

# The Materiality Complex

"The point of analysis is not to strive to give the patient a 'true' or correct image of him or her self, for the ego is by its very nature a distortion, an error, a repository of misunderstanding."

-Bruce Fink

"Transparency is a special form of darkness."<sup>1</sup> We miss seeing something when we see through it. In Thomas Metzinger's book *Being No One* the concept of transparency is applied to human consciousness. According to Metzinger, the sense of having "a self" is a neurological induced illusion. He writes, "Nobody ever was or had a self. All that ever existed were conscious self-models that could not be recognized as models."<sup>2</sup> Metzinger's claim is that what we think of as being "a self" is in actuality a representation of a self, generated by the brain, not an actual self. Because the self is invisible to us, we confuse the two, thinking the representation is real. It is invisible to us because one cannot truly see one's self *through* oneself.

Psychoanalysis views the self similarly but from a different perspective. Because neither the patient nor the analyst has what, in a sense, could be considered *direct* access to a self, what is at stake in psychoanalysis is the "material" put forth, the "language" spoken by the patient. It is not what the patient *means*, but what the patient *says* that is of critical importance. Because what the patient means is in collaboration with his ego and at a level of consciousness, it is what he says that tends to be more revealing. In the eyes of the patient, his language is transparent, what he "says" *represents* what he "means". From the point of view of the analyst, meaning is never transparent. It is through the failure of the patient's intended meaning, that language reveals something deeper. The analyst understands that the correct meaning is often given by the wrong words. It is through this willingness to look beyond the words' transparent meaning that both patient and analyst become aware of some internal logic within the patient. The situation appears convoluted because we are trapped in the dilemma where the clearest of language appears to be an illusion.

The seductive duplicity of the photograph is that we miss seeing the photograph, because we see through it. It is not that we cannot see the surface of the photograph, but when looking at the surface we cannot separate the illusion from the material it is made of. The photograph conceals its form as an object. Photographs, the most transparent of objects, hide their marks well. In doing so, photographs strangely obscure and reveal their makers' intentions. Often the expressive characteristics associated with a maker are entangled with the depictive qualities of the subject. Because this transparency is so convincing, distinguishing which attributes are under the control of and made visible by the photographer from those attributes inherent to the subject is often irresolvable. The lack of perceived materiality of the photograph suppresses both the photographer's presence and the conditions of the photograph's making. The meaning of the photograph is often perceived to be located outside of the photographer, residing within the depicted subject itself.

It was through dismantling the image's transparent meanings that Postmodernism sought to denaturalize the photograph from this hidden artifice. By drawing attention to the photograph as a cultural and social construction, postmodernism sought to make visible that which was previously unseen. This gesture mirrored the psychoanalyst in the belief that the illusion of transparency is a mask that conceals one's "true" desire. Such desire under Postmodernism was often seen through a Marxist eye and seen as a dangerous threat to the well being of those who could not see through the illusion.

In the work of James Welling, the photograph takes discrete form as an object. While this is certainly true of all photographs, in Welling's work it is the basis of its meaning. Welling's practice disturbs and collapses our conventional notions of transparency. Because of this, the discourse around Welling's work often revolves around Postmodernism.

For the six artists included in the exhibition, all in a sense students of James Welling, this reading I would assume misses the complexity of Welling's work. While the disruption of photography's representational powers is a product of their own practice, it is not their reason for making work. One can almost speculate that for this next generation deconstruction is a form of repression; that in seeking to unravel meaning, it hides the source of its own meaning.

Either consciously or unconsciously (I am not sure), the work of these six artists makes visible the antagonistic relationship between the artist's internal subjective

experience and some "other." Because such an experience is un-representable directly, it is here realized in a perverse manifestation, demonstrating how the material in use fails to have any socially recognizable meaning. It is through this failure of representation that we begin to see their desires revealed. I see it somewhat as a backlash to the deconstructive impulse within Postmodernism, because all of these artists seem to revel in this pleasure. It is not the Postmodern desire to deconstruct, disrupt, and reveal meaning on a conscious theoretical level, but its inverse: to engage one's unconscious desires and disturbances directly without contemplating the ramifications of doing so. It is a realization that one's sense of self is defined by one's symptoms.

The objects put forth are the material of the fantasy that gives meaning to their being. Their work, as products of their own models of reality, looks empty at first glance because they fail to conform to established notions of representation. It is a perverse form of representation. This perversion manifests itself within their models. We see it by decoding the material in view, by grappling with that object that deviates from that object's normal function.

