Ascending to the Cloud: Art after Humanity and Meyohas' *Cloud of Petals*

By Samuel Loncar

There were three deaths, but only one funeral. Friedrich Nietzsche, head mortician of Western culture, made famous the death of God at the end of the nineteenth century. The madman in *The Gay Science* said:

> *"Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him---you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.*

So the first death, announced with the cackle of madness, spread throughout the European world. Less noisily, an esoteric but brilliant German thinker (Goethe called him "the brightest light of the age"), Johann Georg Hamann, anticipated Nietzsche by a hundred years and argued that the modern world, and especially the Enlightenment, had killed nature, and that with the death of nature, the question of god's survival was an open one. Hamann, known as the "Magus of the North," was the spell-casting thinker who more than any other lies behind German romanticism and much of the art theory that dominates contemporary academic discussion. (Conversations about the death of art, for example, inaugurated by Hegel, made current by Danto, descend from the romantic tradition). But the death of nature, though memorialized by artists for over a century, has received no broad recognition because science, linked so closely to the concept of nature, has such prestige that the idea that its object has been murdered or died under its hands is a hard truth. But that science works with the dead is part of its mythic status, as in Shelley's *Frankenstein* – it is knowledge congealed from blood run cold. The death of god has been acknowledged, celebrated, and mourned – even if not fully understood – while the death of nature remains questionable.

So the third death, coming in the wake of these two expirations, came quietly, a gentle drifting of the body to shore that was recorded in the journalism of higher ideas – metaphysics, the first draft of history – and then left to languish until technology, above all artificial intelligence (AI), threw it, rotten and less-than-half understood, onto the front pages and best-seller lists. This was our death, the death of humanity. Transhumanism, post-human – the discourse of the "after the human" – has gone viral and is fast becoming a classic topos in Silicon Valley among "thought leaders" (a category best passed over in silence), and in the world of elites who surf the waves of global capital.

Art, meanwhile, has passed through its own debated demise, and entered a phase in which no point of unity exists from which one could grasp the pluriform state of even the New York art world. Celebrated or critiqued, contemporary art is a world where a thousand flowers bloom – but a thousand is not enough for Sarah Meyohas, who took ten thousand rose petals and sent them scattering across the worlds of art, technology, and finance, tainting sterile steel and glass, symbols of technological purity, with the scent of the garden and boudoir, juxtaposing clinical modernity with lush sensualism, like a body, gorgeously draped over an examining table, exposing itself for the eyes of desire and not the probe of inquiry, and thus confounding the doctor, who, conditioned and professionally obligated to see naked human flesh as a site of medical malformation, must confront a rapidly beating heart and the pulse of vital warmth. This seductive clashing of worlds that seem so separate through simple physical objects, in this case that epitome of floral symbolism, the rose, is a characteristic of Meyohas' work, which has from the beginning challenged and redefined space by inscribing it with foreign bodies.

Interpreting Meyohas' latest work, *Cloud of Petals*, demands we see it in the context of the contemporary situation itself, that of post-human art. The post-human, in this essay, refers not to a faddish problem or TED-talk pablum, but to the world after god and nature have died, a world in which the essence of humanity has become a philosophically incoherent idea. In such a world, ambitious acts of art – and *Cloud of Petals* is scaled to overwhelm the senses and mind – are fraught in a way that is novel. When the world exists with relative stability, art can challenge, ironize, affirm, or satirize because it can assume a sufficiently legible backdrop. Art that does so today ignores or does not understand the liquid condition of the late modern, in which values and money, gods and bodies, sex and capital slosh together in a swirling chaos that only powerful acts of self-assertion can momentarily stabilize or articulate before falling back into the maelstrom. In her last work, *Stock Performance*, Meyohas cut a path through the sea of capital and its currents by openly mapping the imperial dominance of finance and technology, with the aesthetic as its subaltern – a movement she continues in *Cloud of Petals*.

