

## **ARTWORKS THAT LOOK AT YOU (AND THEMSELVES). REFLECTIONS ON THE GAZE IN LACAN, DIDI-HUBERMAN, AND PFALLER**

**OBRAS QUE TE MIRAN (Y TAMBIÉN SE MIRAN A SÍ MISMAS). REFLEXIONES EN TORNO A LA  
MIRADA EN LACAN, DIDI-HUBERMAN Y PFALLER**

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**Abstract:** The present article reflects on the possibilities of conceiving a non-human, objectual gaze in the context of the contemplation of art by means of a synthetic evaluation of three prominent theoretical approaches: Jacques Lacan's (often misapplied) formula of the gaze as an embodiment of the *objet a*, imprisoned by a work of art; Georges Didi-Huberman's understanding of the gaze emitted by what he dubs a 'critical image' as an exhortation to the observer to examine their own viewpoint in a dialectical play with that image; and Robert Pfaller's analysis of the interpassive mechanism in art, crystalized in the idea of a piece contemplating itself without any involvement of the beholder.

**Keywords:** Gaze; contemplation; contemporary art; Jacques Lacan, Georges Didi-Huberman, Robert Pfaller.

**Resumen:** Este artículo contempla diferentes posibilidades de concebir una mirada objetual, no humana, en el contexto de la apreciación del arte a través de una evaluación sintética de tres teorizaciones destacadas: la fórmula, a menudo malinterpretada, de la mirada como avatar del *objet a*, encarcelada en una obra de arte, según la concibe Jacques Lacan; el acercamiento de Georges Didi-Huberman que comprende la mirada emitida por lo que él denomina una imagen crítica como exhortación al contemplador para examinar su propia posición en un juego dialéctico con esa imagen; y el análisis del mecanismo interpasivo en el arte, realizado por Robert Pfaller, que se cristaliza en la idea de una obra de arte contemplándose a sí misma, sin implicación alguna de un observador.

**Palabras clave:** Mirada; contemplación; arte contemporáneo; Jacques Lacan; Georges Didi-Huberman; Robert Pfaller.

Else this stone would seem stunted and defiled  
and could not shimmer so, like a wild  
beast's fur beneath the shoulder's sheer surface,

and it would not burst from its bounds, so rife  
with light and star-like, for there is no place  
that does not see you. You must change your life.

### 1. Between subject and object: liberations of the gaze

The opening lines of this article, as many readers will undoubtedly have recognized, comprise the sestet of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Archaischer Torso Apollos" (205), the first sonnet of his collection *Der neuen Gedichte anderer Teil* [*New Poems: The Other Part*] from 1908. The poem itself has achieved fame, granted, but the sestet has taken on a 'life of its own' that some would argue has eclipsed the composition as a whole (Sloterdijk 43). How come? For both Slavoj Žižek and Peter Sloterdijk, two of the more recent (and prominent) commentators on Rilke's poem, the source of intrigue lies in the last one and a half verses—"for here there is no place that does not see you. You must change your life"—(Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* 703-4; Sloterdijk 43-51); a contention most of us, myself included, will readily accept. It is, after all, a curious idea that a work of art, a Greek sculpture in this case, may not only be looked at, but can actively return the gaze, and do so not from a specific point or angle (obviously enough, a torso lacks both

a head and a pair of eyes), but from 'anywhere'. Emerging from this unknown—unknowable—location, this gaze cast by the artwork is not just a casual look, but more of an intense fixation, powerful enough to incite the beholder to change their life—or at least that is the underlying link Sloterdijk discovers between these two enigmatic, otherwise unconnected enunciations (40-51).

Visual contemplation lies at the foundation of the appreciation of art. Even today, in a time where artistic practices have diversified to the point of encompassing many other forms of sensory perception (from haptic and olfactory art to immersive VR environments), the primary mode of access to a work of art continues to be that of vision, of a subject approaching an artistic object by means of looking at it. All kinds of different modes of looking and seeing have been examined in myriad artistic inquiries, ranging from analyses of the looks exchanged between two or more inhabitants of the same tableau (superbly condensed in the German term *Blickbeziehung*) or of the various effects these looks may have when they are directed at you, the beholder, to musings on how a change in the spectator's position (their literal point of view) may result in diverging perceptions of one and the same image (a question that becomes particularly important with artworks that, like Holbein's "The Ambassadors", make use of anamorphic techniques).

One thing, however, has largely remained unquestioned in all these inquiries, at least in the domain of 'classical' art history: that the act of looking is the prerogative of the subject. The gaze has been conceived as inextricably linked to it, as the direct result of the process of conscious contemplation. This observation may readily be reduced to a—somewhat simplistic, yet often tacitly agreed upon—formula: the subject looks and sees, thus emitting a gaze, while the object cannot look back (hence the surprising effect of Rilke's torso), it remains inert and receives the gaze. This generic definition may well seem convincing at first glance because of its simplicity and overall applicability. If one ventures into the more obscure corners of our cultural history, however, one discovers that, in actuality, things were never quite as simple as that. Take, for instance, the curious phenomenon of the 'evil eye', an ancient belief so widespread that it has been identified and examined in a multitude of geographical and cultural contexts (Elliott 1-17)<sup>1</sup>. Although the particulars may vary from tradition to tradition, the evil eye belief is centered around the idea that there are certain people, the *jettatori*, who are capable of 'looking at you the wrong way' in a very literal sense: they hold the power—at least in

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1 John H. Elliott's extensive four-volume monograph on the evil eye belief is perhaps the most comprehensive study of this phenomenon to date, offering insight into its origins and manifold manifestations throughout the ancient world.

the eyes of those who adhere to this belief—to curse someone merely by gazing at them malevolently. This curse may then become the source—the ‘explanation’, if you will—of any and all misfortunes of the afflicted individual (17).

