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## Sleepwalking in a Dialectical Picture Puzzle, Part 2: A Conversation with Thomas Keenan

*For my Night School seminar that took place at the New Museum in New York in October 2008, I invited Avery Gordon and Tom Keenan to each have conversations in Whole Foods, a huge organic supermarket around the corner from the New Museum. The original plan had been to hold the entire seminar there instead of in the museum's auditorium, but this plan failed when the supermarket refused to grant us permission. Instead, we held our conversations there and documented them using wireless microphones and a spy camera attached to cameraperson Angela Anderson's shoulder.*

*The aisles and various spaces of the store served as a matrix for our conversation and prompted critical reflections on revealing and interpreting as two distinct approaches to the political. Referring to the performativity of language and of images, we discussed forms of political agency that can overcome representational politics through radical translation and interpretation, and asked how research practices might link to the ability to act.*

*The conversation lasted about an hour, after which the crew walked back to the museum, rewound the tape, and screened it in the New Museum auditorium for the seminar participants. The screening was then followed by a discussion.*

*This text is an edited transcript of my conversation with Tom. The conversation with Avery was published in issue #3 of e-flux journal.*

—Natascha Sadr Haghighian

**Natascha Sadr Haghighian:** I'm going to start by introducing the seminar, and then we can start our conversation.

**Thomas Keenan:** Okay.

**NSH:** And we don't have to look at the camera at all.

**TK:** We can look at the fruit.

**NSH:** Welcome to the second part of this seminar. We are at Whole Foods on Bowery and Houston, and let me just briefly explain why we are here instead of the auditorium. I see the conversation held in a store, more precisely in a grass-roots-organic-movement-turned-major-corporation-type-store, not only as posing an urgent question of how to relate knowledge and action in a way that makes sense and creates agency, but also as a necessary shift away from the secure and isolated situation of an auditorium to a more challenging place that incorporates the contradictions and incompatibilities of theory in everyday life. I hope this makes sense.

**TK:** It does.

**NSH:** We have the pleasure of being here with Thomas Keenan, whom I'll briefly introduce. You're the director of the Human Rights Project and Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Bard College. You work in the field of human rights, where you have worked with different organizations, among them the Soros Documentary Fund, WITNESS, and the Journal of Human Rights, and you are the author of *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics*,<sup>1</sup> a book that was really important to Ines Schaber, Anselm Franke, and myself in preparation for our unitednationsplaza seminar, "who's there?"<sup>2</sup> Today I wanted to discuss two of your more recent texts. One is "Translation, or: Can Things Get Any Worse?" As I understand it, this is a text that you wrote for the Dictionary of War Symposium.<sup>3</sup> The other text is "Mobilizing Shame," which I think you published in . . .<sup>4</sup>

**TK:** It was in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, in a special issue on human rights.

**NSH:** Right. In both texts, you talk about the connection between knowledge and action, and some of the complications that occur between them in the current situation. I remember in one of our last conversations you mentioned a Bin Laden tape called "Knowledge is for Acting on." At first that sounds so good, but in the end it becomes rather complicated. One part of this complication that you describe in "Mobilizing Shame" considers how the strategies of human rights groups are traditionally based on revealing something—injustice or violence, for example. These strategies don't seem to work anymore in the way that they used to. Revealing the images of atrocities no longer seems sufficient to produce a state of shame that then becomes a motivation for action. Could you describe the relation between revelation and shame on the political stage? How did revelation lead to shame before, and why it does it no longer have that effect?

**TK:** Well, it might still have an effect—this is not really a historical argument. I think there are many times when the revelation of atrocities does have some kind of effect. But in this case, I was mainly interested in two different ways of conceiving the political function of images. The Bin Laden tape, which celebrates the anniversary of the September 11th attacks by presenting the mujahideen of al-Qaeda in a variety of situations before the cameras, along with many other videotapes from the global jihad, is yet another example of the preeminence of the photo opportunity today. Whether it's those tapes, or the ones produced by the American army arriving on the beach in Mogadishu or depicting the President holding a press conference, they represent and exemplify an increasingly important dimension of political image-making. It's sort of what we're doing here, right? The event takes place in order to be photographed and reproduced and rebroadcast, transmitted and distributed, copied and viewed.

