

## PRESENT: REENTRY

by Jay Murphy

There is no text for the present. But we have an uroborus making marks. This is 'inside,' or that is 'outside.' This has given rise to entire technologies of registration of flickers, of sensation, attention, and tracking of the first formation of thoughts. This is significant, as in 6<sup>th</sup> BC Heraclitus' "rivers different and different waters flow...come together and flow away...approach and depart," sometimes rendered as, "for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you."<sup>1</sup> It can even be dangerous: the Tibetans tell the story of a young monk meditating and each time conjuring the image of a fearsome, all-devouring spider. Consulting with his teacher, he was told to carve an 'X' on its belly next time. He found when he had come out of his meditation, he had carved an 'X' on his own stomach. Perhaps overly literal, the monk was being provisional, attempting to live in the 'moment.' We may not be prepared for the Dionysiac circle of Michael McClure's call in his poem for Bob Dylan – "All conceptions of boundaries are lies!"<sup>2</sup> but for all sorts of reasons we are growing accustomed to the ever-shifting factures and outlines, of how permeable and flexible these boundaries we invent are.

In the year of his untimely death, Francisco Varela had helped define it for us:

The boundaries of my body are invisible, a floating shield of self-production, unaware of space, concerned only with permanent bonding and unbonding. The self is also an ongoing process every time new feed is ingested, new air is breathed in, or the tissues change with growth and age.<sup>3</sup>

In coming up with a *figure* for his early finding in studying biological systems that they become autonomous or "auto-poietic," self-generating, by being structurally open yet functionally closed, and by doing so constitute themselves as system by potentially re-entering themselves *ad infinitum*, creating feedback loops of difference yet repetition, returning to their initial yet now changed starting points as new data and new beginnings, Varela took recourse to one of the most ancient signs – that of the snake swallowing its

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<sup>1</sup> Heraclitus in *The Pre-Socratic Philosophers*. Ed. by G.S.Kirk, J.E. Raven, and M. Schofield. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. p. 195; F. Copleston. *A History of Philosophy*. Vol. 1. Garden City: Image Books, 1962. p. 55.

<sup>2</sup> Michael McClure. *Jaguar Skies*. New York: New Directions, 1975. p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Francisco J. Varela, "Intimate distances: Fragments for a phenomenology of organ transplantation," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8 n. 5-7 (2001): 259-271. p. 263.

own tail. The organism is coupled with its environment, which allows for its continuity, while it also creates a “surplus of signification” provided by “the global action of the organism.”<sup>4</sup> In this view, inner and outer are separated only by the process of self-establishment, and so must be identical in some deeper sense.<sup>5</sup> Far from a source of frustrated solipsism, Varela nabbed it as just the opposite – “the symbol which tradition has chosen to represent the creation of everything since time *immemorial*.”<sup>6</sup> In the old European maps, the uroborus denoted the edge in the great oceans, where the territory fell off the map into potentially limitless flux. Ever a sign of liminality, in ancient Egypt the uroborus mediated the underworld and marked the moment from death to resurrection. Among the Dan in West Africa, in the *voudun* religion the uroborus was sort of an artist, creating order among the unpredictable cycles and vicissitudes of nature, of the wind and water.<sup>7</sup> Here it is a sign for “re-entry,” what Varela described as the awkwardness of “the brain writing its own theory, a cell computing its own computer, the observer in the observed,”<sup>8</sup> that allows it to formulate its own identity separate from the environment, what allows it to operate at an autonomous level. One might say it is what allows any of these systems to be present.