Two details of this evil eye belief are of particular interest, as they challenge our spontaneous, conventional notion of the gaze. To begin with, cursing someone with an evil eye implies an autonomization of the gaze, a detachment from both its caster and the immediacy of the act of casting, that transforms it into an entity of its own right, a shadow following the accursed around, sabotaging their endeavors. The gaze is thus no longer a mere activity or process, but assumes the form of a spectral object, a sort of ghost that is just as real as the many rituals to prevent and to neutralize it. In other words, for those who believe in this specific type of hex, the gaze is the curse, but it is not a gaze in the common sense of the word.

The second source of the evil eye’s intrigue resides in the fact that it is always, *a priori*, the gaze of someone else. That is: some fear it, some think they can detect it, some may see it as an explanation for their trials and tribulations, and some believe there are ways to ward it off successfully (hence the abundance of apotropaic objects like the *nazar*, the *Hand of Fatima*, or the curious case of the *Gorgoneion* that cancels out malicious looks with its own terrifying stare). Virtually no one, however, reasonably assumes they are capable of *casting* the evil eye themselves<sup>2</sup>, which creates a sense of alterity that contributes to its objectual (or, at least, non-subjective) condition (Elliott 27-28). The evil eye is, thus, more of an object directed at the subject by another agent than the result of the subject itself looking at something.

Most of us will, of course, instinctively (and perhaps rightfully) banish this belief to the realm of superstitions and parapsychological hocus-pocus. But then there are others—fewer—who take the evil eye belief more seriously; in a non-superstitious, scientific way, that is. Colin A. Ross, for one, conducted a curious study investigating the electrophysiological reality behind the feeling of being stared at (i.e. the moment an evil eye is ‘being cast’ at someone). Ross concludes that the human eye does, in fact, emit detectable electromagnetic radiation, the properties of which differ from those of brainwaves in general. A sensitivity to this, as Ross terms it, “human ocular extramission” may be the physiological reason behind these moments one has the impression of being looked at (and then turn one’s head around to find that this is actually the case)

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2 Those few who do proclaim they are capable of casting an evil eye themselves are normally regarded as a little kooky even by the firmest believers in this type of hexes, and tend to be exhilarating rather than sinister figures, such as the Spanish ‘local celebrity’ Lola, the witch (*La bruja Lola*) who with her antics and shenanigans has created something of a stir in social media.

(48-54). What Ross' study cannot take into account, however, is what actually makes the evil eye belief so interesting: the autonomization, the desubjectivation, the liberation of the gaze it implies (it is, after all, not at the very moment of being cast that the dreaded curse begins to unleash its destructive powers, but during the subsequent hours and days).

But even though it seems that the evil eye eludes any attempt of 'hard' scientific verification, it may serve us as an ancestral hint, a clue that prompts us to reevaluate our preconceived notions of the act of seeing. Perhaps looking and seeing—in one word, contemplation—is not as straightforward a thing as one would think; perhaps the gaze in general is not just the direct consequence of looking at something, but can, in fact, be understood as an entity of its own, as a 'liberated' specter or as an object directed at the subject. This article conducts a combined evaluation of three theorizations of the gaze that challenge both our everyday impressions and our ideas about the 'classical' mode of appreciating visual art: Jacques Lacan's formula of the gaze as an avatar of his *objet petit a* for which an artwork serves as a 'trap', Georges Didi-Huberman's dialectic of the visual deployed in his seminal essay *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*; and, as a sort of quasi-logical end point of this series, Robert Pfaller's observations on the interpassive gaze, an artwork's inherent capacity of auto-observation.

In a way, these approaches can be understood as anticipating in the field of the visual a more general tendency in contemporary philosophy: the dissolution of traditional subject-object relations we discover in the works of Manuel DeLanda, Karen Barad, Donna Haraway, or Timothy Morton. These and other current thinkers are effectively succeeding in dethroning human epistemic agents (the 'classical' subjects) once thought to be at the very center of the world, paving the way for new forms of understanding and conceptualizing our own entanglement in the spaces and systems we inhabit.

## **2. Art is a trap (for the gaze): Lacan**

Lacan's interest in the gaze goes back virtually to the beginning of his decades-long career; his reflections do not, however, constitute a consistent, homogeneous and stable conceptualization, but must rather be divided into two disparate, even opposite moments of development—a circumstance that has often been overlooked, giving way to considerable confusion in some of the countless applications of the concept, especially in the area of Film Studies (McGowan 27-28). The gaze and its implications make their first appearance in Lacan's reflections on the mirror stage, introduced as a concept

at the Fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress at Marienbad in 1936<sup>3</sup> and then further elaborated in his contribution to the *Encyclopédie Française* as well as in the widely influential essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” from 1949.

