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karin lambrecht

seasons of the soul

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“Primary words are spoken from the being”

—Martin Buber¹

“The summer had no reason;

Then, like a primal cause

It had its timeless day”

—Allen Tate²

Consider, for a moment, Porto Alegre. The capital of the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre stands beside a huge watery expanse, the largest lagoon in South America. Five rivers converge at this point, known in Portuguese as the Lagoa dos Patos. When I visited the city almost twenty years ago, the sun shone initially much as expected. Shortly after, though, rains of almost Biblical magnitude continued on and off during the remaining days there.³ No matter the deluge. What impressed me throughout was a bigger splash.⁴ As I shuttled back and forth between the city, my hotel on its outskirts and the Iberê Camargo Foundation a bit further along the shoreline (Álvaro Siza’s sleek new building had just begun construction), nature’s vibes vied with culture’s. Especially when looking towards the horizon from beside the banks of Guaíba Lake, an extension of the lagoon – renowned for its sunsets – my thoughts recalled certain earlier vistas. Specifically the flat prairies, emptiness and “big sky” feel experienced in

¹ Martin Buber, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, *I and Thou* (New York: Scribner, [1923], 1958), 12.

² Allen Tate, “Seasons of the Soul (To. J. P. B.)”, *The Kenyon Review*, 6 (Winter 1944), 2.

³ A lengthy drought preceded them.

⁴ Should this *double entendre* appear to reference David Hockney, remember instead Lambrecht’s... *Splash* (1992).

the United States's West and Southwest. Then again, one only had to turn round to behold the bustling, noisy metropolis. Quietness and sound. Fused together, these are leitmotifs running through Karin Lambrecht's art. By now they may well be nearing an expressive apogee, a silent speech that translates the language of the emotions into color and line.

If yesteryear's weather resembles a topic as dead and distant as the proverbial dodo, it finds new life in Lambrecht's hands. The relevance hinges upon memory and time because these elements suffuse her vision. In fact, it has more than a touch of Proustian time regained. How so?

First, listen to Lambrecht's recollections: "In 2016, my mother died at ninety-seven and as an only child I took care of her. After that, I lost my references in Porto Alegre – my father was born in Germany... The neighborhood where I was brought up in my native Porto Alegre in the house my grandmother built was once a beautiful, peaceful area... The memory of my city was scraped off, now my [original] neighborhood is a semi-commercial area. Long gone are the shady trees, orchards, groves, vineyards and rose gardens the original homeowners, mostly immigrants, planted when they built the houses in the 1930s and 1950s."⁵ In a word, *Sehnsucht*.

Hearing these sentiments may perhaps also summon the atmosphere evoked in, say, the contemplative Soviet-Italian film *Nostalgia* (1983; dir. Andrei Tarkovsky). Certainly, Lambrecht's canvases and mixed-media works on paper project a similar, subliminal bitter-sweet warmth matched by coolness. To cite the nineteenth-century English Romantic poet William Wordsworth's storied definition of his medium, their mode is "emotion recollected in tranquility." Note the mingled rosy and azure hues; the barely visible charcoal inscriptions that float within them akin to mnemonic traces; the vespertine stillness; and even the subtle embroidery. As scholars of the latter ancient craft have observed, "It is a striking fact that in the development of embroidery... there are no changes of materials or techniques which can be felt or interpreted as advances from a primitive to a later, more refined stage. On the other hand, we often find in early works a technical accomplishment and high standard of craftsmanship rarely attained in later times."⁶ That is, embroidery's stitches fasten together the past and present.⁷

⁵ Lambrecht, in Cynthia Garcia, "Spiritual Wanderer: A conversation with Karin Lambrecht on the occasion of her exhibition at Instituto Tomie Ohtake", *New City Brasil* (January 22, 2019), <<https://www.newcitybrazil.com/2019/01/22/spiritual-wanderer-a-conversation-with-karin-lambrecht-on-the-occasion-of-her-exhibition-at-instituto-tomie-ohtake/>>.

⁶ Robin Netherton and Gale R. Owen-Crocker, eds., *Medieval Clothing and Textiles, Volume 1* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2005), 2.

⁷ To cite one of many possible *loci classici*, in Homer's *Odyssey* Penelope's weaving delays her suitors before Odysseus at long last returns home.

