

**RETURNING THE RADIANT GAZE:**  
Art and Visual Embodiment in a World of Subjects

BETH CARRUTHERS  
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There is a place on earth  
where stillness and motion meet

where a pool of water  
or the petal from a single stem

catches the eye

expressing through its rarified  
being-in-time

perfection

and the seeing of this apprehension seeks  
not to impede nor master

this moment

allowing it instead to be  
where it ought most to be--

this reverential care

this fragile power  
shared

this delicate  
body-in-the-mind

this two way mirror where the seen  
looks back  
mysteriously

acknowledging  
in mutual respect

this radiance of the gaze

Nelson Gray, *Gifted*  
– for Beth Carruthers

**It is only through the senses** that we experience what it means to be fully human. It is only through the engaged senses that we are able to feel desire and intimacy, the great longing to be fully, wholly, and utterly *in* the world. But it is only through *the honest and engaged* senses that we will come to appreciate the living world as it truly is, both wildly beautiful and endangered. Cultivating our perceptual capacity is fundamentally related to both the quality of our personal lives and restoring the quality of life on the planet.

*Laura Sewell, Sight and Sensibility*

But what is Nature? From the Latin *Natura*, it is my birth, my characteristics, my condition. It is my nativity, my astrology, my biology, my physiognomy, my geography, my cartography, my spirituality, my sexuality, my mentality, my corporeal, intellectual, emotional, imaginative self. And it is not just myself, every self and the Self of the world. There is no mirror I know that can show me all of these singularities, unless it is the strange, distorting looking glass of art, where I will not find my reflection nor my representation but a nearer proof than I prefer. *Natura* is the whole that I am. The multiple reality of my existence.

*Jeanette Winterson, Art Objects*

***Why is it important to re-embody vision – and what does art have to do with it?  
An introduction to the enquiry***

Vision is, many say, our most dominant sense. Our eyes move constantly, adapting, monitoring, locating us in relationship with the world. Through them we experience sunsets and gardens, disasters and conflicts - a single red poppy in the sun, the terrifying sight of a runaway truck on a crowded road.

Yet, in Western cultural tradition, vision is also suspect and denigrated. From Plato, through the Middle Ages, to the 20<sup>th</sup> century backlash against an ocularcentric Western culture, debates on the nature of vision have figured large in our cultural landscape. Vision, as they say in marketing, has an image problem.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, ocularcentrism and vision itself came to be heavily criticised within cultural practices - particularly the visual arts. Critical theory worked to

deconstruct and critique the Gaze. As David Abram writes in his forward to Laura Sewell's *Sight and Sensibility*, "The objectifying gaze has become a cliché of contemporary criticism" [p. xiv].

But sight, or vision, beyond being an idea or a tool for objectification, is an embodied sense, a vital connection with the world. Perhaps nowhere is this connection more evident than in the practice of artmaking.

This paper shows how artmaking and artworks offer an alternative vision, one that insists upon the subjecthood of the "object" and reveals a world of intersubjectivity and relationship. Such a vision speaks of an emotional and radical relationship with place and other, one we dwell within, rather than observe from without. By drawing us into a relational and sensual world, art denies dualism, while affirming differences. As Jeanette Winterson says, "art, by its nature, objects" [Winterson, 139].

This essay is divided into sections that intentionally flow rather organically into one another. I begin by explaining what I call Visual Being. Then, to provide some background to the enquiry, I consider some history of the debate on vision within Western culture generally and as expressed in 20<sup>th</sup> century critical theory in the arts. I show that such theories and beliefs work to further alienate humans from the world as they reinforce dualistic thinking. Phenomenology – particularly the idea of bracketing, and the notion of allowing objects to "shine forth" in and of themselves, informs the next section, where I draw parallels with art practice.

This leads directly into an exploration of the lived experience of visual embodiment and connection through the practice of artmaking. I use David Abram's term "perceptual reciprocity" to help frame this experience. I then follow with an enquiry into the nature of the artwork in the world and the relationship between the work and the viewer. In conclusion, I find that in a culture steeped in dualistic belief, where dominant languages and practices mirror dualism, art exists as a clear connection that by its very presence and being subverts this cultural narrative, allowing the world to shine forth.

