Can you see what I mean? An exploration of the limits of vision in anti-ocularcentric contemporary art

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Abstract

A great deal of research in visual culture prioritises sight as the human faculty greatly in need of analysis in order to expose the ways in which seeing is constructed in and through culture. This article teases apart the reasons why seeing has enjoyed such prominence in Western science, philosophy, art history and visual culture studies. The invention of linear perspective in painting, the scientific equation of seeing and knowing, and the increasing development of optical instrumentation to enhance visual ability, have served to bolster not only an over-reliance on sight in understanding the relationship between the spectator and the world, but have also positioned the spectator as ideally distanced from what is seen. By contrast, phenomenologically driven interpretations of subjectivity subvert Cartesian notions of detached subjectivity. Two artworks that call for a re-conceptualisation of viewing as connection between perceiver and perceived are investigated by means of a Merleau-Pontian strategy. These works are analysed as examples of anti-ocularcentric ideas that both subvert the hegemony of sight and negate the detached position of a spectator. By emphasising the interconnectedness of spectator and art, the whole body as source of understanding is reinstated.

Introduction

The leading scholar in visual culture studies, William Mitchell (2003:232), suggests that research in visual culture ought to 'show seeing' in a course of action that defamiliarises seeing in order to 'make seeing show itself, to put it on display'.[1] Mitchell (2003:231) wants to 'show seeing' because he believes that vision itself – the actual process of seeing – is invisible. In no sense can one argue that not only is it impossible to see how the eye works, because 'the eyeball ... is never transparent' (Mitchell 2003:231), but the ways in which people living in visual cultures make sense of what they see is generally taken for granted, thereby rendering these 'ways of seeing' invisible. By problematising that which is naturalised in everyday human experience – by making opaque that which is taken as transparent and natural – Mitchell (2003:247) proposes that the study of visual culture ought to grapple with the complexities of what is taken for granted in 'everyday vision', or what he refers to as 'vernacular visuality'.

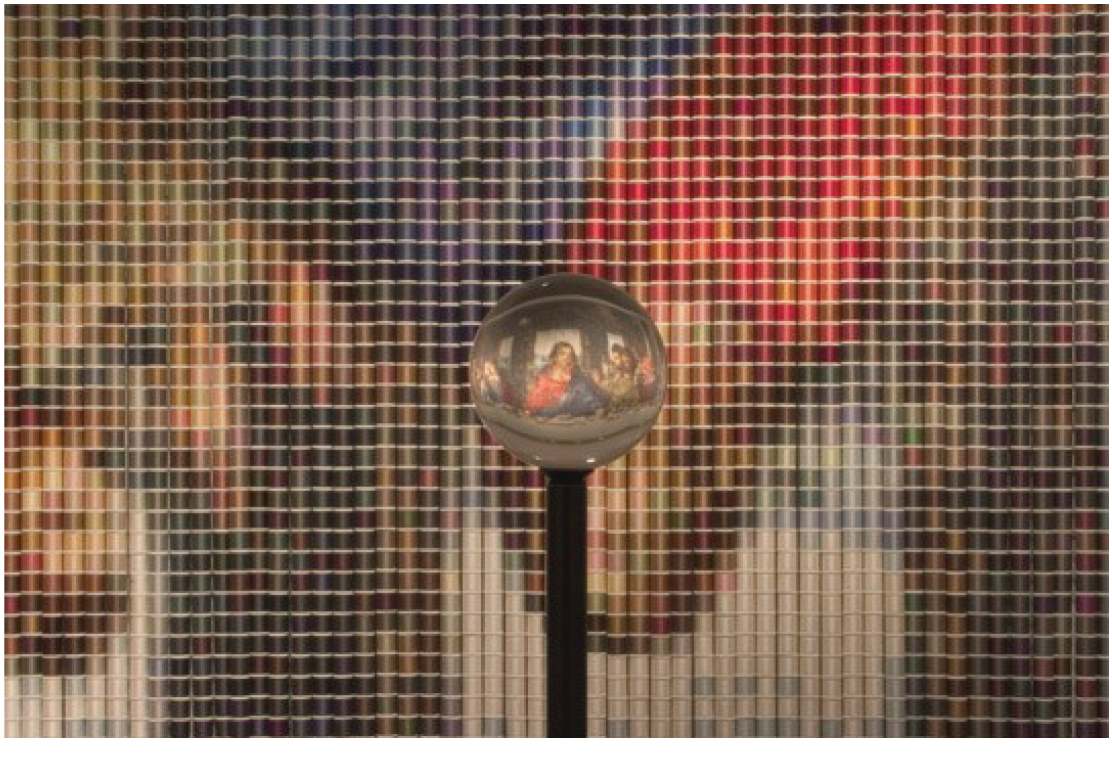
It is now apparent that one of the main tenets of visual culture studies (in its various manifestations) thus far is that (everyday) seeing is an impure phenomenon (Bal 2003:9). This is mainly because vision is 'seen' to have a socio-cultural dimension, requiring analysis of the multiple 'ways of seeing' that are constructed in, and by, culture. As Irit Rogoff (2002:24) succinctly put it, discourses of the visual problematise 'the centrality of vision and the visual world in producing meanings, establishing and maintaining aesthetic values, gender stereotypes and power relations within culture'. This statement could be taken further to argue that, not only are images widely regarded as possessing (hidden) ideological agendas, but the ways in which they are seen and understood by the viewer are culturally mediated. This means that visual culture studies investigate the social strategies of pictorial discourse, or as Mitchell (2003:238) puts it, the analytical breadth of visual culture studies extends to both 'the visual construction of the social field' and 'the social construction of visual field'.

Thus, it can be concluded that the foremost aim of visual culture studies is the analysis of vision, since vision is ideologically and socially constructed and highly impure (not natural). But, is it still useful that visual culture studies (and by implication, art history) primarily investigate the politics of *seeing* only? And, if it is, do these academic endeavours not replicate ocularcentric approaches to interpreting art/visual culture by regarding images as texts that can be read through the analytical strategies of semiotics, Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis and postcolonialism, for example? On the other hand, should art history and *visual* culture studies be interested in anything other than how art and visual culture are *seen* through the lens of social conventions? Surely their point of interest is the visual sphere?

In order that these questions be addressed efficiently, it is unavoidable to reflect briefly on the ways in which vision (as detachment) became the primary point of concern in

scholarship dealing with images. But, further than this, the fundamental notions on which art historiography is based, relating largely to notions of the ideal spectator – or connoisseur – embraced in the Western Enlightenment project, must be analysed with a view to exposing how such seeing was constructed. Is the notion of the ideal spectator as detached and disinterested in the work of art in order to effect aesthetic judgement not still reflected in contemporary vision-centred analyses? An attempt is made here to consider what is 'overlooked' when the visual and how it is seen (ideologically speaking) is assumed to be central to the art history/visual culture project. Thus, the author 'fleshes out' the limitations of the premise that the ways in which people *see* art/visual culture – at the expense of the other corporeal senses – can remain the thrust of these academic fields.

The first part of the article entails an exploration of how seeing has been 'seen' historically, at the same time investigating why the sense of sight has occupied and continues to occupy a primary position in epistemological encounters with visual culture. It is therefore unavoidable to explore some of the reasons why sight may have been privileged above the other senses, and also to ask why seeing in particular apparently ought to be shown. The author proposes that such a limiting account of spectatorship fails to acknowledge the interrelation between all the bodily senses in human experience and thereby upholds the notion of a viewer as separate from what is seen. An important aim of this discussion is to show that Cartesian dualism – thus, the separation of mind (reason) and body, subject and object, and the positioning of the audience as passive observer – is not overcome in such practices. In order to demonstrate the inefficiency of vision, two contemporary artworks that challenge modern Western ocularcentrism are analysed. By means of a Merleau-Pontian reading of their works it will be demonstrated how Casilda Sanchez and Berco Wilsenach explore the multi-sensory nature of human interaction with the world (in particular through the sense of touch). It is the contention, here, that a re-conception of spectatorship as multi-sensorial interaction with visual culture provides a far more nuanced account of peoples' experiences in visual culture than vision-centred readings only.



