

# COLLISION

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A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the scratch as it relates to garbage, scores, and the event. Garbage is that which is cast aside as social systems form themselves, and, as such, is always destined to return. Scores are both methodological maps and experimental artistic methods. And the event, in this context, is the opening that enables both the determination of form and the emergence of the unexpected.

## KEYWORDS

scratch, garbage, scores, event, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Giorgio Agamben

# Scratch: Garbage, Scores, and the Event

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How?

By a stroke

anti-logical

anti-philosophical

anti-intellectual

anti-*dialectic*

of the tongue

by the stubbing with my black pencil

and that's all.

Antonin Artaud, "Ten Years Ago Language Left..."<sup>1</sup>

The first scratch is the deepest. It partitions the world into regions of experience, into words and things, words and words, sense and intellect. We stub with our black pencils and scratch our skins, scratch the skin of the earth. We create garbage. The incision creates events without which nothing would occur and also initiates death as event, non-event, and the end of events. Language comes, lingers for the time of a breath, then dissipates.

## 1 · The Theater of Garbage ---

As our garbage piles high around us, is buried below us in the bowels of the earth, and reaches out toward the boundaries of the solar system — Voyager I has now passed the terminal shock and entered the heliosheath — we are scratching around in the trash to see what emerges. The *mise-en-scène* of this theatrics is the interminable scratching of that which is buried alive, planetary recycling as we scratch out a living by peeling the skin of the earth, and the lightning stroke's incandescent zigzag.

Our art, research, and teaching are increasingly drawn into the chaotic swirl of the many quasi-hidden manifestations of the scratch and of garbage, a term that derives from *garble*, meaning "siftings, refuse," from *garbage* "bundles of sheaves, entrails," and much earlier, from *grebh* "handful, grasp."<sup>2</sup> As with any history of language things are garbled, in need of constant sifting, and there are plant, animal, and plastic remains that mix with each other in the dump, causing a nauseating stench and the death of wild-life (our own included). This discourse moves across the terrain of technology and its computing — GIGO: garbage in, garbage out — and serves as an index of the presence of an ethical and material sorting system, of the operations of a culture.

## Score 1

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Pass a piece of garbage from hand to hand.

Ask your friends to bury you up to your neck in the sand and pile your garbage around your head in a ritual circle.

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During what I fondly call my “garbage course” – but what is more formally known as “Topics in Performance Studies: Garbage as Art” – I send students out to forage for the remains of their own lives, digging through the garbage in their backyards or their purses, drifting through

construction sites, or dragging themselves through the garbage bin of their memories. We tackle a range of social categorizations from “white trash” to genocide, in which whole peoples are wasted. I find out days after the course is “over” that one of my students was harassed by the campus and city police because they refused to believe that she had found the chair she took home in the campus garbage dump. They denied the validity of this explanation of refuse; they even refused to believe that I existed or that I was teaching a course called “Garbage as Art.” Who would do such a thing?

How, the police asked – with a familiar logic – could a university support such a waste of time? Garbage, after all, belongs outside the walls of the academeton, the machine assemblage that generates the space of the modern university. In spending so much time staring into the face of garbage and its dis- and re-appearing trail, the perverse policing of the university by the protocol of the clean, containable, and knowable, we’re just trying to figure out what is happening. Where do things come from and where are they going? What is a thing of value, what is worthless, and what are the mediations between the two?

## 2 · Scratching the Surface

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Old Scratch himself has come for us from what is politely called the “archive” of the past and:

*Old Scratch* “the Devil,” 1740, is from earlier *Scrat*, from O.N. *skratte* “goblin, monster,” a word which was used in late O.E. for “hermaphrodite” (cf. O.H.G. *scrato* “satyr, wood demon”).<sup>3</sup>

Satyrs of the wood become hermaphroditic become monstrous, and then the Devil appears, old cloven-foot himself. That old goat, wily transmuter of form personified. How is it that the hybridity of the satyr and the monstrous – always lurking alluringly along the edges of the maps of civilizations and consciousness – is driven into the form of the Devil who governs the cesspool of human misery? What are the cultural, political, and economic operations that split Hermes – who wing-footed travels from Olympus to the underworld with dead souls in tow – from foam-born Aphrodite, that split man from woman, the animal from the human and the machine, and Old Scratch from the Most High?

