III

Indeterminate Images

Kwasi Ohene–Ayeh reflects on the practice of Kelvin Haizel

The contingency at play in Kelvin Haizel's conception of imaging opens up an enticing array of possibilities that challenge any reductive notion of images existing exclusively as optical matter. The artist has explicitly stated that his attitude to manufacturing images has always been to 'disturb this [traditional] over-dependence on the ocular'.[1] In his world, images conflate the flat plane that regulates pictorial illusions with the literal or physical domain where fictions permeate without privilege. In his 2017 solo exhibition *things and nothings* Haizel poses this compelling reflection: 'How do transitions from images to objects occur? What is the object of an image?'.[2] If the first query points to a teleology from one mode of being to another, the second registers the artist's interest in the ontology of images— i.e. not only in terms of how images are encountered or known but also considering how they come to exist in the first place. In this sense the statement summarises the artist's dialectical explorations into the objectification of images and the imagification of objects.[3] This tangible convolution is vital to the form and content of the artist's work.

Haizel's 'pensive' images are also characterised as such by their transitional expressiveness. Pensiveness[4] denotes an 'indeterminate' state or condition of the image which generates an unsettling surplus between what the work is asserting itself as, and what more may become of it. This latent operation renders the image both complete and incomplete. It is not only the internal relations of the image that brings out its pensiveness; it is also about its co-present relations in the world of things, and with the spectator, such that neither the picture nor the situation of the object is exhaustible both in terms of meaning and experience. We can trace this function of indeterminacy in Haizel's artistic production to two paradigmatic works from his early and recent experiments with the photographic.
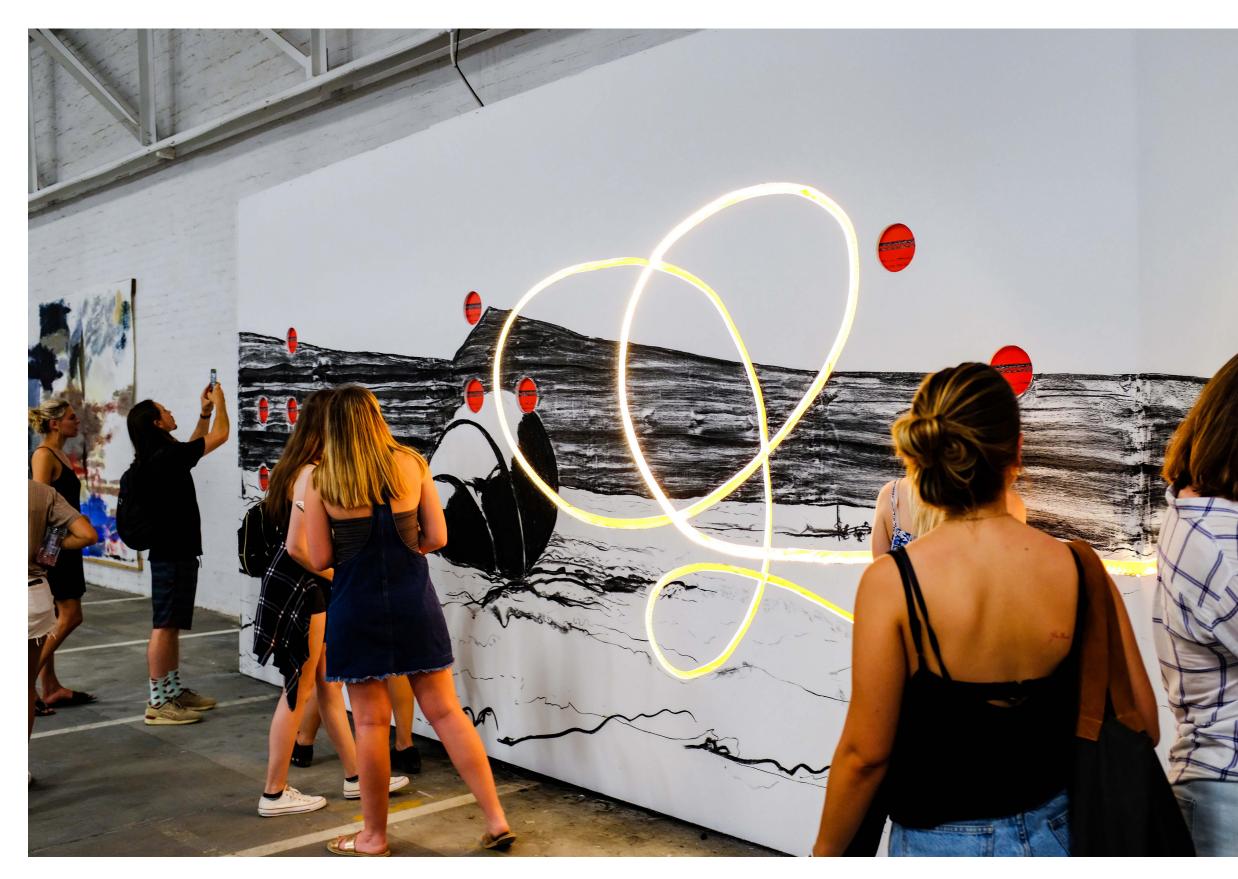
Bangbang33 (2016) is a post-produced silent video that remixes[5] single shots and split screen scenes from the music video for South African rapper Cassper Nyovest's 2015 hit single War Ready [Figure 1 & 2]. The clips are of a vulture preparing to take flight. In this work, the artist stretches the one-and-a-half-minute