Art has had three longstanding mimetic exemplars – nature, the divine, and the human. If they have died, is art now a macabre search for the dead? Perhaps. Art has long been a realm haunted by our dead ideals. We see nature become an object of poetic longing, a screen onto which a yearning for the sublime is powerfully projected, precisely as the industrial revolution and natural science wrenched humans from their total dependence on it and made nature an object of human domination, conceptually and empirically. Wordsworth's English countryside or Caspar David Friedrich's horizons of infinity mark the aching awareness that comes only with loss. How can we rest in nature, knowing we have so radically reshaped it, that we have the technological power to end life on earth, to destroy the earth itself, as we nearly did testing the hydrogen bomb? What is nature after it has ceased to be an eternal process of unfolding species and movement in imitation of god, or the handiwork of a creator who made it as a place for mortal dwelling? We drop rose petals on graves of the dead. Meyohas scattered enough petals for a lavish funeral, perhaps for our trio of dead divinities, buried at the birth site of technology's avatar.

For gods decompose, too, as Nietzsche said, and modernist art grew in soil made rich by the moldering body of God. Theosophy, mesmerism, spiritualism, esoteric cults – practically all the major modernists are influenced by these now embarrassing movements, so clearly god-haunted, searching for significance beyond a nature that could no longer feed the soul, itself dubious to science, its one needed food: meaning.

God's death means nothing less than the collapse of the union of Platonic philosophy and Christianity that came to underlie and characterize the West as Nietzsche saw it. Karsten Harries observed that modern art is characterized by its inhabitation of this world bereft of anchored meaning. This is the state of disorientation described by Nietzsche's madman. With this loss of heaven many turned in the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries to the earth itself, to nature. But in vain. For the deepest thinkers by the turn of the twentieth century knew what Hamann had prophesied: nature had no meaning without the gods from whom it was born, and thus could never replace the divine except in the muddled thinking of those unconcerned with rationality or science. The nature of science is a nature that can yield no ought, that can produce no table of "thou shalt" or "thou shalt not." Science cannot by its nature tell anyone what the world *means*, for it does not know.

Science, for all its empirical power and cultural prestige, is philosophically sterile when it forgets its own history, and this condition of self-forgetting is a hallmark of modernity and especially modernism. An archetype of modernist architecture, the Bell Labs Holmsdel Complex, where Meyohas filmed the documentary that begins *Cloud of Petals*, is a symbol and synonym of technology and innovation, associated with the transistor and the laser, essential to modern computing and the frontiers of high-energy physics. Science tells its history like archaic and traditional cultures: a mythology of heroes, definitive dates and epochs, classic experiments. Thomas Kuhn famously described this view of history as "text book" history, designed to perpetuate a mythic but useful conception of scientific progress for students. The problem is that scientists themselves believe these myths, in spite of the fact that historians of science have shown clearly how misleading such a view of science is.

But this self-forgetting, this mythologizing of history in search of a usable past, is what we find in aesthetic and philosophical modernism as well. T.S. Eliot's assertion of new literary past in which figures that threatened him, like Milton, were sidelined, while previously minor figures, like the metaphysical poets, became prominent is only one famous example of how modernism creates a history fit for its purposes. The anti-aesthetic or the aestheticization of purported function in the Bauhaus or Le Corbusier echoes Schoenberg's twelve-tone music, in that for both an entire history of art, including deeply inbuilt norms of what was considered enjoyable and pleasant, was rejected for revolutionary re-organizations of space, time, and sound.

