

## OUT ON A LIMB: A BODY IN PARTS

(Photography and Thomas Florschuetz)

The diaphanous visual vocabulary behind what we might call in spoken or written language ‘a body’ or ‘a thing’, and I do not mean by that merely the human body but those things that similarly form the material body of the world, characterise the essential photographic impulses behind the work of Thomas Florschuetz. His work is rooted in the personal experience of what might be called an everyday fragmented visual moment, for there is nothing exceptional in each given subject matter he chooses to pursue. It is an object or thing that remains itself as first seen, and which thereafter becomes known to him in a new way. Something created as if newly born within the optics of the mind, and the subsequent processes at work in the act of seeing it. Then comes the general and technical impediment of how to capture and contain the thing seen. For this proposed ‘body’ or ‘thing’ is not a token of a whole, whence it is but an aspect, but rather an aspect that has a complete autonomy unto itself. There is never a specific intention on Florschuetz’s part to simply make a visual record of a given place or thing. In the fullest sense of the meaning, his photographs become an extension of an act of ‘seeing discovery’; a looking that passes through the object to what Heidegger once called “the thing-being (thingness) of the thing. The point is to discover the thingly character of the thing.” An existential presence, yes, but one grounded in the visual conditions of itself – its true and meaningful nature, “truth establishes itself in the work.”<sup>i</sup> Thereafter it has become a body in yet another sense, a greater body of visual self-knowledge, and something for the artist that is in a continual state of personal development.

### The Human Body

Yet it is also quite clear that a tableau-like use of Florschuetz’s body has played a vital role in these processes of ‘seeing discovery’. But, his body is just that, ‘a’ body that expresses singularity, not ‘the’ body (the artist’s body), used to express Florschuetz’s identity or individuality. For singularity is of that thing (or, part of a thing), that has been called elsewhere “pure immanence that is A LIFE, and nothing else.”<sup>ii</sup> Though this must not be considered a transcendental immanence in a Kantian sense, a supposed plane of the universal subject, something ‘to which’ immanence is attributed. It is rather a transcendent indefinite “A life is everywhere in all the moments that a given living subject goes through and that are measured by

given lived objects: an immanent life carrying with it the events or singularities that are merely actualised in subject or objects.”<sup>iii</sup>

I make these observations to clarify Thomas Florschuetz’s use of his body over the last fifteen years or so. Moreover, neither should the photographing of parts of his body be seen as simply a literal transcription of conventions exposed by photographic modernity, which is to say the way that the frame of the photograph has the power to excise (cut-into) and extract fragments of the world.<sup>iv</sup> His photographs are not intended as social fragments as such, except, that is, to the extent that they are a reflection of the singularity of things that make up the social; namely human life or the objects around him. And, though at times they may obfuscate discernible recognition, part-objects that are knees, forearms, hands, wrists, palms, ankles, fingers, mouth, part-torso, they afford a character and sensibility that is always paradoxically singular within plurality, that which marks ‘a’ life. They seek to grasp the truth-aspect of the human body, characterised by the properties of the thing seen, while at the same time reminding us of our lack of familiarity with that which we feign to know – the body (potentially ours or that of anyone else). In this sense photographing his body has become for him both “exchangeable and paradigmatic,”<sup>v</sup> and not a “hint of incompleteness suggesting possible completion.”<sup>vi</sup> Not a fragment cut off from the whole (as metaphor), but emblematic of the singularity that a body (‘any’ body) possesses. And, this is what Gilles Deleuze called the ‘empirical transcendent’, and what is meant to be understood by my use of the word immanent. Something residing in the singularity of ‘a subject’ and not ‘the subject’ that the artist chooses to work with.

This does not prejudice what was clearly an earlier performance-based inflection in Florschuetz’s black and white photographs, namely the diptychs, triptych and polyptych works, of the second half of the 1980s, and which were characterised frequently by his using physical gestures, and facial expressions. These were generated as body part-objects that drew upon what was an increasing twentieth century interest in the singularity of self-scrutiny and exposure.<sup>vii</sup> But, as said, self-exposure is not the essential characteristic that was primarily intended by Florschuetz. His ongoing work with the body soon moved into an indexical or minimal set of concerns; as with the photographs of fingers, wrists, and hands, on distinct colour backgrounds of the years 1989-93. And, the move into colour photography carried forward certain other implications, since it stressed the sensuous nature of skin and surface – an affective perceptual alteration of experience - and a marked drift away from the theatrically ambiguous specificities of his black and white works. In short away from the abrupt and ruptured definition of the identifiable body parts he photographed, to the discontinuities of similitude revealed by photographing his fingers, hands, wrists, ankles and part-torso, “to a more strongly structured system of suggestions and unsettling implications.”<sup>viii</sup>

