

1-1-2012

To see the world clearly: - painting, the camera obscura and the lens of Spinoza

Paul Uhlmann
Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2012>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Uhlmann, P. G. (2012). To see the world clearly: - painting, the camera obscura and the lens of Spinoza. Proceedings of Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUADS) Conference. (pp. 9). Canberra, Australia. Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUADS). This Conference Proceeding is posted at Research Online. <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2012/127>

To see the world clearly: - painting, the camera obscura and the lens of Spinoza

Paul Uhlmann

Lecturer, Visual Arts, Edith Cowan University

PhD Candidate: School of Art, RMIT University

Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the methodology of my practice-led research as it relates to the concept of sensation (Deleuze) in relation to the body and to painting. I argue that the concept of alienation of the Early German Romantics still has resonance for us today. Further to this I will consider the influence of Spinoza's ideas of 'one substance' on my thinking and lastly I will relate my own experiments with the camera obscura. An aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the lens can be considered a powerful metaphor for perception: if we can see the world in a different way, if we can see the world anew then we will move beyond the self-imposed borders of alienation and we will think and act differently.

I have been a practicing artist for over thirty years working in a variety of ways and using the media of painting, drawing, photography, video, artists' books and installation. All of these approaches, for me, may be seen to have emerged out of a rhizomic¹ concern for painting and the history of ideas informing painting, and so each distinct branch of my practice-based research links and folds back into painting. My work has fundamentally desired to understand my place in the world and has been a search for meaning – to find a sense of the sacred in the everyday. Over the years I have endeavoured to create a pictorial language through an evolving combination of symbols and text and through the material nature of 'paint' itself.

Sensation, Painting and Practice Led Research

It is useful here to consider the concept of 'sensation' as expounded by Gilles Deleuze. Sensation, according to Deleuze, is a way our bodies understand the material of paint. The often abstract language of paint, with its bodily traces of gestures and swirls, is not easily understood by the mind, rather it acts directly on the nervous system of the viewer. Sensation then, is both directly related to the body of the maker and the body of the viewer. It is related to instinct, vital movement, the spine

¹ The Rhizome is a concept of Gilles Deleuze. It refers to ways of thinking and researching which spread unpredictably – like an underground root system. Diverse approaches to a problem emerge seemingly of their own accord. A rhizome is an open system that emphasizes the capricious, undifferentiated and nomadic character of life and language (Albrecht-Crane, C. 2005, p.126).

and flesh. For the viewer to understand the painting they must enter into it and become the substance of the paint itself – in a sense the viewer must rechart the movements and instinct of the maker. At the moment the viewer ‘becomes’ the painting they enter, via sensations, into a new relationship with their bodies and the world around them. To understand painting, boundaries collapse and the apparent borders between themselves and the world are blurred - subject and object become one (Deleuze, 2003, pp 34-36).

Deleuze notes, that the concept of ‘sensation’ owes a debt to the painter Paul Cézanne and to a history of thinking about paint passed down through studios and conversations – through demonstration. Therefore the evolution of this way of thinking and acting emerges out of the studio – out of active experimentation rather than ‘passive’ reading or class tutorials. In a sense, the painter of sensation *feels* their way through the creative process, through the mediation and complex engagement of working through the materials in relation to their own body – employing senses and intuition as well as intention. For Deleuze, this way of attempting to understand the world through first principals links with the philosophy of phenomenology. Maurice Merleau-Ponty defines phenomenology as aiming to recreate a direct and primitive contact with the world and to describe our experience as it is – prior to knowledge. To see the world as if for the first time, we must return to the ‘things themselves’. In order to truly understand the everyday world we move through, we must immerse ourselves subjectively in the world – for we are not a ‘bit of the world’ – we are not objectively cut off from the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 p. ix). Phenomenology is accessible only *through* a phenomenological method and therefore we understand the world only through active engagement with it – through doing. Science is a rationale or explanation of the world whereas phenomenology strives to understand the essence of being in the world of existence – through “attentiveness and wonder” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962 p. xxiv). My current research, therefore, strives to employ as a methodology, the phenomenological method through practice-led research.

The Early German Romantics, Alienation and Its Continued Relevance

Informing my work from the outset is the history of potent ideas that emerged at the beginning of the German Romantic movement which sparked into existence in 1797. A powerful concept extrapolated by the early German Romantics was the idea of alienation. There was a sense of loss of harmony that was idealistically thought to have existed in a prior golden epoch. This break-down in harmony was perceived by the romantics as being a universal illness which could be described as alienation (Entfremdung), estrangement (Entäusserung), separation (Trennung) or division (Entzweiung) (Beiser, 2003. P. 31). These terms articulated a sense of loss - a predicament where the self should be at one with something but is now opposed to itself. The early German Romantics categorised this sense of loss into three categories of alienation that afflict the spirit of humanity. There is the division within the self, the division between self and others and the division between

self and nature. It was part of the mission of the Romantics in recognising these forms of alienation to attempt to construct methods and philosophies to bring harmony and unity back to the self (Beiser, F. (2003). pp30-31).

