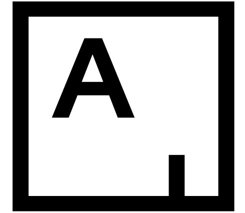

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The Many Faces of Ecstasy in Art

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Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647–52. Via Wikimedia Commons

The truest depictions of ecstasy in art exist in the muddled territory between exaltation and despair. Its subjects are trademarked by a lack of autonomy—an inability to regulate the self as it slips away from the idea of the self. This is its key: Ecstasy is not the supreme heights of joy nor the violent depths of despondency, but rather the phenomenon of transcendence, often through an indiscriminate combination of extremes.

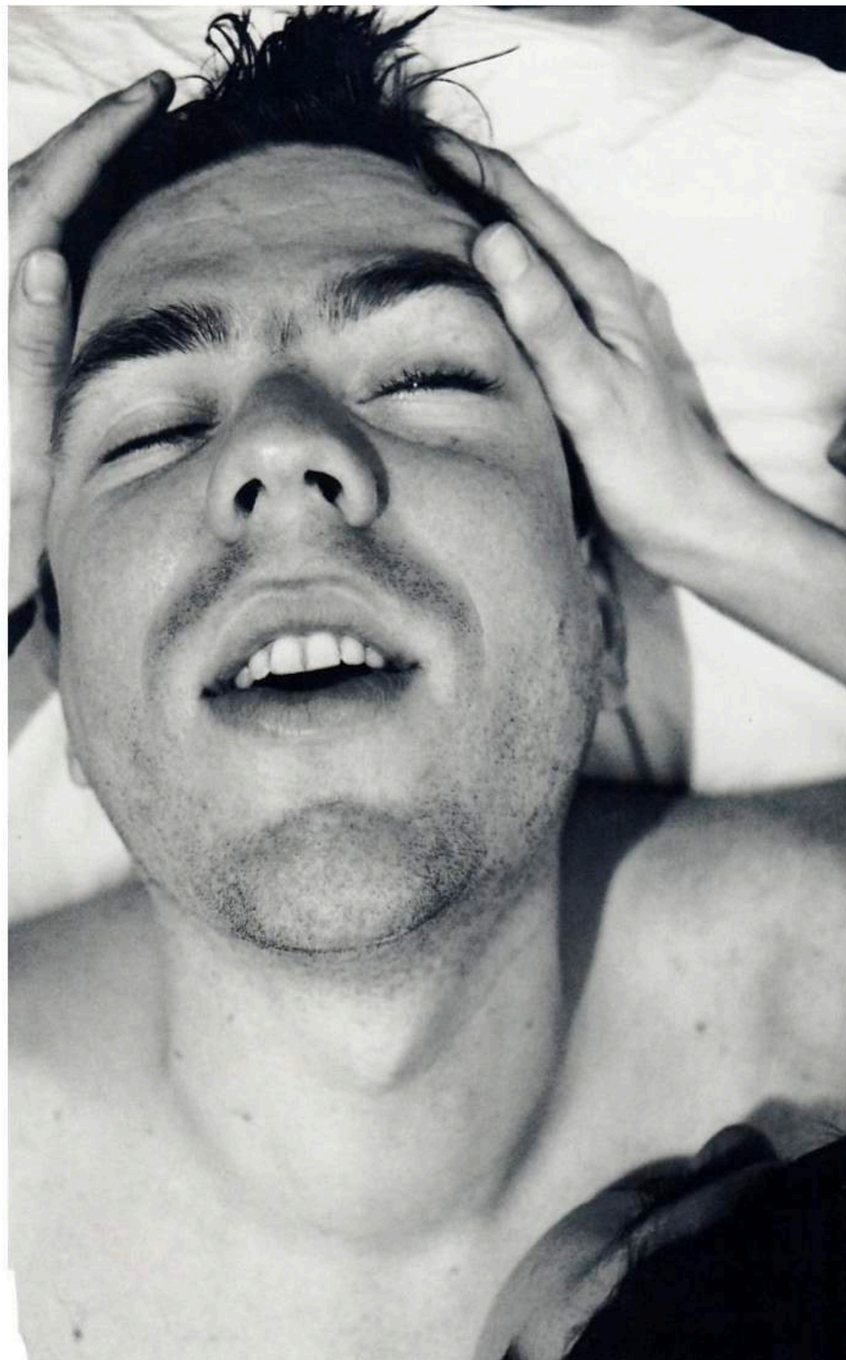
Throughout history, the perception of ecstasy, not unlike its symptoms, has been disorderly. The English language gets the word from the Greek *ekstasis*, meaning “to put out of place.” In 405 B.C.E., the Greek tragedian Euripides premiered his play *The Bacchae*, the tale of a king attempting to fight off Dionysus, the god associated with revelry and religious frenzy, in order to protect his population from falling into a state of debauched ecstasy. But the word is also filtered through the Old French *extasie*, which roughly translates to “rapturous.” In 1933, Gustav Machatý’s *Ekstase*, starring the Depression-era dreamboat Hedy Lamarr, featured the first-ever female orgasm in mainstream cinema. By the 1990s, it came to refer to the rapture-inducing party drug made popular by well-meaning club kids seeking community in electronic music and getting high.

