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The Knights of Longing: Nostalgia and Mysticism in the Work of Steve Bishop

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Steve Bishop, installation image from *All Ages*, 2022. © Steve Bishop 2022, courtesy the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London.

There is an emotion, deeply cherished and yet grievously misunderstood, that colors almost every facet of contemporary culture. This is nostalgia. So much of our entertainment media today either resurrects content or compulsively depicts the milieu of faded historical eras through the genre of the period piece. Change the channel to a news broadcast, something ostensibly grounded in the present, and you'll see some fanatic sworn to the latest iteration of extremist politics bleating about the urgent need for their nation to return to a bygone state of glory. You can try to live as an ascetic and turn it off, turn it all off. But if after a while your thoughts don't turn to some saudade-soaked chronicle of youth or love lost, you still might find yourself indulging in a paradoxical longing for a time when longing for a time wasn't the baseline affect of contemporary life.

The omnipresence of nostalgic imagery and rhetoric can be easily accounted for: quite simply, this stuff is addictive. Nostalgia is intoxicating, and as is the case with so many intoxicants, habitual use quickly establishes a tolerance that takes the user farther and farther away from the bliss they crave. In this sense, rapaciously devouring nostalgia does nothing to draw close that past state of affairs that reminiscence deems so desirable; if anything, such binging will just augment the distance between now and then. And as in any cycle of addiction, this expanding divide between discontent and euphoria only motivates continued use of the nostalgic substance in question, which in turn increases the user's tolerance, and so on *ad infinitum*.

Philosophically and aesthetically speaking, something quite bizarre begins to take place in the eternal cycling that shapes nostalgia. When we feel this unmistakable shade of melancholy, we react to the difference between our immanently present reality and an idealized reality that our imagination has cobbled together from fragments of the past. Inductive reasoning insists that because this past state has existed before, it could exist again. But as outlined above, the feedback loop of an addiction to nostalgia does not reestablish conditions of the past within the reality of the present, but inscribes them into a

collection of images that actually inhibit the reemergence of what was into what is. This has the haunting effect of draining human presence from a reality that was once all too human. What emerges is an "expurgated form" of the past that provokes our continued attempts to reconnect with it, these futile efforts only serving to further eviscerate ourselves from our memories. (1)

This contradictory effect of generating the nonhuman through gestures that are patently human runs parallel to contemporary philosophy's treatment of the distinction between the *phenomenal* and *noumenal* attributes of things. Broadly speaking, an object's phenomenal qualities are those which are given readily to representation within the faculties of human thinking. Conversely, the noumenal properties of an object are those which recede from thought, refusing assimilation into our rational experience of the world. Noumena are an object's aspects that we don't understand, characteristics that we can imagine the existence of but can't experience since doing so would transfigure the noumena into phenomena. At first blush, nostalgia might appear as something rooted solely within the confines of the phenomenal. After all, this is an expressly human variety of pathos, a feeling that produces images and symbols for human interpretation, a form of anamnesis that recalls the past as it had been experienced by human thought. Even if that past is held at arm's length from the present and voided of human inhabitation, it is still vaguely human and thus presumably different from the occulted features that are noumena.

Contemporary continental philosophy has thankfully been much more lenient in its division of phenomena from noumena, opting to explore the various ways in which these ideas permeate and style one another. Eugene Thacker, the prince of pessimism, writes of "a vicious circle of logical paradox" that conditions the relationship between the phenomenal *world-for-us* and the noumenal *world-in-itself*. (2) While the latter escapes absorption into the corpus of collective human knowledge, the objects that populate this world-in-itself shape the very horizon of thinking, strangely becoming crucial components of anthropogenic thought in so much as they form its limit. A serviceable metaphor for this: imagine that all the knowledge we phenomenally comprehend is the air inside a balloon, while the noumenal objects we don't understand are all the things outside the balloon. Everything external to the volume of air inside the balloon, be that atmospheric pressure conditions or the hands of a curious child, can change the fundamental shape of what is inside without actually infiltrating that interior space. This is where it gets a bit more complex, though. Contemporary philosophy tells us that the boundary between what we know and what we do not or cannot know is not impermeable, there can be an exchange between what is inside and outside the balloon's elastic membrane. True to the ambitions of the Enlightenment, human thinking surely can convert the unknown into the known through the application of reason. But conversely, the unknown can reclaim something from us. Such a reclamation is most evident when the world-in-itself encroaches on human life in the form of climate change, global pandemics, or—less cataclysmically—losing ourselves in nostalgia.