One of the artist’s work in “Present” has been said to “thrum with presence.”<sup>9</sup> What could they be talking about? If we continue to think with Varela, each of our modes of attention form “distinctions” of ‘this’ or ‘that,’ that become indications, “a distinction that is of value.”<sup>10</sup> Perturbations that become signs. Signs become values. This can

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<sup>4</sup> Francisco J. Varela. Patterns of Life: Intertwining Identity and Cognition,” *Brain and Cognition* 34 (1997): 72-87. p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Weber. “The ‘Surplus of Meaning.’ Biosemiotic Aspects in Francisco J. Varela’s philosophy of cognition.” *Cybernetics & Human Knowing* 9 n. 2 (2002): 11-29. p. 17. Much as Varela argued that “For (every) Hegelian pair of the form A/not-S there exists a star where the apparent opposites are components of the right-hand side,” in Varela. *Principles of Biological Autonomy*. New York: North Holland, 1979. p. 101.

<sup>6</sup> Francisco J. Varela, “A calculus for self-reference,” *International journal of general systems* 2 (1975): 5-24. p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Marks-Tarlow, Robin Robertson, and Allan Combs, “Varela and the Uroborus,” *Cybernetics & Human Knowing* 9 n. 2 (2002): 31-47. p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> Varela. “A calculus for self-reference,” p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Frances Richardson reviewed in Leah Ollman, “Conveyed through a binary code,” *Los Angeles Times* (May 4 2007): E22.

<sup>10</sup> Varela. *Principles of Biological Autonomy*. p. 104.

happen quickly. Theorist Susan Buck-Morss has written of artists who do not challenge the omnipresent commodity culture, do not politically confront the powers-that-be, or give voices to minoritarian identities or subcultures, but that “move so fully into the social field as to be perceptible within it – before vanishing in the trans-urban flow.”<sup>11</sup> It’s a question of gesture, and of circulation, “lines of flight” that are also often collaborations across mediums. Filmmaker and artist David Bickerstaff gives us a record of this in his work with artist Sonia Boyce. A film that is another chain in the collaborative link that was the dance between sound and visual artist Mikhail Karikis and Alamire consort under the leadership of David Skinner in creating a new piece of music, starting from Karikis’ appropriation of Josquin Deprez’ motet *Tu solus qui facis mirabilia* (*You alone can do wonders*), itself a confrontation of early Renaissance music with Dada-inspired sound art. Karikis is an interloper, but this not merely about the ‘new Europe.’ Boyce’s camera, caught by Bickerstaff, catches the movement, the dance, between Skinner, the singers of Alamire, and Karikis. Much as in the films of experimental psychologists William Condon and Ray Birdwhistell, where they filmed all sorts of human groups and couplings in a wide variety of settings; when slowed down, the films show a kind of dance where each person is responding to minute cues from the other, leading anthropologist Edward T. Hall to conclude that “one realizes that what we know as dance is really a slowed-down, stylized version of what human beings do whenever they interact.”<sup>12</sup> Bickerstaff’s film is an object-lesson in relation, though not necessarily in “relational aesthetics.” As London-based critic and art historian Jean Fisher has written, in Boyce’s *For you, only you*, the ambivalence and agonism that runs through the work ultimately undermines the notion that there can be an “aesthetics” of the “social,” of unproblematic conviviality, that somehow avoids the differentials and knotty negotiations of power relations;<sup>13</sup> yet the tonality of both Karikis’ sound experiments and Deprez’ composition share enough so

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<sup>11</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, “Art in the Age of Technological Surveillance,” *Thinking Past Terror*. London/New York: Verso, 2003. p. 82. Buck-Morss’ essay was written as a “curatorial postscript” to InSITE2000, a bi-national art project in the San Diego/Tijuana region.

<sup>12</sup> Edward T. Hall. *Beyond Culture*. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1977. p. 72.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Fisher. “*For you, only for you: The Return of the Troubadour*,” in *For you, only for you: A Project by Sonia Boyce*. Ed. Paul Bonaventura. Oxford: Rushkin School of Arts/University of Oxford, 2007. pp. 42-51.

that a new ground, a different substrate, a changed multiplicity, is created in the re-scoring.

