

Peter Lang



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Sabine Flach, Daniel Margulies & Jan Söffner (eds)

Habitus in Habitat I
Emotion and Motion

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The Glass Veil

INTERVIEW: SUZANNE ANKER AND SABINE FLACH

An Installation at the Medizinhistorisches Museum der Charite by Suzanne Anker in conjunction with *Habitus in Habitat*.

Enclosed in glass, then again in glass vitrines, specimens for a scientist are stark reminders of life's material code. To suspend in time, to put on display, the corporeal flesh becomes a relic of its own history. In a nether world reminiscent of sleep, yet without the degradation of time, the specimen floats in a pathos of insufficient sustenance, neither here nor there but yet encased in liquids preserving its displaced existence. For a body or tissue or organ or cell, scripted by performative unfolding, this once living matter is akin to homeless refugees, whose sustenance relies on the kindness of strangers. Mutable through time, these specimens speak simultaneously to ravishment and uniqueness, while their failures to exist move them through the domain of mortal understanding.

In zones of ambiguity, bodies and their parts float anonymously as mementos of historical time. In an ocular joust, an observer dons a pose, as details of his gaze emerge into focus. Defining thoughts enter and exit the observer's consciousness until some determination of meaning, however tentative, arrives. What questions are provoked by this once vibrant matter? To go behind a veil is to transgress a hidden boundary. At the same time veils become mirrors of our hidden selves, as we peek behind the curtain of unknowable domains.

The Glass Veil is an installation comprised of several elements, including large-scale photographs mounted on sintra, nylon parachutes, silver leafed plumb bobs and elastic bungee cords. Installed in the Charite's Ruine, the work denotes its space as an historical vessel of messages. From World War II, to anomalies of nature and disease, to the ruin as an architectural metaphor of loss, the installation presents specimens in a familiar, yet unrecognizable, form. Through enlarged scale shifts and reduced hues, the installation takes on the character of water-related life forms. From free-floating squid shapes to in-utero sacs, these works tend not towards morbidity, but towards reverence for these complexities of life encapsulated in death. As part of Sabine Flach's *Habitus in Habitat*, the works address notions of embodiment and the spatial compass of human perception.

SF: Would you please describe the way you choose topics for your photographs?

SA: My interest in photography is as a drawing medium, a means to work with light: to abstract, compound, alter and reframe my thoughts about the natural

world. The infinitesimal complexity of processes such as reproduction, regeneration and replication maintain awe. My topics range from plants and animals to body parts and wax models, to laboratory and museum sites. The chosen icons describe historical, epistemological and political residue of technoscientific culture.

SF: What relevance do the sizes of the images have? And the colors?

SA: The scale of the photographs for *The Glass Veil* range in size from very large to very small: for example, 8'x 10', 6'x 8', 24''x 36'' and even as little as 8''x 10''. By reducing or enlarging the dimensions of specimens beyond their standard ratios, alternative readings of the image emerge. Taken out of context, scale is an indicator configuring the internalized mind/body axis. The muted color effects of the lens' recording is the result of the chromatic arrays available through extant indoor light. In these works, color is not altered or manipulated. The delicate hues are provided in part by the double glass vitrines surrounding the specimens. Nothing has been modified or revised using Photoshop or other software.

SF: What is your perspective regarding these objects while taking photographs?

SA: In carefully observing the specimens, I look for ways in which the glass vessel frames its subject. The distortions in glass, the multiplicities and silhouetting are what interest me, as well as the lighting conditions affecting the phenomena itself.

Each one of these formal elements constructs the alternative meanings in the subject, *i.e.*, color and its chromatic coordinates alter signification through our perceptive faculties. Variety in chroma, for example, can range from tinting to saturating, rendering each choice a signifier of meaning and emotional response. Color intensity in these works appeals to the transparency and translucency of light and carries with it distinctions between sharpness, form and focus. Each of these characteristics is also an attribute interlocked in memory: fuzzy, clear, foggy, etc. The interplay between the colors and the forms are generated by chance in concert with availability of light sources. In shooting these works, I did not have an "applied vision" as one would have if one were a photographer shooting for a client. My process involved exploration and observation.

