

SITE

► **Fra Angelico, *Madonna of the Shadows* (detail), 1438–1450. Fresco. Florence, convent of San Marco, east corridor**

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GRAPHIC DESIGN: Konst & Teknik
PRINTING: Brommatryck & Brolins

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SUBSCRIPTION (FOUR ISSUES):
Sweden — 150 SEK
Europe — 30 EUR
Overseas — 40 USD

SUBMISSIONS: Text proposals to be sent to info@sitemagazine.net

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SITE is supported by
The Swedish Arts Council

“The past is never dead.
It isn’t even past.”
— William Faulkner

29–30.10

ISSN 1650–7894
40 SEK • 4 EUR • 7 USD

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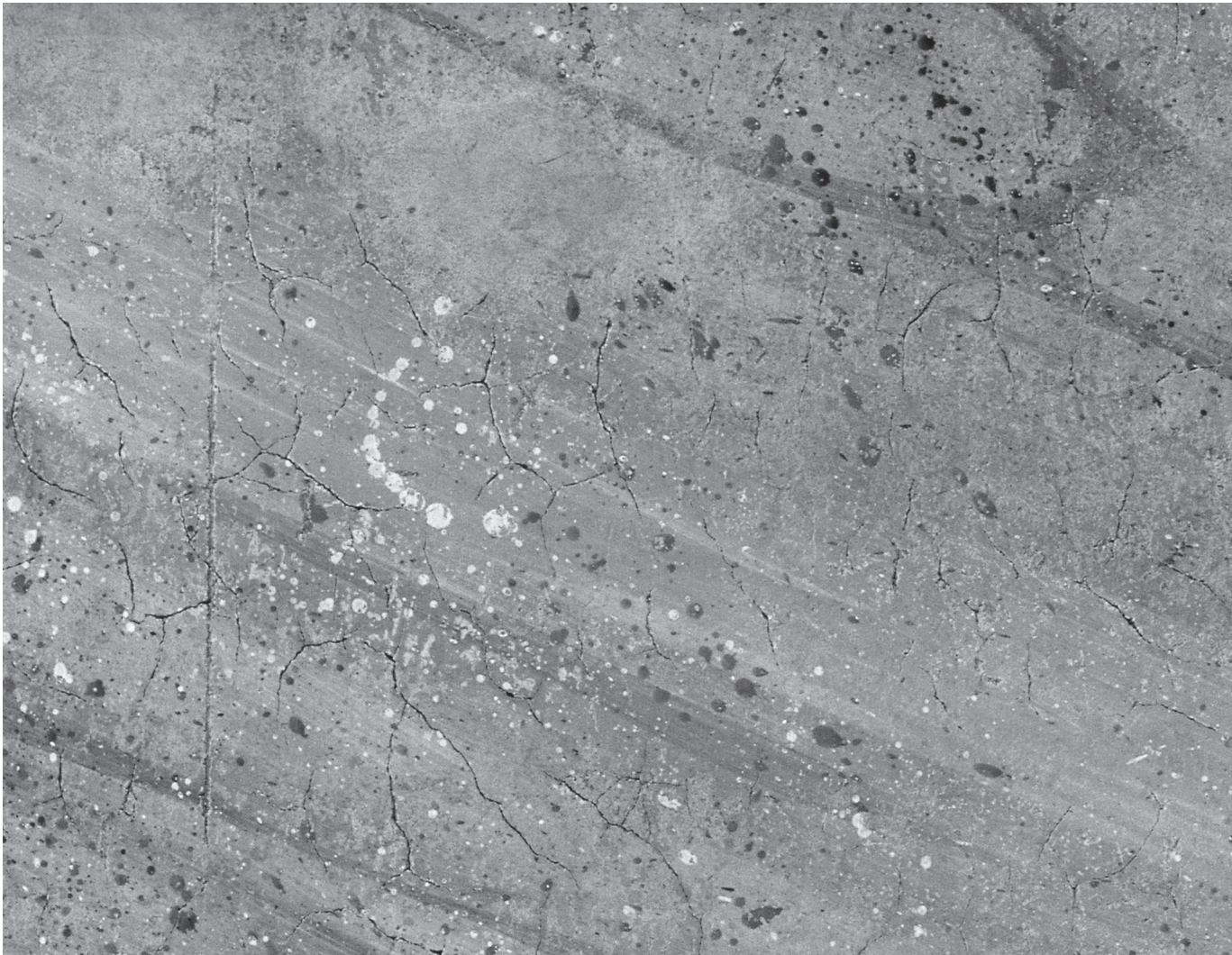
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Vanishing Points

What is the mode of existence of that which has disappeared? Which modes of seeing can discern the hidden and the invisible? In “Disappear Completely and Never Be Found” Julie Cirelli tracks artists and writers who have shown an irresistible, and, at times fatal, attraction to the idea of disappearance, from Doug Richmond to Bas Jan Ader and Bik van der Pol. Discussing their texts and projects — stories about escape from everyday life, manuals for evading authorities, adventurous excursions in search of the miraculous — Cirelli charts the *topoi* and archetypes within which the fantasies of abandoning the past remain inscribed: notions of heterotopia and rupture, dreams of transcendence and flight.

Jeff Kinkle, in turn, approaches the secrets of the authorities themselves, or more precisely, of the US security apparatus and its vast continent of classified institutions and activities. Reviewing Trevor Paglen’s *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon’s Secret World*, Kinkle considers the emerging field of “parapolitical studies,” which examine “systemic clandestinity” and “criminal sovereignty,” attempting to trace the outlines of a military and economic power that exists below the world of public politics.

Reversing this logic, Martin Högström contemplates an object that is too close and only becomes legible from afar. Thomas Ruff’s large-scale photographs of small, strongly compressed digital images seem to set an intricate dialectics to work: confronting the viewer with the reality of the means of mediation, they render the mediated reality itself indifferent, refractory to identification and description.

The thematic section of this issue approaches

the work of Georges Didi-Huberman, who has, in a large number of books since the early 1980s, consistently investigated the capacities of the discipline of art history to accommodate the heterogeneous temporality of images: their disappearances and resurgences, their survivals and dispersals, their aggregations of histories and forms, and their migrations across cultural and temporal distances. Challenging a traditional — primarily Panofskian — notion of the nature of art history, Didi-Huberman proposes a radical reevaluation of the art historian’s cardinal sin: the anachronism. Rather than remaining enclosed within its epoch, he suggests, the historical and epistemological status of the image resembles that of the Freudian symptom, characterized by contradictory temporalities, constitutive repressions, and productive returns.

In his essay “Image, Time, Presence” Sven-Olov Wallenstein critically examines the philosophical foundations of Didi-Huberman’s project, situating his two central works *Devant l’image* (1990) and *Devant le temps* (2000) within a larger shift in contemporary theory towards a thinking of the aesthetic experience in terms of affects and becomings that undermine fixed models of subjectivity and historical presence. Daniel Pedersen’s contribution examines a specific work by Didi-Huberman, his 1990 study on Fra Angelico. Analyzing its conceptual and methodological framework, Pedersen shows how Didi-Huberman discerns a power of figuration and dissemblance at work in Fra Angelico’s attempts to incarnate the Biblical story.

Gunnar Berge focuses on the relation between image and text. If all of Didi-Huberman’s books begin with one or several quotations of authors

or philosophers, Berge notes that this is less in order to establish a motto than to form a language within which the artworks studied may become thinkable. Correspondingly, the images in Didi-Huberman’s studies rarely illustrate or translate specific texts and stories, but rather inhabit them, transmitting them through a figuration that produces another type of legibility, with its constitutive disruptions and lacunae.

Kim West’s essay tracks a recurring notion through Didi-Huberman’s recent publications: the idea of montage as a mode of knowledge and a technique of historiography and critique. Surveying Didi-Huberman’s different studies of the “masters of montage” (Benjamin, Warburg, Eisenstein, Bataille) West traces the outlines of a theory of montage’s philosophical and political potentials. Finally, Jonas (J) Magnusson reads a centerpiece in Didi-Huberman’s production: his massive 2002 study on Aby Warburg, *L’image survivante*. It is in Warburg, it seems, that Didi-Huberman finds the richest concepts and theoretical models for understanding the resilient life of images: their modes of operation and existence, their migrations and survivals. Didi-Huberman’s meticulous investigation of Warburg’s projects, Magnusson argues, confronts us, yet again, with the notion of an art that disrupts the continuum of tradition and forces us to reconsider the nature of our historical identity before the image. •

THE EDITORS

Disappear Completely and Never be Found

Julie Cirelli



Bas Jan Ader, *In Search of the Miraculous*, 1975

There is something irresistibly attractive about the idea of disappearing completely, never to be heard from again. If one were to trace the historical arc of the disappearance fantasy, it would span the history of the mimetic arts. In literature, the vanishing act is typically precipitated by some ordinary activity — stepping out for the proverbial pack of cigarettes, say, or a carton of milk. The juxtaposition of a routine chore against an irreversible, life-obliterating break with reality is the crux of the disappearance fantasy: that workaday drudgery could at any moment be abandoned, eclipsed in an instant by a more potent reality. The fantasy hinges on the idea that identity, like so much fluid, could just as easily occupy one container as another, and that dormant in even the most ordinary individual is a potential that would inevitably surface if only this person were not moored by familial and financial obligations. As Baudelaire wrote, “*Il me semble que je serais toujours bien là où je ne suis pas*. I am most myself in the place where I am not.”

Doug Richmond’s *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* is considered the original contemporary book-length treatise on the subject of disappearance and faking one’s own death. Published in 1986, it was reprinted in 1995, shortly before the growing ubiquity of the internet and advances in surveillance technology would render much of its advice obsolete. The book recounts its author’s chance meeting with a stranger who describes a typical disappearance fantasy scenario: “a friend” trapped in a boring marriage meets a sailor bound for Panama who happens to have an extra passport. The pair spontaneously sail off together, docking somewhere below the Mexican border, whereupon the sailor conveniently dies. The friend swaps their passports, takes the dead sailor’s identity and marries the only daughter of some Central American *paterfamilias*.

The story, like the rest of the text, is unceremoniously tuned to ignite the imagination of unhappily married, middle-class men. “To a man of a certain age, there’s a bit of magic in the very thought of cutting all ties, of getting away from it all, of changing names and jobs and

women and living happily ever after in a more salubrious clime.” An entire chapter is devoted to whether to take one’s mistress along; another to abandoning one’s wife as a form of punishment. Subsequent chapters discuss the formalities of faking one’s own death, emphasizing throughout the spirit of adventure and self-reliance necessary to successfully pull off such a stunt, all the while positing Mexico as the forbidden frontier where women are plentiful and submissive, and authorities are either too lazy to concern themselves with the newly decastated renegade, or else easily payed off.

One wonders if Richmond’s narrator wasn’t loosely based on the tragicomic plight of John Stonehouse, the British politician who in 1974 faked his own drowning by leaving a pile of clothes on the shore of Miami Beach. He was later discovered in Australia with his secretary mistress and a passport belonging to a deceased man named Joseph Markham. Stonehouse had been using Markham’s identity for months. Ironically, it was another case of mistaken identity that resulted in Stonehouse’s discovery: police in Melbourne arrested him because he resembled another, unrelated criminal.

The internet has hindered and assisted the disappearance fantasist in equal measure. Though it has been an indisputable resource, from how-to’s and legitimately helpful resources, to cautionary tails and paranoid speculation, it exists as a catalog of traceable personal histories that has altered the topography of disappearance and escape out of all recognition. To disappear completely, a person must now outrun not only their past, but their digital simulacrum as well.

Take the example of John Darwin, whose seamlessly faked death (in a canoeing accident, naturally) and subsequent life insurance fraud were discovered years later. Darwin turned himself in (after five years, he had grown weary of being dead), claiming to have no recollection of the intervening years, when in fact he and his wife Anne had spent much of that time sunning themselves in Panama. They were discovered after someone typed “John Anne and Panama” into Google and turned up a photograph of the

couple dated four years after Darwin’s supposed death.

Appropriation of the disappearance fantasy is rampant in contemporary art. The most famous and extreme case, of course, was that of conceptual artist Bas Jan Ader, who in 1975 attempted to cross the Atlantic in a tiny, one-man sailboat — a journey he projected would take 67 days and, were he successful, would break the world record for smallest boat to cross the Atlantic. He called the work *In Search of the Miraculous*. Three weeks into journey, Ader lost radio contact. The wreckage of his boat was discovered nine months later drifting off the coast of Ireland. Ader was never heard from again.

There was much speculation at the time about Ader’s fate. He was a playful character and not averse to causing himself bodily harm for the sake of his work (in his series of *Fall* pieces, the artist alternately tumbles off a roof, falls out of a tree and rides his bicycle into a canal). After Ader’s disappearance at sea, a copy of *The Strange Last Voyage of Donald Crowhurst* (1970) was found among his belongings. Crowhurst was the amateur sailor who in a doomed attempt to win a single-handed around-the-world yacht race, faked his coordinates and instead of continuing around the bottom-most point of Africa, circled off the coast of Brazil waiting to rejoin his competitors. In his effort to maintain the illusion that he was still a contender, Crowhurst spiraled ever deeper into the depths of insanity and incoherence and eventually disappeared at sea. His boat was discovered unharmed, but neither Crowhurst nor his remains were ever found. In a recording Crowhurst made of his journey, he evinces Richmond’s lone disappeared figure with uncanny precision. Solitude at sea, he said, “puts a great deal of pressure on a man. It explores his weaknesses with a penetration that very few other occupations can manage.”

Like Ader, the disappearance fantasist must choose his landscape carefully, as there are those that readily lend themselves to metaphor — the sea, desert or mountain — and those that don’t (a dignified person disappears *at sea*, not, say, at the grocery store). Those who disappear must do so into a void, an undiscovered and undiscoverable

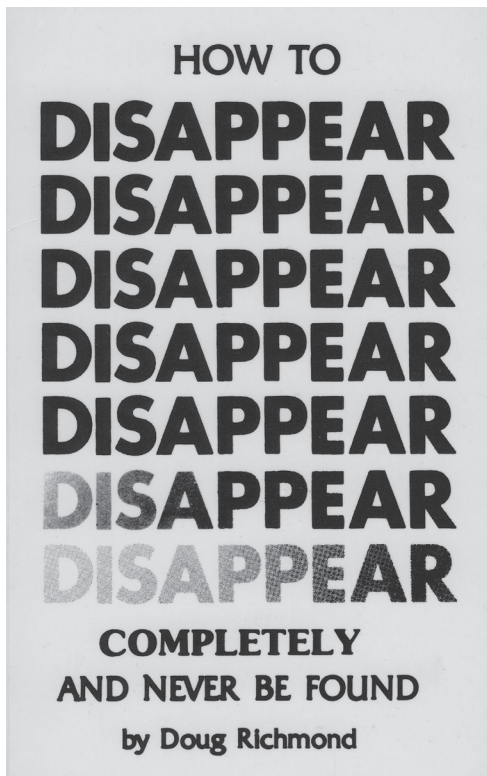
space. Vehicle is also important. How one transports themselves past the vanishing point — through death, as it were — and into the new identity, matters as much for its symbolism as its logistical necessity. For this there is no better archetype for the passing from life to after-life than a boat. Fake your own death in a boat, and Carl Jung will personally congratulate you from beyond the grave.

“The boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself,” Foucault wrote in *Of Other Spaces* (1967), “and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens.” Not only has the boat been the great instrument of economic development from the sixteenth century and continuing into the present, he continues, but it “has been simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination... In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.” The boat is one of Foucault’s heterotopias, a “placeless place” where the parallel planes of ordinary and idealized reality briefly intersect.

The artists Jos van der Pol and Liesbeth Bik, who operate collectively under the rubric Bik van der Pol, use *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* as the focal point for their *Disappearance Piece*, a work they’ve installed in multiple galleries and museums since its inception at the Powder Room in Rotterdam in 1998. The artists simply leave copies of the book for the public without any particular encouragement to take a copy (though inevitably people do). The piles of books eventually disappear, thus creating a fitting visual metaphor to accompany the book’s theme. “The aim, here and elsewhere,” the artists explained, “is to look at the nature of our interrelationships and to create connections that might otherwise not exist or would elude us. Having a copy of the book, one could say, connects those who took one, though we will never find out what they do with it.”

The co-optation of disappearance texts has

▼
Cover of Doug Richmond's *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found*, from Bik Van Der Pol's *Disappearance Piece*



become a veritable phenomenon in the contemporary art milieu. Take, for example, a text called *Vanishing Point: How to Disappear in America Without a Trace*, which originated as an anonymously-submitted entry on the website The Skeptic Tank in 2000. The text is a methodical list of tips on how to relinquish one's identity and elude investigation, in this case for the purpose of escaping an abusive situation or partner, and presumes that the disappeared person will be tracked either by police, the abusive partner, or both. The text was republished in 2006 by artist Susanne Bürner, and again in 2008 by artist Seth Price. Both artists reproduced The Skeptic Tank's essay in its entirety, the latter peppering the text with snippets of four other disappearance how-to's. Bürner kept the original title; Price cut it down to a simple *How to Disappear in America*. Both used their own names as "authors" of the text; neither informed The Skeptic Tank's editor Fredric Rice, the only person who has contact with the original author (The Skeptic Tank maintains an open policy on reprinting the text. Both artists were within their rights to do so.). In subsequent interviews on the subject, Price says he re-wrote the material, a rather strong statement considering he doesn't seem to have bothered to edit out typos, nor references to the fact that the original was posted on the web.

Before providing the readymade text for Bürner and Price, *Vanishing Point: How to Disappear in America Without a Trace* had an auspicious life on the web, its mythology amplified by the mysterious circumstances surrounding its author and origin. Unlike many other texts on the subject, it's written with a great deal of insider knowledge into tracking techniques and law enforcement procedures. Consider the following advice: "Don't go to any place you've talked about or stated a desire to visit. Don't run to any place predictable. Don't hide in a city or town you've ever been to or contains known family members." There is also precise information for locating remote areas of the American Southwest, even citing specific longitudinal locations that are infrequently patrolled. Absent are breathless references to the magical escapist fantasy or rogue's frontier. This text is about

survival and escape, written by a person with extensive first-hand knowledge of his subject.

"[It's] a guide about how to disappear, but at the same time presents a story of someone on that thin line between physical existence and administrative non-existence," Bürner explained. "It suggests that someone has an interest in following the person on the run, trying to make them reappear. Like a vanishing point, this is a state of limbo justified by an imaginary persecutor."

As Bürner suggests, the terms of a disappearance are dictated by those who recognize it as such: pursuers, or those left behind in mourning or wonder. If no one is looking for you — assuming you haven't suffered a psychotic break or amnesic lapse and effectively disappeared from yourself — you have not disappeared at all.

In its original form, the *Vanishing Point* text was a guide to removing oneself from a hostile environment. Relocated into the gallery, it takes on the same sentimental gloss that characterizes Bas Jan Ader's last work. Ader's gesture, however extreme in its motive and outcome, cannot be compared to the real and dangerous escape suggested in *Vanishing Point*. Function is replaced with form, as the message becomes nothing but a jumping off point for fantasy. Ader will never shirk the romance surrounding his disappearance and will be remembered by history as the darling of conceptual art. With the same self-awareness with which Price and Bürner approached *Vanishing Point*, Bik van der Pol took the piddling message of Richmond's *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* and, in the process of making a point about time and relationships, imbued the text with all manner of magic and significance, elevating it from self-help oddity to *objet d'art*. •

Julie Cirelli is a writer and editor from New York. She is currently based in Stockholm where she is editor of Bon International Magazine.

Filling in the Blanks: Trevor Paglen's Parapolitical Geography

Jeff Kinkle

For the past several years, geographer, artist and writer Trevor Paglen has been creating a body of work investigating the contours of the US security apparatus. His latest book, *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon's Secret World*, is a travelogue into the darkest corners of the US "black world" — the secret geography of the American empire in which the US state conducts its classified military and intelligence activities. His exploration of this world and its accompanying juridical vacuum does not only lead him to remote desert locations in which the black world exists in geographical isolation from the everyday lives of most citizens. These are of course included, but beyond the sweltering depths of the Nevada desert and military bases on the outskirts of Kabul, Paglen's investigation takes him to places like the geography department at the University of California Berkeley, where he did his PhD, and corporate parks in northern Virginia. What emerges is, as he puts it, a world map of the war on terror's "relational geography."

Whether thought about in geographical or economic terms, this black world is immense. In the United States approximately four million people have security clearances to work on black world classified projects, in contrast to the 1.8 million civilians employed by the federal government in the so-called "white" world.¹ In terms of quantity of pages, more of the recent documented history of the US is classified rather than not. While the number of secret documents can only be roughly estimated in the billions, an astounding fact is that in 2001 the US Information Security Oversight Office reported a \$5.5 billion expenditure to protect these classified documents.² Secret military bases cover large swathes of America's southwest and classified networks connect different locations throughout the world.

Blank Spots on the Map is a convincing critique of this world and the abuses it allows — everything from the sanctioning of torture to corporate and bureaucratic corruption and the avoidance of wrongful death lawsuits. While it is written with a great deal of anger at times, in the book as in his entire oeuvre, Paglen exhibits a fascination with his subject that differentiates his work from the more hackneyed books on the various ways in which the war on terror undermines democracy. Importantly, rather than being another addition to the legions of literature documenting the misdeeds of the Bush administration, Paglen stresses the historical origins

of the black world and its corrosive affect on American democracy since World War II. Paglen does highlight the ways in which the black world expanded under the Bush administration, but he makes it clear that it is not merely the case of one administration's abuses of power but a systemic problem.

Sissela Bok has argued that increases in secrecy in government and business have a direct connection to the rise of conspiracy theory: as secrecy multiplies so does the fear of conspiracy.³ This process seems to work the other way as well: as conspiracy theory has become all the more prevalent over the past two decades, many researchers are scared of dealing with the black world for fear of being taken for cranks. Paglen claims early in the book that one of the reasons that research into the black world is nearly non-existent is its susceptibility to the charge of conspiracy theory: many associate the very notion of the black world with paranoid visions of New World Order helicopters, alien holding facilities at Area 51, and theories of obscure elites manipulating history from the shadows. It is not only its rigorous research that allows *Blank Spots on the Map* to avoid the conspiracy theory tag, but rather its refusal to use this research as the basis for speculation. As such the book functions well as a contribution to the burgeoning field of parapolitics. Parapolitics is usefully defined by Robert Cribb as the study of "systemic clandestinity" or "the study of criminal sovereignty, of criminals behaving as sovereigns and sovereigns behaving as criminals in a systematic way."⁴ The term "parapolitics" has only emerged in scholarly literature very recently, in the early nineties, and focuses not merely on the activities and crimes of clandestine and criminal groups like security services, cartels, terrorist organizations, secret societies, and cabals, but primarily on the systemic roles played by such actors. If traditional political science looks at the "overt politics of the public state, so parapolitics as a field studies the relationships between the public state and the political processes and arrangements outside and beyond conventional politics," claims Eric Wilson.⁵ As a discipline it has been tainted by its similarities to traditional conspiracy theory, but also by the widespread failure of researchers to investigate the systemic nature of these phenomena, often preferring to see them as the work of rogue elements or corrupted individuals.

