

## Chris Coffin: *Tracing Time's Irreversibility*

### *The breakdown of a baroque fascination for the mathematical sublime*

Recently, the Belgian aesthetician Herman Parret defined *baroquizing* as a central strategy used by contemporary artists<sup>1</sup>. By this, he means a pursuit of the *extreme*, inspired by a fascination for the excessively large or the excessively small. In his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant names this an attraction for the *mathematical sublime*, an experience of the outrageously big or small as “absolutely great” (§25)<sup>2</sup>. In the aesthetic experience of the mathematical sublime, our imagination is not only defied but finally overpowered by a gradual raise towards an ‘unrepresentable’ infinity. An artistic way to confront the spectator with this unrepresentable infinity is *collecting*, where *baroquizing* stands for a presentation of excessive quantities (of the ‘too much’), or of the extremely precise or detailed (of the ‘too little’).

Chris Coffin is a collector. Obsessed by the sea and its surroundings, he lives in Long Beach, Long Island, facing the beach. His *Space, Sea and Earth Series* studies systematically the storms - the ‘excessively large’ - occurring near his living environment. To that extent, he made an agreement with the NASA: the authority transfers to him satellite photos of these storms through the Internet, which Coffin subsequently reproduces in the form of small digital Iris prints. At the same time, he collects a sample of seasand - the ‘excessively small’ - as close as possible to the epicenter of the storm, which he presents in a test tube carrying its name (e.g. *CHANTAL*, *LUIS*, *OPAL*), attached on the wall next to the picture of the corresponding storm. The infinitely large, the macroscopic or the storm, invisible in its totality as we see it on the photographic image, is as such made graspable to Coffin’s and our imagination. The confrontation of these images with a collected heap of microscopic elements, the seasand in the test tubes that actually lived the storm, drives the discrepancy between the largeness of the storm and the smallness of the elements that underwent it and most heavily lived it, to the top. The absolute greatness of the power of the large (the storm) and the subsequent resistance of the small (the sand), defies our imaginative forces in its overwhelming sublimity.

Coffin’s fascination for “ocean-related issues, no matter what form [they take]”<sup>3</sup>, doesn’t end at this point. The *Strand Line Series*, a large installation where he puts all kinds of objects found on the beach into beakers filled with seawater, confronts us with the other

side of the mirror than the one displayed in the *Space, Sea and Earth Series*. Although the reference to Joseph Beuys's *Wirtschaftswerte* (1980) immediately raises to our mind, Coffin's installation couldn't possibly operate in a more distinct way. As opposed to the mythological and religious connotations with which Beuys loaded his work, Coffin on the contrary confronts us with the inevitable decay and leftovers on the shore. He makes us experience them as if they were not useless debris to be repressed or transcended by hopelessly cleaning them up and displacing the entire problem to overloaded dumping grounds, but rather as something precious to be cherished, to be preserved in spirits, each piece obtaining its own individual beaker. This however, is not to be understood without a solid dose of irony. The rubbish put ashore by the waves breaks through the illusory enchantment of the sublimity displayed by nature's forces in the *Space, Sea and Earth Series*, and demonstrates sharply the inevitable decrease towards a dissolution of its seaming perfection. Its ephemerality is demonstrated paradigmatically in a 90 minute audio recording of sea sounds, afterwards drowned in a beaker full of sea water and as such forever and irreversibly inaudible.

#### *Coffin as "Entropologist"*

Coffin's fascination with the tracing of the irreversible or entropic decay of our living environment, not in the overtly obvious surroundings of the city, but rather through the subtle droppings of the ocean, make him an "entropologist"<sup>4</sup>. His entire artistic project is devoted to the study of the ecological, meteorological, and environmental conditions surrounding the ocean, and how they affect our daily life. The artistic medium that will register and afterwards communicate his observations, is solely determined by how he judges in a concrete situation that his ideas can be most accurately expressed. As a result, Coffin's work testifies of an extreme variation in form, while at the same time remaining strongly unified from a conceptual viewpoint.