Taxonomy or typology plays a role in determining what can be grouped in a final presentation. Sometimes the images are grouped according to image, or color, or even metaphor. Emotion always plays a role even if one is not aware of its underlying presence. When reviewing the contact sheets, editing becomes the next task. With regard to anticipating the viewer's emotional reaction, there is no set standard by which emotion can be pre-empted. Since each viewer brings to the work variegated knowledge streams and participatory practices, the range of emotions from empathy to shock are embedded in these images. Intent is not always clear, even for artists. The ambiguity of images themselves in conjunction to "fetal forms" is labyrinthine from the outside.

SF: What role do the parachutes play? How did you make the decision to bring them into the installation?

SA: The Ruine is such a dramatic architectural, historical space. It is quite overwhelming in and of itself. I chose to articulate the spatial aspect of the site by adding an element that is historically related to the Ruine, since the specimens had that relationship as well. The parachutes were transformed into squid-like, jelly-fish-like entities acting in concert with the aquarium-like presence of the photographs. The transparent nylon (reminiscent of a fetal veil) is a memory marker of what occurred during the horrific aerial bombardment of Berlin. Photography and installation, although separate genres, in this case interplay with one another in such ways as to reinforce the transitory nature of agency. Environmental factors also engage and disturb ready-made codes. The content of this photography, that is, fragments of body parts or fetuses, are examples of the “ready-made” altered by some exterior force. In the case of the photographs, that exterior force interprets the presence of light acting upon specimens. In the case of the parachutes, the external potency is generated by an unusual configuration. In each case expectation is thwarted.

SF: Could you please describe the interaction of the installation with this environment? Meaning: what role does the space play? Are there necessary conditions in choosing a space?

SA: After working in a variety of spaces: from white cubes to outdoor parks, from museums and their terraces, to funky alternative galleries, each sort of location dictates underlying solutions. Ranging from wall works to floor pieces to ceiling pieces, to work affected directly by the environment, each space is unique, requiring a site-specific solution. In this installation, particular attention is paid to the environment and its empathetic considerations. Both the subjects and the space are given such deliberation so that the viewer experiences a reverence for lost lives and failed agendas. From human diseases to congenital malformations to vengeful political orders, I was keenly aware of the loaded nature of all these remnants.

Therefore great care needed to be paid to the deceased, on all sides.

The electric fan in the space added a bit of performativity, gently swaying the parachutes, like one rocks a cradle.

SF: Would you say that The Glass Veil is mostly a work relevant to photography or would you say that it is an installation? Is it a site-specific work of art?

SA: Yes, both a site-specific work and one which is relevant to both photography and installations. The works operate in tandem with each other, reinforcing the image base as a field of aquatic memories.

SF: Are your photographs related to iconographic codes from art history? If so, which ones? If not, what kind of other symbols and iconography do you have in mind?

SA: The images I make relate to many and various art historical references, particularly the *wunderkammer* and the more current critiques of museum studies. If an image or object is recontextualized (as in the Duchampian strategy) it is to render the ordinary into art. My concerns, however, are to expand hidden messages encapsulated in form. Whether utilitarian, as in the case of parachutes, or scientific, as in the examples of specimens, on every occasion, visual transactions achieved through framing reveal correspondences that would otherwise pass unnoticed. The concept of the *wunderkammer* has been theorized up to the present by Barbara Maria Stafford and Francis Terpak in their exhibition *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen* held at the J.P. Getty Museum in 2001. The idea of wonder, going beyond the ordinary, is in a sense an aspect of our own consciousness in which revelation is sought after by careful observation, unexpected circumstance and novel technologies. Christopher Knight, art critic for the LA Times, comments that this exhibition and catalogue is as an instance in which “sight connects with insight” and “images are themselves ideas.” The *wunderkammer*, coming into existence the 17th century, was an opportunity to bring together knowledge garnered from many disciplines: geology, biology, early investigations into automata, and works of art. Its configuration is the creation of an encyclopedic vision encapsulating man-made objects and natural entities. My interest in the contemporary *wunderkammer* spans natural history, botany, and medical history and includes a current blurring between the natural and the manmade. A forthcoming project of mine is both a catalogue essay and an exhibition of photographs for a show exploring correlations between fairy tales and genetic engineering. Although the taxonomical / genomic structure of classification of knowledge still permeates many disciplines, and certainly natural history, my central concern is: What happens when oddball man-man mutations twist and bend the natural order to enormous extents?

