Care for the Image – Meaning, Sense, Materiality

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This is a summary of the doctoral dissertation in art history defended at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, on 10 June, 2017. Its theoretical starting point is a phenomenologically-based view of the being of the image, in which Georges Didi-Huberman’s work plays a central role. One of the central aims of this research is the critical assessment of prevailing premises in conservation-restoration and technical art history. This study attempts to show that physical art objects, instead of being puzzles to be solved, are paradoxical in nature. Edmund Husserl has shown that image consciousness requires a specific kind of intentionality; similarly, consciousness of the Materiality of the Image presupposes a consciousness of a materiality that is ontologically distinct to the Image.

The study begins with a discussion on the Heideggerian concept of ‘care’ (Sorge). For Martin Heidegger, care was the ontological mode of Dasein. It meant mindful lingering, Besinnung, on the beings which are ready-to-hand (zuhanden) and present-to-hand (vorhanden) and have a fundamental ontological significance. It meant care for the sense (Sinn) of Being. Georges Didi-Huberman also discusses the concept of ‘care’. His concept (souci) denotes care for images and imagination, for meaningful, affective encounters with images, and involves solicitation that makes images oscillate. Images do not submit to being regarded as subsistent (vorhanden) intentional correlates of the constituting ego in the sense of Gegenstand. Instead, they become constellations comparable to cloud formations or gas eruptions, which are in a state of continuous, endless motion, pulling us towards their swaying motion. Such constellations can provide only negative certainty, certainty without an object, connaissance sans objet, in Jean-Luc Marion’s terms. The only certainty we are able to glean from an artwork belongs to the region of its beingness, to its physical artefactuality. However, that which makes an artwork has nothing ontic, nothing thinglike in it. With the term ‘image’, I refer to a concept that does not fall within the sphere of traditional art-history discourse. It is my conviction that an image is never alone. Images are always contaminated by numerous other images from various eras. In the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, an image is singular plural. Yet it is all too often approached only in its impoverished form, in Marion’s terms as a poor (pauvre) phenomenon.

We can have knowledge only of objects, not of images. The sensuous manifoldness of images has been reduced to match our finite cognitive faculties. Here, I am not referring to images as signs or symbols as they are understood in iconography, iconology, visual culture studies, semiotics or Bildwissenschaft, and I will not try to give a definition of the concept of ‘image’. Neither am I talking about popular imagery. The Image I am talking about is not
a single entity – it is a relation, and it is for this reason that I have chosen to write it with a capital I. The capital initial also underlines the fact that the Image is ontologically distinct (le distinct). When the word ‘image’ is spoken, there is no way of knowing about the capital letter – any more than you can hear the distinction between differérence or différance. Therefore, I must show this image to you – just like Derrida had to write down his différence in order to make it known. Thus writing comes before speech – the material sign that is the original mimésis before any representative function. The Image I am referring to does not represent anything – any thing – that precedes it. It does not represent anything exterior but performs its being of the Image by being an image, a relation.

As the Image is not an entity but a relation, it is, consequently, not an object but an event. We can have knowledge about objects, but not about events. To encounter an artwork that I call an Image, we must always take a position (prendre position), establish a relationship with it and experience (erfahren) the event that the Image is – that is, the event in its evential sense. This kind of experience (Erfahrung) gives us not-knowledge that is immediate and intuitive. This non-savoir precedes the logos, all discursive reasoning. To be able to confront the Image we have no other means than to resort to our productive imagination, Einbildungskraft. To be able to face an Image in its pure givenness – as a relation and as an event – we cannot be separate from it. The Image is not transcendent in respect of our consciousness. Something can appear as an Image only in the sphere of intentionality that Husserl called Bildbewusstsein. The Image is not, however, immanent to our mind either. When we subject ourselves to its radical alterity we are both mentally and physically deeply affected by something without knowing what it is. This is pathos. The Image can preserve its Bildlichkeit only as long as we do not know what it is – to reduce it to its quiddity is to deny its distinct mode of Being. There is nothing ontic in the Image. The ontological distinctness of the Image cannot be reduced to the physical characteristics of the Bildding. If an artwork were ontic, it would need to be seen only once. But an artwork, the Image as a relation and as an event, needs to be experienced time and time again.

