



“Robert Beck’s Dust.” In Bill Horrigan, Helen Molesworth, and Robert Hobbs. *Robert Beck: Dust*. Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2007.

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ROBERT BECK'S *dust*

Robert Hobbs

His face is turned toward the past. There we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

—Walter Benjamin,
“Theses on the Philosophy of History,”
Illuminations, 1969

In trauma discourse, then, the subject is evacuated and elevated at once. And in this way it serves as a magical resolution of contradictory imperatives in contemporary culture: the imperative of deconstructive analyses on the one hand, and the imperative of multicultural histories on the other; the imperative to acknowledge the disrupted subjectivity that comes of a broken society on the one hand, and the imperative to affirm identity at all costs on the other.

—Hal Foster,
“Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,”
October 78, Fall 1996

In his above statement, critic Hal Foster observes trauma discourse's ability to reconcile two distinctly different worldviews. First, this discourse acknowledges poststructuralists' profound skepticism regarding humanistic values, coupled with their reluctance to accept empiricism as a valid means for understanding the self. And second, it permits disadvantaged minorities to communicate their suffering as authentic foundational experiences. Extending Foster's idea, we can regard traumatic memory (as opposed to trauma discourse) as a very personal rendition of history and a way of bridging these seemingly irreconcilable points of view.¹ Such renditions of history underscore the primacy of an experience too numbing to be framed within one's symbolic and imaginative outlook so that traumatic memory occurs later when related events catalyze a latent, yet pressing, need to work through the challenges presented by this initial traumatic event.

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan described the initial trauma as “an appointment...with the real that eludes us.”² Trauma studies emphasizes the legitimacy of the initial episode and also the sense of release and even of excessive joy that occurs when fantasy as well as art making round out the spaces left by the adverse experience. This field of inquiry has also taken full advantage of deconstructionist concepts regarding language's elusiveness and the persistent deferral of meaning memory necessitates as it enters into permutational play with this event, rewriting and reinterpreting it. Constituting unstable bases temporarily shored up by substitutions and displacements, traumas return—often revisiting victims unexpectedly—and reinforce the need to perpetually

rethink them in an effort to dissipate their force, thereby heightening a sense of joyous release when that is accomplished.

Foster believes that “a magical resolution of contradictory imperatives” provides a way out of this critical impasse by characterizing subjects as contingent force fields responding to the demands of internal voids. But the act of working through these contradictions on a personal level is a complicated and never-ending Sisyphus-like task, as indicated by Robert Beck’s exhibition *dust*.³ In the works selected for this exhibition and Beck’s charged installation of them, a sense of self is anchored in a childhood traumatic breach that continues to interpellate him and the exhibition’s viewers, even as that type of unrepresentable psychological wound persists in forestalling any conclusive way of circumscribing it. Trauma, like allegory, is a doubling of texts; however, in trauma the primary text remains an open gap, which the second text—really an ongoing rewriting of the first—attempts to close by articulating it.⁴ Although the pursuit of one’s subjectivity in terms of a major rift might result in a self that is “evacuated and elevated at once,” as Foster suggests, the quest for this dislocated subjectivity in Beck’s art can also be regarded as tragic, because it can never adequately be circumscribed and stabilized; heroic, because the search is continued; and incredibly pleasurable, because tension is released when this gap appears to be healed.

Comprising primarily works dating from 2004 to 2006, Beck’s *dust* represents, among other things, a concerted

effort to come to terms with a traumatic episode that occurred on June 20, 1965, and its aftereffects as a way of interpellating people who have faced such untoward experiences and others who have come in close contact with them. Beck has chosen to keep the nature of the incident private, because its full affect can never be understood due to the profound dissociation that occurs during an initial trauma. This decision is in part due to his awareness that “subjectivity itself is a mis-recognition (exemplified by the mirror stage and the acquisition of language)—we don’t speak, we are spoken,”⁵ and his desire to leave the installation open so that viewers can find spaces for themselves in it.