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Francis of Assisi in Ecstasy*, 1594. Via Wikimedia Commons.

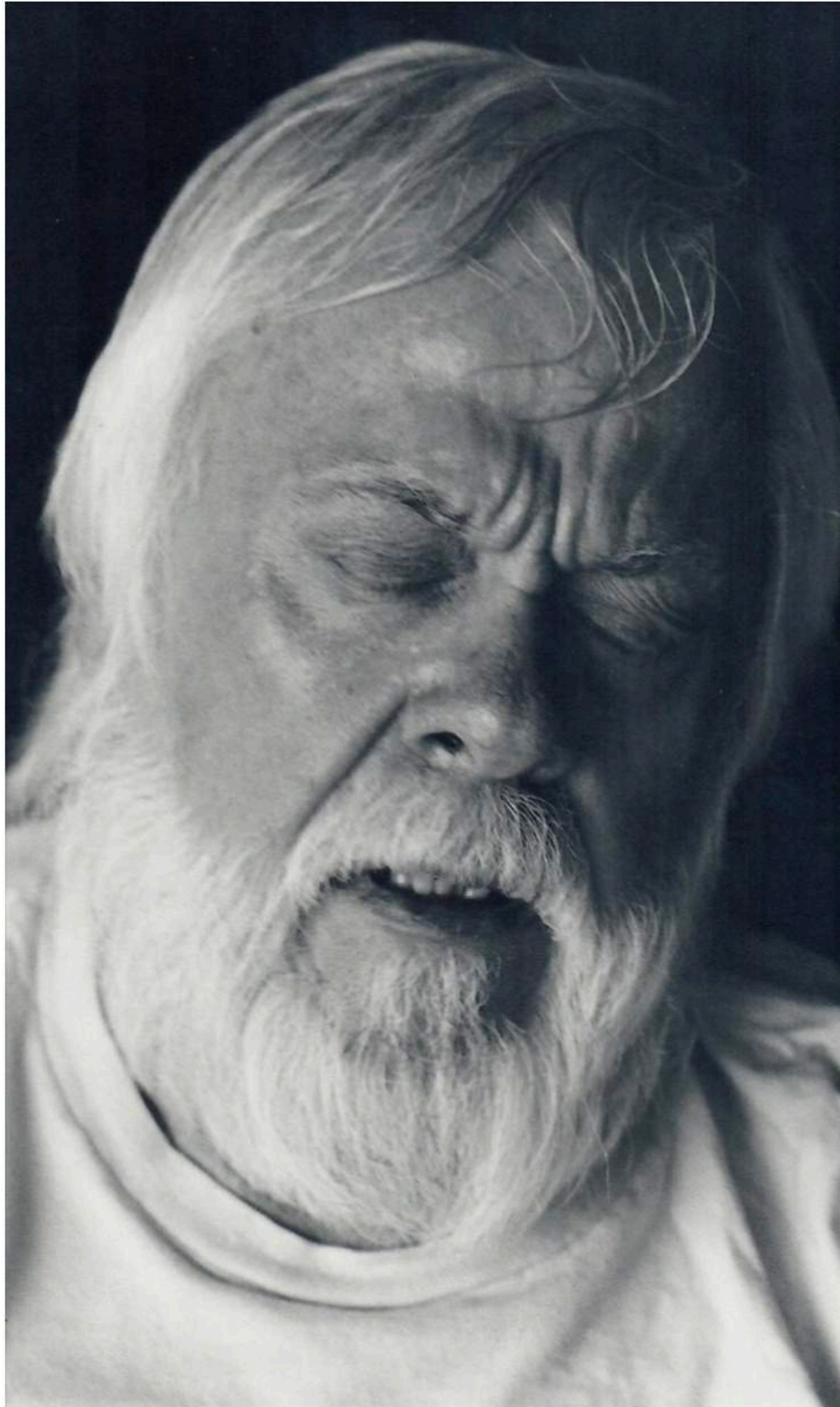
The canonical art-historical example of the emotional condition is Gian Lorenzo Bernini’s *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (1647–52). The marble sculpture, installed in the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, depicts the 16th-century Spanish nun in the exact moment a visiting angel has come to stab her in the heart with a spear. The vision is one that Teresa herself detailed in writing:

“Beside me, on the left, appeared an angel in bodily form.…In his hands I saw a great golden spear, and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it

penetrated to my entrails. When he pulled it out I felt that he took them with it, and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease."