We cannot take the credit for the fact that there are (il y a) images – that there is mimésis – because it is not our own doing. Therefore we cannot set limits to the appearance (Erscheinung) of images. The Image sets its own limits of manifestation. These boundaries do not close the Image within its perimeters but open up its being. These boundaries form the tear or rift (Riß, déchirure) which is the only route for the Image to occur. To encounter the Image is always to feel this tear, this conflict of incarnation-discarnation in our own corporeality. A work of art that does not move us in a specific and undeterminable way does not possess the ontological mode of being of an Image. To undergo a singular experience devant l’image is Georges Didi-Huberman’s souci, care for the Image. He shares the concern of Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben for the destruction of experience. Didi-Huberman does not, however, share their pessimism: he thinks experiences do not vanish completely, they can be found if one knows how to look for them – nothing that has once been vanishes but only changes its appearance. This is the gift of Nachleben and survivance.

How can we preserve an Image? In the field of conservation, preservation is linked to the aim of preserving the ‘physical integrity’ of cultural artefacts. The means for achieving this end are numerous. The aim of preventive conservation is to create such conditions for the exhibition and storage of cultural property as enable its preservation. All handling and treatment of museum artefacts must be as careful as possible so that harmful changes can be minimized. Various practical conservation treatments of paintings, for instance – surface cleaning, varnish removal, consolidation of flaking paint layers – are also listed among preservation measures. It should be noted that all these methods deal solely with ontic preservation: preservation of physical objects. We may be able to preserve physical artefacts by using the above measures, but can we preserve the Image through these means? Do conservators even think about Images in their daily praxis? Are they conscious that they are taking care of images instead of physical objects?

During the last few decades, new attitudes have evolved in the field of conservation. It has been understood that the aim of preservation cannot be preservation of the ontic only. People are more and more aware of the fact that the entire concept of cultural heritage is constructed through socially mediated processes. Nowadays, the various means of
preservation aim at preserving and maintaining the unlimited and fundamentally contingent meanings that artefacts may have for different individuals and communities. This attitude is also reflected in the Heideggerian concept of *Bewahrung*. Preservation in Heidegger’s sense aims to preserve the conflict, *Streit*, that is inherent in an artwork. Preservation can also be understood in the way John Locke understood it. For Locke, preservation has an intersubjective and social dimension: the aim of preservation is to preserve meanings and values rather than physical artefacts. This view, exemplified by Muñoz Viñas’ theory, is becoming more and more popular, especially in the conservation of contemporary art.

It has been said that the focal point of technical art history is the ‘physical reality’ of the artwork. This approach, however, sees the materiality of works of art – actualized in certain physical and therefore analytically analyzable features of individual works – only as a puzzle to be solved. In fact the proponents of technical art history are not capable of asking what the real nature of the materiality of an artwork is. In their world, there is no space for such questions. They do not understand that an artwork’s materiality, which I have called the ‘Materiality of the Image’, is a problem *per se* – a problem that, as all genuine problems, is unsolvable. Therefore, technical art history has no means to tackle the most crucial dimension of an artwork’s materiality: that ‘there is’ *(il y a)* materiality; that in every artwork – in each saturated phenomenon as a whole – there is a *process of incarnation* taking place that is fundamentally paradoxical. We are dealing here with the sense (*Sinn, sens*) of materiality, we have surpassed the ontic region and are entering the ontological. The sense of materiality is neither material (i.e. physical) nor immaterial; it retreats beyond the reach of even the most sophisticated analytical methods of the natural sciences. Therefore, the sense of materiality seems to have no sense. For Heidegger, that which retreats was of even the most sophisticated analytical methods of the natural sciences. Therefore, the place that is fundamentally paradoxical. We are dealing here with the sense (*Sinn, sens*) of materiality, we have surpassed the ontic region and are entering the ontological. The sense of materiality is neither material (i.e. physical) nor immaterial; it retreats beyond the reach of even the most sophisticated analytical methods of the natural sciences. Therefore, the sense of materiality seems to have no sense. For Heidegger, that which retreats was the *Abgrund*, and Cesare Brandi launched the term *astanza*. All such concepts, or ‘quasi-concepts’, are conflictual – as is the Materiality of the Image. In contrast to Edmund Husserl, who discussed the conflict between an artwork’s physical matter (*Bildding*) and its imaging object, *Bildobjekt*, I argue that the *Bildobjekt per se* is conflictual in its nature. Let us take Brandi’s example of a marble statue as our starting point. According to Brandi, a marble block undergoes a fundamental metamorphosis when it becomes a *Bildobjekt*. Naturally, it is clear that a formless stone block has to be modelled into a certain recognizable form in order to represent a *Pietà*, for instance. It is just as clear that the mineralogical constitution of the block does not change from calcium carbonate into some other material during the sculptor’s work, *per via di levare*. Brandi’s point is that when one starts to make a sculpture from a marble block, it becomes a significant part of human history. In becoming a support to the Image – for instance a *Pietà* – the marble block is divided into two: appearance (*aspetto*) and structure (*struttura*). The marble block does not have such a dual nature when it is still in the quarry. Therefore, it would be a mistake to think that the material constitution of the marble that became the *Pietà* is identical with the marble left in the quarry – which has the very same material constitution – but which did not become the *Pietà*. The sculpture does not represent *Pietà*, it ‘is’ *Pietà*. But the material of the *Pietà* is not the calcium carbonate only. Brandi pointed out that the material of the *Parthenon*, for instance, is not only marble – it consists also of the surrounding space and atmosphere, the changing time of the day and weather cycles, various light conditions, and the network of significations – the world (*Welt*) – it belongs to. For Brandi, that which I call the Materiality of the Image falls within the sphere of the ‘pure reality’ of *astanza* and not within the existential reality of *flagranza*. Therefore, phenomenological reduction is a prerequisite for entering *astanza*.

