

Double Agent

by Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley

*'In the beginning there is ruin. Ruin is that which happens to the image from the moment of the first gaze. Ruin is the self-portrait, this face looked at in the face as the memory of itself, what remains or returns as a specter from the moment one first looks at oneself and a figuration is eclipsed. The figure, the face, then sees its visibility being eaten away; it loses its integrity without disintegrating.'*¹

The 21st Century posits a crisis of visibility. We are no longer bound by the certainties of Cartesian Perspectivalism that once chimed with a philosophical position, a 'Weltbild' that transformed the world into a measurable entity. Modernism completed the removal of the fiction of the single and immobile eye of perspective, along with its all-seeing, controlling view. Terms like multiplicity and simultaneity have inveigled themselves into our perceptual field, leading to an apprehension of the world as essentially fractured and discontinuous. But in doing so, the certainties of who and where we are have been eroded, whilst our reluctant belief in surface technologies has led to a concomitant loss of the authentic. These technologies privilege surface and velocity, requiring a radical re-evaluation of vision as a locus or conduit of verifiable truth.

Thomas Eller's work shows a calculated awareness of this need to review our relationship with perception, through a confrontation between the viewer, the process of reception and the image. Rather than seeing this relationship as an unambiguous one, the artist deliberately destabilizes the picture. Indeed, acceleration, one of the key aspects of present culture(s) features strongly in his work and is often linked with its opposite, stasis; the philosopher Paul Virilio asks us '...to consider movement and acceleration not as displacement but rather as emplacement, an emplacement without any precise place, without geometric or geographic localisation...'². The concurrence of speed and stasis should not, however, be understood as a return to Albertian principles, instead proposing a renewal of Martin Heidegger's 'aletheic gaze', a way of looking at the world that is open-ended and circumspect.

'THE white male', a complex installation comprising images of warfare brings together these elements of speed and stasis. Jet-fighters, missiles, tanks and other military hardware appear as manipulated photographic cutouts mounted on aluminium, frozen as if in mid-acceleration. The images appear to hurtle towards the viewer and are supported by metal rods held in place by a large photographic back panel depicting a desert landscape. The work cannot be taken in fully from a single viewpoint, and requires the spectator to alter his/her position to decode anamorphic elements and to scrutinize the shifting relationships between discrete components. The sole static elements of the installation appear in the mid-ground, peering through the plethora of weapons: a number of white-clad figures of the artist, photographed from above. These figures rotate the vanishing point from the horizontal to the vertical.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1993, p.68

² Paul Virilio, p.48

Similar self-portraits of the artist have appeared in a variety of guises throughout his work, their scale shifting drastically from the minute, to the life-size, and to the monumental. Scale alters the physical vantage point of the spectator, and, additionally, makes a demand for empathetic mirroring. Here the viewer can only comprehend the work through altering his/her own scale to reflect that of the figure. Moreover, reduction and increase in scale draw out the discrepancy of size between viewer and subject; it follows that, to surmount this inequality, the viewer must radically alter his/her own perception and position. It is arguable that such a fluid viewing process begs fundamental questions regarding the nature of the unique, and, in so doing changes both spectator and artwork.

The theorist Hillel Schwartz's comment sheds light on the twin-edged nature of the original:

'We admire the unique, then we reproduce it: faithfully, fatuously, faithlessly, fortuitously. Who and which and where may be the real McCoy, those are uneasy questions. With fancy footwork we may fight rearguard actions to hold the natural at arm's length from the artificial and keep the one-of-a-kind out of the clinch of the facsimile, but the world we inhabit is close with multiples.'³

Eller's figures address this desire for uniqueness, whilst simultaneously being resigned to its impossibility. He asserts the power of the image *and* erodes its original source in a single statement. The loss of the image's traceable ancestry sets it free; the self is no longer about identity, if identity is understood as 'the same'. Eller has argued, through his alter ego, Sam Rose that the self has no image and no speech, and that it cannot be communicated, save through a relationship with the 'other'. If the self is not the 'I', then any image chosen to represent it must function in the manner of a 'placeholder'; it posits a presence that, according to the French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard, is 'unpresentable'. Here, radically altered in it's meaning, the self is reduced to a picture that floats without destination. And once the self becomes thus divided, it replicates into copies without end.

The sober 'double-agents' sent out by the artist to populate art galleries and public spaces worldwide appear in conservative dark suits, Usually, the monochrome figures appear to strike no defined pose, they simply stand in front of, or walk towards, the viewer. Yet, this formal attire, a businessman's or undertaker's suit (signifying trust and authority) has given way to a more informal dress code of jeans and T-shirt; sometimes the clothing becomes entirely indistinct, to the point of blending in with particular surroundings. Perhaps these changes may be understood as a relaxation of the strictures, the figures acting as *decoys* that adapt to the temporal, geographic, or social circumstances, and sometimes a suit *will not do*.

