

## Ground Swells

### The Photography of Philippe Gronon

“Relation between commodity and allegory: ‘value,’ as the natural burning-glass of semblance in history, outshines ‘meaning.’ Its lustre (Schein) is more difficult to dispel. It is, moreover, the very newest. [...] Baudelaire as allegorist was entirely isolated. He sought to recall the experience of the commodity to an allegorical experience. In this, he was doomed to founder, and it became clear that the relentlessness of his initiative was exceeded by the relentlessness of reality. Hence a strain in his work that feels pathological or sadistic only because it missed out on reality – though just by a hair.”<sup>1</sup>

“You, Lord, see and have eyes. You are, therefore, an eye, because your having is being. You thus observe all things in yourself. For if in me my sight were an eye as in you, my God, then in myself I would see all things. For the eye is like a mirror, and a mirror, however small, figuratively takes into itself a vast mountain and all that exists on the mountain’s surface. [...] But since your sight is an eye or living mirror, it sees all things in itself. Even more, since it is the cause and reason of all that can be seen, it embraces and sees all things in the cause and reason of all, that is, in itself.”<sup>2</sup>

*Deceptively literal*

*Châssis photographiques, Ecrivoires, Catalogue de manuscrits, Observatoires, Antennes satellites, Pierres lithographiques, Châssis radiographiques, Cuvettes de développements* (Sheet Film Holders, Writing Surfaces,

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 347.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, *On the Vision of God*, in *Selected Spiritual Writings*, Paulist Press, 1997, p. 249.

Catalogue of Manuscripts, Observatories, Satellite Antennae, Lithographic Stones, X-Ray Holders, Developing Tanks): As the titles of his works indicate, the subjects chosen by Philippe Gronon are all related to operations that constitutive of photography: observing, representing, memorising and storing. The apparent monoideism of the images, their exactitude and formal flatness – they always and only present these objects to actual scale – evokes a kind of addiction to reality that could be deceptive. “With Philippe Gronon, photography becomes descriptive, objective and deceptive in its literality. The work of this artist is founded on a protocol that none of his series belies. Gronon extracts objects from the world, decontextualises them by the use of black-and-white and close framing, cuts around them and presents them mounted on aluminium and standing proud of the wall.”<sup>3</sup>

Simple, economical, in fact quite perfect, the notion of “deceptive literality” with which Valérie Mavridorakis introduces her commentary on the exhibition in which Philippe Gronon took part as a *pensionnaire* at the Villa Medici sums up the essential points that have been made about this artist since then – indeed, it seems to sum up the essence of what can be said about him, in a certain sense, or at least, in a certain perspective. The literally of Gronon’s photographs is the effect of a protocol whose function is to decontextualise the objects that it shows, to remove them from the text within which they are involved – this is the readymade aspect of what he does – and, I would add, does so in order that, once stripped of their meaning, ringed around with the

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<sup>3</sup> In *Villa(s) 6*, Académie de France à Roma, Villa Medici, p.6, 1995.

hermetic glow of the hieroglyph, these objects appear “as images” and thus began to speak “to the letter.” The letter of the protocol: of a ritual that remains to be deciphered.

Ritual: each photograph repeats the same operation in accordance with precise rules, and in order to achieve a precise effect. But what operation? The self-reflection of the photographic act? Or the actual-size reproduction of the object?<sup>4</sup> The mise-en-abyme of the photographic act in its materiality? Or the production of equivalents? The question is whether the aim of the speculation here is limited to specularity, or whether this “self-reflective” action is expected to have effects in reality — speculative effects. Without a doubt, the photographic act is taken literally and reflected in itself. Photography talking about photography talking about photography talking about photography — the schema is a familiar one. The interpretation seems obvious in modernist terms. Is this not a typical demonstration of independence on the part of a medium that tries to break free of its dependence on the real precisely by displaying that dependence? It would therefore seem to be an attempt to bestow the dignity of a medium in the superlative sense of the term. That is apparently the issue here. But then why the superfluous constraint, the full-scale reproduction? Why thus intimate that the production of the image is an equivalent, on a scale of 1? Why exactly 1? One need only emerge from this face-to-face — organised by the specular exhibition of the photographs for the questions to bubble up, for Gronon’s work to emerge from its silence. And for the question of its literality to escape

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<sup>4</sup> Two series elude this “law”: the *Tas de fumiers* (Heaps of Manure) the *Châteaux de sable* (Sandcastles), for technical reasons, and to most effectively obtain a full-scale rendition.

that of its reflexivity, in other words, to exempt itself from a “conceptualising” interpretation in the modern sense of the term. For this literality to indeed appear as “deceptive.”