Steve Bishop, *Ages (Medieval) I*, 2022. 30 found photos dating from 1956-2004. © Steve Bishop 2022, courtesy the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London.

The artist Steve Bishop has created photographic taxonomies and sculptures that reflect on this exchange between the world-for-us and the world-in-itself, and they do this through a particularly potent exploration of nostalgic imagery. In Bishop's recent solo exhibition *All Ages* at the London gallery Carlos/Ishikawa, the artist presented a series of works that borrow from the historically themed aesthetics of roadside attractions, theme parks, and Las Vegas casinos. Pieces like *Ages (Medieval) I* (2022) are composed of multiple found photographs that all depict a single example of the oneiric architecture featured in these locations, in this case the exaggerated medieval castle that's become the very emblem of Disneyland. The images gathered in these works immediately strike a nerve of familiarity, of heartwarming closeness. Even if you've never been to a Disney park or resort, you get the sense that you could be there somewhere in the underexposed shadows cast by the castle's turrets and arches, gingerly eating something sweet, holding the hand of someone you love, and wondering about which ride to go on next. Like a replicant in Ridley Scott's 1982 masterpiece *Blade Runner*, you feel like these photographic images are veritable documents of your past experiences, and even if they're not, you'd at least like them to be. These photos, with their bursts of analog colors frozen in the sort of awkward compositions that are hastily framed by a holiday companion, count in the agonizing and repetitive rhythm that structures nostalgic desire.

This isn't, however, the only microcosm of time playing on a loop in these artworks. The strange architecture seen in each of the images that make up one of these typological pieces indicates passages of time that augment the feeling of nostalgia already at hand. For instance, take the iconic Disney castle in *Ages (Medieval) I*. The Sleeping Beauty Castle, as it's called, is a dizzying concoction of historicized aesthetic references. The architecture is a physical manifestation of the castle depicted in the eponymous cartoon film from 1959, which is itself based on a castle built in Germany during the 19th century, which itself was modeled after the Gothic and Romanesque styles common to medieval Europe. All these moments and their respective aesthetics — the austere gloom of the Middle Ages, early modernism with a historicist twist, postmodern kitsch — are inarguably functions of human history and taste, but the length of time spanning all three eclipses what we generally think of as a lifetime of empirical experiences. So to encounter the passing of time through such fantastic architecture, as well as through its photographic reproduction in *Ages (Medieval) I*, is to reckon with a sort of time-in-itself, a billowing swathe of collective memory and imagery that we can hold on to only one tattered end of. We just can't live in all those moments at once, and so a brooding polyrhythm starts playing over the pulse of nostalgic longing that these photographic works have already initiated.



Steve Bishop, *Thank You (Neolithic)*, *Thank You (Modern Age)*, *Thank You (Iron Age)*, *Thank You (Medieval)*, 2022.
Painted MDF, laminate, waste bin. © Steve Bishop 2022, courtesy the artist and Carlos/Ishikawa, London.

The sculptures in *All Ages* continue to explore time and longing in the world-for-us and the world-in-itself, but further unravel these themes with an additional squinted glance towards the deep future. In another of the gallery's rooms, four rubbish bins line the wall, each sporting its own buffoonish take on a historical aesthetic. Once again, the span of time that separates the faux timber beams that line the edges of *Thank You (Modern Age)* (2022) from the bas-relief imagery depicted in *Thank You (Iron Age)* (2022) is too great to be encapsulated in one person's life on earth. And once again, maybe you remember these bulky objects from an adored adventure into the simulated architectural zones of the Excalibur Hotel and Casino, or a renaissance fair, or a Disney park. Your body becomes a theater in which the muscle memory of pushing your hand through the flap to drop a plastic cup or a fistful of sweet wrappers into the awaiting detritus is hesitantly enacted. All that historical time and all that achingly wonderful time, and the only point of contact you can presently sustain with that ribbon of time-in-itself is the mildly sardonic expression of gratitude that's routed into the hinged flaps of these vessels and recycled as the non-parenthetical titles of the four artworks. Perhaps this is what becomes of nostalgia once your indulgence of it becomes too frequent, a curt phrase overflowing with wry cynicism. Thank you for the good times, please leave all memory waste in the provided receptacles.

