

Dark Dreams : Reflections on the Sculpture of John Francis

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J O H N F R A N C I S

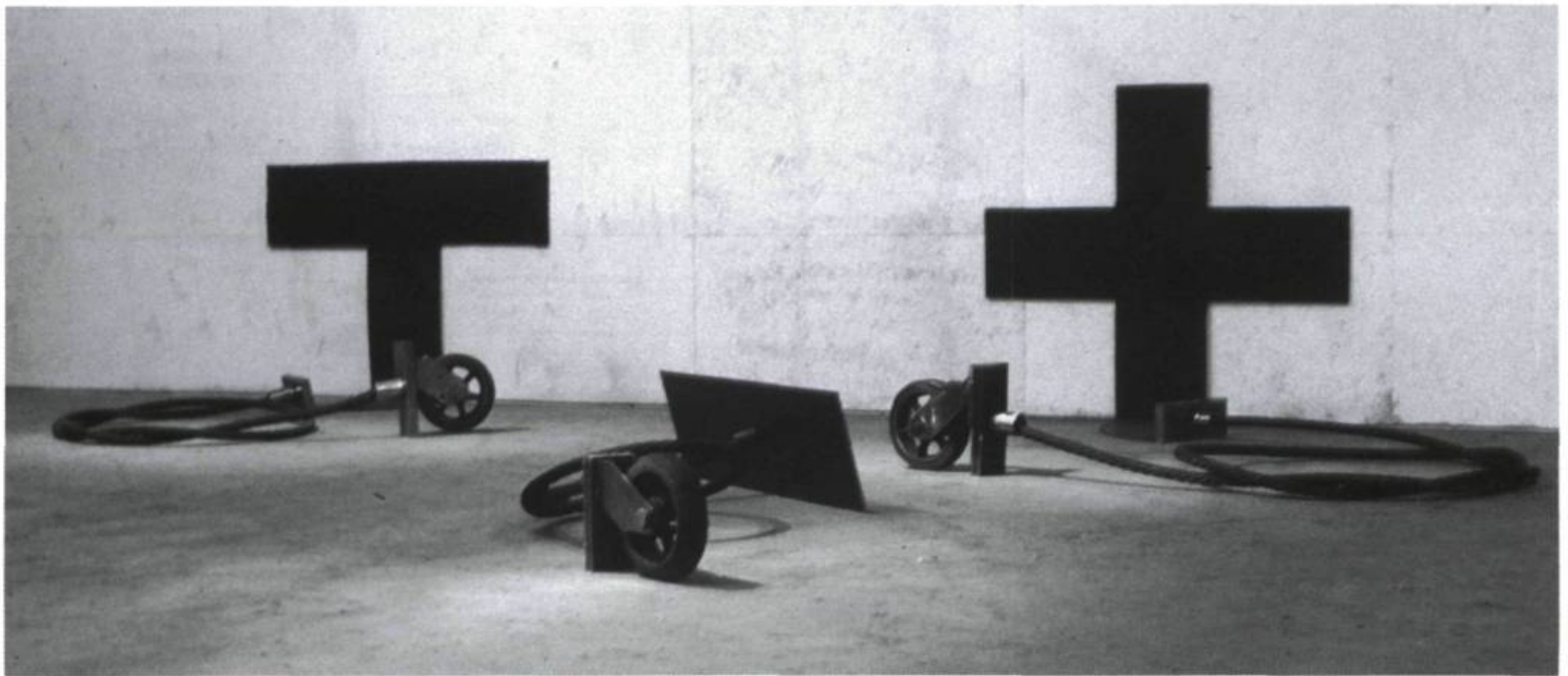
James D. Campbell

John Francis is a contemporary sculptor who creates brilliant metaphors for our various rites of passage. He has never been interested in creating objects solely for the purpose of a facile aesthetic contemplation. He seeks to activate the active, embodied imagination of the observer as the natural consequence of contemplating his work. He wants us to engage with his work on deep levels of

invention while never forsaking the the ethos of the irreducibly human. Through reifying a close *rapprochement* with his own unconscious in original 'sculptural' objects, Francis has created symbolic images that may be said to 'live and breathe' inside us. His work promises us a means of imaginative transport from one quotidian world to another, less picayune, a more highly-

is the very fundament for our strivings, our dreams, our very *doxa* within that world.

