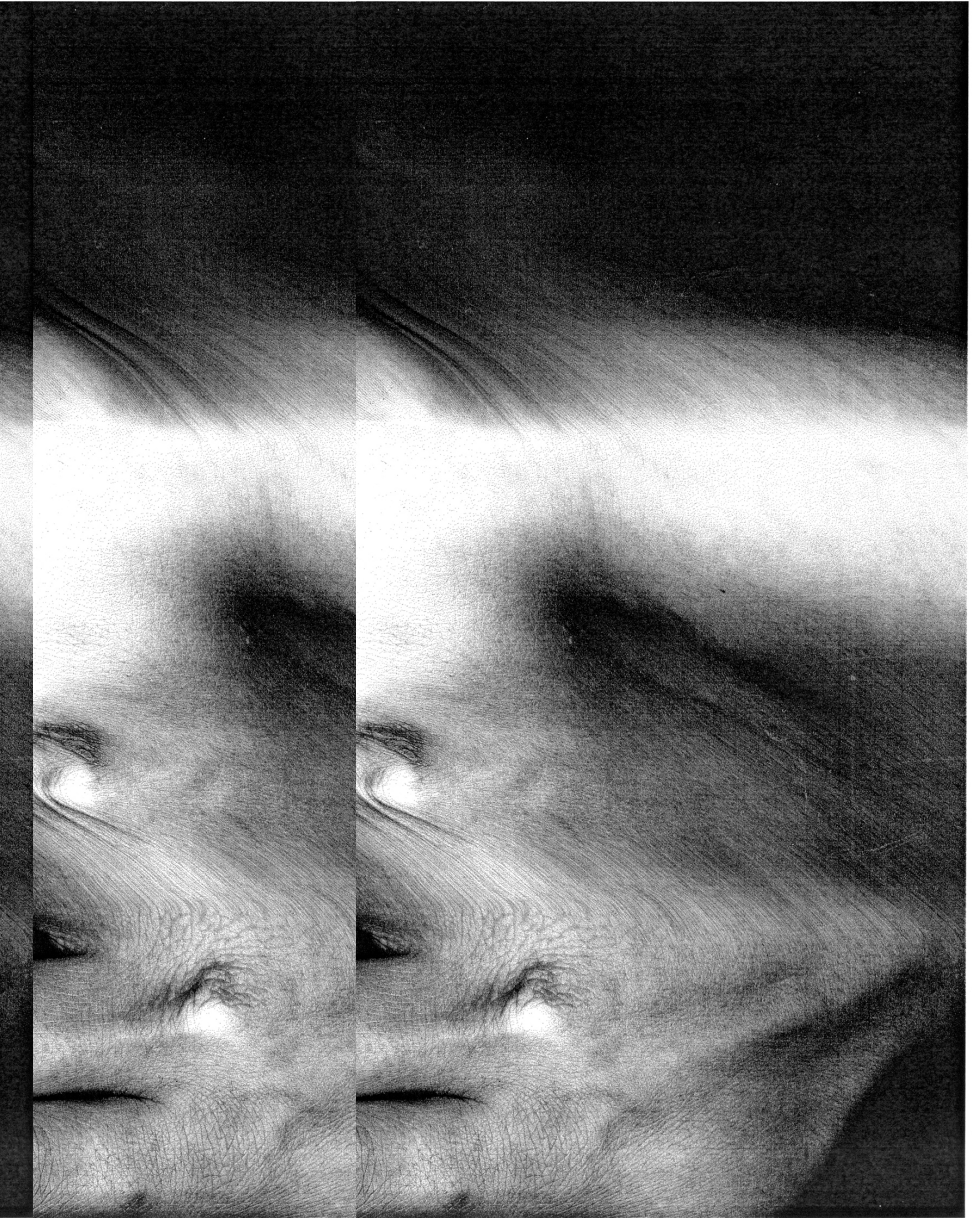touch with your eyes

tess wei

what are you thinking about?

That is what my dad always asks when we talk about my work. Not, why. Definitely never why. He always tells me, "why?" is an unfair question. But, "what are you thinking about?" can make way for more.

I always thought that was interesting: why being an unfair question. For some reason, I agree with my dad. Depending on slight differences in how questions are asked, specific types of reasons get elicited. Maybe this is why I agree with him. Both questions offer space for different types of curiosity and, in trying to provide reasons for why questions, I often feel stifled. While, what are you thinking about, feels less like a trap with a right and wrong answer and more open-ended.

So, this is the first question I remember consistently trying to answer when generating anytype of work. My dad did not want to hear about what he could see. He wanted to know about what was not optically defined, what was not legible (although perhaps alluded to).

sd
lr
ee
ea
pm

steam
steam
bumpy paint   steam
keep   spin
keep
keep   play piano-draw/paella/grilledcheese   -   antenae with tinfoil
keep   after snow balls   a black table, once

My dad is an architect and my mom is a designer. As a result, my child-hood always involved a heightened attention to aesthetics and, more-over, designed space—how profoundly this affects our movements, thoughts, beliefs, etc. How, perhaps, there is a moral/ethical obligation to create spaces (architectural and otherwise) that are thoughtfully conceived, carefully organized.

Space and self as inseparable.

In the mid-90s my parents designed our house, a corner property in Philadelphia. It was my dad's first solo project. His first articulation of what are you thinking about. Bachelard says that the home is one's first universe.[1] Taking this to be the case, my dad's architecture, a tangible output of his thoughts, our home, is my first universe.

My home is one floor and dictated by a minimalist aesthetic: the walls are all white and bare apart from a few minimalist art pieces; there is dark, stainless steel detailing on the edges of partitioning walls; the doors all slide bearing no handles or locks; the shower has no door or curtain; my parents' room has no door; panels of cork board make up the floor; apart from the bedrooms and the bathrooms, the kitchen and living spaces are one unpartitioned space.