Among the works informing this essay are Maurice Merleau-Ponty's reflections on art and the visual, *Eye and Mind*, Laura Sewall's work on visual perception in *Sight and Sensibility*, and David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous*. Other sources include the writings and ideas of Glen Mazis, as well as Jeanette Winterson's critical essays on art, *Art Objects*. I also visit Ron Burnett's comments on our relationship with the image in his essay, *Inside the Virtual Human*. For a review of Western attitudes toward the visual and a study and critique of anti-ocular discourse in the 20th century, Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes* has proved a valuable resource.

While I cannot speak for all artmakers when I make the observations and assertions that I do within this essay, I am aware that observations that I make on the artmaking process reflect the lived experiences of others as well as my own. There is no intention on my part to engage with an in-depth analysis of anti-visual discourse, but as much as possible, to locate my enquiry within an exploration of

lived experience This essay promises no final truths, but a process, a journey through the contested territory of the sensual world of art and vision.

***Visual Being in a world of Subjects.***

What do I mean by Visual Being? What do I mean by Subject? For the purposes of this essay, a Subject is a being with agency. This Subject may be considered to be animate, inanimate, seen, or unseen. A Subject may be an object, an other, a differently bodied force. Visual Being is the embodied visual. Vision is of the eyes, of the body, of the mind, of our entire selves. We are present in our vision, embodied within vision as vision is in us, so that when we extend ourselves into the world visually, we really are extending our *selves*, embodied. As we encounter others, and others encounter us, we may engage, and converse, through vision. We do not have to be within physical proximity to touch, to converse. Through vision we may be, as Merleau-Ponty points out in *Eye and Mind*, “everywhere at once.”

[Merleau-Ponty, 187]

Vision, in relation with the other senses, is how we locate ourselves within the vast matrix of Being. Vision forms a web of relationship linking self, other and world. “Nature is on the inside”. [Merleau-Ponty, 164] We are within nature and it within us. How can we not *be* nature?

***The splitting of vision and self – a little historical context***

Implicit in a quest to re-embody the visual is an assertion that vision has been disembodied. If vision *has* been disembodied, how did that happen; and which

vision are we speaking about? There appear to be several. Psychologist James Gibson speaks of two ways of visual perception; “the visual field” and the “visual world” [Jay, 4], Lacan and Foucault differentiated between “the eye” and “the gaze” and Plato spoke of differences between the inner eye and the eye of the senses.

Although the dominant critique of the visual insists that Western culture has been firmly ocularcentric, the reality is more complicated than that. We continue to believe that we have, in a sense, two visions – the embodied vision of the senses and the disembodied and objectifying vision of the mind. The boundaries of these are vast, shifting and blurred, making any critique of vision a bit unstable in itself.

Current thinking on the visual tends to follow a pattern set at the beginning of Western philosophy. Plato asserted that “surveying through the eyes is full of deceit, and so is perception through the ears and the other senses”. [Mazis, 51] At the same time, he recognized the value and necessity of visual perception, and so he designated a kind of rarified, or true, vision to the realm of the intellect, or soul, maintaining that “We see *through* the eyes, not *with* them.” [Jay, 27] This splitting of vision persisted through most of the Middle Ages, when ecstatic visions as sublime gifts from God were valued, while at the same time, vision, along with the other senses and the pleasure they gave, would lead one into sin. Inner vision brought one closer to God and immortality, while engaging through the embodied senses enforced one’s mortality, leading to death.

Descartes and the enlightenment brought us so called Cartesian dualism, establishing the supremacy of the observer over the things observed. From this perspective the world becomes less of a threat, being mere matter and mechanics - something absolutely different to what we are as humans, so completely devoid of soul, mind, or agency, that we may legitimately seek to control it absolutely. In the enlightenment dream, Man arrives at the centre of the universe. Our eyes, mere tools, assist us in observing, from a safe distance, the mechanics of the world and the heavens – affirming, once again, that vision itself is of the mind. This insistence on distancing ourselves from the world promoted a disembodied, disembodied vision, and linear perspective - a celebration of distance - rose to prominence, becoming the true, the enlightened way of seeing.

