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"Idols of Objects

Like Films from Surfaces Peeled"

Of Exactitude in Science is the title of an ironic tale by Jorge Luis Borges<sup>1</sup> written in the style of an ancient chronicle and with imaginary bibliographical sources. The story speaks of an empire in which

"the craft of Cartography attained such Perfection that the Map of a Single province covered the space of an entire City, and the Map of the Empire itself an entire Province. In the course of Time, these Extensive maps were found somehow wanting, and so the College of Cartographers evolved a Map of the Empire that was of the same Scale as the Empire and that coincided with it point for point. Less attentive to the Study of Cartography, succeeding Generations came to judge a map of such Magnitude cumbersome, and, not without Irreverence, they abandoned it to the Rigours of sun and Rain. In the western Deserts, tattered Fragments of the Map are still to be found, Sheltering an occasional Beast or beggar; in the whole Nation, no other relic is left of the Discipline of Geography."

From *Travels of Praiseworthy Men* (1658) by Suárez Miranda

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, "Of Exactitude in Science," in: *A Universal History of Infamy*, tr. by Norman Thomas di Giovanni, Penguin Books, 1975.

Hans Danuser's *Strangled Body*, seen for the first time, might easily lead one to believe that it shows just such ancient ruins, or that one of those geographers of old has found a modern successor, who has taken the next logical step by making maps that are even larger in scale than the area they represent. But which area? Scientific exactitude has a penchant for leading us astray. If there were no captions and if we had not agreed upon certain visual conventions, we would, for instance, be incapable of identifying shots of the moon's surface. In this and many other cases, it is virtually impossible to determine whether we are faced with a macro- or a micro-reproduction.

Does it follow then that pictures manipulate us quite as much as we manipulate them? Take, for example, sections of tissue, metal analyses, cell structures. Clarity begins to elude us even in the exact sciences. No wonder then that scientists who study chaos are the happiest people in the world and often think of themselves as artists. Their insight into the fluctuations, the aleatory nature of knowledge, the multitude of possibilities inherent in a functioning whole has released them from the pressures of trying to establish irrefutably valid natural laws.

The situation in art seems to be comparable. Since photography has escaped the chains of reproduction and the taboo of representation, it has entered Borges' fictional realm. Cartographers of the body, like Danuser, are coming up with representations that both attract and repel. The artist arouses viewers' delight in seeing. They begin by trying to figure out where they are, by trying to find their way through the blind Argentinian writer's *Garden of Forked Paths*. In the end, their commitment and involvement have grown to such proportions that they find themselves reluctant to leave the labyrinth again. The companion of seeing is curiosity; and of curiosity, voluptuous pleasure, which has probably been aroused because we are moving in the realm of the body, or to be exact, the flesh. The artist's earlier work in pathology and embryology already pointed the way.

With originally critical intent, Danuser shot pictures in the morgue—the deliciously ghastly morgue that figures in the writings of Poe and Baudelaire—and the Institute of Forensic Medicine. The result: a thorough confusion of boundaries. By patiently and unemotionally asking questions about “befores” and “afters,” Danuser's photographs expanded visual territory. When confronted with developments like sperm banks and organ transplants, we find

that the unassailable dividing line between animate and inanimate is rapidly losing ground. Parts of organisms continue to live, or rather, these parts ensure the continuance of life; reproduction is on-line; there is nothing that is not feasible. But what about identity and individuality; where does a particular existence end? Danuser is at home in this gray zone where everything is in flux, where cold and rigidity, despite time-honored experience, suddenly signify potential life.

