

#04
-
ZERO SUM GAIN



ARTIST
-
ULRIK HELTOFT

PREVIOUS PAGE:

#43 UN PERROQUET SUR
SON PERCHOIR SEMBLANT
VOULOIR PARLER A UN
PASSANT. PAS D'AUTRES
PERSONNAGES.

#43 A PARROT ON ITS
PERCH SEEMINGLY TALKING
TO A PASSER-BY. NO
OTHER PEOPLE.

2010

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WORK FROM A SERIE
FOLLOWING RAYMOND
ROUSSEL'S INSTRUCTIONS
IN 'NOUVELLES
IMPRESSIONS D'AFRIQUE',
PIGMENTPRINT FRAMED
WITH ENGRAVED TITLE
IN PASSEPARTOUT.
FRAME 92 X 74 CM.
PHOTO DIMENSIONS
VARIABLE.
EDITION OF 3 + 1 A/P.
SIGNED, 2005-ONGOING

SCIENCE OF THE STRANGE



MAX ERNST, SCIENTIST
OF THE STRANGE
(PHOTOMONTAGE WITH
ANDRE BRETON)
(IMAGE FOUND THROUGH
GOOGLE; PROVENANCE AND
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'My, that is a beauty!' Dr. Sanders reached forward to take the ornament she had exposed, but the woman held back his hands. Glittering below her in the sunlight was what appeared to be an immense crystalline orchid carved from quartz-like mineral. The entire structure of the flower had been reproduced and then embedded within the crystal base, almost as if a living specimen had been conjured into the center of a huge cut-glass pendant. The internal faces of the quartz had been cut with remarkable skill, so that a dozen images of the orchid were refracted, one upon the other, as if seen through a maze of prisms. As Dr. Sanders moved his head, a continuous font of light poured from the jewel.

from: J.G. Ballard,
The Crystal World

The Crystal World is a true classic: a passage out of time. Traveling into the forests of Cameroon, Dr. Sanders—the novel's main character—realizes that his friend's allusive description of the woods as 'a house of jewels' is more than just a figure of speech. At its heart, a mysterious virus spreads like a forest fire, crystallizing vegetation and living beings into an eternal state of frozen marvel—a state in which the sun no longer

indicates time but simply, and mesmerizingly, fractures matter into the luminous and kaleidoscopic reflections of crystals and gems. The forest is of sublime beauty, in its most terrifying sense: it stultifies Dr. Sanders until he himself almost gets caught up—petrified—in the spreading glitter and shine of stones. Contrary to that other western classic voyage into African wilderness—Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*—, Ballard’s tale is timeless, and a journey into blinding light.

Ballard once said that the main difference between a Surrealist landscape and one painted by a classical artist is that the Surrealist landscape is lacking the element of time. In a Vermeer painting, shadows do not contradict the light that shines through a window: we can almost feel time pass by in these Old-Dutch homes. Caravaggio painted scenes that appear to have been caught in an untrue moment of dramatic light and shadow: a hyperreal monument to time. In a Surrealist setting, on the other hand, time draws a blank. Perhaps, this could serve as an instruction to look at the work of the Danish artist Ulrik Heltoft (b. 1973) whose photos and videos often stem from instructions themselves, taken from literary texts and friends or fellow artists.

So we begin with the blank. For his photo series *White-Out* (1999-2008) and *6 Blank Shots* (1999-2010), shot in the Arctic landscape of

ULRIK HELTOFT
6 BLANK SHOTS,
1999-2010,
INKJETPRINT ON PAPER,
6 X 53 X 53 CM, UNIQUE
(#5 OF THE SERIE OF SIX
IS SHOWN)





ULRIK HELTOFT
REVERSED GLOVE,
2005, ROENTGEN
PHOTOGRAPH,
30 X 21 CM, FRAMED
33 X 24 X 4 CM

¹ MELVILLE, HERMAN.
MOBY DICK OR, THE
WHALE. 1851. NEW YORK:
PENGUIN BOOKS, 2003.
PP. 204-205.

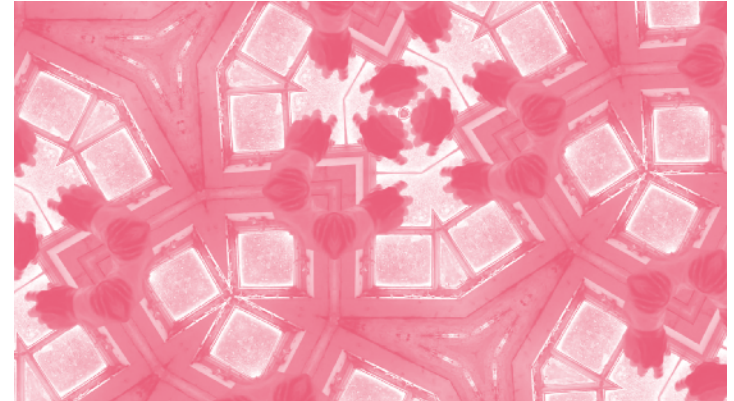
glaciers, snow and overclouded skies, Heltoft tried to capture the 'white-out' phenomenon—whose specific weather conditions rob the environment of its horizon, and thus, its depth. There is reason for artists and writers to be appealed and appalled by the white: this is where the mind draws a blank, or, (better? worse?) starts filling in the blanks. In my small-font edition of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville needs a total of 43 lines—time traveling from Siam to Hannover, from the Roman to the Austrian Empire, from the Native Americans to Greek mythology to Persian fire worshippers, all in one single phrase—to arrive at a point of failure, for lack of words to describe the whiteness of the whale.¹ What if its narrator, Ishmael, had a camera? What does it mean to point a camera towards the white, into the heart of whiteness? And what does a photographic film 'see' when it registers the shadowless blank?