My dad always insists that being *minimal* is not equal to being *empty*. And being *full* does not necessitate being filled with objects and things. So our house is not empty. Open space is not empty. It is full. In an environment where excess objects and decorative elements are absent, what becomes important are the seams where materials meet—where the plaster meets the steel meets the cork meets the steel again.

between

The etymology of *monster* is interesting–coming from the Latin monstrum with "Orig. belonging to relig[ious] lang[uage], *a divine omen indicating misfortune, an evil omen, portent.*[2] Monstri were said to be messengers from god(s) (but just… bad, not archangels). The similarity in roots between monster and demonstrate is no coincidence—these composite messengers were to deliver warnings, ideas, stories. However, cultural perspectives toward monsters for the Romans (and perhaps antiquity entirely) were much more complex and wide-ranging than this definition lets on–in politics and the visual and literary arts:

> In Lévi-Strauss' well-worn phrase, Roman poets found abnormal bodies "good to think with," not least because when old and new ideas conflicted, Roman attitudes toward such bodies (whether emotional, aesthetic, philosophical or political) could serve both sides. The great undiscovered allegory of monsters in Latin literature is metapoetic: from unexpected birth… to ambitious confrontation, monstrous beings often represent poetic creativity itself. This is not merely a poetic phenomenon. As symbol of deviation, the abnormal body in Augustan Rome is always a two-sided coin. One side stigmatizes new forms (artistic or otherwise) as deformed (that is, decadent). The other side celebrates novelty, meaning that "the bountiful boldness of poets…–and of others who luxuriate in controversy–embraces it.[3]

At the crux of monsters is their hybridity, not necessarily their virtue nor vice. Whether in literature, politics, visual arts, their form is constituted by divisions and incongruity – the creation of structures that are composite and incongruous.

In *Monsters of Architecture*, Marco Frascari discusses the relationship between architectural production and human bodies—the way in which the constructed world draws form and sequence from the corporeal and, therefore, how the corporeal itself can inform the ideological underpinnings of architecture. In thinking about the monstrous body as a signifier a parallel can be made with regard to the architectural construction and arrangement of built space. Both architecture and monsters are composed through the joining of heterogeneous elements and function, in part, to present a thought, philosophy, some sort of signification:

> Architectural arrangements of building elements in space are among the most fundamental signs of space. The signs of the built environment substantiate the human ekstasis, which is done by providing events in edifices; the taking place of events and the putting out of place of events generates a building. The edges of walls, the capitals, the keystones, and all the possible architectural elements that express the nature of constructional joints are the places that articulate these monstrous events. These events/joints are architectural monsters that make people think about their environment.[4]

The seams provoke us to acknowledge space.

I am thinking about something my dad once told me:
"I try to design spaces that could hold a marriage or a murder."

So, let's take a site, a room. What constitutes this space? What delimits it? A room can have four walls, perhaps two, one, none? A room does not need a ceiling. Does a room need a floor? When you go from one room to another what marks this passage that provokes the naming of a different room, instead of just going from one part of a space into another that is slightly different? Perhaps a room is only what delimits it: the edges, seams, walls, corners, thresholds. It's easy to forget what delimits space. How often do we stare at where the wall meets the floor?

…

Seams, joints, margins—constituents of construction, the meeting of two heterogeneous elements creating something else… a spark. This is fundamental to the dialectical image/method. Walter Benjamin, for one, used dialectics throughout his unfinished *Passagen-Werk* (*Arcades Project*). As described by Susan Buck-Morss, Benjamin's dialectical method presents a new approach to history, images, and philosophy—wherein the discontinuous is privileged and a philosophy outside of a strict historical framework emerges:

> In the *Passagen-Werk* Benjamin was committed to a graphic, concrete representation of truth, in which historical images made visible the philosophical ideas. In them, history cut through the core of truth without providing a totalizing frame… Benjamin understood these ideas as "discontinuous." As a result, the same conceptual elements appear in several images, in such varying configurations that their meanings cannot be fixed in the abstract. Similarly, the images themselves cannot be strung together into a coherent, non-contradictory picture of the whole.[5]

In placing different historical images—visually, linguistically—in conversation with each other, Benjamin can show his philosophical thoughts. This is (literary) montage—the placing together, side-by-side, of images whose abstract components resist congruence (Benjamin looks to visual examples such as a John Heartfield's photomontage German Natural History). The inability of images to seamlessly integrate, but instead, establish themselves next to/against each other produces rifts. This fissure becomes something else, neither one image nor the other, but something in and of itself. A new ideation appears in the gap – sparked by the initial confrontation/friction. Thus Benjamin's montages, his series of constructions, are to be demonstrative, like monsters, to be dialectical images.

"Construction… plays the role of the subconscious."[6]

When I think about *flashbacks* as something different, maybe, from *remembering*, my associations are with cinema. I could, for example, point to *Citizen Kane* as an important instance of the non-linear sequencing of time in film. Who is Charles Foster Kane? In pursuit of answering this question, his story unfolds through the perspectives of different characters given through overlapping, non-chronological, and fragmented storytelling. When such moments arise, a dissolve transition is used to symbolically change between preceding and proceeding scenes. As opposed to simply a cut, a dissolve implies a certain connection between the scenes—in the case of the interlocutors in *Citizen Kane*, the dissolve transitions allow the proceeding scenes to exist in the mental spaces and perspectives of the individual storytellers, while also indicating a significant passage of time. These transitions set the tone for a flashback—a certain type of recollection existing within the interior, mental space of a character, while also allowing the scene to coherently travel to a different space and time.

In seeing movies like *Citizen Kane*, my visual association with flashbacks are with post-production techniques, not my own biological methods of recollection. Flashbacks, then, are more representative of a type of memory experience conditioned by cinema.