extract into a twenty-minute sequence effectively causing the video to behave like something emerging between ultra slow motion, stop motion animation, and still frames. This technique agonizingly slows down the progression of the frames such that the representational value of the work is no longer the central focus of the spectator's gaze. You only know that it is a vulture in the picture from the opening wide shot that remains frozen for about 27 seconds, waiting for the next motion to occur. The picture seems to be stitching together, collapsing, and fragmenting frame by frame, pixel by pixel, into and out of itself. And yet there are moments when it seems as though no motion is happening in the video at all—as if what the spectator is encountering on the screen is a photographic still in dilated time. Indeterminacy is structurally exemplified in visual form by the immanent tensions and juxtaposition of still and moving picture in this work. But the logic of resistance at play in the becoming of the image goes beyond this internal interplay — it is visceral no less for its creator than for its audience.

A more recent work extends the

operative affects encoded into the artist's imagery by complicating this image-object dialectic even further. *Ironing Out Difference* (2020),[6] currently showing at Denmark's ARoS Aarhus Art Museum, is an instance of Haizel's 'Highlights and Exposures' series which retains and foregrounds the necessity of light in the production of the cinematic/photographic image. The series was inspired by an interest to literally highlight and expose (in the sense of display) note-worthy statements or quotations the artist had come across while reading. This interest further developed into translating selected texts into braille, borrowing from the logic of cell arrangements in this linguistical code to generate image constellations with materials such as lightbulbs, fabric, wooden boards, tables, and so on. The decision to use braille in his work is consistent with Haizel's expanded conception of imaging, and emanates from the aforementioned desire to 'disturb' the structural autonomy of the pictorial format which tends to privilege the eye as its principal apparatus of perception. Haizel first begun incorporating the braille form into his work in 2016 after explorations at the Disability →

→ and Rehabilitation Studies Department at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST)[7] in Kumasi, Ghana. This inclusive tactic also manifests as an extra-optical device or technique that encodes a new layer of visuality into his image-things.

Shifting from an earlier use of the camera to capture, manipulate, and produce images, it is as if, with this recent work, the artist is now foraying into making photography without the camera; stripping the medium down to its essence — which is light, employed both as metaphor and as material. The materiality of light in Ironing *Out Difference* is given presence through LED energy-saving bulbs (reminiscent of vintage incandescent bulbs) mounted on a tabular structure. The composition of these light elements is not arbitrary, it is text — arranged to specifically read 'they must first grow the fruits', by appropriating the left-to-right cell arrangements of braille characters. The anamorphic text-image-object comes together to produce its particular semiotic meaning from a bird's-eye perspective (a tactile writing/reading system has in this case been re-directed towards expanded opticality). Additionally, a motion sensor is fixed at the center of the table which activates the lightbulbs upon detection of real-time movement approximately within a radius of six feet. The theatricality of this installation is experienced through the layers of visual, tactile, virtual images at play [Figure 3 & 4].

