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From: Hans Danuser in the Wolfsberg

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HANS DANUSER AN INSTALLATION WITH PHOTOGRAPHS IN THE WOLFSBERG

FROZEN EMBRYO SERIES Juri Steiner

Topography Despite their size and deep, dark presence the prints in the Frozen Embryo Series have a glassy, unstable look. White, black and gray tones split up the color scale. And in the reflections on the glossy surface of the baryta paper the motif eludes spontaneous viewing. Danuser's photography blossoms and dies in moments, with the slightest variation in the fall of light or the position you adopt to view it. No track leads through the abstract topography. There is nothing to guide the eye, unless you are a pathologist and understand the content. But even the layman, if he looks closely, notices the stratification, sees organically rounded, white-edged internal structures, delicate little flakes that have solidified, frozen into a sort of transparent layer of ice. From a distance these complex forms look like clouds of smoke, granted permanent existence only when frozen in the photographic moment.

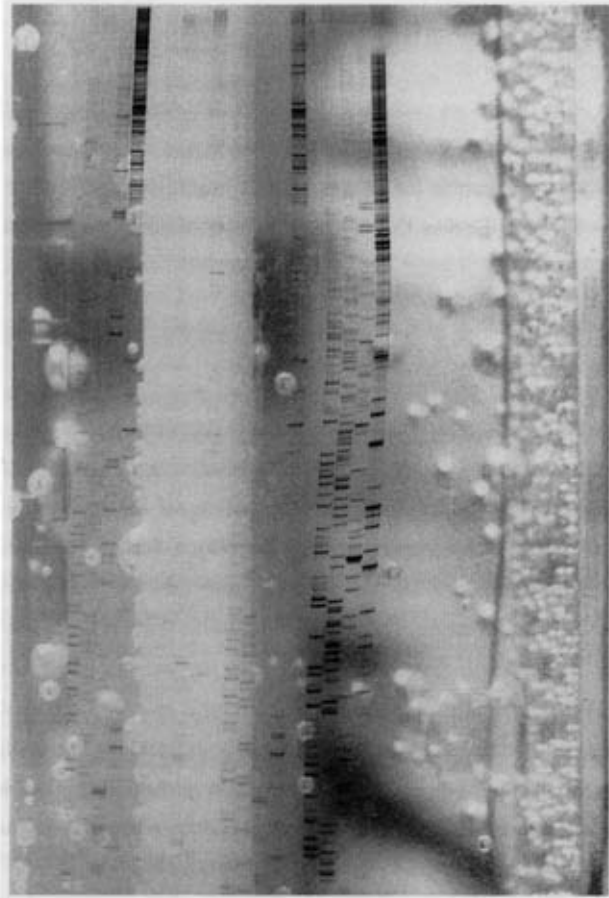
Transience is one of the topoi of art. And the more reductive the form, the colder the effect of the psychopomp. For as long as photography has existed, its internal clock has incarnated the modern hour-glass. It also has the potential, as a probe for perception, to reach beyond reflecting the reality of the moment. In Frozen Embryo Series the process of technical reproduction faces an image with a zero minus rating.

Fleck Subcutaneous takes on the world of this order leave the status of duplicates of perceptible forms far behind. The cohesive power of optical experience, on which photography predicated on the object is based, is cracked wide open. Georges Bataille has applied the concept of the "heterogeneous" to this split, thereby defining the moment of fascinated shock when the categories for our familiar dealings with the world are suddenly scattered far and wide. Bataille's *informe* turned the universe in the late Twenties into that notorious fleck of spittle, which many surrealist and existentialist smugglers took as the point of departure for their divagations and dissipations. With Bataille's fleck formlessness replaced abstraction as the key theme of informal art after World War II. The sun no longer shines to help us find our place on earth. It now blinds humankind to the point of sheer madness, until a someone tears off a finger or hacks off an ear¹, until the eye no longer sits in the centre of the face as a window on the soul, but becomes a *friandise cannibale*² of the kind we still today suck from the screen in Buñuel's *Chien Andalou*.

