

## THOMAS HUBER

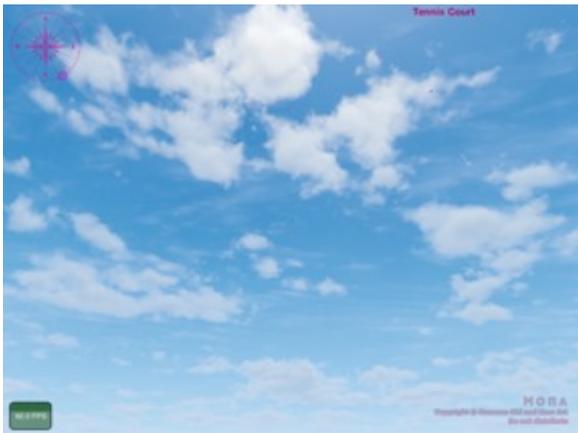
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# ABYSS

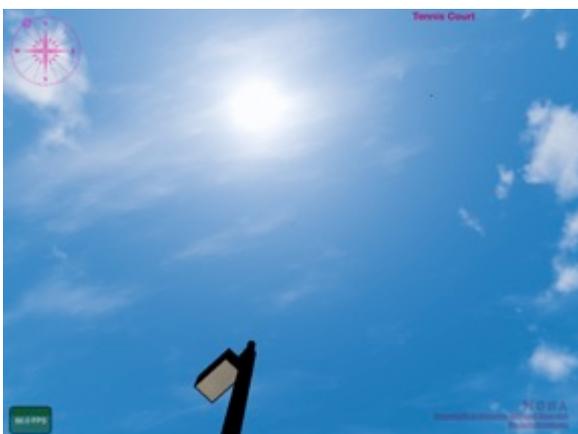
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## LECTURE AT MONA 2017

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The sky above the Museum of Old and New Art on the Berriedale peninsula is bright blue. High up, white clouds are drifting by.



Blazing, blinding sunlight.



Distant hills stretch to the horizon, framing the flat expanses of the River Derwent.



We are standing on a sunny square, facing a low building with a mirrored façade.



We walk towards the building. We go through the door and step into a spacious hall.



There are windows on all sides. We can see outside in all directions. We can see the water from here.



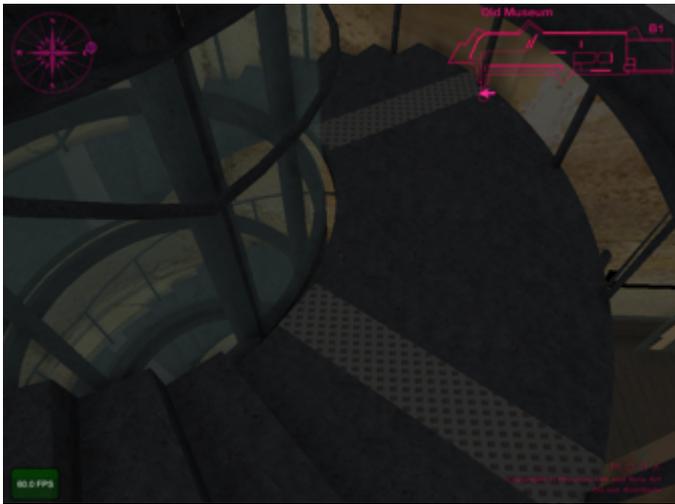
In the middle of the hall is a lift. It is a circular construction made of dark painted steel and glass.



Beside the lift is a narrow stairwell, leading down.



Step by narrow step, we go down the spiral staircase.



Deeper and deeper, we descend from light into darkness.



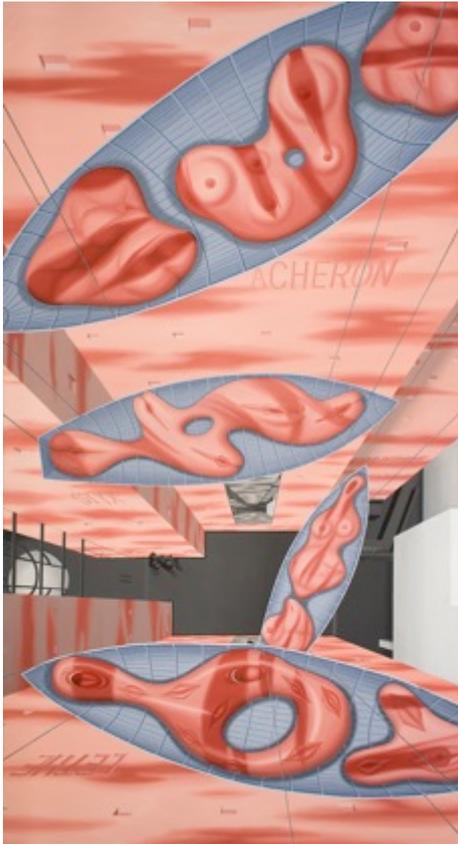
Every twist of the stairwell takes us further away from the daylight, deeper and deeper into the abyss.



