

A New Regime of Images

“To step back from things so as to blur many of their details, to supplement them with your gaze, in order to go on seeing them; or else to look at things from a certain angle; or to place them so that they can only be seen in a gleam and are partially hidden; or otherwise to look at them through stained glass or in the light of the setting sun; or finally to give them a surface, an outer skin which is not entirely transparent: that is all we can learn from artists.” (1)

It is in these premonitory terms that Nietzsche defines the “subtle force” of art. Prolonged viewing, multiple perspectives, proximity and distance in the play of detail, and lastly the diaphanous light of transparency which creates surface effects, an “outer skin”. Such is the new regime of post-virtual images that Pascal Dombis has chosen to explore. Whether they be programmed by algorithms or taken directly in their multitude from the Internet using Google, whether they appear or disappear according to your angle of vision or bodily position, they always proliferate by tens of thousands like an immense digital tapestry, the epidermis of the world. As if the “Nothing but images” proffered by Nietzsche’s Prometheus in his flight over the Caucasus had become reality in the imaginary geography of *Eurasia* and Paris (2).

Eurasia, then, as this is the title of the works on show at the “Eurasia” exhibition in Düsseldorf. A continuous continent forged by one conquest after another, from Asia Minor to contemporary Asia. On the ground can be seen, similar to the carpet ribbon at the Palais Royal (*Text(e)-Fill(e)s*), a flat 8 metre surface like an immense real-imaginary continental map. A great white band, an empty vertical space, showing the direction, and then, surprise, surprise, texts in German: Eurasia, or rather *Eurasien*, revealing nearly 50 years later, in the selfsame town of Düsseldorf, transcriptions of Joseph Beuys’s oral texts from the 1960s, programmed algorithmically and proliferating endlessly.

Beuys’s *Partitur zu Eurasienstab* (1967) with its abstract landscapes and its twin directions Europe/ Asia, but also West and East Germany. Following on from this continent, a whole series of works in an imaginary journey leading back to prehistoric times with its animals, shamanic rituals and nomadic culture. The archetypal journey consisting of traces between past and present: *Gengis Khan’s Messages*, and the *Transsibirische Bahn*, the famous train journey which it is still possible to go on. Eurasia, which even became a symphony and a performance, a graphic utopia transcending the divide between the rational civilised culture of “Western Man” and the emotional Barbarian culture of “Eastern Man”, a theme taken up in *Books from the Western Man* (3).

In going from *Fluxus* to the fluxes of global culture, Pascal Dombis shows us the distance separating the starting point from the reinvented finishing point, in this map on the ground, between text and image, microscopic detail and the view from above. The vision of the cartographical eye, which I have likened to that of Icarus, suggests real and fictional relations between body and sight, the details forever changing and endlessly multiplying within a mobile space in which the aesthetics of perspective dominate those of stasis. Lines everywhere, as in another work from the “Extra_Vague” exhibition at the RX Gallery in Paris, partial curves knitting together so

as to form lines on the screen, myriads of lines proliferating in a veritable state of artificial non-organic life which would have pleased Walter Benjamin, sensitive to “the sex appeal of the inorganic”. Little by little another world emerges from this technological “shamanism”, equally to be found in three other installations framing the ground in *Eurasia*. Here the new regime of images is not the result of algorithmic programming, but comes from the capture of thousands of images on Google, in Western and Eastern languages transferred onto panels where everything is suspended. Close up there are the details, further away everything disappears and a black or red, white and blue spiral appears. The body creates the image in these diptychs opposing the West and the East. On the Asian side: adverts, dustbins, faces, an entire mode of consumption with its writings. On the Western side, here and there, a skull, a flower, a face or a fashion picture. Everyone sees what they want or are able to see in this planetary panoptic which superposes maps in order to better create something else, abstract spiral diagrams, a universal leitmotiv particularly dear to Pascal Dombis (4). For spirals are vortices of the infinite, time rolled up upon itself, both original and ephemeral, the temporal modulation of an eternal return.

The modern era invented the regime of crystalline images analysed by Gilles Deleuze, time-images in which past and present are woven together (5). Mirrors, glass architecture leaving no traces, reflective surfaces, everything was designed to multiply reflections and appearances in Duchamp-style mirroring. The literal or symbolic transparency of all these crystal circles created the time-image in which the imperceptible erupted as in the great hall of mirrors at the end of *The Lady from Shanghai*. Who kills whom? Who sees what, and where? Questions without answers in the crystalline vitality of an art which the baroque style took to its limits.

