

Fugitive Visions: Art and the eidetic image

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Eidetic imagery – vivid pictures seen ‘in the mind’s eye’ – has been a powerful and ongoing source of artistic inspiration. Yet, modernist privileging of disembodied vision and positivist opticality has suppressed the realm of the eidetic: an expansive category that includes subjective spiritual, mystical, synesthetic, hallucinatory, and visionary experience.

This session addresses artists past and present who have employed eidetic imagery in the creation or content of their work, as well as from scholars crafting methodological approaches for understanding and historicising artists’ visionary processes. Can art stimulate eidetic experience in its beholders? How might a hermeneutics of the eidetic contribute to a more expansive art history? How do artists represent the invisible? What perceptual modalities and sensory crossovers are engaged in creating or apprehending such art? Can the highly individual nature of reverie or inner vision paradoxically allow artists to communicate with art’s diverse audiences?

Many art historical moments invite such questions. Prehistoric rock art’s intricate patterning is believed to derive from forms visualised during altered states, while, in the 19th-century, Symbolists instrumentalised individual visions in pursuit of sweeping artistic insight. More recently, Joan Mitchell claimed she painted ‘from remembered landscapes that I carry with me’. Following the work of scholars like Marcia Brennan, Todd Cronan, Linda Dalrymple Henderson, and Martin Jay, this panel includes papers that implement or productively critique methodologies such as affect, feminism, neuroscience, new materialism, and phenomenology to excavate traces of eidetic experience that haunt art’s past, but not yet its history.

Speakers and Abstracts

Phantasmagoria: The *Roman de la Rose* and the artist as Narcissus

Christopher T Richards (Institute of Fine Arts, New York University)

Manuscripts of the *Roman de la Rose* do not properly feature images. Rather, they contain miniatures of eidetic images, of dream visions. Appropriately, within their first folios, most *Rose* manuscripts depict Narcissus gazing upon his reflection, an image of an image.

In the middle ages, Narcissus was not moralised as ‘narcissistic’ in a modern sense. Narcissus’s folly was loving an image, something unreal and unpossessable. Yet the *Rose*’s miniatures question this moralisation. In many cases, the image rises beyond its picture-plane, while Narcissus cuddles or strokes it. Contrariwise, Narcissus is frequently depicted crawling toward his reflection, with one foot outside the frame of his miniature. That is, when Narcissus is ‘captured by an image’, per the *Rose*, he has already been captured by the physical image on the page. This play between illusory image that seems real (reflection) and real image that seems illusory (miniature), offers a self-reflexive statement about art-making. The artist as Narcissus offers his viewers images of images, a tangled knot of what we desire to see and what is actually there, much like the eidetic dream visions illustrating the *Rose*. Calling the medieval artist a Narcissus highlights the phantasmagoric as fundamental to high-medieval picture-making, a practice wherein even the most stylistically ‘real’ or ‘natural’ images are better understood as material instantiations of eidetic visions and desires. Indeed, just as Narcissus might crawl from the real to imaginary and back, *Rose* miniatures question drawing sharp distinctions between eidetic and material pictures.

The Transmission Mechanism of an Image in an Existentialist Context

Ian Herbertson (University of London)

In his *An Existentialist Aesthetic*, Kaelin (1962) examined the works of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty to discern whether either held a theory of aesthetic experience that could be described as existentialist. Since then, existentialist aesthetics has been largely neglected, but work on aesthetic experience and emotional reaction (spiritual, mystical etc.) has burgeoned in the last 20 years. It seems timely to take a fresh look at Kaelin's examination. In discussing recent work that poses challenges to Sartre's views on aesthetic-related topics, new avenues of enquiry have been identified. The first is to apply work on vagueness (for example, Edgington 1997) to Sartre's *irreal* image (for him this is the work of art in its presence and from memory) and the fuzziness of emotion. The second avenue is to examine the components of aesthetic experience in which image is a key component in what I have called the transmission mechanism – from a physical object to a person's consciousness – crucially, to assess the linkage between image and consciousness. This paper will focus on the role of the image in the transmission mechanism and not existentialism more generally.

Awakening Meaning in Matter: The eidetic in Georges Rouault's painting

Jennifer Johnson (St John's College, Oxford)

This paper argues that the thickly painted canvases of French painter Georges Rouault's (1871–1958) are an attempt to embed the eidetic in the kind of modernist vocabulary usually thought of as materialist.

Rouault produced multiple versions of the face of Christ set within a square, drawing upon the legend of Saint Veronica. Painted in thick, brutishly applied paint, the legend appears initially to be explicitly inverted. The mimetic ideal, the image *not* made by human hands, seems to have become an image of making in highly material terms. Yet, even as the thick slab-like layers of paint bespeak the hand of the artist, the density of those layers overcomes and replaces human presence with material force.

