

Heart of the Event: Marion, Badiou and the limits of representation

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“It happens.” This assertion seems all too familiar. Notwithstanding the empirical circumstances out of which this assertion might arise, and while certainly meaningful, such an assertion inevitably fails to fix into a knowable object that to which it refers. In the case of something happening, in its happening, in what does the happening consist in order for ‘it’ to obtain the status of an object of knowledge? Is there something about a happening that happens such that it becomes possible to claim that, ‘it has’ happened, ‘it is’ happening, or ‘it will’ happen? Is there a difference between a set of related occurrences and the identity of their concept? Is ‘what’ happens distinct from what precedes it and everything according to which it is codetermined? To question in this way the certainty of claims about ‘what happens’ is not to blindly challenge the apparent existence of a possible occurrence. Nor is this line of inquiry a matter of simply putting into question the practices through which an occurrence is represented, as with the well-worn debates about the politics of identity. Rather, to question the difference between an occurrence and its status as an object of knowledge – to inquire beyond the linguistic form of the assertion itself – is to inquire into the mode through which an appearance comes to be, as well as the mode through which ‘it’ is given to thought to think.

The present article considers these questions in terms of the notion of ‘event,’ a notion which circumscribes the absolute limit of philosophical reflection on the problems of presence and representation, subjectivity and phenomena, meaning and being. In Part I of the article, I introduce the notion of event in the recent philosophical works of Jean-Luc Marion and Alain Badiou.¹ Despite their investment in radically different philosophical projects (phenomenology for Marion, emancipatory political theory for Badiou), I argue that both Marion and Badiou can be understood to approach the event as a kind of limit, an opening without referent. For Marion, the event offers a measure of the possibility of all apparent phenomena but itself cannot be seen; for Badiou, the event cannot be seen from the point of view of a given situation, but as such, holds the

possibility for the radical reconstitution of its established state of affairs. Together, Marion and Badiou allow me in Part II of the article to reflect on the notion of the event in the context of painting, where the event marks a primordial point of invisibility that allows for the visible to show itself as such. I argue that, on the one hand, while an event for Marion appears in excess of the Kantian faculty of intuition, and on the other hand, for Badiou it is practiced through a kind of subjective fidelity, what makes an event unseen, and therefore poses a limit problem to thought, is *the negativity at its heart which remains more than the different forms of its possible appearance could ever be*. The presentation of an event – the limit it presents for thought to think it in its metaphysical mode – cannot be shown, but must show *itself*. The event shows itself, I argue, as the very limit to – that is, *in excess* of – all symbolic practices.

As exemplars in the project of thinking at the limit of metaphysics, Marion and Badiou offer sustained investigations of an opening which exceeds all meaning, being, and transcendental egoism, rigorous examinations of what Jean-Luc Nancy once called “the birth to presence”.² For scholars interested in theories of culture, communication, and the arts, the notion of the event offers critical new insight into the central problems of presence and absence, being and non-being, and the so-called failure of representation. Looking to the heart of things, we must ask: if the world appears not as it is, but rather, as it is perceived, then what is the absolute measure of that which can possibly be seen?

Part I: What is an event?

While some of us may feel that an event of some kind may have happened to us – an accident, a personal revelation, a crisis – a rare few, if any, occurrences can be ascribed the proper name ‘event.’ An event is not the product of a ready cause, such as an engine starting with the turn of a key and the sending of an electrical current. It is not a simple fact, as with this building being no longer present. Nor is an event anything akin to a unique occurrence, such as being at the right place at the right time. Rather, an event is that which precedes any determination of its cause. It surges forth without expectation,

radically changes the given order of things, then disappears, leaving its mark without return. An event shows *itself* as much as it *gives* itself without recourse to official modes of representation, exceeding the identity of the concept, while refusing any common phenomenon claiming heritage to it. In short, the event *is not*: it has no being, exceeding the capacity of thought to think it. Accordingly, philosophies of the event are in no way archival projects which attempt to trace from a set of singularly stamped occurrences the empirical circumstances under which these occurrences may be said to appear. Testing the limits of metaphysics, the event poses a problem for thought to think it in ways other than according to the measure of its visible appearance.

Jean-Luc Marion's investigations into the notion of the event mark a rigorous effort to expand the method of phenomenology such that it may encompass not only what is given in the fullness of intuition but also that which *gives itself* without the completion of signification. In order to receive phenomena purely as they give themselves, Marion develops a radical third reduction beyond Husserl's transcendental reduction (to objects) and beyond Heidegger's existential reduction (to Being). Suspending all horizons or conditions of phenomenality, Marion's reduction extends all the way to what he calls "givenness," the primordial ground of all and any horizon of meaning, being, or visibility. Marion's primary principle, "so much reduction, so much givenness",³ accomplishes a purification of the method of phenomenology, allowing for unconditioned and irreducible phenomena to show *themselves* only as much as they *give* themselves to be seen. The key here is givenness: the fact that a phenomenon "shows itself first insofar as it is given, before possibly being qualified as a being or as an object".⁴ With his focus on givenness, Marion demonstrates how neither objectness nor beingness exhausts phenomenality, and therefore, how his radical new reduction allows phenomena to show themselves as themselves, thus realizing the primary goal of phenomenology.

