

---

## KNOT EYE

Christopher Page

In recent art, the image itself has become an object of fear, not because of the coercive messages encoded in images, which have long been under analysis, but because of the strange ways that images inhabit and derealise the space in which we live. Images are at once a presence - they are material, if only minimally so - and a stand-in for something else, a mimicry, an apparition, and so also an absence. Images can make us feel that we are somewhere else, and, in their flatness, make where we are feel unreal. Images, if we look at them obliquely, can reveal peculiar dimensions to our world and violences upon our sense of location within it.

Images exist in space, but what space? The proliferation of human habitat on the earth has imposed a spatial order founded on grids. Gridded geometry became theoretically manifest with the ancient mathematician Euclid, and its modern rationalisation by Descartes initiated a rectilinear conception of space that was fundamental to 20th century Modernist architecture and to the computerisation of the built environment in the 21st century. These modern purifications of the spatial order suggest that our world is a passive, rational 'playing field', but is our habitat so rational, or even so spatial, as it claims to be?

The 'spaces' of contemporary art are exemplary of this purified spatial order - sheer, shadowless, rectilinear volume. But these spaces are besieged by image. And not only the images, pictures, that hang on their walls, but the global standardisation of the spaces and the materials used to produce one - white boxes made of sheetrock and MDF with a grey floor, lit by cold fluorescent tubes - makes the volume itself feel flattened under the pressure of the image. This pressure seems continuous with these spaces being ever more secondary to their reappearance as digital image.

This essay treats two artists whose work disrupts, contorts and makes visible these complex entanglements of image and space - entanglements that inhere in the very spaces in which their work is displayed - hoping to open up these collapsing dimensions. On the surface, Thomas Hutton and Jeffrey Stucker's work looks quite different, but their surfaces both guide their beholders down the vertiginous defiles of space collapsing into image, and image masquerading as space.

\* \* \*

Sculptures were once the lynchpin around which space was organised, at the focal point of architectural space and of a shared cultural life. Thomas Hutton is a sculptor whose work bears witness to a world in which this is no longer possible. His exhibitions stage sculptural space in the process of flattening into painterly image. His sculptures, far from the anthropomorphic statue that holds the centre of a gallery or a temple, are composed of facades that are not fully distinguishable from their context, like blank stage sets whose naked verso is exposed to scrutiny. A 'concrete' example of this is *Stone Anchor* (2015), an exhibition in which a portion of the walls of the gallery space, a large panelled room in a Georgian townhouse, were plastered with Hutton's hallmark acrylic siloxane, a decorative render that gives walls the illusion of being made of cast concrete, like a contemporary Venetian plaster abstracted completely from its referent.<sup>1</sup> The render covered the main facing wall with the fireplace at its centre, and wrapped a short way around the flanking walls.



From one particular vantage point - a spot in the room that drew the beholder towards it - the space of *Stone Anchor* cohered and flattened into a satisfying image of wholeness. The walls flattened because of a perspective trick that was revealed as one moved one's body away from the place in the room at which it visually cohered - the grey expanse was superimposed on the walls such that its contours flattened from one viewpoint, but seemed jagged and discordant from anywhere else. Other things too came to light, so to speak, as the beholder moved around the space: the front of the fireplace had been clad with a sheetrock fascia that simplified its form, and the faux-concrete render on its surfaces and the surrounding walls revealed itself to be not uniform but different shades of grey that mimicked the play of light emanating from the window.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 Venetian plaster, in mimicking marble, contains marble dust

2 Or indeed "the hearth", the first element in Gottfried Semper's *Four Elements of Architecture*: "Throughout all phases of society the hearth formed that sacred focus around which the whole took order and shape. It is the first and most important... element of architecture." quoted in Deborah Johnson and David Ogawa, *Seeing and Beyond* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2006) p. 167.



