Archive

An exhibition of new work by

Chelsea Lehmann

MOP Projects Oct 19 - Nov 13 | 2016

Raining On The Inside

When the first interior photograph of the human body was produced in 1895 it showed the left hand of the pioneering physicist's wife. The stacked black mass on Anna Bertha Ludwig's fourth finger goes some way to diagnosing the nature of her condition; married. That she yielded to the bizarre procedure at all nearly completes the investigation of her as a subject. Seeing her insides rendered in black and white made Anna feel morbid. Ghouls and cadavers are made of dull bones like these, she thought. She pressed at the warm skin of her left hand and tried to feel if the black bones were leaking through. She was spooked by her ringed shadow and certain of her fate. "I have seen my death", she said to her husband, who was walking out of the room with a glowing Crookes tube in his hand.

The object renders in material form the preexistent intention that gave birth to it, and its form is accounted for by the performance expected of it even before it takes shape. It is another story altogether with the river or the rock which we know, or believe, to have been moulded by the free play of physical forces to which we cannot attribute any design, any "project" or purpose. [I]

Whatever else is determined from the evidence produced by the first—or last—X-ray image is finally accounted for in the reading or mis-reading of it. That the *reading of images* became the key diagnostic tool for medical science seems unlikely; like divining fortunes from tea leaves, or communing with the dead via automatic writing. The X-ray doesn't speak well of the dead, it speaks instead to a state of living decay, revealing the impact of time on matter. Or, that it is only a matter of time.

Nothing Exists per se Except Atoms and The Void [II]

Like the X-ray, the painting renders in material form the preexistent intention that gave birth to it. But what if parts of the painting are artificial, *products of a conscious purposive activity*, and other parts are natural, *resulting from the gratuitous play of physical forces*?[1] How do intentions register as surfaces? The X-ray readily

It is raining.

Let this book therefore be, before all else, a book about ordinary rain. [III]

Typed letter [Paris,] 11 June [1984]
I'm writing you this note amid a spring sprung without warning from days and days of rain, real downpours in Paris. [IV]

If Epicurus' atoms, raining down parallel to each other in the void, encounter one another, it is in order to bring out... the existence of human freedom even in the world of necessity. [V]

shows up corporeal error, but how does the painter find, and reveal, the aesthetics of the error in design?

When Mt. Vesuvius spewed out a quenching tide of rocks and 1000°C gas in A.D. 79, it petrified the city of Herculaneum. Beneath deep layers of volcanic tephra were buried eighteen hundred carbonised papyrus scrolls. If you have ever left a sausage too long in the fire or held a piece of coal, then you know what The Herculaneum papyri look like. You might be anxious at the thought that these objects constitute the only surviving library of the ancient world. Despite their carbon cast the scrolls have been eliciting rapture from all who encounter them since their discovery over two hundred years ago.

Going back in time is fraught and there should always be good reason. Over time, attempts to read the scrolls have destroyed them. Rose water, mercury, "vegetable gas," sulphuric compounds, papyrus juice, ethanol, glycerin, and warm water are just some of the materials that have been used to soften and unfurl the texts leading to the fatal erasure of many.[2] Most recently, X-ray has been utilised to determine the shape and density of the characters that sit on top of the non-absorbent papyrus and return legibility to the writing through a sort of reverse engineering.

If you are a scholar of ancient Greek or Roman literature it's likely that The Herculaneum papyri are your Rosetta Stone. This is a fertile library that grows with the user's imagination: scholars pick names from the ninety nine percent of Ancient Greek literature that has been lost to time and throw them at the scrolls hoping one will stick: Sappho, Aristotle or Ovid?

In *Philosophy of the Encounter* Althusser reveals that he is writing the book at the end of a three-year long 'ordeal' that begun in 1980 when he strangled his wife. In a 1984 letter to Fernanda Navarro, Althusser writes, "Something quite surprising happened to me recently: the handwritten account of the dream that you found, dated 1964, had an astonishingly premonitory cast, because it involved the murder of my mother, strangled by me. It allowed me and D[iatkine] to work well on the unconscious impulse that culminated in the tragedy." [VI]

A geneticist might be forgiven for concluding that, in the theory of the encounter, the materialism of the encounter existed, at least 'in some manner', before its own birth. [VII]

Sophocles, Gorgias or Euripides? Suetonius? Epicurus?

