



Dana Schutz
"Image Search"
Frieze, April 2007
By Stephen Stern
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Image Search

Referencing such wildly disparate subjects as Google, 'self-eating', headless dogs and imaginary births, **Dana Schutz** examines what it means to be a painter
by Steven Stern

The Internet, as everyone knows, is a tool for procrastination. Not just the online devices explicitly designed to eat time like popcorn – the message boards and the blogs and the pornography and various clever ways of stalking ex-lovers. No, everything, no matter how useful and rational, eventually finds itself repurposed as a toy. There is a tropism towards the ludic, you could say – or you could just say that people will always find new ways to waste time. Google, the search engine which claims to 'organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful', was subject to various hacks and tricks almost immediately after its debut. Personally, I've spent hours just fooling around with Google Image Search. A favourite pastime involves typing in some abstract term in the little box. A search for 'hegemony', for example, yields the expected charts and political cartoons, but also a vacation snapshot of some guy standing in front of the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, and a needlepoint sampler that reads 'Bite Me'. I find this entertaining, but also more than a little marvellous. The magical irrationality of it all adds a little dose of vernacular wonder to my working day.

But of course there's nothing actually magical or irrational going on here. Google Image Search works through a fairly straightforward – though proprietary and closely guarded – algorithm, a series of standardized automatic procedures. As far as I understand it

(which admittedly is not very far), Google's data-hunting worms are sent out through the morass of websites to track down image files, look for tags, for text on web pages, links, and then, after weighing this various data, serve up results. Most of the time it works remarkably well. A search for, say, Sal Mineo will return pictures of Sal Mineo. Even when it's undermined, as in my little game, it is just working as it should. There are, I'm sure, perfectly logical reasons why a search for 'solipsism' calls up a picture of a 19th-century bicycle – it's just that those reasons remain obscure to me, and hence produce something mysterious – and compelling enough to fill great big blocks of time when I should be writing.

What Leonardo's *The Last Supper* (1495–8) is to Christianity, Dana Schutz' self-portrait *Google* (2006) is to this form of avoidance. It is a picture of the artist not at work, a painting about not painting. In other words, it is an image of an Image Search. (The title is clearly meant to be read as both a noun and – though Google's trademark lawyers would object – a verb.) Schutz depicts herself seated at a desk in her studio, gazing hypnotized at – into, rather – an iMac. Her pose (hunched, hand clutching mouse) perfectly captures the strange bodily contortions this strangely bodiless activity produces. She's not a pretty sight. A skewed, slightly elevated perspective renders her head comically large. While

Google
2006
Oil on canvas
183×183 cm



Frank on a Rock
2002
Oil on canvas
168×119 cm

Fanatics
2005
Oil on canvas
229×244 cm



she stares at the glowing pinkish screen, the screen itself, dominating the canvas, addresses the viewer directly – it is cheated outward, like a vain actor playing a dialogue scene. Scattered around the room are the various artefacts of a life: cardboard coffee cups, schedules, water bottles, a box of personal cheques; all discarded and ignored, in favour of the lure of the screen.

Google is a painting filled with things you've seen before, though probably not in a painting. While its distortions edge it gently towards the grotesque, it is essentially naturalistic – the world it depicts is contiguous with our own; we know all too well what's going on in this situation. As such, it is an anomaly for Schutz, whose work runs more towards the fantastic and the oblique. It is precisely for the excesses of her imagination that she has been celebrated. 'I believe she may have an extra wrinkle in her frontal lobe, and may be a wild card in the making', wrote Jerry Saltz in one of the first reviews of Schutz' work.¹ Her paintings are usually populated by unimaginable people and imaginary objects playing out bizarre scenes.

