

HANS DANUSER

DELTA

Juri Steiner

"Venus scratched shrieks aloud..."

As

the scattered drops of the roaring waterfall change with lightning rapidity, while the rainbow, whose supporter they are, remains immovably at rest, quite untouched by ceaseless change, so every idea, i.e., every species of living creature remains untouched by the continual change of its individuals.

Arthur Schopenhauer

My

project calls for a layer of color that I put on the support BEFORE the photographic BLACK-AND-WHITE EMULSION is applied.

Hans Danuser

Hans Danuser's photography is a crystalline pause. It stems from the deep sea of seeing. The subject comes to rest, like a Medusa, on the retina. The eye is refracted in gray values. There dead human skin; here the alluvial sand of slate, the material of blackboards, from the Engadine. The red and the blue of pictorial figures glow on an opaque ground:

\

"Backslash": a computer-age symbol indicating the next level in a directory tree.

Δ

"Delta": triangle and Greek letter—as old as geometry and the trinity. Symbol in calculus and an aesthetic grid in the pictorial composition of the western world.

@

"At": a graphic combination of the letters "a" and "t", a standard ASCII symbol (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) used to format E-mail addresses in Internet.<sup>1</sup>

Hans Danuser reads "backslash," "delta," and "at" as signs of communication and—like Leibniz—dreams the age-old dream of universal symbols that can be read in any language. \, Δ, @ crop up in computer science and cybernetics. Hans Danuser translates them from the monitor of the computer to the archaic slate blackboard, to the ancestral medium of communication.

The photographer travels with mathematicians to alpine rivulets and river banks where the erudite gentlemen write their signs with sticks in the primordial soup. Like Greek surveyors, today's academia trace the particles of their theorems in the sand using the formal instruments of the first man. They leave behind trails, the tiniest carriers of information in a formula-true binarism. And the abstract spheres of mathematics settle down to sleep in the mud like primordial snails in fossilized repose. Hans Danuser acts the paleontologist of creation beyond the space-time continuum. Mathematical symbols are a physical divestment of the body, inscribed onto another body. Living or fossilized ammonites from the Jurassic, organic or anorganic nature: merely two sides of the same coin. Hans Danuser wipes away sequential time and historical linearity; he somersaults over the history of evolution—*natura facit saltus*.<sup>2</sup>

Language, logic, science are products of different stages of human evolution. They are  $10^5$ ,  $2.5 \times 10^3$  and  $4 \times 10^3$  years old. Hans Danuser syncretizes the ambiguity of language with the exactitude of logic and the empiricism of experiment.

Above a door at the  
University of Zurich-Inchel,  
Building 17, Floor M,  
part of *Institutsbilder/eine  
Schrift-Bild-Installation*,  
1990–1993.  
Silver bromide print  
mounted on aluminum,  
130.5 x 105 cm /  
51 3/8 x 41 1/8"

<sup>1</sup> The @ series was in preparation at the time of the 1996 exhibition at the Kunsthau, Zurich.

<sup>2</sup> The natural sciences traditionally assume that nature develops steadily and does not make any leaps: *natura non facit saltus*.



He does not belong to that tribe of cave dwellers to whom Ludwig Wittgenstein referred in his lectures to illustrate definition and naming. Never, says the wordsmith from Vienna, would it occur to anyone to assume that these primitive people engaged in mathematics simply because they painted numbers (ornaments) on the walls.

Hans Danuser certainly does not do mathematics. Nor does he use its symbols as decoration or as magic totems. He retrieves them from their logical discipline, from their semiotic docility where a sign is always a sign of something.

His work speaks of the wish to expand the deductive if-then game of the sciences. It disputes linearity and bivalence, much like current attempts to move from quantitative to qualitative mathematics by revising the concepts of symbol and form. Hans Danuser turns a freighted sign into a

#### Kenogram.

This is itself a nothing, the void, referring only to the place where the infinite exchange of values, of signs in general, takes or can take place; it is a kind of non-place, a function, it is the exchange of signs themselves, without being thereby exhausted. It is the stand-in.

Engelbert Kronthaler

The parameters of the logical structure of "true" and "false" are expanded; inconsistency and aesthetics are admitted to areas where they ordinarily have no place: *Tertium datur*. Hans Danuser toys with Augustine's theory of naming. Children learn the meaning of objects

through deixis. Grown-ups point to things and call them by name. But  $\lambda$ ,  $\Delta$ , and  $@$ , are as alingual, as utterly unlike speech as the anthracite background of the slate photographs.

#### Only

because the thought, like those fleeting, undepictable chemical substances, must be combined with something coarser, something physical, that it may be seen: only for that reason do I avail myself of speech when I wish to impart something and only for that reason do you require speech that you may understand me.