Most significantly for understanding the post-human era is the expression of this forgetting in the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Although Heidegger saw himself as recovering an occult past, he was in fact inventing it. And like all acts of distortion, Heidegger's enabled a crucial clarity. In 1944, Heidegger wrote a letter in response to Jean Beaufret's question of how to restore meaning to the word "humanism" ("Comment redonner un sens au mot 'Humanisme'?"), which was later published as the letter "On

Humanism" (*Über den Humanismus*). Heidegger's philosophy to that point had opened his eyes to the fact that the entire idea of humanity relies on a notion of a shared nature, or essence, which was absurd after the death of God. Not only are there no culturally shared grounds for holding onto a metaphysical idea of the human, but with the development of the idea of freedom as autonomy we have reached a stage at which the essence of humans becomes their power of choice, the sheer fact of our presence in the world as beings capable of doing one thing rather than another. Existentialism expressed this recognition in the phrase "Existence precedes essence," that is, human nature is to determine their nature, and in that sense they have no positive shared essence. Heidegger left humanity behind, because he saw that humanity had lost access to its old idea of itself. Michel Foucault and others would make these ideas more popular, but their origins lie in the deep metaphysical debates Heidegger inherited from ancient philosophy and Christianity.

Heidegger himself could not fairly or accurately see many aspects of the history of philosophy or religion, but he was right about humanity. The idea no longer makes sense. Humans have become strangers to themselves, and there is no greater evidence for this claim or catalyst of its universalization than the progress of technology and its effects.

Technology is understandably but falsely conflated with electrical and now digital tools. But technology is more strictly the logic of instrumental power, the framework and tools by which we extend human capacity. Humans have always had tools, but our most sophisticated tools are generally invisible to us: alphabetic literacy, perhaps the greatest cognitive revolution in the past 10,000 years, is rarely considered in discussions of technology. Similarly, transformations of the media of literacy, like the invention of the codex, and eventually movable type, and now the internet, are developments within the most powerful and subtle of human tools: its capacity to remember, organize, and transmit information, capacities which are inseparable from the particular and historically conditioned shape of humanity at any given place and time. The gradual development of technology has led to an increase in self-consciousness – a trajectory normally read simply as part of the history of philosophy – and the conscious objectification of "technology" itself represents the peaking of this self-consciousness. The idolization of technology in the contemporary world is a projection of a desire to see a manifest, unified, and progressive embodiment of humanity's power over the world. The material, visible artifacts to which contemporary culture attaches this projection are the computer and other digital tools because they are the most accessible and obvious symbol of our power.

As the last event in the Holmsdel Complex before its official repurposing, Meyohas' project of converting it into a work of art in which roses were scattered and digitized chains together the technological, financial, and aesthetic ambiguities of the world IBM has helped create. Petals are fragile. Symbols of the rose's ephemeral bloom before wilting into death, they are delicate, lip-like, and to hold them is to feel the tenderness of swift mortality. Scanned and digitized, become big data, the petals in Meyohas' work turn immortal at the price of their materiality, at least given a life as long as the technology that stores them lasts. Is the petal gone, or is its soul, its digital DNA, not a fragment but an essence? This question of the identity of the petals throughout the various permutations in *Cloud of Petals* – as sculptural exhibits, as data, as virtual reality – parallels the theological and

philosophical questions raised by many in Silicon Valley who think humans could be uploaded into the cloud themselves. These digital immortalists, perhaps Plato's wayward step-children, are part of a new cult, the religion of technology, that deeply motivates many of the most powerful leaders in business today. In this religion, humans are history, the future belongs to the godlike beings that we will become after leaving our bodies behind and merging with our tools. In the eschatology of this religion, the crucial moment is our ascension into the cloud – a new heaven not of eternity and bliss, but data, controlled by corporations.

Meyohas' conversion of petals from bodies to bits thus reads as a meditation on the trajectory of the entire culture: towards dematerialization and the digital mediation of even bodies to themselves. Gods may have made humans in their own image, but as technology is now the god of many, so humans are remade in its image.

As we now lack any clear conception of either humanity or art, nature or god, *Clouds of Petals* stages a confrontation with ourselves: looking into the mirror of the contemporary moment we find no home, but only, as in the mirrors in *Cloud of Petals*, images of indeterminate infinity. Humans have not yet invented their successor, whatever technical wizards may think, but it is high time we confront our disappearance. When we look up in *Cloud of Petals* and find ourselves covered in a gentle hail of petals, forgetting momentarily that our reality is virtual and not physical, we can experience the beauty and sheer wonder of nature and technology married while seeing what the dead see after we have closed the lid on their life: a gentle cloud of petals, a floral farewell.

