

The Indexical Signifier

I try to avoid reworking and overworking paintings and drawings, and sometimes involve strategies for preserving imagery and layers, or aspects of layers, that feel significant, but not ultimate of the process. Such strategies in a sense preserve images' and layers' 'firstness', to suggest their diagrammatic foundational basis, in this case through a reference to Hansen (2016) on Pierce's term for the phenomenological 'pre-relational' quality of the diagram (p.46). However, I'm also attracted to the idea that the work, whether drawing or painting, emerges from an accumulation of the indexical signifier, when the signifier is very much a visual-material characteristic of a particular medium, whether or not in relation to an iconographic intention. By indexical in the context of any medium, I mean how the medium behaves in its most immediate terms when it meets the surface. Kristeva (1997) cites the 'semiotic' as one side of the 'signifying system' consisting of characteristics that have visual-material qualities, such as 'distinctive mark, trace, index, precursory sign, proof, engraved or written sign, trace, figuration' (34-5).

Extracting 'index' from Kristeva's set – although 'mark' or 'trace' also relates – with either the slightest impact, minimum physical pressure, or the effect of gravity, ink, for example, may be said to spill or bleed, depending on the porousness of the surface, a pencil will dot when its dropped on its point, or will seem to make a mark all by itself, such is the mark a pencil's endemic basis, and charcoal will on impact smudge. In the domain of painting, oil paint registers as smear or stain, depending on the porousness of the surface, although its greater complexity is due to its detachment from the hand by the brush, the latter's handling of which is subject to differing degrees of intentionality. When dragged with a palette knife, or scraped when semi-dry, oil paints indexical effects are left in its wake. Acrylic paint at a certain point in drying has very weak adhesion and may be scraped away. A possibly now discontinued brand of blackboard black will show its drying from gloss to matt within seconds. Whatever the indexical registration of the medium, the conceptual or iconographic intention that enables the behaviour can be strong or weak, with different degrees of determination.

What may be left, either wholly or of considerable resonance, is an accumulation of vestiges or traces of *indexicality* of mediums. In the process, however, one's intuitive engagement and rapport with mediums' behaviour in relation to more overt intentionality develops, to the extent that one often sacrifices the 'firstness' for the gamble that something better will emerge from the working process. (Deleuze (2004) discusses the concept and function of the diagram in relation to the paintings of Francis Bacon.) In such cases the gamble either pays off, or fails, and one has to rediscover 'firstness' in the accrued material, or abandon the effort and start again. The impulse is of course more than a mere gamble; it's a matter of belief.

Back, in a sense, to Bergson's (2001) point about the 'confused' state, of two states of 'perceptions, sensations, emotions and ideas' that he identifies (p.129). This ostensibly negative term is in the Bergson context what can be considered an operative creative perception of *perception* itself – through whatever combination of sensory awareness – that one needs, to hold any tendency to determine the image, either pre- or over- determined, in abeyance for such time as the medium's indexical characteristics can *seed* and play their part. This is an arguably implicit ambiguity of communication of the analogue-based visual-material medium, for which reason Lacan's (1981) idea of the psychic obfuscation of the image by a 'screen' is a viable conceptualisation (p.96) – if not even the *truth* of the situation – in his thesis of the 'scopic drive'. In this conceptualisation the key player, as it were, is the 'gaze', which in Lacanian theory extends from the selected object and projects towards the subject, forming, in its movement, the image that might have originated in but separates from the object. Lacan (Ibid) states: '...that which is gaze is always a play of light and opacity' (p.96). The opaque side of it errs to the screen', which is the psychical interference with the image. The analogy of screen to the artist's canvas or other flat surface is important, because in the above-cited section, Lacan has in mind the artist who, above all, may be said to give shape to the question of the scope drive. The likelihood that this *is* the truth, is based on the fact that the creative artistic impulse can be an oscillation of the indexical signifier – which is already askance to the idea of a

determined iconography – with oneself as a psychical as much if not more than an intelligently determined subject.

Lacan (Ibid) references the 'lucinda', which is the flat gridded screen from which the Renaissance artist plots the object's coordinates transposed on and by the screen as its image (p.87), as shown by Durer in some of his woodcuts (Gombrich: 1977, p.244). However, the lucinda is more relevant in the present subjective context of reference to the external object for what it's *not*, except as a physical-material midway between object and perceiving artist. Such midway may alternatively be considered not as a gridded frame but as perception itself – this is the supposition that I'm exploring through the artistic research into perception – as the oscillation of image obfuscated by psychical determinants, the object projecting its gaze to the subject and the subject picking up, unconsciously, aspects that are not visible in and in any way obvious to the object. The material physicality of the lucinda is broken down, and what emerges in the middle space is the image subject to ambiguity. While there will be approaches to creativity where any indication of matters of oneself as subject amidst the work is ignored, the stance I prefer to take is to pivot one's creative interests in the in-between of the object and oneself; not only as a conscious intent but with consequences for the appearance of the resulting artefact. The *object* will be whatever is the physically or apparently external reference that's generating the image. *Oneself* will be what one brings to the object, or perhaps more precisely from the Lacanian perspective of the gaze, how one engages with what the object projects from itself, more and differently from what's suggested as its visual-material appearance.

For the artist who works with visual-materiality in the present context of consideration, the metaphor for the obfuscation, which also runs more deeply than metaphor, may be the indexicality of the signifier; the visual-material characteristic of the medium disengaged from its use as a mere tool for the configuration of an image. (This is not say that the image cannot eventually emerge from careful and perhaps layered use of such a signifier, or allied with other types of signifier, as suggested by Kristeva, above.) In light of this, therefore, a resulting question would be the extent to which one can, if at all,

speak of *image* in the digital medium. Iconography, certainly, but creative 'confusion', to reiterate Bergson's use of the word in the context of an approach to perception, is arguably more, if not only, operative in a medium that involves *actual* rather than virtual materiality.

References

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