In spite of the criticism I direct at technical art history, I am not saying that I consider its methods and approaches useless – it is thanks to these methods that we now, for the first time in human history, have received detailed, systematically collected information about the materials and techniques artists have used in their oeuvre over the centuries. We should bear in mind that due to the age-old form-matter dichotomy, where the latter has always been seen as subordinate to the former, art history has for ages almost totally neglected issues concerning the materiality of works of art. Therefore I do not want to deny the value or importance of the discoveries that have been made, for instance, in Isaac Wacklin’s research project. The gravest problem in technical art history – ‘traditional’ or ‘conventional’ art history dealing with Old Masters as a whole – is, however, that it totally neglects the crucial
phenomenological dimension of the artwork scrutinized: the presentness of the Image. It should not be forgotten that we can encounter an artwork, say a ‘Rembrandt’, authentically – eigenlich – in the present moment only. I am not claiming that hermeneutical approaches have not taken into consideration the temporal and spatial situatedness of the interpretations carried out, I am just arguing that in the final stage of the interpretation process, the hic et nunc of the interpretative act is bracketed from consideration in favour of the ‘factual’ and ‘more real’ reconstructed past. My aim is not to underrate technical art history as a method or as an approach, but in my opinion, it has not been able to make use of its full potential so far, the reason being that it has not understood the complexity of its study material: the Materiality of the Image. One could argue that it has not been able to encounter the resistance of the materiality that Gilles Deleuze called sentiendum. To be able to encounter this resistance, one has to return to a kind of infantile (Agamben) experience of wonderment that there is (il y a) materiality. This is the aporia and conflict caused by the Materiality of the Image. The experience that ‘there is’ materiality should lead us to a groundbreaking reassessment of our theoretical premises.
This resistance of the Image constitutes its critical power. Cesare Brandi’s insightful name for conservation was *atto critico*. For Brandi, conservation was a critical act or recognition (*riconnoscimento*) rather than *praxis*. To this, one should add, however, that conservation and preservation are ideas in the Kantian sense, implications that can be explicated only through practical means of conservation and preservation. *Atto critico* should not be understood as aesthetic evaluation of works of art – it is not art criticism – the true significance of this critical act is not aesthetic but ontological. *Atto critico* recognizes the artwork’s mode of being as ontologically *distinct*, and therefore, *atto critico* is based on reduction that brackets the artwork’s mode of being – *astanza* – from the existence of the empirical reality that Brandi named *flagranza*. When we carry out this act of reduction we set up the Image. The Image ‘reigns’ only as long as it is set up, that is, actualized, time and again. The aim of preservation is therefore to safeguard the artwork’s distinctive presence, its *astanza*. This presence cannot be reduced to *parúsia* or *úsia*. This does not mean that we do not face the artwork as confronting us (*gegenüber*), it only means that the entity we encounter does not belong to any subsistent *Vorhandenheit*.

