

MARKO STAMENKOVIĆ :

*The Rock - Points of View in Bart De Clercq's Painting*

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THE ROCK - POINTS OF VIEW IN BART DE CLERCQ'S PAINTING<sup>1</sup>

## STENA - TAČKE GLEDIŠTA U SLIKARSTVU BARTA DE KLERKA

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**Abstract:** *Images are of the order of monsters. They are beautiful in the same way that they are shocking to the eye. In Édouard Manet's own words: "Un des plus beaux, des plus curieux, et des plus terribles spectacles que l'on puisse voir, c'est une course de taureaux. J'espère, à mon retour, mettre sur la toile l'aspect brillant, papillotant et en même temps dramatique de la corrida à laquelle j'ai assisté."<sup>2</sup> In the bullfighting occurring at the moment of looking at images (any ima-*

<sup>1</sup> The following paper is based on my research work during the doctoral studies at the Department of Philosophy and Moral Sciences - University of Ghent (Belgium) since September 2011, supervised by Prof. Dr. Tom Claes, Director of CEVI - Center for Ethics and Value Inquiry [<http://www.cevi-globalethics.ugent.be/>]. The research makes part of a 34-month long PhD project titled *Suicide Cultures. Theories and Practices or Radical Withdrawal - A Transnational Cultural and Media Paradigm* (2001-2011), supported by Basileus Scholarship - an Erasmus Mundus Action 2 project for academic exchange between EU and Western Balkans funded by the European Commission.

<sup>2</sup> "One of the most beautiful, most curious, and most terrifying spectacles that one can see is a bullfight. I hope upon my return, to put on canvas that shiny, flickering, and at the same time tragic bullfight that I attended." Translated by M. Stamenkovic from: Adolphe Tabarant, *Manet et ses oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947), 373.

ge), the fight between the beholder's eye and the painting's gaze, in Lacan's sense, is won by the latter. The toreros, the embodiment of modern warriors for the bourgeois spectators in the second half of the European XIX century, are always destined to symbolic death: the power of the (self-) annihilating gaze of the picture itself wins over the eye in the ritual of exchange between subjects and objects of looking, whose roles mingle, interchange and constantly shift during the realistic and also hallucinatory act of 'seeing images.'

**Key words:** Image, Death, Perspective, Self-Annihilating Gaze, Bart De Clercq

**Apstrakt:** Poredak slike je poredak čudovišta. Slike su podjednako lepe koliko i šokantne oku, kako je to Eduar Mane (Édouard Manet) jednom prilikom opisao: "Jedan od najboljih, najuzbudljivijih i najstrašnijih prizora koji se mogu videti jeste borba bikova. Nadam se da ću, kada se vratim, staviti na platno tu sjajnu, treperavu i istovremeno dramatičnu sliku koride kojoj sam prisustvoovao" (Tabarant 1947: 373, prevod sa francuskog M.S.). U "borbi bikova" koja se odvija u trenutku posmatranja slika (bilo koje slike) konflikt između pogleda oka posmatrača i pogleda slike, u Lakanovom smislu, završava se pobedom ovog drugog. Toreadori su, pored toga što su predstavljali otelotvorenje modernih ratnika u spektaklima za pripadnike evropske buržoaske publike druge polovine devetnaestog veka, bili predodređeni i za simboličku smrt: moć auto-destruktivnog pogleda slike (slike koja gleda svog posmatrača) pobeđuje pogled u oku posmatrača u rituelu razmene između subjekta i objekta gledanja čije se uloge ukrštaju, mešaju i neprestano međusobno razmenjuju tokom realnog ali i halucinantnog čina "gledanja slika."

**Ključne reči:** Slika, smrt, perspektiva, autodestruktivan pogled, Bart De Klerk

## 1. Introduction

To perceive a visual image implies the beholder's participation in a process of organization. The experience of an image is thus a creative act of integration. Its essential characteristic is that by plastic power an experience is formed into an organic whole. Here is a basic discipline of forming, that is, thinking in

*terms of structure, a discipline of utmost importance in the chaos of our formless world.*

- Gyorgy Kepes -<sup>3</sup>

In the chaos of our formless world, what are the forces of visual attraction in front of a painted image? What are the seductions of the spectacular that disturb our habits in the ways of looking, and disturb them all the more persistently the more we keep standing in front of it? What are the structural (material, spatial, and epistemological) *properties* of that body, a living organism of painting we tend to recognize in a visual image as a 'painting'?

The complexity of an inevitably - and at least - triangular relationship (among painter, painting, and spectator's singularity of looking, from always multiple, differentiated, non-identical perspectives of each and every beholder in a specific moment in time, from a specific position in space, and within the specific environment where the act of looking occurs) is, first and foremost, of a *physical* nature: it demands the very presence of those three major elements constitutive for the practice of looking. The bodily presence is a guarantee to a shared, mutual exchange of impulses that produce, in the process of looking, a certain kind of ritual communication.

What I mean by the 'ritual communication' is not, however, limited by any material ritual practice of recognition in everyday life, as in **Louis Althusser's** famous example of an encounter between two acquaintances who recognize each other on the street, in a sort of (*re*)-*connaissance* that he defines as ideological and which urges them to perform the ritual of mutual greeting.<sup>4</sup> The ritual communication we are here concerned with is of a speculative nature: it is *communication* proper as it is upon this desire to communicate that the act of looking (and being looked at) engages in the exercise of ideas in a broader (theoretical and practical) sense, beyond the casual relation established

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<sup>3</sup> Gyorgy Kepes, *Language of Vision* (Chicago: Paul Theobald & Co., 1944), 13. Kepes was the Hungarian-born painter, designer, educator and theorist. He was head of the Light and Color Department of the Institute of Design in Chicago (the New Bauhaus) in the late 1930s, and also the founder and first director of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies at the Harvard's MIT (1967-1972). He died in 2002 in Cambridge, MA. The Kepes Institute, Museum and Cultural Center, honoring his work, was inaugurated in early 2012 in the city of Eger, Hungary. See also: The Kepes Institute online, <http://www.kepeskozpont.hu/en/> (accessed March 25, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review press, 1972), 127-186.

within a merely sensuous, physical presence; it is *ritual* proper as it is organized and staged within the very recognition of a spectator that what he/she is looking at is not just another acquaintance (from our aforementioned example interpreted by Althusser) but an image of acquaintance: not a painting or photography, but the image of the encounter with a painting or a photography, as a 'sacred center' of gaze-exchange that endows images with the authority to preempt our time and, especially, our attention.