Finally we reach the bottom of the stairs. We are in a staggeringly tall, underground hall.



The walls tower into the darkness above us. They are cut from the rock, dug out of the stone. Dark layers of sediment run like veins through the lighter layers of rock. Like rivers that left their traces here in prehistoric times, deep under the earth.

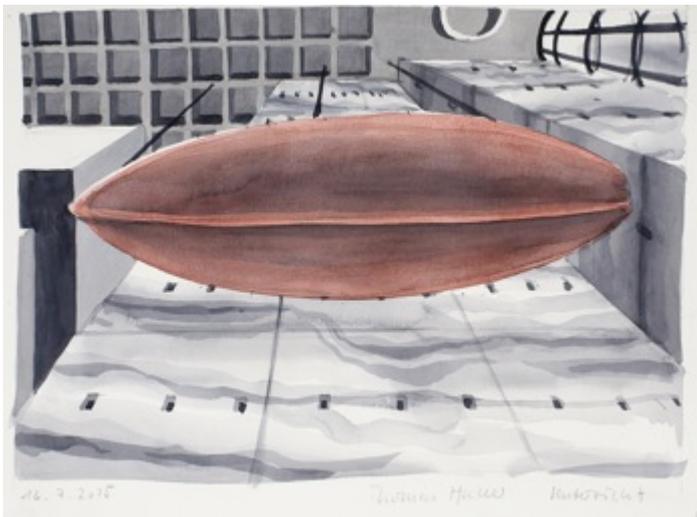


Two paintings hang in this hall, one on the left and one on the right. Very large and very tall, they are suspended in mid-air, floating in front of the stone walls, deep under the earth.

Let us do an exercise. A very simple exercise. Just follow my instructions. Close your eyes. Do it very slowly and deliberately. Take your time. Feel your eyelids gently slide down over your eyes, like a brief caress. Just you, touching yourself. Your eyes are closed now. It's quite dark around you. By closing your eyes, you have shut yourself out from the light. You have shut yourself inside your own darkness. You have turned inwards. You are alone. You are inside yourself. A space that is your own. Your inner space. This space is a feeling, a feeling of being with and by yourself. The space feels round. It feels like you are in a bubble, floating inside yourself. You feel light. You let yourself drift. Let yourself be carried along, like on a current of water. Imagine you are lying in a boat. The boat is rocking you gently from side to side. The boat takes you here and there, in no particular direction. No left or right, no up or down. The boat is taking you through the warm darkness of your inner spaces.



Different paths lead into the darkness. We can take the stairs, down into the belly of the earth. Away from the light into a cave, hidden in the dark chambers under the earth. Or we can just close our eyes, slowly and deliberately. That is also a descent, a journey into our hidden depths, into the cavern of ourselves. Here too, it is dark and warm. Now imagine opening your eyes again, very slowly. Pictures appear in front of you. Imagine it is your inner eye that you are opening. You look around inside yourself. You are looking at your inner space. You look up.



Boats are floating high above your head. You can see their keels from below. There are several boats, and they seem to be drifting upwards, winding their way higher and higher into the darkness. Far above their spindly silhouettes, you can just about make out a ceiling of panelled concrete. This is what the boats are hanging from.



Enormous eyes are painted on the bottom of the boats. The eyes are staring down at you. You are being watched. Who is watching you? You feel intimidated by their gaze. What you see inside is scary. Alarmed, you open your eyes. You want to make sure everything is okay; you want to get your bearings. You want to know where you are.