1 Devorah Sperber, Detail view, *After The Last Supper* (2005). 20 736 spools of thread, aluminium ball chain, stainless-steel hanging apparatus, clear acrylic viewing sphere, metal stand, 247 x 88 cm. Courtesy of Devorah Sperber 2007.

Showing seeing

The main thread that weaves its way through this article is an endeavour to take up Mitchell's (2003) call to expose seeing by tackling the question of what precisely *showing seeing* reveals about what philosophy, art historiography, visual culture studies and artists assume about the way we see, and do not see. In one sense, the New York-based artist, Devorah Sperber, literally does what Mitchell suggests – she shows seeing.[2] Fascinated with the science behind vision, Sperber puts seeing 'on display' in a series of mixed media works that painstakingly recreate famous artworks. Her remakes of the original paintings consist of multitudes of coloured cotton which each represents one pixel in the entire image. The overall effect, when viewed with the naked eye, is that the works resemble blurry, abstract sculptures. This is owing to the fact that the original paintings are recreated and displayed upside down and on a massive scale. But, the abstract forms become recognisable images once viewed through a viewing device – a clear acrylic sphere, placed at a distance from the work.

In *After The Last Supper* (2005) **(1)**, based on Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* (c. 1495–1498), 20 736 spools of thread have been arranged to accurately represent a pixellated version of the original painting, but placed upside-down and backwards. The image is righted in an optical device – a sphere – which is placed in front of the sculpture, imitating the way in which an image is reflected onto the human retina in physiological vision. The sphere (placed at an optimal distance from the abstract picture) synthesises and rights Sperber's blurred image – a result of the relatively large size of each spool or pixel – into the recognisable iconic image. In this way, the artwork itself duplicates the process of human vision, not only rendering the invisible workings of the retina and brain visible, but more importantly showing that when the subject stands at a distance from the chaotic picture it becomes recognisable. These works remind the viewer that the process of seeing is an *active* and complicated one in which a sighted viewer is required to participate (from a 'safe' distance) in the formation and coherence of what is seen. What Sperber's work shows about the physiological process of seeing is that this phenomenon takes place *actively* between the optic nerves and the brain, both of which are necessary components in the process by which blurred shapes become comprehensible to the viewer. For the image that is reflected on the retina is inverted and then corrected by the brain, without whose image processing capabilities 'pictures would simply be variations in light and dark regions without meaningful associations' (Lester 2000:20).[3] Impulses from the optic nerves are transported via the thalamus to the visual cortex, or occipital lobe, located in the back of the cerebrum. Of course, sight was not always understood in this way, but held much fascination for early scientists, mathematicians and philosophers. Why and how did sight come to be regarded as the sense that requires showing?

Ocularcentrism

Western culture, it is often noted, is dominated by scopic regimes whereby understanding of the world is acquired predominantly through the visual sense of sight. This view holds that since the rise of the modern period and its associated increasing advances in visual technologies, people have interacted with the world through visual practices to an ever greater extent. In particular, it is argued, a shift toward equating seeing with knowledge has taken place (Coleman 2007), with the birth of the age of scientific rationalism cited as its pivotal moment. Chris Jenks (1995:1, 2), for example, claims that 'looking, seeing and knowing have become perilously intertwined'. 'We daily experience and perpetuate the conflation of the "seen" with the "known" in conversation,' he argues, illustrating this point with the 'commonplace linguistic appendage of "do you see?" or "see what I mean?"' (1995:3). Similar phrases that equate seeing and knowing that come to mind include, 'from my point of view', 'this is my outlook on the matter' and 'do you get the picture?' to name but a few.[4]

Martin Jay (1988:3) coined the term 'ocularcentrism' to describe modern and postmodern society's reliance on sight more than on any other sense organ in experiencing the world, arguing that our everyday practices are mostly dominated by what we see. Jay (1988:3) explains that 'beginning with the Renaissance and the scientific revolution, modernity has been normally considered resolutely ocularcentric'. Although Jay (1988:3)

is notably sceptical of overly simplistic generalisations, he nevertheless maintains that 'it is difficult to deny that the visual has been dominant in modern Western culture', stating that 'we confront again and again the ubiquity of vision as the master sense of the modern era'.[5]

Perhaps a compelling argument to support the alleged ocularcentrism of modern Western societies is the fact that, from a physiological perspective at least, the human system for sight is both complex and sophisticated. Paul Lester (2000:13) argues that 'more than 70 percent of all the sensory receptors in the human body are in the eyes'. As a result, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching in combination are activated through the other 30 per cent of the body's receptors (Lester 2000:13). Lester (2000:13) points out that Leonardo da Vinci may have realised this fact, when he stated that 'the sense which is nearest the organ of perception functions most quickly, and this is the eye, the chief, the leader of all other senses'. Scientific research has indeed shown that 'the eye is able to accomplish its tasks at a far greater remove than any other sense, hearing and smell being only a distant second and third' (Jay 1993:6).

Aside from scientific evidence of the workings of the human sensorium, in Western philosophical thought the senses have been hierarchised, with the senses of sight and hearing being privileged while the senses of smell, taste and touch are subordinated to them. It is widely assumed now that Aristotle coined the notion of the 'five senses' (Stewart 2005:61). In *De Anima* Aristotle regarded seeing and hearing as the 'higher philosophical senses' (Stewart 2005:61) which give access to 'sensibility'. His hierarchy positioned the senses in the following order, from most to least important: vision – hearing – smell – taste – touch (Stewart 2005:61). Consequently, vision and hearing have been linked to philosophical contemplation and abstraction; these senses produce the disinterested subject who can rise above his/her own nature (body) and make aesthetic judgements. Constance Classen (2005:70) has pointed out that, even further than this, sight and hearing have come to be associated with masculinity and therefore with connotations of rationality, order and domination. Touch, taste and smell, on the other hand, being intimate corporeal senses, have come to be associated with nurturing, the seductive, the irrational and the deceptive – in other words, naturally, women.[6] Throughout Western history, philosophy, ideology and social practice there is much evidence that the senses of taste and touch (which require immediacy and direct contact with the world) are ranked lowest.

As a result of sight's epistemological importance, it has been argued that the dominant, hegemonic visual model of the modern era is a combination of rationalist philosophical thought of the Western Enlightenment project, which valourised the disembodied mind set free from the limitations of the sensual body, in conjunction with the invention of linear perspective by Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446).[7] Jay (1988:4) explains that Cartesian perspectivalism, as this model is termed, combines, on the one hand, 'Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy' derived from René Descartes, and on the other, the 'Renaissance notion of [linear] perspective in the visual arts'. According to this visual regime – Cartesian perspectivalism – the observer is thought to be a rational, stable subject who is able to know and fully understand an unambiguous world. Descartes' spectatorial epistemology designates sight as an objective and mechanical process that, on the one hand, can be explained and rationalised through science, and on the other, can also render the visible world unambiguous.[8] Seeking out knowledge in all fields of human inquiry through a reliable mathematical method was Descartes' (1968:32) main aim. Rejecting philosophy, theology, poetry and the 'false sciences', because they were built on 'shifting foundations', he endeavoured to travel, 'seeing different courts and armies', to 'gather[...] a varied experience', 'witness[ing]' and 'reflecting' on what he saw 'in order to see clearly into [his] own actions' (Descartes 1968:32, 33). While Descartes (1644) was sure that he could not doubt the existence of his mind – '*cogito ergo sum*' – he did think that it was possible to doubt the existence of his body. Although thoroughly discredited by postmodern criticism, Cartesianism became the reigning model of modernity. This is perhaps because it best suited the empirical and scientific worldview of the Enlightenment project, which was based on the belief that vision is a one-way street, that objects are the passive recipients of the gaze, and that distance leads to reason and, thereby, objectivity. According to Cartesianism, since

matter (*res extensa*) and thought (*res cogitans*) operate independently, the rational observer is a stable subject who is able to know and fully understand and control the world through the denial of the bodily senses. Nature (the senses) could therefore be subdued by reason.

The desire to order and control the world from a distance was particularly evident in the scientific 'eye-minded' rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From the 1600s, as Jane Kromm (2010:73) shows, interest in natural history was 'grounded in the visual strateg[y] of collecting and describing specimens .... ' Thus, in the pursuit of objective categorisation and quantifiable specifics, visual scrutiny was utilised to examine every aspect of a specimen. Such sensitive and detached looking, Kromm (2010:73) argues, resulted in the expert's ability to 'ascertain [...] the order and organising principles of the natural world'. With a view to enabling other practitioners to understand the classification system, sight therefore played a prominent role in the scientific project of the naturalists, and 'seeing' from a distance became a way of 'knowing'.