Likewise, the titles convey their own temporality – the month of *June*, the cyclical *Lua Nova* (New Moon), the stratified transience implicit in the substance *Magma* (because molten liquid will cool into static stone) and the gerund, ergo duration, that involves *Collecting Souls*. Contemporary as Lambrecht is, the tense and tenor to these paens has a ripe, Keatsian ring:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time...
 Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes play on;
 Not to the sensual ear, but more endear'd,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone...⁸

Lambrecht's hazes and shadows (particularly in the watercolors) allied to her calligraphic palimpsests possess the selfsame ineffable quality as John Keats's "unheard melodies" that the ancient Greek urn inspired. True, sometimes they can rise to a noontide pitch (the orange and crimsons in *Cliff*) or deepen into blackness. Yet the general key is silence, albeit eloquent, married to "slow time".⁹

Secondly, this essay's purview demands switching from a bygone Brazil to come closer to the present day, simultaneously covering a great distance from the southern hemisphere to the north. Early one afternoon last November I took a train to Broadstairs in Kent. Since I rarely travel beyond a two-mile radius from where I live in central London (except to catch a plane, pandemics permitting), for me it was almost as exotic a journey as that to Porto Alegre. Of course, I thought the purpose was to finally encounter the artist. Not quite so. Lambrecht soon reminded me that she had attended the six-hour talk (truth to tell, an enjoyable marathon by any standards) that I gave at the Museu de Arte do Rio Grande do Sul ages ago. So providence or whatever gods may be had contrived to bring together again – for sure, on a very modest level – what was formerly separate: two people continents apart who had nevertheless had a brief professional encounter. This reunion of sorts finds a strange, serendipitous correspondence that happens to lie at the heart of Lambrecht's whole aesthetic. Namely, the ancient philosophical question about "the one and the many".¹⁰ Is unity or plurality the fundamental condition of being? Lambrecht's artistic endeavor embodies her answer. By diverse means she seeks to fuse the self and nature, tangible matter and whatever we mean when invoking intangible "spirit" or "soul". More on this front shortly. For the time being, weather – a force ineluctably associated with the seasons and geography – keeps the trump card.

⁸ John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1819), in Jack Stillinger, ed., *John Keats: Complete Poems* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), 282.

⁹ I cannot but avoid mentioning Mark Rothko's dictum, "Silence is so accurate."

¹⁰ A quandary at least as venerable as Parmenides (late sixth or early fifth century BC), later amplified particularly by Plato. The former's only surviving work is the poem "On Nature".

That afternoon and early evening in Broadstairs, I stood in Lambrecht's chaste studio on the top floor of her house as she raised one unstretched canvas after another onto the white wall and arrayed works on paper on the floor. Thanks to the crystalline north light streaming through the windows from a cloudless blue sky (one cheer, no more, for climate change), everything began to fall into place. To wit, the art belongs to a world at once personal, perceptual and philosophical.

At face value, Lambrecht's migration from Brazil to Broadstairs in 2017 seems outlandish. However, she had private reasons (her former husband was English and her daughter lives in London), alongside social considerations (suffice it to say that her homeland, like other Latin American countries, has seen its fair share of distasteful dictators) as well as more contemplative motives. Count among the last the fact that Broadstairs, like Porto Alegre, is a coastal town.¹¹ For the Lagoa dos Patos, instead read the Isle of Thanet; for the South Atlantic, think the Southern Bight and Straits of Dover. Furthermore, for Lambrecht her adopted town represents the opposite of exile and overheated modernization. Tellingly, she observes that "In a way, Broadstairs reminds me of the humane atmosphere of my childhood: children walk home from school on their own, the elderly meet in pubs and stroll along the streets with their friends. Life outside inspires safety – the opposite of [revamped] Porto Alegre."¹² Erstwhile halcyon days have segued to others that are, as it were, the same but different.