Insofar as the rational possibility of phenomenality is traditionally ordered as an index of knowing – a measure itself measured by the scope of what it renders visible – the intervention central to Marion's phenomenology is his illustration of an intuition for which no adequate concept can be found in experience.⁵ In opposition to both "poor"

and “common” phenomena (phenomena whose weakness in intuition is compensated by the strength of the concept to fill it out), Marion describes phenomena that are “rich” in intuition (phenomena without concepts, the intuition of which surpasses intention). He calls these phenomena “saturated phenomena,” where in “intuition sets forth a surplus that the concept cannot organize, therefore that the intention cannot foresee”.⁶ According to Marion’s phenomenology, such phenomena are no abnormality.⁷ Rather, appearances which show themselves as much as they *give* themselves (in a saturating excess of both concept and intention) are the only true measure of phenomenality. That is, the saturated phenomenon renders givenness – its “own-most property” – the absolute measure of manifestation.⁸ With Marion’s meditation on givenness, the pure phenomenality of phenomena, “what metaphysics rules out as exception (the saturated phenomenon), phenomenology here takes for its norm”.⁹

In his efforts to expand the method of phenomenology, Marion demonstrates how the event, privileged in its status of indicating the very possibility of phenomenality, exceeds or saturates the formal conditions of experience outlined by Kant.¹⁰ The event saturates the category of quantity insofar as it gives *itself*. By showing itself (without recourse to any measure of visibility) as much as it gives itself (without recourse to any horizon of meaning or being) the event ensures for itself a quantity, the quantity of givenness as measure of its own phenomenality. The event saturates the category of quantity by giving *too much*, more than could ever be measured, its parts infinitely exceeding their sum by continually being given. While for Kant knowledge of “extensive magnitude” is achieved through reconstruction – the successive representation of a whole by adding up, one at a time, each of its previously given parts – an event, according to Marion, exceeds this category. The intending function of “successive synthesis” outlined by Kant is rendered impotent by the event, a phenomenon which is unknowable in all of its parts, and thus immeasurable in its magnitude. By imposing itself or giving itself absolutely – landing by surprise – the event cannot be anticipated, thus cannot be aimed at, measured, nor intended. As such it is “unforeseeable” according to quantity.

Consider the phrase, “the snow caught us by surprise.” What is the surprise? It was December in New England and had been snowing all month; thus, there was time enough to plan, to predict, to prepare for the snow. The barometric pressure can be measured, the degree of intensity of the oncoming weather system can be determined, and the potential accumulation of precipitation can be predicted. In this sense, no surprise seems possible. Yet, the surprise is not that ‘it snowed,’ that there was ‘too much snow’ after it snowed, or that ‘we did not expect’ it to snow. Rather, the surprise is the sheer arrival, *that* it snows, the unpredictable landing of ‘it’ when ‘it snows.’ What snows, exactly? The ‘it’ that snows cannot be explained since it is unforeseen, unexpected, and above all else, unwelcome. Many things can be said after the fact, after the fall, after the event: for example, what time the snow started to fall and for how long, the total amount of accumulation, which locations were most affected, and so on. What cannot be measured or expected, however, is the coming, the happening, the sheer imposition of it when ‘it snows.’ Arriving unexpectedly at the limit of what is predictable and what cannot be foreseen, we are necessarily caught by surprise every time ‘it’ snows.¹¹

Transcending any measure and all understanding, the event exhibits three general characteristics. First, the event is *unrepeatable*. According to Marion, “[i]f it comes from itself and without precedent, the event of unknown cause remains a found event, absolutely unique”.¹² An event comes upon us only once, without sufficient antecedents and without recurrence. To be sure, there are circumstances that may have led up to the event. But, as we have already made clear, the event stands out from whatever came before it; hence its second characteristic, *excessiveness*. The event stands out, posits itself at a distance from all possible causes – “ex-sists,” in the Heideggerian sense – gives itself in excess of all possible attributes. For example, the historic event, as epoch-making in time, overflows any instant, locale, or individual, exceeds a region in such a way that no single gaze can seize it in its entirety.¹³ Giving too much over to conceive the whole in terms of the sum of its parts, the event is excessive, and as such, unrepeatable.

The final characteristic of the event is its *possibility*. In metaphysics, what is possible is that whose concept includes an essence (or existence) already awaiting actualisation, for example, as with a new product conceived for the market. The event, however, is *impossible* from a metaphysical point of view. Its possibility is not exercised in relation to any essence (the event ex-sists outside of all that precedes it), nor can it be actualized according to a concept which allows us to foresee it, study it, submit it to ‘market research’ (the event is unrepeatable). The metaphysical impossibility of the event, however, does not rule it out. Rather, it points paradoxically to the absolute possibility of it as *given* (that is, as a saturated phenomenon). Giving itself without cause, concept, or essence other than itself, the event is possible in as much as it shows itself by imposing itself on a gaze which receives it. *The givenness of the event testifies to its most radical possibility*: “[s]ince it exceeds the preceding situation, the event not only is not inscribed therein, but in establishing itself, *redefines* a partially or entirely different situation”.¹⁴ It is this final characteristic – the possibility of the event – that connects Marion’s phenomenology, in the strictest of terms, to the thought of Alain Badiou.