Since the Renaissance, scientific research has enthusiastically set about expanding the possibilities of human vision and compensating for its imperfections. This is clearly evident from the invention of the microscope (1600s) to the various other tools now available that enhance our capacity to see and visualise the previously *invisible*. In the twenty-first century new technologies such as high-definition television (HDTV) and Google maps street view make the world even more accessible to the subject, and in high definition. In medical science, in particular, the dramatic effects of visual probing are apparent. Visual prostheses such as spectacles and contact lenses compensate for inadequate sight, while sonar and scans non-invasively survey and explore every nook and cranny of our anatomies, which become the objects of the probing scientific gaze. Since the late-twentieth century, MRI technology has been rendering the interior of the body not only visible, but also in three dimensions. Unsurprisingly, HDTV technology has been used in medical theatres for some time now to enhance surgical visualisation. Stafford (1991:48) proclaims that when imaging technologies are used in the area of medicine they have the 'capability of turning someone inside out'. Stafford's (1991:47) research suggests that the impulse to scientifically open up (therefore see) and master the body is rooted in the eighteenth-century desire to 'attain the interior of things' – particularly through dissection. In order to expand objective understanding of its (invisible) workings, the body, or 'the immobilized specimen under scrutiny' as Stafford (1991:48) puts it, is made available for exploration and mapping, with no chance of either 'hiding' or 'escaping'.

It seems feasible to add the notion of aesthetics (as a means by which to attain 'sensible' experiences of art) to the visual model in which distance secures objectivity. In *The critique of judgement* (1790), the idealist philosopher, Immanuel Kant, takes Descartes' rationalist philosophy further in his concept of aesthetics as a mode by which a disinterested observer can judge well-formed objects. According to Kantian aesthetics, universal claims can be made about the beauty of an object if the observer maintains a dispassionate distance from it. As Charlie Gere (2010:155) succinctly puts it, the Kantian viewer/connoisseur 'in a proper disinterested manner ... orders the chaotic and heterogeneous sense impressions generated through the categories of beauty and taste'. Thus, according to Kant, through the contemplation of art or the world the aesthetic subject can properly engage with the object of its sight.

Renaissance perspective

Whereas, on the one hand, the Enlightenment striving for Cartesian rationality supported and maintained Cartesian perspectivalism as the dominant visual regime of the modern era, on the other, according to Jay (1988:4), linear perspective may have laid the groundwork for this model three centuries earlier. During the Renaissance period in Europe, the artistic desire to conquer and 'master' reality was no doubt one of the impetuses behind Brunelleschi's 'invention' of linear perspective in 1413, a well-known system of rules which enables the painter to create illusionistic space – an optical facsimile of a view through a window – on a two-dimensional wall or canvas. Why is the use of linear perspective in the fifteenth century interesting in a discussion of 'showing seeing'? What does this turn in artistic approach from the flattened compositions of medieval art to the creation of the illusion of

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scholarship dealing with images. But, further than this, the fundamental notions on which art historiography is based, relating largely to notions of the ideal spectator – or connoisseur – embraced in the Western Enlightenment project, must be analysed with a view to exposing how such seeing was constructed. Is the notion of the ideal spectator as detached and disinterested in the work of art in order to effect aesthetic judgement not still reflected in contemporary vision-centred analyses? An attempt is made here to consider what is 'overlooked' when the visual and how it is seen (ideologically speaking) is assumed to be central to the art history/visual culture project. Thus, the author 'fleshes out' the limitations of the premise that the ways in which people *see* art/visual culture – at the expense of the other corporeal senses – can remain the thrust of these academic fields.

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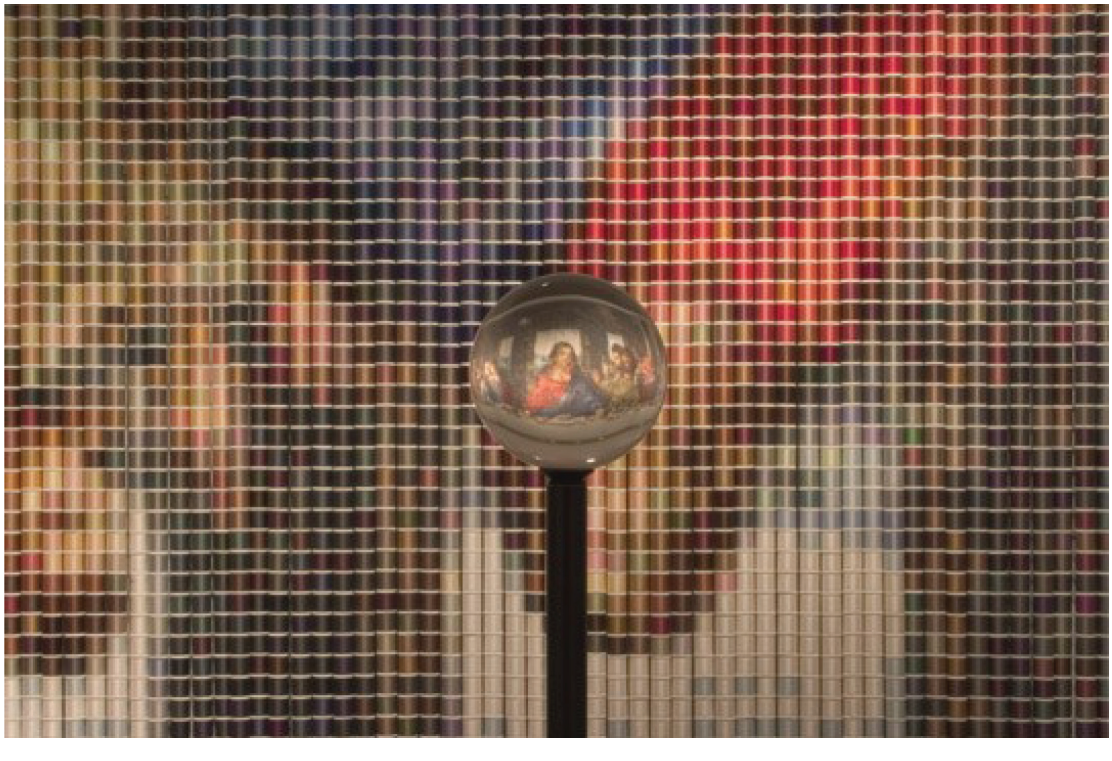

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Perhaps a compelling argument to support the alleged ocularcentrism of modern Western societies is the fact that, from a physiological perspective at least, the human system for sight is both complex and sophisticated. Paul Lester (2000:13) argues that 'more than 70 percent of all the sensory receptors in the human body are in the eyes'. As a result, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching in combination are activated through the other 30 per cent of the body's receptors (Lester 2000:13). Lester (2000:13) points out that Leonardo da Vinci may have realised this fact, when he stated that 'the sense which is nearest the organ of perception functions most quickly, and this is the eye, the chief, the leader of all other senses'. Scientific research has indeed shown that 'the eye is able to accomplish its tasks at a far greater remove than any other sense, hearing and smell being only a distant second and third' (Jay 1993:6).

Aside from scientific evidence of the workings of the human sensorium, in Western philosophical thought the senses have been hierarchised, with the senses of sight and hearing being privileged while the senses of smell, taste and touch are subordinated to them. It is widely assumed now that Aristotle coined the notion of the 'five senses' (Stewart 2005:61). In *De Anima* Aristotle regarded seeing and hearing as the 'higher philosophical senses' (Stewart 2005:61) which give access to 'sensibility'. His hierarchy positioned the senses in the following order, from most to least important: vision – hearing – smell – taste – touch (Stewart 2005:61). Consequently, vision and hearing have been linked to philosophical contemplation and abstraction; these senses produce the disinterested subject who can rise above his/her own nature (body) and make aesthetic judgements. Constance Classen (2005:70) has pointed out that, even further than this, sight and hearing have come to be associated with masculinity and therefore with connotations of rationality, order and domination. Touch, taste and smell, on the other hand, being intimate corporeal senses, have come to be associated with nurturing, the seductive, the irrational and the deceptive – in other words, naturally, women.[6] Throughout Western history, philosophy, ideology and social practice there is much evidence that the senses of taste and touch (which require immediacy and direct contact with the world) are ranked lowest.