A concern with surface and scale entered his work at precisely that moment of perceptual alteration, whereby the ambiguity of reading the body-part photographed multiplied the aspects of the chosen subject's singularity. This took two different aspects. The first was the use of subtly varied repetitions of image as found in works like *Diptych #65* (1993-96), *Triptych#67* (1995) and *Untitled (Total)* (1995), and the second took the form of a perceptual search as to the small alterations that accrue when scrutinising a body. The artist's own body was simply that which offered the most intimate opportunity and point of access. The body thus became a frame in a doubled sense, not least the cropped framing of a photograph, but also a destabilised framing surface and/or mask of perceived and identifiable containment. It was intended to be indexical on several levels in that it pointed to the body without defining it in absolute terms of record. It also pointed to the exchangeable character of the signifier (a wrist that might be read as a torso, as in *Diptych # 157* [1995/96]), and it created a sense of strangeness with that which we suppose ourselves to be familiar – the commonplace that is our own body. A sense of strangeness that brings the eye together with the indexical digit as in *Triptych #1* (1988), a work that literalises hand and eye co-ordination as basic perception, or, as in *Diptych # 14* (1989/91) where an extraneous object is introduced to obfuscate an easily accessible reading of the body part chosen (a fist gripping a nail in this instance).

The body and its surface as a screen increasingly pre-occupied Florschuetz from the mid-90s, particularly in his works that are called his *Plexus* series (1993-96).<sup>ix</sup> And, as the photograph is of itself nothing more than a screened image onto a surface, “darks specks suspended permanently on a piece of paper”,<sup>x</sup> so too the human skin is an organic screen that obscures and masks what it contains. And, as the photographic screen is dependent solely on the relation of surface to light, it simultaneously elucidates and challenges the reading of an image. Hence, the ability to control light in photography effects and shapes perception, and alters the way of our ‘looking at’ an image.<sup>xi</sup> The *Plexus* works are of hand and fingers shot in close-up against a variable background of irradiating light. This said, and unless we become too earnest about Florschuetz's work, they also introduce a humorous quality, rather as a child puts a hand in front of his face before a light source in order to experience the warm and transparent penumbra passing between the fingers. This is very evident in a work like *Untitled (Vanishing Point)* (1993), where the cat's cradle of interlocking hands precisely produces this effect.<sup>xii</sup>

Florschuetz's concern with a ‘looking at’, as distinct from the ‘looking for’ something in a proposed photograph image, has the effect of giving a precise comprehension to his work. To ‘look at’ is to comprehend the central character of a thing in its state of presence, rather than to search simply for intellectual solutions resolved outside the image. In this obvious sense his work is as much about visual presentation as it is about representation; presentation as a fact of

'being there' in the work (Heidegger's *dasein*). This is the condition of being *a priori* and something that I have chosen to articulate in terms of empirical singularity rather than as ontology. For example when he has photographed his eye(s), or, at least certainly since his discrete black and white body of work in the 1980s, they have always been photographed frontally as opposed to profile or across the face. There is a deliberately intended eye contact in the way that you might look at someone. This is apparent in a work like *Triptych #1* (1988) already cited, and has been extended further in his time-based three screen monitor installation called *Augenstücke 01* (2000),<sup>xiii</sup> shown in an exhibition with the affective title *Don't look now*, and which plays deliberately with the idea of the look or *blick*.<sup>xiv</sup> And, this reading does not contradict the indexical content of his work that would seem to suggest that his images point elsewhere, for in a Florschuetz photograph the very act of pointing is the thing itself that needs to be looked at. The signifier is the signified and the sign.

Thomas Florschuetz's use of his body parts literally derived from the singularity of 'a body' has yielded a rich vein of inquiry for the artist and continues to be so. Hence, to read these works through a chronology is often misleading, since they reflect primarily a synchronic and not diachronic set of concerns. They are part of his ongoing visual vocabulary, and it is sometimes pointless to extrapolate and over-determine specific works, for they encompass the nature of a general enquiry he is pursuing at any given moment.