To photography, however, the artist accords a privileged position. Here again, he uses it solely as a *tool*, a medium or *modus* to communicate his artistic intentions, and never as an end in itself<sup>5</sup>. An obvious reason is of course photography's *indexical* nature by excellence, occupying a privileged position in the registering of events forever lost<sup>6</sup>. A further explanation is provided by the way how large-format color photography is able to blur the boundaries between artistic media and deliver a painterly impression. His grid-like installation called *Sea weed fields*, 1996 is the epigone of Coffin's attack of the conventions of modernist painting by means of the photographic medium. Formally explicitly referring to

the modernist grid<sup>7</sup>, the *fields* - in their abstract green beauty - make a thoroughly painterly impression, as encouraged by the large scale of the *ensemble*. Pushing the reference to modernist painting to the extreme, Coffin's slices of seaweed literally evoke the abstract expressionist brushstroke. The apparent painterly homogeneity of the whole is not only overtly perturbed by its being an installation of photographs, but as well in a more subtle way through the disturbance of its seaming purity by barely visible pieces of plastic and rubbish that came ashore together with the seaweed. Functioning as a Barthesian *punctum*, a traumatic confrontation with death and decay, they irreversibly disturb the sublime perfection of this *tableau*. This fatal *coup de bassesse*, this "low blow" towards a confrontation with the seaweed's mere condition as waste spit out and abandoned by the ocean, leaves us with nothing but the *uncanny* sight of the *entropic* condition of an *informe* mass of seaweed, sand and debris<sup>8</sup>.

*Sea Weed Circle #1*, 1996 is a work Coffin realized on the beach after a storm, which subsequently disappeared again in the next upcoming tide. Known to the spectator only through the photographs he took of it, these images take up a special function as documents, privileged testimonies or photographic *indexes* of something that was once there and has forever disappeared. Again, obvious references come to mind, foremost the primary "entropologist" Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1969-1970), today overflowed as well by the Great Salt Lake. Realizing that this was however not Smithson's original intention, Coffin's work differs from Smithson's, since he conceived initially of the *Sea Weed Circles* (and the *Fields*) as ephemeral works that were only briefly experienced *in situ* by the artist himself and some of his friends or a contingent passer-by. As such, the *Sea Weed Circles* come closer to Richard Long's *A Sculpture Left by the Tide, Cornwall, England* (1970), in its form an explicit reference to *Spiral Jetty*, meant as well to be washed away with the next high tide and to 'exist' afterwards solely by the photographic material the artist made of it. But again, Coffin's photographs distinguish themselves from Long's in their explicit painterly dimensions. Forever separated from their original, they are presented as color reproductions in large formats, responding to high technical standards. That makes them differ radically from the way the photo operated as a document for Land Art-artists in the '70s, who generally paid few attention to the quality of the testifying image. The photo-document was usually a relatively small black-and-white photograph, clearly subordinated to the 'real' work of art itself. Coffin's large color images of his private performances on the beach, on the contrary, are *pictures* in their own right, blurring once again the boundaries between the experience of photography and painting.

### *Experiencing Time's Irreversibility*

The ephemeral nature of human life and the constant changing of man's surroundings, form an integral part of Coffin's artistic enterprise. Again this dimension of his artistic production becomes particularly clear in the *Rust drawings* he realizes on Library Cards and on paper. Coffin makes these drawings by pouring a mixture of Iron Oxide and Sea Water on paper, displayed *horizontally* on the floor. The result are *formless* stains of rust, testifying at every point their horizontal position of production<sup>9</sup>. The transience of objects is accentuated in the Library Cards drawn on with rust, anti-monuments to intellectual knowledge by excellence, referring not only to the ultimate erasure of libraries and the thousands of books packed into them, but also to the ultimate disappearance of every human being, however smart and educated he might be. The Graphite vertical stripe radically separating these cards in the middle, tautologically confronts us with the final triumph of time over the vanities of life, and the entropic erosion to which we are fatally subjected.

Coffin's concerns with the problematic of time's irreversible progression, is made clear most explicitly in *A year of Horizons*, an ongoing work. It is specifically concerned with the registering of natural temporal processes and the measuring of time passing by. On January 1, 1998, he installed a camera looking out his window at the dunes, ocean and horizon from a static and unchanging vantage point. Every morning at 7.20 a.m., he snaps a picture randomly, "capturing whatever happens to become the composition of that moment"<sup>10</sup>. He considers it to be a "daily record, collection, documentation" of his immediate environment and location, recognizing that the implications of the work are far more general and farreaching<sup>11</sup>. Here again, artistic practices of the late '60s and early '70s can be recalled, like the obsessive activities of On Kauai, registering for example every morning at what time he woke up and mailing this to his friends by way of postcards<sup>12</sup>. Coffin himself adequately describes the aim of *A Year of Horizons* as follows:

"1. I am intrigued by weather and how it affects our environment. Through the daily documentation of an approaching ocean storm system, you can see the slow and daily progression of how a storm slowly builds and climaxes with its fury (Waves, Wind, Erosion,...etc.) then slowly leaves. When each picture is placed chronologically next to each other, you get to see the subtle meteorological changes that *occur over time* [italics added]. It is dynamic, changing, and cyclical.

