

Space Oddity: Exercises in Art and Philosophy

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Orbital Dying Watching the Crucifixion from God's Point of View

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Abstract A small drawing made by Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591) shows the Crucifixion in a rare, if not unique, view from above. Opening with a closer look at the restoration report as well as the iconographic reception of the drawing within later images, the following paper seeks to bring out the drawing's triangular constellation of subject, image and others in regard of the intertwined dynamics of individuality, positioning and image-making. The diagonal perspective onto the Passion speaks from a dis-placed subjectivity in face of the image and by the example of the author's own practice of drawing, a possible understanding of this rare point of view shall be gained.

Keywords Crucifixion. John of the Cross. Drawing. Bird's-eye View. Orbit. Altar. Artist. Audience.

Summary 1 Searching for the Author's Traces and Position. – 2 The Cloud and the Crowd. – 3 Several Bystanders... – 4 ... and Two Idiots. – 5 The Overview.

If only, on your silvered-over faces,
You would suddenly form
The eyes I have desired,
That I bear sketched deep within my heart.

Withdraw them, Beloved,
I am taking flight!

(John of the Cross, *The Spiritual Canticle (CB)*, 12-13)

1 Searching for the Author's Traces and Position

In 1968, the restorer Vicente Viñas Torner was asked by Father Juan Bosco of the Discalced Carmelite Order to take care of a tiny drawing that was made between 1574 and 1577 by the Spanish mystic and Doctor of the Church, Saint John of the Cross [fig. 1].¹ Father Juan Bosco was urged to search for help by the drawing's alarming state of disintegration: about half of it was already covered with black stains that carried away the graphic image into a blurring darkness.²

Viñas Torner could stop the process of blackening and liberate the drawing from the stains. Once again, the small paper was saved from vanishing by caretakers, long time after it had left its creator's hands. Before it was inserted into the monstrance during the first decades of the seventeenth century, there must have been not much left of it but a tiny shred. Back then, it was showing just a fragmented rest of a body as well as a geometrical construction behind it [fig. 2]. Nothing was left but two arms, one hand, some drops of fluid in the moment of falling, and one nail, connecting the left hand with the constructive element in the back. Of course, this must have been the Crucifixion of Christ.

As immediate as we can recognise these few elements in their iconographic tradition as Crucifixion, the way we see them - the uniqueness of the perspective in which we see them in this version drawn by John of the Cross - stands in contrast to the conventional representation of the Passion. Because conventionally, we are standing right in front of the cross, facing and mirroring the fixed body.³

To use the orbital sphere as a (non-)localisation of the mind within the process of imagination is a metaphor I gained from the artistic work of Sophie Lindner, to whom I am thankful for this 'orientation'.

1 No certain title of the drawing has become established within the field of research. From *La Vision de Jésus Crucifié* (Florissoone 1956) over *Le Christ en Croix* (Oliver, Gelabert 2016) to *Drawing of the Crucified Christ* (Kavanaugh, Rodriguez 2017), several variations can be found.

2 All following details concerning the material aspects of the drawing were taken from Torners restoration report. See Torner 2015.

3 With art historian Daniela Bohde we can make out spacial variations of the frontal perspective onto the cross in southern German art from 1500 to 1530. By rotating the cross within the image, the onlooker was set into "dialogische [...] Kreuzigungen" (di-

But now, way above the cross, we observe the martyr as if we see it with the eyes – God? Or is the drawing just the outcome of an artistic practice by a spiritual who found a small crucifix lying on a table next to him a worthy subject (Oliver, Gelabert 2016)? The speculation about the draftsman's original intention will not come to an end, not to ask if there ever had been one clear and verbalisable intention that lead him.

Viñas Torner found out that during a first restoration in the seventeenth century an authority unknown did not just add new lines to the image by bringing back most of the body of Christ; also the remaining original lines were redrawn by this unknown restorer, covering the last traces of the original hand of Saint John of the Cross and in consequence, making the drawing a graphic palimpsest. This first restorer's will to save the drawing from decay was stronger than his skills, according to Viñas Torner, and therefore causing the blackening over the centuries. Nevertheless, all these caretakers found the small drawing of high value, not only because his creator was a saint. It is the drawings perspective, facing every spectator with the same question: 'with whose eyes am I looking at the Crucifixion and why should I actually put myself into this elevated position?'

Far away from even touching this blasphemous tendency of the drawing's perspective as an apotheosis of the spectator by putting him or her into the position of God, the visual comments on the genesis of this artwork concentrate on the spatial circumstances under which the drawing was made.⁴

One of the first images trying to explain the genesis of the drawing is accompanying the description of the vision within the hagiography written by Jerónimo de San José in 1641. According to Jerónimo (1993, 252-5), the image of the crucified as seen from above was a visionary appearance John of the Cross received while contemplating about the suffering of Jesus. Only afterwards, the Saint grabbed a pen to capture what he had first seen with the eyes of his soul. Nevertheless, when Jerónimo describes the perspective of the drawing, he talks about the Saint having seen the crucifix in a way as if he had been sitting on one of the tribunes which were common in the churches at those times, located next to the main altar.

alogical crucifixions) that confronted the onlooker with his own role of watching the scene (Bohde 2014, 86). Within drawings from Martin Schongauer, Albrecht Dürer or Hans Baldung, the alignment of the cross connects the geometrical composition with a symbolical meaning, moreover, a moral message: "So ist man kein neutraler Zuschauer mehr, sondern gezwungen, über die eigene Position und das eigene Verhältnis zu Christus nachzudenken" (86) (Thus, one is no longer a neutral spectator, but forced to reflect on one's own position and relation to Christ).

