

VAPOUR

THE ART OF DANIEL GUSTAV CRAMER

by Jonathan Miles, September 2004

Silence everywhere, no footprints."¹

This aphoristic essay does not attempt to provide a contextual or art historical view of Daniel Gustav Cramer's work, but has instead served as a space to write in relationship to the stimulation it has accorded to me. I am simply sitting with all the books that I am reading and letting them touch the memories that arise within me of these forest photographs. They are a presence that assumes their place as I awake, reminding me to return to words and musings. I must admit that I am driven in this way because I am not really sure what I am looking at. I feel that my own journey with them has been eventful, so I wish to mark the coming and departing of these images with words and spaces in-between. Indeed it is the case that the style of writing is dictated by them, for the work is a rhythmical tension between seeing clearly and having an apprehension of blind spots or gaps within vision. On the surface it is a smooth art for it feels possible to move easily from one photograph to the other, yet in doing so one is able to slowly apprehend layers of striation, in the form of moments of arrest, uncertainty and darkening. I only take clues though for the work of writing must follow itself also, so the text takes many departures and runs with its own uncertainty. Rather than taking the surfaces of the work in all of its accomplishment, I have decided to reside in its other passages. I was reading an article by Daniel Dennett who was talking about philosophical ideas serving as 'intuition pumps' so even when ideas are formally faulty they might still function to develop other ideas. Hopefully this essay will work in such a way.

*Man becomes obsessed by only ever being able to see images modelled on himself; by virtue of seeing without being seen, he can see nothing but the mirror images of his own gaze.*²

In this series of photographs we are drawn into the interior of forest places. At first glance they might appear as a reworking of the concerns of German Romantic art, particularly the paintings of Casper David Friedrich. There would of course be an attraction to such a regressive turn, for it might occasion a rethinking of the original impulse of modernity within our post-age. Yet I must admit that this would be too much of a simple turn toward an art historical presentation of reoccurrence within difference.

Part of this turn would be the re-inscription of the artist as visionary, and this in turn would require a faith in the image as a transcendental force. The forest is entered instead as a confrontation with the loss of such an idea of agency³, which evokes an excess of inwardness as a cipher of infinity. If Romantic art is in the words of William Desmond "the art of infinite inwardness," then it leaves the problem of how it might achieve its own mediation, which will necessarily be beyond the contingency of aesthetics. For Hegel this was the basis of a symbolic disproportion that demanded "both religion and philosophy for the truly absolute self-mediation of inwardness." As a source of subjectification of creative origination, Romantic Art for Hegel also lead to the loss of a tran-subjective origin, which served as the basis for spiritual seriousness for art. I do not claim in this account that this work in anyway serves as a mediation of this problem, which for Hegel is part of the idea of the decline of art, but the torsions that issue from it appear in ways that might be worth reflecting upon, albeit in a manner that is indirect. When Jean-Luc Nancy poses the question: *What remains of art? Perhaps only a vestige* he points toward an art in our time that *imposes on itself a severe gesture, a painful move toward its own essence become enigma, a manifest enigma of its own vestige*⁴. This vestige is an outcome of art no longer being a presentation of the Idea, but rather its withdrawal. This leads Nancy to claim that we are a *civilisation without image*, because we are without its link to Idea. As a consequence it is *art as a whole that withdraws along with the image*. This leads to the paradox of a *world without image* in which a *whirlwind of imageries unfolds in which one gets utterly lost, no longer finds oneself again, in which art no longer finds itself again. It is a proliferation of views (vues), the visible or the sensible itself in multiple slivers (eclats), which refer to nothing. Views that give nothing to be seen or that see nothing: views without vision*. For Nancy the *vestige bears witness to a step, a walk, a dance, or a leap, to a succession, vestige as a coming to presence for the step is its tracing, its spacing* so if art is *its own vestige* we are opened to it as thus, not as *Idea* but rather as *motion, coming, passage, the going-on of coming-to-presence*. So I wish to take this sense and propose that these photographs represent an art of stepping, of coming and departing, of rhythm, and *syncopated blackout of being*. We witness this passing, but are also incorporated in the passage. If nihilism appears to embody a frozen encounter with nullity and ending, this is an art whose ground is disclosed within shifting vapours emitted from the multiplicity of passage.

