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Not Looking into the Abyss: the potentiality to see

Daniel Sack

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On Not Looking
The Paradox of Contemporary Visual Culture

Edited by
Frances Guerin
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The Potentiality to See

Daniel Sack

When you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks back into you.
—Friedrich Nietzsche

We stood on the cusp of that great abyss, expecting a vastness miles deep and wide. We had imagined it many times before, had preconceived its possible contours in the midmorning light from photographs and landscape paintings that had tamed the massive formation into recognizable compositions and complexions. But when we came upon the Grand Canyon on our drive eastward, there was nothing at which to look. Trees giving way to rocky descents plunged into blank fog suspended in the air all around. Nearly a whiteout, the thickest fog, no reimbursements at the visitor's center. A palpable sense of disappointment also hung in the air, whispered in German and French. Crowds gathered longing for the occasional shreds in the veils of white to show suggestive forms below: the shadowed curl of a tree, hunched backbone of a boulder, surfacing in midair for a glimpse before sinking under again. These hints of appearance eliciting responses far greater than a full view would have entailed, awe that much more acute.

We continued our travels east, wondering if we had seen the Grand Canyon. We certainly had not looked at it, for what was there for the eye to catch hold of, to reel the pupil into focus? But was there something more sublime, more inhuman, in this disappearing act than in the sight itself, the way it beckoned our further approach and promised to disclose its veiled secret? There we were waiting for that great red beast to make its appearance. We knew it must be there—the signs said as much—but what it would be when it arrived was suddenly a matter far beyond the snapshot. For, as Walker Percy describes it in his own reflections on the landmark, the canyon carries with it a whole opaque symbolic logic; it is paved over with the countless photographs, the studium of common appearance, not the punctum of an encounter. No, we had not looked at the Canyon. We had seen the abyss, and it had seen the abyss in us.

In his A Theory of Cloud, French art historian Hubert Damisch conducts a semiotic analysis of clouds depicted in paintings from the sixteenth
century to the twentieth century. He argues that the cloud occupies the limits of perspective as a system of representation, that it marks the unmarked, gives body to the formless and the mutable.

On a conceptual level, a “cloud” is an unstable formation with no definite outline or color and yet that possesses the powers of a material in which any kind of figure may appear and then vanish. It is a substance with neither form nor consistency, onto which Correggio imprints the emblems of his desires, just as Leonardo, before him, imprinted his onto the stains on a wall.3

In other words, cloud is the ground from which figures differentiate themselves. In the paintings that Damisch reads, clouds part like curtains to reveal the transformed, or act as the surface upon which saints and other celestial beings stand to separate themselves from the terrestrial below or beyond the nimbus. Discrete objects only regain stability upon emergence from these Baroque folds.4 Cloud qua cloud becomes the ground for, and of, sight, so that we may look upon the figure it will unveil. It stands as a visible and delineated surrogate for our potentiality to see, before there is any thing to look at in actuality. Forever promising an appearance it withholds, the cloud displays how not looking is not the same as not seeing, how we can see our capacity for vision by not looking at a particular figure.

And yet, this sense of potentiality seems somewhat exhausted as a result of its representational capture. The painted cloud, too, becomes a thing at which the spectator can look and can possess as one part in relation to the other parts of a canvas’s composition. A further enervation of potentiality derives from the instantaneity of object-based art and such an object’s permanence. In spite of all the suggestive turmoil in a Correggio or a Constable cloud study, what lies behind or within the cloud of these paintings is effectively excluded from the possibility of actualization for all eternity. Compare this with how the earthbound cloud in my visit to the Grand Canyon did not form an object at which to look; it kept churning itself sideways and otherwise in time, holding my attention in anticipation. For a field of potentiality to retain its congenital relationship to an indeterminate future, revelation must remain viscerally immanent, threatening at any moment to realize an actualization. After all, what is potentiality without the pressure of an impending release, however extended that expectation may be? A look at an object is an instantaneous discovery. But we can see or encounter visibility, while not looking at an object. This seeing of one’s potentiality to see requires a durational, lived experience. Like the sense of potentiality itself, the sense of not looking I explore here must be experienced live as a time-based proposition.5

This chapter will consider two performance installations that stage a scene of potentiality in the form of a cloud, but not as a localized figure seen from a distance and not with the attendant problems of delineating an edge to its amorphous form and compass. Instead, in Antony Gormley’s Blind Light (2007) and in Kurt Hentschläger’s ZEE (2008), spectators are situated inside the cloud and subjected to its productive instability. Within such clouds, vision becomes tactile, leveling all sense of distance, proportion, and shape as volume crowds close around the viewer. And where being blindfolded or submerged in pitch darkness would encourage attentiveness to the other senses, here the blindness brings the visible to the fore. While morphologically related, the two performance installations represent divergent models for realizing potentiality as a lived experience: Gormley reduces vision to a field in stasis, withholding the eye’s capacity to discern or create a difference; Hentschläger’s piece realizes an excessive or complete production of this capacity to do or create something different from itself. These two ways of presenting the clouded abyss—as void and as chaos—allow one to see the potentiality of vision without looking at a figure and, in turn, they see the viewer while “not looking” at him or her as a (human) figure.6