Moving on from this first observation, we should add the following: the fact that this literality partakes of a certain mystification does not mean that it is disillusioned. And if it sometimes seems cynical — many of Gronon’s chosen subjects seem based on derisive wordplay — this is only because of an old reflex, a reaction to the defence he has had to put up against the climate of post-post-Duchampian derision in which he grew up as an artist. If I take another perspective and consider what it is about these photographs that is meaningful today, and how, over their dead-literal bodies, they form an image, it is because of the naïve aspect of this literality. For if this literality is certainly falsely conceptual, it is above all genuinely romantic, and its beauty comes from the fact that it retains something of the muted pathos of modern lyricism. It is the beauty of allegory. It has to do with a belief that is wounded but not vanquished. With the hope of a paradise that, ultimately, we refuse to lose. For, even though already lost and derisory, it is nonetheless there, reprieved. Is that not the obvious point behind the only literary reference that this work allows itself to vouchsafe the viewer — Milton’s *Paradise Lost*? If this literality affects us, or wounds us, overcomes our indifference, it is because it continues to speak the language of beauty: “I have, to keep those docile lovers

enthralled, Pure mirrors that make all things more beautiful: My eyes, my wide eyes with their eternal brightness.”<sup>5</sup>

With his false subjects, which are like so many pseudo-metonyms of photography, and which make his work an ideal object for theoreticians of photography, Gronon endlessly digs away at the gap that defines his medium: the break between what we see, these frozen figures of his own activity, and the enigma of what is designated, the balcony of here and now from which we look out. He delves this gap so deep that it becomes an abyss. An abyss from “too much seeing.” An abyss by excess, by optical saturation, which pulls in its prey before it can even sense that it has been caught. The irresistible attraction of things seen without seeing anything. Confronted with these trompe l’oeils in which photography seems to spool out the discourse on “photography as photography,” the only pressing question is “what” or “who” is the camera aiming at? What kind of performance is taking place here, working to touch us again and again, we who are looking at these things, are making them be images? We who are acting as the masochistic enablers of this performance? My impression, in effect, is that if there is a literality to this work, it lies primarily in the protocol itself, the “literal” violence of the recording, its studied exactitude, the fatal character of the rendition. And then it is through the contract that is made between this violence and the beholder’s literal, willing consent, a consent acquired at the price of a logic that consists in constantly taking the sadism a little further, for an ever-increasing pay-

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “La Beauté” in *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

off in pleasure, with the risk, of course, that the demands of the former exceed the desires of the latter, or vice versa. This is the razor's edge on which Philippe Gronon balances, and on which, as evidenced in this book dedicated to him by Mamco, he has so far obtained the assent of his "victim."

*Board, pad, ticker, window – the tableau form*

*Tableaux de cotations, Tableaux noirs, Fenêtres, Tas de Fumiers, Grattoirs, Verso* (Ticker Boards, Blackboards, Windows, Manure, Scrapers, Verso): Gronon's titles say what he shows: tableaux (rectangular displays), but also piles of manure – heaps of shit – and scrapers which, we can assume, no doubt had something to do with removing some kind of dirt, and perhaps (to stay with a reference that has no doubt been very important in his work), the "gloves for mucking-off paint" used by Noël Dolla, who was his teacher at Villa Arson. The reference to paint is overt, and overtly scatological. In these photographs the thing shown is deposited on the surface of an idealised tableau by its hyper-planarity, or even, in some recent works over-signified by the framing<sup>6</sup>. This activity at the intersection of the tableau and of painting inscribes Gronon's work within a certain photographic discourse, in a text of which he is the heir and that he reinvests in his practice. This narrative is of course a subtle fiction, the function of which, as always, is to guarantee an origin and to found a value: the value of "photography as art." This narrative was written by one of the major

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<sup>6</sup> Series that are framed include: *Tas de fumiers, Châteaux de sable, Verso, Pierres lithographiques.*

artists and theoreticians of contemporary photography, Jeff Wall, notably in the talks he gave in Vancouver between 1972 and 1977. This account of a century of photography makes a good starting point for grasping the historicity of Gronon's work, the already-constituted vocabulary and the situation on the basis of which his work can be articulated in the form of a series of choices, rather than being visible merely as a succession of tableaux.

