

THE PEEL,
OR ANOTHER PRESENCE

by Thom Bettridge

Much has been said about the frame—the limit that simultaneously reifies and corrupts the representational scheme of the two-dimensional picture plane. A frame creates a window, an excuse for a flat image to become a portal into the world of an artificial space. But a frame also creates a boundary, an area that calls attention to a picture’s own apparatus, its capacity for illusion. With respect to a photograph, the frame is a signifier of signification. It is the point of rupture within what otherwise could be seen as an experience of reality. It is the rat—the snitch that calls attention to the entire mechanism’s ruse: This is not real.

The frame does not need to be thick and gold to accomplish this task. It does not even need to exist as a physical object. It is embedded into the very making of the picture itself. It is the line of the crop, the interstitial space between a recreation of reality and the larger space from which it was cut. A photograph creates its own frame upon being taken, slicing itself from what it attempts to replicate, and it thereby embeds the boundaries of difference into its own creation.

Less has been said about the peel, which, although it occupies the same functional space as the frame, is a concept normally associated with nature instead of artifice. The peel is problematic in the sense that it is not quite external. In fact, it is often difficult to separate that which it acts as a boundary. An orange’s peel is not only part of an orange, it is the part of the orange that is most definitively orange. The peel thereby creates a continuum with what it contains that is much smoother than that of the frame. It is not grafted onto its contents, but rather intrinsic to them.

Yet, because of this, the peeled object has a messy ontology. When rent of its peel, an object goes from being one to being not quite two:

Peel + Content = Object
Object – Peel > Content
Object – Content > Peel
(Object – Peel) + Peel ≠ Object
(Object – Peel) + Peel = Peeled Object
Object – Peeled Object = X
X > 0

Each new object—the peel and its content—is defined by the absence of its other, as is expressed

by an unquantifiable gap between what it is as a whole and what it is when separated into its constituent parts. Meanwhile each new part is reified as having its own independent, yet altered, status as an entity. Each becomes what it is, yet remains modified by the new sightlines formed in the gaps created by the act of peeling. It is through this moment of peeling that all becomes bare and visible in a new state. Unlike the frame, which accuses an object of illusion, the act of peeling affirms the autonomous presence of said illusion, portraying a more ambivalent stance towards the supposed falsehood of a representation. It suggests a connective void between an object and its husk.

In „Satellite City” (2014), Roman Schramm presents a series of peeled photographs. By contorting the picture plane of his images and placing them within digitally constructed rooms, Schramm paradoxically forms a presence that is yielded by interplay of dueling farces—one of the peel, and one of its contents. The first farce is the photographic image itself, which in this contorted condition exposes itself as a surface of representation as opposed to an experience of reality. The second farce is the digitized vagueness of his rooms, which often appear as mere suggestions of rooms, with walls and floors that never quite connect into a full structure, leaving obscure expanses of nothingness. The result of these two farces creates a transformative mise en abyme—the false three-dimensional space of a photograph nestled within another artificial three-dimensional space, the interplay of which forms passages of both opaque flatness and window-like perspective. Composed in such a way, the original photographic image is given something more additive than a frame, it is given its own three-dimensional presence as an object, turned into a structural entity in the most unlikely of ways. For example, in *Mamey* (2014), an exotic fruit is imaged peeled, exposing its raw, fleshy insides. On its black background, the mamey appears to float autonomously within the space of its room, with its reflection spilling onto the tiled surface of the floor below. Peeled as such, it forms a continuum with its surroundings that, although it sheds bare the fruit’s phantasmagorical non-reality, nonetheless establishes its own tactile presence. As such, Schramm creates a peeled space wherein an image is placed within a container that gives it a heightened non-reality, revealing its state as an autonomous yet altered object.

Take Schramm’s two Tripe images (*Tripe* and *Tripe and Pink Wall*, both 2014), both of which depict the raw organ furled into the shape of a conch shell, a surface that connotes the Möbius-like continuity between the peel and

its contained object. Sitting atop multiple skewed planes within the faulty geometry of this artificial space (with its indistinct physics and clashing shadows), the tripe appears centered around its own weight, exuding a type of sculptural presence with relation to its background. This reifying transformation takes place in the chasm between two modes of objecthood—between the peel and its contents—a space that binds two different media yet also separates two different levels of physicality and legibility. The tripe’s presence grows out of its surrounding architecture’s failure, its wonky jointedness and lack of true mortar. This space’s failure is the rent peel’s failure, the missing variable created by the act of peeling. It serves its function as a broken version of the frame.

