FROZEN EMBRYO SERIES VIII

From Painting to Photography and Object

Lynn Kost

Prior to the invention of photography, we used to think primarily of paintings when it came to pictures. They were utilized for representation and visual narration, compressing time onto the canvas. Events and story lines are depicted side-by-side, overlapping, and taking on an abstract form.[1] Photography put an abrupt end to the long reign of this traditional conception of the image. It introduced the present tense into visual tradition and eclipsed the past tense of painting. In a subtractive process, photography selects from a current situation and creates an image of a reality. At both a narrative and an objective level, photography shifts the focus to the presence, immediacy, authenticity, and reality of the moment. With a little imagination and fantasy, viewers can participate and share in the reality the photograph depicts, whereas in paintings it cannot be shared and instead must be passed down to us.[2] The invention of photography atomized the traditional understanding of pictures. With painting only recently having arrived at naturalism, the visual arts were confronted with a fundamentally broadened concept of the image.

Shaken to its foundations, painting began to question its validity and purpose, and embarked upon the deconstruction and dissolution of representation and narration (the two essential characteristics that it had now lost to photography). Finally, in the early twentieth century, avant-garde movements began centering their efforts on abstraction, moving to nonobjective and monochrome paintings. They sought to liberate painting from the chains of illusionism. This evolution was a response to the inflexible and constrictive structures of society, which—in the field of art—manifested themselves in the form of strict institutionalization and conformity to rules. As happened at societal level, painting too began to free itself of these restrictions.[3] It gave free rein to color, abandoned its reliance on proportion and the structures of perspective, experimented with multi-perspectives and found objects, and began exploring the medium of collage. In the end, Marcel Duchamp and dada gave up the canvas. Suprematism demanded a new system of thought that tolerated neither resemblances nor representation and saw painting as a purely spiritual form of expression. Piet Mondrian reduced his pictures to the geometric essentials of space and primary colors, prescient of developments in the 1960s. All modernist avant-garde movements shared in a dissection of naturalistic perception.[4] Painting still persisted as paint on a canvas, but the familiar pictorial traditions that represented and upheld the old orders of society were subverted. Manifestos openly called for social change and a break with the conservative, institutional values of the press, art criticism, authorities, institutions, and the state. This took place at a time when photography was experiencing its first efflorescence.

The cornerstone for a new tradition in visual imagery was laid in the 1910s and 1920s. While photography may have played a decisive part in triggering this development, for its part it remained trapped in its infancy.[5] Abstract and nonobjective painting, however, entered into the canon, although it was still too early for the radical departures from tradition that Duchamp propagated.[6] Instead, the cult of genius prevailed once again, in the development of abstract expressionism and art informel. Poetic narrative supplanted the epic, and the blow of losing naturalism to photography was soothed by an excursion into the metaphysical. Finally, in the 1950s, there was a radical break with the narrative image. The logical consequence was the liberation of materials (such as paint) from their bondage to illusion and narration. Paints, stretcher frames, canvas, painting utensils, amongst other materials, became themselves the subject of representation.[7] This departure from the function of the image is representative of the attack on the dominant, conservative art discourse that continued to uphold painting as its paradigm. The one-way

relationship between artwork and viewer was no more. Materiality was to be felt, spaces and interactions experienced, and meaning imbued on a participatory basis. Viewers were now to become an active part of the works: they could choose their own point of view both spatially and mentally, and could no longer act as mere passive consumers.

Frank Stella provided the impetus for such processes with his conceptual approach, and by radically "de-skilling" artistic activity. Subsequently, Donald Judd, along with several other artists we classify as purveyors of minimalism and conceptual art in its nascent stage, sought to systematically deconstruct the painting. It was dissected into its separate parts, released from the canvas, and its individual components showcased.[8] The subject evolved into an object—it became the opposite of what it had been before. Now the viewer could engage actively with a counterpart, with an object. Narratives became a thing of the past. Instead, the objects themselves addressed the themes of perception, physicality, and space, and referred to their own materiality—questions which viewers could then explore for themselves. As a result, paintings creating a spatial illusion (within the boundaries of the frame) in order to stage stories or historic episodes largely disappeared. It is remarkable that in the conceptual scheme of thought of the 1960s, hardly any photographic experiments pursued a deconstructive approach toward the picture or the "reality of pictures."[9] In the late 1980s, Hans Danuser took up this thread in his work and was one of the first to apply it systematically to photography.

