

6 'It Doesn't Reveal Itself'. Erosion and Collapse of the Image in Contemporary Visual Practice.

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the extent to which 'pictorial art' resists legibility, transparency and coherence. The analysis of three artistic case studies, Idris Khan, Maria Chevska and Jane and Louise Wilson, serves to investigate established hierarchies in our perception of visual referents. In the discussion the article inquires the means of erosion, veiling and dissemblance as ways to critique assumption of the homogeneity of the image. All artists cast a view on the external world by diverting it, defacing it and distancing themselves from the external environment. However, the distancing is never disconnected from the everyday and never succumbs to abstraction. The article argues that the crisis of the image offers a productive framework that allows artists to draw attention to the absence of logical structure and the instability of the visual sign.

KEYWORDS

Idris Khan, transparency, erosion, visibility, image, Maria Chevska, Jane and Louise Wilson;

BIO

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The assumptions that art is a familiar or a conventionally agreed order, a measurable unity and coherent system, is not uncommon. In recent years Visual Studies and art theoretical discourse have departed radically from the traditional orthodoxies of the Cartesian model and deflated assumptions of the 'self-evidence' of the image and the experience of seeing (Mitchell 2002, 166). In this article I want to explore ways in which artists utilize the trope of ruin in order to break up the visual image and to what extent a physical erosion of the exterior coincides with a conceptual collapse of traditional categories of visibility and invisibility.

Erosion is here understood as a set of processes that engage in a physical, but also metaphorical way, with the decay and deterioration of materials, orders and structures. In often contradictory manners, 'practices' of erosion conceal and reveal at the same time. These paradoxical events reflect aptly the complexities of artistic practices discussed in this article where the obstruction of images, the transmutation and reenactment tests assumptions of visibility.

By exploring to what extent the departure from a Cartesian model of images leads to a re-evaluation of ideas of decay and disintegration, I wish to ask: How do we deal with images when art, by definition, 'is no longer distinctly visible?' (Bersani and Dutoit 1993, 101). Despite the fact that we habitually hold on to the belief that images are *per-se* visually

¹ The title makes reference to Richard Shiff's discussion of Per Kirkeby's work (see Shiff 2009).

perceptible, image content is often ‘willfully excluded’ from recognition (95) and the assumption of images as transparent, logical, intelligible, or somehow ‘self-revealing’ seems still to prevail.

I am following here art critic Richard Shiff in his assertion that an image ‘doesn’t reveal itself’ (2009). The tendency of distance to disenfranchise the viewer metaphorically from the image, to question so-called transparency, or visibility of images, can be traced back at least to *Skiagraphy* in 18th century depiction of ‘shadowy, sketchy, renderings’ (Stafford 1990, 172). In a similar way 20th century art shows a fascination with the fugitive as ‘modern’ (Clark 2002) and the indetermination of the blurred image (Morley 2016).

More recent approaches however, take into account the increased circulation of images where visual consumption and creation have been changed (see Joselit 2015, Draxler 2010).

Emphasising notions such as ‘Precariousness’ (Asslein, Lamoureux, Ross 2008), the ‘Potential Image’ (Gamboni 2002), *Undoing the Image* (Alliez 2011), ‘Art of the Possible’ (Rancière 2007), painting for recent theorists can be seen as a series of attempts to disenfranchise ourselves from the immediate ‘object’, as a departure from concepts such as pureness, the close-up, favouring instead ‘dissensus’ and the need to reconstruct our ‘relationship between places and identities, spectacles and gazes, proximities and distances.’ In *Undoing the Image*, Eric Alliez characterises the fragmented vestiges of the image as an ‘identity crisis’ of contemporary art and a ‘breakdown’ of language more generally (Alliez 2011, 67).

In response to the break-down of the image, the concept of ‘Precariousness’, for instance, raises a radical critique an ‘occularcentrism’ in Western culture and the tendency to see unified subject as part of an unrestricted universalism, pure consciousness, pure opticality (Asslein, Lamoureux, Ross 2008, 4): ‘Precariousness – and this is the first trait - is an

unsettling of vision that occurs at the viewer-image interface, a quality addressed to the viewer that troubles the full visual access to the image (and beyond, to the reality to which it refers)'(8). Other critics also contribute to a critique of legibility and transparency by dissolving the unity of the image in its entirety: 'People believe that most observations take place in clear and logical contexts. I believe that is an illusion, a kind of glue to keep our lives together. To a great extent, art's function is to call attention to this illusion. Showing how incoherent reality is' (Shiff 2009, 32).

All those approaches could be summarized in the attempt to disentangle the homogeneity of the image and to substitute it with the concept of 'liberated object' (Bann 2007, 106) 'nonsignifying and countersignifying' elements (Shiff 2009, 33) or to follow Alliez 'unformed, intense matter' (2011, 72). Rancière characterizes this collapse as a necessity for a renewed relationship to the image, when he argues: ' [T]he problem, first of all, is to create some breathing room, to loosen the bonds that encloses spectacles within the machine that makes the 'state of things' seem evident, unquestionable'(Rancière 2007, 261).

Alliez describes the broken, fragmented image as a ruin, 'a ruin of the image, which is deposited through the bizarre planar character of its insensible range. This is an image that becomes empty after having been overloaded and saturated with object-subject devoid and any principle of relations' (2011, 69).