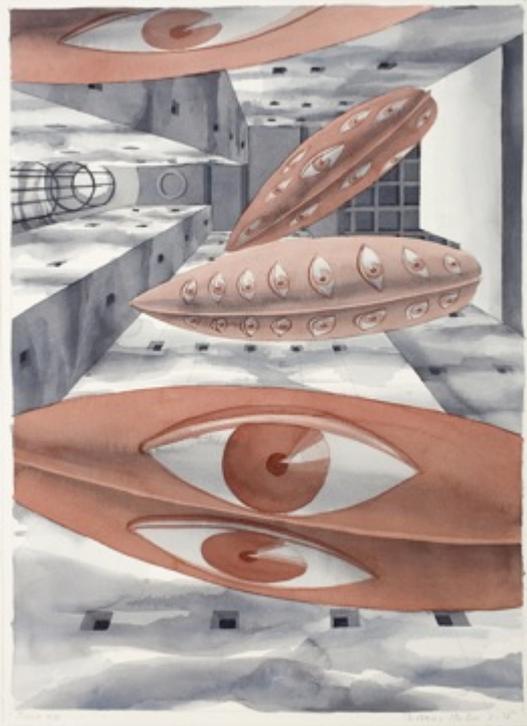


You are standing at the foot of a great hall. Staggeringly tall rock faces sweep past you up into the heights above your head. Far above, in the semi-darkness, you can just about make out a panelled concrete ceiling. You have already seen these rock faces and the concrete ceiling. You saw them just now in the pictures. You saw them inside yourself when you looked into the depths within. Now these pictures are hanging right in front of

you. Your eyes wander from the pictures to the surroundings and back to the pictures. Your eyes wander between the object and the image.



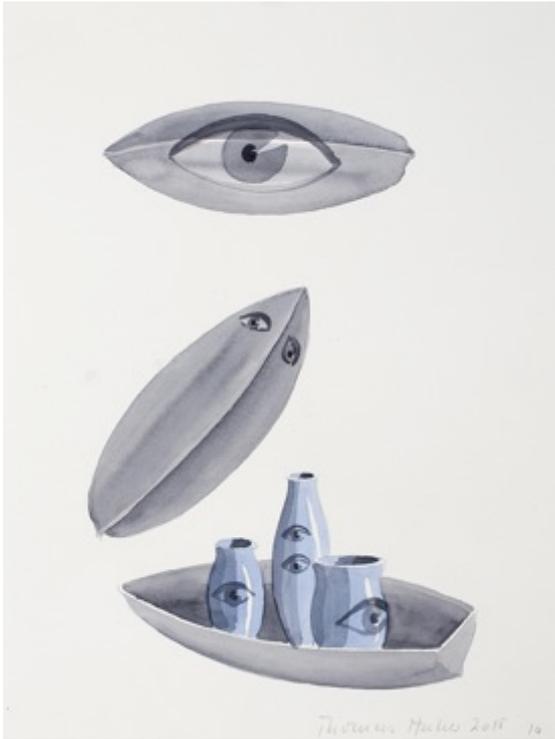
Tell me the difference. Which impression is more valid? What came first? Which picture is more real? Are they not both the stuff of dreams? Cave paintings, an abyss, a stumble, a plunge into darkness. Sometimes we see the boats floating above the abyss, and sometimes they look as if they had just passed over us and are now beyond our field of vision, soon to return. The question of whether they actually exist seems superfluous.



Who asks about reality in the theatre? What is real about a game, what is pretence? Which picture we see is real, and which is just a mirror image? We see one picture after another, one superimposing the other. Which is the real one, the original? Aren't all pictures an illusion, a deception? Is there a chronology in the world of pictures that orders their appearance and disappearance into a before and after? Time seems irrelevant in the world of pictures. We cannot put pictures into an ordered flow of time. They seem to move in circles, the last touching the first, the first the last. There is no first picture, just an endless movement of perpetual change.



We recognize the same picture in different places at the same time and astonishingly, these places are always the same, too. They only differ in size and proportion.



Two pictures are hanging opposite each other. They are exactly the same size and they seem to be looking at each other. The huge painted eyes stare at the picture opposite, observing it. The painted eyes stare at me too. Or so I think. People still attribute magical powers to paintings, remnants of the image worship that prevailed before the Enlightenment. It's not unusual even now to hear comments like, "That picture is looking at me", or encounter fear of a picture's "evil eye" or a stern gaze that seems to follow us around the room. But we really do get the impression that a pair of painted eyes is following us as we walk past a painting. Even though we know perfectly well that painted objects are rigid and lifeless, the eyes seem to stare us down and track our every move. We can also be drawn to a painting that has no eyes at all. It casts its spell and draws us in, as if it had focused specifically on us. We feel the pull of this gaze and interpret it as an imperative: "I am talking to you," says the picture. "I have a message for you. You cannot escape me." When we visit an art museum, we do so to see the paintings on display. Paintings are flat, lifeless objects with paint on the front. We walk through the museum and look at these flat objects. We decide where to look, ours is the sovereign gaze. Very rarely do we gain the impression that a picture may be looking back at us. The roles of the viewer and the object being viewed are clearly defined. *I* – the viewer – am looking *at* the pictures. The idea that a painting could look back at us belongs in the realm of folklore and fairytales.