As if often the case, this narrative is a genealogical narrative. It is a way, for Jeff Wall – but also, through him, for photography in general – to reappropriate an origin; to turn an opportunity into a necessity: a truth. As a support of technical reproducibility, photography can be seen as responsible for the way in which, beyond pictorial modernity, the whole of artistic modernity has been rethought on the basis of the problematisation of the link that has become necessary, and is in reality strictly historical, between painting and tableau. Thanks to this, images can at last be taken out of their frame(work). Born in an ambiguous space, between the fine arts and media, born to blur boundaries, photography could have signified the divorce between these practices, painting and tableau/picture, which Western, Christian tradition had united. And it could have opened up other possibilities, other practices. According to Wall, the contrary was the case. And it seems exact to say that, as long as photography considers that its destiny is linked to the wall of the museum exhibition, rather than to the pages of a book, or to digital screens; as long, more essentially, as it feels affiliated to Art, it remains caught in a kind of primal scene which

keeps it in the position of heir to these two practices. The paradoxical consequence of this is that it also inherits a history of painting to which some believed that its invention was going to put to an end. That it has even become almost its author (in the filial sense of the term, of the person who makes the heritage grow). And that the give or play between the two terms of this couple fixes the limits bestowed on it.

Photography is the medium through which Painting, as the herald of modernity, reflects its own destiny. Such, in any case, is the starting point of the narrative expounded by Jeff Wall and widely echoed by the photographers around him. It makes the *mise-en-abyme* of the photographic operation a historical content that brings the photographic medium close to the limit-form that, in artistic modernism, represented the gap between *tableau* and painting: the monochrome. In “Monochrome and Photojournalism in On Kawara’s Today Paintings,” Wall writes that, as a painted surface which is also an object and without these two functions ever merging the monochrome remains “outside painting, outside all the genres and purposes of painting. It is there as a reflection of the completion of all genres, of all the projects undertaken as figuration.”<sup>7</sup> It is a reflection of what will not have taken place and that for this reason remains in a state of tension, and injects tension into what continues after the monochrome, whether in the form of painting or photography. The nature of the medium is of itself of little importance with regard to the genealogical link that connects them, and to the text that weaves them

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<sup>7</sup> Jeff Wall, *Essais et Entretiens, 1984-2001*, edited by JF Chevrier, Éditions de l’ensba, Paris, 2001, p 207.



together in the field of culture and memory. Conversely, if this tension disappears, then we know that we have entered another history, whatever the medium being used. Now, this tension is precisely what is attested by the exacerbated planarity of Gronon's photographs, as it is by their fetishistic insistence on the object, the ecstasy of the surface and the passion of the photographic detail. Not to mention, of course, their relation to the "quasi-monochrome" in works such as the *Tableaux Noirs*, the *Ecritoires*, the *Pierres lithographiques* (to mention only the most obvious examples).

The second element that, according to Jeff Wall, has been inherited by photographic practice, as the daughter of the history of modern art, is the a-priori disqualification of figurative content, its cancellation as document. In the same text about On Kawara he analyses the way in which photojournalism, caught up in the mimesis of traditional pictorial activity, has immediately discredited its documentary value. "The concept of art applied to photojournalism eventually came to think of itself as *part* of the modernist painting that it had helped engender, that is to say, to consider that it was delegitimised and obsolete before the event."<sup>8</sup> Hence what Wall calls the "parodic redeployment of the idea of photo-documentation in conceptual art, performance and Land Art."<sup>9</sup> This element is obviously present in Gronon's photographs of the tools of knowledge catalogues and other ways of recording data which reflect the "poetic" idea of this knowledge without actually delivering any actual information. They are false documents which effectively delegitimize