As a result of sight's epistemological importance, it has been argued that the dominant, hegemonic visual model of the modern era is a combination of rationalist philosophical thought of the Western Enlightenment project, which valourised the disembodied mind set free from the limitations of the sensual body, in conjunction with the invention of linear perspective by Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446).[7] Jay (1988:4) explains that Cartesian perspectivalism, as this model is termed, combines, on the one hand, 'Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy' derived from René Descartes, and on the other, the 'Renaissance notion of [linear] perspective in the visual arts'. According to this visual regime – Cartesian perspectivalism – the observer is thought to be a rational, stable subject who is able to know and fully understand an unambiguous world. Descartes' spectatorial epistemology designates sight as an objective and mechanical process that, on the one hand, can be explained and rationalised through science, and on the other, can also render the visible world unambiguous.[8] Seeking out knowledge in all fields of human inquiry through a reliable mathematical method was Descartes' (1968:32) main aim. Rejecting philosophy, theology, poetry and the 'false sciences', because they were built on 'shifting foundations', he endeavoured to travel, 'seeing different courts and armies', to 'gather[...] a varied experience', 'witness[ing]' and 'reflecting' on what he saw 'in order to see clearly into [his] own actions' (Descartes 1968:32, 33). While Descartes (1644) was sure that he could not doubt the existence of his mind – '*cogito ergo sum*' – he did think that it was possible to doubt the existence of his body. Although thoroughly discredited by postmodern criticism, Cartesianism became the reigning model of modernity. This is perhaps because it best suited the empirical and scientific worldview of the Enlightenment project, which was based on the belief that vision is a one-way street, that objects are the passive recipients of the gaze, and that distance leads to reason and, thereby, objectivity. According to Cartesianism, since

matter (*res extensa*) and thought (*res cogitans*) operate independently, the rational observer is a stable subject who is able to know and fully understand and control the world through the denial of the bodily senses. Nature (the senses) could therefore be subdued by reason.

The desire to order and control the world from a distance was particularly evident in the scientific 'eye-minded' rationalism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From the 1600s, as Jane Kromm (2010:73) shows, interest in natural history was 'grounded in the visual strateg[y] of collecting and describing specimens .... ' Thus, in the pursuit of objective categorisation and quantifiable specifics, visual scrutiny was utilised to examine every aspect of a specimen. Such sensitive and detached looking, Kromm (2010:73) argues, resulted in the expert's ability to 'ascertain [...] the order and organising principles of the natural world'. With a view to enabling other practitioners to understand the classification system, sight therefore played a prominent role in the scientific project of the naturalists, and 'seeing' from a distance became a way of 'knowing'.

Since the Renaissance, scientific research has enthusiastically set about expanding the possibilities of human vision and compensating for its imperfections. This is clearly evident from the invention of the microscope (1600s) to the various other tools now available that enhance our capacity to see and visualise the previously *invisible*. In the twenty-first century new technologies such as high-definition television (HDTV) and Google maps street view make the world even more accessible to the subject, and in high definition. In medical science, in particular, the dramatic effects of visual probing are apparent. Visual prostheses such as spectacles and contact lenses compensate for inadequate sight, while sonar and scans non-invasively survey and explore every nook and cranny of our anatomies, which become the objects of the probing scientific gaze. Since the late-twentieth century, MRI technology has been rendering the interior of the body not only visible, but also in three dimensions. Unsurprisingly, HDTV technology has been used in medical theatres for some time now to enhance surgical visualisation. Stafford (1991:48) proclaims that when imaging technologies are used in the area of medicine they have the 'capability of turning someone inside out'. Stafford's (1991:47) research suggests that the impulse to scientifically open up (therefore see) and master the body is rooted in the eighteenth-century desire to 'attain the interior of things' – particularly through dissection. In order to expand objective understanding of its (invisible) workings, the body, or 'the immobilized specimen under scrutiny' as Stafford (1991:48) puts it, is made available for exploration and mapping, with no chance of either 'hiding' or 'escaping'.

It seems feasible to add the notion of aesthetics (as a means by which to attain 'sensible' experiences of art) to the visual model in which distance secures objectivity. In *The critique of judgement* (1790), the idealist philosopher, Immanuel Kant, takes Descartes' rationalist philosophy further in his concept of aesthetics as a mode by which a disinterested observer can judge well-formed objects. According to Kantian aesthetics, universal claims can be made about the beauty of an object if the observer maintains a dispassionate distance from it. As Charlie Gere (2010:155) succinctly puts it, the Kantian viewer/connoisseur 'in a proper disinterested manner ... orders the chaotic and heterogeneous sense impressions generated through the categories of beauty and taste'. Thus, according to Kant, through the contemplation of art or the world the aesthetic subject can properly engage with the object of its sight.

Renaissance perspective

Whereas, on the one hand, the Enlightenment striving for Cartesian rationality supported and maintained Cartesian perspectivalism as the dominant visual regime of the modern era, on the other, according to Jay (1988:4), linear perspective may have laid the groundwork for this model three centuries earlier. During the Renaissance period in Europe, the artistic desire to conquer and 'master' reality was no doubt one of the impetuses behind Brunelleschi's 'invention' of linear perspective in 1413, a well-known system of rules which enables the painter to create illusionistic space – an optical facsimile of a view through a window – on a two-dimensional wall or canvas. Why is the use of linear perspective in the fifteenth century interesting in a discussion of 'showing seeing'? What does this turn in artistic approach from the flattened compositions of medieval art to the creation of the illusion of

depth in Renaissance artworks reveal about the intentions of its users, and what they may have intended to show about seeing?

Friedrich Kittler's (2010:52) notion that the revolutionary concept of creating perspectival depth was developed due to research attempting to 'show seeing' provides a useful way in which to explore these questions. In constructing the first working model of the *camera obscura*, the Arab scholar, Abu 'Ali al-Hasan ibu al-Haytham (965–1041) (known as Alhazen by his Western friends), also created the first model of seeing (Kittler 2010:51).[9] Writing in Alexandria, and drawing from his experiments with a *camera obscura*, Alhazen deduced not only that vision is caused by light entering the eye, but also that the image that enters the eye is refracted and inverted (Mirzoeff 2009:23), as also demonstrated in Sperber's work. Prior to vision being understood in this way, the classical Greeks 'founded a science of optics' (Kittler 2010:50), the first recorded writings of which reveal their scant understanding of the actual physical operation of the eye (Mirzoeff 2009:21). In Ivan Illich's (2000:9) words, in the classical regime it was thought that 'the gaze radiates from the pupil to embrace an object, to fuse with it, so that the eye is dyed the object's colors'.[10] According to this understanding, vision is an 'outgoing activity'. Also termed *extromission*, it was thought that the gaze radiates towards the object in the shape of a cone (Mirzoeff 2009:22).

But this was not the only way in which the ancient Greeks understood perception. Epicurus (341–270 B.C.), for example, postulated that the process of sight occurred through *intromission*, whereby 'a visible image of the object travels to the eye and is thereby seen' (Mirzoeff 2009:22). Plato, on the other hand, claimed that we are able to see as a result of a combination of a ray that is sent out from the eye and light that is emitted from an object.[11] It was not until the eleventh century that such notions of vision were critiqued and amended by Alhazen. And in so doing, Alhazen and the *camera obscura* (used as an optical apparatus) assisted Renaissance artists in achieving the spatial illusionism they desired in their illusionistic paintings.