In short, according to these thinkers, there is a kind of productive crisis in the image that photography and other practices can point to: it can draw our attention to the absence of logical structure, can problematize claims to homogeneity of the image and thereby helps us grasp the instability of elements allowing 'never static forms, but rather, active devices for configuring flows of images' (Joselit 2014, 95). Joselit, in line with Alliez's assertion above, characterizes the openness of the image as 'producing a theater of meaning's ruin; its

collapse into compost' (95). In the following case studies I wish to explore the extent to which, following Rancière's provocation, 'pictorial art must be equally able to resist interpretation' and allow 'breathing room' (Rancière 2007,73) in the hermeneutic cycle. In what follows, therefore, I want to explore the ways in which the work of Idris Kahn, Jane and Louise Wilson and Maria Chevska in particular, allow a deviation from the narrow understanding of images. All artists cast a view on the external world by diverting it, defacing it and distancing themselves from the external environment. However, the distancing is never disconnected from the everyday and never succumbs to abstraction.

Idris Khan: Transparent Images

Khan's work shows a series of images and textual fragments digitally superimposed, using source material which ranges from canonic paintings (such as the complete oeuvre of Rembrandt or Caravaggio), photographs, books or musical notation. Khan's palimpsest-like work often has the appearance of 'smudged and blurred' drawings or etchings (Williams 2006, 38) and puts into question any assumptions about clear, 'transparent' image space and the notion of clear vision. The amalgamations of layers of photographs and the interwoven texture of images seem to result in a collapse of the categories past and present, or abstraction and figuration: The eclipse of the gap between the legible and the illegible part becomes a pattern, when the depicted can no longer be seen as text or image, 'but instead [of] pure color, dark matter' (Coxhead 2013). Black, as predominant color in Khan's work, seems very appropriate, referring on the one hand to the minimalist aspect in Khan's work (repetition, transparency) and, on the other, reflecting the ambiguous quality of palimpsest between emptiness and deep space (Prince 2008, 12).

Khan's work seems to respond to the flood of images in our digital age, where the viewer

finds her/himself confronted with a set of constantly ‘animated, separating and rejoining’ images (Williams 2006, 39). Khan questions legibility, whilst eschewing pure abstraction; nor does he respond in his work to a necessity of illegibility. Derrida has outlined this complex issue elsewhere: ‘If there were only perception, pure permeability to breaching, there would be no breaches. We would be written, but nothing would be recorded; no writing would be produced, retained, repeated as legibility’ (Derrida quoted in Doane 1996, 226).

This seems to suggest that the aspect of flattening in Khan’s work emphasises an elasticity and fluidity that often confounds notions of difference; the imposed photographic layers in Khan’s work suggest simultaneously closeness and immediacy, as well as distance. The photographic surface captures experiences of fragmentation and flux. In that aspect Khan shows an unexpected closeness to a modernist agenda, in the words of the critic Clement Greenberg: ‘The picture plane itself grows shallower and shallower, flattening out and pressing together the fictive planes of depth until they meet as one upon the real and material plane’ (1986, 35).

The over-layering of photographs, as a material plane, is less than certain, however, and, in this sense at least, does not adhere to a modernist aesthetic. Khan insinuates transparency, whilst at the same time his work shows an obfuscation of the surface. Moreover, the notion of transparency as a claim for visibility and an anti-hierarchical position as reflected in today’s proclaimed enthusiasm for transparency seems to be *radically questioned* in Khan’s work. The formal proximity to the imagery of a pin hole camera in Khan’s work is a reminder of the camera obscura and its capacity to fold binary oppositions such as time and space, vision and blindness, illusion and reality, as Bishop and Philips have pointed out (2010, 28).

The obfuscated surface in Khan’s work could therefore be read, with reference to Rancière’s analysis, as ‘imageness’, which only ‘speaks to us when it is silent, when it no longer

transmits any messages to us'(Rancière 2007, 11). Khan's work seems to show a gap between the object and representation when the text or notation becomes unreadable, excessive and illegible. The annihilation or erasure of information results in what has been described as, that 'thrill that comes about in the way in which his layered images seem to court their own destruction' (Rappolt 2006).

In a process of 'undoing' the image, Eric Alliez traces the deconstruction of the image-form, as a typical trope in Western art (with the inception of Manet, Cezanne and Seurat) describing the process as a categorical collapse of the unstructured form and 'identity crisis' (Alliez 2011, 67). Alliez takes as a 'starting point' the incomplete image, that 'subverts the *imaginary* relation between the sayable and the visible'(66). Following his argument, the incomplete image becomes here an instance where 'a paradoxical *mise en scene*' of forms enacts a process of revealing the invisible (66). While the image becomes increasingly removed from its mimetic function and the depiction of the outside world, Khan's work reflects a critical understanding of the 'self-made vs. found elements in his images, resulting in a 'new original logic':

Hence the construction of the painting as incessant deconstruction of the image in the work, which will appear as less and less 'made' when it is more and more 'real' in the present of a *self-making* that *conceives* of itself as such by imposing upon sight this new conception [...](Alliez 2011, 70).

The 'dilemma' of 'self-made' and 'natural' elements becomes particularly apparent in the context of iconoclasm and destruction when the found 'unmade' element 'is preferred to the 'too much made' (Paulson 1989, 4). 18th century aesthetics addressed aspects of chaos and loss of control in a particular way: 'The area of chaos and uncontrol which came to be called

the sublime, let alone the playful and subversive picturesque, lacked the disinterestedness, which we may interpret as framing, required of the aesthetic experience' (2).

Idris Khan's 'Every ... Bernd & Hilla Becher Spherical Type Gasholder' (2004) uses Bernd and Hilla Becher's documentary photographs as source material for a disappearing German industrial landscape. Renderings of the post-industrial ruins are taken in an impassionate, timeless fashion and only presented in the manner of a comprehensive set of photographs of industrial buildings. While the presentation as typology in its original state allows a comparison between individual buildings, Khan's superimpositions acknowledge the relationships between individual images, yet in a different order and timeline. The collapse of individual time frames and the overlaps with the compositional device allow a focus on general shape, by eliminating almost of all individual traces. The documentary character balances between highly controlled, 'unremarkable' photographs and the overwhelming amount of factual details and Khan's work draws our attention to this dichotomy.