⁴ For a comprehensive collection of the reception of the drawing within other images, see Florisoone 1975, 60-77; 1956, 191-7.



Figure 1 John of the Cross, drawing of the Crucified Christ. 1574-77. Ink on Paper, 6.4 × 5.1 cm. Ávila, Museo del Monasterio de la Encarnación. © Photograph by the Author

When visualising this explanation within the publication of the first hagiography, the engraver Herman Panneels comes to a twofold solution showing the origin of the drawing as a visionary imagination as well as a real observation within the ecclesiastical building – even though the inner room of the church he had depicted was of a highly schematic outlook [fig. 3]. The angle in which the Crucifixion was drawn by John of the Cross forced both Jerónimo as well as his engraver Panneels to speculate about the spatial position in which the vision could have been optically received even though it was declared to be non-optical but visionary.

2 The Cloud and the Crowd

Herman Panneels shows us an image that is carrying several layers, or rather, it is opening several pictorial spaces. Each of them cuts open the one that it appears in and thereby redefines the status of its own ontological position within the bigger picture. None of the parts can be called a layer in the sense of a flat insertion, as their in-



Figure 2
Scheme accompanying
the restoration report
by Vicente Viñas Torner (2015)
to outline the remaining
original part of the drawing

volvement within the whole image is that of a door opener for another spatial setting and each one influences the meaning of the other parts regarding the distinction not just between inner and outer imagery, but also between what we see and what John of the Cross sees.

The three-dimensional interior of the room lays out a grounding 'reality' from which the cloud-framed vision is distinguished, as Ganz (2008, 18) defines the "Modell negativer Analogie" (model of negative analogy) between reality and vision within the image.⁵ The clouds' moving vagueness marks the threshold between the linear perspective of the ecclesiastical room on the outside and the immeasurable depth of paper-coloured ground on the inside of the visionary field. In symbolically functioning as a purified ground where the crucifix can appear, the blanc surface of the paper within the clouds con-

5 An English translation of Ganz (2008) is announced as *Spaces of Revelation. Visions in Medieval Art*, Turnhout: Brepols, 2021 (Studies in the Visual Culture of the Middle Ages). In his description of methods depicting visionary experience, Ganz also refers to Stoichita 1997.



Figure 3 Herman Panneels, 1641. Graving. First published in Jerónimo de San José, 1641. Taken from the 1993 edition

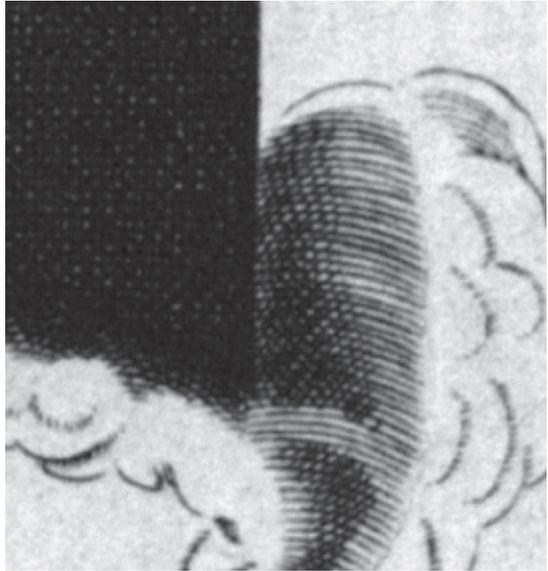


Figure 4 Herman Panneels, 1641. Detail

trasts the measurable depth of the 'real' space due to its irrational void. Nevertheless, the 'reality' of the depicted church room - which is seen almost exclusively on the left side of the graving - is threatened by several aspects.

John of the Cross receives the vision from within a darkness that immerses him in another irrational depth, as if the bright field of his vision needs to correlate with a dark background of nothingness. We, too, encounter this darkness at the end of the ecclesiastical room, the vanishing point itself seems to have vanished into it, in this also unsettling our impression of seeing a 'real' space. The two dark and two bright areas each seem to provide the possibility of creating a grey-scaled visual figure formed by graphic lines, but also they stand for its dissolution. Within the clouds, this *Gratwanderung* between dark and light takes place [fig. 4].⁶

Panneels needs to depict the Crucifixion two times, its status as one image seen twice gives a hint at the consequence in which one

⁶ Here, the german *Gratwanderung* connects the metaphorical meaning of wandering along a mountain ridge (*Grat*) in the sense of a balancing act with the burr (*Grat*) that is being created alongside linear carvings in a metal plate.

image causes the other as soon as the perspectives and therefore the individual positions from where it is seen, differ in time and/or space. This is because we see John of the Cross receiving the appearance and the appearance as how he sees it simultaneously. It confuses identities and positions in face of the image and interchanges our viewpoints, so that we see the Saint from the outside while receiving the vision and we see him also from the inside (that is, we take over his view). The doubled Crucifixion within Panneels' graving involuntarily comments on the fact that the prototype, as any kind of original image to be traced back to, is untraceable.

But whereas the small crucifix situated on the altar is a visionary appearance within the pictorial space of the church room and therefore an image inside an image, the appearance of the big crucifix is threatening the whole picture by displacing the three-dimensional interior with pure void. The small crucifix cuts a circle into the 'real' space of the ecclesiastical setting, the big one is about to push away all of it, as the clouds spread towards us, crawling along the tiles on the floor.⁷

Ready to receive the approaching vision, the Saint is standing behind the window that gives view to the theatrical space of the church. Furthermore, this window cuts open the integrity of his own identity as it is held together by the sequence of the letters that figurate his name, the name that makes him an individual subject.