2. I am intrigued by the natural light at the beach and how even with the same composition day after day, that the composition is ultimately and dramatically different depending on the weather and the light. I started looking at Monet's paintings of the Rouens [sic.] Cathedral where he painted the structure from the same vantage point every day. Each was dramatically different yet the same.

3. Finally [...], I am trying to show the viewer that there is tremendous beauty [...] in nature if you just stop to watch and experience it. For example, one morning, the light may be casting shadows

across the dunes, another morning it may be so foggy that you can't even see the dunes. One morning, there may be a boat on the horizon, and another morning the waves will be 15 feet tall with the next morning being completely flat and placid after a storm's passing"<sup>13</sup>.

The artist confronts us with the difference of the same, the cyclical return of the irremediably lost, of the identical as pure vanity. Compacting in one visual and tactile space an entirely past period (eight months up to today), the work very much operates in the same way as Hanne Darboven's *Ein Jahrhundert* (1971-75) or On Kawara's *One Million Years* (1970), making us traumatically aware of time irreversibly lost. In a dramatic way, the work confronts us with our own upcoming death, realizing itself every day again a little more.

Coffin's collections witness a *virtuosity*, marking the *qualitative* superiority of his artistic project that counterbalances his obsession with quantitative outrage. The *excess in presentation* (the repetitive confrontation of the viewer with similar issues, events and objects) is explained paradoxically by the artist's existential need to find a possibility of *representing the excess* (the 'too large', or 'too small').

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<sup>1</sup> H. Parret, 'Hedendaagse kunst en moderniteit', in ????. He derives this artistic strategy from the term 'neo-baroque', launched for the first time by the Italian semiotician Omar Calabrese in his book *L'età neobarocca* (1987) [English transl. by Ch. Lambert as *Neo Baroque, A Sign of the Times*, foreword by U. Eco, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992)]. Leaving aside the all too overtly 'postmodern' connotations of the notion 'neo-baroque', the term *baroquizing* can be adequately used in the context of Coffin's work.

<sup>2</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, transl. J.C. Meredith, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 94. This "absolute greatness" of the excessively large or small is to be understood in terms of '*grandeur*'.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to the author, June 22d, 1998.

<sup>4</sup> The term is taken from an essay by James Lingwood on Robert Smithson, entitled 'The Entropologist', in *Robert Smithson: le Paysage entropique*, exhib. cat., (Marseille: Musées de Marseille, Réunion des musées nationaux, 1993), 29-36.

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<sup>5</sup> For the use of photography as an artistic medium, and how it operates as a *modusphenomenon*, see my 'Photography: from *modus* to Pictures', in *The Photographic Paradigm*, eds. A. Balkema & H. Slager, *L & B*, Series of Philosophy of Art and Art Theory, vol. 12, (Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 1997), 148-162.

<sup>6</sup> For the indexical function of the photographs as used by seventies' artists, see the pioneering essays by R.E. Krauss, 'Notes on the Index: Part 1' and 'Notes on the Index: Part 2', first published in *October*, nos. 3 and 4 (Spring and Fall 1977), both reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1986), 196-219.

<sup>7</sup> The canonical text on this issue is of course the essay by Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Grids', *October*, 9 (Summer 1979), reprinted in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1986), 8-22.

<sup>8</sup> I obviously refer to the operation of the *informe* as theorized by Y.-A. Bois and R.E. Krauss in *Formless: A User's Guide*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> See on this point the section *Horizontality* in Y.-A. Bois and R.E. Krauss in *Formless: A User's Guide*, (New York: Zone Books, 1997). An interesting remark is the fact that Coffin is particularly attracted to the work and figure of Jackson Pollock, whose nearby house and studio in East Hampton, Long Island (nowadays a museum open to the public), he visited at regular occasions.

<sup>10</sup> Letter to the author, June, 22d, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> One could think as well of Jan Dibbets's 'The Shortest Day at the Konrad Fisher's Gallery' (1970), or Edmund Kuppel's registrations of the sun in his series 'Die Sonne' (1972-74), to name only two obvious examples of the artistic period Coffin's entire work is clearly mostly referring to.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to the author, June 22d, 1998.