in his "Reality and its Shadow".[35] There, art is an ethics, and this ethics is not a knowledge but rather a relationship. He may well have agreed with Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905–1980) meditation on the gaze: "if I apprehend the look, I cease to perceive the eyes."[36] This would suggest that neither Sartre nor Levinas would regard a portrait as a good vehicle for representing a gaze, although for Sartre a variety of emotions, including fear, but not

30. Emanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Pittsburgh, PA 1969, 101.

31. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

32. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 78.

33. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 199

34. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 77.

35. Emanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, Dordrecht 1987, 1–13, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-4364-3_1.

36. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, New York 1956, 258.

responsibility, marks the response to the apprehension of a gaze. Indeed, a gaze is often something that one feels, intimates, or even hears, rather than sees.[37]

It is unclear the extent to which Levinas's own pronouncements about art are relevant to his relation to contemporary art. In fact, the value of the representation of the gaze is possibly the wrong issue to take up with Levinas. Art, as Michael L. Morgan points out in his discussion of the supposed one-sidedness of Levinas's thought, is created with a viewer in mind. The ethical is not, therefore, one area isolated from other, religious areas that Levinas privileges; it is the heart of religion itself. Moreover, it pervades all areas of life.[38] It is difficult indeed to imagine something worth doing that is only done alone, at least when one thinks in terms of the wider context in which one is doing it. There are many ways to "kill" a person, and physical nourishment is not the only way to save a life. Art may help. To go further, the physical representation of a face may not be the only way to seek a face-to-face encounter in art.

It is unnecessary for our purposes to rehearse the history of the denigration of vision in twentieth-century philosophy.[39] Whatever Levinas thought of visual art, and despite his effort to disassociate his theories from perceptual sensations, or at least representation, he was a conduit for ideas of the numinous that seep into contemporary discourses of social justice art. His ideas can and have been used to think with by artists with varying approaches. Most notably, the filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne had Levinas's work in mind in making their films.[40] Their films use Levinasian elements depending, as in *The Promise* (1996), on a plot that concerns relationships of obligation and commitment, and explicitly enacts Levinasian notions of responsibility. They also introduce, as has been argued, formal strategies that convey Levinas's ideas of the numinous.[41] My question here, however, focuses directly on the question as to whether it is possible or

37. One of Sartre's examples involves hearing footsteps behind one and concluding that one is being seen. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 260.

38. Michael L. Morgan, *Discovering Levinas*, New York 2007, 289–299, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511805240.

39. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley, CA 1993.

40. Jean-Pierre Dardenne & Luc Dardenne, *Au dos de nos images (1991–2005): Suivi de Le fils et de L'enfant*, Paris 2005. I owe the reference to the Dardenne brothers and a lot more to Michael Morgan.

41. Perhaps the most notable discussions are Sarah Cooper, "Mortal Ethics: Reading Levinas with the Dardennes Brothers", *Film-Philosophy* 11:2 (2007), 66–87, https://doi.org/10.3366/film.2007.0011; Edward Lamberti, *Performing Ethics Through Film Style: Levinas with the Dardenne Brothers, Barbet Schroeder and Paul Schrader*, Edinburgh 2020, especially 41–42.

desirable to have anything like a numinous experience with a work of social justice art. Does a work of art command the viewer, and if so, how?

A Dialogic Numinous in the Art of Social Justice

Discourse is sticky. Vestiges of an old discourse that one thought one rejected may subtly cling to one's effort to replace it. This applies to the visual discourse of art and art traditions as well as to theory. In the 1960s, the artist Martha Rosler attended lectures on "Oriental art" by the painter Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967), whose work is often mentioned in the same breath with the word numinous.[42] The idea also showed up in the lecture hall. In Brooklyn College, he taught art history, and his style, writes Rosler,

> was like Zen – he would show slides of Asian art and say, "Here is one and here's another, and another..." There was great interest at that time in Eastern philosophies and their reflection is a certain kind of artistic understatement. That went well with [...] his paintings. Everything was very [...] silent, and concentrated. I found his paintings astonishing.[43]

Rosler entered college as an abstract painter herself but as her art turned to a more politically active direction involving more photography and collage, she seemed to abandon the silence, the emptiness, and the numinous as understood in the work of artists like Reinhardt.

