

IN LIMBO ¹

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2. ILLUD TEMPUS ²

The specimens in their glass coffins defy the 'normal' perception we have of a dead thing. Although these creatures are literally dead, the process of decomposition has been halted and by this, their symbolic death has become suspended. It is this disruption of the natural process of living, dying, decomposing and the concomitant disruption of the symbolic dimensions of grief, mourning and rituals that interests me in these 'jar creatures'. What also fascinates me is the impossible bridge they span between the spectacle of blocks of ice containing fixed animals hacked out of glaciers, and the banality of sterilising jars with fruit.

In my photographic work I do not wish to express any opinion towards the scientific motives to preserve specimens. Neither do I wish to make a photographic or cinematic documentary on these archives, nor to make a formal work of art by photographing the thousands of jars systematically.

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7. PHOTOS OF PHOTOS

Death that suddenly intervenes, fixed gestures in their treacherous illusion of 'being alive' and 'eternally dying', the specimens have in common with action photography such as Bob Jackson's. In a sense the jars of specimens are three-dimensional photographs. The images in this book have become photos of photos. What had already been a 'paralysed moment', now becomes duplicated in the photo. The three-dimensional jar animals and people die a second time in the two-dimensional picture I take of them. Artificial life in a bottle is given an extension in the photographic artefact.

The irony of it all is of course that, sooner or later, both the photographs and the specimens will deteriorate and completely disappear. Neither conservation method guarantees 'life everlasting'. The photographic bearers will eventually decay and the immersion in formalin or alcohol does not halt the definite decline of the specimens.

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10. MIMICRY

Il se fait tache, il se fait tableau. ³

When Lacan mentions *le dompte-regard*, the taming of the gaze and the work of art as veil, he gives an example of 'mimicry'. ⁴ Mimicry is the phenomenon whereby an animal takes the colour and shape of the place where it resides, thus trying to disappear 'out of view'. Lacan sees a connection between this form of 'camouflage' and the work of art. According to him, the work of art is a 'masquerade', a 'travesty', a *trompe-l'oeil* in the way the gaze is misdirected.

Some years ago, a striped octopus has been discovered off the coast of Indonesia. It was named 'mimic octopus' because in its natural environment it is surrounded by all kinds of enemies and the shallow, clear water make the small animal especially vulnerable. As defence stratagem the octopus has learnt to portray 'figures'. Depending on the enemy he is confronted with the octopus imitates certain animals and plants by adapting its colour, shape and way of moving. When it is attacked by a certain fish, the octopus puts six arms in a hole in the ground and extends the two remaining tentacles, making the fish think that it is facing a sea snake. The mimic octopus can portray some six figures to mislead or deter various attackers.

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11. MY GROTESQUE MIRROR IMAGE ⁵

*Sunt Quaedam formosa adeo, deformia si sint: Et tunc cum multum displicuere, placent.*⁶

Instead of rejecting the specimens as freaks that do not concern me, I listen to what they say about me. I try to understand their gestures. While the glass of the jars reflects my distorted appearance, I see in the grotesque specimens the mirror image of my warped 'soul'.

This epigram translates as "there are certain things that are beautiful just because they are deformed, and thus please by giving great displeasure". According to John Shearman, this in origin Greek epigram of 450 B.C. accurately summarizes the unusual sense of beauty of 16th-century Manierism.⁷ Manierists had a thing for distortions. They did not 'believe' in art but enjoyed art as an intellectual, artificial game and allowed its ingredients to take all shapes. Fearsome masks, distorted figures, severed heads, lions and dragons. On one of the columns he had designed for his garden of the Villa Orsini at Bomarzo, a garden with grotesque ornaments, crooked houses and stone monsters, Vicino Orsini wrote: "Sol per sfogar il core",⁸ which means 'solely for the recreation of the spirit'. The grotesque monsters are not only meant to frighten us, they also have to stimulate our minds.

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Martien Van Beeck, April 2003

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¹ Figuratively, 'in limbo' means indecisiveness, "to be in a situation in which you are not certain what to do next, cannot take action, etc., especially because you are waiting for somebody else to make the decision" (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* gives among other definitions: "'Limbo' is in Roman Catholic theology the border place between heaven and hell where dwell those souls who, though not condemned to punishment, are deprived of the joy of eternal existence with God in heaven. (...) The *limbus infantum* ('children's limbo') is the abode of those who have died without actual sin but whose original sin has not been washed away by Baptism. This 'children's limbo' included not only dead unbaptized infants but also the mentally defective." *Webster's Dictionary* also mentions: "A place of neglect or oblivion to which unwanted or worthless persons or things are relegated and forgotten" and "A place of confinement; a prison."

² In Latin '*illud tempus*' means 'now and forever' or 'never and forever'. The concept is particularly used by Mircea Eliade in his many studies on religion, shamanism and mythology. *Illud tempus* (*illo tempore*) represents the period of the earliest times when the earth was born. Mircea Eliade says: "In *illo tempore*, in the paradisaical time of humanity, a bridge connected earth with heaven and people passed from one to the other without encountering any obstacles, because there was not yet *death*; (...) once the easy communications between earth and heaven were broken off, people could not cross the bridge except 'in spirit,' that is, either as dead or in ecstasy; (...) this crossing is difficult; in other words, it is sown with obstacles and not all souls succeed in traversing it; demons and monsters seeking to devour the soul must be faced, (...)." In: MIRCEA ELIADE, *Shamanism*, Princeton University Press, 1972 (2nd ed., 1974), p. 483. [Original edition: *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, Librairie Payot, Paris, 1951.]

³ Lacan, *Op.cit.*, p. 114.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113. Lacan uses as example of mimicry a shellfish named 'caprella'.

⁵ Grotesque is that which is eccentric and peculiar in form and which makes a wondrous, sometimes ridiculous impression by its weird combinations.

⁶ A quote by Celio Calcagnini from the 16th century, cited by JOHN SHEARMAN, *Mannerism*, Penguin Books, London, 1967 (ed., 1990), p.156.

⁷ John Shearman cites Francesco Luisino who wrote in 1554: "The poet (...) is free to invent whatever he likes, because his invention is a fiction that does not affect us, and in just the same way we are not moved by pictures, whether they represent frightening things or pleasant, since it is clear to us that they are fictitious (...)." Shearman

sees this as proof of the “sophisticated, disbelieving detachment of the period”. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

⁸ Shearman, *Ibid.*, p. 158.