*A book is a thing and each of its leaves is also a thing, and so too is each bit of its pages, and so on to infinity.*⁵

Romanticism was both a religion of art and a proposal of a theory of an onto-theological art. Art was able to fulfil an ecstatic task, unifying the subject and object in a form of absolute unity. The task of the poet-artist was to be immersed into a created world that was free from exteriority, and thus find accord within a form of inner nature or world. The perceived crises of reason could thus be addressed within the work of art, which evidenced a mode of exemplary freedom. Importantly Romanticism advanced new understandings of the relationship of the fragment and the whole. The fragment pro-

vided a means of infinite extension, opening out possibilities of discontinuity, intensification, and otherness. In this respect this work might be seen as a form of infinite series, which knows neither its boundary, nor its end. It continually poses the tension between a view and a world, and between identity and difference. Part of the work mediates its own relationship to an encounter, but otherwise it is a turning away, rather than a returning.

I feel that some of the issues developed by Giorgio Agamben in *The Man Without Content* follow from these issues of how this work might mediate itself. In this book he repudiates the growing relationship between modernity and nihilism, and as a counterpoint he introduces a reading of the ancient Greek notion of *poiesis*⁶. Agamben believes that the very notion of artistic autonomy began with the blurring of the distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* and with it the gradual introduction of a *willing* toward art becoming its own object, able to give birth to itself, and thus affirm itself as a mode of absolute freedom. This for him entails a prior forgetting of art's original ground. One of the ways in which this work relates to the notion of *poiesis* is the way that it might be pointing us toward an originary splitting through which the figure within a ground is configured through the representational frame, thus providing us with a ready-at-hand horizon of seeing. There is a promise of spatial completion in these photographs, but equally we are drawn to a process of arrest or even cessation. There is an apprehension of something in which time no longer appears to be in itself. We are in a place, veiled by beauty, in which we are aware of a gap or a withdrawal, in which transparency, regression, loss, illumination and shadow might be both worked and unworked between a space of being and becoming.

Heidegger felt that the notion of the face-to-face was not exclusively a relationship between human beings but also had a distant origin in the way earth and sky, god and men touched one another. In this respect things of the world are conceived as having a face that opens to the other. Heidegger conceives this face-to-face encounter as construing a mode of care that both guards and veils the other. This is an important consideration when looking at these photographs, for there appears to be an almost obsessive search for veiled or lost faces within these images. When looking at these photographs together Daniel has often remarked on features that might indicate elements of faces as if the emergence of this veiled other would secure his own relationship to it.

During the early middle ages the northern forests of Europe were still vast, stretching across the continent like domes of darkness and the indifference of time. Interspersed throughout them were smaller or larger settlements lost in the shadows of antiquity's decline. With respect to the medieval social order that was reorganizing itself on the basis of new feudal and religious institutions, the forests were foris, "outside." In them lived outcasts, the mad, the lovers, brigands, hermits, saints, lepers, the maquis, fugitives, misfits, the persecuted, the wild men. Where else could

*they go? Outside of the law and human society one was in the forest. But the forest's asylum was unspeakable.*⁷

If for Parmenides human beings are *looked upon beings*; in modernity it is human beings that do the looking. The world is aggressively surveyed and inspected within a representational frame. Seeing is conceived as occupying an imagined third person from which all things are seen and in turn related back to this spectatorial position. It is this position that secures a contemplative remove from the world. The ancient world conceived of a unity that the modern world needed to push aside in order to realise its will-to-power. These photographs constitute a body of work that figures an apprehension of difference within modes of vision as it confers upon the viewer a dual sense of being looked upon and looking at. We might feel that we have been invited to enter this world as in a poetic event, and in doing so we should leave behind all our devices for coping with the modern world. This is not so much an escape, for this would be a form of sentimental Romanticism, but rather a form of confrontation that has been pushed into distant recesses.