Instead, her work was outspokenly social in content and often conceptual in style. Rosler exhibited *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* as an installation in 1975, and first published it as a chapter in her book *Three Works* in 1981, the version in which I will discuss it here.[44] The Bowery is a neighborhood of New York long known for its sleezy bars, pawn shops, and flop houses, where alcoholism abounded and alcoholics descended to their lowest point. It was a place where, if unable to cough up the sum for a place in a flop house, one might curl up for the night on the threshold of a shop. The word "Bowery" became synonymous with

42.For example, Christopher French, "Against the Proposition that 'Art is Art and Everything Else is Everything Else'", *The Brooklyn Rail* (Ad Reinhardt Centennial 1913–2013, December 2013/January 2014), https://brooklynrail.org/special/AD_REINHARDT/artists-on-ad/against-the-proposition-that-art-is-art-and-everything-else-is-everything-else, accessed 2023-01-22.

43. Benjamin Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler", in Martha Rosler, *Positions in the Life World*, New York 1998, 23.

44. Martha Rosler, *Three Works*, 2nd ed., Halifax 2006. It was uncertain where and when the installation was first exhibited at the time of the interview with Buchloh. Buchloh, "A Conversation with Martha Rosler", 44. But Rosler now says that the first exhibition was in San Francisco in 1975. See also the extensive analysis of *The Bowery* in Steve Edwards, *Martha Rosler: The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, London 2012.

Figure 9. Ad Reinhardt, 34, 1964, oil on canvas, 153 cm x 152,6 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Courtesy of Estate of Ad Reinhardt.

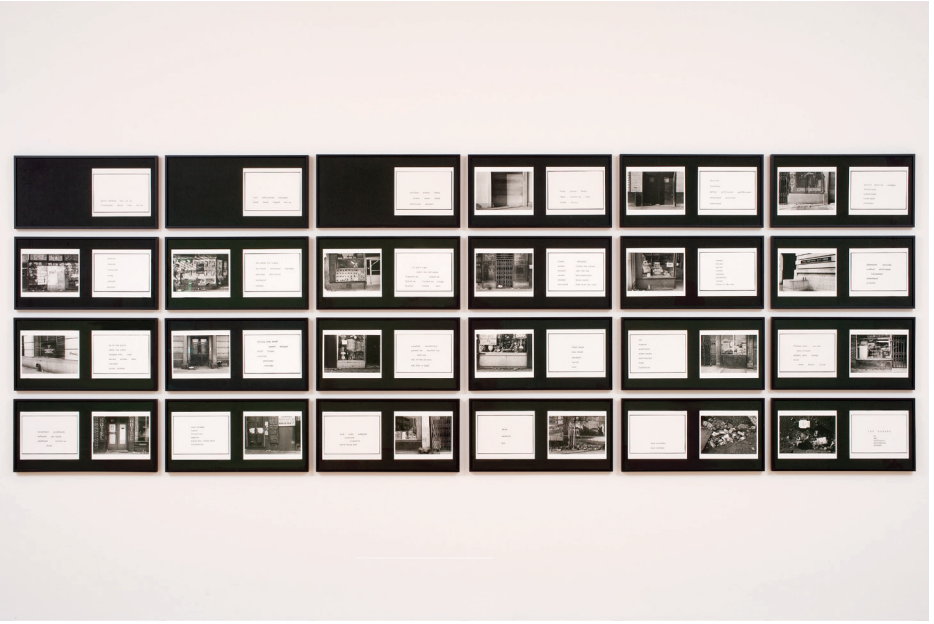


Figure 10. Martha Rosler, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems, *1974–1975, 45 gelatin silver prints on 24 black boards, each 25,4 cm x 55,9 cm. © Martha Rosler. Courtesy of the artist.*

degradation. Like Skid Row in Los Angeles, the Bowery was a favourite subject for documentarists, voyeurs (sometimes the same people), or activists in mid-twentieth-century America. In Lionel Rogosin's (1924–2000) 1956 film, *On the Bowery*, a fiction film acted by real-life denizens of the Bowery, the main character, an alcoholic, walks down night streets populated by drunken men sleeping in doorways. Rosler's project can be seen as an answer to films like this or to a book of photographs that she cites as its "perfect foil", although she saw it only after completing her installation, Michael D. Zettler's 1975 book, *The Bowery*.[45]

