

CÆSURA



RESEMBLANCE
TO PERSONS
LIVING OR
DEAD PURELY
COINCIDENTAL

COMMITMENT
DIGITAL EDITION

ISSUE 0
†

CÆSURA

COMMITMENT
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CONTENTS

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- I FOR THE INDEPENDENT
BARBARISM OF ART
- 1 RESPONSE
MARCO ROTH
- 5 SOME BRIEF REFLECTIONS ON ART
CARLOS MATUL†
- 9 ART BOY
TAYLOR ERVIN‡
- 23 WHEN THE CRITICS SAW
The Early Years of *October*
CHLOE JULIUS
- 33 MUD PIES WHICH ENDURE
ERROL SAWYER†
- 37 MEA CULPA
JARED DANIEL FAGEN†
- 41 SOMERSETS IN THE AIR
KIT SCHLUTER
- 51 BISON MILLENNIUM
JAMIE KEESLING
- 55 A LITTLE HISTORY OF PAINTING
PATRICK ZAPIEN†
- 69 CARLOS MATUL‡†
- 75 SANTIAGO E. CANALES‡
- 85 LULL & THRASH
AUSTIN CARDER
- 99 FOUR POEMS
ERIN HAGOOD
- 107 PANDEMIC
a first GO
JOEL NEWBERGER
- 113 EVER AFTER SERIES
JULIAN-JAKOB KNEER

- 129 DEATH IS THE MARTYR OF BEAUTY
On the meaning of the return of the Gothic in the
work of Julian-Jakob Kneer
LAURIE ROJAS
- 143 FUCK HISTORY?
BRET SCHNEIDER
- 153 MONUMENTAL HISTORY
PAMELA C. NOGALES C.
- 159 PEENEMÜNDE SCROLL
HASEEB AHMED[‡]
- 171 MEOW WOLF
Revenge of the Artist?
MADISON WINSTON
- 183 DANIEL R. LIZANO[‡]
- 199 SCREENS
SUZY VOGENTHALER
- 207 ERROL SAWYER^{††}
- 217 DOCUMENT OF A
PERFORMANCE NEVER SEEN
MATTHEW GOULISH & LIN HIXSON
- 229 PERFORMANCE ART IS NOTHING
& EVERYTHING WITH(OUT) CRITICISM
ESTHER NEFF
- 239 IRRELEVANCE VERSUS IRRESPONSIBILITY
“At Home with Mike Kelley”
GABRIEL ALMEIDA
- 245 TWO PROSE POEMS
JARED DANIEL FAGEN
- 251 WALTER BENJAMIN’S MARXIST CRITIQUE
LOUIS STERRETT
- 259 POLITICAL, AND NOT
FRED CAMPER
- 271 A PAGE OF MADNESS & SOUND & FURY
ANDREW CHRISTOPHER GREEN
- 281 JUNE JOURNAL
PATRICK ZAPIEN[†]

FOR THE INDEPENDENT BARBARISM OF ART

EDITORIAL STATEMENT

“Self-alienated mankind experiences its own destruction as aesthetic pleasure.” Fascism or barbarism, whichever it’s called, is a crystallized nihilism that despairs of existence. It forfeits the present to an ancient vendetta, seeking bleeding redress for the crimes of the dead. And what success this *ressentiment* has had! *Mutatis mutandis* – shape-shifting spirit of unspeakable horror, the 20th century’s creator-destroyer, miserable architect of this infernal machine. And only now do they say that the world is ending! No, too late – it has already ended. The techniques of brutality have meanwhile advanced to subtler means of dismemberment: the infinite mills of *human resource* departments – all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful – where the dreams of mankind are discarded as chaff to the grains of existence. Baudelaire had warned us that this was our fate: “Universal ruin will manifest itself not solely or particularly in political institutions or general progress or whatever else might be a proper name for it; it will be seen, above all, in the baseness of hearts.”