SF: *In the fall of 2008 while we were working on The Glass Veil, one of my favorite pieces was a photo depicting a subject from behind. The subject appears to turn towards a bright light, a figure standing out as itself through your staging. Later on you titled the piece Lonely Planet. The same goes for the pink embryo in uterus; meaning was also displaced and shifted to something else. Your staging of light converted a medical object into the auratic presence of a fresco. Would you please explain your working process for this shift?*

SA: Transformation of any kind is a subtle, fragile process. It is ethereal, ephemeral, and unpredictable. It requires novel ways of looking, circumventing expectation, and going beyond the obvious. It also entails grace, which cannot be predetermined. The word *transformation* has myriad usages: from mathematics to genetics to linguistics. What I am concerned with in this work is how medical specimens can in fact be pictured as being qualifiedly changed. Such modification is obviously indebted to photography and the manners in which an image is perceived. However, another aspect of this process is imbued with intentionality, agency and conversion.

SF: Have you any specific interest in cognitive and neurosciences and if so, which ones? Do these works play a role for your art? Assuming yes, which one?

SA: Yes, but I haven't as of yet fully articulated a satisfactory engagement with this area. I am working with images extracted from neuroanatomical brain scans. I have also created an animation of flapping butterfly wings superimposed onto MRI scans which create perceptual illusions. In this work, a transparent, yet identical butterfly is superimposed over a unique inkblot, which in turn is overlaid on one of the brain's distinct ventricles. Because of the butterfly's transparency, its own composition appears and reappears as if it is morphing. In addition, this "real-time" device engaging the temporal is a metaphor for the way in which thought or consciousness is in constant flux.

II

SF: Would you describe the role the viewer plays in your artworks? Would you say that he has a constituent role already in your plan? Assuming yes, what kind of part?

SA: Yes, a viewer is made aware of the fact that his gaze may not have recognized all there was to observe in his initial scanning of the object. His subjectivity of seeing is enhanced by the conditions created by the lighting, reflections, scale shifts and the like.

I embrace the temporal attributes of seeing as a way to reveal vision as a process. Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* has influenced the way I think about observation. Observation, although rooted in empiricism, also carries with it degrees of subjectivity, and it is this subjective means of seeing, a somatic gaze, which pivots a medical specimen into an ambiguous, and sometimes fleeting, image.

SF: Does the number of spectators visiting your installation affect the manner of experiencing of the piece?

SA: In the case of the installation at La Charite, the setting is so immense. The number of people seeing the installation is dwarfed by comparison. The kinesthetic experience of the place itself diminishes the viewer in all cases.

SF: Would you say that planning your installation would evoke in the viewer the feelings of being part of a social or cultural group? How is space, that is, environment in a larger sense considered a subjective experience?

SA: The architectural space and the subject matter of the photographs alternate between inclinations of loneliness and melancholy, as they address loss. Lost lives, exhausted history and frozen reflection concerning these feelings float through time and space anonymously to become an embedded narrative in these

works. From the harvesting of body parts to the stationary ruin as a center for discourse, the viewer is suspended between wonder and the politics of the real.

SF: What differences between the social and subjective do you interweave in your installation?