It forms part of my argument that these forms of alienation are still with us today. Indeed the contemporary commentator, Clive Hamilton, writes that “the modern concept of ‘progress’ embodies the idea of separating ourselves from Nature both physically and psychologically thus creating a profound ‘disconnect’ with Nature in the minds and actions of the subject”(Hamilton, 2010, p. 135). This is clearly madness as our very survival is dependent on understanding our interdependence with other living beings. I argue that it is urgent and vital for our very survival to find ways of moving beyond habits of thinking and being that have informed this sense of alienation.

Spinoza - Fallen Philosopher Reinvented

It interests me that key figures that fuelled the early German Romantic project such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Novalis took their inspiration from Baruch Spinoza, a banished philosopher, whose works went unread for over one hundred years and who was widely considered to be an atheist. Through a strange series of events these early romantics were able to rehabilitate the public image of this fallen philosopher to make him a key figure informing their progressive thinking. Such was the turn-around in their re-invention of Spinoza that Novalis was able to describe him as a ‘god-intoxicated philosopher’ (Scruton, 2002, p.51). Goethe was so excited by his intellectual discovery that he famously took to carrying a copy of Spinoza’s *Ethics* with him at all times (Gerrish, 1986, p.443).

It is my conjecture that the enthusiasm about Spinoza’s philosophy injected notions of pantheism into the project at an early stage so that a figure such as Caspar David Friedrich is able to say, standing in front of one of his pictures, that ‘god is everywhere, even within a grain of sand’ (Honour, H. 1979, p.77). With this statement it is apparent that a sense of the sacred had been returned to nature. Nature therefore became a place of divinity in the minds of the German Romantics, connecting them to ancient concepts such as the idea of *anima mundi* – the “World Soul”, advanced by Plato - where the world is understood as a living being or organism (Gerissh, 1987, p. 450).

The tragedy of German Romanticism for us today, however, is that key figures misinterpreted Spinoza. One of my aims with my research is to identify this misinterpretation so that I can re-orientate one of the aims of the German Romantic project – to bring wonder, unity and harmony back into the world, to overcome alienation.

Fundamentally where the Romantics got it wrong was by adapting the work of Spinoza to suit their needs. Essentially the pantheistic view of nature held by the Romantics still embraced a transcendent concept of god – a god that could intervene on their behalf, who sat at the top of the system, who gave and took life. The philosophy of Spinoza, however, was one of immanence where god vanishes into the surrounding field to exist within nature. Indeed god seems to vanish altogether so that there is only life itself. Spinoza considered all life - matter and mind - to be 'one substance' so that everything is folded into everything else. With such a profound view we are more intimately connected to our surrounding environment and to all living beings than we can possibly imagine. Responsibility for our actions and for our environment is completely our own – there can be no hope of a divine hand to intervene on our behalf. A further problem with the Romantic conception of things was that they still held to the view that there was an organising hierarchy in nature. At top of the pyramid was nothing less than the creativity of the artist, philosopher, or saint, which was the highest human degree of organisation and development of the divine force. Their creativity was the culmination of all the organic powers of nature (Beiser, 2003, p. 143). Humanity was still on top of the food chain and so this reinforced an anthropocentric view. Spinoza saw it differently and he placed humanity on the same plane as all other life forms – all life was indivisible from itself and so none had the right to exploit the other – the slug was of the same value as a human life² (Beiser, 2003, p. 142). With such a monistic view, humanity cannot claim dominion over other animals and life forms for we are all intricately connected to a single web of life. Deleuze interprets these ideas as being a plane of immanence.

To Think Clearly – Spinoza and The Lens

Spinoza was educated in 17th century Holland in Amsterdam and his father held high hopes of him becoming a rabbi. His desire for free thinking, however, quickly turned events against him and he was accused of being a heretic and exiled from his Jewish community at the young age of 24 in 1656. This exile was profound for, as he was cast out of his community, the rabbis issued a writ banning others to 'communicate with him verbally or in writing; no one was to show him any favour ...nor be within four cubits of him, nor read anything composed or written by him' (cited in Scrutton, 2002, p.10). He was forced to live a quiet life composing his philosophy outside of the mainstream, surviving by giving private lessons in Cartesian philosophy and by grinding lenses³. It interests me that he was known to be so proficient in grinding lenses that his lenses were sought out by Christian Huygens, an astronomer and the founder of modern optics. Spinoza is known to have lived with an

² Beiser summarises, "Spinoza had placed all modes on the same footing; a rock, a vegetable, or a human being are equal manifestations of the infinite, which is completely present in all things" (Beiser, 2003, p.143).