'Every ... Bernd & Hilla Becher' epitomizes the documentary photography that in itself queries the artistic intervention by eliminating subjective or personal features. Idris Khan could be seen as creator or destructor, at the same time, both divisive in an 'aniconic society' (Latour 2002, 23).

As we have seen, the problem lies not only in the perception and understanding of the image itself but in the role of the creator:

He, the creator, will alternate wildly between omnipotence and non-existence, depending on whether or not His presence can be shown and His efficacy proven. What used to be synonymous: "I make," and "I am not in command of what I make" has become a radical contradiction: "Either you make or you are made" (Latour 2002, 23).

Abandoning the 'cult of the image' and engaging in an undoing of the image, the Western

tradition of the image, and of the collapse of the homogeneity of the image, offers ways to re-examine the critical relation between fragmentation and unity in the image.

Roberts' discussion of photography locates in the 'intractability and restless assertiveness' of photographic image what he calls 'the productive capacity for violation' (Roberts 2014, 1). Violation in photography is here understood as 'the very act of making visible and, therefore, is conceptually entangled with what is unconscious and half hidden, implicit.' (2) 'Every ... Bernd & Hilla Becher' seems to extrapolate the general shape by elimination any individual, impermanent traces. Equally, the density of photographic images verges on the edge into abstraction.

What was described earlier as a 'paradoxical *mise en scene* of forms' becomes then a site of an unveiling and uncovering of the invisible. This is an epochal crisis, to return to Alliez, in maintaining the distinction between the sensible and intelligible and lies in particular in the fact that 'it no longer concerns either the refusal or the acceptance of this or that form of the image according to a formal imperative of resemblance or dissemblance...' (Alliez 2011, 67). Form is defined rather by the coincidence of form and formlessness simultaneously. These iconoclastic tendencies within the image highlight the well established fact that 'making /breaking' have become inseparably linked to each other. And while iconoclast strategies are often understood in a simplistic fashion as a limitation of vision, and as the wilful destruction of 'signs', (iconoclasts represented as blind or ignorant toward the value the things they destroy), today's understanding evidences the close correlation of creation and destruction where 'destruction *in art* did not mean the destruction *of art*' (Gustav Metzger quoted in Gamboni 1996, 265).

Khan's work, in its sometimes incomprehensible overlap of 'nonsignifying' and 'countersignifying' elements raises the question as to how to confront overloaded and saturated image referents 'devoid of any principle of relations'. His work very persuasively suggests what defines, in his discussion of faded, erased silenced materiality, as an 'opaque material remainder' which deviates from traditional discussion of transparency and disappearance. As Dworkin argues:

The point then is not so much the play of presence and absence that has animated studies of inscription, but rather the recursive realization that every signifier is also itself a sign. Erasures obliterate, but they also reveal; omissions within a system permit other elements to appear all the more clearly. (Dworkin 2013B, 9).

[PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 1]

Maria Chevska: Transgressive Paintings

The painter Maria Chevska uses in her painterly work a variety of materials. What Chevska describes as everyday material becomes the prop or 'protheses' for 'acting to ground the abstraction of thinking through painting' (Taylor 2017, 86). The objects as part of her painting practice allow her to liberate the work from a singular painting frame (86). Her work effectively questions the unity and integrity of the image through the use of 'incongruous' three-dimensional components as part of her painting practice. This conceptualization of painting as 'apparatus' calls into question the integrity of painting as a closed-off area of aesthetic activity, leading to by engaging in an increasingly 'discursively charged praxis' (Draxler 2010, 109).

Chevska's 2003 installation 'Vera's Room', consisting of a white, windowless room, exemplifies to a large extent the artist's working method, especially the use of objects. The

installed objects, a chair, chest of draws, a bicycle, are surrounded by white possessions built of paper, canvas, and kaolin, suggesting an unstable or fragile character. Despite the simplicity and clarity of the room, the different shapes and the similarity of the objects reflects a malleable dynamic mood, an 'oscillation, constant wobble' (Godfrey 2005, 8). This resonates very strongly with Cixous' annotations which reveal a similarly unstable and contradictory state reflected in words such as 'eviction' and 'hospitality' (Cixous 2005).

The association of theatre props and staging reveals a further layer of a provisionality in the set-up. The transitioning from flat to three-dimensional objects gives a sense of a world that appears to be in constant flux, and serves as a reminder that Chevaska as a painter works also in sculpture (Godfrey 2005,6). 'Bleached shadow of Plato's caves' (8), for example, suggests a visual distancing, inherent to the Platonic system: we are not looking at the real objects and the shapes here appear just as approximations.

Truly, painting has progressed in the last decades, from the self-reflexive modernist approach into methods that forcefully transgresses disciplinary boundaries and shows an increased 'permeability' (Joselit 2015). This permeability from two- to three- dimensionality points to a departure from the modernist emphasis on design and materiality to an opening up of painting to its surrounding in, for example, Rauschenberg's three-dimensional 'Combines' (Joseph 2007). Joselit's conceptualisation of 'Painting beside itself' places the painting within a network that must be seen as an outgrowth of what might be termed a neo-avant-garde strategy. The impact on digitalization, speed and connectedness in our society leads to a rethinking of the painterly sign such that it cannot be understood anymore as 'monolithic and static' but becomes a transitive, malleable mark within a network. Chevaska's work

evidences this tendency to ‘transitivity’ through its emphasis on its ‘porosity’ with/to the outside world.