In Badiou’s philosophy, the event figures as a key concept for understanding the circumstances of a specific situation and the possibility for its radical transformation.¹⁵ At the core of his philosophical project – one part attack on liberal humanist discourse, two parts emancipatory political thinking – is the notion of “truth-process.” The truth-process consists of three main elements: (1) the *event*, that which inaugurates something new from within a given situation (Badiou identifies four possible situations: love, science, art, and politics); (2) *fidelity*, the nature of a commitment made to what the event brings into view (the subjective act of transforming the state of affairs of a given situation); and (3) the *truth*, that which is universal to each element of a given situation (but cannot as yet been seen from the perspective of the situation).¹⁶ These three components hold together to form what Badiou calls an “ethic of truths,” a principle of the universal capacity for the transformation, through subjective fidelity to the truth of an event, of the state of affairs in a given situation. The event, in short, enables what could not have been seen, thought, or practiced prior to its eruption. “Eureka!”

As a break or rupture in the state of a situation, Badiou defines an event as a “totally chance, incalculable, disconnected *supplement* to the situation”.¹⁷ It is both situated and supplementary to a unique and particular “void,” that which is excluded, subtracted from, or not allowed to be seen under the laws of a situation.¹⁸ As “the real and absent cause of a truth,” this void, at the edge of which an event “takes place,” is what delimits a specific situation. It is that on top of which a situation is structured.¹⁹ For example, in politics, the void in the situation of citizenship is designated by residents who have no official status (e.g. the “sans papiers” or “illegal immigrants”); an event in this situation would be the breakdown of rules and conventions according to which all members are counted, that is, included as citizens or not. In music, the emergence of the classical style was an event to the void of the baroque situation, the consequences of which were a wholly new way of musical notation (the twelve tone scale). In love, the event is the chance encounter between two beings, the situation being designated by the void of one from the life of the other. The truth inaugurated by a love event is what must be produced by each subject, a process in which each lover remains faithful by living their lives from the perspective of their initial encounter. Finally, in the situation of science, it is the axiom of the empty set (a void which conditions the possibility of all sets) which constitutes an event in mathematics for theorizing infinity. In each example, we see how an event has no objective or verifiable content: it has no being, other than being only to disappear.²⁰ Vanishing once it appears, the event “punches a hole” in the prevailing knowledge of a given situation.²¹ Never fully seen, known, or proven, the event as such can only be affirmed or proclaimed.

Since the event inaugurates a new way of being according to a truth which, before the event, remained impossible to see, Badiou argues that any attempt to name the void according to prevailing knowledge of the situation – to block the real and absent cause of a truth – is what, formally speaking, should be understood as “Evil”.²² Naming the truth or the void of a situation is evil, according to Badiou, because such an act amounts to renouncing or repressing the emancipatory possibilities it affords.²³ It is this that makes Badiou’s writings – developed with a view to engaging the *real* political problems of a given situation without any prescribed ideological affiliations – precisely a philosophy of

ethics. The ethic of truths consists in a decision, by a subject, either for or against the truth that the event opens up. In this way, ethics are beyond both good and evil.²⁴

Now, while it may strike one as odd to see Marion and Badiou discussed together in the same article (since Marion is a philosopher in the phenomenological tradition, a tradition for which Badiou the Maoist has nothing but contempt), they nevertheless share at least one major point of influence. Indeed, while Badiou's philosophy is developed against the moralizing tendency of current ethical discourse, his thinking nevertheless remains Catholic in nature. Like Marion, whose phenomenology has been berated for its theological dimensions,²⁵ Badiou's work is pregnant with theological imagery: the event consists as the "unnameable" that enables the emergence of the truth of a given situation; it is this unnameable to which a subject must maintain "fidelity" in order for the truth to fully come to light; the event appears as a kind of "revelation," a birth of the Real that induces a subject to do its work, to carry out its truth, whether in painting or in poetry, in science or in politics. For Badiou, the event *par excellence* is the crucifixion of Christ, its subject is St. Paul, and its truth-procedure is crusade.²⁶ Ironically, the event *par excellence* for Marion, who cares not one whit about politics, is the Battle of Waterloo.²⁷ Although a reader may have misgivings about the employment of theological metaphor, these are *irrelevant* to the insights that Marion and Badiou offer into the dilemmas of presence and representation, identity and subjectivity, essence and determination.²⁸