We can see "IOANN [] ES", as it is written onto the wall and opened up by the squared hole of the window, allowing an exchange between inside and outside. This self-opening of the individual name gives access to the sacred area, possibly identifying the church room with the inside of John of the Cross and inverting the ecclesiastical space into the interior of his soul to prepare it for the meeting of Christ and soul alone.⁸ On one hand, the balustrade separates our area from the Saint's and makes us an audience that is attending this moment of intimate revelation as witnesses. On the other hand, we are overwhelmed by the approaching vision on the right side, getting involved into the moment of visionary appearance. It raises the question whether the space we see here is public or intimate, whether the crucified appears to John of the Cross alone or if he appears to all of us.

7 The pun of 'the cloud and the crowd' refers to a printed dialogue between Catherine Keller and Richard Kearney. The cloud as a paradox apophatic appearance of God to the individual has an infinite number of witnesses, as Keller and Kearney emphasize. Countless narrations of experiences follow the ever-shaping figures of that cloud. With Nicolas of Cusa, Keller and Kearney see the chance to turn apophatic theology into politics that try to bridge the gaps between different positions, making the individual experience of something unsayable and incommunicable the basis for a tolerant exchange between different perspectives. See Kearney 2019, 98.

8 If we read the ecclesiastical room as the inside of John of the Cross, it fits his own idea of the self "to become an altar for the offering of a sacrifice" when "[t]he soul will be clothed in a new understanding of God in God" (Kavanaugh, Rodriguez 2017, 129).

As his hands are raised in front of the chest in a gesture of pray and receptivity, they wait to fulfil their capability to draw what the mind was seeing the very moment and they are willing to share what only the eyes of John of the Cross had seen. His hands stand in severe contrast to the fixed hands of the Crucified, nailed onto the wooden bar and incapable of any further action.

There is no sign of a pen in the hands of the Saint and so we can say, Panneels was following Jerónimo's explanation that the vision was drawn onto paper after the reception of the vision. Still, there is a hypothetical space in which we see John of the Cross and even though he might not have needed to sit on the tribune of a real church, two aspects lead Jerónimo to at least compare the perspective with the one from a gallery situated on the side of the altar.

On the one hand, it is hard to imagine oneself being able to draw this axonometric perspective of the cross without a real view on it. On the other side, this view might have reminded Jerónimo of the position that was reserved for spiritual or secular leaders who were used to sit above the crowd, in a position different to where the common people were situated - namely, underneath and in front of the cross.

3 Several Bystanders...

The difference between the outstanding elevated position of one individual having a view that is not the one of the people is, as mentioned above, already outlined within the hagiography of Jerónimo de San José:

Y para que así le viese, es fácil considerar y creer estaría el sirvo de Dios en alguna ventana o tribuna, que en las iglesias de conventos suele haber al lado del altar mayor, en medio del cual se considera haberle aparecido, vuelto derechamente al pueblo. (Jerónimo [1641] 1993, 255)

And because we see him [the Crucified] that way, it is easy to consider and to believe that the servant of God [John of the Cross] would be in some window or tribune, which in the churches of convents is usually located next to the main altar, in the middle of which it [the vision] is considered to have appeared to him, turned straight to the people.⁹

This small note about the cross being "turned straight to the people" reveals the hierarchy giving to understand that by the look one obtains in the Saint's drawing, it is 'me up here on the tribune and

⁹ If not indicated otherwise, all translations are by the Author.

down there is not just the Crucified, but also the assumed crowd of onlookers standing frontally to the cross'. The confrontation of the individual look with the common look is marking the outstanding position of the mystics within their institution, the church, or generally speaking, the question of how to deal with individual experience in the face of conventionalised language.

Michel de Certeau draws attention to the fact that John of the Cross, as other mystics, found himself within a position of social and ethnical discrimination, striving for new ways on old streets in a time of dramatic changes within the Christian church and within European society in general (de Certeau 1992, 17-26).

Staying inside of an overcome clerical and theological language building, the mystics did not leave the Christian community but searched for new combinations of words to express their religious experiences – always on the edge to heresy.

[Their] 'manners of speaking' relate the struggle of the mystics to language. More precisely, they are traces left by that struggle, like the stones Jacob blessed and left near Yabboq after his night of wrestling with the angel. (de Certeau 1992, 114)

Teresa of Ávila, a close companion of John of the Cross and the leading force behind the reformative process within the Carmelite order, did so by writing in a highly personal and detailed manner about her visions, positioning her subjective experience as a fortress against the threat of supervision by the inquisition. John of the Cross, instead, straddles the sayable by a poetic oeuvre in which the *unio mystica* as the wedding of the soul with God is allegorically hidden within radical secular love songs of an unbearable eroticism, even violence and self-sacrifice:

O guiding night!
O night more lovely than the dawn!
O night that has united
The Lover with his beloved,
Transforming the beloved in her Lover.

Upon my flowering breast,
Which I kept wholly for him alone,
There he lay sleeping,
And I caressing him
There in a breeze from the fanning cedars.

When the breeze blew from the turret,
As I parted his hair,
It wounded my neck

With its gentle hand,
Suspending all my senses.
(*The Dark Night*, 5-7; Kavanaugh, Rodriguez 2017, 51)

It is the mystic's speech preparing the 'I' as a welcoming ground for God, but not as a subject that is in triumphant possession of itself, but one that is ready to lose itself completely within the dark void of the *nada*, as John of the Cross calls it - to be found by God.