Put succinctly, the mirror stage offers insight into the process of formation of the ego through the act of primary identification. The ego comes into being in a moment of “jubilant assumption” (Lacan, “Mirror Stage” 76), when a child, after an initial phase of ‘rivalry’ with the image reflected in the mirror, accepts this specular image as their own in order to mitigate the tension between the perceived integrity of the image and their own sense of a fragmented body (76-79). This “imaginary triumph” (“Reflections” 15) of identification is experienced with great joy, since it bestows a feeling of mastery on the child. At the same time, however, as the ego is revealed to be the result of a misunderstanding, of a misrecognition (*méconnaissance*), the mirror stage also becomes a *locus* for the subject’s alienation from itself (“Reflections” 15-17). The concept of the gaze developed in these early writings has little to do with Lacan’s mature, more complex theorization (Copjec 66): here, the gaze is still subjective, the direct consequence of the act of looking; it is inscribed into the realm of the Imaginary—while the role of the Real, critical in the development of the *objet a*, has not been traced out yet—; and it is a gaze of mastery, whereas later on, it comes to embody, as Todd McGowan fittingly observes, the very opposite: “the point at which mastery fails” (28).

The origins of Lacan’s mature theorization, by contrast, can be found in Sartre, whose musings on the nature of the gaze (which, confusingly enough, most English translations refer to as ‘the look’) attract his interest at as early a moment as his first seminar (Lacan, *Freud’s* 214-216). In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre introduces the gaze as a means for the subject to discover that the other, too, is a subject. “My fundamental connection with the Other-as-subject”, he argues, “must be able to be referred back to my permanent possibility of *being seen* by the Other” (256). This identification of the gaze as not necessarily my own, but as the gaze of the other (or, as Lacan will later put it, ‘the Other’) is a crucial first step in the process of conceiving its desubjectivation: the acknowledgment that the gaze, far from being just the ‘result’ of my own contemplation, may well be understood as a sort of object directed at me. What further underlines this first hint of a split between the gaze and the subject—and what seems to have captivated Lacan’s interest in particular—is Sartre’s contention that the gaze is not always necessarily linked to the convergence of the lines projected by a human being’s eyeballs;

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3 The original paper has unfortunately been lost.

“the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain” (258).

Throughout the early years of the seminar, Lacan seems to generally adhere to the Sartreian formula, but mentions of the gaze are scarce. In 1964, however, during the course of his eleventh seminar, Lacan begins to part ways with Sartre’s theorization and sets out to formulate his own account of the gaze, inscribed into the conceptual framework of the *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire (*Concepts* 65-119). The gaze is presented as one of the embodiments of this *objet a*—“The objet a in the field of the visible” (*Concepts* 105)<sup>4</sup> to be precise—joining the ranks, together with its aural counterpart of the voice, of Freud’s list of partial objects (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* 654). Bruce Fink illustrates this capacity of the gaze to stimulate desire with great clarity: “It is the Other’s desire as pure desirousness—manifested in the Other’s gaze at something or someone, but distinct from that something or someone—that elicits desire in the child. It is not so much the object looked at as the looking itself, the desire manifested in the very act of looking [...] that arouses the child’s desire” (91).

This renewed and complex conceptualization of the gaze differs substantially from its Sartreian foundation, which did not distinguish between the gaze and its casting. Lacan, on the contrary, establishes a clear separation, postulating the gaze as the object of the act of looking, the object of the scopic drive; a gesture that transfers it from the realm of the subject to that of the object. The intersubjective exchange of gazes Sartre described, this “fundamental connection with the Other” (Sartre 256) based on seeing and being seen, has no place in Lacan’s definitive theorization, either. Rather, he formulates a split between the *eye* (the subject’s means of looking) and the *gaze* (located on the side of the object) (*Concepts* 67-78), which share no common ground: “You never look at me from the place from which I see you”, he contends, and “conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see” (*Concepts* 103)<sup>5</sup>. The gaze is thus an embodiment of that element which, whenever the subject looks at an object, eludes its conscious grasp; the object itself looks at the subject—returns the gaze, so to speak—from an angle the subject is unable to discern, from a position whence the subject cannot see it (much like the enigmatic, untraceable gaze that Rilke’s Apollo emits).

As is the case with the other embodiments of the *objet a*, the effect the gaze has

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4 Emphasis removed.

5 Emphasis removed.

on the subject depends on the latter's position and degree of proximity towards it. When it is encountered directly, the gaze unleashes a terrifying effect, which Slavoj Žižek has described in great detail: "the gaze 'siderates;' side-tracks, transfixes, or immobilizes the subject's face, turning the subject into a Medusa-like petrified entity" (*Less Than Nothing* 701). This ability to stun the beholder is particularly important when it comes to the relationship between the gaze and the artwork, as the latter serves as a sort of pacifying containment for the former. Lacan, in his thirteenth seminar, thus refers to the artwork—paintings, to be exact—as a trap for the gaze: "A painting of any kind, even a self-portrait, is never a reflection of or an illusion made by a painter [*mirage du peintre*], but a trap for the gaze" (*L'Objet* 234)<sup>6</sup>. This trap set by a piece of art works in two ways: it not only ensnares its beholder (229), but at the same time acts as a 'disarmament' of the gaze, rendering its terrifying powers pleasurable in the first place (*Concepts* 101).

