

**Embracing In-betweenness:
Glass as a Phenomenal Edge in Pascal Grandmaison's
*Verre***

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Abstract:

In Leon Battista Alberti's and Leonardo da Vinci's theories of painting, glass became important only by its disappearance. Alberti understood the transparency of glass as an immaterial assurance upon which correct-picture making ought to rely; for Leonardo, a sheet of glass set between painters and the thing they want to draw should be dismissed and ignored not to draw attentive stares from the painters but to allow them to depict what was behind it. While these Italians acknowledged the significance of glass conceptually, the opposite is the case in Pascal Grandmaison's series of photographs. The seemingly-pulseless models in the artist's *Verre* (2004-2005) appear as a disappointment when viewed in the old framework of exclusive communication between the eye and the represented. Only the models' left hand shows élan vital in this gloomy situation in which the less sallow hand is put on the edge of a large glass panel, the once-neglected "in-between" at the time of Renaissance. The models themselves even attempt to insist on the material presence of glass while being in the position of the photographed. This short paper examines implications of this unignorable glass, which could refer to a phenomenal edge between seeing and being seen, in Grandmaison's *Verre* and argues that that edge can matter to the realm of visual representation.

Keywords

Pascal Grandmaison, glass, photography, portraiture, mediated representation

Pascal Grandmaison's *Verre* (2004-05) is a series of nine photographs depicting young men and women against white backgrounds: each model, eyes downcast and appearing tired of being photographed, holds up a clear glass sheet, as if trying to hide behind a transparent curtain. At first glance, there is nothing outstanding about these models, with their unstyled hair, expressionless faces, and plain street clothes, and the series itself is uniformly bland. The large size of the photographs emphasizes the mixture of controlled somberness and uncanny orderliness, whereas the close-up depiction of the models continues to invite the viewer's scrutiny of their own suppressed particularities. The foregrounded glass seems to clarify nothing about the images, and only confirms the very nature of "the transparent" that "ceases to be that which is perfectly clear and becomes instead that which is clearly ambiguous."¹



Figure 1. Pascal Grandmaison. *Verre*. 2004-05. Digital light-jet prints on photographic paper, 182.8 x 182.8 cm each. Courtesy of the artist.

Given these abstemious photographs, one might see the artist's distrust of the genre of the portrait, which has been credited with the expression of individuality. It seems that the series of photographs reiterates an "enervated subject" which is divested of its marked personality, just as the back of the heads in the *Ouverture* series (2006) shrouds all the individual traits and identities in darkness. The *Verre* of the work's title attests to such an essential loss of interest in representing the person—or to the compelling interest in representing nothing—and to the slight possibility of being placed into the category of the portrait.

In his study of the history of figural representation, Stefan Gronert touches upon the fundamental distinction between the portrait and the likeness: "the latter is oriented around the idea of 'individuality' in a double sense. Not only does the represented subject develop individual traits—the representation itself does so as well. By contrast, the portrait may be regarded as a broader, more comprehensive category, which is therefore more neutral."² By this definition, the portrait as a larger category has little to do with the identification of the represented person; strict

identifiability and its associated symbolism are salient features of the likeness that is among a whole constellation of human depictions in art. Jean-Luc Nancy concurs, insisting that the definition of the portrait is not limited to elucidating the sitter's identity. As is obvious throughout his *Le regard du portrait*, Nancy's consistent detachment from both the mythologization of the subject's interiority and the legitimization of its depiction in art history allows him to analyze the portrait within the whole universe of the philosophy of the subject.³ It is not the portrait as a means to contemplate the human matter in a much broader sense but its schematized historicity that has imbued it with an array of metaphysical, allegorical, and aesthetic significations.