While a complete change in paradigms took place in painting within just sixty years, building on a pictorial tradition of many centuries,[10] photography was only assimilated into art discourse in the 1980s. There is an element of irony in the fact that photography first acquired enduring relevance in art discourse at the moment it submitted to the outdated notion of representation in painting. Painting for its part turned emphatically towards the world of art again. The "Junge Wilde" (Wild Youth), however, was a movement that neither sought a comeback of the figurative, linear narration of classical notions of painting nor the nonobjective traditions of the 1960s, but rather undermined the prevailing codes, the intellectual discourse of the time, and social rules in general, in the tradition of the Punk movement. Breaking taboos, throwing rules overboard, provocation, pop culture, posters, and street art were characteristic of this movement. Photography, on the other hand, filled the vacuum left by the disappearance of classical painting. A major genre within photography emerged with staged scenes (sometimes whole series), constructed pictures, montages, monumental formats etc.[11] Its basis was the pictorial tradition of painting and its principles of composition. Danuser clearly distanced himself from trends such as these right from the start of his artistic career. He had no intention of being a classical narrator or agitator. In his self-understanding as a free photographer, that is, not working on commission, but also free of the categories of applied and artistic photography, he made the most of the attention enjoyed by the medium at the time and worked with the camera on a different kind of image—to be presented in an art context. Both in terms of form and content, his pictures assimilated important elements from the abstract movements of the 1910s and 1960s, which were radically apparent in his *Frozen Embryo* and *Erosion* series. The point of departure was the series *In Vivo* (1980–1989), for which he took pictures of places that had played a key role in developing the innovations which benefited affluent societies (energy, medicine, animal testing, space research). These places—situated between life and death—are represented by the system. In archetypal images, Danuser captured those forbidden zones where the rules of power and morality do not

apply. He has a Kafkaesque way of playing with gray values and perspectives, leaving the viewer feeling uncertain. But the realism of his images does not stem from their naturalism, rather, it is induced by the high degree of abstraction in the pictures, which is in turn the product of the lighting and of the medium of black-and-white photography that often tends towards the monochromatic. In this way, the artist deconstructs our preconception of the image. By undermining our expectations of what an image is, of what the motifs of photography are, and of what techniques are involved, the artist challenges viewers to think for themselves, instead of adhering blindly to narrative readings.

His unique approach to photography also finds expression in his fascination with being able, by means of a series of images, to create a syntax that facilitates a non-linear interpretation of themes. In his images, he consciously deviates from familiar pictorial traditions. His photography neither describes circumstances nor narrates in the past continuous tense. His pictures neither depict a moment in time, nor do they narrate in the present tense. Likewise, they do not replicate reality nor do they make us feel secure in our beliefs and preconceptions. Instead, Danuser uses the camera to create pictures that converse with their viewers not only by means of pictorial motifs, but by means of their material, spatial, and physical presence as well as their serial syntax. He makes the viewer the focal point of his series of images. While the pictures of the *In Vivo* series still present recognizable motifs, they anticipate the concept of the *Frozen Embryo* and *Erosion* series.

Active in the youth unrest of 1980s Zurich, to which he paid homage with his work *Harlequin's Death* (1982), Danuser's interests included political and social conflicts, as well as forms of opposition to the prevailing system. Early on, he began his search for imagery as an artistic means of responding to social conditions and times of change, looking for visual means through which to adequately address system-related violence, or to alienate it in order to illustrate his take on the issue. It is not only his choice of motifs that reveals his distance from—and opposition to—the system, but also the technical and formal ways in which he realizes the pictures. This triad of motif, form, and technique is greater than the sum of its parts. Their reciprocative impact defines Danuser's artistic strategy as much as his commitment to maintaining a clear distance from the prevailing political and artistic discourses does.

Hans Danuser hones in on intrinsic systems, those structures that influence people and their actions. *The Party is Over* series still employs the documentary format in order to address this. With the *In Vivo* series, he established his formal independence and found his thematic leitmotifs. The image of a frozen embryo is featured towards the end of the series. It marks the pivotal moment in his work and heralds the beginning of the *Frozen Embryo* series, as well as his transition to the systematic deconstruction of photography's established visual tradition.

