

Surfaces: Friction, Translation, Corruption: RCA Print Symposium
Swimming in the shallows
Chantal Faust 2016

I was going to start with a quote. One that I came across sometime in the early 2000s. It really stuck with me. And I thought it was from Chris Kraus, from her *Video Green* book. But I can't seem to find it anywhere. Maybe it was Rosalind Krauss, but it doesn't sound like her. It's quite possible that neither of the Kraus(s)'s wrote it - and perhaps I made it up.

“Scratch the surface and there's just more surface.”

I suppose you could interpret this in two ways. One being that the surface is all there is, nothing but surface, the surface is the face at face value, a mask with no exit. It gives nothing away.

But I am more interested in the second reading, which is why it attracted me in the first place, and probably why I still recall it years later, the simple little motto that it is.

Because there is something quite exciting to me about surfaces. Something I would like to scratch and see more of... in order to see more surface, that is. I want to know what is lurking there and what it can reveal, if indeed a surface can reveal anything. If everything is presented, there on the surface, what happens when we scratch it, with our fingers or with the graze of our eyes. What happens when we try to dive in?

I think it has something to do with exposure. With being seen and with what can be seen. I enjoy looking but I don't like the feeling of being watched. When I was a child, I lived in a house with a little bedroom and big windows. At night, when the windows were black, I imagined all the eyes out there, those eyes watching and those eyes I couldn't see. Just my own frightened reflection in the glass. Paranoid cinematic fantasies like *Rear Window*, or even *The Truman Show*, made a lot of sense to me.

This is possibly what spawned my attraction to things which are up close, close enough to touch - the glass of the window, or the glass of a flatbed scanner. I started using scanners to make images when I was in my last year of BA and have continued interrogating the flatbed ever since. We had one computer in the photography department and I scanned some plastic flies. It was surprising for me, coming from behind the lens and a language of depth of field, to see such clarity combined with such proximity. It defied any sense of lenticular vision. The eye or the lens cannot see *on* the surface. It would be like trying to stick your finger into your eyeball. Something painful, and potentially blinding.

What happens when we try and *see* surface? The distance between the thing that sees (whether it's the machine or the seeing eye) collapses. There is no space between the look and the thing. It is all there, on the surface. Nothing is hidden, everything is given away. No staging, no faff... no bullshit.

Surfaces are literal, they are obvious, they are crude and to the point – if indeed a surface can have a point. Perhaps they are to the plane. The flat plane, the glass pane, the plain obviousness of it all.

Bullshit has always been a little problematic for me. I don't know how to do it very well. My best friend in high school was an aspiring writer and the daughter of a psychiatrist and a psychologist. Every night we would speak at great lengths on the phone, me from my little bedroom, she from her patchouli soaked sandstone hippy house on the edges of the city. We could be saying the same thing, but my version of the story would be dealt in two sentences and hers would last an hour or more. I admired this trait a lot. She was a gifted storyteller. But it just wasn't me.

What does it mean, to say what you mean? How many filtering processes does it take to arrive at this point of translation, from a thought to a word or an image? Does decreasing the space between two things get us any closer to some semblance of authenticity, or is this just a staging of exposure, an aesthetics of truth. What happens when we get too close to the surface?

Touching the surface of the glass, touching the surface of the eye, two surfaces touching is perhaps like a form of kissing. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud romantically dissects a couple's kiss as the instant when 'the mucous membranes of the lips of both of them come together'. In *On Touching*, Derrida dwells on the loving gaze and wonders: 'can eyes manage to touch, first of all, to press together like lips?' In *Elemental Passions*, Irigaray writes:

“Proximity? Two lips kissing two lips. The edges of the face finding openness once more... Closed lips remain open.”

In the little bedroom with the large glass was my single bed, under the pillow was graffiti doodled during those long phone conversations and on top of which, sometime during teen-hood, I experienced my first proper kiss. My friend was a little more experienced in that department than I was, and she knew all the moves. She also knew all the talk – and I found this quite disconcerting at the time. How could we have gone from having a normal conversation in our normal voices to this whispering, panting thing that had suddenly taken over my friend's body. I couldn't quite get in the moment. It seemed like a parody, something you were meant to do when you get into such things, and something that felt forced and not felt. The closer you get to the surface of things, the harder it is to hide.