As in the work it documents, that was both a performance, first at Magdalen Church, Oxford, and then a three-screen video installation, Bickerstaff's film seems to revolve around signifying itself. It could be used to illustrate Charles S. Peirce's basic factors of any semiotics; the first factor is the possibility of a perception, the second is the actual perception, and the third is the abstract or general relation that relates the probability functions of the second to the first. These can certainly make up complex sets of signs and relationships, and for Peirce in the world there is nothing beyond this thirdness of relation, what he called "unlimited semiosis."<sup>14</sup> Gilles Deleuze used this for his theory of cinema, seeing in the Marx Brothers an illustration of Peirce's idea, with Groucho "the man of interpretations, of symbolic acts and abstract relations. Nevertheless, each of the three equally belongs to the thirdness that they make up together."<sup>15</sup> The artists in "Present" swim in this ocean of signs, perhaps none with more variability than Torsten Lauschmann, who has moved through, utilized, constructed, created, and noodled in forms ranging from photography, animation, VJing, drawing, painting, sculpture, installation, electronic music, live performance, film, video, "trans Euro busking" and mixing using his own video and audio software. Much like the stuffed peacock that adorned Lauschmann's last solo show at Mary Mary Gallery in Glasgow, Lauschmann's work yields a different perception given the viewer's position or the angle of light; this jousting comes naturally to Lauschmann, who has claimed "there is no bad music but only wrong contexts," whose perspicacity of Pataphysical investigation, that "science of imaginary solutions," is belied by the funny, uncanny, the at-times deliberately clumsy or counter-intuitive execution. Lauschmann often alters the very context of installation, and apparently so casually converts spaces into environments. Laptop technologies make it easier for Lauschmann, who often varies each work for each new time it is shown, so that the flicker of layered meaning one may have grasped has already been transformed in its next incarnation. Some of this offhand ambience is seen

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<sup>14</sup> Charles S. Peirce. *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*. Ed. Justus Buchler. New York: Dover, 1955.

<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. p. 199.

in *Interference, Even* (2006), a loop adapted from found footage from an anonymous French art house film, where the contortionist's pose is annotated by a swirling geometric prism, and mirrored at its edges to transform it from 4:3 to widescreen. In his installations this focus on overlooked or peripheral moments can yield an eerie beauty, where even the flood of pop or psychedelic or childhood detritus is no longer familiar. The Pataphysical saying, "I arise again, the same though changed," continues to be operative here, where the patterns of re-entry again mark, and alter the original substrate.

As if emerging from the same gene pool, the form of 're-entry' Luke Fowler's documentaries take is making present as a reclamation project. In a Zen Buddhist fable it would be called scrubbing the mirror clean. Often extricated from remarkable found footage, Fowler has re-introduced some of the most radical social and artistic experimentation of the '60s and early '70 – Cornelius Cardew's Scratch Orchestra and the "anti-psychiatry" of Kingsley Hall -- to a wholly new generation. Presented so free of judgment and hollow context, with all their absurdity, whimsy, contradiction, beauty, and indeed, heroism, Fowler's exploration of chaos and order, is a plunge into Heraclitus' question of stepping into the same river twice. What's the use of listening to the sounds of alarm clocks and all sorts of odd contraptions rigged up in the ultra-democracy of the Scratch Orchestra? Of picking up again the writings of South African existentialist David Cooper, who coined the term "anti-psychiatry"? It's as though Fowler was working out for himself those dilemmas of being-with-others and being-for-oneself that was a hallmark in the writings of Cooper and R.D. Laing, dilemmas that for them were necessarily occluded in societies based on such exploitation and the transmission belts or fog machines of families in the "normal" sense, existing precisely to induce primary confusion about 'who one is' and 'where one is.' Fowler is plumbing the sentiments Cooper wrote about, in "I went to a demonstration by myself with some friends." If enough people see that, Grosvenor Square will finally be on fire."<sup>16</sup> *Bogman Palmjaguar* (2007) is a film where Fowler's project coheres with ever more shimmering beauty. Scotland's northern Flow Country and its seemingly impassable peatlands and bogs become a microcosm of threatened extinction, natural and human, as the self-styled "Bogman" attempts to reverse his psychiatric classification. Fowler's film is as much an