SA: Of course, the social is omnipresent in this installation, seizing an historical narrative of time and place. The fact that the Ruine was employed by scientists and physicians as a lecture hall for examining pathological case studies is quite ironic when we convert individual pathology to political pathology. The metaphor drives itself. When I think about the subjective, symbolist nature of this work, I come to realize correspondences between language and materials. The amniotic sac visible in the *Hand-Mirror* is paralleled to the parachute material. When I consider translucence I think of an ether world, neither light nor dark, but a combination of both, a transcendent sense of light with positive associations.

*SF: The parachutes are constantly moving. What relevance does movement have in *The Glass Veil*? Is there a link between the movement of the parachutes, a moving spectator, and an inner movement of recognition?*

SA: The movement of the parachutes interacts with nature's (and history's) ongoing flux. This operational view of nature recalls agency as posited in Bergson's *Creative Evolution*. Whereas the specimens are static and require the viewer's gaze to animate them through their glass veil, the parachutes move and in turn are moved through by the force of air or wind. The link between the movement of the parachutes, a moving spectator and an inner movement of recognition comes down to a philosophical argument in which the spectator is presented with several options simultaneously. Holding inconsistent meanings concurrently is also an attribute of a work of art.

SF: How would you describe these different interacting kinds of movement?

SA: The parachutes sway in slight alternating directions, while a viewer completes a path, by going up and down stairways or gazing straight ahead to fully realize the installation. Looking up, looking down, looking straight ahead, the physical repose of the viewer is spatially and kinesthetically directed towards shifting perspectives. There are no fixed directives, no correct angles of viewing. Through discovery, the viewer is escorted through various fields of perception.

SF: What role do such movements play in your piece? Your text speaks about 'zones of ambiguity' – could you please explain this further?

SA: I refer to zones of ambiguity as images that recall an unimaginable presence. What does it feel like for a viewer to be confronted by a brain or a fetus floating in fluids on display? How does one address issues of personhood with regard to these images? Dead, but yet still animated by the reflected light. Akin to looking into an aquarium, viewers are confronted with the anthropomorphic nature of these fragments cum beings. Although these "cuttings" remain dead, they still perform a function in the living world.

SF: Is there an ongoing exchange between inner and outer forms of representation in your work that 'creates' emotions?

SA: Yes, emotions of course are slippery states of being with shifting personas, intensities and durations. Closely aligned to the concept of time, deep time, emotions are conjured up within the domain of art as one of its telltale signs. Walt Whitman's "A Hand Mirror" from his *Leaves of Grass* (1900) evokes a poetic parallel to the work:

Hold it up sternly – see this it sends back, (who is it? is it you?)
 Outside fair costume, within ashes and filth,
 No more a flashing eye, no more a sonorous voice or springy step,
 Now some slave's eye, voice, hands, step,
 A drunkard's breath, unwholesome eater's face, venerealee's flesh,
 Lungs rotting away piecemeal, stomach sour and cankerous,
 Joints rheumatic, bowels clogged with abomination,
 Blood circulating dark and poisonous streams,
 Words babble, hearing and touch callous,
 No brain, no heart left, no magnetism of sex;
 Such from one look in this looking glass ere you go hence,
 Such a result so soon – and from such a beginning!

III

SF: Would you agree that your installation creates an environment in which bodies are reframed by their habitat? And if so – how? What is your intention?

SA: As the glass vitrines frame the specimens, so too we are circumscribed by our container. As space is displaced by a body in its environment, a mutable boundary is marked and can be traced through locomotion and gesture. Our path outlines an alternative architecture, a neuroarchitecture created by movement. Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana's theories of Autopoiesis, come to mind to describe this phenomenon. In such a system, change is self-directed and cannot be distinguished from its structure. It is a continuous trajectory in which the medium and its environment form a feedback loop in which one is continuous with another, resembling the cognitive apparatus of sensory-motor dynamics.