Looking at an object allows one to be looked at as subject, an exchange that instantaneously places one in a (spatiotemporal) coordinate relation to another outside. Think of Lacan’s sardine can floating in the ocean and returning his look as if to say “you are there at the same time that I am here.” Disoriented sight not only disperses one scene across a frameless field, but it also spreads the one seen and looked at across a field of potential appearances. The cloud does not look back from here or there; it takes up a position everywhere and nowhere at once. This is to invest the cloud with an active presence, as if it were some kind of alien life form or spirit confronting and, perhaps, conjoining us. For ultimately we must ask: facing the cloud do we really possess such a faculty of sight or, deprived of the directional relationship between a subject looking at an object, does the faculty possess (in the demonic sense) us? Does it disperse one into a cloud of many sensations?

Before addressing the two works in question, let me trace an outline of the relationship between vision and a theory of potentiality. The distinction between seeing and looking that I employ here derives for the most part from common usage. The OED states that to see is merely “to perceive with the eyes.” To look is “to direct one’s sight,” “to apply one’s power of vision.” The former, then, implies an impression of the visible autonomously received by the subject while the latter insists upon an intervention or active participation in the perception of a sensation. In the case of looking, one “applies one’s power” or actualizes the faculty of sight upon a selected focus. It requires that one consciously acknowledge the object of the gaze. However, we can think of seeing without looking as the reception of an event without the attachment to a particular focus; in this position the one who sees possesses the potential to look but does not choose to actualize attention in a look. Gazing off in reverie, the pupils dilate to attend to the broader field of vision, the peripheral sharing the same plane as the focal. At its extremity, one senses the activity of sight, but there is nothing to look
at—only an open and horizonless expanse. When the entire field of vision becomes a single holistic object of sight, looking crosses over into a kind of not looking. In these terms, one does not look into an abyss, one sees oneself in what could be called a pure act of seeing, seeing nothing, drifting. One senses the sense of sight.

Aristotle touches upon this notion of “sensing a sense” in his writings on the biological faculties, De Anima (On the Soul). Akin to what we now call proprioception (one’s “perception of the position and movements of the body”), it is that through which the living being becomes aware of its own sensation. De Anima offers inconclusive considerations of such self-sensing at work throughout the five senses, but it is the faculty of sight that accounts for the text’s most suggestive articulation. Here Aristotle writes of how the faculty of sight makes itself known through the experience of absolute darkness, an absence of color or light that nonetheless presents itself as a positive presence, the sense seen in its complete lack of content. Opening our eyes in the pitch dark, our capacity for sight is made apparent without confining its vast expanse to a focal point or object. This does not imply a lack of sensation or a blindness—one feels sight’s liveness and preparedness for appearance—only that there is no object at which to look, on which to focus. The potentiality of vision appears in making present the lack of an actual object, in seeing that one could (is able to) not have a look. Such is the connection that the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has taken up as one of the foundations for his own longer rumination on potentiality: “What is essential is that potentiality is not simply non-Being, simple privation, but rather the existence of non-Being, the presence of an absence; this is what we call ‘faculty’ or ‘power’. ‘To have a faculty’ means to have a privation.”

Potentiality displays a capacity to do or to make—to differentiate—without expressing such a capacity in an action or form. Another way of reading this notion of capacity or “faculty” is as the appearance of a medium prepared for, but withholding, articulation; it is a circumscribed field or ground without figure, or a figure becoming a ground. Aristotle uses the metaphor of the tabula rasa or wax surface before imprint to explain such potentiality. In this way, we understand that potentiality is not diametrically opposed to actuality: a field or faculty must be actually present in order to express its potentiality. It is not an absolute negation. By dividing vision into seeing as the ground of sight and looking as the figure of sight, I want to propose that seeing while not looking allows one to encounter visible potentiality.

Considered historically, claiming darkness as the potentiality of vision poses problems for contemporary spectators. Jonathan Crary has explained how classical theories of optics from Aristotle through Locke suppose visual perception as the immediate reception of an external stimulus. Following Aristotle, such a faculty lies dormant in the dark, possessing its capacity to sense while awaiting the stimulation of a lighted source. Crary argues that this conception of vision changes radically in the nineteenth century. Referencing Goethe’s writings on afterimages and contemporaneous investigations that reveal how stimulations of an eye could produce perceptions without a light source—in other words without reference to, and revelation of, an external object—Crary shows how in the early 1800s vision is no longer a matter of a separate subject effected by a discrete outside source. Seeing becomes intertwined with the viewer’s body. When coupled with the wave theory of light, which prompted scientists to approach light as akin to magnetic and electric waves, “light loses its ontological privilege” in relation to vision.41 Instead, color becomes the phenomenal basis of sight, a subjective sensation without a necessary relationship to spatial or luminous referents. While this experience was certainly available to prior subjects, it only now becomes discursively possible to see color without looking at an external thing.