1 Georges Bataille, La mutilation sacrificielle et l'oreille coupée de Vincent van Gogh (1930), in Œuvres complètes, Paris 1970, p. 258ff. 2 Georges Bataille, Œuil (1929), in: Œuvres complètes, Paris 1970, p. 52ff.

Shock Such schizoid perception prescribes that art start at the point where like causes cease to produce like effects. These peculiar moments of consciousness affect the entire field of vision, and consequently also photography. It was not only photography as the medium of spontaneous, euphoric truth to nature that had to be freed from its servitude for this to happen. The modern eye also had to learn to understand the photographs produced by this new con-

sciousness. One of the greatest charms of the paradigmatic art photography of the twentieth century lies in its capacity to reproduce extremely heterogeneous moments. One thinks of incunabula like Wols's pictures of skinned hares' heads or Eli Lotar's photos of the Paris abat-toirs. Even somebody like Mike Kelly is still, in his whimsical way, quoting this photography of sublime shock when he takes black and white pictures of artificial fibers in such a way that behind glass they look like infected tissue, at once repulsive and attractive, and of course also powerfully erotic with their Araki-like suggestion of folds, hair, fluff. Frozen Embryo Series is related to



this eruptive aesthetic. But what Danuser shows is the state after the visual shock. It seems as though he has retreated from the harsh light of photography into the shadows, from there to document the fall-out after the visual shock-wave. With leaden stoicism his pictures report the unspeakable, offer a view of an imploded world. It is the world of the taboo zones of civilization. Atomic energy, gold production, anatomy, pathology, Los Alamos, atomic and laser research, chemical research, gene research, and bio-technology have since the Eighties been part of Danuser's field of inquiry. And his art is an attempt to get close the centers of knowledge and disinformation. Between 1990 and 1993, in the building of the Institute for Pharmacy, Pharmacology, Physics and Mathematics at Zurich Irchel University, he created twenty-nine overdoors with an accompanying frieze of *mots trouvés* from the language of science: "DESIGN COLOR MEMBRANE PHARMACOPOEIA E-COLI."

HANS DANUSER

DNS

From **Chemistry II**, 1989, photographs on baryta paper
In 12 parts, each 40 cm by 50 cm

Touch What Danuser takes from research establishments and laboratories and integrates into his photographic work, apart from concepts and communicative signs like \, *, @, are schemata and shadows, seldom any more narrative in character than the *grisailles* in Frozen Embryo Series. Anyone looking for sensations is on the wrong trail. The searcher is not pursuing researchers or custodians of the Grail for their penetrative depth or hermetic secrecy, he seeks the unresearched quality of an unreflected first contact, which may most readily be compared to a touch. The fascinating broken visual experience of skin-folds and pores in the Strangled Bodies series from 1993, for example, strongly recalls the withdrawal reflex experienced at the immediate prospect of physical contact with a reptile.

Speech The inclusion in the installation of Frozen Embryo Series of a rhyme, which children chant when they play counting games, adds to this ambivalence. "Ini Mini Meini..." stands on the wall before the block of pictures. This almost pre-linguistic utterance says something without stating anything. Like the title of the work it stands in a complementary, if not directly provocative relationship to the silent picture, which Sigmund Freud rates ahead of the conscious word as a primary cultural achievement. The reception of Danuser's work therefore oscillates between intuitive seeing and referential understanding, leaving the viewer trapped between the two. And yet, without being academic, Danuser's pictures formulate classical problems and paradoxes in painting: the perception of nature and its reproduction, the tension between surface and depth, between space and two-dimensional flattening, between foreground and background, between microscopy and totality, between eye and touch. He actualizes such questions, yet in the stream of flowing forms invokes the *Nymphéas* that Monet painted as he went blind, where the painter's cataracts steadily consume the motif and a mental image takes shape in place of a *plein-air* impression.

