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Slow Seeing. Grasping the Image and the Way We Process It

fences & pools

texts from The Book of Revelations, The Story of Creation of Navajo Wildlands and Notebook of N.P. Langford

kitab al manazir

text from The Book of Optics (Kitab al Manazir) by Ibn al-Haytham

Roos Theuws

2014

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In the range of sensory experiences pain occupies a unique position, because pain can be experienced without any referential object. We can feel pain without being aware of what it is that causes the pain. In this respect the visual sense seems to be the opposite of pain. The experience of visuality only emerges in contact with a visual object. Without such an object, without something we see, we don't see anything. Elaine Scarry opposes the two senses as follows: "Physical pain is an intentional state without an intentional object; imagining is an intentional object without an experienceable state".¹ In the works of Roos Theuws, however, visual experience is challenged in such a way that it becomes itself a 'state' or 'process' that we can experience or look at. The vision we have seems to turn inwards as a result of which we see not only images but also the technical and bodily processes from which these images result.

Her video installation *Fences and Pools* (2012) is a prime example of such a dissection of the visual image and of the processes that enable that image. It consists of one monitor screen and one video projection on the wall perpendicular to the screen. Over the two video images there is a voice-over which is heard, speaking three different texts at the same time. The images on wall and screen show similar landscapes. We see fences in an empty, desert-like landscape, probably in the American Mid-West. The two projections share the same location; they present different angles on the same landscape. At first sight both images seem to be stills. Retrospectively, however, after some time, one must conclude that the image has changed. Although one is not aware of any movement in the image, it has moved: in both projections the angle from which we see the landscape has slightly budged. One must deduce that the projected images are not stills but moving images. Observing the images one is compelled to notice the movement. But because the movement is extremely slow, the only way to do that is to concentrate for some time on one single projection. Without any result: one is not able to track down any movement. Perception has become a kind of Sisyphus' labour: all our efforts to track down motion fail to do so, we make no progress. Visual experience has become sensory deprivation. Another comparison that imposes itself is with Zeno's paradox. This paradox concerns a philosophical problem devised by the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea living in the fifth century before Christ. In this paradox Achilles is in a footrace with a tortoise. Achilles, famous as a very fast runner, allows the tortoise, known as notoriously slow, a head start of 100 meters. If we suppose that each racer starts running at some constant speed, then after some time, Achilles will have run 100 meters, bringing him to the tortoise's starting point. During this time, the tortoise has run a much shorter distance. It will then take Achilles some further time to run that distance, by which time the tortoise will have advanced farther; and then more time still to reach this third point, while the tortoise moves ahead. Thus, whenever Achilles reaches somewhere the tortoise has been, he still has farther to go. Therefore, because there are an infinite number of points Achilles must reach where the tortoise has already been, he can never overtake the tortoise. Similarly, all our efforts to track down motion in Roos Theuws' video images fail: our perception turns out to be too slow for the slow motion of the moving images.

Displacing one's attention to the other projection, however, one is struck by the fact that while one was concentrating at the other screen, something has indeed changed on this screen. The angle on the landscape has moved, and the fences are now more in the middle of the pictorial field. The camera moves extremely slowly to the left. This is not something we see happening, but it is the conclusion we must draw retrospectively, after going back and forth from the projection to the monitor screen.

But there is more movement going on. Not only the camera moves, there is also a movement internal to the

image, as a result of which color and representation slowly separate. The image is literally dissected; it falls apart in the different elements or layers that constitute it. For the structure of a video signal, or better video frame, is dual: one part of the frame is responsible for the outlines of the representation, the other part colours the outlines in. Roos Theuws is able to separate the two parts of the digital video frame with the effect of a slowing down of the moving sequence of the images, and of the addition of a blur to the image. The very slow movement in which the application of these two devices results manifests itself as a separation of the two parts of the digital frame. Color either follows the outlines of the representation, or the other way around.ⁱⁱ

Although it is the temporal dimension of these two video projections that strikes the eye most intensely by being almost absent but not quite, nothing happens in these videos. They are radically uneventful. But it is thanks to this uneventfulness that the process of looking can itself become the event one looks at. Our look turns inwards at the moment that access to the visual field is slowed down, frustrated and challenged at the same time.