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (OS)*, 1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.



Aura Rosenberg, *Head Shots (JB)*, 1991-1996. Courtesy of Martos Gallery.

It's this indulgent commingling of pleasure and pain, along with St. Teresa's inarguably orgasmic state of repose—eyes closed, mouth agape, reclining in exaltation as her robe drapes around her—that has earned the Baroque sculpture a place in the canon. Mary Magdalene was similarly chosen for deistic psycho-sexual renderings of ecstasy in Baroque works like Caravaggio's *Mary Magdalene in*

Ecstasy (1606) and Peter Paul Rubens's *Ecstasy of Mary Magdalene* (ca. 1619–20). According to a legend popular in Caravaggio's time, Magdalene was overcome, seven times a day, by "the delightful harmonies of the celestial choirs." Both paintings show her in the midst of such a visit, and in each, she's unable to stand, as if in an erotic delirium.

Eugène Delacroix, *La mort de Sardanapale (Death of Sardanapalus)*, 1827, Musée du Louvre, Paris

Can similarly preternatural states be summoned by secular figures? Ask any fainting concert-goer who experienced the throes of Beatlemania, and the answer is undoubtedly yes. Ecstasy achieved through cumulative, mob-energy fanaticism is the subject of Dan Graham's seminal 1983–84 work *Rock My Religion*. The nearly hour-long video splices together concert footage of acts like Black Flag, the Doors, Patti Smith, and Jerry Lee Lewis while paralleling these videos with discussions of alternative religions and depictions of religious rapture.

Dancing, be it in a group or alone, seems to be one of ecstasy's many earthly access points. In Adrian Piper's installation *The Big Four-Oh* (1988), a monitor—set amid baseballs, a knight's armor, piss, and vinegar—shows the artist dancing alone to funk music for 47 minutes straight, her back to the viewer the whole time as she loses herself in the dance. (Nearly 30 years later, in her 2007 video *Adrian Moves to Berlin*, Piper again danced herself to transcendence, this time alone in Berlin's Alexanderplatz.)

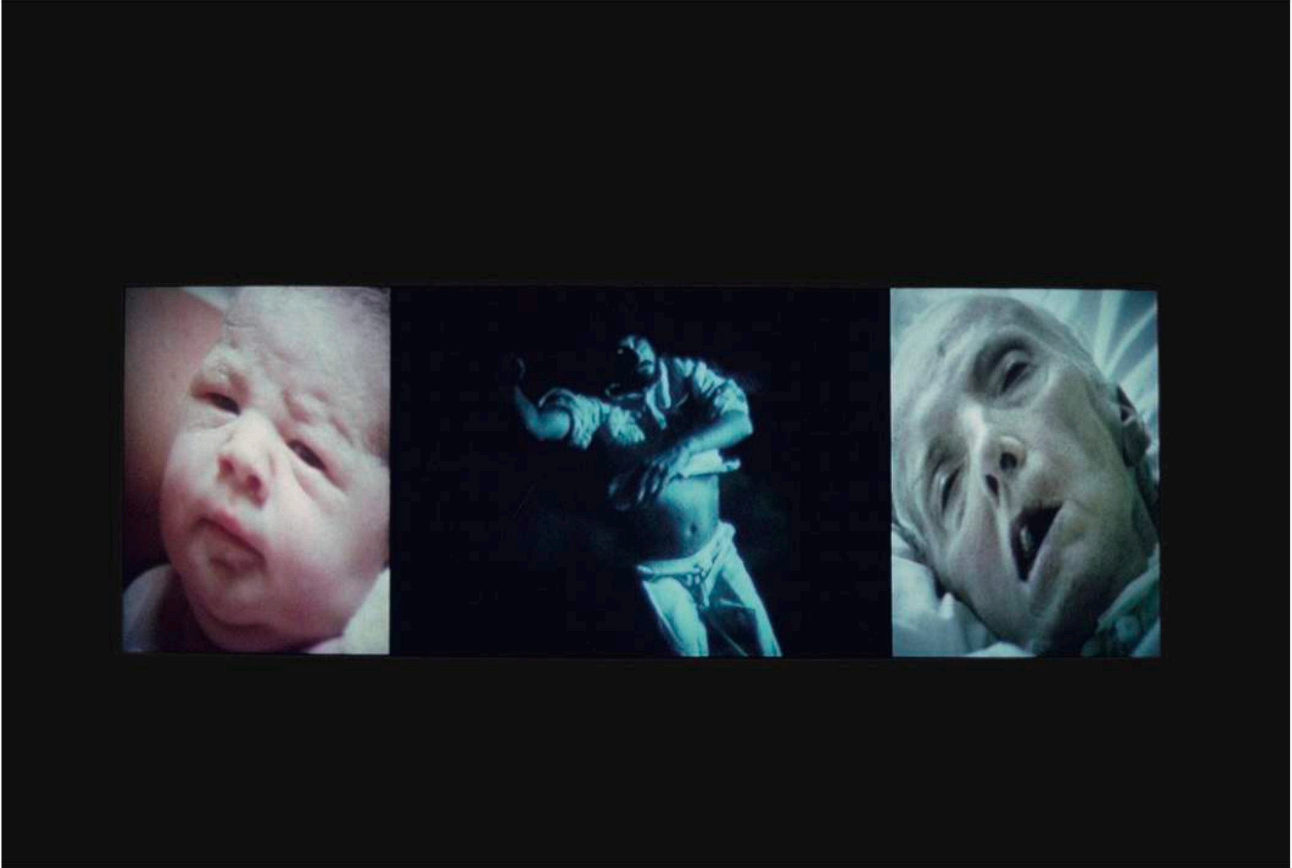
Larry Clark, *xiii*, 1980, Edward Ressle

