

Process of Display
The Gaze in Museum Practices

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Term Paper

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“Seeing on the field of the other, seeing under the Gaze”, Jacques Lacan

1. Introduction

This essay deals with questions concerning the Gaze in respect to museums and exhibition practices. It focuses on perception and furthermore on the reception of art-objects, or objects in a museum. How does the museum influence the public's perception?

In terms of the authority of the museum, or also the “performing museum” (as, among others, art historian Charles R. Garoian calls it) we will have to look at the identity defining importance of the museum. What is it that guides a subject-object relationship as a dialogic process?

Therefore this essay focuses on the core of this experience; the looking at art, or seeing the art, and what shapes the perception of the viewer. What is it that makes the viewer have a cultural experience? The question is, if it is a passive or a reversibly active experience, where on both sides does any form of action take place?

The museum was and is changing, especially in light of the recent developments. The role of contextual information has changed, since the local viewer finds him/herself in the position to act like a global viewer, regardless of his knowledge and social background. Often when in this essay the museum is mentioned as the prior space, the same argument can be drawn on alternative art spaces like galleries or others. Since the museum has a longer history all over the world, I will talk in terms of the museum, basing my argument on the history of the institution. Especially because other formalised institutional spaces, or non-institutional spaces such as galleries, usually lack a definitive curatorship.

The gaze is considered as an analytic framework to reflect on the subject-object relationship. When the viewer places her/himself in front of the artwork, both are being watched; the artwork by the viewer and the viewer by the artwork.

The essay gives a brief overview on the history of the tradition of research that has been done on the gaze in the last century, based on Norman Bryson's essay “The Gaze in the Expanded Field”.

I have not included theoretical discourse about the gaze in terms of gender, or “the male gaze” even though it is a connotatively important topic, but it doesn’t feed the purpose of this essay. I will use the concept of the gaze as neutral, rather than specifically male or female, and give its ownership to ‘the viewer’.

The history of studies on the gaze will give an introduction to the topic. I will be revisiting Sartre, Lacan and his theory on the screen that provides the viewer with cultural codes, and Foucault’s discourse to access the topic. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s idea on “Primacy of perception” and the concept of embodiment will be consulted, too.

2. Norman Bryson’s “The Gaze in the Expanded Field”

Norman Bryson summarizes the history of the gaze in his essay “The Gaze in the Expanded Field”, published in Hal Forster’s anthology “Vision and Visuality”.¹

He discusses the gaze in its history and especially in relation to paintings. Furthermore he revisits the history of the research that has been done on the gaze, starting from Sartre and Lacan and additionally consulting the Japanese philosopher Kitaro Nishida alongwith his student and translator, Keiji Nishitani, who took Lacan’s thesis to a more radical reformulation.²

Regarding Sartre’s concept of the watcher in the park, it becomes a departure point for discussing the gaze in theory. Within his discourse he opens up another perspective, in which the watcher becomes another tangent, and ceases to be the center. Sartre gives the example of himself entering a park where he finds himself all alone, everything is there for him to look at, “from an unchallenged center of the visual field”³, then another person enters and - the watcher is in turn becomes ‘the watched’ as well, displaying, in theory, two simultaneous roles. In particular: Sartre becomes a vanishing point. And without a viewpoint there is no vanishing point, and vice versa.

The “annihilation of the subject as a center is a condition of the very moment of the look”.

¹ Norman Bryson: The Gaze in the Expanded Field, in Hal Foster (Ed.) Vision and Visuality, Seattle: Bay Press, 1988, 86-108.

² Ibidem, p. 87.

³ Ibidem, p. 88.

Bryson proceeds with Lacan's metaphor of the fisherman and the sea. Again the philosopher, in this case Lacan, puts himself in the role of the protagonist of the metaphor. He sits in a boat with a fisherman on the open sea, and they can see floats on the surface of the water; a sardine can. Whereupon the fisherman says: "You see that can? Do you see it? Well it doesn't see you!"

