

PAGE: In the 5th century Before Christ, in an extraordinary separation of the senses, the Scythian slave owners removed the eyes of any slaves whose indenture required only their hands. The eyes of these slaves were surplus to requirements, an excess that signalled the radical potential for these slave bodies to mutate into men.

HAND: And what of the orphaned eyes?

PAGE: There is some dispute amongst scholars. Some have it that they were kept as trophies, embalmed and displayed as an accumulation of power. Other sources dispute this history and have it that they were treated as worthless offal, thrown into the rivers to be swallowed whole by sturgeon and catfish.

HAND: There is of course another view; that it was, in fact, an act of discarding the bodies. A liberation of the eye.

PAGE: What is required?

EYE: A sensible alibi. An alibi of the seen, a legitimate friend.

HAND: A trustworthy alibi, to account for one-another.

EYE: Much more than accounting, an apparatus of circulation.

EYE: Advances in technology have often been resisted by the artist and gallery. But, equally, often met with a fervent enthusiasm, hailed as the next big thing, or as a signal of a fundamental shift in the cultural, political and bio-political milieu. Synthetic paints, photography, cinematography, various forms of print making, Hypertext Transfer Protocol, digital image capture and display, High Definition displays, 4K and retina displays, touch screens and wireless gadgetry have all made claims for augmenting the human experience, ushering in a new era of art, culture and Man — of irrevocably shifting the horizon of the Eye. Some have taken hold faster than others, some have a greater sticking power, it would appear. But amongst all these chemical reactions, silicon chips and floating data packets one technological advance seems to be missing. Why is it that the arts have so far shunned the curved screen? There are, I think, two exceptions, gargantuan IMAX domes, which are generally reserved for the entertainment industry and the popular sciences; and primitive Cathode Ray Tubes, which insult the technics of our time by bending light precisely in the wrong direction.

PAGE: Flatness has a great appeal and tradition to it. A kinship with flatness would certainly be one way of looking at the omission of curved screens. One could, perhaps, write an extensive essay on the history of flatness in relation to the neglect of curved screens. But, the key is really in the Eye itself and art’s propensity to prise the Eye from the body. Whether we are looking at icon paintings, allegorical history paintings or pure abstraction it is the Eye that takes privilege over the body. It is the Eye that acts as a conduit to the transcendental. It is the Eye that alleviates Being from the earthly and soiled body. It is the Eye that sanctions a view of beauty free from the wanton desire of the body. By the early 1960s the privilege of the Eye was being overthrown, or, at the very least, becoming problematic. New object based practices, described intermittently as Minimalist, Literalist, Theatrical or ABC Art, anticipated not only the Eye but the body of the viewer. Whilst these practices would appear to delimit the Eye, they paradoxically coincide with the apotheosis of documentary photography. The legacy of Minimalist art lies not in the reintroduction of the body into art experience, but in the expulsion of the corporeal mess of the human body from the pristine gallery installation shot. The lens becomes the Eye, and...

EYE: ...And the Eye becomes the lens.

PAGE: Precisely, and so with the photographic Eye the viewer inherits a certain degree of artistic agency. Of course, further developments have shifted this relationship again. Subsequent events cut deeper into the body, or what was left. The cornea, pupil, iris and lens were all, at one stage, discarded and the optic nerve championed as a perfect channel for pure data. The body was eventually returned, damaged but not irretrievably so, to perform as an active participant. But, to return to the question of technology, the 21st century really has seen a return to that discordance between the Eye and the body which first became apparent in the 1960s. Displays used today are required to function in a number of ways; a display must, even when perfectly flat, exist as an object that may be captured in some way by the photographic lens of the Eye; it may be medium specific and assert its technological apparatus on the viewer, or capture the Eye through the sheer grace and overabundance of pixels — but it must be fallible. The curved display is not capable of either of these requirements. In the first instance, the curved display refuses to play the same role as a standardised rectilinear display, its curve is far too particular and departs from a function as an equivalent mass or punctuation point in composing a photographic image. In the second instance, the curved display has neither the means to reflect on the specificity of its defining curve nor the weakness of flat and tube screens that readily reveal themselves as dumb objects the moment that the light level or perspective of the viewer alters even slightly.

