

## **Fossil Air**

### On Daniel Lergon: Siderian Tides

“To understand the fossil, it is necessary to proceed from the present to the past, following a logical order, rather than from the past to the present, following a chronological order.” Quentin Meillassoux: *After Finitude*

Daniel Lergon’s work challenges the common notion of painting as the application of pigment to a neutral canvas whose only purpose is to act as a carrier. He paints in clear varnish on a retroreflective material designed to throw light back in the direction whence it came, and in water on oxidising iron dust particles. The surfaces produce the colour, modulated by a transparent medium.

The title of the exhibition at Ivorypress Space in Madrid refers to the Great Oxidation, a massive environmental change which started 2.3 billion years ago, during the Siderian Period, when cyanobacteria began producing oxygen by photosynthesis. Up until then free oxygen had been captured by dissolved iron matter. As oxygen sinks became saturated, free oxygen accumulated in the atmosphere and eventually caused the Huronian glaciation – the first and most severe of the ice ages on Earth.<sup>1</sup>

Siderian Tides begins as a corridor of light white paintings which lead up to a fond of rust. Figures resemble bamboo-like plants growing in sections and algae forming on cliffs and rock surfaces.<sup>2</sup> One series of paintings is made by a single or very few scraping motions, first downwards, then sideways off the canvas, the surface glowing with a dusty rainbow shine. Smooth, glassy shapes when we stand close to them, with strong light reflecting at their base, gradually changing to a darker shade at the top. Weighty varnish with material particles encapsulated within, the paint is thick, almost like an engineered surface itself – car paint or durable thick plastic is dribbled on, then scraped not in obvious patterns but in dynamic movements. Many object-forms appear to be in motion, either flying or falling. A trailing pattern of drops follows a body of matter being catapulted upwards, spraying, as it rises, liquids to the sides. The scraping is incredibly smooth in places, elsewhere there are grooves – dendrochronological growth rings, where material residue or particles on the blade left a pattern. Matter conditions the light’s ability to reflect back and shine.

Two vast white paintings<sup>3</sup> in the innermost part of the exhibition have sprawling gestural shapes and splashes, drips and puddles of varnish in open shapes on the mighty bright canvas. Serpentine roads and rivers cutting their paths through mountainsides, trickling then rushing. There is plenty of movement involved both in the making of these paintings and in experiencing them. What must have been a decided effort to control the application of varnish in shaping the figures looks light and ethereal, the expressivity in the creating motion counterbalanced by both a serenity and an energy of the light radiating and reflecting back around us as we pass or stand nearby. The white paintings cannot exist in any entirety without our interaction, they are not quite independent objects. In a conversation with art theorist and critic Hal Foster, the artist Richard Serra explains one of the ideas behind his monumental iron sculptures as making walking a part of an art work’s content.<sup>4</sup> It seems Daniel Lergon shares this interest of Serra’s, along with an industrial ‘language’ which I would attribute to the rust paintings. Not any one vantage point in the gallery lets us see the whole picture, we have to move and walk alongside the paintings in order to shade and let light hit the canvas from different directions. The art critic Kenneth Baker wrote about Serra’s sculptures that “[o]ur movements affect what we see” and that they work “to sensitize people to the unfelt perceptual activity that forms and evolves their views of the real.”<sup>5</sup> The white paintings prompt the question of their own essence by highlighting perception itself, demonstrating how colour appears as light hits the surface and demanding movement in taking them in.<sup>6</sup> Can they only really exist in the memory of the beholder?

Lergon’s works are generated from a set of premises according to which they develop. There are three contingent stages: Firstly, the background surface is prepared, either industrially as in the case of the retroreflective material, or mixed into a viscous paste of glittering iron powder and evenly brushed on in

fanned brush strokes. Secondly, transparent varnish or water is applied to this surface – poured, thrown, dribbled and pushed around on the surface with brushes and other objects, and in the case of the white paintings acts as a barrier to the reflecting light while in the rust paintings it oxidises and builds up a surface of different colours and depths. The third necessary stage of the white paintings is the movement involved in taking in the work – the movement of the audience before it, whereas the final stage of the rust paintings lies in their continuation to accumulate and slightly change hue with time, contingent on the atmosphere wherein they are kept.

A previous Lergon exhibition in Copenhagen has the medium and theme of oxidisation and the title Rost [Rust] in common with the first part of *West of the Tracks* (2003), a trilogy of documentaries by Chinese filmmaker Wang Bing on the demise of the Tie Xi industrial district in Shenyang, China.<sup>7</sup> The film starts, after introductory statements about the decline of industrial projects and factory closures, with an internal freight train ride – a steam train coming down the whitened snowy tracks of a mostly deserted industrial complex, going on for miles through a mist, past rusty skeletal steel structures without any apparent population or productivity. It is a documentation of the end of an (perhaps the) industrial era. The factory processed age-old raw materials mined from deep within the Earth: iron, copper and zinc ores were melted into liquid form while emitting noxious gases before petrifying into superior, more valued forms. Amongst smoke from the furnaces, stalagmites of ice formed on the ground at the copper plating plant, sunshine filtered through the corrugated steel ceiling and walls on to the dusty earth floor – an environment purposely made by humans and entirely pernicious to them.