And yet *Google* is the painting I think about most when I think of Schutz' work. Something about its subject seems exemplary, even allegorical. Because really it is a painting about painting: *not* painting is a crucial part of painting (just as *not* writing is a crucial part of writing). And Schutz' work seems to be most urgently wrapped up in asking what painting is, what it means to be engaged in this particular activity at this particular time. One thing it means, clearly, is to be always engaged in an Image Search – sorting through all the possible and potential subjects and styles, and deciding what is worthy of putting onto a canvas. For a painter like Schutz, whose results are so unlikely and irrational – so 'wild' – the process through which these images are 'called up' can be easily mystified and romanticized. But perhaps this process can better be thought of as a kind of algorithm – a series of procedures performed on a massive and unruly data set. These procedures may be proprietary, and we may never fully understand how they work, but there is clearly some set of logical operations in place, some 'if *x*, then *y*' method of getting from idea to image. Schutz' work seems to function according to the rules of the hypothetical.

Her 'Frank from Observation' series (2002–3) – the works that first brought her notice – is all about playing out the logic of a simple, if rather fantastic, post-apocalyptic conceit: 'The premise was that Frank was the last man on earth. I would observe and paint him.'² Frank, the invented subject of these paintings, is a shaggy, befuddled loser who appears not quite up to the task of being Earth's sole example of masculinity. Various portraits of Frank, nude on a rock, gazing at the stars or reclining in an ochre expanse, his stoned, forlorn gaze seems ever so slightly uncomfortable with the whole process. One gets the feeling that posing isn't really his idea, but that he doesn't have any better ideas.



Yet Frank, being imaginary, doesn't have any choice in the matter. He has no reality other than as a subject – as in 'model', as in 'topic', as in 'person under the influence of another'. Conceived, says Schutz, as 'a hybrid of information I found in narratives and people I know', he exists as a function of the situation for which he is designed.³ And a situation – a place where artist and model are situated – is all it is. Despite its science-fictional outlines, the invented background to the Frank series is something less than a narrative. It's not meant to tell a story – much is left out or makes no sense. (What happened to everybody else? Where does the paint come from?) It is rather an experimental scenario, conceived to pose specific questions. What is painting? Well, here, it is primarily a kind of relationship between the subject, the artist and the audience. But what



happens if one point of this triad is excised, and the other two have to do double-duty? In the closed system Schutz conceives, portraiture becomes a radically new genre.

Even the last man on earth can grow tiresome. Frank does not appear in all of the paintings – though parts of him make their appearance, his distinctive pink limbs poking out here and there. ‘Initially’, Schutz has noted, ‘I was going to commit to making paintings only of him, but I got restless and wanted to paint other things, so I took him apart and built other people and events out of him.’⁴ If a body is a ‘hybrid of information’, it can, after all, be easily disassembled. Bodies – like ideas – are often being broken down in Schutz’ work. Or perhaps they are being put together. In any case, one gets the sense that wholeness is always provisional – everything is available to be constantly made and remade.

In Schutz’ series of ‘Self Eaters’ (2003–4) the subjects are a species of undying auto-cannibals, able to consume their own bodies and regenerate themselves in an endless loop. As with the ‘Frank’ series, Schutz sets forth a warped premise and earnestly presses it through to its conclusions. These paintings don’t look much like the earlier series, though – they are looser, more aggressive and chaotic, often veering towards abstraction. For Schutz, style follows from subject, and here it is obviously material that is at issue – the slathered surfaces and thick brushstrokes suggesting that paint and flesh are interchangeable. (What is painting? Creating people out of slick, viscous stuff.) The figures press against the frame, compositionally ravenous, eating space. It’s not hard to see various versions of Modernist portraiture in the contortions these figures go through.

Dana Schutz’ paintings are usually populated by unimaginable people and imaginary objects playing out bizarre scenes.

Civil Planning
2004
Oil on canvas
290×427 cm

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Gravity Fanatic
2005
Oil on canvas
183x198 cm



Mona
2007
Oil on canvas
102x77 cm

For Schutz, style follows from subject – the slathered surfaces and thick brushstrokes suggesting that paint and flesh are interchangeable.