For Rouault, painting was a way of divining the invisible within the visible – and the visibility of 'worked' matter in his painting speaks to this project. 'To awaken in matter' was his description of his work, a gambit taken up by the philosopher Jacques Maritain in his neo-Thomist/Bergsonian aesthetics.

This paper argues that Rouault's oeuvre proposes a phenomenological divination of meaning evident in the collision of the conceptual and the material in the icon: its manifest status as a made-thing is bound up in its operation as a sign, as an evocation of sacred presence. The paper then turns to the philosophies of Maritain and Martin Heidegger, who share an interest in the notion of 'shining' as an illumination of hidden truths, of understanding what is at work in Rouault's art.

Painting What Cannot be Seen: Invisibility in the realist art of Manet

Margaret Werth (University of Delaware)

Accounts of artistic representations of the 'visible invisible' in the 19th century have focused on romanticism and symbolism. This paper takes up the question of such representations in the art of Edouard Manet. While Manet painted conventional subjects of reverie, such as women in the interior, he also created pictures that provocatively invoked invisible presences. Two examples are his Hamlet paintings. The first, painted in 1865, depicted the actor Philibert Rouviere, and the second of 1876–77 was a commissioned portrait of the opera singer Jean-Baptiste Faure. In each case, Manet combined close observation of the sitter/model and study of photographs to create recognisable portraits. Yet, both paintings call up the invisible figure of Hamlet's father's ghost from Shakespeare's play. How does the haunting of these individual actor portraits by Hamlet's ghost conjure a 'real invisible' image? My paper will address the following: How does Manet's treatment of invisibility in his art challenge divisions between realism, romanticism, and symbolism? How does Manet's orchestration of the visible – his rendering of space, pose, gesture, and expression and his painterly facture – conjure what cannot be seen?

The Embedded and the Eidetic in the Paintings of Riza ‘Abbasi

Michael Chagnon (Columbia University)

Since the publication of the first systematic studies of Perso-Islamic painting in the early 20th century, the name of the painter Riza ‘Abbasi (active 1590–1635) has been nearly synonymous with artistic transformations that occurred during the 17th century in Iran, particularly the emergence of the single-sheet painting as the primary vehicle for pictorial expression. In the study of Islamic art, Riza is renowned for his figural studies, executed in a modulated calligraphic line, enhanced by subtle washes or luxurious pigments, and depicting generic types or, at times, specific individuals identified in captions.

Several figural paintings by Riza incorporate depictions of ancillary objects, such as textiles and wine vessels, which are themselves decorated with figural imagery. Limited scholarly attention has been devoted to these secondary figures, who appear as active participants in the scene, directing their gestures and gazes toward the main subjects. Since the single-sheet picture genre evolved out of a tradition of poetic manuscript illustration, (pre-)textual or narrative rationales for such puzzling activity have been hypothesised. One possibility is that the embedded figures are manifestations of the main subjects’ (inebriated) reveries.

This paper argues that Riza’s embedded figures, reflecting an altered state of cognition, function as metatextual commentaries on the contested role of figuration in early modern Perso-Islamic thought. Viewed through the lens of the eidetic, these secondary figures become of primary significance to a more nuanced view of Riza’s artistry, establishing – and paradoxically undermining – a hierarchy of imaging, from the ‘unseen’ mental image to painted figural representation.

Turning Listeners into Spectators: Ekphrastic encounters in performance art practice and documentation

Alice Hoad (University of Bristol)

Recent scholarship has positioned performance art as an ephemeral art form that ‘disappears in the moment of its becoming’ (Phelan, 1993). This ontology fixes it in time and renders it unknowable, unsayable, and invisible to all who were not present at the initial performance event.

A more productive understanding of performance might consider the generative possibilities of disappearance, allowing performance to become itself *through its documentation*. This paper will propose that classical ekphrasis – vivid description that creates images in the mind’s eye – is an illuminating lens through which to consider contemporary performance art.

The modern definition of ekphrasis as ‘the verbal representation of visual representation’ has come to eclipse its ancient understanding (Heffernan, 1993). Classical ekphrasis denotes a mode of vivid description that conjures eidetic images for the audience: transforming listeners into spectators. Ekphrasis is a ‘quasi-physical force’ that uses language to penetrate the body of the hearer/spectator to appeal to the ‘eyes of the mind’ (Webb, 2009). The subjects of ekphrasis were generally defined by their absence, e.g. past events and lost objects. It is therefore particularly suited to performance art: a medium condemned to exist in a perpetual oscillation between absence and presence.

This paper will recover this ancient definition of ekphrasis in order to explore how contemporary artists use ekphrasis to create eidetic experiences in the practice and documentation of their work. It will consider a wide range of case studies, including: Sophie Calle, Jeremy Deller, Performance Re-enactment Society, Blast Theory, Georges Perec, JocJonJosch and Forced Entertainment.