In draping these historical references over trash cans, Bishop also hints at a length of time that stretches well into the distant future. So much of the refuse we produce is vividly real to us now but will inevitably also outlive us by thousands of years. In this regard, an object such as a polystyrene cup indicates a future that's always "casting its shadow backward through time" onto our lived experience of the present. (iii) Like the radioactive particles emitted into the water and air by the Fukushima reactor meltdowns in 2011, this index of the future isn't just all around us, it's tearing through us at an immense velocity and radically reorienting both our bodies and thoughts. And yet that future is a time that we as individuals, and perhaps even we as a species, are unlikely to experience. Such a future rhymes with the estranged past that nostalgia attempts to replicate within the present. Like that happy but distant memory of waiting in line to ride the Tower of Terror for the very first time, the futurity that certain kinds of waste allude to is somehow both intimately close and disappointingly far away.

Bishop's *Thank You* series burns off some of the fog that shrouds another kind of world distinct from the phenomenal world-for-us and the noumenal world-in-itself that we've already explored. This is what Thacker calls the *world-without-us*. Even if the world-in-itself is still paradoxically entangled with human thought by virtue of our knowing that we do not know it, the world-without-us is a reality that absolutely cannot coexist with humanity. Indeed, the very defining prerequisite for such a world is the complete cessation of human existence. We might consider this world-without-us as "the collapse of negative and positive, subtractive and superlative" into a state of nothingness that not even Socratic wisdom can actively correlate to human knowledge. (iv) In a sweeping gesture of negation, such a world consumes not just what we are and what we know, but also all the cryptic contents of the world-in-itself that have contoured our existence and thought.

Invoking the arts to grapple with the world-without-us seems like a gesture doomed to fail from the outset. After all, what meaningful statement could we possibly make about a world predicated on our absolute silence? Nevertheless, Thacker uses an unlikely combination of modern communications theory and medieval theology to demonstrate that the texture of nothingness we encounter in contemplating something like the world-without-us may have a great deal more to say about mediation than we would expect. On the one hand, such a world is totally disconnected from earthly human experience. The world-without-us in this sense is like the conception of heaven or hell in many Abrahamic religions, a place so transcendent from our own world-for-us that no channel of mediation can conceivably transmit messages between the two. But like these ideas of an afterlife, the world-without-us is also intimately staked in our existence, or rather our nonexistence. Even though such a world emerges from the negation of our very being, we are still indispensable to its formulation. So like the mortality that is an inevitable feature in any instance of life or the alleged omnipresence of the divine in all things, we are immanently a part of the world-without-us, and it is always a part of us. In this sense, there is no mediation with the world-without-us because we cannot sufficiently extricate ourselves from it in order to create the degree of separation that precedes an act of communication. Like nostalgia, the world-without-us is weirdly both far and near at the same time. Or in philosophical terms, it is both transcendent and immanent. Thacker uses the terms *antimediation* and *immediation* to respectively describe the two simultaneous relationships we have with the nothingness of the world-without-us. (v) Far from being a useless exercise, an attempt at mediation with the world-without-us is manifold and rich, a rumination on the very nature of communication itself.

In addition to those explorations of the nostalgic exchange between the world-for-us and the world-in-itself that are staged in *All Ages*, Steve Bishop's oeuvre contains artworks that similarly use nostalgic imagery to navigate the almost supernatural mediation between the human world and the world-without-us. Such is the case with an installation that was shown in Bishop's 2019 exhibition *Start Over Every Morning* at the Kunstverein Braunschweig. Titled *Something to Remember You By* (2019), the piece in question consists of an elongated kitchen worktop that stretches from wall to wall in one of the institution's galleries, the dim lights from beneath the overhead cabinets the only source of illumination in the room. Placed slightly off center in this composition is a partially eaten cake, the leftovers stored in stacked Tupperware boxes, as well as a radio that cycles through selected renditions of jazz standards. Our familiar world-for-us is firmly established in the grouping of domestic space, confections, and music, all of which are decidedly human comforts. But there is something very eerie about this tableau of objects. While still expressive and moving, the jazz tunes emanating from the radio are all instrumental, the melodic space usually reserved for the human voice now occupied by sounds that resonate through nonhuman objects made of brass, felt, and spruce. There are no bite marks in the cake, no impressions left by teeth, the jaw, a tongue. There aren't even any forks around.