*As formulated in a beautiful Chinese expression of Buddhist inspiration, consciousness neither "attaches" itself to things nor "separates" itself from them (buji buli); it neither clings to the realism of phenomena, losing itself in their midst, nor breaks with them absolutely, to retreat into a vision (just as illusory and forced) of a noumenal void, where it would risk depriving itself of their renewal, their fresh recurrence. Instead, the distance at which consciousness has placed things should remain allusive, and the relative non-differentiation of these phenomena should nevertheless remain positive, ready for the longest of inward journeys.*⁸

This is an art that contains its own reserve. Its pulse is slow; its visual rhythm is sustained within this reserve that beckons us to follow its inward trail. Flickers of slight suspend in dew, shadow is held in recesses, a stilling announcing its coming and then a breeze awakening the order of leaves again. All might be the gentlest manifestations of the visible, and yet a more tumultuous uprising is contained within these things. These photographs were taken in a manner that opens an unexpected encounter between care and vision. This is a mode of primal dialogue captured between the slowing of breaths as they hang within the dappled light that picks out the tiniest events that mark a moment. Hegel wrote in *The Science of Logic* that *pure seeing is a seeing of nothing*, and it is within this seeing of nothing that the tumultuous arises.

But why should forests haunt the mind like some mystical dream or nightmare that every now and then spreads its long, prehistorical shadows over the ordinary clarity of things modern? On the basis of what "data of prehisto-

ry," to borrow a phrase from Walter Benjamin, does the forest become dense with associations and monstrous fears? The forest is at once a temple of living pillars and a scene of horror, an enchanted wood and a wood of abandon.⁹

The forest stands in its indifference to the gaze and as such basks in its own impenetrability. It is as a surface, a covering, but also a void without defined edge. It gives itself over to the apparitional; it is a place to be stalked by the other or a place to assume disguises. As a flux it stretches and moves, becoming a form that is in some way also elsewhere from it. We might think of the forest as a realm given over to modes of darkness. It offers promise in pathways and openings, splendour in the shafts of light that penetrate downward, the soft of the underneath might comfort and yet we are in the grip of its encroaching strangulation of passage. Vision is secured by it and in this we conceive an imagined third figure or even a force. In such a space we might imagine ways in which sound begins to connect with vision, and in doing so, creating an oscillation of the perceptual field.

Perhaps it is the case of the same photograph repeated, because they are not so much representations of forests in their various coats of display of visible difference, but rather a sustained search for the threshold or the beyond of representation. They are in search of what is beyond the capacity of a lens to render and are thus always the same document of a lack that propels the next photograph. Just how many layers of light does darkness contain?

*To dream: to know a foreign (strange) language without, however understanding it...*¹⁰

The historical emerges as forests are cleared, pathways forged and land connected and mapped. The destiny of landscape is to be gradually pierced and transformed into a terrain. Assembling space before us opened it as measure and with this measure came connection and judgement. To travel a long and varied way is also to know things. I think that this is an art that considers the nature of the footstep, how a footstep is made and the relationship of each footstep to moments of vision. In the great Classical tradition of Chinese Landscape painting, artists would spend months walking in a given landscape before considering painting. The feet became true organs of perception that sought out the lines of energy, the openings and closures, the soft and the hard and all other things that draw light into the reserve of the earth. To be a painter was to also to be a walker in order to let the body of the elements resonate within the mind. For the Chinese, mind was understood as being continuous with nature and thus there was no dualism of subject and object. As painters they did not represent nature, but rather disclosed the simplicity of appearance emerging from emptiness and retreat-

ing again in its return to the un-manifest. Each step was a meditation on this simple truth.

