Contact Images
By Georges Didi-Huberman

Contact images? Images that touch something and then someone. Images that cut to the quick of a question: touching to see or, on the contrary, touching to no longer see; seeing to no longer touch or, on the contrary, seeing to touch. Images that are too close. Adherent images. Image-obstacles, but obstacles that make things appear. Images coupled to each other, indeed even to the things of which they are the image. Contiguous images, images backing each other. Weighty images. Or very light images that surface and skim, graze us and touch us again. Caressing images. Groping or already palpable images. Images sculpted by developer, modeled by shadow, molded by light, carved by exposure time. Images that catch up with us, that manipulate us, perhaps. Images that can ruffle or chafe us. Images that grasp us. Penetrating, devouring images.

Images that move our hand.

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Classical tradition is notoriously saturated with anecdotes—more or less famous, more or less likely, more or less apocryphal—about the powers of pictorial illusion, powers so strong, it is said, that the force of its deception sets the spectator's body in motion, compelling visual perception to give way to motivity or almost to tactility. But most often the tactility in question is negative, in the sense that it works to put things back in order, to sweep up, to dust off an image. It is a spontaneous attempt to evacuate something that appears above all as an obstacle or an intrusion. What does Zeuxis ask of Parrhasios? That he draw back the curtain (the trompe l'oeil of the curtain) which he takes to be an obstacle to the object of his vision (Reinach 213). What did Cimabue do when faced with the fly "placed" by his student Giotto on the nose of a painted figure? He tried to "drive it away with his hand . . . before he perceived his mistake" (Vasari 94).

The rhetoric of trompe l'oeil has, of course, made the musca depicta a significant element in the theory of the image that arises from it. As such, the painted fly manifests the powers of mimésis and the so-called "progress" of the realistic detail. But it does so only on the condition that it is placed lightly on the margin of the painting, and that we are convinced that we could simply brush it away with the back of our hand. A fly that can't be brushed away, a fly that returns, that remains, that rounds up its relations who stick around in masses—such a fly reeks of something totally different, it reeks of the real (and not of verisimilitude): I mean, it reeks of the rotten. What it touches becomes the equivalent of something that is decomposing. Henceforth, tactile emotion is no longer identified with a passing illusion. It is insistent, and condemns us to a much fouler anxiety.

This anxiety proliferates, for example, in Un Chien andalou, in the form of insects that are no longer merely "black specks" but multitudinous; no longer motionless in the margins of the image but swarming in its very center; no longer a mere optical game, but a tactile wound, a stigmata gaping smack in the center of a clenched hand. It is further aggravated in Bataille's critique of representation, where it is legible and visually at work in the eccentric montages of the journal Documents. Bataille relentlessly imagined or staged shocking apparitions—as he
himself called them—that were as shocking "in the realm of the concrete as a fly on a speaker's nose".

Bataille's fly—which André Breton quickly came to loathe⁴—was not meant to deceive the eye of aesthetes, but to seize, penetrate or devour the gaze of us old, anxious children. Bataille's fly was there to stick to us: appearing, too close, almost making our flesh prey to the image. In the last issue of Documents, the author of Histoire de l’œil had his text accompanied by grossly enlarged fly feet, so that on the pages of the journal they looked as big as our own fingers resting on the paper. And the masses of skeletons stuck together in Santa Maria della Concezione, in Rome, find echo in Boiffard's celebrated photographs of fly-paper: bodies crushed in their own trap—the tactile space which captures, fixes and disfigures them—tangled cadavers sticking together, sticking to our gaze.

Bataille imposes these images on his reader so that he will take account, insofar as it is possible, of the attitude reversal they demand: for the images to truly touch us, they must no longer be the soothing physic that beauty deceitfully promises. For the images to devour us, we must look at them as we’d look at an approaching swarm of flies: a visual buzzing that accompanies our own vocation to self-decompose.

"The game of man and of his own rotting is perpetuated in the most dismal of conditions without the one having the courage to confront the other. It seems that we will never find ourselves faced with the grandiose image of decomposition whose risk, which intervenes at every breath, is nonetheless the very meaning of a life that we prefer, we know not why, to the life of another whose breath may survive us. We know only the negative form of this image - soaps, toothbrushes and all the pharmaceutical products we accumulate in order to escape daily, with difficulty, from filth and death. Each day we make ourselves into the docile servants of these petty fabrications, the sole gods of modern man. This servitude continues in all places where a normal being might still go. We go to an art dealer like we’d go to a pharmacist, seeking well-displayed remedies for respectable illnesses. " ("L’esprit" 490).

