

Infinite Surface: The Materiality of the Image in Else Marie Hagen's *The Visible*

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Else Marie Hagen's photographs revisit an idea about photography that arose in the years immediately after its invention, described by Honoré de Balzac as being that our physical bodies are made up of infinite ghostly images, and that a layer of our soul would be removed each time a photograph is made.¹ The daguerreotype - which at the time was the most popular technique for making photographs - also appeared startlingly three-dimensional and lifelike, reinforcing the sense that something of oneself could be trapped within the image. While time has disabused audiences of such superstitious ideas, Hagen stages them to a heightened degree, depicting women who often appear trapped within the image, and constructing her compositions in such a way that they practically shimmer in their oscillation between being two-dimensional surfaces and three-dimensional objects, drawing the viewer's attention to the surface of the image itself.

It is possible to place her work in relation to two major revolutions in imaging. The first was the mid 19th century invention of photography as a chemical method for fixing natural images onto a surface that with the use of lenses conformed to the rules of Renaissance perspective. This freed fine art painters from needing to provide realistic renderings of their subjects, and enabled painting to engage surface and form in radical new ways, giving rise to movements including Impressionism, Cubism, and Abstract Expressionism. The second revolution was the rise of digital communication and its steady integration into all facets of social life at the outset of the 21st century, whereby photographic images ceased to be entirely indexical, undermining their physical relationship to the subject depicted, and could also exist as simulations of reality. Such images rely upon numerical codes, enabling them to be endlessly replicated, or produced without a real world referent. Once again, with the rise of digital imaging technologies in realms of society such as medicine or the military, rules of pictorial representation have shifted - whereby images no longer need to correspond to a

physical reality, and instead exist as mere information, reorganizing space in dramatic new ways and enabling the viewer to effectively disengage from a physical present.

One way of exploring the effects of these changes is to make use of or critique their related technologies. Many artists including Harun Farocki, Stelarc, and Mona Hatoum have used images in this way, and address how imaging practices affect states of embodiment and disembodiment. However, another approach is to enact the effects of new media technologies through traditional media, in order to create analogue simulations that mirror their digital counterparts. Thomas Demand accomplishes this through his photographs of life-sized cardboard sets that simulate scenes from news stories, and Jessica Eaton achieves similar results through her use of analogue film, color separation and photographic filters to create images that appear like digital composites. Their work enables the viewer to reflect on how we use and interact with images, and addresses important shifts in the relationship between the simulated and the real, the image and its referent.

Such engagement with the materiality of the image is at work in Else Marie Hagen's photographs - the image itself is the subject of her photographs. She subverts conventions of pictorial representation through surprisingly low-tech means: sculptural presentations of images that oscillate between three-dimensional and two-dimensional space, compositions that challenge the distinction between the surface of the image and the pictorial space that it constructs, and images that deliberately obstruct the viewer's identification with, or imaginary access to the image. These strategies are apparent in her photograph *Forget Me Not* (2009) where blue fabric is draped behind an ivy-covered tree, and green fabric is spread around its base, concealing the forest behind and the foliage around the tree and replacing it with a crude simulation of grass and sky. Of the photo-based works on display at Gallery 44, *Forget Me Not* is the closest in enacting the form of perspective and spatial recession conventionally associated with photography through its failure at concealment. Behind the slightly transparent veil of fabric one can see the shadows of trees and sky, and a landscape receding in the distance. In the parable of pictorial illusionism, described by Norman Bryson in *The Natural Attitude*, the painter Zeuxis so successfully rendered an image of grapes that birds flew down and tried to eat them. Another painter, Parrhasius, in turn painted a veil that was so realistic

Zeuxis asked it be removed so that he could see the painting it appeared to conceal.²

This series of works references the history of trying to depict the world in a realistic fashion, employing its techniques in ways that draw attention to the surface upon which this representation is made. In *Forget Me Not* we see that there is a veil, and we can see there is something behind it, subtly revealing the referent of photography - the real time and place that the photograph depicts - that is neglected or rendered irrelevant with the making of digital photographs that either depict simulations or are themselves simulations. Paradoxically, while *Forget Me Not* suggests spatial recession, it draws our attention back to the surface on which this illusion appears, and refuses us access to the space that it suggests.

Hagen's frieze-like photograph *Panorama* (2009) simultaneously engages the genres of landscape and medieval icon painting, and glamour photography, bridging an eternal spiritual realm and the mundane everyday through its intervention into pictorial space. This photograph presents the familiar image of a figure looking off into a distant landscape, a widespread trope of pictorial representation of the 19th and 20th century. Such an image would have the effect of serving as an imaginary window, whereby the viewer projects their consciousness into the scene, so that they could imagine themselves standing alongside or behind the figure, or of identifying with them, encompassed by a vast and foreboding landscape. But in *Panorama*, the view is blocked by a backdrop of gold foil. Instead of the expected spatial recession that the posing of the subject might normally conjure, the image appears to reference the use of gold to conjure a sense of the infinite - a convention for indicating depth that was widespread in religious paintings of the medieval period.³ With her head turned away from us, we cannot engage the model, and with her blond hair, fair skin, and a yellow dress, she is practically camouflaged, enveloped by the flat two-dimensional surface. Conventions of pictorial representation are in turn subverted, forcing the viewer's gaze back to the surface of the image

Similarly, the turn to mundane and uneventful scenes of everyday life enables formal concerns to enact themselves. In *Cylindrical Plane* (2009), seven Plexiglas tubes contain identical chromogenic prints of a model in a dressing room, putting on layers of tights one on top of the other. The tubes are arranged as to provide a comprehensive

scene of the unfolding activity, with the model surrounded by various items of clothing. The title references the translation of a three-dimensional solid onto a two-dimensional surface and the sculpture in turn oscillates back and forth between cylinder and plane. However, there is something uncanny about the presentation of this ordinary scene of trying on clothes in a store dressing room as a series of sculptures, where the model is reduced not to a surface, but to a cylindrical object, destroying any illusion of presence. The tubes can be turned and inspected, picked up or knocked over, bringing the viewer's body into an encounter with the artwork that reflects the unstable relationship between the image as surface and the image as object.

