

Galerie Neu

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Sean Snyder *Aurora Boraelis* 19.01.2017 – 01.03.2017  
Opening 19.01.2017, 6 – 9 pm

For the longest time, we talked about the relation between images and their supports: the material on which an image was produced, the way in which this material conditioned the image itself and the efforts, throughout the history of art, to either emphasize or hide the impact of the support. Watercolor paintings expose the graininess of the paper base, the way in which it absorbs or distributes liquids. Slick layers of oil pigments and glaze in 17th century painting helped viewers forget the canvas underneath, as well as the materiality of paint itself; 20th century painters had no qualms about exposing both. In contrast, a tapestry erases all distinctions between image and support, since the interaction of warp and woof – the woven pattern – is the image itself.

In fact, it was the structural similarity between weaving and electronics – first pointed out by early video and computer artists who had to contend with the fact that their images were simply the ephemeral effects of signals and code – that displaced the discourse of image supports. In the age of electronic networks, the relation between image and infrastructure became paramount: ephemeral imagery in nature (from the aurora borealis to dreams and hallucinations) gave added weight to this idea. Institutional, ideological and psychological infrastructures were now seen in light of the new technological affordances of the information age. The work of Sean Snyder situates itself at that juncture where the question of support explicitly confronts the vertiginous and at times paranoid question of information infrastructures, exposing less what an image is or what it represents than the new type of organizational forces that run through it.

Such infrastructural concerns were at once exposed and parodied in Snyder's contribution to *Grey Room* journal's recent dossier on the occasion of the election of Donald Trump as the next president of the U.S.A. The item in question is a Dec. 24 letter to the Department of Homeland Security, in which Snyder reports on suspicious activity in compliance with the preemptive logic of the 2001 Patriot Act. Yet Snyder frames his findings by first evoking an ephemeral image, more specifically the famous dream image in which Sigmund Freud appears as an elephant, because, as Freud's patient explained to him: *Vous me trompez* (you are deceiving me). The image is nothing in itself; it is simply a function of the metonymic, or loosely associative, production of the elephant trunk (= trompe in French). The spirit of paranoia thus established – no one mentioned, no one forgotten, least of all the Republican Party and the name of its 2016 presidential nominee – the letter goes on to produce a web or weave of other associations – mainly between a red, white and blue Slurpee slush drink that was deliberately knocked out of the hands of its holder and splattered on the street in Washington DC between a 7-11 and the International Spy Museum, and the exhibition of the Cold War-era CIA-supported Jackson Pollock *Lavender Mist* painting on the walls of the nearby Smithsonian National Gallery of Art.

Fruitless enquiries about such connections having been addressed to the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum as well as the White House, Snyder thought it safest to alert the DHS. In the age of critical infrastructures, this is, apparently, the sort of organization best equipped to handle the new type of "trompe l'oeil effects" at work in contemporary imagery, the new "art of deception".

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In traditional painting, trompe l'oeil effects were typically deployed to produce a tangible sense of three-dimensional reality, yet by working so hard to negate the presence of the two-dimensional support, they inevitably also drew attention to it. In an age of generalized suspicion and round-the-clock preemption, the eye-deceiving effects of information infrastructures may possibly also serve to highlight their presence. But only at the cost of an entirely parodic form of paranoia, where everything is always significantly “connected” and where news is, by definition, fake news. As Snyder’s subtle wordplay suggests, the Patriot Act is simply the constant performance of prescribed paranoia – in other words, an “act”.

The letter may be pure comedy. Still, it points to the more serious aspects of the changing tenets of iconology. Take Snyder’s interest in aspect ratios, for instance. In his work, it has less to do with choice of aesthetic formats than with the constant operations of formatting and reformatting taking place in a world where images mainly exist in transit from one machine to another. In Snyder’s work, even the square QR code patterns - the ultimate conduit images - are subjected to aspect ratio reformatting. Stretched, layered, distended to the point of almost-dysfunction, they have themselves become effects of electronic recalibration. For if information infrastructures are key instruments of capital and government, they also produce their own dark labyrinths and back alleys - as obtuse as the hermetic vaults and server farms that are obliquely evoked in the video *Cloud Sediment* (Gstaad). With drone footage that shifts impulsively between too-distant and too-intimate views from above (frustrating any desire for measured documentation of systems and functions), infrastructural devices come across as quasi-geological formations, part of a natural landscape of earth, stone, woods, mountains, clouds and air.

Paradoxically, the impersonally technical drone footage pinpoints the metaphorical packaging of such techniques of information handling: the “safety” of the earthy abode combined with the limitless lightness and capaciousness of “clouds”. That computing actually delivers none of these things is somehow beside the point. For *Cloud Sediment* (Gstaad) also invests in what we may perhaps call the fantasy infrastructure of digital technologies - primarily by having its own data stored in the famously safe Swiss vault that it documents. Like so many of Snyder’s works, it delivers another abstract image ... of the abstractions of contemporary infrastructure.

Ina Blom

The exhibition will run from January 19th, 2017 through March 1st, 2017. The opening will take place on January 19th, 6 – 9 pm. For further information, please contact the gallery at mail@galerieneu.com or +49 (0) 30 285 75 50.