

Desires are ghosts that dissolve as soon as you light the lamp of good sense
Judith Vrancken

My long fingernails scratch the inside of my pockets. I look down, laser focused on the tiny specs of dirt on somebody's white sneakers. In quick, compulsive movements I try to break up the threads, and penetrate the tip of my nails through the fabric. 'Are you okay?' he asks, or so I think that's the question when I look up and redirect my focus on his lips. They show little cracks from dehydration, and small amounts of creamy, white foam have collected in the corners of his mouth. It reminds me of how thirsty I am myself, but moving to get a glass of water is an insurmountable task at this moment.

When I started thinking about the topic of desire, the erotic, the sexualized and the political body, I knew I wanted to focus on what happens in between the spaces of desire that manifest themselves in gazes and stares; those borderline obsessive moments that take place in neither reality or phantasy and somewhere between presence and absence. Strikingly so, I initially (and shamefully) kept thinking in terms of binary oppositions; in two and only two equal elements: man and woman, gay and straight, open or closed, looking and not looking, reality and phantasy, light and dark. However, the situation of this exhibition, *Un certain regard*, not only evoked, but urged me to try to understand what is in between and beyond those elements, or at least to make an effort to transcend them, as the artists in this show do so ferociously.

My nails scratch deeper and harder. The fabric has to break, it just has to. For some reason this has become the only assignment I have given myself tonight.

Albeit a plethora of approaches that can't be compartmentalized, all artists share a similar talent to analyse the tenuous divides between the physical, the representational, and the abstract, and construct works that are reminiscent of other worlds in which the line between juxtapositions of the two or three dimensional, the organic and the digital, the erotic and the abject is eerily thin. Exemplary of that is the visceral sculptural work by Rachel de Joode that has a base in photography but is portrayed in a 'physical' three dimensional work. Her pink foam squishes portray her ongoing engagement with surfaces that connect (her) skin and the material she works in, and explore the relationship between the object and its photographic representation, as well as its organic and artificial qualities. On the other hand, Taocheng Wang's highly detailed and tactile drawings almost seem to exude a performance persona in and of themselves, playing a role that transcend the male or female, reality or fantasy.

The works automatically took me to the objectified body and eroticised flesh and I was reminded of a moment I experienced during a Melanie Bonajo performance at De Appel in the summer of 2012. In this piece, five women took a seat on a heightened stage behind a table with microphones, glasses of water and nameplates, much like a press conference. They spread their legs wide, showing the strategic cut-outs in their pants that exposed their vaginas with brightly coloured pubic hair at the audience's eye level. 'Where does your gaze rest? Where is your focus?'¹, Bonajo asked. Being faced with a chorus line of multi-coloured female genitalia, people

¹ Cosmic Cosmetics And Politics Beyond Polarity performed by Melanie Bonajo, Annelies Bijvelds, Merel Cladder, Kinga Kielczynska and Janneke Rorst, as part of the exhibition Topsy Turvy, De Appel, Amsterdam, June 24, 2012.

nervously giggled out of collective anxiety. We all knew our inner voyeur immediately emerged but so did the urge to ignore it. Yet in the not looking, the situation demanded us to watch, as swift gazes descended into hypnotic stares causing associations, abjections and phantasies to unfold automatically. The performance was a reinterpretation of the feminist work *Aktion Hose: Genitalpanik* (1968) by Viennese artist Valie Export, in which Export publicly showed her genitals in a cinema in Munich. At the time, *Aktion Hose: Genitalpanik* was as fierce commentary on the role of women in society, the appearance of female bodies in media and visual art and their perceived position and (lack of) power in the domestic realm. In contrast, Bonajo's use of humour and sober questioning were both public and self-reflexive as the questions were directed to the audience, but also to herself, and her fellow performers. The piece emphasized that the gaze is never a one-way street.

When we think of *un certain regard*, who or what engages our gaze? Who or what stares back at us? In her exploration of gender identity, described as a 'grotto of visual excess,' Julie Verhoeven seems to be almost excruciatingly aware of this engagement. Her video piece reaches titillating heights within their kitschy, almost abject sceneries, in which Verhoeven fearlessly gives shape to a range of seemingly incoherent and unrestrained ideas that simply demand you to watch. By lack of a better phrase, it takes you to a world that is not your own.