What has passed into oblivion with humanity is art – Danto was right about the death of art – as a single or coherent object or idea. Art has become like Richard Rorty's postmodern truth: whatever your colleagues let you get away with. What else could have happened to art after the death of its old ideals? The art world can be read as a space of capital's overt control but covert ownership. It is marketing, for the artist, the gallery, the museum, the owner. Meyohas' work is refreshing because of its total transparency about the commercialism at the heart of successful and prestigious art, and its aesthetic suborning of finance for artistic ends. There is no question that craft-based art, linked to traditions developed since the Renaissance or before, still exists and produces interesting and significant work, but art, like fashion, seems future-oriented, breathless in its pursuit of felt relevance, looking for the next big thing.

With art's emancipation from itself it, like humanity, faces a situation of true novelty: a choice to abandon, ignore, or engage the entire history of what it once was, but with no clear, consensual, or organizing criteria by which to decide anything. Success becomes a tautology for work that sells in the art world, that has status in the market. At its most interesting, it can function as a material form of philosophy, a form of thinking through matter itself. The pull of conceptual art is linked to the borderless zone where art and philosophy mingle – the only difference is which world determines success. A good idea in the art world is called art; a good idea among intellectual promotes its author, whether as a writer or academic. But art is about ideas now in a way it has never been, for this is the status of matter that must explain itself. Art is no longer silent; it must speak.

Although nothing could seem farther from the romantic image of the lone artistic genius, refashioning the world, markets be damned, than this modern role of art, it is in fact a distant debtor to the vision articulated by Hamann, Novalis, Hölderlin, and others, for art now has the opportunity to take the entire world as its canvas, and to take the eyes and body of the gallery-goer, and make them part of the art itself, as Meyohas does in linking so many material forms into a flow of experience. As laborers chose the petals they thought were most beautiful, so *Cloud of Petals* as a whole blurs the lines between the artist, work, and viewer. We are the canvas and the easel, paint and brush, because we are what is at stake in significant art: the nature/artifice interface, the question of humanity's willing surrender of its agency to a myth of technological inevitability – all of this is playfully, delightfully, explored, as in the repeated images of the flies who cannot distinguish real petals from the screen, and seek to touch what is no longer there. Grasping at the simulacrum of nature, they are perpetually disappointed and yet still seeking the scent and softness of a world that now exists only in the cloud. Are we better than they, or is Meyohas' recurrence to this image a reminder of the shared condition of humanity, dissolved into the chaotic pool of nature's inseparable union with instrumental power?

In this midst of these images of marriage and death, and the particularly dark scenes of roses burning, the through line is beauty: the Holmsdel complex, captured as an icon of its time; the light streaming through its windows to a world gone by; the roses themselves, embodying the gorgeous inutility of being, their sheer presence forever changing our image of IBM's historic site. Snakes curling through wires, tongues flickering through petals coating the floor—these images suggest the inevitable fate of all attempts to escape animality. Recaptured by nature, civilization fades into jungle and countryside. Such post-apocalyptic images are central to science fiction and increasingly present in popular culture. At first they seem an odd visitor to a world obsessed with its devices, but it takes little psychological depth to read them as the latent fear that our world is somehow converging towards the destruction of all that we once were. For good or ill, the future is built on the ruins of the past. God's body is not the only one decomposing, and even roses will not hide the smell for long.

Cloud of Petals plays on surfaces without losing depth. Discussions of big data, technology, and humanity are trending topics, so long as we are not forced to confront the magnitude or reality of our situation. But Meyohas invites us, without forcing us, to see that as we play with bodies and bits it may be wise to clear a space for that most unsexy of activities, to which great art has always been an ally: mourning.