What color then? Instead of pitch darkness’s negation of the visible field proposed by Aristotle, I would like to suggest that one could see white light—the fount of all color—as the potentiality of vision. In his performance “A Lecture” delivered in 1968 at Hunter College, filmmaker Hollis Frampton speaks of the projector’s unadulterated white light in similar terms: “It is only a rectangle of white light. But it is all films. We can never see more within our rectangle, only less.”42 To turn to the clouds is perhaps to concretize Aristotle’s metaphor of the blank slate as an appearance of potentiality. After Crary, however, it seems especially suitable to this newfound order: “Perception occurs within the realm of what Goethe called das Trieb—the turbid, cloudy, or gloomy. Pure light and pure transparency are now beyond the limits of human visibility.”43 Perhaps not even white, then, but the cloudy. For, rather than an immediate access, the cloudy makes the “not” in not looking a visible interference, a sight suggestive of the potentiality for other depths behind this veil.

In Antony Gormley’s installation Blind Light (see Figure 1.1), the white cube of the art gallery contains a smaller white cube: a chamber of glass walls each about 10 meters long, suffused with uniformly thick and still white fog.44 Spectators can circle the exterior of the cube, peering into it as if into some opaque aquarium. Evenly dispersed lighting holds the mass like a cloud in suspension, no darkened spots or visible variation, everything in balanced white. Entering the enclosure through an opening, one encounters an empty field of vision, the dry and slightly cool fog so dense that one loses sight of one’s outstretched hand. Others wandering around the interior only emerge in the most immediate proximity, literalizing one particular conception of the visual as a ground out of which the figure emerges, but also compromising the visual’s remove, bringing appearance up close and intimate (see Figure 1.2). The air itself gathers about like an eyelid or cataract, the depth of field contracted into a uniformly consistent surface, a tabula rasa enveloping the viewer. Blind Light poses Aristotle’s claim about darkness in the affirmative, by making the potentiality of vision a visible presence, albeit one that still suspends the sensory capacity as a passive negation of the
image. It is, as the paradoxical title so aptly states, a blindness or darkness made light, a potentiality that contains its impotentiality. Not looking at an other or even one’s own extended body, one sees a vision without content.

Best known for producing lead casts or casings of his own body, work that fits more easily into sculptural discourse, Gormley’s Blind Light represents something of a departure for the British artist.\(^5\) Even when these other lead works are arranged in a larger composition or installation—clusters of several iterations of Gormley posed in iconic manner throughout a gallery or across a cityscape—they maintain a distinctly figurative presence, demanding to be looked at and encountered as human bodies however hollowed. Yet the question of a body’s potentiality is central to the artist’s œuvre. The casings index a corporeality suspended in its capacity to move or do, frozen still in the heaviest of shells. It is as if these lead containers not only protect against radiation but also permanently withhold the potential energy of the body that once lived within. So weighty a prison will release no kinetic energy, however much it seems to hoard such force within its walls. Speaking with Ernst Gombrich, Gormley says of the process of making these sculptures: “I get out of the mould, I re-assemble it and then I re-appraise the thing I have been, or the place that I have been and see how much potency it has. . . . The potency depends on the internal pressure being registered.”\(^6\) In Blind Light, Gormley shifts from a representation of his own past instances of potentiality captured in fixed forms, objectified so that he can look back at them as enclosed states, to an experience for the spectator to undergo through which she confronts her own present potentiality to see the future.

Seemingly a matter only for the eye, the potentiality displayed here affects the entire body of the spectator, just as the casts had taken up Gormley in body and eye. As limbs and orientations disappear into Blind Light, one threatens to become the celebrated “disembodied eye” of high modernist art.\(^7\) Yet, the voices and sounds of other spectators in the space insinuate
surrounding presences just out of sight, and the remembered dimensions of the chamber itself promise a limit to this plane somewhere beyond the visible. One expects these to loom up so suddenly that they would become not figures or walls, but felt intrusions on the skin of the eye. Also at odds with the transcendentally disembodied eye is the gnawing desire to delve deeper into this enveloping surface. Again, there is nothing to look at in here; and yet one feels as if an object—perhaps one or many of Gormley’s doubles—has been buried deep within the center of the catacomb, some blind spot against which this field of white determines itself. And so one searches, searches for that missing difference (Gormley quips that upon encountering Blind Light for the first time Ralph Rugoff, director of the Hayward Gallery, asked him, “Where is the sculpture?”). This reflects a felt need to find something to look at, to attain an outlook upon some object that we can claim as an end to our future actions, but which Blind Light pointedly denies us. In everyday life and looking, we recognize time and our place in it by referring to our surroundings as the ends of recognizable actions. I know how long it would take me to reach that wall or sit in that chair, and performing that action shows me how long I have lived that action. The future becomes divisible into separate foreseeable parts. The painted representation of the cloud marks the threshold of the seen, the furthest edges where human action may direct its ends. To look there is to begin to contemplate a known future. Entering the cloud, those projected lines for action are obscured and made available everywhere at once. Wide-eyed in wonder and anxiety one faces the blank slate of the actionable and of the visible. Here, the future extends endlessly, timelessly, into the field opened up by not looking.