It is perhaps Jacques-Alain Miller who, in his essay "Les prisons de la jouissance", gives the most detailed account of this process of entrapment of the gaze through painting and art, adding clarity to the reflections we find in Lacan's thirteenth seminar. Placing emphasis on the exteriorized, almost material condition of the gaze contained in a piece of art, Miller begins by summarizing Lacan's position, substituting *trap* with the semantically stronger term *prison*: "The beholder may see the gaze in the painting, but it is an imprisoned gaze, the gaze materialized in the form of brushstrokes. Thus, the painting—as Lacan describes it in my view—serves as a prison for the gaze" (123)<sup>7</sup>. This choice to replace *trap* in the Lacanian original with *prison* is noteworthy, as it underscores once again the deeply unsettling properties of the gaze (Lacan, *Concepts* 84-85; Žižek, *Less Than Nothing* 701), which have to be diminished, even neutralized—incarcerated rather than trapped, in Miller's view—by the artwork. Synthesizing Lacan's key ideas, Miller also finds the opportunity to censure more traditional psychoanalytical approaches focused on the role of the anal object in artistic creation, which would make it seem "as though the painter disposed of the gaze in the painting, where these, shall we

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6 My translation; the French original reads: "Le tableau, quel qu'il soit, et même autoportrait [*sic*] n'est pas mirage du peintre mais piège à regards." Lacan's use of the word *mirage* is yet another example of his predilection for perplexingly polysemic terms, as it not only refers to an optical illusion (much like its English counterpart), but also alludes to the activity of holding an object in front of a light source in order to examine its content, a process described by the verb *mirer* (hence the somewhat bulky translation). On another note, Lacan's thirteenth seminar has unfortunately not been edited yet, neither in French nor in English, but a meticulously elaborated transcript of the 1965-66 sessions, along with many other interesting documents, can be obtained from the *Staferla* website ([staferla.free.fr](http://staferla.free.fr)).

7 My translation; the French original reads: "Le spectateur peut voir le regard dans le tableau mais un regard incarcéré, le regard matérialisé sous forme de coups de pinceau. Ainsi le tableau, tel que le commente Lacan selon moi, est comme une prison pour le regard".



say, excremental gazes then accumulate” (123)<sup>8</sup>. But this slightly scabrous view could not be further from the truth, says Miller, since a painting, far from being the site of excremental accumulation, “gives pleasure to its beholder, who finds something beautiful in reality, and that soothes their castration anxiety because nothing is missing” (123)<sup>9</sup>.

One artistic genre, however, is excluded from this logic of ‘taming the gaze’: expressionism (Lacan, *Concepts* 101). Here, according to Lacan, the usual *modus operandi* is upended, as expressionists give in to “what is demanded by the gaze” (101): instead of trying to assuage its startling effect, expressionism “seeks to activate the gaze contained in the image”, so that its beholder “feels looked at [*regardé*] and captivated by the spectacle” (Miller 123)<sup>10</sup>. An expressionist painting is thus the prime example of a work of art looking at us, unbridling the gaze’s Medusean power to transfix. But more traditional forms of artistic expression—those that seek to soothe us, as their “pacifying, Apollonian” (Lacan, *Concepts* 101) qualities cater to the eye instead—too contain a gaze, lurking behind the prison bars of the canvas.

### 3. The critical image: Didi-Huberman’s dialectics of the visual

The second theorization of an autonomized gaze this article sets out to discuss, the second development of a way of seeing that does not originate in the subject, but that concerns, affects the subject instead, can be found in the dialectical movements of Georges Didi-Huberman’s essay *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*<sup>11</sup>. In essence, this text is a perspicacious reevaluation of the powers (and limitations)—and our understanding of them—of some of the most prominent works of art the North American minimalist movement has brought forth. If Didi-Huberman’s observations were not quite as keen and insightful as they are, one might have been tempted to dismiss the evident subject of the book—minimalist art—as somewhat of a pretext, for *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* combines them with an inquiry into the phenomenological processes of the appreciation of art and of aesthetic experience in general.

In a way, the appraisal of Didi-Huberman’s essay forms the heart of this article:

8 My translation; the French original reads: “[...] c’est comme si le peintre se défaisait du regard dans le tableau où s’accumulent ainsi, dirons-nous, ces regards excrémentiels”.

9 My translation; the French original reads: “donne du plaisir au spectateur qui trouve dans la réalité quelque chose de beau et cela apaise en lui l’angoisse de castration parce que rien ne manque”.

10 My translation, syntax modified; the French original reads: “Lacan fait une exception pour la peinture expressionniste mais en tant que la peinture expressionniste essaie d’activer le regard qu’il y a dans le tableau et en tant que le spectateur se sent regardé et capturé par le spectacle”.

11 Curiously enough, Didi-Huberman’s revisitación of some of the *pièces de résistance* of US American minimalist art has not been translated into English yet. All quotations have been extracted and translated from the French original (Paris, Minuit, 2019 [1992]).

not only because of its structural centrality, but because it constitutes a sort of bridge, a nexus between the Lacanian theorization of the gaze cast by an artwork and Robert Pfaller's reflections on the potential of self-observation inherent in (contemporary) art. Just like a heart, it is small—it is, after all, not an attempt to trace and synthesize a concept that has left its mark on an entire body of thought, but an estimation of a single theoretical position developed in a monograph—yet crucial, because, as we will see in the course of this exposition, Didi-Huberman, in close proximity to Benjamin's reflections on dialectical images and the auratic principle, elaborates a particular synthetic model of combining both ideas. One has to take into account, naturally, the different theoretical backgrounds of all three approaches; the concatenation here proposed is not one of a historical, logical or otherwise 'teleological' unfurling, nor is it a bid to uncover hidden philosophical convergences between the three authors. Rather, it aims to demonstrate a sort of 'spiritual kinship' between the three, interested, as they are, in challenging the way we perceive the act of looking.