Viewers hardly have a chance to distinguish details, before a feeling of fragility and vulnerability, even danger washes over them. The insecurity is compounded by the suggestively erotic effect of folds, hair and fluff. We see part of a body, but which part and which gender? This protraction of the flesh is iridescent: Are its protuberances and folds natural or the consequence of violence? Or is this scenic skin-scape a *carte du tendre*, a topography of sensations? René Magritte observed that perception of the other in the act of love is forever condemned to be fragmentary; all we can ever see are patches of porous skin in close-up. His witty solution to the problem shows a nude painted in five separate sections, hung vertically, and titled *L'évidence éternelle*. Psychologist Ernst Mach, specialized in the study of perception, already observed in 1886 that the self is not a stable entity but a conglomerate of sensual impressions and "complexes of sensations" that are in constant flux. In view of the inevitably fragmented perception both of ourselves and others, he came to the conclusion that the ego is "unsalvageable."

The dark patch in *Strangled Body* could therefore also be the eye or another organ of perception. After a while walls and cave paintings come to mind, only to be rejected again. It has to

be an epidermis after all—but is it the surface or subcutaneous? Whatever the case, the picture gets under one's skin—osmosis sets in, caused by the very coolness and detachment of the picture surface. The gestalt, the shape of things, is blurred as well. We do not know whether what we see is a continuum, nor do we know if and where it ends. Presumably the thoughts and pursuits of scientists today no longer address such categories. But then, with all due respect to so-called "life," how do they define where the individual begins or ends, and what, in fact, is "life" itself?

In his cosmological epic, *Of the Nature of Things*, Roman author Lucretius ponders the origins of optical impressions. It is the epidermis of things that physically transmits their images.

I will proceed to discuss an extremely relevant topic,  
Namely, the existence of what we call the 'idols' of objects  
Which like films from the surface peeled, in every direction  
Fly to and fro in the air and affright our minds when they meet us  
Both when awake and in our sleep, as frequently happens  
When odd shapes we see, and ghosts of the shades, such as oft have  
Scared us out of our wits as we lay reposing in slumber.  
This will I do, lest any should haply conjecture that spirits  
Make their escape from below, or that shades flit about 'mongst the living,  
Or that after our death some part of ourselves remains over  
When the body and permeant mind, together dismantled,  
Into their several primary atoms have been reconverted.  
Therefore I tell you that images, filmy presentments of objects,  
Are from their surfaces shot. These films reside on the surface

Forming a kind of skin or rind, inasmuch as such image  
In its appearance and form resembles the object  
From the substance whereof it is shed and commences its journey:  
This, however slow-witted you are, you can learn from what follows.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Lucretius On the Nature of Things*, tr. by W. Hannaford Brown, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1950.

The poet/philosopher is at odds here with the agnostic. Lucretius does not believe in life after death, for nothing ever returns from Hades. But he does speak of "ghosts of the shades, such as oft have/Scared us out of our wits as we lay reposing in slumber." The same ambiguity directs Danuser's work. He offers no explanations and certainly no interpretations: everything is transmitted via the senses. He grates on the nerves of perception by receding from and giving way to readability. We are faced with the problem of near and far, as in astrophotography where infinitesimally small stellar scapes come close and curved space is flattened. In scientific photographs, interior views of "nature" seem to be enlarged and coarsened until things ordinarily beyond sensual perception become tangible and accessible. Danuser is also interested in such borderline experiences. The tension lies in trying to find some kind of agreement between these pictures that undeniably render part of "us" and the memory of our own physical bodies.

Ambivalence also prevails in earlier, supposedly more realistic depictions of taboo areas in chemistry, medicine, atomic energy, and genetic research, reproduced in the publication *In Vivo*, 1989. At the time Danuser worked on or in "live material" but his static, non-contextualized shots withdraw into cool alienation, underscoring the absence of life, the abstraction of scientific research that operates entirely apart from daily life. Lack of identifiable place goes

hand in hand with these situations; they could happen everywhere and nowhere, in our midst or light years away.

