Title: Photography at the Chiasm.

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Abstract: An observer who sees the world at a traveling point of observation is ‘everywhere at once’. Thus departing from traditional, one-point perspective, James Jerome Gibson (Gibson 1979) asserts; ‘To be everywhere at once with nothing hidden is to be all-seeing, like God’. To this he adds provocatively; ‘The arrested image is only necessary for a photographic camera.’.

This paper works across these conceptual positions to demonstrate from recent experiments how contemporary photomedia qua the static image, deals with being (noun and verb), and moving, in space.

That both visible and the tangible co-exist in and interpenetrate both the observer and the space in which they move is argued by Marcel Merleau-Ponty as he proposes a ‘double and crossed sublation of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible’ (Merleau-Ponty 1961).

Artist-researchers Marian Drew, David Stephenson, Kristian Haggblom and Daniel Crooks, recording their motion through Australian landscape and in their various representations of affordance, have discovered new means by which to resolve the ‘figure and ground’ at the coincidence of environment and human subjects, at, within and through the ‘Chiasm’.

These artists’, and my own, practical photographic efforts variously approach this conundrum; they are shown here to position the vision and the bodily sensations of a third figure, the self, whether as originator or receiver of the image, in the image.

In the development of this percept the practitioners reflect a number of theories from phenomenology, ‘ecological perception' and psychogeography.

Keywords: Photomedia, phenomenology, motion perspective, self, attention.

James McArdle Biographical information: I come from 33 years of teaching and curriculum development in secondary, adult, higher and professional art, design and media technologies education in parallel with continuous artistic practice and exhibition since 1974, and freelancing commercially since 1966.

In August 1988, after eight years of teaching art and design in Universities (Monash, RMIT) and private tertiary institutions (CAE, PSC, ACPAC), I took up my longest single
appointment at the regional campus of LTU Bendigo, concurrently teaching part-time at Monash and Deakin Universities before achieving full time status as Head of the School of Visual Arts and Design, La Trobe University. I left there in 2011 to take up my current position, Associate Professor in the Image, this year at Deakin.

From this experience I have developed a perspective that teaching students creatively enables origination and the capacity to create and transform.

My teaching is constantly refreshed by my regularly published and exhibited research in which I critically reappraise photomedia fundamentals to discover new methods by which the image itself can transmit and modulate meaning, for instance though adaptations of selective focus and binocular vision.

Through my work in representing the dynamics of human relationships I am aware of the performative dimension of photomedia and excited by the practice of cross- and inter-disciplinarity.
My hypothesis then is that space at the coincidence of 'landscape' and 'human' is being radically refigured by postmodern photo-media, in their capacity to depict being in space; both noun and verb. Practice by Australians Kristian Haggbloom, Marian Drew, Daniel Crooks, David Stephenson, and my own, positions a third figure, the self, into our country's confounding landscape to the extent, I hope to show here, that our photographic vision changes what is observed.

‘Chiasm’ used in the title of this paper needs explanation. It derives from the symbol X, and represents a crossing. ‘Chiasmus’ (from the Greek: χιάζω, chiázō – to form a cross) is a rhetorical figure of speech in which two or more clauses, or in a more sophisticated structure, their meanings, are inverted in relation to each other in order to make a larger point; that is, the clauses display inverted parallelism.

The Optic Chiasm is a partial crossing of the twin optic nerves from both eyes to the opposite-side visual cortex, and partially to the same side, to develop binocular vision across the whole visual field of both eyes.

Being in the landscape is the classic instance of the figure/ground dichotomy. The landscape itself may not register us, but we animate it in the language we use to describe ‘sheltering’ rock, grassy bed, or scratching thorns. The creation of this 'animus' presumes purpose in the landscape, but close analysis of our words reveals that what is expressed is actually our purpose and our being. The word mountain contains our act of climbing it, and gorge doubles as part of the human body. These words and phrases index the human mind's interaction with the forms of the earth. These are the terms of the figure-ground, in which the self becomes the ‘third term’, as phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) reminds us in his situationist, as opposed to geometric/scientific, mapping of this spatiality.
In the last chapter of his never-completed 'The Visible and the Invisible' (Merleau-Ponty and Lefort, 1968) entitled "The Intertwining–the Chiasm" Maurice Merleau-Ponty resolves his earlier concepts of figure/ground into the figure of the chiasm, thus:

"Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world. It is a marvel too little noticed that every movement of my eyes - even more, every displacement of my body - has its place in the same visible universe that I itemise and explore with them, as, conversely every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space. There is double and crossed sublation of the visible in the tangible and of the tangible in the visible; the two maps are complete, and yet they do not merge into one. The two parts are total parts and yet are not superposable."

He discusses the process of conscious attention:

"When seeing, I do not hold an object at the terminus of my gaze, rather I am delivered over to a field of the sensible which is structured in terms of the difference between things and colors, a momentary crystallization of colored being or visibility" (VI, 132).