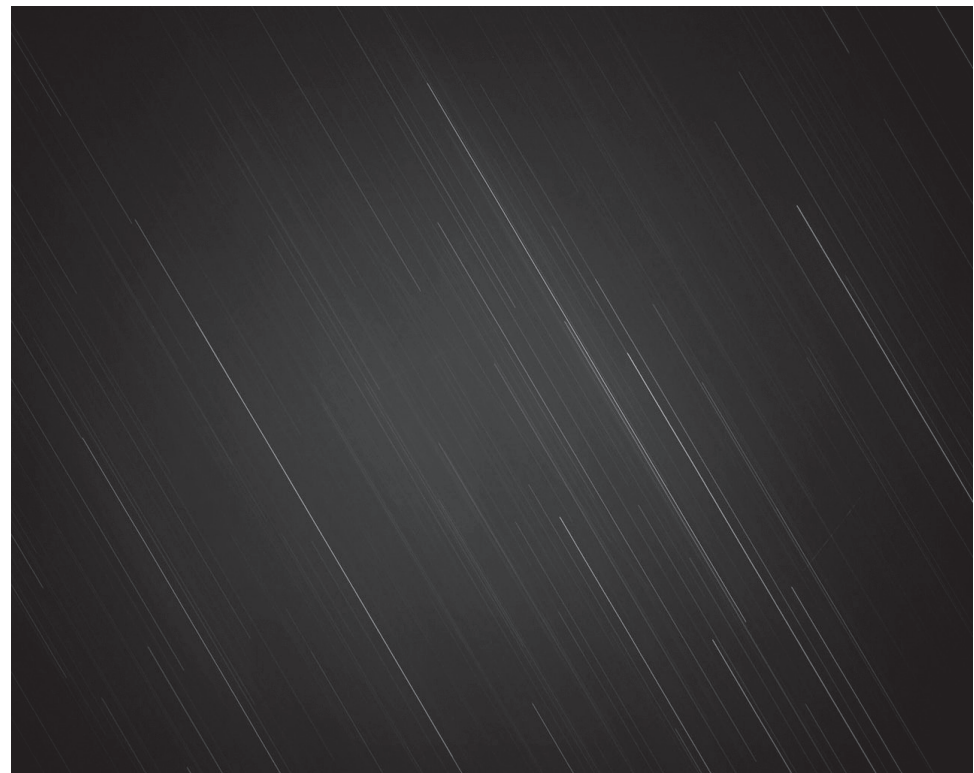
Blank Spots on the Map clearly posits the black world as a sector whose influence is global and



◀ Trevor Paglen, *Unmarked 737 at “Gold Coast” Terminal, Las Vegas, NV, Distance ~ 1 mile 10:44 p.m, C-Print, 76×91 cm*

▼ Trevor Paglen, *The Other night sky: Vortex 3 in Sextans (Inactive Signals Intelligence Spacecraft), 2009*

▶ This patch was worn by DC-130 flight crews responsible for testing the TSSAM cruise missile (also known as the Killer Whale). The numbers 716 and 526 refer to the pair of DC-130s used as control aircraft for the unmanned test articles. From the book *I Could Tell You But Then You Would Have to Be Destroyed by Me: Emblems from the Pentagon’s Black World*, by Trevor Paglen



systemic. In her reflections on the Pentagon Papers, Hannah Arendt writes, “[S]ecrecy — what diplomatically is called discretion as well as the *arcana imperii*, the mysteries of government — and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have been with us since the beginning of recorded history.”⁶ While this is undoubtedly the case, what is novel about the current period is not only the fact that secrecy has been generalized — to borrow a concept for Guy Debord — but that the secrecy of the black world has become an enormous part of the military-industrial complex.⁷ This does not only affect the art of government, but impacts society as a whole. As Paglen writes, “The black world is much more than an archipelago of secret bases. It is a secret *basis* underlying much of the American economy” (277).

Paglen identifies the Manhattan Project as the foundation of the black world in its enormous expenditure, mobilization of manpower, and its generation of large secret sites. “Building secret weapons during a time of war was nothing new. Building *industrialized* secret weapons, employing hundreds of thousands of workers, the world’s top scientists, dedicated factories, and multibillion-dollar budgets hidden from Congress — that was unprecedented. It would become a standard operating procedure” (93). If the quest to build the world’s first atomic bomb set the foundations of the black world, it became a legitimate part of the US state with the National Security Act of 1947, which, among other things, created the Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Council, and merged the various branches of the military into the Department of Defense. A key event in this history is the CIA Act of 1949, which remains the statutory basis for the black budget. Remarkably, the bill was voted into legislation without congress even being able to read it in its entirety. It had been vetted by the Committee on Armed Services who removed portions of the bill that were “of a highly confidential nature” — as Paglen emphasizes, “*The bill itself was secret*” (190).

Paglen skillfully moves from the historical foundations of the black world to stories of individuals around the world caught up in its occasionally Kafkaesque intricacies. One of the book’s more harrowing chapters is the story of Walter Kasza, a sheet metal worker who had been assigned by his union to work on a secret Air Force base deep in the Nevada desert near Groom Lake. In order to work at the base, Kasza

and his co-workers were forced to sign secrecy agreements, and the military in turn classed them as John Does. The base’s dominant mode of disposing of top-secret garbage was to simply burn it, and the workers were consistently exposed to the resulting toxic smoke. They developed bizarre skin conditions — “their bodies were covered with fishlike scales that seeped blood when they moved” — and had lung and kidney problems as well (149). When some workers died, many of their families, together with surviving workers suffering from similar symptoms, filed a class-action suit for wrongful death against their employer. The courts threw out the case as the defendants were able to simply cite the state’s need for secrecy, in that even the simple presentation of evidence of the victims’ ill health would compromise classified information. The military would not even acknowledge that the base on which the workers inhaled the toxins existed.

Blank Spots on the Map makes clear the epistemological boundaries that stand in the way of any investigation into the black world. This is dramatized in a fascinating passage in which Paglen goes through the Department of Defense’s public budget from the 2008 fiscal year. As far as a phonebook, the budget contains line items for various projects. Many programs include descriptions, but alongside of more banal expenses like latrines and postage, there are line items for programs like Chalk Eagle, which was allocated \$352 million for 2009 and does not include any program description. Beyond this there is another class of programs with names like Cobra Ball and Forest Green that don’t even have their budgets listed, and then at the most extreme there are programs whose names or expenses are not revealed and only are listed as “Special Program” or “Special Activities.” By adding up all of the line items and comparing the result — \$64 billion — with the overall Department of Defense budget — just under \$80 billion — one can roughly figure out how much was spent on these completely secret projects. This \$16 billion is only a part of the overall black budget, however, and Paglen, citing a study, claims that it was around \$34 billion for the 2009 fiscal year.

Here Paglen acknowledges his literal inability to “follow the money” and the inevitable incompleteness of any investigation into the black world. This is reflected in Paglen’s artistic work as well. Paglen’s photo series, *The Other Night Sky*, captures classified reconnaissance satellites

by taking long exposures of the night sky, while in his *Limit Telephotography* project he used astronomical equipment to photograph secret military installations at great distances. Both shoot their objects of study at a great distance, and one has to take the artist’s word that one is in fact looking at a spy satellite and not merely an ordinary communications satellite; that one is looking at a secret military installation and not merely a remote airport hangar. In *I Could Tell You but Then You Would Have to Be Destroyed by Me* (2007), Paglen presents a collection of patches connected to various black world projects. One, for example, is an image of a topless woman riding a killer whale with the words “Rodeo Gal” stitched onto the patch and was worn by the flight crews testing a particular cruise missile. The distance in this work is not as literal as in Paglen’s photography, but the viewer is also forced to put a great trust in the veracity of the artist’s revelation and there is also a layer of mystery that cloaks the images, intensified by the notion that one is perhaps viewing sensitive, classified information. These works engage the epistemological drive, presenting the existence of a secret world, the knowledge of which seems as essential for any understanding of the contemporary world as it remains restricted in its totality for anyone without the highest levels of security clearance.

Towards the conclusion of *Blank Spots on the Map* Paglen writes, “I must confess that when I began this project, I was seduced by blank spots on maps, by the promise of hidden knowledge that they seemed to contain. It was easy to imagine that if I could just find one more code name, if I only knew what the HAVE PANTHER project was, [...] somehow the world itself would change for the better” (280). As he concludes, however, this is not enough. Simply revealing the details of many of these classified projects is a complex and time-consuming task — getting the state to acknowledge their existence is even more difficult. While the exposition of these programs is important work, it has to be linked to systemic concerns if it is not going to be reduced to a mere cataloguing of the black world. This is exactly what makes Paglen’s work so powerful and innovative. Paglen is able to shed light on many of the dark corners of this world, but the map that emerges is inevitably incomplete. Their contours can be grasped, but the blank spots are not completely filled in. In Paglen’s cartographic successes and failures, the black world emerges in relief. ●

Notes

1. Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map* (Boston: Dutton, 2009), 4.
2. Peter Galison, “Removing Knowledge,” *Critical Inquiry*, 31 (Autumn 2004), Available online at: <http://criticalinquiry.uchicago.edu/features/artstatements/arts.galison.htm>.
3. Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*, (Vintage, 1989), 199.
4. Robert Cribb, “Introduction: Parapolitics, Shadow Governance and Criminal Sovereignty,” *Government of the Shadows*, ed. Eric Wilson (London: Pluto Press, 2009), 2, 8.
5. Eric Wilson, “Deconstructing the Shadows,” *Government of the Shadows*, 30.
6. Hannah Arendt, “Lying in Politics: Reflections on the Pentagon Papers,” *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 18, No. 8. (Nov 18th, 1971). Available online at: www.nybooks.com/articles/10375.
7. See Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (London: Verso, 1990).

jpeg msh 01 jpeg ag 01 jpeg ag 02

Martin Högström



↑ Thomas Ruff, *jpeg msh 01*, 2004.
Color photograph, 276 × 188 cm

Eight times eight, i.e. sixty-four monochrome squares in various yellow green grayish nuances form larger units, which together on a few square meters depict what must be regarded as a catastrophe. A big pixilated, geometrically fuzzy cloud covers the surface. Whitish smoke in low resolution belches up from a crater at the lower edge of events. A volcano? An explosion? The closer the observer, the less distinct the motif. *jpeg msh 01* is a picture by the German photographer Thomas Ruff. *jpeg ag 01* and *jpeg ag 02* constitute the same explicitly geometrically colored, figurative form of representation. Two big tableaux placed beside each other within a few decimeters. A picture divided in two separate sections. The color scale is a bit wider; sand-colored shades break out into pale grayish blue and red. The sun shines. Set against a ravine in a barren mountain landscape, a number of shadowy mounds rise in two horizontal rows from the left tableau's left margin across to the right segment and out of the picture. Topographic anomalies with the proportions of the human body. Bodies covered by sand, blankets? Shallow graves? Feet, or indications of the silhouettes of feet point upward from the lower edges of the piles. Or is it rocks? One of the mounds on the left segment is purple. On top some sky. The mounds correspond to the silhouette of the mountains. The bodies, or dirt piles, enter the landscape — subordinate to the stage design as opposed to the opposite. The dead bodies, if they are dead bodies, the traces of bodies, the surrounding nature's indication of the presence of dead bodies, conform to nature. Subordinate to nature. Covered by nature. A sharp eye is of no use. The photographs invite the observer to take off her glasses. The images are schematic. Details are discerned only as the result of the production of associations with regards to the big picture, the totality: the images function as

potential mythological fields. There is nothing extraordinary about this — in this regard they do not differ from the thousands of news images of that same standardized compression format that incessantly spread over the world. These monstrous enlargements would in a smaller scale resemble any news images of any disaster. But here this is evident. It's a matter of scale. In the final chapter of the French writer Robert Antelme's *L'espèce humaine* (2007), the narrator describes — after a long and painful account of hunger and fatigue in the German work camp Gandersheim, and the walk and train ride from there to Dachau at the final stage of the Second World War — how the camp's prisoners encounter the American soldiers that come to their rescue.¹ The emaciated captives are offered chocolate and cigarettes and it is evident that the men in uniform have come in peace: they will not beat or kill the prisoners. At the same time, dumbfounded, the young soldiers comment on the sight of the horrors of Dachau: "Frightful, yes, frightful!" When the camp prisoners, little by little, begin to tell their stories, something happens. The soldiers appear to not listen. They are unable. They do not understand. The narrator explains that even though the stories that are told by the prisoners are all true, they lack the ingenuity and artfulness that is necessary to convey a truth. The soldiers limit themselves to presenting the experiences of the prisoners — of which each and every one is an example among thousands — as impossible to grasp, whereupon the internees start to hold their unappreciative liberators in contempt. "Incomprehensible, it's a word that does not divide, that does not limit. It's the most comfortable word." What does it signify? Katharina Sieverding's monumental suite *Stiegbilder* from 1997 contains some greatly enlarged news images. The screen-dots stand

out pointillistically and they outline the motif in the same gesture as they erase it. The conditions for the suggestively figurative quality of the image stem from its resolution. The suite *Bärenkampf* from 1974 by Sigmar Polke depicts a bloody battle between two dogs and a bear that appear to tear each other apart in front of an absent-minded audience scattered on the ground around them. The photographic prints are chemically distorted in patches and stains, which to a certain extent obstructs the onlooker in taking part in the actions. The eye is looking for answers. The terrifying becomes even more terrifying. Blood thirsty, the imagination runs riot. To some extent, these effects apply to Thomas Ruff's photographs as well. However, the implication of the news format and the lack of distance and their uncommented impersonal mode suggest an indifference to the motif that we do not find in the artistically elaborated work of Sieverding and Polke. *jpeg msh 01*, *jpeg ag 01* and *jpeg ag 02* differ from their predecessors by the fact that it is the image format itself that creates the distance — and by the fact that the photographer does not seem to do anything about it. The legacy from the masters of objectivity, Bernd and Hilla Becher, is detectable, even if Thomas Ruff, who with a laconic emancipating gesture towards his teachers at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf states that his generation lost a part of their faith in the so-called objective catching of the real reality. The problems depicted in Thomas Ruff's pictures are mediated in a language that the observer does not fully master. Nuances are lost — and with them maybe something most significant. The observer is placed in exile. The images show or indicate that a problem takes place, but that the complexity and singularity of the problem is lost in mediation: gone up in smoke, disappeared, devastated. An apparently

exact photographic representation of the same events would perhaps give the observer the illusion of actually being able to take part in the problem because it is visible. Thomas Ruff's images are far too indifferent for such an artifice. If *jpeg msh 01*, *jpeg ag 01* and *jpeg ag 02* do not objectively represent their motifs in a traditional photographic sense they instead display the reality that encircles the mediation of a problem. Rather than revealing the actual catastrophe, Thomas Ruff reveals the image of the catastrophe, and the fact that the catastrophe, despite its impressive scope, still lacks representation. The observer squints her eyes, takes one step back until the room frames the image. She establishes distance in order to see.² •

This text is a revised version of a contribution to *Ödeläggelse*, by Marie Silkeberg and Fredrik Arsæus Nauckhoff.

Notes

1. Antelme, Robert, *L'espèce humaine* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2007).
2. *Objectivités — la photographie à Düsseldorf*, October 4 2008 through January 4 2009 at the Musée d'Art moderne in Paris. The exhibition dealt with photography in Düsseldorf from the 1960s until today, with works by pioneers such as Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke and Katharina Sieverding and the professors at the famous Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, Bernd and Hilla Becher, as well as three generations of their students, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Jörg Sasse, Elger Esser, and others.

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Image, Time, Presence

Sven-Olov Wallenstein

I. Image

Georges Didi-Huberman’s two volumes *Devant l’image: Question posée aux fins d’une histoire d l’art* (1990) and *Devant le temps: Anachronisme de l’art et histoire des images* (2000),¹ together constitute a powerful questioning of our normal understanding of what it means for artworks to have histories, for us to engage with them, and of how they can be said to always overflow and disrupt the interpretative frameworks that we impose on them. Confronting us with a new idea of the “image” and of “time,” Didi-Huberman’s work attempts not only to rethink fundamental methodological aspects of art history, but also opens onto an ontological questioning of the status of images in general that situates itself at the crossroads of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and a vast array of contemporary investigations into the foundations of subjectivity.

Didi-Huberman’s quest is to descend into the undertow of representation, and to chart those forces that lead to a dismantling of form: in short, to restore the presence of the work as an inexhaustible enigma whose insolubility both calls for and resists infinite interpretation. There is a certain “ruined clarity” that we must learn to excavate, he suggests, and that stands firmly opposed to a demand for identification of forms, which is nothing less than a “tyranny of the visible” (DI 64/52). There is a power of “disruption,” a “tear” or “rend” (*déchirure*) at work in the fabric of representation, to which art history has most often made itself blind, not just because of some contingent intellectual error, but due to structural reasons that lie as deep as the humanist foundations of the discipline in the writings of Vasari and onwards. To emancipate this force for Didi-Huberman thus

also implies a thoroughgoing critique of various traditional modes of art history, most notably the one developed by Panofsky, with its strong (neo)-Kantian emphasis on form and rationality. In such a neo-Kantian discourse, art and historiography mirror each other as fundamentally intellectual processes, leading from a pre-artistic recognition of form, through an “iconic” stage, and finally up to the rationality of “iconology,” and Didi-Huberman proposes a powerful reading of this tradition that brings out its limits. We should always be wary, he suggests, of a history that turns the object into a mirror image of its own “rational” procedures, that takes its “mode of knowing” to be identical with the thing to be known, and that never opens itself to the challenge of the work.

The critique of irrationalism — the “critique of pure unreason” understood as a particularly German phenomenon — indeed became a predominant motif in Panofsky’s work as it evolved in the American context, against which Didi-Huberman proposes a much more fluid and expanded version of critical activity that opens up toward the dimension of unconscious affects and a different genesis of subjectivity. Unlike this tradition, which presupposes an “implicit truth model that strangely superimposes the *adaequatio rei et intellectus* of classical metaphysics onto a myth — a positivist myth — of the omnitranslatability of images,” and produces a “closure of the visible onto the legible and of all this onto intelligible knowledge” (DI 11/3), whose philosophical summit Didi-Huberman locates in Kant, he wants to restore something of the opacity in the visible, its resistance to translation into iconicity, signification, and codes. (Needless to say, this could *also* be read as a retrieval of certain underlying motifs in Kant’s own work, and especially so in the case of the third Critique, which should by no means be simply handed over to a limited neo-Kantian reading, as Didi-Huberman often seems prone to do.) In this (seemingly) anti-Kantian task, he also finds a close ally in Freud and the analysis of the “dream-work,” which shows that the machinations of representation always have their roots deep down in formations below the conscious level, for which

even the term “contradictory” may be too dialectical and pacifying since time and logical sequentiality here lose their grip; and also in Lacan, who is rarely cited, but who, by way of a quote from his famous analysis of the gaze as *objet a*, a “pulsatile, dazzling, and spread-out function” connected to the unexpected and impossible arrival of the Real (the Real object of painting, *l’objet reel de la peinture*, Didi-Huberman says), in fact seems to get the final word (318/271).

But if the first question posed by Didi-Huberman bears on how we are to account for the existence of such a disruptive moment, and if this necessitates a polemical thrust against a certain model of art history, then we must also be able to proceed to something like an *other* history that tracks the movements of this very illegibility without performing the same reductive move as its rationalist opponent, and that unearths the various modalities of “counter-images” as they impact on history neither from within nor without, but from a position somewhere at the margin or limit; as we will see, the status of this limit is fundamentally what is at stake here.

In this narrative (if this is the right word, which may be doubtful) a particular role is played by the motif of *incarnation*, as this is understood in certain strands of Christian theology. Drawing on a long tradition of negative “apophatic” theology from Pseudo-Dionysius to Albert Magnus, but also going back to Tertullian’s initial attacks on the Greek view of worldly immanence as the plenitude of visual form, Didi-Huberman locates a necessary break within the mimetic order (of which the Byzantine debates on iconoclasm in the 8th and 9th centuries would constitute a different version), where the impossibility of containing the divine within any finite vessel — linguistic, visual or otherwise — on the one hand entails a negation of representation, and on the other its multiplication, as in the multiplicity of “divine names” in Dionysius, whose very proliferation testifies to their fundamental inadequacy. This break with the iconic for Didi-Huberman implies a re-evaluation of the *index*, and he points to the Mandylyon and the shroud of Turin (as images of Christ that are not man-made, or “not made by

A Form That Thinks: Knowledge Through Montage in Georges Didi-Huberman

Kim West

Cinema was the true art of montage that began five or six centuries BC in the West. It’s the entire history of the West.

Jean-Luc Godard

“It is probable that interesting history is only to be found in montage, the rhythmic play, the *contradance* of chronologies and anachronisms,” Georges Didi-Huberman writes in *Devant le temps*, one of his examinations of the fundamental philosophical concepts of art history.¹ Earlier on in the same text Didi-Huberman returns to one of his favorite examples, a “pan” of color onto which bright splashes of paint have been applied, in a fresco by the Renaissance painter Fra Angelico.² He places us directly in front of this surface: “We are *before the pan* as before a complex time-object, an impure time: an extraordinary *montage of heterogeneous times which form anachronisms*.”³ “The exposition by montage,” Didi-Huberman writes almost a decade later, in one of his latest books, on Brecht, “renounces beforehand all claims to global comprehension.” “Its political value,” he continues, “is consequently more modest and more radical at the same time, since it is more experimental: it would, strictly speaking, consist in *taking a position* towards the real precisely by modifying, in a critical manner, the respective positions of things, discourses, and images.”⁴

The three quotes discuss the same concept — montage — but they do so in different ways and as if it denoted different types of objects. In the first quote, montage is the dynamic form, the “rhythmic play,” the “*contradance* of chronologies and anachronisms” with which history — here understood as historiography, as narrative concerning historical events — can be “interesting.” In the second quote we are placed in front of a “pan” in a fresco which presents itself as a “complex time-object”: the montage is the image as such, which itself assembles “heterogeneous times.” And in the third quote, montage is rather a critical, political method which makes it possible to “take a position” towards the real

by modifying and rearranging “the respective positions of things, discourses, and images.” Montage is an image, a historiographic form, a critical method: it has different modes of existence and purposes, it belongs to different fields, disciplines, and contexts.