Heinrich von Kleist

Communication. Hans Danuser shows the limits of what can be expressed in words. The photographic act revolves around the visible. The photographic process is devoted to the embodiment of light. But does art need to know the kind of light involved—Sir Newton's light, for instance, or Einstein's—in order to free the spirit of matter? The artist is a gnostic beholden to the speculative source of light.

The world becomes visual on the way from the retina to the cortex. Visual cells swallow protons. To reveal the hidden universe, the periphery of the identifiable, things infinitesimal or infinitely remote, one must run counter to the senses—enlargements, X rays, markings, and even distortion. Colored biological specimens or biopsies facilitate analysis. Coloring refines perception. Nine of every ten ganglia cells in the retina contribute to the perception of color. The b/w photographer Hans Danuser chooses blue and red, and like the demi-savant Nicéphore Niépce in the 19th

century, he invents a technique of stabilized perception. Its simplicity appeals to the layperson. Its realization, however, requires the intransigence of the pioneer. Curiosity, daring, tenacity, extravagant amounts of time and money have been invested in the project, started in 1992. While the compulsive experimenter works with single-minded absorption on the threshold of asylum, the electrical engineer Brown thinks in terms of business. Nonetheless, Hans Danuser appropriates the freedom of a man of means. He is a universalist from the infancy of modern science, an amateur with the standards of a perfectionist, a self-taught connoisseur in the best sense of the word.

The artist's inspired attitude of the naturalist and the modern atom-splitting sciences are worlds apart. Hans Danuser's works are reminiscent of the adventures of the soul, the rapture of the mystic. He uses authenticity as his medium, as his spiritual substance. He is the documentarist and hermeneutic of his hylemorphism.

#### Morphology

rests on the conviction that everything that is, must also be visible. We apply this principle to everything from the first physical and chemical elements to the spiritual utterances of a human being. The anorganic, the vegetative, the animal and the human all have a morphology. Morphology is flexible, a becoming and a passing away. The study of morphology is the study of metamorphosis. The theory of metamorphosis is the key to the signs of nature.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Hans Danuser, the photographer, works in the sciences and in art. He makes thorough observations to grasp the morphology of natural phenomena. But nature is no longer untouched. Nature is there to be penetrated by human beings, to be dragged into the laboratory and the lecture hall, to be dissected, faceted, dismembered, to be subjected to measurement, classification and labeling. Nonetheless, Hans Danuser's study of nature targets the hidden, indivisible idea in the background. He approaches it like a reporter. He tracks it down in the most remote corner of the Maschänserrüfe in the Scaläratobel.<sup>3</sup> Positivist pentagrams in the sand speak of a primeval meta-physics, the most abstract way of knowledge unfettered by factual foreknowledge.

#### Experiment

Try to make a cast of your mistress's hand, and set the thing before you. You will see a monstrosity, a dead mass, bearing no resemblance to the living hand; you would be compelled to have recourse to the chisel of a sculptor who, without making an exact copy, would represent for you its movement and its life. We must detect the spirit, the informing soul in the appearances of things and beings.

Honoré de Balzac

Hans Danuser recapitulates the history of modern technology and sciences through experiment. He invents partially colored photographic paper. On naked pulp paper, the photographer draws thin lines with the forgotten instrument of the painter: the brush. Arterial red or venous blue wounds gape. The operator knows his procedure. He calculates the position of the colors in advance. There where the sign, inscribed in the sand, lies on the finished print, between the thin

<sup>3</sup> A landslide region in the Swiss alps.

ridges, there he puts his paint. In his own medium, the artist duplicates scientific process, synchronizing and expanding the subject of his photograph.

On the papery skin of the Venus photograph, tattooed by hand, machines draw barium sulfate in gelatin. The signs in sand and paper are wedded in this emulsion. They overlap and are woven into a whole. In the darkroom, the marbled black lours about the colors. In the developing bath, the red begins to foam at the edges of the wound. The blue draws one into the depths as if one were standing on the bridge across the Isthmus of Corinth.

#### "Backslash" an Installation

Serial photographic work \ always the same motif of '\. Paint applied individually \ in different shades of color. Format: 5.5 x 20 cm / 2 1/8 x 7 7/8" each.

The pictures, covered with nonreflecting glass, are inserted in a track resting on thin, welded iron stela. Tape, blackened with a pencil, links the segments of the picture. It is remarkable how accurately the b/w photograph renders the natural coloring of graphite. The color is red.

#### "Delta" Individual Pictures

Serial photographic work \ always the same motif of 'Nabla'-Delta '\n'. Paint applied individually \ different shades of color. Format: 20 x 18.5 cm / 7 7/8 x 7 1/4" each.

