

RED RABBIT: DAVID ECKARD'S *PRESTIDIGITATION*

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"Magician is to surgeon as painter is to cinematographer."

–Walter Benjamin

The thing about magic is this: even after you know how a particular effect is achieved, you still believe in its power in some strange fashion, or, at the very least, you believe in its power to enchant others, the performance reproducing in ritualized form the sleight-of-hand and strange mixture of knowing and unknowing inherent to so many other phenomena in which distraction plays a significant role. It would be a mistake, however, to view magic simply as a reenactment of social behavior, the logic of belief, or a mere lure or decoy by which attention is drawn away from some tasks in order for others, often traumatic or violatory, to be accomplished. In the final analysis, magic is far more disturbing than any conjectured relation between duplicity and consciousness, belief and disbelief, distraction and destruction. At its most profound, it reproduces and plays with a radical facticity – namely, the way in which things in the world suddenly appear and disappear, become dislocated or, indeed, metamorphose into completely other things, often under unbearable circumstances and against their will.

One can't help but think of Paul Virilio's young picnoleptic, subject to lapses of consciousness, dreams, accidents, the difficulty of simply returning to earth each morning from destinations unknown, the bewildering demands of others, their constant and never-ending desire to persuade him that events exist even though he has not seen them and even though they have happened in his very presence. "The absence lasts a few seconds; its beginning and its end are sudden," writes Virilio.¹ "The senses function, but are nevertheless closed to external impressions. The return being just as sudden as the departure, the arrested word and action are picked up again where they have been interrupted." These lacunae occur almost constantly, hundreds happening on any given day, most but not all passing completely unnoticed by everyone around the individual experiencing them. Indeed, even for the picnoleptic himself, on some level, "nothing really has happened, the missing time never existed. At each crisis, without realizing it, a little of his or her life simply escaped."

Isn't this escapology the essence of magic, for, likewise, where do we go exactly when the woman in the box is cut in half and then put back together again? Where are we when the rabbit disappears into the hat? At what point exactly does the woman become a tiger? The tiger, a woman? And, indeed, is it a woman? There are hypnotic spaces in which the distinctions between inner and outer, subject and object, transitive and intransitive, this and that, disappear or are

1. Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, transl. Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e)), 1991, pp. 9–10.

made irrelevant; and even the line between life and death, the dead and the undead, is thrown into question. Death has its own tricks and snares, but, as we know, is itself not entirely immune to magic. It, too, can be lured away from its prey and momentarily sidetracked. Otto Fenichel once wrote a beautiful essay entitled “On Compulsive Doubt about the News of Death”²; and as the title alone makes clear, no one ever really believes on some level in that most radical of vanishings called death.

Prestidigitation: A Folly in Eleven Acts (2009, on view), David Eckard’s most recent work, is about what kinds of things take place when one isn’t paying close enough attention or isn’t paying attention to the right things – and what we do with this condition. We may seem far away here from the immaculately crafted prosthetics for which the sculptor is best known, but, in actuality, we are now in their operational headquarters and control room – an inner chamber rendered in grisaille, studded with props, and heavily cushioned with drapery, whose baroque furrows are clenched by ropes and chains, protuberant tassels, pendants and pendula of all sorts. The set is lush and heavy-hung if bridled, its simultaneous restraint and exuberance suggestive of an entire philosophy. It is crafted of cardboard. In the middle is a stump, a kind of wishing well lit from below; and atop this truncated, former living thing, the magician performs tricks. The stump appears to possess surreally wooden feet à la Magritte, and *Prestidigitation* is full of such citations attesting to the long relation of art and illusion, the art of illusion and the illusion of art. Eckard is interested in what happens when representation is forced back into presence and then back again into representation. In perhaps the strongest of the eleven acts that comprise the piece, “Market Forces,” Albrecht Dürer’s *Young Hare* (1502) is rolled up in a red silk scarf and placed in a black top hat, where it is cut to pieces by giant cardboard scissors. Mimetic thread is added to the mixture, and, after a good long time, the now-bloodied scissors are extracted along with a rabbit-hair coat and the flayed rabbit, its deconstruction having been accomplished as if by representation itself – a jovial version of extreme realism, things made to do or seem to do what it is they represent. Its red flesh appears particularly red, reputedly the ultimate quale.

