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“twinkling . . .”
—from a poem by Seraphine Saghafi

During those first few days, those first few weeks, truth be told, still today, something in me has wanted simply to echo the sentiments of others. That’s because I myself didn’t know exactly what to say and, truth be told, I still don’t know today. But it’s also because others, including and especially some of the people here today, beginning with my co-panelists and, perhaps especially, early on, Leigh Johnson, knew at the time just what had to be said and so expressed so well the sentiments that we all—that I at least—just wanted to echo. Just to echo, that’s what I wanted to do, because by echoing the sentiments of others I would be able to protect myself just a bit longer, I thought, though also, I self-justified, by echoing others I would be able to give back in some way to Pleshette herself, who showed us in her work that Echo does not simply repeat but initiates even when it looks or sounds as if she is not, Echo who gives back even when it sounds as if she has nothing to give, Echo who not only has her own Narcissus but her own narcissism—which Pleshette would have been the first to tell us is not only not a bad thing but a necessary one, and perhaps just what is needed for a new thinking of empathy, of mourning, and, perhaps, as I will try to say, of the ephemeral.

While I will thus no doubt end up, for good or ill, echoing the sentiments and thoughts of others—indeed, as you can hear, I’ve already begun to do so—I will start out from a very different place in Pleshette’s work, that is, from her writings on Sarah Kofman, a thinker who allowed Pleshette to continue her analysis of the logic of narcissism, but who also gave her a different, though hardly unrelated, way to think through questions of “art and doubles, beauty and ruin, life and death, as well as mourning and melancholy.”¹

A deep admiration for Sarah Kofman's work was, I should say, something Pleshette and Kas and I all shared; we often talked about her work at DePaul, we lamented how neglected her work had been, but we also took the time to celebrate that work, in particular when Pleshette, more or less singlehandedly, organized on October 12, 2001 the first ever conference in the United States devoted exclusively to the work of Sarah Kofman. It was an extraordinary day, full of intelligent and enlightening papers, but also full of emotions too uncanny to isolate or define, for as we sat in DePaul's Richardson Library in Chicago that October to discuss Kofman's work the ruins of the World Trade Towers were still smoldering. We thus read and discussed papers written weeks in advance about Kofman's *Prometheus* and her gift for playing with fire, about her two final books on Nietzsche, *Explosion I* and *Explosion II*, and we recalled—as we looked out the window at planes that never seemed so tentative in their flight patterns over the city—Kofman's art of affirmation, her intelligence but also her humor and her life, her traumatic childhood during the Second World War and her early death. The product of that conference, the trace of that extraordinary event, is the beautiful little volume *Sarah Kofman's Corpus*, edited by Tina Chanter and Pleshette, who honored Kofman not only with the conference and with the volume but with their own contributions, which are among the most powerful and illuminating in the volume.

Indeed Pleshette's essay in the volume, titled "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation, or the 'Non-Illusory Life of an Illusion,'" is about as good a primer on Kofman's aesthetics, though really on Kofman's work more generally, that you will find anywhere. Compact, beautifully written and structured, the essay manages not only to summarize, indeed to echo, Kofman's arguments about art and affirmation but to rethink and rearrange those arguments, pose questions to them, and, in the end, sign and endorse them in a totally unique way.

I would like to pay homage to that reading here today because this little work could easily go unnoticed, like Sarah Kofman herself, and because Pleshette's strategy in approaching Kofman's work is not at all apparent at first glance. That is, in part, because the book that is at the center of her analysis, Kofman's 1985 *Mélancholie de l'art*, has never appeared in its entirety in English. There are excerpts published in the Stanford volume of Kofman's *Selected Writings*, but the whole text has never been translated—and Pleshette's essay really addresses the whole text, from its title to its back cover and everything in between.² Pleshette in fact begins with that back cover, or, more precisely, she begins simultaneously with a passage about two thirds of the way through the volume and with the echo of that passage on the back cover. As Pleshette rightly argues, Kofman in effect gives us on that back cover the overall argument of her book in four moments or four movements that Pleshette herself will then use to structure her own essay, which consists of a brief introduction and then four sections, each preceded