Drawings hung on the other walls of the room - hazes of tiny pointillist dots that also cohered into images, images of seemingly disconnected things - a fossilised jellyfish, a stage-set, an eye. These enigmatic figures could be read as a key to the grey expanse that faced them. The fossil was the petrification of a creature that is known as a 'Medusa', named after the Gorgon famous for turning those she beheld into stone. The stage-set belonged to the opera *Orpheus and Eurydice*, designed by Adolphe Appia, who relinquished perspective in scenography, utilising only light and sheer form - monochrome and un-foreshortened - to turn the shallow space of the stage into apparently deep volumes. The drawing of the eye, though, was the (vanishing) point around which the exhibition turned, for it hung on the wall facing the grey expanse, at precisely that magnetic spot, the ideal vantage from which the stony expanse cohered into an image. This eye, marking the point upon which the orthogonal lines of the perspective trick converged, was akin to the mythical prince around whose gaze Renaissance theatres were designed. Hutton's exhibition was structured by this *universal eye*, which is also a depiction of a particular eye - the knowing eye of the late Steve Jobs. Tracing the optical cone that emanated from this eye, the knowing gaze seemed to have petrified the facing walls of the gallery space into a stage-set, an image of dead grey stone.

*Stone Anchor's* confrontation of the eye and the stage-set opens up a schism between the problems of (sculptural) space in our time and the operations of (painterly) image within it, without suggesting there is a resolution. What are the problems of sculpture in our time, and why does sculpture no longer hold the focal point of space and society? Hutton's work and research suggests that the answer is to be found in a long history connecting ancient and recent art. His sheer, non-chromatic forms

are unmistakably in dialogue with Minimalism, both continuing its commitment to seeking out the fundamentals of sculpture, and inverting its terms, turning concrete - a material that is also a metaphor for solidity and objectivity - into an image, an illusion. Minimalism was a pivotal and divisive moment in 20th century sculpture that caused fierce theoretical debate, not least Michael Fried's famous *Art and Objecthood* essay. For Fried, despite its desire for "objecthood", Minimalism was "incurably theatrical".<sup>3</sup> A work like Tony Smith's *Die* might have attempted to establish a new kind of powerful sculptural presence and centrality, but its hollowness, its being made of flat planes with no centre, betrays these attempts as producing merely "a kind of stage presence".<sup>4</sup> 'Theatricality' marked a triumph of the image over sculptural presence, showing Cartesian grid space to be haunted by its own planarity, that Minimalism seemed largely unconscious of and unable to resolve.



What kind of sculptural presence would Minimalism have hoped to establish? For Hegel, sculpture's "moment of perfection" came in ancient Greece, in its 'classical' moment.<sup>5</sup> Hegel's *Aesthetics* tells a story of the rise and fall of sculptural presence in Western Art. It begins with the 'symbolic' era, an indistinct art-historical period that is exemplified by the Egyptian temple, but whose terms might also be applied to other works of the Stone Age. This is the era in which art first appears in the world, incipient architectural forms carved out of the land that are not yet separated into the individual arts - in the Egyptian temple, sculptures were not yet distinct from

<sup>3</sup> Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 153; p. 157.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p. 155.

<sup>5</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics, Lectures on Fine Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) p. 614.

columns or processions, painting was but adornment of the temple, and architecture itself was not fully distinct from the land out of which it was carved.<sup>6</sup> The classical era that triumphed over the symbolic saw a reorganisation of the arts, whereby sculpture became independent from architecture and the Greek temple became an extension of the statue at its centre. The Greek gods *were* sculptures, and they were the focal point around which temples were built and the city-state was organised. The classical was swept away by what Hegel calls the ‘romantic’ era which began with Christianity, continuing into his time and arguably ours too. As society became more complex, with new forms of individual interiority demanding expression by art, painting became the ascendant form.