Eckard carries out these performances with divine nonchalance, his hands animating and destroying with equal indifference. With each of the eleven reveals, he glances blankly sideways, drawing the viewer ever further astray. What is central to this game is, paradoxically, an embedded anti-theatricality. The magician never acknowledges the fact of being seen and never makes eye contact with the gazer – and for this reason alone, we know that its essence is a certain surreptition, an impersonalism proper to seduction or hypnosis. At the end of each act, rather than a curtain closing or descending, he simply walks offstage. There are curtains, but they do not open and close; and thus it is that the stage begins to resemble a dark eye that cannot stop looking even if it so desired – it lacks the salvation of eyelids. The “folly” of the title acknowledges foolishness if not futility as one possible end of such abracadabra, but, more importantly, dismisses the charge. This is both entertainment and entrainment, their happy conjunction.

At one point in the sequence, “Penumbra Dance,” the silhouette of a man appears in the corner of the stage and partially blocks our view of the proceedings, as though a slightly creepy voyeur privy to a display to which we are excluded. He seems not so much a proxy or cutout for us, but rather a personification of the camera, a machine eye that stares dead straight on without blinking, vision ostensibly stripped of the distortions of human desire. One thinks not so much of Walter Benjamin’s Blue Flower at the height of the techno-psychotic but rather of Masahiro Mori’s Uncanny

2. Otto Fenichel, *The Collected Papers of Otto Fenichel* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1953).

Valley – an automaton acting humanlike beginning to feel like a human acting like a machine. But why stop there? On some level, what we have instead is more complicated and irresolvable, and the principle of constancy seems completely lacking – Eckard the magician pretending to be a machine pretending to be a human and a cardboard voyeur pretending to be a human pretending to be a machine – and so forth. Indistinguishability seems baroquely replicated in the set itself, drapery, like any “multiplication of internal articulations,” being, in and of itself, a kind of primitive animation principle.³ And where, one might ask, are we in this chain of interfaces between the animate and the inanimate, the dead and the undead? Why, the rabbit about to be shorn, of course.

Eckard’s piece can be taken both as an electronic postcard from France, the place of his exile, and a sort of cheiromantic revenge on the Apparatus – an exaction necessarily limited in scope. I do not think that sculpture of any sort is particularly amenable to filmic treatment, nor can it be remediated in the same way as can, say, painting. Moreover, flatness, surficiality, and radical dematerialization have yet to be remedied by any number of sculptural attempts to do so, from scratching on film and crumpling, tearing, and otherwise mutilating photographs to ray tracing, prims, and InTru3D™ to general appeals for tactility, immersion, and interactivity. At the moment, contrary forms of magic, the digital and the prestidigital, seem to be doing battle in the world, and what is at stake is an entire aesthetics, that is to say, a sensibility, philosophy, and way of being and feeling in the world, indistinguishable from conviction. That certain types of art persist despite all odds must be understood not so much as a small miracle but rather as a testament to the power, perpetuity, and barbed cunning of certain forms. For the time being, it might be interesting to call by the name of *craft* anything that, unhappy with the conditions of surficialization, resists flattening, dematerialization, appropriation, ekphrasis, remediation, and self-sabotage and, accordingly, is capable of inspiring an almost cultic respect and proprioceptive devotion. It might be a principle applicable to persons, places, and things alike.

The last act of Eckard’s magic show is called “Shudder,” and takes place, according to the cardboard clock, at 3:10 AM. A skull suddenly materializes atop the stump, and with three snaps of the fingers, Eckard’s shirt is off as if in strange dialogue with the memento mori. Against the grisailed props pretending to be 2D, a kind of land of the dead, the human body appears particularly red and alive, but then so did that of the poor rabbit. This is color at its most primal, that is, as hardwired sign of life and momentary banishment of death. This is the body as last resurrection of the real, as instinctual revolt against the flight from reality, and resistance to the psychosis of flatland. In the end, there are sculptures in *Prestidigitation* that serve as models of sorts for escaping the worst excesses of the optical unconscious, and they are all acheiropoetic, not made by human hands. We may think that the pleasure of this performance has been ours, but by the time Eckard snaps his fingers one last time and walks off the stage buck naked, it should be clear that the lure of hands in perpetual annunciations of Behold! is not perhaps where the real action has been taking place. We could call this real crafty.

3. See, for instance, Alois Riegl’s *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts*, transl. Jacqueline E. Jung (New York: Zone Books, 2004), p. 205, and the entire section on “Organic Motifs,” 204–211.