But Decartes' world is a solitary place where the very existence of everything outside of the subject mind is suspect. There is no place in a disembodied world for the agency of the other. When we see only ourselves reflected, separated from the community of others and of the world, we make ourselves alone.

During the 20th century, a critical response to the longtime primacy of a subjective, controlling and objectifying vision developed and rose to dominance. In the latter half of the twentieth century, art and cultural theory were swept by a tsunami of extreme antiocular criticism, including the ideas of Sartre, Lacan, Foucault and Debord. Vision came to represent all that was most tainted and oppressive as, in the words of Martin Jay, “The evil eye emerged from the realm of superstition to become the ruling metaphor of social control and political

oppression at its most insidious.” [Jay, 378] This critique ironically remains located firmly within the ubiquitous authority of dualistic thinking, as a perversely objectifying analytic vision becomes an ever more powerful tool in the critique of the visual. Through its forms of isolation, obsessive examination and intensive deconstruction, the practice itself embodies the form it seeks to critique, taking us ever farther from the body and the world.

The prevailing attitude in the art world is shaped by this mood of intense and suspicious regard. As may be imagined, in such a climate, visual art has a rough ride. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the practice of artmaking itself was increasingly called into question, talking and writing about art came to be of more value than the works themselves. In the words of writer and critic Bram Dijkstra, “contemporary culture has learned to glorify concepts of expression over expression itself. This realm of art as theory has become a fail safe formula for the intellectual identification of what is art...” [Dijkstra, 100] Not only was art made subject to the discourse, within this framework the discourse itself became art – a self-referencing cycle of discourse on discourse.

Artworks themselves were particularly suspect, subject to intense deconstruction as antiocular fervor raced through the cultural world like a virus. The anti-visual was at the core of the new feminist critique, as vision was deemed to be *essentially* objectifying. Vision and visual art were considered specifically representative of Western, male-dominated, imperialistic practice, while at the same time, works that suggested an embodied, sensual, or essential, relationship

with the world, or nature, were particularly suspect and harshly criticized. While the intention of this critique has merit, it relies heavily on maintaining the convention of the mind/body split and actually reinforces existing systems of dominance and control. Disconnected from lived experience and informed by ideas alone, the idealized vision of Plato and the fear of embodied sight, are with us still.

This unconnected way of seeing turns back on itself and on us. If we attempt to treat vision as a tool, we may also become vision's victims, as we objectify, dissect, pin down and are pinned down by the disembodied critical gaze. Because we are not separate from the world, as we take apart the world in this way, we take apart our selves.

### *Attending and Shining Forth*

If we are to redeem vision, we must look in other ways and in other places. The place where I have found a discussion of vision and embodiment that resonates most closely with lived experience is in the discipline of phenomenology - particularly in the work and writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. What occurred to me immediately on learning about the phenomenological attitude is its parallel with the way that I perceive the world as an artist. I call this process listening, or attending, and have often heard it referred to as a state of presence, or of being present-with.

The phenomenological attitude may be described as a focused attending to the other. In order to allow the world, or a being in the world, to reveal itself to us, to “shine forth”<sup>1</sup>, we must put aside our expectations, projections, objectifications and judgements, allowing the world to speak. Allowing ourselves to see, or to hear, the other may be a better way of putting this, since everything is, in its own Being, without us, shining forth – it is our attention that requires adjustment.

