

A Tale of Three Angels

The reason I've been thinking about these angels is something to do with the strange situation that we've all been in during lockdown. It's such a transient period where we know things are never going to be the same again... The situation we're in is one of LIMINALITY

THE LIMINAL

“a state, stage, or period of transition”
derives from the Latin *limen*, which means ‘threshold’.



James Turrell *Twilight Epiphany*

This appears in the English words PRELIMINARY (an event preceding something important), SUBLIMINAL (below the threshold of consciousness). So is obviously connected to concepts of the sublime.

LIMINALITY

In anthropology: the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a *rite of passage*, when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the rite is complete.

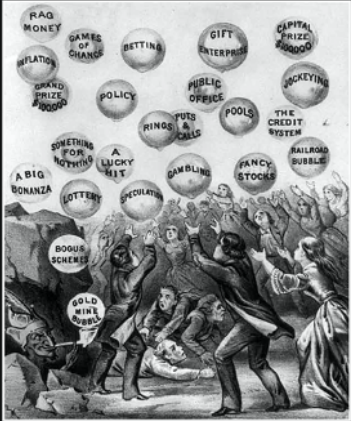
During a rite's liminal stage, participants “stand at the threshold” between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way, which completing the rite establishes.

In anthropology, the concept of liminality was first developed in the early twentieth century by folklorist Arnold van Gennep and later taken up by British anthropologist Victor Turner, and was applied to rites of passage within societies.

BJØRN THOMASSEN

LIMINALITY AND THE MODERN

Living Through the In-Between



LIMINALITY

“Liminality refers to moments or periods of transition during which the normal limits to thought, self understanding and behaviour are relaxed, opening the way to **novelty and imagination, construction and destruction...**

... During liminal periods of all kinds, social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dissolved, continuity of tradition may become uncertain, and **future outcomes** once taken for granted **may be thrown into doubt.**”

Thomassen 2016

More recently, usage of the term has broadened to describe political and cultural change as well as rites. Liminality is closely connected to eastern ideas of impermanence and the western philosophical concept of “becoming” as postulated by Nietzsche and further by Deleuze.



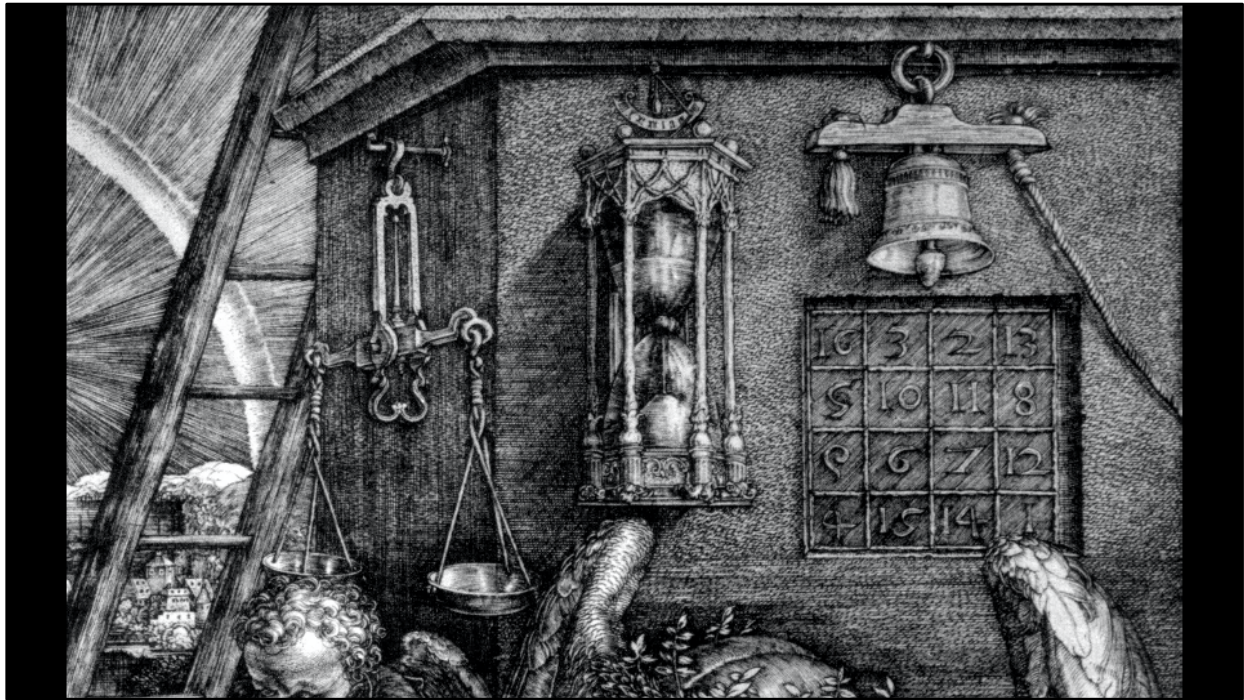
Art history of course is abundant with depictions of angels, particularly references in religious, biblical iconography in painting and sculpture. However, the three angels I'm going to be talking about are largely non-religious beings, but have had a major influence in differing ways on philosophy, politics, fine art and photography. You will probably already know these angels, but hopefully I can shed a light on them and offer something that you can draw from.