In both Rogosin's film and Zeitler's book, the Bowery is inhabited by troubled people who drink and sleep on its streets; the viewer is invited to gaze at their anguished, damaged faces or slumping bodies. In the book, a photograph of an alcoholic on the right side of a spread is coupled with words taken from interviews on the left. Zettler's introduction states:

> The name [Bowery] brings thoughts of winos, down-and-outers, the end of the line. [...] Whatever you're looking for in the way of pain, torment, and degradation is on open display, available to the general public. [...] There is little pretense here; these men are alcoholics, drunks, and most readily acknowledge this.[46]

Like Zettler's book, *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* consists of facing pages with words on side of the spread and images running parallel to it, on the opposite, facing page. The photographs show storefronts on the Bowery, taken from the sidewalk. They begin at the north end of the Bowery and literally continue *down* the street, to the south. Her words are not quotations from people who live and work there, however. They consist rather of stanzas of a concrete poem. The poem explores the role that language plays in turning an individual human being into the representative of a category, that of the "drunk", making a person, in Buber's terms a thou, into an it.

In Rosler's book, the poem begins alone on the first page and the two spreads that follow contain words on the right hand page and blank pages on the left. The words are adjectives used outside the Bowery to characterize the temporary, inoffensive quality of being high: "aglow, glowing, [...] mellow [...] lubricated, greased."[47] On the third full spread, photographs begin to appear on the left hand page, thus preceding the words. These

45. Rosler, *Three Works*, 86, n. 23.
46. Michael D. Zettler, *The Bowery*, New York 1975.
47. Rosler, *Three Works*, 8.

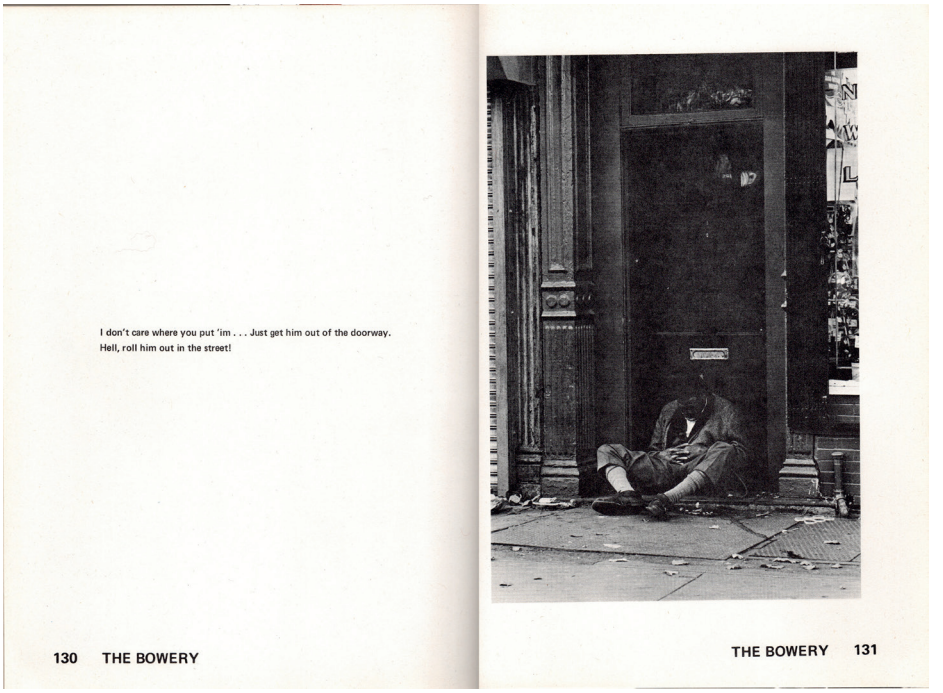


Figure 11. Page spread from Michael D. Zettler, The Bowery, *1975. Courtesy of the artist.*

