

La Triennale québécoise 2011

Le travail qui nous attend

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The Non-Visual

The relationship between the predominance of vision and its critique is somewhat contentious. Depending on the perspective, either the hegemony of vision that originated in Italian Renaissance Neoplatonism remained uncontested until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries or the West has always been a culture where ocular-centrism was kept in check, where overreliance on vision was suspect, even considered potentially dangerous.¹⁹ Michel Foucault is among the modern thinkers who have examined the major shifts in ocular-centrism during the modern age. Connecting vision to the tools of modern technology and "governmentality," Foucault warns against the tendency to abandon oneself to the totalizing, normative domination of administrative institutions. As David Michael Levin sums it up, "The power to see, the power to make visible, is the power to control."²⁰ However, Foucault's critique of visually concedes the possibility of resisting this control. Such resistance may be found in the work of musician and sound artist Tim Hecker, who refuses to be lit as he performs, asking that the venue be kept as close to completely dark as possible. Hecker thus chooses to negate any visual performativity of his own body or of any visual support (the typical rock concert light show or video projection) accompanying his sound works. In a broader sense, the extremism of this approach takes up the radicality of certain twentieth-century avant-garde strategies, such as Robert Rymant's commitment to exclusively white paintings. But more specifically, Hecker's requirement of a non-visual context in experiencing his work recalls Greenbergian modernism's medium specificity, by which logic sound should not only refer to itself, but also — made for hearing rather than seeing — be experienced without visual distractions.²¹

00.01.02 This return to medium-specific perception is also at the heart of a series of large-scale photographs by Lorna Bauer, but with a twist. By taking photographs of the camera (and herself as photographer) taking the photograph as it is reflected in a dark surface, Bauer establishes a critical approach that may be related to Foucault's use of visually to denounce visually.²² Contrary to the analytical self-reflexivity of the work of Christopher Williams, Bauer's photographs, by being as much surfaces as pictorial spaces, conceal nearly as much as they reveal. The dark reflective surface takes up the entire frame and filters the reality behind the image's making. As Jon Knowles recently commented in a short essay on Bauer's work, "The pictures function as an index of the labour involved in their own making, suggesting the importance of process, medium and method with regard to the final resulting product."²³ The photograph,

an intrinsically visual medium if there ever was one, is abstracted to an ontological gesture rather than offered up as a more or less faithful representation of reality.

00.02.74 Charles Stankiech also reveals and conceals. The video component of his installation *LOVELAND*, 2009–2011, shows an empty Arctic landscape that gradually fills with purple smoke from a military grenade. The inspiration for the work is Jules Olitski's monumental purple colour-field painting *Instant Loveland*, 1968. Stankiech was also interested in Olitski's wish that painting be "nothing but some colours sprayed into the air and staying there."²⁴ If the pure opticality championed by Greenbergian modernism is at least achieved conceptually in Olitski's statement, in Stankiech's video, it is fulfilled through a translation of materials. On a seamless loop, the video alternates the vast, blinding white glare of the Arctic with the smothering effect of the purple smoke screen.²⁵ In this work, the Canadian North is the stage for the re-enactment of a New York Abstract Expressionist fantasy. The North is also the subject of growing concern due to its geo-strategic value in the current context of global climate change. What once was a regional issue is now a global one. Much the way Dickens used fog as a metaphor for the negative connectedness of citizens at the hands of corrupt institutions, Stankiech's use of smoke can evoke the state of control implemented by the military-industrial complex, omnipresent in the North since at least the Cold War. A similar passage from local to global can be observed in the history of modern art. Originally censured on the New York School, Abstract Expressionism soon came to exercise a near-hegemonic authority over the mid-twentieth-century Western avant-garde, turning American Art (including the post-painterly abstraction of Jules Olitski) into the next step in the forward march of the canon of Western art history.²⁶

00.01.66 Fog again serves as a metaphor for negative connectedness, this time in terms of subjective solitary connectedness ("the big-city blues" — the sort of alienation that is brought about by high-density living conditions), in the work of Olivia Boushien. The artist takes a mildly eroticized approach to quotidian minimalism by producing lengthy video works that document simple actions and events such as a couple bathing (*Le Bain*, 2010), a woman undressing in the dark (*La Lente*, 2008) and the wind blowing through fabric hung in front of a nondescript wall (*Le Mur*, 2010). The artist avoids direct narratives to better engage the limits of images and their content. This is pushed further in her work on view in the *Triennial, L'Étude*, 2011: a sauna gradually fills with steam and then is emptied, alternately obscuring and revealing its occupants.²⁷ Here, the implied confusion

19. For an overview of this issue, see David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

20. Ibid., David Michael Levin, "Introduction," p. 7.

21. Christopher Cox was in contemporary sound art to return to modernism: "The revival of modernist strategies of abstraction, reduction, self-reflexivity, and attention to the perceptual act itself — what might be called without irony 'neo-modernism' — is nowhere more evident than in sound art" (Christopher Cox, "Return to Form: Neo-Modernism in Sound Art," *Artforum International* (November 2005) p. 67).

22. This question is discussed at length in John Rappoport, "Foucault's Art of Seeing," *October* 44 (Spring 1988), p. 89–117.

23. Quoted from a press release for Lorna Bauer's solo exhibition *What to Not See Could Be If What Could Appear in the Morning Mist*, at Sparrows, Sherbrooke, Quebec, April 7–May 8, 2011. The press release included an excerpt of an unpublished essay by Jon Knowles.

24. Jon Olitski, "Olitski, Jules," *A Dictionary of Twentieth-century Art*, 1999. Encyclopædia.com, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/105-Olitski.html>, accessed June 8, 2011.

25. Another feature of smoke grenades is that they mark a location (they may be used to mark) and also act as a screen, veiling the surroundings from whoever happens to be in the immediate vicinity.

26. See Serge Gullion's essential study *New York First: Birth of the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

27. This is based on a description provided by the artist. The work was still in production at the time of writing this essay.