In this way he expresses an everyday and arguably universal synaesthetic experience where awareness of the object is heightened by attention to the extent that the viewer is engrossed in the experience. Vision here is constructed quite differently from the conventions of Renaissance perspective projection. I argue that the chaism may tested in the field of art and demonstrated, especially in an artform that ‘duplicates’ the object, in this instance, photography, to the extent of changing affect.

This discussion tests Merlau-Ponty's hypothesis against artists’ practical experiment to determine where and how the image stimulates a physiological response or an affect in the viewer. For example; evidence of physiological response might be giddiness and disorientation while evidence of affect might result from amplifying the effect on the sense of balance to produce panic or exhilaration.
The traditional two-dimensional photographic print is still valuable for the potential of its visual and physical presence in stimulating the reactions of other senses. This has not fully been realised. A still photograph is an object of contemplation in a form unlike that of the moving or three-dimensional image, affecting the viewer through its placement, scale, location, presentation and physical qualities. Its truncated dimensionality (flat, not moving) is not a constraint but may present more operable variation that is appropriate to the parameters of this investigation.

Such a conception seems to work against the ‘objectivity’ we expect of camera imaging. The ‘Camera-Eye’ conflation has a history older than chemical photography; in 1619 C. Scheiner in ‘Oculus, hoc est fundamentum opticum…’ presents us with the first correct illustration of image formation in the eye and a description of an artificial eye, later elaborating the analogy with a comparison of imaging in the eye and camera (in parallel diagrams labeled ‘Natura’ and ‘Ars’ respectively), based on his experiments with animal eyes, noting the inversion of the image (and means by which to correct vision by adding a concave or convex lens). His animal-eye experiment is illustrated as ‘procedure for viewing the retinal image with an excised eye’ in Descartes’ Dipotrique (1637), in which the image is witnessed by a disembodied cosmic observer underlining the failure by investigators to show how the brain becomes conscious of it.

Lartigue

The camera is thus not merely a device, but a construct made with the expectation that it will result in images that are analogous with human vision. The anticipation still exists. Geoffrey Batchen (Batchen 1997) names our ‘desire’, that the camera obscura, and by implication its modern manifestation in the photographic camera, will replicate and verify what we see. I recommend we separate the idea of the photograph from the apparatus and connect it with the concept that the process of ‘photography’ may involve a synthesis of seeing itself, and following from this propose that it is out of the perceptual synthesis that a whole aesthetic branch of the medium grows. In the following examples, just as in my own work, artists use the apparatus, or its
absence, to project their own vision into the image. In terms of landscape we return to the merging into it of personal experience – **affect** – as identified by Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty details, as an example, an experience of red, 'prior to being worked over', as an encounter with:

"a punctuation in the field of red things, which includes the tiles of rooftops; the flags of gatekeepers and of the revolution; of certain terrains near Aix or Madagascar. It is also a punctuation in the field of red garments, which includes, along with the dresses of women, the robes of professors, bishops and advocates general...and its red is literally not the same if it appears in one constellation or in another".

Australian photographer Kristian Haggblom, in his series ‘Aokigahara Jukai’, ‘draws’ a compelling sense of panic using the ‘string-figures’ he discovered in his chosen subject environment. The densely vegetated cavernous volcanic terrain at the foot of Mount Fuji is frequently the last resort of people determined to end their lives in solitude, an option promoted in a 1960 serialised novel by Seichō Matsumoto1.

In photographs taken on repeated visits, Haggblom manages to convince us of our isolation and perhaps desolation in a location which is actually a well-trodden tourist destination. His explorations extend off the beaten trail, beyond the entangled trails of tape and string left by other explorers to assist their return journeys; clearly the risk of losing oneself in this forest plays on the Japanese collective consciousness. Shot on large format film, each image contains sufficient detail to allow small elements to play a role in our reading, such as the string against complex monotone green tangles of foliage, which develop on our fear of becoming lost. The perceptual trick of high-resolution imagery ensures that the threads exact our attention in the manner of Japanese popular singer Cocco as she sings “Threads in the Deep Forest”:

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1 Seichō Matsumoto ‘Nami no Tō’ (波の塔)
But our vows
Were far too strong
Straining like tangling threads
Trailing from each other.

. . .

Weave your overflowing hatred
And play me like an instrument
As if killing me, gently.

Eventually he discovers an eviscerated body lying in a hollow, arms upstretched in a posture of supplication or agony.

Long practice in ‘painting’ with light extends through Marian Drew’s practice from experiments of the eighties in which fleeting, struggling human figures pay energetic homage to Muybridge, up to the more recent still life arrangements of indigenous road kill for which she is most well known. ‘WaterLine’ (2004) is a series of photogram murals commissioned for the Brisbane Magistrates Court to flow through five floors of the building. Here she figuratively disinters the long-lost freshwater spring, the Tank Stream, from beneath the site and from under the concrete of Brisbane. Using the archaic materials of wet photography she makes visible water, its motion, the lifeforms inhabiting it and its transparent substance.