The inevitable split inherent in the act of seeing constitutes the point of departure for Didi-Huberman's essay, for in what we see, there is always the trace of an absence; the visible and the invisible are not separate phenomena, but entwined in a dialectic of the visual (9-25)<sup>12</sup>. Didi-Huberman illustrates this split by means of two prime examples that have a structuring effect on the entirety of his discourse: the motive of the 'empty tomb'—with its evident religious implications, but also as a recurrent *topos* in art history—as well as, naturally, minimalist sculpture. On most occasions, our access to the dialectical understanding of the visual is precluded; instead, we resort to the antinomic opposition of either choosing "an exercise in tautology" (19) to make sense of what we see, or partaking in the "exercise in belief [*croyance*]" (21)<sup>13</sup> (hence the split). Both of these strategies are inherently deficient. Those who, casting their eyes upon an empty tomb, prefer to cling to their beliefs thus find themselves entrapped in a transcendental present, in an "obsessive victory [...] of language over the gaze", won by "the claim, congealed in a dogma, that all this is not a mere volume, nor simply a process of hollowing out [*évidement*], but 'something else' that will instill new life into it" (21)<sup>14</sup>. Those who, on the contrary, choose tautology over belief, refuse to see anything other than what is there in its

12 The dialectical nature of visual perception also features prominently in another highly noteworthy essay by the French author, *Devant l'image* from 1990; see especially chapters three (105-168) and four (169-269).

13 Emphases removed; the French original reads: "*un exercice de la tautologie*" and "*un exercice de la croyance*".

14 Syntax modified; the French original reads: "C'est une victoire obsessionnelle [...] du langage sur le regard ; c'est l'affirmation, figée en dogme, qu'il n'y a là ni un volume seulement, ni un pur processus d'évidement, mais 'quelque chose d'Autre' qui fait revivre tout cela".

pure materiality, a ‘what you see is what you see’—approach championed by some of minimalism’s most prominent artists.

But as unbridgeable as it may seem, there is the promise of surmounting this eternal split, of closing the gap between tautology and belief, arising out of those rare occasions when an image entraps us in its gaze (as is the case with Tony Smith’s sculpture *Die*, Didi-Huberman’s predilect example throughout the essay). As he muses about artworks ensnaring us in the gaze, one may at first feel inclined to admit a certain proximity to Lacan’s thesis of the unsettling gaze contained in a piece; one may even feel tempted to regard his musings on the artistic object challenging the subject by means of its gaze as a sort of phenomenological counterpart to the reflections of the psychoanalyst. After all, the gaze described by Didi-Huberman has an effect that is similar, if less terrifying, to its Lacanian *pendant*: it surprises us, it discomfits us, it makes us wary of our perceived certainties. It is precisely this disquieting dimension that is at work in *Die*, argues Didi-Huberman, since “in front of it, our seeing [*notre voir*] becomes unsettled” (67)<sup>15</sup>.

By virtue of this ability to ‘look at us’, to upset our perception, images like Tony Smith’s sculpture reveal themselves as dialectical images, demanding that we actively question our access to them:

Although minimal, it [Smith’s sculpture] is a dialectical image: the carrier of a latency, of an energy. In this capacity, it prompts us to scrutinize our own positioning towards it dialectically [*que nous dialectisons...*], to create a dialectical connection between that which we see and that which, all of a sudden [*d’un coup*], looks at us. This means that the image compels us to think what we take [*saisissons*] from it in view of that which ‘grips’ [*saisit*] us in it—in view of that which, in actuality, makes us lose our grip [*nous laisse dessaisis*] (67)<sup>16</sup>.

This key passage illustrates the inner workings of the ‘objectual gaze’ as Didi-Huberman conceives it; its distance from the Lacanian approach emerges more clearly. It is not the startling gaze of the Other, trapped on a canvas or in a piece of marble, but more of an inquisitive look, an incitation to return our thought to the very preconditions of perception; an idea Didi-Huberman elaborates on in a conclusion that may evoke faint Lacanian echoes once more: “We may say that Tony Smith’s black cube, just like Robert Morris’ plumes of steam, ‘look’ [*regardent*] at us, and they do so from a place capable of

15 Emphasis removed; the French original: “Devant lui, notre *VOIR* est inquiété”.

16 Emphases removed; the French original reads: “Elle a beau être minimale, elle est une *image dialectique* : porteuse d’une latence et d’une énergétique. À ce titre, elle exige de nous que nous dialectisons notre propre posture devant elle, que nous dialectisons ce que nous y voyons avec ce qui peut, d’un coup [...], nous y regarder. C’est-à-dire qu’elle exige que nous pensions ce que nous saisissons d’elle en face de ce qui nous y ‘saisit’ — en face de ce qui nous y laisse, en réalité, *dessaisis*”.

taking our 'seeing' [*voir*] back to the foundational conditions of its own phenomenology" (125)<sup>17</sup>. Whereas Lacan had, perhaps somewhat cryptically, spoken about the object gazing at the subject from a place it cannot see (its gaze is what eludes the conscious eye); Didi-Huberman, too, introduces the category of place, but indicates that the point of emergence of this objectual gaze, far from being 'hidden' or indiscernible, endows it with a kind of piercing 'hyper-visibility' capable of touching on the very foundations of our aesthetic experience. Images like Smith's or Morris' thus bring about a very rare "visual experience that manages to overcome the dilemma of belief and tautology" (125)<sup>18</sup>.

