

Kafka's Ear

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When Max Brod edited Kafka's diaries, he gathered into some kind of order an almost inconceivably disparate set of notebook fragments, in which simple quotidian observations were interspersed with drafts for his fictional pieces. What holds them together, barely, is the sequence of days, months and years: the order in which Kafka recorded his life, both actual and imaginary. Kafka had set himself the discipline of writing every day, and so wrote every day, observing himself in minute detail. And few subjects are more fascinating to him than the state of his own health: he meticulously describes his fatigue, his migraines, his insomnia. Virtually no external event is ever mentioned, aside from the odd theatrical performance he attends. Yet every minuscule shift in his body is an object of fascination. He despairs in and for his body. But there are also passages that emerge with a sudden rapture, like the fleeting moment in 1910 when he wrote: 'The auricle of my ear felt fresh, rough, cool, succulent as a leaf, to the touch.'¹ Like the numerous symptoms that proliferate through the diary entries, there is something in the sensual effect of this brief description of the object that is his ear that defies any distinction between inner and outer – as if the gradient of textures were some deeply alien yet intimate fleshy object.

To be a hypochondriac is to be an acute and scrupulous observer of our own bodies. Not immune from the condition himself, Freud described hypochondria as a state of being in love with our own illnesses. But even more compelling perhaps than the unknown illness itself is the complex relation hypochondria has to the overwhelming desire to describe and record symptoms – which surely accounts in part for the intimate connection between hypochondria and writing. The literary canon is peppered with figures lamenting their symptoms, from Molière's *Le Malade Imaginaire* through to Proust's famous inability to rise from his bed. Hypochondria can be taken as a metaphor for all fiction: after all, it is more than real in the imagination and so stands in for the intensity of all imaginary life.

Susan Morris's artist's book *On My Nervous Illness* taps into this long literary line of sufferers – linking her work to a history of hysteria and hypochondria, not least Judge Shreber's own personal account in *Memorabilia of a Nerve Patient*, published in 1903, which later formed the basis of one of Freud's most famous case studies. And yet, as an artist, albeit one whose thinking is deeply absorbed in a wide range of literary sources from Freud to W.G. Sebald, she also refuses to allow the relation of visual and verbal forms of notation to be straightforward. The work is frankly anti-narrative and abstract even though – in some admittedly imperceptible way – reading is everywhere in it – an intriguing and paradoxical aspect of the work that I will come back to. But first it is worth noting that although the body's syntax of symptoms is literally played out on its surfaces, Morris dramatises what it means to be an *observer* of one's own body and to record those observations on a daily basis in various forms of visual not verbal notation. This has something in common with a written diary, but is not a diary. The notational schemas deployed are even diametrically opposed to those of a diary. Although patterns of sequencing are obviously still involved, they do not follow the form of literary narrative, even a wildly fragmented one.

One format that Susan Morris has used even more than any other is that of the year planner – the kind mainly used in offices. The association with office paraphernalia is strictly anti-pictorial and invokes conceptualist tropes like card indexes or filing cabinets. The year planner becomes a way to collect information on herself, filling in blocks of time according to certain preset procedural rules. These might relate to the most mundane things like visits to the hairdresser, trips to the doctor, her menstrual cycle or mood swings. The daily grind of filling in the squares accumulates to make, by the end of any given year, an abstract pattern of solid blocks set amongst empty spaces of unmarked

¹ Max Brod (ed.), *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1910–13* (trans. Joseph Kresh), London: Secker and Warburg, 1948, p.11.

days. Time is marked out in blocks and voids, creating a direct yet entirely opaque equivalent to the temporal rhythms of everyday life. Year planners offer a ready-made grid, evoking the memory of grid-pictures (from Piet Mondrian to Agnes Martin) without being one.

Year planners are grids with time already built into them. They are intended to look to the future, to see the year ahead all at once, and so suggest impossible containers for time not yet lived. And yet they are also a means to record time passing and sharply condense calendrical time – so much so, in fact, that once completed they are fit only for the waste bin. As a format, then, there is something poignant in the way a year planner combines disparate threads within twentieth-century art – with the grid as both originary clean slate and leftover of earlier modernisms. Even more so, in Susan Morris's series of screenprints and lithographs, they combine the supposed indifference of the geometric grid with the intense subjectivism of the corporeal and the bodily.