Steve Bishop, Installation images from *Start Over Every Morning* at Kunstverein Braunschweig © Steve Bishop 2023. courtesy the artist, Carlos/Ishikawa, London, and Kunstverein Braunschweig

The mise-en-scène Bishop conjures in *Something to Remember You By* feels meditative, almost mystical. It's as if this surreally stretched feature of something we usually call home was being emptied of everything that we recognize as familiar about that space at the exact moment we entered the gallery. You've walked in on the world-without-us subtracting the us from world, but your interruption as the viewer of the work suspends that disappearance, it places you in a strange state of mediation with a world defined by its revocation of human presence. Through channels of antimeditation and immediation, something is returned from the apophatic depths of the world-without-us and given back to our scrutiny in the form of a haunting jazz melody, an ersatz cake, a distorted sequence of cabinets. It's interesting to recall at this point that Thacker's third world recombines, in a way, both the world-with-us and the world-in-itself, the dyad of worlds across which the tormenting repetitions of nostalgic longing are played out. But rather than uniting those two worlds in a positive gesture of synthesis, the world-without-us nullifies and eradicats both with extreme indifference. In the maw of the world-without-us, we merge *via negativa* with all the moments we'd lost to the world-in-itself by trying too dearly to remember them. In this serendipitous gesture of self-abnegation, we are given back to all those blissful memories that we've gone looking for everywhere.

So this is how nostalgia ends, not with a simulation, but with some kind of mystical accident. Doesn't it always seem to be the case that the most evocative experiences of memory really are chance encounters? When someone close to us dies, we iterate elegant symbolic rituals that involve texts, images, and objects, all in the service of mourning. But it's always after the official rites of remembrance, maybe years into the future, that you catch a trace of that person's scent in the air and suddenly they're alongside you again, vividly. Television, politics, starry-eyed daydreaming, and all the other increasingly detailed simulacra we utilize to chase our recollections will never get us anywhere close to that saccharine disaster. And this reconciliation is totally unpredictable! Unreasoned! Unforeseen! It's so perfectly run through by contingency that you can only hang on in hope for it to happen to you. In this solemn dedication to waiting, we are tested for initiation into the chivalric orders that the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard described in the 19th century. In a movement somewhat similar to that performed by Kierkegaard's *knight of faith*, we must renounce the possibility of reconciling memory and experience in the sparkling images that fill the finite world-for-us, and "on the strength of the absurd" and all that is contingent, faithfully dedicate ourselves to the possibility that a mystical nonbeing in the world-without-us will deliver us once again to that which was lost. (vi)

The above might read as a condemnation of consuming images in the fantastic quest for sating nostalgia, but it's the opposite that is ultimately the case: aesthetics and art are integral to how we come to some kind of truce with this feeling, how we vaguely arrive at an understanding of it. It's still true that representations of the past will not magically summon their referent within our experience of the real, not in the way that nostalgia would prefer for this to happen in any case. And casting the same broken spell again and again will only make matters worse, only alienate you further from those times lost to times trying to remember things clearly. But here's the pivot: even in its incompleteness, nostalgic imagery is still fun. Remember, this stuff is a drug. It should come as no surprise that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, those mysterious sorcerers of process philosophy, speak of *knights of narcotics* that devotedly imbibe the potion of faith. (vii) In drinking deep from the cup of nostalgia, we increasingly divest ourselves from our memories. But this isn't the least bit futile: if anything, consuming nostalgic imagery is a symbolic sacrifice that stages the complete abdication of selfhood and being that takes place in the world-without-us, the world where we are returned to memory but as someone that isn't exactly ourselves. Understood this way, nostalgia is interesting for the contemporary moment not because of its entertainment value but because it challenges us to think outside of the confines of our own being. Nonhuman objects have already made contact with human agency in this era of the anthropocene. Perhaps nostalgia is actually a crash course on how to coexist with things during this ecstatic epoch. Steve Bishop's artistic practice understands all of this thoroughly, and challenges us to become something else, become someone that isn't us. As a knight, a princess, a sorcerer, or an angel, it offers a chance to become again.

- (i) Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. p. 19.
(ii) Thacker, Eugene. In *The Dust of This Planet: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 1*. Alresford: Zero Books, 2011. p. 5.
(iii) Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. p. 120.
(iv) Thacker, Eugene. *Starry Speculative Corpse: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 2*. Alresford: Zero Books, 2015. p. 77.
(v) *Ibid*, p. 84.
(vi) Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay. London: Penguin Books, 1985. p. 75.
(vii) Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. p. 282.