No such thing as regards the new regime of virtual and post-virtual flux-images. They have lost their memory and the “double vision” which allowed past and present to coexist. The vision generated by the mobility of body and gaze oscillates between “seeing too much” and “not seeing enough”. Too much, because it is impossible to study all the details simultaneously. Not enough, since the perpetually fluctuating images return to a ghostly state from which everything is reborn differently: spirals and spirals, curved shapes and curved shapes. A strange feeling creeps up on you while contemplating Pascal Dombis’s “abstract” image processes, for the words *Right* and *Wrong* can change into their opposite, and order can lead to potential or actual chaos in all these “delays on screen” which parody Duchamp’s “delays on glass” and modify the spectator’s role. So, where is this taking us?

The last work of the Eurasia exhibition is called *Xplosion*. Certainly an algorithmic and digital explosion. Multiple crosses, symbols of the West and Beuys’s signature, are superposed upon a Chinese ideogram: *ya*, which means Asia. Now, as Serge François indicates in his commentary on *ya*, “the choice of this ideogram to signify Asia is very recent. In fact this name translates the European word “Asia”, China having called itself the Middle Empire for thousands of years. The pictogram itself represents the similarity and duality of the royal tombs of the Shang dynasty, which are orientated according to the four cardinal points of the compass” (6). In this highly symbolic arrangement, the two Eurasian worlds are placed one upon the other: in between all is black, white and grey, rippling with explosive layers. Perhaps an image

of globalisation, somewhere between the two diptychs in dialogue and the risk of explosion.

Cinema created movement-images and images in movement. When used artistically, the new technologies create fractals, rhizomes and the movements of and in the image. We have gone from the multiple facets of a mirrored reality to an epidermis of layered images. A panoptic of the interface and the artefact in which curved topologies can emerge from what seems to be a geometrically ordered outer skin, in a minimalist Baroque all of structural fluidity and infinite visual pathways. Between Alice through the looking-glass and Icarus soaring across infinite skies, the modernist monochrome makes a sudden reappearance in works consisting of multiple digital monochromes piled on top of one another to create fleshless luminous “post-digital mirrors”. But in this new “gaze craze” it is distance which allows you to attain a kind of indeterminateness without limits, a fourth dimension which opens onto an aesthetics of ephemeral and stratified temporality. A temporality which is on occasions machine-generated as in another video from the RX Gallery, *CRACK*, in which two vibrating motors relay hundreds of thousands of crack-images at a rhythm varying from extreme rapidity to extenuating slowness. By determining the speed of the flux, the machine turns Crack into an existential paradigm alternately speeded up and slowed down in a renewal of the ultra-thin.

Perhaps a different China is lurking in these new continents and this Eurasia of furtive images. An allusive and distant China, where the void is understood to be the “nodal point of the virtual and becoming”, according to François Cheng (7). I mull upon Walter Benjamin in 1938, at the eve of worldwide catastrophe, deciphering signs and Chinese paintings at the French National Library: “The multitude of likenesses that they contain stir them to life. These virtual likenesses... form a mirror reflecting thought in an atmosphere of likenesses and resonances” (8). Such is perhaps the new regime of flux-images which Pascal Dombis has made his own: weightless, infinitely changing, untamed “thought-images” whose haphazard presence is nonetheless captured and controlled. Their “fleeting nature” merges “with the penetration of the real... What they substantiate is no more substantial than clouds.”

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Notes :

- 1) Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Folio, p. 204.
- 2) *Eurasia*, TZR Galerie (Düsseldorf), Apr. 20 > June 2. And *Extra_Vague*, Galerie RX (Paris), June 7 > July 20.
- 3) *Joseph Beuys*, Schirmer/Moser, 2010, p.127
- 4) Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Time spirals: from the immemorial to the ephemeral*, exhibition catalog, The Cat Street Gallery, 2009
- 5) Gilles Deleuze : *L'image temps*, Les Editions de minuit, 1985, chapter 4: And Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La Folie du voir. Une esthétique du virtuel*, Galilée, 2002, p. 205
- 6) Serge François, *Eurasia* exhibition catalog, TZR Galerie, 2012
- 7) François Cheng, *Vide et plein*, Le Seuil, 1979, p.33.
- 8) Walter Benjamin, *Ecrits français*, Gallimard, 1991, p. 257-258.