

Surface

A Recent Series of Photographs by Vittorio Santoro

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Surface is an already quite comprehensive series of photographs, begun in 2004. It's still open how many works are still to come in the series. Maybe it isn't a series, should this word suggest variations of the same. The works, despite some noticeable shared characteristics, differ in their respectively specific atmospheric and narrative aspects. But there is one shared aspect: the motif, if that's the right word, of broken, torn, splintered surfaces of glass (that is, until now surfaces primarily made of glass). Santoro is thus not exploring surfaces in general, but a shell, a skin, or membrane that on first glance promises fixity and perhaps security, but also points to separation and isolation. The protective mantle can suddenly become a threat, when attempting to flee from a burning car the doors are jammed, or when trying to leave a building the exits are locked...

Secondly, the photographs have quite a bit to do with camouflage, deception, and dissemblance. They could be considered seductive to the extent that the repeating moment of broken glass or dented car walls presents a sort of horrifying or gruesome "beauty" of chance. This sight might be called "beautiful," because it is reminiscent of ornament, something that Santoro pushes his works in the proximity of, but only close to it. For really, according to Santoro, *Surface* only makes use of a cynicism inherent in the mass media that inheres in presenting such horrifying and gruesome scenarios. The addressee is the voyeuristic beholder. And thus the concept of beauty is anything but innocent: on the contrary, it is tightly bound to an insatiable longing to see, that specific desire called scopophilia. Interestingly, the situation seems at least at first less perfidious or precarious (at least in some examples of *Surface*). The photographs evoke perhaps comparisons to *Op Art*, *Abstract Expressionism*, or Warhol's *Camouflage* or *Oxidation Paintings*. But the ornamental beauty works like a lure, or, as Santoro puts it, "surface noise." While looking at the surface, there is something moving behind that goes unseen at first. It seems as if Santoro uses this "noise" almost strategically, to prolong both the duration of perception as well as to delay the encounter with whatever lurks behind. Is that why a feeling surfaces of a different locale that does not coincide with the site of the visual stimulation, the image, the surface? Perhaps whatever is supposed to become visible here requires this very delaying tactic to become recognizable.

The third point has to do with the affinity between these photographs and conceptual photography. - Accordingly, these photographs are not just visual fields but rather points that indexically refer to another, ultimately quite large space, about which more remains to be said. It could be imagined as if someone had marked various places on the different continents on a globe, and as if these points increased in number as lights illuminating the semi-darkness, and referring to one another, covered the planet. (I'm thinking here of works from the 1970s, like Douglas Huebler's *Location Pieces*, or Robert Smithson's *A Mirror Travel In Yucatan*. In both cases the photographs denote visualized spatial-temporal coordinates that play a role in the framework of real or imaginary explorations and surveys, tours and travels.) The information in the titles of the works gives an idea of this: *Shattered Windshield, Ramadi; Building, Jakarta; Jackson State College, Iowa; Man Clears Broken Glass, Afghanistan; Bus Shelter, Berlin; Tear Gas Mask, Belgrade; Building, Split; Opernhaus '80, Zurich; Passenger Train, Quetta, Pakistan; West Bank...*

This space seems at first geographical, but that is only a first impression, for the titles are not just place names, but stand as signs for usually traumatic events, some of which we remember, some of which we have already forgotten: catastrophes, devastation, accidents, attacks, revolutions. All this

cannot initially be read from the image. But Santoro's undertaking is not documentary in nature. There is something that resists -representation here, if representation is understood in an unfragmented, that is, illusionist, as it were plausible sense; and this is already shown by the broken, burst, cracked, perforated or punctured surfaces...

Santoro's approach differs from that of the first generation of conceptual artists in at least two aspects: first of all, the role of explanatory, complementary, or let us say journalistic language is lessened in Santoro's work. And despite a certain similarity, his conception of the image is more ambivalent. This conception certainly has to do with the fact that for *Surface*—do we recognize it at first glance?—Santoro usually does not use photo-graphs he took himself, but found ones from newspapers and magazines; sometimes they are also images acquired by research in the visual archives of media companies or photo agencies. In this way, the economy of visual production also comes into view: the business with pictures, the traffic with images within globally operating media concerns as well as the role of such images in the so-called market of attention.

Maybe it should be specified that such an economy of the image presents itself here as an issue without somehow being sociologically or pedagogically dissected. The distance that Santoro carefully maintains to such perspectives seems quite significant. Is it a distance to the tendency to talk reality to death or to trivialize it in a pseudo-intellectual way? It's not just that. The works of *Surface* also counter the opposite tendency: the anti-Enlightenment tendency to turn images into fetishes, celebrating their auratic effect and romanticizing their power. Perhaps there is something in *Surface* that resists this form of being gripped by emotion when faced with images; perhaps it is the more limited cropping of the visual field that provides little -occasion for identification. Perhaps the way in which the physical effects of blows, tremors, or explosions are distributed across the visual surface... As if it were a kind of growth, and at the same time the beginning of a process that makes the so-called visual field illegible, a virus destroying the program slowly but inexorably. Naturally, Santoro thus enters a realm between the frontlines, a realm not quite satisfying for iconoclasts or iconophiles.