But care for images is first of all care for their temporality: time as lived and experienced – that is the only authentic (*eigentlich*) meaning of *Dasein*’s temporality. As Didi-Huberman states, when we expose ourselves to a work of art, we expose ourselves to time. Traditional and technical art history have only one conception of time, which Didi-Huberman calls *euchronic*. This consists of degraded historical events that are in the past. Euchronic time cannot accept *durée* or *kinesis*, that is events that have not reached their finality, because that would prevent the artist historian from capturing them, from identifying their ‘real’ content and meaning. The art historian is like a collector of butterflies who needs to halt the flight of the creature in order to define what it is – this can only be achieved by capturing the butterfly with a net, stunning it with ether and puncturing its wings with needles in order to fit it into the right conceptual framework. Then, under the dazzling light of the reading lamp the connoisseur can identify and classify the item and determine what it *really* is. However, killing the insect destroys the very thing that originally aroused his/her interest: its unique quality of being able to *papillonner*. A butterfly that does not fly is not a butterfly but a corpse. In order to fit the butterfly in with his/her *connaissance*, the connoisseur must turn it into a motionless, lifeless object, a *Körper*. The same applies to time. Art historians want time to be a subsistent object before them, a *Gegenstand*. The historical and cultural distance that separates them from the era studied is met solely in negative terms. They try painstakingly to reconstruct their object – the work of art in its ‘original’ historical and cultural context – by using archives, masses of historical documents, all kinds of reference material they can find and use. While art historians spend days, weeks and months in archives and libraries focusing on this meticulous work, the item under study with its historical and cultural context is waiting in its subsistent *Gegenständlichkeit* – at least this is what they expect it to do. This is a fatal misconception, however. The Image invites us to recognize the heuristic value of anachronisms. An artwork is encountered at a certain moment in time, but its eventuality is not reducible to it. Its time is not *innerweltlich*, it is – in Brandi’s words – *extratemporale*. The fact that it is so – that the Image is wholly present in all its actual manifestations – allows it to be experienced repeatedly. None of these encounters is more authentic, more valuable or significant than the others. The Image is not *in* time, it *opens up* time. It creates a caesura in the linear temporality of causally occurring innerworldly facts. Similarly, the Image is not in space but opens up its own spatiality. Finally, the Image is not in matter, but generates its own ontologically distinct materiality that did not exist before the Image.

The Image is preserved only as long as it eventualizes, as long as its genuine givenness is being received. Only those to whom it has been given (*adonné*) and who are able to respond to its call can transform this potential givenness – or virtuality in Deleuzian terms – into its full manifestation. According to Jean-Luc Marion, works of art must be re-experienced again and again. Their givenness (*donation*) that surpasses all our intuitions and projections requires this. All responses to their infinite givenness are necessarily finite, partial and provisional. Encounters with the Image are highly singular, univocally assigned events – experiences (*Erfahrung*) one has to undergo. Such an encounter is not an *Erlebnis* that can be repeated,
it is not an event in impoverished form. The Sameness of repeated experiences is merely an illusion, for repetition unavoidably transforms that which is repeated. Therefore it is useless to imagine that repeated examination and analysis of a certain artwork helps in learning to know it better. Naturally, we can find more information about it – and this may help us to clarify its attribution, composition, provenance and physical structure. All this, however, subsidiary and contingent to its being as an Image. As Claude Romano points out, only innerworldly events can add to our knowledge. The experience of a work of art as event – as an Erfahrung instead of an Erlebnis – has always a distinctly first-time character. It is a singular event whose origin is unknowable and causally inexplicable. Works of art – Marion’s saturated phenomena par excellence – are never seen wholly and totally; the unseen, invu, remains forever embedded in their structure. Repeated reunion with works of art preserves them better than any conservation treatment. It should be noted that second-order representations or works of art – ekphrases, reproductive graphics, documentary photographs, for instance –
are actually measures for preserving them. Jorma Puranen preserves an old portrait by taking a photograph of it. To be able to do this, he must first establish a relationship with it, he must undergo the Erfahrung of its happening. Preservers of Images never encounter the Image as an object. Preservation calls for participation (methexis) and care that entails de-distancing–Ent-fernung. To encounter a work of art we must bring it close – by doing so, however, we keep it at a distance. In order to be able to ex-perience the Image we have to put ourselves at risk in the play of de-distancing.