This swift juxtaposition of partly overlapping, partly incongruent quotes about montage does not aim to reveal conceptual inconsistencies or contradictions committed by their author. Its purpose, rather, is to indicate the reach of the notion of montage that is operative in his texts, in order to see if it could be understood as a challenge. Can it today — this is one way of posing the question — be relevant to revive the idea that, in a remarkable manner, spread among and fascinated artists, filmmakers, and philosophers during the period between the wars: the idea of montage as the paradigm for a general project of cultural critique? In a series of studies published between 1995 and today, Didi-Huberman has turned to the central figures of this project — “the masters of montage,” as he calls them in *Images In Spite of All*: “Warburg, Eisenstein, Benjamin, Bataille”⁵ — and there examined montage from different perspectives. He has studied it as a means of revealing “formless” resemblances, in Sergei Eisenstein, Georges Bataille, and the editors of *Documents (La ressemblance informe*, 1995); as a historico-philosophical method with a specific, redemptive force, in Walter Benjamin (*Devant le temps*, 2000); as a historiographic technique with the capacity to give access to the “unconscious” of art history, in Aby Warburg (*L’image survivante*, 2002); and as a critical instrument with the ability to disclose the heterogeneous complexity of the historical moment, in Bertolt Brecht (*Quand les images prennent position*, 2009). He has also discussed some of the great montage projects of the more recent history of cinema: Godard’s *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (in the polemical *Images In Spite of All*, 2003), and Pasolini’s images of the people (in *Survivance des lucioles*, 2009, as well as in a series of articles destined for an announced book on “les peuples

hand,” *acheiropoieta*, as Byzantine theology said) as cases of this indexicality, but also to devotional relics and various forms of the ex-voto in general. These indexes are traces of presence, and instead of pointing ahead towards a mastery of presence within representation, they gesture towards transcendence both in terms of overflowing and withdrawal. And inversely, there is here also a relation to the viewer as an incarnated subject: the medieval spectator does not look for representational devices in the image of Christ, Didi-Huberman stresses, but experiences the body of Christ as in intense relation to his own body, just as the Eucharist becomes a carnal experience of presence and not an abstract and intellectual deciphering of signs.

Didi-Huberman locates a striking instance of this complex presence in the frescos of Fra Angelico, an analysis developed at length in a monograph published the same year as *Devant l'image*.² Here Didi-Huberman pursues the theme of a “dissemblance” between infinite and finite that calls upon the work of the “figure,”³ understood not in the sense of Vasari’s *idea* and *disegno*, but as a technique of deformation that disrupts the identity of the visible, and in this also makes possible and even necessitates a whole gamut of non-representational painterly expressions that Didi-Huberman traces in great detail. For instance, in the artist’s rendering of the Annunciation, the images take up a dialog with the surrounding white walls of the cell as if to empty out the Albertian *istoria*, and to announce precisely the transcendence and unknowable quality of the divine. When read in terms of the theology of figure, the “stains” of color that in many paintings seem to yield nothing but inchoate fields become the instruments to pry materiality open to a spiritual beyond without determined form. The four panels of false marble surrounding the fresco, similarly splashed with gushes of paint (evoking violent acts of throwing paint rather than the intellectual composure of the Albertian artist in control of his *istoria*), which have received little or no attention by scholars focusing on iconographic meaning, for Didi-Huberman come to indicate a hollowing out of the image, a figural gesture of

humility before a divine presence whose annunciation could only take place in the very failure of representation.

II. Time

In spite of all its brilliant exegetical details, textual as well as visual, the overall status of this analysis in Didi-Huberman’s interpretative strategy remains unclear, however, or more precisely put, *structurally and necessarily ambivalent*. On the one hand he speaks of “those long Middle Ages” (FA 24/10) within which Fra Angelico’s work remained embedded, which seems to accord it a *historical* location: the painterly version of negative theology would be a vestige of a tradition on the verge of being obliterated by the new optical and technical certainties of the Renaissance, by a visual mastery that becomes the opposite of the Dominican friar and painter’s humility, and subsequently ushers into the analogous certainties of the Vasarian art-historical tradition (which is in fact also how Vasari presents the painter, caught between a devout although artistically inept medieval tradition, and the technically proficient although morally questionable nudes of the present). On the other hand the figural work is read as a critique *avant la lettre* of a particular visual model that was not yet in place, which gives it a non-historical, paradigmatic quality that cannot be limited to Christian images.⁴ In this sense the analysis of Fra Angelico is the major piece of evidence for a historical shift, traced through an elaborate exegesis of theology and art at a moment when the subsequent path of Renaissance art was still in the balance, *and* a model for a perpetual dialectic between representation and disruption in all image-making. This is probably also why the pictorial regime of Alberti, which the Dominican painter’s dissemblant practices of studied visual ignorance allegedly oppose on every point, sometimes appears as almost naturalized — it is “the familiar order of the visible” (15/5), or “the ordinary economy of representation” (130/87). Similarly, the schema of incarnation that first was located with great historical and textual specificity subsequently seems itself to overflow its theological frame and become a condition

▼
Johannes Vermeer,
The Lacemaker,
1669–1670



of possibility for images in general: the power of *déchirure*, Didi-Huberman writes, should be situated “under the *complex and open* word incarnation” (DI 220/184, my italics), which seems to grant the concept an indefinite use. In the dense paragraph closing the first section of the book, entitled — with an ironical glance at Kant’s philosophy of religion — “The History of Art Within the Limits of its Simple Practice,”

Didi-Huberman seems to amalgamate several interpretations, fusing a theology reconfigured in a Lacanian vocabulary of desire and demand with an imperative of historical specificity (marked by the significant intrusion of a slightly uneasy “at least”), as if to situate a break that at once must be located *within* history, at the very *limit* and *opening* of the visual: in its attempt to “understand the past,” art history, he suggests,

Vanishing Points

exposés”). The “montage” that Didi-Huberman has found in these studies is not only a material, aesthetic technique for combining images and texts, but also an abstract form of knowledge which seems to question the very notion of history as a linear evolution, in which phenomena can “die” in order then to be “reborn.”

Is there — this is another, more direct way of formulating the question — a theory of the montage in Didi-Huberman? Does the concept have a coherent significance in his different texts, despite its plurality of uses? Can we find a description of its nature and purpose, its qualities and capacities, its theoretical conditions and historical context, or its material prerequisites and possible fields of application?

Before we can address questions such as these, however, we must pose another: against which background does Didi-Huberman take an interest in montage? On a very general level we could say that Didi-Huberman’s art historical and philosophical project aims to open up the idea of the *image* — probably the single most recurring word in his work, which he prefers in its generality to terms that designate specific artistic media or techniques — to *time*. “Always, in front of the image, we are in front of time,” proclaims the first sentence in *Devant le temps*, which together with the earlier *Devant l'image*, in English as *Confronting Images*, and the voluminous Warburg study *L'image survivante* constitute the foundations of his theoretical construction.⁶ However, when Didi-Huberman says that in front of the image, we are in front of time, this does not primarily mean that he is interested in the phenomenology and the time-consciousness of the aesthetic experience, but rather that he opposes himself to a certain fundamental notion about the nature of art history — where “art history” is understood as both historical events and historiographic narrative. In the founding figures of the discipline of art history — primarily Panofsky and his ancestors (Vasari, Winckelmann) and heirs (Gombrich, Baxandall) — Didi-Huberman finds the common idea that

the task of art history is to clarify and account for how artworks were conceived and experienced in “their own” time, that is, in the age or historical moment in which they were created. In order to understand a historical artwork, decipher its iconographic play of signs and uncover its iconological layers of significance, one must study its contemporary sources: identify its characteristic traits in the history of styles; compare it to existing documents on the life of the artist; situate it in its social, technological, and ideological context; trace its correspondences with the religious and philosophical ideas of the time, and so on. The underlying, implicit notion here is that on a superficial (iconographic) level the artwork is characterized by a direct legibility, a sort of semiotic self-presence, at the same time as it, on a deeper (iconological) level is embedded within its own *now*, within the historical, spiritual context — the *Kunstwollen*, the *Weltanschauung* — in which it lives (and outside of which it therefore cannot live — but perhaps be revived). The cardinal sin of the art historian would, according to this belief, be the anachronism: to read concepts and stories from *another time* into the motif of the artwork, to project contemporary values and ideas onto the cultural creations of the past or judge contemporary methods and techniques according to obsolete measures.⁷

In opposition to this Didi-Huberman suggests a radical reevaluation of the anachronism. “Traditional,” Panofskian art history — this would be another way of putting it — finds its basic model for thinking the relationship between the image and the gaze in a Neo-Kantian epistemology that attempts to chart how the subject “projects” its schemes onto the things, and that thereby wants to render possible a critical description of the conditions for the object’s true presence before perception. In the discipline of art history, this would correspond to a critical awareness of the ways in which the historian projects the concepts and ideas of her own time onto the artworks of the past. Against this critical project, which ultimately strives

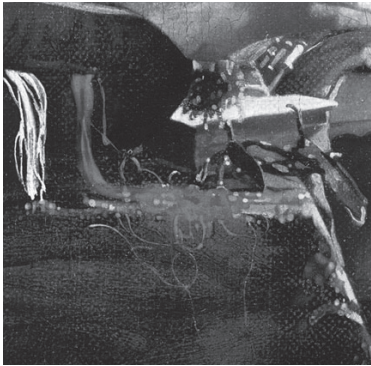
for the uncovering of a “pure” perception of the historical object, Didi-Huberman opposes a belief according to which both the gaze and the image are always already contaminated, impure, constituted by heterogeneous temporalities and inassimilable differences. He finds the model for this belief — and here one can see a very clear, almost systematic continuity in his work, from the dissertation on the images of hysteria at Charcot’s La Salpêtrière in 1982 to the latest texts on Brecht and Pasolini from 2009 — in Freudian psychoanalysis, where the gaze is directed towards dreams and symptoms that mix times and histories, that are characterized by constitutive repressions and productive returns. It is in fact, Didi-Huberman claims, never sufficient to limit oneself to the concepts, theories, and histories that belong to the artwork’s “own” age if one is to understand its actual effects and its ways of negotiating its art historical lines of descent. An artwork is never self-present as a directly legible surface, but torn apart, characterized by becomings and different modes of existence, different ways of acting upon the perception of the viewer. And an artwork never fully coincides with its own present, but is traversed by untimely, surviving forms which force the art historian to question the limits of her discipline and complicate her historico-philosophical diagram: motifs and styles can originate from distant times and places which in themselves appear to set each chronology out of play; essential characteristics of the image can become visible first before a gaze informed by obsolete or contemporary — untimely, anachronistic — methods and techniques, a gaze that consequently may be able to see past this image’s “attachment” to a certain epoch in the history of styles.

Didi-Huberman opens the idea of the image towards time. Against the “monogram-image,” which would be directly legible and correspond to the age of its creation, he opposes a “symptom-image,” which aggregates a multiplicity of temporalities and contradicts simple legibility, and whose art historical description

presupposes chronological leaps and anachronisms.⁸ This, we could perhaps say, has two general consequences for Didi-Huberman’s project, it points to two separate but overlapping problems in his different studies. On the one hand, it points to his interest for the phenomena and techniques of “figuration,” “incarnation,” and “imprint” in Western art history. In a long series of works — from *La Peinture incarnée* and the book on Fra Angelico to *Ouvrir Vénus* and *L'image ouverte* — Didi-Huberman has examined how, in Christian art, there may be a power of “figuration” and “incarnation” that transgresses the statically figurative and mimetic, surpasses the representational system of the image and can instead contain becomings, “pans,” and intensities that act directly upon the body of the spectator. He has also given great attention to the different techniques of “imprint” — molds, masks, prints, inscriptions, indexes — in Western art, starting from which it becomes possible to think the problem of depiction beyond the tradition of mimetic categories, and find new ways of delimiting art’s sphere of experience against other practices and institutions. To write the history of the imprint — this was the starting point for the big exhibition *L’empreinte*, curated by Didi-Huberman at the Centre Pompidou in 1997, and whose substantial catalogue has later been reprinted as *La ressemblance par contact* — would therefore imply rethinking a number of the different narratives and definitions that direct the understanding of Western art history as such. On the other hand, the complex temporality of the symptom-image points to Didi-Huberman’s interest in montage’s assemblage of elements, and to the different studies of “the masters of montage” he has undertaken since the mid-90s.

One could talk of three general ways, three levels on which Didi-Huberman discusses montage in his works. To begin with, there is an abstract or metaphorical way, where “montage” does not only refer to the artistic technique of combining aesthetic elements, but also describes

▼
Johannes Vermeer,
The Lacemaker (detail)



“owes it to itself to take into account — *at least* where Christian art is concerned — this long reversal: before demand there was desire, before the screen there was the opening, before investment there was the place of images. Before the visible work of art, there was the requirement of an ‘opening’ of the visible world, which delivered not only forms but also visual furors, enacted, written, and even sung; not only iconographic keys but also the symptoms and traces of a mystery. But what happened between the moment when Christian art was a desire, in other words a future, and the definitive victory of a knowledge positing that art must be conjugated in the past tense?” (64/52, my italics)

The expansive aspect of this move becomes even more clear in the appendix, “The Detail and the Pan [*Pan*],” where Didi-Huberman draws together many of the preceding arguments and examples in what is probably the great tour de force of the book, a dense discussion of Vermeer’s *The Lacemaker* (1670).⁵ Opposing himself to the clarity and exactitude that Paul Claudel once wanted to see in this image, he observes how the figure’s fingers transmute into blots of white color, and how the threads on the table form an confused entanglement. For Didi-Huberman, what the scene provides are obscurities and enigmas, and the “purification” and “stilling of time” that Claudel discerned in fact leads to an extreme “aporia of the detail” (296/250), and rather than cherishing the splendor and triumph

of representation as a way to capture the world laid out before our gaze, the painting now speaks of suspension, even its ruin and end. Vermeer’s attention to the details of this world, the worldliness and immanence of his imagery, however, are far removed from the theological discourse of incarnation, and the theory of the screen or “pan” that Didi-Huberman develops obviously refers not only to certain strands of 17th century Dutch painting, but to a condition shared by images in general.

This tension between the general and the specific is not so much alleviated as it is brought to the fore as a structuring idea in the following volume, *Devant le temps*, which explores, or perhaps better explodes, the temporal logic of art history. If *Devant l’image* poses a question to the “ends,” understood both in the sense of *aims* and *endings* — both of which are to be taken in the plural — of a certain history of art, the second, a decade later, confronts us with *time* as the necessary “anachronism” of the work, its capacity to disrupt the order of history.⁶ Although more loosely structured than the preceding volume (it is organized around three readings, of Pliny, Walter Benjamin, and Carl Einstein), *Devant le temps* pursues the theme of the disruptive “rend” in order to show that it can neither be understood as some atemporal structure beyond the vicissitudes of history, nor a simple effect or expression of a certain moment in history: the work, Didi-Huberman suggests, or perhaps we should say the *work of the work*, constitutes an *anachronism*, a *montage* of different temporalities that violently undoes the conventional fabric of “tradition.”⁷

Once more taking its cue from the case of Fra Angelico, *Devant le temps* poses the question of how we should understand that his work belongs to several chronologies. Restoring a context and historical sources, no matter how profound and detailed they may be, will never allow one to appreciate the fact that the image is not even *contemporary with itself* — it breaks out of the “euchrony,” a *Zeitgeist* that is always a result of an idealization, and extends towards a past (Fra Angelico transforming and reworking the theology of *figura*), but also towards its own

future, where a contemporary abstraction that charts the physical act of painting (as in Pollock) may allow us to rediscover the *modus operandi* of a 15th century painter. There is both a necessity and a fecundity in this type of anachronism, Didi-Huberman suggests, but instead of chastising it as something which prevents art history from finally becoming a science (humanist, as in the case of Panofsky, or in some other version), we should cherish it as something which is profoundly connected to the historicity of thought itself.

III. Presence

As Norman Bryson has pointed out, the attacks on Panofsky mounted by Didi-Huberman may seem a bit overdone, above all since the model derived from Panofsky has long since ceased to function as a paradigm for art history, which during the last decades has come to face an almost overwhelming pluralism.⁸ In retrospect we may however situate Didi-Huberman’s two books, both in what they reject and what they propose as an alternative — what they “confront” us with or place “before” us (*devant*): images and time — within a larger theoretical shift, which may serve as an interpretative grid for at least some of the current transformations, and which has received many names: the turn towards “presence” or “affects,” towards and “anthropological” understanding of images, or, ironical as this may sound if we bear Didi-Huberman’s sustained attack on the humanist tradition in mind, the “pictorial” or “iconic.”⁹

Regardless of what terminology we choose, this shift may be said to take place in opposition to a “linguistic turn” that seemed to place everything under the aegis of language, and whose high point was the advent of structuralism and its various aftermaths in the mid to late ‘60s. Today it seems as if images and visual objects have once again acquired an agency of their own, a capacity to act on us in unforeseen ways. This is undoubtedly on a more straightforward level due to their sheer ubiquity: once theorized under the rubric of “simulacra,” a concept that still betrayed an unmistakable if not acknowledged nostalgia for a Real beyond

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a condition — for objects, images, texts, artworks, thought processes, events — which is characterized by a specific type of heterogeneity and temporality. In *Devant le temps* the “pan” in the Renaissance painting becomes “an extraordinary *montage of heterogeneous times which form anachronisms*,” and memory “an impure aggregate, [a] — non-‘historic’ — *montage of time*,” while the images “*dismantle history*” and consist of “*montages of different temporalities, symptoms which tear apart the normal order of things*.”⁹ In *Images In Spite of All*, Didi-Huberman goes even further and speaks, in a passage with vast implications — which he has not followed up since then, at least not literally — of “a notion of montage which would be for the field of images what the signifying differentiation was for the field of language according to the Post-Saussurean conception.”¹⁰ The generality and the reach of this use of the montage concept suggest that it could correspond to some of film history’s “expanded” montage theories — where the most apparent example would be Eisenstein’s notion, according to which “the montage principle in films is only a sectional application of the *montage principle in general*, a principle which, if fully understood, passes far beyond the limits of splicing bits of film together.”¹¹ In a famous passage in the text from which this quote originates — also known as *Montage 1938* — Eisenstein puts his “general montage principle” to the test in a discussion about a text by Leonardo Da Vinci, in which the Renaissance artist describes an unrealized painting of the Deluge as if it consisted of a carefully orchestrated sequence of events and scenes: the dark sky storms, cliffs crash into the great river, panicking masses try to save themselves on home-made boats and rafts, mothers lament their drowned sons, others take their own lives in hopelessness and despair, animals crowd upon the mountain tops... This text, Eisenstein argues, follows the principle of montage, not only because it seems to describe both a spatial and temporal composition of separate scenes, but also because it, through

the movement it traces between the different elements, directs the attention of the spectator in a way that enhances the drama of the composition and “pulls her into” the creative act itself, making her a co-creator of the image.¹²

Didi-Huberman’s notion of the image as a montage of heterogeneous times, of course, differs in essential ways from this one. In Eisenstein, Leonardo’s text-image is a montage because it clearly consists of a multiplicity of separate parts, which are combined according to a dramatic logic. It is a “shooting-script” *avant la lettre*, Eisenstein says, and it facilitates the spectator’s empathy and identification with the events of the narrative, and her “fusion” with the artist’s intention. When Didi-Huberman talks of the “pan” — in a fresco by Fra Angelico or a painting by Vermeer — as a montage, this means, on the contrary, that it resists all translation and subsumption into a simple story: segments of the image withdraw from all figurative logic for the benefit of a physical, plastic mode of existence; they resist being seen as details or components of a general composition, undermining, rather, the order of the image; and they set the categories with which one normally approaches the artists and epochs in question out of play, enforcing a reconsideration of the past’s relationship to its own past and to the present. Consequently, they do not imply the spectator’s empathy or identification with the image’s story and the artist’s intention, but rather force the spectator to question her own notion of the past and her own historical identity. The model for Didi-Huberman’s concept of the montage, then, is not in the first hand to be found in a general montage principle such as the one expressed in *Montage 1938*. Rather, one finds it in Benjamin’s famous formulations regarding the “dialectical image,” which Didi-Huberman discusses at length in the chapter on Benjamin’s philosophy of history in *Devant le temps* — a chapter that also includes one of his most important arguments about montage as a mode of knowledge. “It is not,” Benjamin says in an often



representation, the image in its unfettered state has become an autonomous power that neither reveals nor conceals, but *is itself fully real*. This also cuts through the status of images as mere representations, and in this also renders questionable the classical concept of “ideology,” which ever since Marx’s somewhat simplistic use of the *camera obscura* model in most cases has been predicated upon a rather reductive view of consciousness as (deformed, distorted) representation. Today, it is claimed, images are *presentations*, and even if any trust in a clear-cut distinction between presentation and re-presentation, for instance in the form of a massive split between some immediate access to reality and its linguistic mediation, seems more than naïve on the philosophical level — and this is unfortunately how the discussion is often phrased — the claim that we must retrieve the efficacy of the visual, its visceral and physical effects and affects, as a problem *within* theory itself, is highly significant. The emphasis on “reading” the world may to some extent have blinded us to its “being,” as Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht says (although this is indeed too a distinction that must be subjected to severe scrutiny). There is, he claims, an intentionality within the objects themselves, a way in which they produce “presence effects” that must be accounted for.¹⁰

Such “presence effects” are also closely related to a discourse on “affects,” which today has become a pervasive theme in much cultural theory, from media and literary studies to architecture and philosophy.¹¹ This undoubtedly translates a widespread fatigue with inherited models of critical theory that are based on fixed models of experience and subjectivity, and they call for a more malleable and flexible way of understanding the way our sensorium is constructed. But even though these debates obviously become highly complex as soon as one enters into the details, on a more general level they tend to split up along well-known and predictable axes. On the one hand, there are those who understand the concept of affect as pointing towards the necessity of an affirmation that would reject “theory” as an obstacle to experimentation and production, on the other

hand those who perceive affectivity as a renewed possibility of resistance that would be based in the hidden potential of the body itself, beyond or beneath the conscious level.