It would be a mistake to assume that the plywood Erika Vogt holds in her photograph "I Arrive When I Am Foreign (Mid-Century Plywood)" holds any weight for her as an object as plywood in itself. But plywood, particularly Mid-Century Plywood, has the distinction of being an object whose properties overtly consist of the materials the object is made of. So in the context of Vogt's title, the *thing* plywood she holds in her hands makes me think of the word "matter." And if we take Vogt at her word, "I Arrive When I Am Foreign," we get the sense that Vogt is grappling with the gap between her experience as a physical being made up of matter and her internal experience lifted from matter. And if this gap is unbridgeable, our experience as individuals is basically one of self-transparency, of being inaccessible to one's self. Only through an opaqueness, or rather through a manifestation of an object outside of one's self do we begin to make visible that internal experience that we cannot see.

Upon first glance, the photographs of Nancy De Holl parallel the experience of looking at traditional ethnographic displays in museums. Both the display case and the photograph, invite our attention and reflection to the foreign objects put before us. Without belaboring the difference between experiencing an object in a photograph and experiencing one in a display case, De Holl's photographs funnel our attention toward the object in a way that the display case does not. Through her collection of photographs, De Holl appears to be building a sort of perverse museum of the psyche. Dematerialized from their weight,

these objects remain embedded with their psychological residue. As if overlooked by ourselves, De Holl confronts us with that aspect of the object that deviates from its utilitarian purpose, that points to its meaning outside of its function, that defines some internal desire of its maker.

In order to interact, communicate, and relate with others we must enter the realm of language. To not do so is to suffer alienation from others. To do so is to suffer alienation from ourselves. Language always fails to represent that which is un-representable, the internal experience that resists symbolization, that inner experience that feels most real.<sup>3</sup> Looking at Shannon Ebner's body of work, one can imagine that language continually haunts her being. It menacingly circles around her. She is both attracted to it and repulsed by it. Anxiety ridden over the language that inhabits *herself*, in the three photographs here the fantasy of obliterating language manifests itself. The photographs can be seen as a by-product of this process, a process of coming to terms with language, seen here only by its removal and delight in its residue. While this residue may not have any socially recognized meaning upon first glance, it does so at a distance, as a reminder that the experience of our lives has a materiality and weight that escapes signification.

My interpretations here are conjectures upon each of the artist's unconscious. It is through one's symptoms that meaning is delivered. The symptom as coded message reveals and obstructs meaning. Overlooking the material composition of the specific objects put forth, my attention is to the relational order between the components of meaning. It is an effort to understand the position of the object in relationship to the artist's inner psyche. Whether the object is found, made, appropriated or manipulated, it gives material to the fantasy created by one's symptoms. In Arthur Ou's pairings, the ubiquitous, mass-produced Chinese bowl occupies such a relationship. Displaced from its natural surroundings this object is symbolic both as a cultural artifact of China and as an artifact of the home. But beyond its symbolic reading, it embodies the position of a lost object. I would suspect such a sense of separation and displacement on both a political and personal level resonates and drives Ou's being.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis the unconscious is seen as consisting of other people's talk, other people's conversations, other's desires.<sup>4</sup> It is as if some invisible foreign voice has violated our internal space, intruded upon our domain, and taken hold of our speaking tongue. In the work of both Michael Queenland and Michael Rashkow such intrusions are met with hostility, rendered visible, and made mute. Their work lashes out at the other.

In Michael Queensland's piece "Falls" the violence towards the man in the black suit is permanently embedded in the silence of the waterfall. And while we don't know what exactly this man represents for Queensland, we can imagine that his existence is only bearable as a silent hostage, condemned to a corner. For Michael Rashkow these intrusions against the individual are met with an impenetrable body, a shape that resists analysis and understanding of identity. So in Rashkow's piece "Resumé" the other that demands knowledge of the self, the other that embodies society and the weight of corporate culture, is here confronted with mockery, a map of ink that fails to represent its own subject, that fails to answer the desires of the other. It is in his disappearance as a subject and reappearance as an object, that Rashkow destroys himself to save himself.<sup>5</sup>

The anxiety producing realization that the material of our lives is both simultaneously empty and overflowing with meaning permeates the work of these six artists. Manifested by their symptoms and desires, and a mutual longing for the reality behind representation, these new objects embody the fantasy of making visible that inner sense of self, a self we cannot see, a self that represents the experience of being *someone*.

-Mark Wyse, November 2006

1. Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004) p. 331 see also Slavoj Žižek, *The Parrallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006)p. 214
2. Ibid p.1
3. Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) p.7
4. Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) p.9-10
5. Nicholas Zurbrugg, 'The Ecstasy of Photography' Jean Baudrillard interviewed by N. Zurbrugg in N. Zurbrugg, ed *Jean Baudrillard, art and artefact* (London, Sage,1999)