But their ability to engage us in a dialectical conversation, to bridge this gap the beholder experiences so frequently, is just one half of the 'truth' behind these images. As Didi-Huberman elaborates through a conscious examination of Benjamin's reflections on dialectical images and the auratic principle, a truly authentic image, like Smith's, must also display a critical potential towards its own existence:

An authentic image must prove itself a critical image: an image in crisis, an image criticizing the image—thus capable of producing a theoretical effect, a theoretical efficacy—and, therefore, as an image that criticizes our ways of seeing it, precisely the moment when it, looking at us, compels us to really look at it, and to write this very gaze, not in order to 'transcribe' it, but to constitute it (128)<sup>19</sup>.

The gaze emitted by a dialectical image must thus be understood as a redoubled gaze. It looks at us, but it also looks at itself, it questions us as it questions itself. In this double capacity of interrogation resides the true power of this most critical of images: its ability to not only unsettle the beholder by casting its own inquisitive gaze upon them, challenging their modes of contemplation, but to open up a critical perspective on the conditions of its own being, even as this 'explosive' opening—as Didi-Huberman, referencing Benjamin once again, points out—remains inscrutable if it is not confronted with its own destiny in the form of another historical modality that establishes difference (139). The dialectical image constitutes itself in this way as a figure of sublation, as the medium of an *Aufhebung*, yet one that does not strive to reconcile or to subdue the

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17 The French original reads: "nous pouvons dire que le cube noir de Tony Smith, comme l'expansion vaporeuse de Robert Morris, nous 'regardent' depuis un lieu susceptible de porter notre 'voir' à un retour sur les conditions fondatrices de sa propre phénoménologie".

18 The French original reads: "une [...] expérience visuelle [...] [qui] parvient à dépasser le dilemme de la croyance et de la tautologie".

19 The French original reads: "une image authentique devrait se donner comme image critique : une image en crise, une image critiquant l'image — capable, donc, d'un effet, d'une efficacité théoriques —, et par là même une image critiquant nos façons de la voir au moment où, nous regardant, elle nous oblige à la regarder vraiment. Et à écrire ce regard même, non pour le 'transcrire', mais bien pour le constituer".

different forces in its interior, but acknowledges their ludic interplay as a necessary formant of the dialectical movement instead.

#### **4. No observer needed: Pfaller and the interpassivity of art**

Some twenty-five years ago, it seemed we were at the brink of a new epoch: the age of interactivity, inextricably linked to the consolidation of the digital sphere and its burgeoning possibilities, was finally upon us. No longer would we be confined to merely consuming information in a passive, linear, and unidirectional way, but become 'content' producers ourselves, able to interact with whatever was offered to us online, be it commenting a piece of news or replying to a video with our own audiovisual creation. The more 'active' the consumer of information, the better. That was (and probably still is) the watchword for many suppliers of digital services, not least because user-created content is an effective means of cost-reduction—think, for instance, of video platforms like YouTube that, in fact, do not offer any content themselves, relying solely on their users (the 'consumers' of old) for the production of material.

This development, fully put into practice with the advent of Social Media, had in a way been anticipated by certain theoretical positions in the Humanities. While it is of course a truism that the reception of any 'message' or 'content' can never be altogether passive, as it always requires a, however minimal, amount of knowledge and activity on the part of the receiver (to make sense of a text, one must read it thoroughly; to be able to enjoy a piece of classical music, one must listen attentively, etc.), a number of theorists have underlined the importance of an active engagement of this 'receiver' in the process of appreciating literature and art. In the literary field, it is above all the model espoused by reader-response criticism—very much embraced in Germany under the term of *Rezeptionsästhetik*, a field cultivated predominantly by the so-called *Konstanzer Schule* around such figures as Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss—that places strong emphasis on the role of the reader as an active part in the aesthetic experience of a text. In the view of the adherents of this particular school of criticism, it is the reader who plays a significant, active role in the aesthetic unfolding and consolidation of a work, actualizing it with each reading. While the reader-response model pivots around the 'interactive' potential of virtually any literary work, other thinkers have limited the concept of an artwork's 'incompleteness', its necessity of complementation by the 'receiver', to a more specific set of works, forms of expression and artists. One of the most influential proposals for this narrower approach to 'interactive' art is Umberto Eco's essay *Opera aperta* from 1962, in which he develops a differentia-

tion between traditional and modern art on the basis of the degree of ‘unfinishedness’ of a piece. His prime examples for the ‘works in motion’ (*opere in movimento*) that in different ways rely on outside agents—readers, listeners, observers, musicians—as a crucial part in the aesthetic process, are the compositions of Stockhausen, Berio, Pousseur, and Boulez, Gabo’s constructivist sculpture, Calder’s monumental mobiles, or Mallarmé’s *Livre* (1-22, 84-104).