Image: Hamish Gane – *Angelus* from series *Boreas* (2008-2013)



ON THE THRESHOLD OF CREATION

The first angel we are going to look at is the oldest one, and it appears in Albrecht Dürer's 1514 engraving *Melencolia I*, which is repeatedly cited as an allegorical reference for contemporary conceptions of melancholy. With reference to the way many of us have been feeling during the liminal experience of lockdown, Dürer's dark and withdrawn angel seems appropriate. However, rather than seeing this melancholia from a negative perspective, I'm going to discuss the positive aspects of melancholy as a liminal state of becoming. As you can see, Dürer's angel is surrounded by the discarded tools and symbols of both scientific research and creative endeavour: a saw, a hammer, a plane and several geometrical devices, in the centre of what appears to be an abandoned building project. The planet Saturn beams brightly in the scene beyond and a rainbow of nocturnal light radiates across the sea. There is a puzzling duality throughout this multifaceted engraving, an extraordinarily balanced stillness between opposites. Although the angel has wings, he or she is also motionless and heavy. Work tools lie idle, and on the wall above the angel's head, the bell is silent.



The scales are perfectly balanced and even the sand in the hourglass has stopped exactly at the half-way point. To compound this equilibrium, below the bell hangs “a magic square” on which numbers are arranged in rows of four. Whether counted vertically, horizontally or diagonally, these numbers always add up to thirty-four. Almost every detail suggests a mysterious cosmological meaning. The modern reinterpretation of *Melancholia I* was instigated by the German art historian Erwin Panofsky and as he makes abundantly clear, Dürer’s concept of melancholy involves considerably more than, to quote from the *OED*, “Ill temper, sullenness, brooding, anger”.



In its early expression, melancholy was both a temperament as well as an illness, associated with fear, withdrawal, depression and madness. However, the melancholic is also consistently associated with a person of great knowledge and wisdom, one with an insight that is almost too much to bear. There is a tension between the normal understanding of melancholia being a weakening or distortion of the subjective faculties, and being consistently related to a heightening of perception or insight into the nature of the world. The liminal state of melancholia is then a dialectical amalgamation of both weakness and empowerment. Dürer's melancholy angel sits inactive yet pensive, its forearm resting on a closed book, whilst to the rear, in deliberate contrast, a busy *putto* strenuously scribbles on a slate.