by an epigraph taken from that back cover—words that, as far as I know, had never been translated into English before Pleshette’s essay. The first line on the back cover reads this way, in Pleshette’s translation: “And what if the beauty that conceals the evanescent nature of all things were itself ephemeral?” That’s how Kofman begins the description of her own book, a description that bears the initials S. K. There is no attribution of this first line, no proper name attached to it, but Pleshette is right to hear in it not just an echo of Freud but a quasi-quotation of him. For about two thirds of the way through *Mélancholie de l’art* Kofman writes:

In a very beautiful text, Freud emphasizes the distress produced by the following thought: beauty—which is meant to camouflage the evanescent nature of all things—is itself ephemeral. What is at issue in this distress is a foretaste of the mourning that would be occasioned by the decline or loss of beauty.

And Kofman then cites Freud:

It is impossible that all this beauty [the original has *loveliness*] of Nature and Art, of the world of our sensations and of the world outside, will really fade away into nothing. . . . Somehow or other this beauty [loveliness] must be able to persist and to escape all the powers of destruction.³

“This refusal to mourn beauty,” Kofman then comments, “reveals the intolerable nature of all ephemeral things,” and it explains, in short, why art is called upon to mask this intolerable nature.⁴

Now the text in question here is Freud’s brief, three-page essay of 1915 “On Transience,” sometimes referred to as “Freud’s Requiem,” an essay in which Freud recounts a conversation he would have had with Rilke and Lou Andreas-Salomé about the transience of beauty and the possibility of affirming, rather than being despondent over or rebelling against, that transience.⁵ This little essay of Freud’s, so minor when set against his entire corpus, so fragile, written one year into the war, exactly a century ago, would be, according to Pleshette, at the center of Kofman’s own reflections about art. Cited within *Mélancholie de l’art* and then echoed on its back cover, at once protected and exposed, this center would then be the starting point for Pleshette’s own reflections on Kofman.

As Pleshette goes on to say of Freud’s little essay, each of Freud’s two companions is “unable to take pleasure in the beauty of the nature around him, because each has already begun to lament the fact that not only the particular beauty on this summer day but also all beauty found in nature and art is destined to decay and perish.”⁶ It is from this center that Pleshette’s own essay unfolds, as I said, in four times or four movements.

For if Kofman finds in Freud's three-page essay at once "the desire for immortality, the ambivalent nature of beauty, mourning and melancholy, and affirmation in spite of loss"⁷, Pleshette will find in this description all the essential elements of Kofman's own aesthetics, indeed, of her entire work. Pleshette thus scans her reading of Kofman's book by beginning each section with an epigraph from Kofman's self-description. It's a masterful reading, attentive and intelligent, which I will be able to do little more than brutally summarize here.

In the first section, titled "The Mask of Beauty, or the Illusion of Immortality," Pleshette argues—after citing in epigraph once again the first line of Kofman's parsing of "On Transience," "and what if the beauty that hides the evanescent aspect of all things were itself ephemeral?"—Pleshette goes on to argue that the traditional function of beauty, as we find it in Plato's *Symposium* or *Phaedrus*, for example, though also in art more generally, is to promise immortality by "awaken[ing] in those captivated by it a recollection of all that is eternal," giving us "a beauty that escapes all decline and ruin, a beauty that is eternally luminous," "restor[ing] our faith in the immortality of beauty or, more accurately, in beauty as immortality"⁸. But what if, Pleshette asks following Kofman, what if this beauty, which is supposed to mask and substitute for all that is fleeting and ephemeral, were itself ephemeral?

