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WILFRIED LENTZ - ESOTERIC MEANS OF PICTURE MAKING WITHIN AN ARTISTIC REALM

We have here an abstract dark blue image. It could be a landscape of a quarry, shot from a plane or on the contrary, speaking on a nanoscale, it could be the view of some unknown surface as seen through the lens of a microscope. It is neither of these two suppositions but rather: it is a Polaroid of 24k gold leaf, whereby the perceived cobalt color is in fact gold: photographed in a state of reflecting its direct surroundings. The photo has been shot using a macro lens so as to magnify the very surface structure of the gold leaf thereby completely altering its perception.

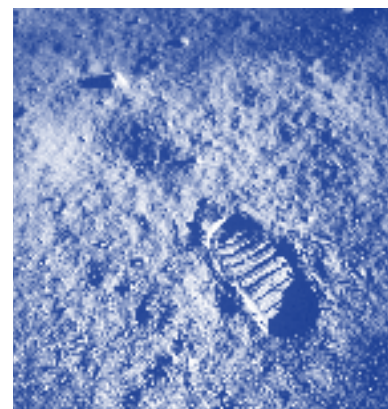
Why use Polaroid film, and especially the unusually large format of 10 x 8 inch (25 x 20 cm) to photograph gold leaf? For nowadays, Polaroid photography is an outdated and esoteric process for picture making and yet, the autonomously constructed images that it produces still remain a mysterious procedure; a chemical process which immediately transpires without the interference of a human hand. Ulrik Heltoft, the artist who made the photograph, is interested in prefabricated structures as the basis for image productions. Exploiting such structures he creates strange images containing concealed meanings.

Only through the title, *24K*, do we deduce that it is gold. Gold, one of the most durable metals, is represented in this work through a medium whose sustainability has a poor reputation. Unlike its resistant subject, the image will disappear over time when shown in daylight. But much like its photographed subject, the 10 x 8 inch format film is also quite valuable since it is no longer produced and its quantities are diminishing. It is because of this rareness that a Polaroid film of this format is worth as much as the gold that it represents. This picture of gold leaf is therefore a strange image: a metaphor as well as a paradox.



WILLIAM HENRY FOX TALBOT, LACE, SALTPRINT, POSITIVE FROM A PAPER NEGATIVE, 1840-1845
PRIVATE COLLECTION

One of the pioneers of photography William Henry Fox Talbot (1800-1877) used this strategy of metaphor and paradox not only to show in his prints the technical implications of his inventions but to also demonstrate cultural and philosophical meaning. As Geoffrey Batchen has suggested, all of Talbot's pictures have metaphorical meaning.¹ In 1839 Talbot chose lace, an object strewn with voids, to use as the subject of the photo that demonstrated his invention of the negative-positive procedure, which makes reproductions, called 'positives', from the same negative. In theory the picture can be mass-produced to an endless amount of 'positives'. Yet, with this process the positive presented black lace threads instead of white, which for Talbot was a weird result. Also in this same period, the introduction of Jacquard cards in England improved the mass manufacturing of lace. These punched cards were in fact the 'zero's and one's' for steering the looms and thus the production of lace was 'computerized' for the luxury market. As ideas, these two inventions, 'positive-negative' and 'punch cards', are conceptually very close to each other and come together in this picture of lace.²



ASI1-40-5878 (20 JULY 1969)
A CLOSE-UP VIEW OF AN ASTRONAUT'S
BOOTPRINT IN THE LUNAR SOIL,
PHOTOGRAPHED WITH A 70MM LUNAR SURFACE
CAMERA DURING THE APOLLO 11 EXTRAVEHICULAR
ACTIVITY (EVA) ON THE MOON.
COPYRIGHT NASA

Ulrik Heltoft (DK, 1973) is an expert in all kinds of specialist technologies that use film and photography. His collection includes NASA equipment, rare slide projectors and special monitors, as well as professional scanning and printing facilities. His art goes beyond a fetishist desire of using esoteric instruments and valuable objects. His interest lies in the new possibilities that arise when scientific and mechanical processes are applied within an artistic aim.



HAROLD EDGERTON,
MRS. LAURENCE WEBSTER SURROUNDED
BY HUMMINGBIRDS
(AS FEATURED IN H. E. EDGERTON'S
1947 "NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE"
ARTICLE ABOUT HUMMINGBIRDS).
BLACK-AND-WHITE REPRODUCTION IMAGE,
1940S. COPYRIGHT MIT MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE MA

Harold (Doc) Edgerton (1903-1990), an engineer by profession, became famous in the fifties for his pictures documenting phenomena which occurred too fast for the naked human eye to see. He did this by using high-speed cameras and stroboscopic lighting so as to capture for example, the splash of a milk drop at the instant it momentarily takes on the form of a crown. This is a literal translation, an illustration, of his inventions. An older, more poetic example is that of the very moment a football player's foot strikes, and even penetrates the ball upon kicking. There's also the delicate 'Mrs. Laurence Webster with her Hummingbirds' that catches the hovering creatures in a rare moment of brief motionlessness. As a viewer, these documented moments belonging to the everyday are more accessible to identify oneself with.



DR. HAROLD EDGERTON,
MRS. FESLER KICKING A FOOTBALL, 1934
© HAROLD AND ESTHER EDGERTON FOUNDATION,
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ULRIK HELTOFT
ZERO SUM GAIN, 2001
DV TRANSFERRED TO 16MM FILM, 2'

Heltoft plays a subtle game, finding new exemplary combinations of technique and object, where the outcome of his experiments is open for the imagination to delve into the strange and unexpected as with his series of icecap photographs entitled *White Out* (1999-2008) and *6 Blank Shots* (1999-2010), realized with the original, mythic Hasselblad 70 mm lunar surface camera. In the skillfulness of the artist lies the promise to fulfill the viewer's desire for perfection.