Your heart, dear reader, is barren like ours. But what kind of art can be raised on this ruined foundation? *Monstrous* creatures like us, can we still know the virtue of *beauty*?

†

We have made a selection in this issue of *Caesura*, a sampling of tendencies designed to rouse you, dear reader, from historical amnesia. These artworks and essays (a “trial” or “attempt”) show traces, however faint, of a deep-buried optimism: a suspicion that freedom lies dormant, that every path forward is blocked in some way. The authors of these works have performed small miracles in their creation. Amidst today’s atmosphere of incoherence, on the fringes of this bleak and dismal landscape – the insular world of contemporary art – they have managed to resist its anesthetizing effect, its lack of *feeling* for aesthetic form. The artists, writers, and critics gathered within this book have banded together to settle the ground on which a new future might one day be built. How good are these attempts? Will they do more than just occupy a void? Only time will tell; *history* will render its judgment. For now, for *Caesura*, they show promise – small glints from the light of redemption. We take them not as they are, but as they could be or should be, in the struggle for freedom that’s palpably absent.



“In a world filled with nostalgia and too profoundly frightened by what has just happened to dare hope that the future contains anything better than the past, how can art be expected to hold on to advanced positions?” Art that aspires to the *avant-garde* today would first have to point out what it itself lacks, to feel the *rigor mortis* through which society progresses. There is no way out of this world, no outer ring to the realm of commodities. Art too must be sold to be made – dear reader, our buyer and patron. To be critical is to have hope for the hopeless, to ascertain how it is that the bad can transform. It would be dishonest to give false consolations; only the immanent truth deserves to be heard. A chorus of commodities sings, but its voice has grown faint with the years. What is the use of commitment? Can it save what has ceased to keep living? Critical art may not be possible today. Its necessity and desirability are in doubt. But what about pre-critical art? And pre-critical criticism? Has regression thrown us back that far? Artists and writers continue to work, and their products still lay claim to existence. Dawn has turned into dusk, and soon night will blanket the earth. In the dark, we will have to make do, in search of a vision by which our time can finally be seen. //

... you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.

EVER AFTER SERIES

Julian-Jakob Kneer

Wake me up when it's all over.

– Avicii, 2013

Lachen ist die schönste Art Zähne zu zeigen.

– Werner Finck, 1968

Ich bin bereit, denn es ist Zeit

für unser'n Pakt über die Ewigkeit.

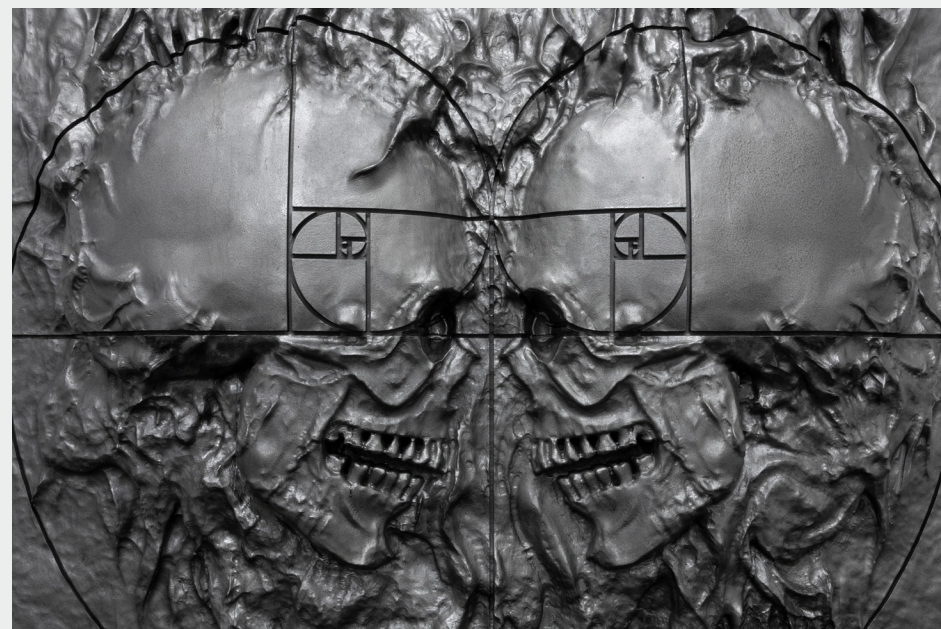
– Falco, "Out Of The Dark", 1998

Have someone else's will as your own,

you are beautiful and you are alone.