What is essence of the splitting that splits? There is always a mark that divides and distinguishes, but this mark is always historicized, leading us to ask the question of "how well-established spatial and temporal practices and 'discourses' are 'used up' and 'worked over' in social action."<sup>4</sup> The scratch is a transmitting transmuter that reconfigures the social world. It is a stubbing with a black pencil that writes, but that also tears into the surface of the subject as it writes.

When we refer to etymologies, which are always salutary fictions, we are reaching into the rubbish bin of history, kicking up the dust, and drawing out a sheaf of soiled pages covered with writings of faded letters that we compose as legible for our own purposes. As the OED has it, the scratch "begins" in:

1474, probably a fusion of M.E. *scratten* and *crachen*, both meaning "to scratch," both of uncertain origin. The noun is attested from 1586; slang sense of "money" is from 1914, of uncertain signification. Many figurative senses (e.g. *up to scratch*) are from sporting use for "line or mark drawn as a starting place," attested from 1778 (but the earliest use is figurative); meaning "nothing" (in *from scratch*) is 1922, also from sporting sense of "starting point of a competitor who receives no odds in a handicap match." Billiards sense of "to hit the cue ball into a pocket" is first recorded 1909 (also, originally, *itch*), though earlier it meant "a lucky shot" (1850). Verb meaning "to withdraw (a horse) from a race" is 1865, from notion of scratching name off list of competitors; used in a non-sporting sense of "cancel a plan, etc." from 1685.<sup>5</sup>

Like the history of language scratch wanders, traversing the domains of finance and sport, indicating something like "nothing": she's a

scratch golfer, without handicap. This movement from domain to domain indicates that scratch functions like metaphor, and, as Michel de Certeau has reminded us:

In modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or to come home, one takes a “metaphor” – a bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.<sup>6</sup>

The scratch makes its way around the city and the countryside, into the folds and surfaces of every screen and every skin. The scratch spreads, travels. Who knows where it will end up?

This attempt to determine the indeterminate makes us want to scratch out our eyes and tear out our hair. There is an immeasurable uncertainty at work here – one that will never be able to be brought into the stable and symmetrical light of the putative neutral objectivity of knowledge – and one crossroads after another is traced as we track down the traces of our own offal. What happens when shit, in any of its forms, becomes that which determines the path of a trace? What is determinable by shit? “[W]hat happens when excrement becomes breath,” Jacques Derrida asks, “when in a word it expresses itself thus, shit, throwing itself against the subjectile without describing anything else, without representing anything more than itself?”<sup>7</sup> We’ll have to sift through the midden, that rag-and-bone shop of the kitchen, the privy, the *domus*, the *polis*, and the planet, and the subjectile.

Language, this silent shitstorm of babbling spirits, plays with us as if we were being jerked around like marionettes. In “God and the Puppet” – and there are dancing bears close at hand whenever the two appear together – Jean-François Lyotard muses over the meaning of writing, the scratch, and music:

That is what writing – including musical writing – is looking for: what is not inscribed. I’d like to falsify the value of the prefix “e” to hear in *écriture* something like a “scratching” – the old meaning of the root *scri*– *outside of*, outside any support, any apparatus of resonance and reiteration, any concept and any pre-inscribed from. But first of all

outside any support. The matter I'm talking about, the nuance (color, timbre) would have to be imagined — but this is already much too heavy — as though it were at one and the same time the event and what it happens to. There would not first be a surface (the whole tradition, heritage, memory) and then this stroke coming to mark it. This mark, if this is the case, will only remark. And I know that this is how things always are, for the mind which ties times to each other and to itself, making itself the support of every inscription. No, it would rather be the flame, the enigma of flame itself. It indicates its support in destroying it. It belies its form. It escapes its resemblance with itself.<sup>8</sup>

Tradition, heritage, memory, music, and the flame (which reminds us of the scratch of the lightning bolt). Human beings are a choreography of an outside-in and an inside-out, dynamic Möbius strips that are scored, seared. The scratch is a tattoo of finitude that, as it binds world and subject, founds and dissipates identity.

