

CHAPTER SIX

MELANCHOLY AND THE TERRITORY OF DIGITAL PERFORMANCE

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The development of the computer, specifically network technologies, is the end of art as we know it; the sounds, images, and interactions of the near future will bear such little resemblance to what we currently recognize as art that various disciplines, including their canonical histories, will no longer actively exist [...] except in their role of marking otherwise determined positions of dominance.

—PARC researcher, 1988

In a time when interdisciplinary artworks are becoming ubiquitous, the question of how to utilize the critical discourse of specific disciplines without refusing a particular work's broader cultural relevance has become increasingly pertinent. Where works of art have traditionally been assigned to one or another conventional disciplinary field, interdisciplinary practices (particularly of the last sixty years) have convincingly dramatized the fact that cultural influence defines an artwork at least as much as disciplinary status. In this context, the recent proliferation of artworks involving digital technology (i.e. contemporary "media art") serves to at once reveal and challenge the ways in which conventional disciplinary vocabularies limit how we can talk about works of art and, consequently, the possibilities for understanding their larger cultural relevance. Simply put, contemporary media demands a new theoretical framework. I will argue that this framework must necessarily connect to the constitutive *subjective* ambivalence that Judith Butler (supplementing Foucault and Lacan) has theorized under the rubric of power. Taking account of how paradox structures the debate of subjectivity—always culminating "in displays of ambivalence" (1997, 10)—Butler's account offers a model from which to address digital art performance's constitutive ambivalence as determinant of and determined by culture; that is, through

insisting that the territory of digital performance is the problematic of the subject, I will also argue that contemporary art practices must first and foremost be considered as ethical practices. That is, any “work” that is accomplished in contemporary media art is achieved within the problematic of a code of practices that is itself grounded in the subject’s relation to the social (a relation that is always under erasure) rather than artistic production. With this territory laid out, then, I will conclude the chapter by suggesting that the performance of media art is a performance of the ambivalence that is constitutive of subjectivity, and thus feeds back as a politicizing performance of Butler’s critique of unilateral narratives.

The Trace and the Reduction of the Subject

In the interest of grounding this article in specific artistic practice, I would like to offer a consideration of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s *The Trace*, a work that consists of a telepresence installation that invites two participants in remote sites to share the same telematic space. The piece features two stations (which can be in the same building, or in different cities), each of which consists of a dark room with a giant rear-projection screen on the ceiling, a side monitor, four robot-lamps hanging from the ceiling, and ten speakers distributed around the room. Upon entering the station, each participant is given a small wireless sensor that monitors her three-dimensional position. *The Trace* transfers the sensor’s coordinates between the remote stations so that each sensor controls audiovisual elements in both stations—3-D graphics, intersecting lights, positional sound, and a statistics screen. One of the explicit objectives of *The Trace* is to allow the two remote participants the option of “telembodying” one another; that is, to have them occupy identical positions in telematic space so that they are virtually inside each other. This notion of “telembodying” emerges as a combination of contemporary cybernetic and virtual practices, the latter captured under the term “telepresence.” For *The Trace*, the key point of connection is the (posthuman) assertion of the impossibility of distinguishing between our bodies and the world to which we are inextricably wired. That is, telepresence is the extension of consciousness by extracting it from our bodies in the form of information, and cybernetics is the extension of the body by introducing new or improved functions. What is critical to *The Trace*, though, is that both approaches feed into one another; our bodies are refigured by the changes in consciousness that come with virtuality, and our consciousness is refigured by the changes in sensation that come with cybernetics. Indeed, the connection between mind and body is so deeply wired that it is

impossible to conceive of them separately, an impossibility that is both the founding paradox and the radical potential of both cybernetic and virtual art practices. This impossibility is the full meaning of the digital, in that the discrete character that characterizes it (as opposed to the continuous character of the analogue) always carries its full potential in the paradox that structures it. The digital proliferates through its very opposition to the analogue.