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<sup>16</sup> David Cooper. *The Death of the Family*. New York: Pantheon, 1971. p. 132.

exemplar of diversification as its ostensible subject – the militant conservationist and his terrain, the landscape not quite like anywhere else in the world where he continually eluded the authorities. It echoes George Oppen’s opening lines in “Of Being Numerous”: “There are things/We live among ‘and to see them/ Is to know ourselves,’” that Eliot Weinburger reminds us was a fully realized political poem.<sup>17</sup>

Other artists in “Present” hold onto and continue the venerable tradition of painting, giving new permutations to its “endgame.” Paul Pagk explores its potential at once as a new language of virtuality, and a field of the body, defined as “partial and yet open to the most diverse fields of alterity.”<sup>18</sup> In a near existential manner, Pagk’s tendentious paintings test structural limits; conflicting systems coexist on the same canvas or abruptly break off; color conjunctions that are not supposed “to work” are recombined in objects obviously material, grounded, extended from the body, and ephemeral and in danger of collapse. Minimal and metaphysical, Pagk’s paintings can take on spectral presence which turns around the specular tables, then the viewer is read as much as the painting. One is led to retrace Pagk’s processual steps, in a traverse that appears both preordained or Talmudic, and companionable with Italian *pensiero debole*, or “weak thought.” Papably rooted in a physicality and *grund*, there are rivulets of more personal experience -- tangible, sensible phenomena -- even though Pagk’s paintings evoke another world. In this world, we map certain types of actuality; Pagk shows where they slip off into infinity. In presenting fragments or cracked, fragile steles from a paradoxical, virtual universe Pagk creates a fundamental visual experience in this one. Often they leave they leave a radiant afterimage or flicker or tone where none perhaps in actuality exists. They are paintings that can be read as an exercise in abandonment where painting’s peculiar sensory virtues and *raison d’etre* surreptitiously return. Pagk

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<sup>17</sup> Eliot Weinburger, “Preface: Oppen Then,” in George Oppen. *New and Collected Poems*. Ed. Michael Davidson. Manchester: Carcanet, 2003. pp. vii-xii; “Of Being Numerous,” *ibid.* pp. 163-88. As Weinburger writes, “These lines are now philosophical, but they were once political, for then the things we lived among included the first televised scenes of war and the photographs of napalmed children: Was seeing them seeing ourselves?” *ibid.* p. ix.

<sup>18</sup> Félix Guattari. *Chaosmosis*. Trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. p. 118.

simultaneously delivers subtle rippling passages of a pastoral, and “heavy metal” music. “Dry ice” at the end of painting, it has been said.

Like Pagk, Sandro Kopp hasn’t reneged on one of the oldest forms of visual culture in the so-called “digital” era. Kopp’s art has a lineage that runs at least from the Egyptian *faiyum* portraits to the fearless self-examinations of one-time Galliano model Anh Duong. Perhaps it is not a form of communication, but of communion, that enables Kopp to do his work -- an interchange that only passes for immediacy. Finely wrought and strongly intuitive figurative painting done in single sitting, usually no more than six hours, in the duration of a single photographic “take,” Kopp’s work aspires to a “capture” that traditional portrait painting cannot accomplish, while it competes with the veracity and energetic sweep of photography. Although novel forms of contact are common to artists in “Present,” for Kopp physical location is even more basic, pulling off feats of exchange that derive from yet show the limits of traditional portraiture and its reliance on numerous sittings, often its completion regardless of the presence of the sitter. It’s a “benevolent neutrality” Kopp has said he seeks; in often dispossessing his subjects of any props – clothes, background, any other referents – Kopp has shed the usual trappings for something like the nothingness of the force field that is the face. Since, despite all the speculation about the human face in the last century, from Levinas to Deleuze, perhaps we still cannot say just what it is, and what it conveys; it may be necessary, as Artaud thought, that “it’s up to the painter precisely to save it in giving its own features back to it.”<sup>19</sup> The titles of Kopp’s work, in their very simplicity, register it as an art again of relation – *The New You* (2003-7), consisting of 40 paintings, and *The New Me* (2007), 28 paintings made from daily series over a three-month period, and hung calendar-style. Kopp’s collaborations are a re-creation and re-entry; he has called their end result a “new entity.” Perhaps the origin of art is not abstract, as Leroi André-Gourhan and others have asserted. Kopp and his sitters’ question, “Who are we now?” could have been painted on the Lascaux cave walls.

