

FLICKERS OF A HALF WORLD  
THE NEW PHOTOGRAPHS OF DANIEL GUSTAV CRAMER

by Jonathan Miles, February 2006

"The eye is the commander of astronomy; it makes cosmography; it guides and rectifies all the human arts; it conducts man to the various regions of this world; it is the prince of mathematics; its sciences are most certain; it has measured the height and size of the stars; it has disclosed the elements and their distributions; it has made predictions of future events by means of the course of the stars; it has generated architecture, perspective and divine painting. Oh excellent above all things created by God!"

(Leonardo da Vinci)

Following from the inward probing and entries into woodland spaces, we are taken downwards into the deep of the ocean floor. The question for us relates to how vision itself is understood within such a frame. In many respects the feeling of the work appears to be in accord, and in this respect, demonstrates a similar registration of sensibility that is evident in the Woodland series. Why indeed should it be otherwise? At the same time a turn in sense is emergent, for not only are we being plunged into the depths, but our relationship to a visual understanding is altered as well. Lines of light become clouds of diffusion, clarities are obscured. Matter and space ease into the other, in a murky in-between in which perspectives give way to an obscurity of views. Despite all these accumulated turns in visual expectancy, we still have a world constituted before us, even though it is a form of half-world, shadowed, refracted, and partly concealed. We are being lead into a zone in which memory, imagination and fascination filter in differing degrees into the visible, to the point where stable forms of focus appear to tremor within the frame. We are shown a world caught between composition and decay, almost a primal stirring beneath the surface of things. Even though our knowledge of these border regions of vision are constituted mainly through the pictorial constancy of the photographic, or moving image reportage aimed to enthrall our sense, these photographs instead dissemble the already given of visual form of this documentary reportage.

We talked together about the Araki show at the Barbican. Daniel said that he was impressed, especially in regard to the feeling of melancholy that appears to pervade the work. In many ways Daniel is the opposite of Araki in terms of his method. On an obvious level Araki shoots continually, and without any sense of the discrete boundaries between the various genres of photography, or even the difference between art and pornography. Following from this, the work takes one into the flux, or even whirlwind of everyday life, in which all surfaces, events or entities appear to coalesce

into one portrait of a life witnessed. In turn it is impossible to escape the subject- eye that is able to collapse all of this difference. The presence of Araki as an author is insistent to the point that the very edges of his work announce vertigo of all composition and sense to this world. This is an art of extreme energy, orgy, and dissolution within a spiralling visuality that touches upon madness within vision. In opposition to this Daniel is almost painfully discrete on the level of method, highly selective, and seemingly bound by an exact sense of genre. Yet I do not think that his attraction towards Araki is born out of extreme difference. So the question might remain as to what Daniel might identify within the other's work. Perhaps this could only be answered by understanding the paradoxes that are contained within the representational process itself.

Developing from this we might say that all appearances lead ultimately to an apprehension: at the very heart of the quest of the visible lays a force of disturbing negativity. In saying this, am I claiming that a similar existential mood of loss is informing the visible in Daniel's work? Well, this issue is far more remote and difficult to discern. Instead it points to the way in which artists often view the work of each other, in order that a recognition of a secret scent might lead them to the heart of a project.

Freedom is one of the most difficult words in relationship to art. There is no agency that might bestow it within the field of another. Instead it is rooted in the capacity to open out a space of meaning that might in turn remove the constraints with the already constituted world. The gesture contained within the artist work to look again, or to look more deeply, or even to look with entirely open eyes, accords with this. In regard to Araki's work it is this gesture of opening that Daniel is identifying and this can only be felt as opposed to seen. Araki might photograph the bustle of the everyday, but the heart of his vision is correspondingly remote, and perhaps - in the way that it gestures - painfully shy. It is this sense that undoes the will to mastery through casting a look, because it leads the artist to the secret reserve of the unfigurable. This in turn gives an artist the feeling that they can never describe their project, or the sense that they are returning again and again to the same thing, repeating to the point of seeming tedium, only to start again.