But there is another kind of agent: one who appears stretched, distorted and quite naked. The work '....' shows an arrangement of naked doubles, each posed differently. As the audience searches for the correct position from which to view the anamorphic effect, we become aware of the potential intimacy of each image: we are uncomfortably confronted by explicit images that foreground the figures' splayed buttocks and exposed genitals. The stretched and distorted nature of the images is suggestive of suffering, of the body *in extremis*. By conflating distress with eroticism, the figures' sexual charge is removed, together with their ability to perform. Eller presents the sexuality of the body as a

³ Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy*, Zone Books, New York, 1996, p.16

conduit, a communication with the viewer, only to withdraw it once more. The suggestion of suffering makes us recoil from the very intimacy we are promised. Instead, the sexuality remains internalized, resulting in autoerotic images; the spectator is invited to view but refrains from stepping into the picture.

The artist has argued that pictorial tradition from the Renaissance to the present has relied on a simple, monocular form of perspective that places the viewer inside the image. Eller, contrariwise, wishes to extend the distance between beholder and object, to quite literally eject him/her from the image. In an age of virtuality, immersion and participation, Eller underscores the need for the unthinkable: to withdraw art's pictorial inclusion of the audience. In this way, to be outside the picture means to be *before* it, suggesting a renewed confrontation with multiple viewpoints, a kind of perpetual frontality that reconfigures itself with every lateral step we take.

The picture, writes the art historian W.J.T. Mitchell 'is treated as something that must awaken desire or even awareness that it is being beheld, as if the beholder were a voyeur at a keyhole.'⁴ Eller's works show the lengths to which the artist goes to identify us as viewers, engaged in the voyeuristic relationship described by Mitchell; here, Eller underlines the scale of the gap between the 'here' of the viewer, and the 'there' of the artwork.

If sexuality invites spatial separation through voyeurism, a visual involvement, it also gives rise to other forms of participation, namely through language: it is arguable that the lack of socialising rituals often lead us to speak openly about sex as a means of communicating something about ourselves. The theorist Sylvere Lotringer maintains that 'Sexuality no longer expresses any truth; it is simply the presentation of self in everyday life.'⁵ Intimacy is thus transformed from a secret to a 'social secretion'. In this way the circulation of sexual signs might succeed in satiating sexuality. Eller's images thus propose a kind of voyeurism that looks not for authenticity, but precisely for the signs that pass for the real, 'it is what's left to be desired when desire amounts to nothing.'⁶

The focus remains with the body in the work 'THE uebermensch', a series of superimposed cutouts of hands brandishing knives and disemboweled corpses. Here, the body is violently cut open, its entrails pulled from the cavity and put on display for public scrutiny. The perpetrator of the action is only visible through the hand holding the knife. Given the circular nature of Eller's work, it is assumed that the hand and the body, though taking the opposing positions of perpetrator and victim, both belong to the artist. The body of the artist is thus sliced open by his 'other', resulting from a nightmarish splitting of the individual. The opposite might be argued in the work 'The bounty – apparition', a montage of images depicting self-harming, where the right hand, holding a razor-blade appears to be cutting into the wrist of the left hand. Here, the violent action is not undertaken by a foreign body, but by pitting the individual against himself.

This aestheticisation of suffering presents a recurring theme in art, from Hans Holbein's 'Dead Christ' to Jacques Louis David's 'The Death of Marat'. The sharp focus on the lifeless body serves to concretise narrative, whilst underlining the subject's emotional tension. Eller's bodies, on the other hand, do not make a play for the viewer's emotions.

⁴ W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want: the Lives and Loves of Images*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2005, p.44

⁵ Sylvere Lotringer, *Over Exposed: Perverting Perversions*, Semiotext(e), New York, 2007, p.207

⁶ *Ibid*, Lotringer p.213

There is little for the audience to identify with, as the figures are truncated, headless, or appear only in detail. The body then becomes a means for the presentation of its blood, flesh and internal organs, spilled or laid bare, perhaps, by way of some gruesome murder or unnamed sacrifice. These images do not mourn the unidentified body, though we recoil at the violence done to it; no melancholia induced by loss is intended, the slain body produces nothing but meat and entrails, a final image of abjection.