Figure 2. Pascal Grandmaison. *Verre 2*. 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

For Hans-Georg Gadamer, as well, the portrait does not adhere to the recognition of the individual it represents.⁴ However, as he states in his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer believes that the portrait appears as, and is essentially intended to be, an idealization of its subject: “[The portrait] is not only a picture and certainly not only a copy, it belongs to the present or to the present memory of the man represented. This is its real nature. . . . a portrait never tries to reproduce the individual it represents as he appears in the eyes of the people near him. Of necessity, what it shows is an idealisation, which can run through an infinite number of stages from the representative to the most intimate.”⁵

This is not the case in *Verre*—the work is not particular about the person in the photograph but instead uses him or her to elicit some other truths. It discloses, or even accuses, more than one sees, and it is willing to sacrifice its immediate subject to show facts irrelevant to the subject's real nature. Should this be the case, the enervated subject can be seen as a prerequisite for eliciting what has been concealed from finished images—that is, for becoming an unrestricted exposure through dissociation from nagging issues of identification and idealization.

What is the exposure for *Verre* then? While the models show reluctance to confront the eye of the camera, their hands



Figure 3. Pascal Grandmaison. *Ouverture*. 2006. Digital light-jet prints on photographic paper, 152.4 × 183.0 cm each. Courtesy of the artist.

bring the glass sheets to the viewer's attention; the hands transgress the vitreous boundary that simultaneously separates and connects the outside world and its representation. Or, it can be said to wedge tangible glass between the viewer and the photographed so that the work destabilizes the unmediated association between them. According to Stefan Jovanovic, "the glass reveals its subject, holding out the fantasy of unmediated access to the real, yet once perceived, it immediately reinforces this impossibility of an unmediated real. . . . in these portraits the glass reflexively calls to our

attention the mediated nature of photographic representation."⁶ At this moment, the glass can no longer be ignored, as every gaze holding the models is inevitably brought to the material. It is more than just an alternative subject to attract the viewer, leading his or her eyes toward the latent structural qualities of representation in which the unobtrusive glass has intervened.

One of the trajectories to see glass as an interventional device shall be found in the perspectival theories of Renaissance painting. For instance, Leon Battista Alberti compared a picture plane to transparent glass in his treatise on paintings *De Pictura* (1435): "[Painters] should understand that, when they draw lines around a surface, and fill the parts they have drawn with colours, their sole object is the representation on this one surface of many different forms, just as though this surface which they colour were so transparent and like glass."⁷ "Like glass," according to Alberti, meant a clear sheet of glass as an imaginative product to describe the better practice of perspectival painting: a completely transparent plane through which rays of light emitted from objects would pass without refraction and arrive at the viewer in a straightforward manner. To the contrary, in practice, Alberti advised his followers to use a thin veil or *velo*—a grid or net of fine threads—so that they could map the three-dimensional world onto a two-dimensional picture plane.⁸ The slight difference between the theory and the practice inversely reinforces Alberti's glass as a metaphorical assurance upon which correct picture-making ought to rely. In fact, glass

was literally an invisible substance in Alberti's time as the painters could make only conceptual use of its flatness, thinness, and transparency.⁹



Figure 4. Pascal Grandmaison. *Upside Land 2*. 2006. Light-jet print on photographic paper, 177.8 x 274.3 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Verre ceases to follow the concept of invisible glass. The models insist on the concrete materiality of glass while being in a position of the photographed. Their hands are not merely suggesting, but physically dragging, the glass into the viewer's line of sight to realize, at the very site of photographic representation, the poetics of transparent mediation

from within. Paradoxically enough, the enervated subject emphasizes a firm decision to challenge the

levels of understanding involved with the role of glass in the history of art: to demonstrate the phenomenological fluctuation between the memory of idealized transparency and its embodied interrogation. In this sense, the dispirited faces of the models insist upon the opposite end of "sincerity" in that they mark the examination of historical agreements lurking behind representation with sufficient dispassion. As long as *Verre* asks its models to reflect on such an idealized transparency of glass, the work deserves to be called a "portrait," as it makes something known without exaggeration and omission. It becomes what Nancy calls "*l'exposé-sujet*" through the performativity of the models grabbing the once-invisibly-instrumentalized glass out of the imaginary frame of representation.¹⁰