When I start to write about an artists work I resort to creating an imaginary interview in my head. In this way I am able to test out what might be possible to say, without being pushed away by the reserve that each artist must claim as their own. Artists are like anyone in the way they compose fictions that might make sense in regard to what they do. The profound feeling of loneliness that can be experienced as a child is for instance, a common citation. I can hear myself talking in such ways, and in doing so I feel embarrassed by any such an utterance, because it illuminates nothing at all. Few will ever say for instance that they felt possessed by an overwhelming narcissistic energy that manifests as an insistence that the world, by design, should pay attention to them. Looking at contemporary art can often be likened to climbing a mountain of misrecognition, emptiness and ruin because narcissism and nihilism are curiously intertwined. Both conditions are probably an outcome of the world cast as image. The world itself is constantly escaping from modes of optical possession that do not correspond to

the depths that it holds in reserve, or against the claims that might be made in its name because of the desire to possess. The first question that I am rehearsing relates to a pursuit of that which escapes vision. This throws Daniel to begin with, but he finally starts to discuss the search for a non-place, or even interval, in which space itself stills to the point at which everything appears continuous and attached. (In German this is called Augenblick, the moment of vision or the glance of the eye that is capable of transforming the passage of what is before and what is after. In Nietzsche this moment can reoccur endlessly because of the depth that it touches. 1 ) Then he really starts to talk. "So look, I am in a forest, and I no longer know what I am searching for, but nonetheless I am feeling tense to the point that I am meeting the flickers of the visible within my own imaginary focus. I can only say that I start to experience a moment that takes me to a passage outside of my insistent claims. Shadow and light become balanced to the extent that everything appears to be composed within itself. This point or moment insists attention. On one level I might walk away after taking a photograph and imagine that I have captured a concentrated darkness on the face of the remote. I might feel that I have captured something other, such as a face within the flickering of light across leaves. But all of this is itself, elsewhere, to what the work actually is. Let us say that spectators start to be convinced that they do indeed see things, such as faces, and that in seeing such a mysterious appearance they have discovered the secret contained within the work. This of course is possible, and a highly seductive occurrence, but it is not what is at issue. To some extent I entertain such an idea because perhaps I desire such illusions about the processes contained within my own art. I need a conceit if you like. Instead I think that this conceit might illuminate a relationship between the image as a mode of visibility, and as that which is composed within the imaginary. I am reading a book called "The Dark Gaze" by Kevin Hart on the writings of Maurice Blanchot. He describes the dark gaze as "the vision of an artist who sees being as image, already separated from the phenomenal world and yet belonging to a separate order of being." (2) If for instance I might imagine that I have captured something other within the field of vision, it might indicate that what I am looking at does not correspond with the object of sight. In effect it is possible to understand that this is a process of losing the possibility of mastery. For instance the feeling that the visual field has an intelligence that draws you inwards, teases with you, and possibly, deceives you as you struggle to centre a view. So when I evoked the notion of being on an edge between inside and outside, and shadow and light, it is in relationship to this idea of the dark gaze that casts understanding on a form of access both to that which is spectral, and that which is readily identifiable. I think that I am seeking the points or moments in the visible world in which the trace of the figure is erased. The spectator is thus placed in a position of both, identification, being there with all the pleasure this can afford, but equally with the anxiety that they could never be there, that there is no position they could occupy. (This is related to Romanticism through its employment of irony, which is expressive of a "paradoxical relation between the absolute and the relative." 3) On a simple level it might be seen as a pursuit of the remote, but I am not interested in that which could be viewed as exotic or even estranged (as in unhomey). Each of the photographs can be said to relate to a journey that results in