However, despite this ‘provisional’ and temporary aspect of Chevaska’s work, her work nonetheless also stands out for its ‘fluidity and rebellious’ character: here the work is a key site for numerous transmutations from painting into sculpture or installation. This resonates strongly with Joselit’s postmodern concept of the network reflected partly in use of everyday material and its embeddedness in everyday life. ‘Painting in the guise of other media’ (Godfrey 2005) becomes then a more profound symptom of mutability within the context of a disintegration of the homogeneity of the image. Indeed, the trope of the fragmentation or ruin, outlined above as a divergent ‘creation of suspense’ with the ability to ‘translate into something different’ is crucial (Jecu 2010). As Godfrey argues. ‘She [Chevaska] saw it as looking in shape and material as a painting that was turning into an object’ (Godfrey 2005). And indeed, her paintings adopt increasingly sculptural qualities. Beyond the mixed media canvases of some of the monochrome paintings, her works reveal themselves only at specific viewing positions; the viewer needs to move to see the painting from different angles to witness the ‘transubstantiation’ (Bryden 1995, 109).

The transmutability of the paintings seem to feed assumption that the paintings appeared as ‘organic’ as a result of the changeability quality of not only revealing but erasing or veiling the painting altogether:

Chevaska’s technique somehow manages to efface itself so as to draw the onlooker irresistibly into the labial contours of natural life rather than into a manufactured representation of it. [...] It both camouflages and preens, it mutates and rehearses its own existence, it suspends membranous veils (tympanum, hymen, pericardium, cocoon) to provide interstitial spaces, points of transition, ante-rooms (Bryden 1995, 109).

The unstable image in Chevská's appears, then, to question the function of the image, as a coherent and homogenous entity more broadly. The potential of the work (its 'potentiality' as a characteristic, we might say) to develop into something else, seems disruptive. Indeed, the 'Potential Image' shows a particular resonance in contemporary art as it not only blurs the boundaries between abstraction and figuration, but also reviews the relationship between artist, image and viewer (Gamboni 2002, 219). As Gamboni highlights in his discussion, the 'Potential Image' questions radically the relation between indeterminacy and intelligibility. The 'dynamism' lies in the role the viewer as interpreter assumes and that 'forces the spectator to retreat into instability' (Gamboni 2002, 220). Indeed, Chevská's literary references to or connections with sometimes 'incongruous objects' often leave explicit 'messages' unclear or ambiguous.

And certainly, contemporary painting denies, as has been argued, 'a palpable legibility', with a tendency to 'change between perceptibility and retreat to the indefinable' (Geimer 2012, 34). The perception of the illegibility of painting and the putative 'failure' of the picture to represent the subject, consequently heightens the self-reflexivity of the painting (34). The 'impoverishment of art' and 'blocked vision' leads to 'an unprecedented act of self-concentration, self-reference, and self-reflection' (Bersani and Dutoit 1993, 128). Bersani argues that 'not only will our looking fail to be rewarded with something significant to see, but the very act of seeing may become irrelevant to the painter's project' (127).

The physical or metaphorical use of cloth or the veil in Chevská's work can be said to draw attention to the line between one's own body and that of another. However, this tendency to veiling deals not only with issues of concealing but offers a more general understanding of process of painting. As Geimer reminds us, traces are not 'produced'; rather, they are brought about deliberately, but in an uncontrolled way (2007, 20). The traces paradoxically unveiled

by the veiling in Chevaska's work also draw attention to a highly curtailed mode of looking, and a limiting of the sense of looking. This restricted vision might also allow for a more inclusive set of senses: her work in its 'readiness to touch and be touched' contests the traditional assumption of the essential quality of the artwork, namely its revealing and uncovering (Bolt 2010, 124). The paintings therefore, similar to Khan's work discussed above, trouble the traditional binary opposition of visibility/invisibility (Bryden 1995, 110).

Traces are a key part of the works we have discussed so far and are intimately linked to the image of the remnants, the leftover, to things left behind *after erosion*. As Geimer argues, traces result from direct physical contact. More specifically, the trace transmits the imprint of the object physically, not optically. Cloth and veil in Chevaska's work provide, along similar lines, a more 'accurate' depiction of the object: "Veiling, it does not conceal the written, but allows 'at least a protective revelation' (Bryden 1995, 113). Hence the veiling that Chevaska deliberately enacts in her work is also a making of trace, a pointing to there having been something there before, to an absence now made present, in part. This ambiguity is constitutive of her work.

This veiling is linked to processes of degeneration and transformation, to transmutation and metamorphosis. In the transformation of objects and mutability, Chevaska of course questions the basis of traditional views of painting (Modernist distinction of discipline specificity) but also problematises the social function of mimesis more generally; she seeks to trouble our belief in the possibility of representing a shared reality. References to Kafka's work, as in one of her most recent exhibitions 'From the Diary of a Fly' and *Metamorphosis*, show an intimate sensitivity in her work to the (perhaps dissident) modernist interest in transmutations and porosity of boundaries. References to membranes, curtains, veils are less concerned with

a total concealment, rather a permeability and breach of established categories: ‘collapsing the past into the present, about letting the body spread out into the world, about collapsing the world into the mind.’ (Godfrey 2005, 6).

[PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 2]

This appropriation of a wide range of material is also reflected in the adoption of new styles and the development of a new sense of temporality, an ‘atemporal’ aspect of painting and a susceptibility to different influences:

In the eighties, artists lifted images and styles from art history and pop culture and dropped them in the arena of contemporary art as if they were toxic ready-mades, stripped of their auras of power and persuasion through decontextualisation. In this new economy of surplus historical references, the makers take what they wish to make their point or their painting without guilt[...] (Hoptman 2014, 15).