– Nico, "Afraid", 1970

PORTFOLIO



ABOVE

Ever After installation
at Shore Gallery, Vienna

RIGHT

MARTYR (feast upon me / Alle Uhren bleiben stehen), 2019 (detail)
Varnish on polyurethane foam,
185h x 133w x 23d cm



ABOVE

Ever After installation
Shore Gallery, Vienna

MARTYR (feast upon me / Alle Uhren bleiben stehen), 2019
Varnish on polyurethane foam, 185h x 133w x 23d cm





LOSVER (life is a game and love is the price), 2019
Varnish on polyurethane foam, 185h x 133w x 23d cm

ABOVE

Ever After installation
Shore Gallery, Vienna



ABOVE

Ever After installation
Shore Gallery, Vienna

RIGHT

LOSVER (life is a game and love is the price), 2019 (detail)
Varnish on polyurethane foam,
185h x 133w x 23d cm



LEFT

Ever After installation
Shore Gallery, Vienna

NEKROMANTIK (Ich bin bereit für unser'n Pakt über die Ewigkeit), 2019
Varnish on polyurethane foam, 185h x 133w x 23d cm



DEATH IS THE MARTYR OF BEAUTY

ON THE MEANING OF THE RETURN OF THE GOTHIC
IN THE WORK OF JULIAN-JAKOB KNEER

Laurie Rojas

“With Gothic the lyricism of modern art,
but also its cult of virtuosity, begins.”
– Arnold Hauser

ARTIST PROFILE

Death is no stranger to the history of art. The figure of the tortured dead has been ubiquitous in the art of the last millennium. Crucifixions, sacrifices, walks of hell, a wide repertoire of martyrdoms and rapes, often elicit an idealized, if sometimes gruesome, celebration of death. They also, importantly, incorporate elements of eroticism. We only need to recall the high watermark of medieval society that is Dante's *Inferno* in the *Divine Comedy*, or Michelangelo's nightmarish late Renaissance masterpiece *The Last Judgment* to recognize the centrality of death in art.

However, as the ancient world gave way to the modern and as sacred imagery gave way to more secular concerns, death began to represent the greatest taboo. As Louis Menand says: The remaking of the individual in an ever-changing society gave rise to a *modern* anxiety based on the recognition that the ends of life are no longer given at the beginning of life – as in the world of the ancients – but are thought to be created, discovered, and transformed in *modern* life. The appearance of skeletons, phantasmagorical images, macabre allegories, and the highly-respected *memento mori* (latin for “remember that you will die” or what I prefer to call the art of remembrance) embodies an often-contradictory representation of this taboo. The representation of death in modern society, therefore, gives *form* to something potentially liberating and/or traumatic, and signifies *fear* over the *transience* of *modern* life.

As long as modernity remains an incomplete project, death will not lose its grip on art. Why? That is the question.

Death has worn various guises, gripping some of the greatest modern artists – from Francisco Goya to Francis Bacon. Skulls, unsurprisingly, have been among the most popular *memento mori* – to the point of cliché or kitsch. They were most recently featured in Damien Hirst's diamond-studded *For the Love of Art* (2007), and Gabriel Orozco's *Black Kites* (1997). Both are powerful aesthetic exemplars of The Gothic's potential.

The Gothic, a self-conscious style ranging from architecture and literature to films and music, has occupied itself with the general anxiety surrounding the contradictions of *modern* life, the taboos around death and the incomprehensible.

