

Waiting to surface

As dusk descended to darkness, I sat at the computer gathering errant thoughts. The low exhalations of passing clouds and a disquieting transformation of light in the atmosphere announced an imminent summer storm. Moving my eyes back and forth from the brilliant luminosity of the computer screen to the irregular brightening in the farmhouse window to my right, these oddly contiguous lenses each framed seductive sources of light. Artificial and natural illumination shared incongruous affinities. The infinitesimal world of the microchip and the expansive turbulence of a gathering storm were congealed and connected by the common apertures that channel and edit sight.

Beginning as an almost imperceptible prelude, the storm rolled through with thrilling, tectonic ferocity. Experience was replete with and limited by a clamor of noise and light. The skies raged and the ground seemed to tremble as if to release some unassailable evidence of beginnings, endings, and improbable connections. Judiciously, I shut off the computer moments before an epiphany of light interrupted the dependable, invisible flow of electricity. The lights went out for a moment, fluttered, and finally were extinguished.

Futilely promising to be better prepared for other unexpected events, I fumbled around on a shelf where I recalled last seeing the sole flashlight. With the failing Shop Rite batteries providing scant illumination in the impenetrable darkness, my eyes hungered for something to see. There was a feeling of loss and deprivation -- a tactual desire to fix my focus on something. Even the insistent digital numbers of the clock radio and microwave were still and vacant. Space seemed to thicken. Seeing and knowing ceased to be reliable companions.

There was a disconcerting silence to confirm the absence of light and vision. The persistent hum of the computer that has become part of the physical sensation of writing had stopped early in the storm. Without electricity the pump was still; the loss of water was confirmed as a dripping faucet quieted. And the straining motor of the freezer, which had become a constant presence during steamy July days, also stopped. I realized that all of these often ignored sounds and pulsations are the dependable calibrations of a palpable dimension of time. Without these familiar noises and in a thicket of darkness, time was suspended.

Roaming around the dark rooms, I reflexively turned on light switches and water faucets. My experience of the loss of electrical power was constantly betrayed by an unconscious, quotidian choreography of gesture and activity. In other more confounding moments, the edges between environment and awareness, context and body were often ambiguous. What was understood and experienced were mismatches. There was no power; the world had fallen into darkness until the sky would brighten at sunrise the next day. But in the hushed blackness of a well-

known setting, the sudden transformation felt like a failure of the most reliable physical senses. Sight and hearing had been extorted or diminished by incalculable circumstances. Touch was the most incisive sensation. Oddly, this enhanced tactility sounded a prescient image for the future, as more of what we know will be visually unavailable -- behind the scenes.

A day later at nightfall, electrical power was restored. Lights left on the night before brightened. The motor of the freezer went into a frenetic pitch to capture and restore the cold. The digital clocks blinked brightly in their inaccuracy. All of the sights and sounds of domesticity were instantly reinstated. With the well-known scripts and staging back in place, an unexpected pause of everyday life came to an end. Did the novelty of the night before change anything? Did the welcome return of usual patterns and amenities dispel any lasting reconsideration of new impressions? Did the temporary compromise -- denial -- of sight, influence a general apprehension?

The abrupt consequences of a sudden electrical storm appear to establish improbable and tenuous connections to the quiet, premeditated work of Marco Maggi. The sublime pyrotechnics of intense light and blasts of thunder had reverberated with the shocking volatility of natural events. Thrilling and threatening, the storm was a ephemeral event, moving across space until its force dissipated. The experience of the storm and a night without light and sight was entirely visceral. The extreme visual stimulation of the storm wrought a mysterious opacity.

In contrast, Maggi's meticulous projects and drawings are hushed serial implosions. Their intricacy and intimacy transport paradoxical thoughts of velocity and stillness, presence and void -- a simultaneous concentration and absence of energy. While time may be a subject, the work is not transitive. The activity has an inappreciable molecular quality; aggressive, persistent movement is self-contained. Development and movement are intellectually accepted, but never tangibly experienced. Strategically unpretentious, the work's eloquent concentration actively summons acute, attentive seeing.

In the 19th century, the invention and availability of printing presses, telescopes, and microscopes secured the ocular bias of the modern western world. 1 There was unprecedented optimism placed on previously unexamined visual horizons rendered by new technologies. It was expected that a technologically-enhanced range of sight would lead to new knowledge -- an expanded optical environment would embolden thought.

... the break with classical models of vision in the early nineteenth century was far more than simply a shift in the appearance of images and art works, or in systems of representational conventions. Instead, it was inseparable from a massive reorganization of knowledge and social practices that modified in myriad ways the productive, cognitive, and desiring capacities of the human subject. 2

Concurrent with emerging techniques of observation, the development of new forms of political power and other industrial innovations, observers and consumers encountered a "new field of serially produced objects ..." 3 Social and economic developments produced a more variable, negotiable, and accessible scope of signs. Transformations in the 19th century that challenged the dominant authority of a Cartesian-based, singular scopic regime anticipated the discursive patterns of visuality that characterize the contemporary world.

As the telescope, microscope, computer, magnetic imaging, and other innovations have extended the biological range of vision, the syntax of sight is perpetually revised. Emerging technologies have displayed confounding similarities between the immense proportions of the universe and unimaginable infinitesimalness of particle physics, atomic structures, cells, and viruses. The techniques of observation present visual evidence that make the macro and micro -- once so unquestionably distinguishable -- entirely indiscriminate. Unimaginable extremes are, in fact, rendered uniformly. Representations of vastly different scales and phenomena have surprising affinities.

