

Double Exposure
By Christel Vesters

A tried and tested art historical method of visual knowledge production is that of the slide show. For decades, students, including myself, sat in lecture theatres looking at series of paired images. This dialectical method of display served to better discern similarities and differences between two artworks, in order to come to an accurate stylistic periodization, a correct attribution to one artist, or even to verify an art work's authenticity. At its core, this method was geared towards a training of the eye, towards art historical *connoisseurship*. But the method was also used to demonstrate stylistic or artistic development. In other words, to show how the progressive flow of art history – from the Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque to the modern era of Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstract Art and ultimately Modernism – was manifested on a work-to-work basis. One of the key figures of this mode of formalist reduction was of course Clement Greenberg.

Since my student days this linear narrative of (Western) Art History has been contested from various angles and to an extent even demolished. And rightly so. However the visual knowledge technique of pairing and comparing, by which this story has been imprinted onto our memory, seems to run much deeper. How often don't we judge the unique quality of one (person, art object, event, piece of clothing etc.) by comparing it to another? And, on a more existential level, how often do we not construct our own identity by mirroring ourselves to others? (And how often has this not led to bias and the outcast of social groups based on their otherness?)

Limen / A New Sun

From 2013 Dutch multimedia artist Pieter Paul Pothoven has embarked on a long-term research into two objects that are similar and different. Pothoven bought two antique Egyptian bronze handheld mirrors from a Swiss antiques dealer. Both were heavily corroded and as a result obscured any reflected image of its beholder. According to the information provided by the antiques dealer one mirror stemmed from the period of the New Kingdom (1570–1070 BC), the other from the so-called Late Period (664–332 BC). They were modelled after the sun and apart from its cosmetic function also served a ritualistic purpose. But rather than engaging in a comparative study of the two objects, analysing their stylistic and material communalities and differences, Pothoven decided to 'restore' the mirrors to their original state.

In his own introduction to the project the artist writes that he is interested in 'the relation between use, exchange and the symbolic value' of the two

ancient objects. Removing the corrosion in order to bring back their mirroring surfaces would mean ruining their symbolic and economic value as antique artefacts, especially because it is this green patina, testimony of its antiquity, that bestows the object with its status. However, it is the decision that he subsequently made, which opens up a whole new set of visual and discursive juxtapositions. He decided to restore one mirror himself, polishing it by hand a couple of times per month and each time the mirror is being exhibited since he acquired it in 2013. So far this has resulted in a solid 49 hours of manual labour. A recurring ritual, the artist calls it. The result is stunning. The antique mirror titled *Limen* (2013) shines like never before, offering a clear reflection of anyone who looks into it. The second bronze mirror, also covered with thick layers of green corrosion, was brought to the Space & Science Lab of TNO in Delft. Here, using the highly advanced technique of diamond turning which is also used in the production of satellites, the surface of the mirror was polished exponentially more precise than any normal mirror we know.

Both mirrors are exhibited in their restored state, mentioning some minimal details about their restoration process. Of course, the most obvious comparison to make between the two objects is the one regarding their shininess. Which object and by default which method, has had the best result; the dedicated do-it-yourself polishing done by the artist, or the one carried out with the ultra-advanced optical technology?

But there is another layer of knowledge that can be deferred from this almost automatic mode of reading paired images or objects: presupposed ideas and contexts that are not explicitly present in the objects themselves but emerge through their juxtaposition. For instance, our culturally determined idea that the sophisticated science of diamond turning *must* be better than the tireless handiwork of the artist? Which in turn may bring up the question if the latter is 'more of an art work' because it shows traces of the artist's hand, than the mirror that is treated by an impersonal machine. Or maybe we will try to imagine the corroded antique version, comparing the old, i.e. what was with what is now?

From the Pit of Et Cetera

One of the critiques of this visual knowledge technique based on comparison, is that by quite literally placing objects or images *vis-à-vis* we can only discern these things that 'the other' mirrors back to us as either the same or as different. As a consequence those things that don't fall into this logic of same/different, the things that fall out of this comparative grid so to speak, get overlooked. They disappear as it were. It is a well known psychoanalytical truth that that what we can recognize in the other, is something that we are already

familiar with in ourselves. Or, to paraphrase Dutch football legend Johan Crujff: 'You can only see it when you know it.'