It seems to me that, epistemologically, that's a very different kind of role than the one we traditionally associate with images, namely, that of making visible something that is otherwise hard to see: converting observation or visualization into knowledge in hopes that some kind of action will come about, based on the rational, reasonable, deliberate interpretation of those images. Although a great deal of political practice now takes place in the realm of the photo opportunity or the performance, many—maybe too many—activists for social justice, human rights organizations, and civil society practitioners are still working within the realm of the traditional image and its interpretation. There, the idea is: if we can not only see something, but create a visual representation of that thing, we'll make it known to a wider public. And that knowledge, properly considered, leads to wise decisions. There is a whole theory of the public sphere and the rational democratic public in this idea that, as things become known, the actions that ought to be taken because of what we now know will more or less follow logically or in train.

I think this "logic," or reason, too often misses a more properly political moment: one that tries to inscribe those images within a narrative or a persuasive project, within a campaign that actually narrates them, captions them, makes them more available for some kind of political action, and doesn't just take for granted that their meaning follows automatically, or that action follows automatically from the meaning that's seen. So I'm partly interested in confronting the limits of this revelatory theory and practice of politics, this epistemological model of revelation and exposure, and in appreciating in turn the increasing prominence of the photo opportunity and the performance, the stage, as a way of working with images politically.

So I don't want to go so far as to say that images don't work anymore. I wouldn't want to be the one who proposed that we stop trying to know things and stop trying to make pictures and render things visible and so on. But to think that rendering things visible totally covers the field of preparation for action overlooks the way this performative dimension already involves a kind of action that doesn't pass through the same cognitive circuits or the same process of knowing as we might have thought it did.

**NSH:** Reading "Mobilizing Shame," I got the impression that if you take the notion of shame literally, images would in fact become like fig leaves or clothes to cover one's private parts. Everyone carefully creates an image for themselves in the public sphere and jealously protects this image, and in this way institutions are no different. Revelation in this sense would basically mean that you're ripping someone's clothes off, showing what they really look like. In an impulse of shame, they would try to cover themselves and reestablish the image. You mention that, due to overexposure, this shame is gone. But that is not completely true, right? Most people—but also most governments or most corporations—are still very interested in a strong, intact image.

**TK:** Well, you could take the place we're standing in now. A lot of investment goes into producing various kinds of images, whether they depict organic wholesomeness, development through trade, ecological sensitivity, or various other good things. There are a lot of images and narratives at work here. So this kind of place is probably particularly susceptible to the politics of exposure or revelation. Imagine if it turned out that, for instance, the food was not what it was advertised to be, or that it made people sick, or contributed to the exploitation of other people, and so on. So the rule goes, I think, that the more one lives by the image, the more vulnerable one is to the exposure of the distortion or falseness of the image. Those strategies have not gone away, and they shouldn't.

**NSH:** But from what I understood, overexposure also means the anticipation of people's expectations by presenting an image that already seems to include everything we could have asked for. What we see in this store is a flow of images that provide answers to any doubts or questions that might occur, saying: you might think we are an anonymous, gigantic corporation, but you're wrong—we even show you the picture of the guy who harvested the coffee. You might be in doubt because we exploit our employees, but we even tell you the story of his grandmother. It is an overexposure of righteousness in an anticipation of a possible accusation. Are these the kind of staged images that create overexposure?

**TK:** They're definitely not stupid here. We're in a hybrid situation. There is obviously a great deal of performance in a situation like this, and they are also still making claims about the-way-things-are-out-there. To a certain extent, this hybrid form makes the process of challenging those operations at the level of the image more complicated, because they seem capable of absorbing so much. One can't produce a lot of surprise in a heavily saturated environment like this. But it's not completely saturated—I think there are points of vulnerability even in this situation. I suppose it's more of a tactical question. What I've been interested in is probably best described as shifting the focus of the discussion about the use of images toward a more contextual, tactical location, rather than staying at the level of general strategic discussion about the politics of images.