Like its close relative, Romanticism, the Gothic returns with a vengeance in moments of great political change.

After its Medieval advent, the Gothic first re-appeared with Horace Walpole's Gothic novel *The Castle of Oranto* in 1764, the year before the

American Revolution broke out; it grew in popularity throughout the 1790s during the French Revolution with countless Gothic writers – who tended to be of enlightened political views against absolutism and the church – giving birth to a widely-read literature of Revolution. *Reason doesn't always appear in reasonable form.*

Meanwhile, Goya's 1799 prints *Los Caprichos*, where he warned that “the sleep of reason produces monsters,” with fantastical, bewitching, and nightmarish characters, still resonates today. Again, why?

Most famously, the Gothic revival is personified in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), written in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, a period that perhaps also marks the peak of Romanticism. While it is the most significant work of art in the history of The Gothic, it might also epitomize the modern novel *tout court*. Arguably the Gothic of the early 19th century was interwoven with Romanticism, albeit its darker side, and is said, contentiously, to have influenced the likes of Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire (what could be more Gothic than the *Flowers of Evil?*), and even John Keats. The Gothic was also poignantly revitalized at the end of the 19th century, during the industrialization of the world and the transition from Victorian to Edwardian England with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. So much for a short history of the Gothic (we'll get to the late 20th century later).

THE GHOST OF BEAUTY'S PAST

Today, the ghosts of the Gothic are paying us another visit, with apparitions in visual art, fashion, and popular culture (i.e., “dead inside” memes, even Gothic-themed donut shops). This recent resurgence of the Gothic is also marked by vampire films like *Only Lovers Left Alive* (2013) and arthouse horror *Mandy* (2018). Both are not without humor, and a parallel phenomenon is a renewed interest in neo-paganism and magic.

Meanwhile, *Kaleidoscope's* 2019-20 winter issue “Gothic Redux” prominently features Anne Imhof on one of its covers and explores the theme from art and music to video games. It must be said that this Gothic revival is more like *Gothic revival 3.0+*.

Berliners might equally call any goth-like clothing simply Berghain aesthetics; from the perspective of Berghain-goers, goth never went away.

Why has something so simultaneously pre-modern and modern captured our attention for so long, and why has it resurrected itself now?

GLITTERING MISERY

Julian-Jakob Kneer, whose work is featured in the pages preceding these, exemplifies the revival of gothic culture in visual art. Last year, the Berlin-based Swiss artist created a series of works that sparked my desire to explore the deeper and multifaceted history of the Gothic and the potential reasons for its resonance now. An attempt at a *critique* of this work means exploring its potential and limitations, and also how, in terms of *aesthetic experience*, it points to the powerful capabilities of the Gothic. And, why?



Last July, the Berlin sex shop *Fetisch-Hof* hosted “L’amour”, a weekend-long group show curated by cool af online/digital art curation project TZVETNIK (meaning “garden full of flowers” in Russian). Kneer presented a funeral wreath made out of leather roses, all delicately folded by hand. The gothic wreath lay on a tall red display podium and integrated a large black silk ribbon with a digital embossed text and graphic. The work’s title *LosVer*, a merger of loser and lover, a recurring character in Kneer’s work, appeared in contemporary distorted serif font on the right side of the ribbon’s tail, to indicate who is sending the funerary wreath – a tradition as old as the Ancient Greeks that represents the circle of eternal life – on the left side, in shiny silver lettering, appears the following haiku:

one / won LIFE,
one / won LOVE,
one / win DEATH.