Illich (2000:18) argues that the Florentine painters, in their use of perspectival geometry, marked a turning point in conceptions of vision, since from 'this point, the image was transformed from an object into a geometrical construct'. The implementation of a mathematical system enabled artists to map space in ways that transformed images into pictures similar in shape and size to actual objects, thereby fooling the eye into seeing them in the same way that actual objects are seen. In art created in the West, the framed rectangle on the wall metaphorically represents the commanding attitude, whereby space and the objects in it are subjected to the gaze of the observer (Illich 2000:18). Even further than this, Illich (2000:7) argues that from the sixteenth century onward 'the gaze seems incapable of neglecting the image'. In contrast to Stafford (1991:48) who suggests that the image could not escape the gaze of the viewer, Illich (2000:7) maintains that following the invention of perspective, the image became a 'trap' for the gaze, which, mesmerised by the image, was unable to resist it. Whether the sighted spectator is regarded as seeking out images, or whether images seduce the gaze, evidently the invention of linear perspective further empowered the complex relationship between sight and site.

When Da Vinci painted his *Last Supper* (c. 1495–1498), on which Sperber's installation piece is based, on a wall in the refectory of Santa Maria Della Grazie in Milan, he employed the perspectival construction of the room with the orthogonals that meet at Christ's forehead, to draw, or 'trap' the viewer, in Illich's (2000:7) terms, into an imaginary space. Although it has been argued that the invention of perspective is important because it allowed its users to draw their audiences into the Biblical stories they represented,[12] this fact is not its main contribution to the history of vision. For, perhaps more importantly, the use of perspective by Renaissance artists also reflects the assumption that what was visible in the perceptual field was a homogenous, regularly ordered space, a rational visual order awaiting duplication by the coherent, unified self (Mirzoeff 2009:29).

In the model of linear perspective, the eye of the beholder is evidently singular, monocular and motionless. Sperber's work makes this fact of perspective clearer, as the viewer must close one eye in order to see the image through the optical device. But the limitations of perspective as a means by which to represent reality were already evident to scholars and artists in the fifteenth century.

Even Da Vinci rejected this system altogether in his later works (Mirzoeff 2009:28). Martin Kemp (1990:51) explains that according to Da Vinci, 'every part of the pupil possesses the visual power and [...] this power is not reduced to a point as the perspectivists wish'. Perspective certainly does not imitate vision. However, its metaphorical importance lies in its ability, on the one hand to 'police' vision, and on the other, to 'allow [...] us to order and control what we see' (Mirzoeff 2009:29). In short, linear perspective can be described as a regulative model for thought and perception.

For Michael Kubovy (1986:159) it is a misconception that perspective was developed to represent reality accurately. He argues that perspective was developed 'to produce space for contemplation, meditation and fantasy' (Kubovy 1986:159). Coleman (2007:5) explains that Da Vinci's *Last Supper* is an example of how some Renaissance artists (particularly Da Vinci and Andrea Mantegna) play 'mind games' with the viewer, who must be 46 cm above the floor in order to be in line with the vanishing point at Christ's head. Kubovy (1986:159) explains that 'these effects achieve the goal of divorcing the viewer's felt point of view in relation to the scene represented in the painting, from the viewer's felt position in relation to the room in which he or she is standing'. In this way, the viewer develops a 'virtual eye that can "leave" the physical body through a flight of imagination to view the physically unattainable point of entry' (Coleman 2007:5). Following Kubovy, Coleman (2007:5) suggests that, in this way, it was thought that the mind's eye, which includes both understanding and imagination, could be separated from the bodily eye, giving rise to the idea that we can be set free from the limitations of our bodies. When regarded in this way, the importance of perspective reaches further than merely providing the basis for rationalist order and control.

With the ancient Greeks having established the concept of sight as 'the noblest of the senses' (Van Heuckelom 2010:57), followed by the invention of linear perspective in painting, the invention of optical devices to enhance visual ability, the dominance of vision in obtaining objective knowledge based on scientific evidence since the seventeenth century, an attempt has thus far been made to sketch some of the ways in which Western societies acquired 'a dominantly ocular understanding of the world ... ' (Coleman 2007:4). An attempt has been made to sketch a background for the modern premise that in order to know the world more fully, we need to see it more clearly. And, in contemplating the world, this supposedly objective gazing subject has been regarded as ideally outside and detached from what is seen. This Cartesian subject, who is able to 'leave the physical body' (Coleman 2007:5) behind, is apparently able to rationally, logically and objectively inspect and observe the world from an 'uncontaminated' viewpoint. As Coleman (2007:6) succinctly puts it, 'sight has been raised to a dominant cultural position, as the mediator of psychological experience and the arbiter of understanding, objectivity and truth'. What is not acknowledged in this system is that sight has its limitations. Far from being able to transcend the physical body, the spectator's perception of the world is from inside the body, rendering detachment a redundant aim.

The Cartesian subject has, of course, been fully deconstructed in twentieth-century philosophy. Martin Jay's (1994) *Downcast eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought* provides a thorough account of both philosophical admiration of, and cynicism toward, vision. In particular, Jay explores the ways in which twentieth-century philosophers critique ocularcentrism and even demonise vision. In his theorising of the gaze, Jacques Lacan, for example, famously decentred Descartes' rational and objective subject, by showing that seeing is a socially constructed activity whereby 'an entire sum of discourses' (Bryson 1988:91) inhabits the space between the subject and the world. Norman Bryson (1998:92) suggests that vision, according to Lacan, is never unmediated, but that seeing takes place through a '*screen* of signs, a screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena'. Regarded in this way, however, the seeing subject, as constituted through culture, looks at the object from somewhere, therefore at a distance from it, or as Bryson (1988:100) aptly puts, 'the object ... appears to the subject ... at the end of a viewfinder'. Inspired by Lacan's psychoanalytic theories, a significant strand of art history/ visual culture studies is the analysis of looking as a form of power, leading to various dilemmas of the gaze having been widely dealt with. To what extent, however, do these theories of the

gaze overturn Cartesian dualism? Do they not merely reproduce the notions of the viewer as but a passive observer, who seizes power over an image/object?

Anti-ocularcentric aesthetics

It may be argued that the hegemony of the eye in Western societies has resulted in an allegiance to a vision-centred aesthetic in artistic practice (Gablik 1991; Jay 1994). This has meant that both the Western idea of art and its production have traditionally – or at least since the Enlightenment – been based in large part on a 'disinterested' aesthetic experience according to which art is validated by a learned group of people, such as art critics, curators, dealers and museum-directors whose 'aesthetic way of seeing' (Gablik 1991:40) hinges on their ability to distance their intellectual experience of an image from their 'unreliable' multi-sensorial physical bodies. However, challenges to the primacy of vision in human experience, as well as the notion of the disinterested subject/viewer of the work have led to what the author terms an *anti-ocularcentric discourse* in artistic practice. While two contemporary artworks are discussed in this section, the author is aware that their resistance to dominant ocular readings of art and visual culture is a re-emergence of a stream of artistic ideas first generated in the years following World War I. In the 1920s, dada and Surrealist artists as well as the Russian constructivists already rejected the notion of objective vision. Claude Gandelman (1991:154) maintains that the works produced by the Surrealists, such as the film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) by Salvador Dali and Luis Buñuel, revealed simultaneously their 'glorification of sight and fear of seeing'. For, in the many works produced in this period (several of which displayed severed, disembodied eyes), by so-called 'eye artists', 'the fetishized presence of the eye signals, paradoxically, the end of vision' (Gandelman 1991:151).[13] In contrast to these negative attitudes toward vision, the two artworks discussed below reveal neither an underlying 'glorification of sight' nor a 'fear of seeing'. Rather, these works can be interpreted as denying the assumption that seeing is accomplished by a passive spectator whose gaze on the world is from an outside, disinterested position. The following discussion shows the ways in which distance is denied between subject and object, and how the works subvert Cartesian and Kantian models of rational and disinterested seeing and knowing.

A contemporary artwork that shows seeing by literally also slowing seeing, is Chicago-based artist Casilda Sanchez's video projection *As inside as the eye can see* (2009) **(2)**.

2 Casilda Sanchez, *As inside as the eye can see* (2009). Looped video projection, 7,00 min. Courtesy of Casilda Sanchez.

Sanchez may very well be described as an 'eye artist', for in this work she interrogates what seeing is, how we see seeing, and she challenges the viewer to look at seeing in terms of closeness and proximity to what is seen, thereby defamiliarising seeing in Mitchell's (2003) terms. The video loop shows a close-up of two eyes (clearly from two separate bodies that are facing each other), which very slowly move closer together from the left and right-hand sides of the screen respectively. Each eyelid slowly opens and closes – as if they are blinking – as the bodies progressively move together until they are so close that their eyelashes touch. The eyes we see are definitely not disembodied (as is the case in Magritte's *The False Mirror* (1928)). These eyes are clearly embodied within the skins of their respective bodies.