**NSH:** What would that look like, a contextualization of an image?

**TK:** Well, paradoxically, it involves a lot more research. So again my suggestion that knowledge or revelation might not be everything is by no means to suggest that we should give up on doing research, but rather that it probably involves knowing more and working harder on what we already know. I only have clichés to offer here, but it means a kind of local sensitivity, it means trying to get a rich sense of the political context in which you operate, knowing about the history, knowing what the local forces are, who the actors are, and so on. Too often, well-intentioned and ethically-self-confident political movements are reassured by the quality of their own good intentions, and they take this as an alibi that allows them to skip over a lot of local analysis, research, or interaction with people who live in the places in which they want to intervene.

**NSH:** One problem that I see, just in my own experience, is that the kind of research you describe often takes a long time, and its outcome is quite complex, resulting in complicated answers to the situation. Where do you see the political stage for presenting this research and the knowledge that

it produces? What kind of language, what kind of format, or, perhaps, what kind of images are useful for creating agency on a political stage?

**TK:** One thing that's been happening over the last twenty or thirty years is a kind of fragmentation, a dissolution of the obvious political spaces. Some years ago, it seemed pretty clear where one would want to be in order to produce images for political reasons and make those images work. In the United States, this place would have been in the major metropolitan daily papers, the news magazines, and on the three television networks' nightly news at 6:30. This doesn't entirely seem to be the case anymore. Now, the stages on which one wants one's images to appear seem infinitely more dispersed, and this has its positive and negative effects. It means that the threshold for entrance into various political spaces can be lower, but also that, because of this dispersal, one is robbed of the chance to access a mass audience.

**NSH:** Maybe I'll try to pose this question a bit differently. In "Mobilizing Shame" you describe a situation in which images are increasingly staged or performed. In the case of overexposure to this performed information, disclosing the results of our research will not have the desired effect, or possibly any effect at all; regardless of what I discover, people either think they know it already or they just don't care. In light of this overexposure, do we need to consider working more with staged formats in order to get attention for the results of our work? Or is it not so much a question of presentation formats, but a more general problem concerning the connection between knowing and acting?

**TK:** I guess there's a simple point to be made: just acknowledging that things aren't the way they seem, however necessary, is not sufficient. After discovering this, more research is required to consider what could be different, what the potential outcomes of the knowledge that one has produced might be, because the results could be completely equivocal and go in totally opposite directions. For me, the strongest and most painful example of this was the news coverage of the war in Bosnia. For weeks, months, years—three and a half years in the end—the most dedicated reporters, photographers, and investigators in the world covered this catastrophe very carefully, producing the most astonishing and shocking images and headlines. Their work produced a lot of responses, but didn't really stop many of the terrible things from happening.

Until just before the very end, there was a conflict of interpretations—a debate around whether what was being portrayed was a humanitarian catastrophe that required tents, clothing, and medicine, or a genocide that required emergency political and military intervention. Though they were not unprocessed, the images nevertheless constituted a kind of raw material for this debate by making the situation available for recoding, contextualization, narration, and there was a battle between different political agendas over how to put this quasi-raw material to work in the service of a project. In the end, the ones who advocated a humanitarian interpretation of the crisis did a better job of persuading policymakers (and even the general public in a lot of European countries and elsewhere) that this was just a crisis of suffering and not a crisis of an ideological or political sort.

**NSH:** In one of our last conversations, you said that you're interested in excavating the unacknowledged theoretical dimensions of a lot of current political events or texts. Is that the process you just described?

**TK:** (Laughs) That would be a very grand name for what I just described!

**NSH:** Maybe we could call it digging for the different kinds of meanings, or—as you suggest in "Translation, or: Can Things Get Any Worse?"—a process of radical translation in which translation becomes an act of deconstructing and interpreting a text or an event. Perhaps you are describing something like this?