Guilt-free transcription or re-doing and repetition have traditionally been seen as reductive or as antithetical to art. The notion that repetition and re-doing could be seen as attempts at distancing or detaching oneself is attractive. However, Chevaska’s staging of installations of the artwork as painting practice, include, crucially, the act of redoing and restaging, thereby allowing a new encounter act of making of something from the past. Art theorist Godfrey makes this distinction clear:

What Chevaska is doing in her shift to installation is to reclaim that possible space where artists, not curators, stage the event. The act of making is intentionally reverberating into the future (which is the present for the viewer) and into the past where dead voices await to be re-awoken. (Godfrey 2005).

Permeability and openness, in the form of a restaging and reawakening of ‘old voices’ in the work by specifically testing ‘atemporal’ characteristics in painting, involve also a reworking, redoing while the image sign appears in particular as unstable.²

And yet, from a 21st-century perspective, we still seem to be trapped in endless anachronistic correlations of styles and approaches, trapped in a ‘double image’, playing the role of both ‘believer and agnostic simultaneously’, as Herbert puts it, confined to ‘sheer simultaneity’ (Herbert 2011, 92-3).

And, of course, the atemporality of Chevaska’s and others’ work references also the practice of retaking, re-appropriating material and styles from the past. This could be seen as translation into a different context, not being identical with the original in the first place:

[T]ranslation must avoid the perfection that would cause it to cease to be recognizable as a translation. In this way, the problem of translation thus replicates the problem of mimesis: the most realistic artwork would not be identifiable as an artwork. Some inframe difference must assert itself, even as that difference is what translation seeks to eliminate.’ (Dworkin 2013B, 117).

Dworkin continues, ‘[The phrase] “what gets lost in translation”... should be understood not in the sense of elegiac ruination or privation but of absorption and reverie, in the way one might be lost in thought.’ (124). The field of translation may thus help us to understand some of the ways in which Herbert’s simultaneity can also point to a constitutive ambiguity in the visual medium.

² Recent accounts of contemporary painting highlight the ‘instability of a cultural moment’ and painting’s atemporal quality (Hoptman, 13). A plethora of cultural influences and its ‘transitivity’ of the painterly sign results in a deflation of categories of abstraction and figuration (Joselit 2015). Yet, the emergency of previous styles, forms and processes in painting, and the ‘temporal’ aspect of painting has been discussed as a retake and appropriation of abstract painting in the 1980s. The work of Sherrie Levine, Philip Taaffe Peter Schuyff and others, dealt in their abstraction with simulation and appropriation. Levine’s ‘abstract frauds’, to follow Foster, ‘disrupted’ the traditional canon (110). While those abstract paintings responded to ‘new modes of information’, their questioning of ‘representability’ in late modernism in a ‘pre-industrial craft’ of painting(114), seems more timely than ever.

Splitting the painting process into an, on the one hand, ‘objective optical’ aspect and, on the other, a ‘subjective sentiment’, Joselit defines the painterly sign as an oscillation of both sides as ‘subjectobject mark’ (Joselit 2015, 169). The semiotic mark is defined as ‘the dynamic transition between person and things’ (169). Joselit with the trope of the ‘subjectobject mark’ points to the transmutability of the sign where the mark essentially becomes ‘a passage of force’. This resonates with the work of Khan described above, especially with regard to the notion of transitivity and. And we might understand this transition as a way of coming to terms with the constitutive transmutability of the sign. Indeed, as Joselit puts it: ‘Modern painting is haunted by the alterity of the picture and this alterity is fundamental to its becoming abstract’ (2015, 171).

Jane and Louise Wilson: Ruination and Restaging

Jane and Louise Wilson’s photographic, video or installation work features predominantly inactive or dysfunctional spaces. The photographic rendering of Second World War fortification such as ‘Sea Eagle’ (2006) offers a point of departure for the discussion of ruination. Artistic practices and art theoretical approaches in recent years have utilized not only themes of archeology and memory, as in the above mentioned ‘meta-historical mode’, but increasingly use geographical terms and methodologies in urban aesthetics (see Hawkins 2014, Wylie 2007, Deutsche 1996).³ Despite the fact that ruins by definition have, to a certain extent, lost their function and meaning in the present, they still maintain an ‘unstable semantic potential’ (Hell and Schönle 2010, 6):⁴

³ ‘Along rather different lines, arts practitioners and theorists take up, and problematize, a range of practices and concepts that we might regard as inherently geographical – for example, questions of space and subjects relations, theorisations of bodies and mobilities; the politics of critical urban spatialities; topographic studies of place and location; globalization and theorization of place, community, and locality; landscape theorizations; critical cartographies and mapping (Hawkins, 2014, 3).

⁴ For further discussion on ruins and art see e.g. Dillon, 2013; Hell and Schönle 2010; Huyssen 2006, Edensor 2005; Cadava, 2001; Wagner 2004; Picon 2000). Ruins have featured in major recent exhibitions such as Roman Ostia: Ancient Ruins, Modern Art, Estorick

The ruin's dialectic between absence and presence, fragment and whole, is also one between visible and the invisible. Close detailed description seems to suit the representation of the visible remnant just as photography seems to be its main medium. And yet reflections on ruins inevitably seem to lead away from this austere minimalism (7).