The scratch also marks a jagged line of randomness *through and across* all programs, simultaneously outlining and red-lining the form of the program-as-program, that which can be calculated for profit, moral reward, or the predictability of the event determined by a chain of causality. A causes B. One force creates an equal and opposite re-force. But there is also a zigzag: a scribble in the sky or on a support like paper, textiles, or a body. This scribble doesn't simply mark by its appearance on an already established surface — tradition, memory, consciousness. It makes paper and the body writeable; it makes sound open to the musical; it makes the event, as determined, possible. Outside any apparatus of support except that given by the spatial folds of temporality, the temporal lines of flight that accompany the production of space, not as a neutral container but as torque, touch, the working over of social relations.

This lack of support from a stable foundation, the groundlessness of existence that somehow gives rise to determinate forms, is a recurring motif for contemporary thought. Giorgio Agamben, for example, reminds us that:

Benveniste has shown how human temporality is generated through the self-presence and presence to the world that the act of enunciation makes possible, how human beings in general have no way to experience the "now" other than by constituting it through the insertion of discourse into the world in saying "I" and "now." ... But this unsteady foundation reaffirms itself — and sinks away once again — every time we put language into action, in the most frivolous chatter as in speech given once and for all to oneself and to others.<sup>9</sup>

“Subjectivity” and “consciousness,” synonyms for the *cogito* that founds the phantasm of modern self-certainty, is not a foundational apparatus for epistemology, but a visible-audible evanescence formed by the enunciating event of languaging. Agamben, reading Foucault’s archaeology of knowledge with its fracture between enunciation and the enunciated, the saying and the said, continues:

“I” is neither a notion nor a substance, and enunciation concerns not what is said in discourse but the pure fact that it is said, the event of language as such, which is by definition ephemeral. Like the philosopher’s concept of Being, enunciation is what is most unique and concrete, since it refers to the absolutely singular and unrepeatable event of discourse in act; but at the same time, it is what is most vacuous and generic, since it is always repeated without its ever being possible to assign it any lexical reality.<sup>10</sup>

This, too, is the scratch: unique, concrete, singular, unrepeatable, vacuous, generic, and always repeatable only with a difference. (Dis)establishing (non)logic. Being is event; event is ephemerality itself. And yet it appears in a sentence that can be repeated.

The scratch tears us apart, irritates us without end, strikes us with power, shapes us inside and out. This “we” is the striated and layered space where the point scratches the surface and the surface offers itself to that which scratches. It is punctured and not-punctured, scraped and not-scraped, something like Freud’s children’s game, that old *Wunderbloc*. The stylus of history styles us as singularities of experience, but the surface that we “are” offers all of us to the same writing procedure, the same scratch being notated when the notation is the play of possibility and freedom itself. And the scratch always, from the beginning, signs our gravestones.

Whenever there is a scratch, there is surface that is scratched. The scratch-surface is an inseparable event. This, in turn – which is not a phrase of temporal succession, but of incessant movement – engages the *jetée*, the “-ject” of project, subject, abject, disject, eject. This surface and this bombardment of the thrown is what Derrida, reading in the wake of stubbed pencils and cigarette burns, presents as the “subjectile,” a word of Artaud’s, which



appears untranslatable ... [and] will never be transported into another language. Unless it is taken over bodily and intact, like a foreign substance. So we shall be able to conclude: (1) What exceeds translation really belongs to language. (2) What so drastically exceeds linguistic transfer remains on the contrary foreign to language as an element of discourse. (3) The word "subjectile" is itself a subjectile ... . This spatial work would be first of all a corporeal struggle with the question of language – and at the limit, music.<sup>11</sup>

How do we begin to "translate" garbage, the scratch, noise? At what limit does music appear to be heard? Why does music inevitably sound when we attempt to think the inscription of the scratch? Perhaps because of a certain rhythm in the event.

