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Image extraction as visual strategy, professional practice, and aesthetic gesture

A photograph cuts a slice out of time-space, violently, as if with an axe, Philippe Dubois claims. (Dubois 1983) A later “sensitive” cut (Taylor 2017), following the contours of an object, can be performed with scissors, a paint brush or a digital mask. The result is an extracted image, *object-without-background*, prevalent in product catalogues, botanical atlases, and clip-art libraries. The clear-cut figure, removed from of the clutter of its background, can be quickly recognized and compared to others. It can be easily placed in different contexts because it has none of its own.

The technical operation of making such an object is called *freistellen* in German, *friläggning* in Swedish, and *syväys* in Finnish. The first two ones have the sense of setting the object free and the last one that of “making deep” i.e., carving out the background in a print matrix. The operation – mundane in image processing practices of today and the past – is strangely absent in writing about photography.

The use of isolated images has a long history predating photography. The visual representation of isolated natural objects on a blank background was central in the sixteenth and seventeenth century nature study and played a part in the commodification of nature taking place in early modern Europe. (Neri 2011) Visual reference books presenting natural objects such as insects or seashells next to each other enabled collectors to identify the species for selling or buying them. (Margócsy 2014) These books bear an astonishing resemblance to product catalogues of mail-order businesses and department stores, which appeared in the late 1800’s. Their modern-day equivalents retain the same visual logic.

The isolated image object has a close relationship with collage, as cutting out images is the first step of its workflow. Max Ernst reported discovering collage in 1919 when objects in a product catalogue, arranged in rows, floating in the air, produced hallucinations in him. Collages often retain this sensation of strangeness, the elements “never fully liberated from the aura of its origins, never absorbed in its new context, never yielding a global coherence.” (Adamovicz 2011, p.30)

In my video works I have released everyday objects from their environment through physical means. I have painted, scratched, or taped a mask on a transparent surface between the camera and the object. As the mask I create is physical not digital, it leaks: it is translucent, the ambient light dyes it, it freezes in cold weather and rain washes it away. In the process I get to experience and make visible the profound strangeness of the cut-out lens-based image.

References:

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