Notwithstanding their philosophical differences, and if we can ignore for a moment the theological allusions within their work, Marion and Badiou can each be read as *attending to a limit that circumscribes metaphysical thinking*, a closure that is also an opening. In theorizing the event, Marion and Badiou offer us a productive new figure through which to think about this limit as the structural discontinuity or dislocation – a 'hole in a whole' – that gives us the space to act, the freedom to be, and the network of symbols necessary to communicate. This notion of discontinuity has had many faces in 20th century thought: an "opening" in time from which ontological differences obtain (Heidegger);²⁹ the "play" within structure that enables the movement of its different parts (Derrida);³⁰ the "subject" of a signifier which is always another signifier (Lacan);³¹ the kernel of "antagonism"

which prevents society from ever being a unified whole (Laclau and Mouffe),³² and so on. The notion of the event can be read as a version of this dislocation, as that which poses an absolute limit to all modes of representation. For both Marion and Badiou, the event brings into the open what cannot be seen to exist from the perspective of current measures of phenomenality (objectivity, meaning, transcendental egoism), cannot be captured by current modes of symbolisation (ideological, scientific, artistic, and so forth). It overcomes the capacity of metaphysics to think it, radically undermining the unified wholeness depicted by a given situation. A key figure of structural discontinuity, the event puts into sharp relief the limits of representation. To illustrate the implications of Marion and Badiou's work for the question of representation, let us turn to the realm of painting.

Part II: Heart of the event

What lies at the heart of the visual field? Consider the paintings of Derek Brunen.³³ In his "Untitled" works, solid tones of blue, red, pink, green, orange, white, black are featured on wood panels.³⁴ There is no figure to be discerned in any of the paintings; rather there are patterns, lines, and waves, which, through the various colour combinations, impress on us with a sense neither of randomness nor of geometrical determination. We expect to see something; but *this*? Each work is therefore quite imposing. Releasing themselves upon us, each work bears down on our gaze, arrests us, demands that we regard it in the splendour it affords. At the same time, each painting also offers a kind of release or escape from it, if only for a time, since each painting shows more than could ever be seen, too much for one sitting – a promise held out of something more. As much as each painting shows, no painting shows anything other than itself. Each of Brunen's works shows itself and itself alone, accomplishing nothing less than an event of visibility. That is to say, each work brings to visibility the *unseen* enslaved in the visual field.

The unseen, from which springs all visibility, shows itself as much as it gives itself in excess of all concepts and any aim, beyond the horizons of being and objectivity. The unseen is not seen, but only for a time. Provisionally invisible, the unseen “always exerts its demand for visibility in order to be made to irrupt, sometimes by force, onto the scene”.³⁵ In Brunen’s paintings, what gives itself to be seen is the absolute surface of painting, the condition of possibility for the rendering of all images. Previously unseen, the surface of painting in Brunen’s work comes to visibility in the form of the wood grain of the panels. This grain is given the privileged of appearing in place of any content with which such a surface could possibly be endowed. Through the trace of the wood grain surface, what each work shows is what shows itself; *not* this particular combination of oils, here, on this particular surface; but rather, the pure surface that renders painting as such visible – the heart of the visible that awaits to be seen. By showing itself as much as it gives itself, each of Brunen’s paintings “abandons itself to sight,” appears on the basis of nothing other than itself.³⁶

As we know from recent psychoanalytic theory, all symbolic practices are conditioned by a structural discontinuity, the gap which remains between an object, and the image or symbol used in its place. As Slavoj Žižek famously put it, it is precisely around this gap or discontinuity that a network of signifiers may accumulate, covering the gap, filling it with content, and in so doing, accomplish an act of symbolisation.³⁷ The proof of the possibility of this gap, unseen within any chain of signifiers, is found in the sheer plenitude of images: without a gap to be filled, there would be no symbolic processes, no meaningful images, no need to signify.³⁸ Approached from this angle, Brunen’s work can be regarded as having accomplished nothing less than the liberation of the unseen from the depths of the invisible.³⁹ Opening the scars which cover the hole in the visual field – revealing not simply this surface, here, on wood panel or canvas, but the absolute unseen surface of all painting, the ground that wells up from the invisible – each “Untitled” work “opens up a possibility to that point not anticipated, unthinkable, impossible”.⁴⁰ Unseen and unforeseeable, *the surface of each “Untitled” painting bridges the distance separating the visible and the invisible*. Once uncovered, this absolutely new appearance imposes itself independently, without discussion and by force,

with the “authority of the evidence of the unseen that has become visible”.⁴¹ In Brunen’s work, the coming to form of the unseen of visual representation marks nothing less than an event of visibility. What Marion says about great paintings applies no less to Brunen: “the painting is not visible; it gives the visible”.⁴²

