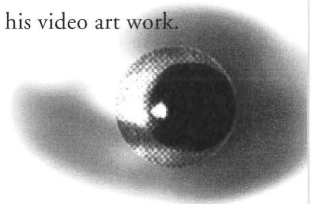


L i m i n a l E y e

Herman Rapaport

This short paper concerns some interrelations between painting and video art. It also reflects an ongoing collaboration between the editors of this volume, since the piece is based on a remark by Hans Breder in conversation, namely, that one should think of the surface of the painting in relation to the membrane of the eye as if the painting's surface were part of the eye itself. If we thought of the surface that way, the painting's surface would have to be thought of as a membrane of visible excitation that is hard to separate from vision. Vision therefore would not be something we simply brought to the work, but to the contrary, would be indistinguishable from or part of the work itself. The eye and icon therefore enjoy a much closer relation that one might ordinarily assume. At issue are Breder's *Liminal Icon* series of paintings and his video art work.



icon

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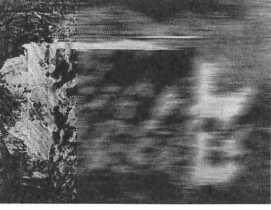
Hans Breder "Liminal Icon CCIII" (1993) Acrylic on Board.



It would not have been considered odd by some seventeenth century Dutch painters to imagine that a painting's surface could be considered a part of our visual apparatus or system of perception. For them a painting might not have been something one merely looked at, but something with which one could see. This is what the painter, Hans Breder, was pointing out to me in his studio, when he said that maybe one should think of the surface of the painting in relation to the membrane of the eye, as if the painting's surface were part of the eye itself. If we thought of the surface that way, he suggested, the painting's surface would have to be thought of as a membrane of visible excitation that is hard to separate from vision. Vision therefore would not be something we simply brought to the work, but, to the contrary, would be indistinguishable from or part of the work itself.

If we were to improvise on a word like icon from this perspective, we might think of substituting the word “eye,” as in the eye with which we see, for the word’s letter “i.” In that way we would be able to get the word “icon” to mean something else than a detached image or object of devotion. Instead it would have to be understood as an illumination that is indistinguishable from what we call seeing. The surface of the painting, then, would be the site where the visible is not just present to be seen, but has a visualizing capacity.

We could say that this visualizing might be part of what one should imply when a simple word like *showing* is used. And we could ask ourselves what it means for a work to show itself to us? Here some synonymous formulations come to mind, age old subjects like how a work can be said to present or disclose itself



to us. In yet other terms, we could say that we're talking about no more than how a work appears, or to take the long way about, how the work comes to pass as appearing and as appearance. We know, of course, that when these issues came up in antiquity there was a Platonic tradition which quickly dispatched them by talking about shadows in caves. It never occurred to this tradition that the visual arts might be considered in terms other than false appearance. The Aristotelian tradition was somewhat kinder to the visual arts, but it also had the disadvantage of making sharp distinctions between appearance and reality, as in the difference between the real world of life and the golden world of art, or the structure of works in comparison to the universalizing truths to which they pointed. In art criticism such divisions still exist; people usually end up talking about the sign instead of the the gaze.

When I refer to the icon as eye-con, therefore, I do so in order to imagine a notion of appearance that suggests exposure or exposing rather than *the merely exposed*. Here the history of the nude or nudity in art suggests itself as an analogue to a notion of exposure. After all, a nude has the ability to metaphorize the painting's surface or membrane as a site of erogenous excitation which is imbricated in seeing. Art critics who have thought about the representation of flesh have no doubt discovered this for themselves. Similarly, art historians of the Renaissance know that the female nudes in Correggio (*Mercury Instructing Cupid Before Venus*), Titian (*Venus With Mirror*) and others figure an interplay between the visible and the invisible which is supposed to be related to the viewer's ability to construct beauty, truth and goodness in the mind's eye. That this construction is not purely literary —



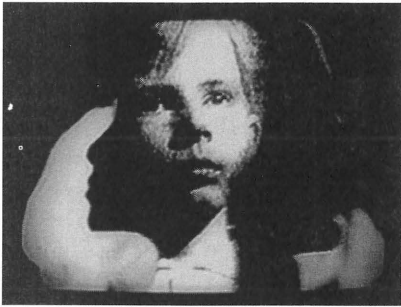
in other words, merely a matter of signification or symbolism — is what many historians fail to point out, particularly Gombrich and Panofsky who don't think it gentlemanly to allow the icons to excite them in a certain way. What is overlooked is that the surface of the painting could be considered a membrane or tissue where excitation is not only depicted, but embodied or somaticized as quality, light, color and, of course, as brush stroke or touch. That there are many examples in which one might well ask where seeing ends and sexuality starts is obviously where such works become quite radical in their mode of appearing.

In the case of abstract expressionism we are sometimes awakened into visualization without ever fully being able to objectify the painting as a representation. This is not to say that critics have not assigned cultural



meanings to even highly abstract works, as if they were representations that corresponded to some idea, but that these cultural assignations efface the work's awakening us to a visibility which is more or less pure since it is not encumbered by its forms. Although an artist may employ images, this does not obscure recognition that the visibility or appearing of the work is not reducible to image. If one wonders why the artist does not turn away from the iconicity of the work altogether, the answer might be that in doing so one would be abandoning the bodily or concrete aspect of the work required to awaken vision as an excitation without limits. Painters who come to mind are De Kooning, Morris Louis but also Jules Olitski in whose work the trace of iconicity is always somewhere to be found.