To be deprived of such ends is an entirely unnerving and uncanny experience. During a 2007 roundtable discussion with Gormley that reflected on the opening exhibition of Blind Light, psychoanalyst Renata Salecl spoke of the sense of anxiety that the work produces, making the distinction between a fear of the known and anxiety that faces the unknowable, the objectless:

We know from Kierkegaard that anxiety is an essential human condition that has to do with the possibility of possibility, with the fact that the subject is, in a way, free. Sartre says this anxiety has to do with the fact that, when I am standing in front of an abyss, I am not afraid that I will fall, I am actually afraid that I have the power to throw myself into the abyss.19

Vertical and horizontal axes give way to a vertiginous sensation, as if one has stepped into the abyss with Alice to begin an interminably long, slow fall, with all the time in the world to wonder what will happen next.20 To take a step in the cloud is to lose sight of one’s footing and start that slow fall until the ground is met solid underfoot; it is a small act of faith that there will be somewhere to place each foot. By removing the visible coordinates of the articulated body, Blind Light remembles the spectator as a phenomenal consciousness disassociated from an optical organization of parts and pieces. Combined together, these affect the body of the spectator to perform an unseen dance towards an unseen end. Like some Beckertian character just remembering how to walk, I stumble on, my hesitant shuffle careful of the encroaching glass walls and wandering spectators somewhere out there. Perhaps this is why Salecl speaks of feeling as if Blind Light possessed a kind of monstrous force threatening to envelop or invade the viewer, a threat energized by the unseen presence of these other bodies that are not looking at me.

One is reminded of Michael Fried’s attack against the theatricality of the minimal/literal object in his 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood,” a theatricality deriving at least in part from the sense that an anthropomorphic presence hides unlooked at behind the even industrial surfaces of the white beam of a Robert Morris sculpture or Tony Smith’s six-foot cube, Die (1962). For Fried, this arises in part from the seeming hollowness of the minimalist object: “The quality of having an inside—is almost bluntly anthropomorphic.” For Fried, the secret inner life of the minimal object gives the impression that it is always looking out at the observer, awaiting her arrival. From the outside, Blind Light’s industrial walls, “painted” white from the evenly lit cloud behind the glass, recall nothing so much as a gigantic minimalist object. Perhaps it, too, seems to look upon us. Upon entering its domain, it is as if we have stepped into the interior of such a cube only to discover that the hollowness the exterior seemed to obscure does not end at the dividing line between inside and out, but extends into an absolutely consistent interior. It is a hollowness, yes, but one that while negating an object for my looking, still harbors unseen forces—or, rather, forces me to see everywhere. No longer an object posing as a subject (as in the minimalist object’s confrontation with the viewer), but instead, as a field of visible hollowness, Blind Light cannot look at me either.

If, from the outside, the object parleys in the language of looking, inside it sees without looking. Its potentiality for producing an appearance mirrors my own potentiality to see, so that the installation itself stages a faculty of sight common to myself and my surroundings. This is a radically isolating proposition. While each spectator presumably sees the “same” lack of an object, it is impossible to share a common perspective with another inside Blind Light—each individual must encounter his or her own private potentiality face to face. I say “face to face” for several reasons: because Gormley’s cloud leaves no room between the spectator’s visage and its own—it lies like a mask against the human face; because one cannot turn aside or back to its approach since it faces us from all directions; and because for all these reasons it shows our potential for sight to be alive with unknown secrets, inhuman and no thing to look at. A brilliantly white and alien abyss that, as Nietzsche tells us, returns our blank gaze. If something definite appears, it will not be through my look, but through the realization of the cloud itself.
The cloud is not only a means of obscuring the view of an object; as mentioned above, it is also the scene for transformations. Damisch writes: "Cloud, in the ever changing variety of its forms, may be considered the basis, if not the model, of all metamorphoses." Looking up at clouds in the sky, I can project any number of images onto their formations. This look outlines the distant amorphous shape into a recognizable form so that the world may look back at me and recognize me, my anthropomorphisms confirm my own humanity as the nexus of a knowable world. In this way, a cloud seen from without contains many possible articulations—as many as the spectator chooses or waits to see. If this is the case, looking at Blind Light from the exterior, as the bounded minimal white cube, illuminates how both clouds and minimal objects act as potential sources of withheld imagery: the white cube as the block of stone before the sculptor's stroke carves a look into its matter or as the boxed cloud before its contours spill out into countless possible representations.