Lacan, highly doubtful, doesn't believe this and argues that the world of inanimate objects, the perceived, looks back towards the perceiver, through 'the screen', which can be defined as a net of ideas which are socially constructed and agreed upon, through which perception takes place. Lacan talks in terms of a screen, which he also calls either 'scotoma' or 'stain'. This screen is located between the viewer and the object and contains the cultural baggage, which is depended on the viewer's background. Through this s/he expresses a retinal experience or basically 'seeing'. 'Seeing' it is coded, it mortifies sight. The visual field holds a network of signifiers.

In Lacan's interpretation, vision is socialized, and becomes a hallucination; a "visual disturbance". The concept of 'visuality' is made up between the subject and the object.

At this point it becomes obvious: the cultural construct makes visuality different from vision.

From here Bryson brings an example of the 20th century Japanese Philosopher Nishida, and his translator Nishitani who wrote the book: "Religion and Nothingness". He criticises Sartre's concept of the standpoint of the subject, everything that exists is cast into doubt beside the "je" that does the doubting, "J'existe, c'est tout."

Sarte, departing from the tradition of German phenomenology, believes that our ideas are products of real-life situations experiences.

In Existentialism, the individual's starting point is characterized by what has been called "the existential attitude", or a sense of disorientation and confusion in the face of an apparently meaningless or absurd world.

Nishitani, claims that Sartre's nihilism is only half-hearted: Sartre places the universe around the self on the field of nihility, surrounded by blankness, but Nishitani thinks that the "je" places itself on the field of nihility or emptiness, and reinforces it's position as the center of it's experience.⁴

⁴ Norman Bryson: *The Gaze in the Expanded Field*, in Hal Foster (Ed.) *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1988, 94-95.

The watcher in the Park: the self becomes a spectacle or an object in relation to the Other, objectified by the Other's gaze, facing alterity, but after Nishitani, there are just these two (twin) poles of subject and object. He demands for the wider frame and talks in terms of 'Cogito', which means Argument or Thinking and, makes the subject the universal center. This relates to Descartes philosophy of "cogito ergo sum", I think, therefore I am".

Coming back to the subject, we can understand that it looks at objects, which are separate entities from itself. Objects manifest the subjects as complete beings, with a stable location in a single place, independent self-existence and that stay in a permanent form.

The subject exists, in one place, independently of the objects around, infact the subjects doubts the existence of the objects around, for the sake of it's own existence, subject remains itself, subject is in the position of the universal center. Nishitani argues this with his concept of Sunyata, which also means emptiness, blankness and nihility, and he criticises, that the separation of the subject and object, tends to create the illusion of the subject as an independent entity separate from the rest of the world.⁵ This creates the rift in human consciousness that lies at the root of the nihilism confronting modern humanity. The split – Essentially the beginning of duality; of the Sunyata splitting in two – The rising of the subject and object from nothingness: In this argument, both the artists and the art arise from a single point of, becoming two distinct entities; following which, the art and artist become part of the art object viewed by the viewer, remaining interminably and continuously interlinked; each giving rise to the other – in viewing, the artist is always present within the art, and vice versa.

Sunyata is as a concept remains always non-representational and anti-representational.

To understand the transformation, Nishitani gives the example of a flower. The seed turns within a period of time into dust. The flower is always in transformation, never completed or finished and therefore never really there and never just in one place. A locus doesn't exist because it is constantly transforming. Therefore, only the perception of the flower locks it into specificity in time and space, for posterity, for consumption as a stable continuous phenomenon.

⁵ Norman Bryson: *The Gaze in the Expanded Field*, in Hal Foster (Ed.) *Vision and Visuality*, Seattle: Bay Press, 1988, 101.

Therefore the object is defined in negative terms and depends on its surrounding (vis-à-vis the perception-agent or viewer), object x is defined only through the difference x and the surrounding world and vice versa.

This 'Difference', can also be understood through semiotics, as used by Jacques Derrida. In terms of language it means that a word never stands forth in its full array. The reader needs the whole sentence to understand a single word in the sentence.⁶ Something, no matter if it is a word or an object, becomes itself through the surrounding or the context. Talking in terms of language also Maurice Merleau-Ponty should be considered. His phenomenological philosophy influenced Lacan to a great extent and in relation to the Gaze, made seeing intentional.

