

Occupational hazards

Michael Fagenblat on 'Nerve' exhibition

The eye is like a camera, it is commonly supposed. Light from an external scene passes through a diaphragm (pupil or aperture) and strikes a specific location (retina, film or sensor) at the rear of the dark chamber where it forms an inverted image of the external scene. A lens to focus the image, a shutter to control the quantity of light, and transmission mechanisms to convey the information, are similarly used by the eye and the camera alike. This much is elementary.

But the similarity between the camera and the eye generates a more controversial comparison, that between the perceived scene and the photographic image. Are the qualities we perceive like shape, colour and solidity out there in the world? Do they belong to the object? Or is it we who produce those qualities when the chaotic glare of the cosmos passes through the aperture of our eye, conveying information that the mind processes into the experience of quality.

Since Galileo, leading scientists and philosophers have argued that the mind, intellect or soul introduces quality into existence. At first they made what now seems like a modest proposal: "secondary qualities" like taste, colour and smell are features of the mind, but "primary qualities" like extension, solidity and shape belong to the object. In other words, the subject represents an object as having a certain colour, but the colour itself inheres in the mind of the subject. The experience of colour is an effect of the non-coloured surface structure of the object as represented by the human subject. As empirical science discovered the micro-structures of objects the distinction between primary and secondary qualities blurred. Trying to turn the tables on empirical reductionism, Kant argued that not only were qualities like colour and heat representations of the mind but so too were features of the object such as its unity and extension. Here the very idea of an object becomes nothing more than incoming information processed by the subject, who re-presents it in the forms of perceptual experience. Qualities like red or sweet, then, are in the mind; their reality manifests only because of the representational nature of the sentient, conscious subject. Many philosophers and scientists nowadays think that even qualities like solidity and form are properties of the mind, useful illusions that help wily mobs of genes survive. But if or when the curtain comes down on the theatre of the mind, if for example sentient, conscious beings should cease to exist, so too would all the colours and tastes, as well as all the densities and shapes of the universe, for minus mind, reality is only a "blooming, buzzing confusion," as William James called it.

Gustavo Sagorsky invites us to reconsider this conviction. The standard modern Western conception of the object as a represented idea in the mind is here overturned, giving an iconic aura to Sagorsky's work; unlike the image, the icon restores sovereignty to the object. In his hands the camera, the very instrument that corrupts our conception of objects, restores our relation to the object. Here, seeing is no longer a cognitive accomplishment; it neither judges nor constructs nor even represents anything but *attends* to the object, lends an eye to *its* abundant visibility, letting the object manifest its own qualitative nature.

This does not mean that the eye or camera do not process information presented to them. But the processing does not mean that there is an image "in the mind" which is caused by the object and resembles it by virtue of some complex informational code. Rather, the image *is* the object itself, for the "content" of your mind is out there, partaking of qualities that belong to the objects presenting themselves to your body. Instead of thinking of the perceptual image as being "in the mind," we should think of the qualities presenting themselves to perception as *calling to mind*. The qualities of objects, their forms and colours, are not produced by the mind; they are there with the object and will continue to be long after conscious life passes from the earth.

That qualities are autonomy, manifesting as they are independently of all subjective representation, means that there are qualities out there which have not been experienced. There are colours no eye has seen. There is a blue bluer than blue which birds, for example, can see because they have four cones while we have only three. (We know its affect on our skin but not on our eyes.) And there is a red redder than every red. Under experimental conditions the human eye can be made to see a "supersaturated red" that is purer than any red we can ordinarily see. Our actual vision, then, is a *sampling of the visible*, neither a mental representation of reflective matter nor an exhaustive encapsulation of it.

Sagorsky's camera, like the eye, does not produce images but partakes of the objective qualities out there, presenting them to us in a manner that "fills the soul beyond its capacity," as Baudelaire says, making it plain that nothing we see exhausts the visible. Intrinsic to this way of seeing objects as icons rather than images is our bodily emplacement among the abundance of visible qualities, so that we adjust ourselves to the object's initiative. Only by occupying a position and conforming one's vision to the object can the qualities out there strike us, as lightning strikes only when the right attachment on earth becomes available. The camera does not capture or represent an object but extends the availability of the artist, who bears witness to the transcendence of the object as a manifest qualitative event.

Here, however, one must be careful. The photographer's bearing witness does not imply that he is a neutral observer. He is on the contrary eminently involved, being himself, by definition, interested (in the etymological sense, as *inter-esse*, existing between). His absolute involvement with objects and his pre-reflective capacity to handle them solicits his whole body to take a

particular stance in the environment they share, like dancers on the one stage. It is intimacy with the environment that transforms a moment on the light-rail into a revelation. The scene strikes us, calls to mind, not only through the contrastive effect of the dazzling light and the shadowy wrinkled face but also through our intimacy with the environment, which subtly alludes to our familiarity with the seasons, for the woman is wearing a knitted cardigan, and with the background presence of the light-rail, which suggests that she is returning from work as the winter sun sets. That is why what *comes to mind* is not just the luminous reds but also the halo of the invisible that surrounds her, as if a supersaturated brilliance hovered beyond the red, waiting for us to see it as our eye moves from the worn sweater and the dark brow through the dazzling hair and beyond it, to her reserves of visibility, many of which will never be seen, like colours out there in the cosmos waiting for some witness to see them.

The modern account of the image as a representation of the original is thereby reversed. The object seen may correlate with a brain state or a digital code, but that is because *the mind is given over* to the qualities disclosed by objects, not because it captures them as internal representations. Lily Briscoe, a painter in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, faces her canvas wondering how "to get hold of that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything." The artist merely occupies a position through which the autonomous qualities of the object are made visible, often by chance. The artist is an occupational hazard, a committed risk to new ways of approaching the surplus qualities of the object that everyday vision often fails to see. Sagorsky understands the wonderful banality of this situation, which at once characterizes every possible moment of our lives and at the same time depends on me chancing upon the right relation to the object, the right distance and angle for the object to disclose parts of its abundant visibility. Photography is here a matter of seeing an object as it sees others, a solicitation of vision from the visibility of things, penetrating and commanding us from our common yet eccentric world. The reversal here effected resembles the truth of poetry. The poem is to ordinary language what the icon is to the image. In the poem, words surrender their representational function and become themselves sovereign objects bearing their own qualities, independent of representational content and yet calling to mind, the way Sagorsky's plastic bag in the wind calls to mind a bride's blowing hair, a ram for Isaac, and a poem by William Carlos Williams:

A rumpled sheet
Of brown paper
About the length

And apparent bulk
Of a man was
Rolling with the

Wind slowly over
And over in
The street as

A car drove down
Upon it and
Crushed it to

The ground. Unlike
A man it rose
Again rolling

With the wind over
And over to be as
It was before.

* These reflections are greatly indebted, especially to various works by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Luc Marion and Mark Johnston.