What about Epicurus? Who posited the theory of a world made of atoms, those indivisible elements of matter that fall in an infinite rain, then swerve and collide in series of encounters from which the world is born. Epicurus, who proposed that the spaces between atomic particles—the lacunae with their extant marginalia—are just as defining as the atomic particles themselves.

Perhaps the temptation of a closed loop, that complete path from beginning to end and back to beginning again, is a denial of our mortal fates. But wouldn't it be fitting if Epicurus' atomic philosophy—that thinking that prefigured our understanding of matter and led to the very knowledge that allows us to virtually re-write the scrolls and begin to read them anew—was the very text that the scrolls themselves contained?

Chelsea Lehmann exposes her paintings to a process of diagnosis that extends them, as objects, past naturalness and artificiality and beyond the idea that they begin and end with her hand. Each exposure incrementally damages the painting; but with every new injury comes new information and beneath every surface is another surface. Lehmann's movements as a painter run parallel to her nature, from which form also emerges. These two gestures, let's call one conscious and the other blind, run in parallel, recalling—in their parallelism—Epicurus' rain. The artist can see when it's raining outside, but wants to see what it looks like when its raining on the inside too.

Thus it will have been noticed that this philosophy is, in sum, a philosophy of the void: not only the philosophy which says that the void preexists the atoms that fall in it, but a philosophy which creates the philosophical void...in order to endow itself with existence...[VIII]

The walls of this room present six unanswered questions in the shape of objects. And perhaps two more that aren't tethered to an image: How might we find the void in the space of art?

These are some movements toward a theory of painting.

-Stella Rosa McDonald

Notes

[I] Jacques Monod, "About Strange Objects", in Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 15

[II] T. Lucretius Carus, *Of the Nature of Things*, in Six Books (London: 1714).
1 Monod, "About Strange Objects", 15
[III] Louis Althusser, "The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter" In *Philosophy of the Encounter, Later Writings, 1978-87* (London: Verso), 167.
[IV] Althusser, "Letters to Fernanda Navarro" In *Philosophy…*,214.
2 John Seabrook, "The Invisible Library," The New Yorker, November 16, 2015.
[V] Althusser, *Philosophy...*, 168
[VI] Ibid, 215
[VII] Ibid, xli
[VIII] Althusser, 174.

Artist Statement

The artwork in this exhibition is largely informed by a collaboration with the Ide Lab of Advanced Imaging Technology at the Graduate School of Engineering, Kyoto University, Japan. Founded by Professor Ari Ide-Ektessabi, this laboratory is the world's largest archive of ultra high-resolution 2D cultural heritage data and has developed more than 35 scanning systems which have been deployed in Japan, Europe, Asia and Africa for the digitisation of significant cultural heritage.[1]

Analytical imaging refers to the technique of extracting information from images using pattern recognition and data mining. The type of information depends on how the images are acquired, which could be trichromatic, monochromatic, multispectral, hyperspectral, or infrared. Analytical imaging differs from conventional imaging used in cultural heritage by extracting and assigning numerical values to the image information providing unprecedented control of the colour accuracy, among other features. This technique provides ultra-high resolutions and high colour fidelity that are not achievable with traditional camera techniques.[2]

Because art and cultural heritage are often under threat from climate change, tourist traffic and political iconoclasm, high-resolution and multispectral digital scanning have become an important means of accurately documenting and archiving these objects for future generations. In the words of Professor Sarah Kenderdine, a leading researcher and developer of visualisation systems that present these images, these data sets are 'important repositories for cultural memory.' [3]

The aesthetic potential of these imaging techniques is also significant and underpins the premise of this exhibition. The extraordinary capacity of both visible and non-visible light-based imaging to capture material phenomena inaccessible to the naked eye elicits a sense of accumulated time and depth in the surfaces of objects, hence light is employed as a central agent and motif in these artworks. Scientific and analytical scanning techniques highlight the relationship between layers of material, between material and image, and between technology and image production. In *Archive,* these techniques are employed to present the painted surface as a space-time compendium of matter and thought which circumscribes the haptic interaction between the artist and the art object.

