

Making the invisible visible in Filip Berendt's 'Pandemic' series, 2009

Given the situation that we currently find ourselves in – a pandemic – it is interesting to consider the etymological root of this term: the *pan* (all) *demos* (people) that hints to the pervasive, insidious movement through bodies that characterises COVID-19. And yet in spite of the quickness with which this virus is transmitted and its comparatively gradual process of unfolding and escalating throughout animal bodies, what is particularly disturbing about its proliferation across the world, threatening 'all people', is its invisibility. Aside from the global news rhetoric that names the 'invisible enemy', as recently spoken both by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and President Donald Trump, the very nature of a pandemic and the necessarily extreme responses to its spread are predicated on the fact of it being unseen – invisible outside of the body, but visible and felt once inside of it.

The work of photographer Filip Berendt is often centred upon a process of making the invisible visible, of revealing a set of hidden processes and layers within a single image, each of which arise from his rigorous method of creating certain scenarios and actions that unfold upon a two-dimensional surface. This process-based approach to image making is echoed in the artist's words when he says: *I don't look on myself as a photographer, rather I make certain performative actions, sculptural actions, for which a photographic camera turns out to be an ideal tool.* This performativity is explicitly evident in series such as *Badland* (2010-11) in which Berendt staged a series of 'post-apocalyptic or post-nuclear anti-utopia', landscapes of abject forms, substances and textures that simultaneously attract and repel their viewers. More subtly performative is the series of works *Every Single Crash*, presented at l'étrangère in 2015, where deep saturations of colour and reflective, multi-directional contours play out together in a dynamic choreography.

Where these two series by Berendt make visible certain formal and material relations through the act of staging and positioning certain elements in conversation, his series *Pandemic* speaks to the notion of the unseen in a different way. Completed in 2009, each of the twelve works presented as part of this online exhibition follows a visual schematic that not only reminds one of the close-up organic structure of a bacteria or virus, but also speaks to an aesthetics of the body, one that is in a state of decline and deterioration. To make these works, Berendt utilises natural substances such as mould and sediment to render each abstract composition and then re-photographs each configuration to reveal their granular detail. In some of the works, this manifests in striking patterns that fill nearly the entire surface in an encroaching bacterial topography, whereas in others, circular forms float upon a white background, loaded with intense conglomerations of fizzy textures, skin-like layers and dark blobs of colour. A sense of movement remains in spite of the frozen moment that Berendt has rendered: substances leak and drip, appear to be expanding outwards or slowly proliferating, such that each image becomes but a moment in an ongoing process that exists before and after the click of the lens.

As with many of Berendt's series, *Pandemic* entices as much as its repulses, which aligns with the contradictory impulses embedded within the notion of the abject. As Julia Kristeva explains in her 1980 work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.



Filip Berendt, *Pandemic I*, 2009, archival print on dibond, 70 x 50cm, Edition 6 + 2AP

What emerges from our experience of abject subjects – wounds, decay, and the many different viscera that constitute our bodies - is an ambiguous feeling of recognition, whereby our concurrent rejection of and attraction towards the abject becomes a continuous dance with death and its inescapable proximity. When we look at Berendt's *Pandemic* series a similar sensation arises, of being drawn to the grotesque beauty of each work's patterns, colours and textures, but of also being left with a residual uneasiness that is located firmly within our own bodies. Just as we are reminded of a certain deterioration when looking at these works, so we are reminded of a universal fragility that is inherent to all people, all bodies.

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