(The Copy is) The Origin of the World: Stefan Abrams at Vox Populi

It seems that Stefan Abrams has been reading his Plato. Perhaps this is not the case, and perhaps Plato is right to have Socrates say, in the Apology and again in the Republic, that artists – poets and painters and the like – need not create on the basis of knowledge but rather from another, more elusive source. Plato, at least a certain Plato, would also have us believe that the origin of the world and the respective origins of each thing are to be found among the ideas, of which the works of artists can only offer a pale imitation. If Abrams' last exhibition at the Vox Populi Gallery, "The Origin of the World," does not consciously and intentionally offer an inversion and displacement of this classical Platonic schema, I would be happy to attribute the resonances I will explore here to that other and more elusive source.

According to Socrates' polemic against tragic poetry in Book X of the Republic, what I have called the classical Platonic schema of artistic imitation runs as follows. Truth and being belong to the idea, which is, with respect to each kind of thing, always one. When making an artifact, a craftsman looks to the idea and puts it to work in making manifold particular things – tables and chairs and beds. When making an artwork, a painter or a tragedian looks not to the idea but rather to the manifold particular things in the world, to things made by craftsmen and to natural things, and imitates these. Following the Greek counting method, the artistic imitation or representation is therefore three steps removed from the idea, and thus from truth and being. The origin of the world lies outside the world, in another world, a Hinterwelt, using Nietzsche's term: a world behind the world.

There are many good reasons – nuanced textual complexities, the dramatic movement of Plato's dialogues, Plato's own status as the maker of these highly stylized texts – to resist the traditional attribution of this caricatured mimetic theory of art to Plato himself. If we take what Socrates most explicitly says uncritically and at face value, however, the artist is little more than one who carries around a mirror for the sake of promiscuously imitating all manner of things, "for that," Socrates says, "is the quickest way of all" to "make" things (596d).

In the collection of fifteen photographs that constitutes "The Origin of the World," Abrams gladly takes on this role of the mirror-carrier, using his lens to reflect not merely things in the world but reflections of these things. In terms of the classical Platonic schema, Abrams offers reflections of reflections, images of images that fall one step further away than even painting and poetry from the truth and being of the idea. But Abrams hardly takes up this strategy because it is the quickest way of all, and instead of the promiscuity of imitation and image making that one finds in Socrates' account of artistic mimesis, one finds disciplined selection. The exhibition thus constitutes a well-constructed challenge to all those Hinterweltlern who would locate the origin in some world behind the world, and offers a provocative alternative: the world first opens up with the image and the graphic mark. Instead of being three steps removed from the world's eidetic origin, the work of art first opens up the world.

The title photograph of Abrams' exhibition, like the exhibition itself, is called "The Origin of the World." The photograph is thus both a part of the exhibition and also stands, in some sense, for the whole, just as a king is the ruling part of a kingdom and, as such, plays the part of standing in for the whole. Whereas Socrates says that the artist is three steps removed from the eidetic origin and is thus "by nature third from the king and the truth, as are all other imitators" (597e), here the synecdoche serves to invert the Platonic schema. Here the origin of the world is no mighty and masculine king, as it was for Nietzsche's Hinterweltlern; rather, the image depicts a figuration of a woman's breasts, torso, and splayed legs, revealing the swath of her pubic hair. Far from a phallo-logo-centric sovereign, one is in the proximity of a fertility goddess, only this time, looking closely, one notices that the lines describing her figure have been carved through an inch-thick layer of snow resting on a car windshield. Abrams thus avoids the stale trap of simply inverting the classical metaphysical model. First, in the place of the origin he does not simply replace the masculine sovereign-god with a feminine principle; with a much more sophisticated gesture he gives us an image of an image of the place, the origin, from which we all quite naturally emerge. The second photograph in the series, "Family," hung next to the title piece as if emerging out of it, makes this quite explicit. Second, though, this continuity between photographs does not simply appeal to nature as the origin preferred to replace the 'otherworldly' or supernatural origins of classical metaphysics. In offering one photograph of a playfully crude found image (one imagines boys pausing on their walk from school to scrawl something scandalous in the snow) and another of a car decal depicting a cartoon family (the black sheen of the car's surface almost disappearing, in the photograph, as the surface that it is), Abrams suggests that the world first opens up through the distorting repetition of the image and the graphic mark. One might even say that nature only becomes accessible as such through the supplement of its repetition and hence through the image.

For Nietzsche's Hinterweltlern, the world is a dream and an illusion. But instead of placing his hopes elsewhere, as they do, Abrams revels in the play of illusions. Instead of projecting an occult reality beyond the surfaces of things, his lens skims across these surfaces in a way that distorts them and turns them into something else. At times this distortion presents the illusion of digital-photographic artifice, as in "Eye," when a first glance seems to reveal a painted eye hovering spectrally over a brick wall. My first impression was that this image resulted from the slight of hand of digital overlay, but on closer inspection I realized that the eye is painted on the wall and the photograph simply captures the spectral quality endemic to this found image. Whereas "Eye" foregrounds a photographic artifice that isn't there and thereby marks the artifice that already belongs to the world, "Roller Coaster" uses photography to dissimulate such worldly artifice. What initially appears to be a photograph of three amusement park goers beginning the joyful plummet from a roller coaster's apex to its nadir reveals itself to be a photograph of an advertisement poster for the amusement park; one can barely make out a crease, not in the texture of the photograph, but in the texture of the photograph of which this photograph is a photograph. Somewhere between these two trajectories – between the photographic accentuation and the photographic dissimulation of photography – the beautiful "Manayunk" presents a black and white townscape either threatened or beatified by a throb of white light. Though we might expect that this light has been digitally imported, it actually results from the flash of Abrams' camera as he captures the image of an old black and white image of Manayunk.