The artwork is not a Gegenstand, it is not an object of knowledge – to think so is to give in to Erleichterung, in other words, to make things all too easy. According to Romano, a work of art should not be an object of connaissance but an event of co-naissance. The art historians who try to distance themselves from their own era and cultural context in order to better understand the past categories of their object of research actually prevent access to the past. The only understanding of works of art – ancient, modern, or contemporary – stems from the actually living presence of image recognition and its categories. The only way to see an artwork as meaningful is to experience it as relevant from the perspective of current concerns. For – as Walter Benjamin argued – ‘every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irrevocably.’ Therefore, instead of art history based on euchronism and reconstruction, we need art history that is, in Balian terms, ‘pre-posterous’ – art history that brushes its object against the grain. Such an approach ‘puts what came chronologically first (pre) as an aftereffect behind (post) its later cycling’. Benjamin argued that the original (ursprünglich) may never be revealed as a naked fait accompli, but only through that which precedes (Vorgeschichte) and that which comes later (Nachgeschichte). Pre-posterous history follows the logic of Nachträglichkeit by deconstructing the relation between the past and the present. Preposterous history is not in time – it opens up time, creating a flash of lightning. Furthermore, it also crushes the logical opposition of word and image: dialectical images – Images in their proper sense – can be encountered only through language. The idea as the Image can be encountered only by reading it. This kind of reading, however, is not based on recognition: it is neither iconographical nor iconological, it is not based on pretexts, but purely on the visual, that ‘there is’ visibility. To read visually is to live through the Image, which should be understood as a problematic Idea in the Kantian, Benjaminian and Deleuzian sense. Such an Idea manifests itself only in shreds, fragments, and blotches. Therefore, in order to approach it, the art historian has to be a kind of Lumpensammler, a ragman. Bal and Didi-Huberman are both such collectors of rags.

The origin of metaphors for revealing can be traced back to antiquity, as Pierre Hadot has shown. They are prevalent in the prevailing hermeneutic-reconstructive approaches, especially in the field of conservation-restoration. By removing the features that are categorized contingent and accidental to the artwork in question – such as overpaintings and yellowed varnish layers, for instance – the conservator attempts to reveal the underlying ‘authentic’ strata which are thought to reflect the artist’s pure presence unhindered. In actual praxis, these ‘acts of revelation’ can be both destructive and non-destructive. For instance, removal of later layers of paint and oxidized varnish layers from a painting is always destructive. However, the highly sophisticated analytical methods that are applied in the research of the Bildding – identification of the pigments by using X-ray fluorescence, for instance – are frequently non-destructive. Application of various methods based on electromagnetic radiation makes it possible to see through the paint surface into the underlying strata. Regardless of whether the methods used are destructive or non-destructive, both operate exclusively on an ontic level. The ontological cannot be revealed. By disclosing the ontic features of an artwork one cannot, however, disclose the onticity itself; the Sinn of the ontic conceals itself from view. The thing considered ‘revealable’ is thus always an entity that has already unconcealed itself. Therefore, the acts of revelation are capable of ‘revealing’ only ‘poor phenomena’ in Jean-Luc Marion’s terms. The ‘discloser’ of the ontic arrives all too late, only when the event of rising into appearance, surgissement – which is the Image – has passed by and the saturated phenomenon has already been transformed into a fact, a fait accompli, frozen into an object of knowledge: phénomène pauvre. Didi-Huberman asks: ‘Isn’t the historian a man who exhumes the objects of the past, dead artefacts of vanished ancient
cultures? He reminds us that the scholar does more than just this. The archaeologist disturbs the soil of his excavation site with its many layers of deposited sediments. This is the only way to exhume buried artefacts – a stone gadget without a handle, for instance. In order to ‘reveal’ the ancient utensil, the archaeologist has to dig it up. Ergo: ‘revealing’ disfigures its figures as much as it figures. The artefact exhumed and brought into the light of logos always remains a representation of the past. But representation cannot bring back the life of the deceased – life cannot be represented, it can only be lived. The thing we share with past civilizations is the world we live in. Representation, Vorstellung, makes things all too easy.

