

1000 words

Nickel van Duijvenboden: Metamorphosis

It all begins with the removal from a cooled storehouse. A dramatic reheating ensues. The temperature rises with about ten degrees, but remains chilly all the same. Here you spend the night. The following morning, the same person transports you once again, but this time to a warmer spot at room temperature. You end up on a table, where you are subjected to a superficial examination under glaring lamplight. Possible damage is recorded and inventoried. Gloved fingers are set to work. Before you even realize, a scalpel pries you open. Organic tissue is removed, disappearing without further ado into a waste basket. You end up naked on a white surface that after a moment's flicker lights up into a glaring white. Everything tightens inside. This must be what pain at a molecular level feels like.

It's been years since you were exposed to so much light. It reminds you of that very first time, when you were still blank and greeted by a joyful scene. Then too, it happened with an unexpected flash searing a drawing of light onto your dark support. That's what started it all, fifty-three years ago. Almost right after that, you were submerged into some foul fluid, in pitch-dark, time and time again. It bit into you, it made you swell up. Then, for the first time, you were exposed to the light of a lamp for a prolonged period of time. They cut you up into equal pieces and clasped you into a rectangular housing, so people could take in your fixed impression through a small window preventing them from soiling you with their sweaty fingers.

Strangely enough, the doctor is wearing cotton gloves this time. Together with others, you are subjected to a slow procedure scanning you from both sides in a light box. Nothing escapes scrutiny. Your inside is exposed, fragmented and reconstructed elsewhere. It seems you are being discarded. Afterwards you are brought back to your original state, with your wafer-thin essence joined without stitches to the frame where they lifted you from. You feel mangled – yes, that's exactly the phrase: to mangle. What sort of laboratory is this anyway? The basement of the former museum of photography was wholly tiled, as befits the true laboratory. This

created a certain atmosphere in conjunction with the hum of industrial refrigerators and the sparse daylight coming from the elongated basement windows, which had to be supplemented with that of tubes. For two years I worked here in this restoration studio. While shuffling through the corridors, certain negations would whirl around in my mind. They were all concerned with what I was *not*, and attempted to determine through a process of subtraction the capacity I was operating under. Not as a photographer, that's for sure. Neither as a historian. And I was anything but a restorer, although I heeded the laws of that profession as closely as possible.

These negative designations were translated into a drive to become invisible. My work was not so much a mystery, but an operation intent on leaving behind no traces. It was imperative that whoever received the objects that had passed through my gloved fingers should get an intact copy on the table.

The patching up itself was the responsibility of my superior, so I needn't worry about scarring. I was merely a mediator carrying out certain assignments. I was not in a position to change anything, even if it would have amounted to an improvement. I could only secure that authority after making a duplicate. This explains my preoccupation with twins, and in particular the degree in which they were identical. I could afford to be more careless with one of them. It was always inferior to the original.

The slightest of glances also counted as an intrusion. After some time I became conscious of the almost physical impression the gaze would leave behind. Although there is no change in the chemistry, support or material, it is beyond question that the image undergoes an irreversible metamorphosis as soon as it catches your eye. Perhaps it would be better off remaining unseen.

My method resembled the stare: although I did look, I took pains not to recognize the image. I inventoried by means of circumscribing gestures, meanwhile refraining from making hasty conclusions. It was best not to draw any conclusions at all. The accumulation of data had to be clouded as little as



possible by feelings and interpretations, as they tend to take something away from the image. The judging gaze always makes something disappear.

One day, a wooden box with numbered notches had come in, containing tin-cased slides. Between the glass and the support were minuscule webs of white material. Those had to be of something living. Shriveled pupae of an insect's ribbed body were strewn across the corners of the box. Some of the yellowed labels that had been provisionally stuck to the frames had been eaten into. The names of a seemingly illustrious company had been left behind in fountain pen.

The top of my form showed the encoded comment: IMG WOII E6. The letters were followed by an exclamation mark between brackets. I knew what it meant: I had just received colour documents from a military archive dating back to the war; the exclamation mark emphasized the rarity of colour. I somewhat had to feign my astonishment as the slides were as monochrome as images in black-and-white. When I held one of the slides against the light, I could only make out cyan figures. All the other colours had already faded.

I categorized them on a light box. My task was to produce duplicates and restore colour. Despite severe decay, pieces of skin had remained intact. Their pigment had coalesced into crimson epicentres, like an infection. The red could serve as a reference point for reconstruction, together with the insight that the uniforms of those depicted had to be in some shade of green.

And yet I realized I was actually scrutinizing a colouring picture. Indeed: how was I to know that the random green I would introduce matched the actual green of that uniform of decades ago? Again, I had to proceed by way of subtraction: I only knew what colour it definitely could *not* have been. Within the bounds of that limit I was free to do whatever I pleased. My reading of the image would retroactively colour reality and no one would be able to verify my intervention. I imagined myself undetectable.

I did come across some scattered neutral spots, like the gleam of the silvered skulls that crowded a

number of the images. Without exception, they were attached to the peak of the army caps the men had so nonchalantly slid to the back of their heads. One man's slicked-back hair in particular turned out to be a key into unlocking this coloured past: its darkness was instrumental in neutralising the implausible hue veiling the image. He was the touchstone I had been looking for: all the images unfolded through him. I was fortunate to find him recur in several images – this shy and smiling figure in the background. I did not ask myself who he was, but one of the slide frames, gnawed at from both sides by some insect, revealed his name. The only remaining letters spelled ENGEL.

To me, this man was nothing more than an instrument: I accepted his presence without contemplating the fact that in an eerie way he blended into his surroundings. Without exception, he was only partially present in the images, either cut off by the frame or by another figure he could hide behind. Indistinctly, as if he were a camouflaged animal, he would inhabit the corners of your eye.

The other men surrounding him, the photographer and myself: we all bear witness to this moment, and yet, at the same time, we were not aware of him. All that remains is you, the photograph, and self-consciousness is not one of your traits. How could you become conscious of the images you bear, if it weren't for us to reflect on them?

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Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow* (1991). Novel where a war criminal comes to know the events of his life in reverse order. Because his actions are literally rewound, he cannot but relive them with a naive ignorance.

Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence* (2002). Examinations of photographs that harbour a trauma, written by a psychoanalyst. In addition, images of former concentration camps are surveyed.

Website United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Auschwitz through the Lens of the SS: Photos of Nazi Leadership at the Camp*. Flash presentation of the recently discovered album of photographs of SS officers in the vicinity of Auschwitz, including Josef Mengele, the 'angel of death.' <http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/ssalbum/>