But it is difficult to believe that such references are the point. The distortions in *Face Eater* (2004) – eyes peering out of mouth, tongue lolling between – are not motivated by typical ‘art’ reasons: they’re not formal, they’re not expressive, they’re not any sort of caricature. This is simply what it would look like to eat your own face. As Schutz conceives it, the self eaters are entirely self-sufficient and hence anti-social. And similarly, these paintings, as much as they recall art-historical models, also find a way to escape them, to function solely according to their self-sustaining, self-enforcing logical operations.

For all of Schutz’ interest in autonomy and solitude, there is an equal and opposite pull towards sociability, group dynamics. Often there is a project at stake, something that urgently requires doing. Yet such actions seem destined to fail, affiliations dissolve and break apart as easily as bodies. In *Civil Planning* (2004) the self eaters are trying to construct a building – or so the artist has explained. Really, it’s difficult to tell what is going on. What’s clear is, as Schutz has said, ‘things aren’t going too smoothly for them’.⁵ Battles rage in the Rousseau-esque background, while up front two girls take a break from the chaos and play with with a pile of rocks. They don’t much look like they’re co-operating either. (What is painting? A collaborative social endeavour performed, ineffectually, by a bunch of loners whose

interests never align.) *Presentation* (2005) offers some sort of ambiguous public spectacle – a dissection, an execution or a community festival. The huge crowd gathered around a pair of figures on a dissecting table doesn’t seem in an especially festive mood, though. Nor does the larger of the two figures, who, though already partly disambiguated, seems alarmingly conscious. His arm is in a traction device that extends invisibly out of the canvas. A sad-looking woman makes a tentative incision in his enormous hand. Whatever is about to take place, something will probably go wrong. (‘He’s definitely more than they can handle’, Schutz has said.⁶)

Sometimes it is all too obvious to the viewer what has gone wrong. *Headless Dog Living* (2006) is a blunt illustration of the paradox proposed by its title. The decapitated dog seems mysteriously oblivious to its missing head. Clearly, there has been violence here. Yet the scene is placid, stately, classically composed. It might be a George Stubbs or Edwin Landseer. The leash, now serving no use, is a lovely streak of sea green on the bloodied grass. I can’t help feeling a kind of empathy. I wonder: does the dog know what’s happened? It is a nonsensical question on many levels, but feels germane. (There’s something contagious about Schutz’ habit of speaking of her fictional creations as though they were real.) I have similar concerns for the subject of *Brain* (2007) – an engorged lump of grey matter displayed on an oval plate. Shaped

like a Snoopy head or a Volkswagen Beetle, it seems to have a personality. Is it alive? Is it still thinking? Does it – like Frank – know it’s being painted? (What is painting? An attempt to depict consciousness in something that can’t possibly be conscious. And an attempt to answer ridiculous questions.) We have a better idea what’s going on in the mind of the young woman portrayed in *Gravity Fanatic* (2006). Obsessed with invisible forces, she is engaged in a type of demonstration, like Newton and the apple in reverse. Everything in her room has been taped down; weights hang from her face. Would these objects float away without stays in place? Not likely. She is ‘confirming a given’, says Schutz.⁷ The painting itself seems to celebrate gravity: it suggests a landscape transferred indoors – sky blue above, earth tones below. Everything is in its proper place. And yet that doesn’t help its subject, it offers no relief. Confirming a given is precisely what sane people don’t have to do. (What is painting? A way of worrying over the basic physical principles that everyone else takes for granted.) The subject is carried away by her mania, abstracted. Talking about this work, Schutz has commented, somewhat cryptically: ‘Fanaticism is a form of abstraction, a very scary abstraction.’⁸

Clearly there is something fascinating and more than a little scary about abstraction for Schutz. Over the last few years she has spoken repeatedly in interviews about being attracted to non-representational painting