At the very moment of *this* recognition, in which a spectator is able to recognize the character of encounter with an image (image as a body that speaks its own language to him/her) and also vice-versa, *that* becomes a force of integration – and particularly of social integration among those spectators who can share the same or similar feeling about such a recognition. When an encounter is not just a meeting between two persons who might have known each other from before, but when both of them (a spectator *and* a painting) can silently recognize that they are witnessing and, at the same time, taking part in the construction of the *event* of their encounter, this is the moment that becomes 'a creative act of integration,' as **Kepes György** (Gyorgy Kepes) would define it in his *Language of Vision*: when, in the ceremony of their encounter - the highlight of which is the moment of their mutual recognition - the eyes of the spectator and the gaze of the painting become fixed on the 'ceremonial center' in between them.<sup>5</sup>

But what this communication reveals is not bound by our ways of rationalizing the world on a cognitive level: it may remain silent, as the power of keeping silent makes the images speak, behind the veil of their visible existence, to those who can engage in the process of the close-up reading of images, or even listening to what they have to say. For *theoria* comes from the Greek word 'to see' (as **W.J.T. Mitchell** reminds us)<sup>6</sup> and it has expressed, since the antiquity, the state of being a spectator:

*We tend to think of 'theory' as something that is primarily conducted in linear discourse, in language and logic, with pictures playing the passive role of illustrations, or (in the case of a 'theory of pictures') serving as the passive objects of description and explanation. But if there is such a thing as a metalanguage,*

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, "Metapictures," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 82.

*it should hardly surprise us that there is such a thing as a metapicture. Our search for a theory of pictures may best be advanced by turning the problem upside-down to look at pictures of theory.*<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Image

Let us therefore take a glance at a single image (before we take a close look at it as a *theoretical object*, as **Mieke Bal** would claim)<sup>8</sup> from the position demanding to turn the things, always over and over again, upside-down. This could give us but one possible orientation in our search for that something we would prefer to name *the meaning of vision* – and, hopefully, the meaning of our own position in the world inhabited by images, the visual world we have never been independent from.



Bart De Clercq, *The Rock*. 2011, oil on canvas, 225cm x 238cm. Private collection.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. In addition to Mitchell's argument, it is worth noting that, according to *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 2005), both Greek θεωρία and Latin contemplatio primarily meant looking at things, whether with the eyes or with the mind. The Greek theoria (θεωρία), from which the English word 'theory' is derived, meant 'contemplation, speculation, looking at, things looked at,' from theorein (θεωρεῖν) 'to consider, speculate, look at,' from theoros (θεωρός) 'spectator', from thea (θεά) 'a view' + horan (ὁρᾶν) 'to see.' See: *Online Etymological Dictionary*, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?l=t&p=13> (accessed March 20, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> On the concept of 'speaking images' as 'theoretical objects', and the divide between cognition and emotion, see: Mieke Bal, "After-Images: Mère folle," in *Nomadikon: About Images 7* (2010), <http://www.nomadikon.net/ContentItem.aspx?ci=172#1fot> (accessed March 20, 2012).

And here we are, in front of it. It exists for us (just as we exist for it) in at least two modes at this moment: either we look at it directly in the 'eyes,' in a privileged space of its physical display, or we look at it from a more comfortable and controllable position – as a small-scale image reproduced in a printed form, a book or a catalogue, for example. In order to grasp at least some fragments of meaning, my proposal would always rather go toward the former mode, where the physical display of paintings - in their 'natural' setting of an artist's studio or an exhibition space - would allow us not only to take a closer look at them, but also to engage in a more intimate and direct way with the ritual aspect of the mutual encounter. What is it that we can see? Eyes wide open and overwhelmed with the feeling of growing confusion in the presence of a single object (the very object of our attention painted on canvas, hanging on the wall, silent yet undoubtedly present, there, in front of us), a beholder starts doubting. Has it been properly *hung*? Or am I myself supposed to be *hanged* in order to take a proper viewpoint so my perception would be correct?<sup>9</sup> Something must be fundamentally wrong with that image. Otherwise I would not have such an annoying impression that things would have looked more stable if the painting were turned around a bit, upside-down, or just a little bit to the side. But which side? It makes me think. And it makes me think of a very particular thing, a postcard: "While you occupy yourself with turning it around in every direction, it is the picture that turns you around like a letter, in advance it deciphers you, it preoccupies space, it procures your words and gestures, all the bodies that you believe you invent in order to determine its outline. You find yourself, you, yourself, on its path."<sup>10</sup> The effect of turning the page of a postcard, as dramatized by **Jacques Derrida** in this case, introduces an impression that it is the picture that turns *me* (like a letter) and not the other way round. I am in its hands. The longer I look, the deeper impression grows in my mind about the fallacy of that picture – any picture, as a matter of fact - to comfort, by any means, its onlooker. It is in the very nature of looking that the musculature of the human eye alternately (and continually) gains or loses its shape, its own power 'to see.' If

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<sup>9</sup> Mind the difference between the terms 'hung' (the regular past tense of the English verb to hang), and 'hanged' - the latter, being an exception to the norm, is used when it comes to hanging someone by the neck, in which case the past tense means *death by hanging*.

<sup>10</sup> See the back cover of Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1987).

the basic premise of our ability to see remains clutched between the external signals of light and the internal reception of brain processed over the retinal check-point of our eyes, there is, however, more to the manner in which we see what we come to see: beside the dimension of physical (optical) relations, stemming from a very direct confrontation with images in the presence of mutual exchange of gazes between the subject and the object of looking, it is the *experience* of vision manifested by this exchange that, as a mental (social, cultural, and also emotional) communicative process, disturbs my habitual ocular principles of perceiving the world around me.

This bodily experience, here and now, in front of *that* painting, turns my viewpoint upside-down in an unprecedented way. It puts me in an uncomfortable position from which I am trying to reach a point-of-view of a very different kind. Already from the very beginning, in the initial, innocent moment of catching the image by the first look of the eye, the relationship between distance and apparent height of objects seems deliberately misrepresented. It forces me to have this first and still weak impression translated by my brain into the image of a question mark ('?') asking simply: What is going on here? It looks as if the painting, in order to have itself put into question rather than to become immediately understood, demands a particular type of onlookers who are suffering from disturbance of perception. What the painting demands, evidently from the beginning, is a distance from normative (linear, orthogonal) practice of looking. Such a demand is all the more important as the only way for the painting to have its own existence legitimized depends exactly on this very first premise - you must accept that what you witness here is the distortion of perception, or: "What you must accept at this very initial moment in which I am welcoming your look upon my surface is that your account of ordinary perception (and what is meant by 'ordinary' refers to orthogonal, linear, one-point perspective) is unimportant or it is important but insufficient to let you inside. So the doors will remain closed until the moment you'd recognize that what you've learned about looking so far is simply not enough. You shall stop and think." The spectator is put in a position which affects his/her sense of vision in terms of lacking the spatial perspective, which he/she finds incorrect so that objects of looking seem to be of the wrong size, smaller or larger than they should be, too far or too close

than the distances we normally consider to be correct.<sup>11</sup> Something must be wrong – in the chaos of our formless world...

