

LISTENING TO LIGHT: KATHERINE BASH AND
OBSERVATIONAL DISPLACEMENT

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Katherine Bash commits mayhem in the name of art by physically displacing our attention. She will, for example, build platforms upon which you recline backwards until you are tilted just past the horizontal and contemplating the world upside down. Her *Blink Chair (metastasis)* puts you into a precarious position that is stable only as long as you do not perturb it. This is, of course, a condition not meant to last, anymore than is our sitting in a chair and tilting back on two legs. Bash rotates us out of what we normally construe to be reality. Then, just as we have achieved the stability necessary to mentally compensate for the world being turned on its head, we bring ourselves upright again, but now with an altered field of perception.

In another act of disorientation, Bash photographs panoramas that, instead of circling around the horizon, vault over your head so that you are forced to connect the view by craning over, yes, backwards. These deliberate displacements of how we normally observe the world refocus our attention on how it is, exactly, that we perceive it. The mayhem is performed quietly, yet its effects can be profound on the participant; one is never simply a viewer in the presence of a Bash piece, but always a co-conspirator.

At the end of the nineteenth century G.M. Stratton experimented with displaced images by wearing goggles that reversed, inverted, and even tilted into the vertical images of his surroundings. He discovered that his mind compensated over time so that he regained the ability to navigate his surroundings. Subsequent experimenters found that subjects donning the apparatus again months after their first trials would almost immediately alter their behavior accordingly. These early confirmations of the mind's ability to profoundly alter its processing of information were discovered in the name of psychology. Early the next century the psychologist-turned-philosopher John Dewey identified those times when our perceptions are altered and integrated with our past experiences as heightened moments, as potentially aesthetic experiences. As art. He argued that aesthetic experiences led individuals to readapt to their environments, an adjustment that, because it could alter your world-view, had potential political ramifications as well as aesthetic ones.

Bash was trained as a scientist, but makes her life as an artist. Trained as an artist—although schooled in design—she subverts our perceptual habits as her aesthetic practice. Her purpose in crossing these wires is to spark unexpected perceptions that will lead us astray from our conventions. Her ultimate goal is to get us first to see the world anew, and then to understand how we do so in order that we might become self directed agents able to exercise that ability at will. She observes and classifies ephemeral phenomena, gives them names, holds up a mirror to watch their shadows, then presents us with incontrovertible evidence that the world is stranger than we had supposed. Then hands us the tools to do it ourselves. Like I said, mayhem.

If one had to label the work that Bash performs, a good title might be that used by the poet and early scientist Margaret Cavendish for her seminal 1666 book *Observations of Experimental Philosophy*. Her text, which fused empiricism with science and philosophy, influenced thinkers as diverse as Hermann von Helmholtz and Dewey, both seminal experimental psychologists who helped trace the boundaries of human perception. Another key figure in this heritage, and one of personal interest to Bash, is the nineteenth-century scientist and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who was the first to measure distance with light and who created the term pragmatism, a philosophy of inquiry built

upon verifiable observations. He lent the term to his friend William James, who made it famous, and to his student Dewey, who referred to it as “instrumentalism.” In the early 1930s Dewey published *Art as Experience*, which traced how artists distill the commonplace precisely in order to bring viewers to those moments of heightened awareness he identified as art. He also proposed that the artist and audience were co-participants in the process.

Multiple terms were used to describe these thinkers—instrumentalist, experimentalist, empiricist, naturalist, psychologist—a polyvalent status seldom allowed contemporary scientists, given the increasing trend toward specialization during the last three centuries. But artists in the twentieth century veered away from imitating their former colleagues in inquiry, and began to abandon singular disciplines in favor of following ideas, materializing their inquiries as needed through a variety of experiences. It is no accident that the inventor of the Happening and facilitator of this tendency, the 1960s avant-gardist Allan Kaprow, is described by his biographer Jeff Kelley as an American pragmatist. As a result of this emphasis on inquiry over medium, someone trained as a painter today may create a temporary earthwork, document it photographically, then recreate it as an installation in a gallery with interpretive texts focused on issues of environmental science. Peirce, and then Dewey, were champions of inquiry as a formal philosophical and scientific technique, and it is a concept that occurs repeatedly in conversation with Bash.