An increasing number of museums are replacing the customary audioguide with a smartphone or museum app available for download onto our own mobile phones. The app is programmed to inform us about the painting we are standing in front of and looking at. Information labels are becoming obsolete. Many more details about the painting are shown on our mobiles than could ever fit on a label, and we even have the option of accessing yet more information, should we be so inclined. But most of us are unaware of the fact that the selected function on the smartphone is actually monitoring us, the visitor. It registers how long we look at a certain picture, and an eyetracking system can even determine what parts of the picture attract our particular attention and how long they hold our gaze. The app also registers our chosen route through the exhibition or museum, how fast or slow we move. It draws up a precise electronic profile of our entire visit. The individual visitor profiles are collected and stored as mass data, allowing the museum to calculate the average visitor's behaviour and intellectual curiosity. They can establish which works attract most attention, and how extensively the information on offer is used. The legend of the picture that looks back at us is coming back to life. But it is no longer about a single picture trapping us in its gaze, it is about the museum as a whole. The museum is observing us. It is looking at us and inside us. The museum has become a voyeur that watches every step we take, tracks our every move, and is even capable of deciphering the feelings we may have while standing in front of the pictures on show. In former times, the saints stared out of the pictures and deep into the souls of the believers. Their forbidding gaze kept us to the straight and narrow and warned us of the perils of going astray. Whether in religious ecstasy or stern conviction, their image cast us down upon our knees. We were to bow our heads and

kneel in front of the image in silent contemplation. Today, we bow our heads over our smartphones, mostly unaware of the omnipresent eye watching us from behind the screen, registering, analysing and finally evaluating and even judging us.



Gazes are being traded here. Gazes are shown, gazes are talked about. It is all about eyes. Is the viewer alone in looking, or do the pictures also have a gaze? And these days the omniscient eye of the museum rests on us too. We look at the world with open eyes. As the philosopher Schelling famously said: "In mankind nature opened its eyes and became aware of its own existence." The open eye turned towards the light is the symbol of the Enlightenment. Human beings look at the world, they are aware of it and of their own existence within it. Every era of human history has its own relationship to vision and the act of seeing. Today we see ourselves as children of the Enlightenment with an impartial view of the world, which we set out to measure, count and analyse. Ours is the sovereign gaze. But now we are busy developing machines that can watch and monitor us themselves. We are about to outsource our sovereign gaze to an almighty eye that is no longer human.

Young children close their eyes when they don't want to be seen. They believe this makes them invisible. But I doubt whether this stubborn reflex will protect us adults from the omnipresent eye. We close our eyes when we are tired. But we also close our eyes in states of extreme alertness, to focus intently on a particular thought. In former times, people closed their eyes to delve into memory. It was the age of myths and legends. Tales from the dawn of the history of consciousness show what a vast wealth of stories and pictures such introspection generated. We have retained a remnant of this ability to look within ourselves. But we may presume that our gift for introspection has shrunk in comparison with that of the mythical singers of the past.



We remember. Remembering means looking inside ourselves. It is a process of introspection. We close our eyes. When we close our eyes we see pictures. Pictures of things and events of long ago perhaps. We call these pictures memories. We experience this process even more vividly when we sleep. When – tired of the daylight – we close our eyes, and our inward eye opens. It looks around our inner space. The space that used to be called the soul. Today we call it the psyche or the unconscious. The soul is a notion from the age of myths and legends, the era which preceded our age of daylight consciousness. The age of myths and legends was a twilight age. It was the dreamtime of humanity. Human beings experienced the world as a dream, as if they were living with their eyes closed. Stories of this epic age have come down to us through the words of its greatest singer, Homer. It is said that he was blind, a blind singer. I don't think he was blind in the sense of a physical handicap. I think he was blind in the sense that he composed his songs and poems with his eyes closed. He looked deep inside himself rather than out into the world about him. For us today, his songs are a testimony of a period in which people still lived in a dreamlike state. Myths move in the realm of the soul. Early pictures of the people of this age show them with no eyes. The faces have no eyes. A halo of hair points from their head, like antennae, as if these people perceived the world through the tips of their hair. Only a mouth is cut into the middle of their faces. It is the mouth of the singer, with which he tells of his journeys of the soul. The great mythical tales are always about ships.



