

“Everything is illuminated” | José Santos III by Kenneth Tay

In the late nineteenth century, when photography was fast establishing itself as a medium for the masses, it was purported that painting had died. The camera had replaced, as it were, the painter's hands as a quicker and more effective means of recording the reality before us. Painting did die, though it needs to be said that what died was a certain understanding of painting. And what took its place subsequently were a series of responses in the twentieth century: Cubism; Dadaism; Surrealism; Pop Art; Photorealism. Painting, as we are constantly reminded as students of art history, no longer became tied to the tiresome practice and imperative of replicating a perspectival reality.

However, closer towards the end of the twentieth century, we might say that painting has slowly exacted its revenge on photography. With the advent of digital imaging, it is now possible to fabricate an image purely from the inventory of a digital paint program. The technology of digital imaging essentially destroyed the spontaneous belief we have of photography's veracity to the real. In other words, Henry Fox Talbot's famous metaphor of the camera as a “pencil of nature” could hardly hold today without evoking a few knowing chuckles. Images, in the age of digital technology, are as much animated by the hands on the deck of a computer as they are by the hands on the shutter. Photography has returned to the painterly.

Such an inversion between photography and painting is doubtlessly seductive. Yet, what it rests on is the idea or presupposition that reality remains static; it is fixed; and it is thus that stable entity against which photography and painting are measured. But as most of us are aware, reality is never static; it is constantly moving, changing, and becoming. And in the age of digital imaging, reality is already an effect of signification, rather than some transcendental cause. This is, after all, what Jean Baudrillard means with his famous concept of the “simulacrum”. Baudrillard does not assert that we find ourselves living now in a kind of digital Plato's caves, haunted by the delirium of virtual reality. (For this is really a mistranslation popularized by the film *The Matrix*.) Rather, in his oft-cited example of Disneyland, what Baudrillard sought to illuminate was the ways in which we are dependent upon a supposedly fake entity (i.e. the fantasy world of Disneyland) in order to posit that there must be a reality out there. In other words, for Baudrillard, to take away the Disneyland-s is to also anticipate the disappearance of reality beyond our horizon:

It is commonly said that the real has succumbed to the hegemony of the sign, of images and of the simulacrum – in short, that reality has succumbed to artifice (it is this analysis that underlies the concept of the society of spectacle).

We must say today, rather, that we have lost the sign and artifice and are left with absolute reality. We have lost the spectacle, alienation, distance, transcendence and abstraction – lost all that still separated us from the advent of Integral Reality, of an immediate, irrevocable realization of the world.¹

In his later critique of contemporary digital culture, Baudrillard would go on to coin the term “Integral Reality” to describe the sort of immediacy that we have come to expect with the Internet and other assorted tele-technologies. This is evident in the instantaneity of our global-positioning systems, our mobile communications, and perhaps even our Internet pornography. Integral Reality is the fulfillment of a techno-utopian fantasy where everything is searchable, verifiable and thus transparent. Everything is illuminated in Integral Reality. We are, one could imagine Baudrillard say, living the Google dream/nightmare.

¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, trans. Chris Turner (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p67.

Here, it pays perhaps to return to the artist José Santos III's curious observation of the word "hide". As he notes, there is something troubling about the word: as a noun it suggests at once a surface, a skin; but as a verb it suggests a desire to conceal. We encounter in the word a troubling ambivalence between outside and inside, between revealing and concealing. In many ways, this is similar to the word "screen" as well, since to screen something suggests both a projection of something but also to hide something as with to screen away. Yet more importantly, what the artist wishes to focus on is the sense in which there seems to be something left that we have not say, something else that is yet to be seen, thought, or articulated. Our everyday veneer of familiar and ordinary objects are, in fact, never static but charged, each with the "hidden" potential always to become something other than themselves. To put it differently, these objects are no longer merely the stuffy inert furniture of reality. Rather, they are, in Santos III's view, equally as dynamic as reality itself.

This isn't to say that Baudrillard's view or concept of Integral Reality is necessarily wrong. After all, to a certain degree I would like to believe that many of us continue to operate and perform under the quiet (and sometimes unconscious) belief in an ever-present reality. But more importantly, it needs to be said that Baudrillard's picture is really only ever a freeze-frame: a diagnosis of the world that Baudrillard could only make by way of fixing this image of the world down. By the time the French philosopher has finished describing this image, the world would have undoubtedly moved on. Perhaps then, we might see Santos III's works as a mean to point us to look beyond the horizon of Baudrillard's Integral Reality.