The ascendancy of painting marks the rise of the image over space, and, through Thomas Hutton’s work and research, we can read the early signs of this in the Roman temple. For while the Greek temple is a volume to be approached from any of its four sides, with columns marking its entire perimeter, the Roman temple is to be approached from one side only, the columns that mark its front dissolving into half-columns on its other three sides that are walled off, introducing the facade into classical architecture. While the Egyptian temple is not wholly distinct from the land it is carved out of, the Greek temple is volumetric, organised geometrically around sculptural independence and centrality, and the Roman temple is frontal, painterly, imagistic. Already in Roman antiquity, space is under pressure from the image.



In Minimalism we can see a classicising impulse made futile by the pressures of our romantic era, thanks to the work of Stephen Melville, who updates Hegel’s story to encompass our complex aesthetic moment. For Hegel, art was supposed to fade away as humanity made peace with the world, but no such peace has come and art is still

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 644.

with us, taking on new forms that bear witness to new kinds of alienation.<sup>7</sup> In our time in which urban space has taken on inhuman proportions and subjectivity is entangled in ever more complex structures, the forms of art proper to Hegel’s symbolic, classical and romantic moments collapse in on one another. Minimalism can be seen as an attempt to compress the complexity of our time into a sculptural form that unconsciously echoes the Greek statue-god at the centre of the temple.<sup>8</sup> But contrary to the powerful centrality and fullness of classical sculpture, the Minimalist object finds itself hollow, always and already without centre, in a temple that is but a white box made of sheetrock lit by cold fluorescent tubes. Both sculpture and its attendant architecture turn out to be arrangements of flat planes - images - built like a house of cards around a spatial absence. Hutton’s facades, masquerading as solid concrete, are a *staging* of the impossibility of sculpture reestablishing its classical centrality - becoming once again indistinct from architecture and also from painting - reflecting a time that is without a shared centre, or whose centres are camouflaged.

\* \* \*

How does the image operate in space? The use of perspective in *Stone Anchor* binds the beholder into a web of relations that anticipate their arrival, beckoning them to a particular point in space at which the image appears. Jacques Lacan argued that a perspectival painting is not a triumph of pictorial rationality, but a “trap for the look”, catching the desiring gaze “like a fly in glue”.<sup>9</sup> Lacan shows our experience of images to be schismatic and layered, reading them, as he does all experience, through the knotted triumvirate of psychic registers named in his work as the ‘imaginary’, ‘symbolic’ and ‘real’.<sup>10</sup> These knotted but discreet registers allow us to approach images from different angles, and see in them operations other than those that they would have us see. Hubert Damisch has applied this schismatic thinking to a rigorous study of the development of perspective in Renaissance painting. In *The Origin of Perspective*, Damisch makes the case that ‘beneath’ the *imaginary* impact of the image - the illusion of visual mastery offered to the beholder of a perspectival painting (or film or photograph) that bolsters egoist fantasies for ideological ends - perspective

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Melville, “Hegel, Reading”, lecture series delivered at Central St Martin’s School of Art, 2015: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cD2q81SKUw4&t=5s>

<sup>8</sup> One of Michael Fried’s critiques of Minimalism (‘Literalism’ as he calls it) is of its having an unconscious anthropomorphism at work at its centre: “I am suggesting, then, that a kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed anthropomorphism, lies at the core of Literalist theory and practice.” “Art and Objecthood,” *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998) pg. 157.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, Seminar XIII, *The Object of Psychoanalysis* trans. Cormac Gallagher, p. 226 [http://www.lacanireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/13-The-Object-of-Psychoanalysis1.pdf].