Siderian Tides clearly has two sides: light and mineral matter; white and rust paintings that are positioned as opposites and codependents. The sculptural element of two elliptical paintings suspended on wires and supporting each other at the epicentre of the inner exhibition space is, to use a term from Hal Foster, a “primary object”<sup>8</sup> for the show – one that indicates Lergon’s interest in the dualism of light and matter expressed in previous exhibitions and during studio visits.<sup>9</sup> Lergon describes his decision to work with a double ellipse in this case: “The idea occurred to me in the context of this ‘planetary’ exhibition because of the challenges of representing something spherical on a flat surface. The elliptical shape is often used to capture the Earth on a world map for instance”. The white side of the ellipse is the one we encounter first, facing the rust paintings and opening up a horizon of white paintings. It has light growing staples, tubes, stems or stalks radiating upwards, outwards from a curly squiggly liquid mess at the base. On the flipside of this, in the ellipse’s rust counterpart against a background of rust paintings, a liquid body has left an imprint, before evaporating, in the shape of a mountain from above. Inverted, it is an abyss filled with magma. The ground is of a silvery bronze and graphite colour, the motif in flaming orange-vermilion red with its figure split in two like continents parting or forming. Expressive end-of-brush strokes break up the firm contours of the imprint. Rust paintings on the surrounding walls have aurora borealis light clouds hovering in one figure and browner, greyer backgrounds behind hammer and blade shapes and traces of greasedrips. The scissor-blades on one painting are an imprint and the material they are cutting is half imprint, half bled, brushed out. There are circular shapes in one painting suggesting the motion of a machine axle. Trickle and traces appear as if the canvases had been left in the deteriorating industrial environment of Tie Xi.

The experience for the visitor – the relationship between us, the perceiving subject, and the painting objects – strikes me as analogous to the epistemological problem of the knowledge of the unobservable. The philosopher Quentin Meillassoux addresses in *After Finitude* the problem of knowing what was before our time and consciousness, and uses the beginning of Earth and life as an example. Since we cannot have an empirical knowledge about the beginning of Earth – we were not present in order to experience or record it – we have to rely on data resulting from calculations from traces that are left. Meillassoux terms this kind of trace an ‘arche-fossil’ and claims that they are “... not just materials indicating the traces of past life, according to the familiar sense of the term ‘fossil’, but materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life. An arche-fossil thus designates the material support on the basis of which the experiments that yield estimates of

ancestral phenomena proceed – for example, an isotope whose rate of radioactive decay we know, or the luminous emission of a star that informs us as to the date of its formation.”<sup>10</sup>

Meillassoux criticises the way that we describe the accretion of the Earth as a strictly chronological development from the Big Bang, as if it had been created for and leading up to exactly this point in time, our present. In the quote at the beginning of this text he suggests we instead apply logical calculations and accept that “... the referents of the statements about dates, volumes, etc., existed 4.56 billion years ago as described by these statements – but not these statements themselves, which are contemporaneous with us.”<sup>11</sup> An acceptance of our planet as pre-existent of humans and not for us, and the humility that should ensue as a consequence of such a realisation, is much overdue.

As we enter this exhibition and experience an existence not entirely ‘man-made’ or finite, as we realise that we form a part of something taking place before us and within, as temporary and intimate as it may seem, this is precisely the key proposition to keep in mind when stepping back into the world outside.

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1 University of Zurich online news desk: Great Oxidation Event: More oxygen through multicellularity  
[http://www.mediadesk.uzh.ch/articles/2013/grosse-sauerstoffkatastrophe-mehr-sauerstoff-durch-vielzelligkeit\\_en.html](http://www.mediadesk.uzh.ch/articles/2013/grosse-sauerstoffkatastrophe-mehr-sauerstoff-durch-vielzelligkeit_en.html)  
(last accessed 24.03.2013)

2 A n earlier show of white paintings called Whiteout at Almine Rech Gallery in Paris in 2011 suggested polar landscapes and an ice age – a time before life on Earth. I have expanded on these thoughts in a previous essay called Light Matters soon to be published.

3 The two untitled paintings measure around 250 x 420 cm and 270 x 720 cm respectively.

4 Hal Foster: Richard Serra in Bilbao, Parkett 74, 2005, p. 33

5 Kenneth Baker: Richard Serra’s drawings function as sculpture  
(review of Richard Serra Drawing, SFMOMA, 2011), SFGate, 15 October 2011

<http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Richard-Serra-s-drawings-function-as-sculpture-2327215.php#photo-1787469>  
(last accessed 18.03.13)

6 I t is true of any colour or pigment that it is reliant upon light to make it visible but here it becomes extraordinarily apparent.

7 Wang Bing: West of the Tracks – Rust, preview

[http://youtu.be/1\\_z4BTaTRko](http://youtu.be/1_z4BTaTRko) (last accessed 20.03.2013)

8 Foster, 2005, p. 33

9 Previous exhibitions on this subject include dualis (2011, Christian Larsen, Stockholm) and 3000K (2011, Galerie Andreas Huber Gallery, Vienna).

10 Quentin Meillassoux: After Finitude – An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency, (Tr. Ray Brassier), London and New York, 2008, pp. 20–22

11 I bid, p. 25

Emma Gradin is an independent curator based in London and Stockholm. She has written on Daniel Lergon’s work previously in the essay Light Matters (soon to be published) and introductory texts for exhibitions at Almine Rech Gallery in Paris and Christian Larsen in Stockholm.