My mom is a huge movie buff. I grew up watching *Blow Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966), films by the Brothers Quay, *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz,1942), *Jules et Jim* (François Truffaut, 1962), *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Wiene 1921), *Brewster McCloud* (Robert Altman, 1970), the suite of Monty Python and the Marx Brothers, of course.

My mom also showed me my absolute favorite movie while I was in middle school, *Harold and Maude* (1971). Starring Bud Cort and Ruth Gordon, as well as a soundtrack solely of Cat Stevens (when that was his name), the movie follows two characters who are eccentric, quirky, offbeat, etc. etc. and, moreover, curious. Maude found the minute glorious, the banal magnificent. The movie changed me. That sounds very generic, but it truly changed me. In middle school, the height of wanting to fit in, the height of (at the time) Victoria's Secret pink, high buns, popular girls in Uggs and straightened hair and white washed interests, Harold and Maude reoriented my outlook on life and reinforced the sentiment of being oneself, being curious, playing hard—sentiments that were important to hear while immersed in a social atmosphere saturated with 'fitting in'.

This new orientation and subsequent approach to experience introduced questions as to how we are taught and conditioned to act and see and think and interpret; what is positioned as 'normal'/standard and why. I began to question how prescribed ways of seeing translate into my understanding and re-presentation of reality and experience... even an understanding of myself.

So, I am fond of the space of motion pictures. A pact of word, image, music, in which to transplant for a few hours and feel sorrow, hilarity, adoration, panic, confusion.

...

But Horkheimer and Adorno caution about film (along with radio and magazines). In *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*, Horkheimer and Adorno warn that capitalism creates a culture industry, whose overarching effect is the homogenization of all art and culture. Capitalism creates a monopoly that homogenizes taste and is dependent on the top-down circulation of "demand" (obviously very Marxian).

The hegemony of capitalism masquerades as independence, offering the false sense of choice in order to create subservient consumers. Horkheimer and Adorno argue that often, the only thing avant-garde about what is produced are the deceitful mechanisms by which producers of homogenized art construct their 'expertise.' Combatting this inevitable homogenization of art under capitalism can only occur when not adhering to the predominantly popular and accepted style:

> The great artists were never those who embodied a wholly flawless and perfect style, but those who used style as a way of hardening themselves against the chaotic expression of suffering, as a negative truth. The style of their works gave what was expressed that force without which life flows away unheard. Those very art forms which are known as classical, such as Mozart's music, contain objective trends which represent something different to the style they incarnate… The great artists have rendered a mistrust of style… the inferior work has always relied on its similarity with others – on a surrogate identity.[7]

When pushing against the culture industry's incentives, the filmic format makes space for different applications of light, focus, narrative, etc., and creates new relationships to the world at large. Instability and lack of closure, enemies of capitalist control, can become central to certain cinematic projects. Antonioni, for example, taught me that riddles can rule narrative and not all stories need resolution or linear coherence. And even with Altman, who introduced strange ways of acknowledging the artifice of the film format itself—for example, by bringing together all of the characters at the end of *Brewster McCloud* like a circus curtain call. Through some film, I learned that all stories do not need resolution and, sometimes, resolution is very unsatisfying.

almost

Out-of-focus, blurred. Why are these positioned as mistakes, outcasts, both mechanical and human errors, oppositions to an impulse for 'clarity'?

 In-focus, clear, high-res. Why are these qualities favored?

Clarity as a quality is loved, sought after, but what is 'clarity' really? We fix our eyesight with glasses to help us 'see more clearly.' We fill prescriptions to help us 'think more clearly.' The clear is thrown about to describe experience and consciousness positively. But what is this 'clearness' toward which we aim and why is it favored?
Clarity seems false—a category and valuation that points toward the co-opting of our visuality. Yes, there are evolutionary/scientific reasons for our need for clarity. However, I think this impulse toward the clear is also heavily driven by a fear unrelated to evolutionary fitness. A fear that being out-of-focus is to be of lesser value, lesser ability, an overall lesser existence.

In part, the apprehension and negative associations toward the out-of-focus image emerge as consequences of social, political, and economic hierarchies. Hito Steyerl writes of a similar dynamic in *In Defense of the Poor Image*, in which she traces the 'poor image' and its position in contemporary society. Although Steyerl is primarily writing about the poor image with regard to pixelation and file-size, the blurred image can be

kin to these image types. Within Steyerl's project, the status of the poor image is approached as a side effect of certain circumstances including: technological changes allowing for differences in resolution; neoliberal media production and consequent hierarchies in image valuation, access, and 'quality'; emerging and diverging networks to produce and watch certain imagery; etc. The poor image's lower status (in mainstream culture) can be traced to socio-political and economic systems such as capitalism—a system that diminishes the 'class position' of the low quality image by framing it as cheaper, quicker, expendable. In other words, to be lower quality is to have less value. This equation, which devalues the poor image, extends to the out-of-focus and blurred image as well. Evidence that constructed categories and systems—such as value, quality, and ability—create optical distortions and preferences that are not in favor of certain images.

However, Steyerl argues that the poor image holds certain qualities such as its 'exchange value' (speed of sharing) and its ability to create a new hybridity between producers and audience. These qualities hold both positive and negative outcomes: not only allowing the poor image to fuel "capitalist media assembly lines" but also "alternative audiovisual economies." The latter pointing toward a different, more positive way to interpret the out-of-focus, poor image's existence and its merits in visual culture. Within these economies, images can circulate more freely, removing certain geo-political and class-boundaries attached to accessibility.

...