The images, the forms, the expressive manifestations of Francis's sculpture may be said to interpenetrate with the objects they symbolize in the undifferentiated matrix of all image-making, resulting in a powerful shock of recognition for the involved viewer. This sculpture always seems in motion, it is



the embodied psyche, and not just detour us into his beguiling surfaces for the sake of some brief epiphany. Indeed, his recent work brings to a critical juncture his career embracing a long fascination with the Jungian "process of individuation" and alchemical thought.

For almost twenty years, Francis has methodically investigated the psychological problems of alchemy and the process of

individuation, in sculpture that demonstrates considerable formal

charged and spectral world — a realm of pure possibility, of the embodied imagination, where the base metal of our beliefs and most basic strivings may be transformed — not into fool's gold or even real gold but into a more precious metal still: self-knowledge.

In so doing, his splendidly factual and metaphorical sculptures and reliefs celebrate the pre-logical processes of lived experience rather than only the merely rational ones. They celebrate their own factuality — but they also take us beyond the safer precincts of our fact-world. We plumb the depths of the primordial well of the unconscious that

so relentlessly *kinetic*. It is a vehicle for obtaining knowledge forcibly; no possibility of resignation or stasis or passivity here — and the viewer realizes that in this work there is something preternaturally willed.

Like the *Nkisi nkonde*, the Congolese nail fetish that is psychically charged, that works by virtue of sympathetic magic (which means only that it ensnares the psyche and belief contexts of its victims, and feeds on their wealth of unexamined *doxa*), Francis the sculptor taps into a genuinely hyletic flux and unleashes primordial atavisms which surge up in our unconscious minds

John Francis, *Passage Accelerator*, 1989-90. 6,09 x 3,04 m. Rubber, steel cable, steel.

and somatic imaginations much like the spirits that are said to possess the dancers/supplicants in the religion of the *Voudoun*.

In his current work, the imagination (imagining, that is, as an active process rather than a merely passive state, more strength of *will* there than staid *reverie*) enjoys a primacy it never had to this extent before; the artist builds vehicles for the mind to travel in and the imagination to revel in. Here is no static "image" but an imaginal dynamism in which we can engage freely and at will.

The sculpture secures a projective identification on the part of the spectator that palpably enlivens the condition of looking. This unconscious release of our psychic content is always directed towards the sculpture in its very physicality. Invested in the material of sculpture, this unconscious data is then transformed into the *prima materia* of the sculpture itself.

The *Accelerator Ramp* is especially noteworthy in this regard. The route it lays out for us seems perfectly suited for me, a

demonstrates both the formal and imaginative power of this work, which seems to draw atavisms out of the body and archaic memories of passage from the embodied psyche. In other words, we introject into this sculpture our own embodied archetype of wholeness.

The metaphor for passage in John Francis's work becomes a potent touchstone for a process of individuation; the process by which human beings become more completely themselves and attain wholeness.