The first work that she made based on the format of a year planner appears both shiny and shadowy, like smoked glass. The data was collected over a period of ten years. Then the black patterns of filled in squares were printed onto ten sheets of transparent acetate, one sheet for each year. These were laid one over the other and framed. The sheets furthest from the top of the pile, being obscured by degrees, fade to grey, so that the one on the very bottom appears only dimly through the other nine layers. The work is a record of Morris's menstrual cycle, but its effect is a bit like looking at a history of abstraction through a glass darkly – registered indexically in monochrome blocks of grisaille. It looks like an abstract picture without being one. It looks like a photographic plate without being one. It is in limbo, neither picture nor photograph. And so dramatises the fact that all visible surfaces, however abstract the schematic notations, are always haunted by photography. Although it is conventional to see abstraction in opposition to photographic representation, the two idioms can be seen to be intimately entwined in the history of twentieth-century art – not least in the role played by Étienne-Jules Marey and other photographers who saw the medium as a means to observe human movement in sequences that were invisible to the naked eye. In relation to Morris's work, the photographic calibrations of the body played out in a fluctuating series of overlapping bodies have a particular vividness – just as they had suggested the repressed body in seriality for conceptual artists of the 1960s like Sol LeWitt.

The geometric blocks of the acetate year planners are a smokescreen, then, for an underlying photographic impulse – as if the pattern of greys and blacks suspended in this strange void space are like the lights and darks coming into being in the mysterious process of developing a photographic print in the dark room. (This process has, of course, has been lost in digital photography.) They suggest a model of viewing *unclearly* – as if vagueness is a kind of necessary condition of the obscurity in which we live our lives. All the self-surveillance and self-monitoring looks as if it turns inward on the artist herself. It does. But in so doing it also turns outward, not unlike the auricle of Kafka's description of his ear, making an impression of the cycles and rhythms and ailments of a whole culture.

In 2008 Morris began to make what she calls her plumb line drawings. In the first of these she used builder's chalk, which comes in standard red and blue. Initially they seem to be very different from the year planner prints. They are drawings, after all, and the sense of the lines falling from top to bottom of the paper fixed to the wall is of an entirely different order to the rectangular blocks and voids that mark out the body's temporal rhythms and cycles in the year planners. But it is precisely these lateral connections between works that animate Morris's project. The plumb line drawings could even be thought of as a kind of print, except now the printing apparatus is partly the plumb line and partly the body itself. Pinning it to the paper at the top, the artist 'pings' the line of string against the surface, standing right up against the wall. She becomes almost a kind of pitchfork, tuning the space in

front of the work – which will of course become the space of our encounter with it. The mechanistic operation is repetitive and indifferent, with the variations arrived at purely by chance. Each line has a different quality, and the repetition of the gesture only exacerbates the differentiation of each trace – extraordinarily delicate and bearing the minuscule imprints of each twist of the string's fibre.

There is a large black and white plumb line drawing made using vine ash, in which the sense of a visual reverberation that is already apparent in the red and blue drawings is now even more insistent, – as if the spectator, in that sliver of space in front of the work, is being 'played'. Although this drawing abandons colour, it introduces a new level of physicality. I don't think this has only to do with the more velvety effect of the black powder that drifts across the surface – or the greater emphasis the material lends to those tiny imprinted wisps and curls of fibre that become almost phototropic (distantly recalling Darwin's experiments with climbing plants, where tiny pencils were attached to the tendrils of a plant to make automatic drawings that tracked their movements). Rather the combination of the powdery material substance with an *absent* body suggest ghostly traces. The small smudges marking the areas where a dirty hand has rubbed the paper top and bottom makes this clear – but so, too, do the fluctuating lines that form the screen of striations across the surface. The screen shudders and flickers. Minute convulsions make for sudden movements. Susan Morris has said that she sees her work as more like a body cast than an imprint, which I interpret to mean that it involves not just a pressing down onto a flat surface but a twisting and stretching and bending – contortions of a body in three rather than two dimensions.

Susan Morris has also said that it is important to her to try to make a handmade mark that is 'inhuman'. This runs entirely counter to the tradition of the handmade mark as expressive gesture. The mark is now an automatic reflex, yet it still reverberates with the sense of a hand's touch – the sheer physicality of the work no longer quite human but made irrevocably strange. The physical labour of making the works is – and has to be according to its logic – her own. It is slow. It is exhausting. What does it mean to measure the body you are in like this? To observe the body you inhabit not by looking in a mirror but by calibrating its most fundamental rhythms and habits and compulsions. Observing yourself observing yourself, to make something like a temporal chart – or graph – of what W.G. Sebald might have called the body's 'nervature' and which Susan Morris refers to as the 'bodily unconscious'. The systematic nature of her methods of collecting data only reinforces the role of random accident in the results – not only in the hysterical body's errant behaviour but also the deeply mysterious gaps and intervals that are as much a part of what she collects as any of the rest of it – marking out the very discontinuities that define us as subjects in the first place.