³ According to A. Wolf he " was an optician by profession, and it was in this capacity that he was sought out by Hudde, Huygens, Leibniz and Tschirnhaus. He wrote on the rainbow...Wolf. A. 1927. P.5)

artist⁴ (Scrutton, 2002, p. 15) and is also known to have made drawings himself (Scrutton, 2002, p. 18). As this was the time of Vermeer it is not too difficult to project the possibility that he was quite familiar with the camera obscura. I want to draw a parallel between the slow process of grinding and polishing the lens and the slow accumulation of knowledge. Spinoza wanted his philosophy to allow others to 'think clearly,' to move beyond illusions so that the individual could be truly free. The lens here becomes a powerful metaphor for perception, as it can reveal hidden worlds to us which lie in the microscopic worlds as well as the universe above in the sky. It can also bring a sense of wonder back into the mundane world of the everyday.

Practice Led Research With a Simple Lens

I had my first memorable experience with a lens when I was about 12 years old, walking through the hallway of my parents' home carrying a magnifying glass. I was lost in a solitary game of magnifying the mundane world when I made a discovery. Holding the glass lens to the wall with the soft afternoon light spilling in from the window I became transfixed to see the window projected upside-down in exact and minute detail on the wall.

There was something wonderful about being able to see the events outside the window unfold in real time as I watched my brother move outside. He was weightless and full of light and air.

Without knowing clearly why, from the outset of my project I have had the desire to use the camera obscura as one branch of my research. Rather than becoming overwhelmed with the complexity and scope of optics, I have wanted to remain somehow close in my experiments to the simplicity of my first boyhood encounter with the lens.

During my residency at Fremantle Arts Centre in 2009, I had a hexagon plywood room built at 2.4M high with each panel being 1.2 M wide, with a hole, at 30cm in diameter, in the centre of the ceiling. (See Figure 1.) The room was placed on a hill outside under a tree at the back of the centre. The idea was to make a small chamber big enough for just one person to contemplate the sky above. A touchstone for this project was a fresco painting by Giotto of St Francis of Assisi communicating with the birds. For me St Francis represents a figure who desires to subsume the ego so that he is able to be in the here and now in a very primordial way. He therefore becomes a symbol for ideas of interconnectedness and 'returning to the things themselves'. During this time I made repeated experiments with a makeshift camera obscura where I covered the entrance with a black cloth and set-up a lens inside the chamber so that it projected shimmering images of the trees and sky above downwards onto my paper or canvas. Observing these images within the secrecy of my chamber was completely absorbing and beguiling.

⁴ Spinoza is known to have resided in The Hague in the house of painter van der Spuyck in 1672.

I have recently moved this contemplation room to my front garden under a gum tree, which is often frequented by a great variety of bird life. During the early months of 2011 I have been engaged in making small videos of either 30 seconds or 1 minute in duration. The videos have been of the projection of the camera obscura on notepads and of the view looking straight up through the cupola (see Figures 2 & 3). For an exhibition in May this year at RMIT Project Space I set up an installation in the Spare Room, which is a small monastic room approximately 3.7 M x 2.15 M, with no natural light at the rear of the gallery. Importantly this room is very high at 3.6M. Part of my aim was to recreate the sense of intimacy that I experienced with the contemplation room. There were 5 components installed in the space – 3 birdhouses painted in bright colours referencing a Giotto painting and two small video frames each measuring approx 25cm x 15cms. I wanted the birdhouses to be spaces of architectural immersion for the mind and to try to find a way for the viewer to consider the nature within this urban, internal setting.

The first birdhouse that the viewer encountered was hung quite low and angled towards the viewer away from the wall. In peering into the round hole of the birdhouse the viewer encountered a reflection of themselves, as I had placed a black glass sheet within the box. As they peered down they also encountered a reflection of a small video on a one-minute loop of a view through the cupola. Taken on a windy day the clouds race across a blue sky as the trees sway wildly. A single bee hovers near the nectar of the wattle. The reflection of this blue moving circle is made deeper due to the thickness of the glass. It was a surprise for people to encounter this small apparition within the birdhouse. One commentator said that I had “put the sky back in the box”.

I also installed two small video frames with one-minute videos on a continuous loop cycle. One video had a projection of a camera obscura of the trees above unfolding onto a notepad. Both of the images were round projections. At times birds would flit, like spectres, in and out of the round frames while the trees swayed slowly in the wind. The quality of the video frames was such that the images staggered a little so that I was reminded of old silent movies. I had these videos installed on a darkened wall at eye height with a gap of about 15cms and someone commented to me that they reminded her of two eyes. Indeed, it is not yet clear to me but perhaps the reason why we are so arrested by the image of the camera obscura is that in reversing the image it mirrors the way we see the world; that is, before our brains automatically correct the image our eyes present to us.

