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Hans-Christian Berg

Optical Pulsations on the World's Retina

Hans-Christian Berg's works makes the gaze itself the focus of observation. The subject that relies on the primacy of Cartesian thinking uses its senses in relation to the surrounding world in a way that is a form of taking possession guided by cognition. Berg's works, meanwhile, challenge the mode of perception itself, and thus intervene in the structure of the genesis of understanding. As he has said, with his sculptures and via the spatial illusions they create, he wants to re-display the boundary conditions for perception, via which the viewing situation is created. The exhibition consists of four series of works: *Thoughtrise in vacuum*, *Perception Instruments*, *Light Cells* and *Minds*. The parallel realities set up by these works encapsulate what Berg calls his attempt to get *in touch* with thought – to get perception and mental images into tangible form.

The human gaze is associated with curiosity, with a fundamental desire to see behind something or to reveal what has been concealed. We recall the Classical tale of the two Greek painters Zeuxis and Parrhasios. This is a story about imitation, about the delusory nature of painting. Even the birds tried to peck at the grapes in Zeuxis' painting. And Parrhasios was even more skilful when he painted a curtain, so that Zeuxis *wanted* to see *behind* it. We could say that a similar interest drives psychoanalysis in its exposing of people's unconscious desires or hopes, to peer beyond the visible and the manifest.

When we view Berg's works they throw up the issue of the singularity of the gaze and its situation-specificness. This is also a matter of directing the gaze and of locating it. These works are above all about their own nature as optical illusions and through that about one of the oldest tasks of art, which it sets for the eye or for seeing: about deceiving and seducing the eye. About how art can tame the gaze and disarm it.

The function of the lure in art is most evident in the works in the *Perception Instruments* series. The effectiveness of the works is as a bundle of different impressions that go in different directions. In them, Berg has placed various instruments that challenge the gaze in front of concave glass mirror surfaces. An unexpected effect occurs in the visual field when the viewer focuses his or her gaze onto the objects via the mirror. The suspended spheres bring to mind the hypnotist's pendulum, which in its suggestiveness detaches the viewer for a moment from the consciousness of perception and from the fixed points in the surroundings. The familiar self-portrait appears like a blotch or a stain on the mirror surface.

Some of the works take the viewer *away* into a continual illusion of space: into a floating artificial reality made up of bits, which appear to presuppose the possibility of some kind of absolute perception. This is also evident in the *Thoughtrise in vacuum* sculptures. At the same time, however, the impression induced by the spheres within spheres, whose reticular surface is formed out of a mesh of ones and zeroes, tells us the opposite. They form a stratified space, in which *here* and *there* lose their locatability in space.

Having disarmed or tamed the gaze, the Dionysian side of art – its disruptive or destructive propensity – refuses to leave the gaze alone. This comes to mind when looking at the sculptures in the *Perception Instruments* series, where a sharp point bends towards the convexity of the mirror surface. The gaze is bound up with a desire to see something in a picture. That something, according to Jacques Lacan, is the gaze behind the picture, the gaze as an object, the Real that cannot be shown, with which “the painter as creator who sets up a dialogue”. The work immediately returns the gaze back once it has encountered its object. In Berg's work the mirror reflects onto the viewer a sharp point that comes straight at him or her. That magnified spike

represents the gaze associated with the work. It comes across as threatening the viewer and as shaking the equilibrium of the self – as something that is capable of wounding.

The puncture brought about by the work awakens the viewer from the spell induced by other observation devices. The sudden tear caused by the reflection brings us back from the borderline state between self and world, from the optical unconscious. It has found the basic principle that is concealed within us, the breach or opening that lies between our senses and the world, and which keeps us in an open relationship with the world and with comprehension of it. The instruments of perception cause a breach in the prevailing fiction of figurativeness, in the idea of a perspectival image that gives itself up at once. At the same time, they punch a hole in the subject's specular relationship with the picture, in the hope or dream of recognising oneself as whole and undivided. The instruments of perception are beguiling, perforating, and predatory – they try in various ways to lure the gaze into their trap. The gaze is associated with reciprocity. We do not just look at works, but rather they can also respond to our gaze.