Neither visible perspective nor vanishing points are present in these photographs, and their motifs are displayed frontally in full-bleed images. As a consequence, the motif of ice—destined to conserve embryos—is stripped of its context and is scarcely identifiable. While working on *In Vivo*, Danuser discovered that the different structures and colors of ice that has been frozen by nitrogen to -191 degrees centigrade correspond optimally with the color values of photographic paper coated with silver bromide. The colors and specific structure of the ice fascinated him. Ultimately, the work is not concerned with the ice, the object, but rather with our perception of this material, its color, and its structure. With this in mind, Danuser probes the interplay between

black-and-white photography and the corresponding photographic paper in a quest for an equivalent to the materiality and color of the objects. He attempts to produce an image by means of photography, but extending beyond the usual naturalism of photography. That which existed only rudimentarily in *In Vivo* becomes concrete in this series. Only abstraction can enhance realism for the viewer. Realism must become manifest in the mind, not on the retina.[12] Danuser strives to display dimensions in such a way that they become detached from the object. One of his ways of achieving this is to present the pictures so that their center lies at a height of 2.2 meters. The artist wishes to represent a material aspect, to make the paper the object. He describes it in terms of millions of tiny sculptures: particles of light-sensitive silver bromide emulsion on the photographic paper which produce the image. The image varies according to the angle at which light hits the surface, and the angle at which the viewers are positioned as they move around it.[13] This materialization of photography can only be achieved with analog photography. When creating the series, Danuser switched between 24 x 36 mm and the medium format of the Hasselblad camera (6 x 6 cm). The alternation of formats highlights the elimination of the axes and undermines the expectation of a horizon line in a landscape format.[14] Furthermore, Danuser dispenses with a frame and mounts his full-bleed images directly on aluminum in a 150 x 140 cm format. The slightly distorted square format enhances the overall effect, giving the illusion that the image flows into the exhibition space. All these factors enable the viewers to concentrate fully on their perception, without disturbance. The fact that the work is photographic is secondary. All the connotations that are echoed in traditional discourse and in the interpretation of photography disappear into the background. The viewer is submersed directly in the material. Danuser planned every last detail of his approach, and it was at this point that he abandoned the hitherto accepted classical tradition of visual imagery. He emphasizes the objecthood of his pictures and therefore also defines them as distinct from photography and paintings in the way he presents them. During the same period, photographers such as Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth subscribed to the tradition of painting by framing their monumental formats classically.[15] The *Frozen Embryo* series is exhibited without frames and consistently suspended several centimeters away from the wall. By choosing a square photographic format, the artist defines each negative as the original of eight possible prints: rotated four times around its center and again upon a mirrored axis. Hence eight originals can be reproduced from one negative. These pictures, although identical, have been rotated or are mirror images. Shown in series,[16] they reveal how deceptive our faculty of sight can be, since we primarily perceive differences. These quasi monochrome and serial "pictorial objects" question the viewer's perception and morph into a physical counterpart through which the viewer negotiates the issues of uniqueness, difference, interchangeability, series, and individuality. The work's complexity resides in the fact that these questions correspond to the topics implied in the title, such as genetic research, genetic engineering, mutation, and cloning. The extensive abstraction and, in this case, the fact that the object of the image—the embryo—is missing, have a decisive impact on the intensity of these pictures and the way they function.[17]

The point of departure for Hans Danuser's pictures is his social engagement, which finds formal parallels in his work. The *Frozen Embryos* series is based on embryonic research as well as the complex and controversial issues of reproductive medicine and genetic modification. In an abstract sense, the series present subject matters such as the body as object, reproduction—in the