The artwork, which only existed for the duration of the show since the leather had been lent by the sex shop, struck a deeply melancholic, adoring, yet piercing spear through my chest. It might have had something to do with the conflicting feelings its aphoristic plea conjured: the celebration of love attached to a sense of loss, the poking of raw wounds, where the experience of love is scarred by mourning, loss, and even death of a kind,



maybe the death or liquidation of oneself onto another. It is the ambivalence of knowing that love can bring great joy and pleasure, but that it comes with a price. It is the experience of vulnerability and eventual suffering and loss. If you are a lover you are a loser: if you love, you lose, the work seems to say. But LOVE, in the haiku, also stands exactly in between LIFE and DEATH. Not only the work, but LOVE is a kind of *memento mori* that reminds you that you are mortal and that you must live *life*, now!, even if it means suffering and the inevitability of death. The loss of love teaches us to live even if life stinks like a corpse.

The triangulation of life, love, and death is one of the organizing concerns expressed in Kneer’s work. It represents its own kind of impossible triangle, that nonetheless has found shape in an “impossible object” (like the penrose tribar). This seems to open onto deeply personal yet universal concerns, as well as aesthetic possibilities, making the work alluring even if unsettling. The draw is that it is a form of an allegory, a puzzle one has to piece together.

Roses – symbols of death, mortality, and transience, in addition to the more obvious associations of love and beauty – are a recurring motif in Kneer’s work. *LosVer* evokes some of the ethos of the earliest *vanitas* (Latin for “still lifes”), which often are their own type of *memento mori*. This captures the great appeal of their somber and monochromatic arrangements, the elegance and precision of their execution. It also conjures the tradition of the *danse macabre*, which Kneer made into a work of its own in the video *danse macabre (further! further into ruin, we must live until we die)* in 2018, perfectly fitted among the ruins of Berlin’s goth, S&M, sex-positive club culture. Well, almost perfect, if it weren’t for the hyper-kitsch ribbon twisted into a bow, that youthful shape sweet girls like to wear on top of their ponytails. Then again, that’s its own precious dom/sub kink. The synthesis of erotic and gothic elements do have the potential for arousal. Necrophilia is a thing.

The wreath left me with a conflicted romantic feeling, an amorous sentimentality choked by disturbing coldness. It is a celebration of death, after all. It is the gift of death from the lover/loser. The message is: YOLO, or you only live once, you only LOVE once, you only die once. Take this message to the grave with you.

Then the question arises: who is this wreath for? *LosVer*, by sending us his plea and condolences, seems to be making a confession of the artist's own future suicide. It creates a feeling of foreboding and melancholia, but also commemorates something most of us would rather keep repressed. It might not only mean fetishes and taboos, although it is also a well-positioned antidote to millennial sex panic and kink-shaming, but something more obscure that is seeking to be redeemed. Freedom of the artist? Perhaps.

A concern with repressed desires also relates Kneer's work to that of *Darja Bajagić* (whom Kneer and I discussed in the Fall 2019 issue of the art and fashion magazine *Gruppe*). In conversations, Kneer has cited the influence of Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*. The protagonist of the tragic novel pledges his soul to preserve his youth and beauty, undergoing a transformation from impressionable naïve boy to a hedonistic man addicted to wicked exploits. He's a narcissist, wracked by the guilt of his fiancé's suicide and a fear of his hideous soul (portrait) being exposed. It ends with him destroying the magical portrait in a suicidal rage that culminates in his death. In *LosVer*, Kneer adopts Wilde's motif – suicide as a performative act – as an act of self-preservation, vanity, and narcissism, which might even give the artist's work more meaning, or give the artist a chance to leave *his* work at its peak. Meanwhile, Wilde's aphoristic introduction, for Kneer, serves as a kind of guiding manifesto in defense of the artist's rights and of art for art's sake, just as the right to die.

Kneer takes up several elements from the preface as his mantra, including – or especially – its opening lines:

*The artist is the creator of beautiful things.
To reveal art and conceal the artist is art's aim.*

And:

There is no such thing as a moral or immoral book [artwork].

What we find here is an articulation of Kneer's interest in formally establishing the tension between pure aesthetic enjoyment – even if that pleasure comes from suffering, even if it means the abandonment of morals – and

questioning the purpose and meaning of life with regards to that suffering and those morals. Strangely, it feels like a breath of fresh air.