Hans-Christian Berg's works' relationship with perception appears to proceed via various kinds of epistemic apparatuses and ontologies. Or, as he himself terms his attitude, "breathing the conception of the future". The works' figurativeness contains references both to the history of the development of optics and to the instruments (blown mirrors, observation instruments), to space geometry, and to three-dimensional modelling (geometrical shapes one inside another, the cut-out laser patterns in the acrylic works), to the meta-reality of electronic data transmission (sculptures made out of strings of ones and zeroes), and to the history of cognitive brain research (the bulging phrenological shapes of the brains in the *Minds* sculptures). Together these elements or this open network of references are directed, on the one hand, at the current technological world as a transparency of observation and as possible worlds; and, on the other hand, at the physical reality as a fixative adaptation of the relationship between humanity and technology. Simultaneously, via artistic creativity, the works refer to science as fantasy, as science fiction, reinforcing its utopias and, at the same time, revealing its illusions.

It is said that the eyes are the mirror of the soul. The lobes of the brain in the *Minds* works do not see what is around them. In addition to curiosity, their blatant corporeality also awakens features of disgust, astonishment. The caricatured, reflecting bulges are reminiscent of a mutilated cyborg. It is as though the corporeal reality and the softness in the grey brain mass had turned into an isolated membrane with a toxic magma of mercury beneath it. The muscles condense into a metaphor for the technological exploitation of the brain and for efficiency. The enlivening, reciprocal character of perceptual experience threatens to congeal into a deadening effect. The task of the *Minds* works is to reflect or reveal to the viewer on their surfaces the distortedness of the gaze. To bring out the contradictory perception associated with the combining of the inanimate and the animate, a perception that first offers a presumption of the familiar, the living, the reactive, and then withdraws into a cool, preserved lifelessness. The cyborg heads lack orifices connecting inside and outside. Therein lies their terrifyingness – in an organic form that is combined into an unholy alliance of biomorphism and technology.

The *Light cell* acrylic sculptures offer themselves in the form of horizontal strips and vertical beams – as landscape-likeness for the viewer to inhabit. Their figurativeness reminds us of plasma displays or the pixel structure of digital images, of the current visual horizon. The sculptures' closed and ordered chaos captivates with its aestheticness, in its simulation of a changing fractal reality. Berg, in fact, refers to controlled kineticism when talking about them. At the same time, as the gaze passes through the work's acrylic-glass surface and follows the evasive, holed illuminated space that opens out from the ends of the pipes, it also shows the penetrative power of the gaze. It looks as though the work's continuous internal motion of ordering and reconstruction is a result of the viewer's positions and spatial coordinates when faced with the work. The gaze gets stuck and caught up in that feeling of success. As the materiality of the gaze is revealed, its

assumed transparency becomes cavitied and ragged, along with the works. The consciousness aroused by these works of the fixing and focusing of one's own gaze – and hence of its boundedness and potentials – encapsulates the whole theme of Hans-Christian Berg's exhibition: into the corporeal reality of the inevitable singularity and fixing of perception.

In this exhibition as a whole Hans-Christian Berg has successfully reconstructed the simultaneous richness and fragmentariness of the perception world of our time. What we see and refine into understanding and concepts, on the basis of our perceptions, is neither self-evident nor given. Various areas of science and the structures of society shape and articulate the reality around us. Visual art is one of those ways of articulating and means of opening up understanding. Berg's works display the possibilities of art for taking part in this chain of shaping, dismantling and constructing. The reality of everyday reality and of the perceptions, routines and habits that arise out of it are presented for reassessment. In Berg's works the transparency of thoughts and mental images has been given tactile form. The immateriality of thoughts has found tangibility: surfaces for thoughts to solidify and grow. At the same time, they radiate visual gaiety and lightness. In the viewing situation the impressions produced by these works stimulate attentiveness and challenge us to see. Reality is neither here nor there, but rather in their intersection: in us and in the corporeal reality articulated by our senses. The gaze thus extends further: into a perception that challenges our environment, and into the primacy of the gaze as the force that transforms it. This altered perception opens up into a field of values and diverse appreciations.