

Ella Sutherland

*An unbearded, athletic youth*

23 November – 22 December 2013

The Physics Room

# A Magic Eye

## Ashlin Raymond

A magic eye, the omniscient eye, the viewer's eye, the artist's eye, the designer's eye; the eyes of history, converging. The archive of oneself returning to self as medium, as J-Lo sings *I'm going in, I'm going in...* 'We do not have meaning anymore because we ourselves are meaning'.<sup>1</sup> Frameworks evaporate, while a natural derivation from the self occurs; a result of art inertia. Inexplicable templates created alongside art, the 'exploded biological script'.<sup>2</sup> To use oneself in a way that morphs into a world sanitised and scared of the subjective. In *An unbearded, athletic youth* Ella Sutherland creates a micro-zone of tranquility. She asks time for some of its strength: tracing it through eras, holding up candles to see womb, flesh and breast as gears towards existence; unsacred, dangerous, flashing, speeding, dancing. By the end of 2013 I was burnt-out by the 'meta genre of the contemporary'.<sup>3</sup> It was a chomping infinity of denseness: infinity scroll, Nyan cat, 10-hour Youtube videos. *An unbearded, athletic youth* creates a zone that cleverly sways in and out of the contemporary. It is part of the colossal endgame of culture and its perpetual forwardness. It is digital but also silent, stationary; simultaneously rest, bite and propeller.

Like an evanescent mist, *An unbearded, athletic youth* addresses the multiplicity of being and dissolving into time. The preserved building of The Physics Room gallery space, a lone figure in the desolate surrounding cityscape, becomes a medium in the show. Elements such as the series of posters lining one wall and the cracked concrete floor give us a moment to breathe, away from the never-ending white screen of the iPhone era.<sup>4</sup> To reduce this show to a pre/post digital binary is wrong, but it says more about the digital than it first gives way. Among the softness and poise of form, beauty is obliterated. The picture is gone and we float around in an intoxicating world of oblivion that we must be at peace with to exist in the present. Is this the contemporary as the ultimate scent of desire?

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<sup>1</sup> Irit Rogoff, "Looking Away – Participating Singularities, Ontological Communities", 2 February 2011, cited at <https://vimeo.com/21190144>.

<sup>2</sup> Kerstin Brätsch, Adele Röder, Anja Nathan-Dorn and Kathrin Jentjens, Eds., *Das Institut: triennial report 2011-2009*, (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2012), 142.

<sup>3</sup> Suhail Malik, "On the Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art: Exit not escape", 21 June 2013, cited at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fimEhntBRZ4>.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Sanchez, "2011: Michael Sanchez on Art and Transmission", *Artforum*, Summer 2013.

Ella introduced me to Deep Time when she was researching Auckland's volcanoes. I asked her how do we know when one will go off? She said that it is tricky to forecast because they work in this thing called 'deep time',<sup>5</sup> and this felt somehow reassuring. Deep Time seems like a mantra we can't fuck with, that the volcanoes are so old they can't be measured. The idea of being immeasurable, unfathomable, echoes the philosophical questions and discomfort surrounding graphic design that interlaces Ella's practice, as a silent drive. Is *An unbearded, athletic youth* a dissolving of the 'problem'? Is graphic design the ultimate tool for bending time? And if graphic design is a carrier – a bare framework – then is the self and time the medium? Is Deep Time a way of being?

A rhythm and a cavern, going deep and coming back up again to the surface, this is what rhythm is. Something you don't always notice, but just is, accepted and appreciated from all angles. Taking poly-forms, it can be a ghost and a mirror all at once.

