Unfolding in Space and Time: On Tauba Auerbach’s *Fold* Paintings

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"The fold of the world is the fan or "l’unanime pli" (unanimous fold). At times the open fan makes all particles of matter, ashes, and fog rise and fall. We glimpse the visible through the mist as if through the mesh of a veil, following the creases that allow us to see stone in the opening of their inflections, "fold after fold," revealing the city."¹

Deleuze’s emphatic reading of Mallarmé’s poem Hérodiade as "the poem of the fold"² is in many ways revealing of his own attraction to the mystique of invisibility. The folding and unfolding of matter relates directly to a waxing and waning of visibility, and extends more broadly to complex metaphors about space and time, in which folded planes shift and transform unpredictably, allowing only fleeting opportunities to decipher their personality. The fold sparks a curiosity about its own process of becoming, and its ability to continuously generate new forms while simultaneously contributing to its own concealment.

It is difficult to not also think of Tauba Auerbach’s Untitled Fold paintings in such a way: where her process of folding becomes a sort of stand-in for an expansive materiality that is endlessly malleable in its sense of interior and exterior, subject and object, construction and dissolve. Furthermore, while there is a reversible relationship between folding and unfolding, it is not a straightforward one, and just as no fold can be completely predictable, half of its identity is always hidden from view. One side is always present at the cost of the other, leaving part of the equation to be assumed, but

² Ibid.
ultimately unknown (or as Merleau-Ponty notes, "always imminent and never realized in fact\(^3\)). The fullness of the fold is, by its very nature, always 'about to occur': caught in a continuous process of pointing to its own inverse. Never static and always in motion, the fold embodies a past, present, and future action, operating as an index of material intervention.

It is no wonder that the artist has been quick to relate her work to an exploration of the fourth dimension and 'tetrachromatic vision'\(^4\). The illusionistic surfaces of Auerbach's paintings seem a novel nod to the ability of the surface to mask what lies beneath. But for the inquisitive viewer, the problem of surface becomes an imaginative entry point, yielding potential clues about the invisible and the unknown.

Through a discussion of process, embodiment, duration, and creativity, I would like to examine the significance of the fold to Tauba Auerbach's conceptions of alternative dimensions, by conceiving of them as experiments in space and time. What is the nature of folding and unfolding?

**Folding the Body**

Auerbach's paintings are not the first to experiment with the technique of folding. The Hungarian painter Simon Hantai's 1960's *pliage* paintings are perhaps the most well-known examples of this method, and are in turn part of a much longer tradition of process-based practices which have often incorporated repeated actions as material and conceptual strategies. While Hantai uses folding as a way of arbitrarily withholding areas of the canvas from paint, Auerbach's folds aim at creating a topography of an

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\(^4\) from the exhibition press release: "Tetrachromat" held at the Bergen Kunsthall in Bergen, Norway from November 11 - December 22, 2011, curated by Solveig Øvstebø.
otherwise assumed two-dimensional space, creating material and spatial presence. The differences in their techniques effectively demonstrate the double essence of the fold, both as a method of hiding and revealing, collapsing and expanding. In both cases, the automatic process of folding becomes useful as a strategy of freeing the work from the artist's intentionality and replacing it with a repetitive and embodied action that is forever embedded in the form. Deleuze's observations of Hantaï's painting techniques are likewise strewn with descriptive action words, as surfaces of colours are "stretched", "splayed" and "knotted", in their "tubular" and "swarming" movement from being open to closed in each fold. The action becomes the content of the work (suggesting, perhaps, that it can never be finished at all), and shows how a 'way of working' can produce a specific 'way of seeing'.

