

Concealed Science
Dennis Balk's Spectral Data
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Writing about the landscape of Tarahumara in *The Mountain of Signs* (1936), Antonin Artaud scans light patterns in the rocks surrounding him, picking apart their irregular contours and searching for symbolic forms in the dry terrain's ridges and ravines. And he believes he finds them, declaring finally that "this symbolism conceals a Science." The desert appearances, in their "strange signatures," harbor another, hidden reality of a higher order. With the rhetorical fervor of religious epiphany, Artaud—standing, in truth, at the precipice of his own psychological projections, pushing the fine limit of the perceived—professes that an "awesome mathematics" underlies all things he sees.

Nevertheless, if eyes could be changed, what would this "concealed science" resemble? Perhaps something like Dennis Balk's *Data Accumulation Print-Outs*, a series of ten Cibachrome light prints in which the artist reproduces images captured during advanced engineering tests that use photo-luminescence to find flaws in metals. In effect, the prints visualize the invisible and depict the immaterial: luminescent currents weave across stark black vacuums, their patterns interlacing in gleaming waves and shifts to create insubstantial fabrics and optical textures. Amorphous, tinted bands gel and diffuse in intricate, disarmingly saturated spectrums. Each illustration holds the cold, sharp, vibrant precision of high science, with ethereal, unreal ocular networks: a fine, ground zero conceptualism and a high resolution of scans and graphs suggest cerebral formulas. These incandescent threads seem to linger on the very borders of the physical, in fact (perhaps it should be no surprise that some frames resemble contemporary, computer-driven graphic design, another airless sphere where pure image is barely fettered by actual surfaces). And accompanying textual fragments that explain the images' origins imply as much, reading, "spectral stress...retiring magnetic signals—generate the data to acquire picture" or "through multiple

tunings of the bandwidth's subfields and anomalies—the following is achieved.” Each individual print features a number of such images arranged in irregular, non-sequential panels of data, the individual frames juxtaposed randomly as an unresolved accumulation of obscure information, and aggregate of luminary particles—fractions of an electromagnetic vantage located exclusively in the realm of high-tech instrumentation.

The attempt to grasp the intangible defines one approach to making art. De Kooning's pressing scenarios of the “slipping glimser” is all the more engaging as content inevitably dissolves into the very material that first conjures its presence for the eye. Yet, in excavating technologically what is normally concealed, Balk's prints also touch on a vast culture of dislocated visual events, where surfaces are not finite or discrete but, rather, serve as links to networks upon networks of contingent material—where the invisible, and its “awesome mathematics,” is inextricably tied to the visible. (This is true, in a sense, even for popular culture. What form could Barthes' *Mythologies* take in a society where an advertisement in the *The Wall Street Journal* pictures a cup of coffee,” and then lists what “we” see—a series of statistics and percentages of production? The labyrinths embedded in the other side of signs are now ordinary territories for discourse.) Individual appearances can disperse among other continuous, tangential surfaces and media, each new manifestation emerging as a surfacing locus for matrices of information. An illustrative parallel arises in conceptual art (perhaps it is possible to consider all of conceptual art as a kind of Gnostic circuit, where any image is a deceptively simple skin for complex content): as in Kosuth's *Chair*, for example, an exercise where a single object of observation scatters among media. More recent (and more evolved) examples include the work of Luc Tuymans, whose images flow in perpetual transubstantiation from conception to photograph to painting to drawing—across all media, each of which offers a different reality of equal weight. That trend of displacing objects continues, as articulating the very modes of distribution and dispersal becomes a regular project among artists. Beyond any loss of “aura,” contemporary modes of

reproduction and exchange disallow finality (even object hood itself), with no one medium in the chain having primacy. The singular piece with distinct boundaries disappears in favor of previously sublimated fields of systems. This terminology may be very familiar. But Data Accumulation Print-Outs registers a contemporary, technological correlative, where such latent visual information arises and accrues by changing not what is perceived but the terms of perception itself.

The prints are rooted in Balk's earlier, multifaceted theatrical works. (Balk composes "a theater of the contemporary cultural mind," in all its varied dimensions; he adds that, to that end, one should realize that "the theory of technology is the theory of possibilities.") Always composed of fragments and resisting formulation, his plays have incorporated the promotional invitations mailed out to audiences; and stage sets and props have later been installed in gallery spaces as sculptural objects. Divorced from a narrative context, their spare construction calls up Minimalism, while seeming like mute receptors for any number of potential interpretations. The literal materials involved in Balk's productions pass through multiple contexts, and are designed to activate underlying networks of critical associations. Such heterogeneity is mirrored in Balk's narrative structures, which often entail broken episodes nearly indecipherable to audiences, let alone to the fictional characters who populate them. In *Prophet's Plain*, for example, an Inner-city Asian-American theater company with an Irish director attempts to produce a work based on the massacre at Wounded Knee. For each character, the "true" cultural story exists only at a remove, as an obscure, unarticulated presence. (The characters, ultimately, are never able to enact their scenes, they only describe them.) Scenarios onstage often involve actions peripheral to some unseen signal event, so that the plays, in a kind of distension of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, are composed of residual visual occasions that obscure the core circumstances that propel them. Attempting to synthesize meaning, audiences become conscious of their own interpretive apparatus, the truth always receding (like a horizon line) into the distance. There is an inevitable failure of representation, a basic inadequacy and inaccuracy to

what the eyes actually see.

It was when Balk began diagramming his narratives—drawing out extensive flowcharts of intertwining lines—that he noticed a correspondence with electromagnetic imagery. Textual flows soon became waves, and areas reserved for scripted scenarios became knit fields of electromagnetic structures, sometimes with a dizzying (even slightly sickening) Op Art intensity. Here language itself becomes opaque and the opaque becomes a language: a move recalling the analytical mysticism of Benjamin’s “On the Mimetic Faculty,” where he describes the desire “To read what was never written.” Such reading is the most ancient reading before all languages, from the entrails, the stars, or dances. Later the mediating link of a new kind of reading, of runes and hieroglyphs came into use. This is the Benjamin who strives time and time again to discover the “magic” shuttling between object and symbol, to render thought itself somehow palpable—in other words, to allow the “Science” to seep back into perceived images.

Which is where Balk finds himself in his latest project, the Photomagnetic Receiver; a mechanism designed to allow audiences to view actual photomagnetic waves, creating what Balk calls an “Abraxas Light Event” (abraxas being a Gnostic term meaning “on the other side of light”). A potential viewer first drinks a saline solution, then is exposed to electromagnetic waves emanating from two parabolic antennas at 8.73 Hz (“the planet’s operative frequency,” Balk points out). The person’s cellular structure is temporarily modified, realigned to access a new spectrum; the electromagnetic capacity of the optic nerve is reactivated, allowing one to see “the different reality that exists at this other vibratory level,” as Balk puts it. The electromagnetic aspect of objects and events, even thought, suddenly appears.

That objects hold different realities is a common idea. Tempered by media and the awareness raised by incisive instruments of science, sight is not what it was—nor is the composition of objects, even for the casual viewer. Balk’s most recent attempt to present alternative routes for observation, and separate

channels of enhanced and augmented perception, may seem absurd to some (and even dangerous). The artist himself might agree. But they do point to this ever-evolving architecture or perception, the malleable sense of space and time that is constantly reconditioned, reformulated, and rechoreographed by the advance of technology—its new speeds, its new landscapes, its new unknowns. The status of the seen and unseen is constantly changing. Who knows, perhaps only electromagnetic waves will be recognized by the eye someday, and it will be actual appearances that compose the arcane subject of spirituality and artistic desire.