The Odyssey and the story of Noah are typical stories of this age. Myths equate a plunge into the depths of the soul with an immersion in water. A confrontation with abysmal depths and dangerous currents. Like the blood that rushes through our veins, so the body of the earth is full of rivers, deep inside. It is these rivers mythical men and women encountered and travelled upon on their journeys of the soul. The rivers were called Lethe and Styx and spilled into the greatest river of all, the River Acheron, which led to the Kingdom of the Dead. It was the path to the forefathers, the ancestors.



Traces of these mythical rivers were detected on rock faces in caves under the earth. Like veins, the layers of sediment were seen as traces of great rivers that had dried up in a primordial age. Homer followed the ancient ferryman Charon, who took him across these rivers to the gates of the Underworld.



Ulysses had to cross the seas to find his lost soul. Dante got into a boat to descend into the Underworld, as he tells us in the *Divine Comedy*.



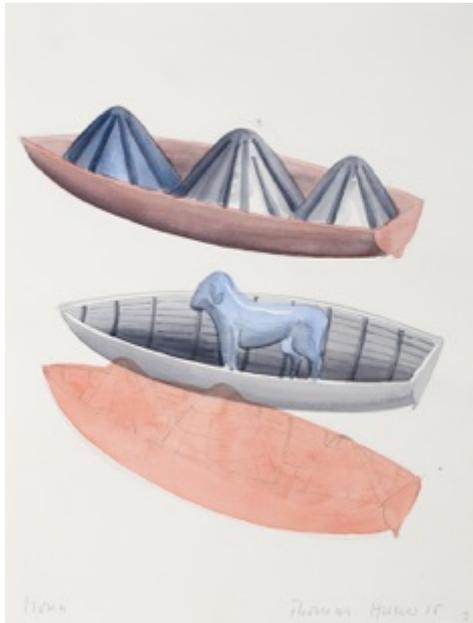
Cerberus, the hellhound guarded the gates to the Kingdom of the Dead. Fear painted him with several heads. Today we entrust ourselves to a therapist to guide us through the depths of our psyche to our innermost selves. Terrifying creatures and evil spirits or even just our own taboos can prevent us from accessing this part of ourselves.



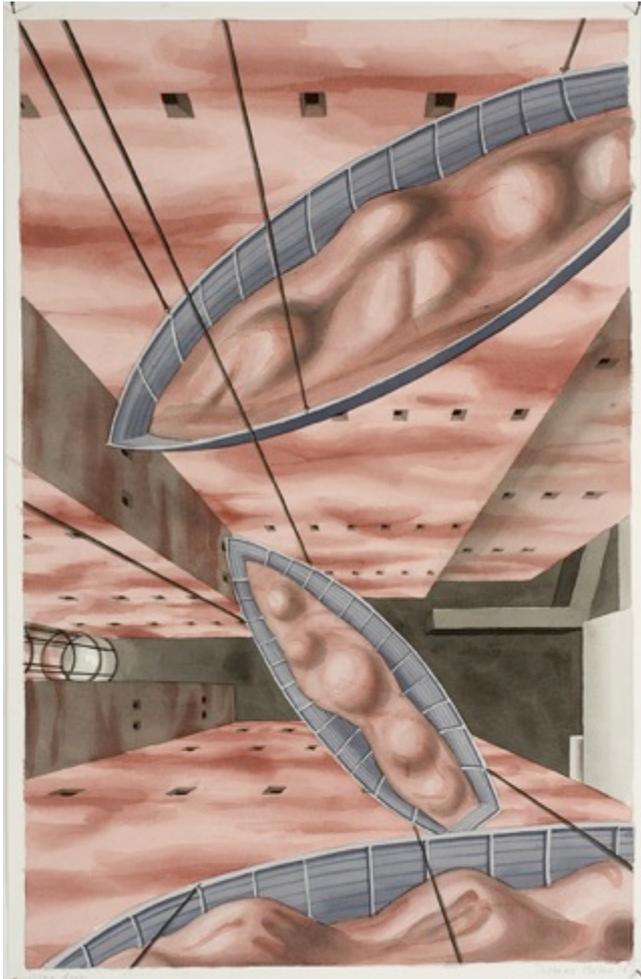
We have descended into a deep hole. From the daylight in the museum lobby, we went down a spiral staircase, deeper and deeper into this cave, this subterranean cavern. Standing at the bottom of this pit, gigantic walls tower over our heads, hewn out of the rock. How on earth was this hall made? Enormous quantities of rock must have been cut away and ferried out of the pit. What huge hands dug out this pit and carried the stone away?