“The more benign version of sight, which refuses to stare aggressively at its objects, is dependent on a primordial opening to Being which is prior to the very differentiation of the senses.... Here the viewer is situated within a reflective, circumspect visual field, not outside it...” [Jay, 275] This opening to Being may not be as far distant from our everyday lived world as we might like to think. Our own lived experience “forbids us to conceive of vision as an operation of thought that would set up before the mind a picture, or representation of the world, a world of immanence and ideality” [Merleau-Ponty, 162]

Vision is powerful in both our ability to see and our ability to visualize – vision permeates our Being and extends us into the world, connecting. Seeing does not *innately* consist of the projection, or imposition of an interior vision onto the world. Neither does seeing appropriate the world. "Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world." [Merleau-Ponty, 162]

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<sup>1</sup> Heidegger believed that by setting aside our preconceptions, we allow an object to shine forth in its own being

The senses are an opening within the world. They allow us to experience the other, and more than that, to engage in an intimate exchange, “the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives” [Abram, 57]. Presence is the necessary beginning of an intentional dialogue between self and other at the heart of the artmaking process. The world is always speaking, but most of the time we do not *allow* ourselves to listen attentively. What if we were to listen, attend, respond – knowingly participate in the conversation?

There is no better way that I can think of to illustrate this attentive Being in the world, than through a description of the experience of artmaking.

### ***The Agency of Things – Artmaking as Embodied Conversation***

Artmaking is a collaborative process that begins with interaction, a conversation. The artist opens and attends to the world through focused, sensual, intimate and often fruitful intercourse with another, or with many others. “The artist”, as Jeanette Winterson says, “is looking for real presences.” [Winterson, 147]

Imagine a large space filled with many conversations and opportunities for interchange; how do I choose with whom and what to engage? As I move about, I am attracted, not always understanding why. Even in an empty room, there is still a manner of light, of form and shape, that will call to me more loudly, interest me more than another, asking for my engagement. At times, I intentionally “listen” for what calls to me the most, for what I find the most intriguing. Once the

reciprocity of attentiveness and intention is established, I become acutely aware of my engagement with another force, or presence.

This experience of reciprocity and engagement is available to me always, not just as I approach with an intention, or an idea, of making art. As I move about and through the world, opportunities for engagement are continually presented to me. I may ignore them, hurry by, acknowledge the other quickly in passing - or sometimes I am called to attend, to focus. This may happen when the one-eyed cat arrives in my path, or when morning light hits the stone of the wall and the blue door. Then, if I desire more than a passing awareness of connection, if I desire focused engagement with this other, then what is required is acknowledgement of that other - not as an object in my path, but as another subject - and a willing slowness, as things not only take time, but make their own time.

### ***Touching and being touched – Perceptual Reciprocity and Artmaking***

In the space between self and other there may be a twinkle, a frisson, an electric song ... here ... or here... It is this that I listen and feel for – this murmuring in between bodyselves<sup>2</sup>. I stop, and attend. Then, as I attend with my whole self, “the present expands to become an enveloping field of *presence*.” [Abram, 203] In practice, what this means is that I lose track of linear time – or indeed of any conscious awareness of time, while I am engaged in this interchange with another.

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<sup>2</sup> Glen Mazis, in *Earthbodies*, uses the term bodyself to mean the embodied, whole self, within the world

The closest description would be that of a continuous present, where each detail is sharp, immediate, declaring itself without expectations. While working, whether I am drawing, painting, or photographing, my attention is honed and oddly expanded into an attentive focus that is both a participatory interchange and a sensual intercourse. I am drawn into the sensible mystery of the other, into strange languages, sensations and a shared vision that is not only my own, but also other. This communion assumes and acknowledges the agency, the real presence, of the other. In Western culture it is not usually supposed that so-called inanimate objects have agency. We relegate such ideas and experiences to the realm of fantasy, or childhood. Perhaps children do engage an unclouded vision. As a child, the wind, the birds spoke to me and I to them – and this was not so much as I *desired*, but simply as the world *was*. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram speaks often about the agency of things such as rivers, trees and winds, noting that this recognition of agency is unremarkable in many non-Western cultures, Such recognition is implicit within culture, which is not perceived as separate from an exterior nature. Similarly, for the artmaker, even objects such as houses, shoes and chairs have their own Being and their own stories to tell.

“The artist is a translator; one who has learned to pass into her own language the languages gathered from stones, from birds, from dreams, from the body, from the material world, from the invisible world, from sex, from death, from love.”