Yet, are we not in danger of arguing that the act of tracing the grain of wood panels amounts to a rendering that is nothing short of evental, even miraculous? In the strictest sense, the answer is that we are not. Any idiot can trace, of course. However, the true painter traces nothing. “He pinpoints,” Marion says. “He guesses, in a way that is better than the blind daily march of observers, what claims to reach the visible by virtue of the pressure of the unseen”.⁴³ Like the weight of time pushing down on us, wrinkling us under its unrelenting force, the unseen bears down on the painter until one day, at last, it explodes into form. Giving itself according to no form previously recorded, the unseen, however, cannot simply be presented, let alone *re*-presented. It must be received. “To paint,” Marion says, “means to await a donation”.⁴⁴ To put this in Badiou’s terms, the event of the unforeseen happens to the painter, seizes him, and carries him away. It must therefore be *proclaimed*.⁴⁵ In the event, the painter does not know what he has painted; he is surprised by the discovery of what he had dared not to foresee. In the case of Brunen, the painter becomes the work of the painting, and not the other way around.⁴⁶ Abandoning in favour of the event those techniques which he knows only too well, those forms which he could replicate *ad nauseam*, the painter becomes subject to its truth. Maintaining fidelity to the event in painting, Brunen allows “something that resembles nothing else suddenly to appear, something that has neither meaning nor the slightest utility: a new view, a new coming in the visible recovered from the unseen”.⁴⁷ Each “Untitled” work fulfils what is expected neither by the painter nor the spectator; they fulfil the unexpected. In its ascent from the invisible to the visible, the unseen surface of the painting catches everyone by surprise. “We expected to see something; but *this*?” If there is truth in painting – if there could be such a thing – this would be it.

If the unseen gives itself to be seen, commanding the painter to bring to the level of the visible what awaits to be seen, from whence, exactly, does the unseen arise? The

crossing of the unseen into the visible must be understood in the context of a “fund” that is at once a ground as well as a reserve.⁴⁸ The fund is why the artist, as poor as he always appears to be, is, in fact, the richest of us all: he has been given the ability (the gift) to draw upon a resource that, for the rest of us, remains hidden in reserve, untapped, unexploited. His wealth comes not from the market (just take a look at his clothes); but rather, from the fund that gives itself to the artist, and to him alone. The painter is supported by this fund, put to work by it and it alone (this is why painters do not usually have ‘jobs’ – they are already employed full-time). The painter invents nothing because he submits himself to what imposes itself without concept; the painter receives the wealth that this fund imposes on him, putting him in its service to bring to visibility the unseen concealed in its depths. In this sense, the painter is never in debt. He is paid from a reserve for his work in bringing to visibility the unseen of the visual field. The painter is never in debt to the fund because the fund gives itself to him, and the painter, in turn, submits to its giving intuition (to its *donation*). Bringing to visibility the unseen held in reserve, nothing is ever on loan, not even the painting.⁴⁹ The authentic painting does not belong to the painter, for once he has finished the work (and here we get the precise sense of ‘work’ in “the work of art”), the work takes on a life of its own – a monstrosity.⁵⁰ At most, the painter owes his life to the fund, for if he gets out alive – if he does not go mad from the donation that bears down on him, if he escapes the monster he has assisted in coming to form – then the painter owes a debt of gratitude to the gift given by the giving intuition, the fund at the heart of painting that gives to visibility what has yet to be seen.⁵¹

Let us leave the realm of painting in order to push the notion of event to its logical conclusion. Recall the assertion which began this essay: “it happens.” I have argued that what an event shows most is that which remains impossible to see: the negativity (limit, void, truth, unseen) in any phenomenon that forever exceeds any of its positive attributes.⁵² In the case of the happening, consider how there must necessarily be a consequence, a second happening, for any happening to be named an “event.” It is only on account of this second happening that the first obtains its priority as “first,” preceding or coming before the second. While this second happening is antecedent to the first, this second happening *must* accompany the first as the necessary condition for apprehending

the first as logically prior. According to this differential logic, the second moment – a consequence in its own right – effectively renders the first moment no longer first but *third*.⁵³ A happening seemingly first in priority, this ‘first’ is reconstructed in the here and now as a happening which has ‘already happened,’ a third count made possible only with the hindsight of the second moment. With respect to the event in question, it is this third moment which is knowable, in all of its ‘first-ness,’ as a ‘first moment’ which actually happens third, and is thereby *misrepresented* as ‘it happens,’ as ‘event.’ In other words, an event acquires the status ‘event’ only retroactively, only once it has passed, once the traces of this previously meaningless happening are gathered into a network of signifiers through which ‘it’ acquires the identity of a meaningful happening.

Singular, unforeseen, and unexpected, the event as such cannot be governed by the laws of cause and effect.⁵⁴ First, the event precedes its cause. Any knowledge of the event begins first with the arrival, the brute imposition, of the effect. Without effect, there would be no reason to investigate the cause. Causes may serve the role of explaining effects, but it is the effect which stands as proof of the cause. The effect must impose itself first, before the cause, in order for a cause to even be a question. As Marion puts it, “the cause remains an effect of meaning, assigned to the effect by the will to know, or rather, imposed on the event to compensate for its exorbitant privilege”.⁵⁵ Second, the event does not have an adequate cause. To be sure, it is not a matter of any shortage of causes attributed to the event, but rather, an overabundance of them. For example, in the *historic event*, there are an infinite number of local and national circumstances, an infinite number of witnesses, an infinite number of interpretations – in short, an overabundance – which prohibits fixing any single cause, or even a combination of causes, to the event. Giving itself, what qualifies event as event is the fact that “these causes themselves all result from an arising with which they are incommensurable”.⁵⁶ The academic legitimacy of departments of History, curators of social ‘facts,’ testifies to the absence of an adequate cause of the event: were it not for an endless output of new findings, new details, and new witnesses of the open totality of the event, the historian would surely be out of work.