HAND: Then this what I shall commit to. Removal of the Eye. A liberation of the optic. I will first press the sphere into an ovoid.

PAGE: There will be some resistance here. It is important to gauge the appropriate pressure in order not to cause a rupture. A number of muscle groups will work together to resist and so a balance of pressure is important. The automatic response of these muscles is fast and leaves a fine window of opportunity to extract the organ. The orbicularis oculi will first close the eyelids with some expediency. This is the most immediate of reflexes, but also the easiest to overpower.

The corrugator supercilii, just above the eye, and the procerus muscle, which runs along the ridge of the nose, will partner to draw down the forehead. The action of these muscles will draw tissue down to surround the eye, reducing the aperture of the eye socket. It is vital to force pressure into the socket before this gap has been closed; once tensioned, these muscles would require external pressure from the forehead, nose and jowls to release them.

At this stage the extraocular muscles will attempt to protect the eye. There are two main muscle groups attached to the eye; the rectus muscles and the oblique muscles. Both groups comprise of a superior, inferior, medial and lateral muscle surrounding the eye. They will attempt to retract the eye away from the hand. These muscles may also compress the eye and rotate to defend the organ. The superior oblique muscle is fixed at the top of the eye by the trochlea, a pulley-like structure, this will be important to remember for the next steps.

Removal of the extraocular muscles from the eyeball itself is a delicate task. As these muscles will attempt to defend against extraction, it may be advisable to remove the muscles whilst still attached to the eyeball. Both the rectus and oblique muscles all originate at the annulus of Zinn. Disconnecting the muscles here not only circumnavigates the complex detachment from the eyeball under the pressure of resistance, but also allows the use of bunched nerves to cushion the eye on extraction.

HAND: I will slide digits over the eyelid, force my fingertips back into the socket. I will act swiftly and enter in before the facial muscles prevent access, resisting their defence. And once beyond the threshold, I will work with these clamping muscles. I will tighten my grip and overcome the lines of muscles, retracting and twisting. I will detach a bundle of twitching threads of muscle from deep within. And here, what will I find?

PAGE: The most challenging stage of a manual operation of this type is the disconnection of the optic nerve. This bundle of around 1.5 million fibres is encased by a sheath of three protective layers. A direct removal from the optic head will be difficult until the extraocular muscles are removed. Further difficulty lies in the extended structure of the optic nerve, which connects not only with the sister nerve, but also to other bundles of cranial nerves, most immediately the olfactory nerves. Considerable force will be required to tear the nerve with tension, and it may be advisable to weaken the sheathing and cut into the nerve fibres with a fingernail before exerting force.

PAGE: The Hand took the Eye, gently, between the thumb and ring finger, with clear intraocular fluid draining out through the pupil and collecting in the webbing of the fingers. The Hand placed the Eye on the Page and spoke.

HAND TO THE EYE: Feel the cool surface of paper. Feel the sensation of air at your back, the drying of your membrane and the bond forming between Eye and Page. Feel the tips of three digits guiding you back and forth, peeling from that damp patch of the Page.

EYE TO THE PAGE: Feel the soft warmth of the Eye on your skin. Feel the damp settle, fluids collect and spoil. Feel the collapse of fine fibre structures, the peeling of your surface, the darkening of a stain forming on your bleached facade.

HAND TO THE EYE: My palm pushes into your back. A little pressure, building steadily until your shape shifts. The roll of contours on contours, spreading your mass across the Page. Let’s take a journey, let me guide you along. Now, feel the imprint of the words on the Page. Can you feel the smooth glaze of ink against the coarse paper? Can you feel each glyph against your membrane? Follow them up the page... ‘s’ ... ‘s’ ... ‘s’ ... ‘F’... ‘b’... ‘b’... ‘b’ ... ‘F’...

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