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## OF STARRY FACES AND CELESTIAL FLOWERS

by Nadine Olonetzky

Dots, bursts, ribbons of light in yellow, green, violet and blue; a thousand shimmering points of colour. A shining, twinkling face, perhaps, or a ghostly mob emerging from a dark room, roaming against a strange night sky. Romeo Vendrame's *Neutrino head* and *Neutrino half* photo series, created between 2004 and 2006, explore the space where shapes merge into the non-objective and abstraction takes over. The face, which we perceive only indefinitely, and the half-figure, apparently suspended in the blackness, consist of clouds of luminous dots. Like weightless, glittering ornaments, they recall cosmic phenomena such as hitherto undiscovered constellations or an alien milky way. Certainly the black depths out of which these disembodied faces and sparkling figures shine suggests the endlessness of space – inhospitably vast, lonely and cold. The effect is chilling but also a reminder that everything is interconnected and made of the same basic materials – be it moss, stars, man or stone. Neutrinos, the particles from which the series take their names, «are not among the building blocks of the cosmos» however<sup>(1)</sup>. They are, in fact, solar emissions, tiny chargeless subatomic «ghost particles of an insignificantly small size» that shoot from Sun to Earth at close to the speed of light, whizzing around us and through us in unimaginable quantities. They pass through matter of all kinds – through trees, mountains, humans and stones. They penetrate «clouds» of protons, neutrons and electrons, even those that are large enough to be identified by our naked eyes as creatures, plants or objects, those things from which we derive a temporary sense of security and which form the basis for all manner of perceptions, actions and decisions. Such is the nature of life, this dance performed by changeable atomic constellations surrounded and permeated by neutrinos, by ghost particles.

Stanislaw Lem's fantastical novel *Solaris*, which features sinister figures that the author calls «Phi-creatures» and describes as «neutrino structures», was a key inspiration for Romeo Vendrame. In the book, a living ocean generates «neutrino figures» from the subconscious and past of the three scientists stationed on the planet Solaris. In his *Neutrino* series, Vendrame takes a large, apparently uniform whole and breaks it down to its micro-level constituents: he atomises the portrait's outward appearance in several stages, shattering perceptions of what began as a clear image via manipulations of the medium. What we are left with is a picture of a picture of a picture, where only traces of the original conventional portrait or half-figure remain, the suggestion of a person, a being that is neither man nor woman, but rather a neutral presence haunting the space – a manifestation brought forth from the past or the subconscious, perhaps, that has allowed a momentary snapshot to be made of its likeness. This visual manifestation is only made possible by image creation processes however; what remains at the end of the transformation is a visual truth that has no relation to the visible world.

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Having worked first as a typesetter, then from 1979 to 1991 as an experimental musician, and finally as an artist, Romeo Vendrame takes an exploratory approach to each new medium, seeking out traces of memory, of visual impressions, colours and sounds. With keen ears and an open mind towards coincidences and the poetry of the moment, Vendrame is an amateur (in the original sense of the word) who embarks on his exploration of the medium unencumbered by the formal constraints of the professionally trained.

His ambient music, for instance, is conjured mostly from everyday objects and has a striking, characteristically visual feel. When listening to the tracks «Die Verteilung der Winde» [The Dispersion of the Winds] and «Im Wasser» [In Water], both of which can be found on his CD *the principle of moments* (RecRec, 1992), images pass in front of the mind's eye and form a movie made up of various scenes.

Since 1997, Romeo Vendrame has been exploring the possibilities of photography. His interest is not so much the traditional reproduction of an image, however, as the painterly qualities of the medium. Although his photographs are ostensibly of visible real-world objects, the finished pictures convey a reality that has little to do with the original objects. Instead the magic of each picture derives from the detour it takes through the medium, via which the invisible spirits lurking within each person, thing, flower, tree or blade of grass and swirling around in front of the lens – or is that just the neutrinos? – suddenly seem visible.