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.223

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.224

documentary activity as a “dream of knowledge,” to adapt Walter Benjamin’s words in “One-Way Street”: “In documents the subject matter is wholly dominant. Subject matter is the outcome of dreams.”<sup>10</sup>

The third point raised by Wall consists in showing that, by their radicalism as limit-forms, the monochrome and photo-conceptualism both express a limit of artistic form, an inability to represent more than itself. What he is pointing out here is not a purely formal limit, a limit *per se*, but a limit prescribed by the consciousness of the historical and political limits of artistic practice. Wall thus observes a kind of “topical” crossover of these two forms whereby they express each other. The monochrome becomes the mode of expression of the necessary failure of photo-conceptualism, just as photo-conceptualism becomes the means of expression of the necessary failure of the monochrome. The silent figurativeness of the dates inscribed on the surface of On Kawara’s monochromes is an exemplary illustration of this inter-expression, which is still and always present in Gronon’s work, but in the ornamental form of a motif: the inscription of a “locus” on a support that is abstract in its functionality – catalogue labels, reference numbers, displays, signatures, dates and location names, conservation instructions, titles of pictures on blackboard, ticker boards, lift indicator panels, etc. The lost memory of the place and the formal emptiness of the support reciprocally image each other in accordance with a mode of aesthetic resolution whose meaning is suspended, heavily discrediting Knowledge severed from history.

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, London: NLB, 1979, p. 66.

“Painting and photojournalism have been raised to a point of historical consciousness whose content is emphasis *on the fact* that neither is capable producing a valid rendition of any subject. Painting has reached this stage by reflecting within itself an image of itself that it thought it saw in photographs. Photojournalism has done it by imitating the painter’s reaction. This confrontation can be conceived as a double mimesis, a kind of comedy of misunderstandings.” With this problematic, going beyond the theoretical ambit of his own practice, Wall defines the discourse in which, whether or not explicitly or consciously, “photography-as-art” can be conceived, that is to say, the discourse within which Gronon continues to work, as can be seen from the tension of his photographic image, and the simulacra of information that figure there and, finally, the relation of expression sustained in these two images between these two dimensions. The question then is how, after Gerhard Richter, Victor Burgin, Jeff Wall and Patrick Tosani, he is rewriting this context, how performing it, and within what sphere of reference.

### *The form of value*

*Coffres-fort , Tableaux de cotations, Bascules de fret de l’aéroport de Paris Orly, Moteurs de Viking et Vulcain ( Fusées Ariane IV et V), Tas de fumiers, Elevator* (Safes, Ticker Boards, Freight Scales at Paris Orly Airport, Viking and Vulcan Engines [Ariane IV and V Rockets], Manure, Elevator). Other signifiers of Art. Art, money, speculation, power, engine, social ascent... Now that the signifiers of Knowledge are

discredited, the signifiers of power can take over. And here we must at once add another list: that of the places that Gronon enters in order to seize this power and subvert it. *Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Biblioteca Vaticana, Bibliothèque Mazarine, Bibliothèque de l'Assemblée Nationale, Imprimerie Nationale, Chrysler Building...* We can imagine how difficult it is to be able to work in the Vatican, in the hall of the Chrysler Building or in the hangars where the engines of the Ariane rocket are kept: finding out about channels, identifying and contacting senior civil servants, obtaining permission, waiting and, finally, the emotion of entering the holy of holies, of being “at home” there and setting up one’s equipment. This quest clearly has something of the return to the primal cave about it, the transgression of the tabernacle. A desire for the hidden object, concealed deep in the Temple. The Object par excellence. The Great Fetish. Gold.