When the eyes meet, they are in effect looking at each other from a distance that denies any coherent vision,[14] for distance is necessary for the eye to focus clearly on an object.[15] At this proximity, it is impossible for the eye to know what it is seeing. It is at this point that the two bodies are touching instead of seeing one another. Capable of seeing only blurred colours and shapes, we could say that these eyes are 'blind' to what they see. In fact, it is more likely that their exploration of each other is through the 'other' senses: touch, smell and hearing. Perhaps Sanchez is suggesting that 'as inside as the eye can see' is not very much at all.

There are at least two kinds of looking that can be investigated in this work. On the one hand, it is the looks exchanged between the two bodies on screen. On the other, it is the way in which viewers look at the work, an overwhelming close-up of the two eyes. Viewed from either position, instead of enabling objective knowing, looking is shown to be paradoxical. The bodies on screen cannot visually recognise each other; they are too close to do so. Similarly, although viewers can see the image, they may feel limited by their exclusion from the intimate exchange taking place on a monumental scale in front of them.[16] And yet, the viewer cannot deny feeling 'in touch' with (perhaps overwhelmed by) what is seen. In fact, far from being excluded, distanced and detached, it is tempting to suggest that the viewer's eyes wander over the surface of the video projection – the screen – caressing and touching the images on screen as the eyes they see caress and touch each other. We are drawn not only into the image, but also into the intimate, even erotically charged exchange we see before us. This kind of seeing is what Laura Marks (1999) terms 'haptic visuality', which she proposes is 'a kind of looking that lingers on the surface of the image rather than delving into depth and is more concerned with texture than with deep space' (Barker 2009:35).[17] In contrast to optical images, haptic images allow for an intersubjective relationship between the spectator and the image. In *As inside as the eye can see* we are compelled to interact with the enlarged close-up image of (hairy) textural skin, wet eyeballs and scratchy eye-lashes, as if we ourselves were getting 'up close' to the image as we are, at the same time, 'eyeing them out'. In her insightful analysis of the tactile interrelation between a film and its spectator, Jennifer Barker (2009:35) argues that haptic visuality is 'an erotic form of communication between film and viewer'. She states that, as spectators of film, 'we feel ourselves being touched in the act of touching' (Barker 2009:35). But it is not the case that we lose ourselves in the act of looking, since we are not 'absorbed or erased' (Barker 2009:36) by it. Instead, she argues that 'we lose our sense of our separateness from the film, but we don't lose our sense of our*selves*' (Barker 2009:36 [original emphasis]). When recognising that we interact with this work in this way, and that we are in a complex interchange with it, it is no longer possible to assume that the work represents a rational space that is ordered and controlled by the power of the gaze (of the subject) as is presupposed in Cartesian perspectivalism. Instead, Sanchez forces the viewer to acknowledge that knowing and understanding can emerge through the irrational, intimate sense of touch.

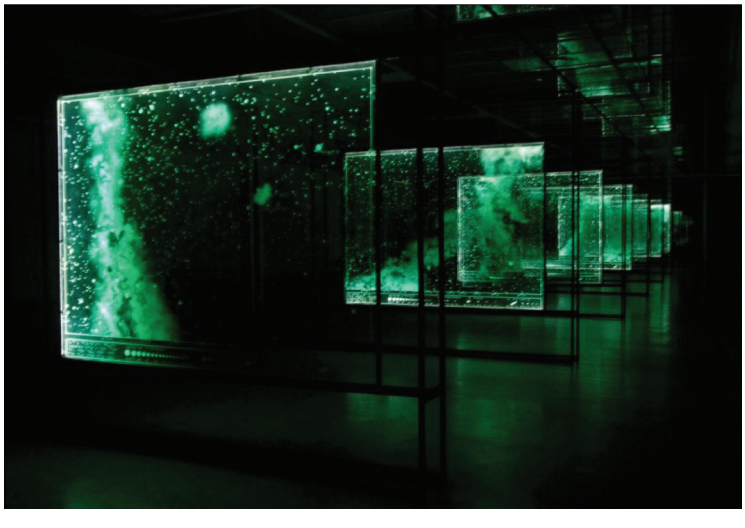
The South African artist, writer and academic, Willem Boshoff (1997:40) holds the sense of touch in higher regard than the sense of sight, arguing that 'touch provides for a more intimate sensory experience than sight'. Boshoff (1997:40) states that 'touch eliminates distance whereas sight enforces it, touch is committed to an immediate encounter whereas sight is illusionary and superficial'. While it may not be useful to once again 'denigrate' vision in this way, in Sanchez's work the sense of sight is compromised and cannot aid one

body in knowing the other. In opposition to the Cartesian model distance is subverted here, both between the bodies on screen, and between the bodies and the viewer.

South African artist, Berco Wilsenach, takes a more 'hands-on' approach to the limitations of vision. In his work entitled *In die sterre geskryf II* (*Written in the stars II*) (2009) **(3)**, the sighted viewer is once again encouraged to abandon distance for proximity. This installation piece consists of a series of star maps engraved into seven glass panels which are suspended on black metal frames.[18] On entering the darkened room of the exhibition space, the viewer is immediately struck by an intense green glow of light which illuminates what at first looks like hazy, floating, ephemeral images. Through closer engagement with the work, each panel reveals a tangible (by means of the engravings) decoding system, devised by Wilsenach, which makes star maps accessible to the blind (Wilsenach 2009). Stars and star constellations are engraved as circles and ellipses, with symbols explained in Braille in a legend at the bottom of each panel. Cartographically precise, they serve to 'explain the night sky to somebody who constantly lives in darkness' (Wilsenach 2009).

But the audience is faced with a double irony: blind spectators, who see with their hands, cannot access the visual component of the information, while, at the same time, sighted observers cannot access the information required to unlock the meaning of the visual image, which is only provided in Braille. Ultimately, both audiences remain, both literally and figuratively, 'in the dark'.

Colourless light-emitting diode (LED) lights are attached to the frame (top and bottom). The 'green glow' is produced when the LED lights shine through the sandblasted areas of glass (which trap the light).[19] This work maps out the universe which is invisible to the naked human eye. Here we are seeing the universe through a bright green screen which renders our view similar to that which we might see through night-vision goggles. The screens themselves remind the viewer of a flat computer screen, or a high-tech transparent digital touch-screen on which digital information and images are rapidly and readily accessed and moved around at will, as if the user can plug in and download an infinite spectrum of information. They bear an uncanny resemblance to computer monitors on which 'disembodied information' is made visible as 'ghostly green or amber apparitions that float before the eyes' (Stafford 1991:xviii). However, the screens referred to by Stafford are smooth and cold, and their users are in search of the ephemeral images they produce. Here, by contrast, the screens are tactile; they invite touch and require that audiences experience them as material form, at the same time as they present the viewer with an emotionally, intellectually and physically discomforting experience. This is because the audience is not sure how to engage with the work, or even how to act in its presence.



3 Berco Wilsenach, *In die sterre geskryf II (Written in the stars II)* (2009). Installation. Photographed by Carla Crafford.

While visually spectacular, there is also an unsettling atmosphere surrounding the work. It was interesting when, at the exhibition opening, the audience spoke in hushed tones, as if this were expected of them. Of course, this is due to the conventions of galleries and museums which police people's behaviour and experience of art. The fact that the eye, but not the body, is welcomed in such spaces is paradoxical to the concept of the work which requires intimate, tactile and kinetic

interaction. The viewer is thus physically drawn into and involved in the work.