When Gadamer observes the incarnation of the sitter's interiority through the portrait, he also notes the fundamental specificity of the genre: "the portrait is only an intensified form of the general nature of a picture. Every picture is an increase of being and is essentially determined as representation, as coming-to-presentation. In the special case of the portrait, this representation acquires a personal significance, in that here an

individual is presented in a representative way.”¹¹ Granted, the increase of being in the portrait is primarily concerned with the man represented, which, as discussed earlier, has little to do with what *Verre* accomplishes. As a picture, however, the work emphasizes the materiality of the glass sheets in order to make its exposure credible and tangible. For Gadamer, the increase of being would contribute to the idealization of the individual portrayed and to the revelation of “the essential quality of his true appearance.”¹² On the other hand, as “the general nature of a picture,” the increase of being becomes a key to seeing the way in which Grandmaison presents his glass. The important thing here is to see how this increase can be assessed in conjunction with the artist’s reflections on the historical (in)visibility of glass as well as on the idioms of photographic representation.

Each of the photographs in *Verre* shows a glass sheet with only one of its four edges visible and a model from the waist up against the white background. There is no legible totality coming into being, and only its absence or decentering becomes of interest in order to know what is intensified. Indeed, the use of tight framing allows both objects to make a direct relation with one another only at a right edge of the image, narrowing the focus to “showing one edge at the edge” rather than putting the whole picture together. This “double edgedness” repeats itself through the seriality of the photographs, which implies that such repetitive losses of the whole can be aggregated into a specific form of multitude. The edge becomes what indicates the thickness of phenomenal being whose intensification engulfs the space of representation or even that of beholding. Unlike Gadamer’s definition, the increase of being in the series internally disintegrates “the fantasy of unmediated access to the real.” The models demonstrate an increasing plurality of glass sheets layered as thick as what one ceases to call a transparent screen; it is perhaps what one can describe as a bloated boundary that no longer provides the divide between traditional dichotomies such as the subject and the object, seeing and being seen, reality and representation. Not in “quality,” therefore, but in “quantity” does the increase appear to allow the excessively stratified de-mediation to come into being.

Upside Land (2006) is another example of Grandmaison’s interest in the economy of the edge. The work consists of three photographs, each depicting the edge of a

running shoe's sole in close-up; the edge occupies the top part of the image that is dominated by the oddly intimidating white, doubling its edgedness as is the case of *Verre*. At first glance, the work seems to emphasize the soles that make both a smooth contact and a protective barrier between the foot and the ground; with the help of the white background as "a *repoussoir*,"¹³ the focus is given to one of the most constitutive but undistinctive parts of a shoe which supports the foot and makes walking easier and safer. In the image, however, there is no discernible part from which one can conceive of the totality of the shoes it is supposed to make up. Instead, the extremely enlarged soles attain and increase "some sort of totality" which has no direct relation to the supposed referents.¹⁴ No definite clue to see it as a shoe sole can be found either in the image or in the work's title. Again, the emphasis is no longer on the represented in its legitimated entirety but on the limits of photographic denotation that shows everything and explains nothing; the more closely the magnifying vision of photography examines the details of an object, the less it articulates what those details are. *Upside Land* not only reveals this paradoxical shortcoming of photography, but also suggests that it is this critical revelation through which the medium can cause something other than its intended representation, something that belongs neither to the photographic image nor to what it signifies but that would have never emerged without its presence (or difference).

As to the focus on the edges in *Upside Land*, the impact of the white is not insignificant. It helps the viewer to conceive of a yet-to-be-filled site for the possible expanse of the soles that will grow until they are no longer as thin and flat as they had been: the white is an open field that is capable of embracing the paradoxical expansion of what was originally destined to wear down. Meanwhile, the white itself is also expanding to prepare for having the edges grow at the expense of what once occupied it. Each of the young models depicted in reduced size in the series *Waiting Photography* (2003) better illustrates this situation, as if each model is under the threat of eviction from the space in which he or she has been allowed to be the subject of representation. In Pierre Landry's words, the white in these works is "an indistinct yet quite tangible 'place'" that "creates a sort of state of hesitation, as if the representation were in suspense, wavering between the referential aspect and the

expressiveness of the white itself.”¹⁵ Or, drawing upon David Batchelor’s insightful analysis of the implications of the whiteness, it becomes “a kind of white that is not created by bleach but that itself is bleach,” and that what looks settled in it will “soon be purged from it.”¹⁶