We are standing on the brink of an abyss, staring down into its depths. Far beneath our feet, we can make out the bottom of the pit. Boats are floating over it. Suspended at different heights above the abyss, they travel along their chartered ways. We can see into the body of the boats. The stone blasted out of the rock has been piled into the boats. The mass of excavated matter hewn out of the rock is being ferried away, load by load. Travelling their course along rivers deep in the rocks, the boats carry the waste material up into the open. That is how it could have been done.

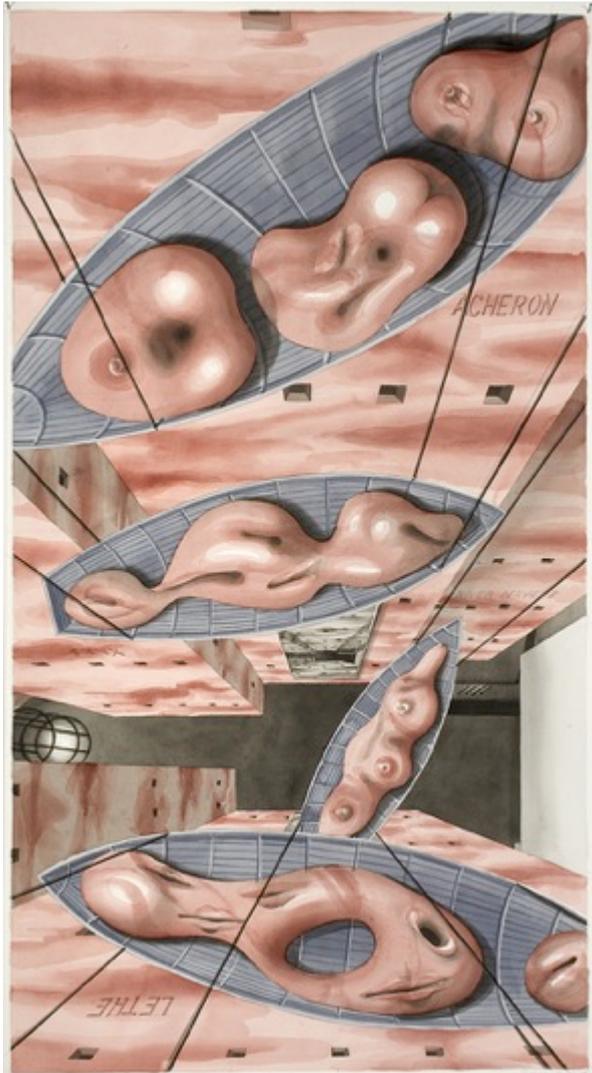


The painter stands in front of a white canvas. A gigantic white canvas in his studio. The wide white expanse stares at him, its blank surface sealed. The painter sets to work with his brush, spreading paint over the surface. Even though he is covering the surface with paint, the opposite is what actually happens: the surface opens up in front of his eyes. The painted parts of the canvas gain depth, they become deeper and deeper. The further the painter progresses with the picture, the more clearly these spaces emerge on the canvas. The painter transforms a sealed surface into an open depth. Working with a brush is like digging with a spade. The painter is an excavator, digging into the depths. With every stab of the spade, the hole, the abyss gets deeper. But while the excavator delves in the earth, the painter delves in the imagination. He buries himself in the substance of his picture. Heaving waste material to the side, he penetrates deeper and deeper into the imaginary substance, the virtual picture space. He has to heave out the slag material, dig deeper and heave out more. Imagine that he also has to dispose of the waste material. The studio is like a building site: the spoil mounts up beside the hole the painter is digging in, and the deeper he digs, the higher the slag pile gets. Where can he dispose of the waste, the accumulated spoil of the picture that is piling up all around his atelier? The spoil piles up so high that he almost has no space left to work.