### The Body of a Thing

Before a thing is a something, it is merely an anything, an anything in the world, and only takes on a particular specificity through human engagement with it. The double-glazed windows of Florschuetz's old studio in Forsterstrasse, Kreuzberg, or the curtains at Villa Aurora, Pacific Palisades, and the Capodimonte Museum in Naples, might seem in the first instance a facile and unprepossessing subject matter. However, it is Florschuetz's ability to elevate the commonplace, to evoke the essential embodiment and character of the things photographed that makes his work so persuasive. And, it is not coincidental that such subjects are drawn from the distracted proximities of the museum and the studio. Windows and curtains are screens, the former transparent and the latter opaque. The play of transparency and opacity has been an important concern throughout his work, extending the material and immaterial properties inherent to a photograph. In the case of his window series 1997-99, it also furthers the idea of singularity represented through multiplicity. Indeed, the title of the series is *Multiple Entry*.<sup>xv</sup>

A concern with the idea of a window functioning as a double frame has always interested Thomas Florschuetz, not just in the way that his double-glazed source material generates visual

ambiguities in the reading of the image, but also in that the window operates as a traditional analogy to the pictorial window of representation. The framing of the photograph serves a similar function of the frame framed. The window onto the world has been turned quite literally into the internal singularity of itself. That which is transparent has been moved towards an architectonic abstraction, a multiple entry, a pluralized abstraction mirrored through reflection (in a doubled sense), and a blurring of the boundaries that constitutes our understanding of inside and outside. The inside being the seeing-eye and the outside the processes at work in the seeing gaze that engages with the thing seen, “the synthesis which constitutes the unity of the perceived objects and which gives meaning to the perceptual data is not an intellectual synthesis.”<sup>xvi</sup> It carries forward the observation of ‘looking at’ as the basis of perceptual synthesis, and not the ‘looking for’, which would lead towards an intellectual determination. The windows of *Multiple Entry* are therefore obfuscated optical experiences that are expressions of both transparency and denial.

The curtains of Villa Aurora (2000), capture the artist’s contradistinction when dealing with the opacity of the screen. The soft and hard vertical pleats of the curtains, the play of light and shade created in part by the hidden visible of the light outside, leads to another form of abstraction. The frame of the photograph both singularises the image, and at the same time denies any particularity or place. What remains current is literally the ‘curtain-ness’ of the curtains as screen, and which fulfils my earlier observations on the ‘thingly character of the thing’. Conversely, the 2001-03 Capodimonte Museum photographs of curtains and screens mediate the simultaneity of inside and outside, they have a sense of either/or, since they are translucent interludes that are neither transparent nor opaque. Considerations as to frame-screen-frame is extended further in these works, as the grid-like frame of the window becomes apparent through the curtain-screens, and these photographs can be said to summarise and vindicate the artist’s investigations of the transparent and opaque.

### The Architectural Body

The usual argument suggests that before a building is anything it is a frame around space. However, Florschuetz’s photographs of Mies van der Rohe’s German Pavilion in Barcelona, originally built for the International Exhibition of 1928-29, would seem to challenge this assumption.<sup>xvii</sup> Mies van der Rohe intended the building to express throughout a sense of spatial continuity, and to elide a definitive boundary between inside and outside. He therefore rejected the idea of using conventionally constructed walls around a space. And, it is this characteristic that Florschuetz has developed in his photographs, a series of fragmented subtle moments of arrested spatial continuity. These photographs, dating from 2001-3, are extremely abstract

photographic incisions that concentrate on frames, screens and surface. The sense of verticality and plane echoes implicitly the architect's intention on the one hand, while denying van der Rohe's emphasis on "transactions between building and site, building and user," on the other.<sup>xviii</sup> For no people are ever present in the artist's photographs of architectural motifs, and no sense of immediate historical recognition ever supposed by Florschuetz. At the same time the subject matter has been driven towards an even more severe planar abstraction than the famous architect might have intended.

Having said this for the most part the buildings Florschuetz has chosen to photograph are leavened with architectural and biographical identity. The artist's photographs of the Bauhaus at Dessau (2003), similarly extract elements of constructed planar abstraction, sometimes as redolent of the paintings of Van Doesburg as of photography. Concentrating on stairwells and transitions within the building, Florschuetz has used the diagonal viewpoint to create a flattening effect, something that again excises a singular characteristic from the space. Like his earlier works with the body, there are small shifts of positioned perspective that vary the serialised similitude of the subject matter. Indeed, the works have a close analogy, though translated in this instance from the animate to the inanimate, with his photographs of superimposed ankles and lower leg that make up *Untitled (Total)* (1995) discussed earlier. There is also the same visual sense of a pictorially layered use of composition. Hence that that has become exposed by his use of the extracted fragment, is the essence of a building and its form. While at the same time it reveals the building it to be consonant with the mind and Bauhaus practices which generated it.