The work contains significant reference to the concept of Artist's Melancholy. In the 15th and 16th centuries, as with today, the training of an artist was expected to include knowledge of both theory and practice : mathematical perspective, optics, geometry, anatomy and philosophy, as well as the attainment of practical skill. This explains the disparity between the angel's physical stagnation and the putto's bustling activity. The angel reflects mature and learned 'theoretical insight' which thinks before it acts, whereas the ignorant infant reflects only Practical Skill which acts but cannot think.

Artist's Melancholy was conceptualised by Dürer as a nobler form of melancholy than previous conceptions. In Dürer's interpretation of melancholia, Panofsky deduces an elevation of melancholy from its conventional position as the lowest of the four humours, to the highest. He recognises it as the temperament of the great and prophetic. No longer "inert depression" or mere idleness, melancholy becomes a "unique and divine gift" and "the proper disposition of intellectual work"



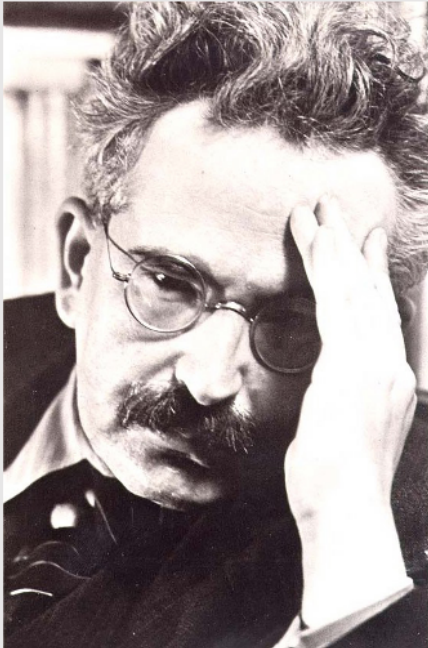
It's energy is paralyzed not by sleep but by thought; the angel is what Panofsky describes as:

“super-awake”

Erwin Panofsky, *The Life and Art of Albrecht Dürer*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955), p.160

Dürer's angel is inactive not through laziness, its energy is paralyzed not by sleep but by thought; the angel is what Panofsky describes as: “super-awake”.

So I thought this was an interesting way to think about how some of us have possibly been feeling over the past weeks... super awake, actively thinking – not necessarily yet acting or making... There's still exactly 4 weeks until submission, so plenty of time to make work.



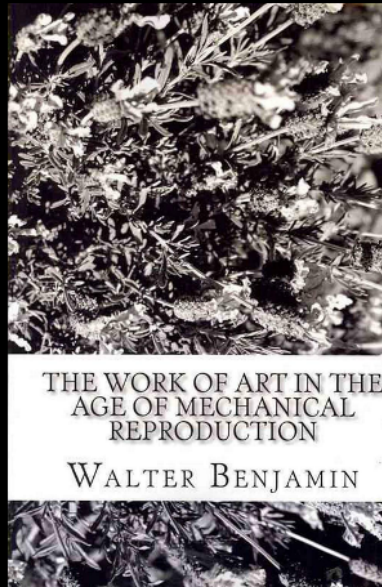
Walter Benjamin

Theses on the Philosophy of History
(1940)