If the heart of an event may be understood in terms of the non-visible, non-substantive discontinuity around which any sensible totality accumulates, then the question remains as to what takes place in an event. To ‘take place’ means to connect representations of what came before and what is yet to come, to gather them together into the void that structures the present, the void of absolute separation that “marks out the location of existence as such”.⁵⁷ In this sense, an event can only be reflected on after the fact, once all the evidence has been gathered together. And yet, this is precisely what makes an event elusive, unknowable: in the present, ‘it’ becomes knowable as, or in terms of, that which has *already* taken place, after ‘it’ has happened. Knowledge of an occurrence is constituted retroactively since the future of an event nullifies the possibility of it ever being known here and now, in the present, as it happens. The present, for its part, is not a point of origin. The present ‘is’ what it is only after the fact, only in the arrival of the second moment. In this sense, the very *presence* of an event is nothing but its *future*, its coming-to-be, a future which renders knowledge of it in the present impossible (‘it’ has not yet arrived), a presence which unfolds on to the present only in its passing (once ‘it’ has arrived). The ‘it’ recalled in declarations such as ‘it happened’ is therefore *not* the event. This ‘it’ is a reconstruction, a misrepresentative cover made after the fact on account of happenings previously made meaningful.⁵⁸

In light of the above analyses, let me now summarise. Everything I have argued up to this point can be reduced to the following statement: the unity of the identity of what may properly be called “event” depends on something that exceeds its *different* symbolic representatives, something within it that, paradoxically, will always remain the *same*. What remains the same in every event is the structural dislocation which at once permits as well as limits the possibility of all signifying practice. Call it lack or absence, excess or surplus, distance or separation, it is on account of the ‘missing link’ between word and object (what Laclau describes as the negativity latent in the structure of objectivity) that the event will, at best, appear only as a partially affirmed identity.⁵⁹ Whether in form of the painting, or in the everyday practice of naming an occurrence, while we may attempt to specify ‘what happened’ at a particular time, to explain the rupture of a particular appearance, all such attempts will inevitably fail: the ‘it’ that happens can never be fully

fixed by any symbolic act. An event properly so called is thus only the coming-to-be of the not yet: sheer unfolding. It forever remains more than the different forms of its possible appearance could ever be.⁶⁰

Is this to arrive at a rather mundane conclusion, namely, that a thing becomes a thing only once it is so named? The answer is no. To such an obvious conclusion has been added the more radical insight that a thing always remains *more* than itself. What remains the same after every failed attempt to synthesize the impressions made on us by the phenomenon, the failure to fully signify the features of any apparent identity, is the dislocation in the very structure of objectivity, the heart which beats in the coming-to-be of any identity whatsoever. Apropos of the philosophical perspectives discussed above, an event is thereby a mark of the limit of representation, a locus of thinking about the singularity of occurrence which fails to be expressed in all metaphysical language. At the heart of things (the painting, the image, subject and object, and so on) is the birth of brute being – the event. Giving itself, the event stands at the threshold of metaphysics with no heritage, origin, or reference other than itself alone. ‘It’ opens onto and crosses the absolute limit of what can be seen, anticipated, and symbolized.

I wish to thank the editorial collective of *antiTHESIS*, specifically Benjamin Smith, whose expert care of my original manuscript yielded feedback from two anonymous reviewers which helped greatly in the improvement of the final article.

¹ While there are other philosophers in the Continental tradition who have written about the notion of the event – Heidegger, Derrida, Lyotard, Jean-Luc Nancy, to name a few – my discussion will be restricted to the philosophies of Marion and Badiou. In their work we find some of the most sustained, rigorous, cogent, and thus helpful examinations of the structure of the event available to date.

² Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

³ Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 203.

⁴ Marion, *Being Given: toward a phenomenology of givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Koskey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 161.

⁵ Marion seeks to push Kant’s fundamental assertion in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that “thought without concepts are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind,” demonstrating that knowledge obtained

through the union of intuition and concepts does not suffice as the true measure of the phenomenality of all possible phenomena. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York & Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 1965), A52/B76.

⁶ Marion, *Being Given*, 225.

⁷ Saturated phenomena include the idol, icon, flesh, event, and the other. For a rigorous discussion of each, see Marion, *In Excess: studies in saturated phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002).

⁸ Givenness is equivalent to phenomenality. Insofar as there are phenomena which exceed their measure in intuition (they give too much), Kant's rational measure of experience becomes not only inadequate but obsolete. Givenness frees phenomenality to its own devices: "what shows itself gives itself absolutely."

⁹ Marion, *Being Given*, 227.