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Bataille hoped that a gaze could touch the flesh like an illness, that is, decompose it. An untenable and paradoxical hope (except, perhaps, in a long-term process of psychic mortification). Boiffard's flies keep a good distance from our face, just as they kept their distance, however minimal, from the camera lens. If they reek of the real it is, after all, merely the reek of clean paper and printing ink.

It is surprising that an artist like Patrick Bailly-Maître-Grand, so distant from these somber demands, would manage with flying colors, if you will, to bring the real insect closer to our hand and our gaze. For this he goes to the cellar, to the dusty corners where he traps flies or spiders without crushing them, tenderly putting them to sleep with chloroform. For sticky fly paper he substitutes a glass trap—two sheets of glass separated by a few millimeters—where the insects revive confounded.
The plan is meticulously designed, based on a simple principle and realized with extreme subtlety: the double sheets of glass are placed on bromide paper under a safelight, and a flash of white light from above instantaneously captures the insects' positions (positions which always prove to be at the edge or margin, not because of a prior aesthetic decision but simply because the animals are trying to find a way out of their glass prison). The flash of light produces an initial impression on the bromide paper, a white shadow that is the *negative* trace of the insect on the darkened background. The image must then be *inverted*, solarized, so that the silhouette appears as such. Later the image is *fixed*, and *bleached* by a solution applied with a sponge
that removes—by abrasion, says the artist—the silver pigments. Finally, Bailly-Maître-Grand tones the image with sulfur salts, in a paradoxical attempt to solarize it.

The result is ambiguous: on the one hand, he gestures to the pictorial tradition of well-calculated distances, of optical details and subtleties. The glass was coated with grease to create a kind of matter or pictorial ground; in the final image the cardboard borders take on the aspect of an old wooden frame. On the other hand, the photographic monotype compels recognition of the tactile body of what it depicts. Perspective is abolished (or better yet, crushed): by the visual paradox of these animals whose silhouettes are not projected shadows but—nearly—direct contacts (contact-shadows, perhaps); by the disturbing evidence of natural scale; by the absence of optical equipment, or of an image taken with an intervening lens. The image is created from animal bodies, a chemical medium, a glass interface, light and hand-applied liquids.

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Contact images? Complex images. Between touching something (the impression as such) and touching someone (in the gaze that is instituted) a complexity, mediation, or supplement always intervenes. The photographic paper—which the gallery owner firmly discourages you from touching—has not really touched the fly. The glass intervenes just as, in other cases, there is an intervention of film, fixative varnish, chemical processes, rubbing materials, some kind of machinery, or montage: a fold that distances contact. Thus contact images are not immediate images (a genre which, in any case, probably does not exist). Rather, they are images that impose a certain symptom of adherence on optical distance, such that we can feel our seeing touched. Or that force physical contact to retreat—severely or only slightly—in a well-composed distancing, such that we can feel our touching seen.

Contact images? A slight trembling from front to back. A dialectical groping of the hand that seeks to see and the eye that seeks to touch.

(1997)

Translated by Alisa Hartz
Works Cited

Bataille, Georges. "Figure humaine." Documents 4 (1929), p.196.
———. "L'esprit moderne et le jeu des transpositions." Documents 8 (1929).


NOTES

2 L. Buñuel and S. Dali. Un chien andalou. Transcription by Phillip Drummond. Trans. Lorrimer Publishing Ltd. London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1994. p.4-8. Trans. of "Un chien andalou." La révolution surréaliste 12 (1929) p.35-36: "The young woman goes over to him and also looks at what he has in his hand. Close-up of the hand full of ants crawling out of a black hole in the palm. [. . .] When the man is just about to reach the young woman, she rushes out of the room. Her attacker lets go of the ropes and hurls himself after her. The young woman manages to get out of the room into the next one, but not quickly enough to slam the door shut. The man's hand is trapped in the door, caught in the jamb. In the other room, the young woman pulls harder and harder at the door, watching the fingers of the hand moving painfully and slowly as the ants begin crawling out of the palm onto the door."
4 Breton, André. Manifestoes of Surrealism. Trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972, p.184. "The only reason we are going on at such length about flies is that M. Bataille loves flies. Not we: we love the miters of old evocators, the miters of pure linen to whose front point was affixed a blade of gold and upon which flies did not settle, because they had been purified to keep them away."