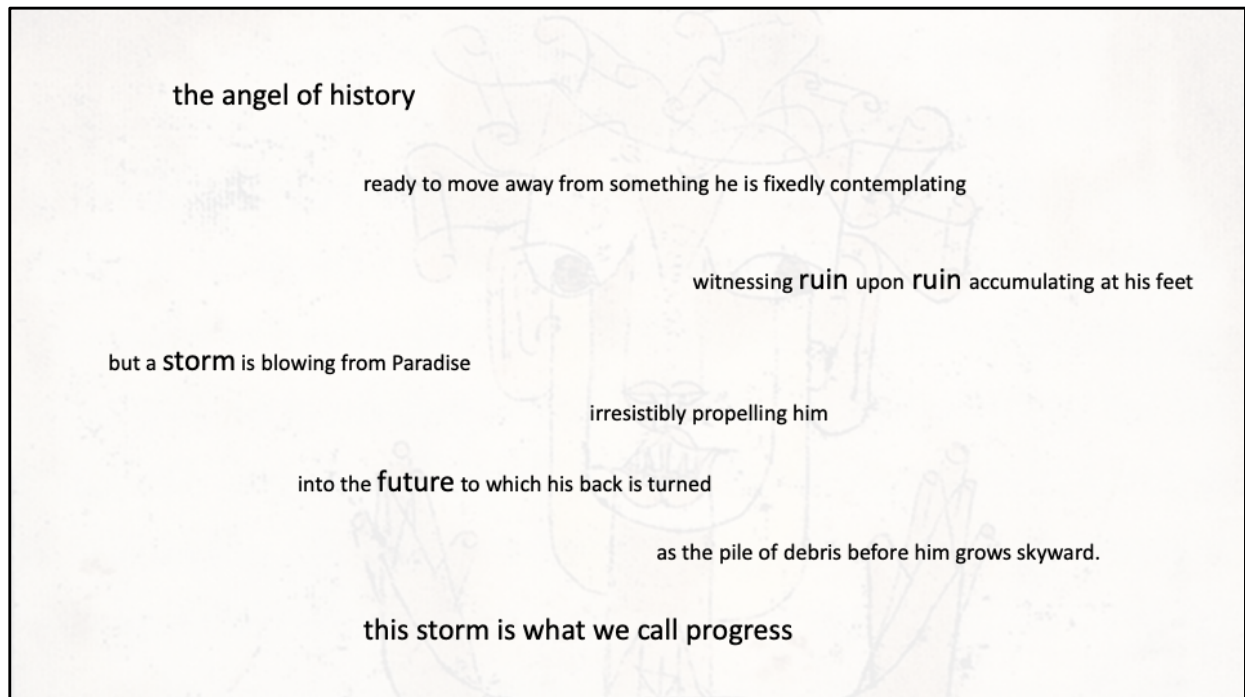
“indolence of the heart”

“there is no document of a civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”

The second angel we will be thinking about is 20th Century philosopher Walter Benjamin's 'Angel of History'. Benjamin's very last essay, *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), is a set of thetic passages assembled shortly before his suicide, whilst he was fleeing Nazi Germany in 1940. In the text, Benjamin describes a process of empathy that affects the recording of history, and the origin of this empathy is an “indolence of the heart”. It is a sadness brought about by the inexorable knowledge that history is written by and for the victorious, and that “there is no document of a civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”



Although Benjamin is best known for his 1936 text *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, with its prophetic and positivist orientation to the future, his own preferred posture was that of looking back.



In 'Thesis IX', Benjamin conceptualises a depiction of "the angel of history". Within this vivid image, the angel is staring, mouth open, wings spread, face turned toward the past, ready "to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating". Benjamin pictures the angel witnessing ruin upon ruin accumulating at his feet, wanting to stay, to wake the dead and repair what has been smashed, but unable to do so. "A storm is blowing from Paradise... [irresistibly propelling him] ...into the future to which his back is turned, as the pile of debris before him grows skyward". His final statement in this passage is poignant; as the angel of history is blown backwards into the future, the children of Paradise never rest content: "This storm is what we call progress".