Pieter Paul Pothoven decided to restore two ancient objects back to their former shiny glory. With his interference he destroyed their status – and value – as antique objects, but gave us two new art pieces in return. The Mexican artist Raúl Ortega Ayala also deals with returning art works to their former state, but, if a comparison needs to be made, his approach is less destructive and in a way less shiny.

In Ortega Ayala's paintings the dynamic of a visual dialectics plays out within one object, rather than two. It plays out between what is and what isn't visually there. By way of X-ray technique, which is a common tool in scientific art historical research, especially in the determination of authenticity and provenance, Ortega Ayala rediscovered the hidden images within four different paintings.

The paintings in his series *From the Pit of Et Cetera*, are based on the X-ray photos of these obscured images. Hereby Ortega Ayala not only 'brings them into the light', he also sets up a comparison between these hidden images and the more public paintings that are on display in different museums across the world. In almost all cases, the comparative reading between the image of the X-ray painting and the image presented on the painting, as we know it today, reveals a striking story related to the power of images.

The painting, which is now titled *View in Pickersgill Harbour, Dusky Bay, New Zealand (after William Hodges) (2016)* for example shows a grainy black and white image of an extreme and bleak Antarctic landscape. Ortega Ayala based his painting on the X-ray images that were made in 2004, which revealed this underlying scene. As the artist points out, this image is in stark contrast with the more idyllic scenery that is depicted in the upper layer of the painting. It shows a colourful image of a green, lush and peaceful bay set against a blue sky and a tranquil sea. In the right hand corner we can see the contours of a ship that has just dropped anchor. It is a typical William Hodges painting of the Pacific, which he made during his time accompanying Thomas Cook on his 1772–75 expeditions. Hodges was appointed by the Admiralty to record the places discovered on Cook's second journey, which on return were exhibited in London. Though the covering up of the extreme and bleak Antarctic scenery was probably due to a shortage of artist's materials and not to any form of censorship, the juxtaposition of the two images reveals an historical narrative about the colonial idyll that would not have emerged otherwise – that of a carefully constructed image of a successful journey worthy of attracting future donations.

Another intriguing story emerges from the juxtaposition of the original scene depicted in a painting attributed to The Le Nain Brothers (circa 1643), titled *Four Figures at a Table*, which currently hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London, and the painting that exists underneath. The top painting so to say shows a simple family meal. A mother, dressed in workers clothing and with a tired look on her face, is sharing a scant meal of bread and water with her three children. However, the X-rays made in the 1970s on which Ortega Ayala based his painting, reveal the bust-length portrait of an affluent man. Again, the juxtaposition of the two tells a story about the contrasts in living conditions and economic positions between different social classes in those times.

Postscript

There are of course many variations on this idea of a comparative study of artworks: The Ying and Yang are not always in perfect balance, or the act of juxtaposing two things may bear no common ground to sustain any relation or comparison, except for the one sparked by our imagination. As in the following *parataxis*: 'It has been raining for days. The cat walks by the house.' There is no causal relation between the two, yet we almost immediately create a story. The Surrealists adopted this technique of montage with a phrase from the 19th Century French poet Comte de Lautréamont who describes a young boy as 'beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella'. (The table, as Foucault would later explain, is the ground that holds the two figures together, like the [period] grammatically connects the two sentences of the rain and the cat.)

To be invited to write a text about two artists, who in turn both deal with twosomes, comparisons and juxtapositions, almost inevitably leads to a dialectical reading. Even if there is no obvious connection to be made, the fact that both bodies of work appear in the same art fair booth, or side-by-side in this text, gives enough of a stimulus to construct some meaningful relationship. (One could say that this piece of paper, or the plywood construction of the booth functions as the operating table in Lautreamont's sentence). I could end this text with a summary of the differences and similarities between the works of Pothoven and Ortega Ayala – I have hinted at some of these along the way – but I decided not to. Simply because, like the Surrealists, I value the input of the third party involved, the viewer, who in the end sets up his or her own rules for comparison.

*The title of this text refers to Mieke Bal's seminal publication from 1996 'Double Exposures' in which the Dutch feminist literary theorist investigates various modes of comparative study across the arts and culture at large.

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