Regarding the writings of Teresa of Ávila, Alois Haas points it out as follows:

Wie keine andere ist die mystische Rede am Ich-Sagen interessiert, da sie einzig es ist, die die Gotteserfahrung zu verbürgen in der Lage ist. Wo Gott sich dem inneren Menschen nähert, ja einigt, da läßt sich die Beweislast für diese Begegnung und Vereinigung mit Gott niemand anderem auflasten: Das Ich muß für seine Innerlichkeit selber einstehen. (Haas 1998, 612)

Like no other, the mystical speech is interested in I-saying, since it is the only one capable of vouching for the experience of God. Where God approaches, even unites, with the inner, the burden of proof for this encounter and unification with God cannot be placed on someone else: the I has to stand in for its inwardness itself.

Spaemann (quoted in Haas 1998, 616) calls this authorised position from where the mystics speak, the "Festungshöhe des Ich" (Fortress height of the I) that is not just elevating the subject into an overview which identifies itself with the position of certainty and authority. It also catapults the self into a sphere of "unbeteiligte[m] Zuschauen" (uninvolved watching).

Banned onto the gallery, this view is the one we obtain observing the Crucified from above. Apart from raising the question of theodicy - 'why is god not interfering in face of the cruelty that takes place?' -, the drawing contains a hidden diagram regarding the triangular constellation of subject (me looking), object (the image, the Crucified) and the yet unseen but assumed bystanders (as we know because of the cross being "turned straight to the people").

The condition of the individual experience as being set apart from any of the others' points of view is inherent to the tiny drawing of the Carmelite. Its constellation can be made more tangible in comparison to a different and more collaborative practice in the face of an image, the one that is instructed by Nicolas of Cusa in his writing *De Visione Dei* from 1463.

Nicolas of Cusa had sent a letter to the monks of the Tegernsee as well as a painted icon showing the Son of God. The monks wished to be guided through Cusanus' mystical theology, but instead of giving them

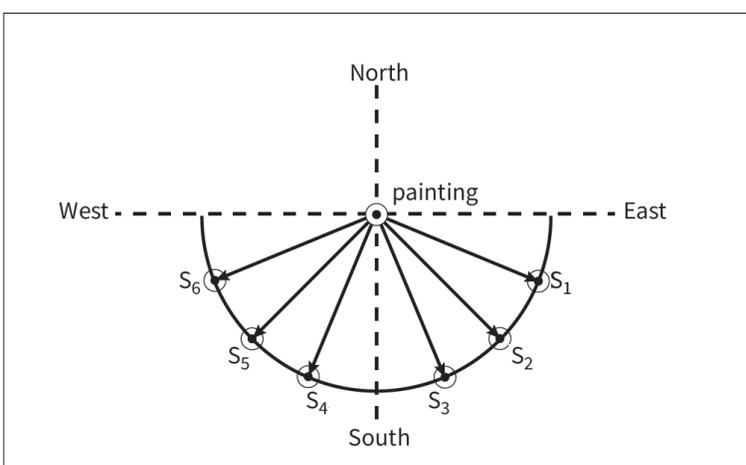


Figure 5 The scene: a stratification of spaces and a relation of positions. Diagram taken from Certeau 2015, 42

a written explanation alone, he directs them to experience a paradox phenomenon in front of the painted image. They should hang the icon onto the wall and set themselves up in a semicircle in front of it [fig. 5].

Now, each of them realises that his own look meets the one of the painted Christ and even when he moves from east to west in front of the image, the look of Christ is following him. As if this were not enough of a wondrous phenomenon, Cusanus goes further by telling the monks to share their experience with one another. In consequence follows what de Certeau (2015, 46) calls “[t]he social Space of the Look: Believing”.

It is not just the look of the painted face following the own individual look that is leading to astonishment. Furthermore, Cusanus points out what the brothers can reveal to each other – that the icon is looking at each one of them individually and at all of them at the same time. This paradox shall stand for the way of looking which cannot be understood and which is only reserved to God – to see everything at once. As de Certeau emphasises, the only way for the monks to get a glimpse into this paradox enlightenment is to believe each other what they experienced individually:

This passage is accomplished first by a transposition of the not-knowing/known relation to a relation between an initial astonishment (“I don’t believe my eyes about it”) and a final assent (“I believe what the other says about it”).

[...] A *will* marks the threshold of an access to a regimen of operations that is other, achieved by several and no longer alone: it makes a qualitative change of space, by allowing the introduction of a social field into the visual one. (de Certeau 2015, 48)

The will to know bridges the unbridgeable gap between two or more individual positions according to de Certeau, as it was practiced with Nicolas of Cusa's spiritual guidance as an exercise in front of the image. Therefore, the individual experience of a paradox and godly revelation needed a community of ones willing to believe each other about what they see. But this is just one possible outcome of the diagrammatic structure that is set up in face of the image.

4 ... and Two Idiots

Changing from agreement to disagreement, from the will to believe each other to neglecting communication or even setting up a false truth, two further examples shall illustrate the intertwined dynamics between the solitary perspective on one side, as it is connected - for better or worse - to a community of views bundled into one, on the other side.