These titles and these places, as if signifying the practice in all its power, make it clear enough that the reinscription of photography in its originary myth of Art has the function, here, of exhibiting its value as Object, its exchange value. Its value as such is translatable both into ideality and in financial and social terms. As a quality that is simultaneously abstract and sensible. And if Gronon is rewriting in his own way the discourse of “photography-as-art” then is doing so in the name of “Art as value.” In On Kawara’s *Today* paintings, as in Andy Warhol (I am thinking here of the *Catastrophe* paintings, those diptychs made by juxtaposing a monochrome and a silkscreen representing a disaster reported in the newspapers), the disjunct between the surface

of the painting and the “painted” figure highlighted their mutual incompatibility. The works of On Kawara and Andy Warhol made this mutual exclusion an image of the condition of art in the age of irreversible capitalism. In Gronon’s photographs they are compatible. Here they fuse. The purity of outline made by the tableau on the wall is extended in the uplift of the figure beyond the surface itself. Transubstantiation. Levitation. The ecstatic flatness of the surface and the thing shown express and signify each other reciprocally as equivalent within a certain logic of value. Where On Kawara and Warhol underscore the limits of Art by the gap between the tableau and the painting, as well as its confinement in its condition as Art and the social failure inherent in this confinement, Gronon rewrites this gap as the pure and simple cancellation of the social question of Art. His work even constitutes what one could call an assumption of the disappearance of this question, as it is reflected today in the representation of Art under the sole “title” (and auspices) of Art.

The recent series entitled *Verso* is exemplary in this respect. By showing the backs of pictures by famous painters, as they can be seen in museum storerooms, bare or unwrapped, more often than not signed, annotated in accordance with the ups and downs of their history, reflecting conditions of transport and conservation, Gronon erases both their front and their history. He exalts the poetry of the inscription which, in the absence of anything other than emblematic information, becomes as evocative as a graffiti, as spicy as a bit of gossip: tasty like the farce that came out of the tragedy of the 1960s, as

expounded by Jeff Wall through the strange expressive transaction between monochrome and photo-conceptualism. The signature (re)produced as the guarantee of the work's origin is to the signature seen at the bottom of a tableau at first contemplated what exchange value is to use value. False transcendence, it concentrates the power of the name of Painting in the form of the tableau. Likewise the presentation in the form of "series" of what there can be no question of exhausting. Series short or long, random series, with no prospect of exhaustiveness, and above all, series of singularities, they evoke the form of the vitrine in which the models on display become equivalent under the weight of their mutual competition. The beauty of each lift indicator panel, of each ticker board, of each index card, of each desk, of each blackboard, of each rocket engine all the same, all different is overwhelming. Under the pure quality of each object it expresses a unique beauty, the "burning mirror" of value.

Strengthened by the use of colour, the overtly culinary aspect of these recent works, the way in which they draw the eye and hold up the image of a "je ne sais quoi," clearly has to do with the at first glance light, fluttering enigma of merchandise. But it is that at first glance only, for very soon, if only under the effect of the accumulation of works, the contingency of this accumulation, the feeling of its morbid or mortifying character becomes uppermost. To turn the tableau round is another way of pinning it down. And of revealing it for what it is, a commodity: a "dream for sale." This is what lies behind the deep melancholy of this recent series, even though it looks less austere than

Gronon's earlier works. It is what creates the feeling that there is a meaning on the surface here, and, with that meaning, a form, in which Walter Benjamin, reading Baudelaire, saw a crystallisation of the essence of the modern commodity: allegory. "The 'metaphysical subtleties' in which the commodity delights, according to Marx, are, above all, the subtleties of price formation. How the price of goods in each case is arrived at can never quite be foreseen, neither in the course of their production nor later when they enter the market. It is exactly the same with the object in its allegorical existence. At no point is it written in the stars that the allegorist's profundity will lead it to one meaning rather than another. And though it once may have acquired such a meaning, this can always be withdrawn in favour of a different meaning. The modes of meaning fluctuate almost as rapidly as the price of commodities. In fact, the meaning of the commodity *is* its price; it has, as commodity, no other meaning. Hence, the allegorist is in his element with commercial wares."<sup>11</sup>

The inscriptions written on the back of the tableaux replace the label giving their price. They undermine the incontrovertible obviousness of this price – the one that is accompanied by a whistle of amazement, a deep silence or trenchant indignation – and substitute for it detailed information that is at once charming and unusable for ordinary viewers. Information that, varying through the series, visibly loses its determined meaning, or at least meaning determined by a system. It in this sense becomes as arbitrary and fragile as prices on the art market. What is apparent, however, is the physiognomy of each

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project. op. cit.*, p.369

Verso, as mysteriously lifelike and “pathetic” as a portrait. But this pathos is the pure and simple expression of its contingency. Of what makes the value of the tableau itself so mysterious, unpredictable and, in this sense, moving, that mixture of belief, judgement, esteem, prejudices and love from which its price issues, and the avatars of that price over the seasons.