Viewing the individual works making up *dust* and the exhibition itself as means for coming to terms with trauma’s void, Beck underscores the exhibition’s necessary contingency by covering with blackboard paint the gallery housing his works and the walls leading up to it. Choreographing viewers as active participants in a pedagogical exercise represented by this exhibition, Beck provides them at the outset with a blackboard-like surface, together with a tray for chalk and erasers, where they might write freely and erase with impunity. In addition to the chalk dust ensuing from their efforts, viewers are presented with the word “dust,” the exhibition’s title, which appears in gray letters against the chalkboard-like background. Dust is also apparent throughout the installation’s walls, on which Beck has inscribed and then erased articles, classifieds, obituaries, and advertisements from the June 20, 1965, editions of the *New York Times* and *Baltimore Sun* and the June 25,

1965, issue of the *Community Times*, his hometown weekly. He did so, he has said, because “the profound affect of any personal, indelible event cannot be adequately addressed publicly, even if the story of such an event did appear in the media.”⁶ He characterizes the erased walls and the chalk dust permeating the exhibition space as “*sous rature*” (under erasure), referring to Jacques Derrida’s approach to such debatable terms as “being,” which presuppose similar presences and absences to “trauma.” The resultant ghostly ambiance of chalk dust on the gallery’s walls, signaling past and present circumstances, serves as a vacillating perspective, enabling us to consider Beck’s individual pieces as a palimpsest, which he has defined as a work capable of “being at two places at one time,” thus aligning it with trauma. The word “dust,” which the artist has connected with the phrase “from dust to dust,”⁷ is not only one key to this exhibition, pertaining to the rupture or symbolic death that is the trauma’s legacy, but also a literal component of the installation in terms of actual chalk dust. Moreover, “dust” seemed an appropriate title for the exhibition, Beck has emphasized, “because it accumulates.”⁸

Shown either singly or in groups, the works Beck has chosen to include in this exhibition are organized like a series of meditative or devotional stops similar to the Christological Stations of the Cross, familiar to him from his Catholic upbringing. The gallery is lit in a theatrical manner, with industrial lights clumped around two of the three columns supporting the space, to emphasize the fact that “the exhibition is contingent upon the context of the museum.”⁹ After the entryway, the exhibition

moves in a clockwise direction, ending where it began, thereby underscoring its cyclical nature as well as traumatic memory’s repeated attempts to heal rifts in one’s subjectivity. Each work or group of works in this exhibition builds on the ideas of the preceding pieces; this intensification constitutes a narrative of revelation and masking that, like dust, accumulates as one moves through the show.

The exhibition commences with a group of “diagnostic” drawings that are redrawings of published artworks by children, adolescents, and young adults that psychologists and art educators have used as diagnostic tools. In addition to rendering these prior works—an approach emphasizing traumatic memory’s continual returns—Beck dramatizes a lack of closure in his art when he overlaps drawings made by two different youths, together with their captions, so that disjunctions and confusion between images and their references ensue. He poetically reenacts these drawings by extending them—drawing them out over time, so to speak—to underscore contrasts between his own work, with its subtlety and refinement, and the young people’s, characterized by directness and forthrightness. In Beck’s drawings this repetitive process analogizes and symbolizes the types of memories to which subjects are prone. It also references, according to Beck, “the insistence of ordinary experiences because one is never psychically present for the initial ‘impressive event.’”¹⁰ Both redrawings of drawings and drawings in themselves, these highly psychological works achieve a formal redundancy through superimposition and a tripling of forms that is apparent when we read

the works in terms of the youths' contributions, the clinicians' diagnoses taken from such favored sources as personality assessment tests, and the artist's reworkings to ascertain how each screens out certain aspects of its original sources while affirming others. Beck's liberal use of latent fingerprint powder in these works, which he employs to "bring something to light not always within the drawings," is no doubt intended as both a literal and figurative replaying of the creative role latent memories play in recalling disturbing events.