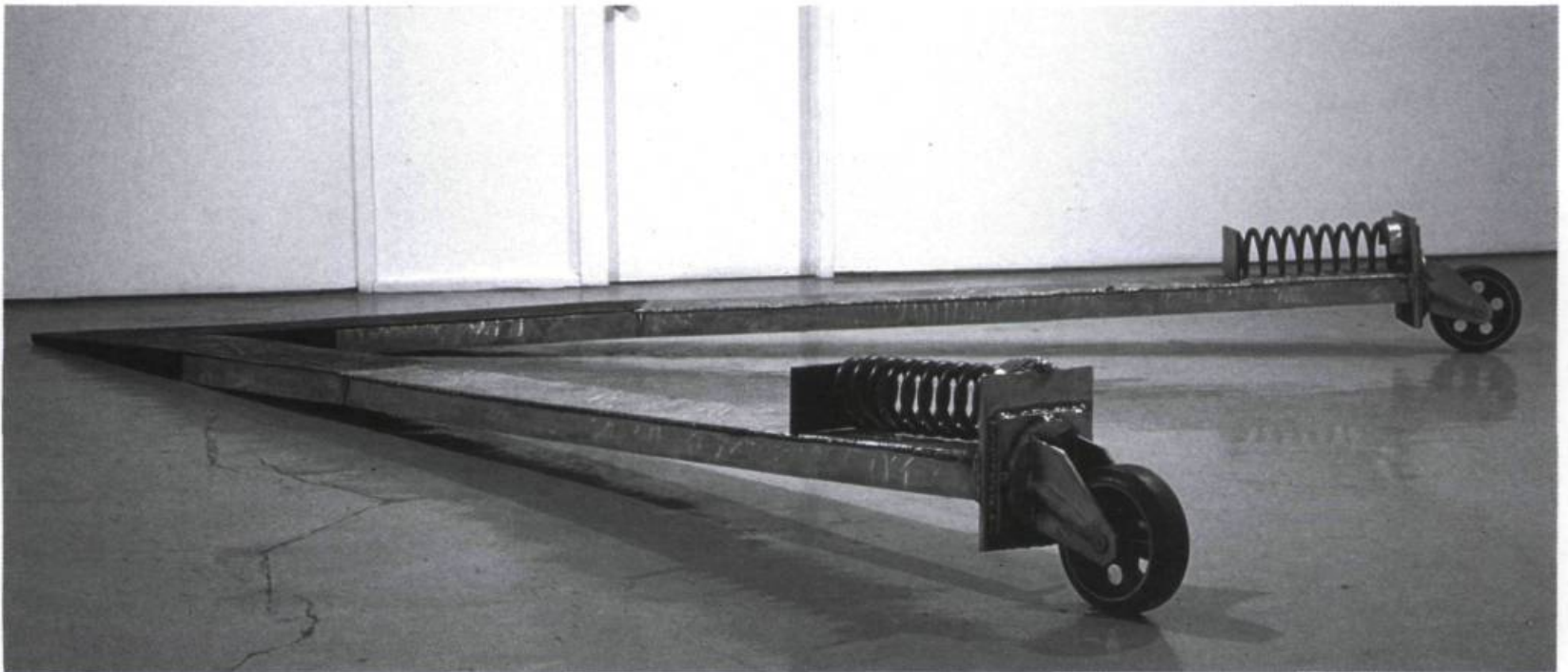
As the psychologist Jung taught us, psychologically speaking, human wholeness can only be described in terms of fundamental *antinomies*. Francis paradoxically attempts to give us an holistic vision through exacerbating the schism between reason and emotion, mind and body, and then demonstrating how the gap between them can be closed in one felt instant through the activity of an embodied imagination. Francis wants to reach an original, half-animal state of unconsciousness that is less a constituting subjectivity than a dark unity of body and soul.

Not only because of their scale in rela-

generation to generation, millenia to millenia, within the limits of some shared genetic legacy of consciousness.

Francis begins through an intensive *imaging*. Imaging as it is used here denotes an imaginative presentation — the sculptor's attempt to articulate a process of individuation that is consummately difficult to allude to, much less invoke concretely, in sculpture. So resolutely and well is it conveyed, the process of bound imaging that informs this work from the outset is always open to our own imaginal involvement.

The forms imaged, and then lent sensuous presence by the sculptor's hand and body-schema seem like primordial atavisms that spring full-blown from our own heads and bodies, and which wrench us out of our own complacency, forcing us to forsake our own prejudices. Francis does not reduce his images to a facile, easily assimilable semiotic; he renders them pure expressions of underlying archetypal material. He does not seek their resolution into some vapid stasis; he informs them with a vitality and pre-logical resonance that draws on all the latent



more Lilliputian self, it is true, but still an adamantly embodied being. In my fancy, I speed along the track at breakneck speed, the coiled spring behind me setting me on this perilous journey.

Somewhere up ahead, and beyond the last turn, the ramp ends and I know that I will be propelled, projectile-like, into some other space, some other time. That the work should so successfully integrate me within

its circuit; should secure a psychological investiture so hard to gainsay or guard against, surely

tion to human scale and their implied potential for human use, but also because of their potent symbolism, these sculptures by John Francis function as anthropomorphic counterparts to the body — the self embodied — with functions that can only be read as metaphor.

