

THE FRONTIERS OF VISION AND THE PAINTING OF MOVEMENT

Oded Na'aman

"Movement is a quality of a particular viewing . . ."

Georg Simmel in *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*

Yes, Daniel Lergon is a painter, but first and foremost Lergon is an artist of vision. The surface is not a mere canvas, the color not mere paint. Yes, the work is a painting, but the painting is not a window unto the world; it *is* the world. The light, the color, the surface and texture are not features of the work; they *are* the work. Moreover, the work is not an object; it is an encounter in which the viewer takes an active part. As in the works of minimalists such as Richard Serra or Fred Sandback, you begin by looking at the work as if it were in front of you, only to realize that you are inside it, that you are partaking in its creation. You are completing the work by perceiving it as it communicates with you, reflecting light onto you, changing your vision as well as your sense of what is visible. Lergon's art offers a visual discovery even before it offers an artistic one. It is an intimation of the world—the *natural* world—as we fail to see it, as we cannot possibly see it. As we encounter Lergon's paintings, one piece after the other, it may suddenly dawn upon us: these works are the tip of an iceberg of beauty that exists beyond human perception.

Close the book and look at it. The cover shows us nothing but the color gray and one word, *Eigengrau*, which stands for the shade of gray we see when

we close our eyelids shut. The cover is the first work in this book. It accurately defines the space of Lergon's art. With this one word, *Eigengrau*, we are told from the very start the lesson implicit in all of Lergon's paintings: *close your eyes and see, open them and behold your blindness*. This is neither an abstract philosophical idea nor a hollow saying, but a conviction that drives Lergon's art and appears wherever his works are shown. Negation can be seen; absence can be made concrete. The vastness of that which we cannot possibly perceive is made present to us, and thereby that which we are able to perceive is made all-the-more precious.

Listen to Lergon speak about astrophysics, about the geological, meteorological, and cosmological events and processes that inspire his work, and you will share his stance of fascination and awe. In this world of matter—which, after the big bang, had expanded for 400,000 years before it cooled down sufficiently for light to escape—in this world we are no more than transient drifters, a fleeting breath of existence. Through Lergon's work, we confront the reality of things hitherto unknown to us, things we would have most likely thought impossible or inconceivable. Consider some of the themes of Lergon's past exhibits: the moon's shadow converges in the shape of a cone only to diverge again at its tip to create a counterpoised cone-shaped shadow (*Antumbra*, 2011); a satellite of Saturn, mostly comprised of water and ice, shows the greatest light-dark contrast of a celestial body in the solar system (*Iapetus*, 2010); snow-covered ground conspires with cloud-soaked sky to obliterate the horizon (*Whiteout*, 2011); light produced without generation of heat (*cold fire*, 2008); mass rusting in the oceans caused by the development of photosynthesis (*Rost*, 2012). The visual happenings that captivate Lergon occur when opposites collapse upon each other and new possibilities transpire.

But the works themselves are not illustrations of natural occurrences, nor are they solid, stagnant shapes of matter and light that represent states of nature. The works are primarily instances of movement. Movement in Lergon's work is the manifestation of tension, generated by the contrasts that define each work. For instance, in *Rost*, pulverized iron is "painted" with water; the chemical reaction creates movement, forms, and colors. We watch the movement internal to each work as well as the movement created by the works as they

appear one after the other. At first, one has the impression of observing natural processes through a telescope (or is it a microscope?), processes beyond the reach of human intention. However, gradually a history of movement accumulates, and the viewer begins to recognize the lines, the touch, the brushstrokes, the shapes, and the dynamics of excitement and rest. That which only a moment ago seemed untouched—geological, cosmological, chemical—now strikes the viewer as soulful. The works appear as traces of a child playing in the vastness of time, in the colors of distant stars and the deepest layers of earth. These are paintings, one might imagine, created by an uninhibited toddler who dances at the edges of the universe with peculiar gasses, metals, and liquids. Now, as we come upon another work we recognize it immediately, as if it were a familiar face.

Not only do we recognize the work, but the work seems to recognize us. Greg Carlock writes of a cone extending in both directions from the plane of a Lergon painting, up to and including the spectator. This cone defines the boundaries of what Carlock calls *Eigenraum*, literally translated as: “own space.” The viewer is *addressed* by the painting, as it were, “affected by a battery of sensual and perceptual stimuli.”¹ This private encounter is the full realization of the work, just as a spoken word is realized fully only in being heard and understood. The movement of the viewer in the space before the work, and in a specific moment in time, parallels the movement imbued in the painting itself, the movement of the artist-child, the traces of his instruments and touch. Something grand and universal as the limits of visibility or the beginning of light merges with an intimate, private experience, scarcely utterable. The viewer encounters the artist through the mediation of matter and light in movement.

But what is this movement? It is tempting to assume that a painting can only capture movement by mummifying it: movement is stopped, frozen, only its gesture preserved. This would amount to the representation of movement at the expense of its conservation. But what more can we hope for? How could there be movement in a painting, which lacks the dimension of time?