This turning inward of our look is accompanied by a challenge to our aural sense. The aural dimension of the installation gives the impression to perform aurally what the video images do visually. But is this indeed the case? Yes and no. One hears a voice that reads three different texts at the same time, each through a different speaker. The first text is the Apocalypse story from the Biblical Book of Revelations. The second text is a scientific text by the geographer N.P. Langford. The third text, titled *The Story of Creation*, is a native American mythological text. All three texts discuss the same or a similar location, have the same topic and use even the same kind of expressions. But they do that within different discourses: a biblical one, a scientific one, and a mythological one. Because the three texts are spoken at the same time, by the same voice-over, one can, however, only understand bits and parts of the spoken sentences. They mingle into one continuous flow of aural expressions. This makes sense in view of the history of the place, where the indigenous people of North America, Christian pioneers, and scientific knowledge have reigned successively, yet remain co-present in contemporary society. The only way to recognize the different discourses of which this aural flow is constituted is by means of memory: by combining isolated and fragmented expressions with earlier ones that one has heard. This makes the aural experience uniquely suited to sensually experiencing, instead of knowing from history books the mixed society in which the location is situated

The dissection of visual layers is accompanied by a mingling of different aural layers. In neither case is the reception of both the visual and the aural parts of this installation immediate. Our eye as well as our ear can only make sense of what we see and what we hear when our memory supports our senses. This conclusion compels a revision of the common notion of how our senses work, especially the sense of sight. The visual experience is not made up of a visual object world, but also of processes that are internal and intentional; in this case memory. If we want to grasp what happens before our eyes, on our retinas, or in the back of our minds, Theuws' *Fences and Pools* is highly illuminating.

A second video work by Roos Theuws dissects the image in yet another way. This video installation is titled in Arabic *Kitab al Manazir* (2014) (*The Book of Optics*), a text though originally written in Persian is recited in Arabic. This is a seven-volume treatise on optics written in the 10th century by the medieval Arab scholar Ibn al-Haytham, known in the West as Alhazen. The *Book of Optics* presented experimentally founded arguments against the then widely held 'extramission theory' of vision, as held by Euclid in his *Optica*, and in favor of an 'intromission theory'. This now accepted theory, also supported by Aristotle, argues that vision takes place by light entering the eye. Alhazen's work transformed the way in which light and vision were understood, earning him the title the 'father of modern optics'. The video-installation consists of three monitor screens of the same size, but placed on different walls. The three screens present different positions within the same space: a room in the Science Museum Boerhaave in Leiden. All the objects displayed in this room are optical objects and instruments. As we can expect in a conventional science museum, the room is packed with those objects and instruments and many of them are placed in vitrines. In each of the three different videos the camera moves slowly through this space along a straight line. In contrast with the video-installation

Fences and Pools the viewer is aware of the camera movement, albeit a very slow one.

In each video one object especially draws our attention: a mirroring sphere, which reminds us of the well known round mirror in Jan Van Eyck's Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his wife from 1434. In this painting the round mirror is placed centrally in the middle of the composition between Arnolfini and his wife on the most remote wall of the interior space of the painting. The composition of this painting is organized on the basis of the principles of linear perspective. Within this kind of structure the round mirror functions as the vanishing point but also points back at us, as we see an image reflection in the mirror. In Roos Theuws' video images it is not immediately clear if the mirroring sphere also functions as a vanishing point. Although it attracts the attention of the viewer because our gaze is lead into the direction of this object, it is not obvious that all the other optical objects are visually organized along lines that point to this mirroring sphere. The sphere is reflecting. Because of the reflections on the round surface the camera has problems to focus on it. It is not really able to assess the distance to it and as a consequence to establish a vanishing point for the composition. One of the effects of linear perspective is a clear and stable positioning of the viewer in front of the image. In Jan van Eyck's painting this effect occurs indeed. The viewer is positioned centrally, in the middle of the forefront of the painting. The three screens of Roos Theuws' installation do not effectuate such a stable positioning of the viewer. This instability is even increased by the fact that we are facing three instead of just one video. And because of the fact that the three screens are not placed on the same wall, we never have an overview that would allow us to see the three images at the same time. We have to look back and forth, and like in Fences and Pools, our vision is necessarily supported by memory. Although we recognize the same objects in the same space in the three videos, it is difficult, perhaps even impossible to understand where you as viewer are positioned in relation to this space, or where in relation to the objects in this space.