The claim for a “presence” of the visual, that there is a “life” lodged within images to which we must respond, indeed flies in the face of a certain type of interpretation, predominant within what has become “cultural studies,” which seals the visual object within an analysis of ideological formations whose representation it would be, and that consequently calls for a mode of deciphering that eventually uncovers the true meaning — a truth that becomes all the more compelling by breaking away from the surface order of phenomena. A critique of images that reduces them to mere ideological reflections seems to deprive them of life, in transferring all of the movement and intelligence to the one who “reads” them; against this, the theory of presence requires that we restore something of the encounter, the way images confront our bodies with their physical texture in a kind of violence of the surface.

But although it may be true that the skin is the deepest thing of all — “*Ce qu’il y a de plus profond dans l’homme, c’est la peau*,” as Valéry famously said¹² — this does not imply that we must simply discard depth in favor of a naïve immediacy, instead it may just as much make us aware of the intricacies of the surface/depth model, as any more thorough consideration of the surfaces, folds, and crevices of poetry surely will tell us.

To some extent, it seems as if the emphasis on presence and affect would attempt to relocate the “object” (and/or “subject”) of critical theory — presuming that this term should be preserved, as I do — to a new region, where the entanglement of the subjective and the objective is more acute, and where all appropriating hermeneutics comes to and end. But we must also note that this may be a struggle against a non-existing enemy, provided that we make the case of the opponent as strong as possible. Indeed, few thinkers have emphasized the power of the musical work to undo our conceptual schemes to such an extent as Adorno, and few have highlighted the capacity of the visual art object to question all inherited

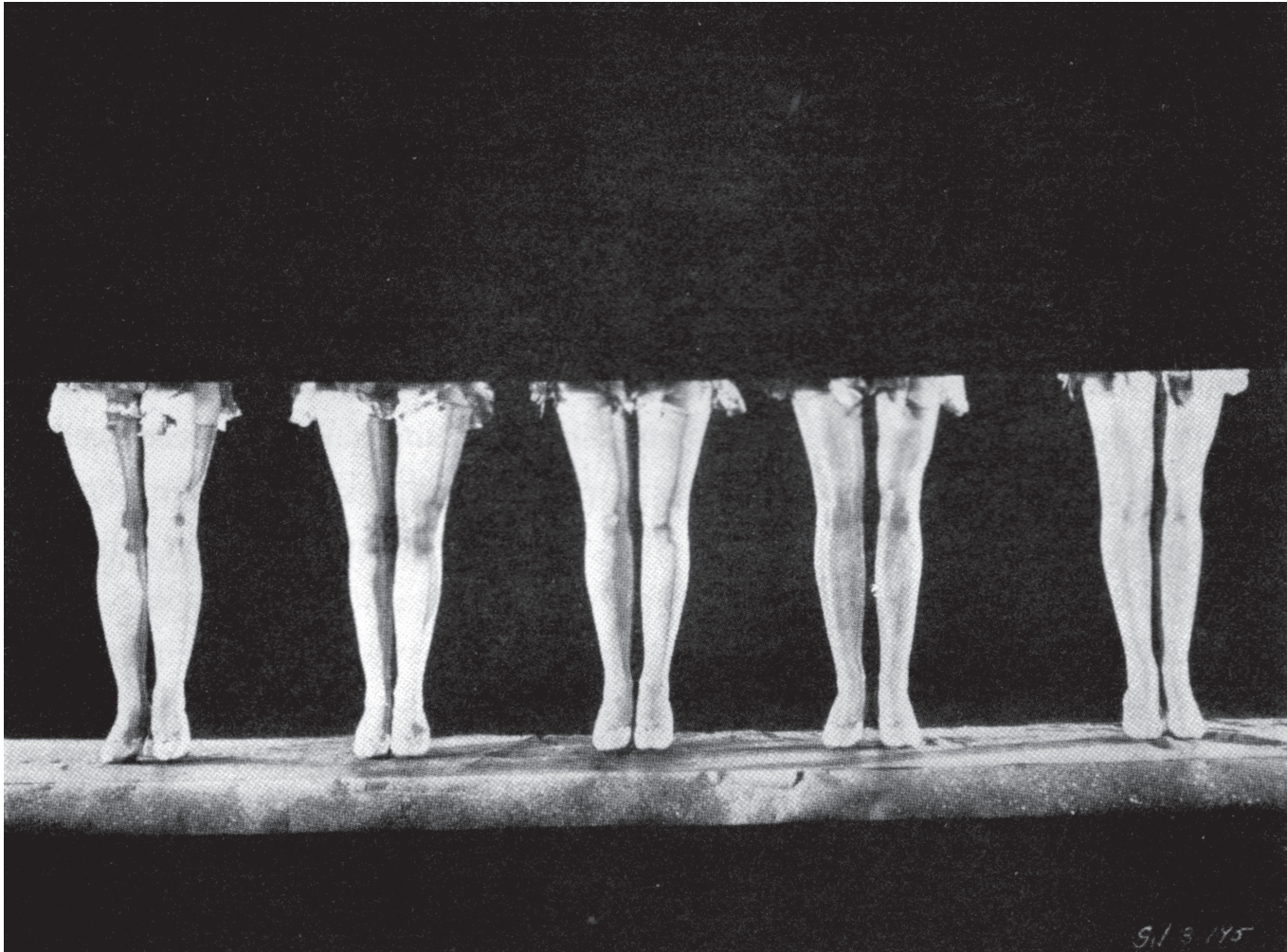
views of perception more than Merleau-Ponty — all of which indicates that the difference between interpretations that seal the work in pre-given categories (of art history, literary history, cultural studies, critique of ideology), which undoubtedly do not only exist but in fact provide the bulk of academic discourse, and those that put these categories themselves at risk, runs within these traditions themselves, and can not be used to pit them against each other.

If it is possible to locate Didi-Huberman within this theoretical shift, as for instance Keith Moxley does,¹³ then we must also note the extent to which he resists it, i.e. the extent to which the claims for presence imply a certain anti- or non-theoretical stance that opts for immediacy, enjoyment, and a farewell to reflexive discourse (which obviously, no matter how sophisticated some of its proponents may be, squares all too nicely with demands of our present culture industry). His critique of the art historical tradition may undoubtedly be mapped onto the critical reactions against a certain view of images as simply bearers of an ideology that could be decoded in another discourse whose authority remained unquestioned (be it social history or psychoanalysis, the point here not being the *content* but the *position* of the theory “supposed-to-know,” to paraphrase Lacan), where the cultural analyst effortlessly assumes the places of the iconologist. But his re-evaluation of the power of images, particularly in their “anachronic” dimension, also indicates the temporal complexity that must be accounted for in any theory of presence. It effectively undercuts the simplistic division between representation and presentation, and shows the considerable resources that still exist in the traditions of critical theory, psychoanalysis, and phenomenology. In short, if his work rejects certain models of art history and theory, it does this with the intent of reinvigorating theory, and to render it more open to the challenge of the object; and if it rejects certain rationalist models of history, it does so with the intent of opening us up to a dimension of historicity that may be all too easily lost in the certainties of various forms of social-historical analysis.

Seen in this context, the considerable polemic energy that runs through the work of Didi-Huberman is not what makes it so resourceful for the contemporary reflection on images. It is true that by reading books like *Devant l’image* and *Devant le temps* we learn a lot about what may be wrong with neo-Kantian aesthetics, Panofsky’s iconology, Vasari’s rational *disegno*, etc., and with a certain type of (perhaps somewhat malevolently portrayed) art-historical discourse that wants to be done with the object — but their fundamental thrust lies in their capacity to invent a powerful counter-discourse that mobilizes an *other* side of the philosophical tradition in order to reconstitute an agency to the work that calls for a renewed effort of thought. •

Notes

1. *Devant l’image. Question posée aux fins d’une histoire de l’art* (Paris: Minuit, 1990); trans. John Goodman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2009). *Devant le temps. Histoire de l’art et anachronisme des images* (Paris: Minuit, 2000). Henceforth cited as DI (French/English) and DT.
2. *Fra Angelico. Dissemblance et figuration* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990); trans. Jane Marie Todd, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Henceforth cited as FA (French/English). For more on this book, see Daniel Pederson’s essay in this issue.
3. In many respects the theory of “figure,” which eventually comes to oppose the “figurative” and the “figural,” and which Didi-Huberman develops on the basis of a reading of medieval philosophy is close to Lyotard’s idea of the “figural,” which similarly draws on a cross-reading of phenomenology and psychoanalysis, most systematically developed in *Discours, figure* (1971). Lyotard’s pioneering work however receives no attention in Didi-Huberman’s account of the image, except for a cursory reference to his discussions of Barnett Newman (DT 247, note). For a discussion of the importance of the figural in Lyotard’s early work, see my “Re-reading The Postmodern Condition,” *Site* 28, 2009.
4. For a discussion of this tension, see Alexander Nagel’s review of *Fra Angelico* in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 78, No. 3 (September 1996): 559–565.
5. In focusing on Vermeer Didi-Huberman obviously has a great predecessor in Proust, when the latter in *La prisonnière* describes the last moment of Bergotte, absorbed at the very instant of his death by the



▲ Fox Follies, in *Documents*, no. 6, 1929, 388

▲ Eli Lotar, *Aux abattoirs de la Villette. Article “Abattoir,”* in *Documents*, no. 6, 1929, 328

cited passage in the *Arcades Project*, “that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. Image is dialectics at a standstill.”¹³ “In front of an image,” Didi-Huberman writes, “the present never ceases to reconfigure itself, lest the dispossession of the gaze has completely yielded its place to the self-gratifying habits of the ‘specialist’. In front of an image [...], the past at the same time never ceases to reconfigure itself, since this image only becomes thinkable within a construction of memory, if not of dread.”¹⁴

What complicates matters is that “montage” in Didi-Huberman is not only the name of the pan, the image or the historical object which constitutes a “dialectical image,” but also refers to the procedure with which this dialectical image is produced. There is, one could say, a general sliding in the use of the montage concept in *Devant le temps*. On the one hand, Didi-Huberman talks of the “pan” and the image as montages, as phenomena that demand a mutual reconfiguration of the present and the past: dialectical images. On the other hand, he also, in direct connection to this first use of the concept, refers to montage as a narratological and historiographic operation, as the principle of composition at the basis for the *Arcades Project*’s great aggregate of quotes and text passages. An image can be a montage, a combination of images can be a montage. How should one understand this? The image “*dismantles history*,” Didi-Huberman claims. That is, it is characterized by a heterogeneity that as such opposes itself to a certain type of historical narrative and discloses its limitations. But, he continues, the image only has this capacity to dismantle history — is only a montage in the first sense — to the extent that it belongs to a montage in the second sense: an assemblage of images — to the extent this “*démontage*” will lead to a “*remontage*,” a new type of historiographic or narrative composition. In other words, the montage is a double operation:

- precious materiality of the small patch of yellow color (*la précieuse matière du tout petit pan du mur jaune*) in Vermeer's *View of Delft*; see the commentary to this passage in DI, 291ff/245ff and 314/67.
6. The questioning of the authority of historiographic reason is by no means limited to Didi-Huberman. The year after *Devant l'image*, a similar note was struck by Daniel Payot, in his *Anachronies de l'oeuvre d'art* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), and the same year Jean-François Lyotard could claim, from the somewhat different though not entirely unrelated vantage point of a theory of the sublime, that "there is no history of art, only of cultural objects"; see Lyotard, "Critical Reflections," trans. W.G.J. Niesluchowski, *Artforum* (April 1991), 29(8): 92–93.
7. As Didi-Huberman notes (DT 25, note 31), the book should be read in relation to Deleuze's *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps*. Separated as they may be in be their "philosophical sensibilities," these two works nevertheless both partake in a powerful attempt to rethink the relation between art and history, which first needs to pass through a negation of a historicism that seals the work in time and deprives it of its agency, which however is only a first step towards recovering a connection to history, or a "faith" in the world, as Deleuze says; cf. *L'image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), 322ff.
8. See the review of the English translation of *Devant l'image*, in *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (June 1993): 336–37.
9. For an overview of these discussions, see Keith Moxey, "Visual Studies and Iconic Turn," *Journal of Visual Culture* 7(2), 2008: 131–146. The "pictorial turn" was proposed by W. J. T. Mitchell a decade and a half ago, in his *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), and restated more emphatically in his *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2205). On the possibility of a general "anthropology of the image," see Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie. Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich: Fink, 2001).
10. Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2004). It must be noted that Gumbrecht's idea of presence both draws heavily on Heidegger and argues for the continued relevance of Derrida (in close connection to the idea of "birth to presence" through touching in Jean-Luc Nancy, to which Derrida's own book *On Touching* constitutes a thoughtful response), which should make the distinction between "being" and "reading" difficult to uphold. In fact, already in Merleau-Ponty any sharp divide between "being" and "reading" seems impossible, if the latter is understood as a diacritical movement of spacing and temporalization that engages our being-in-the-world to the fullest extent.
11. The theory of affects has been put forth most eloquently in the writings of Scott Lash, who

extends its genealogy back to Tarde, Bergson, and Simmel, and inscribes it in a general movement towards a new "vitalism" (a concept whose associations to irrationalism significantly made it into something of a bad name within earlier critical theory); see, for instance Lash and Celia Lury, *Global Culture Industry* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007). In a somewhat different fashion Maurizio Lazzarato, who also draws on Tarde, develops a theory of "noology" or "noopower," a power that extends Foucault's biopower into the substructure of perception; see, for instance, *Les Révolutions du capitalisme* (Paris: Empêcheurs de penser en rond, 2004), or *Videofilosofia. La percezione del tempo nel postfordismo* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1996). For an application of the idea of presence to architecture, where it seems to have gained a particular currency, see the contributions in *Archplus* 178 (2006), "Die Produktion von Präsenz." For a discussion of affectivity as a critical resource, see Jeffrey Kipnis, "Is Resistance Futile?" in *Log 5* (Spring/Summer 2005). These discussions in fact to some extent appear to return us to certain aporias within earlier versions of (the death of) critical theory, for instance in the fascination with intensity in Lyotard's work from the early '70s (and in fact, Lash and Lury place their investigations into the contemporary culture industry under the rubric "libidinal economy"), which he first opposed to the critical theory of Adorno and then, in a consciously self-defeating move, to theory in general. The return of these figures of thought is indeed significant, and I discuss the implications of this for critical theory (it must be stressed that this challenge cannot be simply dismissed, if we are to grasp the present) in more detail in *The Silences of Mies* (Stockholm: Axl Books, 2008), 68–80.

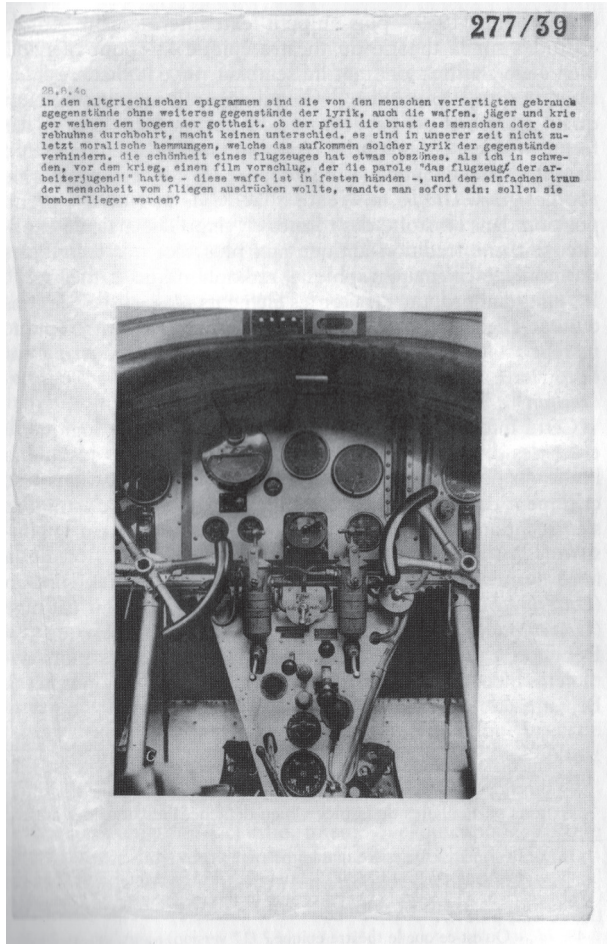
12. *L'idée fixe* (1931), *Œuvres II* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. La Pléiade, 1960), 215. For Didi-Huiberma's analysis of skin and depth, see *La peinture incarnée* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), 20–28.

13. "Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn," 134f.

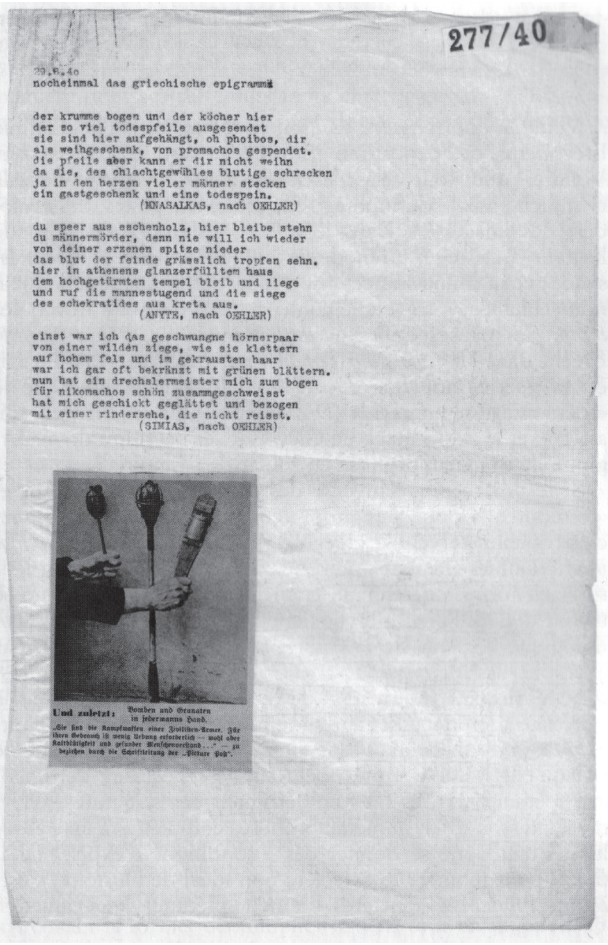
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Fra Angelico, *Holy Conversation (Madonna of the Shadows)*, 1438–50. Fresco and tempera. Florence, convent of San Marco, east corridor



Vanishing Points



▲
Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, August 28, 1940. Berlin, Akademie der Künste, Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv (277/39)



▲
Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, August 29, 1940. Berlin, Akademie der Künste, Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv (277/40)



▲
Bertolt Brecht, *Arbeitsjournal*, May 16, 1942. Berlin, Akademie der Künste, Bertolt-Brecht-Archiv (280/12)

Confronting Fra Angelico

Daniel Pedersen

In the beginning of Georges Didi-Huberman’s *Confronting Images* (*Devant l’image*), published the same year as *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration* (*Fra Angelico. Dissemblance et figuration*), the following question is posed: how has art history traditionally dealt with a certain “image of art”? From this starting point, an attempt is made to radically change our common preconceptions and expectations of art history as a specific knowledge and academic discipline.

The aim of this text is not to assess Didi-Huberman’s critique of art history as a discipline as such, but to see how he uses an alternative epistemological framework in dealing with the 15th century Italian painter Fra Angelico, and specifically his frescoes in the San Marco convent. The following text contains three main themes. Firstly the epistemological problem will be situated and defined, secondly the scriptural background will be approached in order to

penetrate into Fra Angelico’s lived universe, and thirdly some specific problems, such as the annunciation and incarnation, will be addressed as well as the key concepts that Didi-Huberman brings out of the scholastic tradition. These will serve as reference points for an alternative way of encountering the frescoes. The underlining problem, however, is how to encounter the frescoes. Which methodological tools did Didi-Huberman deploy when engaging with Christian art in general, and Fra Angelico’s frescoes in particular? Didi-Huberman’s own fear of the stakes involved is worth quoting:

Paintings are often disconcerting. They present our gaze with colors and obvious or simple forms — but often color and forms we were not expecting. No less often, unfortunately, we choose to close our eyes to the obvious, when this obviousness is there

to disconcert us. We close our eyes to the surprises offered the gaze: we arm ourselves in advance with categories that decide for us what to see and what not to see, where to see and where to avoid looking.¹

One traditional way to read Christian art is to identify the passage in the Bible being “illustrated.” This presupposes causality in art history: the *figures* in the painting are identified and the gestures are codified. By identifying the *motif* being transformed, which takes us from Panofsky’s first meaning, the pre-iconographical, to a *figure* (*figura*), i.e., to the secondary meaning, or the iconographical, we end up with the biblical story. Thus, by grasping the story we likewise believe that we have grasped the subject of the work of art. Such a reading commits to what we could call the naturalistic fallacy, in that it does not account for the fact that religious art is always already a part of a living liturgical practice, and hence it risks misunderstanding religious art as mere illustrations of biblical stories. The act of freeing oneself from this fallacy of the traditional — or rather Panofskian — art historian, nevertheless risks leaving the spectator in a void, bereft of all traditional categories. Rather than entertaining a notion of the encumbered self, it is important to see how the possibility of relating to the artwork in a different way is possible only on account of constructing an alternative grounding. What is then Didi-Huberman’s suggestion? Does he in fact claim that we do not need any form of grounding at all? It is obvious that Didi-Huberman is not proposing that *any* other system would serve us just as well. The confrontation with a traditional epistemology of art is intended to bring forth all the aspects to which the spectator has previously been blind. In doing so Didi-Huberman proposes that the spectator should enter into the painting’s living history in an almost philological way and break with the view that the “image of art” is something dead on the wall, ready to be dissected by the master surgeon himself: the art historian, or rather the Art historian.