In viewing Auerbach's paintings we can imagine the bodily presence of the artist at every step, pressing the material into new forms. And just as the material's texture is revealed in the way that it folds, we can think of the artist's body as becoming similarly exposed as a secondary texture becoming defined simultaneously, and one that embodies a mimetic relationship to the form that it is producing. The body is present throughout the process as sculptor and sculpted: folding and ironing the canvas, unfolding it loosely, and spray painting its three-dimensional form from different angles before finally stretching the canvas flatly again. We can imagine the body shifting to find a viewpoint to best observe the different planes, or its negotiation with a light source casting highlights and shadows on the newfound object. The result is a cyclical matrix of indexical traces pointing from the body, to the act of folding, to the paintings, and back again: the paintings as indices of the folds impressed into their surfaces, in turn indexical of the action of the body which created them, and the body which itself is also

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5 Deleuze, The Fold, 36.
6 Ibid., 46-47.
forever changed by the past action which it executed (like the man whose persistent
"rolling gait" indicates his time spent on a boat at sea).

The epitome of the fold's embodied index also extends to the act of viewing. Occupying
the liminal space between two and three dimensions, the illusionistic map of ridges and
valleys produced by the process of folding is an astonishingly convincing trompe l'oeil, which
nevertheless collapses flatly when observed from one side. The relationship between
the eye and the mind in the viewer is fundamentally shifted. What we see is no longer
what we know to be true; visuality openly deceives us. Perhaps Auerbach's transparent
deception could be understood as an exercise in developing a more acute optical
awareness, something like the visual exercises developed by Charles Hinton in his 1904
book, *The Fourth Dimension*, in which he aimed at developing the four-dimensional
"space-sense" of his readers through the memorization of various spatial and colour
configurations of cubes. For more than simply building a skeptical viewer, Auerbach's
fold paintings seem to work more generously. In as much as they break the illusion of
surface, do they not also suggest the remarkable depth of optical space? And is the
eye so deceiving, when in fact it is quick to detect the ghostly markings of a past
action, which would otherwise be invisible to touch, or smell, or hearing?

If it weren't for the primacy of vision, Auerbach's folds might be perceived as
nearly invisible, in which case the spatiality of the paintings would be completely lost.
Like the floating pictorial space containing Kazimir's geometric objects, her paintings
require the viewer's awareness of flatness in order to evoke infinite expansion.

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9 Henderson, "The Image and Imagination of the Fourth Dimension", 147-150.
However, while the former relies on the foregrounding of objects in an 'empty' free-fall, Auerbach's paintings suggest an intense crowding, a foregrounding of the pictorial surface itself, and an extension of the frame outwards into a universe of infinitely folded planes. Where "to unfold is to increase, to grow; whereas to fold is to diminish, to reduce", the process of folding and unfolding provokes an overwhelming series of contractions and dilations suggestive of the fold's supernatural ability to simultaneously take up an infinite amount of space, or almost none at all.

Thus the fold is not only suggestive of the index of the human body, but also suggestive of its own material mass in space - one that is surprisingly chameleon-like in its characteristics. And can we not also imagine that this infinite unfolding of planes might extend beyond two and three dimensions, on to a fourth, fifth, or sixth dimension? It seems that the versatility and unpredictability of the fold might be precisely that which allows it access to the impenetrable and the unknown. For despite the fold's ability to both expand and contract, Deleuze points out the generative way in which the fold always materializes form in the process, when he writes:

*The problem is not how to finish a fold, but how to continue it, to have it go through the ceiling, how to bring it to infinity. It is not only because the fold affects all materials that it thus becomes expressive matter, with different scales, speeds, and different vectors (mountains and waters, papers, fabrics, living tissues, the brain), but especially because it determines and materializes Form.*

Folding is constructive, even in its unfolding. And if only its visible trace remains, the act of folding continues to evoke a collaboration between the body and material form.

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11 Ibid., 34.
Untitled Fold Painting, Acrylic on Canvas, 60 x 45 inches, 2010
Past, Present, Future Tense

Are Auerbach's paintings in the process of folding, or unfolding? Are the clues that they expose about their existence slowly taking shape before our eyes, or are they already rapidly dissolving, to disappear completely in a matter of seconds?