¹⁰ In the Transcendental Deduction, Kant shows that the categories or "pure concepts of the understanding" are *a priori* conditions of experience: experience of phenomena is possible only because these concepts are applied to something perceived or intuited. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A84/B117. Marion demonstrates that the saturated phenomenon "appears" in excess of each category: invisible according to quantity, unbearable according to quality, absolute according to relation, and irregardable according to modality.

¹¹ As will be further explained below, an event exceeds the laws of *cause and effect*. First, effects produce as much as, often more, than the cause. The effects of a snow storm, for example, are not foreseen by the cause, and though the latter may attempt to make up for them, effects can never be fully absorbed by the cause. Second, the effect is preeminent to the cause. It is the effect that grants status to the cause as an object of inquiry: without effect, no reason to go looking for the cause. The effect imposes itself, arrives unpredictably on its own terms, and in so doing, permits identification of the cause as an *after effect*. Giving itself, the event of snow has no adequate cause; rather, it demonstrates how the cause is but an effect of an effect.

¹² Marion, *Being Given*, 170.

¹³ Marion, 228.

¹⁴ Marion, 172.

¹⁵ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: an Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001).

¹⁶ This is a major tenet of Badiou's philosophy of ethics: "In order for there to be truth, there has to be something other than the situation... [T]he situation is without truth. This antinomy must be resolved. That's where I turn to the category of the 'event'." Alain Badiou, "Being by Numbers," interview by Lauren Sedofsky, *Art Forum* 33, no. 2 (1994), 84-124.

¹⁷ Badiou, 87.

¹⁸ Badiou, *Ethics*, 68.

¹⁹ "The void is the destiny of any event, since the being of an event is a disappearing." Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought: truth and the return of philosophy* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 87.

²⁰ Badiou, "Being By Numbers," 87.

²¹ Badiou, *Ethics*, 43.

²² Badiou's object of attack is what he calls "the ideology of ethics": *a priori* judgments of "Evil" and quasi-theological appeals to "respect all differences," an ideology in which the "Good" is left unquestioned, and where the discourse of "human rights" serves as moral cover for the self-satisfying interventionism of Western capitalist enterprises.

²³ The example Badiou provides of naming the void is National Socialist "revolution" in Nazi Germany. *Ethics*, 72.

²⁴ The question remains, however, about how one could possibly name a void/truth if a truth is impossible to know according to available knowledges within a situation. For the answer to this paradox, Badiou turns to psychoanalysis, and to mathematics. According to Badiou, the truth must be thought outside of consciousness, that is, it must be a matter of unconscious thought. It is mathematics which must work out the problem of truth, because "[mathematics] is the thinking which has no relation to reality, but which knots letters and the real together." Badiou, *Infinite Thought: truth and the return to philosophy*, trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London and New York: Continuum), 2003, 88.

- ²⁵ Dominique Janicaud (ed.), *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: the French debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).
- ²⁶ Alain Badiou, *St Paul: the foundation of universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).
- ²⁷ Marion, seminar on “The Saturated Phenomena,” Boston College, Boston, MA, 2001. Cf. Marion, *Being Given*, 228.
- ²⁸ An entire article could be devoted to the theme of the subject in Badiou, and the witness in Marion, in their relation to the development of what an event reveals to a specific situation.
- ²⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 1962).
- ³⁰ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- ³¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Principles of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998).
- ³² Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: towards a radical democratic politics* (London and New York: Verso, 1996), 95.
- ³³ Derek Brunen (BFA) was formally trained at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver, British Columbia. His work has been featured in installations in Vancouver and Tokyo.
- ³⁴ “Untitled,” #1’s – #5, by Derek Brunen, 2003. Oil on wood panel. “Untitled #17,” by Derek Brunen, 2004. Acrylic on wood panel. All paintings, private collection. Photos by Derek Brunen, 2005.
- ³⁵ Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K. A. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 26.
- ³⁶ “The painting does not live in a peripheral section of the phenomenal universe, rendered secondary by some function of imitation; it appears by right in the region of privilege reserved for phenomena par excellence – those that appear in terms of their own proper distance, out of the confrontation [antagonism] within them between the unseen and the visible. The painting does not amuse or entertain, does not decorate or embellish, and shows nothing – it shows itself, from itself and for itself. And thus, in this self showing on its own terms alone, it shows us above all what this is – to show itself, to appear in full authority, full glory, like the dawn of a new day.” Marion, *Crossing the Visible*, 43.
- ³⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York and London: Verso, 1989/2002), 169.
- ³⁸ Zupančič captures the complexity of this notion in the following passage: “If it is true, on the one hand, that the lack is the inscription of an impasse or an impotence in the symbolic order, one must not forget that, on the other hand, it is at the same time the condition of this power and has, in consequence, a constitutive function for the symbolic order and for reality as well – without the lack, there is no reality. Reality is constituted in the loss of a little bit of the Real.” Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (New York and London: Verso, 2000), 240.
- ³⁹ “Black” and “Yellow” dramatically emphasize the notion of the surface as the invisible of the visible. “Black,” “Yellow,” by Derek Brunen, 2001. Ceramic, oil, glass, 48” x 48”. Private collection. Photos by Derek Brunen.
- ⁴⁰ Marion, *Crossing the Visible*, 32.
- ⁴¹ Marion, 30.
- ⁴² Marion, *Being Given*, 52. While one might designate as “effect” the accomplishment of the painting to make visible what is not visible – passion, serenity, horror, etc. – this is not my concern. The “event of visibility” concerns precisely, and technically, the bringing to visibility of that which remains unseen. In the essay, “The Blind at Shiloh,” Marion provides examinations of the phenomena of perspective, the gaze, and knowledge, as invisibles which gives the visible to painting. *Crossing*, 46-65.
- ⁴³ Marion, *Crossing the Visible*, 36.
- ⁴⁴ “In order to see what gives, it is thus necessary first to admit that this – the painting – gives *itself*, and the pictorial act is restricted to a matter of welcome, recording and being undergirded by the support of a gift.” Marion, 44.
- ⁴⁵ Badiou, *Ethics*, 45, 51, 122.
- ⁴⁶ “It struck me that the grain of the panels on which I had been working represented a void in the situation of painting: an excess which had not been accounted for. I decided to “proclaim” it and have become