First, there is *The Fat Woodworker*, written by Antonio Manetti in the late fifteenth century. Taking place in Florence in 1409, the story tells us how the world of Manetto (being called the 'Fat Woodworker' and not to be confused with the story's author Manetti) is being turned upside down from one day to another. In a meticulous plan forming some kind of *Truman Show* of the Renaissance, Filippo Brunelleschi drafts a set up against Manetto in which several members of the local society play the role of convincing Manetto of not being himself anymore, but someone else called Matteo. After talking to his stolen self through the closed door of his own (former) house, he begins striving through the city, constantly meeting people who call him Matteo and not Manetto. Little by little and during several conversations, the tricked loses faith in his former identity, standing completely confused on the Piazza San Giovanni and saying:

Jetzt bleibe ich so lange hier stehen, bis jemand kommt und mir sagt, wer ich bin. (Manetti 1993, 17)

Now I'll stand here until someone comes and tells me who I am.

Encounter after encounter, Manetto is slowly accepting his new identity as Matteo, the line between dream and reality was redrawn and blurred by the community of tricksters. It is of high significance that the mastermind of the story is Filippo Brunelleschi. It is as if the trick that he is playing to Manetto is following the same rules as his invention of the linear perspective - to optically distort all objects that are surrounding the subject into a view that is suiting his or her first-person position, giving an impression of a 'right' angle. In consequence, all elements are fitting his or her perspective, but they are also open to a fictional construction (Bach 2009).

After the resolution of the trick, Manetto could not stand staying in Florence, because this place had become the stage of his embarrassing metamorphosis. It was not just a transformation from one individuality into another, rather still he got stuck within the Neverland between two individualities, because: what if the resolution was just a trick again?

Leaving the city in a rushing manner, he only comes back for a visit now and then. During those visits, he has the chance to gradually learn about how he has been tricked, realising that most of it took place "im Kopf des Dicken" (in the head of the Fat) (Manetti 1993, 75). He had been fooled.

Another 'idiot' stands central within the second example - another story which speaks from a "Madness in the crowd" (de Certeau 1992, 31). Once again, it was Michel de Certeau who pointed out the extraordinary constellation of one individual standing crosswise to a community, when he tells us about *The Idiot Woman*, a story coming to us from the fourth century.¹⁰

Being the "sponge of the monastery" (33), the unnamed idiot woman lived within, but equally at the edge of the community of 400 sisters, being treated badly but bearing everything "without murmuring" (33). The story gets rolling when an angel appears to the ascetic Saint Piteroum, who lives solely on a mountain. The angel says, if he thinks of himself being a righteous believer, this idiot woman in the monastery is living way more in a godly manner than he does:

She is better than you. Contending with that crowd, she has never turned her heart from God, whereas you, who stay here, in thought you wander in through the cities. (33)

Piteroum descends from his elevated position both physically and symbolically, when he goes to the monastery and demands to see the woman. Then, he falls at her feet asking her to bless him, and therefore, evoking the astonishment of all the others. In return, she is mirroring his act by falling on her feet the same way, asking him for blessing. Now, the sisters aside excuse for the idiots behaviour, but Piteroum encounters:

You are the ones who are the idiots [...], for she is for me and for you our mother. (33)

After he says this, all the sisters fall on their feet themselves, confessing whatever degrading things they have done to the idiot woman. From that moment on, the community admired the woman, but,

¹⁰ De Certeau (1992) translated the story himself on the basis of the text by Butler (1904).

in consequence, makes her leave the monastery as she could not bear this admiration:

Where she went, where she hid herself, how she ended her days,
no one has found out. (33)

The woman not just left the community, she dissolved into nowhere for them and only she knows, how her story ends.

These two stories figure the vanishing points of the perspective constellation which is evoked by what we see in John of the Cross' Crucifixion. It is the moving and vivid line between the individual perspective that is solely standing aside the others'. Power and powerlessness of the outstanding position on the balcony of the world are shown as two sides of a coin that is easily being flipped around. The Archimedean point of a transcendent subject is enthroned as an outstanding perspective, but nevertheless, it is always threatened of getting lost in the void of the unbound overview, above the (common) ground.

5 The Overview

When John of the Cross drew his tiny but outstanding image in Ávila during the 1570s, not far from him, halfway to Madrid in the middle of nowhere, the Escorial was built as a centre of the world-spanning Empire of Philip II. As Christoph Asendorf puts it, the Escorial stands for

eine neuartige, nämlich bürokratische Form von Herrschaft, ausgeübt von einem nun nicht mehr reisenden Herrscher. (Asendorf 2017, 175)

a new, namely bureaucratic form of reign, exercised by a ruler who was now no longer travelling.

Merging secular and spiritual architecture within the Escorial, Philip II was able to see the altar of the central basilica from his bedroom, looking through a window - and because the Escorial was the central point bundling all the information coming from a territory mostly ever unseen to his Emperor, there was no need for Philip to travel the globe (Asendorf 2017, 175). His reign was made possible by what Latour calls the "immutable mobiles" as a system of "paperwork" (1986, 25) that made (visual) information both "optically consistent" (7) and movable anywhere.

The mobilisation of the seen was possible by the servitude of its medium, the flatness of the carrier. By flattening the world into two dimensions, the onlooker is put into a bird's-eye view automatical-

ly. Sybille Krämer calls this process central to the idea of *Graphism*, following the anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan:

Ein durch Begrenzung handlicher, oftmals auch handhabbarer und zumeist rechteckiger Raum wird erzeugt, den wir kraft seiner Verflachung – jedenfalls tendenziell – vollständig überblicken und gegebenenfalls überarbeiten können. Flächigkeit versetzt in eine Vogelflugperspektive, die das, was gezeigt wird, im Überblick darbietet. [...]

