

## **From the Vantage Point of Today**

*By Marit Paasche*

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*Forget Me Not.* The photographic motif itself is quite simple. A blue piece of cloth draped across the space, dividing it into front and back. In front of the cloth are only two elements, the ivy-covered tree trunk and another piece of cloth; the latter green and spread out on the ground. Connotations to the landscape genre are less important than the arrangement of the pictorial space. While the blue cloth accentuates the surface, its light transparency opens up a space behind it, a depth to which we are denied access. By emphasizing the frontal space, attention is inevitably pulled towards the obscure, what lies behind the scene. In this way, the work plays with the romantic idea of finding the hidden meaning 'behind' a work of art.

I.

The well-known art historian Erwin Panofsky claims in *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1924) that the way space was defined during the Renaissance should be regarded as part of a new conception of the world.<sup>1</sup> The development of the central perspective provides a whole new way of presenting space, putting humans in an ambivalent relation to the world. Infinity, which according to Aristotle is beyond Heaven and Earth, often represented in the Middle Age as a monochrome surface (preferably gold), is hereafter a natural part of the world. When the central perspective, mathematically calculated to point towards an infinite point, is introduced as the governing principle for organizing space, space too becomes infinite in principle. The motive depicted in a painting is merely a section of space. The pictorial space of the Renaissance presents the infinite as *natura naturata* (nature already created).

While the Renaissance managed to solve the technical challenges of perspective that tormented artists during the Antique and the Middle Ages, it also brought to the surface

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<sup>1</sup> *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Zone Books, New York, 1991.

the symbolic implications of perspective. For perspective is a double-edged sword; it offers a space in which bodies and objects can move mimetically and sculpturally, but it also creates a distance between humans and objects. What was before left for the human visual sense to organize, is now subject to a strict system, in which mathematics defines and governs the relation between objects and body, and the subjective is systematically objectified.<sup>2</sup> The central perspective also incorporates the object-world in the human visual field, thereby granting objects new meaning in a profound way and enabling them to be read as symbols of *weltanschauung* and social status.

A premise for the development of the central perspective is that the physical world, is conceived as a coherent systematic space. This conception did not exist in the Antique, as it lacked a philosophical foundation. Antique theories of space did not even come close to defining space as an organised system of height, width and depth and never managed to bring together the concepts of “front”/“back,” “here”/“there,” “body”/“non-body” into a higher and abstract system of three-dimensional extension. Plato, who condemned the few early attempts at perspective, claimed that they distorted; “the true proportions” of things and replaced reality and the *nomos* (law) with subjective appearance and arbitrariness.’ Plato objected to replacing divine order with Man as the benchmark of all things. (The very possibility of opening up for multiple points of view in a motif was simply unthinkable in the Antique.)

Responding to criticism, Panofsky claims that perspective can hold both the objective and the subjective (this is where its duality lies) and that both originate in an urge to create a visual space that corresponds to an empirical space but nevertheless abstracted, on the factual as well as on the sensorial level (it is only the visual space that is subject to the mathematical). For Panofsky, the main point is that perspective is a premise for the separation of art from the magical; it drives religious art out of the magical sphere.

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<sup>2</sup> Panofsky’s interpretation of perspective under the Renaissance has been contested by several. James Elkins claims, in *The Poetics of Perspective* (1994), that Renaissance man applied a pluralistic approach to perspective, and that different practises, where mathematics were not always dominating, were allowed to co-exist.

“Through this peculiar carrying over of artistic objectivity into the domain of the phenomenal, perspective seals off religious art from the realm of the magical, where the work of art itself works the miracle, and from the realm of the dogmatic and the symbolic, where the work bear witness to, or foretells, the miraculous. But then it opens it to something entirely new: the realm of the visionary, where the miraculous becomes a direct experience of the beholder, in that the supernatural events in a sense erupts into his own, apparently natural, visual space and so permit him really to “internalize” their supernaturalness. Perspective, finally, opens art to the realm of the psychological, in the highest sense, where the miraculous finds its last refuge in the soul of the human being represented in the work of art (...) Perspective, in transforming the ousia (reality) into the phainomenon (appearance) seems to reduce the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for that very reason, conversely, it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine.” (Panofsky: 72).

Walter Benjamin, a German cultural critic from the same epoch as Panofsky, also points to the shifting of art from the magical to the secular sphere, although a decade later and in relation to the emerging reproduction technologies of modernity – film and photography.<sup>3</sup> Connecting Benjamin and Panofsky, one could argue that the camera is truly a device that continues the Renaissance heritage of perspective, through its ‘supernaturalness’ and its ability to transform real objects and subjects into mere appearances.