<sup>10</sup> *The real*, the *imaginary* and the *symbolic* are dimensions of psychic life that, broadly speaking, take centre stage in that order. The *real* can be seen as the primordial pre-linguistic dimension that is forever lost, notwithstanding its remainders, with the imposition of the other orders in the development of the subject. The *imaginary* dimension is inaugurated by the famous ‘mirror-stage’ in which the child, in its inchoateness, sees in its own image in the mirror a wholeness that becomes the (ego-)ideal it strives towards. The *symbolic* order are the structures that one is alienated into in order to become a subject, exemplified by language.

operates as a *symbolic* structure, binding the beholder in a web of visual and spatial relations with the image in a similar way to that in which language binds subject and object together. “[T]he perspective paradigm is equivalent to that of the sentence, in that it assigns the subject a place within a previously established network that gives it meaning.”<sup>11</sup> Looking through the prism of the symbolic, the symmetry of viewpoint and vanishing point strips the beholder of their fantasy of power in respect to the image - they are slotted into a position that anticipated their arrival and set the terms of their engagement, the way that we are assigned a position in the grammar and syntax of language. The beholder is in this sense *beheld* by the image.

Reading them through the knot of psychoanalytic registers shows that images, regardless of their content, interpolate their beholders in structural ways. *Stone Anchor* dramatises the split in the imaginary and symbolic dimensions of the image by spatialising the perspective construction, allowing us to move aside from the ideal vantage that ensnares us and watch the image dissolve into its theatrical symbolic operations. This might seem to have an emancipatory thrust - just as Lacan saw the, perhaps impossible, task of psychoanalysis as following this trajectory from imaginary capture to symbolic decentring.<sup>12</sup> But there is a catch. Steve Jobs’ knowing eye knows more than we first thought. If we held an iPhone up to the ‘petrified’ walls from the viewpoint of his pointillist eye that gazed upon them, we saw that the width of the grey expanse exactly matched the space of the screen. Here the exhibition had anticipated its own ultimate sinking back into image, its own full and final flattening into that open casket of contemporary art - the install shot. The deathly pull of the image finds perhaps its best enunciation in Maurice Blanchot’s version of the imaginary as “the less than nothing that remains when there is nothing”:

The image can certainly help us to grasp the thing ideally, and in this perspective it is the life-giving negation of the thing; but at the level to which its particular weight drags us, it also threatens constantly to relegate us, not to the absent thing, but to its absence as presence, to the neutral double of the object in which all belonging to the world is dissipated.<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \*

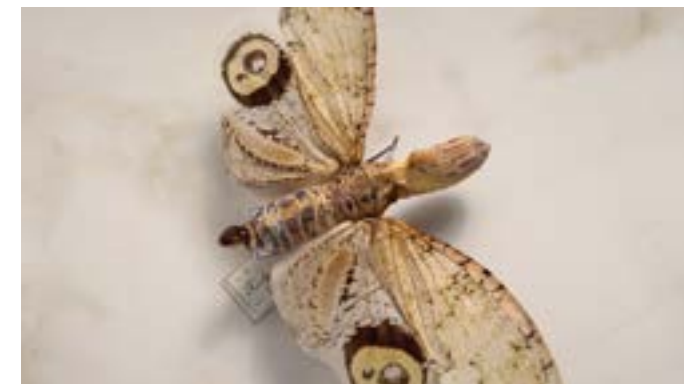
If Thomas Hutton’s work shows space collapsing into image, Jeffrey Stuker’s films show image masquerading as space. His film, *Fulgora Laternaria* (2015) presents the

11 Hubert Damisch, *The Origin of Perspective* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998) p. 446.

12 “What is my desire? What is my position in the imaginary structuration? This position is only conceivable in so far as one finds a guide beyond the imaginary, on the level of the symbolic plane” Jacques Lacan, trans: John Forrester, *Freud’s Papers on Technique* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 1991) p. 141.

13 Maurice Blanchot, “Two Versions of the Imaginary” in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) p. 262.

beholder with extreme close-up shots of a specimen of a peculiar moth-like creature, inanimate, pinned upon a white marble surface. The detailed vistas of the intricate body, the slow focus-pulls along the arabesque structure of its wings appearing like satellite images of the earth, suggest that we are looking through the eye of a naturalist’s state-of-the-art camera lens. A baritone male voiceover speaking the Queen’s English seems to teach us what has been established about the *fulgora* since it was plucked from its natural habitat. The white environment, the creature and its latinate name cleanly pinned upon a marble surface, the extreme clarity of the image and the authoritative voice all imply that we are in the alpine space of Science, and in which we breathe the pure air of Knowledge.