The work in this exhibition deploys scientific imaging techniques from the field of art conservation and high-resolution digital scanning as creative process by combining the empiricism of science with the vicissitudes of painting. Using these techniques, the material surfaces of densely layered paintings can be explored by exposing their layers in reverse, or up close. The main imaging techniques used are X-Ray, which might be seen as 'painting backwards', high-resolution scans, poetically described as 'rococo data' (a term that implies 'excess' information), and infrared imaging, which may be imagined as a form of monochrome painting, or false colour painting in which certain material phenomena present in different ways; for instance, Lead White pigment becomes almost transparent to infrared, whereas it is highly visible to X-ray.

Paint texture, pentimenti and other material nuances discernible to non-visible light (restoration attempts, support type/age, pigment changes, coatings etc.) all contribute to understandings of the painted surface as an archive of processual, material and thinking 'movements'. In a remarkable testament to a painting's ability to interact with light, densely layered surfaces are also

---

1 LUXLAB: Advanced Analytic Scanning. http://www.niea.unsw.edu.au/research/projects/luxlab-advanced-analytic-scanning. Accessed Sept 20, 2016.

2 ibid. LUXLAB: Advanced Analytic Scanning

3 Kenderdine, Sarah, eResearch Australasia 2015 (Published Nov 6, 2015).

capable of bending it, much like a lens. This suggests the surface of a painting operates as a porous interface in which exchanges of physical, perceptual and conceptual processes take place.

Arguably, new developments in image capture and presentation, including advanced facsimiles of artworks, are also capable of transforming or eliminating the traditional barriers between different times, places and people in what might be described as an artwork's proliferation of aura,[4] by employing the very means, i.e. advanced imaging and distribution technologies, that Walter Benjamin once deemed a threat to the sanctified aura of the original work of art.

The 'destruction' of aura through transience and reproducibility is judged 'a salutary estrangement'[5] by Benjamin; an idea that suggests a dual negotiation of an encounter, one that is both advancing and distancing. Salutary estrangement implies a useful impartiality or new freedom of the object beyond parasitical dependence on a certain type of access (to what Benjamin called its cult value). In the context of 'distance' from the original artwork, this may be interpreted today as a kind of productive mediation, whereby aura is not destroyed or lost, but transformed from one materiality to another, forming a new presence or 'auratic assembly', i.e., one that is not solely reliant on tradition, or conventional ideas of materiality and human access.

What Benjamin saw as a palpable change in the authority of artworks can now be debated in terms of the aesthetic and philosophical singularities of the digital age and the proliferation of new visual technologies. As Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe propose: 'facsimiles, especially those relying on complex (digital) techniques, are the most fruitful way to explore the original and even to help re-define what originality actually is.'[6]

To this end, *Archive* is an exhibition of artwork that looks at the tangential connections between the original painting and its reproduction, and the visual and technological implications of advanced imaging techniques. Since Benjamin's theory of aura is fundamentally about human perception, this work is also a reflection of how we might be brought closer to the process of making and to the passage of time embedded within artworks through advanced reproductions. Can an original work of art be enhanced, rather than depleted of aura by the agency of technologically complex imaging processes? Facsimiles (or advanced copies) may be seen to operate as stand-alone versions of the original, sitting alongside its materiality and concepts. When applied to artworks, advanced imaging technologies produce information different from and even in excess of the original. Consequently, the aura of the reproduction emerges as separate from, but contingent on the original artwork. The technological reproduction of artworks offers the kind of information that returns time and aura to the dematerialised image through sheer quality and versatility of data, acknowledging the surface of artworks as multifaceted interfaces.