But how should we begin? The challenge is to connect to the pictorial *enigma* — the enigma

of pictorial matter — only to refer it back to the *mystery* from which it drew its most profound and peculiar necessity. We should not fixate on an image of art and seal it by identifying its subject. This is a critique that, in a secular vein, can be found in Malevich: the modernist who wants to bring back the subject matter into painting performs a (pseudo-) resacralizing of color. In one of his essays on art Malevich writes: “Color and texture in painting are ends in themselves. They are the essence of painting, but this essence has always been destroyed by the subject.”² Even if it is not possible to attribute these thoughts *in toto* to Didi-Huberman’s essay, Malevich’s critique of the priority given to subject over color and texture finds a resonance in Didi-Huberman’s claim that the very essence of religious paintings, supposed to be reincarnated and transmitted to the spectator, ultimately will be lost if one does not try to go beyond an understanding of them as mere representations. For Didi-Huberman, it is only by dwelling on the dissemblance that the gaze can gain access to the incarnated world beyond the fresco on the wall.³

The book *Fra Angelico* has, as the title suggests, two main parts: dissemblance and figuration. In medieval theology *dissimilitudo* was the non-resemblance between the phenomenal and the divine. How then does Didi-Huberman go about examining dissemblance? In order to flesh out this aspect he probes deep into the scholastic world of the Late Middle Ages. The process of reaching deeper in the Scripture and the dimension of the mystical can only be fulfilled by delving into its sources, the very world in which Fra Angelico lived and worked. So when Didi-Huberman walks through the convent in San Marco he is both walking through the very same corridors as the 15th century painter, and trying to recreate the spiritual world in which Fra Angelico existed. In order to succeed in this he has to revive the scholastic tradition. The admirable depths [*mira profunditas*] can be reached by the act of dividing. “The letter killeth but the spirit giveth life,” writes Saint Paul.⁴ But, as Didi-Huberman writes: “In medieval exegesis, the technical name for the front side — the

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▲ Bertolt Brecht, *Kriegsfibel*, 1955, plate 44

it combines, but in order to combine it must first break apart. “[T]he montage as procedure,” Didi-Huberman writes in the text on Benjamin, “in effect presupposes the *démontage*, the previous dissociation of that which it constructs.”¹⁵ The same idea — the same dialectics — one finds five years earlier in the book on Bataille (that Didi-Huberman here rather refers to the concept of collage makes no essential difference): “How can one not see that only that which has first been separated, cut apart, will stick together [*colle*] with force? That only that which has first been in touch will separate and ‘cut through’ [*tranche*] intensely?”¹⁶ “Montage,” therefore, is the name of the objects of historical knowledge, of the procedure which assembles these objects into a new composition, and of the form which is the result of this procedure; montage is a procedure which consists in dismantling in order, then, to be able to remount, which in turn generates the montage’s new totality. One could hazard to establish that it is this simultaneous presence on a multiplicity of levels of significance, this at times intractable polysemy, which is at the basis of Didi-Huberman’s abstract and metaphorical way of using the montage concept, where it can denote images and compositions, but also historical objects, intellectual procedures, and methods of knowledge. We could also note that the tension which here becomes visible — between montage’s dismantling, separating, *analytic* force, and its remounting, assembling, *synthetic* force — points towards Didi-Huberman’s two other uses of this concept: one theoretical or philosophical, and one historiographic or critical.

In a number of contexts Didi-Huberman returns to the idea that the montage is the means — or perhaps even the medium — for a specific type of knowledge. Throughout his different studies on the “masters of montage” — not only on Benjamin, but also on Bataille and Warburg, and to a certain extent on Godard — an image appears of montage as “theoretical,” in the original sense of the word: it allows for a

specific seeing, it renders visible a certain type of qualities in phenomena or in history as such. “Montage,” Didi-Huberman writes in the book on Warburg, “is not the factual creation of a temporal continuity starting from discontinuous ‘shots’ assembled into sequences. It is, on the contrary, a way of *visually unfolding the discontinuities of time* at work in each sequence of history.”¹⁷ In *La ressemblance informe*, the formulation is: “They both” — Bataille and Eisenstein, respectively the editor and the one-time contributor to the magazine *Documents* — “saw in montage [...] the royal path for making the *forms regard us*, that is, correspond to this ‘essential and violent state of things’ which Bataille would name ‘transgressive’, while Eisenstein would call it ‘revolutionary’.”¹⁸ Montage can visually “unfold,” disclose, and render visible the discontinuities operative in each sequence in history. And it functions as the main method for making “the forms regard us,” for opening a specific seeing, before which the things show themselves in their “essential and violent state.”

In *La ressemblance informe*, Didi-Huberman approaches the concept of montage through an examination of Bataille’s philosophical project and its specific implementation in the art review — in a wide sense, the subtitle was “doctrines, archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie” — that he, during a few years around 1930, directed together with Michel Leiris, Georges-Henri Rivière, and Carl Einstein. If the general project of the magazine was to — in Bataille’s terms — establish a cultural theory of “base materialism,” a reflection into the “formless” nature of the human, an “anthropology of cruelty,” then the editors aimed for this both by publishing texts that directly addressed relevant themes, phenomena, and concepts (slaughterhouses, sacrificial rites, cannibalism, insects, body parts, “primitive art,” transgressive literature, etc.), and through an original way of working with images, where the reproduced photographs, etchings, and artworks did not always have an illustrative function, but could just as well







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**Fra Angelico, *Annunciation*,
1438–1450. Fresco.
Florence, convent of San
Marco, cell 3**

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**Sergei Eisenstein, thirty
photograms from *The
General Line*, chosen and
mounted for *Documents*,
no. 4, 1930, 218f**

letter, the surface — is *historia*” (*Fra Angelico* 38). *Historia* is just a surface, and in order to reach the biblical depths behind this surface we must gain intimacy with the biblical world in which the paintings were meant to act. The question being posed relates not only to what is visible in the painting, but also to what is not visible, or what is present and not visible and only implied in the painting. In the scholastic world in which Fra Angelico lived dissemblance was a living relationship, a dialectical process of which the spectator was conscious at all times.

Didi-Huberman writes that “the figure demands and presupposes the totality of Christian time” (*Fra Angelico* 38). In an analogy to the idea that the figure embodies its own time and mystery, something that cannot be perceived from outside, it also embodies a truth (*veritas*) that goes beyond it. This “outside” is the allegory, a rhetorical figure common during the Middle Ages and a foundation for understanding not only the Scriptures but also the classical Greek and Latin heritage. By understanding the marble allegorically we could sum up the life of Christ from the *uterus Mariae* to the crucifixion, from the virginal birth to his resurrection, in its red “incarnated” color and material.⁵ Christ is a rock, the foundation of the church, and Gabriel’s red clothing during the Annunciation. The figure opens up a path that connects different parts of the theological and scholastic universes.

We should not forget that, according to the Scripture, the first act that involved God and the human was the creative act with which God gave life to dust and created man. This is both a sculptural act and an act in which the very material (dust) is assigned a double meaning: when given life it is no longer what it was, but something else. There is an analogous way of thinking in relation to the Medieval paintings, in which the image was to incarnate the very mystery it was supposed to depict, as with *Annunciation*. The different parts of the portrait were not to be seen as mere points of reference for scholars of the Scripture, but as a passage into the biblical mystery. The image itself was to reincarnate not merely the biblical stories, but also the scriptural truth and its mystery. At least this ambition

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follow the logic of surrealist experiments (extreme close-ups, unexpected angles and frames, “graphic” or violent motifs, naivism and exoticism, etc.). By treating the magazine as the space for a montage work, where these images, articles, subjects, and motifs functioned as the elements of a macro-composition with its own, specific effects of significance, Bataille and the editors — this is the argument which Didi-Huberman develops in some detail in his substantial reading — expose “resemblances” and “dissemblances” of a type that was foreign to the idealism of Western metaphysics. The principle for the compositional work was, according to Didi-Huberman, a “dialectics of attraction and conflict,” whose model Bataille is supposed to have found in Eisenstein — but not the Eisenstein who in 1938 spoke of a “general montage principle,” rather the one who, ten years earlier, formulated the idea of an “intellectual montage” — a “conflict-juxtaposition of accompanying intellectual affects,” as he calls it in “Methods of Montage” from 1930 — and put it to the test in films such as *Strike* and *October*.¹⁹ The ability — at least theoretically — of this intellectual montage to assemble separate elements without reducing their heterogeneity, to withhold a relationship of tension between the included parts that emphasizes rather than conceals their differences and specificities, made it the appropriate method with which the *Documents* editors strove to reveal forces and intensities which were, per definition, inaccessible to the categories of Platonic and Christian thinking, to the notions of “form” and “resemblance” that guided the Western gaze: the states where the human face is distorted and becomes animal, where the anthropomorphic is deformed and deconstructed by being set in contact with the inanimate, with masks and figures, where “cruel resemblances” are disclosed between plants and body parts — and so on. Here, the montage becomes a philosophical form, which can display, make visible a certain type of phenomena and relations: it sets a “symptomal” rather than synthesizing dialectics

to work, it exposes differences by establishing connections, it tears resemblances apart by creating them — and thereby it can represent this “essential state” where forms may “regard us” and show their “violent” and “transgressive” nature.²⁰ “Montage,” Didi-Huberman writes in his discussion on *Histoire(s) du cinéma* in *Images In Spite of All*, “is the art of producing this form that thinks.”²¹

Montage as a “thinking form” and a dialectics without synthesis, a dialectics which does not unite but proliferates, also returns in *L’image survivante*, Didi-Huberman’s reading of Aby Warburg’s art historical project and of the famous montage of images with which the German art historian worked during his final years, *Mnemosyne Atlas*. Here too, montage is seen as a method or form which can render other relations and phenomena visible. Here, however, it is no longer a question of the formless resemblances of a base materialism (even though one can find a number of parallels between Warburg and Bataille, notably starting from their respective readings of Nietzsche), but rather, Didi-Huberman says, of exposing “the images’ memories,” of establishing a “rhythm” which discloses the “returns” and the “surprises” in the “long durations” of culture, and which thereby “unfolds” the discontinuities which are operative in history.²² The 63 black screens with about 2,000 photographs that together form the great composition of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* (in its presently existing condition)²³ in a certain sense therefore constitute an application of the historical-philosophical and historiographic concepts with which Warburg wanted to rethink the basic categories of art history and extend its field. In order to understand the relationship of the Renaissance to its past it is not sufficient, he held, to accept the classical notions about the eternal life of antiquity or its perpetual and tragically incomplete rebirth — it is obviously significant that Didi-Huberman opens *L’image survivante* by delimiting Warburg’s project against Vasari and Winckelmann — but rather, one must educate

a perception and a sensibility for how artistic forms, styles, motifs, and gestures may “survive” or “live on” (*Nachleben*) even beyond “their epochs,” by being replaced, transferred, or by migrating to other cultural and social contexts. One must also develop methods for visualizing and charting the patterns, what Warburg called the *Pathosformeln* for these cross-disciplinary and transhistorical movements, through which styles and motifs travel through the ages and over spatial distances and cultural borders. Warburg’s project, therefore, not only points to an extension of the discipline of art history towards a general science of culture, where anthropological, ethnographic, and sociological investigations become essential for an understanding of the legacies and traditions of artworks and artistic expressions, but also — this, at least, is Didi-Huberman’s central argument in his text — to an affinity with Freud, where images have memories that are characterized by heterogeneous temporalities, even an unconscious, with constitutive repressions and anachronistic, creative returns (and thereby it also becomes evident why art history must always return to Warburg, just as psychoanalysis always returns to Freud — see here Jonas (J) Magnusson’s text in the present issue). *Mnemosyne Atlas*’s montage of photographs, Didi-Huberman explains, is precisely an attempt to open such a perception and develop such a method. With *Mnemosyne*, Warburg wanted to design a new type of “comparatism,” which would not search for the common, the unity between the compared terms, but to expose them in their complexity, in order to be able to trace the movements of the “phantom lives” of images. The relative homogeneity of the composition of the atlas — black-and-white photographs isomorphically distributed over the surfaces of the monochromatic screens — therefore serves to produce serial effects which can expose subtle differences and intervals, or to render possible methodical deconstructions of images into their composite parts, but also to create a dialectical play between similarities

and differences: the famous anachronisms of the montage (Manet next to Carracci, the contemporary, political imagery of the last few screens, with their suggestive connections between religious iconography and fascism, between the pope and Mussolini) sharply delimit themselves against the surrounding images, at the same time as the returns and transformations that Warburg wanted to trace and diagnose are clearly outlined.

Montage, then, has an analytic force. It dismantles history: it shows the historical object in its heterogeneous temporality and consequently breaks the continuity of a certain established historiography. In Bertolt Brecht, this operation, where the “natural” development of the narrative is distorted and its underlying complexity is rendered visible, has another — very famous — name: *distanciation*, *Verfremdung*. In Brecht’s epic theatre, however, the “V-effect” aims not only to disclose the conditions of the narrative and the spectacle, to show the mechanisms behind the stage, but also to render possible a new, critical composition of its elements, now torn away from their apparent naturalness. When Didi-Huberman in *Quand les images prennent position* approaches Brecht as a montage artist, it is therefore also a question of a third level, a third aspect of his discussion of the montage concept: montage has a synthetic force, an ability to remount the dismantled elements into a critical narrative art or historiography. *Quand les images prennent position* is a study of two books by Brecht, the *Arbeitsjournal* and the *War Primer*, which both apply a montage technique and combine images and texts according to partly divergent procedures. The *Arbeitsjournal* collects Brecht’s notes from his years in exile 1933–1955, and juxtaposes them with news images and different types of reproductions, according to an open, organic model. *War Primer* is a peculiar children’s book for grown ups, which in a more systematic fashion combines photographs of the horrors of WWII with short prose passages and poems.

can be found in the scholastic writings. In his interpretation of the “figurative,” Dionysius the Areopagite proposed that the figure served “as a mean of constituting the image *between* body and mystery: the paradoxical path of *dissemblant similitudes* — we could say the path of the uncanniness of form — figures that are not valued for what they represent visibly, but for what they show visually, beyond their aspect, as indexes of the mystery” (*Fra Angelico* 6f). A problem in the Christian tradition is how to understand the complexity of God as superessential, and the consequences this yields for the image. In every aspect, God’s qualities go beyond what the painter can fix on the wall or the canvas. Didi-Huberman writes: “the image as such did not define an aspect, and still less a story; it was concentrated at the highest level of the soul, exactly where it could demonstrate its ‘aptitude for knowing and loving God.’ Everywhere else, the image was broken, its fragments disseminated or diffused in a ‘nonspecific’ resemblance” (*Fra Angelico* 6f). Contemplating the frescoes requires going back to what is considered the first act of art in the Christian tradition: the very creation of the world. This has to do with the fact that Creation itself is the first and only example of something not already in the world being created.

Today one can understand art as the creation of something new or as copying something already existing, which is to be compared to the Socratic critique of art as the mere copying of a copy. However, when it comes to *Annunciation* there is not only the problem of copying a copy, but also of rendering an event that was analogous to a creation for which there were no natural analogy. One is trying to depict something that is not possible to depict: a divine intervention. This the paradox. Thomas Aquinas writes:

Even though there is some degree of resemblance to God [*aliqua Dei similitudo*] in all creatures, it is only within the creature endowed with reason that the resemblance to God is in the form of an image [*imago*]; in all other creatures, it is in the form of the

vestige [*similitudo vestigii*]... The reason for this can be clearly understood if we observe the respective means through which the image and the vestige constitute a representation [*modus quo repraesentat vestigium, et quo repraesentat imago*]. For the image, as we have said, represents according to a specific resemblance, whereas the vestige represents in the way an effect represents its cause without attaining a specific resemblance, just as we call the prints [*impressiones*] left by animals’ movements vestiges, or as ash are called vestiges of the fire, or the desolation of a country is called the vestiges of the enemy army (*Summa Theologica*, Ia, 93, 6, quoted in *Fra Angelico* 38).

To God, man is like an image. When Christ was born as a man he was born as an image of his father, but not so different from other men that he could be perceived as radically different. The power of the image lies not so much in its power of representing as in disrupting “the order of representation” (*Fra Angelico* 41). The resemblance of images is supposed to function as the dissimilarity [*defiguratio*] that the mystery imposes. The basic difference is the one between the naive and the theological spectator. The first might see the picture as equivalent to a window through which one can see the world, while the latter can distinguish between two forms of imitation: the one that lies and the one that tells the truth. Didi-Huberman calls the latter “the figural imitation.” His own example is a painting of a young bearded man, which from a naive point of view can be seen as “the representation of Christ” due to the simple fact that this young man looks like the Son of the Virgin. But in the Christian (theological) tradition, the shapeless rock that, according to the Old Testament, gave water to the thirsting Israelites, is a “living *figura Christi*,” although it has no visible resemblance to Christ. In this sense it is also useful to reconnect this to the earlier discussion on man as created in the image of God, and to the fact that Adam’s original sin has distorted man’s resemblance with God. Man himself is forced, even condemned, to live in a state of dissimilarity.

When painting Christ one must paint Christ as a “Word became flesh,” but at the same time, one must be aware that picturing God as a man is picturing God as the wounded resemblance to God, i.e. man. The paradox is to paint Christ as similar to man and yet so different that he is differentiated from man; this difference (one should really see this as a difference *par excellence*) is simple a way to point towards the mystery, incarnate the mystery, since God himself is superessential and impossible to depict. To put it in Spinoza’s terms: it is the problem of grasping a mode of the attribute, but in doing this still retaining a mystical remainder that transgresses the attribute, whereupon this mystical instantiation is there to point towards substance.

Before we go deeper into the question of the human image and incarnation, let us first pursue the path of the mystery of the image. This mystery is only possible to understand if we first enter into the specific scriptural meaning of the different passages that serve as material for the frescoes. One of the most powerful examples of the failure of the traditional representational approach that Didi-Huberman provides, is the painting of the *Holy Conversation* [*Madonna of the Shadows*], in the east corridor of the San Marco convent, where art historians often have ignored half of the painting. The lower part of the painting, the painted marble, has not been treated as a part of the painting, and in many reproductions of Fra Angelico’s work it has simply been omitted. This is not only exemplary of how art history makes choices about what to include, but also of a flagrant lack of knowledge of the lived world in a Dominican convent. Hence a part of the painting has often been excluded simply because it does not fit into already existing categories. This, however, has perversely enough been seen as a problem for the painting and not for the epistemology of art history. There is, according to Didi-Huberman, a dialectical relationship between memory and imagination, and marble can be seen as memory’s material *par excellence*. The painting is one figurative gesture consisting of both marble and canvas. By closely examining the marble both as a material and as a means of transcendence, Didi-Huberman shows how the

essence of the biblical story is incarnated in the painting.

Here we have an example where the word incarnation itself deserves close attention — *incarnatio* as the very place and act when something is being “embodied in flesh.” Didi-Huberman wants to restore the world of experience in the convent, which is what gives life to the painting. Here there is a double bind: the mystery itself and the memory of the mystery. The scholastic thinking was indeed meant to bring preciseness and accuracy to the human understanding of the Scriptures. The marble aims to exhibit another visuality. Against this background it is possible to see how Fra Angelico deals with an aesthetic of limitation, which prescribes that it is only possible to paint certain human aspects of God’s being. God is superessential, He is beyond qualities, and therefore his divinity can only be hinted at, never fully captured. Could the marble be such an attempt to grasp and transmit this experience? Didi-Huberman discusses this by closely examining one specific painting, whose richness the traditional art historian’s approach fails to grasp: the *Annunciation* painted in the third cell in the San Marco convent.

Because of the work’s horizontal line the viewer of the *Annunciation* is forced to kneel in order to assume the right position. This is the Scripture at work, not only as an illustration, but a re-embodiment (incarnation) of the Word. The eye that meets *Annunciation* will have to meet the eyes of the Virgin. Exegesis accounts for a web of references that makes the spectator not only gaze at Mary with the angel’s eyes, but also look at the divine (the angel) with Mary’s eyes. To think the Virgin with one’s eyes is also to have Mary *lend* her gaze and contemplation to whoever is kneeling and believing in front of her. This *lending* is what the theologians would call mediation. It is the *Maria mediatrix* that goes back to Albert Magnus and the Dominican scholastic tradition. In Magnus’s writings mediation means reconciliation. Mary reconciles with her calling, to be chosen as the mother of God, but before that we have the mediation of Christ himself, who will have to sacrifice himself to reconcile man

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⁴ Andrea Pozzo, *Apotheosis of St. Ignatius*, 1685–1694. Fresco. Rome, church of Sant'Ignazio

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Both of these books, Didi-Huberman says, are based on a distanciation, a demontage which breaks apart the images of the war from their established narratives, in order to remount them according to what he, with Brecht, calls an “art of historicizing”: “an art that breaks the continuity of narrations, extracts their differences and, recomposing these differences themselves, restitutes the essentially ‘critical’ value of all historicity.”²⁴

It would probably not be misleading to claim that *Quand les images prennent position* is Didi-Huberman’s most ambitious discussion of the montage concept so far. In the different chapters of the study, and by way of a meticulous close reading of Brecht’s two books, he returns to the different ideas and analyses of montage’s capabilities that he had introduced in his texts on Bataille, Benjamin, Warburg, and Godard: montage is the name of the image or the historical object which assembles heterogeneous times and resists assimilation into the continuum of tradition; it is the analytic force, the philosophical or theoretical procedure that dismantles the narratives of history, distanciates the elements of the story, in order to render visible the image or the historical object as montage; and it is the synthetic force, the narratological or historiographic method for remounting the dismantled montage-images into new, critical narratives or compositions, a new montage. In a certain sense one can say that *Quand les images prennent position* describes the diagram for these different levels in Didi-Huberman’s montage concept: “To distanciate,” he writes in a discussion about Brecht’s term, “is to demonstrate by dismantling the relationships of things shown together and connected according to their differences. There is, then, no distanciation without a work of montage, which is a dialectics of demontage and remontage, of the decomposition and recomposition of all things.”²⁵ A few pages later he repeats more concisely: “This is what montage is: one does not show without dismembering, one does not dispose without first ‘dysposing’.”²⁶

But there is also something else in this text, an explicitly political dimension which is absent from the earlier studies. Didi-Huberman establishes a central distinction between the mode of narrative which *takes sides* [*prend parti*] and the one which *takes a position* [*prend position*]. The concepts are introduced in a discussion about the conflict between Brecht and Lukacs: the programmatic realism which is advocated by the latter “takes sides” by representing a certain, defined reality, mediated through a doctrinal interpretation; the montage which Brecht practices in the *Arbeitsjournal* and the *War Primer* “takes a position” by, rather than representing a defined reality, returning to reality its problematic character, rendering it undefined, polyvalent, emptying it of authority. The critical historiography of the montage is therefore also a possible political art of storytelling, a form for resistance and emancipation: just as it may tear away the objects of history from the tradition and render them inaccessible to reductive narratives, it may create a mobility in the order of words, images, and things, tear them away from their positions in a given hierarchy and combine them in a constellation which upholds, even defends their heterogeneity.