This last series thus underscores what is a characteristic feature of Gronon’s work, the way it addresses a conceptual “taste” with images that carry a powerful echo of fleshy physicality, images whose dark brilliance holds the memory of a complex erotic experience. He himself evokes this experience with regard to the series of “Lithographic Stones” that “in the jargon are called ‘skins.’” “Every time they are sanded, after each printing, these skins recover their virginal aspect, but at the same time they are rich with all the images that they have generated. It is in a sense this power to record that I have tried to grasp in the very silence of these abstract surfaces, by conserving the infinitesimal singularities of each stone, which are there for attentive observers.” Hymen and womb, the lithographic stone becomes the figure of the inviolable, and consequently of violation. Note the idea of the maximum here: extreme thinning on the one side, infinitesimal detail on the other. The maximum is to be obtained by metamorphosing the thin layer of stone into a blinding light and then by transmitting that light to the tip of the “attentive” observer’s honed gaze, which is concentrating totally on the pleasure that is seeing. It is perhaps here, in this determination to reach, not just the eye but the



gaze of a person who is not just a viewer but an observer tense with expectation, that the alchemy of Gronon's images reveals its secret workings.

*A hair, a grain of sand*

*Châteaux de sable*: This title of a series of images dating from 2002 (Sandcastles) evokes the fragility and destructibility of the operation carried out and carried out again by Gronon. It bespeaks the unique nature of the goal pursued, the need to be constantly starting again, and the feeling of pointlessness that overcomes the person pursuing it. For beyond the apparent differences between the photographs, it is clear that Gronon is always making the same image, in the sense that he is always working towards the same objective: to photograph the ideality of value, an objective that is constantly elusive – as if, to quote Benjamin's words on Baudelaire, which I quote in my epigram, "he was doomed to founder," as if "the relentlessness of his initiative was exceeded by the relentlessness of reality. Hence a strain in his work that feels pathological or sadistic only because it missed out on reality though just by a hair." This notion of missing out "by a hair" recurs in another text when Benjamin quotes Valéry, again in relation to Baudelaire, and notes that "no recollection, no thought, no mode of behaviour can obliterate its effect or release us from the hold it has on us."<sup>12</sup> This tiny but inevitable failure refers to none other than the

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<sup>12</sup> Paul Valéry quoted in Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Selected Writings – Volume 4. 1938–1940*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003, p. 337.

power of representation over what it conveys, however intimate it is with the thing that it is conveying, and however strong the desire to be free of the power of what conveys it to us: memory, thought, action. This hair is the awareness that representation can only ever be transgressed. And thereby re-established. These are perverse games that can end only in art, whatever form this may take.

To photograph value would be to imprint the flutter, the dazzle of the commodity, the appearance. It would be to photograph the skin. Except that the image, being itself a skin, an epidermis, can only figure another epidermis; it is condemned to take its place. Such is the experience of merchandise evoked by Benjamin in talking about Baudelaire. It is the experience of something ungraspable on which the reflexivity of practice slips and breaks, or rather, would break if it found no way of interiorising and entering into a kind of *mano a mano* struggle with it: by making the image, in its materiality, a metonym of the form of value, and thus, the content of an experience that would otherwise be bound to become abstract. Gronon's perfectionism, the "reinforced" side of his images, the totalitarianism of the photographic rendition, is in this sense the contrary of an aesthetic. It is at once a theoretical proposition about the image as a metonym of value, a defensive strategy, and the only true subject of his photographs. It is not a matter of literal images, but of making images "literally," images as required by the law of the commodity, images in which the order of value is manifest. What Gronon communicates is in this sense an authentically "allegorical" experience — an allegorical experience, at any rate, in the

sense described by Benjamin, since the image, which has come to “signify” in and of itself, independently of its referent, and in this sense hyper-photographic, no longer designates anything through its multiple manifestations other than one single signified: value itself.