What is the stuff that dreams are made of? What is the stuff that pictures are made of? Does it look like these hills, these piles of spoil? An amorphous mass, like sand, difficult to form? Torpid like heavy earth. The mass is obedient only to gravity. Piled up, it seeps downwards, forming a broad base with a tip, a rounded cone. There are no clear-cut edges, no straight lines. This picture substance, these liquid dreams make amorphous shapes, round, soft or tear-shaped. A gust of wind can change the shape, the rain can hollow it out.

It is a sunny day and I am sitting outside. The sun is shining on my face. Blinded by the light, I shut my eyes. A temporary darkness enfolds me. Behind my eyelids, my eyes adapt to the darkness. A different kind of light spreads out in front of my closed eyes. It is a diffuse red at first, warm and soft. Then it lightens into pink. I am immersed in pink. The sun shines through my eyelids and illuminates my inner eye. I see the light of the sun through my eyelids. Filtering through the blood of my skin, it dyes everything I see in a light pink. I manage to stay there in this pink world and just admire it for a while. A quiet world in bright pink. Movement comes into my field of vision. A spot appears that gets lighter, intensifies, expands and pushes the dark zones to the edges. Then the edges halt the process of expansion, the darkness rolls back and pushes the light back into the middle. Up until the shrinking spot of light resists and starts expanding again, as before. So it goes, back and forth. Light triumphs in the end, and the pulsating change of light and dark ebbs away. Lightness spreads gently and casts a pale pink hue over my entire field of vision.



What I see looks like a desert landscape. Sandy expanses of rolling hills, whose silhouettes remain distinct, stretch row upon row to a barely perceptible horizon. But the longer I look at this undulating landscape, the flatter it seems to become. As if a subtle breeze were evening out the hills into a plane. Close up I see the individual grains of sand the wind whisks up in turbulent lanes like race tracks. The polymorphic plane gets flatter and flatter and surprised I ask myself what I am actually seeing here. Is this the effect of the sunlight shining through the blood vessels in my pulsating eyelids? Are the ups and downs a measure of my pulse? Where does the desert come from? The sand? Have the inner pictures triumphed over the purely physical, sensory impressions? Is my mind projecting pictures onto the inner walls of my eyelids? I call my roving thoughts to order: What you see is sunlight filtered through your fleshy pink eyelids. But the inner pictures are obviously stronger and the unceasingly interpreting mind wins the day. It turns the light and darker patches into hills, it discerns a landscape, a horizon on the edge of nowhere. Perception frees itself from sensory impressions and takes off on the wide wings of association.



The gentle hills move closer, compress and merge into what now looks like a face. The wind of consciousness pushes the contours of these hills and valleys into intimations of body parts, of skin. Is it the colour pink that turns the shapes I see into female body parts? The hills turn into female breasts, the valleys split into vulvas that mutate into mouths. A reflex above a hill turns into an eye.



The eyes turn into mouths, breasts into buttocks. Nothing has substance, nothing remains the same. All forms are fluid. Barely identified, they turn into another shape. Lying in my chair in the warming rays of the sun, I watch the play of shadows, my face turned towards the sky. Lost in daydreams, my eyes closed, I obviously encounter my own desires. I see the images created by my desires.



Boats pass, deep beneath my feet, on their chartered ways. I stare down at them from far above, into their open holds. They are carrying the substance of pictures, the stuff that pictures are made of. There it is, piled up in heaps, a pinkish mass, suggested forms hovering on the brink of interpretation. Soft and flowing forms with intimations of eyes, mouths, buttocks, genitals. The boats and their strange cargo pass deep beneath my feet.

Let us look back in time again. Far back, further even than the time of myths and legends, to a time when the soul had not yet been discovered. Traces of this preconsciousness survived in some indigenous groups until the twentieth century. Indigenous groups would choose a shaman – male or female – from their midst. They invested this leader with exclusive qualities, which we today automatically define and experience as inalienably our own. That applies particularly to the question of sexuality and sexual activity. The person chosen to become a shaman was usually identified as possessing the attributes necessary to assume this special role within the group in early adolescence. A marked individuality, peculiar psychological powers and a gift for visual expression were the hallmarks typical of a shaman. Today, we would send a young person displaying such characteristics to art school. In indigenous societies, this young person was apprenticed to the shaman to learn how to perform and organise the rituals that kept the group together. In the course of this apprenticeship, the young shaman built their own drum from the bones and hide of animals. The drum skin was painted;