Beyond the aforementioned titles with their upbeat, refulgent associations (a pale moon hung in the pellucid early evening sky, Samuel Palmer-like,¹³ as we left Lambrecht's house), the change of scenery has influenced the artist's style. Almost altogether gone is the visceral, literal gutsiness that Lambrecht had plumbed in her early career, particularly in the *Eu e Você* project and its satellites that focused upon the slaughter of sheep on the Brazilian pampas and in Chile, Uruguay and Israel.¹⁴ Real blood and entrails steeped those sacrificial surfaces and fabrics. Now the painted dark vermilion, curvy configuration in *Collecting Souls* – maybe a spreading sanguine stain or a Christological fish's outline or both? – distills in microcosm that previous carnage. The redness appears to issue from satin strands anyway, while the glassy paper that Lambrecht uses is tissue-thin, silken-soft yet strong enough to be slightly resistant to her aquarelle and to hold

¹¹ More accurately, Porto Alegre lies on a delta.

¹² Lambrecht, in Garcia 2019. As it happens, I spotted an old-fashioned pub – of a rustic type increasingly rare in London – just round the corner from the street in which Lambrecht lives. In contrast, by 2017 Porto Alegre ranked as 39th among the world's 50 most violent cities.

¹³ Palmer (1805–81) also spent an especially productive part of his life in Shoreham, Kent.

¹⁴ See André Severo, Karin Stempel, Maria Helena Bernardes and Rolf Wicker, *Eu e Você* (Santa Cruz do Sul: Edunisc, 2001). Elsewhere, Lambrecht added that she had had a difficult time in her Catholic school where the teachers singled her out for a special exam. My own father never quite recovered from attending a public school (that is, in English usage, a private one) where Jesuitical tyrants held sway.

the embroidery in place.¹⁵ Similarly, the dry powder pigments from the German firm Kremer (which manufactures no less than 1,500 of them), the French company Sennelier and London's L. Cornelissen & Son (est. 1855) feel refined – a far cry from her youthful recourse to burnt canvas, politically resonant “mail art”, ashes, a rusty tray and, in Berlin, the rough, strikingly daubed cardboard box that she let float down the River Spree. The slashes that butchering a ram presuppose have shrunken to light vertical strokes in some recent compositions, such as *Primera Lua Nova*, a ripple or rift rather than a gash. Above all, the pigment now wafts in washes, becoming diaphanous. The surfaces breathe. Consciousness diffused into the aether. Inevitably, J. M. W. Turner's late watercolors spring to mind, not least since The Turner Contemporary art gallery is a short hop from Margate. An art historian's remarks about these tinted apparitions applies equally to Lambrecht, “although *Lauerzersee* [a Turner study from circa 1848] lacks precision, this creates a luminous, dematerialized landscape that leaves much to the spectator's imagination.”¹⁶ Elsewhere, Turner juxtaposes red and blue akin to Lambrecht's palette.



J. M. W. Turner, *Coastal Terrain and Buildings, South of France or Italy* (c.1834, Turner Bequest, Tate, London, D28965).

¹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, these and other such observations are from communications with the artist.

¹⁶ Barry Venning, *Turner* (London and New York: Phaidon Press, 2003), 289.

Given the iterations and faintness to the words inscribed in charcoal – their different languages implicitly denoting a cosmopolitan wanderer adept at benign glossolalia – the overall effect tends to suggest a hushed, visual melisma. Make no mistake, the emphatically sacramental or ritual character that had marked Lambrecht’s earlier output lingers, but is muted rather than graphic. An analogy might be with Saint Veronica’s veil, rarefied to the limit where the image is almost effaced. From edgy existential roots reverberant with the silence of the lambs,¹⁷ the art has blossomed into more serene, even hedonistic moods. The animal bodies exemplified in *Eu e Você* and Joseph Beuys’s dead hare (the German activist artist-cum-shaman made a strong impact on Lambrecht during her sojourn in Berlin in the early 1980s) have become disembodied. The spirit or soul, too, is a disembodiment. As such, it is tempting to regard these airy chromatic fields as spiritual. (To make an irreverent analogy, what are liquid spirits if not vaporous distillations made from much earthier substances? Think grapes, wine, grains and their kind). Whatever, evanescence prevails, a highly bearable lightness of being expressed through pure chroma abetted by inscribed, incantatory nouns. Liturgies in paint? Yes and no.

