

Twilight to Oblivion, My Little Museum

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The following sentence came into my mind the other day:

Imagine this ... *the very last ray of light that enters your eyes* ... at the moment of your death.

The above sentence conjures up for me a gloriously evocative visual idea, a conceptual diamond embedded in the darkness of dung and a clue to my preoccupation with that inevitable *last image*, the theme of this exhibition. I am asked to write something for this catalogue about what motivated me to create the *Museum of Optography*, a difficult task but one I will start by saying, what first intrigued me, and what, at some point, many of us are likely to have thought about, is of our last moments of existence, the when, where and how of it all. My exhibition the *Museum of Optography* plays with this idea in a complex neural network of objects, photographs, documentaries, drawings, video works, audio recordings and paintings whose meanings and connections I attempt in fragments or short notes, to elucidate further below.



My fascination with optography started when, out of the blue, I was thumped in the eye in a London Street around 1992. For a week or two after the event I had developed an overwhelming apprehension of crossing the road and as a byproduct a new interest in sudden death and eyes.

SCAR!

The flash of impact, the glug and gush of blood as it splatters my virginally white jeans, the scar to my head evidence to an earlier moment of trauma. To see or maybe witness, scrawled graffiti in nature, an indelible sub-note to the event so sudden and horrible. The iris narrows as it focuses itself, contracting with the blinding light, the flash of the hatchet as it falls to make no more in the mind. The number 33 doubledecker bus has passed, I'm still alive.

Rather morbid you say, and yes you are right. My blood stained white jeans signalled in violent visual evidence unbeknown to me at the time, the start of the *Museum of Optography*. The big bang moment. The traumatic moment that leads me to this considered moment. That thump just above my eye triggered a strong sense of mortality in my mind 'reawakened' a few years later by the following small piece of description in a *Time-Life* book from 1970:

A Jesuit friar called Christopher Schiener made an amazing observation in the mid 17th Century whereby he had observed an image laid bare on the retina of a frog, a faint, fleeting record of what the eye had been fixed on at the moment its owner had died. It was rumoured it became possible to fix this image and create what is termed an Optogram.

I seem to recall reading somewhere, in relation to 19th century photography, a reference to the photographic image as being like 'The Pencil of Light'. My memory is wrong, though close to the truth, as the first illustrated photographic book was called *The Pencil of Nature*.

I imagine a scenario where a tiny photon of light emanating from a distant star travels at a mind blowing 300,000 kilometres per second in a straight line, through many inconceivable light years of space to be stopped by my retina, after first deviating its course, refracting through cornea and lens to then be absorbed into the fundus of my eye. This internal journey continues still further towards my brain on a micro level, a complex chemical and electrical interaction. Finally, with the rapidity of a blink of an eye, this tiny speck of information finds its way to its place in my visual cortex and I see. The point of light has become an idea and therefore thought, an amazing transformation from a point of distant starlight. All this has been in motion for the past fifteen minutes while I have been intensely observing, through a telescope, this tiny photon particle of light. I then die suddenly from a blow to the head, and thanks to the new science of optography which was reportedly used as a forensic tool in the late 1880's with the Jack the Ripper investigation, there is a possibility that my murderer will be caught. A light sensitive protein called Rhodopsin (like silver nitrate used in the photographic process) is contained in my retina which has held this image for the past two minutes as the optographic forensic scientist uncovers this ghost star from a distant time. Like a photograph in mid development, the bleached retinal image



has been interrupted by an even stronger beam of daylight destroying the image and returning my retina to its natural clear state. Images come to me of ancient artifacts turning to dust upon discovery.



I have just learned that an optogram can still be produced once somebody is already dead, rather than at the moment of death. In the 1870's, Professor Wilhelm Kühne who worked in the old physiology building of Heidelberg University produced many optograms, mainly from rabbits and in some instances the animals were already dead. Only drawings of these images exist. Around a hundred years later, Dr Evangelos Alexandridis, also a Professor at Heidelberg University produced at the request of the police in 1975 a small number of optograms that appear as light boxes in the *Museum of Optography*.

I describe an optogram as being like the imprint formed on an arm pressed up to the edge of a table, the elasticity of the flesh retains an image or impression independent of the brain, as the eye mechanism is merely a constant collector of light. With the table analogy the flesh imprint returns to its natural form in moments. When the animal is already dead there is no more light perceived in the brain as there is no function remaining. The dying flesh leaves the secret imprint like a camera loaded with exposed celluloid ready to be processed unbeknown to the outside world. A hidden world.

My *Museum of Optography* is an art show about the tendency of our memory to fool; about imagination and the hidden internal world cloaked by our senses; about parallel histories where I am

curator and creator, my history and that of the *Museum of Optography* converge and overlap to make, in hybrid form, an invention of the imagination where fact and fiction blur, birth and death merge and objectivity is lost.

The science with optography is connected in my mind with the now 19th century romantic image of the great pioneer scientist or inventor, akin to the protagonist in H.G. Wells *Time Machine*. But this is romance and suggests an ideal that never fits reality. In the late Victorian era, technologies of reproduction of reality such as photography, phonographic recording and primitive cinema entertained the idea of hyperreal immortality, technology as a possible means to stop death. Technology was salvation. The *pencil of light* or of nature, was now to replace painting as *memento mori*. The camera as eye made perfect sense.

Now, if we take the idea of:

The very first light that enters our eyes

We can say that it is like waking up to a sunny day, yes, the very first sensation of this held in the newly forming foetus's brain trapped in its amber like golden encasement, light defusing through the warmth of flesh, of course this is fanciful and again a false memory on my part. *The very first light that enters the eyes* is likely to be a blur of a delivery rooms fluorescent tube seen through a haze of blood. Perhaps the last and first images imprinted on the retina are in some cases the same, fluorescent tube lights.

The very first and last sound that we utter

It has been often observed that during a soldier's painful death the mother figure is held in vain with his last cry to the world. This is perhaps akin to the mother during child birth with the painful scream of her babe in arms signalling the trauma of coming into being. It seems that beginnings and ends are often similar.

The optographic process is a sudden and violent end as opposed to gradual deterioration of mind and body. In my video piece *Hymn*, housed in the *Museum of Optography*, my grandmother appears before us, sunken cheeked, pale and near to death and through belief and the song she sings perhaps finds solace. Her words "In his hands and feet are imprints and his side" remind us of Christ's last body image left in cloth echoing her repose position in the video. She is at one with her god. This moving video is her last self image for us to see, she is immortal but she doesn't know it.



This is where I will stop this little essay as I have had my allotted time and space in words and paper. I notice my arm has strangely picked up the slight impression of a leaf from the armchair I am sitting on. It is much like an optogram and I watch as the leaf-shape slowly disappears and my arm returns to its former self.

