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# The 'I' of the Beholder

Between the 'viewing' and the 'knowing' there is a world of dialogue that exists, and it is within that gaze of the audience perpetually subject to the nature of time that the aesthetics of art comes alive

PETER BOND



The Indian Holi festival conjures up my past as a painter mixing paint from powder colour. Inert pigment has a special quality; it coats everything and makes the mundane colourful and gets everywhere. In my own painterly learning, I fix the powder colour to achieve permanence. I write from the 'I', the performative node of enquiry. Knowledge has no hierarchy and is unnaturally hinged upon a selfish and elite 'mystical' academy that is not the only sort of knowledge.

I, the writer, come with a different knowledge, by degree, to the reader. My learning is from a working class beginning, my experiences, and from the academies I work with and teach through. It is not one thing or the other. You will cast your own knowledge over mine and it will connect in different ways; it may be discontinuous, alien, repulsive, warming. An audience is free-willed and this is how it should be. On 'The Audience' the editor asks for a way forward and in response I have 'brushed up' on some key thinkers who have influenced my *Habitus*,<sup>1</sup> where I stand or 'see fit' in the realm of audiences of creativity. This personal re-visitation is affected by new, and worldwide, contemporaries. An audience will never be the same twice; the nature of time prevents us from receiving the 'same thing' in the 'same way'. Time erodes and revitalises the 'same thing' if one chooses to re-visit 'that thing'; like the Taj Mahal changing colour at different times of the day.

New political and religious enigmas grip our 'new contemporary'. This newness makes thinkers such as Jacques Rancière, Jacques Lacan, Hal

Foster and Pierre Bourdieu unique to my re-visitation.

Rancière, in *The Emancipated Spectator*,<sup>2</sup> states that 'viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals.' This fact, together with the idea of the spectator being passive and 'separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act' is a 'bad thing'.<sup>3</sup> Rancière describes this as an 'illness of the gaze', a 'theatrical mediation', which 'prepares the gaze for passivity and illusion'.<sup>4</sup> On a 'media stage' this prevails. What Rancière calls for is a type of looking that incorporates a community of 'living attitudes' of each of its members. My reflections on the nature of knowledge, and of the Holi festival, focus on communities of 'living attitudes' with individualised referents.

Rancière wants audiences to be active and fearless in challenging whatever is put before them. Rancière's work, in this instance, draws me to the socio-philosophical works of Pierre Bourdieu and Henri Bergson. Rancière speaks of two types of knowledge. The first is established by the establishment, the second is what we assume to know, and which we are unsure about. The former, intrinsically connected to the academies of knowledge, is wrongly assumed to be the guarantor of all knowledge. Knowledge, or the thirst for knowledge, comes from all angles. Established knowledge, academia, is likely to make us feel inferior. Bergson promotes instinct above any

other type of knowledge.

It is the impossible-to-measure gap between different types of knowledge that divides our knowledge. According to Bourdieu, it is the difference between academic discourse (sanctified knowledge) and other types of knowledge. For Rancière, wanting to know and not knowing is the only key to intelligence. The only entity knowledge has is 'drive'. '... What is involved is linking what one knows with what one does not know.... Like researchers, artists construct the stages where the manifestation and effect of their skills are exhibited, rendered uncertain in the terms of the new idiom that conveys a new intellectual adventure.'<sup>5</sup>

To begin this article, I visited Tate Gallery London where my plan was to eavesdrop on conversations of people looking at artworks. I wanted a different sort of knowledge about art, one that gave me information outside of theory and history gained from the academy. However, what happened was quite different; I began to see the galleries as forged from the minds of their curators. This highlighted curators as social mediators to the public viewing art. Audiences, like research, are about cross-referencing, evaluation and being surprised.

Hal Foster, art historian, begins his book, *The Return of the Real*<sup>6</sup> with Minimalism as going against the grain of the art establishment. He makes two important points: firstly that Minimalism breaks away from art history because of its theatricality; and secondly that interaction between the work

SHOW ME WHAT  
YOU SEE IN  
WHAT I SHOWED  
YOU

and the viewer completes the art of the Minimalist. Foster describes this as somewhere between architecture and memorial. Robert Morris's interactive work, *Bodymotionspacethings* (1964), when shown at the London's Tate Gallery was closed after a few days because it was wrecked and loved to bits by the public. From this moment art became more accessible, and like theatre, less elitist.

This 'theatricalisation' of art caught on. In 2011 the Hayward Gallery in London staged an exhibition called *Move. Choreographing You!*<sup>7</sup> – a series of installations from significant episodes in art and dance history. The public could climb, swing, dress up, dance and experience a play of forms and environments ranging from a gorilla suit to a simulated war zone and live-time delay video. The most striking thing about this exhibition was that it brought strangers together, where they conversed and exchanged experience and knowledge. It was participatory art as a useful expose of truth. Nicolas Bourriaud, curator and critic, brought to the forefront 'relational aesthetics', where an artwork would, and always will be, subject to the points of reference within the viewer.