Flächigkeit evoziert den Eindruck von Sichtbarkeit, Kontrolle und Beherrschung dessen, was sich darauf zeigt; sie verwandelt den Leser und Betrachter – ein Stück weit – in externe Beobachter. (Krämer 2016, 16)

Through limitation, a rectangular space is created that is handy, often also manageable, a space that we can – at least in tendency – completely survey by virtue of its flattening and, if necessary, revise. Flatness puts into a bird's-eye view, which offers an overview of what is presented. [...]

Flatness evokes the impression of visibility, control, and mastery of what is shown on it; it transforms the reader and viewer – to some extent – into external observers.

The intelligible shift of treating a surface as if it had no depth catapults the image-maker into a space outside, giving him or her the position from where the world can be lifted out of its hinges. But the price for this position is high, replacing act with passive observation. Right here I stand, by looking onto the drawing of Saint John of the Cross, realising with God's eye that "both despair and triumph are inherent in the same event" (Arendt [1958] 2018, 262).

While creating the image, we turn our eyes away from the world – in order to look onto the flat surface, a surface that is the ground for the creation of absence.¹¹ It is not just the look of Saint John's drawing that is flying above the Crucified in an orbital and uninvolved watching, it is every look onto an image that sets us outside the world and "instead of nature or the universe [...] man encounters only himself" (261).

11 It is a small but severe shift to understand the visual presentation of a thing or a person not such much in the sense of making it present to us, but emphasising its absence. As we see the depicted thing or person, we realise it is not present at this very moment.

In this sense, Blümle and von der Heiden (2005, 13) outline Jacques Lacan's understanding of what an image does, rather than imitating or representing. With the example of a "geheime Geometrie" (hidden geometry) (13) underlying a painting of Georges Rouault – in which a group of figures is arranged in a circle around an empty centre – Lacan comes to the conclusion that this empty centre stands for the absence that is created by an image in general.

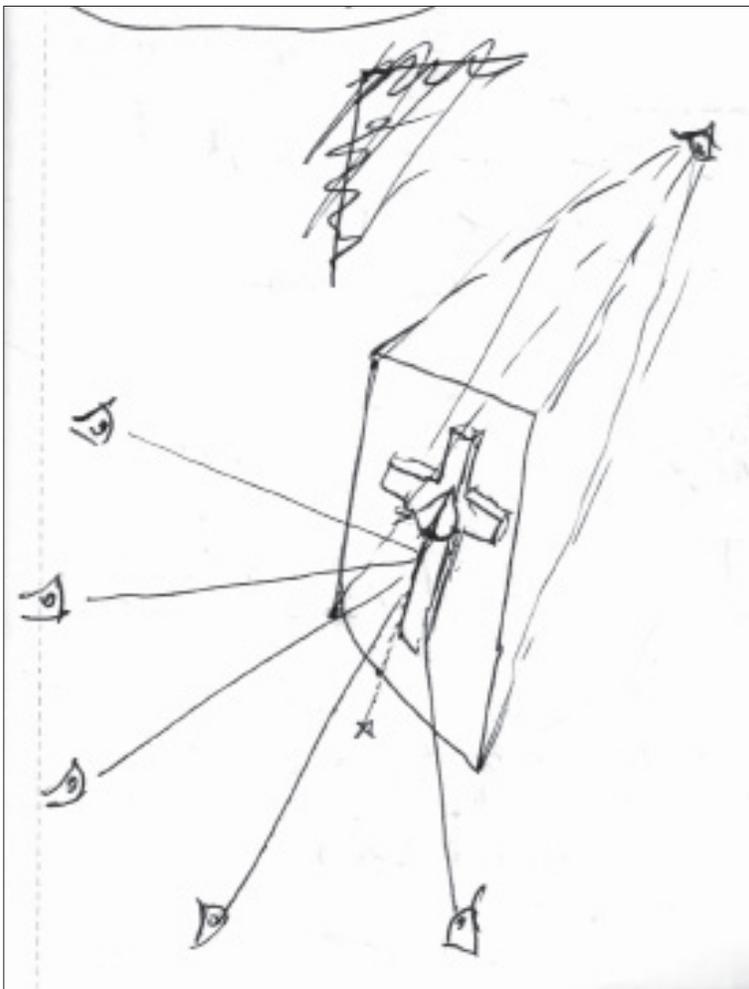


Figure 6 Sketch of the drawing's inherent constellation. 2022. © The Author

Within the constellation of this tiny work of art, the participants form a triangle of abandonment – no look meets the other anymore [fig. 6]. There is the Crucified, lost and forgotten by God, becoming an image by being killed or being killed by becoming an image. There is the crowd in which each individual is optically de-individualised, as Lambert Wiesing (2009, 218) points it out, because “[d]ie Zuschauer sitzen letztlich immer im selben Boot” (the viewers are always in the same boat in the end). None of them has an outstanding position differing from the others’ and each one loses himself or herself within a mass in which all share the same visual impression. But what about the third part, the flying eye, the idle God?

