

Medium Specificity

or Photography by other means

There are a couple of notable points in Lucas Knipscher's show. It consists of discrete objects—ceramics, wax, paintings—but the logic of presentation is installation. Unlike most installations, there is not much “stuff”; the environment is sparse and objects look displaced. “Installation art,” Rosalind Krauss says, was not a break from logic of medium specificity but instead an (oft unacknowledged) extension of a given medium that takes the specific logic of significations that constitute it and moves it into space. If we accept that this show is fundamentally a type of installation, then I think this show is the consequence of what used to be called the medium of Photography.

In order to unpack this, I need to trace some antecedents. There are lots of body surrogates on display: meat, (metal) bone, skins for projection (gridded, rendered paintings depicting antiquities from The Met). Maybe sarcophagi in the ceramic molds of cellphone towers. Paul Thek's *Technological Reliquaries* are the strongest antecedent. Here's what he says about the synthetic meat-under-glass works (made of painted dentist's wax):

Inside the glittery, swanky cases—the ‘Modern Art’ materials that were all the rage at the time, Formica and glass and plastic—was something very unpleasant, very frightening, and looking absolutely real¹.

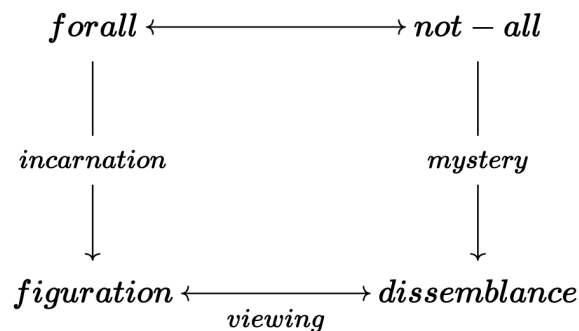
First, Thek's works hinge on the uncanny effects of painted wax: the meat looks stranger, more unsettling than actual meat under glass. Second, these works are often seen as resistance against the cool aesthetics of minimalism and pop. Thek reintroduced the body—queer, heterodox, Catholic, mystic—where pop and minimalism elided it. The logic lies in the material's stuttering: wax signifies meat but exceeds mere signification, displacing figuration while producing it.

There is a version of this logic in the pictorial tradition where it is also, because of its religious (again Catholic) context, accompanied by much discursive work: Fra Angelico. The theory starts with Pseudo Dionysus the Areopagite and goes through Aquinas and the Thomists before arriving at the Dominicans and Angelico. It's too much to do justice to here, but George Didi-Huberman has an excellent book on Angelico that tries to excavate that logic, which he summarizes as “dissemblant similitudes.” Anagogy, a concept from Pseudo Dionysus, extends beyond linguistic negation to a material excursus. In language, anagogy proceeds through negation, naming the divine by what it is not (e.g., the worm as the furthest from God's grandeur). In Fra Angelico's paintings, this unfolds through a slippage between signification and material: the paint both represents and disrupts, pointing to the divine

¹ Interview by Richard Flood. “PAUL THEK: REAL MISUNDERSTANDING.” *Artforum*, October 1981.

through its opacity and excess. This material excursus allows the work to gesture toward the limits of representation, where meaning emerges in the tension between figuration and its unraveling.

We'll get to how this old concept of anagogy might relate to Knipscher's "photography" in a second, but let's go a little further into the mechanics of where and how it works first. The incarnations of anagogical logic don't end with the Dominicans: you can take Thek and Eva Hesse's work of the 60s, at a minimum, and, perhaps maximally, take the text of *Informe: A User's Manual* by Krauss and Bois as an encyclopedia. I'm going to try to formalize the core logic using Didi-Huberman's terms and allege that it is the core logic of the informe. "Forall" and "not-all" are Lacanianisms and point to different quantifiers². In Didi-Huberman's *Angelico*, the standard signifying repertoire of painting is on the side of the universal: figuration, allegory, icon, etc synthesize across the domains of linguistic difference. Not-all is the divine to which one gets access only by dissemblance:



Effectively, the aesthetic experience happens between figuration and dissemblance and it opens onto the opacity and limits of representation. This characterized the artist's enterprise during Fra Angelico's time and, though the terms have changed, the logic has not.

