



GERALD MOORE  
GALLERY

at Eltham College

## The Oval Window

Representation is a dirty business; so too is mediation. Given this, which is a better body part to hold in mind to when talking and thinking through the way we represent the world to ourselves and to others: the eye, or the ear?

As feminist philosopher and historian Donna Haraway pointed out more than 30 years ago in her 1988 essay, “Situated Knowledges,” it is the *eye* which, at least since the advent of industrial modernity, has stood for the masculinist image of a gleaming, pure and cleanly reflecting surface to human subjectivity. The eye, clear and translucent, yields up the myth of crisp and immaculate pictures of the world of things. Vision, in this imaginary, allows for “the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation.” (Haraway, 1988: 581) Eyes, she tells us, have been used to “to signify a perverse capacity - [...] tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy - to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power.” (Ibid.)

The eye, at least from this perspective, is also - as art historian Cadence Kinsey (2014) argues - the machine eye of visual technologies: the glassy, spotless surfaces of cameras and of screens, recording what they see and conveying it to centres of political, economic and military control. The eye also figures the glassy screens of separation keeping scientists clean from their experimental subjects, allowing a one-way flow of information. The eye stands for the one-way mirror, the surveillance apparatus, and the slick operating system which, as Kinsey points out, *screens-off*, for example, the deadly battles in the Congo for the rare earth metals needed to power our devices’ warm, reassuring glow.

Many feminist thinkers of the past 50 years, including Haraway and Kinsey, have sought to show that, *contra* the myth of the eye, to think in the world is to be contaminated and made-grubby *by* the world. They have argued there is nowhere to stand from which to survey the dominion of the human without both contaminating, and being contaminated by, that territory’s muddy ground.

Haraway decided to try to re-purpose the mythos of the eye for a feminist politics. She points out the eye’s fleshy qualities; the way surveillance is shaped by the human-machine hybrids that make up its circuits. *The Oval Window*, however, proposes that the *ear* might stand as an alternative figure to think contaminated, embodied thoughts with. Thoughts, that is, about the ways in which knowing the world means touching and being touched by the world.

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The oval window is a chamber between the middle ear and the inner ear. Itself empty, the oval window carries sound amplified by a series of tiny bones from the world to the maze of cavities that make up the inner ear. The oval window sits at the centre of a complex sequence of embodied mediations, encompassing a series of bony, fleshy and membranous connections. These in turn depend, for the travel of information, on the passage of percussive

movement. This assemblage manages to provide us with a stream of representations. As well as the sonic landscape that we occupy, the ear also tells us about the action of gravity and acceleration upon and within our own bodies through the otolith, an intricate crystalline formation submerged in hormone-suffused fluids. It is through the inner ear that we know where we are in relation to the earth's gravitational field, and, at the same time, whether or not it's a good time to vomit. The ear is the organ both of gravitation and of hangovers. The masculinist (and, indeed, racist) fantasy that the eye (pure white-and-blue, all surface), is clear of all contaminations, seems to have had a long and healthy life. But it is surely harder to sustain such a fantasy in relation to the ear. The apparatus of the ear is a tremulous, waxy, damp and dark muddle of parts, signals and flows.

In 1983, the high-modernist poet J. H. Prynne published "The Oval Window" - the poem which partly inspired the exhibition's title. There, Prynne explores the possibilities for reconfiguring representation opened up by the membranous opening that is the oval window. Mediating between an array of discourses spanning Shakespearian soliloquy and high-finance techno-jargon, Prynne presents a sequence of reflections on the potentialities of bodily apertures, which imagines windows in places that we might rather not look. Literary critics Richard Kerridge and N. H. Reeve tell us that, for Prynne, the oval window occupies "the rim of human identity, across which pass the fundamental processes which enable us to have our being; the oval window itself is another point at the edge of what constitutes the integrity of the human subject." (Kerridge and Reeve, 1994: 153-154)

A few pages into the poem, Prynne gives us a concrete example of the way this membranous rim can become an aperture for viewing, delving into the economies linking markets to the lives of political subjects. He tells us that,

[...]A view is a window  
on the real data, not a separate copy  
of that data, or a lower surplus in oil  
and erratic items such as precious stones  
aircraft and the corpses of men, tigers  
fish and pythons, "all in a confused tangle."  
Changes to the real data  
are visible through the view, and operations  
against the view are converted, through  
a kind of unofficial window on Treasury policy,  
into operations on the real data. (Prynne, 1999: 319)

The "real data" - that is, matter *as* matter, rather than representations of matter - enters through the view of the oval window. With it comes confused tangle of "erratic items:" bodies and animals and stones. Here Prynne imagines the political work of managing flows of data: of cleaning up the real, material connections between erratic matter and its representation. Where Treasury's job is to obscure the messy *relata* of capital, labour and exploitation, the "view" which Prynne writes here is a window on the "operations on the real data". This ear-view, were we to look (or hear) through it, reveals - amongst other things - that the rhetoric of statistically driven economic rationality requires a clean divide between the murkiness of lived lives and the burgeoning Thatcherite neoliberal policy of the 1980s.