Her most recent year planner series, *The Artist's Tears Fall like Rain*, sets the emotive against the indifference of self-surveillance. Each lithograph chronicles a period of one year, recording the days in the month when Morris was reduced to tears. A regulatory language of self-indulgence versus self-control fails to describe the awkward veering between the sheer liquid dissolution and the dry detachment that seems to be involved here. The heightened or even hyper sensibility is taken to such a pitch that it is hard to contain and yet it is obsessively measured. It charts the body in a kind of liquid breakdown: rather than recording menstrual bleeds, as she had in her earlier year planners, now tears register menopausal mood swings, calibrating the psychic ruptures that accompany the body's physical transformation. And the tears 'fall like rain'. This phrase echoes Lacan's famous evocation of Merleau-Ponty on Matisse – his description of brushstrokes as 'touches that fall like rain from the painter's brush'.² Rather than looking *at* such a deluge of colour from the outside,

² Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan), London: Penguin Books, 1994, p.114.

we are now necessarily at stake as subjects within the visual field. Suggesting a gravitational pull downwards makes the presence of the fine grid all the more precarious – and evokes a wet world, perhaps even the ‘vapours’ of the old melancholic.

While she was working on the large black plumb line drawing, Susan Morris had scribbled a small set of notes on the far left-hand side of the paper, which she cut off from the final work. The words ‘fall like rain’ were among the annotations in this little diagram – literally to the side of the work but also a part of the thinking process that is absorbed into it. Other jottings included ‘Proust’s asthma’ or ‘Deluge’. Barthes is quoted as well, and, of course, Sebald. These scribbles made me remember how insistent is the relation of the work to writing – and even more pressingly – to reading – both Susan Morris’s patterns of reading and our own. Rather like the way the body figures in her work more pressingly precisely because it is invisible in it – so, too, the intimate connection of her work to the novels of a figure like Sebald is all the more powerful because it is not at all obvious – and because in its conception it is so antagonistic to literary or narrative art forms.

Susan Morris has frequently made allusions to W.G. Sebald’s enigmatic books. Think of the character Beyle in his novel *Vertigo*. The syphilitic writer Beyle was the pseudonym for Stendhal, who, plagued by his symptoms, obsessively recorded them in various ‘cryptographic forms’ – the diagrams and calculus with which he calculated how long he had to live, and with which Sebald illustrates in his text. Or recall the passage in *The Rings of Saturn* describing the seventeenth-century silk pattern books in the Bridewell Museum in Norwich as ‘these catalogues of samples, the pages of which seem to be leaves from the only true book which none of our textual and pictorial works can even begin to rival.’³ The pattern book, a photograph of which appears alongside Sebald’s description, shows the woven patches of fabric attached to the pages, descending on the left-hand side. My point is not necessarily that some of her year planner works look like pages from these pattern books, but rather that they mirror the processes by which they were made; they are also formed, somehow, by nature itself – the consequences of entirely impersonal and automatic reflexes. The little blocks of black and grey that seem to fall down the gridded sheet of *The Artist’s Tears Fall like Rain* echo, as shadows might, the way the textile samples are laid out.

Despite the monochromatic colours and the bare grid structure, the effect of these falling shadow swatches is not austere. The black and grey ink blocks may not be ‘succulent as a leaf’, but their slight shine against the matte white paper makes the idea that they ‘rain down’ not so anomalous – or rather, somehow accurate precisely *because* so anomalous. It is nothing to do with what is being cried over. In this respect this series of lithographs deliberately cuts against the grain of its title. Tears, like the symptoms that beset the hypochondriac, fail to be signs *of* something, and they fail to connect to other symptomatic indications within a cogent system of causality. Symptoms without content, which connect mysteriously but without explication and emptied of affect. But there is a dogged persistence in the task of observing and recording the tears which tend to stop one’s being able to see clearly at all, and occasionally come with blinding fury. Tears can be light or they can be the proverbial waterworks. The point of collecting the data is not to make those sorts of distinctions – so we can’t know. No pathos, then, despite the inclination of the title, just a determination to continue to make work in lamentable times.

3 W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (trans. Michael Hulse), London: Vintage, 2002, p.286.