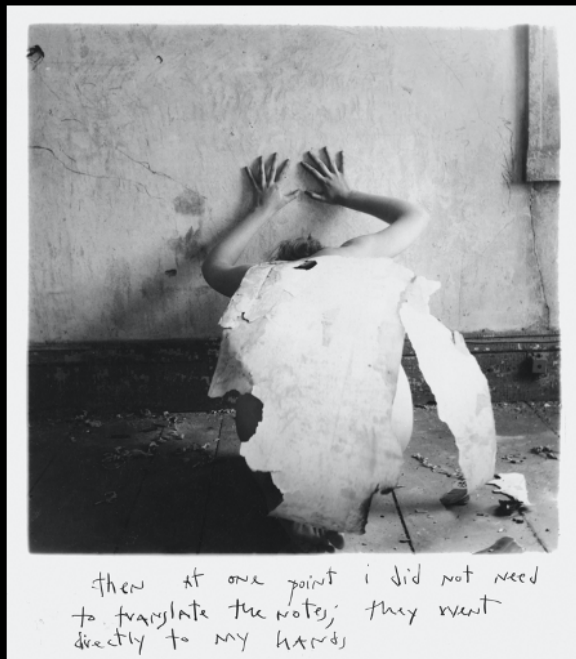
The inspiration for The Angel of History is Paul Klee's painting Angelus Novus. Benjamin purchased Klee's painting in Munich in 1921 and kept it with him until he died, and it is striking the influence this simple watercolour had on his writing as it became a personal touchstone between his private world and his published work. Of course, B's allegorical interpretation of the watercolour is not explicitly supported by its formal content. For example, there is no sign in the painting of either a 'pile of debris' that 'grows skyward', nor the storm 'blowing from Paradise.' However, there is a slightly dumbfounded quality to the angel, and it could be said that there is a certain tension evident as, with its open mouth, frozen posture and eyes staring to the right, B's angel projects a powerful sense of liminality... with the future behind the angel and the past that lies in front.



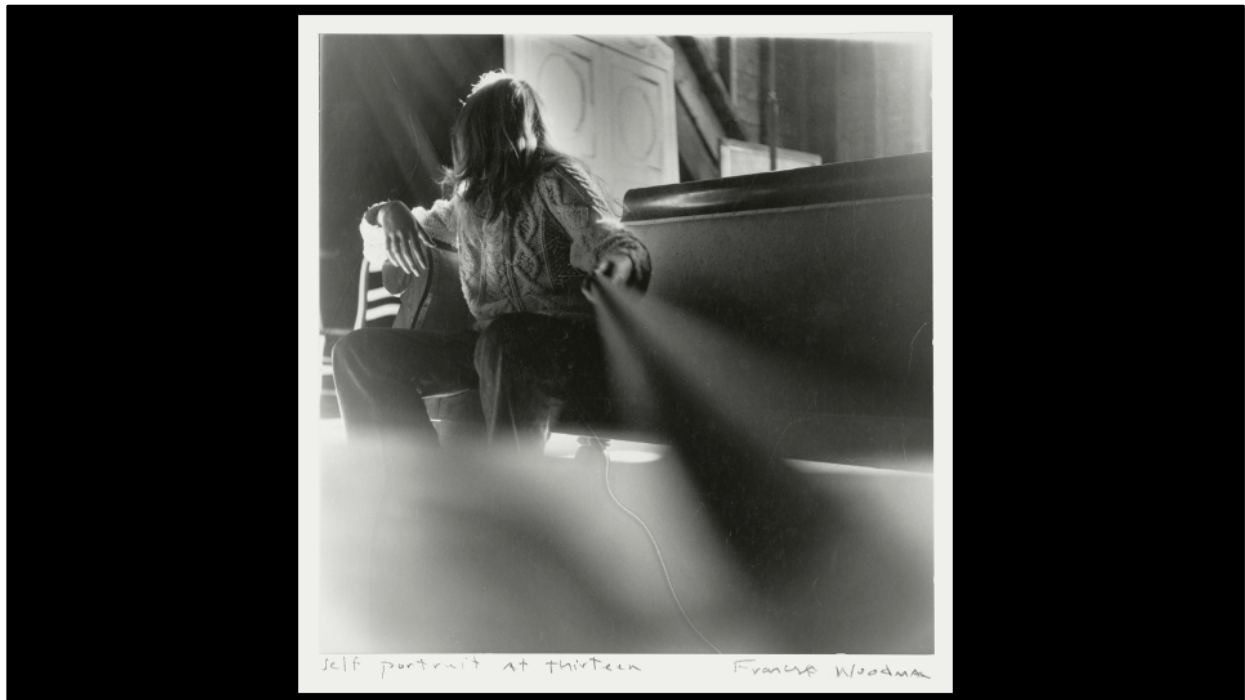
The 3rd angel I want to discuss is one conjured by the work of Francesca Woodman, partly because in these days of lockdown, many photographers have been feeling restricted by the limits of space and of movement, and Woodman's work was never restricted in this way as it was made so simply yet it still holds such power.