In one sense, the screens in Wilsenach's work function as mediators between the invisible universe and the audience who seeks its meaning. Paradoxically, however, meaning remains elusive and the viewer cannot understand what is shown. Even the blind audience is denied access to the information, since the screens are simply too large for a blind person to make sense of them – the size exceeds the two hand span required for blind people to 'see' (Wilsenach 2009). In this way, the work denies comprehension.[20]

In die sterre geskryf II (Written in the stars II) critiques the alleged effectiveness of vision in engaging with the world through ocularcentric practices,[21] for seeing the invisible universe in this work does not facilitate understanding. While an astronomer aims to visualise and objectively reflect what the universe looks like in order to show (or more aptly, control) it, this work comments on the ineffectiveness of such an endeavour. As with Sanchez's work, this is a manifestation of an anti-ocularcentric aesthetic, since in both works not only is the hegemony of sight overturned, but the possibility of a detached subject is negated. In Wilsenach's work the insufficiency of the eye alone, in order to engage with the work, is obvious. The eye needs a hand. Now the skin seeks out and tries to understand.

A phenomenology of vision

It does not require much effort to conclude that both artists want to dethrone seeing from its privileged position in the sensual body. This is because both works demand that the viewer disengage the visual sense in order to become a 'whole-body seer' (Sacks 2005:26) when engaging with the work. This term is explained by Sacks (2005:26) when he relates how John Hull, who, after becoming completely blind at age 48, learnt to experience the world through his other four senses. When he reached a state of 'deep blindness', his senses of smell, hearing, touch and taste sharpened and he began to 'sense an intimacy with nature, and intensity of being-in-the-world, beyond anything he knew when he was sighted' (Sacks 2005:27).

Both artworks discussed above, while aesthetically and materially quite different, require that the viewer becomes such a whole-body-seer. When engaging with these works it is not possible to draw on only the sense of sight. The works effectively critique sight as the detached practice of Cartesian perspectivalism, offering instead an investigation of vision – showing seeing – as embodied practice. In placing two eyes at such close proximity to each other, as well as slowing the real time moving together of the two eyes, Sanchez's work draws the viewer in to consider the breaking down of distance in an otherwise 'face-to-face' or 'eye-to-eye' relationship. Similarly, Wilsenach's work invites viewers to participate in the work, thereby breaking down physical barriers normally associated with the viewing of works of visual art. Furthermore, his work points to the insufficiency of human endeavours to comprehend the scale of nature.[22]

In these works it is apparent that the phenomenologically-based arguments embraced by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who not only critiqued Cartesian perspectivalism but who also tried consistently to develop an alternative theory of sight, are relevant (Van de Vall 2008:40). Merleau-Ponty's anti-Cartesian philosophy is especially evident in his posthumously published book, *The visible and the invisible* (1968), in which he discusses subjectivity, vision and embodiment. While the critiques of vision mentioned previously – by dadaists, Surrealists and Lacan – regard vision in negative terms, Merleau-Ponty offers suggestions for a different ontology of sight. For this reason, Merleau-Ponty's thoughts on perception and subjectivity are especially useful in this discussion.

Working within a phenomenological approach to seeing, Merleau-Ponty (1968:212–213) offers an interesting alternative question to the view of the cultural determinism of perception, as discussed earlier, asking: 'How can one return from this perception fashioned by culture to the "brute" or "wild" perception … By what act does one undo it (return to the phenomenal, to the "vertical" world, to lived experience?)'. His questions, of course, reflect the philosophy of phenomenology, which seeks to understand the relationship between people and the world. Colin Smith (1962:vii) describes phenomenology as 'transcendental philosophy' which 'puts essences back into existence'. Further, Smith argues that phenomenology is directed at 're-achieving a direct and primitive

contact with the world, and endowing that contact with a philosophical status'.

Merleau-Ponty's main criticism of the Enlightenment model of vision involves both the way in which it denies the 'corporeal nature of human being, knowledge, experience and perception' (Wylie 2007:147) and the way in which it constructs an empty space between the subject and the object in the visual field. Rather, Merleau-Ponty (1968:133) does not recognise a space between the one and the other at all, but argues rather that the observer (subject) is always part of the observed (object). While detachment from the world is generally considered a good place from which to know the world (recall my earlier examples, 'from my perspective', 'I see what you mean' and 'from my point of view'), Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of subjectivity insists on the corporeal and engaged nature of human experience, rather than the detached rationality of Cartesian subjectivity.

For Merleau-Ponty, the lived body is the place from which understanding stems. Thus, the observer is regarded as always both subject *and* object and when we look, as Wylie (2007:150 [original emphasis]) explains, 'what is occurring is an *enlacing together* of body and world'. Merleau-Ponty (1968:163) explains this as follows:

> Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves itself and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself. Things are an annex or prolongation of itself [which means] the world is made of the same stuff as the body.

This fundamentally alters the role between the perceiving subject and the perceived world, effectively overturning Cartesian accounts of subjectivity which presuppose that the seeing eye is disinterested and disembodied, and entirely outside the world it claims to know. But, if we understand vision as embodied then our gaze on the world is not from without, but from within; vision therefore surrounds us.

Merleau-Ponty (1968:133) illustrates the interlacing of subject and object in the example of one hand touching the other; the hand that touches is the subject and the hand being touched the object. But at the moment of touching, these roles become indistinguishable from one another or, more accurately, reversed. Sanchez's work *As inside as the eye can see* demonstrates this concept, which Merleau-Ponty (1968:133) terms *reversibility*, effectively showing the notion of vision as interlacing. For Merleau-Ponty our bodies (and for Sanchez our eyes) are simultaneously seeing and seen, touching and touched, active and passive, observer and observed, subject and object. What is more, the visible is as much reversible as the tactile (Merleau-Ponty 1968:134).

Such a phenomenological understanding of vision can be applied to Wilsenach's work, in that the sighted observer is actively involved in the meaning of the work. Ultimately, meaning occurs only at the site of the embodied subject, who is not 'disinterested', but fully (read bodily) present. This is because the audience both sees *and* touches the panels **(4)**, in an activity that reflects Barker's (2009:62) contention that 'what is merely seen is less enlightening than what is seen and also touched'. What emerges from this seeing/touching relationship is that the space between both the sighted and blind subject and the object (the glass panels) evaporates as they touch the material object. In this way, there is quite literally no distance between the observer and what is observed; seeing becomes touching. Furthermore, the viewer is not only 'in touch' with what he/she is viewing, but because the glass panels are transparent, the sighted observer is also continuously aware of being observed by

4 Berco Wilsenach, *In die sterre geskryf II (Written in the stars II)* (2009). Installation with glass panels. Photographed by Carla Crafford.

the audience in the room, in other words, constantly aware of their own being seen.

And, if Merleau-Ponty's (1968:133) concept of reversibility is understood as 'vision that touches', then it is not unlikely to read the transparency of the panels as allowing each viewer to see – and touch – every other viewer in the room. In this way, both works can surely be read as a critique of the Cartesian paradigm.

What of the blind astronomer implicated in the title of Wilsenach's work? Is it feasible to suggest that the blind astronomer referred to is in fact the sighted viewer who is always blind? If so, what can the sighted observer not see? In his book, *The object stares back, on the nature of seeing*, James Elkins (1996:205) maintains that blindness – which he describes as the 'failure of vision' – is 'intimately connected to seeing itself' and that 'blindness happens alongside vision'. This is because a blind spot exists in ordinary vision in both eyes, which normally compensate for each other. Lester (2000:20) explains that without the blind spot, the place through which the optic nerve enters the brain, humans would not be able to see. The blind spot can be thought of as pure absence of vision; it is therefore an invisible absence for we do not see it as a visible absence (a darkness) or a constructed absence (a hole that is covered). It is an absence whose invisibility is itself invisible (Elkins 1996:205). In these terms, then, we see when actually we do not see. And this, presumably, is precisely what Wilsenach aims to do. His work effectively exposes the gazing subject not as the detached epistemological authority constructed in the Cartesian conception of vision, but rather as fully present to the body and the world. In this way, both Wilsenach and Sanchez suggest an ontology of vision as connection, rather than detachment, between the seer and the seen.

Conclusion

In this article an attempt was made to show that seeing is a limiting experience which, when analysed on its own – that is, to the exclusion of the other sensorial modes of the body – does not allow for an adequate understanding of how meanings are produced when audiences engage with the visual cultural sphere: the eye is merely one sense organ in a multi-sensorial body, and that body exists in a complex relation to what is seen. Neither artwork discussed above is compatible with a methodology that hinges only on the ways in which spectators apprehend the world visually. The argument was also put forward that scholarly negotiations of the visual field have, until recently, often avoided explorations of the affective multi-sensorial body of the viewer in relation to what it sees. The discourse of anti-ocularcentrism, as it has emerged in the above analysis, therefore requires a re-evaluation of what it means to see as a multi-sensorial being. Thus, it is no longer feasible that art history/ visual culture studies limit their enquiries to the *visual* field alone, for this field is also informed by the senses of touch, hearing, and so forth.