finally erasing the pathway. The visible is a composed screen through which we cannot continue. At this point, we no longer possess the time we are in, because direction has been dissembled, and thus disarticulated, both in space and time. I am not attempting to assemble riddles, which might lend my work claims that are not really evident, but rather pointing to the sense that work attends to its task in a double sense. I am concerned with the extreme possibilities that issue from the actual craft of photography, everything must be exact in this respect, and yet I am also profoundly in a state of error that my craft appears incapable of correcting." It has taken a couple of days to solicit this statement from Daniel and now he is no longer willing to go on with this process. I imagine that he feels betrayed by words. I ask if he minds me writing about his work. He is laughing now because he says that this satisfies his narcissism and for a moment placates his loneliness. "You can serve me in a way that my work never can." I am not really sure how I should take this so I start to feel resistant to my task. The object of my attention will not settle before me. I wonder if I am doing something that at its root, is narrow and limited. Each time I sit down to write I have a feeling of a possibility that could be born out of simply writing according to uncontrolled inclination, but then I fall back into the habits of writing, that both appear to give it shape and control my orientation within the process. I start to think that my imaginary interview with Daniel exists in a state of limbo, without authorship, and thus claims of truth. It floats between us like a virtual cloud. Not unlike the condition of his work. The words "floats...like a virtual cloud" tease from me the critical sense of a wavering, flickering quality that resides in potentiality. As I use the word cloud, I turn around to see if there is a cloud in the sky but instead it is uniformly and bleakly grey.

If I were assuming an elevated posture within this text I would start to map out a relation between the heavens, the sky, the high, the open, the veiled, the perspective within the spatial extent, and the abyss of ocean depths. All these spaces and positions are composed of echoes that resonate as constellations across the order of appearances. Landscape would form an elusive poetics, accessing for us, a theory of tones, through which the resonances of spatiality might surface. This leads us towards Romanticism, though there are reasons for resisting such an appeal. Romanticism cast the world in a state of ruination, a world that is emergent through the fragment, in such a way that any sense of totality can only emerge as a collection of those fragments. Aesthetics becomes increasingly dependent upon subjectivity as an outcome of this process for as modernity develops we have on the one side the reification of the object world and the installation of alienation with the subject world that is given over to the realm of aesthetics to overcome. In the age of modernity the subject articulates itself within a line of sight, which in turn becomes over-determined as a pre-disposed perspective. Heidegger typifies this process as vision descending into "a mere looking at or looking-over or gazing at." (4) Through this model of vision the world is transformed into an image or what he termed as the "age of the world picture," an age in which the gaze is pre-disposed to articulate a will-to-power. Works of art can never stand as philosophical critique, but rather they can seek out memory traces (5) that will indicate forms of difference within the dimming uniformity, that are consequent of

an ego-logical subject imposing its view. Appropriation is the outcome of fastening upon objects in order to realise objectivity that in turn enables an understanding of mastery to occur. This is an art that resists this process of narrowing vision within the lighting that emanates from duality.

In the book "Remnants of Song" by Ulrich Baer there is a discussion of the sky and imagination. "Bachelard explains that in the contemplation of the sky the poet realizes an "imagination without images, an imagination which finds its pleasure and its life in 'effacing images.'" (6) This notion of the sky as an "absolute image which cannot be decomposed," and where the real and the imaginary become indistinguishable, adheres to an understanding of the sky as an original phenomenon that discloses nothing but itself." If the sky is an "absolute image" then I attempt to think of how the image of the ocean depth might be characterised. In some respects it is a realm of decomposition in which clarity and distinction are not really possible. The very mobility of vision is restricted so it is as if vision itself is pressed into the perceiving subject. The lack of mobility might be reported as an increased apprehension of wonder but equally could turn into a terror of the unknown. Although there are forms of mapping that record the shape of the ocean there are no overviews like those given to us from space. Without overview and limits of spatial extension the subject experiences a loss of power and with it an increased sense of vulnerability that issues from the feeling of being outside a world where objectification can be controlled. In this respect there are features in this work that intensify the "Woodland Series" as they destabilise our relationship to pre-disposed clarity of view.