This work is, archeologically speaking, an attempt to unearth sundry prelogical processes in the very act of our perceiving it. The genetic thrust of the work is to tap into a collective unconscious, if you will, to draw out the images that inform that shared unconscious; images handed down from

psychic and creative energies of the imaginative life.

In his *Psychological Types*, Jung discussed at length Schiller's concept of the imagination as occupying a middle ground between sensation and intellect. This endorsement of imagination as an independent operation of the mind is reprised in our experience of Francis' work, wherein it cannot be reduced to sensory processes or thought, but is its own operation, and one that is of primary importance in opening up and epitomising the realm of "pure possibility". This autonomous activity of the

John Francis, 'V Ramp', 1992.
3,65 x 2,43 m. Steel carbon,
rubber.

psyche, which Jung called "the mother of all possibilities", is central to understanding Francis' work.¹

Jung distinguishes in his *Psychological Types* between three forms of fantasy or imagination: voluntary, passive and active. The first, the voluntary, is wholly trivial. The second, the passive, denotes when one is overwhelmed by a phenomenal upsurge of one's own fantasies. The third, the active, is the sole type that concerns us here: herein, there is a positive participation of consciousness. In observing Francis' work, we are never passive. Observation itself is volatile and dynamic. We are enjoined to observe. Such is the strength of the artist's imaging and the evocativeness of the articulating medium. Neither are we overwhelmed by our own imaginative propensities. Rather, the conscious self becomes caught up in the web of images which stem from a collective unconscious. One is not overwhelmed by one's atavisms but one is onset by the active process of imagining along with the artist. Here, for both artist and observer, imagination is transformed into "an image-making, form-giving creative activity".²

The imagistic content of the work is intended to provide the viewer with a means of ingress from individual consciousness to the collective unconscious, and to activate and energise the images which reside there. If the prelogical processes these sculptures invoke grow out of the innumerable sub-threshold percepts that lay the foundations of one's everyday thinking, their images afford us access to the archetypal constants that inform the fundamentals of the self.

These sculptures invoke prelogical and atavistic experiences with their shadowy aura of the autosymbolic phenomenon occurring in the so-called "transition state of consciousness" — the hypnagogic state that is the twilight zone between sleep and waking.

The really interesting thing is that the autosymbolic experience of the work corresponds quite closely to the creative insight and the creative act, as though Francis had apprehended something of the quintessential character of creativity *qua* creativity and shared it with his viewers through revealing — and revelling in — the primacy of autosymbolic experience. Given the pervasiveness of prelogical thought processes in lived experience, and the fact that for the last fifteen years, Francis has evolved a language in his sculpture that increasingly emphasises both the participation of the observer and the artist's own atavistic and transformative vision (and active imagination), it is not surprising that the work has such primordial strength or that it should touch its viewers so strongly.

The participation of the observer is, as I have said, absolutely crucial to Francis' pro-

ject, because the archetypes his works tap into are shared by the widest possible spectrum of subjects. His work opens up a shadowy way that leads ever deeper into the self, and by drawing on the largely untapped potential of active imagination, brings us into confrontation with something that both subtends and reaches impossibly beyond what we are: the archetypes. Now, how exactly does Francis achieve his goal?

Jung defined archetypes as "certain collective unconscious conditions which act as regulators and stimulators of creative fantasy-activity".³ It is as though Francis were attempting to give form to these archetypes, promising transport to them, and drawing us closer to them. Active imagination as it pertains to Francis' project has to do with the artist's process of felt imaging — the way in which his forms cause us to latch onto various "primordial images" ourselves in the viewing. These images effectively distill various archetypal dominants. Francis succeeds in the spontaneous amplification of these archetypes in drawing upon our own active imaginations as embodied observers who might ride these strange vehicles towards some ultimate and too often unattainable truth of the self.

Francis takes recourse to a technique which he suggestively terms "image-splicing". The intent is to generate through the interaction of two or more images (for "image" read, according to Francis, any sacred or profane object, action, shape, gesture or function) a potent gestalt — a quintessential image that is far richer in its metaphoric potential than the images used to produce it.