On the one hand, Lambrecht courts the sacred. From the Veil of the Temple to Mark Rothko, Agnes Martin, James Turrell and many more besides, the diaphane has figured an interface with the divine and the otherworldly.¹⁸ Along the same train of thought, the recurrent copper crosses glint with sacred connotations. Mostly, the emblem is a Greek cross or *crux quadrata*, with four equal arms. Sometimes a Latin cross or *crux immissa*, whose base stem is longer than the other three arms, quivers in charcoal (or are they signs portending the horizontal-vertical orientations of earth and sky?). Both are residues. Alter egos of the crucified body. On the other hand, Lambrecht is laudably adamant: “I have no interest in religion. Usually artists are wary about religious institutions.”¹⁹ Hers is a secular theology, a pantheistic vitalism grown meditative.

Nature is the clue and muse, the unmoved mover and demiurge. It speaks in plain sight. “Sky”, “rain”, “sun”, “house” “garden”, “bone”, “sea”.... Listing these nouns throughout her recent images indicates Lambrecht’s imagistic syntax and its metatext. By turning things into words and nature into chromatic space, even charged absence (despite or on account the aura of *pleroma*), she establishes a fresh relationship between the self and the cosmos – large and small, the one and the many. The great early twentieth-century German poet Rainer Maria Rilke had a comparable epiphany. His “Ninth Duino Elegy” – as difficult as it is profound –

¹⁷ Severo 2001, 20.

¹⁸ See Paul Hills, *Veiled Presence: Body and Drapery from Giotto to Titian* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019).

¹⁹ Lambrecht, in Garcia 2019.

voices this ontology, which amounts to a secular or profane theology.²⁰ To quote Rilke:

For when the traveller returns from the mountain-slopes into the valley,
he brings, not a handful of earth, unsayable to others, but instead
some word he has gained, some pure word, the yellow and blue
gentian. Perhaps we are *here* in order to say: house,
bridge, fountain, gate, pitcher, fruit-tree, window – ²¹

Commenting on Lambrecht's previous work, Glória Ferreira stressed the relationship between mind and matter (the young artist had a conceptual bent that nevertheless batted on quotidian materials). Both merit quoting at some length: "Her personal experience with nature and the incorporation of the relationship between the organic and the mental come to light in her use of rain, as well as the earth from her garden, as the co-authors of certain works – in the exploration, ultimately, or the constitutive instability of the elements of nature. The materials being used, the artist says, 'have memory, they've already been used and reused. When I take a piece of scrap iron, I look at it with a painter's eye, seeking out the stains on its surface, situations that can create new situations. But I always have in mind something undergoing a process of reintegration with nature.'"²² To invoke the title of a seminal exhibition in Paris that critiqued conventional Western ethnocentric ideas about the "primitive" and the modern, Lambrecht manages to be a multicultural *magicienne de la terre*.²³ Her realm is an elemental cosmogony – shades of Lucretius²⁴ – but one without bombast. It substitutes poignancy and intimacy for religiosity and outsize bravura.

Lambrecht's pictorial and linguistic process reconfigures relationships. Here, syncretism counts for everything. It melds the subjective psyche with nature: two becomes one. The vertical meets the horizontal in the *crux quadrata*; the supernal (rain) greets the terrestrial (flower); domesticity (house and garden) coexists with the universe (moon, sun, cosmos); darkness matches radiance; and language inflects visuality. Why else would Lambrecht begin with pronouns *Eu e Você* (You and I) and flow, as mentioned above, into nouns? Turning to the Jewish

²⁰ Cauê Alves, "Karin Lambrecht: Fecundation, Crossbreeding and Never Ending Genesis", in André Venzon, *Nem Eu, Nem Tu; Nós. A Obra de Karin Lambrecht e o Olhar do Colecionador* (São Paulo: Santander Cultural, 2017), 109.

²¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, "Die Neunte Elegie" (1912/1922), in Stephen Mitchell, trans., *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 199.

²² Glória Ferreira, *Karin Lambrecht* (São Paulo: Cosac Naify, 2013), 6.

²³ *Magiciens de la Terre*, Centre Georges Pompidou and the Grande halle de la Villette (May 18 – August 14, 1989). As for multiculturalism, Lambrecht's outlook is refreshingly devoid of the trite clichés and trendiness into which it has sometimes fallen.