Thus, *The Trace* suggests that a fundamental formal and aesthetic shift is ushered in with the emergence of the contemporary digital artwork. That is, implicit in the co-terrain of telepresence and cybernetics is the realization that when we begin to think of machines in terms of humanity, we must also think of humanity in terms of machines, to which end N. Katherine Hayles has noted that “even if a particular model fails, the basic terms of comparison remain” (1999, 64). This point resonates in a number of distinct ways, but the most pertinent to the argument presented here is the fact that the territory of machine-human equivalence implicitly insists that the ground of contemporary digital artworks is the problematic of subjectivity.¹ That is, dynamic human-machine agential intensities, as media, are what are fundamentally at stake in digital art performance, rather than a canon of artistic practices.

This latter point is particularly worth bearing in mind when we consider the participants’ actions in *The Trace*, which are mapped by extracting information, translating it, and representing it as a multi-sensory experience. Lozano-Hemmer emphasizes the importance of the *multi-sensory* feedback as a means of foiling simple representation of the participant in favour of a more complex embodiment; that is, the participant’s actions are not just mapped through visual projection, but are translated into a complex virtual embodiment, a complexity that (Lozano-Hemmer insists) ensures that there are no uniform corporeal effects among participants. However, while this appears to allow the participants to avoid the reductive processes that virtual technologies often perform on the body, I would argue that it is instead the case that the site of reduction has simply been relocated from the participants’ bodies to their ethical consciousness; ethical in that it pertains to the participants’ codes of relating to one another. That is, though each of the performing subjects has access to a highly specified virtual embodiment, their mode of relating to one another is limited to a simplistically rendered experimentation with what Lozano-Hemmer calls virtual “lebensraum” (literally translated as “living-space”).² Specifically, then, the reduction of the subject occurs through the limitation of the modes of relating to one another that are

available to the participants; it occurs on the paradigm of their social agency (which is to say their agency itself).



Fig. 6-1, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Will Bauer, *The Trace, Remote Insinuated Presence*, 1995 (Collection Telefonica Foundation, Madrid, Spain).

My purpose in insisting on the reductive process that is implicit in *The Trace* is not to criticize the work, but rather to highlight the fact that it is demonstrative of the “change” that constitutes the transition from the use of analogue to digital technologies in contemporary art practices. That is, it is not so much the case that digital artworks are *interdisciplinary* as it is that they are radically *antidisciplinary*: their particular evolution is not registered relative either to a given corpus of artistic knowledge, nor to the generalized territory of artistic knowledge itself, but is instead best understood as a technology of the subject mobilized against unilateral

disciplinary narratives. Thus, the transition from analogue to digital is not so much a “change” as it is an intensification of the problematic of the subject played out in the theatre of art; an intensification that flips the problematic from an investigation of the constitution of the subject as it relates to the social, to an investigation of the radical relationality of both the social and the subject. The digitality of the digital artwork, then, is at its core an ethical position, first and foremost comprising a morality of living. And this does not just apply to “interactive” digital art, as a legacy of literal interactivity is exposure of the fact that the postmodern dispersal of authority is a material fact rather than a simple metaphor; interactive digital machinery is always-already at work in all contemporary artistic production, where digital art, digital performance art, and analogue art are now in a complex and continual feedback loop.

Butler, Melancholy, and the Relationality of Media Art

To understand how the relational subjectivity of media art suggests a particular ethical project, Judith Butler’s rethinking of Freud’s account of the role of melancholia in subject formation is invaluable. While Butler agrees with Freud that the mode of desire is always melancholic, she nonetheless argues that the constitutive foreclosure of this melancholia is not that of incest (as Freud argues); rather, it is homosexual desire that is the primary foreclosure in subject formation (existing prior to that of incest), so that the constitutive melancholia of subjectivity is the active absence (or disavowal) of homosexual desire—a disavowal that attests to the existence of that which is foreclosed. That is, in its very disavowal (in its radical foreclosure), homosexual desire is sustained as a structural necessity in the (always repeating, citational process) of subject formation (1997).

Thus, in its most basic formation, the subject is melancholic and melancholia, in *its* most basic formation, is properly understood as the “internalization” of the Other. That is, whereas grief represents an externalization of the self into the social field of relationality (through the process of recognizing that a part of oneself has been lost in the loss that is the object of grief), melancholia (as foreclosure) is unable to recognize the object of loss so that loss itself, in its most unknowable dimension, is taken in *as* the subject. In this sense, the subject is always a radically ambiguous composition of self and Other, just as the porous boundaries of the social are always penetrated by (and penetrate) those of the individual. In a basic equation, then, the ambiguity of the subject and the relationality

of the social are strictly correlative, and their mode of relation is that of vulnerability (since the intelligibility of each is at the mercy of the other).