Against this background of an ever-growing activity on the side of the manifold ‘receivers’ involved in aesthetic and communicational processes arise the reflections of Austrian philosopher Robert Pfaller, who soon grew weary of what he perceived as an exaggerated, and questionable, fixation on all things interactive (*Ästhetik* 28-31). Rather than join in the celebration of these new productive possibilities, Pfaller opted to examine the uncanny obverse of interactivity instead: a phenomenon he named, fittingly, *interpassivity* (*Interpassivity* 18-19). Succinctly put, interpassivity constitutes the exact opposite of interactivity. While the latter emphasizes, as we have just seen, the need of an active involvement of a work’s public in order to function ‘correctly’, the former dispenses with the figure of the receiver altogether. Interpassivity is at work, in other words, whenever the subject delegates a theoretically desirable, enjoyable or socially necessary activity, such as appreciating art, to another agent, thus disentangling itself from the commitment to perform a specific task or even depriving itself of pleasure, in a gesture that itself produces a sort of ersatz enjoyment (the Lacanian term for which, of course, would be *jouissance*) (*Illusionen* 32.)

The delegation of *work* to another (more efficient, less fatigable) agent is, of course, firmly inscribed into our models of economic production. That’s what the machine was invented for, after all. Interpassive delegations, however, are not quite so straightforward, as they apply to activities that insert themselves not in the field of work and effort, but somewhere on the spectrum of what an ancient Roman would have called *otium*, be it scholarship and the cultivation of the mind, prayer and other religious practices, or more decidedly leisurely endeavors such as visiting an art gallery or watching a movie (*Interpassivity* 19). Back in the 1990s, Slavoj Žižek—a colleague of Pfaller’s who himself has reflected on the interpassive mechanism as well—contributed to the incipient study of the matter, as he drew attention to a phenomenon that is as widespread as it is curious: the use of ‘canned laughter’ in US sitcoms (*How To Read Lacan* 23-32)<sup>20</sup>. Observed from an ingenuous angle, this feature seems rather odd, superfluous even; after all, shouldn’t it be the viewers who decide when to laugh, without a track of fake giggles tell-

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20 Although the phenomenon has been referenced by Žižek in a variety of texts, its first treatment in a monograph is to be found in the 2006 publication.

ing them to? But this is not entirely how canned laughter works. As Žižek points out, just hearing people laugh on the show may have an effect that is strikingly similar to actually laughing. Even if I don't laugh, he remarks, "I nonetheless feel relieved after the show, as if the soundtrack has done the laughing for me" (23). This idea of vicarious laughter may seem to be grounded on an apparent enigma: Isn't laughing an enjoyable activity, something one would like to actually do instead of just delegating it? Yes, says Žižek, it is in principle, but even experiencing pleasure may be (and is increasingly) understood as a 'duty', as the result of the superego's injunction to 'enjoy!'. The interpassive laughter, which effectively enjoys the show for us, helps us to elude the incessant bombardment by the superego (79-90).

Interpassive transferences thus constitute a means of escaping, or at least of temporarily mitigating, the superego's demand to fulfill our duties. This evasion strategy is most evident in activities that not only provide satisfaction, but, when carried out properly, require a certain effort as well, such as religious rituals—think of Tibetan prayer wheels (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 23) or of the tradition of lighting votive candles found in many Christian denominations—or scholarship, where interpassivity shines through in phenomena like *tsundoku*, the Japanese term for piling up books in one's home without ever actually reading them, but also, as Pfaller points out, in the use of the photocopier as an interpassive agent that 'reads' texts in one's stead (*Illusionen* 41). These examples shed light on one crucial aspect of interpassivity: the act of delegation must be understood as constitutively twofold, comprising the delegation of an *activity* to another agent or medium, but also a delegation of the *belief* in the effectiveness of this transaction. In other words: very few people (if any) assume that lighting a candle and praying (or Xeroxing and reading) are perfectly equivalent; if one were to ask them, they would indubitably reject the idea of an inanimate object capable of fulfilling a human task. The reason why interpassive strategies are nonetheless employed with such frequency are rooted, according to Pfaller, in this second gesture of delegation, where "this imagination [*Einbildung*] is transferred to the virtual public of the scene" (*Illusionen* 41)<sup>21</sup>. This functional basis of the interpassive mechanism, centered around the redoubled delegation, remains the same even when it comes to the most intriguing of transactions, where the subject tries to escape not work or other 'objective' duties, but pleasure itself. This is the case, along with many other manifestations, with the appreciation of art, where the impulse to circumvent the Superego's unyielding injunction to enjoy—and obtain an ounce of *jouissance* in exchange—has widespread and profound implications.

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21 My translation; the German original reads: "diese Einbildung wird vielmehr dem virtuellen Publikum dieser Szene übertragen".

As a matter of fact, moments of delegation and exteriorization have long been part of artistic reality (Pfaller, *Interpassivity* 21). Some would go as far as to assert that a minimal degree of interpassivity is at work in any artistic practice centered around the creation of objects, which, in this view, retain a capacity of self-contemplation from the moment they come into being. In this sense, then, art has always looked at itself. Or at least that is an opinion shared by many advocates of ‘non object-centered’ approaches. For them, contemplating a work of art should involve an active search, require the ability of recognizing artistic manifestations hidden in the most quotidian contexts, incite the spectator to cultivate a keen eye and a sharp mind. These tasks—deemed vital to aesthetic experience—lose their importance in the context of ‘traditional’, object-centered art; here, they are fulfilled preemptively by the object itself (*Interpassivity* 18).