The answer comes in the second section, titled "An Economy of the Intolerable and Tolerable," which bears the epigraph, again taken from the back cover, "The decline of what makes the intolerable tolerable would cause vertigo and disarray." "To make the intolerable tolerable"—that is a phrase we find everywhere in Kofman's corpus, from one end to the other. It's almost her signature, her motto, the words by which she lived, because, as Pleshette explains, this is the function of art. Indeed "beauty's power, according to Kofman, is not only to captivate and entrance, but also to ward off all that is utterly unbearable—the intolerable"⁹. The two figures that "exemplify the economy and logic of the tolerable and the intolerable," Nietzsche's Apollo and Dionysus," must thus be understood not as "two concepts" that oppose one another but as "two forces" that "conjure [*conjur*er] one another," and Pleshette reminds us here that Kofman's use of the word *conjur*er must be heard "in its double resonance: to conjure away or ward off *and* to conjure up or call forward"¹⁰. Pleshette concludes this second section: "It is Nietzsche who showed Kofman that only the Apollonian image, which is by its nature beautiful, can render the intolerable—death, suffering, the ambiguities of becoming, in a word, the Dionysian—tolerable"¹¹. In the well-known words of Nietzsche, which Pleshette does not cite but Kofman does, putting them in quotes but, again, without attribution, "We have art so as not to die of truth"¹².

The third section, "Catharsis, or an Impossible Mourning," once again begins with an epigraph from Kofman: "This refusal of the mourning of

beauty reveals the cathartic function of art, which is as mystifying as the speculative . . .".¹³ Art is thus complicit in the refusal of mourning, but this refusal is cathartic, even therapeutic. As Pleshette argues, "inherent in the nature of the artistic image is a certain power of occultation or mystification, which Kofman affirms as therapeutic".¹⁴ If "Apollo's blinding beauty brings about a 'forgetting,' a forgetting of his double, Dionysus," this forgetting is, it seems, at once an illusion—a form of repression—and something originary, even necessary.¹⁵ Pleshette then asks, "Is that not art and beauty's great power—to ward off death and thus to deny the need for mourning?"¹⁶ Art represses the intolerable by giving us an illusion of eternity or immortality, but this repression appears necessary, even therapeutic. It is here that Pleshette, following all the ambiguities and aporias of Kofman's thought, poses questions to that thought—irresolvable questions, I would hazard to say, for they are in the end Kofman's own questions. Pleshette asks: "Is she arguing that the function of art is to create an illusion of 'blessed security,' by transforming an intolerable 'reality' into a tolerable 'illusion'? Or is she, like the Freud of *The Future of an Illusion*, asking us to abandon all illusions, to grow up, to refuse to be childish and narcissistically enchanted by art and beauty?"¹⁷ Pleshette's answer to these questions is that Kofman does not, in the end, "decide between these two responses to art and beauty" and that what is thus required is "a double reading and a double affirmation of art," one that "says 'yes' to the melancholy of, or the impossibility, of mourning beauty and 'yes' to the necessity of mourning the eternity of beauty".¹⁸

The fourth and final section of Pleshette's essay, "The Art of Amor Fati," bears the epigraph, "To break with everything in art that responds to our desire for eternity is to dislocate the space of representation and meaning; it is to invent a space of indetermination and play—to open up a wholly other place."¹⁹ To try to think what it would mean to break with this desire and to invent such "a space of indetermination and play," Pleshette enlists the help of an untitled essay by Derrida on the work of Kofman in order then to distinguish what seems to be an unhealthy or life-denying desire for eternity from this space of indetermination and play. This allows Pleshette to say, for example, that Dorian Gray's "fetishizing of beauty" in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is linked to his "inability to mourn its ephemeral nature".²⁰ Like Freud's two walking companions in "On Transience," Dorian "is incapable of affirming beauty or art and, hence, unable to affirm life".²¹ By refusing death, by giving in to what is, for Kofman, "a fear of both death and life"²², one is unable to affirm life itself. For "this affirmative mourning is all too aware," writes Pleshette, "that art and beauty cannot offer salvation from 'pain, anxiety, illness—and death'".²³ Which is why, in the closing lines of her essay, Pleshette opposes salvation to serenity, a curious word, *serenity*, so easy to say, and maybe even to imagine or to think, and yet so difficult to live. Pleshette writes: "Kofman does not negate the illusion of art and beauty, but affirms another light,

which still possesses pharmaceutical powers and provides serenity without salvation".²⁴ Such serenity without salvation would be that which accompanies, as Kofman has called it, "the non-illusory life of an illusion"²⁵ and the possibility of inventing "a space of indetermination and play," in short "a wholly other space" and, says Pleshette citing Derrida, "another affirmation, other but older, more ancient," but "also younger than everything it endures, through, and thus beyond, if this is possible, the experience of an impossible mourning become possible".²⁶