But also because although there are very few photographers who have been as celebrated and revered - or as imitated - in the past 30 years, as Woodman, her work is so timeless and transient that it draws you to repeatedly revisit it.



American photographer Francesca Woodman produced an incredible body of work from the mid 1970s to the time of her death in 1981. Before other women photographers such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman were addressing feminist art themes and processes during the 1980s, Woodman's work was evoking a liminal shift of feminine identity, an exploration of female subjectivity and representation.



Woodman began producing photographs at the age of thirteen and worked solidly until her suicide at twenty-two. It's an ironic tragedy that in a state of deep melancholic depression, this contemporary conjurer of angels jumped from a loft apartment window in New York City in 1981.



She grew up with two artists for parents, so regularly visited galleries and museums and was well versed in art history and contemporary art practice of the 1960s and 1970s. She went on to study at Rhode Island School of Design which included a year studying in Rome. It was during this period that much of her most recognisable work was produced, often in response to college assignments.



Despite the static nature of the photographic medium, through the use of long exposures staged in disintegrating interiors, Woodman blurred and mutated her human form, blending with, or appearing to move across, the space.



A repeated motif is her own naked or partially-covered body reconfigured as angelic and captured in moments of disappearance, displacement or transformation



Woodman conjures an angel as an apparition from beyond existence, possessing the ability to linger in a liminal space between the realms of life and death. In theological terms, angels are described as non-human, genderless guardians or messengers - yet most biblical and artistic representations are of winged, ethereal female bodies flying beyond mortal existence.



Rather than overplay these biblical connotations, Woodman appropriates the angel's transgressive nature, one that can move across boundaries.



With her acknowledged fascination with mythology and death, Woodman's suicide encouraged critics to assume that her work was driven by inner turmoil and a desire to escape life. That may be true, however, the photographic angel that Woodman left is a liminal figure that defies oppositional categories such as life/death, presence/absence, woman/environment and subject/object.



It is this liminal nature of the transitional angel figure that has enabled contemporary critics such as Rosalind Krauss to acknowledge the strong sense of feminist agency in her work.



Her compositions appear like dreams or nightmares, obscured figures and surreal objects in the decaying walls of dilapidated houses, capturing moments of disappearance and transparency. They often also include a further trace - a ghostly marker suggesting that another presence has come and gone, and perhaps still lingers.



Somehow - these images of trace, vanishing and fluid flight, where blurred bodies appear to continue moving as we view them - exist in a photographic form of stasis. In her essay on Woodman, Peggy Phelan says that when living in Rome, she was influenced by visiting cathedrals and seeing the physical suspension of statues of angels - seemingly liminal - balanced on the threshold between heaven and earth.



Woodman's angel repetitively intimates that she has the power to enter other worlds, indicated by the traces of exits and entrances from the spaces she inhabits. She appears to melt into walls and floors like a spectre, and metamorphose into shapes that defy the fixed physicality of her body.



Allusions to, and uncanny multiplications of entrances and exits are present in many of her works. Doors, windows, fireplaces, frames, all seem to achieve unusual dynamic qualities.



In her writing on Woodman, Helaine Posner describes how “she hovers in a realm between matter and spirit ... the artist seems impossibly light and disembodied, like an angel about to disengage from the world”.



In this sense, Woodman's photography creates a liminal space that seeks escape and disengagement from the female form. The woman in Woodman's photographs is no longer human but a disembodiment of imagination and desire.