The artist's strategy and procedure for picture making seems objective and rational but it is also nonsense - a ridiculous treat. Following rules as strictly as possible, the brave protagonists in his work appear, in a rather humorous way, pathetic. In the short film *Zero Sum Gain*, a man seems to search for something missing from his pocket; perhaps a coin or maybe gold. In the end only pocket dust is found.

¹ GEOFFREY BATCHEN, *EACH WILD IDEA* (2001) THE MIT PRESS, PAGE 7.

² *IBID.*, PAGE 167-169 GIVES AN INTERESTING ACCOUNT OF THE EXPERIMENTAL USE OF LACE FOR PHOTOGENIC DRAWINGS BY TALBOT, THE INTRODUCTION OF JACQUARD CARDS AND THE ADOPTION OF THESE CARDS BY CHARLES BABAGE FOR THE PLAN FOR THE ANALYTICAL ENGINE.



ARTIST
-
ULRIK HELTOFT

DATE
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SEPTEMBER 2010

MILJOHN RUPERTO - THE PERSISTENCE OF OBJECTS

Physical material undergoes a transformation according to aesthetic rules when it is turned into an art object. The transformation happens in accordance to the rules of art-making, often resembling a physical change, but more importantly, the material must undergo a re-contextualization or a re-framing to make it into an art object. In this re-framing, the material becomes subordinate to an aesthetic process. It is absorbed within a conceptual framework of the art object to serve as structure or container for the idea of the art work. Alongside this process, the material can also be physically forced into a form conceived by the artist, making the material conform to the artist's intentionality. In both ways, the material is always subjugated to aesthetic reframing. In the physical transformation of material, however, this subjugation takes on a more meaningful aspect. The artist's subjectivity willing the material into a form poses possible problems to the early German Romantics' notion of a metaphysical aesthetics and how it comprises of the synthesis of objectivity and subjectivity.

The early German Romantics had an issue with the overall subjectivist trend regarding aesthetics in the 18th century. They believed Kant's project in the *Critique of Judgement* was incomplete in that it reduced aesthetic experience completely into the subjective realm while leaving aesthetic's objective possibilities unanswered. According to Kant, the artist's feelings are expressed in works of art created and the judgement of art works depends on a viewer's subjective reaction. Creation and judgement both remain in the subjective sphere. In Frederick Beiser's *The Romantic Imperative*, Beiser proposes that the early German Romantic's innovation is, in their striving towards the absolute ("the things in themselves" for Kant), the reconciliation of the subjective and objective, unifying them both together in the artist. This unification of both the subjective and objective view manifested (and also adding a metaphysical dimension to aesthetics) ultimately in the artist's process of creation. According to the early German Romantics, the artist subjectivity imposes itself upon the world while simultaneously becoming a conduit for nature unfolding or creating. The artist becomes the synthesis of objectivity and subjectivity. Through the artist creation the absolute's process reveals itself. Beiser writes, "This doctrine means that aesthetic experience, as the perfect incarnation of subject-object identity, should have both an objective and subjective manifestation; in each manifestation either the objective or subjective preponderates but neither exists without the other. When the objective side preponderates, the subject should conform to the object, so that the artist should imitate nature; and when the subjective side dominates, the object should conform

to the subject, so that the object reveals itself only through the expressive activity of the subject." (p.76) Beiser adds that in the Kantian notion, the ego is the absolute and nature is a modification. Conversely, in the early German Romantics' view, nature is the absolute and the ego is only a modification. (p.77) Hence, through the dynamic process of creation, both the subject and object spheres are conjoined, further approximating what the early German Romantics viewed as the totality of things.

The vague position of the early German Romantics regarding their account of subjectivity and objectivity in artistic creation problematizes their construction of a metaphysical aesthetics. The striving towards the absolute, which is the process the early German Romantics championed, stumbles upon an unclear account of creation. In the early German Romantic model, through the process of creation of an art work reality or the absolute is supposed to be revealed. This happens because in the objective read, the artist creating exists alongside nature and therefore the creation is co-fashioned by nature. But in the physical transformation of material, the subjective supersedes the objective in that the ideal is imposed upon the real. In this case, the subject does not conform to the object. The artist does not imitate nor is the artist a conduit of nature. The attitude throws off the balance in favor of a more subjective read. Employing this type of physical transformation calls material to serve the subjective will, which contradicts the early German Romantics' effort in expanding the known by the addition of objectivity to Kant's completely subjective process. The balance collapses and the progression towards a holistic unity breaks apart when subjectivity is imposed upon material. The objective read then becomes less convincing.

In the forming of material into an art object without physically transforming, the alteration operation happens completely inside the aesthetic realm in accordance to the early German Romantic values. The material is preserved and remains as before, robust/empty in meaning and ready for another re-contextualization re-use or blank inertness. In the preservation of the material or in keeping it intact, there is a highly conscious care or admission to clarify and preserve the holistic goals of the early German Romantics' ambitions. The artist does not claim the initial or end material. The artist only claims the process and the contextualization. Art making then becomes a way of apprehending material without the problem of claiming or subjectivity encroaching into what should be the realms of the objective. Through this material distance, a balance is struck between the objective and the subjective. This way the process can remain inexhaustible.

ARTIS
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ULRIK HELTOFT
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2011-2015
DYNAMIC LAMB, SILE POLAROID,
10 X 8 INCH, FRAMED,
-
ARTIQUE

#04
-
ZERO SUM GAIN