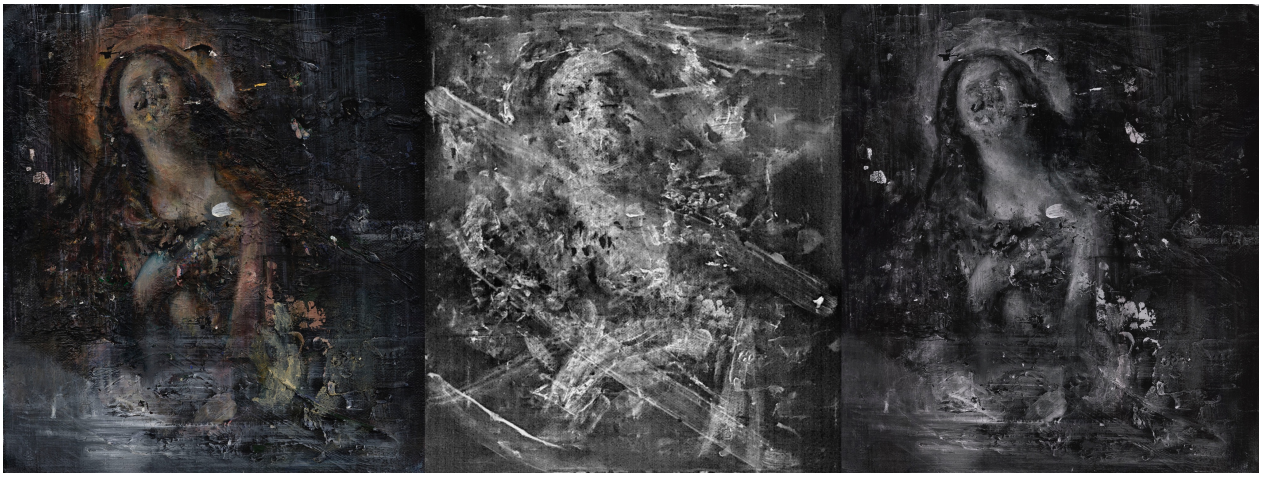
Chelsea Lehmann
2016

---

4 Sarah Kenderdine in: eResearch Australasia 2015, (Published Nov 6, 2015), AARNet interview (Dec 15, 2015), How will museums of the future look?, TEDxGateway 2013 (Published Apr 11, 2014), 'Art and Experiential Design (ANGSW, May28, 2016),The Digital Masterpiece, The World Economic Forum (Published Feb 19, 2016).

5 Walter, Benjamin, Selected Writings, ed. Howard Eiland & Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 1991–98, p.518.

6 Bruno Latour, The Migration of the Aura – or How to Explore the Original Through Its Facsimiles, 2008. A chapter prepared for T. Bartscherer and R. Coover (editors) Switching Codes. Thinking Through Digital Technology in the Humanities and the Arts, University of Chicago Press pp. 275-297 (with Adam Lowe 2011).



Images: RGB high-res digital scan (1000dpi), X-ray, high-res digital infrared scan of painting. RGB and Infrared image courtesy of Ide Advanced Imaging Lab, Kyoto university. X-ray courtesy of Bureau Veritas, Australia and New Zealand. Painting: Chelsea Lehmann, Tenchi, (2011-2016) oil on linen, 24 x 21cm.

This project has been realised with the generous assistance of The Ide Laboratory of Advanced Imaging (Graduate School of Engineering, Kyoto University, Japan).

With thanks to:
Professor Ari-Ide Ektessabi, Terumi Akasaka, Mr Koji Okamura, Kado Mie, Jay Arre Toque, Fargol Mahjoub Moghadas and all of the many students and technicians who assisted this project at the Ide Laboratory.

Ian Coker and Rene Dumont at Bureau Veritas, Australia and New Zealand.

George and Ron Adams, and Samantha Ferris at MOP Projects.

Installation: Gotaro Uematsu, Antoine Loew, Gwen Lecampion.

Text: Stella Rosa McDonald.

Chelsea Lehmann holds a Bachelor of Visual Art (Hons) from Adelaide Central School of Art (1998) and was a visiting scholar at Glasgow School of Art, Scotland (1999) courtesy of the Ruth Tuck Scholarship. She has an MFA (Research) from the College of Fine Art, UNSW (2007) and is currently a PhD candidate at UNSW Art & Design supported by the Australian Postgraduate Award. Lehmann has been the recipient of several awards, grants and local and international residencies and has exhibited regularly in Australia and internationally. Her current work focuses on retrieving layers of images within the painted surface through scientific imaging techniques such as X-ray and infrared, and physical erasure.

This catalogue was produced on the occasion of Chelsea Lehmann's exhibition 'Archive' (19 October - 13 November 2016), held at MOP Projects, 2 / 39 Abercrombie Street, Chippendale, Sydney NSW 2008, Australia.