[Winterson, p 146]

I once saw a film of an elephant, gently and tenderly enquiring of an elephant skull on the plain. For a long time she touched around, through, caressing and gathering the stories of this other. As I am present, embodied within my vision, reaching out to another, I am reminded of this elephant carefully and lovingly touching and turning the skull.

We all know the sense of being stared at<sup>3</sup>, when we literally *feel* the gaze of another – and not only of human others, but of the non-human as well. Visual touching is a subtle thing to our Western selves, yet we acknowledge it when we declare that we feel ourselves undressed by the gaze of another, or when I feel the eyes of the bear on me while walking in the forest.

We are always seen, as well as seeing, "...my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself..." [Merleau-Ponty, 162] This self is also seen by the other, so vision begins with, and returns to, the bodyself as a kind of circuit, a current cycling through self and other. "... the same thing is both out there in the world and here in the heart of vision... It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze." [Merleau-Ponty, 166]

My vision extends as my very self, never disembodied, so that when I am attending to the shape and contour of a stone with my eyes, my hand on the paper is translating the story of that stone. I *feel* this other tactilely - the surface, the

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<sup>3</sup> See Rupert Sheldrake, *The Sense of Being Stared At and Other Aspects of the Extended Mind*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2003

texture, the temperature, the form. This stone is telling me about its *own* stoneness, as distinct from any other stone. The stone is engaged with me.

Artmaking is always collaboration. One must be, or become, good at listening - attentive to the murmuring between self and other, self and world. This attentiveness is always present in creative process and in the interchange among myriad others, oneself and the work. Working with these others regularly requires more and different ways of listening, of negotiating languages of process.

“What is the language, the world, of stones? What is the language, the world, of birds? Of atoms? Of microbes? Of colours? Of air?” [Winterson, 146] Some listening occurs with effort, but the place where listening and hearing become effortless is the place to find, because there is the intimate connection of intention – the new life of the work.

The place of the manifestation of the work is where inspirations and visions come together, at times collide; but it seems to me that the invisible murmuring of shared process leads form to resolve itself to this intention (murmuring) – and then interesting things happen. We can see and hear that the piece has its own life and desires its own form. Sometimes I am visited in a dream, or a vision, or on waking from sleep know exactly what is next wanting to resolve itself.

“We speak of inspiration, and the word should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernable that

it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted.” [Merleau-Ponty, 167] A kind of immersion in pleasure is inherent in the intensity and immediacy, the sensuality of this coupling with another. Such a coupling requires “active surrender” [Winterson, 6] – the naked presence of the self.

The language that I use to describe the process of art making is loaded with words like intimacy, intercourse, gestate and birthing, because it is like carrying the intention and growth of a new form, until it is born – which is sometimes difficult - and then there is the post-partum sadness when it is no longer with me. “ The painter’s vision is a continued birth” [Merleau-Ponty, 168]

### ***Art, Image and Agency***

What is this artwork manifested, born into the world; what is this other, this new presence? Is it a mere document, a record of ideas and theories, a spectacle - or is the artwork an agency unto itself? “It is a spectacle of something only by being “a spectacle of nothing,” by breaking the “skin of things” to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world.” [Merleau-Ponty, 181] Jeanette Winterson says that “A fully realised work has an identity that is not the identity of its characters, or the identity of its author.” [Winterson, 170] It is its own self.

There are, in my experience, two basic ways by which I might approach an artwork. One is as an apparently disembodied, analytic mind and the other is as an embodied being among beings. The first way is the way of objective distancing

and deconstructive analysis. Once engaged in this way, I have in a sense tuned myself out. This objective analysis keeps me on the surface of things, away from depth and from the dizzying experience of intimate knowing. What comes to mind is Heidegger's distinction between wonder and curiosity – wonder being an open allowing of manifestation, and curiosity being an imposition, a kind of forcing of oneself upon the other in order to pry forth secrets.

“Art is odd, and the common method of either taming it, or baiting it, cannot succeed. Who at the zoo has any sense of the lion?” [Winterson, 5] When I regard the lion, do I experience a spectacle, an object, or another intelligence, strange but familiar, meeting me gaze to gaze?