**TK:** I guess so. I always enjoy talking with you because you show me things in texts I've written that I didn't notice before. But yes, not only are the political situations we're talking about places where some kind of intervention or action is required—and where we're capable of taking on the responsibility to engage—they are also opportunities for research. There are a lot of bad stories and failures in our lifetime that do need to be excavated and thought about, and theoretical insights can be and need to be drawn from them. In that essay on translation, I was interested in

the flipside of the conversation we're having now. Whereas we've been talking about the failure to make an adequate move from knowledge to the domain of action, in that essay I was interested in, let's say, the fantasy of being able to move so directly from knowledge to action that one almost skips the moment of knowledge altogether.

I was fascinated by that moment in Roland Barthes' essay on myth and mythology, "Myth Today," in which he offers this example, this fantastic dream of the woodcutter who, in cutting the tree, manages to avoid language—for Barthes in that essay, "language" is representation and knowledge of a certain sort, knowledge as representation—and, as Barthes says, simply "act the things."<sup>5</sup> He skips over all the opacities and paradoxes and difficulties of representation and just goes after the tree directly. In my essay I was insisting that this notion of a language that needs no translation is not only impossible—conceptually impossible—but also dangerous, and that Barthes' example should be a warning to us when we become, let's say, too hasty in our desire to arrive at the realm of action.

So in that sense, it's the other side of what we were saying before—the delay, the calculation, the research, the investigation, the work with language seems incredibly important if you want to know what you're doing. I know that it's a very traditional theory of responsibility and knowledge, that you need to know as best you can what you're doing before you do it. But the problem is that you can't always know what you're doing, and this is the story that I tried to tell in *Fables of Responsibility*: that there are demands which are placed on you that won't wait for the knowledge that is necessary, or situations in which you might feel as though you've been overwhelmed by too much knowledge. That might be the problem of overexposure as well. Then one's action is in some important way disconnected, or not entirely saturated by one's knowledge, and one has to act in a way for which the knowledge doesn't provide a full alibi. This seems to me to be a more rigorous definition of responsibility.



▲ Winslow Homer, *The Woodcutter*, 1891. Watercolor over graphite, 13 3/4 x 19 7/8 in. (34.9 x 50.5 cm) Private collection.

**NSH:** Tell me if I'm wrong, but this image of a language that needs no translation, and that seems to mark some recent political events as being successful, or somewhat successful, is this the dream of the ultimate felicity of the speech act coming true, end of discussion? It sounds great to

say that we can now immediately see the effect of what we say. But I think you're suggesting that taking this shortcut is rather dangerous and problematic.

**TK:** Maybe this is just something a priori for me, so you can challenge it if you want. I was referring to an essay by Saskia Sassen about September 11, published the day after, in which she characterized the events this way: "the oppressed and persecuted have used many languages to reach us so far, but we seem unable to translate the meaning. So a few have taken the personal responsibility to speak in a language that needs no translation."<sup>6</sup>As much as I admire her work, I thought that that was a mischaracterization of what happened. That event, of all events, was one rich in translation, a moment when an enormous number of competing narrative frames were already available for understanding or processing or reading what was at stake in those attacks—precisely not a moment in which meanings were self-evident.

What happened after September 11 was in fact a global debate over its meaning, motivations, rationality, sources—a debate rich in implications for the way we responded to it. I thought it was a mistake to suggest that it was an unequivocal act. Of course it needed translation, desperately (and Sassen was in fact offering one, needless to say). So why say that it was finished—that once it had happened, it was over? Actually what happened was that it went on happening, it's still going on, and it's going to continue going on for a long time. If we think that its meaning is unequivocal, we abandon the important process of debating and trying to shape its various possible outcomes. And I actually think a lot of us did unfortunately miss the opportunity in the short run to make a persuasive claim about what those events meant and how to respond to them.

**NSH:** In the "Translation" essay you refer to Jacques Rancière's notion of a radical or active translation. The question I'm trying to get at is: what could that be, a radical translation? It seems to be a process of interpreting an event, or a deconstructive process—one takes it apart, and might come up with a new set of revelations in the process that are different than what was originally proposed.