The most ubiquitous, intentional use of the blur is not a positive one. Intentional blurs are employed for censorship—blurring bodies to hide nudity, blurring mouths to hide expletives (even the auditory "beep" is the acoustic equivalent of the blur). The mass-distributed blur, then, is employed to hide the profane, the obscene; it is meant to 'protect' the un-identified 'community' at large. So the blur in censorship is not itself, instead, it is used as a blinder to obscure the 'full' image in question—its presence is used to create omissions and redactions in our otherwise clear world. Therefore, clarity has been conflated with truth, certainty, and moral standards—based on an assumption that there is a specific way to perceive reality in-focus.

In fourth grade I was tasked with writing an autobiography spanning from birth to old age. Reading it recently, I was reminded of my past fantasies of becoming a Veterinarian. I was also reminded of my imagined husband: Harpo Chico Marx. A mixture of the Marx Brothers with whom I was and will always be fascinated–thanks again to my mother for the lifelong cinema survey.

Groucho, of course, was my icon, the beacon of quick wit balancing absurdity with an advanced knowledge of life and 'what's going on.' Someone with words somewhere between fantasy and more real than anyone has ever said it. I've always found comedians particularly magical in this way: crafting drama that is, on the one hand, humourous, and, on the other, an accurate commentary on the world–from a superficial incident to a horrific tragedy. Comedy, done well, can examine anything including all the abhored habits/impulses/histories of humanity–infidelity, sexual assault, murder, racism, mysogyny, etc… I think the argument of 'you can't joke about that' is incredibly conservative. Humor creates a space governed differently than normal conversation, where incongruous aspects of life are discussed and shared beliefs can supplant the negative; where seriousness is not an expectation. It seems that comedy uses among many things: critical thinking, deftness of language, and a level of amusement/play.

How do you "get" a joke?

Comedy is some sort of existential inquiry. It can interrogate, defile, and satirize truth, all the while being something so pleasurable, so amusing, that it inspires laughter—"like a disequilibrium in systems which are themselves far from equilibrium."[8] What a strange phenomenon. I guess sometimes laughing can make you better understand things.

This is why, besides Groucho, I very much admire comedian–social satirist–Lenny Bruce. The *Village Voice* once praised Bruce for his uncompromising honesty and veracity in relation to his contemporaries:

> [Lenny Bruce] is also much freer and much more spontaneous and emotionally involved in his material than Sahl, May and Nicholas, etc. He says things on a night club floor that tear furiously at the hypocrisy that is at the core of so many of our social habits and limp beliefs. He can be funny but at his funniest he's the most truthful commentator on our private, let alone public, life that we have.[9]

Honesty, sometimes signaled / sometimes concealed.

Censorship, in all its forms, immediately reminds me of Lenny Bruce's obscenity trials. His trials—his efforts to keep his art, his comedy, his social commentary alive—are central to why obscenity laws and freedom of speech are more nuanced today (in favor of protecting creative production).

My first encounter with Bruce's obscenity trials occurred while researching his numerous charges in comparison with the trials of William S. Burroughs's novel *Naked Lunch* and Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*. One of the main distinctions between the legal prosecutions–two pieces of literature versus Bruce's comedy acts–was what exactly was being tried. *Naked Lunch* was up on trial, not Willam Burroughs; *Howl*'s publisher and City Lights bookstore owner, Lawrence Ferlinghetti was tried, not Allen Ginsberg.[10] Lenny Bruce, however, was tried over and over as an individual–his personhood and art, one in the same.

To add to the distinction, by the time of Bruce's final obscenity sentence in 1964, he was "the magnet for enough prosecutors (twelve or more) to staff an entire state attorney's office, enough defense lawyers (twenty-three) to fill a small law firm, and more trial and appellate judges (some thirty) than [had] presided over any single body of First Amendment litigation."[11] So, although these legal cases seemed to focus on issues of obscenity, they were truly apropos to art and freedom of speech.

And it's no wonder. During the 1950's and 1960's, America faced unprecedented changes politically, socially, economically–overall cultural shifts and rifts, from the growing civil rights movement to the Vietnam War. These changes spawned challenges against the status quo. During this time, a group of dissident artists—poets, novelists, comedians, musicians—emerged, predominantly in New York City and San Francisco. They were America's beatniks, including the aforementioned Burroughs and Ginsberg (Lenny Bruce was their contemporary but never a self-identified beatnik). The artists and thinkers of this growing counterculture exercised free speech and social critiques that questioned, rejected and confronted America's materialistic and militaristic idolatry. They were met with admiration and praise as well as disdain and objection–especially from local and state governments and organized religious groups. As their art continued to emerge on the American scene, it became the target of legal entanglements and indictments.
The grounds? Obscenity.

So, the issue that ultimately arose was that: as the progressive ideas of these artists, such as Bruce, gained momentum and audience, the obscenity law was used against them in order to censor and thus deny their First Amendment Right to free speech. Through the selective and systematic employment of the obscenity law, these artists were tied up in enough legal troubles to hinder their creative expression. In Bruce's case, these accusations and trials were successful in diminishing his voice and, as he prophetically said in his final obscenity trial, "taking away [his] words, locking them up."[12]

So censorship is a dangerous game, an inherently subjective game, although the act itself is often blanketed/disguised as one that is in the objective and moral interests of a society/group/humanity(?) It is an act that stakes a moral claim, that something should or should not be said, seen, shared; as though censoring is 'helping'. It is not only a deprivation of the senses but a deprivation of knowledge—a way in which 'some' funnel the access and content that 'the rest' can encounter/consume. Such silencing and restrictions often remind me of attempts to stop people from taking from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—a reversion to 'the beginning' or a nostalgia for some biblical, Eden-esque past in which we do not know our own nakedness, that we might not be able to handle it.