## II.

The camera brings the ambivalent relation between man and object, introduced by the central perspective, to a new level, by reproducing outer reality on a surface. This shift changes the relation between space and object more or less through the same principles as Renaissance painting. What is new is the enhanced sense of reality, the supernaturalness of the photographic image. Today, we feed on “spirit”: images of

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<sup>3</sup> “The Work of Art in The Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” in *The Work of Art in The Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y. Levin, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008

objects and subjects. Because these images form such a large part of our reality and normality, their superficial character is rarely noted. Yet these surfaces and their perspective arrangement of visual space define our perception of reality; in front of, behind, over and under surfaces, and in relation to coherent and incoherent spaces. Though they appear simple and concrete, these terms hold profound philosophical meaning, always tracing back to one simple question: How do we understand the world?

### III.

Our notion of the world is inextricably linked to whatever technology is available to us, and each time a new technology is introduced, it brings out or makes visible new aspects of reality, while erasing others. Else Marie Hagen's occupation with space and the photographic image can be regarded as a continuous investigation of the demarcation line between the visible and the invisible, the representable and the unrepresentable. What is brought to the surface by the camera, and what is concealed?

At first glance, nothing seems to be hidden in the pictures of Else Marie Hagen. The fact that all elements are presented distinctively, like in *Cover II*, masks a paradox. The transparent wrapping is what makes the glass pane (also transparent) visible, thereby turning it into an object. The surface, apparently insignificant, is suddenly everything. Even the tiny pieces of adhesive tape become visible, while the folded edges in both ends form a kind of perspective space on the surface, the reflected light breaking it up into fields of white and bluish grey. The transparent surface inserts itself between the eye and the object, just like the lens of a camera.

### IV.

According to Panofsky and Benjamin, our images (spirit) are disconnected from magic or the cultic. The reproduction technology changes our perception, and thus our whole existence, claims Benjamin.<sup>4</sup> In modern aesthetics the ritual value of objects (their aura)

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<sup>4</sup> See "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility". The question is whether these new reproduction processes really conveys no aura, or if the new technology simply transfers the aura from the object to the transmission situation (the relation between the near and the distant) offered in mass media like film and TV, as indicated by Samuel Weber in *Mass Mediauras. Form, Technics Media*, Stanford University Press, 1996

is displaced, in favour of the reproduction – or duplication – of our bodies and objects. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Else Marie Hagen's works is the way they discuss this process of duplication, probing deep into the ambivalent relation between man and object that Panofsky holds to derive from the advent of perspective. Twisting and turning this ambiguity, she draws our attention to measures, colour nuances, the optical effects the camera lens has on space and the mirroring and reproduction of ourselves on surfaces.

Take, for instance, the installation *Cover I*. The girl in the photograph seems to step out of the image and onto the catwalk-like structure that runs into the physical installation space. Her eyes are closed, her feet are on the corner of the ramp, which forms a duplication of the physical one. As the line of the installation-ramp and the image-ramp almost runs together, the pictorial and physical space becomes interconnected in a way that could be described as *unheimliche*. Something uncomfortably familiar contrasts the strangely clean and almost abstracted character of the situation. A disorder exists within this orderliness, appearing in the barely visible void between the image and the physical space, and in the tension between covered and uncovered surfaces. A skin-coloured wrapping paper around the photograph is seemingly ripped off in a single movement, but the remnants are still partly concealing the girl's head. The body is covered in several layers of clothing. Below the image, the same paper is partly removed from the ramp, while the rest of it is still closely wrapped up, just like the other image hanging at the diagonal end of the ramp, muffled in skin-coloured silence. The use of perspective draws the attention to the surface and creates a paradoxical illusion of synchronous stillness and motion: the figure is fixed, but at the same time on its way out of the image and onto the ramp, leading to another surface, the covered image.

In the large, frieze-like photograph *Panorama*, the surface takes on baroque proportions. A woman with bare shoulders is facing away, into a golden foil, which surface mirrors a number of distorted reflections of the woman. The title refers to the image genre of the panorama, a genre where painting was replaced by photography very soon after the introduction of the latter in the early 1800. This genre is characterized by a wide-angled

view over a landscape usually too far away for the spectator subject to interact with. In *Panorama*, the space between the spectator (the woman) and the spectacle (the foil) is reduced to the point of claustrophobia. In some areas of the image (particularly on its right) there is hardly any sense of depth at all. In this state of collapsed perspective, the distance between object and the world is lost; the woman is forever fixed to the surface and its reflections of herself.

V.

Where Renaissance painting used perspective to establish a pictorial space and lead the eye of the viewer into it, Else Marie Hagen does the opposite. She creates spaces in which the eye is forced to the surface(s). Here, the idea of finding "hidden meaning" or "underlying structure", so emblematic for modern cultural criticism (such as psychoanalysis and Marxism), loses significance. Instead, Else Marie Hagen spurs us to investigate the consequences of the world's appearance as surfaces, and to ask ourselves if the vantage point of today may be in appearance itself.