SF: How would you describe "photographic transference" from the specimens to the photographs to the spectator? What role does the space play?

SA: We are accustomed to seeing photography in books or on computer screens. However, when we are confronted with large-scale photographic installations they produce a kinaesthetic jolt. Situated within the Ruine's space is a photographic image garnered from a specimen in another wing of the medical museum. After viewing the museum's collection and then experiencing these speci-

mens as images, a mental refashioning occurs. One administrator, who has observed the museum's collection of objects numerous times, was nevertheless upset when she was confronted with a large-scale version of one particular specimen. Do we see or understand images more clearly than objects?

SF: Would you describe the relation between vision, motion and emotion? How are embodied emotions brought into visibility?

SA: That is a really good question. I'll take a cue from Varela's concept of "embodied" philosophy as a way to experience the body in both its phenomenological sense and its biological sense. Sense perception electrifies thought and emotion as one moves in space. Akin to dance, intuitive movements frame experience to form mental pictures which in turn can be retrieved at an alternate time from the brain's database. The recovery of images, as receptacles of meaning, restates propositions inherent in my exhibition. Viewing the container and the contained, through a glass veil, is not a static experience.

SF: Could you describe the process of encoding and decoding as being part of the emotional process in your work?

SA: The body and its parts are iconic images calling into question identity, natural history, longevity and disease as well as fashion. As forms of what could be called "the dark sublime", the images generate a range of emotions from terror to awe. Sometimes perceived as beautiful, these images partake in the aesthetic dimension, even though their source is wedded to a clinical telos. Bodies in pain, or in the sense represented here, fragments of bodies, stripped of identifying data, for the viewer, can be very emotional, even disturbing. At once grotesque and beautiful, these images oscillate back and forth between these domains of vision and thought as indicators of lived experience.

SF: Could you describe the relation between cognition and sensory-motor aspects of emotions, and their relation to the imaginary as well as proprioception in 'The Glass Veil'?

SA: Our senses drench and filter us with data, providing access to an external world. The internal world operates in a more covert way. Accessing the world through an unconscious nervous system brings into play the connecting loop between body and mind.

The nervous system, operating autonomically, expands our ability to multi-task and self-regulate. The mind also relays with the body through cognition, but the body's physical stance, such as muscle tension or complex motions are carried out under the body's radar. Muscle memory and the repetition of movements act as a GPS, maintaining the body's awareness in its proprietary space. Thus, as in Varela's theories of *The Gesture of Awareness* how does a spectator perceive phenomenon while suspending belief? How does the spectator's autonomic nervous system get recharged by aesthetic enchantment or stimuli? Questions addressing the relationship between the imagination and cognition and the sensory-motor circuit are brought to bear once again by way of aesthetic experience, par-

ticularly sculpture and architecture. As an embedded visitor to the artist's construction of fictive space, the viewer must for a moment suspend his rational mind to allow for wandering. In this sense, the slow articulation of messages to be gleaned from works of art is fostered by moving through space, referencing angles of perception and accessing nodes of memory markers. *The Glass Veil*, situated in Charite's Ruine, transforms an historical stage into a living one.

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- Whitman, Walt: *Leaves of Grass*, Philadelphia (David McKay) c. 1900.

Figures

(See pages 150–157)



Figure 1: *The Glass Veil (Crimp)*, 2009, Digital print on watercolor paper, 8"x10"/ 20.3cm x 25.4cm.



Figure 2: *The Glass Veil (Crimp)*, 2009, Digital print on watercolor paper, 8"x10"/ 20.3cm x 25.4cm.



Figure 3: *The Glass Veil, (White Light)*, and *The Glass Veil*, 2009, digital prints mounted on sintra, 9'x120" / 243.8cm x 304.8cm each, *The Glass Veil (The Center of Gravity)*, (Installation Berliner Medizinhistorisches Museum der Charité, Berlin, Germany), 2009, nylon, bungee cord, silver leaf, lead and brass.



