

Extending Collective Attentions: Notes on Seeing Not Looking.

Anne Wilson's work "Seeing Not Looking" currently showing at [Mars] Gallery from 13 July to 3 Aug, is a video investigation into the boundaries of sensing and the shifts that arise when a person's awareness extends to include other aspects of the environment. The components of a network, amplified through technologies, allow participants and viewers have access to other ways/modes of attending to existing networks of relationships. These components must be composed and can therefore, can be re-composed to drawing attention away from one configuration and link it to others. Contexts, movement spatial arrangements and sequences of events, are the elements of a video choreography. The difference between seeing (being able to perceive information) and looking (organising information relevant to perceiver/s) is the proposing and composing of links and pathways. Artworks, such as Wilson's, produce vibrant and expanded pathways for uniquely lived-experience of seeing and looking, to be understood and embodied differently.

Robert Smithson's drawing "A Heap of Language" supplies a clear example of what different modes of attention might look like or feel like. His 1967 essay begins by stating: "Language operates between literal and metaphorical signification. The power of a word lies in the very inadequacy of the context it is placed, in the unresolved or partially resolved tensions of disparates." He notes that a paradox arises between isolated language and language supported by an already meaningful context—causing dissimilar things to resemble each other. The shifts involved from seeing a heap of language to looking at the heap of shapes requires partially resolving the tension between different modes of (cognitive) processing. How these shifts are presented, orchestrated or choreographed can guide a person from one way of embodied processing to another. The senses, or more precisely, the specific configuration of the multi-modality of sensing—is at the heart of participatory sense making. Practice-led research provides insight into the specificities and benefits afforded by shifting modes of attention.

Wilson's video is consistent with contemporary artworks that extend and expand the perceptual system to reveal the implicate order and complexity in which we live. One of the conditions of this new era is the collective concern of coming to terms with the legacy of western thought—the insistence upon and maintaining of a separation from our environment that operates independent of the reality human-non-humans co-construct. In the video, a variety of attentions are made visible through the choice of technologies (drones, video, dancing bodies) and contexts (video gallery, dance studio-laboratory, video documentation and dance on film). Wilson offers three (at least three) modes of attention that problematize the boundaries of persons separate from their surroundings. The first is the choreographic score that that supplies attunements for the work.

The second is the video capture of the event which moves from documentation of the laboratory space to a more filmic framing of the dancers that foregrounds the qualities of movement, interspersed with the drones' perspective, which is itself composed of sensors, mechanical movements and the attentions and bodily-dispositions of the coders and programmers. The third is the text that appears on the video, which can be read or recognised as code, poetry, annotation and/or provocation. The set up a scenario in which viewers move in and out of the depicted scenes and coded signification, thus forcing them to see, look and read at the same time. Together these modalities of spatial, temporal and material events, sites and non-sites, form a thick network of potential attentions. The viewing experience is compounded by the contexts that overlap with, are augmented by or interfere with each other. For example, the intensity of the embodied connection a viewer forges with the mover and movement; the wilful engagement with the space of the work or; the degree of overlap between the video gallery and the lab space in the video. The numerous linking of pathways offered by the video are exponentially multiplied, activated, changed or overlooked by the attentions of the viewers in each viewing.

The key to engaging with Wilson's experiment in collective attention, is recognising that one must pilot the shifts and moves between modes of attention. The pilot-as-choreographer moves through events, modalities and movements—which unleashed from dance, nevertheless retain the ethos of the dance that produces an

intricate web of causal and non-linear connections. A pilot- choreographer such as Wilson, offers pathways of kinetic linking and inroads across perspectives to viewers who must navigate their own way through modes of engagement to find value in the exercise. The artwork, as an artificially constructed space of social intelligence, extends the practice-led approach to the gallery goers. It is not the newness that has value here, since it is increasingly difficult to be shocked by anything new, rather, it is the uniqueness of the embodied pathways that offer insight into the specific modes of collective attention.

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Notes

Wilson draw on, Oliver Sacks who, through the anecdotes of neurology, brings the anomalous cases into focus up close and personal Sacks, Oliver, "A Neurologist's Notebook: To See and Not to See". The New Yorker magazine, May 10, 1993.

Smithson, Robert "“Language to be looked at and/or things to be read” (1967)” in Flam, Jack (Ed) Smithson, Robert: the Collected Writings. Berkeley: University of California Press: 61.

The invention of practices that creative new sensing and body-environment opportunities can be done externally from the person sensing as which Bach-y-Rita's sensory substitution experiments (1972, Brain Mechanisms in Sensory Substitution. Cambridge MA: Academia Press) or within the sensing experience by people such as Daniel Kish who developed an acute echolocation skill (<https://www.revolvy.com/page/Daniel-Kish>)

De Jaegher, H. & Di Paolo, E. "Participatory Sense Making: An nactive approach to social cognition." in Phenom Cogn Sci (2007) 6: 485. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-007-9076-9>