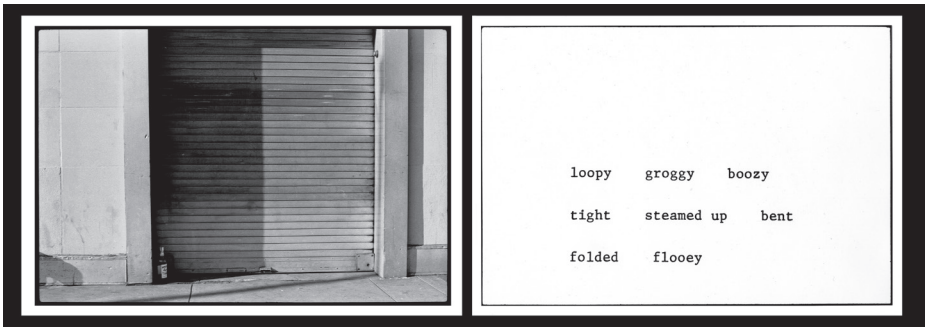


Figure 12. Martha Rosler, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems, *detail.*
© Martha Rosler. Courtesy of the artist.

adjectives might already seem dehumanizing. But across from the photographs they demonstrate the stages of dehumanization as the words shift to ones that describe a deeper, more profound drunkenness of the person who might sleep in an entranceway like the one on the photograph opposite. Even here there is a progression in both words and images. These first words, being vague, are accompanied by photographs of facades with no words, almost as abstract as a canvas of a Reinhardt or even a Richard Diebenkorn (1922–1993). But the facades become a bit noisier; the more clamorous ones respond to the rhythm and the metaphors of the words, which cascade around the page in different configurations, adding to the ruckus.

Up to this point, the words, at least, are reminiscent of a list compiled by Edmund Wilson (1895–1972) in "The Lexicon of Prohibition", which contains many of the same words in much the same order, "beginning with the milder stages and progressing to the more disastrous".[48] One could almost think that Rosler has created an illustrated version of Wilson's text, a work that she does not recall having seen. But two-thirds of the way into Rosler's text, something happens that changes everything. The words and the images trade places, and nouns replace the adjectives. They do not describe, but rather label, fixing people firmly into a type. The nouns, now on the left pages of the spread, run the show. There is no longer the potential to become something other than a "drunk". The section is shorter, as if to show that once a noun is applied to someone rather than a descriptive adjective, rapid deterioration sets in. The people, mercifully, remain unseen: they are exactly what you fail to see when you make a person – a thou – into a thing – it.

Both "stanzas" of the poem refer specifically to death. The last word among the adjectives is "gone". At the end of the shorter section of nouns the words are "Dead Soldiers, Dead Marines", phrases that refer to empty bottles. Empty bottles lie on or near the thresholds in nearly all the photographs, as though to represent the people who left them there. In the context of the last image, they also evoke the people who drank them to the dregs. The last two photographs lack an architectural background, but look down at piles of bottles. Zettler's book, too, ends with death: a dead body, a morgue, a death certificate, and finally Potter's field, where anonymous and unclaimed bodies are buried. In Rosler's book, the words have run out; the poem has ended; the images reverse again; only the title of the piece accompanies the last image. The work demonstrates how words can violate the

48. Edmund Wilson, *The American Earthquake: A Documentary of the Twenties and Thirties*, New York 1971, 89.

Figure 13. Richard Diebenkorn, Ocean Park *#67, 1973, oil on canvas, 254 cm × 205,7 cm. The Doris and Donald Fisher Collection at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. © The Richard Diebenkorn Foundation.*

