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## The Rembrandt Search Party: overlooking an elementary particle of meaning

### 0\_Introduction

*Weltformel* = **W/whole** (no whole without hole)

This article is a detailed account of a research project – **the Rembrandt Search Party** – that involves Rembrandt’s name and signatures. It also attempts in video clips to situate this project within the context of a much broader intellectual effort that concerns basic philosophical questions on the nature of reality, or, more to the point, the nature of mind.

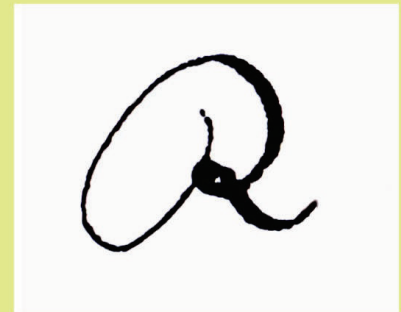
Since my own mind seems incapable of understanding or adhering to formal philosophical discourses and systems, I have had to find my own way, intuitively. I was fortunate in having had an experience at an early age (17) that provided me with certainty – not just intellectual understanding – concerning the nature of consciousness. In Zen this is called a *satori*. One way to put it would be that consciousness can be seen as a container, and that it is not to be identified with its contents. At a much later date, I was to refer to consciousness as the ‘Ur-Medium’.

I trusted that life would meet me halfway in my efforts to understand the mind, having given me one to work with: mine (= the measure of all things?). And so I was able to pursue my informal philosophical investigations in an unexpected field: art history. It was clear to me as a graduate student in Paris that my main interest was not the history of art, but learning about images. My own training and practice in working with images as an art form involved straight black-and-white photography.

In 1976, I concentrated my attention on a Rembrandt painting at the Louvre with the promising title *Le Philosophe en méditation* (see image) and trained it on this image for almost forty years. I saw it as an alchemical symbol of wholeness, an integration of opposites. In 1986, the **Rembrandt Research Project** (RRP) disattributed the painting on the basis of very weak arguments. I was asked by the Louvre to review this opinion. In my article (1990) I confirmed Rembrandt’s authorship and corrected the subject matter of the painting to *Anna and Tobit* (waiting for the return of their son). Far from representing the meditation of a philosopher or alchemist, Rembrandt depicted a blind Jewish patriarch taking a nap. Since the ‘philosophical’ interpretation of the painting had a long and prestigious tradition, it seemed also to involve a certain blindness to pictorial facts. A quarter of a century later (2014), the RRP reversed its decision and re-attributed the painting to Rembrandt.



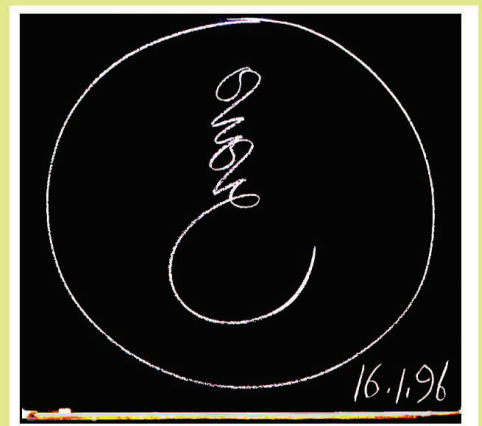
Rembrandt, 1632 (Musée du Louvre)



Rembrandt initial, 1634



brass token (found object)

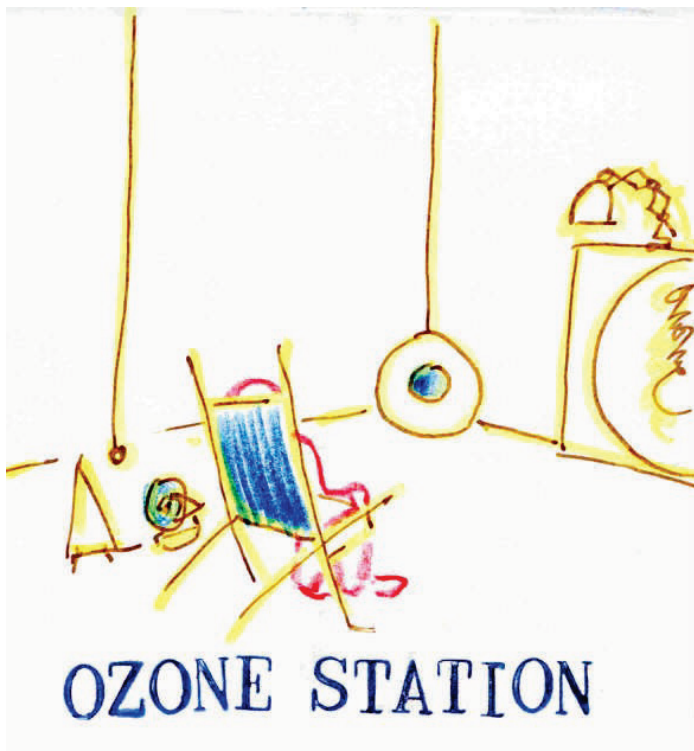


1996 Ozone Station blackboard

In the course of writing my article for the Louvre, I began to take a closer look at Rembrandt's signatures: their formulation and design. This was the special context in which I made the discoveries discussed in the present article. They concerned not just the primacy of the name as a personal and cultural reference, but inattention to details of the name and letter forms. I called the latter '**elementary particles of meaning**'. According to a purely visual logic, the elementary form of Rembrandt's initial 'R' was re-iterated – fractal-like – on the scale of an entire composition. My research gravitated around the related issues of *overlooking* and *over-looking*. Edgar Allan Poe's story '**The Purloined Letter**' offered a verbal model of this elusive, but effective dialectic.

I was still in the midst of my research on the signatures (1991) when I moved to Hamburg to take a course in performance art with Marina Abramović. I wanted to forego static words and images – and their supposed opposition – in order to work in the *immediate*. The chance find of a pierced brass token (see image) on a sidewalk became the seed for an installation that I used in a process art project called '**Ozone Station 1993–2000**'. Out of this installation and its use in performances crystallised a model of the human mind, in both its *mediate* and *immediate* states. It appears as a three-dimensional coordinate system, the axes of which are formed by what I call the three *Metamedia* – words, images, numbers – which converge on the zero point of the *Urmedium*: consciousness (see last image). Briefly put, my conclusion is that there are no wholes without holes. Thus my *Weltformel* = **W/whole**.

In the **videos** that accompany the present article I allude to this wider context and try to put into words my ongoing thinking about the issues of **immediate and mediated experience**. The videos are also an attempt to '**flesh out**' my research. An integral part of my working method is to accept both serendipitous finds and technical constraints. Thus the videos run (uncut) only as long as the camera memory or battery lasts.



Here is a sketch depicting the 'Ozone Station' installation. It consists of a pierced concrete disc (diam. 60 cm) behind which is a B&W TV set on 'snow' in a corner (far centre), a small fan that blows the brass token against a triangular piece of marble (left), a blackboard with a lamp (right; see image, previous page), and a blue canvas beach chair to sit in (near centre). The TV makes a rushing sound (white noise), while the token is blown randomly against the marble triangle, making a pinging sound. The light of the TV is bluish, whereas that of the lamp is tungsten yellow. On the blackboard is a freehand circle, the word 'ozone' written in a vertical script, and the date, all done in white chalk. The performance involved sitting in the chair and, after a certain lapse of time, standing up and erasing the blackboard to draw a new circle and write a new inscription and date. It is a meditation on mediation.