In the entrance to her sculpture/sculptural installation at Corn Exchange Gallery during Edinburgh’s peak festival month August 2007, Frances Richardson had posted –

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<sup>19</sup> Antonin Artaud, “The Human Face,” *Watchfiends & Rack Screams*. Ed. and trans. Clayton Eshleman with Bernard Bador. Boston: Exact Change, 1995. p. 277.

“The object thingness does not lie at all in the material world of which it consists, but in the void that it holds. It is within this void that the sculptural image resides.”<sup>20</sup> Richardson calls her installations “walk in drawings,” an extension of the “rhythm of viewing”<sup>21</sup> of her graphic work. Much as in her installations, where she often uses distinctly un-“aesthetic” materials – medium density fiberboard, I-beams, floorboards, carpets – seemingly denuded of narrative or anthropomorphic connotation, her drawings were titled simply by date, surrendering themselves to a play of perception. Built up from various shades, densities and configurations of + and – signs, Richardson’s drawings form symmetries, patterns and waves based on the movement and perception of their viewer, marking a presence, or “membrane,” apparently freed from recognizable context and even from the chains of time. They constitute the shapes of what Richardson calls “remembered patterns,” the spirals and curves of virtual functioning, our micro-identities’ path-making through space. The apparent independence of these forms from their platform or support that grew increasingly invisible, their play with macro and micro appearance, perhaps led to Richardson testing her vision in full installation. If the drawings had the effect of, in Richardson’s words, “breathing on skin,” the encountering of space in the installations broached a wider set of responses, of what the objects wanted or desired. So dependent on point of view and movement of the eye, Richardson usually had concerns for the value of reproductions of her drawings; there is a similar issue with the installations, where the movement of the viewer through them constitutes their efficacy, communication, poignancy, or lack of it.

If Richardson offers a void, where one must rely on non-linguistic means of navigation, with few or none familiar narrative or aesthetic placeholders, a universe of pulsation and wave, that starts from a ground zero derived from minimalism, Gregory Chatonsky operates in the fluidities and intensities of the web-sphere of *economie 0*.<sup>22</sup> Chatonsky’s work functions at that increasingly busy intersection where what Marx and

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<sup>20</sup> “Internus: Frances Richardson, “ Corn Exchange Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland, August 17 – October 4 , 2007.

<sup>21</sup> Cliff Lauson’s phrase in “Frances Richardson,” *VITAMIN D: New Perspectives in Drawing*. New York/London: Phaidon, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance the recent convocation in Paris, at <http://incident.net/theupgrade/economie0/>