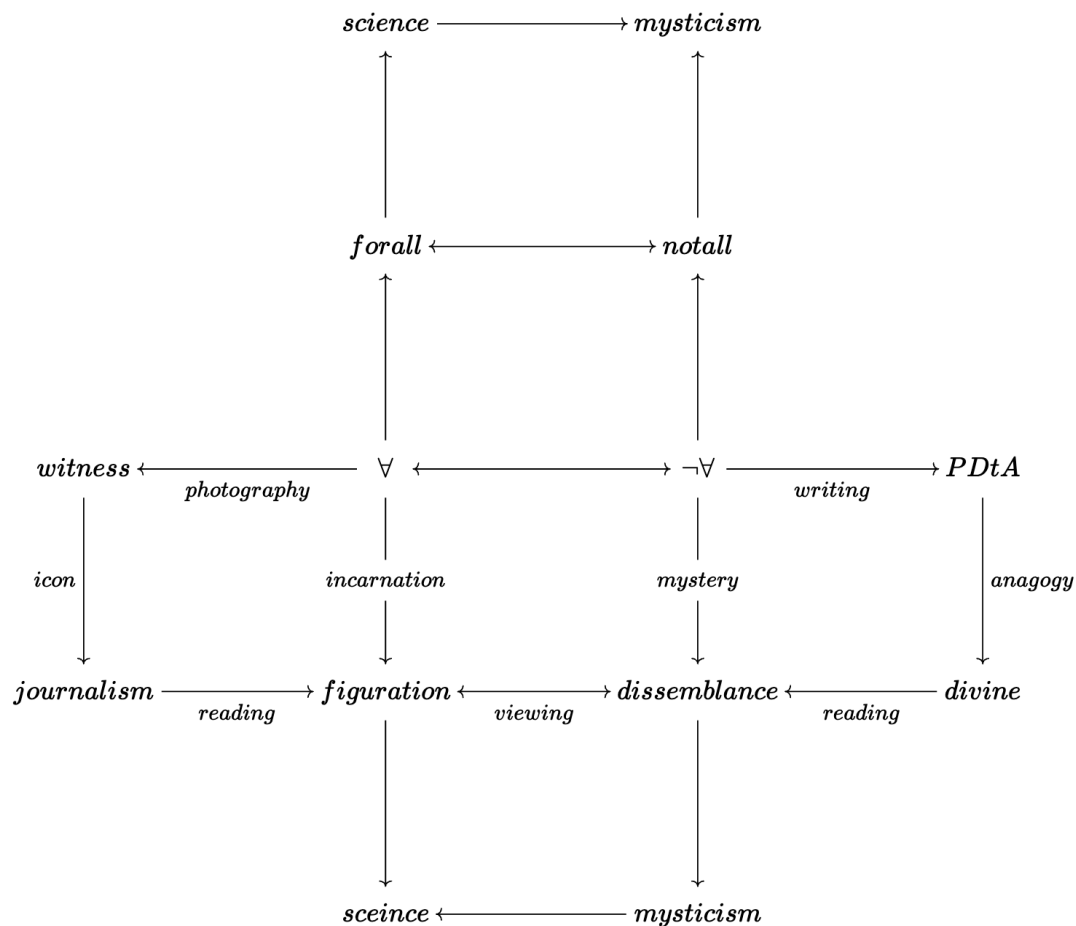
Why photography? My reading has two parts:

1. Knipscher has long worked in "photography" and the terms in play in this work seem to borrow from that logic. The ceramics are molds, indexes of their subjects; the subjects—cellphone towers—transmit signals using the same electromagnetic spectrum as Daguerre and the "images" are projected via the old

² Lacan's "not-all" logic twists traditional quantifiers. Unlike "forall" or "exists," which define clear scopes, "not-all" refuses to pin down whether it means none, some, or most—it only says something's not universal. This marks a limit in signification and is indebted to Pseudo Dionysus' negative dialectics as much as Frege's logic.

painterly grid method and rendering—which is a verb which literally means to give flesh. This transposition from photography’s projections, transmissions, and indexes into installation is an anagogical move on the level of terms of photography.

2. Photography in the present moment has veered away from the “dissemblance” pole and toward the “figuration” pole. One might even make the argument that photography’s function as media has overtaken its promise to be a medium. In the same way that the dominant form of poetry has become prose and the dominant form of prose has become journalism (fictional or no), photography has become a frictionless ground for the support of semiotic content. With the exception of a few practices—practices that used to be called “deconstructive,” contemporary photography has gone the way of efficient communication, which elides the material limits of the fleshy transmitters/receivers that are coextensive with the signifiers that move them.



— Tim Pierson
Lisbon, October 2025