My shoulder is starting to hurt from leaning against the cold stonewall. I've nestled my shoulder in a little corner so I don't lose my balance. My body feels stiff, frozen almost, yet I've never felt my blood pump through my veins in such a throbbing rhythm before, in sync with the muffled beat downstairs. People must still be dancing, though the crowd in this room is getting bigger, which I can only sense by the increase in body heat and soft breaths of air gracing my face when somebody passes. I clench my jaws, and frown in concentration. The wet brown spots on the white shoes have started to evaporate, leaving perfect little circles on the white leather.

Verhoeven's work to me clarified what happens when you allow yourself to let your gaze rest; it is the place where its contours, its outlines, are drawn, though they are not static and always subject to change. It is what I believe differentiates the gaze and the stare. Whereas the gaze tends to be swift, is often secretive and sudden, the stare has more structure and body, though it still exists between presence and absence, and you are constantly in between both. Yves Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss draw on the concept of Bataille's *informe* in explaining this idea of the absent present to dissolve the binary oppositions of form and content in an artwork². They identify them with entropy³, a condition in which the internal and external conflicts are at rest. Krauss equates this concept with the dissolving of the figure ground relationship in art and the collapse of the barrier separating art from life. Entropy, Krauss suggests, makes the viewer disappear, only to become part of the chaos that is the artwork⁴, and to be transformed within it.

'Hey.. hello..?!' I briefly look up in his eyes and manage to crack a faint smile to reassure him. He seems concerned but he is probably just annoyed by my lack of response.

² Yves Alain Bois, Rosalind Krauss. *Formless*. New York: Zone Books, 1997: p.73.

³ Bois, Krauss. 1997: p.73.

⁴ This collapse of barriers, the dissolving of the artwork into entropy, Krauss suggests, resonate[s] with the ambition of 'high modernism' to conceive a spatial condition unique to the perceptual modality specific to the arts of vision, one that would cancel all separations of figures from their surrounding spaces or backgrounds to produce a continuum unimaginable for our earthly bodies to traverse, but into which we viewers might easily slide – or glide – in an effortless, soaring, purely optical movement. Bois, Krauss 1997: 75.

In the same moment, another pair of eyes stares back at me. Not his, but somebody behind him, from miles away it seems.

The desire to be transformed within the work and to become part of it, is experienced whenever we expect to be led somewhere, when there is the anticipation of arrival. Like in Celia Hempton's nudes, who are seemingly anonymous, as the faces of her models are typically cropped out. We feel intimately involved with them, as if we painted them ourselves. Silvie Fleury's work on the other hand steadfastly focuses on the superficiality of fashion—seductive glossy advertising and alluring design that emphasizes desirability for something that can never be reached. Her work can be mistaken for an advocacy of consumer culture, though in their abundance, her pieces provide a subtle commentary on the superficiality of materialistic society and the means it uses to manipulate consumers. In contrast, Leigh Ledare's works can be viewed as deeply disruptive, though not in the strictly aggressive, cathartic sense as they seem to be. And as opposed to the abundance of signifiers in Ledare's child's drawings on a photograph of his naked mother, Martin Soto Climent elevates the quality of his image with the most minimal interventions, in part infusing his objects with a visceral physicality.

I can tell they are light, fluorescent ice blue pools framed by a web of thin, long lashes. His heavy brows make him look sceptical rather than curious. My eyes oscillate in quick gazes. Looking at him, looking down, looking up again. Apart from my scratching fingernails, it's the only movement my body is allowing. Great, unspecific waves of excitement emerge, yet I feel no desire to act upon them, only to let them simmer my body in their electricity, a heat wave engulfing my frame as my gazes extend in length and my eyes interlock with his for what seems to be minutes. I look up once again, only to see that he left, leaving an afterimage where his presence was. A spectral shift. Was he a fabrication of my infused brain or the contours of a reality I was unable to reach?

When classical notions of the unity of being and place are deconstructed into the experience of solely standing *in front* or walking *around* the works without any possibility of 'entering', it inescapably creates trace trajectories of desire. One is simultaneously both inside and outside the works, and inside and outside the gaze and stare, shifting back and forth between these two unsettled positions, eventually desiring to become part of the works themselves, like Krauss's definition of entropy. It is despite the inability of fulfilling that desire, that *Un certain regard* extends any sense of arrival, resulting in an eternal flow of experience that never really stops or stays still; a flow of desires that dissolve as soon as the light of good sense is lit.

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