Consciousness of the Materiality of the Image can help us awaken from our intellectual slumber. Gilles Deleuze argued that only genuine encounters with pure difference can set us free from our natural tendency to make things all too easy, from the Erleichterung Heidegger described. An encounter with old and familiar facts, recognized identities, cannot awaken our cogitandum. Only the affectively met sensuousness, aisthésis and sentiendum of the world can lead us to cogitandum. An artwork’s materiality belongs to the sphere of sentiendum – that is the antithesis of the already known, recognized ontic physicality. Consciousness of the resistance of the artwork, which is both sensuous and physical, should be harnessed to work in favour of an epokhē enabling us to break up our ossified conceptual frameworks. Only this resistance can really challenge our deep-rooted mindsets. Didi-Huberman approaches an artwork’s materiality in precisely this way. He is strongly affected by the sentiendum the artwork creates. It makes him slow his pace and finally halt before a certain painting, sculpture or a film, devant l’image. He himself does not decide to stop in front of the artwork, it is the immanent power, the artwork, the image, that forces him to stop. It creates a critical interruption, a moment of thaumazein that takes his breath away. This is the moment of kenōsis – or epokhē that Lambert Wiesing regards as necessary for the genesis of image consciousness. Didi-Huberman allows himself to be increasingly affected by the sentiendum. The silence of this moment is not devoid of voices; he is standing motionless but not without movement – we can see even in total darkness because there is always movement in our souls. This critical pause is the moment of the Benjaminian Ursprung, the tourbillon dans la fleuve; the dialectic at its standstill, the event of the Image. The very surface of the painting, sculpture or film, its apparition, is dialectic in nature: a templum of heterogeneous elements, a non-lieu of mimēsis, Urphänomen consisting of ressemblance and dissemblance. This is not stasis but ek-stasis; just like the beholder of the image, the image, too, is always in motion – any image, not just ‘moving pictures’. This motion consists of overdetermination, chains of associations: condensation and displacement. This moment forms a conflict – it is the navel or a wormhole through which consciousness is connected to the unconscious, a locus in which astra, the conceptual rationality, meets monstra, the monsters of the unconscious, the unconsciousness from which the Lacanian Real, the Barthesian punctum, the Freudian-Balian detail-comble, the Arassean détail-comble meet. The Didi-Huberanian le pan rise. It must be kept in mind, however, that in contrast with Real, punctum, and navel, le pan has always a distinctly material dimension: il fait littéralement front dans le tableau. It is the symptom of real paint confronting us with its obscure physical resistance that challenges us with its ipenetrability – its reflexive opaqueness, in Louis Marin’s terms.

The Image cannot be encountered in the region of aesthetic evaluation or cognitive analysis. It can be encountered only when its being as a paradox is understood and recognized – the artwork is not a puzzle, it is a paradox. All we can do when confronting images, devant l’image, is to wonder. This astonishment is caused by something we do not know, and it preserves its strangeness, its Unheimlichkeit, to the very end. When confronting images we expose ourselves to pathos. In this state of mind, we do not try to understand what it is that causes this sense of awe in us. We wonder that there is, il y a, Being. To my mind, there is no room for real thaumazein – in Heideggerian terms, Erstaunen – in current technical art history. Technical art history does not encounter the artwork as a paradox but as a problem to be solved: confronting a painting does not give rise to awe but curiosity, a pressing need to know more. This kind of Neugier is an inexhaustible thirst for knowledge epitomizing the will for power – in contrast, thaumazein means passion for non-knowledge. When we suffer from this passion for not knowing – Didi-Huberman calls this jouissance le gai savoir inquiet – we focus our minds on something that is not gegenständlich, something from which we cannot glean any positive knowledge. But, as Kant argued, that does not prevent us from thinking it. To be
able to do so, however, we need to resort to our *Einbildungskraft*, our powerful potential for productive imagination.

Thus, the approach of technical art history reflects the academic premises of traditional art history. Erwin Panofsky regarded art history as a humanistic discipline. For Didi-Huberman, Panofsky’s attitude represents exorcism aimed at eliminating from the discipline its real *Lebenskraft*, its ‘elixir of life’ – the very thing that makes it vital. In the spirit of Aby Warburg, Didi-Huberman stresses that works of art cannot be reduced to the human. For him, an artwork’s essence is inhuman, *unheimlich*, strange and inexplicable – in material terms, it can be seen as embodied in wax, which in its viscosity and instability, reflects the workings of human memory and can be felt threatening. This *informe* is the *Ursprung* of an artwork, and the origin of an artwork is not in the human realm – although art history as a ‘humanistic discipline’ tempts us to believe so. We can direct our thoughts towards that region by adopting concepts such as Friedrich Schelling’s ‘first nature’ (*erste Natur*) or Merleau-Ponty’s ‘wild being’ (*être sauvage*). Maurice Blanchot longed for the ‘other night’ (*autre nuit*), which is not subordinate to the day. Didi-Huberman uses the term ‘technical unconscious’. Its roots are not only in Walter Benjamin’s ‘optical unconsciousness’ but also in many of the above-mentioned sources, as well as in Gilbert Simondon’s texts on the essence of technicity. It is probably unnecessary to point out that the technical unconscious has nothing to do with technical art history. It delves into the materiality Ned Lukacher has called ‘the other materiality’, and I have adopted this term for the purposes of this study. This other materiality is not subordinated to the ontic. It refers to *physis* that is not controlled by human intentions but is ontologically older than human beings. It refers to the Being of beings.