How are we supposed to look at this image? From an upside-down point of view? But things are not static over there, at the surface of the canvas. They are moving. The movement is not immediately noticeable, but the feeling of movement is still upsetting. And it is *there*, without doubt. Shall we look at it from an inversed point of view, rotating around it, like a wheel? Would that be a solution? The more we ask ourselves *how* to look, which position to take in order to have a proper view, the more we become aware of the urge to put *ourselves* (and not the painting) into question and to do so in relation to our object of looking. We are becoming more and more conscious about the fact that what the painting is asking from us is not only to look at it, but rather to take a distance from our own habits of looking - so we could reconstruct our own standpoints in the world of vision. A playful task, yet a demanding one: it puts our notion of vision upside-down in a sense that requires to recognize that some other viewpoint (or a multiplicity of viewpoints) could be helpful in understanding the upside-down conditions of looking. These are the conditions resisting the norms we have been used to. Let us, for the time being, name them by a common term which would lead us further into our discussion on so-called disturbed perception. Let us capture such a perception in language (an inevitable tool) by considering it from an inverse standpoint – or by referring to this other type of perspective as reverse or *inverse perspective*.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that something opposes our normative viewpoints does not necessarily imply that it must be irrevocably *wrong*: it does, however, imply a

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<sup>11</sup> Compare with so-called Alice in Wonderland Syndrome, for example in: Wikipedia contributors, "Alice in Wonderland syndrome," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Alice\\_in\\_Wonderland\\_syndrome&oldid=476739545](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Alice_in_Wonderland_syndrome&oldid=476739545) (accessed March 20, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> *Umgekehrten Perspektive*, in Oscar Wulff's German terminology in his article "Die umgekehrten Perspektive und die Niedersichte" (Leipzig, 1907); *Обратная перспектива* in terms of all major Russian writers on the phenomenon since 1920, namely Pavel Florensky (who borrowed the term from Wulff), Lev Zhegin, and Boris Uspensky. For the terminology as applied to the subject of 'reverse perspective,' see: Clemena Antonova, *Space, Time and Presence in the Icon. Seeing the World with the Eyes of God* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 169. See also: П.А. Флоренский, "Обратная перспектива", *У ВОДОРАЗДЕЛОВ МЫСЛИ (Черты конкретной метафизики)*, <http://www.magister.msk.ru/library/philos/florensk/floren07.htm> (accessed March 20, 2012).



certain level of distance from our standard manners of dealing with what we have tended to comprehend as a norm – for centuries, even. It thus implies that what opposes our normative viewpoints is and always could be *different*, as opposed to *wrong*. It is the concept of difference that I would like to look for in order to open up the preliminary pages about the image at hand: **Bart De Clercq's** painting *The Rock* (2011, oil on canvas, 225cm x 238cm). More precisely, it is about the concept of vision, embodied by this image as a result of our integration with its structure of material, spatial and epistemological properties within the painted surface of the canvas, that my opening words will revolve.

In addressing a single image out of De Clercq's prolific painterly practice, my intention is not to exclude, or point out, or fetishize a unique object of analysis for the sake of its outstanding qualities or extraordinary singularity; nor is my desire to expose one artwork singled out from the rest of artist's oeuvre by putting an exclusive and predominant focus on it. On the contrary: by focusing on a single painting my intention is to have its beholders exposed – and to have *them* exposed to one dimension of our relation to the contemporary image-world. The structure of this single yet significant dimension that I am concerned with here is organized upon the principles of intimate (personal) and, at the same time, broadly conceived human (social) ability to engage in the construction of authentically eye-challenging and mind-challenging pictorial world. The world thus organized becomes capable of producing and keeping its own course, in dissonance with the mainstream of occidental ocular centrism – a kind of centrism that, after many centuries following the end of the International Gothic, has come to the point of breaking up its umbilical cord with the inherited, accepted, established and always again re-established convention of a Renaissance man, namely: with the 'invention' of linear perspective and the ideology of vision adjacent to it.

In an attempt to recognize the subject of the painting, what could be the simple, automatic, early stage of our analysis of its apparent form of structural organization? Before we would embark onto any further, more reflexive level of encountering its complex set of meanings (and the ways they are being constructed for any spectator each time it is being observed), let us pose a simple question: what are the elementary optical properties upon which the material structure of *The Rock* resides?

### 3. Death

*In order to safeguard his happiness, contemporary Western man has contrived to stop thinking at all about death and, more particularly, about his own death, to deny it in a way by maintaining a stony silence with regard to it. Some philosophers end up taking part in this masquerade by considering the subject taboo or by declaring that it is not philosophical. Whereas the act of philosophizing was understood in the philosophical tradition as a preparation for death, as a rumination on life and death, many contemporary philosophers set aside the very question of man's relation to "his own death." Does this habit of averting their eyes originate in a fear of death? Is it due to a shift of attention away from radical questions concerning the meaning and ultimate foundation of human life, in both its personal and its social dimension, so as to focus on particular and local problems? Whatever the reason, it seems that philosophy would have everything to gain if it once again centered its theoretical and practical reflections on such fundamental themes, for they are at the heart of human existence.*

- Bernard N. Schumacher -<sup>13</sup>

What are the elementary optical properties upon which the material structure of *The Rock* resides? A single view at its surface creates a sense of disturbing unquiet construction of the picture plane, an atmosphere of a stony silence - as **Bernard N. Schumacher**, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, would poetically describe in the preface to his *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*.<sup>14</sup> In our 'educated optical nobility' to always inevitably recognize first what we have been familiar with, our eyes welcome the three humanlike figures frozen around the stone structure (or a hill even, depending on one's personal understanding of such a mistakenly proportioned object in its relation to the rest of the elements of the painting). Silent and turning their faces away from our look, the three figures seem to "encourage a feeling of mistrust, having their faces shielded from the viewer"<sup>15</sup> like in **Gustave Courbet's** famous though irrevocably dead painting

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<sup>13</sup> Bernard N. Schumacher, *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*. Translated by Michael J. Miller (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ix.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Michelle Facos, *An Introduction to Nineteenth Century Art* (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 258.

- *Stone Breakers* (1849, destroyed in World War II): "Because their expressions and physiognomies could not be read, viewers could not determine whether these men were dangerous or submissive. Courbet painted an image that provoked anxiety in a destabilized and modernizing world."<sup>16</sup>

In a destabilized world of *our* times, De Clercq's figures - anonymous and impersonal as they appear to our eyes - are nonetheless involved in a strangely repulsive type of activity: their bodies revolve around the centrally positioned object which does not seem to be more of a cold and immobile element than anything else around it. For what looks like a presence of human subjects (or any *shadow of living substance*) swiftly dissolves into their appearance of mere objects. Being absorbed by the same sphere of interest, they are all invited (including the stone monster among them) to undeniably share the pictorial space - but under the condition of remaining at a safe distance from each other, circulating around, turning their faces away from us.