A floating apparition, a vessel, formed from skeins of light, hovers like a blazing premonition on the water of a mangrove. Lightning flickers on the horizon. It is a ghost-ship but all the more threatening because its presence is distinctly located as it casts its hard glare on the surrounding sand, bush and grasses, where it plants sharp blades of light along the shore. This is Marian Drew’s ‘Moreton Island, the creek that leads to
the sea' (2008). Drew describes the process of physically painting with light the forms and motion that animate an invisible history in her landscapes.

The eastern beaches (on the oceanfront, and along creeks leading to the sea) of Quandamooka, or Moreton Island, were in 1833 the site of a massacre of the resident Ngugi by white settlers whom the terrified aborigines, by popular account, credited with the power of spitting fire. Drew thus delineates the Queensland landscape to infer that a passage of experience from pre-European settlement co-exists with us. Nathan Shepherdson (Shepherdson and Drew, 2008) was prompted to write of this phenomenon in his extended poem 'what marian drew never told me about light':

my ability to remember is always a significant gesture

of exposure

my gesture is implicit
the materiality i live
liberating ephemeral material from decay

walking a line
throwing sand
moving into the frame
and through the body

an extension into the image
Jonathon Crary (Crary, 1999) links Blake and Cézanne with reference to Cézanne’s ‘sustained attentiveness’ when he says “William Blake and Cézanne shared a related understanding of the universe as perturbations and differences between centers of energy.”.


The Starlight series were metre-square prints. Their content, all arcs and curves and spirals, could seem to be the product of an obsessive geometer, and this impression was reinforced by the edge-to-edge grid-pattern presentation of these prints, like their companions, the symmetrical kaleidoscopes of the Dome series. The appearance of the grid, and an interest in geometry, may also trace Stephenson’s association with the Hobart School of Art, where Geoff Parr has collaboratively investigated digital modelling of lattice and framework structures in 2D images.

The effect of Stephenson’s imagery however is entirely original, as the viewer comprehends that these images are the recorded passage of stars. He eschews the digital manipulation promoted by Parr, and here transformed the simple ‘star-trail pic’, whose concentric arcs are familiar from astronomy books and camera clubs, into a form much more compelling. The arcs intersect with others, inscribing the blackness with hairsbreadth curving lines that in the colour prints are astonishing prismatic hues (so bright are the stars in the pristine Tasmanian air). Sometimes the arcs are broken into steadily increasing intervals and angles, arrayed to form concentrated hatchings. In “1902” and others like it, the thatch of short strokes and dots models in white relief against deep space, a contracting spiral. It is not a galaxy but the abstract for one.

To produce such images Stephenson has had to section his nocturnal exposures systematically, in some cases also repeatedly reorienting the camera and tripod to subdivide angles, precise to the minute-arc, relative to
the passage of the stars across the sky. The vortex form emerges from the interaction of two time frames, that of the camera and that of the stars and earth and while it is experimental, experience would make the results foreseeable, the outcomes transformative not mechanical. The ethereal predominates over the mathematical in the product of these complex geometrical harmonisations, and they are more like mandalas, a meditational orrery with a lineage that can be traced from Descartes’ orchestration of the vortices, see (Cope, 1992), to a transformational torque. In this process, the original star trails and their underlying logic do not entirely vanish but they become abstractions with intimations of the infinite in a re-ordered constellation. These meditational devices are indeed made with traces of the stars themselves, but mediated by Stephenson’s calculated re-configuration, so that a design emerges where before there was the chaos of the heavens and the simple motion of the earth. To consider these alongside his images of the domes of European cathedrals, churches and mosques is to realize that their inspiration is similar, that both kinds of design are an attempt to order the infinite. The decoration of church domes is the imposition of a two dimensional design on a pronounced concave surface, a built equivalent of the celestial sphere. These are rendered back into two dimensions by Stephenson using a camera position on a sandbag directly underneath the centre of each dome. Technically, then, the Starlight series process, which is a rotation of the camera around the lens axis, reorders the three dimensions of the landscape and its chaos into a two-dimensional form.

In working from Merleau-Ponty’s writings the intention is not to illustrate the philosophy; drawing on the theories of phenomenology, 'ecological psychology' (Gibson, 1979) and psychogeography, contemporary photographers reveal the way our articulated body, mobile head, and socketed eyes concert to reveal space. Condensing space with time creates a visceral awareness of the environment; the scratching thorns as much as the soaring treetops. From a revealed connection between body and environment come signs of mind and attention.

Each of these photographers draws on everyday synaesthetic experience of the Chiasm to promote awareness of the object heightened by attention to the extent that the viewer is engrossed.
References:


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