signs and symbols were carved into the bone body of the drum. Adorned with all sorts of paraphernalia, the drum was the primary instrument in the performance of the rituals and the defining emblem of the shaman priest. In some groups, the shaman – male or female – was expected to remain celibate, either for their entire lives or during set periods in the group’s calendar. The group rituals, led and determined by the shaman, had clearly sexual connotations. This can be seen in the dances and the symbolic objects made especially for such occasions. The purpose of the rituals was to keep regenerating erotic desire within the group. The provocation of sexual desire and the cultivation of eros in these rituals ensured the survival of the group. Procreation was essential for the succession of generations. The collective eros was bound up with particular signs and rituals. The individual’s libido might still belong to him or her, but it was guarded and manifested as a tangible eros in the group’s language of signs, symbols and traditional dances. The collective eros lay in the hands of the shaman. He was its guardian and keeper and brought it to the group in set rituals. A further peculiarity of the shaman was his change of mood, his psychic ups and downs. He could enter a state of crisis, manifested in strange behaviour. In a state like this he would get the particular attention and support of the group. The group would do everything in its power to take care of him. After all, he was the standard bearer of their group identity, the personified guarantee of their ability to procreate and survive. At the climax of his crisis, the shaman would embark upon a journey. A journey to the ancestors, the deceased members of the group. They would be able to repair the crumbling images, refresh the fading symbols of the group, renew and revitalise them by guaranteeing their validity. Propelled by the beat of his drum, the shaman would dance himself into a trance, flying to his ancestors on the wings of its rhythm. He consulted the ancestors and they told him the symbols and forms he needed for his rituals. Armed with these images, he returned from his journey. His crises or psychic states of emergency could be of longer or shorter duration. His instability could lead the group into an existential crisis, manifested in an inability to copulate. The collective libido lay fallow. The survival of the group was threatened. The procreative power innate to the pictures, symbols and rituals of the group was blown out like a light while the shaman was in crisis, unable to activate the symbols and convey their power to the community. The shaman could not renew the power of the symbols by himself. He might be powerful as the keeper of the collective eros, but not powerful enough to uphold its force by himself. This is why he submitted himself to the power of the ancestors. In the visions he had on his trance journey, they would reassure him of the validity of the erotic triggers. Failing eros and declining libido is a natural process in any group or relationship. The elixir of life uses itself up, evaporates. In archaic societies, such a crisis did not affect the individual but the chosen one, the representative, the one with the greatest psychic sensibility. The loss of eros generated a crisis of the soul for him. He perceived this crisis in the faltering power of the pictures he used to convey the eros he represented to the group. His position in the group as the chosen one was a psychological and creative distinction. He was the keeper of the symbols and generators of libido. He was responsible for these existentially essential pictures. Should they weaken, falter or fail, it was his responsibility to go back to the source of the group and consult the ancestors. That was the purpose of his journey. The images he brought back from the journey had a clear, an unshakeable purpose. They regenerated the community and brought back the magic of erotic desire again and again.

Today people ask about the deeper meaning of art, the hidden meaning of pictures, the origin of the artistic creativity that gives rise to these artefacts. It is worth remembering this early function of visual representation. Pictures were an existential intermediary of

a biological necessity. Today we put art in the category of culture. The purpose of art is to refine our senses, a hallmark of good taste and education. It also serves to entertain us. In primordial times, the creative ability of a few members of the group had a purely practical function: pictures furthered the principal goal of procreation. They were part of a biological programme. The purpose of the pictures and artefacts was quite simple. They were made to guarantee and regulate collective desire and thereby the survival of the group.



We have gone very deep. We climbed down the stairs right to the bottom of the museum. We looked at pictures and succumbed to their depths also. We closed our eyes and descended into the depths of the soul. We followed the course of rivers. We saw monsters. Finally we saw strangely shaped piles pass by in the bellies of boats. Female body parts, mouths, breasts, buttocks. Did we return to our origins? I will leave you to answer that.

We have seen enough. We want to leave this place and head towards the exit.



We trust in the technology we seem to take for granted these days.



We step into the lift, press the button and let ourselves be hauled out of the abyss, back into the brightness of the day. We reach the surface and it feels like we have suddenly opened our eyes. Dazed and relieved, we stand there blinking in a blaze of sunshine.