FIRE WALK WITH ME

Kneer represents a new generation of artists to come after the older millennial post-internet cohort that have developed bodies of work reflecting on cultural phenomena related to the internet. In Kneer's case, the phenomena are not exclusively online but are at the border of social acceptance, such as sexual perversion, criminality, outcasts, loners, and losers. Similar to post-internet art, Kneer's work combines an aggregation of images found online with art historical references and relies heavily on pastiche. However, Kneer is also inspired by his personal experiences with love and narcissism, whereas post-internet artists had much less personal approaches.

The Swiss artist is also deeply influenced by the architecture and Protestant culture of his home town, Basel, which coincidentally has an impressive Gothic Church and its own tram station called *Totentanz* (German for the "dance of death"). The Gothic imagination is said to emerge in the time of the Protestant reformation, an essential feature being Protestant martyrdom, the Protestant version of *ars moriendi* ("the art of dying well"). This is complemented by the life the artist has lived in Berlin for the last six years. Berlin is one of the few places in the world where it seems 90s goth and industrial clubbing culture never went away, until 2020 that is. The younger millennials and older zoomers in Berlin have much more openly embraced, if not outright spearheaded, this gothic revival. This combination is, arguably, what has drawn Kneer to The Gothic, which in a way is a romantic dissatisfaction with the current state of art and society.

DEATH AS A STATE OF GRACE: THE ART OF DYING WELL

In Kneer's work, which mostly consists of carefully crafted sculptures, the aesthetics are of a darker romanticism and form their own kind of Gothic imagination. They are nonetheless haunted by a sense of ambivalence. This oeuvre marks a new facet of the Gothic that takes inspiration from the mode's perennial concerns with the uncanny and the antinomies of life/death, ancient/modern, avant-garde/kitsch, unconscious/conscious, realistic/artificial, while also incorporating more youthful antinomies such as, pretty/ugly, sick/healthy, predator/victim, and right/wrong.

In “Ever After,” his solo-show at Shore Gallery in Vienna (December 2019 - January 2020), Kneer recast the modern fable, or rather modern (Shakespearean) tragedy, to explore the relationship between love and death again.

The first impression one receives upon entering “Ever After” is that of arriving at a sacred burial ground right after a memorial service. The mood is morbid, cold, and enigmatic. The sense of trespassing is counteracted by the pleasure in walking over the generously spread roses, which emanate an erotically-charged fragrance and crinkle when you step on and torture them. Meanwhile, Kneer’s requiem score, which is both mysterious and uncanny, emanates from the small hall that connects the two main exhibition rooms and accentuates the dramatic atmosphere of being on sacred ground. The main works, three monumental hovering sculptures, look as if they were cast in dark grey industrial-grade metal, but were in fact stele reliefs CNC-cut out of polyurethane foam and painted-over in metal lacquer. Each sculpture depicts one of three archetypes:

LOSVER (life is a game and love is the price)

=

The lonesome lover.

MARTYR (feast upon me / Alle Uhren bleiben stehen)

=

The narcissist.

NEKROMANTIK (Ich bin bereit für unser’n Pakt über die Ewigkeit) or in English, “I’m ready for our pact of eternity”, a lyric from Falco’s “Out of the Dark” song

=

The lover’s suicide pact.

What makes these three works exemplary of ‘true’ or ‘good’ Gothic artworks is the presence of a romantic impulse wedded to modernist questions of aesthetic experience, beauty, eroticism, and death.

The stand-alone two-meter-high headstones are exquisite monstrosities of these tragic archetypes of the tortured self, or self-tortured soul. Each features a “carved” grinning skull devoid of flesh, perhaps burned by the halo of fire that surrounds them, overlaid with the perfect Fibonacci Spiral, positioned slightly differently in each. In all our archetypes, the choices are tragically marked by pain, suffering and death, but recast in a kind of grotesque splendor. It draws from traditional craftsmanship in funerary culture while recasting it in the latest digital sculpture technology that not

only presents itself very much as *contemporary art*, but gives form to Kant’s recognition of civilization’s glittering misery.