The unmourned dead haunt our waking life, and cast shadows even a California sun cannot dispel. Meyohas employs archetypal images – snakes, roses, spiders – that unsettle the mind and confuse the eye. What do these have to do with each other? What is this really about? We are unnerved in the midst of our engagement. Production quality capable of entertaining slides past the curious eye, absorbed in deflowered roses and petals being opened until they lie flat, or have their juices smeared along the ground until it is stained with rose-red life, and these scenes begin to work below conscious attention. Sex, myth, and death are the images we are given, and whatever we know or think of these things,

they excite visceral reactions. A Burmese python writhing around the body of a beautiful woman, a bouquet of roses burning between shots of a cigarette at day's end, flowers cast down to a many-storied fall: echoes of a past that still lie ahead of us, for we cannot escape the past or our stories. Origins, as Heidegger said, remain ever our future.

And it is in this past present to us as the barely anticipated possibility of tomorrow that we find the torn fragments of a blueprint for art after humanity. To begin fully to recognize that what we are is now available to us only as memory – the gods, the world, the species we once belonged to live as the background and origins of today – means seeing art itself as a site that cannot escape time and contingency, and thus should not pretend it does not depend on finance (as in the modernist myth of art's autonomy, for example), but that can nevertheless intervene into our experience of the world, our sleepwalking stumble of everyday life, and open our eyes to the living possibilities of the moment.

For this is part of the magic of humanity and the enchantment of *Cloud of Petals*: that in the midst of chaos or stress, in a very crisis of identity, we stand transfixed before a petal, sadly staring from a wall, or watching with childish joy as flowers swirl around us. *Carpe diem*, *memento mori* – even if we ascend to the cloud and live forever, we will be humans no more. Technology will not save our humanity. Through it, we have helped bring ourselves to an end, for now we are as all other things in a commodified world: one choice among many. What kind of human do you wish to be? It is up to you, or the commercials that make you. The past provides a horizon but no template for tomorrow.

Rose petals fall like rain in Meyohas' work, a work of art that, if funereal, is no less but more poignant a reminder that beauty is not passé, only those who say so. Beauty is lust's fire, the seducer that stirs desire to a raging flame and that moves the eye forward, tantalizing us with novelty and glory. Beauty also consoles us, and whatever our pretenses about consolation, we will all of us one day mourn, and as we mourn and rage, beauty will be an ally. Transgression today is to take the world seriously enough to recognize that we have so much to mourn that a lifetime would not suffice, and yet, as Jack Gilbert says, "There will be music in spite of everything."

God is dead. His decomposition is well underway. Nature has fallen, and she will not be redeemed even if she is revenged. Who wants to live under nature's sway, in truth? But it is decent at least to acknowledge the life we have lost in nature's demise. *Cloud of Petals* is many things – that is part of its power. But in its epic scale, its wanton glorious waste of roses, I see the proleptic funeral rites for humanity, even now beginning to decompose and yet, like nature, unacknowledged and unmourned. Three deaths, one funeral, ten thousand petals, and now we, with them, ascending to the cloud in a work of post-human art, married with technology, god of the age. Art after humanity is simple, and Meyohas points the way. We have only to recall Ezra Pound, but made fit for the times: Make *us* new. Art is the exploration and construction of a fluid species, now at sea under shoreless skies, rafting to freedom under the gaze of a jealous and powerful god. Our piety is defiance against divine tyranny. Technology is our creation, but we still have not unlearned our alienation by which we divinize our own handiwork. In humanizing technology, Meyohas points towards its disenchantment. If there is magic, let it be in roses and snakes and water turning to

wine. If there is a god left walking, let it be our bodies, mystery of all technology and mother of all art. Meyohas poised atop a satellite dish provides an apt image for this vision: let technology beam us our bodies back to ourselves. Perhaps after humanity, the essence, the species, all we have left are bodies, and that is why it is bodies, above all – of roses, of snakes, of herself – that make *Cloud of Petals* the work it is: an exemplary exhibit of post-human art.

If we have a future, it starts here, in the body. Transcendence be damned.