“It is my body which gives significance not only to the natural object, but also to cultural objects like words. If a word is shown to a subject for too short a period a time for him to be able to read it, the word ‘warm’, for example, induces a kind of experience of warmth which surrounds him with something in the nature of a meaningful halo.”⁷

Merleau Ponty's discourse on “Primacy of perception” reflects on the traditional problem of the surrounding. Perception inherently involves a datum, clear or unclear, something that exists for someone, happens to someone, or is present before someone. Perception remains a being-for. If one begins with perception, then interaction seems to consist of two individual perceptions. According to Merleau-Ponty, perception has an active dimension, in that it is a primordial openness to the life-world (to the "Lebenswelt"). This primordial openness is at the heart of his thesis of the primacy of perception."

Returning to Bryson's essay, he explains that Nishitani takes vision to another dimension. For Sartre, the object only appears to the subject, like looking at it through a tunnel, there is no surrounding. Nishitani removes that tunnel and looks at the frame and places the object on the field of 'Sunyata' or in the field of blankness, the Gaze is on the outside.

Bryson asks why Lacan provides only one model of vision and painting, the negative/terrorized gaze?

⁶ Jacques Derrida: Cogito and the History of Madness, in *Writing and Difference*. Trans. A. Bass. London & New York: Routledge, 1978, 75.

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge, 1989, 273.

Subject is formed by culture, history and class, not by nature, makes it difficult to think through the cultural variation or diversity; stuck.

Art historian James Elkins reconstructs Lacan's ideas about the nature of perception. He agrees with Lacan that objects look back on us, but the viewer arranges his/her 'seeing' with a filter. Objects that are too alien to us fall through this filter and are not received.⁸ Therefore sight, or seeing, depends on personal experiences and knowledge. Again, there seems to be a need for a dependent cultural knowledge to be able to focus, and create meaning.

"[Seeing] is irrational, inconsistent, and undependable. It is immensely troubled, cousin to blindness and sexuality, and caught up in the threads of the unconscious. Our eyes are not ours to command; they roam where they will and then tell us they have only been where we have sent them. No matter how hard we look, we see very little of what we look at. . . . [Seeing] is like hunting and like dreaming, and even like falling in love. . . . Ultimately, seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer. Seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism."

The subject-object relationship is mediated through a screen, a network of signs and signifiers that is based on cultural knowledge, which is socially constructed.

In terms of a museum, the curated content becomes mediator, in Lacanian terms, the screen. That can appear in forms of label texts, catalogues, audio guides, etc. But furthermore, curation itself means to enable the viewer to have access to the meaning of the artwork, to provide context.

Reversibility, Lacan, alienating the subject through this reversibility, the subject questions itself. The viewer is no longer the center itself (Satre) when the object comes into place.

The spectator is also turned into a spectacle. The power of visibility is constantly in flux. The viewer becomes self-conscious, and realizing that the space s/he finds her/himself in, requires appropriate social behaviour. As Foucault said, the museum becomes an institute of discipline, an institution with authority.

Foucault undertakes a critique of power structures. These structures are outlined in the metaphorical "Panopticon" (1979), social conduct is a self-regulating process. In Foucaultian terms, the museum is an institute of discipline, which indoctrinates appropriate behaviour in the viewer. Foucault's critique reinforces the notion of the museum as a place in which cultural values are authorized and specific behaviors encouraged as a means to produce socially acquired knowledge. To carry that argument

⁸ Elkins, James. *The Object Stares Back: On the Nature of Seeing*. New York: Harcourt, 1996, 11-12.

further, you can say, that knowledge becomes esoteric in a non-religious way. Knowledge that only addresses a small and elitist group of people that agreed on the same system of signs and signifiers. An elitist institution that includes only a certain viewership and therefore falls into endless repetition.

3. The Authority of the Museum

In 19th century museums in the era of western expansion, museums had the prior role to collect, display and store imperial objects. It also “researched and preserved curios, exotica, rare, and sanctified objects.”⁹ These museum were not intending their viewer’s to debate the objects, neither were they giving additional information to gain a better understanding of the works. It seems that there was no purpose for educating the viewer, or even enlightening him, but to wonder and create a spectacle. The way the view/anticipation was narrated in a distance constructing way.