Serially mounted on the green walls of the exhibition space to form an L-shape are twenty-four objects designed to appear as folded up ironing boards — which allusively refer back to the title and play up the double entendre often used in language. Stretched on the worktop of the boards are canvases Haizel lent to commercial paint retailers to use as rags for sampling their paint mixtures. The accumulation of these pragmatic gestures, over periods ranging between one to five years, creates what in mainstream painting parlance could be referenced as abstract expressionist marks on the material. And so what appears to be non-representational paintings in the ensemble of image presences are actually decoys to non-art or commercial activities. This artistic strategy 'allows the image to enter the domain of other systems of relations; material, economic, and legal systems amidst other fields of non-human engagements'.[8] To heighten the

fiction at play in the logic of appearances, and the non-functionality of the ironing-board-object, the iron dock is fixed in the midsection of all the boards with distributed braille embossments displaying transposed phrases that collectively articulate the following message: 'Practice without thought is blind; thought without practice is empty. Our philosophy must find its weapons in the environment and living conditions of the African people. It is from those conditions that the intellectual content of our philosophy must be created. The emancipation of the African continent is the emancipation of man. This requires two aims: first, the restitution of the egalitarianism of human society and, second, the logistic mobilization of all our resources towards the attainment of that restitution'.[9]

Altogether, the texts communicate ideas collected from Kwame Nkrumah's 1964 classic *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonization*.[10] The tactile images embossed on the ironing docks conceal meanings that can be decoded and known by the braille-literate spectator. For the uninitiated, this idealism is repressed and the potentiality of seeing and feeling the embossed elements is rather given prominence. The image-objects (ironing board, fabric, braille, lightbulbs, motion sensors, sound waves, etc) tend to function as signifiers, always in conversation with each other, exchanging and negotiating their peculiar affects in the context of the dynamic conditions set for them by the artist. The slippages and excesses that occur as a result of this translative mode of causation is what strikes me as the force of indeterminacy in the artist's production. In the aforementioned examples, braille is used both in literal and connotative forms. Opticality is de-centered and rendered in relation to tactile and sub-phenomenal elements. Meaning simultaneously appears and withdraws depending on one's position in space and time (and on what the spectator can decode), whereas the didactic and poetic sit side-by-side. In short, the pensive tendencies of Haizel's aesthetic decoys also constitute their political efficacy. The images participate in his, as well as their spectators', intentions and/or expectations, while ultimately exceeding both in the pursuit of an inhuman desire to be more than conventional things.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] Haizel K. & Ohene-Ayeh K. 2020. In conversation with Kelvin Haizel. https://iubeezy.wordpress.com/conversations/kelvinhaizel/ [Accessed on 8th May, 2021].

[2] The emphasis placed on transitions is mine.

[3] I owe this thought to the artist-pedagogue kặrî'kachä seid'ou, the first to point this out about Haizel's strategy in a conversation I had with him and the artist.

[4] Jacques Ranciére develops this notion in his text published as 'The Pensive Image' in Ranciére, J. 2009. The Emancipated Spectator. Trans. Gregory Elliott. Verso London/NewYork. For him, pensiveness "refers to a condition that is indeterminately between the active and the passive. This indeterminacy problematizes the gap [...] between two ideas of the image: the common notion of the image as duplicate of a thing and the image conceived as artistic operation". pp. 107.Jacques Ranciére. See Ranciére, J. 2009. The Emancipated Spectator. Trans. Gregory Elliott. Verso London/NewYork. 107.

[5] I mean "remix" in terms of artistic strategy or technique as theorised by Nicolas Bourriaud in Bourriaud, N 2002, Postproduction. Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World, Lukas & Sternberg, New York, p17.

[6] This work is currently showing in a group exhibition at the ARoS Aarhus Art Museum in Denmark titled "This Is Not Africa: Unlearn What You Have Learned" from 27th March to 24th October, 2021. A satellite exhibition was hosted in Ghana in collaboration with Savannah Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) Tamale and Red Clay, both institutions founded by Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama.

[7] He recounts the first time he came into contact with braille embossments after a medicine pack was gifted to him by a collaborator at the time— a visually impaired student at the university. See note 1 for full interview.

[8] Haizel, K, Akoi-Jackson, B, 2019, 'Imag[e]-ined

Objects: A Short Conversation Between Kelvin Haizel and Bernard Akoi-Jackson', A New Gaze 2: Kelvin Haizel, Babysitting a Shark in a Coldroom - Comoros Encounters, Vontobel-Kunstkommission, Zürich, p49.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Kwame Nkrumah is a leading theorist and figure of Pan-Africanism, and the first president of Ghana.