In all of these questions, invisibility is curiously tied to time. If we follow from Derrida's notion of the "in-visible" as a collection of "secret visibilities" in which certain things of the visible world are only temporarily hidden from view\(^\text{12}\), then revelation is simply a matter of timing. That our relationship to the unknown or the invisible is fundamentally temporal (being a matter of "when" and not "if" it will become visible) seems to be further supported by Deleuze's concept of the "virtual": that everywhere around us, virtualities are teeming with the potentiality of becoming "actualized" at any moment.\(^\text{13}\) Certainly, ongoing speculation about the fourth dimension is similarly tied to the grounding belief that the continued building of empirical knowledge will eventually lead to an unlocking of new space-time continua.

Tauba Auerbach's paintings apply this temporality liberally: just as the fold of the present indexes an action in the past and implies a similar action in the future (or its reverse), she also activates the semiotics of a 'nostalgic futurism' in her choice of colour, calling to mind all of the tropes of dated science fiction films and an aesthetic in which the 'clothing of the future' bears convenient similarity to iridescent 1980s ski suits. But more importantly, we can imagine her technique of spray painting as a kind of lightweight preservation treatment of something that has emerged from the recent past, and something which is deemed worthy of preservation for the future (perhaps before it


dissipates again). The folds in her canvasses present themselves subtly and fleetingly, trembling with the potential of being lost forever with any quick and mindless gesture. Does Auerbach become, then, a kind of "archeologist of the future"? Does the fragile mystery of the universe await the preservation of its folds?

In his essay "Semiotic Ghosts: Science Fiction and Historicism", Peio Aguirre relates a science fiction sensibility to our current conceptions of history, and to the resurgence of past art forms within the frameworks of the new.\(^\text{14}\) To do so, he calls upon The Gernsback Continuum, a 1981 short story by William Gibson in which the photographer protagonist becomes haunted by the "unrealized futures" he is uncovering in his process of assembling a coffee-table book about futuristic architecture from the 1930s.\(^\text{15}\) The thematic detective story of digging up a lost future seems to find enduring links with science fiction's fascination with the fourth dimension, and shows a similar irony in its confused conception between past, present and future tense, or what Aguirre described as "the time-space shifts that tend to present the past as science fiction and science fiction as past."\(^\text{16}\) The fourth dimension is today an archaic concept, now used primarily as a symbol of a historically-specific optimistic prospect. Resurrected in the present, it makes for a compact sign, loaded with all of the cultural motifs that make history seem mobile.

Auerbach's paintings seem to position themselves within this same paradigm, but intentionally so: self-reflexively attempting to achieve 'timelessness' with all of the markings of the present still intact. She does not attempt to illustrate the redundant motifs of the fourth dimension which have become so adept at time-travel, like the expedient design book which claims to capture the 'look' of a future-past. Instead, her

\(^\text{16}\) Aguirre, Peio, "Semiotic Ghosts": 125.
work is more like an "inflection" (to use Deleuze's term), that is not of the fourth dimension at all, but rather, "between dimensions"\textsuperscript{17}. vitally tied to a creativity in the present, and actively performing the fold as an embodied analogy to space and time.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{17} Deleuze, The Fold, 15.}
Untitled Fold Painting, Acrylic on Canvas, 60 x 45 inches, 2010
Creation Unfolds

Does the process of creation expose the virtual, or does it only further conceal it? Is it even possible to think of the work of art as a spontaneous collision between the actual and the virtual, or what Deleuze called the "crystal image"\textsuperscript{18}, when the intentionality of the artist figures so prominently into the process of creation? Though Auerbach's folding process incites a certain level of determinism on the resulting form, she never relinquishes her free will entirely. This is different, for example, from a piece of fabric which is thrown against a wall, and inevitably folds onto itself upon impact.