Thus, Butler's political wager lies in the belief that to think of our melancholic subjectivity as deeply embedded (in and as us) is to open the possibility of positivizing the aporetic ambiguity of our subjectivity as the form of our political agency. That is, Butler does not think of agency as the expression of an agential subject, so much as considering it as the mode of avowing a relation of vulnerability as constitutive of agency. And isn't this precisely the scenario that is implicit in the posthuman reconsideration of subjectivity, where there is "no *a priori* way to identify a self-will that can be clearly distinguished from an other will" (Hayles 1999, 4)? This avowal, then, is properly understood in terms of grief: whereas our melancholic subjectivity has tended to give rise to unilateral narratives of political dominance that foreclose the possibility of grieving certain human lives,³ an understanding of this tendency as an attempt to suture the gap of ambiguity that is constitutive of our subjectivity is now properly understood as an ethics, because it implicates us in our inability to grieve. Strictly speaking, then, unilateral narratives are treatable symptoms of melancholic subjectivity. Thus, though we can never fully avow the lost object of homosexual desire (which would be to obliterate our subjectivity), the ethico-political agency opened through the concept of ambiguous, ambivalent, and vulnerable relation is properly understood as the act of traversing the fantasy of an agency composed of unilateral narratives.

This is the precise sense in which virtual performance is always-already antidisciplinary: through the insistence on a technologically conceived subject as constitutive of the work (which is to say, through the inclusion of the virtual as a valid territory of art), disciplinarity must be conceived first and foremost as a symptom of the subject's ambiguous and doubled relation with the performance; that is, disciplinarity is a unilateral narrative. Disciplinarity is thus a symptom that forecloses the ambivalence that is constitutive of the subjectivity upon which it depends. In this light, then, interdisciplinarity (as a frame from which to consider a work) is likewise symptomatic of a foreclosure of ambivalence in favour of unilateral narratives. That is, interdisciplinarity functions relative to the Law from which it deviates; a Law which, emphatically, is not the particular disciplines from which a work may draw influence, but rather the discipline of disciplinarity itself.

This is precisely the line of critique that Butler levels at Lacan in *Antigone's Claim*, the central argument of which is that, in addition to functioning to prohibit sexual exchange among kin relations, the incest

taboo “has also been mobilized to *establish* certain forms of kinship as the only intelligible and livable ones” (2000, 70). That is, the unilateral narrative of kinship (that is implicit in Lacan), even when it is only operative as a normative structure, carries within itself its own menace, implicit in the deviation that is constitutive of the reiteration of the Law that is necessary for kinship’s structural operation. For Butler, then, the question is what this unilateral narrative of kinship forecloses; a question that she answers with a series of further questions pertaining to the contemporary status of structural figures of kinship.⁴

Butler’s elaboration of this “menace” that is always implicit in deviation recalls, of course, Derrida’s critique of structure through the notion of supplementarity, which includes the argument that repetition always requires deviation. This connection to Derrida is important, I think, because a criticism of Butler’s analysis that remains relevant is that it is not clear what her criteria are for deeming a “structure” structural, such that it becomes a necessary site of this mode of deconstructive analysis. That is, while Butler’s criticism of Lacan’s positing the heterosexual family as the unilateral narrative of kinship is certainly convincing, could not the same critique be levelled at the forms of sexuality, gender, and desire themselves? While it is clear that Butler thinks of gender and sexuality in the most fluid terms possible, they remain, in a formal sense, uniformly operative. This is really to reappropriate Butler’s interrogation of Lacan, then, to ask: if gender, sexuality, and desire always allow for multiple definitions of themselves, where is this multiplicity (intelligibly) registered, and what sorts of meaning does the normative matrix of this site itself foreclose?