Conclusion

I have not known why I have been interested in the lens until recently, when the nature of my questioning has begun to be informed by the philosophy of Spinoza. In the light of Spinoza the lens becomes a philosophical and political tool. It allows the viewer to re-imagine the world, to bring wonder, back to the here and now and to overcome, if only for a moment, the sense of alienation that is a persistent contemporary illness first identified by the German romantics in the late 18th

century. In short, it is possible through the lens, via sensations, to enter onto a plane of immanence (Deleuze) where we, and indeed all life are revealed as being 'one substance'.

End.



Figure 1. *contemplation room dedicated to St Francis and the birds (2009)*
Paul Uhlmann
Plywood 2.4M H x 2.4M in circumference.
Photograph by Pascal Veyradier



Figure 2: *cupola 25th April 2011 10.28 AM,*
archival image from the series '*to breathe (what is it to live a life?)*'
Photograph: Paul Uhlmann

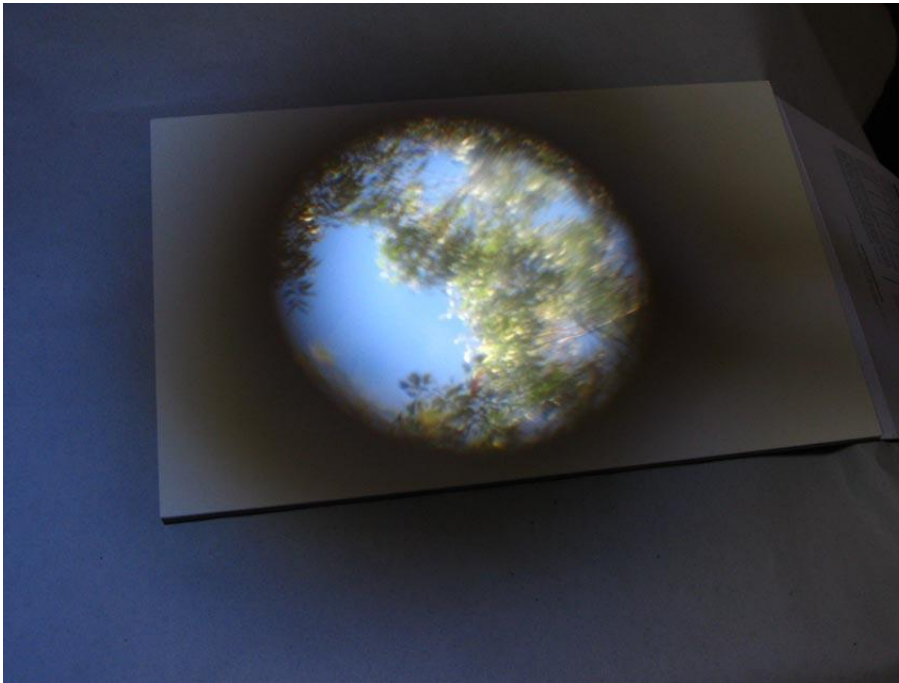


Figure 3: *Camera obscura, 13th May 2011, 9.44 AM,*
archival image from the series '*to breathe (what is it to live a life?)*'
Photograph: Paul Uhlmann

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albrecht-Crane, C. (2005). *Style, stutter*.
In Stivale, C. J. (Ed.), *Gilles Deleuze, Key Concepts*,
Chesham, UK, Acumen.
- Beiser, F. C. (2003). *The Romantic Imperative, The Concept of Early
German Romanticism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and
London: Harvard University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1988). *Spinoza Practical Philosophy*. (R. Hurley,
Trans.). San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- Deleuze, G. (2003). *Francis Bacon: the logic of Sensation*.
(D. W. Smith, Trans.), New York, London: Continuum.
- Hamilton, C. (2010). *Requiem for a Species, Why we Resist the Truth
about Climate Change*. Crows Nest, NSW, Allen and
Unwin.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). [C. Smith, Trans.], *Phenomenology of Perception*.
London ; New York : Routledge.
- Scruton, R. (2002). *Spinoza: A Very Short Introduction*. New York,
Oxford: University Press.
- Spinoza, B. (1992). *The Ethics, Treatise on the Emendation of the
Intellect, Selected Letters*. (Ed.). S. Feldman,(Shirley,
Trans.). Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett
Publishing Company.
- Stafford, B. M & Terpak, F. (2001). *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a box to
Images on a Screen*, Los Angeles: Getty Research
Institute.