Take wind and light, primary subjects for Bash’s inventory of observations. Both are ubiquitous, yet visible to us only when they interact with something. The human eye is so sensitive it can see a candle burning twenty miles away, but we don’t actually see the light itself. All we can perceive is the reflection of light at differing wavelengths exciting the photoreceptors of our eyes, where radiant energy is transduced into neuroelectrical energy. We don’t actually see light passing through the air unless it strikes dust and reflects off of it. Yet this virtually indeterminate force both particle and wave brings us eighty percent of the information we perceive every day.

As with light, so with wind, those movements of air created by differential heating of the Earth’s surface, which in turn generate areas of higher and lower atmospheric pressure between which the wind flows. We only perceive wind when we can sense it moving something else: the sight of dust, the sound of leaves, pressure on our clothing, the smell of chemical molecules from baking bread. The physical world is never the same from moment to moment, in large part because the light changes and the wind is literally shaping the land and everything on it all around us all the time. The first recorded example of observed cause-and-effect was, in fact, made by the Greek philosopher Anaximander in the fourth century B.C., who described wind as arising from what he observed to be the interaction of water vapor and sunlight.

Bash seeks out and then documents phenomena such as how sunlight breaking through a matrix of leaves creates multiple cameras obscura, which project the intact, round images of the sun on the ground beneath the trees regardless of the shape of the openings in the latticework. It’s even better for her purposes if the leaves are moving in the air and the images dance for us in a video of the moment, an activation of the two forces commingling their effects.

The thing about light and wind is that it is possible to plot the course of each, but not to predict exactly where they will end up or what their effects will be. Not only do we perturb them with observation, but their interactions with each other and the world are simply too damned complicated. In order to witness their effects upon one another it is more efficient to use the formulae of art and poetry than mathematics. Bash’s instruments, therefore, are not limited to pivoting chairs, rotating cameras, mirrors, and the dozens of other tools she deploys. Her most versatile instrument is language, the ultimate human instrument.

Ludwig Wittgenstein early in the twentieth century famously declared in the 1922 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that what lies outside language is unknowable. Bash, who practices walking along the threshold of perception, takes us into that liminal zone where that which can be described fades into the ineffable. The approximately one million words in English (half of which are technical terms), and the several billion words available in the world's 6809 languages don't include very many words to describe what happens in these shadowlands. In order for us to see what Bash reveals there, we have to be able to include it within language. So, Bash creates a terminology that captures moments of ephemeral observation. This defines why language is such a powerful tool—you can extend it as needed. And it explains why her work is almost always accompanied by indices, glossaries, and archives.

Example one: *lourndish*, which she describes as a visible set of elements that interact with an invisible force, as in the morphing shapes of the wind captured by “a lourndish of leaves.” Example two: *abrisamento*—“the beginning of a breeze, the coming into consciousness, what happens when we see the trees move and then we feel the breeze move over us, it is that slight moment—that moment of passing from the unconscious to the conscious which is abrisamento.” Neither of these words has, as she puts it, “yet made it into the dictionary.”

The making of a word—just one of what she calls her “minimal interventions”—is the making of a tool; to create definitions is to exercise instrumentality, to experiment. Bash, by naming these commonplace phenomena that our neurology habitually filters out, assists us to see and interact with them. Like wearing Stratton's goggles, this allows us the opportunity to develop additional ways of processing information about the world and then navigate in an expanded arena.

Wind is for Bash not only a literal instrument or agent of change—as it sculpts the landscape through aeolian erosion—but also an apt metaphor for the process of understanding a tool you can't see. You can't directly perceive how your mind works anymore than you can see wind and light—but you can learn to notice the effects of all three. And, unlike the wind and light over which you have but little control, you can learn to change your mind. Subversion. Mayhem.

Many artists in the early twenty-first century use science in their work. To take two very diverse examples, the installation artist Mark Dion recreates both the wonder cabinets of natural philosophy and the laboratories of scientists, installation works which critique the institutional politics of representation. The photographer Catherine Wagner documents the flow of scientific information via the visual hierarchy of specimens. Conversely, scientists use aesthetics when they colorize images returned from space probes, or produce computer graphics not only to illustrate models, but to actually help frame theories.

But Bash is not using science for art or art for science. She is practicing inquiry, the root activity of both. This is eminently practicable—to use the slightly old-fashioned word for it—because she designs the requisite tools for changing our minds. That we call it art to do so instead of science is a pragmatic choice.

References:

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