These photographs acquire the depth of a palimpsest by layering image upon image in the construction of a flat surface. The photographs refer beyond themselves without losing a sense of aesthetic completeness, still containing a set of references within their frames and thereby exposing the depth of surface and the surface-character of depth. In "Save," for example, the camera gets in close to the surface of a car, on which one can read the mirror-image of the photograph's title word. The wider world is out there; the photograph refers to the original of which this reflection is a copy, while the tight focus of the shot both allows for this reference and makes it unnecessary. The surface of the car and the distorted legibility of the reflected word are transformed into an image that stands on its own while still highlighting the reciprocal reflectivity and clandestine communication constituting the relationality of things.

By calling attention to this strategy of photographic distortion, however, I do not mean to imply that Abrams aims to produce merely aesthetic objects. For a long time I have been drawn to this artist's aesthetic and to the mastery of craft evident in his work, and past exhibitions – "Doppelgangers," "Insite," "Auto Show," among others – have certainly raised theoretical issues in provocative ways. But here Abrams seems to break new ground in theoretically considering what it means to make art in our age, or at least these considerations have become more explicit. The images (and images of images) in this exhibition arise out of a process of decontextualization that distorts and complicates the legibility of found images and everyday scenes and objects. Despite this distortion, three photographs remain strikingly legible, especially in the context of a gallery: "Van Goph," "Matisse," and "Lichtenstein," hung in descending order in a clean vertical line on a wall of their own. On the top, "Van Goph" reproduces part of a sun-bleached reproduction of a painting from the Sunflowers series; at the bottom, "Lichtenstein" reproduces the pop artist's "Still Life with Silver Pitcher," from an exhibition at the Gagosian. In the middle, "Matisse" frames a graffiti rendition of the artist's signature, scrawled in white on a reddish-brown wall. The references are unmistakable but the complexities abound.

Benjamin, of course, has shown most lucidly what happens to the work of art in the age of limitless technical reproducibility. The infinitely reproducible work of art extinguishes the aura of singularity because it severs the work of art from the singular, signed art object and hence from the singular event of artistic production, from the hands of the artist. By presenting a distorted reproduction of a reproduction of a Van Goph and a reproduction of a piece of pop art (which had already exploited the positive possibilities opened up by Benjamin's analysis of reproducibility), Abrams locates the theoretical concerns explored in the exhibition's other images in the question of

the relation of our age – the age of technical, digital reproducibility – to the history of art. The forger-graffitist's Matisse signature underscores the fact that this relation is characterized by rupture, that our images, constructions, and the meanings of our words cannot be tethered back to an originally seeing eye, forming hand or intended meaning.

The historical origin can therefore not be understood in terms of a singular event of production that might be received in its immediacy, without disruptions or distortions. And the metaphysical origin, if this language can still be rehabilitated, cannot be posited in a world behind the world. In this work both of these versions of the original origin yield to their repetitions and reproductions; the model yields to the copy, the truth (and the king) yield to their images and their figurations and the second becomes the first.

The first would have been the king. In Book X of the Republic, Socrates says that all mimetic art "is likely to distort the thought of anyone who hears it, unless he has the knowledge of what it is really like, as a drug (pharmakon) to counteract it" (595b). Here the drug, the pharmakon, is a remedy and a cure: knowledge of the truth will inoculate us against the dangerous distortions of artistic mimesis. As Derrida has shown, it is this same and yet a different pharmakon that Socrates invokes in the Phaedrus when relating the story of the origin of writing. The father of writing, the Egyptian god Theuth, brings his invention to the king of the gods, Thamus, as a remedy (pharmakon) for memory, and yet Thamus declares it to be a dangerous poison (pharmakon). The image and the graphic mark hover between remedy and poison because they can be reproduced, passed down, and disseminated without relation to their origins. Thus they are dangerous and must be regulated by a god and by a king. God makes an appearance in "The Origin of the World," but not as or at the origin. Instead God shows up as a graphic mark, written in ink on the broad shoulders of a man by a pool: "Only God Will Judge Me." This still gives the rights of final judgment up to God, but the gangster script carving out these words suggests a different message: none of you will rightfully judge me. I'm not sure if I can wholeheartedly endorse this total suspension of judgment, but I do think that we should be suspicious of those authorities attempting to contain the possibly liberating, free comingling of our images, our constructions, and our meanings. "The Origin of the World" disrupts the logic of containment and control by letting the work of art, the ostensible supplement and adornment of the world, come first, in that fragile and empty place where something might begin.

-Jeffrey D. Gower