An image of **Gerhard Richter's** *Betty* (1988) comes to my mind. She is looking back, turning her face away from a viewer, the patriarchal figure of her father whose gaze replicates our own act of looking at the picture of her. She looks back, refusing to expose her face to a present-day viewer. This is not a negative experience, on the contrary: without any anger, disgust or shame, her own gaze remains hidden yet promising, so as to be able to look forward very soon - which is a moment we are never able to see in the picture. Like Orpheus, Betty feels she *must* turn away. Her way of looking, her *own* way of looking - resistant yet captured forever by her father's camera - entails that kind of human experience we are all familiar with: the need to communicate with what must remain unspoken, or must be spoken differently in order to bless, to condemn, or only to awake. Betty must turn away in order to project a question mark onto the gray background of their past, the repressed memories of *their own* past. And our common past indeed. The act of looking back at our present comes no more from the eyes of an angel but from a two-headed beast: "In this way, they transcend the historic specifics of their subject matter. On an aesthetic level, this is achieved by blurring the surface of the paintings. This blur exponentially increases with the viewer's appetite for photographic detail, thus creating a strong dynamic of refusal [Richter refusing to retell a story that had been told so many times already] and withdrawal [Richter

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

allowing the subjects of his paintings to withdraw from the intruding stare of the media and, by extension, the viewer].”<sup>17</sup>

*Betty* is about what we do not know, about what we are not allowed to know, what we must escape from knowing, thus allowing mysteries to remain unsolved. **Jan Hoet** said many years ago, by the end of the 1990s (which beautifully coincides with my first experience of Flanders, the beloved Flemish soil that nurtured all my passion for images, image displays, and the culture of looking): “The tension must be retained, the tension between the present day and history, so that the mystery does not reveal itself. Only then does art have a place in life. In our life. [...] But then why not simply accept them? Why question, instead of believing? My answer is, because you then keep the mystery, in the work of art, without consecrating the work of its creator. The mystery must to a certain extent remain a mystery, trapped in the question. Not knowing often means knowing more.”<sup>18</sup> And even if there is no mystery, the questions must remain - not to be answered by any means, but to maintain the existential tension without which we would be condemned to death, all together, without any difference. Is death the mystery not to be seen?

Not surprisingly for De Clercq’s choice of historical references, a similar resonance of the circulation of narrative is to be found in one of the early fifteenth-century Italian masterpieces of the so-called International Gothic - **Gentile da Fabriano’s** *The Adoration of the Magi* (1423, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence): “It should be read as if it were a text of a tale, beginning at the top left corner, where the three Magi, meeting at the seaside, notice the star they have to follow. If we follow their course among sloping hills and cultivated fields we can see how they march into Jerusalem under the frame of the central arch, while in the lunette on the right we can see them departing. In the middle distance the direction of their journey changes, proceeding towards us and suddenly the mass of people appears from a deep ravine flanked up by a precipitous rock and a fence.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Achim Borchardt-Hume, “Dreh Dich Nicht Um: Don’t Turn Around: Richter’s Paintings of the Late 1980s,” in Nicholas Serota and Mark Godfrey (eds.), *Gerhard Richter: Panorama. A Retrospective 1962–2011* (London: Tate Publishing, 2011), 167.

<sup>18</sup> Jan Hoet, “Creating Space for Looking,” in S.M.A.K. *De Collectie* (Gent & Amsterdam: Ludion, 1999), 13; 18.

<sup>19</sup> Anna Eörsi, *International Gothic style in Painting* (Budapest: Corvina Kiadó, 1984), 43.

A precipitous rock in De Clercq's case dominates the scene in which the three 'Magi' no more perform a purposeful missionary action: they rather pulsate by absurdity of circulating in their own stillness. In such a state of performative stasis, the painting resonates with hardly sensible traces of living substances, of what makes human figures appear as subjects of life events. The three 'Magi' in *The Rock* are subordinated to a supposedly unifying, rock-steady presence of the hill, the centrality of which is yet another illusion offered to our 'educated eye.'

The proper iconographic roots of *The Rock*, if one is to engage in such a task (unnecessary for the purpose of this text though), are to be found in another artwork of the same style and conceived around one hundred years before da Fabriano's masterpiece. *Saint Martin Renouncing His Weapons*, a fresco by **Simone Martini** (as part of the decoration cycle for Cappella di San Martino, in the Lower Church of San Francesco in Assisi, around 1320) made one of the starting points from which De Clercq's motivation for *The Rock* emerged. Suffice it to say that one of the main motifs for this choice was provoked by the presence of Martini's mountainous structure in the middle of the fresco, and especially by its *scale*. It was the scale of the hill, conceived in an erroneously proportionate and 'monstrous' relation to the rest of the subject elements, by which this rocky structure provided itself the role of a dominant protagonist in an utterly religious composition, the one that served the goals of clerical and political Christian propaganda at the times. It is in this sense - by deviating our expectation of what conforms to the idea of a correct scale - that both Martini and De Clercq have a certain violence exposed, whereas "violence exposes itself as figure without figure, as a 'monstration,' an *ostension* of something that remains faceless."<sup>20</sup> If one would prefer to read this overturn of scale from **Jean-Luc Nancy's** perspective, what makes the image, each image, of the order of the monster/monstrum is a prodigious sign, which warns (*moneo, monstrum*) of a divine threat: "The German word for the image, *Bild*— which designates the image in its form or fabrication— comes from a root (*bil-*) that designates a prodigious force or a miraculous sign. It is in this sense that there is a monstrosity of the image. The image is outside the common sphere of presence because it is the display of presence. It is the manifestation of pre-

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<sup>20</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Image and Violence," in *The Ground of the Image*, translated by Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 16.

sence, not as appearance, but as exhibiting, as bringing to light and setting forth.”<sup>21</sup>

In his commentary on the distinctions and mutual influences between the two major European schools of painting developed by the middle of the fifteenth century, **Rudi Fuchs**, a former director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, outlined their respective characteristics in an introduction to the grand exhibition held by the end of the 1990s at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice. At least one of these characteristics seems to be very appropriate in highlighting the mode by which De Clercq pays homage to this historically significant conversion of visual cultures between the North and the South – though he does so in a way that is far from being uncritical:

*Every style or painterly method has its own developmental potential, and that development will reflect the expectations of a specific culture. To this day the Italians are more extrovert than the Flemish or the Dutch. Their paintings have always been livelier and more mobile than ours. Even when the subject matter is as intrinsically dramatic as a Deposition (by an artist like Rogier van der Weyden, for instance), in Northern paintings the figures stand there calmly and silently, frozen in their pose, more like precisely drawn full-length portraits than of people actively involved in an event.*<sup>22</sup>

According to Fuchs, the “condition of a still life is the most typical condition of all Northern painting [...] pervaded by the strange, silent concentration that is so characteristic of still lifes” (especially in reference to **Joachim Patinir**’s 1520 painting featuring yet another curious rock formation – *Landscape with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah*, now at the Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam): “Despite its realistic finesse [the landscape] is capable of abandoning reality in order, quite literally, to ‘fantasize’ with it. Perhaps this is a Flemish form of *invention*.”<sup>23</sup> From yet another perspective, this difference is interestingly described in a complementary manner by **Jan Hoet**:

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Rudi Fuchs, “L’antica storia dell’arte moderna,” in *Flemish and Dutch Painting: From Van Gogh, Ensor, Magritte and Mondrian to Contemporary Artists*, edited by R. Fuchs and J. Hoet (Rizzoli: New York, 1997), 17.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 18.