form of cloning—, and the uniqueness of the individual. Society's ethical stance towards these issues is faltering, and our perception is infected with the same sense of uncertainty when we view these pictures. The *Erosion* series was Danuser's reaction to the crumbling of the Cold War balance of power at the end of the 1980s, when the demarcations between the Eastern and Western blocs began to dissolve. A general feeling of instability became a constant feature of Hans Danuser's work. Building on the *Frozen Embryo* series (the investigation of color and materials, all-over composition, and objecthood), the erosion of slate lent itself perfectly to displaying the materiality and color in analog photographic processes, and to expressing a concrete feeling in a concretely visual way. But this time Danuser goes a step further. He firmly rejects the insistence of the Western pictorial tradition on horizontal pictures and their presentation on a wall—as well as the mode of reading from the top left-hand corner to the bottom right. He continues to develop the objecthood of his photographs by transposing them from the wall to the floor as an installation. He grouped the series into areas. Viewers can move along these areas or traverse them. Making the transition to installations assimilates fundamental trends of the 1960s.[18] The artist no longer determines what is the top, the bottom, or the sides of a picture, as in the *Frozen Embryo* series, and leaves that up to the viewer. Viewers no longer stand face-to-face with the works in order to read them in the conventional manner, but rather do so according to their own position and perspective in relation to the works. They are free to change their position as they please. On the other hand, they fall victim to this freedom. They are forced to take a stance and choose a perspective, both of which change with every movement. Danuser strives to show that traditional values have been rendered uncertain, creating a sense of disorientation. He further demonstrates that there can never be a single correct position or perspective. He addresses gray areas, figuratively speaking: those zones in which obscurity dominates, in which suddenness and accident are concealed, in which opinions and emotions are generated and continue to evolve. Hence we are not only looking at sand in these images—we feel as if we are mired in quicksand, an impression which is heightened by the color of the photographs, the shimmering shades of gray that have been produced by the technical implementation. To an extent, Danuser wrenches the images into a gray area between photography, object, sculpture, and installation.

The notion of the image has changed radically since photography was first discovered. Over time, photography had appropriated all the most important facets of painting for itself, and today it is no longer the painting but the photograph that we equate with pictures. On the other hand, painting expanded the notion of pictures beyond their narrative and representational function to encompass the monochromatic and the non-representational, and thus found a new relevance within art discourse, with many repercussions. This led, as described above, to new forms of painting, sculpture, installations, and an orientation towards performance. The interaction between viewer and artwork, as well as the focus on materiality and space, became the motor for these changes. Hans Danuser sees analog photography as a means of working with—and on—material. The artist's exhibition at the Bündner Kunstmuseum Chur in the summer of 2017 is titled *Darkrooms of Photography*. The photographic material is developed and processed in two darkrooms: that of the analog camera and of the photo lab. Danuser's reference to the physical metal particles of the silver bromide emulsion on the baryta paper is significant. He sees these particles as a sculptural surface that reflects the light falling on it in ever new ways, in this way also influencing the colors we see when viewing the images. The importance which he attaches to materials is

shown by his penchant for researching emulsions and even developing his own.[19] In the 1980s, when photography acquired a major role in art discourse and in the tradition of classical painting, Danuser resorted to widening the scope of photography, taking it in new directions. In his eyes, the silver bromide emulsion does not just fulfil the function of print-making. It has a materiality of its own and additional functions that are independent of the reproductions it produces. It is exactly at this point that he adopts the principles of the 1910s and especially those of the 1960s, rejecting illusionism and concentrating instead on materiality, on liberating pictures from their place on the canvas, and moving towards objecthood, spatial development, and transformation into installations. In short, he removed his pictures from the wall and brought them into the room to interact physically with the viewer.

Hans Danuser thus departs from accepted notions of the photographic image. Since he employs the classical techniques of analog photography and only carries out marginal retouching on the images, they remain strictly objective. Formally, however, they do not correspond with the criteria of the classical notions of painting and photography. With his various series *Frozen Embryo*, *Erosion*, and *Landscape in Motion*, he creates images that have powerful, sensuous qualities. But their effect can only unfold fully when they are confronted with a physical and intellectual counterpart. His photographs do not narrate stories; they invite us into dialog. The resulting image is multi-layered. But these layers do not necessarily fit together neatly like the pieces of a puzzle. Complex thoughts and their many repercussions are the subject of the viewing process—thoughts and repercussions that concern our society today, and that greatly concerned Hans Danuser.

1
The past continuous is the tense used for objective, visual narratives. Examples include the oral tradition of fairy tales (beginning with "once upon a time," and ending with "and they lived happily ever after"), as well as to legends, sagas, and epic narratives such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, or standard religious texts. Stories such as these connote universal validity.

2
However, whether or not the pictures have been manipulated is irrelevant. The important thing is for the event of the photograph to be authentic.

3
Expressionism, cubism, futurism, constructivism, suprematism, and dada, each in their own way, invalidated pictorial traditions in ever more radical ways.