That is where Pleshette ends her essay, with Derrida on the possibility of an impossible mourning. But let me end by returning to the place where she begins, and where she claims Kofman begins. In "On Transience" Freud says, after recalling the inability of his two friends to affirm the beauty that surrounds them, that two reactions can follow the recognition that everything must perish: "despondency" over the potential loss of beauty and "rebellion . . . against the fact of this inevitable loss," in other words, mourning—or melancholy—and the refusal of mourning. How right Freud was about transience, *Vergänglichkeit*, in 1915 and how right he will have been a century later about the *Vergänglichkeit* that surrounds, surprises, and so stupefies us today, a transience, a thought of transience, that Kofman and Pleshette (not to mention Freud and Derrida) will have in some sense shared, or at least echoed—and maybe that makes a difference—echoed, this thought or this sentiment of *Vergänglichkeit*, not only between Narcissus and Echo, his Echo, but between this very other Narcissus and her Echo, echoed, then, across eras and cultures, generations and languages, for the French title of this essay—it and its echoes—says all this at once, somewhere between despondency and affirmation, rebellion and recognition, between conjuring death up and conjuring it away,²⁷ the beautiful and beautifully melancholic French word and its echoes, *L'éphémère . . . mère . . . ère*, which recalls us to ourselves, we creatures of a day, but across generations, through a sentiment that is, if not shared, at least echoed within us.

¹ Pleshette DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation, or the 'Non-Illusory Life of an Illusion,'" in *Sarah Kofman's Corpus*, ed. Tina Chanter and Pleshette DeArmitt (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 23.

² Sarah Kofman, *Selected Writings: Sarah Kofman*, ed. Thomas Albrecht with Georgia Albert and Elizabeth Rottenberg, trans. Jennifer Bajorek (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 205-236.

³ Kofman, *Selected Writings*, 234.

⁴ Kofman, *Selected Writings*, 234-235.

⁵ Sigmund Freud, "On Transience," in vol. 14 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, eds. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 303-8.

⁶ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 23.

⁷ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 24.

⁸ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 25.

⁹ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 26.

¹⁰ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 26-27.

¹¹ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 27.

¹² Cited at Kofman, *Selected Writings*, 235.

¹³ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 27.

¹⁴ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 28.

¹⁵ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 28.

¹⁶ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 28.

¹⁷ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 28.

¹⁸ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 29.

¹⁹ That's where Pleshette chooses to end her analysis of Kofman, though this is not, interesting, exactly where Kofman ends her own self-description on the back cover of *Mélancholie de l'art*. Kofman's self-description ends not with this desire "to open up a wholly other space," but with the sentence that begins, "Beauty is never exempt from melancholy . . ." Whereas Pleshette thus ends her epigraphs with an emphasis on this "wholly other space," Kofman ends her description of *Mélancholie de l'art* with an emphasis on melancholy.

²⁰ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 29.

²¹ Ibid.

²² DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 29-30.

²³ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 30.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 31.

²⁷ I am alluding here to a text of Derrida's on Kofman that Pleshette knew very well, "Conjuring Death: Remarks on The Anatomy Lesson of Doctor Nicolas Tulp (1632)," trans. Pascale-Anne Brault, in *Selected Writings: Sarah Kofman*, 237-241. It will not escape anyone, of course, that what we are doing here—in this session, in this special issue—is precisely what Derrida says Kofman says the doctors in Rembrandt's

famous painting of “The Anatomy Lesson” were doing, that is, looking at the corpus rather than the corpse, celebrating the articles and books as a way of avoiding or turning away from the body, because this latter is, for all of us, so intolerable.