In his work, Heltoft makes use of the certainty of camera lenses, to arrive at a point of unstable vision and ambiguity. Another work shows an x-ray photograph of a glove. Here, one may ask oneself: What is the exact range of x-ray when it penetrates to the textile surface and ends up uncovering 'nothing?' (*Reversed Glove*, 2005). The glove could be of the kind worn by magicians, just before a rabbit pops out of a hat. The real trick, so it seems here, is that sometimes there is nothing to be seen... In a

photomontage made by Max Ernst, André Breton looks up from a microscopic lens and gazes into the camera as if slightly annoyed by the magic of it all (Max Ernst, *André Breton, Scientist of the Strange*). Heltoft's work could be situated in that moment between delusion and disillusion, where a trick unveils itself and another type of spectacle comes into play. Heltoft's *Reversed Glove* and *White-Out* series depict a surreal, impossible interior and nearly invisible landscape without the marvel of melting clocks, or the calculated confusion of collage techniques, but these photographic impressions of light without darkness are no less strange than any other surrealist recording of the 'real' minus time and space. From here, we can build the empire of dreams and imagination.

In *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (2008), time seems to multiply, disperse, and indeed, crystallize through the hypnotic visions of a kaleidoscopic lens. This short film of a man being trapped in his room (played by Heltoft himself) is inspired on an autobiographical account of the same title, written by Xavier de Maistre (1763-1852). Sentenced to six weeks of house arrest, de Maistre wrote about his own furniture; his dog; his window views, as if on a voyage in a faraway exotic country. By viewing and contemplating the world through the micro lens of one's own direct surroundings, an interior turns into a camera obscura: a peep

ULRIK HELTOFT,
*VOYAGE AUTOUR DE MA
CHAMBRE*, 2008
FILM ON HD, 4'05",
EDITION OF 5 + 1 A/P



hole to a multi-faceted dimension where time seems to leak from here to there, from then to now—"as if seen through a maze of prisms," as Ballard would say. A prison turns into a privileged space. "When I travel through my room," de Maistre writes, "I rarely follow a straight line: I go from the table towards a picture hanging in a corner; from there, I set out obliquely towards the door; but even though, when I begin, it really is my intention to go there, if I happen to meet my armchair en route, I don't think twice about it, and settle down in it without further ado."

Wandering, the way de Maistre did, might well be considered a physical and spatial form of automatic writing. The major difference between the two is that we don't conceive of drifting, or getting lost, as an experiment or work of art. Heltoft applies a mental form of wandering in his work that is to some extent similar to that of De Maistre being 'trapped' in his own universe. Embodying de Maistre who embodies the explorer and anthropologist, Heltoft has clear intentions to follow certain given instructions, to arrive at a point of surprise and marvel. Such is also the case in the *Series of 59 works following the instructions by Raymond Roussel*, an ongoing project in which Heltoft re-enacts the instructions of the poet Raymond Roussel, given to the illustrator Henri A. Zo for Roussel's *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* (1928). Despite the matter-of-factness

of the poet's instructive notes (*Saint Louis in his prison at Damietta; A deserted thoroughfare. In the foreground a street lamp; A very old, very sturdy oak; A man running a milometer across a map, to name just a few*) Heltoft's series is by no means a reprise of Zo's drawings. Instead and once more, we wonder, and begin to wander: what if Henri A. Zo had owned a camera? What does a drawing hand transmit and translate that a camera cannot, and vice versa?

The real marvelous, as the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier remarked, existed long before it was dreamed upon and proclaimed in a manifesto. In the context of Heltoft's work, the real marvelous is that of camera registration—a moment of clear fixation, in which the artist looks at reality through a lens; a window; an eye onto the world, and a glimpse of the fictional appears. What the master of Surrealism, and 'scientist of the strange,' Andre Breton was looking for, after all, was not a strange and possibly dogmatic science, but a science of the familiar that goes unseen, and drifts by unnoticed.

That is the science of the strange.

NEXT PAGE:

#32 UN HOMME UTILISANT
UN CAMPYLOMÈTRE SUR
UNE CARTE DE GÉOGRAPHIE.

#32 A MAN RUNNING A
MILOMETER ACROSS A MAP.

2010

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