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Both oval windows - the oval window that is this exhibition, and Prynne's aural-passageway to murky materialities - present us with the possibility of unofficial views and unclean,

membranous divides through which bodies, limbs, and tendrils might reach to touch the hidden underside of materiality. The works can be roughly divided into two: on the one hand, critiques of dominant figurations of representation and mediation held within the image of the eye, and, on the other proposals for alternative, feminist visions of intimacy after the sticky potentialities of the ear's oval window.

Works by Ilona Sagar, Anja Olofgörs and Holly Graham's work form the exhibition's critical-deconstructive edge, with each artist offering a view, in Prynne's sense of an opening onto "real data," of representation's inextricable entanglement with materiality. Sagar's video piece, "Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye," directly addresses and questions the rhetoric of the disembodied eye. Showing broken sequences of bodies and glassy surfaces in-the-making, Sagar's work opens up the possibility for other apertures through images of touch which reveal the imaginary eye of total knowledge as a brittle organ, breakable as glass, continually touched and cracked even as it is idealised. Along similar but more explicitly monstrous lines, Olofgörs video and still works circle around early film productions of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*. Her (Olofgörs) work points to the contingency and precariousness of human attempts to manipulate living matter whilst denying their complicity in its corruptions. And, in *Sweet Swollen*, Holly Graham sets out another hidden, corporeal complicity, showing how capital, racist, colonial power have been bound together by trails of sugar and sugar consumption. Graham's work stitches together range of visual and textual interventions, including "sugar lift" etchings, aluminium plates showing industrial sweet food production in London, and wall texts which combine fragments from 19<sup>th</sup> century news clippings V&A African Heritage tour guides about "Blackamoor" sweetmeat, with William Morris quotations and critical reflections Christina Sharpe and Stuart Hall. In so doing, Graham provides new aperture into, and beyond, the flattened, medicalised discourse surrounding sugar. In so doing, she replaces the language of calories, addiction and health with a bittersweet cultural matrix of nostalgia, pleasure and oppression. All three artists point to the fragility and breakability of some of late modernity's most significant images of power: shining glass screens, the chemical whiteness of white sugar, and pristine lab coats. Their work reminds us that the living bodies that industrial capitalism manipulates can, and do, reach back towards us in uncanny and shattering intimacies; intimacies from which we, sensing the glassy fragility of our images of the world, recoil. These intimacies are, as a voice in Sagar's video tells us, "beyond the body before thought, a haptic and unplanned agent."

The three remaining artists work towards material proposals for worlds structured by relations that break almost completely loose from the optical, Cartesian model of representation of the eye, turning instead towards bony, waxy margins of the ear's oval window. Miriam Austin and Rutie Borthwick's installations each offer different takes on the world of interactions between bodies, surfaces and thoughts that arise within the ambiguous territory of the family structure. Austin's work, centring on an imagined dialogue with her great, great grandmother - part of an early generation of New Zealand colonisers, who spent her life rearing her family in a tent in the New Zealand bush after the death of her alcoholic husband - imagines a territory in which culture, materiality and the organic merge as memory-traces across layered generations. Borthwick, on the other hand, focuses more closely on the family drama of generation itself: on the sensate symbolism of practices of swaddling, wrapping and hugging during early infancy. Her work seeks to trigger latent sensory perceptions in the viewer, returning them to early memories in which the boundary between self and world were less fixed, offering opportunities for the forging of new internal familiarities. Finally, Robbie Fife's painting records the brief romance of two walkers on the *Camino de Santiago* pilgrimage trail: a flashing possibility of intimacy through this window into the lives of others, made possible by the ancient route. The *Camino de Santiago* moves not through homogenised, flattened plane of representation suggested by glass, but is instead

deeply inscribed into the earth's surface by more than a thousand years of pilgrims' footfall. Perhaps sound's rhythmic waves have likewise scored our own ears' channels and caverns.

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At least at times, Prynne seems to have been overwhelmed, and to have wanted overwhelm us, with the range of sounds and visions that travel through the waxy, bony, fleshy aperture of his poem, "The Oval Window". He writes, as if describing a scene of confusion and terror at the window's threshold, "the rain would pelt and cure by the foam inlet / smartly clad they could only panic / through the medium itself". (Prynne, 1999: 313) But the Oval Window of this exhibition does not, I think, seek either to induce or represent a sensory overload. Rather, it seems - as anthropologist Maryln Strathern puts it - to induce *partial connections*; connections which are partial in the sense that they are open, indeterminate, incomplete, *and* connections which are "partial" in the sense of being affectively charged, intimate, loyal. (Strathern, 1987). Writing of the Melanesian tribes she observed during her extended fieldwork, Strathern tells us that their practice of thinking through partial connections and breakages could be seen as "a kind of replicative process, where each configuration of concepts produces a remainder that generates a new dimension." (Ibid.: 108) The membraned hollow of the Oval Window is an entryway onto a new dimension, because of, and not despite, the partial, fragmented and broken connections it reveals. "Gaps," Strathern writes, (ibid., 115) "give us somewhere to extend."

### Text by **Matthew Drage**

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