The artist's photographs of Oscar Niemeyer's public school architecture in Rio de Janeiro (2002), returns us again to the issue of the façade as screen and spatial containment when seen from both inside and outside. Yet with this recent example the ideas of frame, grid, and aperture, are directly embodied in the architecture itself. Though it must also be said that the biographical association between Berlin and Brazil has not been lost on Florschuetz. The utopian aspirations behind the building of the schools, and the bleak reality of their concrete facades stand in contrast to each other. His interest in repetition and difference, and in finding distinctions within what are standardised buildings, illustrates the same singularity of approach where the different colour fascias form a subsidiary typology. Florschuetz's choice of architectural motifs is consistent in that they are almost invariably buildings in descent from International Modernism, though in the case of the Rio de Janeiro schools the emphasis tends to be on the totality of the building itself, and unusually not a fragment (of part thereof) that is taken to reveal an aspect or point of view. In that sense they reflect a shift away from his earlier engagement with architectural photography. However, there are also other works from recent

trips to Brazil concentrating on steps or fragments of buildings of more traditional nature, and these in turn are the now familiar extracted aspects that follow his delight in discovering moments of abstract planar construction.

### Of Vegetal Life

Flowers, plants, and vegetables are of the commonplace, as with so many subjects Florschuetz has chosen to photograph. However, to treat this chosen subject matter as if were discrete body of photography would be a great error; they are as much part of his work as anything else. Indeed, at many levels they clarify the very principle of singularity that drives forward his work; since bodies are lived in and buildings are built. For when we speak of 'a flower', or 'a vegetable' we engage with the essential characteristics of an indefinite singularity. And, if they are cultivated it is only as a bi-product of human interest or need, for as natural organic things they do not of necessity require the intervention of human organisation.

In his recent series of orchid photographs called *Blumenstücke* (1999-2001), we find fragmented aspects of *cattleya* and orchid stems.<sup>xix</sup> But while they may appear beautiful in their detail they have no real intention of serving specific purposes in descriptive botanical photography, and nor does Florschuetz particularly desire to expand upon what is now a well established history of orchid painting.<sup>xx</sup> In reality they are concerned with the fragile architectonics of space, scale, and surface. The differing viewpoint of repetition extends the work, and at the same time magnifies the sense of an arrested moment, reminding us of their former existence. The transient life of flowers has always served to stress the literary and the allegorical, the symbolic and the iconographic; as with Charles Swann when he places his nose against the *cattleya* of his mistress Odette's corsage.<sup>xxi</sup> But unlike his use of body parts, windows, curtains, and architectural sources, the blooms are naturally self-composed. And, while anthropomorphic content and symbolisation (the word *orchis* connotes the testicle or testes) may provoke analogy, it does so in this instance only in respect of what is contained in the photograph. The real character of these photographed flowers remains in the subtle variance of their sepals and labella. However, these variations are so often indistinct that it requires a close examination to discern the shifts in viewpoint, exaggerating the need to 'look at' the image to dispel the generality of what is seen. The artist's decision to choose softened pastel colouration strengthens the necessity of scrutiny. For what is common to many other orchids that he might have chosen, is their exotic excess of colour and heightened theatricality. The stem spray seen in works such as the *Untitled (Orchideen)* (2000), flatten and expose the delicate skeletal structure upon which the bloom depends. And, unlike the architectural motifs where spatial framing has

been imposed – the photograph capturing it – space becomes engendered around the flower. In this sense the photographing of organic things always implies a form of motility. The normal-size and scale means we move around the bloom or turn it in space (hence the arrangement of flowers), but by reversal Florschuetz’s large-scale photographs deliberately imply and alter our comprehension of the scale and meaning of the flowers themselves. In consequence it alters the usual sense of informational perception and how we look at them.

The extracted organic fragment (the part of), be it the border shrubbery and/or grasses shot near Tucson and Pacific Palisades, translate what have always been his concerns. In this particular vegetal context it is the pre-occupation he has with surface and screen, and how in the most subtle of ways through shifts of focus or exposure images are never quite exactly the same. Photography due to its reliance on the mediating practicalities of mechanism is and was always part of an expectant process; though the sense of the expectant moment has been shrunk somewhat by new digital technology. However, Florschuetz uses a Nikon camera and approaches his subject matter in a manner that is quite traditional. Images are all about him and it remains only to find the place and moment to extract them. His images of the branches of acacia trees, shot in Death Valley, California, are one such chance find of spontaneous immediacy. But what they do is visually elide a sense of the boundary between photography and drawing, they are almost Pollock-like in their achieved abstraction. And, it a salient feature of all the work of Florschuetz, notwithstanding that a photograph of a subject in the world is a three-dimensional image on a two-dimensional surface, is that he obscures this overt determinism by his pursuit of the singularity inherent in his subject matter. I thus return to where I began in the immanent condition of the empirical transcendent, namely that within a subject or object in its indefinite (and non-specific) reality, there still resides the ability to capture the truth and meaning of a thing seen.