Larry Clark, *Skip Tapping Vein (from the series "Tulsa")*, 1971, ClampArt

As John Lithgow's character in *Footloose* (1984) warns us, dancing slips easily into sexuality. Andy Warhol's silent film *Blow Job* (1964) shows only the head of a man who, for a single 35-minute shot, receives the titular act; his face, sunken at times in shadow, slips between wincing and rejoicing. He is an inverse of St. Theresa—experiencing pleasure so great it looks like pain. Aura Rosenberg found success in similar territory with her "Headshots" series (1991–96). She photographed male artists such as John Baldessari, Mike Kelley, and her husband, John Miller, mid-orgasm. Each picture, as the title suggests, focuses on their faces. Stripped of context, these images suggest people vacillating between extreme pain and sublime exultance.

The search for ecstasy can also be a violent spectacle. Eugène Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) shows the moment the Assyrian king, facing defeat, has decided to destroy

everything he takes pleasure in, including his women, horses, and riches. Nude bodies flail about in a downright orgiastic state of chaos. The hyper-sexualized death scene is an anti-bacchanal—the opposite, despite their Dionysian similarities, of a work like Henri Matisse's *The Joy of Life* (1905–06).



Bill Viola, *Nantes Triptych*, 1992, Royal Academy of Arts

If we understand ecstasy as a state of transcendence through emotion—often at the expense of such profoundly human traits as the governance over one's own body—then it can be found in much humbler settings. Larry Clark returned to his native Tulsa to photograph the series collected in his 1971 book by the same name. Figures from Clark's world bounce through life, trapped, colliding like pinballs between highs and lows. The viewer watches them unmoor: shooting up in bathtubs and on beds; sleeping with and harming one another. This is the endless pursuit of ecstasy, the active hunt to separate the self from the self through religion, music, and sex, or through getting high. Countless photographers, from Nan Goldin to Wolfgang Tillmans to Dash Snow, have made careers capturing similarly hedonistic scenes of unbridled drug use.

The messiness of ecstasy is contained in Bill Viola's breakthrough 1992 work, *Nantes Triptych.* The 30-minute, 3-channel video shows a home birth on the left screen, a man floating in water in the central

panel, and, on the right, a home video of Viola's mother as she lies dying. On the left, the viewer witnesses childbirth and the agonizing pain and exaltation it intertwines. In the center, the submerged figure seems somewhere between drowning and calmly floating. And on the right, there is Viola's mother, leaving it all behind in the dismaying quietude of a coma. For a stunning and crucial few minutes toward the end, a newborn baby is held by its mother in the first channel while Viola's brother lays a mournful, tender hand on his mother's head in the last. Here, life and death meet each other, the messy ring of ecstasy soldering itself whole.