Danuser's matter-of-fact approach is not confined to the identifiable aspect of things but seeks out what lies behind them. Just as these things resist perception, his photographs also tend towards anonymity. A texture results that eludes definition and seems to be self-sufficient. When Danuser was awarded the Conrad Ferdinand Meyer Prize in 1992, Toni Stoss, the then curator at the Zurich Kunsthau, described it as phototechnically generated all-over painting with no explicitly referential character. One is reminded of the series of *White Paintings* Sam Francis made in Paris between 1950–1952, with their streaked surfaces and undefined flooding flatness. The motifs in Danuser's photographs also coalesce into an order; they are subject to subtle aleatory regulation that can lead to changes and even reversals of pattern, since the pictures can be read in two ways: in terms of brightness or darkness.

Hans Danuser restricts himself to black and white, to shaded areas, grays, and transitions. His artistic decision is interwoven with the mutual penetration of form and content—which seem to be related without emotion in his earlier work—until inside and outside become indistinguishable. The pictures are no longer separate entities; they now form a continuum; the viewer is enveloped in an art-skin. Danuser works with this contradiction. What he withholds from our perception in his pictures still manages to oppress us. Their inscrutability is all the more disturbing because it seems to have been concentrated on the surface.

These effects are not random. At the end of the modern age we have left the physically graphic positivism of the natural sciences far behind. The liveliest studies specialists hold in

store for us today consist only of planar, diagrammatic networks. Such reversals also contribute to the enigma of Danuser's pictures, as in the shots of disintegrating slate. Here the gaze within, the visual play of the materials, knows no bounds (seams of coal, river beds, geological beginnings or end states, excavations, nature vs culture?) until a footprint, the tread of a heel ironically adjusts the proportions again, and restores scale to this unspecified ensemble.

In the recent series, the associative field is expanded even further until the edges disappear altogether. The coloring runs from a saturated dark grayish black to bright, interstellar zones; "life" takes the shape of shadowed skin or bioplasma that is detached from all identifiable matter, like a solar system.

In Thomas Mann's novel, *The Magic Mountain*, in the chapter headed "Research" ["My God, I see" in the German original], Hans Castorp looks at X rays of himself and his co-patients in the sanatorium. He is jolted by a sudden acute awareness of his own mortality and even his appearance after death as a memento mori. Stretched out on his balcony, he studies works on "anatomy, physiology, biology" to explore the origins of life and the postulated evolution of the organic from the inorganic. Three times, like a fatal motif, the question is posed: "What was life?" Finally

"as he lay there... in the frosty night illumined by the brilliance from a lifeless star, the image of life displayed itself... It hovered before him, somewhere in space, remote from his grasp, yet near his sense; this body, this opaquely whitish form, giving out exhalations, moist, clammy; the skin with all its blemishes and native impurities, with its spots, pimples, discolorations, irregularities; its horny, scalelike regions, covered over by soft streams and whorls of rudimentary lanugo."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Mann, *The Magic Mountain*, tr. by H.T. Lowe-Porter, London: Martin Secker, 1927.



Thomas Mann's famous erotic, vanitas-like montage of facts still seems to be imbued with the joyful animism and vitalist self-sufficiency of the 19th century. And yet every writer is a prophet in disguise. Danuser's metaphorical skin can be divined, organically smoldering away under Thomas Mann's microscope — a saturated layer inside and out, Lucretius's film as a condensate of the world's condition with a hermaphrodite touch that casts a chilling spell over us.

Several photographs explore the motif of strangulation; the mirror image, that is negatives printed in reverse, is also used. In one shot, the region of the larynx is vaguely discernible; the extent of the wound implies the selected scale. Time is incorporated; the body was found at some point after its violent end; its post-mortem history has commenced and on closer inspection traces of decay, a coarser epidermis and its discoloration, can be made out. But a vanitas image is not intended. Danuser's concern is not the individual in question but rather a general destiny, just as *Strangled Body* does not consist of singular pictures but is meant to be viewed as a group.