To take but one example: the Fluxus Event. As Hannah Higgins explains, the Event originated

both practically and conceptually, in John Cage's 1958–59 music composition class at the New School. The Event must therefore be understood as relating somehow to Cage's musical idiom, wherein time (rhythm in a broad sense) is the determining standard for musicality. Cage accepted whatever sounds occurred within a specific period of time. Those sounds determined the music – but not in the prosaic sense. Attentiveness and concentration (the listeners' intentionality) are required, or the sound is mere noise.<sup>12</sup>

Music = temporal frame + sound + intentionality. Or else it becomes "mere" noise.

Derrida, who has more than one thing to say about "intentionality," continues his rigorous reading of Artaud. "We will never grasp the drama of the subjectile," he reminds us, "without grasping this strategy of the projectile. If pictography is heard both *as* music and *as if it were* music, it is first of all through a certain force of penetration. Just as sound penetrates the ear and the mind, just so the pictographic act strikes and bombards, perforates, pierces and forces, digs in and traverses."<sup>13</sup> The subjectile is both the surface that supports mark-ups – the paper through which the pencil stubs, the cigarette burns, the body which is tattooed or scarred – and the penetrations of the surface via shreadings, piercings, scratchings. But what if, as in deafness, the sound does *not* penetrate the ear? What, then, of music? There is still the scratch of felt vibrations.

All of this is, from one angle of listening, only a series of the most mundane philosophical clichés, a child practicing sounds in its crib while playing with a rattle, the dull repetition of scales, a repetition of what we've read inscribed by an automaton that may or may not be alive. This stupidity of the automaton is, however, nothing to be ashamed of, this lack of the genuine, the originary, the inventive, "when one speaks merely in order to speak, one gives voice to the most splendid, original truths" and we mark, via saying, an event-structure. We chat; we gossip; we repeat like a puppet.<sup>14</sup> We scribble; we scratch –

### Score 2

Scratch yourself, anywhere. On the head, under your arm, between your legs.

Scratch your neighbor, lightly.

## 3 · Scoring the Scratch \_\_\_\_\_

We have begun to rummage around in the theater of garbage and to consider the implications of the scratch. Part art project and part scholarship, we are developing a series of scores – drawing from the Surrealist games, Fluxus event scores, the Anna and Lawrence Halprin RSVP cycles, the notational systems of Rudolf Laban, musical scores, and digital systems of scoring – in order to shape a research method for encountering garbage, its many guises and potential for transposition into new forms. As a result, we set in motion a re/cycling of change that revises our relationships to the discarded, the worn out, the useless.

There is, of course, a long history of artistic exploration – from Lichtenberg’s *Waste Books* through the early German Romantics, the Dadaists, Surrealists, and so on – as to how the discarded can be reframed and thereby made to speak again in a different tone than its “original” voice. Walter Benjamin addresses the ways that garbage, the detritus of culture, appears as a blast from the past, while new media theorists speak of the “remediation” or “remix” of older media. Time’s ecstasies, tensing and extending, offer events as a visible scratch that marks timing-spacing.

### Score 3

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**R:** Take a walk and gather random pieces of trash that catch your attention.

**S:** Arrange the material so that it asks a question about the environment.

**V:** Evaluate the question in the garbage. What are other ways to arrange the same items so that it again asks that question, differently?

**P:** Rearrange so that the construction also begins to answer the question.

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We think, sometimes, that an event is something distinct from the simplicity of time timing and space spacing, for all timing and spacing is determinate: something, *in particular*, is always going on. If there is any such thing as an event, then it is always in the here and now – though let’s not rush to pretend to understand those words – with its framings, its inscriptions and tattoos, its bounding determinations, and with what we might as well call – if only provisionally, out of habit and a continuing curiosity – a subject of consciousness which always has an object of intentionality.