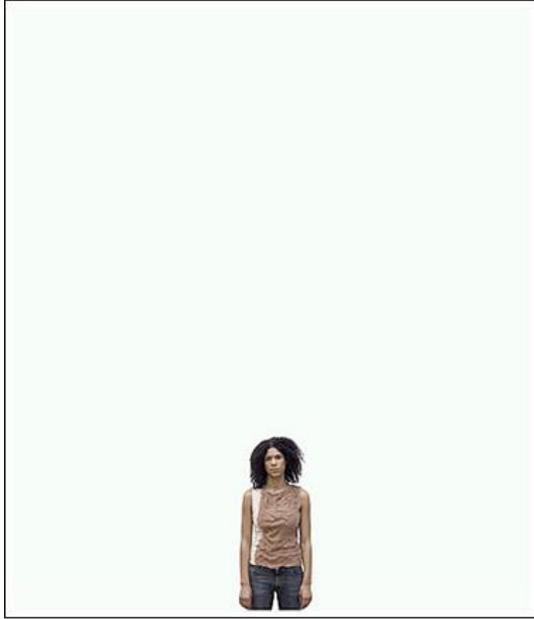


Figure 5. Pascal Grandmaison. *Waiting Photography, School Editing Video*. 2003. Digital ink-jet print on a polypropylene base, 177.8 × 152.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Grandmaison’s photographs simultaneously expose and subvert the fundamental structures of mediated representation. By using various photographic languages—i.e. the tight framing, the close-ups, and the white backgrounds—these photographs re-materialize the threshold of representation in a way that destabilizes the conventional association between the viewer and the represented. *Verre* reconsiders the age-old concept of an invisible screen by having its models, who are no longer the subject of the traditional portrait, remove transparent glass sheets from the imaginary frame of representation; the plurality of the glass sheets alludes to their possible rebellious stratification, leading to the visualization of de-mediation. *Upside Land* likewise develops a critical awareness of the mediated reality of representation, though its focus extends to the “creative flaw” of photography that offers a new understanding of the interactions

between the part and the whole, the center and the periphery, the image and the white space. Indeed, by the very means of photography itself, the works ably demonstrate the poetics of being at the edge of the validity of mediated representation; beyond an ironic critique of the fictional nature of conventional photographic truths, they further explore self-reflective techniques to “unlearn” what the medium had once been in order to witness, from within it, the emergence of an alternative reality of photographic representation.

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Endnotes

¹ Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky, "Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal," *Perspecta* 8 (1963): 45.

² Stefan Gronert, "Portraits of the Image," in Stefan Gronert, Gerhard Richter: *Portraits*, 45-46 (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2006).

³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le regard du portrait* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), 12.

⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Garrett Barden and John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1975), 129.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁶ Stefan Jovanovic, "The Limits of the Specular: Some Notes on the Works of Pascal Grandmaison," *Parachute* 121 (January, February, March, 2006): 132.

⁷ Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972), I.19, p. 49.

⁸ See *ibid.*, II.39, p. 69.

⁹ Since Alberti's remark on transparent glass in *De Pictura*, this material has been frequently referenced in relation to the theories of painting, perspective, and representation. His famous metaphor of a painting as an "open window" stimulated this trend. Although "fifteenth-century windows," as Anne Friedberg advises, "did not necessarily use glass nor were they necessarily transparent," many artists and thinkers presumed that Alberti's was a glazed window through which the world could be seen and be translated into a two-dimensional picture plane. Anne Friedberg, *The Virtual Window: From Alberti to Microsoft* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2006), 32. See also Joseph

Masheck, "Alberti's Window: Art-Historiographic Notes on an Antimodernist Misprision," *Art Journal* 50 (Spring 1991): 36.

¹⁰ Nancy, *Le regard du portrait*, 16.

¹¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 131.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Pierre Landry, "Pascal Grandmaison: Close-up View," in Pierre Landry, *Pascal Grandmaison*, 104 (Montréal: Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2006).

¹⁴ Ibid., 105.

¹⁵ Ibid., 104.

¹⁶ David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 10-11.

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