Censorship pretends to be in service of a public, although this public is usually ill-defined, too general, essentialist, hypothetical. Who are we protecting by censoring? The most insidious type of censorship is that which is the least overt—i.e. not iconoclasm or book burning or some stereotypical conservative/extremist act—it's the type of silencing that disguises itself as progressive, forward thinking protection, or, at least, claims to be on some 'right' side of a moral, secular debate. Censorship is inherently unprogressive because knowledge, thoughts, discourse is what makes things progress. Censorship will always be a moral crusade—and like the history of crusades, harmful and violent.

But what if the blurred, the out-of-focus is its own existence, not a mistake, a remnant, not a devalued image? What if its main, intentional application was not associated with another once-clear image, nor with a mechanical error, nor with a transitional effect in cinema? The blurred and out-of-focus can be legitimate in and of itself. Considered in this way, nuanced variations within types of blurs arise: some more translucent and ethereal, others dense, straining-your-eyes thick; some relating to a type of motion, speed, spinning, falling. Whole, stable, intentional, an image with a different objective all together: offering a space that alludes quick imaging and visibility in favor of a thought, a feeling, sight without the satisfaction of the namable. The blur disrupts the impulse toward clarity. In *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Gilles Deleuze similarly discusses the cinematic importance of the absent image and the black and white screens:

> … they no longer have a simple function of punctuation, as if they marked a change, but enter into a dialectical relation between the image and its absence, and assume a properly structural value… this new value of the black or white screen seems to us to correspond to the characteristics analysed earlier: on the one hand, what is important is no longer the association of images, the way in which they associate, but the interstice between two images; on the other hand, the cut in a sequence of images is not now a rational cut which marks the end of one or the beginning of another, but a so-called irrational cut which belongs neither to one nor the other, and sets out to be valid for itself.[13]

The blurred and out-of-focus image, then, finds kinship with Deleuze's absence of image in the black and white screens. These images provide a space to exercise sight without the namable and knowable extending to the forefront. Here, vision transforms into a different type of evaluatory experience, temporarily releasing itself from the imperative for directness that grips clarity.

near

When I was little, my dad tried to teach me how to draw straight lines without a ruler. We sat at the kitchen table and practiced. Placing the pencil at the top of the paper and directing my eyes to where the line would end. Dragging the pencil to that end-point without looking at the pencil itself. Sometimes this yields surprisingly ok results.

If you open my dad's closet you will find each of his black t-shirts tightly folded over a thin piece of cardboard. In driving to-and-from soccer practice, we would agonize over each and every unlevel bumper sticker encountered.

In November 2019 I had the honor of visiting the seminal, realist painter Rackstraw Downes. His SOHO studio and living space is a top floor apartment, and thus has the beautiful benefit of skylights. Beneath these skylights we discussed many things: his lesser-known portraits; the reason for the coarse-ness of his canvas; the fear and shame he felt when transitioning from abstract to representational painting (at a time when Abstract Expressionism was a la mode). Among his memories and insights, he recounted how his hallmark, curved horizon line and panoramic perspective entered his work. While measuring and drawing the composition for a new painting nothing was coming out correctly. In order to resolve the composition, he realized it necessary to abandon the straight horizon line presupposed at the start of all previous compositions.

It was a pivotal moment of trust—trusting his eyes and perception over the learned conventions of linear perspective. Suddenly, the world was slightly curved, slightly tilted. I looked out the window, and it was. The buildings were no longer as I saw them when I walked into his studio—their straight, rigid lines turned gentle curves. A moment of rapid unlearning.

The horizon is not straight! Of course… it seems so obvious, doesn't it? I was wondering how I was duped for so long.

Straight　　　lines　　　help　　　keep　　　things　　　in　　　order.

But on second thought…

The curved horizon lines in Rackstraw Downes's paintings are sugges-
tive of sustained looking. They are a culmination of multiple visits and,
as he described during my visit to his studio, the curve also occurs due
to the swiveling of his head. As he turns his head, a panoramic view
with a curved horizon appears: "I am interested in the whole place and
everything that pertains to it: the long canvases I use result from want-
ing to get all that in. I wish to create a space and a paint surface that
could accommodate light, scale, forms, solidity, mood, details, weather;
and in a way of painting that would allow one's own varying moods: for
example, one day an appetite for detail and precision, another day for
relaxation."[14] In these works, Downes is not only capturing a place, but
moreover, duration.

However, although concerned more with the empirical than conceptu-
al, Downes's paintings still are not truly empirical. In fact, they may be
just as conceptual as they are empirical, because they alter the momen-
tariness of optics—presenting a conception of what sustained viewing
of a seamless, almost 360 view could be. His landscapes offer uninter-
rupted panoramic views. However, as one scans a room, the eye does
move smoothly from one side to the other. Instead, a panoramic view is
achieved only through multiple, isolated views that do not align smooth-
ly as something panoramic like a Downes painting suggests.

So, placing observations of a space and time smoothly together is not
necessarily as empirical as it appears, but instead imaginative—a con-
ceptualization of duration. 'Scanning' a space does not create one com-
plete view, but instead, a composite perspective—the eye shifts almost
'frame-by-frame', filmically.

down

This space defined by linear perspective is calculable, navigable, and predictable. It allows the calculation of future risk, which can be anticipated, and therefore, managed. As a consequence, linear perspective not only transforms space, but also introduces the notion of a linear time, which allows mathematical prediction and, with it, linear progress… This so-called scientific worldview helped set standards for marking people as other, thus legitimizing their conquest or the domination over them…[15]

I am thinking about horizon lines.