*Italy has always drawn us to it like a magnet and more so because of its creative diversity and originality than because of the sun. The mutual artistic influences between Flanders and Italy are innumerable, both in name and in art. But there has always been an important difference, I believe – a difference at the heart of the matter. I will attempt to make this clear by means of a small example: the difference between a yardstick and a step. Ask an Italian how long a metre is and he'll go off in search of a ruler. Ask a Flemish person how long a metre is and he'll take a step. You don't have to take it literally; it's just a way of talking – of talking about art. Compare Italian and Flemish art from the time of Jan van Eyck, for example. What strikes me about this period is the way Italian artists relate ordinary, everyday experiences and observations with a ruler in their hands, while Flemish artists make use of their sense of the step to show the same thing. Even a great master of drawing and compositional efficiency like Van Eyck. With him, too, you will find, behind all his rationality and calculation, something which is characteristically Flemish and which I would dare call, in the broadest sense of the term, intuition.<sup>24</sup>*

Could anything be more visually indicative of a statement in favor of a human step as an ultimately Northern (Flemish) measuring tool than the inverted female foot near the upper line of *The Rock*? Calmly and silently, frozen in their pose, trapped between Flemish fantasy and intuition that belong to the Local (the space of tangible intuitive sensibilities, in Hoet's own terms), the figures in *The Rock* behave as if nothing is happening, yet everything is in movement: the motionless *mise-en-scène* within the square limits of the canvas is mobilized precisely at the moment when the internal circular basis of the structure becomes recognized. In De Clercq's case, there is a clear example of this fantasy, of the hallucination about reality beyond the visual perception comprehended by the eye - that form of fantasy that is taken to be reality once a dynamic iconography of the depicted scene, though not immediately revealed, displays its strength when spectators' eyes become mobilized by a rotating movement producing a never-ending, circulatory turn. Instead of lively, energetic variants of movement typical for the Renaissance South, the Italianate quality of vivacity is replaced by a panel "in which everything, even the

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<sup>24</sup> Jan Hoet, "A Yardstick or a Step," in *Flemish and Dutch Painting: From Van Gogh, Ensor, Magritte and Mondrian to Contemporary Artists*, Ibid., 29.

movement, seems to be frozen under a dome of bright light, but in which the tiniest details become sparkling jewels of painterly finesse."<sup>25</sup>

A description as sweetish as this one shall not however be overlooked and ignored: there is something of a theoretical truth embedded in it, something that – by taking into consideration a Lacanian commentary on the ambiguity of the jewel - expresses a play of light and opacity constitutive of the nature of the gaze through “a play as glitteringly shifting as that of a jewel.”<sup>26</sup> With time passing by in front of the canvas, the viewer of *The Rock* really experiences the circular movement that develops into an optical spiral, similar to **Marcel Duchamp**’s application of rotoreliefs in his notorious *Anemic Cinema* (1926). Duchamp thus challenged not only the borders between the two- and three-dimensionality of images behind the veil of a word game, but also the human eye (and brain) while confronted with a vertiginous dynamics of objects in forceful image-spinning. The movement in *The Rock* is not emanating from the surface of the canvas: it comes from our ability to detect and recognize the painter’s intention of making a constellation of all elements rotate and converge towards an imaginary yet unstable center, so that such a logic would allow a painting to communicate with a viewer – by the seductive power of its own gaze.

#### 4. Circle in a square

A circle in a square – the way I want to read the elementary geometrical structure upon which *The Rock* is based – does not therefore only inhabit the space of the square as it is given. Filled with a single, monstrous, circular object, the borders of the frame are themselves filled with tension produced by the circle’s pushing outward, outside of the given frame - like the overgrown Alice inside the White Rabbit’s house. This is what **Peter Schwenger** reminds us in his text *Painting and the Gaze of the Object*: while discussing **René Magritte**’s paintings, he is referring to what is known in medical terms as Alice in Wonderland syndrome, a disorienting neurological condition that affects human perception.<sup>27</sup> This sensory disorientation is the effect of an interaction with the painting, a product of sight, by which for a split second - and a very

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<sup>25</sup> See Rudi Fuchs, *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Schwenger, “Painting and the Gaze of the Object,” in *The Tears of Things. Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 38.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*



significant single second in time - seeing itself becomes strange and alien: it is no longer recording a truth that is anterior to it but the fact that, surprisingly enough, *I cannot believe my eyes*.

A reversal of the common view of vision in terms of scale imposes questions to which some of the answers may be found in De Clercq's inspiration rooted in the European visual arts emerging from the 'dark ages.' One is the explicit example of a fourteenth-century Siennese master: a two-dimensional world "ignorant of principles of linear perspective, populated by 'flattened' saints and holy people of enormously different sizes, bigger than the houses and toy-like cities they inhabit."<sup>28</sup> But a more poignant explanation, I believe, is to be found in aforementioned Schwenger's text backed up by psychoanalytic gaze theory. Schwenger's discussion around the 'forceful, intrusive visuality,' inseparable from the Lacanian 'pressure of the gaze,' revolves around three paintings: **Georgia O'Keeffe's** *Red Cannas* (1927, The Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, TX) as well as **René Magritte's** *Les valeurs personnelles* (Personal Values, 1952, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art) and especially, I would insist, *Le Tombeau des lutteurs* (The Tomb of the Wrestlers, 1960, private collection). In *Le Tombeau des lutteurs* De Clercq's *The Rock* meets a perfect soul mate, while my personal hallucination of (geometric) abstraction - about the circle in a square - finds a benevolent justification and excuse to put these two paintings under the same microscope.

The question of scale negotiates our relations with vision and accordingly with social and political power structures inherent to the logic of inverting the common presumptions about the measure of things. By 'breaking' the fourth wall of the canvas, in what seems to be the hiding of the fourth construction point of a circular skeleton inside the square, De Clercq's *The Rock* introduces a subtle political dimension into his work: by challenging the screen of our vision, saturated by the feeling of uneasiness and discomfort that (like in Schwenger's account of Magritte) an enormously enlarged object could produce in a narrow space of a single room, the painter invests in the kind of challenge that takes place in the gaze of the picture itself. This is an *annihilating gaze*, as Schwenger names it, "in contrast to the function that is usually demanded of the object's gaze: the assertion of our existence as the

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<sup>28</sup> See Richard Howells and Joaquim Negreiros, *Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 160.