Eye Witness Pictures like this with no moment bring problems of their own. The approach in the last resort has to be via the intellect, via the hermeneutic circle of pre-cognition. In Danuser's case knowledge and piety are so wedded to one another, that the initiated observer becomes an affected, silenced witness. So the viewer too seeks to protect his perceptions from the verbal deformation of the visible. It is not by chance that probably the soundest commentaries on Danuser's work come from musicians or writers who have no use for hermeneutics. Fritz Hauser was inspired by Danuser's photography to write *Maeander*, a composition for four percussionists which in 1996, as an acoustic installation, accompanied Danuser's one-man show *Delta* at the Zurich Kunsthaus. The writer Reto Hänyy at the beginning of the Nineties used Danuser's work as a catalytic medium for his own researches in the area between speech and silence. And this engagement with the pictures produced *Hell-Dunkel*, a book which won

the renowned Ingeborg Bachmann Prize, and which disturbed, indeed could not help but disturb his readers with its relentlessness.

Civilisation Danuser himself is never explicit. His work is not based on any formulated statement or accusation which would provide arguments the guardians of morality might latch on to. *Frozen Embryo Series* shows artificially generated embryos, frozen for a later life without blemish or ailment. The deep-frozen embryo is the suggestive conjunction of coldness and vulnerability. But Danuser does not intend this as a statement against *in vitro* fertilization. His microscopic gaze goes beyond pure documentation of the frozen fetuses, so as to realize an artistic concept that brings light into hermetic zones of civilization in a way no scientific photo of chains of genes ever could. For the paler the light, the dumber, more impenetrable, more soulless the sector becomes into which the photographer, like a deep-sea diver, descends. The darker it becomes the higher the outside pressure rises, while the viewer for his part loses his voice as a result of the expanding silence. That Danuser installs his photographs in series of three, four, eight, or ten, is essentially connected to his determination to go above and beyond.

In spite of his almost total abandonment of narrative, Danuser's style and subject matter constantly come down to a fundamental social attitude. This attitude can, it seems to me, once again be related to Bataille. As head of the Cercle Communiste Démocratique in the inter-war years Bataille conducted the above-mentioned discussion on figuration and abstraction, which went beyond purely aesthetic categories. His decomposition of the figurative was directed against the goods-fetichism of the society of things. In his urge to break with this situation Bataille reversed the polarity of classical aesthetics: from *goût* to *désir*, from *beauté* to *intensité*, from *forme* to *informe*.³

3 See: Rosalind Krauss and Yves Bonnefoy (Eds.), *L'informe*, Paris

Archeology It is not only or initially due to Bataille that the twentieth century has gone down in history as the age of the disintegration of the obvious. But his *informe* did contribute to the rout of artistic perception by destructive ambiguity. As the French philosopher and art-historian Georges Didi-Huber has recently impressively demonstrated, a seeming disorder of the non evident began under the triad, *désir*, *intensité*, *informe* to displace the traditional order of the redundant beautiful-true-good. What is significant is that this did not mean the rejection of the figurative, but rather implied a specific questioning of form in the manner practiced by Bataille's contemporary Alberto Giacometti.

It is a fact that much in Danuser's work is implicitly related to the sculptor from Stampa. Carbonized or frozen, small as a fetus, or exposed unborn to the world, the human body is in both instances the *sine qua non* for any spiritual and emotional capacity. The human body is the *pièce de résistance*, and the natural burial-ground of culture. The strength of Giacometti's small

and smallest figurines lies in exposing the heart of the matter in just this way. And yet the match-sized ruffians of the late Thirties do not seem in any way dehumanized. They too radiate the magic repose that follows the intrusion of fate. They stick it out. Sticking it out is the leitmotif for life at the brink, life in extremis. Giacometti's art is witness between procreation and destruction to the struggle for dignity and sense in the knowledge of one's own impotence. *Frozen Embryo Series* follows this trail in that it seems to zoom microscopically in on Giacometti's corrosiveness. Humankind, in one case a Tom Thumb in plaster, in the other an embryo in ice. Times and techniques have changed – so too has knowledge. In the year 2000 the human genome has been almost 100% mapped. Nevertheless. The existential and the *angst* of dead existentialists survive. Hans Danuser has in the last ten years developed a visual language, which focuses on the blind spot of the missing one percent. But his work is really archeology rather than biology, he is closer to Pompeii than the laboratory.