Cover 1 (2009) similarly depicts a model who appears trapped within the formal constraints of the image, and who is camouflaged by her surroundings, standing on the edge of a fashion show runway with her eyes closed. She is wearing clothes that match the dusty-pink palette of the room in which she stands, and her own skin tone. When it was exhibited at Gallery K, in Oslo, in 2010, this image was installed with a real runway that extended out from beneath it, which in turn was wrapped in layers of pink paper that peeled away its surface in crumpled and dramatic curls. The photograph was also covered in paper, torn away to reveal all but the upper portion of the image, and a second frame was entirely covered with paper. But unlike conventional fashion shots, where the gaze of the model confronts the viewer, there is no point of connection, no communicative exchange or blasé aversion of gazes. Facing the viewer, with her eyes closed, she disappears into the picture plane of the photograph; her body, her clothing, and the backdrop becoming almost inseparable. Challenging the distinction between figure and ground, it is apparent that she has worn layer upon layer of clothing in the palette of her skin tone, suggesting that perhaps there is nothing beneath the surface but yet another surface.

If the foregrounding of surface is not immediately evident in *Cover I*, it becomes more apparent in *Cover II* (2009). Here, a chromogenic print depicts a transparent plastic wrapper, like one that would enclose a book or a package of greeting cards. But purposely, there is nothing inside but a transparent plastic sheet, a window that stands in for the object that might otherwise be there. A similar play occurs in *Untitled* and *Four Times Tomorrow*, where there is a play between the surface of the photographed object,

and the surface of the photograph as object. In *Untitled*, two t-shirts appear as photographic prints that were then framed, with a non-identifying logo placed on the glass, inverting the viewer's apprehension of the three-dimensional object (the framed photograph and glass with a logo sticker placed on it), and the two-dimensional image (the photograph of the t-shirt). In this presentation, there is no three-dimensional t-shirt, but only its representation. In *Four Times Tomorrow*, which stages a shift between two-dimensional surface and the three-dimensional object, identical copies of a portrait are placed in a Plexiglas box that is mounted to the wall. It seems that the images have been placed there carelessly, simultaneously drawing attention to the materiality of the image - almost a solid form here - and to the reproducibility of the image. A living breathing person, existing in four-dimensions, is transformed into an infinite series of surfaces that curve and bow, reorganizing themselves across the picture plane and producing a sense of spatial recession across all of the images, while also distorting the two-dimensional image.

The role of perspective in the construction of pictorial space had its impact not just in painting, sculpture, and architecture, but it was instrumental in the formation of a modern conception of subjectivity, of the self as a solitary, rational observer of the world. The organization of the world into pictorial space - that could be seen through a window - brought about what Hannah Arendt described as the "twofold flight from the earth into the universe and from the world into the self."⁴ In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this idea was similarly important - expressed not in terms of a transparent frame - but as a screen that existed between the subject and the gaze, through which one learned to recognize oneself as an image. While Hagen's images present us with the framing devices and conventions of pictorial style, her images subvert this - they are deliberately inaccessible - preventing the viewer from placing themselves in the space of the visual field and from entering into an identificatory relationship with the subject of the image.

Hagen's images appropriately coincide with what Anne Friedberg describes as the end of the age of perspective, an era that lasted about 500 years, and the emergence of multi-perspectival spaces as part of everyday life.⁵ These include contemporary computer and Internet-based screen technologies, such as Microsoft Windows, Mac OSX, email, Skype, Facebook and many others, through which we

engage multiple spaces simultaneously. These platforms do not necessarily render three-dimensional pictorial spaces, but exist as multiple, overlapping, layered surfaces. And, while these technologies enable us to be mobile, to travel and communicate virtually, Hagen's images trap their subjects within their layers, and deny the viewer access. The art historian Marit Paasche argues that there are no hidden meanings in Hagen's photographs and that "the eye is forced to the surface" so that we might contemplate appearance itself.⁶ If we can't fully contemplate what lies behind the image, it takes on sculptural dimensions, foregrounding the materiality of the image itself.

Endnotes

1 Nadar, "My Life as a Photographer (Balzac and the Daguerreotype), Thomas Repensek (trans.), in *October: The First Decade, 1976-1986*, Annette Michelson, et al (ed.), (Cambridge MA, MIT Press: 1987), 19.

2 Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 34.

3 Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2001), 85.

4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 6.; quoted in Robert D. Romanyshn, *Technology as Symptom and Dream* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 42.

5 Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2006).

6 Marit Paasche, *From the Vantage Point of Today* (Oslo: Galleri K, 2010), www.maritpaasche.no