Georg Simmel argues that one of Rembrandt's greatest achievements was his ability to capture movement in painting without canceling it:

Whereas in classical and, in the narrower sense, stylizing art, the depiction of a movement is achieved via a sort of abstraction in that the viewing of a certain moment is torn out of its prior and concurrent stream of life and crystalizes into a self-sufficient form, with Rembrandt the depicted moment appears to contain the whole living impulse directed toward it; it tells the story of this life course. It is not a part of a psycho-physical movement fixed in time where the totality of this movement—of this internally unfolding event—would exist beyond the artistically shaped being-in-itself. Rather, it makes evident how a represented moment of movement really is the whole movement or, better, is *movement* itself, and not some petrified something or other.²

Simmel's book is an inquiry into the possibility of Rembrandt's accomplishment and its philosophical upshots. Rather than conceive of movement as compounded of successive moments, each moment a state onto itself, Simmel suggests we should understand any given moment as expressing the larger movement in which it is embedded. Movement is to time as geometry is to space: just as geometry structures our understanding of matter in space, so movement structures our understanding of isolated moments in time. To put the point somewhat less abstractly: just as a triangular object expresses an abstract triangle, Rembrandt's paintings express the larger life movement in which the painted moment is embedded.

Just as it is the nature of life to be at every moment there as a *totality*, since its totality is not a mechanical summation of singular moments but a continuous and continuously form-changing flowing, so it is the nature of Rembrandt's movement of expression to let us feel the whole sequence of its moments in a single movement—overcoming its partition into separated sequential moments.³

So little is visible in us at any given instant, and yet we carry with us, in every moment, our whole past as well as our potential future. Compare the painting with the photograph. The camera lens aims to strip the moment of any movement in order to capture all that is visible in it. Then, by putting the frames in order, the result can be used to *reconstruct* movement (*reconstruct* rather than *record* because movement is here constructed of successive states of stillness). By contrast, painting, or at least Rembrandt's painting according to Simmel, has the capacity to make the totality of movement present in one moment. While the camera reduces its object to its visible ingredients, Rembrandt's painting forgoes the minute details of the visible and finds the invisible hidden within it. Here is Simmel, again: "Rembrandt transposes into the fixed uniqueness of the gaze all the movements of the life that led up to it: the formal rhythm, mood, and coloring of fate, as it were, of the vital process."⁴

This is the counterpoint to Walter Benjamin's famous claim (made exactly twenty years *after* Simmel published his book on Rembrandt, in 1916) that in the age of mechanical reproduction the work of art loses its aura. According to Benjamin, the growing capacity to reconstruct almost anything undermines the idea of uniqueness. For the same reason, the conception of movement as an accumulation of perfectly distilled stills has prevailed. We say we *record* movement because we can reconstruct its likeness, and we thereby overlook the movement expressed in each moment of stillness. The alternative conception of movement that Simmel articulates allows us to see beyond the false presuppositions enforced by mechanical (and now digital) reproduction. It is a conception familiar to viewers of Daniel Lergon's work: a conception according to which the invisible may be present, absence may be concrete, and vast spans of time and space can be folded into a single encounter.

Lergon's use of retroreflective material, for example, allows for an extraordinary amplification of movement in and in front of a painting, but this motion can only be perceived in an encounter with the original works. The surface of these retroreflective paintings, also shown under the title *nimbi* (the plural for nimbus, a halo) reflects incoming light back in the direction of its source. This produces a halo of light around the shadow of a viewer's head on the painting when the light source is at his back. This phenomenon also exists in

nature, for example, when a dewy meadow is lit by the sun in a similar way. Each one of the paintings in this series creates, quite literally, an aura unique to each of its specific viewers. The photographic stills in this catalogue cannot possibly re-create the movement found in the originals. Ironically, the attempt to document Lergon's works involves a crucial concession to the "mummifying" conception of movement to which the works themselves pose an alternative.

While Simmel is concerned with Rembrandt's portraits of individual people, Lergon paints the movement of life in the natural world. Better yet, Lergon portrays life's expansion toward the outer boundaries of the natural world. This expansion of life through movement is initiated in the painting but completed in the viewer's perception. Thus, Lergon does not so much *depict* movement but *summons* it. And the movement occurs not merely in the work, but in the moment of encounter between the viewer and the work. These differences notwithstanding, Lergon shares with Simmel's Rembrandt the conviction that life is only present in movement, and life made still is life extinguished. Yes, Lergon is primarily an artist of vision, but in his explorations of vision he reaches the frontiers of painting, where movement is a quality of a particular viewing.

1 Gregory Carlock, "Painting Potentials, Enframing Perception," in *Daniel Lergon, works and exhibitions 2007, 2008* (Berlin 2009), p. 9.

2 Georg Simmel, *Rembrandt: An Essay in the Philosophy of Art*, trans. Alan Scott and Helmut Staubmann (repr., New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 6–7. First published in German in 1916.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 10.