However, the depiction of the (derelict) landscape in itself has been categorized as fetishistic, erasing traces and the labour of its creation (Wylie 2007, 107).⁵ From an iconographic perspective, we might ask to what extent landscapes function as 'glosses, facades and aesthetic veneers, designed to perpetuate existing social, economic and political hierarchies' (Wylie 2007, 100). Looking at the 'production' of landscape in relation to agency (from man-made, to natural to categories of present/past), approaches in recent years in cultural and social geography emphasise the urban surrounding as a place of production, where the beholder is closely involved in the 'creation' process and the 'sign' of the landscape is equally malleable. Instead of viewing the surrounding as a finished, completed setting, the urban landscape is understood as 'constructed and circulating system of cultural meaning, encoded in images, texts and discourses,..' (Wylie 2007, 94). This emphasises the widening and more permissive understanding of urban landscape, handing a particular role of the user; her/his impact on the city environ plays a key role in the ruins, as for example in urban ruins. Taking the ruin as a 'sign' that effectively rebukes the perception of a finished facade or 'aesthetic veneer' (100) allows us to focus on a dynamic open-ended understanding of the urban environment, and a visual economy that shows its 'transgressive and transcendent possibilities.' (Edensor, 2005, 4). In his discussion of derelict urban sites, Edensor argues:

Collection(2014); Against My Ruins, Nils Stærk, Copenhagen (2014); Ruin Lust, Tate London (2013); Ruins in Reverse, Tate Modern (2013); Modernism As a Ruin, Generali Foundation Vienna (2009); Modern Ruin, Queensland Art Gallery Brisbane (2008); RAW, Among the Ruins, Centre for Contemporary Culture, Maastricht (2007).

⁵ 'In many respects [landscape] is much like a commodity: it actively hides (or fetishizes) the labour that goes into its making... those who study landscape representations are repeatedly struck by how effectively they erase or neutralise images of work... the things that landscape tries to hide, in its insistent fetishisation, are the relationships that go into its making (Mitchell quoted in Wylie 2007, 107)..

Bereft of these codings of the normative – the arrangements of things in place, the performance of regulated actions, the display of goods lined up as commodities of for show – ruined space is ripe with transgression and transcendent possibilities. Ruins offer spaces in which the interpretation and practice of the city becomes liberated from the everyday constraints which determines what should be done and where, and which encode the city with meanings (2005, 4).

The disintegration therefore is not limited to aspects of material decay, but could be further described as a disintegration of categories or what Simmel describes as ‘obscure antagonism’ between natural and psychological effects and forces life (Simmel 2011, 23).

Indeed, ruins in Edensor’s analysis play a particular role in the attempt to ‘rebutte’ and question ‘scenarios of endless progress’ (Edensor 2005, 15) where past and present are reunited in the ruin itself, and in its outlook into the future (its potentiality) (Huysen 2006, 7; Hell and Schönle, 2010, 3). The gothic and romantic fascination with ruins shows a particular preoccupation with the collapse and transgression of boundaries resulting in a ‘disintegration of the ordered’ (Edensor 2005,15): ruins and dereliction, as ‘unpoliced’ sites and unleashing of fantasies, become sites of critique of the ordered, regulated and restricted (17).⁶ Walter Benjamin’s fascination with the dereliction, ‘out of date ruins’ as ‘residues of a dreamworld’ are just one example where the ruin becomes a site of collapse (Buck Morris (1995) 4).

Benjamin expresses his quintessentially modernist fascination with ruins thus: ‘[T]oday the passages lie in the great cities like caves containing fossils of an ur-animal presumed extinct: The consumer from the pre-imperial epoch of capitalism, the last dinosaurs of Europe’ (1995,5). The ruin here becomes a way to destroy the immediacy of the presence, and to link everyday experience with theoretical fascination for the collapse. This ‘openness’ or susceptibility, is reflected in semantic terms, for instance, in the photographic traces in the work of concrete fortification by Jane and Louise Wilson, epitomising the complexities of

⁶ This alternative culture not only existed amidst urban decay but actually appropriated the fragmented and unstable character of the architecture as part of creative strategies, creating ‘something new which thrived on an atmosphere of provisionality’. (Sandler 2011, 690)

our relationship with historical objects and events: the presence of the bunkers seem to resist decay and paradoxically, as has been argued, ‘are not as remote as the dereliction to which they are destined’ (Hell and Schönle 2010, 3). Ruins show, as explained elsewhere, a characteristically ‘ghost-like return’ and exposing a ‘disharmonious sentiment: Nostalgia, threat, loss, revivification.’ (Herbert 2011,90). In Wilson’s work the bunkers become remnants of a distant past on the one hand and show an eerie similarity to modernist building blocks, and their aspiration on the other.

And indeed, Jane and Louise Wilson confirm the complexities of the trope of the ruin where our relationship to objects is never distanced and clear and the rendering of the derelict buildings hardly objective and detached: ‘Our architectural designs are not just singular interventions in an objective void space, rather a continuum that both impacts and is impacted by the environment and leads a fluid life of its own in relationship to the world’(Carlos 2011, 5). This relationship to the world, and to the viewer in particular, is reflected in the Wilsons’ installations of exhibition spaces and screenings of the filmic work, where the often life-size settings allow the viewer an almost physical engagement.

This ‘restaging’ of something that had been done before but is out of function now is essential. Wilson’s work *Stasi City* (1996), exploring the former GDR Secret Service, enacts just such a restaging and ‘instils anxiety and fright’ using hanging objects, open doors, all showings how the ‘construction of the very space of fear is revealed’ (Bruno 2011, 77).

Despite the Wilsons’ ‘reveal[ing] the internal mechanism [of the] social domination as we peer into the system of authority and legality’ (here in the context of the STASI Headquarter) the work does not allow us unregulated access. In the case of the *Stasi City* or Pripyat as seen in *Atomgrad 6* which shows the contaminated Ukrainian city built in the 1970s to house Chernobyl factory workers, it becomes clear that we can only be there when the place is not active, ‘precisely because it is not functioning’ (Bruno 2011, 77).

Ruins as the symptom of a past can be seen as a breakdown of order but, more relevant to the work of Jane and Louise Wilson, as a radical destabilisation of existing categories. What becomes very apparent in Wilson's work is the process of disorientation and oscillation between subject and object. The abandoned, claustrophobic spaces have been described in a manner reminiscent of the domestic uncanny and in relation to the 'Neo gothic aspect' (Osborne 2010, 7).