‘the one who is seen’” (and, I would like to emphasize, not the one who masters the process of seeing).

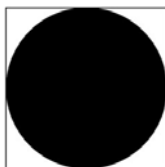
This instability, this overwhelming tension in the space where nothing is happening yet everything is on the move, brings the anticipatory atmosphere of *The Rock* close to the mysterious silence of the deserted room in **Léon Spilliaert’s** early twentieth-century painting *The Restaurant* (1904, Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels) or, even more, in his 1909 *Alone* (Museum Dhondt-Dhaenens, Deurle). This is the image of a situation where a single unintentional move of a rocking chair behind the girl, or of a diagonal rope across her room, could create a fatal accident that breaks all silent rules in an overprotected space – the space that breaths the atmosphere of a taboo. This atmosphere of *l’attente*, waiting in expectation for something to happen, is meant to break the taboo, to change the standstill reality of a ‘still-life,’ to escape a pictorial trap and to make a move inside and outside of the painted canvas.

That *something*, trapped yet in the state of suspense, proves to be crucial for the existence of the structural organization in *The Rock*. It comes from the fact that the center of the painting is not geometrical in its essence, and this is not without purpose. It does not coincide with the optical center of the picture plane regulated by the principles of classical Renaissance perspective according to which the look onto the canvas gives an illusion of an open window. Here the painting behaves differently: indecent and irregular toward the rules of image construction, it screams outside from *somewhere* inside the canvas. In his blasphemous desire to resist the inherited system of Western optical perspective, De Clercq nonetheless follows the paths that led toward the constitution of hegemonic principles dominating our ways of looking since **Leon Battista Alberti’s** ‘invention’ of linear perspective in the fifteenth century. In *The Rock* there is no strict following of Alberti’s truth based upon “harmony of all parts in relation to one another” (as described in *De Pictura*, his famous treatise on the theory of painting).<sup>29</sup> De Clercq’s appropriation of the inherited optical knowledge aims precisely at challenging the supposed truth brought about by that geometric instrument of artistic representation we got to know as linear perspective. Furthermore, his working statement is not merely motivated by the rebellious desire to oppose the given coordinates so the science of loo-

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<sup>29</sup> See Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting* (Della Pittura), <http://www.noteaccess.com/Texts/Alberti/> (accessed August 2, 2012).

king would be provoked. It rather stems from the necessity to put into question the object of painting today, again and again, as an apparatus of lying and mystification *par excellence*, the cognitive properties of which still rely upon the cemented truths (the most dogmatic one being so-called truth of representation).



The interplay of vertical, horizontal, and diagonal layers of colors, smeared by touches of unarticulated traces of painterly gestures, does not only outline the scenery in which a curious summit of three mysterious figures around a stone-like object is staged. It also blurs and confuses the original boundaries between the two basic elements, a circle and a square, the combination of which served as a starting point in the construction process of the painting. The silent event, with its frozen standstill character, is to be transformed into a *tableau vivant* by the hallucinatory act of looking, the trap into which every spectator in front of this whirling and spinning scene is being thrown. What emerges out of the surface, once the figural elements are intentionally excluded from the first line of sight, resonates here with the form of a circle touching the square at four points. Similar to the space of the eye, or the "eye' self-contained space,"<sup>30</sup> the image of a circular space limited by the space of a square involves the same kind of duality that puts into question the nature of images and the modes of their constructedness. It also provides "a commentary on the limitedness of the understanding, which can also be read as a commentary on the limitedness of the eye, that dark chamber that admits only 'Resemblances.'"<sup>31</sup>

This circle is, however, not of a regular form: it becomes deviated and distorted exactly at those points that - in my 'hallucination of abstraction' behind the surface of what is immediately offered to my eyes - are defined by the very presence of figural characters at three different sides of the canvas.

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<sup>30</sup> See Peter Schwenger, "Corpsing the Image," in *Critical Inquiry* 26 (Spring 2000), 407.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 406.

The first point lies at the bottom of the central line separating the space into two supposedly symmetrical parts: it is exactly below the figure of a spearman that gives an impression of falling on its back, the one in the front lower register of the image. The second point is at the rightmost side of the painting: it is the dead point of a line extending, almost continuously but not entirely, from the top of the spear into a diagonal that stretches out of the canvas; it is thus demarcating the borderline between the two parts of a milky blue space at the left, behind which the only upright standing figure (a chevalier) shows itself. The third point is hovering above the center of an inverted foot of a free-falling female character in the upper register of the picture plane. The fourth point is curiously absent: we cannot locate it easily, simply because it remains hidden behind the veil of a vertical strip at the left side – a colorful strip of painting's body which, instead of holding up the ground level of the image, takes a wicked vertical stand, inverted to a position that parallels the upright figure of a chevalier on the opposite, right-hand side. Instead of keeping the rest of the composition from falling or moving upside down, this piece of abstractly painted surface resists all rules of an orthogonal spatial matrix and irritates the eye by its abominably improper whereabouts. This, however, does not diminish its role in the construction process of the image itself: the veiled, hidden, 'dead' part of the painting reveals the very nature of the image as such – a *shadow without living substance* that brings to the foreground the core element upon which the image performs its role in the scopic, social and political realm of the desire-economy. It renders visible the 'point of light' that, by actively showing itself to the eye, becomes the *gaze* looking at me from the picture itself. It is from that 'invisible' part of *The Rock* that the painting takes a self-aware stance in order to hold control of its own viewpoint so that I (you, him, her, they) could be transformed into a picture - to be looked at from so-called vanishing point of the canvas.

This is a radical turning point by which De Clercq's practice breaks away from the inherited tradition of painting but simultaneously remains dependent upon it, consciously and stubbornly. By pointing out *the site of death* at the far left side of the painting's body, this part - under the veil of an abstract color field – struggles for its autonomy in the environment inhabited by strangely positioned creatures. It maneuvers the disruption of any common iconographic resemblances while counterbalancing the weight of figurative representation in the rest of the canvas. Beyond the common divisions between figuration and abstraction fighting for their own prestige, as in this

case could seem apparent at first instance, De Clercq avoids the conflictual nature of such a polarization within the painting's tradition. Instead, he is treating the canvas as a body (of decay, of a *corpse* even), as if the object of his work had become an organism ready for a pathological examination under the viewer's scrutinizing medical gaze. In doing so, the *skin* of the canvas makes the idea of painting visible again: what becomes essential for the viewer is the logic of offering the subject of death to the object of a viewer in a slowed-down transformative process regulated by the lateral virtual mirror - the veiled, abstract strip of colors at the left side of *The Rock*. Turning his entire approach toward the phenomenon of painting upside-down - by beheading this body at the side where the crucial, fourth point of the painting's geometrical construction is expected to be hiding from our view - De Clercq pinpoints the *radical withdrawal* of representational norms in managing our visibility from either abstract or figurative standpoint. It is from the unsecure and deviated 'light-point' that *The Rock* engages in turning our attention from the comfortable position of viewing the site of a forced *tableau vivant* into the site of autopsy, and our own symbolic end-point indeed.