The type of screening found in Beck's "diagnostic" drawings parallels trauma's elisions and is the subject of Chapter IV of Freud's *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*,¹¹ which theorizes memories of childhood as occurring with visual immediacy even though they are later displacements of events that have been masked out due to their difficult or painful contents. Psychologists J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis provide the following succinct definition of screen memory: "A childhood memory characterized both by its unusual sharpness and by the apparent insignificance of its content. The analysis of such memories leads back to indelible childhood experiences and to unconscious phantasies. Like the symptom, the screen memory is a formation produced by a compromise between repressed elements and defence [sic]."¹²

Beck is fully aware of Freud's twofold approach to screen memory, which veils even as it provides occasions on which to project recollections of childhood events. In this exhibition he employs it as a "curatorial conceit"¹³ as well as a *mise en abyme* on which his earlier work and the entire show can be projected, thus providing, in the artist's words, "a puncture in the exhibition itself—its trauma,

if you will."¹⁴ Literally taking the form of a screen, which thereby enacts aspects of Freud's screen memory, Beck's mainly spray-painted stainless steel urinal partition in *dust* can be connected to a recurring process he noted during his eight years as a faculty member at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan: the ongoing cycle of students drawing graffiti on such restroom panels, and janitors attempting to eradicate the drawings with paint and the more violent erasures of scratching through them or sanding them out.

Similarly, *Apart from the Whole (Communion)*, referring to a Catholic child's First Holy Communion, enacts a screen-memory-type selection of the highly cathected events occurring in Beck's own family and the families of friends and relatives. This vignette of seemingly inconsequential gestures is arranged in an enlarged version of what Beck calls a "dime-store frame," even though such gestures would never have been highlighted in a domestic presentation. The ostensibly innocent details of adults caressing children or young boys clasping their own hands is undermined by the ominous shadow of a photographer—perhaps a family member or a friend—who supposedly made all the images and thus is responsible for them.

Screen memory's ability to block even as it reveals is the subject of the next work in the exhibition, *Hidden Pictures (Between Two Deaths)*, an image appropriated from *Highlights*, a children's craft and activities magazine, in which children are instructed to find a series of objects, including a ladder, table, basket, flower, and boot. About this "hidden picture," Beck notes, "while in the actual game the boy is among the objects to be uncovered, I have erased him, so he is effectively lost, subsumed by the

background, and because the word 'boy' has been excised from the caption as well, in effect he is doubly occluded."¹⁵

In *Dust* (*The Community Times*, June 25, 1965) Beck moves from the childhood concerns of the aforementioned works in this exhibition to human history. *Dust* is a framed Polaroid of the back of an angel in a cemetery that adjoins a church Beck knew as a child (it was the predecessor of the church the artist and his family regularly attended). Viewing the angel's back in this photograph, I am reminded of Walter Benjamin's figuration of history in his essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," a particularly appropriate citation for Beck, since this author is no doubt key to understanding history metaphorically as a backward glance. In Thesis 9, cited as an epigraph to this essay, Benjamin describes the angel appearing in Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* as history's allegorical embodiment.¹⁶ In addition to referencing history's modus operandi and alluding to trauma's spoils, Benjamin's passage correlates well with a statement from comparative literature specialist Peter Szondi. Beck e-mailed me Szondi's analysis of Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, no doubt because of its ability "to provide hope itself, a kind of hope-in-knowing, an epistemology of reparation."¹⁷ Szondi writes that Benjamin "is sent back into the past, a past, however, which is open, not completed, and which promises the future. Benjamin's tense is not the perfect, but the future perfect in the fullness of its paradox: being future and past at the same time."¹⁸

Beck's *Dust* (*The Community Times*), with its subject of history in general, is followed in the exhibition by *Glove Skinning* (*Manifesto*), an image we might regard as a displaced personal memory, which has taken the form

of an illustration from *The Modern Man's Guide to Life*, a book Beck's parents gave to him when he was thirty-three years old.¹⁹ The book is intended to be a man's how-to guide, including information on grooming, cooking, household management, and car repair; Beck focused on the sections describing how to survive in the wilderness. Subtitled his work *Manifesto*, he leaves open the implication that the violent coming-of-age act of skinning a rabbit with one's bare hands can function as a screen memory, albeit a particularly violent one. Although Beck has not undertaken such a rite of passage, he equates it with the hunting rituals in which he has participated, and he has indicated that these activities are often followed by intense feelings of exhilaration because they can prompt the psychological release of veiled memories.²⁰ A schematic of glove skinning is presented in this drawing in white conté crayon against a gray background of paper remnants sewn together to resemble animal skins. Beck heightens this work's irony by employing a repeated "Crack'n Peel" pattern on the paper to suggest that it might be peeled away to reveal another, perhaps more significant surface beneath it. The death figured in this work is both literal in terms of the subject of a skinned rabbit and symbolic in the traumatic episode it potentially displaces, resulting in additional references to dust as decomposed matter as well as a placeholder for the Lacanian real, which by definition is inaccessible.