Furthermore, even though viewers obviously *see* artworks, this seeing need not be regarded as an act of distancing and separation from objects. Instead, the works discussed above demand contact and nearness in an interwoven field, thus undermining the notion of psychological distancing and detachment between subject and object. The ways in which Sanchez and Wilsenach's works dismantle and dissolve Cartesianism were highlighted as an effective strategy for negotiating the relationship between the viewer and the artwork, suggesting that their works require not only the participation of the audience, but also the merging of observer and observed.

Phenomenology is a helpful tool when discussing human experience. However, it is not self-evident, to the author at least, that a phenomenological account of spectatorship is entirely useful unless aided by other approaches to the visual. Phenomenology has been criticised for its emphasis on individual experience at the expense of critical engagement with historical and material contexts (Wylie 2007:180). Rather than privileging one paradigm over the other, or even thinking of phenomenological interaction as the polar opposite of Cartesian distance, it may be more sensible to employ a measure of both in strategic readings of visual culture. The dynamics of contemporary spectatorship are certainly not straightforward. It may only be feasible to conclude that thinking about seeing as connection, and about spectatorship as a multi-sensory phenomenon (affected by our corporeality), allows for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the perceiver and what is perceived.

The current speed at which optical instrumentation continues to expand suggests

that vision is set to retain its position as the 'master sense of the modern era' (Jay 1988:3). A new understanding of vision (as both interlaced with the world and embodied) may be particularly urgent at this moment when virtual reality and cyberspace beckon those intent on losing touch with their bodies. In the current milieu, in which the denial of our bodies may be enticing, recognition of the sensuous tactile relationship between the embodied self and what it sees may, perhaps, be critical.

Notes

1 In utilising Mitchell's (2003) notion of 'showing seeing' as the thread that runs through this argument, the author of this article does not intend to suggest that Mitchell is an advocate of an approach to visual studies in which the visual dimension of image culture is analysed exclusively. For this is simply not true, since Mitchell (2005:5) argues that 'there are not visual media' and that 'all media are mixed media'. In other words, Mitchell recognises that we do not interact with media, including paintings, only through optical perception. Instead, he insists that any medium appeals to a variety of senses simultaneously, albeit to varying degrees. At the same time, however, Mitchell focuses on the ways in which seeing is constructed, while not asking the same question of hearing, tasting, touching and smelling. In this article the emphasis on sight is teased apart.

2 The artworks discussed in this article have been chosen on the grounds that they are capable of articulating intellectual concepts dealt with in the author's argument in visual terms. The aim, therefore, is not a critique of these works per se, but rather to apply them as a means to think through an argument.

3 This intricate process takes a mere three-thousandths of a second (Lester 2000:18).

4 See also Martin Jay's (1994) discussion of the prominence of linguistic metaphors associated with seeing in other languages in *Downcast eyes, the denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*.

5 It should be noted that this is not an accepted fact and many commentators have convincingly argued against this reductive view. For instance, Mitchell (2003:241) argues that 'the supposed hegemony of the visible in our time [...] is a chimera that has outlived its usefulness.' And yet, texts dealing with art/visual culture continue to cling to the notion that how audiences see objects and images is to be analysed. A notable deviation from this tendency is Di Bello and Koureas' (2010) *Art, history and the senses: 1830 to the present* and *Empire of the senses: The sensual culture* reader edited by Howes (2005).

6 Classen (2005:71) argues that one of the aims of the witch hunts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was to quell the transgressive power of feminine sensuality, as the feminine sensorium was regarded with suspicion and in need of control. Feminist discourse also provides a means by which to topple Cartesian perspectivalism, such as Pollock's (1988) analysis of Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot's allegedly 'poor' application of the perspectival system in their work.

7 Mark Poster (2002:1) has noted that much of the critical theory emerging in visual culture studies assumes the 'autonomy of the visual' in modern cultures. He rejects Mirzoeff's (1999:4) well-known contention that 'human experience is now more visual and visualised than ever before' on the grounds that it is more the case that, due to advances in visual technologies, 'we are only in different visual regimes' and not more visual than people living in previous periods (Poster 2002:2). Interestingly, Mirzoeff has removed this statement from his second edition of *An introduction to visual culture* (2009), choosing instead to focus his introductory argument around the case for the multimodality of visual media as mixed media.

8 This discussion on ocularcentrism may be familiar territory to some. It is, however, included here as a means by which to develop the main argument more clearly.

9 The workings of the *camera obscura* had, of course, been understood since antiquity.

10 Illich (2000) distinguishes between four main scopic regimes in the Western world, beginning with the classical regime, which ended around 1000 A.D. The second is the scholastic regime which coincided with the Gothic period. The third regime begins with the early Renaissance, at which point the eye is increasingly thought of as a camera whose abilities can be enhanced by technical devices. Regarded by Illich (2000:9) as 'the age of show', the fourth regime begins around 1800 and is still continuing at present.

11 Illich (2000:11) explains that for Plato the gaze could never reach reality, but instead 'fuses with the colour from the thing somewhere halfway ... '. Mirzoeff (2009:21) describes Plato's notion of sight as occurring at the '*interface*' between the seer and what is seen.

12 According to Gombrich (1982:21), the development of this system was presupposed by a shift in the expectations and demands of the public who insisted on the representation of a sacred event set on an imaginary stage as if through the eyes of an eyewitness. By

concentrating on the rules and procedures for achieving perspective, the Renaissance artist was able to explore space more than the subject or objects in it.

13 Examples of such works include constructivist posters for films such as Dziga Vertov's *Kino Glas* (1924) as well as his film, *The man with a movie camera* (1927). *Magritte's The object* (*the eye*) (1932) and *The false mirror* (1928), which both show a detached eye, exemplify this early twentieth-century artistic preoccupation with (the problem of) vision.

14 A short excerpt from the video can be viewed at: http://www.casildasanchez.net/html/As-Inside-Video-video.html

15 The ability to focus clearly on nearby objects, referred to as the 'near point of convergence' (NPC), decreases with age as the lens in our eye hardens (Near vision complex. Sa.).

16 It is evident that a complex exchange is taking place between the two bodies, because they are, of course, emitting all sorts of emotional information as they look at each other. In an argument dealing with the power of looking, Jay (1994:10) states that 'the eye is not only, as the familiar clichés would have it, a "window on the world," but also a "mirror of the soul." Even the dilation of the pupil can unintentionally betray an inner state, subtly conveying interest or aversion to the beholder.'

17 The term *haptic* stems from the German *haptein* which means to fasten. The use of the term has a complex history which cannot be sketched here. Alois Riegl used it to analyse the textural quality of tapestries and artworks in which the textural surface is emphasised over the sense of depth (Barker 2009:38).

18 The choice of seven panels is most likely deliberate, since its prominence in a broad range of cultural practices is undeniable. For instance, there are seven days in a week; there are seven days in a lunar cycle and seven candles on a Jewish menorah, to name but a few examples.

19 When in the dark, the rod cells of the eye are most sensitive to blue-green light and therefore blue-green colours are seen far better than red colours (Elkins 2000:216).

20 It may, of course, also be feasible to read Wilsenach's work in terms of the Kantian sublime which would, no doubt, add another dimension to this argument.

21 This interpretation is only one way of engaging with this work, and what is suggested here is not necessarily what the artist intended. Other viewers will certainly experience the work in many different ways. For instance, it has been suggested that Wilsenach's work deals with the 'inaccessibility of language (both the spoken word and the felt Braille) as an effective medium of communication' (Wilsenach 2009), which is no doubt an obvious conclusion.

22 It was interesting to observe one viewer at opening night, the first to enter the exhibition space, who did not touch the works at all. As is customary when viewing art, particularly in a museum, he did not immediately expect to be allowed to touch the glass surfaces. It was only once others had interacted with the panels in this tactile way, thus only once touching had been condoned by the art police, that he felt comfortable touching the artwork.

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