Mark Gisbourne.

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#### ENDNOTES

(translations are by the author unless otherwise stated)

<sup>i</sup> See, ‘Thing and Work’, and ‘Truth and Art’, from, “The Origin of a Work of Art” (1950), reproduced in, Albert Hofstadter and Richard Kuhns, *Philosophies of Art and Beauty: Selected Readings in Aesthetics from Plato to Heidegger*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1976 (pp. 650-703), pp. 653, 687

<sup>ii</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on Life*, (Paris, 1995) Eng. trans., Anne Boyman, New York, Zone Books, 2002, p. 27



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- iii *ibid* p. 29
- iv Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, London, 1994.
- v Ulf Erdmann Ziegler and Ina Hartwig, *Thomas Florschütz: Total Inconnu/Unbekannte Summe*, ex. cat., Galerie du Jour, Paris; Centre d'Art et de Culture, Brétigny-sur-Orge, 1992, np.
- vi Christoph Tannert, 'The Fragmented Universe Within Us', in, *Thomas Florschütz*, ex. cat., Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1988, np.
- vii One might think of Jaques André Boiffard's black and white photographs of the 1920s; see, Georges Bataille (et al), *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, London, Atlas Press, 1995. Alternatively, one could turn to the 'body language' and/or expressive 'facial taxonomies' of Arnulf Rainer's *Franz Xaver Messerschmidt Character Heads/Arnulf Rainer's Overdrawings Franz Xaver Messerschmidt*, ex. cat., Institute of Contemporary Art, London, 1982.
- viii Christoph Tannert, 'Das Schmerzlust-Prinzip/The Pleasure-Pain Principle', in, *Thomas Florschütz: Belvedere*, ex. cat, Galerie vier/Galerie Nikolaus Sonne, Berlin, 1992, np. Also extracted in an altered translation in *Le Shuttle: Tunnelrealitäten Paris-London-Berlin*, ex. cat., Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, 1992, p. 65
- ix See, Hubertus von Amelnxen, 'Aus dem Blick (Obstruktion II)', in, *Thomas Florschütz: Plexus*, ex. cat., Neue Berliner Kunstverein, 1994.
- x Stuart Morgan, *Thomas Florschütz Between Two: Suburbia*, ex. cat., Stills Gallery, Edinburgh, 1996, np.
- xi Klaus Honnef, 'Ereignisse von Licht und Schatten: Bemerkungen zu Thomas Florschütz', in, *Thomas Florschütz: Vor dem ersten Blick*, ex. cat., Kunstverein Göttingen, 1996, np.
- xii The work is beautifully reproduced to give this effect in, *Thomas Florschütz Anatomie eines Triptychons/Egy triptichon anatómiája*, ex. cat., Műcsarnok/Kunsthalle, Budapest, 1998, np.
- xiii Maren Polte, 'Dazwischen', *Eikon*, Heft 33, 200, pp. 4-12
- xiv This exhibition title suggests something of a humorous take on the Nicholas Roeg's 1973 film *Don't Look Now*, an adaption of Daphne du Maurier's novel (1966) of the same title.
- xv *Thomas Florschütz: Multiple Entry*, ex. cat., Städtischen Museum, Zwickau, 1998.
- xvi Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Primacy of Perception and Its Philosophical Consequences', in, *The Primacy of Perception*, Northwestern University Press (1964), 1989, (pp. 12-42), p. 15.
- xvii The original building was commissioned by the Weimar Republic in the late summer of 1928, and built between March and May of the following year (it was demolished in 1930 and reconstructed in 1986); see, *Mies van der Rohe 1905-1938*, ex. cat., Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2001, pp. 236-41
- xviii *ibid*, p.237
- xix *Thomas Florschütz 'Ricochet' Blumenstücke*, National Galerie im Hamburger, Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, WMB Berlin, Berlin, 2001
- xx One might think particularly in the German tradition of Ferdinand (1760-1826) and Franz Bauer (1758-1840), the latter in 1788 became the Royal Botanical Painter at Kew Gardens: see, Joyce Stewart, William T. Stearn, Franz Bauer (Illustrator) *The Orchid Paintings of Franz Bauer*, Timer Press, London, 1993.
- xxi The use of orchids is a familiar literary motif in Marcel Proust's *Du côté de Chez Swann* (Swann's Way), in the first volume of *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of lost Time).