Up to this point in the exhibition, the term "screen memory" has been implicit in Beck's work, even though the inclusions of redrawings of "diagnostic" drawings, a urinal partition, details of family First Communion, a Polaroid of a cemetery sculpture, and a glove-skinning illustration all can function literally and figuratively

as masks. For the last segment of the exhibition, Beck invokes the phrase “screen memory” as the title for a series of five photographs, with each depicting a clichéd dime-store reproduction (a religious picture, for example, or an image of a sailing ship) obscured by reflections of the room where it was originally displayed. Each room, and so each image, relates to a member of Beck’s family; the veiled images thus create a series of poignantly blurred meditations on metonymical displacements.

Completing the circuit of the exhibition after viewing these five photographs, one is once again faced with the show’s opening installation of diagnostic drawings that attest to the preeminently visual character of early screen memories. Just as all the works in this exhibition reveal the artist’s concerns with a number of different screen memories, creating a series of nested recursive images, so do they also partially displace its ambient screen, consisting of a monumental erased blackboard. Because the affective content of Beck’s traumatic episode can never be adequately understood by either him or his audience, the profound visual noise, which his exhibition offers in terms of minute aerosols of dust, composed of both actual and represented particles, plays with the trope of trauma’s unrepresentability, thus attempting in allegorical fashion to present what it intends to demonstrate is impossible to do.²¹ Assuming the form of chalk, latent fingerprint powder, spray-painted-over graffiti, sifted memories, submerged imagery, silk-screened illustrations, transferences or displacements of imagery, and grainy photographs, Beck’s collection of dust begins to unravel significant contents even as it partially obscures them, leaving us all in a poignant limbo that is itself affecting and mysterious.

Notes

1. Karyn Ball, “Introduction: Trauma and Its Institutional Destinies,” *Trauma and Its Cultural Aftereffects*, *Cultural Critique* 46, (Autumn 2000): 5, 8, and 23. Ball provides excellent insight into the workings of traumatic memory vis-à-vis her own work on Holocaust imagery.
2. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 53.
3. Beck has requested that the title of the exhibition be written in lowercase, no doubt to analogize both trauma’s and this material’s ubiquity.
4. A number of writings on trauma view it in terms of allegory. My definition of allegory is predicated on Craig Owens’s useful analysis in “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” *October* 12 (Spring 1980): 68–69.
5. Robert Beck, e-mail to author, February 6, 2007.
6. Robert Beck, e-mail to author, February 7, 2007.
7. Robert Beck, interview with author, January 19, 2007, New York City. Unless specified otherwise, all references to Beck’s ideas about *dust* come from this interview. The formal source of the phrase “from dust to dust” is Genesis 3:19, “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”
8. Robert Beck, e-mail to author, February 6, 2007.
9. *Ibid.* [As a result of changes during installation, the sequence of works in the exhibition—and in the photographic documentation included here—does not precisely conform to the planned layout described in this essay. The basic clockwise progression, beginning with the “diagnostic” drawings and concluding with the “screen memory” pieces, however, remains intact.—ED.]
10. *Ibid.*
11. Sigmund Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York: Macmillan Company, 1915).
12. J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), pp. 410–411.
13. Robert Beck, e-mail to author, February 6, 2007.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 151. The inspiration for Thesis 9 was Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin acquired in Munich in the spring of 1921. That same year Benjamin named his intellectual journal after this watercolor. Toward the end of his life, Benjamin asked Gerschom Scholem, his friend since 1916 and a major scholar of Jewish mysticism, to take the watercolor with him to Palestine.

17. Robert Beck, e-mails to author, January 22 and February 6, 2007.
18. Robert Beck cites this statement by Szondi in his e-mail to author, January 22, 2007. See Peter Szondi, "Hope in the Past: On Walter Benjamin," trans. Harvey Mendelsohn, in Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 19.
19. Denis Boyles, Alan Rose, and Alan Wellikoff, *The Modern Man's Guide to Life* (New York: Harper & Row, Perennial Library, 1987).
20. Robert Beck, e-mail to author, February 6, 2007.
21. Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 275.