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Experiencing the Optical Unconscious

ABSTRACT

*This paper will investigate Rosalind Krauss' 'Optical Unconscious' and the different perspectives and experiences of vision made possible by video and photography. It will look to works such as Trisha Brown's, *It's A Draw/live feed* (2003) which explores the process and performativity in drawing video and photographic documentation. I will interrogate performance and documentation within drawing, looking at the different perception of time and space captured by digital media and how the experience created by the digital media differs from the drawings produced. Thus, exploring how the information is differently received by the audience. As technological advancements in popular culture today have invaded the tactile, human quality of writing, reading, drawing and communicating, these digital devices have become a crucial tool for everyday life. I will question technology's influence on the experience of digital art forms today and how the language or dialogue of technological mediums has changed.*

KEYWORDS

unconscious
Krauss
video painting

INTRODUCTION

This paper will investigate Rosalind Krauss's term "Optical Unconscious" engaging with its relevance to Contemporary art and Popular Culture today. I will interrogate Trisha Brown's, *It's a Draw/live feed* from 2003, as an example of performativity and documentation within drawing. Here the modes of perception through time and space become shifted captured by digital media. I will draw upon the use of video and the screen as a form of a transmitting medium, and how this uncontrolled aspect and performativity projects further within online broadcasting networks. I will also briefly make reference to Krauss' exploration of medium specificity in *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (2000) in which she explores the use of film as an art "medium". Here, I will reference a couple of points written by Stephen Apkon in *The Age of Image*, published last year. Although *The Optical Conscious* was written twenty-one years ago, I will demonstrate how parallels can be drawn to the shifts of perception occurring today.

In *The Optical Unconscious* Krauss uses the metaphor of the sea and the sky to term the structural framework of figure and ground. For Krauss, ‘The sea and sky are a way of packaging “the world” as a totalized image, as a picture of completeness, as a field constituted by the logic of its own frame. But its frame is a frame of exclusions and its field is the work of ideological construction’ (Krauss 1993: 12). Here the “Optical Unconscious” is alluded to as that which exists but is not acknowledged within the picture plane, or seen by the eye. In the graph representing figure and ground in the formal constructions of a work of art, Krauss locates the “maybe” or the “neutral axis” in which not figure versus not ground. Krauss explains the “Optical Unconscious” in terms of the graph constructed by the Structuralists as being finite. For Krauss, ‘the graph itself is also a picture of pure immediacy, of complete self-enclosure’ (Krauss 1993: 19). The graph permits you to go out to the outer limit and then stop. Nothing rises up from the graph below, it is as deep as its surface. The surface being the obvious which is brought into vision with the conscious eye, and the unconscious laying in the belief that the pictorial plane cannot penetrate any further than the graph. Krauss persists that the depths are there within the transparency of the graph, a transparency which is only seeming. Krauss writes, ‘It masks what is beneath it, or to use a stranger term, represses it’ (Krauss 1993: 25). By using the expression “represses” Krauss draws a relationship to Freud’s theories of the unconscious which he termed as being that which is repressed, the result of being rejected by a censorship. For Freud, the state of repression is only able to be lifted once the conscious idea is brought into connection with the unconscious memory trace (Freud 2005: 58). In these terms it can demonstrate Krauss’ motive to break down the resistance of finite grid and to look beyond the surface.

For Krauss, artists such as Jackson Pollock take part in constructing the optical unconscious, allowing for it to be externalized within the visual field, thus projecting the way in which human vision can be thought as less than a master of all it surveys, being in conflict with what is internal to the organism that houses it (Krauss 1993: 179). Concerned with the psychoanalytical aspect of the “Optical Unconscious”, Krauss points to the possibility of the internal human conscious thought as having a possible affect or interference with the external perception. This differs from Walter Benjamin’s term of the “Optical Unconscious” which looked to the camera as a tool for capturing possibilities that the optics of the eye could not see. This shifting of modes of perception and dynamics of space are prevalent in Contemporary art and the wider Popular Culture today with the abundance of infinite possibilities created through the advancement of photographic and video transmitting

technologies. For years, advancements of digital photographic and video technologies have provided artists, cinematographers and filmmakers with virtually infinite possibilities. What we are now facing today is this further dimension occurring with the progression of the internet, a virtual sphere of space creating another dimension for the optics. The shifting variables that come into play now instead of Krauss' ground and figure are the distributive element of active space and online media, taking on the form of medium and site specificity. It now becomes relational and accessible with its virtual broadcasting properties to anyone, everyone and anywhere in the world.