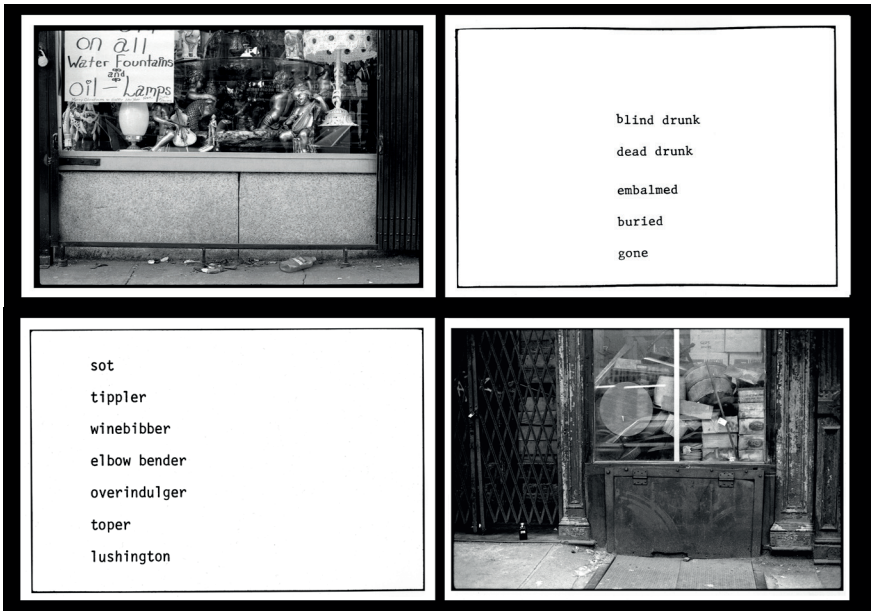


Figure 14. Two consecutive spreads from Martha Rosler, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, detail.*

very commandment imparted, according to Levinas, by the ”look”: Thou shalt not kill.

Like much conceptual art, this series is in large part a meta-comment, or as Rosler puts it, a quotation. It is not exactly about the Bowery, or at least not primarily about the Bowery. The photographs are in part commentaries on the kinds of businesses whose thresholds are nightly resting places for homeless people. Consequently they critique capitalism, which makes profits for banks, and leaves the lower classes out in the cold: the trickle-down theory at its limit, where the lowest in line get the dregs. A focus on the individual would not show these structural problems, but a view of the literal structures outside which these human beings sleep make the point.

The work is also, in accord with its title, about the limits – and the power – of “descriptive systems”, or “representations”. Whether the subject is an individual or a great social problem, these systems are based on conventions, and tend to reify whatever they describe. This effort places *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* close to the project of deconstruction. It shows, under the guise of inadequacy, the actual *power* of description, which, in turn plays its role in capitalism, where inadequate beings wield great power.

This project might seem to have little to do with the numinous, but contemplating this work could open up the numinous-like feeling of a revelation, as it did for me when I first saw it not long after it was published. Rosler, too, may have had some of the same feelings. She dedicated the book in which she published this piece to Ursula Eder, “in whom I first saw the beauty of thought brought to bear on art”. Rosler does not often use the word “beauty” without irony. Nor is the word “beauty” often used in connection with Rosler’s work. The straightforward way in which she photographs the Bowery, one facade at a time, might seem to be self-consciously unaesthetic. How can something so thoroughly non-humanized, so mundane, be beautiful? But the beauty of thought can be thrilling – there is the beauty of math, but also the beauty of carrying out an idea to its limit. “Beauty” is in itself not an expression of the numinous. But I do want to retain Otto’s association with the irrational, and term Rosler’s work “rational” only in a metaphorical sense.

Recall that the meditation on the beetle, which gives Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s Lord Chandos a feeling comparable to the numinous, concerns the direct contact with the real as opposed to the inadequacy of language. The numinous, if that is what it is, precludes rationality, but can be found in the trivial, in the detail, in the ostensibly unimportant, as in Leopold Krakauer’s drawing of a thistle. The trivial detail certainly marks

