

**Behind the Looking Glass /  
Reflections about Anatoly Shuravlev's "Viewing Deception"**

For at least two thousand years it has been known that light rays passing through a transparent converging lens produce an extremely enlarged image of the objects behind it, while in a concave lens the world is compressed in a minimum of space. These optical properties were already described by scholars as varied as Euclid, Abu Ali Alhazen, Leonardo or Johannes Kepler who also wondered about how they might be compared to the vision faculty of the human eye—and also how they could influence and, possibly, enhance it. The knowledge about light, refraction and the eye, which has been accumulating over the centuries, not least due to the research of the above thinkers, is often considered to be an inexorable process of scientific discoveries and developments allowing an ever more precise translation of the visible phenomena. As lenses and the devices using them are not merely seen as technical equipment in the field of optics, however, but traditionally also as a code for the seeing and comprehending subject, they just as much symbolize an increasingly rationalist view of the world. Integrated into magnifying glasses, microscopes and cameras, we are meanwhile advancing into hitherto invisible worlds at the nanoscale. Not least for that reason they are considered by many as a metaphor of enlightenment and perception even today. They are the physical incarnation of mankind's scientific curiosity.

Anatoly Shuravlev's thirty-six eye-foolers arranged in Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti seem to aspire to the exact opposite of enlightenment. Our focused gaze trained in perspectives is diffused behind the lenses into the approximative of the enlarged world so that the unity of space is scattered into many separate micro-worlds. In its methodology, *Viewing Deception* reverses Shuravlev's earlier installations that drew upon an enormous pool of collected film stills and actors' portraits which were embedded into acrylic glass spheres or billiard balls as millimeter-sized dots. The contrast is only a apparent one though, since both techniques—dwarf-like diminution or bizarre magnification—are aimed at analyzing vision and cognition as separate domains of experience that can indeed only be activated by a dynamic, autonomous viewer. This immanent contradiction residing at the reception level should be interpreted as a moral reflex response to a pathological development of our perceptive abilities.

So far for science. Most obviously, however, *Viewing Deception* addresses the play instinct as well, and with its crystalline light effects caters to our esthetic needs. As is well-known, glass lenses, which until today can only be manufactured by a handful of dedicated professionals with sufficient precision, from the very beginning have also been collector's items. They had their quite natural place next to sophisticated craftwork, precious stones and exotic artifacts in the cabinets of curiosities and Wonder Rooms of the European aristocracy. In the microcosm of these self-contained worlds they were not only met with appreciation as exclusive tools but possessed a second identity as entertainment objects for the educated classes. They were used for optical tomfoolery, furnishing amusement in experimental setups that nowadays we would rather associate with a historical market fair. It can be assumed that applying the optical properties of a lens in this way to most contemporaries did not appear to be incompatible at all with its scientific usefulness. This view was based on a holistic view of the world determined by the Divine in which science simply had not yet detached itself from other ways of interpreting the universe. What in Late Renaissance had not posed any problem yet began to differentiate in the Baroque era. And suddenly the lens became the instrument of precision through which one was meant to peer with appropriate seriousness. The modern notion ever since has been that our senses are deceiving us, and that reason corrects sense.

Before, however, the lens was a tool for sensually experiencing the world. Paradoxically it was the very possibility of distortions, the characteristic effect of extreme angles, that served as an esthetic corrective to the concept of beauty, comparable to the role of dwarfs or colored people at European courts who always, apart from their quasi-practical "usefulness" as musicians, servants or companions, also served as curiosities to validate the esthetic norm. This, in turn, stood in direct relationship to the divine order of the world which was deemed to be neatly arranged and in perfect proportion. Shuravlev's installation derives part of its effect from the very same source. We still comprehend the image of the others as objects of projection, as a possibility for

narcissistic self-adulation. Only today our validation stems from the endless torrent of images in the man-made analog and digital visual worlds.

Certain other aspects in analyzing the impact of the visual effects of Shuravlev's Venetian glass lenses can less well be supported historically. They rely on fascination, on that undertow of enchantment that *homo ludens* is unable to escape. This does not lie at the level of meanings (be they intended by the artist or projected by the viewer) but in the dynamics of the generated images. They cannot be proved, only postulated. It is a captivating, intangible power that at the level of sensual contemplation can be exhibited by the dissolution of durable and permanent shapes in the *sfumato* of almost infinite magnification which is the very subject of this artwork.

*Viewing Deception* is therefore a piece intended against the growing standardization and control of the viewer, against the abstraction of watching and the atomization of thought. The immanent contradiction that resides at all levels of reception should be interpreted as a moral reflex response to a pathological development of our perceptive abilities. In contrast with this is the faith in the power of the visionary body.

Text: Susanne Prinz (2011)

Translation: Werner Richter