

ON ANTOINE RENARD'S COSMIC CRIME SCENES

by Philipp Kleinmichel

Like many other artists of his generation, Antoine Renard confronts the viewer with a number of everyday life objects such as screens, liquids and cables, or signs and images, which range from corporate brandings to pornographic images. Yet, Renard selects, alters and arranges these things not, as one could expect, in order to criticize or affirm the reality of the internet, digital technology or commodity culture from which they were taken.

The shirts of famous soccer clubs (*Fly Emirates*, 2016), sneakers (*New Balance*, 2016), energy drink cans (*Black Dance*, 2016), that one associates with the seductive spectacle of the contemporary consumer world and life in Western civilization, are burned, frozen, or aluminum coated. In other instances one finds dissected parts of cars, machines (*BraveNewWorld study 2*, 2016), and traffic signs (*Perfect nightmare (tryptic)*, 2016), which similarly indicate a larger framework of a technologically rationalized world, albeit one which has experienced a violent event that seems to indicate its apocalyptic collapse. Some of these objects show carvings (*Chiroptophobia study 1 (Diaemus youngi)*, 2016) and, hence, traces of meaningful expressions as if they were sci-fi memorials for an extinguished human species, not unlike the way in which older cave paintings refer to the expressions of a human civilization that has long since vanished.

It is in fact this absence of human life that seems to be the common theme of Renard's sceneries. His objects certainly appear as referents of our contemporary world, but the

artificially produced visual effects of decay, destruction, and decrease make them at the same time visible as media, in which a violent force has left its significant traces. They are presented as forensic clues of a fictitious crime scene, although not of any sort of crime but, rather, to a crime of cosmic scale, a crime that seems to have led to the disappearance of human life and civilization. It is in this regard that the viewer who enters Renard's scenes will always find him or herself in a rather uncomfortable position. For if the human species has already vanished due to the imprint of a simulated violence of such scale, Renard forces his viewers to perceive one's own absence or, in other words, to imagine life after the possible empirical death of humanity. But how than is it possible to perceive one's own absence? Arguably, only from a transcendental position, in which one is no longer from this world, not any longer of flesh and blood, but pure face and witness without organs.

The world enforces itself on us and Renard is forcing the viewer to face the material traces and imprints of this violence. He presents his objects as a scenery that stages the world beyond its appearance in the sign on the digital screen and it stages it as an anarchic, violent and sovereign world, which seems to have forced its own will upon human culture and its technological frameworks as we know it. Thus forcing viewers to anticipate the end of human existence, the world, from this cosmic and transcendental perspective, appears as purified and cleansed, it appears as life in its ideality. Ideally, life can namely be described in biological





Fly Emirate, 2016 (p. 209) Unreal Engine 2 (E day), 2016 (opposite page) All images Courtesy: the artist

terms as a complex and vital meta-organism consisting of infinite connections. Even if human life, culture and civilization have disappeared, biological life as such will continue not unlike the plants and mud, the fire and mineralization in Renard's installations. In *E2M4 Deimos Lab* (2014), for example, one finds familiar objects of our everyday life covered in mud, dirt and overgrown by plants. Branded clothes and other trivia of our contemporary everyday human life appear to be the remnants of our extinct contemporary world.

The sceneries of Renard certainly depict this idealized anarchic life without origin and human-centered cultural repression, but the artist's play with common tropes, signs and feelings that arrive from contemporary media and discourses indicate interestingly enough that the platonic tradition has an irreducible, and in a certain sense even humorous advantage. The reality of pure biological life can namely only be meaningfully observed and described if there is a second life. And in Renard's crime scenes this second life is present in the form of the transcendental life of the viewer, who is forced to perceive the objects and violent traces from a transcendental perspective, from a standpoint outside of empirical life. This means that the object and the representation of violence is not pure violence, since pure violence would be, as Derrida wrote in *Violence and Metaphysics*, "a relationship between beings without face." The transcendental viewer not only has a face, that faces and thus witnesses this violence, he or she is also able to wonder about its meaning and significance. And insofar as this representation of pure idealized life can only have meaning in the eyes of the viewer, but not in itself, all meaning the viewer can find is the meaning of his or her own possible transcendental position and that is in other, traditional words the human soul. Without it, the scenery would be sense- and meaningless, or, according to Derrida, "pure violence."

Within the long metaphysical tradition, this position has been often identified with the absolute spirit or with God. And it is in this

regard that Baudrillard has, perhaps not accidentally, described a similar situation. In *The Perfect Crime* he claims that, at the end of a general historical process of rationalization, enlightenment and increasing access to information, "it is God (this we cannot hide)" that one will find. "God," Baudrillard states, "is never at the origin, but always at the end. And so we can say that that end is necessarily an unhappy one, and it is as well to leave it hanging." Thus it is the soul of the transcendental viewer, which the traces of the possible violent event that seems to have abolished conscious human life has still left its imprints. Renard's series of seven glass works *Dark Soul* (2016) appear in this regard as the spectral negatives of such violent imprints. The viewer, in other words, faces its own uncanny metaphysical presence as the condition of the possibility that the ideal material and post-metaphysical life still makes sense after all.