In investigating the visual conscious formality in the construction of a work of art, Krauss looks at the displacement of the formal figure and ground extensively in Pollock's drip paintings. With the removal of representation, Abstract artists used expressions of the unconscious through improvisational actions and intentions (Krauss 1993: 252-253). Pollock's paintings become a performance through the automatic gestural approach, with a shifting perception of the event to the finished artwork. This is reiterated by Krauss in Rosenberg's words, 'that to enter the canvas's "arena" was "not a picture but an event" - form, colour, composition had been dispensed with. Voiding "form" the canvas would become a mirror, a vehicle of "self-revelation" it would be "of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence' (Krauss 1993: 260-265). It becomes not only a physical but a psychological interaction through this performance. Here in the finished artwork, the marks made become traces of the performance thus a form of the unconscious comes into being.

Artist, choreographer and dancer Trisha Brown explores a documentary approach to recording the process of a series of drawing performances in her work, *It's a draw/live feed*. As Brown performs improvisational dance movements on large sheets of paper, drawings are created through the charcoal and pastel held in between her toes which mark her traces. Over a two day period this work was presented live to the audience through a screen on which the video was projected. Similar to Pollock, Brown is concerned with the happening of gestures and actions, depositing marks onto the surface material, on the ground. The documentation captures the marks made in the time of the performance, emphasising the importance of the process. Through her spontaneous actions and bodily movements, Brown engages with an unconscious approach to drawing. Here the artist is performing in a way which she does not see what she is making. Neglecting all conscious or pre-conceived ideas for the artwork, it is the immediacy of the unconscious actions within the process that determine the final

outcome. Krauss brings to the foreground through the mark making, the idea of the graffito. This idea being, the artist delivers a mark over to a future that will be carried on without their presence (Krauss 1993: 260). In this sense, Brown's drawings testify that the figure was there and the body left that mark in that particular time. What's more is the aspect of the video documentation in Brown's work as a "live feed". Here Brown explores a technological transmitting device used as a medium for projecting imagery through live time of recording and documentation.

Brown's work often exhibits the video and photographic documentation of her performances as well as the drawings themselves, which become traces of the performance. This investigates how the recording and digitalized documentation differentiates from the physical gesture drawings produced. It brings to the foreground the importance of the time and space in which the work was made, the process. The work made in that particular time, in that particular space. Furthermore, we can take the example of Brown's performance footage as it was further distributed online through broadcasting mediums, creating a further dimension of accessibility to the work. Similar to Pollock, the shifting context of the work in Brown's can be looked at as it is further projected onto a broadcasting medium, such as being upload onto the museum's website, and others such as Youtube. Instead of drawing, as mapping a space on a support, the space is inhabited by the body and its movements which creates the work in real space and time.

Krauss' graffito, also resonates with the idea of cyber space, for when we project into online space we make a mark, it remains there to be observed. There is the sense of the present marking time, particularly as it is nearly impossible to erase information once it is launched online. With the speed and immediacy of the online network, it draws a connection to the mechanical automatism Krauss writes of in the *Voyage on the North Sea*. Krauss references Stanley Cavell's definition of "automatism" as capturing the sense in which part of the film - the part that depends on the mechanics of a camera - is automatic; it also plugged into the Surrealist use of "automatism" as an unconscious reflex and it contained the possible connotative reference to "autonomy" in the sense of the resultant work's freedom from its maker' (Krauss 2000: 5). In *It's A Draw/live feed* the mechanical device of the camera records and projects the performance drawings in this instantaneous automatic manner. Once an image or video is casted online into the virtual infinite space, there is a lack of control. The way in which it continues to project and its distribution becomes somewhat spontaneous, improvisational, automatic as the outcome is unknown. Freud spoke in *Civilization and Its*