²⁴ Lucretius, trans. R. E. Latham, *On the Nature of the Universe* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1994). The first century BC Lucretius's Book One treats "Matter and Space", while Book Three is about "Life and Mind" – in turn, Lambrecht's quintessential preoccupations.

philosopher of dialogue, Martin Buber, clarifies this synthesis. In a nutshell and simply stated, the humanist Buber argued that there are two modalities of being-in-the-world. The first is caught in the “I-It” conjunction. The primary word here merely objectifies reality as a multitude of discrete entities. The second is the “I-Thou” relationship. Whereas the primary word *I-It* can never be spoken with the whole being, *I-Thou* can only be spoken with the whole being.²⁵ Such, Buber suggests, are the parameters of the human condition’s vastness.²⁶ Nothing is discrete in Lambrecht’s pictorial scenario. Everything coalesces, epitomized by the ubiquitous blurring or hazes together with the ethereal scirms and canny scribbles, like a stream of consciousness. Over and again, planes melt into each other, geometries tilt or deliquesce. An intimate cosmos – the oxymoron is deliberate – unfolds.

One last factor completes the equation. Time. Inescapable, temporality overarches existence. No wonder that in 1997 Lambrecht made a piece titled *Morte eu sou teu* (Death, I Am Yours). Sigmund Freud, avatar of *eros* and *thanatos*, recognized this truism in pithy prose: “Everyone owes nature a death and must expect to pay the debt”.²⁷ Artists and poets have turned it into images, metaphor, allegory, figuration and abstraction. The diverse results can only be called seasons of the soul – the self and nature turned cyclical. We find this *topos* in the poem by the American Allen Tate that lends its title to this essay. Tate makes Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter into spiritual states:

The summer had no reason;
Then, like a primal cause
It had its timeless day...

Summer has no reason: it just is. While it lasts, the moment(ary) waxes eternal. When it wanes, we know that existence must perforce occur *sub specie aeternitatis*. Seasons are inseparable from time and human life, not to mention where I began – with the weather. An even finer American contemporary of Tate’s, Wallace Stevens, wrote poems that embed feelings into the seasons. Hence his “Credence of Summer”, “The Auroras of Autumn”, “The Snow Man” and “The Sun This March”.²⁸ Studying Lambrecht’s art in Broadstairs in her quiet house

²⁵ Buber 1923, 12.

²⁶ Cf. Michael Chapman, in Ferreira 2013, 7.

²⁷ Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915), in Sigmund Freud, trans. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alex Strachey and Alan Tyson, *The Standard Edition of the Collected Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume XIV* (London: Vintage, 2001), 289. In 1986 while in New York state, Lambrecht made the assemblage *Nascimento do tempo* (Time’s Birth).

²⁸ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 372–78, 411–21, 9–10, 133–34. Other Stevens poems share Lambrecht’s subjects and signs – such as the sea/cloud (“Sea Surface Full of Clouds”), the moon (“Lunar Paraphrase”), blueness (“The Man With the Blue Guitar”), redness (“Disillusionment of Ten O’Clock”, which ends with “red weather”), holidays (“Holiday in Reality”), cliff (“The Irish Cliffs of Moher”), words (“Men Made Out

made the world for an instant feel calm – to paraphrase another title of Stevens – though it has not been so in a long while and probably never will be.²⁹ The poet explains what Lambrecht’s work can, I think, instill in the sensitive viewer:

But how does one feel?
 One grows used to the weather,
 The landscape and that;
 And the sublime comes down
 To the spirit itself,

The spirit and space,
 The empty spirit
 In vacant space.
 What wine does one drink?
 What bread does one eat?³⁰

of Words”) and the cosmos (“The Planet on the Table”), etcetera. Of course these are as much concinnities as inevitable coincidences.

²⁹ Interestingly, Tate’s poem addressed the Second World War, its violence and related brutishness personified, as in *Eu e Você*, by animals. See R. K. Meiners, “The End of History: Allen Tate’s ‘Seasons of the Soul’”, *The Sewanee Review*, 70 (Winter 1962), 34-80.

³⁰ Stevens, “The American Sublime”, in Stevens 1999, 131. Note the sacramental ending. Speaking of which, the sacraments and temporality meet in a medieval commonplace, the book of hours.