It was a systematic production and legitimation of knowledge, collected for far cultures, which fulfils the institutional goal.

In recent development, the museum has become a social agency which is able to interact with the public. In particular, it seems as though the museum has become a geographically universal or global institution, with a wide range of international exchange. The history of trans-global exhibitions in the past and present signifies this. At the same time, museum discourses are almost inevitably entangled with political questions, implying definitions of cultural values and privileges of interpretation.

The role of contextual information has changed, since the local viewer finds himself in the position to act like a global viewer, regardless of his knowledge and social background. Museums are not only places of collection and preservation, but also places of display and interpretation.

In contemporary times, it often has been said, that the new museum performs¹⁰, meaning a radical shift in the pedagogical development and within this process of new production the viewer’s position is constantly changed. It creates an open discourse between the

⁹ Stephen Weil: *Cabinet of curiosities. Inquiries into Museums and their prospects*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995, 38.

¹⁰ Charles R. Garoian: *Performing the Museum*, in: *Studies in Art Education*, Vol. 42, No. 3, Spring, 2001.

And:

Valery Casey: *Staging Meaning. Performance in the Modern Museum*, *TDR* (1988-), Vol. 49, No. 3 (Autuum, 2005), 78-95.

viewer and the institution and more important: between the viewer and the object. The historical shift lies in enabling new ways of seeing. The museum (or exhibition space) also becomes a place for self-observation; it triggers the intellectual border traffic between the familiar and the foreign. Since the viewer is now involved on such high extent, at this point his personal memory also comes into play to create his own narrative on the viewed objects. The viewer is personally challenged to address his cultural knowledge for identity building questions.

To sum up, the contemporary museum should look for change and rupture, and not find generalizations and unities to invoke the viewer's interpretation. But it also controls ways of seeing by curatorial input, and since there has to be a selection on the objects made through another person, they gain their importance and validity by being exhibited in a museum. Also the reception of the works is narrated if objects are exhibited in other cultures, as Svetlana Alpers¹¹ points out, by turning objects into art by taking them away from their ritualistic position into a museum space; displacing the object and thereby creating new meaning.

4. Performing Perception

Taking a closer look at perception in this context, perception seems to be a performance itself as well.

“Einstein's brain is a mythological object... he is commonly signified by his brain, which is like an object for anthologies, a true museum exhibit.”¹² The organ that is responsible for collecting, preserving and exhibiting, is presented, preserved and exhibited. The notion between the private and the public is demonstrated here.

Are there differences between seeing an art work and looking at it? And regarding the performing museum: How does the museum enhance the viewer's body and mind to act out in a certain or specific way?

The American philosopher John Dewey mentions this discourse in his 1934 book “Art as an experience”, as he wondered about the viewer and his relationship to the object.

¹¹ Svetlana Alpers: *The Museum as a Way of Seeing*, in I. Karp & S. Lavine (Eds.) *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 25–32.

¹² Roland Barthes: *Mythologies*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972, 68.

The viewer himself aims to be absorbed by the aesthetic appearance of the art object, furthermore to be an emphatic projection, but also considering it as work, as an active process that has to be done by the viewer.

“to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience. And his (/her) creation include relations comparable to those which the original producer underwent... without the act of re(-)creation the object is not perceived as a work of art... There is work done on the part of the percipient as there is on the part of the artist”¹³

How one interacts with the world and how it is experienced, Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out in his writings on Perception and his theory on enfleshment, the manner of being or as he describes it: the texture of being. It could also be described as embodiment.

However, perception cannot occur without bodies to perceive and to be perceived. Embodiment is fundamental to perception and is thus highly implicated in the creation of relational dynamics between the leader and the follower.