Are we celebrating our own funeral? Whose funeral is it? Will I die alone, never having loved again? Do I believe in something strongly enough to embrace death for it? And what of happiness, eternal love? The work intimates, if not fully provokes, fear, anxiety, terror. At the same time, it is strangely reassuring. It makes one feel hopeful that such commitment to one’s ideals is possible, desirable, and even necessary. The burden of mortality and the promise of immortality connotes hope, even if in phantasmagorical form, much more than despair.

In the triptych, the character of *LOSVER* returns. This time proclaiming that “*life is a game and love is the price*” in its title. This *lonesome lover* has not found his match, he is the Shakespearean incel, tragically destined to die alone. But he is proud, not bitter, even when it is marked by a broken-heart Fibonacci. The Protestant origins of the Gothic imagination is recalled in *MARTYR*: this time it requests “*feast upon me / Alle Uhren bleiben stehen.*” The narcissist who wishes to be devoured is marked by a mirrored Fibonacci forming a heart symbol. Protestant martyrdom provides the fatal narrative arc, while an imagination that explicitly mixes its sources and styles and juxtaposes seemingly opposite aesthetics. The Fibonacci spiral, which points to an underlying desire for perfectionism, equilibrium, and beauty, with the kitsch burning-but-still-grinning skeleton head, both represent a process of development and transformation, and not final judgement. But to what end? To redeem the narcissist as a martyr? *NEKROMANTIK*, however, is the ghost of the lover’s suicide pact, or “the pact of eternity,” marked by two Fibonacci’s spiraling into one another. What could be a greater representation of a commitment to love than the willingness to die for it? These are all ghosts who feel the burning fires of purgatory, not yet judged, but not repenting either. This celebration of death invokes the negative or impossible side of the ideal of perfection and of beauty.

CAN DEATH BE REDEEMED?

Once upon a time, a subculture came to be known as Goth. Ever since it crawled out of the death throes of the 1970s, Goth has been difficult to define. The style is seen in everything from The Velvet Underground’s Nico producing the first proto-Goth album in 1968 and Kate Bush’s 1978 single “Wuthering Heights,” which is a tantalizing interpretation of Emily Brontë’s eerie romantic novel, to Vivienne Westwood-designed bondage pants in

1976 and the quintessential gothic quality of Steve McQueen's designs from the 90s onward. This Victorian or Medieval-inspired dark romantic sensibility became well established by the 1980s when Goth Rock became a legitimate musical genre and various bands from Bauhaus (the first "pure goth" band) and The Sisters of Mercy, to The Cure and Joy Division, moved from the shadows to the mainstream, where it penetrated all spheres of the culture industry by the 90s. Every single American millennial knows about Hot Topic or Marilyn Manson, has seen Christina Ricci in *The Addams Family* or Johnny Depp in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*. Burton, of course, epitomizes the mass appeal of gothic culture whose blockbuster films from *Beetlejuice* to *Sleepy Hollow* almost always featured goth characters, dark dream worlds, and endearing misfits in macabre scenarios.

The remains of this world in the UK can still be seen in London's north side Camden Market, or the Fairygothmother store in Spitalfields. Meanwhile, goth culture permeates Berlin fashion, famously known for its preference for black, embodying, even if entirely unaware, Johnny Cash's chosen black attire as a form of rebellion against the status quo while always looking like he was attending a funeral.