Linear perspective instills a type of order, and ordering is an exercise of control with a long lineage: wunderkammer, museums, map-making, grand magasins (a la Benjamin) wherein commodity fetishism blooms, etc. So, linear perspective's claims to universal truth and visuality (a very useful ideological tool in the lineage of colonial and capitalist projects, from the cartographer to the collector) fueled its dominance:

> … the ability of the linear perspective to position and distribute viewing bodies in space: the geometric nature of perspective necessitates that the vanishing point of the "painted world" has a mathematically equivalent viewing point, equidistant from the "window" of the painted surface set along the central viewing axis… Yet even when it was not, the success of linear perspective's ability to align bodies perpendicular to viewed surfaces can be seen in most forms of modern architecture, whose linear geometries are invariably built to facilitate "a view," whether it be of pictures (the museum), people (the prison), or commodities (the department store).[16]

In *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*, Hito Steyerl characterizes our contemporary moment with having a sense of free fall and therefore the inability to distinguish directionality so much so that there is the feeling of permanent fall. This non-sense of orientation and the disappearance of a stable, singular perspective, is coupled with shifting viewpoints that incorporate a new sense of verticality, unstable ground (even groundlessness), and a horizon line that is montaged, multiplied, and in flux.

For centuries, a stable horizon served as a linear, objective truth necessary for navigation, astronomy and, consequently, the pursuits of colonization and globalization. This horizon line and its kin, linear perspective, presupposed a singular and stable vision—one belonging to an equally stable, non-specific observer. This was the illusion of predictable space as well as time:

However, despite linear perspective's historical hegemony, Steyerl argues that competition against a clear horizon line is, perhaps, a long time coming as it "became a hostage to the truth it had so confidently proclaimed. And a deep suspicion was planted alongside its claims for veracity from its inception."[17] As a consequence of linear perspective's compromised status, other visual paradigms continued (and continue) to emerge, providing multiple orientations to the world.

In part, Steyerl attributes the rise of new visualities to 18th and 19th century perspectival and technological advancements in areas such as cinema, advertising, physics and mathematics, aviation and drones. Of import in these augmented mechanisms is the increased predominance of verticality and aerial views from above. This verticality is surveillant in nature and, therefore, not dissimilar from linear perspective's colonial gaze:

Our vision, our eyes are disembodied and transplanted,

allowing technologies of surveillance to be our conduits of sight.

...many of the aerial views, 3D nose-dives, Google Maps, and surveillance panoramas do not actually portray a stable ground. Instead, they create a supposition that it exists in the first place. Retroactively, this virtual ground creates a perspective of overview and surveillance for a distanced, superior spectator safely floating up in the air. Just as linear perspective established an imaginary stable observer and horizon, so does the perspective from above establish an imaginary floating observer and an imaginary stable ground.[18]

Surveillance as an expression and privilege of power and control.

around

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault describes the architecture and system of a panopticon and its disciplinary effects. Foucault's panopticon is the site of a modern prison. There is a center tower where one guard is on duty watching the inmates. However, this tower and its windows are not lit so it is impossible to see where this guard is looking (and if there is even a guard inside). Surrounding the tower is a circular (think colosseum-esque) sequence of jail cells, all facing the tower and all backlit so that the silhouettes of the inmates are vivid. Foucault argues that not only does the prisoners' visibility have a disciplining effect, but also the prisoners' knowledge of their own visibility. It is impossible for the single guard to observe all of the prisoners at once, but it is the possibility of the guard's gaze, which causes the prisoners to control their own behaviors. The thought of being seen is embodied through the self-regulating actions of the prisoners, creating a virtual yet overwhelming discipline—surveillance takes on a social form as the disciplinary gaze is intensified and multiplied by each prisoner.

"La courbe de tes yeux fait le tour de mon cœur…"[19]

The disciplinary effects of surveillance are intensified with new technologies that multiply, mobilize, and make omnipresent the ability to see and the paranoia of equally always being observed. These mechanisms "…have enabled the detached observant gaze to become ever more inclusive and all-knowing to the point of becoming massively intrusive—as militaristic as it is pornographic, as intense as extensive, both micro- and macroscopic." When Steyerl discusses this, now multiplied, gaze she sites examples of drones, satellite imaging, planes–views that are disembodied or necessitate a certain technological/mechanical conduit. What these all have in common is a top-down view, the orientation and feeling of looking down, which causes the disappearance of a horizon line and the subsequent feeling of free fall. The experience of free fall is such that one does not know if they are going up or down, they are in flux and directionless. This top-down, horizonless view produces the sensation of disorientation. But, is groundlessness always disorienting or can it create something pleasurable and calming instead of alarming?

Where else do horizon lines disappear? Become absent? Is it only accessed when looking down? Steyerl's entry points for vertical perspective are disembodied, aerial views. One cannot access these horizonless views in physical space with only their own body. Technological aid is necessary. But, where else could one look-out onto/into a horizonless view without a virtual, aerial conduit?

"The curve of your eyes goes around my heart…"

up

I grew up with skylights. In the main section of our house there are high ceilings with five skylights. These fixtures have varied behaviors affecting temperature, airflow, and luminosity, and provide a way of connecting to the outside. Our roof windows—as skylights are sometimes referred—open and close via venting flaps, operable with long, thin chains that drop down, reachable while standing. Although out of view, the shifting of the vent is audible and fresh air circulates. The chains are practical for operating the vents as well as entertaining to fidget with, braid, knot. Sometimes they are tied to avoid interference or slink and puddle when in the palm. From afar, they hang like vertical line drawings in space, like the ones my dad made me practice drawing without a ruler.

I am thinking about ceilings.

Looking up, one could see painted drywall, light fixtures, fans, exposed ventilation systems, beams and other indications of the architecture's structural system. With skylights, the ceiling takes on some celestial quality: iconic blue, overcast, the blurred view of incessant rain, pitch black, perhaps starry in the absence of light pollution. Whatever the scenario, the skylight provides a view out–connecting the interior and outdoor worlds.

This view out is without a horizon. A crop. A horizonless view that needs no technological conduit–accessible while standing and looking up and, as I often did (still do), while lying down.