There seems to be a turn towards the political in Didi-Huberman’s latest texts, a clarification of a position, a will to articulate a critical attitude and address a contemporary social situation. *Quand les images prennent position* approaches concrete political issues — of symbolic resistance and emancipation, of the political efficiency of aesthetic forms — which are only suggested, present in the background in the earlier texts on Benjamin, Bataille, and Warburg. And Didi-Huberman’s latest number of publications on Pasolini, the “documentary montage” and the “exposition of the people” are directly inscribed into a search to describe the conditions for the production of “other images” of the “peoples [sic],” images that can resist to and transgress the spectacularization of contemporary politics and the media world’s “over-exposure” of the

people.²⁷ The essay *Survivance des lucioles*, “survival of the fireflies” takes its point of departure in — and lingers on — a suggestive metaphor that recurs in two texts by Pasolini. In the former, a letter written in the poet’s and filmmaker’s youth, at the high point of Italian fascism, Pasolini describes a remarkable experience of political and social community: a night of love and friendship between young men, where they escape from the searchlights of the police, and find refuge on a dark hilltop in Rome, where they witness how “a great quantity of fireflies” form “swarms of fire” around the bushes. The firefly, then, becomes the figure for a minor politics and community, for another people that exists below the forms and orders of “major” politics, a “small light” that glows outside of the beams of the great searchlights.²⁸ In the latter text, “L’articolo delle lucciole,” written in 1975, a few months before his death, Pasolini is, on the contrary, deeply pessimistic: the fireflies are dead, they have been extinguished by a society of the spectacle which drains everything in a blinding light, with an efficiency which even surpasses the tyranny of fascism. Against this pessimism, to which Didi-Huberman finds a correspondence in Debord, but also in Agamben’s latest texts on the power, the glory, and the generalized state of exception, he opposes a thesis — which almost has the character of an axiomatic hope, a principle of faith — about the continued existence of the fireflies *in spite of all*. The minor people, the other type of community which Pasolini experienced on the hilltop in Rome, “survives” or “lives on” (in “*survivance*” one should of course hear Warburg’s *Nachleben*), and can therefore be recorded and displayed in the images of the “documentary montage,” in a form of narrative and historiography which — and here one finds a more clearly political reading of Benjamin — can liberate itself from the “barbarism of tradition” and “expose the nameless.”²⁹

Montage, in short, as a method and model for producing critical images of the people: it can show those who are excluded from the order of

major politics, and it can find another, minor political community in the gaps, the fissures in the integrated spectacle of late capitalism. One asks oneself whether these passages of cultural critique in the texts on Pasolini and the exposition of the people — which, while intriguing, are perhaps less original — in a sufficient and exhaustive way account for the politics of montage in Didi-Huberman. The historiography of montage, we may establish, has a politics in his work from the outset. To reveal the heterogeneous temporalities of the historical object, to tear images and words away from their given positions in the great narratives of tradition, to remount them into critical stories — these are all, of course, political activities: it is to resist against a thinking which wants to enclose historical styles, techniques, and objects in “their own” epochs, which wants to establish defined positions and roles for subjects and objects, words and images, which wants to limit the migratory movements of forms and phenomena; it is to shatter the past in order to criticize the present and open other ways of relating to the coming. In other words, montage’s relationship to history — this should be clear, here and now — is complex. Perhaps it is only from such a starting point, given such an argument about the historiographic politics of montage, that one can approach the question of the actuality of montage, of its relevance as an artistic technique, historiographic method or as the name of a general critical project *today*. Montage, one could say, is precisely the technique, the form, the anachronistic operation which reveals the limitations of such a notion of the actual, of *today*, which exposes the insufficiency of such an idea of a technique or form’s affiliation to its present. In other words, perhaps the tense and direction of this question are misleading: perhaps one should not ask if it today may be relevant to talk of a general montage principle, but rather how, in what ways montage may function as a principle for untimely resistance against the present. •

with God. Mary is situated where the “extremes of time” and “extremes of places” intersect (*Fra Angelico* 225). She is in a closed (virginal) garden (*hortus conclusus*) that brings the Garden of Creation together with Paradise. The time present in the garden is “at the same time” actual lived time, and the descent into the garden is a descent into life, where the monks have Mary present in their own garden. *Maria templum* will watch over you, to the extent that the material of the garden will encapsulate even the cell; the convent will be part of a great Marian body. It is not only the figure or the ground (the Ādām, in Hebrew dust/soil) in the Garden that carries memory. Man was created from dust and the Word gave life. They — dust and Word — are the common ground of Christ and man, a ground in which the Word was rooted, just as in the story by Jacobus de Voragine, as cited by Didi-Huberman:

A rich and noble soldier, abandoning the ways of the world, entered the Cistercian order; and because he did not know his letters, the monks, not daring to send back to the lay people such a noble individual, gave him a master to see if by chance he could learn something and, in this way, stay among them. But having received quite a long time lessons from his master, he could learn absolutely nothing, except these two words: *Ave Maria*. He held them with such love that everywhere he went, and in everything he did, at every moment he would ruminate on these words. Finally, he died and was buried with the other monks in the cemetery: and it came to pass that on his grave grew up a magnificent lily and on each leaf these words were written in letters of gold: *Ave Maria*. Everyone hastened to contemplate such a great miracle. They removed the earth from the grave and found that the root of the lily began in the mouth of the deceased (*Fra Angelico* 226f).

The only words the idiot knew were *Ave Maria*, but that was enough to save him: such is the power of the Virgin to the kneeling monk. In

order to understand the image we must consider such stories and believe that the monks found them to be literally true. The mystery was such that the Word could give life and the Name was likewise miraculous. When uttering “*Ave Maria*” you were not alone. In retelling Jacobus de Voragine’s story, we must also consider the corporeal dimension of the Word and its possibility to become materialized. There is a dialectic of the corporeal dimension, the room for contemplation, the Scripture, and the scholastic universe, and in facing the image we must try to move freely between them. A further analogy between the painted matter and the biblical flesh is that the divine nature of the Son joined, but did not mix, with human nature. Christ is at the same time divine and human. This relationship is present in the images where they are said to capture one aspect of the divine mystery, but in no way do they contain a part of the mystery itself. It exists as a relation. This means that the frescoes have the pedagogical function of recreating the Incarnation they depict. One could argue that the coexistence of man and divinity has its counterpart in the depiction of the Incarnation and the revealing of the mystery.

The aim of Christian art is the resemblance with a beyond — the *desire* (*desiderium*) for something that does not exist in this world, a *Jenseitss Sehnsucht*. But in the picture a transformation occurs when the figure reaches beyond natural resemblance toward the supernatural (perhaps glimpsing the superessential).⁶ This act of willing, which is also a form of love, is desire. The color in Fra Angelico’s fresco (the pictorial marble) is in one way the pure formulation of a “mystical desiderium.”⁷ And Didi-Huberman adds: “no figure will ever let itself be recognized by its true face” (*The Power of the Figure* 39). The real truth (*virtus*) of the figure is not and cannot be expressed, it acts virtually within it. This virtuality of painting is expressed in the power of color. Color is not only in one place, and here we might compare this with the red dots on the flowers and of Christ’s stigma in Fra Angelico’s *The Crucifixion*, the wound as transposed into nature, because it should have the capacity to pass from one place to another. Once again, we

could go back to the red marble and its virtuality, and the power to find a specific point through which both the scriptural mystery and story can be exposed, as described above with the summary of Christ’s life. Didi-Huberman also takes Christ’s blood as an example of something that can become a network of “fluencies”. He concludes: “The entire figure has virtualized the event it celebrates, and in the use of color it has transformed the virtual into a real visual power” (*The Power of the Figure* 40).

There is always an act of displacement (*translatio*) in Christian paintings. The first commandment of the figure could, according to Didi-Huberman, be called *translatio* (*The Power of the Figure*, 33). In every crucifixion there is a displacement of time that prevents us from fully fixing our attention on the event being portrayed. The wood of the cross can also tell us of the life lost in Paradise, and the skull, often painted in the foreground,⁸ reminds us not only of death as “invented” by Adam, when driven out of Paradise, but also of Christ murdered by the crowd and himself killing the “sinner” in man, as the new Adam. There is always *translatio*, multiple layers of displacement. The *translatio* is therefore another way of seeing art and a different practice of reading art works not reducible to (simple) narrative sequences. It changes the historical causality that is otherwise being forced upon the spectator. The image must not only, through dissemblance, reveal its own as well as the scriptural mysteries to the spectator, but also reveal a divine presence. Christ’s *figure* in the communion is its presence (*praesentatio*): it is the body and blood of Christ being consumed. The Christian image demands the spectator to believe, trust and imagine the existence of impossible spaces, as when Word becomes flesh. The space produced by the figure operates by “putting two heterogeneous objects in one place” (*The Power of the Figure* 46). This contradiction can be seen as the mystery of the incarnation which by necessity also must be spatially situated, but wherein the mystery always lies beyond the mere visibility of the image. In order to construct another space one must have the natural space in mind, as if the mystical and divine

space could only be recognized in relation to the room in which the paintings are viewed. What is happening with the Virgin is only possible to know through the scriptures and whatever she discloses with her solemn facial expression. The figure is the place of “the power of the place,” the place where the divine and human is gathered in one single body. The Virgin Mary is not present in the image only as a figure put in a place, but as the “mutual inclusion of place” (*ibid*). Didi-Huberman elaborates: “As if interior and exterior covered each other, as if the entire space of the mystery could nestle in the womb of Mary herself” (*ibid*). The figure in *Annunciation* should therefore not be seen as being in a place, but rather as the place itself. The Virgin Mary is the result of the impossible space where the divine and the human coexist. The power of the place (*collocatio*) and the power of the name (*nominatio*) are closely linked. In the beginning God said “Let there be light: and there was light.” God’s word is a creation by means of a first division: the heavens and the earth created separately, a division between light and darkness. In *Annunciation* the Word marries the divine and the human. The divine name fits into the divine word. The Word became flesh and uttered the divine name Mary — brings forth her presence. They are never far away. The exegetical practice uses many different techniques to work the figural meaning around the name. The name has the power (*nominatio*) to generate the place where faith can unravel at least one aspect of the divine mystery.

Let’s return to the *milieu* in which the paintings were present, in order to excavate not only its material and historical aspects, but also the imaginary universe in which the monks acted. To understand this, if it is at all hermeneutically possible, we must understand the way in which the medieval monks interacted bodily with the space. One telling example of how perspective is everything, and how it alters the viewer’s visual experience, is Andrea Pozzo’s *trompe-l’œil* in the *Sant-Ignazio* dome in Rome (1685), which demands that the spectator should assume one fixed place if he is to fully see the perfect perspectives of the paintings. This is an example of how paintings affect the bodily presence in the

Notes

1. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps* (Paris: Minuit, 2000), 39.
2. I here follow John Goodman — translator of Didi-Huberman’s *Devant l’image* — in simply translating the French “*pan*” (section, surface, side, etc.) with “pan.” Cf. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, trans. Goodman (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).
3. *Devant le temps*, 16.
4. Didi-Huberman, *Quand les images prennent position: l’œil de l’histoire 1* (Paris: Minuit, 2009), 109.
5. Idem, *Images malgré tout* (Paris: Minuit, 2003), 191.
6. *Devant le temps*, 9.
7. This is an argument that Didi-Huberman returns to in a number of contexts, but which is articulated in the most clear and careful way in *Confronting Images*, ch. 3: “The History of Art Within the Limits of Its Simple Reason”; *Devant le temps*, “Ouverture” (and passim); and *L’image survivante*, part 1: “L’image-fantôme: survivance des formes et impuretés du temps” (Paris: Minuit, 2002).
8. Cf. *Confronting Images*, 136f, 144ff.
9. *Devant le temps*, 16, 35, 120, backside.
10. *Images malgré tout*, 152.
11. Sergei Eisenstein, “Word and Image,” in *The Film Sense*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harvest Books, 1947), 35f.
12. See *ibid*, 24–33.
13. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H Eiland & K McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), N3,1.
14. *Devant le temps*, 10.
15. *Ibid*, 121.
16. Didi-Huberman, *La ressemblance informe, ou le gai savoir visuel selon Georges Bataille* (Paris: Macula, 1995), 302.
17. *L’image survivante*, 474.
18. *La ressemblance informe*, 294.
19. Eisenstein, “Methods of Montage,” in *Film Form*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1949), 82. Of course, the opposition between an early, experimental Eisenstein interested in a conflictual “montage of attractions” or “intellectual montage,” and a later, domesticated (Stalinized) Eisenstein, searching for a “harmonic” or “organic” montage, geared to a psychology of identification and empathy, is far too schematic and does not give a sufficient account of his artistic and intellectual development. This question, however, belongs to another text. Cf. Jacques Aumont, *Montage Eisenstein* (Paris: Images modernes, 2005), 206–257.
20. One can note that this argument seems to be one of the sources for the antagonism between Didi-Huberman and Yve-Alain Bois (and, one is tempted to say, the *October* historians in general): according

to Bois, Didi-Huberman hereby reinscribes dialectics into Bataille’s thinking in a way that is essentially foreign to his philosophical project, and replaces the Hegelian synthesis with a “symptom” which is only another word for the same thing. See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 68f, 79f, 266n5. A thorough examination of the different arguments obviously points beyond the limitations of this text, but it seems clear that Bois’ objections are based on a rather summary rejection of Didi-Huberman’s reading, which, says Bois, “goes against everything that the present project [the exhibition *L’informe*, curated by Bois and Krauss at the Centre Pompidou a year before Didi-Huberman’s *L’empreinte*, in the same exhibition space] is trying to demonstrate” (80).

21. *Images malgré tout*, 172.
22. See *L’image survivante*, 464f.
23. They exist only as photographs, and a number of screens are not reproduced in this material. See Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften II, 1: Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000).
24. *Quand les images prennent position*, 68.
25. *Ibid*, 70.
26. *Ibid*, 86.
27. See Didi-Huberman, “Expose the Nameless,” in Filipovic & Szymczyk (ed), *When Things Cast No Shadows: Fifth Berlin Biennial of Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (Berlin: JRP/Ringier, 2008), 554.
28. Idem, *Survivance des lucioles* (Paris: Minuit, 2009), 14ff.
29. Cf. “Expose the Nameless,” 557. See also idem, “Pasolini ou la recherche des peuples perdues,” in *Les Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne*, no 108, Summer 2009, 96ff.

New Forms of Knowledge

Jonas (J) Magnusson

“Such are the stakes: to know, but also to think non-knowledge when it unravels the nets of knowledge. To proceed dialectically, beyond knowledge itself, to commit ourselves to the paradoxical ordeal not to *know* (which amounts precisely to denying it), but to *think* the element of non-knowledge that dazzles us whenever we pose our gaze to an art image.” (Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant l’image*, 1990)

“What is the use of art history?” asks Georges Didi-Huberman in *Devant le temps* (2000). His answer: Not much, if it contents itself with a prudent classification of objects that are already known, already identified; quite a lot, if it succeeds in placing *non-knowledge* at the centre of its complex of problems, and if it succeeds in making this complex of problems an anticipa-

tion, *the opening of a new knowledge*, a new form of knowledge.

Exploring a critical archaeology of art history, in books like *Devant l’image* and *Devant le temps* Didi-Huberman sets out to disentangle multiple lines, to emphasize the counter-times and anachronisms that syncopate the exuberance of images, upstream of the canons of symbolic form and the temporal models applied by the historian’s discipline. In this quest Didi-Huberman has been preceded by an “anachronistic constellation” of thinkers: Walter Benjamin, Aby Warburg, and Carl Einstein. The rereading of these historical figures in *Devant le temps* responds to a triple desire, a triple stake: archaeological, anachronistic, and prospective. Warburg: the creator of the library (in Hamburg, then in London) that bears his name,

church by demanding fixation in one particular place. Everything, both the perspectives and what they depict, is twisted and changed when we leave the “place of pure seeing.”⁹ It would be possible to argue something similar in relation to Fra Angelico’s frescoes, although this is in no way makes then comparable to Pozzo. In *Annunciation* the horizontal line is raised as if it would force the viewers to their knees to see the fresco as it is supposed to be perceived.¹⁰ This, however, results in some very interesting consequences. First, it reproduces the liturgical posture of *Ave Maria* (and her own humbleness in her task), and second, the posture puts the monks in a position that makes them look up towards the picture, hence assuming their place in the theological hierarchy. The act of piety when kneeling in front of the image is forced upon us, since we can only see the work properly if we have assumed this position; and since it is the position of the believer, it follows that we can only see the miracle — the incarnation, Word becoming flesh — if we believe and enter into the theological universe. To this we could add that the latter method also characterizes Didi-Huberman’s method — which can be taken both as a critique and an appreciation.

The convent itself is a place of spiritual work, a place of commemoration of the Creator, and the frescoes cannot go against this purpose. It is a sanctified place, and the liturgical function that brings the spectator to her knees is also supposed to make her remember. It is the place for the soul to remember.¹¹ The place of remembrance becomes especially important if we recall the Thomasian doctrine that the art of memory, i.e. to remember not only the biblical time or the Incarnation, was founded upon the principle that we do not remember through time, but rather through place. Didi-Huberman quotes Albertus Magnus:

Since it is self-evident that the time for everything we must remember is past time, it is therefore not time that can distinguish between the things to be remembered: for time does not lead us to one thing rather than another. The place, on the contrary,

especially if it is solemn [or sanctified, *solemnis*] distinguishes between these things, since there is not only one place to remember all of them, and its power increases [*moveſt*] to the degree that the place is solemn and rare. In fact, the soul adheres [*inhaeret*] more firmly to solemn and rare things; and that is why they are more firmly imprinted [*imprimuntur*] and move us [*movent*] more deeply.¹²

Albertus Magnus identifies three criteria for a place of memory, all of which can be connected to the complex functions of *collectio* and identified in Fra Angelico’s convent frescoes. The first has to do with the image itself, i.e. that the place does not emerge from a simple position. Didi-Huberman exemplifies this with the Virgin’s house, which was not built in a garden, but from “the arrangement of places and images” (*De bono 477, Fra Angelico 175*) [*dispositio locorum et imaginum*] that recalls the “as if” construction in the garden of Paradise. Once again we are faced with the biblical story that Christ resurrected humanity and retrieved the possibility for man to enter into Paradise. Secondly, the place of memory is not a natural place, but is constructed *within* the soul by the soul to “conserve the image” (*Fra Angelico 175*) [*sibi facit anima ad reservationem imaginis*]. The goal is not to accurately describe the situation pictorially but to make the transition in temporality through a play of associations. Thirdly, this is the proof according to Albert Magnus, namely that the place of memory cannot be attributed to one particular event (but to the place). Rather, images perturbate and distort each other through their dissemination in the human soul “as waves in water interfere with one another when they are great in number” (*De bono 477, 479; Fra Angelico 175*). •

Notes

1. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico. Dissemblance and Figuration*. Trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 1. Henceforth cited as *Fra Angelico* with page number.
2. Kazimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism,” in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art. 1915–1928*, Vol. I, trans. and ed. Troels Andersen (Copenhagen, 1968), 25.
3. The question of opening up images has been a central part of Didi-Huberman’s project and his critique of the traditional epistemology of art history. One of his later books, *L’image ouverte* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), is devoted to incarnation in the visual arts. Another work on “opening,” which deals with the theme in a very physical way, is *Ouvrir Vénus. Nudité, rêve, cruauté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).
4. 2 Cor. 3:6.
5. It should be noted that Didi-Huberman explicitly makes the argument with reference to Giotto’s allegorical paintings in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua, but I would argue that the allegorical reading is applicable to Fra Angelico’s frescoes in the San Marco Convent as well.
6. Cf. the statement by Thomas Aquinas: “Est quaedam operatio animae in homine quae dividendo et componendo format diversas rerum imagines, etiam quae non sunt a sensibus acceptae.” (*Summa Theologiae*, I, 84, 6 ad. 2.) “There is an activity in the soul of man which by separating and joining, forms different images of things, even things not received from the senses.” Quoted in Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Hugh Bredin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 172. There is a different operation at play here, which adds an imaginary component nowhere to be found in nature. With respect to Fra Angelico we could call this something almost analogous to a Kantian category, but a voluntary one (belief). Through this the mystery of the image can be understood, the similarity being that both are prerequisites for seeing. Aquinas’s quote draws closer to the discussion of natural objects as a possibility, if not a necessity, for the construction of something that is not already given in nature.
7. Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Power of the Figure. Exegesis and Visuality in Christian Art* (Umeå: Depaertment of History and Theory of Art, Umeå University, 2003). Henceforth cited as *The Power of the Figure* with page number. The following presentation is a summary of Didi-Huberman’s main points.
8. Golgotha is literally “the place of the skull,” which here also invokes the last hours in the life of Christ. In this respect we could also link life and death together, from the incarnation to the crucifixion, in a slot of time containing Christ’s whole life. This is also pointed out by Didi-Huberman in his *Ouvrir Vénus*, 57.
9. This could also be understood allegorically, as the choice of pure seeing.

10. Fra Angelico painted two Annunciations in the San Marco convent. One is located in the north corridor and the other in cell three. Unfortunately this is not the place to undertake a more detailed study of the two versions, and here I have focused on the general features of *The Annunciation*.
11. The theological discussion whether the human soul bears with itself a vestige of God’s touch in the Creation, is too far-reaching and complex to be summarized here, although it should be noted that this question was highly relevant to Fra Angelico.
12. Albertus Magnus, *De bono* (4.2.479), in H. Kühle et al (eds.) *Opera omni*, vol. 28 (Münster, 1951). Henceforth cited as *De bono* with page number. Here quoted from *Fra Angelico* 174f.

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the shadow-founder of the discipline known as “iconology,” an adventurous thinker aiming for a symptomatological interpretation of a culture through its images, its beliefs, its dark continents, its residues, its shifting of origins, its returns of the repressed — but nevertheless strangely ignored by historians and philosophers. Benjamin: more than famous among philosophers, but also the founder of a certain history of images by his “epistemo-critical” practice of montage, inducing a new form and content of knowledge in the context of an original and revolutionary conception of historical time. Einstein: almost forgotten today (except by a couple of anthropologists interested in African art and some avant-garde historians interested in cubism, Georges Bataille and the journal *Documents*), in spite of the fact that he invented new objects, new problems, new historical and theoretical areas — paths opened up by taking an extremely *anachronistic risk*, the heuristic movement of which Didi-Huberman tries to reconstitute as much as possible.

“My way of speaking is not systematic,” Carl Einstein writes in 1923; a confession of fragility, but also a vengeance against all systematic tendencies, all axiomatic approaches. Refusing to simplify art, Einstein prefers the risk of the uncompleted, multifocal and exploded. In its “cubistic” form, what Einstein’s project demands of art history is a *heuristic* approach: to let the image play or “work” in view of unforeseen concepts, unexpected logics. “I only believe in people who begin by destroying the means of their own virtuosity. The rest is only petty scandal,” he writes in *Documents* in 1930, refusing to capitalize on his competences, his intellectual work, his knowledge. For Einstein, in the reading of Didi-Huberman, the act of practicing a knowledge thus always responds to an act of questioning it, with the risk of momentarily destabilizing or delegitimizing it, but in order to be better able to open it up. This would be one of the reasons why Einstein — rejecting the institutions but not wanting to “save” himself either

— never spoke “in a systematic way.” This is also one of the reasons why he is so forgotten today, and one of the reasons behind the difficulty that still remains when “using” his work in the field of art history.