Media Art as Active Ambivalence

It is important at this stage in the argument to emphasize the subtlety of Butler’s argument (rather than oversimplifying it) because, to a certain extent, the critique that I have raised is actually precisely what is addressed through Butler’s emphasis on ambivalence.⁵ The fact that Butler’s subject is always in flux means that this menacing is, paradoxically, both the condition of, and greatest danger to, the subject. As alluded to above, then, performing this ambivalent flux emerges as the constitutive project of media art: any performance of media art cannot be read as an attempt to register a specific artistic activity as an expression of “self” within established codes. Instead, the function (which is not to say the purpose) of media art is to suggest (1) that it is always artistic practices which retroactively produce performing subjects who are then perceived

as their cause, and (2) that the radical vulnerability of both the retroactively produced subject and the circulating social sphere of desiring intensities are constitutively ambivalent. This is not to say that media art is somehow proof-positive of Butler's account of melancholic subjectivity, but rather that the subjective ambivalence performed in media art means that the territory on which this art can register itself, can make itself intelligible *as art*, is that of the subject. In this territory, to consider this art as an *act* (in the most radical sense of the term) is to register it—first and foremost—as an act of grief; which is to say as the production of an ambivalent subject.

And this is why it is so important not to oversimplify Butler's argument: the ambiguity that constitutes the performance artist's relation with the digital landscape of her performance is precisely the "turn" that Butler focuses on in *The Psychic Life of Power*, which we can now understand as the act of generation of a properly melancholic subjectivity that grounds any subjective stance. Digital performance, then, is always an act of grief, where to grieve is to assume an agency that is the product of an avowal of vulnerability. But what, precisely, is the nature of this vulnerability? A radically non-centred subject. That is, it is not only the case that the (machine) Other resides in the subject (through foreclosure), but also that the self that resides outside of the self (in the Other) also contains alterity as its constitutive core. The point is (a) that the alterity of melancholic subjectivity is by no means contained in a self-identical subject, nor in a definitively bounded social sphere, and (b) the various "containments" (i.e. "internal" and "external") are not so much containments as the grammatical predicates of the mode of relating/desiring that (retroactively) produces subject positions. That is, it is not the case that alterity and identity form an eternal "Russian doll" structure, but that the very constitution of both the self and the Other is always radically relational; that is, radically vulnerable.

However, if I have taken some pains to really show how subtly Butler mobilizes ambivalence through the concepts of grief and melancholy, it is because I nonetheless believe that the criticism mentioned above—pertaining to the structurality of structure—remains active as the disavowed constitution of meaning itself, as the condition of possibility for the registration of Butler's critique. This is really just to insist on a basic point: the moment that the possibility of positively advocating for an ethics (even of ambivalence) emerges is, and will always be, simultaneously the moment of emergence of the menace that is always internal to meaning. That is, the emergence of ethics (as a response to the challenges of gender, sexuality, and desire in Butler, as a response to the

normative discourse of disciplinarity in media art) is the ultimately *arbitrary* constitution of a restricted perspective field, where the premises and consequences of any act or event are calculable. The question that pertains to the territory of media art, then, is whether this disavowal is acceptable in the context of a continuously reconstituted subject that is always profoundly ambivalent, which is to say, whether we have succeeded (alongside Butler) in thinking ambivalence in its radical character as the end of determination. The answer to this question is not clear, which is to say that Butler's ethics of ambivalence, which is presented here as the ethics of media art, is itself ambivalent; the answer to the question is a field of other questions.

From Lost Object to Lost Field

The "field of other questions" that emerges in Butler points to a broader critique of her argument that will ultimately lead our discussion more securely back to the problematic of digital performance as an implicitly ethical project. Specifically, consider Butler's substitution, in Freud's schema, of the foreclosure of homosexual desire for the incest prohibition. When Butler notes, in a footnote, that "presumably, sexuality must be trained away from things, animals, [...] and narcissistic attachments of various kinds" (1997, 211), we can understand that "homosexual" functions in her writing as a sort of stand-in for the field of desire itself. Paradoxically, then, desire is the foreclosure of desiring, so that the lost *object* of Freudian melancholy (and the Lacanian subject) is replaced not by the lost object of homosexual desire (as Butler usually claims), but by the lost *field* of desire itself.⁶