**TK:** Yes, I would emphasize the mediated quality of a translation—the sense that some labor, some contextualization, some uncertainty is involved in the work of offering the interpretation, that it's not just the voice of the event finally speaking in its own language, and so on.

**NSH:** In the same essay, you introduce two important figures, and both seem problematic. One, as you mentioned, is the woodcutter, and the other is the witness. I wonder what their relationship might be, if there is one. One suggestion would be that any act on a political stage needs witnesses. In other words, the woodcutter needs the witness to cut the wood, right? The fact that somebody is watching becomes part of the cutting. So what happens when we're unwittingly drawn into the role of being witnesses to events? We haven't chosen to be part of the event, but it nonetheless seems like we are part of it. Whether active or passive, we are chosen to be part of it, as it were. How do we relate to this attribution? Is the translation process you described part of being a witness?

**TK:** That's pretty complicated. In Barthes' little fable, the woodcutter has a solitary kind of bilateral, or not even bilateral, almost unilateral, relation to the tree, and no one is said to be watching. But in the fantasy of the act that needs no translation or the language which needs no translation, there is a witness for whom no translation is necessary, right? So there is a third party implicated.

But there are a lot of different kinds of witnesses. If it's the media context that we're talking about, then a powerful category is one that I learned from Levinas and Blanchot, which would be that of the hostage. The television, or the event—the public event—takes us hostage. The hostage is neither active nor simply passive. It's a position of extreme passivity that is equally the most intense experience of responsibility. There's no particular reason why you became a hostage—you were in the wrong place at the wrong time, and you were chosen through no intention or fault of your own. But everything that happens in this situation happens to you, so in that sense you are completely responsible. There is something complicated and confusing for a traditional theory of political activity or agency when we locate at least some agency in this witness, in this observer. But for me, the important thing is to try to think about what sort of activity is in fact characteristic

of the witness without just subsuming the position within the classical notion of the subject or the political actor.

**NSH:** I think it relates back to the question of responsibility, however traditional or not. It's an important question. For me, the publication of the images of the Iraqi prisoners' torture and abuse by American soldiers at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq was one of the moments where I felt I had been forced to be a witness to something I didn't choose to participate in.

**TK:** There's the hostage, right?

**NSH:** Right, and I somehow stubbornly, and in an almost childish way, refused to even look at the images. I turned my head away from newspaper stands or televisions, trying to boycott the mandate to participate in witnessing that performance.

**TK:** Did you succeed?

**NSH:** Well, of course you can't avoid getting glimpses of the newspapers, but so far I've managed not to see the whole thing. Knowing what the images look like doesn't change my opinion about torture, so I don't need to see them.

**TK:** It's tricky, there are many things to say. I looked, I looked immediately, I looked at as much of it as I could find. And I respect very much the rigor of your refusal to look. But in spite of one's refusal to look, one still sees somehow what's going on. And if one doesn't see, one imagines. So that's the sign of a real, public address: it means that it even overrides your private intention in some way, making those images visible even if you don't want to see them.

Why not look? To avoid a certain kind of implication, I imagine, or complicity, or cooperation in the work that those images seem to be intended to do. But what if a certain amount of complicity or collaboration or cooperation—even in evil, for lack of a better word—is a price that we currently have to pay for challenging those kinds of things? Perhaps not looking or opting out of the complicity also deprives us of any kind of position from which a challenge can be mounted. That would constitute a political reason for looking. But there might be an ethical reason not to look as well, and I am sympathetic to the idea that politics perhaps shouldn't completely take over the ethical sphere.

But, back to the images. For me they are the most incredibly powerful hybrid of the two kinds of images we started out talking about. They were, at least initially, a kind of pure performance, staged for all sorts of reasons that still remain unclear. We don't know whether they were meant to be trophies, souvenirs, or part of some potential future blackmail, but in any case they were staged. They were not exactly documents of something that was happening independently; they were made to be pictures—of events performed in order to be pictured. And they were revelatory, in the most extreme way: they exposed not only the torture that was going on in Abu Ghraib, but also the fact that these people, the guards in Abu Ghraib, felt comfortable enough in doing what they were doing to entrust their actions to these photographs. So they became a kind of auto-exposure, photo opportunity turned into document.