There is a Taoist maxim that poses a riddle of formless becoming form and form becoming formless. The solidity of mountains is potentially obscured by mist, water can flood the land, and fire destroys forests, the power of dissolution set against the forces of composed matter. We are mainly composed of water and yet we view our ascendancy, as being, through becoming firm and upright. The idea of the formless should not necessarily be a source of dread, but rather as the natural counter-point to form itself. Think of the planet Solaris in the short story by Stanislaw Lem. This planet appears as a living or "thinking ocean," like a gigantic brain "engaged in a never-ending process of transformation, an 'ontological autometamorphosis.'" This was an entity that appeared to test the limits of human knowledge and in so doing had served to resurrect "one of the most ancient of philosophical problems: the relation between matter and mind, and between mind and consciousness." (7) (Solaris can be viewed as an allegory, or even much more probably, a critique on the nature of the sublime (8). It captures both the breakdown of imagination - and of reason. This testing of human cognition leads to the limits of the subject becoming fragmented and in turn stretched to, and beyond, these limits. Solaris thus, is a vanishing point of vision, limit and understanding.) Often the act of photographing, or even observing, something strange within the natural world can provoke such questions about the status of boundaries which govern the regulative manner we embrace for being-in-the-world. The photograph is like a temporalised fold within consciousness in which lived anticipation of the visual field is translated into a moment that is viewed as a bracketed instance

of an entire process. In turn the photographer-artist has the task of deciding if this is adequate in relationship to the inscribed memory of the process. The photograph cannot be readily possessed because it must invariably be seen as elsewhere to this memory trace. Historically it has been tempting to look towards photography as a confirmation of Cartesian optics and methods of knowing, and thus serving as a confirmation of the relationship of seeing and knowing. Art historically it appears to have served as a vehicle for intensifying, and perhaps, even liberating aesthetic subjectivity, and yet as the paradigm of separation is enunciated, we have to recoil, in order to reframe the question of photography because the ground upon which its certainty is posed is (also) in turn vexed by uncertainty, otherwise the photograph would simply be an object of vision in the form (appearing as...?) an image. The very question, as to what is the image, is not so readily answerable because we logically require a model or schema for the relationship of mind and matter in order to theorise with any level of complexity. This is precisely what is at issue with the articulation of the position of the art photographer. They are of course engaged with both a craft and a technology, but essentially they forward the process of speculation that is assembled within the conceptual apparatus found in the question of what is photography and what is the image. Historical questions about the relationship between photography and the occult are being raised as they inflect upon contemporary practices relative to the trajectory of the evolving processes of speculation. The most objective of all devices appear to raise some of the most complex questions about the nature of subjectivity. This in turn has solicited the richest philosophical and aesthetic forms of inquiry that are at hand within the contemporary trajectories. We might stop to wonder how that which was seemingly the most transparent of mediums, has paradoxically perhaps evolved into a medium of the greatest density and opacity. Indirectly I am trying to explain why it might not be fruitful to regard Daniel's work as being framed by genre and his practice as leading toward an archive within such genre. Instead of such positive work of depiction, we should explore the more errant features of his practice and sensibility that exist outside of the immediate frame. In this respect his work is closer to Tarkovsky than Amsel Adams, or Chinese Classical Landscape rather than the painting of Casper David Friedrich. At this moment I feel Daniel looking across at me. He simply says, "Really?" Well of course such emphatic statements always exaggerate the case, and because of the nature of writing, I need such a case because I do not know how to describe the work in any significant way. The work has an elegance within its address, it retains itself by yielding slowly to the embrace of our attention, which might lead us to believe that they are in possession of a complex interiority, which is an attractive mode of focus for a writer to muse over. In accord with early Chinese painting we might even reach for the notion of a mindscape, but I think that this passage from landscape to mindscape needs far more interruption or striation. Instead I would like to discuss ways in which they constitute a relationship to the 21stC and in turn to questions not already posed fully within the present. In such a context the work is suddenly fragile and vulnerable, by staying with this thought about fragility and vulnerability, I start to feel a sense that these might be the qualities of emergent work that wish to be within this century. The pressure on art of the present is that it needs to become