But the cloud is also the emblem of active, time-bound metamorphosis. Unlike the fixed and unchanging blot, or the minimal object hunkering down in the gallery's expanse, in time clouds churn over into other figures or collapse completely. Looking out an airplane window at the clouds passing by, one cannot tell where one begins and another ends, or how scale and distance intercede. Recall as well how many truly impossible transformations, such as those in the myth of Zeus and Io, take place within a cloud. These metamorphoses dispense with shape and form and their promise of representable bodies. In his Meteorologia, Aristotle describes clouds as masses of tiny reflective surfaces (molecules of moisture) that fracture the shape of an image, but transmit its color. In Kurt Hentschläger's ZEE, the cloud expresses mutations of color as the basis for seeing form. It places one at the origin of white light's disintegration, as if immersed in a rainbow still caught in its storm, suspended in chaotic display before its earthbound descent fragments into ordered bands of light. The piece stages another form of seeing while not looking, here through the constant formation and deformation of sight too fleeting for an objective stare.

As in Blind Light, Hentschläger's ZEE features a chamber uniformly thick with fog, but instead of the stasis of Gormley's deep tabula rasa, a performance of constant variation fills the space. Assistants lead groups of six visitors into a room of unknown dimensions, bounded by a rope at waist height (see Figure 1.3). Left alone in the fog's clasp, they hold the rope as a last tether to stability, otherwise lost to each other and their own disorientation. Flashes illuminate the grey surround, and, as the frequency of the bursts establish conflicting rhythms of flicker, forms and shapes begin to coalesce across the full range of each individual's vision. A series of stroboscopic lights hung along the perimeter of the space send out the flashes that trigger this dance of color. With the fog acting as a projection screen that brushes against the retina of the eye, the lights stimulate one's vision at such a rate that they soon begin to inspire what are known as "flicker-induced hallucinations." For the seemingly timeless fifteen minutes of the performance—timeless because the rapidity and ineffability of the hallucinatory onslaught moves at an inhuman pace—one sees the full potentiality of sight actualized over and over, simultaneously an exhaustion and renewal of the visual capacity without the possibility of clinging to an object. One encounters another form of blinding light, of seeing without looking. Indeed, the title of the piece seems to suggest a mutation of the very word to "see."

"An overwhelming flood of intensely bright patterns in supernatural colors exploded behind my eyelids, a multi-dimensional kaleidoscope whirling out through space. I was swept out of time." So wrote artist Brion Gysin in describing his first experience of such flicker-induced hallucination, a seeing without looking rife with color. The vision would inspire Gysin to invent the Dream Machine in the 1960s, a kind of slotted screen placed over a turntable and illuminated from within that could produce flicker effects on spectators. First recorded by physiologist Jan Purkinje in 1819 (roughly the same period as Goethe and the scientists Cray discusses were investigating after-images), these hallucinations of brilliantly colored moving patterns are caused by the stimulation of light flashing between eight and twelve times per second. The frequencies mimic alpha waves, an electrical rhythm produced at times of rest or relaxation in the part of the brain that contains the visual cortex. Grey Walter, the first scientist to explicitly investigate flicker through experimentation, "found that the alpha rhythm disappears from most of the brain during mental tasks that require purposeful thinking,
and is even reduced by the simple act of opening the eyes. Since external visual patterns seemed to interfere with the illusory images, Gysin instructed users of his Dream Machine to close their eyes in order to see the hallucinations. The cloud accomplishes the equivalent by blocking out the intrusion of objects and bringing the screen of projection up against the retina like a second skin. Setting multiple strobes at diverging frequencies, as in ZEE, seems to cause further disturbances in the brain and produce even more variegated and mutable imagery. It produces a chaos of sights fleeing the look’s grasp.

As with Gormley, Hentschläger’s larger interests could be framed as an interrogation of sensory potentiality. Having studied architecture before turning to the visual arts, Hentschläger’s work foregrounds the spatiality of vision and sound, how they take and make place in live time around an embodied spectator. He first experimented with the idea of combining fog and stroboscopics in a 2004 collaboration with French choreographer Angelin Preljocaj, but ZEE descends most directly from his 2005 performance FEED. While the first part of FEED focuses upon projected 3-D models of human figures free-floating in space (adapted from the 1999 video game Unreal Tournament), the second section of the piece makes use of fog and flicker in a manner akin to ZEE. Fog pours into the performance space to obscure the projections, as strobe lights barrage the audience with a less complexly programmed version of the light storm from the later performance. FEED anchors its audience in a bank of seats within a space whose contours it has come to know over the preceding action, so the obscurity of the cloud is always in a dialectical relationship with the original location. ZEE, however, unmoors the spectator to the impulses of her own drifting wander in a space of unknowable dimensions; one leaves the chamber as one enters it—though an unassuming door—without ever looking at the extent of its bounds (see Figure 1.4). The free-floating wander encouraged by ZEE (as by Blind Light) situates one as an actor instead of as either a passive or active viewer.