We suddenly become aware of the painting's previously invisible *skin structure*: it gives an impression as if this moment of revelation (and of revealing painting's skin, so to say) occurred once we were invited to break into Marat's refuge in the Parisian sewer system, "which exacerbated a debilitating skin condition, relieved only by immersion in a bath of soothing salts."<sup>32</sup> What **Jacques-Louis David** intentionally tried to hide from us by omitting "unsightly signs of Marat's skin disease while presenting him in heroic nudity"<sup>33</sup> (in his controversial 1793 masterpiece *Death of Marat*, Royal Museums of Fine Arts, Brussels), De Clercq seems to reverse by foregrounding his own masterpiece upon the very diseased 'skin' of that part of *The Rock* that is immersed in the layers of dirty, expressive and boiling bath of soothing colors at the left side. He is not denying an already overused **Maurice Merleau-Ponty's** stance that, in the end, what a painting makes visible is the *visibility* itself - and here we are confronted with the kind of visibility that renders the entire classical tradition of painterly representation discreetly cut into two parts ('abstract' and 'figurative'), none of which is supposed to take a predominant role nowadays. What takes control instead is the partial unveiling of

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<sup>32</sup> Michelle Facos, *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

the staged surface of the painting: the gesture revealing an empty field (of our own corpse) never to be displayed in front of our own eyes. It is in this sense that what is being exposed in De Clercq's *The Rock* is essentially emerging behind the taboo of violence, and a self-inflicted one, indeed: in Nancy's sense that "violence exposes itself as figure without figure, as a 'monstration,' an *ostension* of something that remains faceless," this violence is performed in a struggle between the Eye and the Gaze, between the beholder and the painting, where the roles of a subject and an object are constantly shifting.

### 5. Sign

The power of the gaze in the arena of looking (bullfighting arena) is constituted in the ritual capacity of a self-sacrificial exchange to take place in the site that acts as a social organ of sight on the order of a battlefield between bull and torero, between observer and observed, between an unfocused and receptive *gaze* (of the painting) and a focused and purposeful *look* (of the eye). This in itself contains the threat of physical annihilation, largely due to the *scale* of what is seen (Schwenger 2006: 43). The falling of a curtain, reminiscent of **Lili Dujourie's** black velvet flaking off from inside a red-lacquered wood frame (*La Traviata*, 1984, S.M.A.K., Ghent), takes equal part in an ambiguous game of looking which reveals everything that inevitably and simultaneously must remain hidden from the view. It is precisely this kind of 'suicidal attitude' on behalf of the Western tradition of the art of painting that, in **Norman Bryson's** terms, characterizes the self-effacement of a painting itself.<sup>34</sup> If painting is an art of signs rather than a record of perception (as **Ernst Gombrich** used to maintain in his *Art and Illusion*), Bryson argues that "painting in the West manipulates the sign in such a way as to conceal its status *as sign*." Which sign?



When, in early 1997, Russian performance artist **Alexander Brener** sprayed a green Dollar sign (\$) over **Kazimir Malevich's** canvas *Suprematisme 1920-1927* at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, a scandal surrounding the

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<sup>34</sup> Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting. The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan, 1983), xiii.

event (followed by the local police and crime court interventions and Brener's ten-month imprisonment) concealed a significant fact. The emergence of this 'significant fact' went beyond Brener's insistence on justifying his act by claiming his desire to establish a personal dialogue with his dead Russian colleague, all the more motivated by his protest against "corruption and commercialism in the art world."<sup>35</sup> What this gesture actually revealed and exposed, being at the same time destructive/disintegrative and constructive/integrative (in Gyorgy Kepes's terms from his *Language of Vision*, at the beginning of this text), was the very mechanism upon which the nature of vision functions - as applied to the act of seeing in general and to the medium of painting in particular. Following the old Lacanian claim, in divorcing a subject of looking from its object at the moment when the object returns its own gaze to beholder's eye, the nature of vision creates a situation of radical separation inside the bearer of the look. What happens is the split of the subject in the scopic field (the field of vision) mastered by the power of gaze on behalf of the painting. The looking subject (S) erases and annuls himself/herself at the moment when his/her look surrenders to the gaze coming from within the canvas. The graphic interpretation of such a self-effacement of the painting (a kind of symbolic self-annihilation, or suicide even) is perhaps most interestingly materialized in the graphic solution of a Dollar sign. A letter "S" drawn with one vertical line (or two lines, as in Brener's case) is submitted by this single or double stroke to the ultimate gesture of self-execution. Here the vertical line itself plays the role of a screen through which not only the vision takes place, but it becomes manifest of a *separation* (the split of a subject) that allows the vision to exist. A subject of looking, split in-between the eye and the gaze, exists in the field of vision through the absence of an object. Nothingness (a piece of dirt, stain, spot, or blur) thus foregrounds our way of seeing *something* that is essentially absent from our normative looking regime - something in the blind spot of a painting (any painting), in the monster of the canvas, in the reflection of "winking and glittering surface of a sardine can in the sun," as in Lacan's famous and exemplary case.

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<sup>35</sup> *Art Crimes*. <http://www.artcrimes.net/suprematisme-1920-1927> (accessed June 20, 2012). Also: The Letter of Support (for Alexander Brener), by Eda Cufer, Goran Dordevic, IRWIN: Dusan Mandic, Miran Mohar, Andrej Savski, Roman Uranjek, Borut Vogelcnik, February 11, 1997. <http://www.ljudmila.org/~vuk/nettime/zkp4/69.htm> (accessed June 21, 2012).

Our comprehension of a painting today belongs exactly to that aspect of our confrontation with the pulling off of a curtain – behind which there is nothing to be seen but the contagious skin, a death-mask indeed, which undoubtedly evokes the etymological origins of the very term image (*imago*, in Latin). *Imago* is, once again, an image that denotes a death mask representing the facial features of a human being passed away, worn during the funerals in ancient Rome: “This definition links not only the image, which can also be the spectrum or the soul of the dead, to death, but also the entire history of art and funeral rites.”<sup>36</sup> Like in **Paul Nougé’s** photograph from the late 1920s - *The Birth of the Object* (‘A group of people observe a particularly captivating and confined spectacle. ‘This spectacle is substituted with a banal wall’) - the ‘curtain’ must be taken off from the painting in order to open up the sight of absence, a beautifully depicted figure behind which the skin disease makes itself visible in the image of a corpse, the remnants of a body no more alive, in which we recognize no one else but ourselves:

*The corpse, whose horror seems to be precisely that of the living being become inert object [...] is never wholly object, for it is always also image – an image of otherness that is also, paradoxically, the image of self, image as self. [...] Thus while we can never see our own corpse, we always see in the corpse of another something of what has constituted our selves. That is, we see a subjectivity at the same time that we see an object; we see the degree to which subjectivity is the seeing of an object. This, and not death, is the source of the horror we feel when we look upon a corpse. For we cannot look upon death, but only upon its effects. It has already taken place, and its place is taken by the corpse. Death is the departed. The corpse remains; and that there are remains is profoundly disturbing. For we cannot help but identify the recognizable image of the departed, that shadow without living substance, with the other’s self. And sensing that process of identification in our selves, we sense at the same time that every self is similarly created by a process of bodily identification. The face in the coffin fascinates us because it is a reflection of our own. [...] So the corpse is a subject; it is an object; it is neither and both, an uneasy frontier.<sup>37</sup>*

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<sup>36</sup> Martine Joly, *Introducción al análisis de la imagen* (Buenos Aires: La Marca, 2009), 22.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Schwenger, *Corpsing the Image*, *Ibid.*, 400.