4
The fact that painters discarded the use of perspective and proportion (one of the fundamental characteristics that painting relinquished to photography), that is, naturalistic representation in three-dimensional space, is interesting to examine with reference to the emergence of photography as an art form. It appears logical that photography becoming a widespread medium was an important factor in the crisis of painting as an illusionistic and narrative form of expression; the way in which the two events coincide, at least, is remarkable.

5
Photography did play a role in surrealism and in constructivism, and the first photographic movements—straight photography and new vision (*Neues Sehen*)—were underway by this point, these developments remained straws in the wind to the world of art discourse. Furthermore, it was not until much later that the impact was felt of Alfred Stieglitz's cloud pictures, which explored the idea of abstraction very early on. The influence Malevich had on Stieglitz is worth a mention.

6
Duchamp did not seek to break with painting. Instead, he wanted art to be established on a new foundation. Painting, regardless of the extent to which it developed the above-mentioned pictorial traditions, was still painting: still paint on a canvas and thus dependent on the eye or (retinal) perception. It was therefore necessary to abandon the canvas entirely, rather than using it to try out new things. Duchamp's invention of readymades laid the cornerstone for conceptual art. Duchamp's friendship with and artistic affinity to the photographer Man Ray highlights, in the broad sense, the potential of the relationship between the concepts and approaches of the two artists, and between the readymade and photography.

7
Exemplarily in the work of Jackson Pollock and characteristic of the art of Frank Stella, Morris Louis, Helen Frankenthaler, Kenneth Noland, etc.

8
As a result, the art world saw the development of shaped canvases, specific objects, minimalist sculptures, installations, conceptual art, and performance art. All these developments undermined the predominance of the square or rectangular-painted surface as the focal point of art discourse. According to the critic Michael Fried, the weak point in the term "specific object"—as coined by Donald Judd and which became the buzzword for minimal art—was that specific objects (mostly presented in series and groups) declined into theatrical settings and were no longer art, because they were no more than simple objects. Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," *Artforum* 5 (June 1967), 12–23.

9
John Baldessari was the exception. His *Cremation Project* (1970) programmatically represents his artistic engagement with the representational function of paintings and its deconstruction. For his artworks, which often address this subject matter, he used various media, especially photography, for instance in the piece *Throwing Three Balls in the Air to Get a Straight Line* (1973).

10
This shift in paradigms is however only valid for the minority of painting at the time. But looking back, it is justified to speak of a decisive development in art history.

11
With the work of Cindy Sherman, Andreas Gursky, Wolfgang Tillmans, Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, etc., this genre became very important from the 1980s onwards in visual arts discourse and paved the way for the recognition of photography as a medium of the visual arts.

12
The principle that reality—or the completion of the work—first takes place in the viewer's brain is visible in the art of Marcel Duchamp in a radical form. Basing his work on this concept, and discarding what he dismissed as retinal art, Duchamp was incredibly influential for the following generations of artists.

13
Hans Danuser in conversation with the author at his studio on February 20, 2017.

14
This presentation can likewise be viewed as a reference to Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*. When the latter was first mounted in an exhibition it was hung very high up, in an allusion to the classical presentation of icons.

15
Since the 1950s, the old pictorial traditions of painting had been rejected, especially that of the frame. The painting was no longer to be a restricted illusionary space. Pictures no longer told stories and because they were without a plot or action, they no longer needed a frame. Thus the frame became a backward-looking reference to old pictorial traditions.

16
The series are each made up of a different number of pictures (from three to ten).

17
The *Frozen Embryo II* series (see pp. 172–173) is the only exception in this regard. In reference to and in connection with *In Vivo*, the point of departure for the entire *Frozen Embryo* series, an embryo is featured in three of the eight pictures.

18
Carl Andre's floor installations address this aspect from 1967 onwards, and Les Levine presented photographs in his work *Systems Burn-Off X Residual Software* (1969) as an installation that viewers could actually walk through.

19
On the relevance of material and Hans Danuser's research in this area, see the contribution by Kelley Wilder in this publication, pp. 48–55.

EROSION
FLOOR INSTALLATIONS WITH PHOTOGRAPHY
2000–2006

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Several bodies of works
Detail of image no. A1
Paper 40 x 50 cm, image 21 x 46 cm
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