This broad understanding of interpassivity may offer some initial insight into the inner workings of the mechanism in art. Yet there are other, more specific examples that illustrate it with greater clarity: artworks that appear to have been created not so much for human observers, but for an autonomized, objectual gaze, emitted by and directed at the work itself. For Pfaller, this independent, non-human gaze reveals itself most saliently in pieces that include written text as an artistic strategy:

The presence of writing within visual arts, for example (in artists such as Jenny Holzer, Joseph Kosuth, Roni Horn), is to be seen as reflecting a desire for a kind of writing that reads itself. In its material, spatial presence, and especially in light installations that present a text, writing appears different from its ‘absent’ existence in books. It is staged in a way that in itself strongly resembles reading. Therefore this writing always sends out the underlying message ‘You need not read this.’ (*Interpassivity* 18)

With their tendency to emulate the dynamics of reading instead of reproducing static, compact dispositions of written texts, these works can be seen as the ‘perfect version’ of an interpassive agent we have already come across: the photocopier that ‘reads’ for the subject merely by replicating visual context. Moments of fully delegated contemplation should not be seen, however, as limited to this specific type of artworks that exclude the beholder, *a priori* and within the usual circumstances of a museum or a gallery; they can also be detected in pieces and arrangements that effectively bar the observer from full contemplation through the imposition of limitations. This is the case, for example, with video exhibitions, where the total duration of all displayed works would run up to several days, were they to be watched one by one. Conversely, spatial limitations may also prove significant in certain contexts. Take Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, one of the finest, most-discussed examples of land art, that is nonetheless often ‘invisible’ to the average observer, not only because of its relatively



remote location, away from the centers of artistic creation, but because it spends prolonged periods of time submerged in the waters of the Great Salt Lake. Both unending video exhibitions and remote pieces of land art, then, seem to exist for their own gaze rather than that of an observer.

In the context of visual art, the interpassive mode of contemplation can in a way be considered a possible end point of the logic of 'liberation' of the gaze: here, we are no longer dealing with the terrifying, Medusean gaze Lacan describes, 'incarcerated' by a work of art; this is not an inquisitive look that entwines us in a dialectic spiral, not a critical self-evaluation performed by an image, but a completely delegated, estranged, objectual gaze that the interpassive artwork casts at itself tirelessly (and perhaps pointlessly) in solipsistic serenity.

In light of this deferred and stupefied modality of (no longer) contemplating art, one may be tempted to view interpassivity as a 'step too far' in the domain of human laziness and escapism, to give in to the admonishments of non-object-centric artists and consider it, at least in the sphere of art, something to battle against. But there is another side to it. After all, if the artwork looks at itself, you don't have to. Interpassivity can rob you of the joy of contemplating art, some art may even suggest it was made specifically for an objectual gaze, for an interpassive mode of observation, but at the same time, knowing that there is someone (or, rather, something) observing the art in your stead can also result in a liberating, beneficial experience. Museums, galleries and similar institutions, in Pfaller's view, thus provide a valuable service to society not only by means of their actual activity and engagement with the public, but also by simply existing, by functioning as interpassive depositories:

[T]he museum, the gallery, just like the theatre, the opera house and so on, [...] work for society as interpassive media: they produce observation in the place of absent observers. You do not have to attend the event in order to hear the noise from the Bruce Nauman video from the other room. Rather, it is sufficient to know that there is a gallery in the city where it is being shown. There is a fundamental interpassivity to the art institution: if something takes place there, it is as if somebody has seen it. (*Interpassivity* 68)

This shift in focus, away from the preeminence of human agents in these institutions and towards a (non-)appreciation of objects in their sheer 'objectuality', poses a challenge to one of the most widespread preconceived notions on the function and 'utility' of the museum: the idea that its success may be adequately measured by the number of visitors. While this number continues to be relevant for a variety of reasons (ticket sales contribute to the museum's financial assets; more often than not the funding an institution receives depends at least to some degree on its capacity

to attract visitors, while the ‘utility’ of those that fail to draw a crowd is called into question), Pfaller stresses the need to acknowledge the interpassive function of the museum, its commitment not only to its visitors, but also to the artworks themselves, which find in it a safe haven, and the circumstance that its mere existence—the fact that one knows that the artworks ‘are taken good care of’—may already be a source of gratification (*Ästhetik* 23-25). Inveighing against recent practices that seek to ever increase visitor numbers by engaging the general public in a ‘participative’ manner<sup>22</sup>, Pfaller scoffs:

As if the main function of places like museums were to attract visitors! Rather, their greatest utility consists in knowing that artworks are safe and sound within their walls, without having to frequent them all the time. The idea that such places become useless the moment the incessant stream of human faces popping up in front of artifacts subsides, is a strange, culturally insensitive [*kulturvergessene*] idea (*Ästhetik* 24)<sup>23</sup>.

How true.

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<sup>22</sup> See also *Ästhetik* 308-322.

<sup>23</sup> My translation; the German original reads: “Orte wie Museen erfüllen ihre Hauptfunktion doch nicht darin, dass sie besucht werden! Ihr größter Nutzen besteht vielmehr darin, dass man weiß, dass die Kunst in ihnen gut aufgehoben ist und man nicht ständig hinzugehen braucht, um sie anzusehen. Die Idee, solche Orte seien nutzlos, wenn nicht pausenlos ein menschliches Gesicht nach dem anderen vor einem Artefakt auftaucht, ist eine seltsame, kulturvergessene Idee”.

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