The Wilsons' works have been described as dark spaces, not necessarily because of the physical characteristic, but because of their disturbing breaches of categories, where order and categories have been abandoned: 'The ego does not affirm itself in relation to darkness but becomes confused with it, becomes one with it.' (Miller 2000, 39). The visual characteristic of ruins lies however, in the radical transgression, that makes the trope of the ruin a sign destined to be signifier of a wide spectrum of significations, from defeat, trauma to romanticised creativity (Sandler 2011, 691). It is this that lends the Wilsons' work its 'darkness', their unflinching commitment to the misfire of signification in the dark.

The deviation from established categories and blurring of boundaries makes the distinction between visibility and invisibility more keenly felt. All intentions to recreate and restore, sometimes described as the 'management of ruins and the resulting perceptions' become equally problematic as attempts at re-enactment and restoration result in a further obfuscation and removal, finally resulting in the 'inventions of history' (Leoshko 2011, 661). And indeed ruins, with its multifaceted and its complex open-ended relationship to the past and the present, link to one of the traditionally crucial aspects of the work of art, which is duration and material longevity (Gamboni 1996, 271):

The incompleteness, obscurity and slightly threatening quality of ruins demand full bodily engagement, at the same time spurring introspective reflection. The ruin borders on the irrational, inevitably frustrating any attempt at complete mastery or full knowledge (Sandler 2011, 696).

In art theoretical terms, then, ruin becomes a site which manages to transform itself and its relationship with time, mutating into something different from itself, side-lining or troubling traditional categorisations.

The ruin becomes then a site where the material vestiges manage to connect with a virtual entity, with the intangible, allowing them to deviate for established categories of past and present, materiality and abstraction. Following Deleuze's concept of the 'possible', Jecu describes the ruin as a 'correlative of the real', that will transform itself into reality (Jecu 2010, 1). The ruin here becomes a 'conduit' into the future, rejecting any categorization of past and decay but instead becoming an 'effect of rhetoric' (Hell and Schönle 2010, 4).

Inverting the common assumption of ruins as decay and disappearance into construction, Jecu argues that the ruin 'maintains a visual form, but transmits its totality via the virtual'. This allows the object to trespass beyond 'itself' outside the discipline of art or architecture, location, and to create the ability to translate itself into something radically different (1). While this can be understood as a further instance of the semantically open, it radically questions the way we understand object painting or artistic practice, or the man-made vs. 'natural' found aspect in the work of art. The moment of mutation and transgression seems a vital point, as it deviates from, as Jecu argues, that which '... does not search for completion by itself or within its own logic'.⁷

Reconstruction and reenactment in recent art practices has been described as a 'retrospective, historiographic mode' and puts a particular emphasis on the historical account, the archive,

⁷ Jecu, in her discussion of Portuguese artist Carlos Bunga, describes this moment of transformation and transition with reference to artistic practice and the ability to transgress perceptions of the past /present relation. 'This moment of transition is not a technical mutation, but rather what Bunga calls a "pictorial space" that does not search for completion by itself or within its own logic. Rather, he performs what could be called "documentary alterations" to his own constructions, modifying past forms of his present buildings.' (2010, 2).

and other primary source documents (Roelstraete 2009, 1), a particular artistic trend ‘of excavating and unearthing’ and engaging with the complexities of forgetting. In what has been termed a ‘meta-historical mode’, artistic practices show a particular interest in reenacting and reconstructing the past as ‘another type of storytelling’, avoiding the tendency to ‘look at the present’ but also avoiding being erased through the means of reenactment and reconstruction (3). (Roelstraete 2009).⁸ While this supposes a transitivity between and overlap of timeframes, as ‘traces preserved in sediments of fossilized meaning’ (5) and an opacity of objects, it equally nonetheless deals also with the challenges of illegibility and uncertainty. As Roelstraete argues, the similarity of archeology and artist practices lies in the fact that that the material is ‘resistant’ to interpretation, and shows certain resilience to one-dimensional signification and making-sense (6). A common feature with archeological practices is the focus on material, the overwhelming importance of mere ‘matter’ and ‘stuff’ in any attempt to grasp and truly read the cluttered fabric of the world (5). The alteration of established values, artistic material and artistic practices is characteristic of much contemporary artistic practice, allowing for (indeed demanding) a radically new relation to the world.⁹

How, then, does the retake relate to the artistic practice and how can a sense of opacity in artworks using influences from different periods, often described as ‘meta historical mode’ prevail?’ Gamboni asks this very question in his discussion of ‘potential images’ when he situates, referencing Eco, ambiguity within a ‘pendular dialectic between the suggestion of

⁸ The exhibition ‘The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art’ (Nov 9, 2013–Mar 9, 2014 Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, curated by Dieter Roelstraete) investigates the role of the historical, archival research in contemporary artistic practices (see also Roelstraete 2009).

⁹ It also resonates in a more transitory understanding of reality, reflected for instances in Raoul De Keyser’s painting, a representative of the Belgium artist movement *Nieuwe Visie*. The titles of some of his paintings such as *Camping II* (1969) and *Clochard* (‘Homeless people’) (1978) suggest something of the transitory in his work, disrupting established patterns, altering schemata. Searle characterises him as having something ‘unsettling’ about him where ‘nothing seems to remain except residue, or a ground disfigured with brush wiping’ (Searle 2004, 17).

plurality of worlds of form and the undifferentiated chaos' (2002, 10). The meta-historical template and the archeological focus at 'digging' and 'unearthing' seems well suited in this discussion with its particular focus on materiality and archeology or ruination. And as we have seen above, the image of the ruin works as a metaphor for an image, based on 'overloaded and saturated' matter lacking object-subject, 'devoid and any principle of relations' (Alliez 2011,69).