Discontents, of viewing technological advancements as a set of “prosthetic limbs” that expand the power of the individual, pointing to the camera as having a “microstructure that lies beyond the range of the naked eye...” (Krauss 1993: 179). Although Freud claims it is not a structure which is able to obtain consciousness/unconsciousness, I would comment that through surveillance or documentative modes of the medium it may permit awareness to a perception which remains unconscious to the human eye. Here comes into play the performativity of the broadcasting medium, it pulls down social barriers or boundaries becoming an accessible tool digitally performing independently once it is projected into the public space of the internet. It engages and invites outsiders to participate in this social casting. This reflects notions of interconnection in our Popular Culture and globalized society today - our dependance on these forms of media for communication becomes heavier and heavier as progressively our everyday actions are transformed through technology. It evolves as a form in its own space that it inhabits - its travel through virtual space can take on the role of a performance.

The camera today is the smart phone constantly capturing and recording with the swipe of the touch screen. It is so accessible it is as easily used as pencil to scrap paper, engaging with automatism in the aspect of doodling. This idea of performance stems into the realm of digital media and the online network projected through transmitting devices. Launched images into cyber space become haphazard and bombarding in the way they manifest and multiply with thousands of users all over the world. This transcending use of media with technological advancements today we communicate in an instantaneous way. Everything online has an immediacy, a mark is made, it stays. In *The Age of Image*, Stephen Apkon says the ‘dissemination speed of video content is creating its own language’ (Apkon 2013: 243). Here the internet is as a space of projection with infinite possibilities of whom it can connect to. Through the constantly advancing technology and its active use in our everyday lives and daily routine it is possible we are becoming unconscious to the slow, gradual shift which we accept as the norm. With the abundance of digital images and media and forms of transmitting and receiving devices today, we are constantly digesting information we may not even be aware we are receiving.

Krauss explores film specificity derived from the medium’s aggregate condition, defining it as the ‘compound idea of the “apparatus” - the medium or support for film being neither the celluloid strip of the images, nor the camera that filmed them, nor the projector that brings them to life in motion, nor the beam of light that relays them to the screen, nor

that screen itself, but all of these taken together, including the audience's position caught between the source of the light behind it and the image projected before its eyes..' (Krauss 2000: 25). Here Krauss looks to Structuralist film as demonstrating our relationship and connection with our world through the perception encountered with this use of technology. Krauss writes of Structuralist film as producing the the unity of this diversified support in a single, sustained experience in which the absolute independence of all these things would itself be revealed as a model of how the viewer is intentionally connected to his or her world (Krauss 2000: 25).

If this is a representation of how we inhabit our world then we must be translating this information accordingly, and perhaps we have become desensitized. Today in popular culture Youtube could be the equivalent that has the potential to socially connect each person to the shared virtual space and their world. Here, in Krauss' example of Richard Serra's film *Television Delivers People*, he realised video was in fact television which meant a broadcast medium, one that fractures spatial continuity into remote sites of transmission and reception (Krauss 2000: 30). There is a constant surveillance element to all these forms of digital media which also provides this perception of the Popular culture today in which people are constantly recording, with its accessibility. Apkon writes, 'The video revolution is going to unlock unexpected creativity and energy from millions of unexpected and heretofore obscure places. The only "master curator" will be the instant human response. And the sharing is going to create a cumulative effect of creativity as people who don't know one another, and would never have met one another, will begin to build on one another's work' (Apkon 2013: 243).

The speed of evolving digital media is pushing open possibilities of virtual relational aesthetics and collaboration through today's advancements. The action and performance of engaging with this through social media and broadcasting websites is something we are participating in before we can even perceive it is happening, it has happened. Perhaps we are experiencing a version of the *Optical Unconscious* within Popular culture today.

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