In this famous image 'On being an angel' Woodman composes the shot so that her head and upper torso appear to occupy an impossible position, detached from her body, glowing white and floating. This positioning acts to unsettle rather than objectify the female form. By photographing herself as an angel, she enables a liberation of identity from a static visible female body available for objectification and consumption.



Through ambiguity and obscurity, uncertainty and displacement, Woodman's angel achieves emancipation within a medium that has traditionally functioned as a discursive device, fixing identity through technical permanence, and thus, her work opens out photographic representation.



Woodman's angel works to disrupt the patriarchal representation of femininity that equates femaleness with an objectified body.



Her angel destabilises the meaning of femininity by enacting a departure from habitual female corporeal experience to another register of 'becoming'.



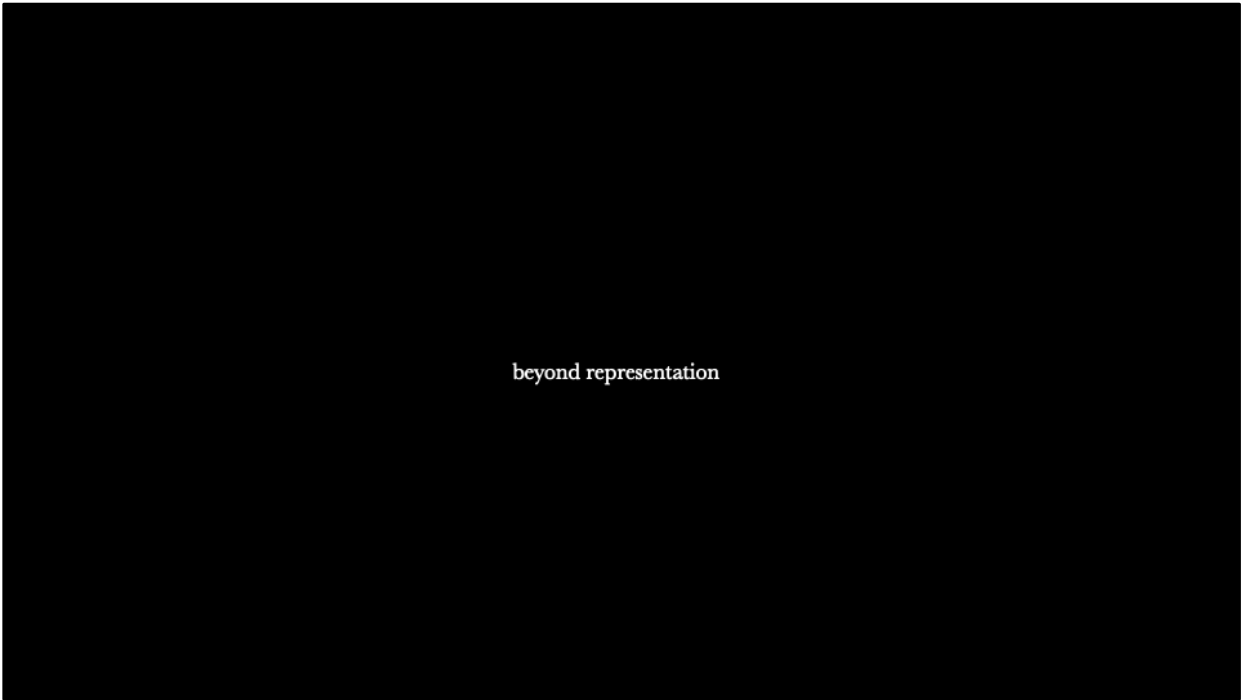
Whilst making perceptible their liminal existence between recognised states of being, angels defy the representational binaries of presence and absence, life and death.



They are in a state of 'becoming'.



The ambiguity of this liminal position allows them to resist the oppressive authority of representation.



beyond representation

They are beyond representation.



Hamish Gane, *Der Engel* (Berlin) from series *Boreas* (2008-2013)

200 Seconds - Benjamin's Christening 1979