Just as the concept of art is located in a historically changing constellation of elements, Gothic art refuses definition. "[Art's] essence cannot be deduced from its origin as if the first work were a foundation on which everything that followed were constructed and would collapse if shaken," as Adorno says in *Aesthetic Theory*. Like most genres, styles, or artistic movements that dominated the 19th century, the Gothic often encapsulates contradictory definitions. It presents itself in the extremes of avant-garde and kitsch, almost to the point of undermining, if not at least toying with, those distinctions. As numerous books on the Gothic show, the Gothic is medieval as much as modern, the Gothic is proto-Romantic as much as it is a darker subset of Romanticism, and it shows us that the Gothic is less a means of expressing some essential historical Idea than discovering and recovering the unfulfilled potential in the old, in tradition. The Gothic cannot be understood then without acknowledging its perpetual capacity to change and penetrate the interests of new generations. It is a deathliness that can't die because it can't be put to rest.

The Gothic's significance is its thoroughly historical character, that is, its ability to evolve and represent a symptom of its moment, of a kind of restlessness and anxiety at each historical inflection point it comes out of. It is no surprise then that the Gothic appears in moments of great political

change, especially as it appears during neoliberalism's benchmarks in the late 70s, 90s, and 2020s. The Gothic gives form to Adorno's phrase "the new is the old in distress."

Two centuries of mounting catastrophe have followed since Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* in that dreary year without the sun she spent in the Alps. Before Shelley, late 18th century Gothic was a literature of Revolution. But it feared the freedom it ardently desired. At the hands of Shelley, the monster is the character mask of the inhumanity of society, and that most human need for love, companionship, and freedom. *Frankenstein* resonates today as much as the Gothic because it captures that unfulfilled desire for freedom in an alienating world. That capacity for imagination, to imagine a different world, and a different kind of life, is why the Gothic has remained an ever-changing enigma.

Thus, the Gothic is perhaps better understood when it does not merely remain a concept, but is made into a historically-changing Idea. A bad historicism of Gothic art would simply pose how the past furnishes models for present practices and would not account for the historical transformation in art, technology, and society that condition the present. What late 20th century Goth and neo-gothic culture in the second decade of the 21st century signal is actually the problem of the historical break assumed by postmodernists on the one hand, and their ahistoricism on the other. The return of the Gothic now suggests that this particular Idea and tradition of art still haunts us today, and the concerns and anxieties that were largely modern, or modernist in its consciousness of crisis and transformation, as they were expressed in this particular form of Romanticism, have not dissipated or been overcome. They have merely been repressed. And now they have returned with a vengeance.

Why? Because it represents the return of the unfulfilled potential of past societies and practices. For example, the *danse macabre*, the dance of death that served as a collective celebration of one's certain death (particularly popular during the Black Plague) has a kind of appeal today, especially in the face of the horror of COVID-19. The revival of Gothic art, style, or culture in Kneer's work builds upon the former synthesis of tradition and the new that signals the ambivalence of the present state of things – of art in particular, but of love and commitment as well.

The postmodernists raised the banner of the anti-aesthetic, or anti-art, and even the exhaustion of art about the end of art. Though there might

have been a fundamental transformation marked by the postmodernists in neoliberalism, a complete shift of artistic practices from the early 70s to today (although any attentive person would recognize repetition more than anything), the revitalization and transformation of the Gothic as a tradition undermines the already forgotten, but nonetheless naturalized, anti-modern premise of postmodernism (or it's a further symptom of its degeneration). It raises the specter that perhaps modernism as a task still remains, if obscure and unspecified, and this task could reveal itself more clearly for artists, critics, and all kinds of cultural producers through the Gothic. What is this specter haunting us? The potential redemption of barbarism, the horrors humanity has faced; in other words, the redemption of unfreedom.

The ghosts I have raised in the preceding paragraphs do not simply attempt to link the history of art and critical theory to an understanding of a contemporary artistic practice; they also seek to understand more than 250 years of unrealized desires and persistent fears through the Gothic (as a kind of Romanticism, that is, a kind of modernism). Art has become a negative repository of humanity. It still is a protest against reality and an accumulation of suffering. The return of the Gothic in the work of Kneer reveals this. Ultimately, it shows that the Goths might be the last optimists left alive. They may be guilty of romanticism but not of despair.