A re-examination of the notion of “history” in art history — this is one of the challenges of *Devant le temps*: a critical archaeology of the models of time, of the use values of time in the historical discipline that wanted to make images its object of study. The starting-point is that which for many historians seems to be most evident: the rejection of the anachronism. Never “project” your own realities — concepts, preferences, values — on the realities of the past, on the objects of the historical investigation! Lucien Febvre’s damnation of the anachronism is well known: “the sin of the sins — the most unforgivable of sins: the anachronism.” At the same time, Didi-Huberman reminds us, the anachronism keeps intersecting and flashing through every form of contemporaneity. There is (as Marc Bloch already pointed out in *Apologie pour l’histoire ou Métier d’historien*, 1942–1943) a structural anachronism that no historian is able to escape: it is impossible to understand the present without knowledge of the past, but it is also necessary to know the present in order to understand the past and to be able to question it. In reality, there would be no history that is not anachronistic, anachronism being the only way in historical knowledge to account for the anachronies and polychronies of history, the temporal way to express the exuberance, complexity, and over-determination of images (anachronism seeming to emerge in the exact fold of the relation between history and image).

The anachronism, then, would be a necessary risk in the activity of the historian, the condition of possibility of the discovery and the constitution of the objects of his knowledge. The problem is the *unthought* anachronism. This is why the Didi-Hubermanian art historian has to commit another one of the mortal sins according to Lucien Febvre: to “philosophize.”

Didi-Huberman, for example, hints to a possible relation between the concept of anachronism and Gilles Deleuze’s “time-image,” with its double reference to montage and to “divergent movement.” It is possible, he writes, that there is no interesting history except in *montage*, in the rhythmical play, the contradance of chronologies and anachronisms. Images are always complex time-objects: montages of heterogeneous times that form anachronisms. And in the dynamics and complexities of these montages, fundamental historical concepts like “style” or “epoch” are suddenly found to be extremely plastic. To raise the question of the anachronism would thus be to explore this radical plasticity and, together with it, the mixture of time-differences at work in every image. Fra Angelico, for example, is an artist who also manipulates times that are not his own, creating a strangeness in which the fecundity of the anachronism is affirmed. The *drippings* of Pollock, of course, cannot serve as an adequate interpretant for the violently material rain of colored spots on the lower panels (never commented in the principal monographs and catalogues on Fra Angelico) of Fra Angelico’s *Madonna of the Shadows* (c. 1440–1450) discovered by a surprised Didi-Huberman in a corridor of the monastery of San Marco. But that does not mean that the art historian, in front of this chock of a “displaced resemblance” or a “relative defiguration,” gets away so easily. For the paradox remains, the anxiety in the method: that the suddenly emerging historical object as such would not have been the result of a historical standard method, but of an almost irregular anachronistic moment, something like a symptom in the historical knowledge (this strange conjunction of difference and repetition denoting a double paradox: interrupting representation, but also carrying with it an unconscious of history). In reality it would be this very violence and incongruity, this very difference and non-verifiability, which would have produced a kind of heaving of censorship, the emergence of a new problem for the history

of art. This is the heuristics of the anachronism according to Didi-Huberman. It is an approach that seems contrary to the axiomatic historical method, constituting a rhythmical interruption in it, a syncopated, paradoxical, often dangerous moment, but one that may lead to the discovery of new historical objects. Endowed with the capacity of complexifying models of time, traversing multiple memories, re-establishing the fibers of heterogeneous times, rearranging rhythms of different *tempi*, the anachronism thus obtains a renewed, dialectical status; as the cursed part of the historical knowledge it discovers a heuristic possibility in its very negativity, in its capacity to strangeness.

Crucial for this approach to anachronism as an epistemological question is Didi-Huberman’s rereading of Walter Benjamin. If Benjamin tries to confront the historical discipline with the question of “origin,” this origin is not something that happened once and will never happen again, but a dynamics that potentially is present in every historical object: the unpredictable whirl or vortex that can appear at any moment in the river, an origin that does not denote the becoming of what is born, but the becoming of what is breeding in the becoming and in the decay. A history of art that raises the question of origin, in this sense, is a history of art attentive to the vortexes in the currents of styles, to the fissures and rifts in the foundations of the aesthetic doctrines, to the tears in the web of representation. This origin dialectically crystallizes the newness and the repetition, the survival and the rupture. It is above all, according to Didi-Huberman, an anachronism, surviving in the historical narrative as a crack, an accident, an anxiety, a formation of a symptom. An art history capable of inventing new “original objects” would thus be an art history capable of producing vortexes and fractures in the very knowledge that it assigns itself the task of engendering. This is what Didi-Huberman calls a capacity to create new “theoretical thresholds” in the discipline.

Rubbing history “against the grain” is

Figure Without Mimesis

Gunnar Berge

Georges Didi-Huberman's close analysis of medieval theologico-philosophical peculiarities in *Fra Angelico. Dissemblance et figuration* (1990) may come as a surprise in a production otherwise concerned with Walter Benjamin's analyses of modernity, Bataille's transgressive forms, Freud and Charcot's studies of hysterical women, and Carl Einstein's readings of African art. Religious frescoes and altarpieces of the late medieval piety in the San Marco convent in Florence have little to do with the events in art during the last hundred years, and according to traditional academic thought, the one and the same person cannot be an expert on both old and new art. If the topic of the book seems remote from our present concerns, it is first and foremost due to our way of thinking the relationship between art and history: that our habitual thinking places the artworks in their established epochs, lending them an identity positioned within a

fixed view of developing progression. Specialists view the art of Fra Angelico through pre-defined categories, forming expectations of what they will find. Didi-Huberman claims that such an aprioristic approach "leads the eye to close itself to surprises" (9). His way of addressing early artworks is less concerned with suggesting alternative interpretations of what we see than with pointing out the limitations of iconographical analysis in its encounter with what it cannot see. Confrontations with empirical elements contrary to the expectations formed by the methods of historicism, the use of supposedly irrelevant sources, and the juxtaposition of works violating the boundaries of periodization are all elements in a project of expansion. Writing the history of the unexpected means drawing lines of development that are incongruent with those describing progress, with the primacy of the new compared to the old, with the dominance of

renaissance painting over the static images of the Middle Ages, with the triumph of modernism over figurative painting, etc. When, according to such a logic, one tries to invest history with a direction, in a line developing from Alberti and Vasari's humanist project, history unavoidably closes itself by making what does not fit these categories invisible and unattainable.

In *La peinture incarnée* (1985) Didi-Huberman talks of a "colored vertigo" (47), a moment when a painted figure suddenly comes alive. Fra Angelico's art is, according to Didi-Huberman, an example, in spite of the art historians, of how it is still possible to be surprised and discomposed by what one sees within the established history of art. The four Pollock-like fields of the *Madonna of the Shadows* appeared as a non-neutralizable exception, a limitation in art history's application of solutions and system of knowledge. The spectator had to ask: "What do I see?" In a mimetic perspective, there are four marbled, saturated color fields, but what is disturbing is not what they resemble. Neither are they decorative, abstract or referring signs. The spectator is in front of an "it is" which simultaneously is an "it is not," where a "rain of matter" (90) and the indefinite of the figures of the fresco above undermine the figurative. Alberti, who wrote *Della pittura* around the same time as Fra Angelico painted this work in the east wing of the monastery, would in the upper part have seen a carrier of *istoria* and in the lower part only absence. As long as art historians follow his directions, they miss out on the shock as well as the problem, the anachronism of the work is overlooked, and the non-conceptual is eradicated by unitary visibility. According to Didi-Huberman, the pious Dominican monk's non-hierarchical juxtaposition of the so-called figurative and the non-figurative does not demonstrate that Fra Angelico practiced action painting five hundred years ahead of his time (any such identification of precursors and the idea that someone is ahead of his time are both based on the idea of the closed epoch), but that the concept "figure" must have meant something entirely different to him than what the later tradition understands by this concept.

The question of what we see is a question of which words we use to see, how words instigate thinking about an image and how the image thinks. If all of Didi-Huberman's works begin with one or several longer quotations of authors and philosophers, this is less to establish a motto than to form a language that enables us to think what we see. *La demeure, la souche* (1999) begins with a quote from Mallarmé's *Igitur* because Pascal Convert's works are haunted by this text. They carry this text within them and encircle the problems of dwelling, disappearance and the self-portrait. *Fra Angelico* is introduced by quotes from Exodus where it is said that what the people saw when God spoke to them didn't imply resemblance, from the Church council of Nicaea saying that God also can work miracles through images, and from Proust on the topic of colorful cracks in cliffs and in marble. Fra Angelico's paintings were created in a universe of texts. He paints neither to translate the textual to the visual according to the *ut pictura poesis* of the Renaissance, nor to illustrate the biblical narratives for those who cannot read, but to inhabit this textual universe. The four saturated color fields of the *Madonna of the Shadows* are fields of exegesis, they invent a poetics where the end is "the always re-invented, variable production of in-numerous networks of holy meaning" (17). In *L'étoilement* (1998), where Didi-Huberman approaches Simon Hantaï's art by inventing a language, by giving us words as a means to see, "yarn" is defined as "a network of stitches, a trap for a prey" (25). The image, be it made by Hantaï or a Dominican monk in the 15th Century, assembles thoughts and weaves threads together to open up the eyes to the play of associations and to confront us with a meaningful materiality. Exegesis literally means creating exits, extract meaning from texts, establishing nodal points. The colored spots in Fra Angelico's images are "particles of exegesis," words made visible teaching us to see more than what meets the eye, leading vision into an eternity of ever changing nuances of meaning, and "the less they let us distinguish, the more they open up the meaning" (144). The function of the yarn is to arrest the perceiving spirit in an

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Benjamin's expression of the necessary dialectical movement in re-addressing the fundamental problem of historicity as such. For Benjamin, the challenge is to bring forth new models of temporality, models at the same time less idealistic and less trivial than the models in use in the historicism inherited from the 19th century. These new models would be based on the specific historic historicity in the artworks themselves, expressed in the *intensive* mode that multiplies connections between them. The image, according to Benjamin, produces a double-sided temporality. This is the famous and fugitive "dialectical image," resisting any reduction to a simple historical document as well as, symmetrically, preventing the idealization of the artwork in a pure monument of the absolute.

It is well known that Benjamin, the philosophical junk dealer and the archaeologist of memory, early on made Aby Warburg's motto his own: "*der liebe Gott steckt im Detail*," "the good God hides in the details." But this paradox of litter and detritus, of the unnoticed and very small, obtains a new dimension when one, with Didi-Huberman, notices its inherent over-determination, its opening force and complexity, practiced in the montage-character of the historical knowledge that Benjamin (as well as Warburg) produced. By means of montage, the "reified continuity of history" is blown up, scattered, as is the homogeneity of the epoch, in multidirectional series, rhizomes of ramifications where, for every object of the past, there occurs a collision between what Benjamin calls its "earlier history" and its "coming history." The unconscious of the epoch arrives through its material traces and works: vestiges, counter-motives or counter-rhythms, falls or interruptions, symptoms or anxieties, synopses or anachronisms in the continuity of the "facts of the past." Confronted with this, the historian must abandon the old hierarchy of "important" and "unimportant" facts, and adopt the scrupulous gaze of the anthropologist paying attention to details, and above all to the smallest and most "impure" among these,



▲ Girolamo Franzini, *Laocoön*, 1596. Xylography. After *Icones statuarum antiquarum Urbis Romae*, Rome, 1599

exhibiting a "prehistory" of a culture. The humbleness of a material archaeology, the historian as a junk dealer of the memory in things, of the archive of singularities equals practical responses to the aporias of theory. This is the "Copernican turn" in Benjamin: it is no longer in the name of the eternal presence of the Idea, but

rather in the presence of fragile survivals, mental or material, that the past is present. It is no longer the universal that is implemented in the particular, but the particular that, without any definitive synthesis, is distributed everywhere. *Knowledge by montage?* Didi-Huberman theorizes montage and re-montage as a "paradigm"



▲ Niccolò Boldrini, *Caricature of Laocoön*, After Titian (detail), 1550–1560. Xylography. Photo Warburg Institute, London

and a mode of knowledge consisting in remounting the path of the continuous heading for its accidences, ramifications, discontinuities. The image, he writes, dismantles history in the same way as one dismantles a watch, which is to say the same way as one scrupulously disjoins the pieces in a mechanism. In that moment



▲ Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, 1927–1929. Warburg Institute, London. From *Gesammelte Schriften II, 1: Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, ed. M Wanke & C Brink, Berlin, Akademie Verlag, 2000. Left to right: Plates 8, 25, 41, 77

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the watch ceases to function. But this arresting (Benjamin's "dialectics at a standstill"), this structural deconstruction, produces an effect of knowledge that otherwise would not be possible. Montage and remontage qualifies the historical operation as such, but montage as a procedure presupposes in reality the demontage, the preceding dissociation of what it constructs, of what it, on the whole, only remounts, in the double sense of anamnesis and structural recomposition. To recast history in a movement "against the grain," this is to strive for a knowledge by montage after having made the non-knowledge — the suddenly emerging, original, whirling, jerky, symptomatic image — the object and the heuristic moment of its very constitution.

Benjamin chooses to approach a complex cultural reality — Paris during the 19th century, for example — by refusing to synthesize, by emphasizing a myriad of, usually very small, singular documents: the ones that in general are neglected by the large historical constructions. But the philosopher-historian of rags and detritus also knows that it is necessary, between the pure empirical dispersion and the pure systematical pretension, to lend the rags and detritus their use value, by using them, that is, by restituting them in a montage that can offer them a "readability" (*Lesbarkeit*). Closely related to the art of montage in Benjamin, therefore, is the art of quoting without quotation marks: showing something by using it. But what distinguishes, in the final analysis, montage from a standard epistemic construction? Didi-Huberman's answer is a double one: on the one hand the montage constructs a (jerky) movement, the complex resultant of the polyrhythms in every historical object. On the other hand the montage visualizes (even if only partially and in a jerky way) an unconscious. Images are as uncontrollable as they are new sources of knowledge, a dismantling of history and a mounting of historicity, of a more subtle and complex knowledge of time. Images are dismantling

the continuity of things, but only in order to accentuate structural affinities. Beyond the pure aggregates, and on this side of synthesis, knowledge by montage makes it possible to think the real as a "modification."

Discussing Aby Warburg in an interview by Elie During in 2002, Didi-Huberman emphasizes the need to reread Warburg the way Lacan reread Freud, Foucault reread Binswanger or Deleuze reread Nietzsche: to use Warburg as a platform, a point of study, a worktable for new forms of knowledge, an editing table on which you can show a different dimension of historical time. Warburg offers a new image of thought, grasped (or rather grasping him, as he lets go of his pre-established knowledge) on the brink of madness, but in order to catch sight of its heuristic and philosophical fecundity, it is necessary to look beyond the flattening of it by the mainstream view of Warburg as the slightly crazy precursor of Panofskian iconology; it is necessary to ignore the homogenization of Warburg's ideas by his neo-Kantian heirs and to take those ideas seriously, testing them case by case. Extending the exploration of the anachronism in *Devant le temps*, Didi-Huberman's *L'Image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (2002) retraces Warburg's theoretical concerns, and especially the question of *Nachleben*, this "after-life" or "survival," this paradox of residual energy (cf. Jacob Burckhardt's theory of "vital residues"), of a trace of passed life, of a death eluded by a narrow margin and almost continued, phantomlike — this capacity of the forms of never having to die and to come back when one is least expecting them.

If influences, revivals, and renaissances are a matter of conscious transmission, Warburg's "survivals" — disorienting the relations between before and after since their rhythms are set by the powers of differed action and the return of the repressed — relate to an *unconscious* memory. Warburg, thus, offers a radically different form of history than Vasari's humanistic history and Winckelmann's neo-classical history. Neither

Christian resurrection, nor Olympian glory. Warburg deconstructs Winckelmann's schema of biomorphic evidence; he substitutes the model of a natural cycle of "life and death," "greatness and decadence," with a resolutely non-natural model, a cultural model of history where the different times are not modeled on biomorphic stadiums, but express themselves in strata, hybrid blocks, rhizomes, specific complexities, unexpected returns, and frustrated objects. In the same way Warburg substitutes the ideal model of "revivals" and "renaissances," "good intentions" and "serene beauties," with a phantom model of history where the different times are no longer modeled on the academic transmission of knowledge, but express themselves in hauntings, "survivals," remanences, specters of forms, non-knowledge, the unthought, the temporal unconscious.

The survival of forms, the opening of history: Warburg as a vortex in the stream of the discipline, the phantom father of iconology, impossible to take hold on, to take the hang of. Warburg disappears in his library, and in a work (including thousands upon thousands of unpublished pages) that has not yet found its *corpus*. In order to respond to his dissatisfaction with the territorialization of the knowledge of images in art history, Warburg attempts to produce an incessant displacement: a displacement in the ideas, in the historical periods, in the cultural hierarchies, in the geographical territories — a displacement that gives rise to a violent critical process in the discipline and a veritable deconstruction of disciplinary boundaries, making him the battering-ram of art history.

By the time of Warburg's death in 1929 the *Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg* is a rhizomatic space containing 65,000 volumes, a place where its founder over the years has lost his own self as much as he has constructed his "space of thinking." Wherever there are boundaries between the disciplines, the library, this space for questions and for documentations of problems, multiplies connections between

them in the name of a "nameless science." In his library Warburg can cherish his dream of not having to choose, of not having to truncate, of being able to take his time to take everything into account. But how does one orient oneself in this maddening knot of problems? There is another way of displacing things: not differing anything anymore, but, on the contrary, heading directly for the differences on the ground — for example by studying Indian rituals in New Mexico and Arizona (1895–1896). But in what way is the object Warburg is looking for favorable to the task of displacing the object of "art"? Precisely because, Didi-Huberman answers, it is not an object but a complex, a conglomerate or a rhizome, of relations. To "anchor" the images and the works of art in the field of anthropological questions was Warburg's first way to displace, but also to engage in, the history of art without trying to extract a general law or an essence of a human faculty or a domain of knowledge, but in order to multiply the pertinent singularities, to expand the phenomenal field of a discipline which until then had been firmly riveted to its objects — to the detriment of the relations that these objects established. For Warburg anthropology displaces and defamiliarizes the history of art, not in order to disperse it in some eclectic and perspectiveless interdisciplinarity, but in order to open it up to its own, partially unthought, "fundamental problems." This would entail doing justice to the extreme complexity of relations and determinations or over-determinations that constitute the images, but also reformulating the specificity of the relations and of the formal works that the images constitute. Warburg, Didi-Huberman emphasizes, is no anti-formalist only looking for historical "facts" and iconological "contents." What he tries to do is rather to reframe the question of style, this problem of formal arrangements and efficiencies, by always connecting the philological study of the unique case to the anthropological approach to the relations that make these singularities historically and



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culturally operative.

When he engraves the Greek word for memory over the entry to his library, Warburg indicates to the visitor that he enters the territory of another time. This other time bears the name *Nachleben*, the mysterious watchword for Warburg's project: *Nachleben der Antike*. This is the "fundamental problem" whose materials his archive and library research projects try to assemble, in order to make it possible to understand the sedimentations and movements of the terrain. The theoretical and heuristic function of anthropology is here its capacity to de-territorialize knowledge by reintroducing difference in objects and anachronism in history. Warburg, who borrows — and displaces — the concept of "survival" from Edward B. Taylor, opens up the field of art history to anthropology not only in order to discover new objects of study for it, but also to open its time: the phantom time of survivals (in 1928 Warburg defines the history of images that he practices as a "ghost story for truly adult people"). The present is woven by multiple pasts, and this is why, according to Taylor, the ethnologist must become the historian of each of his observations — Taylor, who, before Warburg and Freud, in the "trivial details" admires a capacity to make sense of their own insignificance.

The surviving form in Warburg, Didi-Huberman accentuates, is not triumphantly surviving the deaths of its rivals. On the contrary, as a symptom and a phantom, it survives its own death — having disappeared at one point in history; having reappeared a long time later at a moment when, maybe, one did not expect it any more; and having, consequently, survived in the ill-defined borderlands of a "collective memory." Bricolaging his theory on the memory of forms, a theory constituted of jumps and latencies, survivals and anachronisms, desires and the unconscious, Warburg thus operates a decisive break with the very notions of historical "progress" and "development." And like Burckhardt, he always refuses the synthesis, puts off the moment of conclusion, the Hegelian moment of absolute

knowledge. This would be Warburg's epistemological modesty: to take the consequences of the fact that an isolated researcher, a pioneer, cannot, must not, work on anything else than singularities. Modesty, but also courage: daring to travel as far as possible in this uncompleted analysis of singularities, discovering the extreme plasticity, the vertiginous capacity of transformation, in the time-image; a plasticity that imposes a new relation between the universal and the singular, a relation where the universal constantly would be able to transform under the pressure of, or impulse from, the local object. This is what Didi-Huberman calls Warburg's "superior empiricism": the close, analytic and philological attention to artworks as an occasion for inventing concepts, that is to say, for actively occupying the terrain of philosophy. This "superior empiricism" would also permit us to break with the negative judgments that the knowledge produced by Warburg is often submitted to: not a single coherent book, articles on microscopic questions, ideas that are too "big" and too movable, historical results that are as specialized as they are disseminated. This "bizarre" behavior is perhaps, in part, related to the mental struggles of "an (incurable) schizoid," as Warburg himself described it in 1923. But, Didi-Huberman argues, it also originates from an epistemological choice that is remarkably well founded: the choice to transform, to remodel, the historical intelligibility of images under the pressure of each fecund singularity. This is why Warburgian knowledge is a plastic (and critical) knowledge par excellence, acting by interwoven memories and metamorphoses, intertwinings of knowledge and non-knowledge. His library and his incredible quantity of manuscripts, files, and documents constituted a plastic material capable of absorbing every accident, every unthinkable or unthought object of art history, and of transforming itself without ever fixating itself in an obtained result, a final knowledge. This is Warburg's "theoretical non-limitation."