This is possibly one of the ways to approach the notions of the 'savage eye' and the 'talking cadaver' following the questions posed by **Elizabeth Klaver** in her *Sites of Autopsy in Contemporary Culture*, a significant work that I would need to reflect upon in a more consistent manner only in the future.<sup>38</sup> The questions she poses, and that I find important to be noted here already, are namely: "We might wonder, in these theories that depend so much on a reciprocal relation of the subject to the object, what happens when the other is dead? What happens when the other's look is fixed and staring? What happens when being seen is being seen by something that is starting to disappear?"<sup>39</sup> If painting itself is really dead today, what does this death mean to us? Is it the kind of death that was proclaimed by some other Flemish painters belonging to De Clercq's generation such as **Vincent Geyskens**, for example? They treat the medium of painting as *undead* ("a restless zombie from the past that cannot justify its presence")<sup>40</sup> and they believe that what makes a painting so that it is still able to exist - and all the more autonomously at the present time - are the qualities such as "the inseparable link with the past, the fact that the painting is a consequence of physical activity, and the awareness that the painting is a material construction, a fiction" at its best.<sup>41</sup> If life is only the façade of death, then a painting is the mask that strips the object of our looking bare naked, and addresses our thoughts on upcoming absence via the perception of the actual masquerade of our living presence. *The Rock* makes visible precisely that façade by challenging our perception on the grounds of what remains the only invisible construction point in the quirky composition of our *still life* (and not death yet) – the Holbeinian anamorphosis under the abstract strip of colors at the left side of De Clercq's painting.

Though rooted in the European painterly tradition, Bart De Clercq's *The Rock* positions itself in a critical way to its dogma of representational painting by questioning a common sense vis-à-vis the Western tradition of ocular centrism - and not only. Alongside, the questions around the entire set of complex relationships in the visual world following the 'invention' of one-

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<sup>38</sup> See Elizabeth Klaver, *Sites of Autopsy in Contemporary Culture* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005)

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>40</sup> See *UnDEAD*, an exhibition by Vincent Geyskens, 23/06 – 02/09/2012, S.M.A.K. Gent, online press release [http://www.smak.be/files/SMAC\\_Geyskens.pdf](http://www.smak.be/files/SMAC_Geyskens.pdf) (accessed 27 July 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Marc Ruyters, "Painting in Flanders after 1980" in *Painting in Flanders after 1980*, OKV nr. 4/2005 [http://www.bamart.be/files/OKV%202005-4\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.bamart.be/files/OKV%202005-4_ENG.pdf) (accessed September 26, 2012).

point linear perspective emerge. De Clercq's term *quirky perspectives* (whereas the English adjective 'quirky' denotes something unusual, strange, in a somewhat silly and awkward manner, without necessarily any negative connotation) characterizes the essentialist perception of the world and asks for an effort to revise the historical gaps or, more precisely, a monolithic closure of our view, a stone-wall visual obstacle (a rock) in front of which we have found ourselves thanks to our slipping into such a monopolizing trap. The positive aspect, however, of finding ourselves in the state of crisis – of being blocked in front of a stone wall – introduces the possibility of taking a moment of rest, necessary for contemplation, for thinking, for looking at our own ('Western,' Eurocentric, linear and single-point) history from a different point of view, in reverse. It also introduces a possibility of taking a distance from the layers of historical body of 'truth' and thus taking a stance (a different stance, indeed, though not always necessarily new) toward the directions we could take in the future, through the practices of looking. This is the stance that resists the blocking of view not simply by overcoming the obstacle in order to proceed in a predetermined, fixed and unchangeable way; on the contrary, this is the stance of understanding, that allows a human being to re-gain his/her own freedom of *acting* through *thinking* via *looking*. This is the condition without which we could easily erase our own status of thinking-human-beings, and slip into an unfortunate position of unconscious self-erasure, which means that what would finally become excluded – and by our own fault indeed - is exactly the possibility of our freedom as human beings.

This, however, does not negate or exclude the value and significance of the actual presence of the stone-wall obstacle blocking our sight: the wall itself, playing the role of the membrane of our retina, visually reinforces the potentiality of thinking and acting. While being stuck in the situation of historical stasis, the actual condition urges us to take this moment of stagnation (the moment of crisis in our movement forward) as a turning point, a turning point in our ways of understanding the world exactly through our ways of looking. And being a 'turning' point indeed, it eliminates the solid ground below our feet in order to turn us upside-down so the demand for a quirky, unusual, different (and, I emphasize again, not necessarily new) perspective would take place. This is the point that serves as a demarcation line, the liminal space and a common frontier line of "the small space running above the words and below the drawings on the page of an illustrated book, [to which] we seldom pay attention. It is there, on these few millimeters of white, the

calm sand of the page, that are established all the relations of designation, nomination, description, classification."<sup>42</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

What these few millimeters of white urge us is to reflect on our situation of today - because *this* is not a rock, not even the clone of a rock or a wall, but the *invitation* to a *theoros* (spectator) to stop, to think, and 'to see' (*theoria*); to observe and to reason in front of an unreasonably overexposed presence of the figure of obstacle embodied by the rock, whose central position implies nothing but the fact that the dominance of its position – hegemonic within the constellation of spatial properties of the painting - is just a *travesty* in front of our eyes. It is a myth supposed to keep its dominance in our culture which is itself maintained by our inability to see that behind the veil there is nothing, not even a 'representation' (of our reality, of a body, or a corpse): nothing more than the backside of the canvas in its intimate encounter with the concrete wall upon which the painting is hung. In this line of thought, the only position that remains relevant to be considered as 'real' is the one remaining invisible or almost invisible, the few millimeters of white between the backside of the canvas and the surface of the concrete wall upon which the painting is hung. This hidden passage, a kind of vacuum inhabiting the common frontier zone between our optical illusion of the 'wall' and the physical presence of the wall, is the critical gap where the potentiality of freedom resides, our *right to have the freedom* - freedom of looking, of thinking, of acting – through painting.

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<sup>42</sup> See Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 28.

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