

Itaru Hirano

## **The Privileged Visual Sense**

In the history of the development of media beginning with language and written letters, there were several important stages such as the invention of printing. Among these stages, the appearance of the technique of photography in the first half of the nineteenth century was particularly revolutionary. As a medium that could visually reproduce any object, photography spread rapidly during the course of modernization, accelerating the urge of human beings to exactly reproduce the real world. Within just 150 years, it has given birth to movies, television, videos, and digital images.

The development of visual media based on the technique of photography has not only radically changed society but also fundamentally transformed the conditions governing our perception and thinking. These visual media in particular have, together with the progress of modernization, had the effect of implanting in us the habit of giving priority and pride of place to the visual sense among the various senses. This could be described as the separation of seeing from the human body. Originally, the sense of sight was part of an indivisible whole and thus not easily separated from the other senses. But with the development of the visual media, this wholeness was lost and the visual sense became separated and refined as a superior tool for understanding the world around us. In the course of modernization, during which human eyes were rapidly superseded by mechanical eyes such as the camera, our dull bodies, cut off from the visual sense, have been left behind. This can be illustrated by countless examples, such the constant deluge of photographs and TV images, the diffusion of surveillance cameras, and the use of satellite images captured on a scale far beyond human capacity.



The images collected by Andreas M. Kaufmann remind us of this contemporary problem of an exclusive visual sense cut off from the body. Since most of these images are taken from the mass media, they pose afresh the question of how our visual perception has been given its privileged status through the mass media.

For instance, because we have seen many of these collected images via the mass media, we think we "know" about these incidents or events. Even if we were not actually in the place where the incident occurred, or have no detailed understanding of it, we already "know" or "comprehend" it. Through visual media, the idea that "seeing" is the same as "knowing" has become widespread, reflecting the special status of the visual sense. In times before the development of visual media, to know something meant to actually experience it, and this knowledge could only arise through the totality of the

experience of seeing, hearing and feeling. But now we live in an age when seeing is paramount and the visual sense dominates our experience. The main factor underlying this conditioning of our thinking is the mass media that produce these images in vast quantities.



Recent acts of terrorism and wars, which feature among Kaufmann's images, reflect this contemporary situation in its most extreme form. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center were a terrible tragedy that took the lives of several thousand people, but what has come to characterize the attacks even more are the images of terror etched indelibly in the minds of billions of people throughout the world through the countless pictures and photographs repeatedly shown on television and in newspapers and magazines. These mass media images stay vividly in the memories of people all over the world, including children, thus perpetuating the fear of terrorism. This is the mechanism through which visual images control and dominate us. The perpetrators of terrorist acts naturally place importance on this effect: it is an intended and integral part of their strategy. In this sense, the attacks on the World Trade Center have the aspect of "terrorism in images," and a similar view can be taken of modern high-tech wars. During the Gulf War, images of US bombing were precisely photographed from planes and satellites and shown in the media. These images, strikingly similar to those of video games, were essentially a means of providing the American people with convincing proof that enemy targets were being efficiently bombed to oblivion. At best, the public probably had only a peripheral interest in what was actually happening on the ground. It was a "war in images" in which primary importance was attached to the visual results. This trend in contemporary war or terrorism is an extreme example of the "pseudo-events" referred to Daniel J. Boorstin's study of media, *The Image* (1962). It also demonstrates the absolute authority of visual perception arising from the complicity between images and war discussed by Paul Virilio in his *Guerre et Cinéma I, Logistique de la perception* (1984).



The mass media thus accelerated the process through which the visual sense gained its privileged position while the totality of the senses was left behind and ultimately disintegrated. As an artist, Andreas M. Kaufmann is very sensitive to this almost inevitable situation. In an age when images are all processed instantly at digital codes, the restoration of the lost totality of the senses is now nearly impossible. Kaufmann seems to be searching for how we should relate to the world on the basis of this impossibility.

*Translated by Richard Sams*

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