Artworks are not reduced to their physical *Gegenständlichkeit* – neither are they anything purely ideal. An artwork ‘is’ not – it is not ontic – it eventualizes, as Claude Romano and Jean-Luc Marion argue. An artwork can preserve its structureless structure as a *Gebilde* only as long as it events and embraces us by eventualizing. The eventualizing...
of an artwork is always conflictual, and remains so—therefore it is irreducible to the Fichtean-Hegelian thesis-antithesis-synthesis—dialectics. In the eventualizing of the Image ‘thesis’ and ‘antithesis’—whose relation is not to be understood as antithetic but rather as differential—can never constitute a reconciling synthesis—they collide with each other generating a symptom. It is a decisive critical moment, when the Image reveals its readability (Lesbarkeit) and recognizability (Erkenbarkeit), if only for a fleeting moment. Readability can only occur when the past collides with the present and forms a dialectical image. That kind of image remains forever open (ouverte) and restless (inquiète). Didi-Huberman urges us to see a tear (déchirure) in the tissue of representation—it is a place where the image burns. This tear epitomizes a symptom. Encounters with images are always traumatic. We can be touched by an image only if it affects us fundamentally. Freud talked about symptom formation and of the navel of the dream where consciousness is connected to the unconscious, Lacan launched concepts such as the Real, the lack (manque), the object a, Barthes the punctum. Didi-Huberman’s term for this subversive detail is le pan. According to Benjamin, only dialectical images are images in the authentic sense. The past can be rendered meaningful only when it is brought into a critical confrontation with our present time (Auseinandersetzung). This is an antithesis to the hermeneutic, reconstructive approach of traditional art history dealing with Old Masters. The temporal and cultural distance between ourselves and the past should not be seen as an impediment limiting our access to the past. We must use it to our advantage. We should recognize the heuristic power of anachronism.

We can break the vicious circle of representation only by breaking the form, by breaking our own image reflected in the pool. Another solution is that we have the courage to stare deeper into the dark abyss of the pool from which something uncanny stares at us. This is the Lacanian Real, this is le pan, the symptom, the Nichts. When we do this, we abandon the illusion that we are rulers of the visibility and expose ourselves to a dimension that we cannot by any means control and that is neither explainable by the categories of sufficient reason nor articulated in the framework of logical discourse. We are no longer dealing with what there is but that there is: that there is givenness, Gegebenheit, that there is Being, that there is materiality, and that there are images we do not master but that rule over us—images that have turned their faces upon us before we have even noticed them. We are not the origin of the fact that there is visibility: visibilité, or the visuel, precedes us. We must be able to adapt to this facticity, find a way to respond to it.

Didi-Huberman’s denomination for the region of il y a is visuel. It could be translated as ‘visuality’, but the translation would weaken its power—that ‘there is’ (il y a) visibility is more powerfully expressive. Therefore, I prefer to leave the expression untranslated. I suggest the best translation for it might be ‘visibility’—this is to underline its closeness to Merleau-Ponty’s concept la chair (flesh), along with notions such as l’écart (difference), le chiasme (chiasm) réversibilité (reversibility), le pli (fold) and so on. Didi-Huberman’s visuel has, however, some affinity with the Derridean undecidables (indécidables) as well: visuel is neither visible nor invisible but a quasi-concept that oscillates undecidably between them. But one could also think of visuel in terms of Kant’s theory of negative magnitudes. From that point of view, visible and invisible are logical, qualitative oppositions, but not really perceptible oppositions, which are necessarily quantitative. We see neither absolute lightness nor absolute darkness—those qualia are not logical but real opposites. Merleau-Ponty uses the metaphor of fold to name a non-place where light and darkness, presence and absence, the inside and the outside encounter each other by constantly changing places. That which Didi-Huberman calls visuel, is this fold: the visuel is the fold in visibility. All we can sense are degrees of luminosities. There is always a hint of darkness in the brightest daylight, always some faint glow in the deepest night. Perception is always accompanied by counter-perception.

