

"modernizing vision" and describe an artist to relate essay sample

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Jonathan Crary's essay " Modernizing Vision" raises a new perspective to the history of vision. Instead of looking at it in continuum which is how it has traditionally been viewed in the Western culture, he points out a rupture in the history of vision in the 1820s and 30s and how quickly the change occurred. This new vision seems to be functioning within photographers still today. Uta Barth's photographic series Ground is a visual representation of the modernized vision.

Before the 19th Century, the vision is described as that there was a direct correspondence between the observer and the object, much like camera-obscura produces the true representation of the external world. People like Richard Rorty or Descarte's ideas on observation are based on this camera-obscura model that secured the position of the self at the center , and this idea clearly shows the distinction between the inner and the outer world. However, in 19th Century, physiological study done by Goethe or Muller revealed that the perception of the external world goes through our body and the stimulus from outside are processed on sensory nerves. For example, the analysis of the afterimages which was previously thought as illusion was studied by major scientists at that time.

Johannes Muller, the major theorist of vision in the first half of the nineteenth century, came up with the " doctrine of the specific nerve energies" in which the specialization and division of human sensory system was discussed. This introduction of body between observer and object collapsed the line camera-

obscura system was creating between inner and outer world. The secured position of an observer is taken away. Our perception depends on how our bodies process the stimulus from the external world anymore. As a result, the vision in 19th century became autonomous and subjective.

Uta Barth's photographic series *Ground* consists of about fifty images varying in size and shapes of rectangular, of landscape and interiors, which are all unfocused. For example, in *Ground #47*, there is an emerald green curtain hanging on the left side of the frame, and the rest of the image is a white wall. The space is lit by soft light, it looks as if it is one of the room from an ordinary house. *Ground #3* is a photograph shot exterior during the day. There are office buildings in the background, and in the middle ground and the right side of frame there are trees, suggesting it is a park in metropolitan area. Objects or scenes in the images are still identifiable, but they refuse to speak about themselves. By showing the unfocused background and middle ground, she sets the focus to foreground where there is just an empty space. This lack of foreground makes viewers wonder what it is they are looking at, and thus her photographs raise awareness of looking at something for the viewers.

The modernized vision Crary proposed is subjective one. Based on the theories of Goethe and Muller, each person reacts differently to the same stimulus from the external world. In this system of vision, the question of which perception is more true is no longer at place. It proves the plurality of vision. This new vision Crary sees in 1820s are still working in the 21st Century, in fact it is one of the characteristic of the post modernism. There

are so many contexts an image can be put into. There are cultural differences, religious differences, and we are exposed to these differences through the availability and the accessibility of information. With TV and the internet, we are able to access anything, but it does not establish a rigid position of one's point of view. Depending with which perspective one is looking at, the meaning of information changes. Today's vision hints that there is no limitation in vision itself.

In Barth's Ground, the places she photographed are banal. Ground #47 looks like it is shot in any houses, and Ground #3 looks like it is shot in any metropolitan areas. The lack of specificity of the location of the photographs suggests unimportance of the content of the images. During an interview with Mathew Higgs, she commented " I'm interested in the margins, in everything that is peripheral rather than central"(Phaidon, 10). They do not represent anything specific through the content of the images. By exhibiting these banal images horizontally in the gallery, it makes the viewer feel that it is not actually through the images she is communicating, but it is through the act of looking at those peripheral views. It seems she is interested in the possibility of expanding the vision.

Representing one of numbers of other visions does not speak about the vision today. Instead, she tries to connect different peripheral visions from daily banal scenes and hints there is no limits to our vision by presenting them as a whole. It is as if she is trying to make connection to the world by collecting numbers of peripheral viewers and tying them together. It is not a aggressive, direct relationship to the world, but it is one way. Pamela M. Lee

uses a quote from Merleau-Ponty's quote in describing Barth's work. "When I perceive, I belong, through my point of view, to the world as a whole, nor am I aware of the limits of my visual field. Variety of points of view is hinted at only by an imperceptible shift, a certain 'blurred effect in the appearance'" (Phaidon, 36). This represents Barth's idea of vision, which is the modernized vision.

Traditional photography tries to communicate through the content of the images, while Barth communicates through the lack of objects in the images. This creates the relationship between the viewers that is not closed, direct, or hierarchic, but the relationship that is more open and accessible. It seems with this series that she is trying to take off the layers that would require some prerequisite knowledge to read the work by refining them down to elemental compositions such as background, middle ground, and foreground and also by using banal scenes for content. The vision she presents in the Ground series stands on the base of Crary's modernized vision.