Turich im November 1992

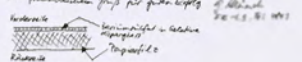
PROJEKTIONEN

Die im Handel erhältlichen Fotopapiere haben einen  
weisen Schichtaufbau.  
Mein Projekt zielt auf, dass ich den Schichtaufbau  
nach seinen Veranlassungen mit FARBE bearbeitete BEWEIS  
zu dem einen fotografischen BEWÄHRUNGSMATERIAL  
beschichtet wird.

Handwritten notes in German:

Handwritten notes in German:

Als gelbes von DANIEL  
mit einem Foto gelbe eine Zelle (100-2000cm<sup>2</sup>)  
kann ich Papierüberlage zu die die Durchführung von  
Aufgabenarbeiten, was mit 10. Jahren am 11. 11. 92  
bestanden. Lassen die Idee von der Seite, obwohl sie  
nicht Beziehung mit der Einheit sind.  
178 Handwritten text for photo copy of the book  
20-11-92



Sketch, correspondence with an expert

Section of paint on paper and photographic emulsion

Elevation of photograph on painted paper

Handwritten notes in German:



Handwritten notes in German:



Handwritten notes in German:

The pictures are placed in light wooden frames. One, two, or all three sides of the triangle may be glowing in color. One notes the self-contained surface fenced in with blue, the arrow of the triangle with two colored sides, and the rotation of the triangle with one colored side. The reclining triangles are arranged in groups and rows. The delta of Venus, rotated by 180 degrees. The color is blue.

#### "Kilimandscharo" Individual Pictures

Serial photographic work \ always the same motif of 'Laplas'-Delta 'Δ', Paint applied individually \ different shades of color \ different motifs. Format: 20 x 18.5 cm / 7 7/8 x 7 1/4" each.

The delta becomes a mountain. "Kilimandscharo" presents the most narrative and most painterly treatment of the three groups. The association coalesces into certainty in the title: eternal snow is marked by colored hatching, which does not belong to the pictorial subject matter but has been applied to the paper freehand and pushes its way through the photograph.

The photographer has parted ways with the scientist. The sign has become picture. It has lost its freedom as a kenogram. As a pictogram, it transmits new content, vastly simpler in nature than what the complex sciences offer us. Archaic reduction is part of Hans Danuser's method: from micro-electronics to slate blackboards, from genetic engineering to children's verse, from calculus to the uncomplicated icon. In the ambiguity of complex concepts, in the recollection of everyday images and words, the possibility of naming is reestablished with a set towards the wide open vessel, the imagination of the child, the ability to turn abstracts into concretes.

Hans Danuser has discovered painting and has fertilized photography with it. The buried brushstroke, the lost painter's claw have surfaced again. The hairs of the paintbrush create a relief on the support. Pressure on the pastose pigment, once practiced by peinture, generates trace elements in the red and blue lines.

It does not make sense to color photographic paper according to plan, to anticipate the trail of the photographic subject through arithmetic calculation, and to reverse the protocol of traditional photographic method. Here we have someone at the historical end of the positive-negative process, at the grave of the iridescent silver bromide print, thumbing his nose at the digitalized world of "Photoshop".

"Matography" is what Hans Danuser calls his procedure, commemorating a razed cinema in Zurich. The designation comes from the second half of the original sign: "Kiné"-matograph". The artist rescued this useless appendix from the wreckers and carried it home. The movie house does not need its anachronistic matograph anymore. It belongs to an age long past. But it is the very obsolescence of the hoary term that captivates Hans Danuser. A madman, a matto, succumbs to uselessness.

"Matography" seems to be as unprofitable as its namesake was. A retrospective aura clings to the elaborate spectralization into color and photograph of the process of color photography, invented long ago. What an effort: to paint every print manually with individual nuances of color instead of using efficient methods of reproduction. In addition, the making of the colored works explodes the boundaries of economic reason. Hans Danuser's photographic paper is tailor-made. Expensive machinery, cost-effective only in mass production, is used to chemically coat the painted pulp paper.

Helvetia Bar (and  
Sihbrücke Cinema)  
in Zurich, 1930s  
Photo: Emil Acklin/  
Gretler's Panoptikum  
zur Sozialgeschichte



There is something otherworldly about the project. Just as modernism and antiquity coincide in the photographed subject, so do various stages of development meet in the making of the work of art. Manual labor and industrial high technology shake hands. The individualist secures the services of the photographic paper factory and undermines the anonymity of the machine. The process took three years. Initial inquiries and evaluations led to negotiations and finally to the persuasion of the management. Business reneged on its highest principle and gave the green light to a non-profit experiment. The return is not quantifiable.