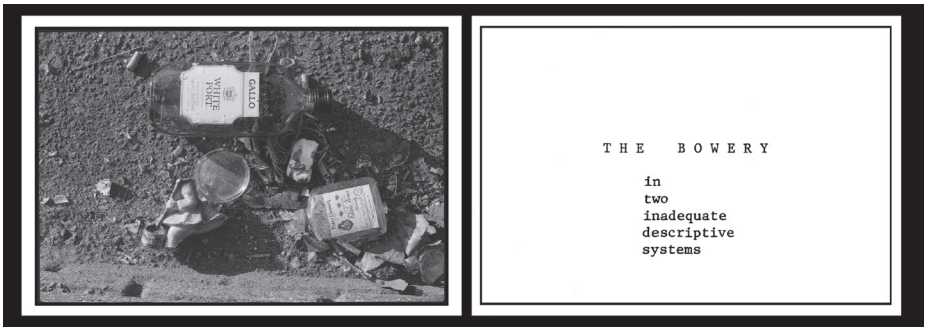


Figure 15. Martha Rosler, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, detail.*
© Martha Rosler. Courtesy of the artist.

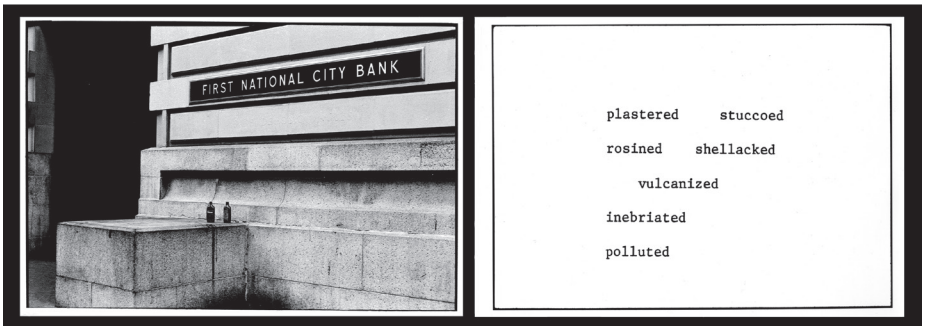


Figure 16. Martha Rosler, The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, detail.*
© Martha Rosler. Courtesy of the artist.

Rosler's subject matter as well. In Krakauer, and also in Otto's favourite classical Chinese landscapes, the emphasis was in the artist's effort to show a great deal with few means. There is an emptiness in Rosler's work, too, in the omnipresent empty bottles in the doorways, which compensates, if anything can, for the absence of people, and the "inaccessible mystery" of the interior spaces of the shops.[49] It is an emptiness that can evoke the numinous. In Rosler's rigorous and exacting determination to follow a path in which she expresses as much as possible using the fewest means – the fewest words and photographs depicting only the absolutely necessary – is there perhaps a kind of Ad Reinhardt moment after all?

The procession of scattered words on one side and that of facades on the other, in the painstaking adherence to their system, in the refusal to succumb to a sentimentalizing and objectifying view, and in the depressing full stop to which it comes, this poem of words and images asks the viewer to contemplate actual human beings sleeping, resting, in these thresholds. The title also suggests that both of these two descriptive systems are inadequate because they do not add up to one full description. In fact, nothing adds up to a "full description". If these representations were adequate, they would exclude the numinous, which cannot, after all, be described. In Levinas's terms, the ability to describe these people would relegate them to a "totality", rather than "infinity". I use the term "dialogic numinous" to describe the effect that Rosler's work can have.

Epilogue and Conclusion

Some of what I have written about Rosler's work could apply to more recent work by other artists as well, work that forces us to face people through their empty environments, that makes us aware of the "thou" behind the "it". Miki Kratsman's and Shabtai Pinchevsky's "anti-mapping project" works "towards an investigation into the conditions of visibility and invisibility imposed upon Palestinians in the production of the landscapes of Israel and the Occupied Territories". Kratsman uses the expression "emptiness" both in photographs and in a written text to describe the feeling the project intends to impart: "One of the goals of the project is to represent the absence or future absence of a place, of the victim, the one no longer there, sometimes all we can do is write of, or point at an emptiness to represent the absence of the victim."[50]

49. The phrase is from a personal communication from Martha Rosler, to whom I am indebted for reminding me of the absence of shop interiors in the piece, and much else.