Didi-Huberman’s Survivance des lucioles (2009) is dedicated to the envois of visuel: the fireflies. He writes that we can find these tiny, barely visible creatures of the night if we just have enough time, patience and sensitivity, passibilité. In the darkness their glow, lueur, is contrasted with the blackness of the night; it is the dark of the night that allows us to see them. Fireflies are adventurous creatures, and their glow is à peine visible. Their phenomenal givenness is sparse but they are still out there, against all odds. A certain attitude is required before they can be found. The eyes that see them cannot resort to the Promethean gaze...
The flood of images being poured on us on a daily basis can easily lead to a situation in which we no longer recognize the strangeness of the Image. We cannot view the Image as a paradox. How could we restore the Image to its *Unheimlichkeit*? Images need to be given back their primordial complexity. Instead of *Erleichterung*, we need *Erschwerung*. The photos Jorma Puranen has taken of old portrait paintings in the Sinebrychoff Art Museum should be seen as servants to givenness, *sentiendum*, and reflexive opaqueness. They tear up the representation, they open up the Image to its underside. They arouse, as Puranen says, ‘some slight restlessness’. Puranen’s act is an appropriation after which the portraits are no longer the same. The prevailing ambience he takes advantage of in his photographic sessions – that there is light, that there are reflections – brings forth previously unnoticed details in the physical art objects. The natural daylight falling on the paintings draws our attention to the cracks, joints and wood grains of the panels, the weft of the canvases and deformations, craquelure patterns on paint layers and glossy and yellowed varnish surfaces. Thanks to the raking light we can discern single brushstrokes and paint impastos unnoticed when the paintings are viewed in homogenic museum light.

Puranen is never separate or absent from the artwork he photographs. As proof of this, his or his camera’s shadow is thrown on the paintings photographed. Like Sarkis in his video *Au commencement, l’apparition* (2005), Puranen is very near the portraits he has chosen to photograph. The photographer’s physical presence is intertwined with the physical presence of the paintings. Between them there is a kind of reversibility, which is inherent in such an *experimentum signae*. We can experience a comparable sensation by placing our hand on a wooden table. By doing so, we feel its impact on the palm of our hand. The table as *hylē* touches us in its dark and mute lignity. The wood encounters our flesh – a saturated phenomenon par excellence – but does not negate it. Their relation is not logical opposition, it is rather a fold, a kind of reversibility. This event of the flesh oscillates between flesh and wood – as Daphne during her metamorphosis wavers undecidedly between her flesh and bark of the laurel tree. The material of this event of *Ent-körperung–dis-carnation* is neither bark nor skin. The philosophy of reflection which ‘structures’ reality solely on the basis of logical discursive structures and subject-object–relations only, can not reach this resistance. But we should think about this in-betweenness. The place in-between, the *sense*, which is ontologically ‘older’ than logical oppositions, is the very place where we should be. This place, which is actually a non-place, *atopos*, can only be approached intuitively, by means of Bergsonian-Deleuzian intuition, Merleau-Pontian hyperdialectic or by Heideggerian *Besinnung*. Our existence consists of living our in-betweenness, the *Da* of the *Da-Sein*. This *Da* is never static and centripetal but always dynamic, *ec*-static and centripetal. Preservation (*Bewahrung*) sees care for the Image as a place, *Da*. This place, which is not extensity but virtual intensity – has not existed before the occurrence of the Image. The Image ‘is’ its place in its own ontologically specific materiality.
The Image never ‘is’ but takes place, eventualizes. To be able to confront it we cannot be separate from its eventualizing, we must live it. The Image cannot take place without its preservers: conservators, art historians, philosophers – museum visitors. In order to encounter the Image we have to expose ourselves to it. The Image can never be an object in a sense of Gegenstand. In becoming an object it loses its distinct mode of being – it becomes Zeug, an object among other objects. In Claude Romano’s definition, the Image is an an-archic event in an evential sense, an event that has no antecedent causality that occurs not in time but opens up time. To live through an Image equals its preservation. Every single time we are able to encounter an Image – every time we are capable of responding to its call – we are taking care of its being.

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