Merleau-Ponty’s conceptualisation of embodiment is particularly radical by arguing that human bodies are both “immanent” and “transcendent”.¹⁴

As Martin Heidegger and later Drew Leder describe, the human body is in an ecstatic state, the body gets forgotten during experiencing the world, here Merleau-Ponty’s idea on enfleshment or embodiment can also be drawn.¹⁵

What is it that comes into place when the body disappears during experiencing the world? Sense perception can be termed as the apparatus through which the viewer is deliberately engaged with what is being viewed, the viewing as an intangible experience solely dependent on learned and absorbed cultural definitions.

Aesthetic absorption can only happen because the viewer’s body is flesh, so it is also an object – the specific site for the sense perception to exist is the flesh body.

Returning to Einstein’s brain, reflexivity between the artwork and the viewer, in continuous flux.

That leads us to the following chapter on the question of the identity forming function of the museum.

¹³ John Dewey: *Art as experience*, New York: Capricorn, 1934, 54.

¹⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty: *The Phenomenology of Perception*, London: Routledge, 1989, 68.

¹⁵ Charles R. Garoian: *Performing the Museum*, in: *Studies in Art Education*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Spring, 2001), 241.

5. Identity - Compensation theory

As pointed out earlier in this essay, a museum commands subconscious ownership and cultural baggage, but also private narratives of the viewer¹⁶, which are based on the viewer's memories and cultural histories. By reflecting on his own culture the viewer develops her/his own identity.

In today's times the postmodern orientation of the cultural landscape can be read as "the temporal phenomenon of musealization"¹⁷. Museums are dealing with a large number of museumified objects and visitors.

Why is that the case? Philosopher Hermann Lübbe explains the boom in museum interest, with "the cultural materialisation of the past in our present" and the museumified culture, against the "temporal identity diffusion"¹⁸.

The dialectic of near and far, alien and familiar, what already Walter Benjamin pointed out in his writings on the "aura", which is not about beauty but about distance. An object in a museum is near or almost graspable for the viewer in terms of spatial distance but might be far or alien, cognitively and mentally.¹⁹ The aura is "the appearance of a distance no matter how near (that which evokes it) may be"²⁰.

But can the performance of a museum be judged by, whether the viewer is enhanced to overcome the distance? Or rather in which way this distance is moderated? The museum should regulate the nearness and farness, between the experience of the visitor and the displayed object.

Also Korff asserts, that

"the gaze of the museum entails mechanisms of segmenting, integrating, and understanding. When applied to foreign cultures (distanced spacially or

¹⁶ Charles R. Garoian: *Performing the Museum*, in: *Studies in Art Education*, Vol. 42, No. 3, Spring 2001 234.

¹⁷ Brenda Trofanenko: *Interrupting the Gaze: On reconsidering Authority in the Museum*, in: *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2006, 52.

¹⁸ Gottfried Korff: *Reflections on the Museum*, in: *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 36, No. 2/3 Special Double Issue: *Cultural Brokerage: Forms of Intellectual Practice in Society* (May-Dec., 1999), 268.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit: Drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie*, Surkamp, 2010, 9.

²⁰ Benjamin Walter: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit: Drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie*, Surkamp, 2010, 18.

historically), to nature and technology, or special kinds of knowledge – object and practice domains that are not necessarily generally accessible to the public – this gaze is always also an expression of the society’s self-understanding.”²¹

The objects, as Timothy Mitchell proposes “seemed to be set up before one as though it were a model or picture or something. Everything was arranged before an observing subject into a system of signification, declaring itself to be a mere object, a mere signifier of something further.”²²

6. Conclusion

The very placement of an object in a museum creates the importance and validity as an (art-)object. Therefore the institution needs to be aware of its authority and identity building influence on the viewer. The curated content of an exhibition narrates the already present knowledge and cultural baggage the viewer carries with her/him.

At the same time the viewer takes action as the embodied subject, in turn making the object what it is, and vice versa. Nearness can be reached through a dense network of signs based on cultural knowledge.

²¹ Gottfried Korff: Reflections on the Museum, in: *Journal of Folklore Research*, Vol. 36, No. 2/3 Special Double Issue: Cultural Brokerage: Forms of Intellectual Practice in Society (May-Dec., 1999), 269-270.

²² Timothy Mitchell: *Colonizing Egypt*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 6.

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