

The Morality of Attention

'The Morality of Attention' continues the theme of the curators' previous exhibition, 'There are no Things only Relationships' 22nd February - 17th April.

When viewing this show you are asked to consider and question how your attention makes up the world that you see and take part in.

The materialist worldview which we questioned in the previous show, has dominated western culture since the 5th century BCE¹.

Contained in this perspective is the belief that we all see the same world through a neutral 'objective' gaze and everything can be neatly categorised through linear narratives of development.

But this is far from the truth and

we only have to look at the media and social discourse to see how unquestioned attention is both heavily biased and far from neutral.

In fact division appears to be one of the main characteristics of how we now collectively attend. There are studies showing how different cultures see the world differently.

In western society we tend to see things and objects in isolation whereas in eastern cultures the focus includes the ground from which everything arises.²

So what has this to do with looking at paintings? If art is to have any meaning these days it must help us to question and become more conscious of how we

co-create the world. It is profound to consider that how we look is not neutral but also how this creates what and how we see.

Self, others or things can be viewed as separate static parts. Alternatively this very same equation can be seen as a creative interdependence in constant motion.

A shift in perspective is not an abstract notion, it can also be a shift in identity. This is how attention works and you can easily see that there is a moral dimension to looking and more importantly seeing.

Morality here does not mean the kind that judges others but is to hear the consideration of what is better, what joins, what solves versus what divides.

The Exhibition

As artists, we understand that the object that hangs on the gallery wall in front of us, has already led a life behind closed doors, in the artist's studio.

There may have been an intense relationship of highs and lows, struggle and harmony, disruption and subsequent satisfaction, and finally acceptance and letting go.

Once the completed artwork is removed from the sole gaze of its creator, (perhaps to a specific exhibition space, perhaps remaining where it is) but, most importantly, placed in a position to be looked at by others, the art object has entered a new phase of the creative journey.

This may mean calm and critical assessment: appreciation, discomfort, or neutrality. Will this part of the journey be handled with appropriate attention?

Can we trust that our artwork will be looked after and paid attention to with a similar level of care and intensity once it is out in the world? And can the viewer be trusted to 'read' the painting with balanced authority (fairly)?

This text raises several contemporary questions about the nature of viewing artworks;

- The nature of our attention and how we attend
- How we engage with and are influenced by the autonomous life of the object and lastly
- How we view the material of the art object before us.

"Attention is a moral act: it creates, brings aspects of things into being, but in doing so makes others recede. What a thing is depends on who is attending to it, and in what way."³

Iain McGilchrist, author of *'The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World.'*

The nature of our attention

We all have our own lens with which we look at the world, and create our own experience. It is impossible to put aside our own value systems and beliefs before we consider a work of art.

As much as we might try to be objective, we experience the painting through our own set of values, beliefs, and taste. As readers of painting, we are never truly neutral in our looking and seeing.

In Iain McGilchrist's recent comprehensive book, *'The Matter with Things'*, (supported by case studies), he raises the question of how we understand reality and how we view ourselves.

Over time, and since the Renaissance "enlightenment", society has become increasingly materialistic, argues Iain McGilchrist. This is due to the growing bias of and perspective of the left hemisphere of our brain: and is surprisingly acknowledged as less emotionally stable and less intelligent than the right hemisphere.

The left hemisphere orders everything into known categories and tends to see the world as static and unchanging. How does this way of thinking and seeing influence our perception, and isn't

this something that we should be careful of in relation to the idea of measuring or judging art?

For McGilchrist, the world is the product of our attention, and as such we are not merely passive observers, but actually responsible for co-creating our shared world.

He describes our relationship with the world as being a reverberative one, in which rather than being just passive consumers, we have an impact on the world, making it what it is. This means that the way we see alters and generates what is before us.

Do we not, therefore, have a duty as active observers, to see the world in the right way - in a nourishing way that brings everything into being, not use our attention to alienate and cut us off from a true and deeper reality?

Further, McGilchrist reasons, there is a need to find a harmony with life because currently we put ourselves in a dangerous position by adopting a stance of extreme remoteness.

The ultimate cost of not paying the right attention, which may be



Follow QR code
for references and
further reading

beginning to dawn on us, is to potentially lose the very world that we depend on and are caretakers of.

If there is a bias, as McGilchrist argues, towards the manipulation of matter, then surely this is not always the best way to look at something as intangible as painting.

How can the art work then be understood in its entirety? McGilchrist continues; that the hemispheres always work together to understand, read, measure and manipulate the world; but critically, the two hemispheres also pay attention in profoundly dissimilar and distinct ways.

The right side of the brain understands that nothing is ever static or unchanging, but flowing and radically interconnected, an animate universe full of complexity.

The left simplifies, stands apart, manipulates and values power. This division of attention is a catastrophe when the bias is too strong towards the left hemisphere.

And this increasing colonisation of our engagement with reality has created a simulacrum and abstraction of the world.⁵

As an artist there is often a certain amount of unknowingness that occurs within the creative process. Part of the making process is allowing things to unfold, for “accidents”

“The spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”⁴

Marcel Duchamp

to happen and for the work to start to resolve itself, after exploration through mark making.