Gronon thus finds himself dealing with the same difficulties as photographers who specialise in luxury, that is to say, in the cosmetics of the capitalist world; those whose job it is to make images that signify not the object that they represent but the form within them that embodies value. An impossible job. One only need open the magazines to see how elusive this appearance is, and how the technological hysteria deployed in its pursuit is converted into pornographic stagings whose sadomasochistic foundations are increasingly explicit. Dominatrix anorexics and gangs of haggard young vampires are the clothes horses of a fashion industry exuding sadness and bloodthirstiness that is supposed to be our mirror. The relentlessness of reality evoked by Benjamin represents none other than this domination of form by value which fulfils the function of appearance. It is an incredible relentlessness insofar as, in becoming involved with things, and following their commodification, the image-quality makes these things inaccessible to physical capture. They cannot be imprinted by a technology based on the optical, material imprinting of these things. It has become impossible to take the imprint of a real that is decanted and elevated by its own image. Some rather jump to the conclusion that the digital image, because it is immediately encoded by cognitive processes would, as the calculable representation of optical

capture, be a more suitable instrument for these new conditions. This is clearly problematic because this digital image is ultimately viewed “as a photograph,” and by eyes to which photography has become a “natural” prosthesis. Gronon reveals a clear consciousness of this difficulty in his highly strategic coupling of the crafted, view-camera photograph and extremely sophisticated digital printing techniques. Again, what is important to him is the effect, the photographic rendition.

This question of the image to be conquered beyond Life, which is now no more than an image, is first addressed by Baudelaire when he describes Mr G., alias Constantin Guys, the “Painter of Modern Life.” In the essay bearing this title, he describes Guys emerging from a kind of electrifying, exhilarating immersion in the crowd and getting down to work, “darting on to a sheet of paper the same glance that a moment ago he was directing towards external things, skirmishing with his pencil, his brush, splashing his glass of water up to the ceiling, wiping his pen on his shirt, in a ferment of violent activity, as though afraid that the image might escape him, cantankerous though alone, elbowing himself on. And the external world is reborn upon his paper, natural and more than nature, beautiful and more than beautiful, strange and endowed with an impulsive life like the soul of its creator. The phantasmagoria has been distilled from nature.” The phantasmagoria, that is to say, the stereotype, the cliché, the abstraction of value has been extracted in almost surgical fashion from nature, which can then become, in an image, “more living than life itself.” This “bleeding”

capture of social life in the nineteenth century is what is meant by the idea of Baudelairean sadism, with the distinction that what the newspaper artist achieves is something that the artist cannot quite do, because unlike this sketcher of the world and its mores that is, whatever else he may be, Mr. G, and because he invokes the Ideal of Art, the Artist has made the Image his Law, a law that he therefore “must” transgress. Must perversely, sadistically circumvent.

Beyond the impossibility of physically grasping value in the image, there is thus the prohibition on seeing it as once it is idealised as Image and therefore posited as Law. Like God. To see God is, as we know, literally forbidden. Unless the ideal is converted into ideality and from this attempted literality we move towards a literalising reflexivity. This in reality is the only transaction possible. And it is perhaps the only desirable one for a practice that does not renounce Art because it does not renounce Vision. Even if only by a hair. Or a grain of sand. Such is the implicit Neoplatonism of this art that too often presents itself as “conceptual,” forgetting the constraint that orders this so-called conceptuality. Gronon takes his place in this tradition which is as modern as it is Neoplatonic. He drives this exigency of Vision to its extreme limit: hence the sadistic tone of his images and, by the same token, their artistic power. That in the process and in the beating of an eyelid he gives us a glimpse of the image of value proclaiming “I am value,” and thus manages to bare it, is the forbidden pleasure afforded by his work. A pleasure that is a challenge in the sense that yielding to it means taking the risk of being vanquished. Such, in any case, is the

challenge that heroically, from one image to the next, and in a kind of gradual shift, Gronon throws up to the beholder. Who yields and obeys him to the letter.

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