If an artwork is a presence, a subject, what of the mass-produced images ubiquitous in our culture? Images and fragments of artworks are re-worked in the context of marketing and political persuasion. Images, aside from our own intentions when using them, are not innocent of an inherent presence and intention. If they were, they could not be as effective as they are - and as a marketing tool, an image would be no more valuable than a line of text. In reality, images, being more than signs, texts or objects, do not always affect us as we would choose or predict.

According to Ron Burnett, “Images... are an integral component of everything which we define as sensual, which is not to say that images are equivalent to our senses. Rather, "to see an image" does not have to mean that the "it" is outside of

or beyond vision. No sooner seen than a part of the seer. And strangely, yet also wondrously, images form as well as deform in a circular fashion within and outside of bodies, marking us in a variety of ways which are sometimes predictable and often times, not.” [R. Burnett, *Inside the Virtual Human*]

The ways we are “marked by images” are unpredictable, in the same way that we cannot predict how we are marked by any interchange. That we use images and fragments of artworks in this way admits to the embodied potency of the visual, of images – and of art.

***Opening the Eye of the Heart - Reciprocity and the Embodied Gaze***

*CaNte Ista. Those are the words used to describe a way of seeing that is good and true...the true place of the heart is – in that circle where all things are connected... CaNte Ista, through the eye of the heart.*

Joseph Bruchac

There is no denying the potency of art. We have outlawed art, burned art and glorified art. This is not because art is a mirror, a narrative, or a representation, but because art is something more. “Art has deep and difficult eyes and for many the gaze is too insistent. Better to pretend that art is dumb, or at least has nothing to say that makes sense to us.” [Winterson, 11] We have turned art into “pictures” in an effort to mask its potency.

A painting, an image is not a tabula rasa on which I write – a passive recipient of my gaze – an object onto which I project whatever meaning I desire. Neither is the world a collection of objects onto which I project meanings. Images speak to us.

Art speaks to us. Art proves an intimate, animate world. Art invites us in, at times, seduces us. We are seduced because we desire connection, and perhaps this seduction is a very spark of life between self and other requiring us to be present and attentive. In its very Being, art bears the traces of intimate contact, tells us stories of interconnections and strangely familiar intimacies. We enter the image. The image enters us. Through vision, we experience the world as a place of intimate connections, of constant interchange among self and others. This intimacy frightens and entices, we want to hold it back; but intimacy does not need control. True intimacy is not based on power over another, but of power *with* the other – or with many others. “Love is reciprocity and so is art.”

[Winterson, 139] “...its true effort is to open to us the dimensions of the spirit and of the self that normally lie smothered under the weight of living.” [Winterson, 137]

The world is a place of agencies and powers, continually mysterious to us, since we cannot know these agencies and powers by denying their existence or by reducing the world to matter and mechanisms to be deconstructed and thereby understood – as if things were inanimate.

These other powers do not reveal themselves to us through denial or deconstruction. Things look back at us. The world returns our gaze. We are held within that gaze as we hold the world in ours.

The sensibility of the artist and the act of artmaking deny notions of separation. To participate in the process is to participate with many others, to acknowledge agencies and powers seen and unseen. The artist brings back visions [Winterson, 148] – visions recounting the stories of others, visions holding traces of Being outside the human, and ultimately, visions that hold meanings and messages that remind us of our embeddedness in a world much larger than we consciously acknowledge. The artist dwells in the mutable boundaries between human sensibility and the more than human. She negotiates and mediates, engaging passionately and fearlessly with other powers.

As all beings hold in themselves their genesis, so art bears witness to relations and correspondences outside Western notions of what is true or acceptable. Art opens the eyes of the heart, and the world returns our gaze. “Vision alone makes us learn that beings that are different, “exterior”, foreign to one another, are yet absolutely *together...*” [Merleau-Ponty, 187] Choosing to acknowledge our innately inter-relational Being in the world is to welcome uncertainty, relinquishing illusions of control. It is to meet and return the radiant gaze of the world.

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