50. Quoted in Andrew Fisher, "Miki Kratsman and Shabtai Pinchevsky: The Anti-Mapping Project", *Philosophy of Photography* 10 (2020), 244, https://doi.org/10.1386/pop_00019_1. See also Nurit Chinn, "Miki Kratsman and Shabtai Pinchevsky's 'Anti-Mapping' Unveils Histories

Figure 17. Miki Kratsman & Shabtai Pinchevsky, The Anti-Mapping Project*, detail. Camera location: 31° 48' 42,22" N, 35° 20' 18,84" E. Altitude: 240,5 m. Image direction 161.00° (magnetic direction). Courtesy of Miki Kratsman.*

Figure 18. Naomi Safran-Hon, Mirror Ceiling: A Room with a Mattress and a Chair*, 2020, acrylic, gouache, lace, archival ink jet print, and cement on canvas and fabric, 243,84 cm x 152,4 cm. Courtesy of the artist.*

The victims, in the case of Khan al-Ahmar, like Rosler's denizens of the Bowery, are absent from the photographs, but not – yet – from Khan al-Ahmar. This village in the occupied territories was slated to be demolished by the Israeli government and the occupants expelled to an area that houses a garbage dump near a Palestinian city. Seeing the homes empty is, in fact, chilling. And the project is about this feeling, perhaps more than the facts it contains: straightforward photographs, GPS coordinates, and an arial map. As with Rosler, the care with which Kratsman and Pinchevsky obey their own rules and assemble their facts is an important component of the feeling.

Israeli-American painter Naomi Safran-Hon imparts a different expression of emptiness. Safran-Hon grew up in Haifa, Israel. Her series consists of enormous, breathtakingly beautiful paintings derived from photographs she took of the interiors of homes that Palestinians left behind in 1948 when they fled the neighbourhood Wadi Sahid, in Haifa. The varied materials, including concrete and lace, that Safran-Hon works into the paintings give the destruction they depict a sense of having been lifted from the rooms themselves. Like *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*, people are absent. In this case, they are absent not only from the paintings, but also from the homes, and from Haifa. The paintings depict the debris of their lives, the remains of the beauty people once cared about creating in their homes, and the thoughtless destruction that tried to make "thou" into "it", over and over.

The examples of Social Justice art discussed here do not only issue a litany of complaints. There is a reason why one works for social justice; it involves pulls and yearnings towards something better as well as anger at what is.[51] In the work of these artists that means showing "what is" while coming face to face with people who have been victimized, people whom one cannot look *at*, but whose gaze one can feel. Their absent voices are a command that one must obey, even when one would prefer to spend time alone, steeped in the numinous so beguilingly described by Rudolf Otto. Martha Rosler has said, "I am still trying to cope with the loss of the Transcendent from Art".[52] ▲

---

of Forced Displacement in Israel and Palestine", *British Journal of Photography*, 11 August 2021, https://www.1854.photography/2021/08/miki-kratsman-shabtai-pinchevskys-anti-mapping/, accessed 2023-01-22.

51. I borrow this expression from Maud Lavin, with whom I explored this interpretation in e-mails.

52. Personal communication to the author.

SUMMARY

In *Das Heilige,* Rudolf Otto discusses not only conceptual, but artistic parallels to the idea of the "numinous". The artistic styles and periods that he mentions are those admired by European literati and intellectuals of his time. They include the spare Chinese landscapes "of emptiness", made in the classical period of the Tang and Sung dynasties, as well as the gothic art that inspired the movement towards abstraction in the early twentieth century. Related ideas continue to pervade the discourse of champions of abstract art well into the twentieth century, as in in Michael Fried's exegesis of "presentness", in his essay "Art and Objecthood". Seemingly counterintuitively, ideas associated with the numinous also infiltrate discourses of the art of social justice. Some Jewish thinkers who referenced or absorbed Otto's ideas, translated them into relational notions or ethical ideas of responsibility. When these ideas seep into the contemporary discourse of social justice art, concepts of the numinous cling to them. An investigation of a significant work of art in the service of social justice reveals a connection between conceptual art, the numinous, and social justice that extends from the era of the early 1980s into our own time.