This is rather amazing because technologically generated images like photography, film and video are supposed to do that. The optical lens that is used by all three media translates the represented space automatically and mechanically into an organization of space that follows the rules of linear perspective. Especially architectural spaces and structures are susceptible for such a translation. The museum room in Kitab al Manazir is such an architectural space but the expected effect fails to occur. This space cluttered with optical objects and instruments remains immune for the organizing effects of linear perspective.

Because of the fact that the three video screenings represent the same space, one would expect that the principle of the stereoscope would apply; not literally, on our retinas, but figuratively, in our minds. Although consisting of not two but three images, the stereoscope scope effect would then lead to a merging of the three individual images into one while we were looking at them. However, this merging of different images into one never takes place. The visual field remains fragmented in all respects. When I say in all respects I mean the relations between the respective screens as well as the viewer's relation to it.

The cancelling out of the effects of linear perspective results in a paradoxical visual situation. Looking at this fragmented visual field the viewer has no real points of reference. The viewer recognizes the kind of optical objects and instruments in the museum room, but is not able to recognize any visual organization of the objects in relation to each other. The effect in which this paradox results is like a montage of visual impressions that do not cohere. Again, we can make them cohere by means of our memory and postulate the knowledge that all objects are placed next to each other in the same museum room. But in our visual experience they remain fragmented and frustrate the coherence of a visual field that can be grasped.

After fifteen minutes the mirroring sphere appears simultaneously on all three screens as the central object. Next, nervously moving imagery of vitrines and reflections are repeated on all three screens. Whereas in the first part of the video images the reflections were concentrated on the mirroring sphere, in the second part the reflections return all over the space of the museum room. Intensified by lamps above the vitrines, mirroring reflections fragment the visual

field even more, which makes it impossible to grasp the visual field of these moving images. It is first of all the camera itself that is confronted with this impossibility: it gropes and scans the reflecting surfaces in order to get control; its focus is groping the visual field. But it is clearly out of control. As a consequence, the viewer, too has difficulty establishing a stable viewing position in front of the fragmented visual fields on the three screens. This impediment of viewing is in sharp contrast with the promise of perfect looking raised by the optical instruments in the reflecting vitrines.

Both video installations can be seen as deconstructions or more literally, dissections of the technological image and of how our look tries to grasp that image. The way Roos Theuws deconstructs the image is by hampering its constitutive elements and processes. In case of *Fences and Pools* her deconstruction entails two aspects. The first one is technical. The digital image is dissected in two layers: one layer is responsible for the outlines of the representation, the other layer colours the outlines. But it is this technical dissection which makes us aware of something more fundamental and interesting. Our look is deconstructed by compelling the conclusion that looking is not only constituted by what one sees, the visual object, but also by memory, an internal and intentional process. This conclusion is also unavoidable while looking at the video installation *Kitab al Manazir*. The only way to integrate the visual fields of the three screens into one cohering field is by means of memories of what we have seen before. The visual field itself lacks any organization that would make it coherent and graspable. What is hampered in this video installation is the organizing effect of linear perspective. The optical lens used by a video camera fails to translate the represented space into an organization of space that follows the rules of linear perspective, whereas this translation should have happened mechanically, due to the many mirroring reflections this space seems to be immune for it.

The combination of the two video installations demonstrates also how deconstruction works. It is not by following the rules and adopting the principles of a certain process or medium that we can understand it in its constitutive elements. We can only take a process apart, deconstruct it by hampering it. It is only then that the constitutive elements separate themselves and become visible, like the separation of oil and water. That is why the way Roos Theuws operates in these installations reminds me of Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Theatre* series, which he begun in 1978. Although Sugimoto's medium is still photography and Theuws' medium is (in the cases discussed) the moving video image, they both assess their respective mediums by demonstrating a moment at which their medium fails to work. Sugimoto's technique adopted for producing the *Theatre* series is as follows. His photographs record a film during the entire length of its projection on the screen. He succeeds in this by using the projection time of a feature film as the exposure time of his camera. But the motion of the film images creates emptiness in the photograph. The screen, on which the pictures appear and disappear, remains empty in the photograph. It cannot keep the number of images it attracts.ⁱⁱⁱ