But where David Attenborough would guide us through the peculiarities of this creature like an omniscient father, the circumlocutions of the booming voice shift between description and riddle. We discover that the *fulgora laternaria* is a mimic whose body blends with its environment in various ways, but the exactitude we might expect from the voice is itself camouflaged by the punning density of the monologue. From Roger Caillois’ essay, *The Mask*, that Stuker himself has translated, we learn that the creature’s “upper wings are covered with camouflage drawn and tinted so as to allow them to blend with the trunk of the Simarouba tree... From their abdomen large waxy fleeces emerge rendering them invisible among the mosses, lichens, and irregularities of the bark... Resting under the dissimulation of the mimetic wings, large *ocelli* round out the lower wings of the *fulgora*.”<sup>14</sup> The very peculiar aspect of this insect, though, is that it appears to wear a mask. The “cephalic protuberance” that extends beyond its body is but an empty shell displaying what the narrator calls its

14 Roger Caillois, “The Mask,” trans. Jeffrey Stuker, *The White Review* (online) [<http://www.thewhitereview.org/art/the-mask/>]

“incisored smile”, resembling “the head of an alligator with perfect precision.”<sup>15</sup> In his essay, Caillois asks, what could the purpose of such a minuscule mask be, what predator could it frighten? Stuker’s film answers that this mask is anxiety itself “sculpted forever in the morphology of the species”.<sup>16</sup>



As we behold the incredible detail of this mimic’s body, we might notice that something about the quality of the image is not quite right - it is too smooth, too perfect. Depending on the beholder’s level of initiation with contemporary image-production, it may dawn on them that *Fulgora Laternaria* is entirely computer generated (CGI). Every detail of the *fulgora* and its sparse surroundings have been modelled in digital 3-D space and though our eyes want to believe otherwise they have no physical existence outside their determination through algorithm and code, and in the glow of the screen.

The underlying spatial architecture of most CGI programs is, to this day, founded in the principles of Descartes’ transformation of Euclidian geometry into three dimensions by way of algebra, known as Cartesian co-ordinates.<sup>17</sup> According to Damisch the roots of Cartesian space can be traced back to painting, for “Renaissance single-point perspective ... anticipates Descartes’s rationalised conception of space as infinite extension and Kant’s Copernican revolution in epistemology.”<sup>18</sup> If Cartesian space was born in Renaissance painting, then this *fulgora laternaria* has been born in the digital

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Jon Pedie, *The History of Visual Magic in Computers* (London: Springer-Verlag, 2013) p. 33.

18 Margaret Iversen, “The Discourse of Perspective in the Twentieth Century: Panofsky, Damisch, Lacan,” in *Oxford Art Journal* no. 28 vo. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 200; p. 194.

perfection of a spatial order whose own infancy is the image. Perspective for Damisch, though, is not simply rational but has “precisely the determining, decentering, extra-personal quality of Lacan’s symbolic order”, and we wonder if this quality also extends to three-dimensional grid space.<sup>19</sup> CGI, then, is the crystallisation of a geometric symbolic order, but is also tied to the imaginary dimension: born of painting, of the image, it is also used to produce images. Like the *fulgora*, CGI programs are themselves mimics, conjuring the illusion of space by way of simulated surface. Here they have produced the perfect likeness of a creature that, as Stuker’s narrator points out, *likens* itself to *lichens*.

