

Surface Tension

by Reuben Son

https://www.are.na/reuben-son/surface-tension-lplz_n4k22g

*The aesthetic moment is a caesura in time
when the subject feels held in symmetry and solitude
by the spirit of the object.*

– Christopher Bollas, *The Shadow of the Object* (1987)

There's an event from my early childhood that my mother sometimes recalls back to me: We are meandering through the local Toys "R" Us, and periodically, I pick up a toy, just for a moment or two, before returning it to its shelf and we continue on through the store. Upon holding each object, I would intuit an inevitable sense of unfulfillment, a slow-release disappointment of whatever desire I was surfacing. I would leave empty-handed.

Walking along aisles of new hardbacks at certain local bookstores, I feel a familiar despair, a faint melancholic breeze that blows as my gaze drifts across a Sargasso sea of books. Their market-tested covers furnish soft color palettes and faux-handwritten titles, differentiable only in minor rear-

rangements of shapes and letters. Despite their cheerful appearance, these books only lead me down a narrowing corridor of pessimism, inexorably gathering the sense that whatever book it is that I need to find at this moment could not possibly be found here.

I've often noticed that if I go for a while without reading a good book, a book that somehow sustains my sense of living, my mood sours and the edges of my life begin to yellow. Although we often say we have "picked up a book," I also find the inverse to hold true, that it's the book that's doing the picking up. And while we're taught not to judge a book by its cover, this is an ironic assertion that can only prove itself in its contradiction.

Despite telling ourselves otherwise, we move through a world composed of surfaces.¹ "The ability to intuit a viable meaning via surface-level qualities," as Caroline Busta writes,² "is now essential for negotiating our sprawling information space." Across these surfaces, our gaze meanders, if only for the promise of briefly finding our own reflection within the mise en abyme of alterity.³

1. "Surfaces are becoming ever more important in our surroundings. For instance, TV screens, posters, the pages of illustrated magazines. In the past, these surfaces were rarer. Photographs, paintings, carpets, *vitreaux*, cave paintings surrounded men in the past, but these surfaces did not offer themselves either in the quantity or with the degree of importance of the surfaces that now surround us." Vilém Flusser, "Line and Surface" (1973)
2. Caroline Busta, "Hallucinating Sense in the Era of Infinity-Content," *Document Journal*, 2024, <https://www.documentjournal.com/2024/05/technical-images-film01-angelicism-art-showtime-true-detective-shein/>
3. "They say that there is always a moment to catch when the most banal or mysterious creature reveals its secret identity. But its secret alterity is more interesting. Instead of looking for the identity behind the mask, we should look for the mask behind the identity, the figure that haunts us and makes us turn away from our identity—the hidden divinity that haunts each and every one of us for a moment, at some point in time." Jean Baudrillard, "Because Illusion and Reality are not Opposed," *Radical Alterity* (Semiotexte, 2008), p. 153.

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“Beginning a new phase of reading/writing can be mortifying, but when it takes on momentum, it is one of the greatest highs I know of,” writes the artist Moyra Davey. She continues, “I feel taken care of by my unconscious, ‘held’ (in the Winnicottian sense) in a kind of suspended embrace.”⁴ This embrace traces back to the earliest months and years of our lives with our caregivers, and is a period of development given much attention by the Object Relations psychoanalysts like Melanie Klein and D.W Winnicott. Within this context, holding is “the environmental provision indispensable to emotional development in earliest infancy,” through which “the revelation of the self could arise and be felt by the infant or patient to be safe.”⁵ This holding, a precursor to the revelation of the self, is perhaps precisely what I was sensing for while wandering the halls of Toys “R” Us, and what I still look for now in the surfaces I encounter.

■ *fig. 1*

Vija Celmins, another artist who predominantly works from photographic material, describes of her work: “beginning with the ocean drawings, is [...] letting the material be the material. Letting the image be more and more like an armature. In some of these the image is almost nothing. It just holds you and it articulates the picture all over.”⁶ She began making intricate drawings of oceanic surfaces in 1968,

4. Moyra Davey, “The Opposite of Low Hanging Fruit,” *Index Cards* (Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2020) p. 204.

5. Madeleine Davis and David Wallbridge, “The Spatula Game,” *Boundary and Space: An Introduction to the Work of D.W. Winnicott* (Routledge, 1981) p. 21.

6. Chuck Close and Vija Celmins, *Vija Celmins* (Art Transfer Resources, 1992) p. 14.

translating from a photograph she took at Venice Beach near her studio. Her assertion that the image is almost nothing is neatly disparagingly, denying her surfaces of any symbolism or signification. But in spite of this austere quality, her pictures are quietly generous and richly rewarding to the eye, as if her “almost nothing” is also just enough to simply transmit the surface itself.