#### Series

I

filmed an old washer woman climbing the stone stairs. When she reached the top, she was exhausted and made a gesture expressive of futility. The scene was basically mundane but, copied 20 times (sic) and linked, at the end, to the beginning of the climb, it visualizes the futility of life because the washerwoman never reached her goal.

Dudley Murphy

I

had the intention, when I made the "Woman Climbing the Stairs," of startling, gradually disturbing and then deeply moving the audience.

Fernand Léger



The photography in "Backslash" consists of stills from a continually moving film. Photo-memory is fragmentary, static. The sequence of 24 pictures per second is called cinema. Hans Danuser's installation "Backslash II" is static cinema. It is more than meticulously measured cuts from a temporal sequence. Fifteen meters (c. fifty feet) long, it celebrates simultaneity and repetition, two topoi of art in our century. In the twenties Hans Richter transferred his long strips of pictures to the dynamics of the film with Vikking Eggeling. In his film, "Ballet mécanique" (1922), Fernand Léger repeated 20 cuts of the same short scene. Hans Danuser's "film" lies there unrolled like a potential stereoscopic image for a centi-ocular viewer. The plot is reduced to a minimum: nuances of red in different segments of the pictures, a reservoir of time. It evaporates instead of flowing down into the valley.

The image is preserved in a "painterly" body. It unfolds, spreads out in space. The privileged vista of the ambulant viewer is directed at an ordered, calculated rhythm, defined by the beat of the red measures in the narrow shadows of graphite. The long beam of pictures geometrizes the site, every element seems to be assigned to a mathematically calculatable place. This musical arrangement generates an atmosphere. But at the same time the individual pictures have no vanishing point, like fifteenth century paintings in which the landscape began to reach beyond the frame and the vanishing point was located outside of the actual representation; the body is not clearly defined in painterly terms, and the light—in Hans Danuser's case the shadows—spread out into space.

Hans Danuser's matography walks a path from a seen to a conceived image. He abandons pathology because "the presentation of extremes to the eye" as Gottfried Ephraim Lessing



tells us, "clips the wings of fancy, prevents her from soaring beyond the impression of the senses." The stoical understatement of the matographic series must be called, with Lessing, untheatrical, and thus conforms to the classical canon of the fine arts. But the aesthetic standpoint has changed. The border between painting and poetry has been abandoned: Poetry (spiritual instruction and moral efficacy) no longer takes precedence over the fine arts (sensual pleasure in unfettered beauty). Enlightenment did not consider the materialized scream of a statue beautiful: an ugly black hole on the canvas, a dark cavity in a stone. However, we learn from Lessing that Homer's heroes were allowed to "fall with cries to the ground. He makes Venus, when merely scratched, shriek aloud; not that he may thereby paint the effeminacy of the goddess of pleasure, but rather that he may give suffering nature her due."

The red and blue cracks in Hans Danuser's matographs are like the stigmata of Venus. The modern sciences without gestalt, which proceeded from describing to explaining nature and have now reached the point of correcting it, are here cast in a mold, in a mute hole of shades of black. Color chants therein—Hans Danuser's Venus is not a siren.

Partial view of installation  
-Backslash I- (studio)  
Photo: Jun Steiner



**Collaborators on the MATOGRAPHIE Project**

A great number of people contributed to the success of the matography project, during the five years it took to complete. I thank them all.

**Mediation**

Roland Rasi made it possible for me to submit the initial idea to the headquarters of Agfa. Following a memorable meeting, Joachim Lohmann took the responsibility and gave the green light for the experimental phase.

**Photography**

In the field of photography in research and development, I am especially grateful to Axel Geratz as well as the team who spent untold hours on my project: Thomas Kaluschke, Rainer Bukowitz, Heinz Boldt, Rolf Hagen, Manfred Gebauer, Mirko Goldmann, Udo Lautscham, Mike Jeske, Frank Hoppe, Georg Grzesik, Karl Heinz Huber, Jürgen Schulz, Frank Cesarini, Georg Munch, Kunibert Remmel.

**Pigment**

In my search for the exact composition of the paint, I wish to thank Gerhard Horstmann, K. Dieter Leffels, Ciba, for their unstinting support and help. It was through Anton Bleikolm and Ulrich Saupp that I was able to experiment with the red pigment ordinarily reserved exclusively for governments and their monetary printing presses.

**Iron**

My warm gratitude goes to Johannes Husmann, who planned and executed the metalwork.

**Patronage**

The realization of the matographs would not have been possible without the commitment of Agfa. I wish to thank my publisher Lars Müller, who once again threw all economic reason overboard in the interests of quality. I think back with pleasure on the many times Guido Magnaguagno came to my studio and thank him for his confidence in this project.

Hans Danuser  
Zurich, March 19, 1996