Again, it bears emphasis that, in a sense, this critique is simply an intensification of precisely what Butler is arguing: the shift from lost object to lost field that I am identifying can be understood as the shift from a subjectivity that operates relatively autonomously and in relation to the established norms of kinship, to the radically relational subjectivity that Butler advocates, and that has here been claimed as what is performed in a performance of digital art. That is, keeping in line with Butler, we might say that whereas the lost object presents desire under the problematic of the subject's relation to the social (where the two categories are distinct, but related), the lost field presents desire as the mode of action the *effect* of which is the (always repeating, and thus changing) constitution of the subject and the social, of the performer and the performance. However, considered in another light, the shift from object to field again points to an ambiguity in Butler's writing: rather than originating in normative forms

of kinship, it seems that the Law resides in the value-form of desire itself.⁷ Desire is predicated on the foreclosure of not only desiring, but also desire itself, which is akin to saying that desire is simulated. The question, then, is to what extent desire remains an active force of political agency (which Butler's characterization of melancholy requires it to be) if it is always-already also the normative Law that it opposes. That is, does Butler's emphasis on the constitutive deviation of repetition, with respect to normative discourse, still hold if the Law and its deviating repetition both remain within the form of value itself? That is, does Butler succeed in articulating a form of desiring that does not relate to a determined form of desire? To a value of desire (in Nietzsche's sense)? Or, thought from the other direction, does this perspective offer a model of an agency that ultimately has no way of registering itself as such? Obviously, this is a line of questioning that is not entirely unattended in Butler, but it is also not resolved; the question remains as to whether Butler's ambivalence is the radical potential for agency that she hopes it is, or whether it is simply the ambivalence of meaning itself, always securely located within the contemporary landscape of completed nihilism; that is, within meaninglessness.

Media Art and an Ethics of the Subject

If I began this chapter by trying to situate subjectivity as that which is performed in a performance of media art, then in the case of media art the fluctuating field described above is the field of the performer and the performance. Paradoxically, then, we are returned to the impossible but necessary consideration of media art from the perspective of an ethics of the subject; impossible, because mediality—in its insistence on a model of human-machine equivalence—evacuates any possibility of a subject considered primarily in terms of human agency, of thinking a subject in terms of its relation to the Law of desire; necessary, because ethics (in its externality to the landscape of reason and causality), *in its very ambivalence*, might represent the only possibility of thinking beyond the value-form that is this equivalence; beyond the value-form of pure technicity. Media art, then, as that which—in its very mediality—suggests something else: we can't be certain what this "something else" is, but it seems to be the suggestion of something akin to a non-agential agency. An agenting? A "poeting" of mediality?

From here, then, I would like to begin to conclude this chapter by returning to a consideration of *The Trace* to think of it as a piece that ambivalently performs the disjuncture between Lacan and Deleuze, which

is to say performs the “turn” that Butler identifies as constitutive of the subject’s social intelligibility.⁸ In the simplest terms possible, Deleuze distinguishes his thought from Lacan’s first and foremost through his insistence on the productivity of desire: desire is productive rather than destructive or reductive; as opposed to destructive in the sense that the Deleuzian subject (which is not properly a subject at all) does not desire relative to a constitutive lack; as opposed to reductive, in the sense that the circulation of agential intensities does not operate relative to a normative structure.⁹ Thus, while the (apparent) content of *The Trace* is clearly a reduction of the constitutively ambivalent relationality of the participants (relative both to one another, and to the medium of relation) through the unilateral narrative of the piece’s mode of relating, it is precisely the fact of this reduction being *acted* that lends it a performativity such that it might also function as a critique of unilateral narratives of relation, and of the form of relation itself.

All of which leads us back to the question that was *not* asked at the start of this chapter; namely, the question of whether digitality really does constitute a change? Hayles’ answer is that we have “always been posthuman” (1999, 279), but what are the implications of this assertion? One reply is that both the human and posthuman exist under the sign of the value-form, so that the answer is a doubled relation, one that is latent in the fictional quotation with which this chapter began: on one hand, digital artworks are the harbinger of a posthuman subjectivity that is not formally different from the human subject which preceded it (and thus did not precede it). That is, posthumanity is ultimately a technology of the subject, which statement is to assert that it is always reclaimed within the enframing territory of technology (in the Heideggerian sense). On the other hand, though, a second possible reply to Hayles’ assertion is that perhaps this is precisely the radical potential of media art. Here, then, mediality emerges not as a critique of the human subject in the form of the posthuman, but rather as the process by which meaning is exposed as contingent *but also as radically non-contingent*; non-contingent precisely in the sense that the circulating drive of meaning perfectly describes the territory of completed nihilism as the expression of the value-form itself. That is, media art emerges as art precisely where meaninglessness is taken to be the only acceptable value (by virtue of its being that which does not impose meaning), but also emerges as the always-repeating affirmation of pure difference (that is, as Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche’s “eternal return”).¹⁰ In the first reading, meaninglessness is built in at the very point where an agential (and political) claim might be made; that is, technology as the possibility for change carries within it the impossibility of moving