■ *fig. 2*

To encounter a surface is to be presented with the possibility of something surfaced up from within ourselves. Technology has made the act of photography as frictionless as possible, perhaps short-circuiting or re-routing something in the process. But these moments, in which we’re struck with the impulse to document, are when we find ourselves suggestively porous and permeable.

Luigi Ghirri, an Italian photographer and contemporary of Celmins, describes the art of photography as one where we “seek an image in equilibrium, suspended between detection and revelation, between the interior and the exterior.”⁷ Within this equilibrium, the surface becomes a portal, one that delineates an object as separate from us, and yet produces the site of a delicate exchange, a moment of intimacy with exteriority. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan defined a term for this, *extimité*, in which we are held in an encounter where we experience “in the Other, something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me.”⁸

7. Luigi Ghirri, “Photography: An Open Gaze,” *The Complete Essays 1973-1991* (Mack Books, 2017), p. 89.

8. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-60*. Trans. Dennis Porter. (London: Routledge, 1992,3), p. 71.

I've long forgotten now what I'd known as a child, when my psyche first began to produce this differentiation of interiority and exteriority, the dissociation of sensation from surface. These artists' surfaces draw attention to how they are made, holding our gaze as we circle closer, returning us to what we knew as children, that whatever is out there is also in here.

■ *fig. 3*

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In his memoir on developing blindness, John Hull describes his experience once opening the front door to his house during a rainstorm: "Rain has a way of bringing out the contours of everything; it throws a coloured blanket over previously invisible things; instead of an intermittent and thus fragmented world, the steadily falling rain creates continuity of acoustic experience [...] As I listen to the rain, I am the image of the rain, and I am one with it."⁹

The evocation of the intermittent and thus fragmented world that he blindly perceives mirrors the fragmentation of the inner world, an interiority that we spend our lives blindly trying to hold together. But in these brief moments, these passing encounters, the surface is both caesura and suture—a suspended embrace, a colored blanket, a brush on the cheek of eternity.

9. John Hull, *Touching the Rock: An Experience of Blindness* (Vintage Books, 1991), p. 29.

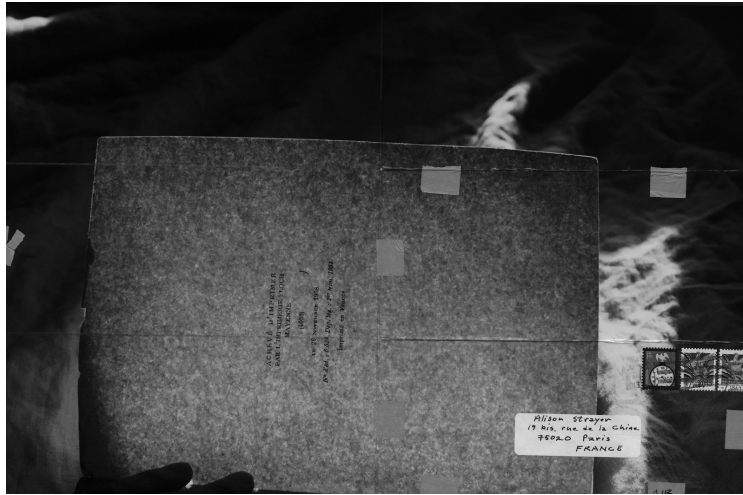


fig 1 *Dédicace II*, Moyra Davey (2013)

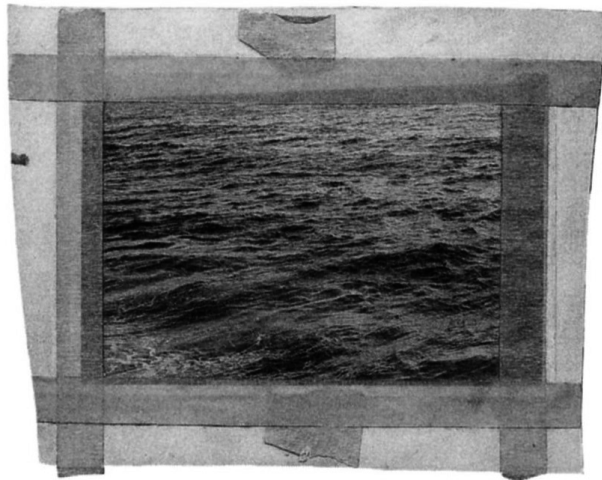


fig 2 Photograph of the Pacific Ocean by Vija Celmins



fig 3 *Lucerna*, Luigi Ghirri (1971)