its “subject.” The conspicuous absence of the original pattern speaks to the invisible quality of “event.” The process of these works is undetermined insofar as I can only visualize the final image through actualizing them. In this sense, I can only ever know them as “events,” as that which comes to be from a void within the plenitude of visual representation.” Derek Brunen, correspondence with the author, August, 2003.

⁴⁷ Marion, *Crossing the Visible*, 32. Badiou may have written the exact same phrase.

⁴⁸ “A fund – neither fundamental nor original, since the unseen abandons it and renounces it.” Marion, 39.

⁴⁹ This fund, like others, can be depleted once the unseen has been brought to the visible, though this does not mean that there is only enough of the fund for a single work. Nor does this mean that any debt is incurred, since the fund, strictly defined, is a reserve surplus, there when needed, unconditionally. When this fund, given to this painter, collapses under the escape of the unseen from its cache, this also does not mean that there are no longer others funds, given to other painters, to release from their hold the visible as yet unseen. Finally, nor does this mean that there is only one fund per painter; if that were the case (which, at times, can be true) then “great painters” would not be called gifted, but rather, lucky.

⁵⁰ “Far from remaining inert under the watch of the gaze, the painting imposes its internal rhythm upon the spectator, who must follow it and adapt to it... The gaze must thus cross the distance from which the painting draws its own life... It is the painting that grants to the gaze the ability to make this crossing, as well as the climb from the unseen toward the visible... Strictly speaking, it’s not so much that we learn to see the painting as that the painting, by having given itself, teaches us to see it.” Marion, *Crossing*, 42.

⁵¹ Those people who make a handsome living off of their wildlife paintings – scenes of eagles, hounds, wolves, horses, cattle, and so on – are *not* painters. The fund that funds these folks is purely market driven, fueled by the hunter’s lust to dominate the visible, as with taxidermy and crude, velvet portraits.

⁵² I am here drawing on Žižek’s definition of the Lacanian Real, “that surplus in the object which stays the same in all possible worlds.” Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology*, 95. This is of course the same real that Badiou refers to as the “truth” of a specific situation.

⁵³ Brian G. Chang, *Deconstructing Communication: representation, subject, and economies of exchange* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 159.

⁵⁴ See Marion’s discussion of cause and effect, as “negentropies,” which testify to the givenness of the event. *Being Given*, 163-165.

⁵⁵ Marion, 166.

⁵⁶ Marion, 168.

⁵⁷ I am here referring to the categories of space and time, discussed by Kant in his first *Critique*, as framing the manifold of appearances, grounding what he calls “synthetic representation.” I am also referring to Jean-Luc Nancy’s contribution to Heidegger’s existential analytic of *Dasein* as the unique existent which “stands out in the clearing of Being.” Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert R. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 168.

⁵⁸ With this we get a better sense of the convergence of Marion and Badiou: the historical event can never be fully known in all of its parts (the saturated phenomenon), and yet this does not preclude those ideological attempts to name once and for all the truth that the event brings into being (the question of Evil). In a way, Badiou’s ethics almost needs Marion’s phenomenology for a more rigorous and comprehensive account of *how* the truth of a situation is impossible to know, and therefore, how the attempt to grasp, name, and cover it over can be understood as precisely an *ideological* maneuver.

⁵⁹ This is what Laclau means by “antagonism,” that at the core of any objectivity (a social formation) there remains a structural gap or an excess (difference – in identity, time, space, opinion, etc.) which limits the complete affirmation of any objectivity (“society” as a harmonious whole). Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London and New York: Verso, 1990), 17.

⁶⁰ It is precisely on account of this gap or dislocation between word and thing – the absolute permit and limit of representation – that most criminal trials are won or lost on the basis of “reasonable doubt.”