It is often not a question of imposing a message onto the artwork, but allowing a message to unfold. We make marks, listen, sense and respond and repeat this process until the image feels resolved.

On occasions the artist is unsure, but a philosophy of doubt and uncertainty can actually be very useful. As Amy Sillman has noted, doubt is mobilised, to employ mark-making as an “...invitation for the viewer to go on a journey with the artist, embracing a kind of unknowability”.

The fluidity of the message behind our work fluctuates. We cannot be sure of the interaction that has taken place. We can only be aware of the making experience, and even

that may alter in retrospect.

The “unknown” is like a zone of proximity in which being nearer results in perceptions of relations, and for the artist, opens creative opportunities hitherto unknown.

Agency

Once our artwork is out in the world, however, we lose control over what this object means. We can only stand by what it meant to us in the moment of making, with all the temporal attachment that aided its completion.

And yet, there is already a dialogue within the artwork that we have created. Early Modernists focused on achieving a fetishised power akin to ‘primitive’ artefacts, not so far removed from early Christian artefacts of worship, that were revered as all-powerful and sacred.

Post/Contemporary painting, its undeniable presence and intrigue, also arguably possesses a power whether the artist is present, (known to the reader), or absent (in which the viewer is a stranger). The artist’s absence is noted and felt within the marks on canvas.

Out in the world, the painting may even become a thinking object itself, as discussed by Isabelle Graw: “...painting can be potentially experienced as being

intriguing in a way that only an intriguing person could be.”

A painting that, after the artist’s dialogue with it is complete, goes on to continue the same conversation elsewhere. Like a thinking thing, Graw’s “quasi-person” (our painting in the world), goes on to be read and valued by others.

There is a kind of acceptance that needs to happen for artists, once we have set our painting free into the world. We feel the need to share our work and to have it valued, to have it be seen and read. But are we happy with the values projected onto it by the public and how it is subsequently measured?

Are we satisfied with the value and judgement the reader has bestowed on the work of art, and if so, what are these agreed value systems? A certain amount of

categorisation needs to happen in order for a dialogue to happen.

Once a painting enters the public arena, it is the viewer, not the artist, who decides what should be focused on, what the message is to them.

Simultaneously, the artwork may pose crucial questions and direct the attention for the viewer. Because it is, or was, once so close to us, we can understand notions of the painting as a thinking object.

Graw refers to this Hegelian position as “a mode of artistic representation into which the ‘principle of finite and inherently infinite subjectivity’ had forced its way.” As such it has the ability to have an independent mental life.

Whether the painting has its own agency, and with that the power to influence the experience of the viewer, is the profound question – the alternative places the proposition onto the reader’s interpretation, projection or introjection.

New Materialism

This resonates with the New Materialist discourse that all things contain a “...vitality or liveliness, as opposed to being inert and passive matter ...an ontology of immanence”⁶.

Rather than requiring an external force to activate them, they are on the contrary, active agents. The work of art houses that potential, the capacity, to be considered as such, and gives every appearance of having led the artist relinquishing control of its content.

The painting, accepted as it stands, is not so much in danger of being misunderstood or undervalued by the viewer, because it imposes its message on them regardless.

“By rejecting the division between the physical world and the social constructs of human thoughts, meanings and desires, new materialisms opens up the possibility to explore how each affects the other, and how things other than humans (for instance, a tool, a technology or a building) can be social ‘agents’, making things happen.”

Therein lies the special quality of painting, that it remains active in continuing a dialogue, even with the painter absent. It arguably sways and remoulds the work, creates a dialogue with it; causing a sense of friction, cohesion or challenge.

Perhaps then, in the case of understanding a painting, the notion and the value of attention is intrinsic. The relation is an active dialogue between the artwork, associated ideas of agency, and the viewer's attention, that makes sense of what has been created.

(1) *The materialist tradition in Western philosophy begins with Greek philosophy in the 5th century BCE. According to Democritus, the world consists of nothing but atoms in empty space...*

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/materialism-philosophy/History-of-materialism>

(2) *How East and West think in profoundly different ways*

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20170118-how-east-and-west-think-in-profoundly-different-ways>

(3) *"Attention is a moral act: it creates, brings aspects of things into being, but in doing so makes others recede. What a thing is depends on who is attending to it, and in what way."* Iain McGilchrist, author of *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions and the Unmaking of the World*.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Matter_with_Things

'Attention as a Moral Act' Iain McGilchrist in *Conversations on Remaking the World*

- *Perspectiva series of dialogues with a range of thinkers and intro to Ian McGilchrist.*

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=YHU-GuUhB1c4>

<https://channelmcgilchrist.com/matter-with-things/>

<https://thejollysociety.com/mcgilchrist-attention-is-a-moral-act/>

(4) *"The spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."*
Marcel Duchamp

<https://www.themarginalian.org/2012/08/23/the-creative-act-marcel-duchamp-1957/>

(5) *Simulacra and Simulations*

Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, ed. Mark Poster (Stanford; Stanford University Press)

https://web.stanford.edu/class/history34q/readings/Baudrillard/Baudrillard_Simulacra.html

(6) *New Materialism*

<https://globalsocialtheory.org/topics/new-materialism/>

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-9566.13265>



Follow QR code
for references and
further reading