Timing, spacing, subject, object: is that the event? What is the relationship between the process and “an event”? The event *is* particularizing and this has nothing to do with a logical movement away from the generalizable or from universality to the particular. We are attempting to say things in a way that does not depend on such categories that have governed thought since Aristotle, and, more particularly, since Kant. One way to approach the question of what *an* event is to assert that an event has a beginning and an end. It starts at x and is finished at y. The sequence of the alphabet or of the number line of the clock gives us the boundaries of an event. A talk or a movie starts at 7.30 post-meridian – there is the spatializing – and ends at 9.30. A performance runs from 3–5 p.m. or for three days running. A woman is born in 1932 and dies in 2008.

The event of her life opens, runs its course, and is then permanently wrapped up. Scratch her off the list of the living.

There is no more here-and-now for her; no longer can an event, any event, occur for her. All of these statements are true enough, but tell us next to nothing about the nature of an event. They do show that we can number the timing-spacing and thereby construct *an* event, but this is clearly the arbitrariness of the sign at work in a fundamental manner. This sort of sorting, of differentiating into a particular narrative, is artificial through and through, depending on the histories of calendars, popes, clocks, Arabic numerals, the privatization and commodification of time, political domination of one region over another, the railroad schedules, the technology of writing and motors, and uncountable other variables. And yet this is something we should take note of, for this marking of timing-spacing as a narrative, as a complex network of signifiers that tell an infinite network of stories, is one of the great works of art that we undertake as a species and as individuals. The artful is the space in which humans have our being.

We *historicize* ourselves by a saying that, by necessity, differentiates the spaced timing, the rhythm, of the event. We *say* time and space, its particularizing events, as an essential aspect of life. Origins and ends: *telos*. The race is run and day is done. When, however, does the morning begin and end? When the night? Are morning and night events? Something like blurring and blending occurs, something about a different form of boundary than the boundary line. Anytime we create a structure of any sort we create a space-time for *an* event, a boundedness of experience. And anytime we create *an* event, we have a structure. Artificially designated beginning, differentiation extended in duration and extension, and artificially designated ending.

The event-structure is the forward movement that crests, bringing with it the past. Let's re-name the event-structure, and, taking a place in a confluence of traditions, call it, for the time being, a *score*. Events are marked. The score is a scratch, a visible mark upon events, that structures a particular event, but scratching can also defibrillate the score, cause it to come to pieces. Scratch the needle across the old LP, for example, or listen to the scratching of the DJ in the club. Something rips across the fine-lined circles of vinyl and scars the lyrics, the beat. Something tears the rhythm, slides across the singing of the song. Something, then, about materiality, as well as the where and the when. The scoring of the event is

a timing–spacing of a determinate materiality that breaks itself open to enable the next event to appear.

One way, then, to articulate the task of scoring is to understand it as a form of experimenting with the materiality of thinking. A stubbed pencil bearing down hard on paper; a cigarette scorching the skin. Scribbling late at night, alone, when neither logic nor dialectic arrives to console us. There is only static. Philosophy, at that hour, is a joke. A match flares and is flicked aside. Ashes. Scratch, in the end, might not mean a thing, but perhaps if it has a certain swing it indicates something like a non–sensical condition of sense. The ragged surface; sound that disrupts sound; something devilish in all motion and rhythm: the non–foundational support of the scarred, the scratched.

## • Notes •

<sup>1</sup> Antonin Artaud, “Ten Years Ago Language Left...” quoted in Jacques Derrida and Paule Thévenin, *The Secret Art of Antonin Artaud*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 113.

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed August 10, 2013, <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

<sup>3</sup> “Old Scratch,” *Monstropedia*, last modified February 11, 2009, [http://monstropedia.org/index.php?title=Old\\_Scratch](http://monstropedia.org/index.php?title=Old_Scratch).

<sup>4</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 227.

<sup>5</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>6</sup> Michel De Certeau, “Spatial Stories,” in *What is Architecture?* ed. Andrew Ballantyne (New York: Routledge, 2002), 72.

<sup>7</sup> Derrida and Thévenin, *The Secret Art*, 118.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 158.

<sup>9</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 123.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida and Thévenin, *The Secret Art*, 65.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 51.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida and Thévenin, *The Secret Art*, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Novalis, “Soliloquy,” in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writing*, ed. and trans. Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 145.

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