Its glazing serves two purposes. As in old museum display cases, it protects the objects behind it. But it also allows viewers to enter into and pass through them: the ego and its doppelgänger, aporias of perception. We are forever being conned by this dialectic. Detailed structure suddenly shifts to sweeping movement, the wrinkles of the wound look organic or formal, depending on whether the picture is hung vertically or horizontally. Motifs recede or come into relief. Here the skin looks like hatching; there like brushstrokes, elsewhere like grated clouds; the closer we move, the stranger it looks. Dips become visible, a transformation has set in that makes the skin look like plastic. One could also read the juxtaposed rows

of photographs as a monochrome sequence, which gradually hints at a vague figuration. Finally, we realize that the damaged skin and the strangulation must be all that is “enfolded” in a soul, the spring of all knowledge, as postulated by Leibniz in the *Monadology*:

In this characteristic of the monads (that their restrictions are not in the objects but in the modifications of knowledge of the object) the composites accord with the simples. For the whole is a plenum and it is this being a plenum which binds all matter together so that every movement has an effect on distant bodies proportional to the distance. Each body then is not only affected by the bodies in immediate contact with it and responds in some way to everything which happens to them, but through them it also responds to what happens to them by reason of their contact with other bodies, and this communication will extend indefinitely however great the distance. Consequently each and everybody responds to everything whatever which is going on in the universe. Anyone therefore who could see all would be able to read in each what is happening everywhere, even including all that has happened and will happen, he would observe in the present what is distant in time as well as what is distant in space. Συμπνοια πάντα, said Hippocrates. A soul, however, can only read in itself what is distinctly represented therein, it cannot open out immediately to itself all that is enfolded within it for this extends to infinity.<sup>4</sup>

This applies especially to the Landscape sequences. Lifted slightly off the wall like paintings, they show frozen water shot under laboratory conditions with an ordinary lens. One might call it a documentary approach but the result is visual deception and an optical illusion. Structures surface that continue without end, infinite extension both laterally and in depth. The pictures evoke a host of associations — molecules, art informel, the naturalistic painting of the

\* Herbert Wilden Carr, ed., *The Monadology of Leibniz with Introduction, Commentary and Supplementary Essays*, London: The Faval Press, 1930, #61.

Danube School, surrealist decalcomania — but in the final analysis they defy comparison. We are confronted with ordered chaos, regulated probability, a surface that encourages the sense of touch, that is static and restless. We notice a rhythm running through the work that does not stop at the edges but leaps from one picture to the next. Trompe l'œil is the order of the day. Instead of a flat plane we see a relief, instead of grisaille we see polychrome coloring, an iridescent palette engendered by the play of light and dark values.

Every picture has its own movement, its own brand of density. It is always the same and never identical. As we proceed, the series becomes a petrified stream, or we sink into one of the crystalline webs, cannot touch bottom and lose our way. We are drawn into unresolved depths. On closer inspection, a just barely perceptible optical illusion of “nature” blurs, is transmuted into deep structures, and finally into fields of energy.

Without being explicit, Hans Danuser's work addresses the classical problem—and paradox—of painting: the perception of nature and its reproduction, the tension between surface and depth, volume and two-dimensionality, foreground and background, microscopy and totality, vision and the sense of touch. The artist actualizes these issues and yet his stream of drifting shapes reminds us of Monet's Water Lilies. Our gaze wanders, roams, follows winding shapes in an ecstasy of sensual expansion and refinement.

The ice pictures are punctuated by photographs of frozen embryos; they too are a consequence of the cold, but what a difference from the grisaille works! The repetition of the motif evokes the phenomenon of cloning. But the brightness increases in proportion to the extreme

temperatures that reach a depth of minus 180 degrees centigrade ( $-292\frac{1}{2}$  F). The embryo in the middle has a lighter halo; it could also be a radiantly glowing nucleus with protuberances around the edges. Danuser pits life in cold storage — which, being frozen, can be manipulated — against a word-picture, the nonsense poetry of a child's counting rhyme humorously inscribed on the wall: INI MINI MEINI MOU. Life is an accident, a genetic gamble.