The archaeological approach, as artistic practice, can be understood as a sustained critique of the prevalence of opticality. We might look at the visual sign as 'overloaded', where the viewer is seduced by something, yet only part of the image is visible. Foster remarks: 'In the postnatural work[...] the slight residue of any image remains, as representational content (use value) is subsumed under abstract 'packing' (exchange form)' (112). The viewer-consumer is seduced, invested in the mediation – in these works and in the media world at large. As Roelstraete argues, like in archeology, the meta historical mode and the use of archives makes the material equally 'resistant to interpretation and reading', 'resistant to one-dimensional signification and making-sense' (6). A feature in common with archeological practices discussed here, and in the discussion of Khan's work above, is the focus on material, the overwhelming importance of mere 'matter' and 'stuff' in any attempt to grasp and truly read the cluttered fabric of the world (5).

As we have seen, then, erosion provides a way of thinking about presence and absence in contemporary artistic practice. It is both metaphor and process, both name and action. It also enacts a profoundly disturbing and potentially energising alteration of established values. Contemporary artistic practices are thus struggling to find a way to account for the dizzying precarity of the image, and are reaching, in a manner both fatalistic and utopian at the same time, for an imagination of or scheme for living a radically new relation to the world.

Conclusion,

With the words of Ernst Bloch, art shows a ‘pre-appearance of [its] completely developed subject matter’ (14)

‘Consequently, waking dream with world - extension is always presupposed for the accomplished work of art, *as the most exact imaginative experiment of perfection possible*; in fact not only for the work of art’ ([1959]1986, 95).

In this article I have explored three bodies of work by contemporary visual artists that use in their work decay and erosion as artistic strategies. Erosion may be physical or conceptual, and it subverts established categories, as we have seen. However, whilst, in a traditional sense, the ruin is associated with the past and ideas about memory and loss as I have shown, the temporality of the ruin is highly complex. Instead of standing for a sign of memory, mourning, the vexing aspect is its continuous impact in the present or future is also palpable.

In terms of artistic practice, the case studies show a sense of porosity and transmutation and point consistently to the erosion of the visual sign by superimposing, merging or re-enacting spaces, materials and images. Chevaska’s work, with its heightened sense of transmutation and transition from painting to objects and installations, deals with approximations placed between the outside world and abstract geometrical shapes. The shadow character of her work evokes associations with and critiques of the Platonic system. However, like in the work of Idris Khan, in Chevaska’s paintings categories of painting/sculpture, present/past again collapse, overlap.

I have shown how a deconstruction, or erosion, of the image or art object in order to create meaning allows a widening of the artistic discourse beyond the hegemonic order of

traditional temporalities. Artists discussed in in this article operate in a specific situation where categorical boundaries, the terms of temporality, and notions of agency are suspended. This might be the legibility of an artwork, in the case of Kahn's superimposed photographic prints, the transition from painting to sculpture (in Chevaska's work) or Jane and Louise Wilson's immersive installation of post industrial ruins that transgress the traditional boundaries of interior and external space. What unites all these distinct approaches is the direct outlook on the external world enacted in their art; a body of work that engages the outside only as highly mediated, re-enacted or staged.

The approaches discussed here, I argue, coincide with broader artistic tendencies. Influences such as the 'meta historical mode' or the raise of 'archaeological' practices or the porosity between artistic disciplines, happen at a time when direct confrontation with the object or the external world seems less possible. All artists then cast a view on the external world by diverting it, defacing it, putting obstacles in its way, creating, in short, a 'breathing room' to relax the bond with the outside world. Importantly, the effect of distancing is never disconnected from the everyday and never succumbs to abstraction. The question here is whether it is possible to free the image from its iconic shadow,¹⁰ without abandoning it entirely. How to avoid falling into the trap of visibility/invisibility and nevertheless reconnect, tie the images to external referent? As mimesis arguably reflects our relationship with the external world, the artists discussed here, in their accounts of erosion, give testimony to how our relationship to the world has changed. The crumbling and disintegration of the environment stretches the bond with the external world. The use of archives, without giving the viewer greater insight into the collection, reflects a clear shift in our relationship to the sign, where the sign has been given the capacity of a 'detournement', to use Dworkin's term

¹⁰ I am making reference here to the question raised by Peter Osborne in the 2009 Tate Britain symposium 'Undoing the Aesthetic Image'.

(2013A, 13). The potential of misappropriation and hijacking, shows a shift in our understanding of the painterly sign, artistic mark and gesture that clearly deviates from reductive binary positions of visibility/invisibility, here/there and so on. Crucially, it also deviates from the traditional notion of artistic agency. Notions such as ‘authorship at distance’, the removal of the direct ‘artistic touch’ have been discussed before. Erosion and iconoclastic strategies, however, offer a different outlook: the question of artistic agency becomes irrelevant in the context of erosion and destruction, where categories of making and being made overlap and become indistinguishable.

As I discussed above, traditional notions of visibility and transparency are radically inverted in the work of these artists. Claims to transparency and the accumulation of information invert into their own opposite, as in the case of Idris Khan, into imperceptibility. While discussion of the transparent homogenous image is linked to a specific moment of modernity, the departure from a *Cartesian Scopic Regime* and its visibility goes beyond the pure optical impact. It reflects a shift where the basic relationship between viewer-screen-object collapses.

In places the article shows an overlap of actual erosion and metaphorical erosion. The interferences in and with each other and indeed, the dialectical relationship between the physical and the conceptual decay, overlap. What might seem complete, might be eroded any minute, or it might obstruct another layer, thereby also making something else visible.

Erosion, then, I want to argue, requires the viewer take a position, decipher the ‘detournement’ of the sign, comprehend the close link between creation and destruction since that what he/she sees is not what it *is*.

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