One is an actor-participant not just because of the piece’s peripatetic demand, but also because these fugitive sensations differ radically for each visitor. In a cab drive from the theatre I described checkered geometric patterns receding while my companion spoke of seeing gently floating amorphous shapes. We were trying to find words for forms far removed from recognizable objects. This singularity of vision leaves the performance impervious to documentation: a video recording of the piece shows a field of fog with intermittent flashes of light, a photograph even less, both capturing the external production of light’s action but without the temporally embodied sight that sees its affects. Scientific researchers working on flicker-induced hallucinations lament how the constant variation and ephemerality of the imagery disrupt attempts at analysis. If the recording of a live performance differs from the live event by virtue of its framing, its iterability, its texture, and a host of other deformations necessitated by the medial shift, then ZEE makes these distinctions in the starkest terms, secreting away the actual performance from all objectivel capture or trace. For ultimately the event of ZEE takes place not in the chamber, but in the individual’s reaction to the external stimulation, the flashes of light inspiring one’s phantasmagoric display only as a privately seen response, as it were after the fact. In this respect ZEE is a quintessentially live performative work of art, exaggerating the ontological fact of liveness as that which makes itself known through disappearance. Unlike an ever-receding live performance, however, one cannot mourn over the negation of this present as it moves into the past. For it is the very collision of appearance and disappearance, compressed into shuddering past in light and dark, that produces the piece’s continuous stream of constantly emerging color. Likewise, it encourages one to attend to the affirmative power of seeing rather than conceiving of not looking as a negation of appearance.

ZEE performs a cascade of differentiation quite impossible in any actual everyday scene. In the words of Andrew Pickering, “if our capacity for cognitive tasks is immediately before us—I already know that I can
do crosswords and sudoku puzzles—the epileptic response to flicker was, in contrast, a surprise, a discovery about what the performative brain can do.” For Pickering, the brain is “performative” because in addition to thinking intentionally or in terms of the known ends of a task, it acts as an autonomous creator. Flicker reveals the potentiality of sight to be much more expansive and intense than one could anticipate according to expected uses and expected things to look at. Brion Gysin suggests as much in celebrating the visions produced by his flicker-based Dream Machine: “What is art? What is color? What is vision? These old questions demand new answers when, in the light of the Dream Machine, one sees all ancient and modern abstract art with eyes closed.” Indeed, research subjects exposed to flicker have reported that the colors produced in the hallucinations are more vivid than any incarnated color in the “real” world. The intensity of this seeing exceeds objectively oriented looking, becomes not looking. At the same time, the scenes produced achieve a realization of the entire field of vision impossible in everyday directed looking. To look at an object is to focus one’s eyes on a part within the larger surrounding expanse, it is to actualize a definite point from amidst the open field that lies ahead, a field otherwise filled with infinite potential points of attention. Flicker does not allow one to look at such a focal point; it comprehensively occupies the entirety of one’s sight, out to its furthest edges, suspending all as a potential site for emergence. It possesses the full extent of the visual faculty.

This is to say that ZEE takes the potentiality of my sight away from my ownership and makes of it what it will; no longer a potentiality that expresses my possession of a faculty, its “possession” passes into the demonic register as if it were a spirit that overtook my body. As in Blind Light, the experience of ZEE is profoundly disturbing not only of the arrangements that one uses to operate in the world, but also of the boundaries between the internal and external, between who or what possesses the threshold of the sensible. Visitors to the Gormley piece reported a fear of the cloud infecting them; here, the chaos of colors infiltrates the spectator even when one closes one’s eyes. It appears that there is no escaping the affects of not looking.

Crary writes of scientists from the nineteenth century whose experiments on afterimages eventually resulted in severe damage to their sight. They would gaze at the sun until it produced a proliferation of incandescent color. . . . Not only did their work find the body to be the site and producer of chromatic events, but this discovery allowed them to conceive of an abstract optical experience, that is of a vision that did not represent or refer to objects in the world.

ZEE stages this embodied optical experience of chromatics without reference to an actual object. Rather than a negation of the content of the look, here potentiality expresses itself as an affirmation of difference, a constantly differentiating form where ground and figure fold into one another. Just as the scientists Crary mentions burnt out their eyes on the glare of the actual only to be transfixied by phantasmagorical blossoms of colored afterimages, the performance installation destroys the world in order to simultaneously make it anew as pure color. ZEE offers up an apocalyptic vision, ending one world to form another and another and another. Every figure that appears becomes a ground for further differentiation, the event constantly exhausting and renewing vision’s potentiality for change by undermining the stability of a localized look.

Potentiality, then, offers us two abysses: the calm and the storm, the still and the chaotic. But perhaps at root these two senses of potentiality are not so far apart as they may seem at first glance; as Heraclitus wrote, “it is in changing that things find repose.” Gormley and Hentschläger’s stagings present both sides of this potentiality—on the one hand, an extraterrestrial vision without horizon or ground suspended eternally (for, ostensibly, one could remain lost in Blind Light forever), on the other, an apocalyptic vision creating and destroying the world of the “lookable,” and forestalling the fixation of looking, all at once. Dante’s heaven was a place of increasingly indescribable white light, held in a kind of timeless stasis and dwarfing the pilgrim’s human capacities with its presence, looming larger and larger; a divine sense of potentiality overtook the limits of his articulation as the cloud of white overtakes perspective’s comprehension of the scene. Or perhaps one becomes the many-colored beast, falling and falling into sight with no actualized ledge upon which the look can grab hold.