The current work usually takes the form of an assemblage of different components that invariably cohere and which suggest a powerful sense of movement and internal transformation. Using diverse working materials like steel plate, steel cable, copper, brass, rubber plate, aluminium, stainless steel, steel walk tread and rubber belted steel wheels, Francis demonstrates a wonderful capacity for integrating disparate elements in a homogeneous whole that imaginatively transports the viewer to a different time and a different space. In terms of "image-splicing", all the *Accelerator Ramps* splice together three images: the wheel, the ramp, and the spring. The resultant collocation of objects becomes an integrated thing — a unique device with powerful vehicular implications of movement, passage and delivery. The physical capacities of these various elements can now only be read as metaphors with metaphysical designs in mind.

In works like *Tight Rope No. 6* and *Passage Accelerators with Copper T Ramps*, and even the most recent *Dream Sets*, Francis seems knowingly allied with a minimalist ethos; the work has, after all, a distinctly industrial edge. Yet, despite the gleaming components, the well-lubricated aura that connotes well-oiled machinery, and the resemblance to some unknowable precision instrumentality, this work effectively transcends any facile reduction to a minimalist type by virtue of the way in which it actually functions, the implicit quasi-



metaphoricity and the sheer strangeness of the sculptural object itself, which successfully crosses the threshold of the physical world into a wholly aethereal space by virtue of its "image-spliced" manoeuvres.

Our active imagining in front of one of these works thus brings us into close contact with the primordial archetypal material that lies at the fundament of our unconscious. Francis' material itself becomes a metaphor for that archetypal material, just as the sculpture is designated as a vehicle that might well carry us towards internal transformation. While there are obviously references to certain art-historical concerns, there are no decorative elements here whatsoever. Everything is indispensable towards a specific end, and that end lies more within the observer's head, and with alchemical procedures and shamanic myth, than it does with the recent history of get-on-the-bandwagon sculptural praxis, whether within postmodernism or without.

Francis has recently been involved with his *Shamanic Dream Paintings* or, as he also calls them,

John Francis, *Alchemical Construction with Neon*, 1984-85, 1,52 x 2,74 m. Rayon, steel, blood.

Dream Sets (sets being a reference to the fact that they are usually stacked vertically in triptych presentation modes). These works, fabricated from different materials, are more wall reliefs than paintings. Their exaggerated rectilinear forms alternate between segments of painted aluminium — usually deep autumnal hues inflected with seductive flecks that seem to recede deep into their surfaces — and solid metals like copper, brass and steel plate which complement the colored zones with their natural patinae and lustre. Rubber is also used. These resplendent “paintings” are both literally and figuratively “rites of passage” — they obviously refer to the aboriginal myth of passage between dream and reality states on the part of the tribal shaman.

The exemplary craftsmanship of these objects enhances their inherent undecidability. Long visual passages, they are meant to be metaphors for sundry dream states and they are the visual equivalents of tone-poems. Obviously bolted together — their facture always explicated as such — yet consummately original in both their intention and execution, the inordinate rectilinearity of the relief-form stakes a somatic as well as optic claim, encouraging the eye that would know them to willingly enter their circuit, moving relentlessly from one zone to another across the breadth of the surface plane. But aside from the somatic and optic claims, one must speak of the functional ethos here — the specific and unavoidable sense that the relief object can be used. The *implementarity* of the thing is primary.

We have an overwhelming impression here of psychological transit, and the painting its vehicle, as if the horizontal field had been transformed into an operative horizon with a wealth of possibles we might embrace. In other words, we have a sense that this course might lead us somewhere, that it might afford us transit from one picayune reality to a hyper-reality that is just this moment beyond our ken. This is exactly Francis' intention, of course, which is to make the object transcend itself by having it infiltrate our psychological reality.

We can see clearly in this recent work Francis's preoccupation with ways and means of being human. His work is, finally, contingent upon the human desire for *wholeness*. The promise of transformation — of setting the crooked being straight, if you will; of bringing together in a primogenitary One all the contradictions which hold human beings apart from themselves, short of realising their true potentiality — is crucial here. Our imaginative transposition into this work is effected by the strength of this message, and if it is unerringly conveyed, this is because of the effectiveness of their felt imaging or “image-splicing”.