Eller uses radical shifts in scale, distortion, and blurring in many of his works. This is especially the case in his depictions of inanimate matter, a range of material traditionally found in the still-life genre, and, latterly, in advertising. These photographic cutouts remain distinct in what they show us: arrangements of fruit, potatoes, fish, oysters, cans, bottles, knives and guns. The iconic nature of the images appears to point towards mimesis; indeed, we accept the images for what they purport to show: images of things that exist and that are familiar to us. Eller suggests, however, that digital image processing has removed the need for real subjects; what we are left with is a pure surface that can be manipulated at will. These techniques are often used in advertising to present images and objects that have been 'supersized', and boldly coloured; such methods turn the viewer into a consumer, replacing choice with desire. Indeed, these methods of regressing the viewer into an infantile state ruled by boundless desire can be said to underpin the industry of advertising. Eller's objects borrow from these strategies, both to entice and seduce, but also to expose the manipulative and mendacious nature of surface. The digital treatment imbues the works with a beguiling, almost visceral quality. They excite our vision exactly because their hyperreality separates them from physical experience. We want to touch them though they would likely elude our grasp as they are either too fast or too slippery. This desire to handle them occurs despite our knowledge that the objects have no substance. In this way, Eller emulates the position of the 'product', a thing that trades on its appearance and lacks in substance, in short: a means of perpetuating desire.

The work 'THE projectile (NTSB)' presents an arrangement of anamorphically distorted sharp instruments blacklisted from being carried onto flights. These objects, chiefly knives, scissors and screwdrivers, are classified as potentially dangerous, all the more so, as Eller's distorted representations are elongated to the point of tearing or shattering. The more brittle the feared object, the greater our anxiety of its splintering becomes, each shard transforming itself into a smaller, less traceable, weapon. As streamlined acrylic photographs they pose no actual danger, but as images that draw blood they remain threatening.

In these works sections of images are pin-sharp, while others are deliberately rendered out of focus, as if accelerating towards or away from the spectator. This phenomenon reminds us of the filmic image that relies on passing still frames at a certain rate before the viewer's eyes. However, Eller's pictures are not animated, and they do not result in a moving sequence. Instead, they appear as accretions of time and movement, frozen into single still images. They differ from photographs where the subject moves unexpectedly as the shutter clicks, resulting in entirely blurred or unfocused images. The simultaneity of sharpness (stillness) and lack of focus (movement) succeed in unsettling these images since the viewer craves the clarity of one or another, rather than both states at once. It is remarkable, however, that the human eye quickly accommodates what appear to be such contradictory states of rest and motion. Paul Virilio argues that '...now reduction is

rejected, for the simultaneous collective response acts as a ubiquitous eye that sees everything at once.' ⁷ In this way, different object-states and views become permissible, and indeed desirable within single images.

These works refers precisely to scopic desire, a point at which the eye's longing for mastery over what is surveyed is overtaken by a surfeit of imagery it cannot take in, let alone digest and classify. If desire is to be maintained, the object itself is of limited importance and may be substituted for another; therefore, it is the nature of its representation that lends itself to interchangeability and multiplication. Representation actually favours endless repetition, as suggested by the simulacrum, which, though matching in appearance, has cut all ties from the original.

The art historian Norman Bryson thus proposes that such images have no actual match in reality and are uniquely *destined* for the gaze. 'Still life's potential for isolating a purely aesthetic space is undoubtedly one of the factors which made the genre so central in the development of Modernism...it aims to remove itself from function altogether.'⁸ It is the switch from a real event to an aesthetic frame that activates the representational mode. It is then arguable that advertising utilizes techniques provided by the still-life. The creation of aestheticised spaces and objects points towards the complete loss of actual function, a means of relating the world to experience. Moreover, by selecting a limited number of goods for a display, an abundance of goods not seen in the picture is proposed, inferring an aesthetics of plenty. The dialectical 'turn' multiplies each single image, making it stand in for everything that is absent. In other words, what is *in* the image is tangible, though the sense of plenty suggested *via* the image, articulated through its denotative function, points towards a surplus that exists *elsewhere*.

Similarly, 'The mosaic' a vast mural of anamorphic flowers made from ceramic tiles, deliberately lacks context. The distorted flowers reveal themselves only after careful identification of the correct oblique viewpoint, an exercise that needs to be repeated with each subsequent botanic specimen. Once more, Eller involves the audience in a formal game; what is at stake is not a *natural* object, but its lacking link to palpable experience. Eller's critical still life tableaux are indeed neither still, nor alive, or, more precisely, *about* life. Nothing is depicted which can be said to exist; Eller's efforts at representing the world, mourn the loss of the real, which has been replaced by design, where 'nature' is replaced by 'cogiture', the ability to think and devise our entire surroundings. It is no longer the case that our image of the world is fragmented, or shattered even, but that it has been traded for a surface, a mirage. We hold fast to this image in the absence of something that has been lost. The world remains present, but we are unable to see it. Therein lies the crisis of visibility. To see, today, signifies to be blind.

Thomas Eller offers a critique of 'bad faith' and asks that none of his visual propositions be taken at face value. Indeed, though his surfaces are honed to perfection, he asks us to dismiss their seduction entirely. We are told 'that there is nothing here to see': no self-portraits, no flowers and no potatoes. The conjurer's vanishing act initiates our escape from the very tyranny of vision that blinds us, since to understand is to dispense with sight.

⁷ Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension*, Semiotext(e), New York, 1991, p.70

⁸ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, Reaktion Books, London, 1990 p.81