The distinction between the conscious act of folding and the spontaneous fold is an important one when it comes to considering Auerbach's paintings within the extended metaphor of folding and unfolding. It seems that these works are likely a combination of the two: where through the process of pressing one crease into place, one inevitably produces several other folds also. The intensity of the work seems to lie precisely in the tension created between these two kinds of folds, in a delicate balance between the forced creation — as constituted by the artist's role in producing the fold (or forcing the fold to fold) — and the inadvertent one.

Bergson may have appreciated Auerbach's gesture for its demonstration of his grounding concept of "Duration", which he defined as the continuously changing and incomplete flow of lived experience that constitutes the frameworks for which our intuition and free will can take shape.\textsuperscript{19} Bergson's \textit{durée} seems a much more fitting analogy for the performative act of folding and unfolding than any statically-defined conception of "time" or "space" alone, and it is not surprising that he was at odds with Einstein's \textit{Theory of Relativity} and that it caused him to emphasize the difference.

\textsuperscript{18} Deleuze, "The Actual and the Virtual", 150-152.
between lived, 'Real time' (Duration) and measureable, externally-defined 'clock-time'\textsuperscript{20} in his book *Duration and Simultaneity*: "Real duration is experienced; [on the contrary] we learn that time unfolds and, moreover, that we are unable to measure it without converting it into space and without assuming all we know of it to be unfolded."\textsuperscript{21}

Auerbach's works pit themselves against any fatalistic understanding of "unfolding time", and instead assert creativity and invention at the centre of their potential for accessing the invisible and the unknown. She is not interested in transparently unfolding the secrets of the fourth dimension to the viewer, because she does not know them. Auerbach's process of folding and unfolding corresponds to a basic understanding of a larger system — one that is perpetually oscillating between translucency and opacity — and to the playful proposition that perhaps the artist's role is to simply invent new ways of seeing within this paradox. As Bergson writes in *Creative Evolution*, "The universe endures. The more we study the nature of time, the more we shall comprehend that duration means invention, the creation of forms, the continual elaboration of the absolutely new."\textsuperscript{22}

In conceiving of Tauba Auerbach's *Fold* paintings within the imaginative possibility of an alternative dimension, I am drawn repeatedly to my own skeptical question: What is the capacity of the invisible to reveal itself in the visible? Pop culture's allure with avisuality certainly suggests that we want it to be possible, and there is no shortage of interest in holographic images which seem to defy the limits of two-dimensional space, or in stereograms whose abstract patterns stare down the patient

\textsuperscript{21} Bergson, Henri, *Duration and Simultaneity*, trans. Leon Jacobson (Manchester: Clinamen, 1999), 43, quoted in David Scott, "The 'Concept of Time' and the 'Being of the Clock'", 186.
viewer to eventually and magically reveal a hidden picture. In some ways Auerbach's paintings share similarities to these forms as experiments which, through their limited scopes, serve to jar our sense of visual comprehension. However, while the former examples set out to deliver a pre-determined product which is marketed for its ability to 'trick' the eye, Auerbach's works are left open-ended. There is nothing specific to be expected of them, and their process is left naked and exposed. They do not rely on the gimmick of illusion and surprise to deliver their first-hand experience, but rather work generatively from this experience as a starting point in the process of learning. It is in this way that they encourage not a skeptical viewer, but a generous one.

To say that Auerbach's fold paintings truly 'reveal the invisible' would miss the subtlety of Merleau-Ponty's concept of the invisible as the "lining" of the visible and the extension of the imagination that this implies. Auerbach's paintings present us with a folded exterior shell, opaque but not seamlessly so, with which we can extend our experiential sense of the fold to speculate not only about its reverse, but of an expansive set of non-opposing movements which constitute the 'breathing' of a complex entity in space and time. As Deleuze writes: "Folding-unfolding no longer simply means tension-release, contraction-dilation, but enveloping-developing, involution-evolution." It is within this productive potentiality that the fourth dimension might take shape, not through a way of quantitative deduction, but rather, as an outgrowth of invention.

24 Deleuze, Gilles, The Fold, 8. (italics my own)
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