While, as we have pointed out, much of the earlier work used found materials and was palpably anthropomorphic in form and resonance, the latest sculptures and paintings use new materials and are more suggestive of instruments for achieving transformation than of beings undergoing transformation. The artist's longstanding interest in alchemy is still evident. While the work deals successfully with important formal issues, it also addresses various alchemical procedures which, for Francis, are important not only to his working methodology but to the interpretation of the work. But we should remember that the alchemical procedures which meaningfully inform all Francis' work are important in so far as they are an effective pretext for bringing us into touch with the archetypal material and the free elaboration of primordial images in consciousness.

With respect to the foregoing, we might cite in particular a piece the artist was working on recently entitled *Blood Box*, a latter-day *abaton*. Inside this flanged aluminium structure, caked with a layer of black blood-based paste, which rests on the wall and floor there is room to accommodate — a sort of dream armature, if you will — the artist himself for his performances using light. The relation of artist to this metal chamber is akin to that of the ancient incubant to Asclepius. The *Blood Box* is a loaded metaphor for a human being and an overt sign of transfiguration. It is also a chrysalis; an incubation chamber, and an alembic.

Certain other new pieces use neon light. Francis has used neon in innovative ways for many years and it is no surprise that his use of it in the more recent work is as innovative as at any time in the past. In his earlier *Alchemical Constructions*, as we have seen, neon was always used as a metaphor for the activity of a human consciousness. This is also the case with the current work. But we might suggest that the neon in certain recent pieces is the perfect embodiment of the active imagination we have discussed above. The passage from the self to its archetypes, the sudden recognition of the archetypal materials themselves, seems to find its perfect symbol in the neon light, with its otherworldly radiance; emanating, as it were, from the dark side of the sun.

In all this new work, whether it be sculptures which use neon or his new wall relief/paintings, Francis evokes a haunting sense of otherworldliness in opening up the sense of passage between sundry physiological and psychological spaces. But despite this auratic otherworldliness, Francis offers a potent metaphor for the one world we know, and our multiple strivings within it. The metaphoricity in this work is

a guarantor of sorts. For if it is rife with “pure possibility,” and the icon of the anthropomorph, this work offers a real incentive for our renewed acquaintance with it. It simultaneously beseeches and cuts across the full, embodied breadth of our own possibilising as human beings who inhabit a lived-world. Further, Francis would seem to agree with Jung that the human psyche has an autochthonous religious function and wants to draw on this in his creative work.

Much sculpture today asks us to suspend our disbelief and step inside it. But too often its manner of asking is brusque, boorish and uninviting. And too seldom does it succeed in convincing us to suspend that disbelief. If we willingly suspend it — and with a certain alacrity — in Francis' case, and somehow step within it, imaginatively transpose ourselves there, dream its dream, and partake of this rite of passage that the sculptor enjoins us to undergo — it is because the work itself always refers back to the self and its ongoing efforts to render the pure possibility the concrete actuality. If the wheels and springs and metals and colors and the sheer wealth of other materials — used in conjunction with ramps, ladders, tightropes and so on — function in order to convey the notion of passage as a primary concern, this sense of passage has, as in the dream, still deeper meanings, and invariably promises a real and lasting epiphany for the involved viewer who actively engages in finding them out.

Here is sculpture that represents an eloquent soliloquy on the soul which, enmeshed in the dark world of matter, has been granted by the sculptor a most singular *instrumentum* towards achieving self-knowledge and reconciliation, if not transcendence. Here are dark dreams that ensnare us readily. John Francis challenges his viewers to realise their own inner transformation and to become the *Anthropos* or whole person. ◆

NOTES

1. Carl Gustav Jung, in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 13. (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1971).
2. Jung, *op. cit.*, Vol. 6, p. 52.
3. *Ibid.*, Vol. 13, p. 167n. and p. 168n.

L'auteur analyse les travaux récents de John Francis: ses sculptures et ses reliefs peints. Ces oeuvres sont une métaphore du concept de “pure possibilité”, tel que décrit par Jung, qui croit que la psyché humaine possède en soi une fonction religieuse.

Chez Francis, la notion de passage est primordiale. Elle procure, dans la quête qu'en fait le spectateur, une révélation véritable et permanente.