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Opinion /



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
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The Haunting

The role of the dead in the lives of the living

'I meant to write about death but life came crashing in, as usual.'
Virginia Woolf, diary entry, 17 February 1922

We're all haunted, to varying degrees, by many things, but most extremely by ourselves; by the unconscious gestures, unresolved impulses and failures that shape our day-to-day lives. We're haunted by our ignorance and by the possibility of change in the midst of stasis. We're as haunted by the living as we are by the dead: in the inevitable elisions of mutual understanding that shape our relationships. But, perhaps most extremely, we're haunted by the appalling inevitability of our own death. None of which, I hasten to add, is necessarily a reason for gloom – it's just how it is.

Despite being an absolute, death is the ultimate in subjectivity. Art, being produced by humans, is no different; a living thing that, in a kind of conceptual homeopathy, must absorb the dead in order to resist becoming deathly itself (nothing is more lifeless than an art that is ignorant of its precedents). It's an active relationship – an elegy demands a reader, a threnody a singer. No work of art can be made in a vacuum; art, like life, is a never-ending and ever-changing accumulation of ideas, shapes, forms and content (we respond to history as we make it).

Contemporary art would be nothing without the great generosity of the dead, the artistic legacy of whom is made freely available. It's as if each new generation of artists has been left a fortune by a benevolent benefactor to do with as it chooses. Most artists (and writers and musicians) grapple to understand what it is they've been given and what it is they're meant to do with it; some squander these riches; others try to ignore them (at their peril), trade them in or transform them; the worst either assume they were written out of the will and rage against the past like a teenager shouting at a weary parent, or attempt to bask in history's authority but, history being history – and thus slippery – fail. It's complicated, though; trying to understand art's bequest is a bit like trying to understand how it's actually possible to see the light from a long-extinct star (perhaps the most vivid of all dead things).

If the art of the past is like a ghost – something dead that refuses to die – then it follows that a haunting is the unresolved relationship between influence and action. At its best, the impact of someone else's thinking on your own is the development and deepening of a necessary conversation; at its worst it's the sort of anxiety-inducing pressure that results in creative paralysis pace Harold Bloom. Haunting, as influence, is a spectral residue; the past reconfigured as a continual present that pervades much creative activity. ('One need not be a chamber to be haunted,' wrote Emily Dickinson. And she knew what she was talking about.)

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There is a lot of art around at the moment that seems, if not haunted, at least a little melancholy – as if it's grappling with the sense of something (often undeclared) that is lost, out of reach, unattainable. The best of it often involves a resurrection of forms or ideas from the past that cast a shadowy light on our present. For many of these artists, their daily lives involve a kind of studio-based seance; an invitation to those who are not physically present to contribute to discussions about how best to understand the here and now. It's an invitation often proffered by Cyprien Gaillard, who is interviewed in this issue; he's an artist who never stops wrestling with earlier forms of art and architecture in order to respond to a contemporary intertwining of nature and architecture, history and excess. What form a conversation with the dead should assume in different contexts, however, is another matter altogether, and one that involves the ethics of representation – to what extent do images of the past belong to us? In his essay, 'What is Appropriate?', Jörg Heiser considers what might constitute a suitable response to the Holocaust, a subject that artists and writers have struggled to find a language for over the past 65 years. (Elie Wiesel's observation that the opposite of life isn't death, it's indifference, is apt here.) That the scale of the past is more of a continent than a single country is made apparent by Brian Dillon, who explores the various ways in which ruins have been co-opted by diverse artists and writers to wildly different ends. 'On the one hand,' he writes, 'the ruin appears to point to a deep and vanished past whose relics merely haunt the present, reminding us of such airy and perennial themes as the hubris of Man and the weight of History. On the other, ruins seem to traffic with the modern, and with the future, in ironic and devious ways.'

Despite our period's obsession with newness, youth and change, most of us spend at least a much time with the dead as we do with the living. We inhabit their buildings, read their books, look at their art and listen to their music; more recently, of course, their photographs and films have transformed our understanding of the world, and our lives are governed by the legacy of their politics and their religions. For the first time in the history of the planet, the living now outnumber the amount of people who have ever died. As the earth's population booms, and anxiety about its future reaches crisis levels, it is more important than ever to consult the dead; not because they need us, but because we need them. They've been here before, and, in their own way, many of them have survived. And that's saying something.

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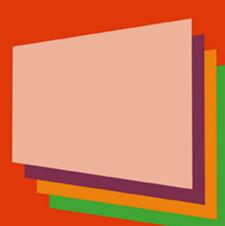
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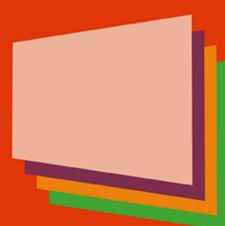


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