In the clear sky of the everyday, one looks at a world composed of knowable parts. I imagine looking at the Grand Canyon on such a cloudless day, as if it were a landscape I already know, through past pictures and through paths and cliffs I can relate to in the previously named terms of my own expected negotiations. In choosing how to look at these objects and others, I recognize them as stable entities available to my possible use or engagement, as parts in any number of possible chains of action unfurling a past and promising a future. A sense of relationality accompanies this look as I come to place myself against the actualization of these possible ends and uses, identify alliances and obligations as well as perform my actions. However, in the cloud of visible potentiality I am relieved of the burden of my responsibility to look actively towards a purposeful end—to look and be looked at (or not to look and not be looked at). I see where there is nothing to look at, nothing to acknowledge, and a nothing that acknowledges me in turn. It is a Faustian bargain, though, for my possession of that potentiality is my possession by that same vastness. I am taken up by an immanence that exceeds my use of the sensible, taken away from the enclosed self I sense so well and conjoined with the outside. The apocalyptic future seen without looking is a world after the one in which I am a subject amidst objects, I will join that nothing that cannot be looked at in the thickets of the cloud. No one—only nothing—will see me as I disappear into, and become one with, that field.


4. “Cloud (and at this point we should remember the importance that Wolfit attached to the motif of the veil in Baroque imagery) reveals only as it conceals: in every respect, it appears to be one of the most favored signs of representation, and manifests both the limits and the infinite regress upon which representation is founded” (Damisch, *A Theory of Cloud*, 61).

5. I explored this sense of potentiality inherent to live art more fully in my doctoral dissertation. A revision of the text will be published in 2015 with the University of Michigan Press under the working title *The Futures of Performance*.

6. These divergent modes are discussed further in *The Futures of Performance*.


8. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the origin of the word “proportion” to 1606, but the concept of a “common sense” has a much longer history. See Daniel Heller-Roazen’s genealogy of the sixth sense, *The Inner Touch: Archaeologies of a Sensation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). The following paragraph benefits from his luminous text.


12. Hollis Frampton, “A Lecture” in *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. Bruce Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 125. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript for directing me to this source.


14. The installation, which premiered at London’s Hayward Gallery in 2007 (May 17–August 19) and which I encountered at the Sean Kelly Gallery (October 26–December 1) in New York later that year, is actually a chamber 11 meters by 9.5 meters by 3.5 meters.

15. Gormley has recently produced more installation work concerned with disrupting the architecture of the gallery. The 2009 installation *Clearing V*, for example, contains 12 kilometers of metal rod looping through the gallery in a continuous tangled line. Spectators wander within this spatialized line drawing.


19. Ibid., 358.

20. “Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next.” Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland* (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 3.

21. See Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 156. Gormley’s 1991 sculpture *Sense* captures in harrowing fashion the affect that Fried decries. *Sense* is a concrete cube with holes or absences where head and limbs would press out from the surface, as if a body were interred in the block or had been contained, but is no longer. Whereas the lead casings entraps the potentiality of the figure to move, this sculpture, as the title clearly states, purports to firmly grip sensation, a sensation claustrophobically narrow in its dimensions. *Blind Light* submerges the figure in a singular object as thick and consistent as concrete. Not yet set, it is light as air and as open to free movement.

22. As Gormley states in an interview from exhibition catalogue for *Blind Light*, “this reversal of the normal relationship between viewer and art object is a preoccupation that has run through my work for a long time—the idea that the individual becomes slowly aware of how she is the focus of this witnessing field.” W.J.T. Mitchell, et al., *Antony Gormley: Blind Light* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2007), 47.


24. Ovid tells how Zeus desired the nymph Io and how, to distract the watchful eye of his wife Hera, he hid her in a cloud. He then transformed the nymph into a cow and took the form of cloud himself, all to no avail. Hera demanded the heifer as a gift and he was forced to comply. Hera then placed Io under the watch of the many-eyed Argus, forcing that she be looked at intermittently in her metamorphosed state. See Book I of *Ovid’s Metamorphoses*, translated by Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 21.

25. Ibid., 36.

26. *ZEE* was originally commissioned in 2008 by OK-Center in Linz, Austria, and the Wood Street Galleries in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I saw the piece during its New York premiere at 3LD Art & Technology Center (October 28–November 15, 2009).

27. After five minutes the assistants returned to check on the visitors (there had been isolated cases of epileptic seizures in previous performances) and to encourage those willing to wander away from the roped perimeter of the room.

28. “ZEE” also evokes the horizonless expanse of the sea and the gender-neutral pronoun “Se” pronounced “See,” or “Zee” that queer theorists have used as a replacement for “He” and “She.” This bears significance for the posthuman life that I argue appears through the performance. I am grateful to Jennifer Cayzer, Jenny Spencer, and Erika Rundle for their reflections on these possible connotations of *ZEE* and their broader comments on this essay.