That forces us to ask a bigger question: what is the political effect of revelation? I used to think more unequivocally about this, that the Abu Ghraib photographs had simply failed because they didn't result in any significant punishment for those who organized the torture there, they didn't immediately force a change in American policy regarding the Iraq war as a whole, et cetera. But today, I think that they had a more low-level, corrosive, and subversive effect that is difficult to measure. Beyond the immediate shock effect of the images, and beyond the impunity of those responsible for them, I think they are actually a testament to the ways in which many different political actors made use of them over a long period of time, and with interestingly different outcomes. I totally agree with what you just described as the effect of these images, but I think it's necessary to also mention another effect, namely, that they helped to normalize the discussion around torture, they made it possible for the CIA and even politicians to openly discuss the advantages and possibilities of torture in public.

So there's the fourth dimension . . .

**NSH:** Yeah, it's complicated.

**TK:** But torture is not one example among others here. The American rediscovery of torture is the best example of this phenomenon we can call "the open secret." For me, that's another important version of the "beyond revelation" paradigm. On the one hand, where torture and interrogation were concerned, it was a state secret of the highest order that the U.S. had more or less completely abandoned its longstanding commitment to international humanitarian law, the Geneva Conventions, and human rights. Elaborate measures were taken to protect these secrets. On the other hand, American military and intelligence officials felt completely comfortable speaking under cover of anonymity on the front pages of our major newspapers about their renewed appreciation for the benefits of torture. So it wasn't that it was totally revealed, nor was it that it was totally secret. Torture and interrogation operated in an intermediate space between a traditional secret, which is then susceptible to revelation and exposure and delegitimization, and a kind of increasing (as you say) public acceptance that the question of torture could be openly discussed: "it's not an absolute, there are moments when, there are individuals for whom . . ." and so on. That's one function of the open secret: it robs the revelation of a considerable part of its power. Without admitting everything, without compromising sources and methods, it makes a topic for public discussion out of what had—as one of the great achievements of the human rights movement—previously been ruled out of public discussion. I think this openness of the secret was actually a key in allowing that discussion to go on for as long as it has. The Abu Ghraib photographs played a role in that. They made it viewable, maybe, for better and for worse.

**NSH:** I think this brings us back to where we started, with the question of the political stage. I'm glad you mention the open secret. If I understand you right, it relates to a politics of images that creates overexposure and invisibility at the same time—a play between the cause and effect of exposure and closure created for and with different types of witnesses. How do the human rights groups react to this? How does the conservative public react? Depending on their reaction, the boundaries of the political stage are changed. Is it possible to develop an agency that actively produces a political stage and doesn't only react to an existing one? I guess I'm talking about a practice that goes beyond the traditional activist approach of exposing in hopes of producing shame, one that doesn't get stuck constantly absorbing and analyzing information about events, always lagging behind in order to properly analyze, making it a passive or reactive position at best. How does knowledge become a useful and powerful part of one's ability to act?

**TK:** Yes, I see what you mean. Let me try something out on you. I'm not even sure if I believe this, but maybe the line between acting and reacting is not entirely clear. I would be tempted to say that the notion of the completely innovative, inaugural, agenda-setting event is a little bit mythic. Let's put it this way: we shouldn't make the threshold for entry into political discussion or resetting political agendas too high. There are a lot of low-threshold ideas that may look like they're merely reactive—just responding to some bad things in the world today—but they may in fact offer ways of recasting or working with existing problems that can actually have serious implications. In their reaction, they might constitute a proposition about a very different way that the future should be organized. I think there are moments when politicization in the strong sense—taking something that wasn't political and placing it into the political sphere—is not a pure innovation, but on the contrary requires only a very slight shift in emphasis or interpretation, a little re-definition, maybe even just a sort of reactive mimicry; but this shift changes things significantly.