(This) structure is not singular, but composed of many interrelated and interdependent parts. While this would assume clarity, in a sense it retains a certain ambiguity due to a 'something else' that is not a part of the whole structure or the whole structure itself. This essence is 'neither calculable nor rational; but a rhythm which opens to human experience'.<sup>6</sup>

Our natural rhythms are skewed by the infinity scroll of the now. So, is the incalculable essence of life more important than ever? I saw photos online of *An unbearded, athletic youth*. I clicked through the stream and liked a few photos, I felt warm inside, happy, but the images gave off a cold flatness. When I went to see the exhibition in the flesh it dispelled the notion that I only needed to see artworks online or that the experiential didn't matter. Somewhere in 2012 I stopped caring so much about the experiential and was happy to just be in the superhighway of the virtual. Graphic design as a job has made me flip around and need the real more than ever, I want to touch paper, like never before. *An unbearded, athletic youth* has it both ways; it works in the flat pixel word and in the smooth formed real. It can be read multiple ways, historically, digitally, 'designery', sculpturally.

Everything at the centre of Ella's work comes back to the line. To a simple dash, a vector that is tracing and retracing what has always been. The line is her medium and is evident in all corners of *An unbearded, athletic youth*. Transforming 2D into 3D harmoniously, the vectors of her moments surmise to a breaking apart of the vector as a beginning/middle/end of history. Seeing the bend in the aluminum strips as a dance

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<sup>5</sup> Conversation between Ella Sutherland and the author, February 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Ella Sutherland, "A Split and a Stop: the potential of graphic design to be more than just the sum of its parts" (Master of Fine Arts thesis, University of Canterbury, 2013), 5.

move –a perfect unsettling leap of materiality and form – this made me forget the now with an otherworldly relief. Relief as emotion, as a frieze. *Form follows emotion.*<sup>7</sup> Are we there now? The relief of the bend of aluminum. *When was the last time you got your boogie on?* A sign on a mesh fence reads, just down the road from where I exit the tranquil space of The Physics Room.

The cheap quality of the prints traces an un-time – a difficult position of economic freezing, where toes are dipped in the past but heads are in the future. Then it flips around. *Zorbs*. The lines on the posters are soft, *10pt round brush*. Floating on a transcendental plane, journeying from Ancient Greece, to the 1900s, 1980s, to now. Touch a piece of pottery, excavate, zap it with light, blow it up. The lineal effect on the paper is so important, a reminder of our strangeness. The feeling you get when you look around and see the world stuck–it can't get to the future, most of it. A feeling of technology drenched in déjà vu, where the mind stretches beyond itself. For a moment this breaks apart the rigid frameworks of time, identity, narrative that we are all locked into. NO REPEATS, ONE MOMENT, ONE SPACE.<sup>8</sup>

The printed works read as Ella's own microscopic readings of time, redrawn, recreated into a limbo print moment, speaking to technology bubbles. Alluding to the digital without being a gesture within it, these 2D posters read as bird's-eye views of ancient elements rearranged into new patterns. The eyes, mentioned as a start to this writing, encompass the condition of the artist now: bionic, everywhere all at once. Perspective is infinite, spiraling like a circular drone spinning out of control into deep space. *Spin my multiplicity into deep time. Tell us what is out there*, a supercomputer types to its own explorer drone. In the world that *An unbearded, athletic youth* has crafted, we see this bionic eye in progress, scanning over history, pinging in-between dimensions.

There is a scene from the film *The Fifth Element* where Leeloo sucks in the entire history of war in seconds and is obviously devastated.<sup>9</sup> This scene pops into my mind frequently and speaks to the speed-state of our present minds. Her whimpering face, as a way of being, while a never-ending historical GIF plays out in front of you. This emotional black hole is the synthesis of contemporaneity, how to survive it and still console in the human impulse to create. The loop as default, how do you find your way out of the loop or the gesture?

The bend of the strip and the hedgehog are laughing in a loop of timeless comedy. 'You have to know where the funny is, and if you know where the funny is, you know

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<sup>7</sup> Virginia Postrel, *The Substance of Style: How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture, and Consciousness* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 6.

<sup>8</sup> These words are featured on the posters in *An unbearded, athletic youth*.