product in order that it might satisfy the law of circulation within the common world, or it needs to understand itself as withdrawal, and as such become closer to an apparitional state. Derrida in his book "Spectres of Marx" says, "learning to live - remains to be done, it can only happen between life and death. Neither life nor death alone. What happens between the two, and between all the "two's" one likes, such as between life and death, can only maintain itself with some ghost, can only talk with or about some ghost (s'entretenir de quelque fantome)." (9) The spectre is defined as "the furtive and ungraspable visibility of the invisible" or the body of someone other." What Derrida presents in this text is the possibility of thinking about the European project of modernity from a standpoint of its invisible remainder. To say the word standpoint, is already to slip into misrecognition, for it is precisely standpoint, and the underscoring of standpoint in the form of the index, that is erased within this shifting view in which the other of modernity looks back at us. In this we are being touched by something that resists naming - without the process of naming we lose bearing and position. It is not enough to be on the side of otherness, blindness, vestige, or ecstasy but rather to locate the way in which this displaced elsewhere of the in-between might enable to examine the tension between the sovereignty of the work of art and the subjectivity of the artist. This leads towards the coupling of aesthetic freedom and philosophical negativity. The gesture of withdrawal both touches a nerve end of political resistance and aesthetic reconfiguration simultaneously. Importantly this posture cannot be spoken. What we might see instead is forms of art that are contained within intervals or micro spacing, flickers, evanescent passages, tiny shafts of diffuse light, surfaces that lead nowhere, empty moments, wavering forms, phantom suggestion, radiant eruptions, slumping of matter, the arrest of sense, and blackouts.

Daniel is smiling at me. He tells me how his life is filled by looking after his newly born child and about the way that this has nuanced his sense of time in ways that have surprised him. He is not really sure about how to understand art in relationship to this shift in his life, but then he concludes, "Why should it?" I solicit a look from him, or even a blink of the eye. Then for a moment I start to drift because I have lost my direction, then a passage opens.

Ryokan, a Zen master, lived the simplest of life in a little hut at the foot of a mountain. One evening a thief visited the hut only to discover there was nothing in it to steal. Ryokan returned and caught him. 'You may have come a long way to visit me,' he told the prowler, 'and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift.' The thief was bewildered. He took the clothes and slunk away. Ryokan sat naked, watching the moon. 'Poor fellow,' he mused, 'I wish I could give him this beautiful moon.' (10)

## Notes

1

For a discussion on the question of Augenblick see Gary Shapiro in *Archaeologies of Vision* Chicago 2003 P. 160. The book discusses ways in which the aesthetics of presence might be considered as untenable because of its metaphysical underpinning. See Rainer Nagele *Echoes of Translation* John Hopkins 1997 "The naked eye has no erotic appeal; it gains it only through its occasional occlusion and veiling by the eyelid, the batting of the eye. It is the condition of the glance of the eye, which in turn is the condition for the erotic moment. It produces the glance of the eye, the Augenblick and its temporality as the momentous moment." P102. Finally see William McNeill *The Glance of the Eye* SUNY 1999 for a discussion of Heidegger and the relationship of vision and knowledge in the context of an interpretation of Aristotle.