Skylights, then, may provide something akin to Steyerl's vertical perspective. However, in reversing the aerial view–looking up instead of looking down—the view is embodied, not technologically outsourced. It is neither as "linear perspective established an imaginary stable observer and horizon" nor as "the perspective from above establish[es] an imaginary floating observer and an imaginary stable ground."[20] Instead, looking up into skylights, establishes an embodied vantage point accessed from stable ground.

But the fact remains that the view out is still horizonless. However, the facilitators of this erasure–the skylights themselves–do not create an imaginary, discorporate perspective in order to make the horizon disappear. Instead, due to one of their architectural functions as a light conduit and source located on ceilings, the view out is always, already horizonless. The view is not altered, not unnatural, just limited. The sky, no horizon, no ground in view. Instead, the view from the eye: whole, grounded. Perhaps with this groundedness and inhabited perspective, the negative disorientation incited by freefall and unstable horizons disappears. In fact, Steyerl suggests the potential of embracing freefall–that there is a freedom that occurs: "what seemed like a helpless tumble into an abyss actually turns out to be a new representational freedom. And perhaps this helps us get over the last assumption implicit in this thought experiment: the idea that we need a ground in the first place."[21]

When I lay beneath the skylights in my house I do not think of anything in particular, but I also do not think about nothing at all.

in

According to Walter Benjamin, habit causes the appropriation of architecture: "Buildings are appropriated in a two-fold manner: by use and by perception - or rather, by touch and sight."[22]

w

t

y o ur   e

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how does one do this?

What do thoughts feel like?

Occasionally, I wonder if I *think* thoughts or *feel* them, because they are often more akin to spatial sensations or physical presences than purely abstract, proper nouns. Thoughts occupy the space just above both my eyes, pressing against the center of my forehead. Sometimes thoughts exist in a space outside of me: a little bit above the top of my head; a few feet in front of my body; on the periphery of my face. Sometimes they hide and I cannot quite figure out where they are. I have thoughts that feel claustrophobic, disgusting, like that weird sensation where you cannot quite grip with your hand. Other times thoughts feel hilarious, euphoric, like winning a game you don't even know you are playing. Thoughts seem to have their own system of communication, with a lexicon that eludes direct translation. And what is the distinction between thinking and imagining (if there is one)?

What do feelings think like?

"Touch with your eyes" was my dad's request while walking through museums or galleries when I was little. This was his poetic attempt at curbing my desire to physically feel the work. This hallmark phrase, therefore, shaped how I partook in the act of seeing and looking, and continues to influence what and how I see.

h   What I've discovered is to touch with my eyes is to acknowledge the materiality of the work. A key part of this inspection of materiality is bringing my focus to the edges–the contours, the perimeters of the thing in question. When you try to touch with your eyes, your focus gets pushed to the edges, the margins, the boundaries of whatever you are looking at: a painting, a sculpture, a photograph, a mug, a leaf. To touch something with your eyes necessitates an imagination of picking it up, acknowledging its object-ness, the start and stop of its existence. Since this activity dictated much of my critical looking since a young age, my focus remains to the thresholds of things, where things meet. The edges of a room, the sides of paintings, the shadows below shelves. This type of consideration is slow, contemplative, endless. 'Touching with your eyes' is not a goal oriented endeavor, because the 'touching' is ultimately mysterious, an activity in imaginative lingering. There is no true finale. In fact, it decentralizes the focus of art objects. For example, when touching a painting with your eyes, the main aspects of its applied composition relinquish their primary importance, and become equivocal to the stretcher bars, the margins, the unseen verso, the moment where the material of 'art object' stops and the rest of the environment begins. All of these elements gain importance when 'touching with your eyes' because the practice of looking at is no longer only superficial or conceptual, it becomes imaginatively physical. This focus on edges, privileges marginalia and residue, the sediment that falls or floats. It necessitates a slowing down of time and careful looking–if you pick it up, you don't want to drop it. A quick look will not suffice. Therefore, the idea of slowing down is critical.

e

s

Lingering can be a critical state and an art of resistance.
This art finds kinship with

rest   pause   hesitation   contemplation   (*vita   contemplativa*)

This constellation of states is increasingly important in our contemporary moment as it poses a challenge to the acceleration of life, the (quick) legibility of images, and the rise of the labouring subject.

The necessity of the *vita contemplativa* and an investigation of the poetics and politics of temporality is discussed by Byung-Chul Han in *The Scent of Time*. Through a philosophical framework, Han posits that our experience and sense of time can be characterized as a temporal crisis. This temporal crisis is driven by demand for acceleration, efficiency, and information.

In our current "information age," Han positions information as entirely different from knowledge. Information is atemporal, retrieved outside of any historical context, and immediately consumed. Often, information is 'looked up,' clicked upon, and causes one to 'jump' without making meaningful connections to the amassed information. Knowledge, on the other hand, is always embedded in historic lineages and temporal frameworks, and cannot be quickly consumed but, instead, slowly taken in. One needs to think, contemplate, sit. In other words, one needs a *length* of time to critically digest and accrue knowledge.

So, the nature of imagery in our "information age" becomes dislodged from time and appears, instead, as a whirlwind of rapid (visual) inundation. The data point-esque nature of information evades history, lacks direction, and atrophies the measure, tension and perception of time—ultimately limiting the traction and ability to find meaning in one's own identity and self. The effects on our bodies? Our consciousness? Devastating. A culture emerges characterized by anxiety and haunted by the overwhelming need to perform, move forward, climb the social and economic ladder. But for what?

The impulse to be productive and efficient, to beget our bodies like machines, is tightly connected to the terrain of capitalism. This system favors production, consumption, alienation, efficiency, etc… qualities that are antithetical to contemplation, slowing down. Even duration as a length attributed to rest, durability as a quality attributed to objects (bodies, too) threaten the capitalist ideal. Therefore, the vita activa is favored by capitalism and its purview.