However, this type of presence should not be confused for a form of real-time immediacy. In her 1981 essay *The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism*, Rosalind Krauss explains the use of supplementary logic in the spacing and framing of surrealist photography as a means for pointing to a form of symbolic reality—one that the surrealists used to reverse the empiricist privileging of perception over representation as well as vision over writing, creating a form of nature-as-sign, a system governed by a Derridian type of dissociation and difference. In reference to Man Ray’s Monument to de Sade (*Monument à D. A. F. de Sade*, 1933) (a close-up of a buttocks framed by an upside-down cross), she describes the operation of the frame as a means for serving this function:

“The lighting of the buttocks and thighs of the subject is such that physical density drains off the body as it moves from the center of the image, so that by the time one’s gaze approaches the margins, flesh has become so generalized and flattened as to be assimilated to the printed page. Given this threat of dissipation of the physical substance, the frame is experienced as shoring up the collapsing structure of corporeality and guaranteeing its density by the rather conceptual gesture of drawing limits. The sense of structural intervention of frame inside contents is further deepened by the morphological consonance—what we could call the visual rhyming—between shape of frame and shape of figure: for the linear intersections set up by the clefts and fold in the photographed anatomy mimic the master shape of the frame. Never could the object of violation have been depicted as more willing.”¹

Whereas this type of frame fills in the density of a photographed form through imposing a type of limit (in Man Ray’s case, a geometric boundary onto the curves of natural one), the peel provides

the same corporeality through opposite means. For the peel unravels into a continuum that spills into something infinite, a space that can be seen in the black voids around the cruxes and corners of Schramm’s artificial environments. While in earlier work such as *Ohne Titel (Italien)* (2013), we can see Schramm’s use of this framing logic through the cropping of an abstracted human form, images such as *Auster* (2012) contain the type of floating effect later mirrored and made more explicit in peeled images such as the Mamey. Suspended on a field of black, which due to its darkness appears as neither flat nor deep, Schramm’s oyster is rendered ambiguous in relation to the constraining limits of the frame, it is neither on top of nor within the field of black wherein it resides. Unlike the surrealist frame, which employs itself in order to impose the mediation of the camera and set reality in relation to the limits of its own representational terms, the peel is an inherently self-effacing form of boundary. It is created in order to dissolve, and thereby affords its contents a non-symbolic presence that is jostled away from the disconnected one-to-one logic of Ferdinand de Saussure’s signifier-signified. The peel has a type of naturalistic vagueness that belies the symbolic mechanisms of surrealist image-making. Instead, its system collapses into something much more muddy.

The manner in which the peeled image falls short of immediacy can best be compared to a sabotaged sexual innuendo. It is a type of sensuality beheaded of fulfillment, one that can be seen across “Satellite City”: in the tightly-wound orifice of *Chayote* (2014), in the sideways non-copulation of *Turtles* (2014), or in the motif of eager and bodiless cartoon eyes peering out from the darkness. Together, these tropes form into a lampoon of physical fulfillment, a deferred eroticism that is perhaps best exemplified by Schramm’s portraits of a man and a woman, a couple who seem to be communicating, although they are never on the same plane. Their suggestive faces are cast out into the dark non-space of the peel, unable to be reciprocated or confronted by another. They appear as trapped, within the confines of cubic prisms, or scrunched into the bottom of the picture plane by the peel’s architecture in images such as *Wall and Ixchel* (2014). The peel in this instance reveals itself to be a form of incarceration, a maze that tangles its inhabitants into its own circuitous non-logic.

Through these various shortcomings, Schramm demonstrates that the peel is a mechanism that affords a type of physical objecthood, yet simultaneously flattens presence and subjectivity into its own scheme. His images thereby point to the way in which advertising uses spatial vagueness—

the semi-architectural spaces of green-screens and “anywheres”—in order to stir a type of eerie and un-consumable object-lust. It dramatizes a form of physical alienation, cleaved from the larger networks—or “satellites”—suggested by the unraveling of the peel, an impossible detachment from the particularity of surroundings, one which connotes a type of urban loneliness, a fetishistic systemization of the physical poured into a heightened not-quite-reality. This effect culminates in *Street* (2014), which features a doubled image of a hand that is severed from its arm in an attempt to reach out the frame of window. This frame rebukes the tactile experience of the hand, which wishes to the touch the street, yet finds itself frozen into the interstitial space of the boundary, on the precipice of fulfillment. Beneath this failed touch lies the street itself, peeled and floating, contorted into a heightened yet vacant presence. The deferred tactile experience of the hand reveals the street’s—the peeled object’s—inaccessibility, its location behind glass. It offers something enticing yet impossible, an image bare and floating, a Venus in a scallop shell, an un-quellable erection. Trapped in the non-space of the plane/screen, it enacts a soft type of cruelty.

1 Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 90.



Don't Do Anything That Isn't Play, 2013, C-Print, 70 x 55 cm