What does "surface" here mean? Perhaps a distinction should be made between two kinds of surface: that of the image and that of a photographic object or setting. Here, we find ourselves within reference, and there we are within the representation. The works of *Surface* belong neither in the one or the other level, but as *signs* they owe their meaning to a very special relation between representation and reference. But what does this mean? I am underscoring this distinction somewhat, because for a long time it seems as if these images present no real identifiable objects, things, or scenarios. I cannot initially make out a figure that distinguishes itself from the ground, a figure that I can identify as this or that specific thing, as this or that specific scenario, although this is true for most, but not all cases.

In some cases Santoro even goes so far as to present photographs that seem completely abstract or -formalist, lacking a message of any kind. This is a deception, albeit a necessary one. It is a possible error, or more precisely, a necessary possibility for erring. It says something about to what limit Santoro wants to feel his way. But I don't want to overtax this possibility of erring and thus remain blind to the reference present. For at least a few of the works can be recognized as being representational, since they exhibit the composition of a press photo (half-toning) or at least clearly present their status as processed images (pixels). -Together with the subtitles, we begin to get a feeling that there is something going on beyond the apparently abstract-formal surface.

What kind of sign does each photograph represent? A comment on the cropping of the images clarifies this point, for what all these works share is that they select a rather small section from an existing image, hiding the object, but without making it invisible. Put in another way: the surface of the photograph assimilates the -present object without (immediately and in every case) becoming

identifiable. Assimilate here roughly means absorbing the object and concealing it without deleting it. It seems almost a paradoxical state, but this is not the case. But why should Santoro want to show something in this way, whereby “something” here, as we said earlier, encompasses catastrophes, devastations, accidents, attacks, revolutions?

I am not sure if I can answer this question. It might help to discuss this in more precise terms: the sign in *Surface* thus materializes in the coinciding of representation and reference, without obliterating the difference between them. It is as if we were dealing with a documentary image, but without any information to guarantee the document’s so-called “worldly reference”! Here, it would be good to direct our gaze once more to the surface, truly towards the surface, to the sites, where surfaces of glass are splintered, burst, and broken, where metal surfaces are dented by metal, broken, and torn.

They are visually strong signals. They are narrative in nature. They suggest an event that has to do with commotion, blows, violence, power, ferocity, vehemence, blasts, and the like. This kind of dynamism immediately triggers associations, even if place and time are not specified. In the case of *Surface*, we should clarify: precisely because time and place are not more clearly defined. A general feeling of being subject to uncontrollable powers might arise. Powers that do not merely come from the outside but from inside, not just from society, but also from one’s individual psychic constitution. As if a pane of glass could explode not just when a bullet physically hits it, but also if a destructive thought were directed to it, as if by telekinetic activity, as it were. (In fact, what is the relationship, the social relationship between telekinetic activity and political reality in a society that bases its evaluations and judgments more on images than on experience, or on experiences that depend on images?)

As is well known, in Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner* (1981-82), there is a spectacular sequence in which a female android, dressed in nothing more than a transparent and vaguely futuristic cape, in flight in the midst of an nightlife district, crashes through a row of staggered shop windows, gradually slowing down and finally collapsing after being shot by her pursuers. But, as Santoro once noted, the android does not just fall through an architectural situation. Instead, she seems desperately trying to break out of the deeper and more comprehensive limitation represented by the ban on her presence as an alien creature, foreign to the species, in the midst of humanity. And still more: she tries to break the biological frame, as it were, which limits her lifespan to four years, her programming. When the android flies through the glass windows, it is a strong synesthetic embodiment of unsurpassable social borders that are monitored and defended and that the film so convincingly treats, because it also includes the ontology of the “human.” This scene indirectly points to the metaphoric level of *Surface*, even if the meaning there turns out to be somewhat different than in *Blade Runner*.

By way of a conclusion, perhaps a note on the “sound” of *Surface*: the brief, violent hit that can make surfaces shatter or burst, the specific sound that lingers in the air for a few moments, usually too brief to be localized. Even if it isn’t understood—was it a falling glass? An accident, a crash, a shot?—it nonetheless provokes, within fragments of a second, an attentiveness that is all too often leveled by routine and anesthesia. Perhaps this could be an answer to the question why Santoro shows the images the way he shows them. If you will, these images do indeed narrate of catastrophes and conflicts, but not in such a way that they already have frozen to representation, that moves us for moments, but at the same time makes us helpless and apathetic. *Surface* rather provides impulses, be they ever so fine and subtle, that release the beholder from the extreme double bind of shock and numbness, adrenalization and anesthesia, hyperactivity and apathy. Is a single impulse enough? Hardly. That is why *Surface* offers a series of impulses that perhaps suspends the regime of the double bind.

Faced with the photographs of *Surface*, we might get the impression that something had been taken away from us. And that's most likely the case. But at the same time, Santoro is leading us, quite literally, closer and closer to something else. Such a detour is, perhaps not only in the case of *Surface*, an unavoidable condition of vision.

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