What is being probed is a time outside the linear determination of history, a time in which an apprehension of a pre and post- time are linked together. Where the light blooms a forbidding darkness assembles also, but for us there is a gap. On the level of time we attempt to find continuity, but this pushes us further from our imagined centre. In this respect what hangs in front of these works, or is it behind, is the question of the subject. We are posed as occupying an in-between posture, aligned perhaps with gaps and modes of withdrawal. We are asked to close these gaps, but in doing so, we realize that our endeavour to do so is implicated in the very production of the gaps we seek to overcome. In other terms we appear to desire the blissful awakening of a primal unity and yet are aware of the passage into a void of unknowing. This is of course a form of sublimity, but an account of the sublime does not exhaust this dynamic

*Without name and without form. Consideration of the starry heavens. To see the mass of stars, a formless mass - that doesn't mean anything. But to see forms is yet a lower form of perception. It is to see an order without form. Hence, to see the forms is a degradation. The same applies to the names of stars and constellations.*¹¹

In his later writing Maurice Merleau-Ponty developed the use of the word 'flesh' to denote an element, which immanently enters into the composition of all things and binds them together. Both the lived body and the world are joined by flesh which is an oscillation of the visible and the invisible, serving in this way as the opening of being (Merleau-Ponty termed this *wild Being*). *Flesh* was the means by which the dualism of subject and object, material and spiritual was overcome. Chinese aesthetic theory was of course preoccupied with similar problems, and in particular the relationship of the visible to the invisible and form and the formless. Both the visible and with it form leads into that which is invisible and without form. Chinese art and poetry are both anti-mimetic and anti-symbolic, and as such they draw us into that which is allusive. The figurative field leads to that which is beyond its powers representation leading to *nothing but its own emptying. It leads all that is too specific in figuration in order to make it infinitely allusive.*¹² This detour allows me to touch this notion of visibility carrying within itself its own emptying, for if this pertains to these photographs, then the landscape form depicted might be serving as a cipher or medium we might pass through to touch the nullity in which everything circulates. Indirectly this then is an art whose backdrop is marked by a sense of empty subjectivity (the modern idea of agency as self-objectifying), so that by seemingly staging an excessive inwardness ("underway in all directions, on the way to nothing" Sophocles, *Antigone*) as an aesthetic vantage point we are able to reflect upon the mechanism of this. For this important reason, even though only vaguely a truth, this is the reason why these works should not be viewed as a form of genre or even less works oscillating between beauty and the sublime.

*The world also intends to be seen by an infinity of eyes because even those creatures and things at which we look with pleasure exceed our capacity to see them. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, everything that reveals itself to the look has a "behind" and "after." This is in part because we do not stand in front of the world, as if before a picture; rather, we are inside it, and our interior vantage point serves not only to disclose aspects of what we look at, but conceal others. It is, in addition, because beings do not always display themselves in the same way to the look; they are constantly moving, and with each move they show changes. Some new aspect comes into view and a previous one slips into invisibility. Perspective is consequently a feature not only of the look, but of objects as well.*¹³

I am looking at the clinic's assistant eating an apple. The sunlight catches her face, which appears to open with each bite. With these bites the angle of her face changes as though moving into a direction of a new thought. For a few moments her face is the source for my entire attention. I can only imagine that each of these photographs emerge from similar moments of reverie in which there might be total absorption into the field of visibility. In turn I question how the decline of observation within aesthetic activity has become so pronounced. This decline is related to the low prestige accorded to empirical procedure on the level of theory, as opposed to abstracted speculative projection within late modernist culture. There is within this the notion that the possession by the visible of the subject leads in some way to the dispossession of the cogito itself. This idea of such a foundational estrangement of the body mediated by the play of the sensorial and the cognitive is the very gap that this work is attempting to probe. What is at stake in this work is the desire to move freely across the registers of visual inspection and speculative introspection.

There are a group of forest photographs by Ueda Yoshihiko called the Quinault series (1990-91). They depict an extreme form of remoteness to be conceived within the landscape form. Ito Toshiharu writes of this series *it is as if one were being dragged into a mysterious magnetic field, where the dimensions of time and space are slightly off.*¹⁴ These forests appear as sites for the disappearance from sight, as opposed to points of position in relationship to it. Likewise the passage of time appears as dislodged, even doubled back on itself, and so is only able to open out a relationship to its own origination. Certainly we cannot take measure of such images, they are not open to be surveyed or even considered as graspable. Instead we are left on an edge between our before and our after. What we witness to is nothing other than our effective tomb.⁽¹⁵⁾ When thinking about such a series, in contrast with the work under scrutiny, we are drawn not only to thinking about the difference between a Far Eastern visual sensibility and memory and Northern European one, but also a fascinating and nuanced set of encounters with that which lies behind or beyond appearance.