Even though the view from above can easily comment on a subjectivity that seeks to be a sovereign wholeness and loses itself in distance, the drawing seems to close itself from being read in a way that makes any further sense. What can it say to us? It stopped talking, just like the Crucified. And like every image it leaves us in the critical state of trying to give meaning to it, but there is none – we only see the act of image making itself in all its violence.¹²

Within the noise of the market hustle in which people and their images interact, change positions and get mixed up [fig. 7], the Carmelite’s drawing infuses a silence that gives way to the fear like the one of an astronaut floating away into space, hearing nothing but the own breath. John of the Cross opens a vacuum inside and around each individual onlooker as an almighty powerlessness of the *homo pictor*, showing that

both the worst fear and the most presumptuous hope of human speculation, the ancient fear that our senses, our very organs for the reception of reality, might betray us, and the Archimedean wish for a point outside the earth from which to unhinge the world, could only come true together, as though the wish would be granted only provided that we lost reality and the fear was to be consummated only if compensated by the acquisition of supramundane powers. (Arendt [1958] 2018, 262)

In this sense, Leon Battista Alberti’s emblem of the flying eye as “*quasi deus*” (Alberti quoted in Belting 2008, 231) was set out on the way to lift the modern subject into a godlike position when the draftsman is equipped with the power to unveil and to create.¹³ Anything

12 For a further understanding of the intertwined dynamics of image making and violence, see Kappeler 1988.

13 With Belting (2008, 230), we can say more precisely that the flying eye is not so much the godlike overview that sees everything at once, but the earthly application of the will to do so – a look that wants to see everything and therefore flies and races in all directions.



Figure 7 Crucifixion and Descent from the Cross as seen at the Semana Santa in Medina de Rioseco, Valladolid. Image taken from Martinez et al. (2003, 150). © F.A. Novo Pérez

yet hidden shall be discovered, anything imaginable shall be visualised and the creator will be astonished by the power of his own possibility to make visible. But with Hannah Arendt ([1958] 2018, 248-84) we can point out that the line between discovery and production is blurred, and instead of the world, we discover our images and encounter ourselves.

Apart from the idea of the draftsman or draftswoman being a visionary or creator, it is also possible to think of him or her not seeing, but blind - and the linear perspective of a focused forthcoming going over into a steadily tactile screening of the own ability to communicate both visually and scriptually.¹⁴ Within *Graphism* “als ges-

14 The idea of describing the drawer as a blind was adopted from Derrida 1997, 49. In the moment, when the pen touches the surface of the paper, the “Einschreibung des Einschreibbaren” (Inscription of the inscribable) is invisible to the drawer and therefore “muß der Strich in der Nacht vorhergehen” (the stroke must precede in the night).

tische Lösung des Problems der Menschwerdung" (as the gestural solution of the problem of *Menschwerdung*), a trace of scribbling enfolds within "einer paradoxen Parallelität von übermächtiger Kraft und wirkmächtigem Zeichen" (a paradoxical parallelism of overpowering force and powerful sign) (Driesen 2016, 322).¹⁵ This powerful sign speaks from our ability to make images, to name, to grasp and to understand. As the overpowering force, our signs and images return to us. A practice of drawing that tries to entangle these two opponents – the human need for naming on one side and this need's potential violence on the other side – has to lead the parallelism of both forces into a crossing, visually expressing an endless dialogue: 'It is. It is not.' [figs 8-10].

The balancing scribble traces back to a point before our abilities to leave a mark, to make an image and to write letters depart from one another. The scribbling, therefore, gives space to a state in which we are just about to draw a distinction, but no thing appears yet. It acknowledges the human need for making images but is aware of the consequences.

Like the mystics, the drawer could be someone who

cannot stop walking and, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is *not that*. (de Certeau 1992, 299)

Within the narcissistic arena, he or she therefore resembles God by gaining self awareness through leaving a mark, through naming or image-making, but loses the controlling power which was postulated in the beginning of the drawing process and loses himself or herself right away [fig. 11]. It is this entanglement of self awareness and powerlessness which we are facing when we look at John of the Cross' drawing. If there is any resemblance between God and a human being, it is this unstoppable disintegration in face of the depicted world. The look of the absent God above the Crucifixion equals the look of the absent human above the two-dimensional ground of visualization – leaving nothing but an eye/'I'.

The creation of images drags behind itself the trace of a visual stuttering just like the mystics' paradox speech about what is unnamable and incommunicable, a speech that sets in with the authority of the 'I' and loses itself in search for the beloved. Just as if the invisibility of the other leads to my own. When the orbital look of the

¹⁵ The translation of *Menschwerdung* into 'incarnation' would be too one-dimensionally theological, but the one into 'anthropogenesis' cannot take into account a certain impossibility of self description of the human within the scientific language. *Menschwerdung* seems to stay in between these two poles as 'being/becoming human'.

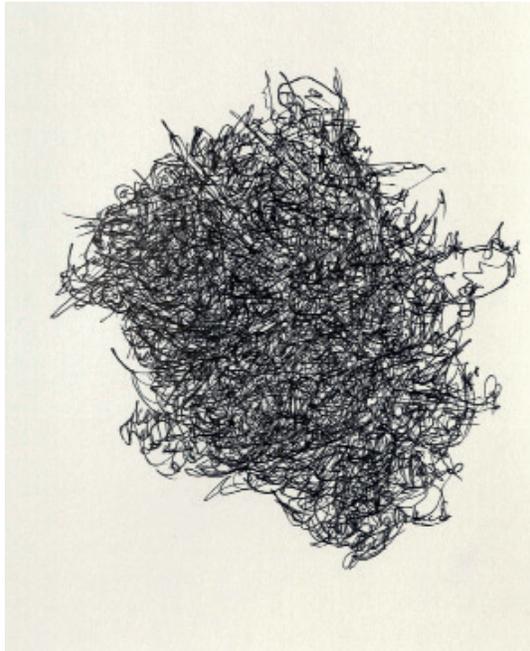


Figure 8
A Graphical Stuttering.
Detail of an unfinished
drawing. 2022 © The Author