The shift from the vita contemplativa to the vita activa can, in part, be traced to certain religious convictions that ultimately gave rise to secular principles of labor. One such example is the Protestant connection between salvation and being a good worker:

> In Luther, work as a vocation is associated with God's calling upon men. In Calvinism, work is given meaning in the context of the economy of salvation. A Calvinist is uncertain whether or not he or she is chosen or condemned… Only success in work is interpreted as a sign of having been chosen. The care for salvation turns the individual into a worker.[23]

This is an entirely Weberian take—a la Weber's position that Protestantism, the Protestant ethic set up cultural carriers for the rise of capitalism. This was part of Weber's aim to show that certain affinities occur between religious ethics and work ethics, and ultimately affect economic trajectories.

According to Weber, Protestant asceticism sets up the conditions for foundational elements of capitalism, such as capital accumulation and investment saving:

> … if we combine the strictures against consumption with this unchaining of the striving for wealth, a certain external result, [that is one with an impact outside the realm of religion], now becomes visible: *the formation of capital* through *asceticism's compulsive saving*. The restrictions that opposed the consumption of wealth indeed had their productive use, for profit and gain because used as *investment* capital.[24]

And the rise of the bourgeoisie:

> In addition, religious asceticism gave to the employer the soothing assurance that the unequal distribution of the world's material goods resulted from the special design of God's providence. In making such distinction, as well as deciding who should be among the chosen few, God pursued mysterious aims unknown to terrestrial mortals … as the religious roots of an idea died out a utilitarian tone then surreptitiously shoved itself under the idea and carried it forth.[25]

The rise of the *vita activa* over the *vita contemplativa* is part and parcel of the effects of capitalism. So then, in the current late-stage capitalist arena wherein neoliberalism reigns, what is left for lingering, resting, contemplating? Does one need to be actively productive, efficient, utilitarian in order to find and make meaning? What resists the rapidity by which information is shared, ingested, scrolled through?

Han positions scent/smell as a marker of duration that resists speeding up, quick transferal, and compressed, digitized access. The burning of incense, for example, serves as a temporal marker through its gradual emittance of scent, subtly combining space and time as the smell fills and then slowly dissipates from a room. This is similar, in a way, to the burn-in (after) image that appears after looking at bright objects. Both an after image and scent: appear after an initial event (a bright object appearing in one's line of vision, a smell emitting from something); effect the senses; and then fade. They elude exact reproducibility and permanence. The presence and dispersal of scent, then, is unlike the discontinuous and discrete nature of data – in being spatial and temporal, scent cannot be segmented, sped-up, exchangeable. Scent cannot circulate as a commodity in the market (not that which emits scent, but scent as a thing itself). Scents linger, and take their time; ephemeral, slow.

"... If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."[26]

somewhere

What would an architecture of rest be? Not just a space in which to rest, but a space whose principles of construction, its joints, are about rest, slowness, duration, dreams. Spaces wherein shadows, shifting light, darkness, blurriness are not just prioritized, but integral to the structure. Where everything lingers.

There is an importance in lingering, contemplating, (day)dreaming in our fast contemporary moment. A need to slow down, rest. Not rest-up for something, or rest in order to do something else. Just rest as a thing in and of itself.

An art of resistance.

There is a loose part somewhere
between thought and heart.
In an open space
where the wind blows.
Where imagination wears things out
before they are made.

Somewhere by Rachael Hoffman

notes

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 4.

2. "Monstrum," in *Harper's Latin Dictionary: A New Latin Dictionary Founded on the Translation of Freund's Latin-German Lexicon*, ed., Part 2 (Woodstock: American Book Company, 1902), 1163.

3. Dustan Lowe, *Monsters and Monstrosity in Augustan Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 14.

4. Marco Frascari, *Monsters of Architecture: Anthropomorphism in Architectural Theory* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1991), 16.

5. Susan Buck-Morss, "Part II," in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989) 55.

6. Sigfried Giedion, *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferro-concrete*, trans. J. Duncan Berry (Los Angeles: The Getty Center for the History of Art, 1995), 87.

7. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "Dialectic of Enlightenment," in *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) 130-131.

8. Hito Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," in *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 43.

9. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 232.

10. Nat Hentoff, "Lenny Bruce and the Hipper Than Thou", *The Village Voice*, 22 April, 1959, Vol IV, No. 26.

11. Ronald K.L. Collins and David M. Skover, *The Trials of Lenny Bruce: The Fall and Rise of an American Icon* (Naperville: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2002), 42-43.

12. Ibid., 4.

13. Ibid., 293. [Excerpt quoted from 1964 Cafe Au Go Go Obscenity Trial]

14. Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, 200.

15. Rackstraw Downes, *Nature and Art are Physical: Writings on Art, 1967–2008* (New York: Edgewise Press, Inc., 2014), 116.

16. Hito Steyerl, "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," in *The Wretched of the Screen*, 18, 20.

17. David L. Martin, *Curious Visions of Modernity: Enchantment, Magic, and the Sacred* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 143.

18. Steyerl, "In Free Fall," in *The Wretched of the Screen*, 20.

19. Ibid., 24.

20. Paul Éluard, "La Courbe de Tes Yeux," in *Capitale de la douleur* (Paris, Nouvelle revue française: 1926, https://www.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/eluard_capitale_de_la_douleur.pdf

21. Steyerl, "In Free Fall," in *The Wretched of the Screen*, 24.

22. Ibid., 27.

23. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn from 1935 essay (New York: Schocken Books, 1969) 18. https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf

24. Byung-Chul Han, *The Scent of Time: A Philosophical Essay on the Art of Lingering*, trans. Daniel Steuer (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2019) 89.

25. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2011), 170.

26. Ibid., 171–174.

27. Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 6.

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