*The path of language does not lead toward us. On the contrary, we must travel far to find this "near", this There, that we have to be. The path of the most near is also the longest path.*¹⁶

Socrates claimed that in desiring something we also experience its lack. Desire is forward moving, restless and always reaching beyond itself. Desire forwards itself as infinitude for there is nothing that cannot be desired despite the restrictions that the finite self strives to issue. Unbounded, it appears to seek out spaces between the self and the world, difference and identity, and limitation and transcendence leaving ruptures, holes, and breaks in its wake. For Judith Butler *desire is at once the most fundamental striving of the human subject and the mode through which the subject rediscovers or constitutes its necessary metaphysical place.*¹⁷ In discussing the Hegelian notion of the subject she states that it is *not a self-identical subject who travels smugly from one ontological place to another; it is its travels...* This I think resonates closely with the work we are considering, for the work is almost literally *its travels*. The series appears to be developing without limit, because they address a lack that propels the search itself. Of course the expectancy might be that a single photograph could initiate a closure, and be the last image that stands, either as utter loss, or complete bliss. In short it is work that declares restlessness¹⁸, even whilst in pursuit of moments of stilling, desire is inscribed into the depth of its field in the midst of moving through the different points of view (loss is to be found in its visual reserve), but finally through these detours and turns, the work finds its condition within the exhaustion of discovering the point in which there is nothing to see, as if this is the constitution of desires enigma. The problem is of course, that enigmas by their nature cannot be seen for and in themselves, because this in turns propels the enigma to lose its visible form.

*Fascination is the gaze of solitude, the gaze of what is incessant and interminable, in which blindness is still vision, vision that is no longer the possibility of seeing, but the impossibility of not seeing, impossibility that turns into seeing, that preserves - always and always - in a vision that does not end: a dead gaze, a gaze that has become the ghost of an eternal vision.*¹⁹

I am reading a book called Zen and the Art of Post-modern Philosophy by Carl Olsen and I came across two statements by the monk Dogen.

*Every moment contains a total reality and is complete in itself.
Each instant covers the entire world.*

I have been attempting to think about the nature of the moment, the instant and the event within photography. When Deleuze says *meanwhile, the event, is always dead time; it is there where nothing takes place, an infinite awaiting that is already infinitely past*²⁰, he points to an emptying of the moment. I wonder about the ways we use words in relationship to concepts such as time, especially in regard to a still image. As works they are both present and absent, full and empty, near and far, conceptual and sensuous.

As I am writing words, it makes me feel alive, but also they eat me in the instance of this sensation.

*But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power, not as something positive, which closes its eyes to the negative, as when we say something that it is nothing or is false, and then, having done with it, turn away and pass on to something else; on the contrary, Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being.*²¹

From what vantage point might we consider the closure of the modern project, because the notion of its ending might also be a source of its very propulsion. The Cartesian dualism of subject and object was a clear foundation for a quest for certainty, which enabled the subject to be the measure of itself. Art assumes a relationship to gap, fracture and dispersion because it cannot assume a relationship to such certainty. In the twilight of modernity, this becomes an assumption of the common culture.

It is hard to ascertain whether art is not part of this common culture, and that as part of this culture, it might have lost a capacity to create difference or resistance. Also I do not wish to call upon art to do, or be anything (such as a turn toward politics, to philosophy or to authenticity), for that would place a faith in an idea of programmatic expenditure. I come to this work because of its capacity to open an almost feminine dwelling with the spaces that it inaugurates, but also for its patience for residing within the subdued and the silent. Strangely, it might be from such places, where art is at its most hidden and least demonstrative, that we might be witnesses to a slow but deepening aesthetic impulse that will offer other ways. If it is the case that all objects and all people can be works of art or artists, then we no longer have any difference within the world and art itself, and within this we have a paradoxical sense of closure. Everything is thus made interchangeable, and therefore all value and values reside within empty form. It is this spectre of an absolute emptiness that presides with the panic self of the post-modern world. We are pushed up to this reality, face-to-face, in its orbit of becoming, circled and completed by its project stripped of the very possibility of distance. It might have come to me in a dream, but someone was holding a perfect marble ball in the air and he pronounced that this was the only object in the world that was not a work of art, and that all other objects were. Somehow a cleavage within thought was inaugurated and with it a radical negation had served it notice. Meanwhile small moments of difference, delicate incursions into the foreign, probing of the forgotten and the overlooked, will all help to trace the steps that we make.