In the late 20th century, the traces of these and other profound changes are identified and examined through the different lenses of literary, art, and architectural theory, computer science and the digital world, and advertising and popular culture. Contemporary visual culture is calculatingly seductive and absurdly mundane. In spite of the promotional gusto of brand names and unique items for particular clients, the packaging of every aspect of life has produced a generic environment of manipulated expectation, sensation, and satiation. This slippery common ground of desire and commerce -- its insubstantiality -- is a significant preoccupation of Maggi's meditative, yet anxious work. His disciplined methodology, a fascination with format and presentation, and a modesty of materials form an insistent critique with sightlines to the past and the future of vision and knowledge. In Stuart Ewen's book *All Consuming Images*, the themes of the politics of style, image management, seeing as scanning, and surface over substance frame a bleak critique of contemporary consumer life. 4 Ewen's book

is a single compelling example of the pervasive pessimism about the social control (and superficiality) of vision and experience in a mediated society. Offering another perspective, Martin Jay writes: "In the case of the art of describing, we might see another reification at work, that which makes a fetish of the material surface instead of the three-dimension depths." 5 But just as vision and visuality are intricately braided phenomena shaped by nature and culture, biology and technology, surface and substance are not intrinsically estranged. Scanning the surface is not endemically an avoidance of deep ideas.

Maggi does not subscribe to the notion of a "true" vision. Optical processes are socialized, variable, cultural, and contingent. But his intricate work frames questions about the consequences of sight in a culture that is saturated with a storm images and things. In contrast to fast food, facsimiles, and other accelerated services, Maggi describes his work as "slow art." His making and our tracing of hundreds of almost imperceptible notations across different surfaces require patient and conscious search. And time.

With a sudden electrical storm, the surrounding environment became an inappreciable void. Space became empty. A typical drive-by experience of art might suggest that Maggi's work is empty and absent. At first glance -- nothing. Nothing seems obviously apparent. A more concentrated look -- a deliberate gaze -- locates an astounding proliferation and fullness extending across the surface. Through a devoted application of small marks and incisions on different surfaces and materials, Maggi slowly and inextricably reveals the drift of all of the common signs that skittishly move across surfaces.

Drawing with pencil leads the size of straight pins, Maggi places a single stroke that is the genesis of an unfolding, internal logic of marks and patterns. The visual experience of this work produces a notational crisis between intelligibility and intelligence. Observation and interpretation are prolonged commitments, but the time spent simply intensifies the conundrum. The mazy network of lines is rational and inscrutable; a calculable intent never leads to a conclusive impression.

Architects, designers, and scientists develop and deploy models and representations. Fastidious drawings and constructions simulate unbuilt structures or untested speculations. With reasonable confidence, viewers assume that these are accurate pictures of prospective visions. Maggi's disquieting, shifting work gravitates between the traditions of drawing and diagram. The precision of his drawing and etching, makes unclear whether each work is complete in its ambiguity, or a scale representation of something that only resides in the imagination. The tiny lines and marks possess the self-contained focus of the miniature, as well as the expansive potential of representations of vast systems or minute particles.

Paul Virilio has compared the field of vision to the site of an archaeological excavation. 6 Maggi's creative process has the obsessive qualities of a prolonged, painstaking dig. Every particle and stroke has immense purpose. The surface is continually examined and excised for evidence. Maggi draws delicately and fastidiously on the surface of paper and other materials. He incises with surgical precision foil, foamboard, and other vulnerable surfaces. Intelligible impressions are made, but the actual plane of the material is never excised. Occupying this intense non-space -- this dimension between surface and substance -- the work reveals the superficial and insignificant as profound concepts.

With the excavation of old landfills and other quotidian sites, the archaeology of the ordinary is now intellectually endorsed. For Maggi some of the most fascinating evidence of an entropic visual culture is discerned in the ubiquitous floor plans, product displays, and commonplace materials of Home Depot, Staples, or WalMart. Wandering and poaching in these epidemic franchises, he faithfully uses generic, often banal formats and materials for his extreme work -- conventionally-sized drawing paper, simple frames, plastic slide mounts, transparent slide sheets, insulation board, aluminum foil, and Macintosh apples from the fruit-growing region where he lives. If often ignored, endured, or scorned, they are never benign; they are the unacknowledged texture of our lives and the receptive surfaces for Maggi's idiosyncratic work.

From the fast convenience of the freezer to the microwave to the art gallery. What time is required -- and allocated -- to produce and look at art? The current politics and economics of the art world do not condone or reward creative investments of interminable hours. Unaffected by conformity, Maggi's slow methodology is subversively time-consuming. Vision may be fast and restless, but his timeless meandering marks and impressions evoke the purpose and intimacy of touch. Our choice is clear. The work can be easily overlooked, or we can let ourselves be held by an unhurried tangibility of time. In the darkness following an electrical storm, a dilated sense of time made the familiar suddenly mysterious. Maggi's work invites a similar kind of suspension. Facing unfathomable entanglements on the most mundane surfaces, the work immerses us in the vagaries and vulnerabilities of sight.

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Notes

1. Martin Jay. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity". Vision and Visuality. Edited by Hal Foster. Bay Press. Seattle. 1988. p. 3.
2. Jonathan Crary. Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century. M.I.T. Press. Cambridge. 1990. p. 3.
3. Crary. p. 13.
4. Stuart Ewen. All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture. Basic Books, Inc. New York. 1988.
5. Jay. p. 20.
6. Crary. p. 1.