2

Kevin Hart *The Dark Gaze* Chicago 2004 P.12. See further qualification of the "dark gaze" in the passage which states "Fascinated as one is by the dark gaze of the imaginary at the heart of being, no one can remain before it: the ambiguity between image and imaginary cannot be resolved. An image gives us a grip on reality; the imaginary makes us lose that grip. We pass from meaning to nonmeaning, from truth to nontruth." ( P.66)

3

Simon Critchley *Very Little...Almost Nothing* Routledge 1997 P.114  
For a discussion on irony and Romanticism see the essay "Fredrich Schlegel and Romantic Irony" in Peter Szondi *On Textual Understanding and Other Essays* Manchester 1986. Also see Andrew Bowie *Aesthetics and Subjectivity* Manchester 1993 for a discussion on "German Idealism and early German Romanticism" Chapter 2. "Romantic art becomes concerned with representing that which is per se unrepresentable." P.43 , Romanticism is often driven by opposing psychic drives combining the extremes of order and chaos, for example, and this is invariably viewed as issuing from modes of divided or split subjectivity.

4

See the chapter "Gestalt Gestell Geviert" in David Michael Levin *The Philosopher's Gaze* California 1999. This chapter discusses Heidegger and his ideas related to dullness and loss of radiance ("we dim entities down to focus" and through enframing block off the "shining forth"). In a passage that illuminates issues in relationship to this new series of work Levin says "the fixation of a staring gaze, the enframing typical of the Gestell interrupts the figure-ground interplay and distorts both figure and ground. Instead of a dynamic, spontaneously flowing interaction between figure and ground, a loser, freer, softer differentiation between periphery and the center of focus, there is a "freezing" of the flow, interrupting the work of time - the emergence and dissolution of perceptual configurations. And when the figure is subject to such reifying intensity, it becomes detached from its ground, frozen in a state of permanent disfiguration. As



for the ground, although it is the opening of openness, the end-less origin of the figures that enframing brings forth, its presencing is either forgotten, suppressed, and neglected, or else it is submitted to the most extreme ontic reduction - as if it could be possessed by the ego-logical subject as just another figure." P.126

5

In Kaja Silverman *World Spectators* Stanford 2000 P.128 there is a discussion repudiating the notion that words "constitute our primary means of symbolization. Visual perception comes first, and visual perception is not located "in" us. It is situated, rather, at the point at which memory meets external stimulus." This idea of memory meeting external stimulus is striking in the way it might alter many of the models of perception that are attached to.

6

Ulrich Baer *Remnants of Song* Stanford 2000 P. 86 See also Chapter 3 "Blindness and the Sky" which probes the relationship between vision and blindness. "Blindness, it seems, would offer poetry a way of accounting for those "black sectors," which are intersected only by the small slivers of reality illuminated by the sense of sight. Blindness may offer an escape from the tyranny of the visual that overwhelms the poet." (P.113)

7

Stanislaw Lem *Solaris* Penguin 1981 P.31

8

For a recent discussion on the sublime see Jean-Luc Nancy: *A Finite Thinking*, Stanford, 2003 in the essay "The Sublime Offering" in which he states that art "itself is doubtless that which is happening par excellence to us (to us others, the Occidentals); that which is offering us our destiny or deranging our history. But in the sublime, art itself is deranged, offered to yet another destiny; it has its own destiny in a certain sense outside of itself. The sublime is tied in an essential way to the end of art in all its senses: that for which art is there, its destination or telos, and the cessation, overcoming, or suspension of art." P.212

9

Jacques Derrida *Spectres of Marx* Routledge 1994 P. xviii In discussing Hamlet's statement "The time is out of joint" Derrida says "time is disarticulated, dislodged, time is run down, on the run and run down (traque et deranque), deranged, both out of order and mad." P.18 Derrida evokes a darkening of the world and the breach in time as a ground in which the spectre appears as a form that exceeds binary or dialectical logic.

(10) Paul Repts *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* Pelican 1973 P.23 "The Moon Cannot be Stolen" We make view such a story as illuminating issues pertaining to the way in which we might understand appropriation within contemporary culture. Freedom is posed here as a form of depropriation in which the subject and the object of vision become an indivisible unity. The moon is viewed in a purely disinterested manner and it is this that exposes the nature of freedom and the freedom contained in nature.

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