beyond the form of technology *as* change. In the second reading, there is a move “beyond completed nihilism,” beyond thinking technology technologically, but it is a move that can never keep what it wins, and can never know if it has truly moved. In the ambivalent relation of the two approaches, then, is the ethical situation of this chapter, and the question of ethics itself as it relates to media art.

All of which is perhaps to conclude by situating the problematic of an ethics of digital art as a classic questioning of the nature of libidinal economy, acted out in the undefinable field of the posthuman body, where the crux of the matter is the always-reiterating constitution of the subject and the social as it is outlined in Butler; the question of what constitutes authentic desire is replayed in the field of desiring (rather than vice versa). For Lacan, desire always relates to a lack that is inscribed by the Law; this is the force of desire understood under the sign of technology. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire is always a productive line of flight that attaches to real objects (as opposed to symbolic positions); this is the force of technology understood as the pure difference of desiring. Finally, then, we might say that the ultimate wager of media art is the performative repetition that sustains this crux *as crux*, maintaining the active relation to ambiguity that constitutes the field that is the becoming of the posthuman body in media art.

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Notes

¹ As will become clear in the middle section of this chapter, the term “subjectivity” should be understood as being under erasure throughout. In fact, the choice to retain the term was made out of a desire to maintain an active tension between the discourse of subjectivity and that of the object; a desire that acknowledges the fact that a theorization from the perspective of the object (such as Baudrillard undertakes throughout his work) is more easily reconciled with the work presented here than I might hope. “Subject” should thus not be thought as here presented in opposition to “object,” but rather as the form through which subject and object are created as oppositional.

² Of course, lebensraum is most notably associated with the Nazi politics of expansion, where the term suggests a certain amount of space that is required for an entity (be it the German people, or a single subject) to be able to comfortably grow as its authentic self.

³ Butler offers the situation of Palestinian and homosexual lives in North America as an example (2006).

⁴ For example, Butler considers the status of the father for a child of a single mother: is the father still there as a spectral ‘position’ or ‘place’ that remains unfilled, or is there no such ‘place’ or ‘position’? “Is the father absent, or does the child have no father, no position, and no inhabitant? Is this a loss, which assumes the unfulfilled norm, or is it another configuration of primary attachment whose primary loss is not to have a language in which to articulate its terms” (2000, 69)?

⁵ This is particularly true with respect to the way in which ambiguity is mobilized in connection with grief. That is, Butler registers grief as a certain mode of being outside oneself (one is “beside oneself” with grief), so that mourning, properly understood, has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation “the full result of which one cannot know in advance” (2006, 21). To grieve, then, is literally to make oneself vulnerable to a certain sense of destiny, to something that is larger than “one’s own knowing and choosing” (2006, 21); to grieve is to be taken hold of by something, a position that is (paradoxically) both chosen (in that we make ourselves open to grieving) and imposed (in that grieving involves the recognition that a part of oneself has already been lost in the loss being grieved).

⁶ The term “field” here denotes an active relationality such as that described by McLuhan (1988) with respect to the acoustic.

⁷ “Value-form” here indicates the form in which an entity is presented as valued, which is to say is presented in the form of meaning (which form is predicated, arguably, on a nihilistic rendering of meaninglessness).

⁸ Butler notes that the subject exceeds the law of non-contradiction, but remains bound to it as the condition of its intelligibility (1997, 17-18).

⁹ That is, Deleuze (especially in *Anti-Oedipus*) repeatedly accuses Lacan of reducing desire to the “name-of-the-despot,” nee “name-of-the-father.”

¹⁰ This description of the eternal return aligns with Deleuze’s assertion, in *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, that the eternal return is the “law of becoming” (1962, 24).