30. A more recent experiment on the composition of these hallucinations offers the following, more measured, description of the effect: "The reported visual phenomena . . . were highly complex in nature, and seemed, on the basis of observers' anecdotal reports, to be relatively uniformly distributed across the whole visual field. They were subject to constant structural variation such that existing forms and colors continually transformed into other forms or colors. Subjective experiences were thus in general transitory phenomena, which could lead to the general experience of motion across the visual field." Cordula Becker and Mark A. Elliott, "Flicker-induced Color and Form: Interdependencies and Relation to Stimulation Frequency and Phase," in Consciousness and Cognition 15 (2006), 179.


33. Ibid.

34. Hentschläger states that the piece "is not documentable, because the visual impression unfolding is rendered in the brain, its not really seen, even though one seems to 'see' it." Here, Hentschläger refers to the second part of FEED, rather than ZEE, but the principle remains the same. Interview with Marco Mancuso, "Feed, Visible Space Collapse" in Digimag 26 (August 2007), accessed June 17, 2014. http://www.digicult.it/digimag/issue-026/feed-visible-space-collapse/.

35. "Unfortunately, perception of flicker-induced form is multistable, the fleeting shapes obscured by a riot of dynamic form and color that thrashes serious study. . . . Theoretically, no spontaneous state is predominant, and, experimentally, none are stable, perhaps because each flicker can disturb the previously elicited state," Vincent A. Billock and Brian H. Tsuo, "Neural Interactions between Flicker-induced Self-organized Visual Hallucinations and Physical Stimuli," Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America 104, no. 20 (May 15, 2007), 8490, 8493.

36. Peggy Phelan opens her famous essay "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction" with the following lines: "Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. . . . Performance's being . . . becomes itself through disappearance." Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: Politics and Performance (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.


39. Ibid., 23.

40. "The interesting point is that, independent of the subject as they are of a prominent part of the eye's mechanism—its shutter and lens [sic]—these effects cover the entire visual field and are everywhere in focus. This is a sharp contrast to normal vision in which only a small center portion of the visual field is in focus." Ian Sommerville, "Flicker" in William S. Burroughs, Brion Gysin, and Ian Sommerville, Let the Mike In, ed. Jan Herman (New York: Something Else Press, 1973), 26. The effects of monochromatic flicker in Tony Conrad's The Flicker (1966) and Peter Kubelka's Armulif Rainer (1958–1960), and chromatic flicker in several of Paul Sharits's films (such as Ray Gun Virus from 1966) have been widely discussed by theorists of film. However much these, too, inspire afterimages, negative coloration, or even hallucinated imagery, as projections on a physically distinct screen these structuralists' films offer a different ontological experience from that of Hentschläger's cloud and its clausrophobic surround. Amidst the wealth of material on these artists see in particular P. Adams Sitney, Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde 1943–2000 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Branden Joseph, Beyond the Dream Syndicate: Tony Conrad and the Arts after Cage: A "Minor" History (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

41. Closing the eyes can even intensify the experience as in Gysin's prescriptions for the Dream Machine, which was intended to be "viewed" with eyes shut. Only covering the eyes with one's hands and blocking out the light completely prevents the flicker from triggering hallucinations.

42. The scientists in question were Sir David Brewster, Joseph Plateau, and Gustav Fechner. See Cray, Techniques of the Observer, 141.

REFERENCES


The Rest Is Noise
On Lossless

Rebecca Baron and Douglas Goodwin

Now if you’re playing the movie on a telephone you will never in a trillion years experience the film. You’ll think you have experienced it, but you’ll be cheated. It’s such a . . . sadness that you think you’ve seen a film on your fucking telephone. Get real.

—David Lynch

Lossless is the authors’ ongoing collaborative project that highlights representational failures, economic pressures, and technological presumptions embedded in contemporary audiovisual technologies. As of this writing Lossless includes one 16-mm film loop and five digital videos. It may take other forms as we follow developments in the field. This chapter will address three of the pieces, Lossless 1, 3, and 4 as they relate to perception.

Lossless began after a conversation with filmmaker Ken Koblansky. We were visiting him in his studio in 2007, and he was excited to show us the results of the side-by-side test shots he had made with a 16-mm film camera and a prosumer MiniDV camera. Looking over the video Ken pointed at the dark blocks rapidly filling one corner of the frame and wryly said, “We’re not supposed to be able to see that!” We laughed.

The dark blocks are plain to see. When asked, most people remember having seen these Lego-like forms in fade-outs and fade-ins on DVDs and streaming video. Few seem bothered (or amused) by these artifacts of compression, happy to turn their attention and stay focused on the plot and content in the frame. Before meeting Ken that night we had been reading about how digital video constructs moving images. We were especially attracted to the “Lossy” methods that discard aspects of the image that supposedly lie outside the thresholds of human perception. How are these thresholds determined? Had Ken found an artifact from botched laboratory research?

It may be true that in a laboratory setting, people cannot see the gradation from one dark color to another. But Ken’s video tests demonstrate that video compression turns shadow areas in an image into Tetris blocks that move nervously every time the light within the frame changes. It is not subtle. Did the designers of MPEG2 video compression make a miscalculation?