Notes

¹Jullien, Francois, *In Praise of Blandness*, Zone 2004

²Marion, Jean-Luc, *The Crossing of the Visible*, Stanford 2004

³The notion of agency expresses the idea of the subject in the process of development through engaging in action. For a discussion on the notion of agency see *Elliot L. Jurist 'Beyond Hegel and Nietzsche'*, MIT 2004

⁴Nancy, Jean-Luc, *The Muses*, Stanford, 1996

⁵Hegel, G.W.F., *The Science of Logic*, New York, 1969

⁶Agamben, Giorgio, *The Man Without Content*, Stanford 1999

Poiesis is a complex term that opens itself to different readings or nuances. In distinguishing poiesis and praxis Agamben states "poiesis (poien, "to pro-duce" in the sense of bringing into being) and praxis (prattein, "to do" in the sense of acting). As we shall see, central to praxis was the idea of the will that finds its immediate expression in an act, while, by contrast, central to poiesis was the experience of production into presence, the fact that something passed from nonbeing to being, from concealment into the full light of the work. The essential character of poiesis was not its aspect as a practical and voluntary process but its being a mode of truth understood as unveiling..." (P.69 *The Man Without Content*). See also William McNeill *The Glance of the Eye*.

⁷Harrison, Robert, *Forests*, Chicago, 1992

⁸Jullien, Francois, *In Praise of Blandness*, Zone, 2004

⁹Harrison, Robert, *Forests*, Chicago, 1992

¹⁰Jullien, Francois, *In Praise of Blandness*, Zone, 2004

¹¹Weil, Simone, *The Notebooks of Simone Weil*, RKP, 1976

¹²Jullien, Francois, *Detour and Access*, Zone, 2000

¹³Silverman, Kaja, *World Spectators*, Stanford, 2000

¹⁴Toshiharu, Ito, Ueda Yoshihiko, *Korinsha*, 1998

¹⁵Related to this idea of the forest being a tomb, modern day Japan has one of the highest suicide rates in the contemporary world and one of the most frequented places for this act are the remote forests of Japan.

¹⁶Froment-Meurice, Marc, *That Is To Say*, Stanford, 1998

¹⁷Butler, Judith, *Subjects of Desire*, Columbia, 1999

Judith Butler claims, *the Phenomenology is not only a narrative about a journeying consciousness, but the journey itself. The narrative discloses and enacts a strategy for appropriating philosophical truth; it sets the ontological stage in a variety of ways, compels our belief in the reality of that staged scene, encourages our identification with the emergent subject that the scene includes, and then asks us to suffer the inevitable failure of that subject's quest for identity within the confines of that scene.* I feel that this analysis of Hegel's text has interesting, if remote, connections with a way we might be invited to consider this series of work. There is of course no analytic point that I am making but rather a possible imaginative device of thought that might open ways of thinking about the nature of passage.

¹⁸For a discussion on restlessness see Jean-Luc Nancy *Hegel. The Restlessness of the Negative*, Minnesota. Nancy says *this world that is in principle and structurally outside itself, this world where nature does not subsist but steps out of itself into work and into history, this world where the divine does not subsist but exhausts itself beyond all its figures...*

¹⁹Blanchot, Maurice, *The Gaze of Orpheus*, Station Hill, 1981

²⁰See Chapter 8: *Infinite Discretion*, Maurice Blanchot, *Gerald L. Bruns*, John

Hopkins, 1997 for the discussion on the event and the fragmentary. Chapter 3 The Surprise of the Event by *Jean-Luc Nancy* in *Hegel after Derrida* edited by Stuart Barnett, Routledge, 1998.

²¹*Hegel, G.W.F., Phenomenology of Spirit, Oxford, 1977*

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