Mimicry destabilises the spatial order and the subject’s place within it. Where perspectival painting and Cartesian optics place the subject - a beholder utterly distinct from their environment - at the apex of the cone of vision surveying the discreet objects laid out in the rational space before them, mimicry makes them worryingly continuous with their environment, becoming themselves an image of space. In his essay, *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, Roger Caillois refuses the common assumption that animal mimesis is naturally selected because of its protective advantage. There is little evidence to prove that mimetic creatures fare better in ‘nature’, many going “from bad to worse” as they metamorphose into their environment, while some “inedible” creatures, who have “nothing to fear, are also mimetic”.<sup>20</sup> Rather than a form of defence, mimicry is a “temptation by space”, a play of *like* producing *like* between an organism and a kind of space that Caillois characterises as strangely active.<sup>21</sup> The corollary to animal mimicry in human psychology is a type of schizophrenia - a condition he names as “legendary psychasthenia” - in which the sufferer is dispossessed of their stable position, “no longer know[ing] where to place [them]self” in a space that “seems to be a devouring force”.<sup>22</sup> Caillois’ subject is not the beholder but the beheld, for, as Elizabeth Grosz says, “both the psychotic and the insect renounce their rights to occupy a perspectival point, abandoning themselves to being spatially located by/as others. The primacy of one’s own perspective is replaced by the gaze of another, for whom the subject is merely a point in space and not the focal point organising space.”<sup>23</sup>

19 Ibid.

20 Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia,” trans. John Shepley, *October* vol. 31 (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1984) p. 25.

21 Ibid p. 28.

22 Ibid p. 28; p. 30.

23 Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) p. 47.

Lacan drew on Caillois' conception of mimicry, which he took not to be the preserve of psychotics, but fundamental to all human psychic development. Mimicry is essential to the 'Mirror stage', which we pass through when as toddlers we become fascinated by our own image - a *Gestalt* of wholeness that plunges into our unconscious as an *imago*, an idealised image of an other - and by which we become mimics of our own image, "caught up in the lure of spatial identification".<sup>24</sup> Lacan also drew on Descartes, seeing in the intersection of his geometry and his meditations on existence the inauguration of modern subjectivity.<sup>25</sup> We might imagine a clean divide between the two by saying that through Caillois' mimicry we enter the imaginary register, and by finding our place within Cartesian geometry we enter the spatial symbolic order, but the situation is far more knotted. In an excursus on vision and painting, Lacan makes an uncharacteristic Freudian slip, saying the name "René Caillois".<sup>26</sup> His slip tells us that within the Cartesian geometry of the subject, who proclaims "I think therefore I am," lurks the mimetic creature of Caillois, who says "I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself."<sup>27</sup> Lacan's reformulation of Descartes' famous phrase expresses the way in which our spatial dislocation is continuous with the psychic splitting inherent to modern subjectivity: "I think where I am not".<sup>28</sup>

Stuker's film warns us that we too are caught up in a spatial order that Hutton's work shows us contorting into its own image, a spatial order whose dissolution into image "touches the individual directly, envelopes him, penetrates him and even passes through him." The *fulgora laternaria* - an *imago* in the other sense of that word, meaning a winged adult insect - transforms itself into an image of its environment. In Stuker's film, using the technologies through which our time dreams of itself, we see a perfect mimicry of this mimic, in a Cartesian space that is not its natural habitat, but that is a fundamental dimension of ours. The rationality that seems a feature of such a spatial order is but another *imago*, a fantasy that we identify with, blind to our capture in the lure of a spatial order that extends out of the image and sinks back into image. In the glow of the screen, I wear the mask of the anxiety of my own habitat. In the face of the image, *I am where it thinks, but I do not know where it is.*

24 Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the "I" Function, As Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Écrits* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 2006) p. 76; p. 78.

25 "It was at the very period when the Cartesian meditation inaugurated in all its purity the function of the subject that... 'geometral' or 'flar'... optics was developed." Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin Books, 1994) p. 85.

26 Ibid, p. 100. Jeffrey Stuker highlighted this for me.

27 Roger Caillois, "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenea," p. 30.

28 Jacques Lacan, *The Logic of Phantasy* trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished manuscript) p. 242 [http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/the-seminar-of-jacques-lacan-xiv.pdf]