Thus the "survival," according to Warburg, offers no possibility to simplify history: being a

transversal notion in relation to every chronological division, it imposes a terrific disorientation on every will to periodize. It imposes the paradox that the most ancient things sometimes come after the less ancient ones. Woven by long durations and critical moments, by ancient latencies and brutal resurgences, the survival anachronizes history. This is why we again need to confront the question of the symptom — this exception or intrusion, this disorientation of body and thought, this rupture of the "principle of individuation." What is a symptom from the point of view of historical time? In this context it is, Didi-Huberman argues, the very particular rhythmicity of an event of survival: the mixture of an interruption (the sudden emergence of the Now) and a return (the sudden emergence of a Past), the unexpected compound of a *contretemps* and a repetition.

To speak like this is to recall the lesson of Nietzsche: genealogy as a symptomatology, implicating the necessity of thinking the symptom as something more than a strict discontinuity. Events of survival, critical points in the cycles of *contretemps*, these would be the movements and the temporalities of the symptom-image. During all his life Warburg tried to find a descriptive and theoretical concept for these movements. He called it *Dynamogramm*: the graph of the symptom-image, the impulsion of events of survival that are directly perceptible and transmissible thanks to the "seismographic" sensibility of the historian (the Warburg "seismograph" would be situated somewhere between Burckhardt and Nietzsche). Which, then, are the *corporeal* forms of the surviving time? The concept of *Pathosformeln* — the "pathos formulas," the visible, physical, gestural, figural symptoms of a psychic time that is impossible to reduce to a simple web of rhetorical, sentimental or individual peripeteia — responds to this question. *Pathosformeln* and *Dynamogramm* seem to indicate that Warburg thought the image in a double regime, or according to the dialectical energy in a montage of things that in general

are treated as contradictory: the pathos and the formula, the power and the graphic, the force and the form, the temporality of a subject and the spatiality of an object. It would be wrong, Didi-Huberman stresses, to say that the "great configuring energies" are "behind the works." Warburg is an historian of singularities and not someone looking for abstract universalities. According to Warburg the "fundamental problems," the forces, are directly *in* the forms, even if these are determined by or limited to miniscule singular objects.

In searching for traces of the *Nachleben* of classical postures and gestures in Renaissance art, traces that would shed light on the lasting power of certain *Pathosformeln*, Warburg attempts to create a kind of inventory of the psychic and corporeal states embodied in the works of figurative culture: a historical archive of intensities. Is there a typology for pathos formulas? In 1905, Warburg opens a large folio entitled "Schemata Pathosformeln," presumably hoping to record in this register the typology in question. But most of the boxes are left blank: the project is a failure on the level of diagrams. Twenty years later, the atlas *Mnemosyne*, the constantly reworked, never finished montage of a considerable *corpus* of images, an unending body of work, will replace the Schemata Pathosformeln. Iconography can be organized by motifs, by types, but the pathos formulas encompass a field considered by Warburg to be rigorously *trans-iconographic*. In contrast to Charcot's reductive charts, mastering the differences of the symptom in an iconography aiming for continuities, resemblances, and temporal uniformity, the montage in *Mnemosyne* respects the discontinuities and differences, never effaces the temporal hiatus between an archaeological drawing and a contemporary photograph, for example. Whereas Charcot always desires to bring the symptom back to its determination (see Didi-Huberman's *Invention de l'hystérie*, 1982), the symptom in Warburg is an incessant and open work of the over-determination. The symptom moves, displaces. The

uninterrupted process, in a continuous exegesis where man, as it is stated in Psalms 38, “walks in the image” (77).

L’homme qui marchait dans la couleur (2001) is about James Turrell and his work with light, distance, and the boundaries of space and vision, accompanied by a quote from Beckett suggesting that what we remember of art is not always exact. Proust has nothing to do with the universe of Fra Angelico, but for Didi-Huberman there is in his way of wandering in art, his way of writing in the memories of a time lost, a demonstration of how networks of meaning unfold across periodical boundaries. The red, green and yellow fields of the *Madonna of the Shadows* are a visual memory where the image demonstrates its ability to grasp thought in the repetition of mystery. *La peinture incarnée* is centered on the presence of the body in painting, the artwork’s incarnation of Catherine Lescault’s body, whereas for Fra Angelico it is the mystery of the divine Incarnation which is repeated in the painting, irrespective of any temporal distance. According to Didi-Huberman, the marbled fields must be described as a subtle and highly productive art of memory, a technique for wandering in the presence of the divine. The shock displays the power of the image to initiate and form a reaction on the part of the believer’s vision. But what appears is not only a rupture; the image is also a structure, an eternal mystery. Tony Smith’s sculpture *Black Box* (1962–7), Didi-Huberman writes in *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (1992), was understood by contemporary spectators as a “scary” image of memory, a recollecting presence. It “is content only to soberly *present its mystery* as volume and as *visuality*” (83), and consequently it also succeeds in bringing vision past the present and the visible, and thus appears as a temporal paradox.

However, the repetition is not of a mimetic kind. What appears in the image is always the mark of the absent, its trace in what is incarnated. Where Alberti and Vasari speak of a correct representation of things as they appear, Didi-Huberman is concerned with the image as ruin, a remnant of something that has been and at the same time as something that displays

destruction and endurance. The reference of the image of memory is elusive, and moves in circles in a labyrinth of meaning where what one sees simultaneously always also is what one does not see. Resemblance with the represented is not decisive. On the contrary, as one can read in *Fra Angelico*, it is because “dissimilitude *opened up the image* for the play of association, by making the appearance blurred and by prohibiting the strict representational definitions, [that] it became the privileged place for all the exegetic networks, for all the movements of the figure” (23). The un-ambiguity of “it is” is met by the visual “it is not” in a cathartic dialectics where colors become “operators for a conversion of the gaze” (91). Before the aspectual art there is an art devoted to the transitions, forcing the fiction of the image “all the way to the unlikely and the absurd,” as phrased by pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite (84). According to the comments of this unknown writer, writing under another name, it is the unreasonable, inconsequential and deformed images that are most apt to lift the spirit so it can see the divine. The words we use are inadequate for expressing what is most real, and for this reason it is only through negation, by approaching the higher mystery through *via negativa*, that one can speak about it. Fra Angelico knows well that everything he paints must be thought with a “not-” in mind, and consequently lets dissimilitude, as in the four fields, be a part in his representation of Maria with the child Jesus. Even what has a visual shape, as the flowers in his *Noli me tangere*, is transformed into stains of blood, suggesting the presence of what cannot be rendered in colors. *La ressemblance informe* (1995) is an analysis of the presence of deformity and distortion in art around 1930. Fra Angelico is at the entrance to the art historical period of the closed referential forms, while the images of *Documents* are at the exit, but both cases concern the opening of the image through the distortion of mimetic thinking. Already Plato writes of an “eternal sea of dissimilitude” (*Statesman* 273d), a *regio dissimilitudinis*, where all ontological order has broken down. In Plotinus and Augustinus, dissimilitude functions as a condition formed by the distance to God. When pseudo-Dionysius

makes the denial of the affirmativity of words the condition for approaching the unattainable, this means for Fra Angelico on the one hand that the one who paints cannot stop at the literal, allegorical or moral meaning, but has to make the colors incorporate the anagogical meaning. On the other hand, it means that painting, as a result of the deluge, can never go beyond being a reminder of the distance between man’s earthly existence and the mystery.

The function of the four multicolored fields as memory images depend on what Didi-Huberman calls the “opacity of the support” (74). In their marble-like character, they designate a transparency and a movement of the gaze from what one sees to what cannot be seen. Their central position brings out the background, and what normally just accompanies the holy figures, as the floor or their surroundings, becomes a condition for the visual exegesis. This is where the mystery of the Incarnation takes place, but, along the lines of Albertus Magnus’ comment to Aristotle’s Book 4 of *Physics*, by bringing out this passive condition for the image, Fra Angelico changes the place into a creative power. *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* speaks of a double structure of the place, as something present but without revealing its characteristics. The place disturbs sight by entering the foreground and by its unlikelihood, but it also entices the spectator to enter into the riches of incarnated marks and traces. This is how the *Fables du lieu* series relates to contemporary art. Guiseppe Penone’s steel sculptures of magnified sutures in the skull do not resemble Dürer or Leonardo’s works, but still bring along their studies of skulls as survival-images, as virtual openings in the works. Didi-Huberman writes of his encounter with the four fields of *The Madonna of the Shadows*: “I realized that this problem of dissimilitude should be called exactly ‘figuration’, to the extent that Fra Angelico himself had to call these zones of stains that he loved to include in his works *figurae*” (12). “Figure” isn’t only the relationship between what produces meaning — which in continuity with Alberti and Vasari means what connects to an *istoria* — and its background, but also what transmits, what establishes connections.

Independently from their metaphorical transport, the four fields function as “transit signs” (39), unpredictable elements conveying transformation, connections and multiplication. On the one hand, the production of figurability means the repetition of the past in the present, on the other, painting “the shadow of future things” (95). The temporality of the image, its hesitation between a dissimilar present and a future that does not yet exist, demands a “relative de-figuration” (54), a decomposition of the visible features of the present to attain a continuous migration of meaning. “The purely operational nature of this figure explains why it is so difficult, even impossible, to define it as a thing or as a simple relation: the figure is always between two things, two universes, two temporalities, two modes of meaning. It is between appearance and truth” (96). The figure is the form, the figure is the formless, and figuration means always to let “where” and “when,” as what the image refers to, remain interchangeable dimensions.

The absence of matter that first made the four richly colored fields in *The Madonna of the Shadows* meaningless proves, after the reading of some of its inherent texts, to be incomprehensibly rich in meanings. Didi-Huberman finds the opposite with the minimalists: an attempt to reduce the production of associations of the work to zero level. In Panofsky he finds a way to read images that makes us blind to the mystery as well as to the tautological image. When *Devant l’image* (1990), *Fra Angelico* and *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, three books published more or less at the same time, so self-evidently connect to each other, it is because the three subjects are part of the same problem. The concepts and the thinking about the image in *Fra Angelico* also seems to determine which artists and which works he is engaged with, to the extent that it may seem that he is only looking for support for a theory. This is, however, a problem only if one believes in a “pure” visibility, art without memory and without potential for figuration. In this case, his montage of works across art history, between so-called modernist, classical and antique works, also becomes a problem. *Fra Angelico* consists of two parts, the first “begins

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symptom only gives us access — immediately, intensely — to the organization of its own structural inaccessibility. The organization is a matter of removals and transfers, the “migrations” that Warburg made the destiny of the pathos formulas, and the moving geographies and historical survivals of which *Mnemosyne*, this cartographical application of a symptomatological observation of culture, exactly tries to reconstitute.

During the war Warburg spends all his energies collecting, collating and collaging disparate information on the causes of the conflict. In this process, he comes to believe that he himself is the cause of the war, having aroused the wrath of the pagan deities through his art historical scholarship. This, in combination with paranoia about his position as a high profile, wealthy Jew during a time of massively increasing anti-Semitism, provokes his collapse into psychosis in 1918. After a couple of years in various psychiatric institutions he ends up in the Bellevue sanatorium in Kreuzlingen (where he stays between 1921 and 1924), directed by Ludwig Binswanger, the nephew of Otto Ludwig Binswanger, to whom the mad Nietzsche was entrusted. Nietzsche is Warburg’s starting point when he elaborates his “epistemological break” in the field of aesthetics in order to move away from Kant, Lessing and Winckelmann. But Nietzsche is not enough for Warburg, whose vocabulary, Didi-Huberman points out, is closer to psychopathology as practiced by Freud or Binswanger (and, when he speaks of culture in terms of schizophrenia, to the thinking of Deleuze).

Foucault shows how a history of madness can produce an archaeology of knowledge. In the destructive forces of his own psychic trial Warburg arrives to find the conditions of a renewal and intensifying of his entire research. The psychotherapy of Binswanger describes this anamnesis and this dialectical reversal: it is necessary to make Warburg understand his trial as an experience that is not a pure privation or dysfunctionality. This displacement is crucial: the symptom is no longer to be considered as

a simple sign of disorder or ill health, but as a structure of a fundamental experience, not as a lack to correct, but as the expression of a total function. This is knowledge by involvement, an implicated, entangled knowledge, managing at the same time knowledge and non-knowledge, meaning and non-meaning, construction and destruction — a knowledge that constitutes a radical break with the positivism of the medical semiologies, in which the notion of the symptom always had been brought back to the “sign” of the illness or disorder.

How to expose an extreme entanglement of connections? How to find a form that is rigorous (that is, theoretically founded) and non-schematic (that is, non-reducing, capable of respecting every singularity)? *Mnemosyne*, the atlas of images that Warburg tirelessly works on after his return from Kreuzlingen and until his death, is, according to Didi-Huberman, such a form of exposition. There are no reducing operations or reductive functions in Warburg’s work. Ernst Cassirer’s big mistake is probably, Didi-Huberman argues, to think the symbolic forms according to the implicit model of an exact knowledge. The “non-knowledge,” the unconscious knowledge, does only have a negative place in it, absent or revoked. Cassirer, even if he admires Warburg, hypostasizes the direction of history by establishing an order that shows all the signs of Hegelian teleology. *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* plays an analogous role in relation to Warburg’s manuscripts or *Mnemosyne* as Hegel’s *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften* in relation to Novalis’s *Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, where it is not the unity of every domain, but the circulation of connections between them that matters.

Mnemosyne is, above all, a photographic *dispositif* (even if, as Didi-Huberman stresses, the visual part of the project was supposed to be accompanied by at least two volumes of writings). The photographs from Warburg’s huge collection were attached to big black panels (150 cm x 200 cm) by means of clips that made

them easy to regroup, rearrange in a perpetual combinatory displacement from one panel to another, with all sorts of serial effects or effects of contrast. *Mnemosyne*, thus, presents itself as a *dispositif* destined to maintain the entanglements, to manifest the over-determinations at work in the history of images, making it possible to compare at a glance, on one single panel, ten, twenty, or thirty images; making it possible to expose the entire archive. Not only in order to recapitulate Warburg’s work, but in order to unfold it in every possible direction or to discover still unnoticed possibilities.

The knowledge that resulted from this experimental record was radically new in the field of human sciences. It was necessary for Warburg to invent a new form of collecting and showing, a form that was neither bringing things together under the authority of a principle of totalizing reason, nor bringing together the most different things possible under the non-authority of the arbitrary. It was necessary to show that the fluxes only consist of tensions, that the assembled packages of images were to explode, but also that the differences sketch out configurations and that the divergences together create unnoticed orders of coherence: what Didi-Huberman calls montage. Warburg would be creating a new epistemic configuration — a knowledge by montage related to Benjamin’s in the *Passagen-Werk*, but also, in some aspects, to Bataille’s montage of repulsions or Eisenstein’s montage of attractions — starting from an observation on *Nachleben* itself: the images that are carrying survivals are no other than montages of heterogeneous meanings and temporalities.

Didi-Huberman is not the first to stress an affinity between *Mnemosyne* and some of its more or less contemporary avant-garde experiences, such as collage, photomontage, and film montage (cf. William Heckscher, Martin Warnke, Werner Hofmann, Kurt Forster, Giorgio Agamben, Philippe-Alain Michaud...). But such associations have also found their critics. In “Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive”

(*October* #88, 1999), Benjamin Buchloh states that *Mnemosyne*, as based on “a model of historical memory and continuity of experience,” would be opposed to the models of modernity “as providing instantaneous presence, shock, and perceptual rupture.” In reality, though, Didi-Huberman, points out, Buchloh here seems to content himself with extending the common confusion of survival and continuity of tradition, and of memory and memory of things passed; he is unable to imagine that the action of memory presupposes the involvement (this would be the theoretical lesson of the symptom) with everything between which he wants to establish an opposition: “shock” and “historical memory,” “rupture” and “historical transmission.” The fact that Warburg’s atlas is about the memory function of images in the Western culture does not imply that it would not invent something as radical, “shocking” and inopportune as a surrealist montage in *Documents*. *Mnemosyne*, then, according to Didi-Huberman, is an avant-garde object in its own way. Not by breaking with the past, which it does not stop to become involved in, but by breaking with a certain mode of thinking the past. Warburg’s rupture consists exactly in the thought of time itself as a montage of heterogeneous elements.

Thoughts are exempted from customs duty, Warburg writes. And only montage, as a form of thinking, makes it possible to spatialize the de-territorializations of the objects of knowledge. *Mnemosyne* would be an avant-garde object by daring to deconstruct the historical souvenir album of the influences from classical antiquity and replacing it with an erratic memory atlas, deregulated in relation to the unconscious, saturated with heterogeneous images, submerged by anachronistic or archaic elements, haunted by empty places, missing links, gaps in one’s memory.

What does a montage consist of, what are its elements? Warburg often speaks in terms of “details.” Details: small, unrecognized things, like the discrete motifs that are lost in

with form to approach content (if these words really make any sense)” and the second “begins with meaning in order to approach form” (12). A reading of Didi-Huberman’s work reveals a comparable dialectic at a general level. The form and the concepts are there as a language, they are the condition for thinking the works and thinking what one sees. On the other hand, the consistent topic is the openings of the images and the openings of the gaze to the figure and the powers of the image to transform the gaze. Both are required to make us capable of thinking the works, thinking art history, which is to see what we see but still do not yet see. •

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Vanishing Points

the *grisaille* of the fresco, the backside of an unknown medal or the modest pedestal of a statue. Here we find Warburg’s most famous motto again: “the good God hides in the details.” According to Dieter Wuttke, its direct reference would be a philological *dictum* by Hermann Usener: “it is in the smallest things that the greatest forces reside.” In reality it would be possible to construct an entire tradition haunted by the image of *mundus in gutta* and by the problem of a truth hidden in everything, even in the most humble. In Leibniz, for example, the details become a theoretical motif as the “small perceptions.” But, as Didi-Huberman further reminds us, the detail has no intrinsic epistemological value: everything depends upon what you expect from it and the manipulation that you subject it to (Gaston Bachelard, in his *Essai sur la connaissance approchée*, 1927, described the epistemological status of the detail as that of a division, a disjunction of the subject of science, of an “intimate conflict that it can never wholly pacify”). In order to understand Warburg’s motto, it would thus be necessary to investigate the use values of the detail in *Mnemosyne*.

In Warburg, the detail, according to Didi-Huberman, is neither a simple index of identity, nor a *semeion*, nor an iconological “key” that would permit the revelation of a hidden signification of the images. In Warburg, the detail is always also a symptom. Identity is not the goal of his interpretation; the detail is understood on the basis of its effects of intrusion or exception: its historical singularity. This singularity, this rift in the present time, is in its own turn understood as the index of a structure of survival, which presupposes that one regulates oneself on the powers of the unconscious. As in Freud, the detail in Warburg reveals itself in the discards of the observation: it is a detail by displacement, not a detail by enlargement or magnification. Warburg’s model is “pathic” or “psychopathic” — a way of saying that the detail does indeed concern the movements or the displacements of a desire that does not reveal its name: less a

“meticulous consciousness,” then, than a sly unconsciousness that always arrives to locate itself where you did not look for it. Warburg’s detail brings us neither the omnivoyance nor the omniscience that positivists hoped for. The details are only significant if they are bearers of uncertainty, non-knowledge, disorientation. (In *Devant l’image*, Didi-Huberman differentiates the detail — considered as a semiotic object tending towards stability and closure, as presupposing a logic of identity — from the *pan* — considered as something semiotically labile and open, only revealing figurability itself: a process, a power, a not-yet, a “quasi”-existence of the figure.)

Didi-Huberman calls attention to the fact that Warburg’s motto “the good God hides in the details” is written next to another one that concerns the question of non-knowledge: “We are trying to find our own ignorance, and where we find it, we fight it.” Why, incessantly, try to find this element of non-knowledge that we are fighting? Why not restrict ourselves to knowing, like every scientist is supposed to? Warburg obtained his response from his own psychoanalytical experience in Kreuzlingen: the non-knowledge bears the trace of that which is the most essential, but also the most combated, the most repressed, or foreclosed, in ourselves, or in our culture. The detail, in that sense, is that which can produce this paradoxical knowledge: a knowledge woven by non-knowledge, incapable of constituting its object without being involved or entangled in it.

This symptomatological acceptance of the detail does, at all events, offer a way to better understand the strangely non-iconographic structure of *Mnemosyne*, this rhizomatic comparativism that is less interested in the identification of motifs and their historical laws of evolution, than in their contamination and temporal laws of survival. *Mnemosyne* shows how Warburg, by shattering the iconographic guardrail, from the very beginning displaces every ambition of the iconology whose paternity one nevertheless attributes to him. “Iconology” is indeed not the

name of the “nameless science” that Warburg hoped for. His own disciples, and above all Saxl and Panofsky, reduces it to the job of deciphering figurative allegories. Panofsky’s magisterial iconology in fact discharges itself from all the great challenges that Warburg’s work contains. Panofsky wants to define the “meaning” of the images where Warburg tried to catch their very “life,” their paradoxical “survival.” Panofsky wants to interpret the contents and the figurative “themes” beyond their expression, where Warburg tried to understand the “expressive value” of the images even beyond their meaning. Panofsky wants to reduce the particular symptoms to symbols that would encompass them structurally, whereas Warburg had engaged in an inversed path, trying to reveal, in the apparent unity of symbols, the structural schize of the symptoms. Panofsky wants to start from Kant and engage in a knowledge-conquest with a quantity of acquired results. Warburg, on the contrary, started from Nietzsche in order to let his work bear witness to the excessive pain in his thinking, to the place that the non-knowledge and the empathy occupies in it, to the impressive quantity of questions without answers that it raises.

In *Mnemosyne* iconographies are indeterminate. This is why Warburg characterizes the particularity of his iconology as an “iconology of intervals” (*Ikonomie des Zwischenraumes*). The intervals are the epistemological instruments of disciplinary de-territorialization par excellence in Warburg, and first of all they manifest themselves in the borders that separate the photographs from each other in *Mnemosyne*: vacant zones of black cloth. These zones offer a “background,” a “medium,” but also a “passage” between the photographs. They offer to the montage its space of work: every “detail” is separated from the other by a black “interval,” sketching out, in a negative way, the visual structure of the montage as such. But every “detail” is itself reframed so as to include the whole system of “intervals” that organize the *dispositif* of the

representation. Every “detail” of *Mnemosyne* could without any doubt, Didi-Huberman asserts, be analyzed in relation to the network of “intervals” produced by its own framing. It would then be possible to say that for Warburg “the good God hides in the interval.” In fact, Warburg would seem to anticipate an idea that is essential for Benjamin, according to whom “it is precisely in the very small details of the intermediary that the eternally identical manifests itself.” At the same time Warburg would anticipate the project of a structural analysis of singularities: the *detail* has only an importance as a singularity, that is, as a hinge, a pivot — namely the interval that makes it possible to effectuate a passage — between orders of heterogeneous realities which one nevertheless has to mount together. •

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