Prior to all of this, Jacques Lacan laid out a concept of *the gaze* whereby we create an *image-screen*, a form of our unconscious imagining of what we are looking at and experiencing. Lacan's *image-screen* is the result of *the gaze* as it 'screens off and on', an oscillation between the viewer and artwork. It is what a viewer is compelled to see and not necessarily what

the artist or curator wants us to see. When going around an exhibition we are hooked according to what Roland Barthes called the *punctum*, the 'thing' that 'strikes' us immediately about a part, a fragment, of what we are looking at.

According to the artist and writer Victor Burgin, the 'scopic drive is the only drive that must keep its objects at a distance... (and that) the look puts out its exploratory, or aggressive "shoots" (in Lacan's expression) but it equally clearly also takes in objects, from the physical space – just as it projects unconscious objects into the real.'<sup>8</sup> This power of looking results in the power to exchange individually diverse references. What springs to mind is the moment that the British artist brothers, Dinos and Jake Chapman decided to buy watercolour paintings by Adolph Hitler. They purchased these, with a viewer's eye, to paint rainbows on them. To these artists the images warranted an *image screen*, a projection of a rainbow. Nevertheless, the hidden horror of these works remains 'unscreened'.

Lacan distinguishes between looking and gazing. In a *scopic regime*,<sup>9</sup> where we can look at anything as a subjectivity, we read the object or encounter with an unconscious pre-existence, this is similar to language as fabrication and locality. The gaze, like language and the source material for theory, is situated in 'the world' and not in the academy. Therefore, in Lacanian thought, the subject exists from variable, not fixed, sets of signifiers. The subject is without a predetermined signification.

What we look at is subject to *the Gaze* as predetermined sets of the signified in the process of objectification. 'Newness', seen by an audience, nourishes a new subjectivity. These types of knowledge potentials are contained in us, and are as individual as every snowdrop has a unique shape. This is why, when searching for something on the World Wide Web, we look for the nearest thing that conforms to our sensibility as thinkers, these become micro-narratives (Jean Baudrillard).

In art galleries we are at the whim and mercy of the metonymy of the curator. This is why a display at Tate London, called *The Artists Studio*, for example, can appear as a jumble, even though it is clearly not. Whatever the curator says, we nevertheless latch onto the nearest thing to our sensibilities. I once heard a viewer say to a friend upon entering a gallery, of the works of Cy Twombly: 'Is this joke art?'. I am sure Twombly would have approved of this reaction.

Lacan said, 'in the early 1960s that the subject is the subject of the signifier'.<sup>10</sup> Therefore the relationship between the signifier and the signified is unstable, subject to an infinite number of meanings. These are taken to be in the realms of symbols or symbolic orders. This forms the imaginary, what audiences see via *the gaze*. The signified, the outcome of the signifier, is suspended in the individuality of the subject, like the British are subjects to the Queen of England.

Knowledge is predicated on non-knowledge or the quest to find out. The unconscious

sometimes betrays us in this as fear of that which is not understood. This can lead to a dismissal of diversity, contained in significations. Therefore, we must normalise diversity through actions and studies of audiences.

According to Bourdieu, the domain of the individual, the social standing or position, is called *Habitus*. To me this is a place to reside thoughts that contribute to our supposed or assumed 'standing in the world'. The fragile arrangement of *Habitus* produces a ping-pong effect between knowledge of different kinds. Too often the knowledge of the state or the academic institution habitually gains the upper ground. 'The view of the academic milieu as 'fair' and competitive and supposedly charged with 'pushing back the frontiers of knowledge', and selecting 'the best mind' for the task, is the kind of common-sense orthodoxy Bourdieu's sociological research and reflections aims to dispel.'<sup>11</sup>

Bourdieu sets up a thesis whereby 'ham, egg and chips' has a cultural value equal to say, 'Hamlet', and each should be curious about the other. Equal opportunity and social mobility arrive from Bourdieu's thinking of 'establishment knowledge' set against 'experiential knowledge' of, say, a lift operator or rickshaw driver.

Knowledge in terms of the latter is subconsciously absorbed and not given credit or formalised. These are merely different forms of *Habitus*, not set in fields of ancestral bindings and generations of people that are born to perpetuate hegemony.

The spectacle of the everyday is akin to raw sewage; it is not pickled, boxed and packaged in the way that artists make a spectacle of the everyday. Intelligence is a working proposition, not intelligence *per se*.

1 A term used extensively by the socio-philosopher Pierre Bourdieu on which I elaborate below.

2 Translated by Gregory Elliot, London/New York: Verso, 2011.

3 Ibid. p 2.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid. p 22.

6 Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1996.

7 Curated by Stephanie Rosenthal.

8 Bergin, Victor, IN/ DIFFERENT SPACES, Place and Memory in Visual Culture, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1995, p 72.

9 A term used by the feminist poststructuralist philosopher, Hélène Cixous to describe the freedom to look anywhere, as opposed to mediated looking of the camera, screen and so forth.

10 Lechte, John, *Fifty Key Contemporary Thinkers from Structuralism to Postmodernity*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995, p 68.

11 Ibid. p 46.