But it's not just the kiss, or the moment of touching that is important here, for me in any case. It is the residue of the encounter. What kind of stains do we leave on the surfaces we touch? And if they are even visible, what is the key to reading such a map of gestures and movements, of lines and traces of being - there, and then, and there?

Scanning stretches the time of the image, it is movement, caught moving, still moving. Moments of previous contact can be wiped away and forgotten, or else remain, like a slimy residue. I always liked that quote from Bacon too:

I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory trace of past events, as the snail leaves its slime.

When I first read Deleuze's book on Bacon, I was underlining more words than I wasn't and a little bit incredulous at the thought that after all these years of writing about scanning (I had

just finished my PhD on scanning at the time): *why hadn't anyone told me that I was actually speaking about painting?* The language, it seemed, was so similar. And so I started painting.

Perhaps when you keep pushing at surfaces, you get to know their topography. You get to know their makeup so well that it becomes forced and not felt anymore, like a parody, like a staging of exposure, like an aesthetics of truth. I was beginning to feel that way about scanning, but with painting, despite having spent a very long time at art school, there was genuine sense of not knowing what I was doing, as if the neurotransmitters that connected the hand and the brain had not been quite developed. And it's that truth to the surface of things that I was chasing, even if I didn't quite believe it was possible.

Painting heads is a little like scanning them, trying to distill the essence of the person onto a flat surface. Trying to understand something about resemblance. Or perhaps trying to become another person.

I have been fascinated by Slavoj Zizek for a while. In this video from 2010 I tried to *be* Zizek, for 74 minutes. Listening to a podcast of one of his lectures for the first time, and trying to repeat his words verbatim, whilst going about the flat where I was living at the time, doing domestic things like washing the dishes, sitting around, having a pee.

It's a bit like that idea that all art is just pointing at things, which I think was once said by the artist Al Held. And I like the simplicity of that gesture. Rather than trying to illustrate theory in a pseudo-theory kind of way, why not just point? Like Hirschhorn does when he sello-tapes his books in his Cave Man Man.

I enjoy reading Zizek, but I really like painting him. Perhaps it's his beard. There is eye Zizek. Little Zizek. Big Zizek. It's kind of a dumb painting. And it's flat, like a scan, with some traces of moving around, like a scan. And it's all just kind of there, on the surface. No scratching involved.

But maybe we don't need to scratch in order to dig deep. Maybe superficiality is significant.

When everything is obvious, when everything is exposed, what is really revealed? A surface is an outer face, but faces change, everything changes, through movement and through time. The veil that gets lifted is simply placed somewhere else, waiting to be uncovered again.

Fingerprints and dust-spots and blobs and smears of paint, all signs of an encounter with the surface, of surface tension and sometimes surface breakdown. It's the space between what can be seen and what can be thought. It's the translation of a thought into the visible. What we can't see, we must imagine.

When I split my head open at the age of three, having slipped and hit the frame of the door to my little bedroom, my mother wouldn't let me look at the cut. It was quite a good one, I'm told, a proper gash in the middle of the forehead and you could see right in. Her reasoning was, that if I couldn't see it, I wouldn't be afraid. So there was no blood for my eyes to take in, just a memory of lying with my head on her lap while she frantically rang friends to find someone who could stitch me up without leaving me looking like Frankenstein. And it's quite a good logic, to see nothing, instead of a little bit of something: the monster in the horror film is always partially hidden from view.

When we split the surface, when we break the glass, like Duchamp did by accident and Hito Steyerl does on purpose, again and again which each successive loop of *STRIKE*, her 28second high definition video, what is left behind is a scar – sometimes only visible in a certain kind of light, like the one on my forehead. Cracks and holes are deeper than scratches, but possibly no more forthcoming. If anything, they help us to see the surface that is sometimes invisible, in spite of its blinding presence.

I'd like to advocate for an openness to surfaces, to probing the depth of surfaces, to taking it all in at once and seeing where it leads you. That surfaces are deep spaces and that swimming in the shallows is rewarding.