In the three-part series *low life* (1998/99), we see circular shapes that remind us of distant planets hurtling through the cosmos. And yet we are unable to quite place the pictures' motifs, which also resemble scientific images of egg cells (part 1), or recall unidentified objects flying through sky-like coloured spaces or swimming through water (part 3). We find strange life forms – half-plant, half-animal, entirely uncategorisable – and unexplainable landscapes. We seem to be looking at something plastic and yet at the same time are reminded of encrusted salt lake surfaces (part 2). In short: no single definition seems adequate. What these photographs have in common – and what they share with Vendrame's other work – are the confusing perspectives, the occasional glimpses of axes of symmetry and the way they take us in two different directions at once: leading us down into the infinitesimally small and from there off into the far distance, into huge open spaces, then returning us to the microscopic. With these early works based on three-dimensional objects and coloured surfaces, Romeo Vendrame has created abstract visual worlds that are without place or name, existing somewhere at the beginning of an indeterminate something.

Another reference point for Vendrame is the work of the Polish author Andrzej Stasiuk, whom he quotes in his first book «Afterglow»<sup>(2)</sup>: «It's just their traces that reach me now, phantoms of defined objects, captured halfway between existence and existence in name only.» With his *Art of Memory* project (1999/2000),

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Vendrame uses important family photos donated by friends and acquaintances to explore the construction of individual and collective memory. How and why do we remember what we remember? Which portion do we choose to store in our memory banks, and what do we cut away from the original scene? From where do we view and record the remembered scene, which words tell the story? That each member of a family will relate a different version of family events is well known. This is, in essence, a genuinely artistic activity; the arts, after all, shape our cultural collective memory by helping us to remember and come to terms with past events, a process that involves questioning and re-evaluating, that can provoke anger, create productive confusion and make us laugh.

Like *Neutrino*, Vendrame's *curiosus naturae spectator* series (cns, 2002 on), in which earthly flora forms the starting point but is subsequently transformed, appears otherworldly, as if the work came from some fairytale forest, or at least from a place that cannot be precisely defined. It takes us in close, finding magic in the ordinary and greatness in small things. The subjects are flowers, grasses and trees, but Vendrame uses the tools of photography to create his own painterly world of imagery and colour. Here too, the medium is used to transform the subject, taking us from a ground-level, close-up perspective to views of an unreal sky, of the depths of a fantasy cosmos, where the invisible horizon acts as an imaginary axis of symmetry across which the worlds above and below are reflected. Our perspective is turned on its head. We imagine ourselves to be in a star-studded night sky but, at the same time, on flower-strewn Earth – and yet we find ourselves in a new and unfamiliar reality, a world that exists only in the picture.

Romeo Vendrame's role here is that of the curious nature-watcher who plucks from the air the visual signals broadcast by flowers, grasses and trees and transforms them into a new visual reality. Like some fairytale scene in the half-light, the pictures convey the fantastical atmosphere of a semi-natural, semi-artificial world. As the product of analogue processes rather than computer manipulation, these photographs have the air of a romantically inspired antidote to digital image generation: the mysticisation of nature in an age of technological imagery perhaps. Either way, they transport us to an aperspectival space in which colour is used to create a dream-like reality. Vendrame has now added mountain themes to the series. Looking like something from an alien planet or moon, these surreal landscapes suggest not so much real topographies as the kind of scenery that has entered our consciousness via science fiction movies or fantasy novels. They call up our images of magical, fantastical worlds, of mysterious and menacing environments, and awaken visions of dream landscapes that rise from the depths, bathed in strange light or unusual colours. They deal, on the one hand, with the point at which observations and notions of nature merge but, at the same time, speak first and foremost to our inner landscapes. They suggest realities that are without end, and yet at one with atomised life and all its whizzing ghost particles.

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1 Govert Schilling, Unser Universum, Kosmos, Stuttgart 2004

2 Romeo Vendrame, Afterglow, edition fink, Zurich 2001

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