But there is more to Theuws' way of grasping the technological image of video. The deconstruction of the video image and the way we grasp that image can also be pursued by confronting it with another technological image, photography for instance. The other part of Roos Theuws' exhibition does exactly that. The mirroring sphere, which is the central object in the first part of the video installation *Kitab al Manazir* is also the central object in three large-format photographs. Originally, the photographs were stills, taken from the video films. The sphere is an instrument for measuring the distance between galaxies. In each photograph the sphere is placed on a stem and is photographed frontally in the middle of the image. The background of the museum room is absent. The difference between the three images is the reflection in the mirroring sphere and the darkness or lightness surrounding the sphere. There is no connection between the reflections in the sphere and the surrounding context of the sphere. That connection is broken as if the reflection had turned inwards (*KaMoo1*). The inwardness of these reflections is even foregrounded in the second photograph *KaMoo2*, the one that is greyish compared to the other two that are either light or very dark. It is as if there were a veil between viewer and sphere, which makes the reflections almost impenetrable. The opposite effect is established in the very dark one, *KaMoo3*. The reflections in the dark sphere make the reflections look like an eye,

confronting the viewer with its look. This association is also established by how the object is placed frontally on a stem. It has the superiority of an object that looks back at the viewer in front of the image.

A smaller photograph, *KaM200* consists of an excision of the visual field of the second part of the video installation. The excision shows lamps, parts of the vitrines, and of reflections that cannot always immediately be located, nor can we see where they come from. The excess of reflections makes it impossible to know what is foreground and what is background. Whereas in the moving video image the viewer could notice how the camera was not really able to focus because of the many reflections, in this still photograph the inability of the camera has been displaced onto the viewer. This photograph is, in a sense, an allegorical representation of the problem the camera struggles with in the video images.

The next photograph, *KaM400* is the same shot but from a greater distance. The greater distance provides spatial context to the vitrines and to the objects in the vitrines. Although there is still an abundance of reflections, they do not dominate the image in the same way as the earlier photograph that zooms in on it. Taking distance from the scene enables the eye to regain control over it. But only more or less.

The issue of distance is explicitly at stake in another photograph, *KaM1000*, which is a combination of two images, one on top of the other. The first one is in black and white, placed below the other one, and shows optical instruments that make it possible to see from a great distance. The image on top, which is in color, is a close-up of silicium. The distance to it is minimized by means of close-up. Distance is clearly crucial in what we can see. When we come too close, we don't see anything. Taking distance makes it possible to see and to gain control over the visual field. But when the distance becomes too enormous we again fail to see anything.

The photographs as well as the video image of *Kitab al Manazir* were taken in the room of Museum Boerhaave where optical instruments are displayed. All these instruments are meant to measure and manage the function of seeing in relation to distance. Microscopes enable microscopic seeing, whereas telescopes enable seeing from a great distance. One of these optical instruments, a kind of sundial, is the subject of another photograph, *KaM300*. This measuring instrument is decorated with the twelve signs of the zodiac. But this zodiac seems to be more than just decoration. In order to indicate what this Enlightenment instrument is all about it needs another symbolic system. The symbolic system that manages distance by means of measurement can only explain what it pursues by means of symbolic signs. By means of ironic downplaying it exposes its own limitations. It can measure but it cannot name.

However, Roos Theuws' photographs and video images do not measure, nor do they name. They demonstrate by means of dissecting and baring the image. What becomes visible then is not only the constitutive elements of how images are built, but also unexpected beauty.

i Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 164

ii A video field is half of a frame, formed by taking every other line horizontally. The upper field is the half that comprises the odd lines, starting from the first. The lower field is the half that comprises the even lines, starting from the second. Upper and lower refer to interlaced video. On TVs, each frame is drawn between 50 and 60 times a second on the screen. The photon guns draw every other line (upper, or odd) then go back and do the others (lower or even). It does this because our power cycles at a fixed amount of Hz. and causes blurred, distorted images if it can't catch up.

iii For an excellent reading of Sugimoto's work, see Hans Belting, "The Theatre of Illusion" in *Hiroshi Sugimoto: Theaters* (New York: Sonnabend Sundell Editions)