Hans Breder "Under a Malicious Sky" 1988.



More recently, Hans Breder has been exhibiting paintings that are also neither encumbered by their forms nor willing to simply reject iconicity. The outline of a door, passageway or aperture could be taken as a simple form, abstract device or hierophantic symbol. But as such it cannot be divorced from what in a Heideggerian way we could call the coming-to-appear-of-what-shows-itself-as-the-showing-of-the-work. The door or frame is not to be seen merely as a copy or expression of some thing in the world, but should be considered a partitioning or differentiating of what shows itself in the showing of the work. Without this differentiation the work could not come into appearance as an interplay of relationships involving quality, light, color or stroke that is indistinguishable from the showing of the work as visualization. The form or governing icon

structures the interplay without objectifying it necessarily as a thing. This means that the structuring is not just a formal procedure for mapping out relationships to be seen, but is that differentiating or partitioning which is internal to showing or exposing.

Television with its electronic images and fast edits has mobilized the differentiation or partitioning of the figure in ways that construct vision often more from the side of the sign than the gaze, in that television is usually something that we are asked to read as if it were a comic strip, or *bande dessinée*. Video artists have been wise to the fact that video icons come pre-loaded with cultural meanings that are so excessive that they excite us no end and that this excitation cannot be divorced from the deployment of media generally. It isn't so much that the image is disseminated



(or sent) by the media. In other words, these icons are not the mere signs of cultural capital; they are also complex sites of excitation (enabled by dissemination) which do our seeing for us by awakening or exposing us to a vision which we could never achieve or even endure independently of them and their apparatuses.

While we have been encouraged to see popular icons as banalized or depleted signs estranged from any referential ground (Baudrillard's thesis), we have not been encouraged to think of these icons as eye-cons that exceed representation and, as such, have the ability to awaken an excitation of visibility without limits. This, it seems to me, is what some artists like Ed Paschke have exaggerated, but here video art may have a leg up over painting, in that the medium of video is a



powerful conduit for the icon, the television set itself being a kind of devotional object or alter of consumer culture (i.e., home shopping network). As we know, video, like film, structures the gaze and no doubt the video icon is conditioned (disseminated, fissured) by edits, tempo, special effects and the like. But, it would be a mistake to see the icon as something that is merely presented or conditioned to be a thing-in-itself, a ready-made image ripe for identification and glorification. Rather, the icon, precisely because it is mediated by a large number of technical broadcasting interventions, is sutured. This means that whereas the image of someone or something famous may appear unified, fluid and extraordinarily smooth, the unconscious picks it up as morcellated: cut up and re-pieced together.

The commercial video icon, I would like to suggest, is unstable from this point of view, because while we see it as whole, we sense that it is inherently disarticulated and, in that sense, bodiless. To put this another way, despite all appearances, the sutures don't seem to hold anything together that we could call coherent or unified. The icon is therefore always nothing but what Trinh T. Minh-Ha calls "resemblage." Therefore, while icons like Madonna or Elvis may excite us as seamless radiance and sexual power, they disturb insofar as we know these icons have been tampered with like bodies that have been surgically opened and closed numerous times. As if to follow Oscar Wilde's dictum that life imitate art, we are finding that media stars like Michael Jackson have increasingly come under the plastic surgeon's knife as if to physically literalize the very sutured image created for



them by television. Just as the viewer is trapped or fascinated in the disjunction between the visible and the invisible, the star literalizes this captivation by physically disarticulating himself or herself as icon. Again, the recent fascination with drag queens, as in the film *Paris is Burning*, has a little bit to do, certainly, with how gendered reassemblages literalize and perform the videotaped suture. The migration of that suturing from video, to drag runway, to film is a good instance of how sutured icons may migrate from one site of dissemination to another.

Of course this is but one instance in which the televised turns into the concretized. Indeed, this migration — or trans-iconization — might extend to Breder's *Liminal Icon* series which re-enact the sutured icons of his video work, for example, *Under a Malicious Sky*,

where media and history are sutured iconically as images of devotion and destruction. It is here that I would locate a certain excitation — really terror — which is and is not visible, an excitation that concerns less what the image literally expresses or says than how its membrane, surface or skin exposes itself as a sensation rather than a representation. Here we are back to the matter of how the image differentiates or partitions and how that enables the excitation of an image to take to the side of visualization rather than the side of the merely visible. In *Under a Malicious Sky*, the vision's relation to the apartheid of the death drive is quite detectable. But in the *Liminal Icon* series it is really a question of genesis, which recalls a well known verse in the Old Testament about how in the beginning light was separated from dark. Religious implications aside, this separation marks the primacy

of perception, which is to say, that moment in which the cosmos makes itself capable of being visualized, since in order to be shown, it had to first produce the conditions in order for visualization to become phenomenologically possible. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in a famous essay called "Eye and Mind" summarizes what I think is second nature to many artists but not to many critics: "The visible world and the world of my motor projects are each total parts of the same Being."

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