<sup>9</sup> Available to view at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WxAIIPSxIE>.

everything'.<sup>10</sup> My friend asked me the other day, 'What will comedy look like in 2014?' Maybe it will look like a white cube. A soft moment butting up against the hard ridges of bleached white walls worldwide.

'Welcome to the Saatchi gallery.'

'Contemporary art.'

'Welcome to Serpentine gallery.'

'What colour are your gallery walls?'

'To me its white, but I'm not sure what white...'

'Pale beige?'

'Brick painted white.'

'Umm like very white, pearl white, classic white and white floors as well.'<sup>11</sup>

The roughly painted floor of the gallery space where you come across the hedgehogs is a conciliating moment, stripping away the soaring tendency of cleanness. Ella places us in several dimensions at once. The hedgehog possesses an aura of a neutral gift, an unbiased, un-gendered offering to an ambiguous entity. Is this entity contemporary art? Should we pretend art is a spiritual entity to be gifted? The hedgehogs operate as a stand in for Ella, offering herself up as an artist to the world. Objects coolly taken apart, with the action of the now, now, now: that human impulse which surges inside. Hunger, the greatest hits of some faraway moment, feeding on an offering to some god we will never know. Actually the 'god' is not art, but ourselves and everything. I see a book in the library called *The Gift*, an important anthropological text. I pick it up and turn it over and use it as a way to write this essay but do not read it. Just the title and the small blurb on the back is all I need to insert it into something else, to twist it into a dichotomy I can work with. This simplicity is the specter of the now.

Netflix keeps going, NO REPEATS, ONE MOMENT, ONE SPACE. The next episode is beginning before the last credits have rolled out. Then it stops to see if you are alive. I click 'keep playing'. I feel like I'm dying inside of time that isn't even time. I have no control of it, *keep playing*, yes we must, we must keep going for a greater good, for a sense of achievement. Netflix is a great analogy of time, a fictional lecturer says to a class of students who are not absorbing the present.

This work is outside of tradition, as tradition evaporates in the realm of contemporary. Ella is not the unbearded athletic youth. She cannot be this youth, as this youth is timeless, something that is used by the world as decoration and she taps into that pool wisely. The 'youth' is everything we are not; it is already winning (in an unreal floating way), dragging boulders up hills, and drawing itself in shallow pools. Ella

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<sup>10</sup> Sheila Heti, *How Should a Person Be?* (Henry Holt and Co., 2012), e-book edition.

<sup>11</sup> Dora and Maja Worldwide Gallery Traxx, <http://www.doraandmaja.com>.

suggests that most of us are hedgehogs, existing in the neutral comedy loop of our lives, offering up gifts to the unseen, the other.

Oneness, coolness drifts away as we are interlinked by the sneaky vector, soft and playful as it dances over the exhibition, offering up each element to a wholeness of space. Making sense is what we all hope to do, making sense through ambitious, autonomous motions. The hedgehog says, *I've never felt at home in any tradition, but it's okay 'cause I know I'm part of this narrative now, for better or worse, for richer or poorer.*

Existing as gatekeepers of the now, dust is still a part of the world and as I imagine every desert on earth consumed by data centers, no nature left, I realise the importance of four walls, of concrete, of the touch of it on your hand or face. As people calmly say, *I don't want to die, I want to traverse the universe with the robots. I want to be a robot.* And as I become soft, I think there is a point to the contemporary after all and it's more than a mirror, 'the mirror would do well to be more than a mirror'.<sup>12</sup> Don't worry, it is.

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<sup>12</sup> "Mirrors would do well to reflect further.' I mention this quote because I think somehow it echoes a very 'Yale' caution about the role of designers. By this I mean partly the idea of questioning how a mirror's function is normally just to reflect its immediate surroundings, but also at the same time there is the suggestion that mirrors should be cautious not to overstep their place." Jonty Valentine, "What is Design?", *The National Grid*, #8, 2012, 93, cited in Sutherland, 26.