Figure 4: *The Glass Veil (In and Out of Time)*, (Installation Berliner Medizinhistorisches Museum der Charité, Berlin, Germany), 2009, digital print mounted on sintra, 76"x 96" / 193cm x 243.8cm.



Figure 5: *The Glass Veil (Spoon)*, 2009, Digital print on watercolor paper, 24"x 36" / 61cm x 91.4cm.



Figure 6: *The Glass Veil (Kidney)*, 2009, Digital print on watercolor paper, 24"x36" / 61cm x 91.4cm.



Figure 7: *The Glass Veil (Lonely Planet)*, 2009, Digital print on watercolor paper, 24" x 36" / 61cm x 91.4cm.



Figure 8: *The Glass Veil (The Center of Gravity)*, (Installation Berliner Medizinhistorisches Museum der Charité, Berlin, Germany), nylon, bungee cord, silver leaf, lead and brass, dimensions variable.



Figure 9: *The Glass Veil (Shelly's Dream)*, 2009, Digital print on watercolor paper, 24" x 36" / 61cm x 91.4cm.



Figure 10: *The Glass Veil (Deep Storage)*, 2009, Digital print on watercolor paper, 24"x36" / 61cm x 91.4cm.



Figure 11: *The Glass Veil (Sleep)*, 2009, Digital print on watercolor paper, 24"x36" / 61cm x 91.4cm.



Figure 12: *The Glass Veil (Tunnel)*, 2009, Digital print on watercolor paper, 24"x36" / 61cm x 91.4cm.



Figure 13: *The Glass Veil (White Light)*, 2009, digital print mounted on sintra, 96"x120" / 243.8cm x 304.8cm.

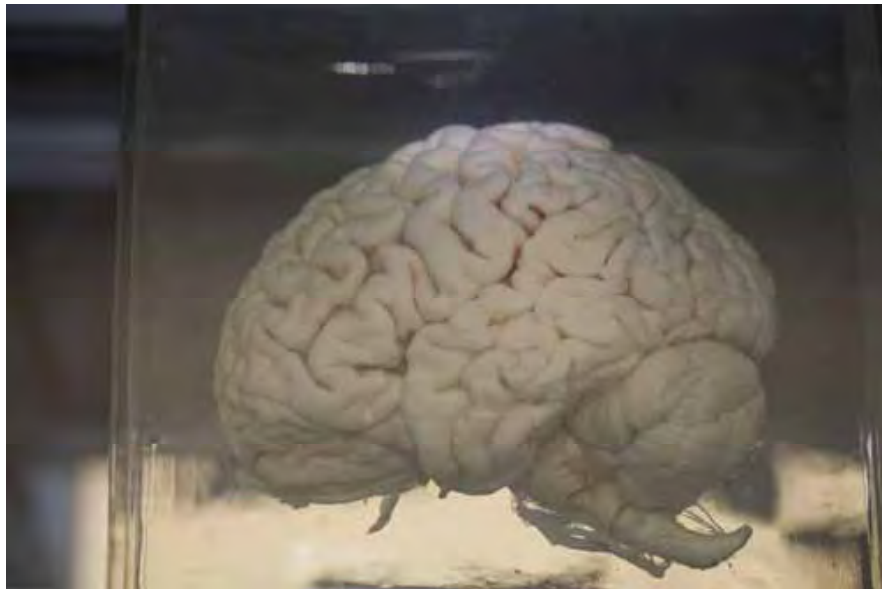


Figure 14: *The Glass Veil*, 2009, digital print mounted on sintra, 96"x120" / 243.8cm x 304.8cm.



Figure 15: *The Glass Veil (Beaker)*, Digital print on watercolor paper, 8"x10" / 20.3cm x 25.4cm.



Figure 16: *The Glass Veil (The Hand-Mirror)*, 2009, digital print mounted on sintra, 76"x 96" / 193cm x 243.8cm.