

Four Rooms

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Catalogue essay for Dennis Del Favero 'Firewall', 8—31 May 2014

Not all of us can sit comfortably in a room with an open door. We are unsure what might come in uninvited, what might slip out before we notice it leave. But then, a closed door has the capacity to surprise us, fatally. An open door at least gives us a view, a perspective that we might embrace, as long as we keep one eye on it even with our back turned. A door that remains open, without guard, represents a chance to stumble into something that we cannot contain, and only recognize our folly when it is too late to get out. An open door reminds us of our mind and its darknesses. The light shining through a door is sublime in its beauty, the darkness behind a door is threatening. Whichever way the door swings, all we can be sure of is that we know so little about everything we know. Doors to perception are also doors to temptation, and doors that might swing shut, irrevocably. When doors enter dreams we know that we are in the realm of the truly terrifying or, perhaps, suddenly on the path to a transient enlightenment. Our dreams tease, invite, exclude and confuse, at the best of times. But a dream with doors has given itself (well it was us all along that allowed this to happen) so much power of surprise, such deep uncertainty, what are we to do with that?

Del Favero has created four rooms, each has a point of entry and exit, but the real doors are waiting for us inside them. They are the vaporous upper atmosphere, the cloud cover of the lower atmosphere, the corridors of the basement killer, the walls behind which we lead out lives. How do we stage our encounter with our world of doors? We walk into a quiet space and there we regard an illumination shimmering on the surface of the floor or projected onto the wall. We are in the presence of home, defamiliarised, but still recognizable as our world outside the barriers of the body. In the first two encounters, *Descartes* and *Lenz*, we meet the

Earth wreathed in the barriers to our inner and outer worlds, barriers that are both permeable and evasive. This is a world that we can almost see, but that keeps itself silent. The swirling mists of the atmosphere are rendered visible by algorithms and encouraged by an imagination already deep inside our mind's eye. There are dark spots, like rents in magical material, and we may fall through. But nonetheless we climb the ladder to a high point in the chamber and here we can hear a voice. It is the voice of a person caught in the throes of a dream, fear speaking in enunciated whispers, devastated yet fascinated by the reality of her dream's insistence. Her feet come towards her, she says, but no, that's impossible, this must be a snake. Snakes slip through the doors of the world. Now I am in my own child's dream. I remember C.S.Lewis and the pool of the worlds in the forest – sublimely situated at both the end and the beginning of time – in his Narnian masterpiece, *The Magician's Nephew*. The snake, a witch-woman of course – C.S.Lewis was a Christian man – slipped into the pools ahead of the heroes, brave children sacrificed in a chronicle of the Apocalypse. I digress, but I think this is what I am supposed to do, looking down at my cloistered planet, fearing for my life.

So, how do we wake from a dream that curls itself like the atmosphere around our bodies, a snake with endless skins, sloughing and plunging? A dream is protective and aggressive, like a door. Doors come in many guises, the secret is to open them without falling through. And now perhaps, slip away from the first room and look at the photographs on walls made of mountain stone outside (*Dolomites*), and wonder at these doors that are not doors, these suspended structures of wooden promise, these tricks of entry and exit, of passage and rebuff. Teasing and testing, the photography is beautifully rendered. It reminds me of a hundred Chinese doors in parts of Beijing that have been knocked down in the last two years since I saw them. It reminds me of properties in the Australian landscape, where the gate is greater than the house, or where the house has disappeared altogether. The lost homeliness of inhabitation in a tough swathe of bushland, no less than the lost quarters in concreted Beijing, pique and move us. But, again, I digress into my own dreams, this is Europe. It must be.

And, because it is Europe I just say one thing to those beautifully opaque doors. Didi-Huberman engaged in a furious debate with critics when he gave analytical and imaginative space to images of the hell of Auschwitz, four images snatched by men in extremis, men caught in a reality that did not end in time¹. These were not dreams, nor nightmares, but events. It was the dream that won't let you wake up and takes everything down with you. The philosopher Zhuang Zi dreamt he was a butterfly and then woke as a butterfly dreaming he was a man. But that was interesting, not wounding. The man in Auschwitz took photographs of the dying and the dead from behind a door, a death's door. This is the worst a door has to offer, and every European door suggests that possibility.

In the second encounter (*Lenz*), clouds clothe the planet coyly and fiercely, the camera moves and they are settled, receding and thickly soft. This door is a wet membrane that is both a cloud and a range of heavenly mountains. The staircase sinks into the floor, fulfilling that suicidal impulse to step out of a plane's window and walk like a prophet on the clouds. The voice, when we reach her, echoes the lost madman of the mountains, Büchner's Lenz looking for comfort in the remote fastnesses of snow bound idyll, he finds a slip in time between now and then, a pool of the world into which he wants to jump and fall without anyone calling him back. He is a man escaping his Father's will, hers is a voice echoing his longing for calm, the kind of peace that the clouds exude and that is lodged in the mountains that they echo and mimic. Or is it the other way around?

A woman's voice recounts dreams. The dreams are coldly remorseless, she, our voice, is under attack. So we enter the fourth room, a miniature space, named after *Cassandra*, the prophetess doomed to be disbelieved. And here there is naked terror. The scale of the imagery in Descartes and Lenz are overpoweringly beautiful. They give us access to the totality of a protective planet that cossets us even as she suffers our brutal attacks and horrible indifference to her slow destruction. In *Cassandra* we encounter the Real. We peer into the tiniest room

¹ George Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

of all, and hear a killer's logic. She has walked away from childish fears into something that the dream threatens, something closest to the doors of hell. As Burke reminded us many years before we ruined our humanity and brutalized our planet, there is a kind of terror that exceeds the Sublime, a kind of murderous danger that tips into a sheer fall away from pleasure or pain and into utter destruction. She is in a basement – don't all our dreams at some point become works of perverse architecture? Perhaps she is in a horror film, don't they always descend to the basement, as though Dante's muse is with us still, driving us down? Think of the doors in Hitchcock and Lang, the sloping shadows and the bold monochrome, the careless flipping of desire into death. But truly *Cassandra* is something more than an encounter with the psychological terrors of a shared unconscious. This confrontation requires recognition that she / we have choices to make. We may listen to a voice that murmurs us towards collapse or disintegration and call it the sublime, or we can walk purposefully towards the right door, turning our back without a glance on the stalker in our wake.

In *Cassandra* the woman is visible at last and she is certainly under threat, and we understand that this is something she has flirted with too long and it may now be ready to claim her. She is beautiful and young, and her hair still shines even in the dim light. The killer insinuates that her death will be extraordinary, necessary and desirable, but we know now that it will not take her back to the mountains or over the clouds. It will only be an ending, and premature at that. She really needs to find an escape, and she needs to pick the right door. The adult that cried Wolf in the mountains is now in the deeps of her twisting mind, and the Wolf has come home. But within fear there is also a memory of those clouds, the rock of the mountains and the dreams that take us closer to ourselves. And we are not helpless.

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