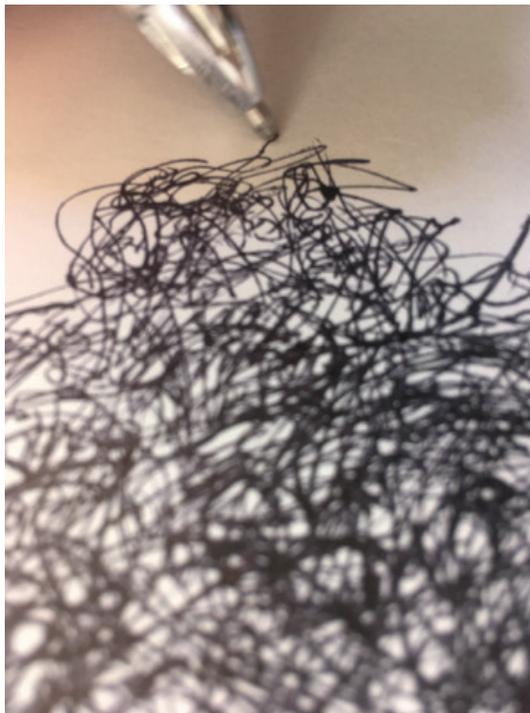


Figure 9
*The Stroke Must Precede
in the Night.* Detail.
© The Author

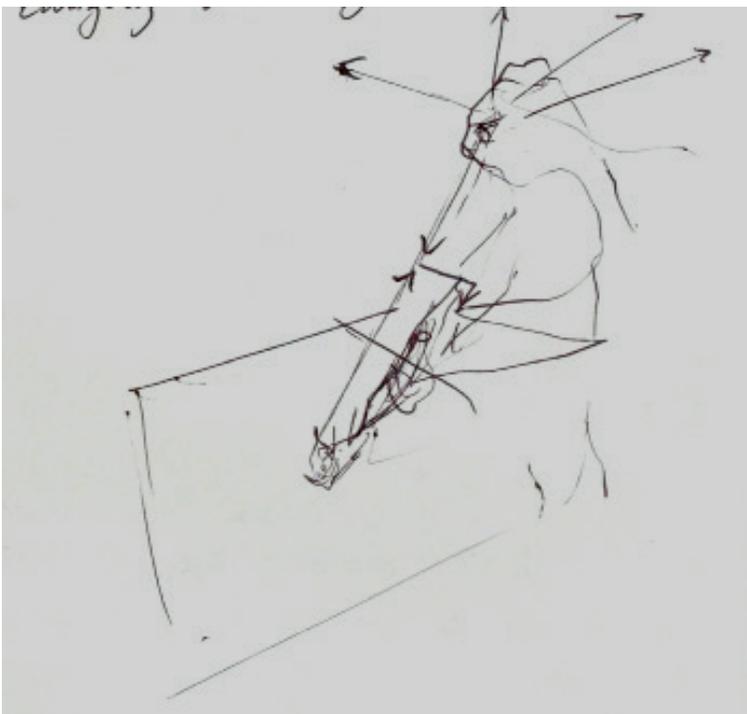
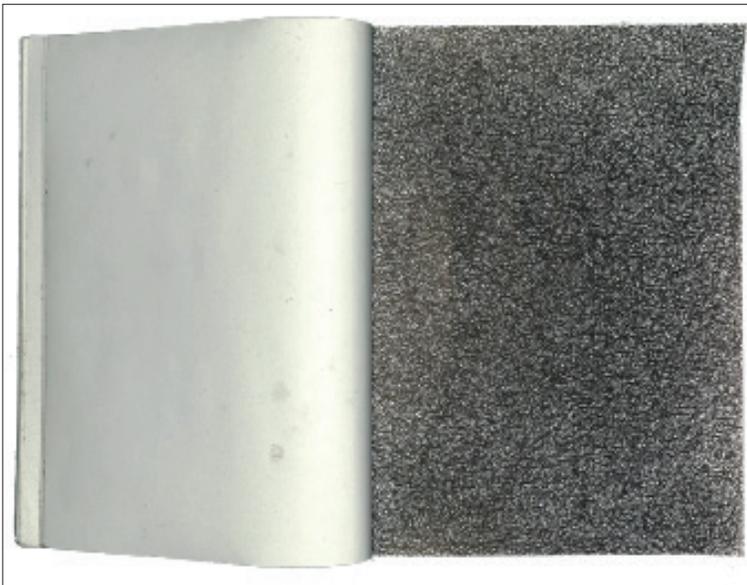


Figure 10 Untitled drawing of an ongoing series of scribbles. Since 2018. © The Author

Figure 11 *It is. It is not. I am. I am not.* Sketch to visualise the critical state of drawing. 2022. © The Author

drawing sets me outside the world, then I am the one who is being searched for. Just like the idiot woman. So where did she go and how does her story end?

Es begann mit den Namen – sie allein sind übrig geblieben. Es ging weiter mit den Bildern, die statt der Dinge persistieren. Man fertigte Karten der Erden an, die als *mental maps* keinen Widerstand dulden können. Schließlich verbindet sich das Ingesamt der Zeichen zu einem Orbit, der eine restlose Gültigkeit beansprucht – und daran scheitert. Das symbolische Universum der Namen, Bilder und Muster bricht durch die erklärte Allmacht der Gedanken ein. (Kamper 1996, 39)

It started with the names – they alone are left. It went on with the images which persist instead of the things. Maps of the earth were made which, as *mental maps*, cannot tolerate any resistance. Finally, the total of signs combine into an orbit which claims a rest- less validity – and fails at it. The symbolic universe of names, im- ages and patterns breaks through the declared omnipotence of the thoughts.

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