

WHAT YOU SEE, IS WHAT YOU GET.

‘Oh, Kitty! how nice it would be if we could only get through into Looking-glass House! I’m sure it’s got, oh! such beautiful things in it! Let’s pretend there’s a way of getting through into it somehow, Kitty. Let’s pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it’s turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It’ll be easy enough to get through —’ She was up on the chimney-piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how she had got there. And certainly the glass WAS beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist.

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

One of the things that I really liked about the Vechte at Nordhorn, from the first time I visited, was that it reminded me of a stretch of the River Stour I had known well as a boy. The Stour, in some ways a much more rural river, ran through the water meadows. Weeds and lilies floated on its surface, pulled by the current. We children swam in the deep water just above the weir. It was only ever the sunlit surface that was warm, underneath the river ran on cold and dark, weeds occasionally wrapping your legs like a warning if you dived down deep beneath the surface. Below the weir, the river divided in two, one half slow and steady going on into the flour mill, where it drove the grinding wheels before falling turbulently into the mill pond and drifting out to join its other half, which all the while had been rushing and bouncing along. I preferred this quicker half, the water was shallower and humped and dipped in partnership with the riverbed. It was shallower, you could see more – especially from the cattle bridge. Leaning over the rails you could watch the swinging weeds and the darting life in the eddying river below. The mill

reach was always dark, overshadowed by chestnut trees along the bank, which the surface reflected back, black against the sky. At the end of the reach the river plunged mysteriously through a grille into the noisy mill. This grille kept the largest floating debris from interfering with the machinery of the grinding wheels as the water passed through the mill. The track from the village led over the water meadows, crossed the lower branch of the river and passed by the mill itself on a walkway over this grille.

It was always interesting to look down and see what flotsam had been creamed off the water's surface, mostly twigs and branches but also bits of crates and boxes and, occasionally, dead fish. Once there was a dead cat. There were two other bridges in the water meadows, curiously abandoned, bridges over nothing, but whose purpose became clear when the winter floods made the river spread across the water meadows, reopening old pathways for itself. Then these bridges kept the track to the mill open.

Summer mornings – I could never sleep and would go out, leaving the sleeping house and walking across the wet fields to the river. Fish interested me. I was endlessly fascinated by the grey shapes I could see flitting from clump to clump of the weed beds or, on a hot afternoon, floating in the sunlit surface water. I'd begun to learn that different patches of water had different inhabitants; nervous dace darting where the water was shallow and ran rippling over the bed; roach in slightly deeper water, running in the channels between the weeds, the weeds themselves flicking lazily to and fro as the current swung and eddied; perch where the water was deeper still and the brown river began to hide the bottom; pike lurking in the deepest waters, prowling amongst the stems of the lily pads, an unseen, hunting presence advertised by the occasional panicky eruption of tiny fish from the surface.

I was often fishing. I wasn't much good at it and later gave it up because I no longer liked it, but at the time I was keen. One morning, in a favourite spot I began to notice a fish different from the rest, just visible in the dark patch under some floating weeds, hanging back but occasionally snapping something floating past. Finally recognizing it as a brown trout – the roundels I could make out on its back were a giveaway – I began to fish for it. It was a discovery. The fish seemed to be a secret that I wanted to unlock. Every morning I would be up and out trying every bait I knew or had heard of, wet flies, worms, maggots, larvae, minnows, bread, cheese: a whole diet drifted past the fish's nose. Occasionally it would grab at something, only to spit the baited hook out almost instantly. My tackle got lighter and lighter until finally there was just a light line and a tiny hook with whatever bait I was trying floating down the river whilst I tried to keep contact without jerking the line. Finally catching the fish made me proud, but was also perhaps disappointing. The connection that I had made between out of the water and in the water had been electrifying, almost as if I'd been talking, but with the fish in my hand it was gone. I'd lost the guide that carried me into the river.

In the film *The War of the Worlds*, at one point the optical extension of one of the Martian invaders is linked up to a video monitor. "Now let's see what a Martian sees!" says one of the actors, as if seeing and cognition were separated acts. One of my favourite school-textbook diagrams was an explanation of the fish-eye view. The fish looking upwards, out of the water, is only able to see through the surface within a narrow circle. Beyond that circle light is internally reflected and an image of the river or sea bottom replaces that of the bank or shore. The fish has a window that moves around with it. The greater the depth the smaller the window. Similarly, from the land, looking down from above the water can be seen through, whereas at an acute angle the water reflects rather than refracts light and an image of sky, clouds, trees – the surroundings – appears in the surface. These of course are mechanical

explanations, fish might as well be Martians. Nevertheless what's interesting about this textbook diagram is the notion that the surface is OCCASIONALLY transparent, OCCASIONALLY penetrable, depending on the viewpoint. My hunting the trout seemed to involve opening that window through the surface.

Surface is both the extent of our looking and that which constitutes appearance. How do I look? is the question we ask others of ourselves. The body is at the same time behind the appearance, its substance. *The Man with the X-Ray Eyes* changed his receptivity to the electromagnetic spectrum by means of a chemical treatment: eye drops. In optical examinations, eye drops are sometimes used to dilate the pupil and the feeling afterwards is often of too much light entering the eye, of somehow seeing too much, so there is some logic to the use of eye drops as the means of expanding the range of perception. To begin with the treatment has salacious results – at a party it appears to him that no-one is wearing any clothes. Then this increased capacity becomes a diagnostic miracle: he is able to look through a girl's skin and detect the presence of a malignant but operable tumour. Following an accident, he is stripped of his research funding and cast out both from the hospital and from the scientific community. Isolated and alone he continues the dosage that transforms his vision and earns money in a circus performing mind-reading tricks, as a mental freak. Finally and tragically he can no longer see anything except colour and pattern, since there is no longer any barrier to his vision. He sees everything and nothing, receptivity destroys all objects, there are no longer any surfaces. There is no more world.

The marvellous membrane that is the water surface seems to me to be on the edge of appearance, an outer limit of objecthood. It's another world down there.

I sees a blackbird up a tree,

I sees him and he sees me . . .

Traditional song

The second thing to try and write about at Nordhorn is – why two? In some ways the proposal to have two parts to the work is a fairly natural development from being interested in the water. The original site, Landspitze, is the point where two streams of the same river meet. Since there is a point where they come together again, there is also a place where they part. To me this was an immediate question – where does the stream split? A connection was always clear, though the consequences of making the connection were not. In many ways the two places, Neumarkt where the stream splits and Landspitze where the two streams reconnect, allow a between, make a space, a before and after, a beginning and end. Nordhorn lies BETWEEN the two points. I'm only a tourist, so it's fair to say that this is a Nordhorn of the mind, something that I have imagined. Nevertheless this Nordhorn is a single place, a node or fixed point in space. The river on the other hand is clearly in both places, Landspitze and Neumarkt, at the same time. It is therefore not fixed in space. A visitor is always only ever in one place at one time. And a part of the experience of the work lies in going from one part to the other. In going from one to the other the work becomes confused with the visitor's experience, a combination of that which comes from the place and that which is brought to it.

There is something else. I know what I want, I know where I want it to be and I know what condition I want it to be in, but circumstance, material fact or contingency impinge. The two parts of the work do not behave and the life of the river treats them with a familiarity that easily renders them instrumental, as if they were *for* something. Both of these conditions or problems, how-to-do-it problems and openness to use, represent ways of dealing with the world that I normally avoid. It is therefore disconcerting to encounter them here. It's like catching fish.

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