Negri discussed as “immaterial labor” meets the dematerialization of art; in Chatonsky’s parlance, a borderline or zone, neither “inside” nor “outside” of the properly denominated economy, that nevertheless constitutes its own network. It is where “relational aesthetics” stop being the latest effort to revive the antiquated institutionalization of art, and become the invention of new relationships beyond the usual parameters of value. Real-time generated videos about the Internet present, Chatonsky’s *Flussgeist/L’attente/Waiting* (2007) series probes the “spirit of the Internet” using phrases found on the web to activate images via Flickr, conjuring an ongoing flow or fiction of our lives and fixations. If we actually function, as Varela has argued, as a “nonsubstantial self that acts as if it were present, like a *virtual interface*,”<sup>23</sup> Chatonsky plumbs this reflection for all its poetry. One could imagine Rimbaud, who experimented with advertising jingles, trying his hand at Flickr and Twitter. Poetic and entrancing, Chatonsky’s *Flussgeist/waiting* is not only rooted in the most quotidian of experiences – waiting for a train, or surfing the web – it’s also an analytic of affect, a self-conscious sociology. For Chatonsky, affect is the product of an “*impossible accord*,”<sup>24</sup> a juggling of the disequilibrium and disjunctions accentuated in an image culture. In the *Flussgeist/waiting* series, we experience our autism and aphasia as much as our excitement of connection, aware of our autonarratives. With its at times minute, other moments dramatic, shifts of real time and differential time, of image and genre, we find we’re on display as much as the passengers at Gare du Nord. Chatonsky is pursuing new forms of fiction, new narratologies, what Oppen called “no narratives but ourselves.”<sup>25</sup> If we are composed of an illusive “I” “arising out of our recursive linguistic abilities and their unique capacity for self-description and narration,”<sup>26</sup> this is also an important ontological investigation, of our ongoing fragility.

Indications, marks, facts, boundaries, lines, re-entry, values: these descriptions became unified in the notion of “enaction,” that sought to explain how “action can be

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<sup>23</sup> Francisco J. Varela. *Ethical Know-How*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. p. 61.

<sup>24</sup> <http://incident.net/users/gregory/wordpress/06-l-affect-de-lart/>

<sup>25</sup> Oppen quoted in Michael Davidson. “Introduction,” *New and Collected Poems*. p. xxviii.

<sup>26</sup> Varela. *Ethical Know-How*. p. 61.

perceptually guided in a perceiver-dependent world.”<sup>27</sup> Enaction becomes an ethics. It’s very close to what Iranian sociologist Asef Bayat described as “the art of presence,” writing that “it is extremely challenging to be heavily *present* at the heart of society...More precisely, I am referring to that delicate *art of presence* in harsh circumstances, the ability to create social space within which those individuals who refuse to exist, can advance three causes of human rights, equality, and justice, and can do so under formidable political conditions.”<sup>28</sup> With the increasing preponderance of Tibetan Buddhism in his thinking, Varela’s last work was completely self-referential, having moved from the ‘objective’ models of cognitive science to tracking subjectivity itself; yet the usual understanding of these ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ polarities had been completely traduced. Varela wrote,

I can see it all: all of us in the near future being described as the early stages of a mankind where alterity and intimacy have been expanded to the point of recursive interpenetration. Where the body techné will and can redesign the boundaries ever more rapidly, for a human being which will be ‘intrus dans le monde aussi bien que dans soi-meme [extruded into the world as far as into himself] as the epigraph says.<sup>29</sup>

“The poetic dimension,” Varela had once written, “is the most convincing for this kind of kinky logic.”<sup>30</sup> That said, we must admit that the object of what for so long was called “art writing” or “art criticism” really no longer exists.<sup>31</sup> None of the artists in “Present” require any such “interpretation,” but rather the active conjunction of connection, however difficult this “poetic dimension.” Attention studies have shown just how

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<sup>27</sup> Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991. p. 173.

<sup>28</sup> Asef Bayat. “The Art of Presence,” *ISIM Newsletter* 14 (June 2004): 5. Quoted in Mark LaVine. *Why They Don’t Hate Us*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005. p. 316.

<sup>29</sup> Varela, “Intimate Distances,” p. 271.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Ranulph Granville, “Francisco Varela (1946-2000): A Working Memory,” *Cybernetics & Human Knowing* 9 n. 2 (2002): 67-76. p. 71.

<sup>31</sup> Not so much because of the lack of what James Elkins’ described as “reflection about judgment itself important enough to count as history, and vice versa,” without his adequately defining either term, in *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003), but rather what David Rodowick points to as the exhaustion of the category of the “aesthetic” altogether, in *Reading the Figural, Or, Philosophy After the New Media*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2001. pp. 139-40.

difficult and fleeting sustaining this dimension can be: being present, or not being present  
– and the difference between.

Jay Murphy  
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