

XYZ-NYC 2011- Natasha Johns-Messenger & Leslie Eastman  
with No Longer Empty- Catalogue Essay

## *'Turning on Axes of Light'*

### Melissa Miles

Light and optical phenomena have long fascinated artists and philosophers. Ever in pursuit of light, they have tirelessly studied its effects and put forward innumerable theories about its makeup. The ancient Greeks believed that light originates in the eye and flows in a fiery stream to the objects that are seen. To Empedocles, the sun was not a source of light but merely a facilitator that allowed this fire in the eye to do its job. The later Greeks separated light as a vehicle for information from the eye, but continued to conceive of light as a 'thing' that travels through empty space. Aristotle's model of light is one such theory, in which light radiates from the sun, bounces off objects and ricochets into our eyes. Dual concepts of light, encapsulated by the couplet *lumen* and *lux*, have dominated western thought ever since – driving a conceptual wedge between light as an external agent existing independently of the eye and the experience of light in human sight.

We invest heavily in this divisive binary scheme. Even when it is conceived objectively, light has a profound impact upon how we relate to and represent the world around us. The notion of geometric rays of light travelling through space is privileged in Euclidean optics, and informs the construction of perspectival space in painting and drawing. Like studies in *catoptrics* (the science of reflections) and *dioptrics* (the science of refraction), perspectival representation establishes axes of light that help us to imagine ourselves within space in objective terms and override the subjective experience of the body. The Cartesian co-ordinates *xyz* establishes an ordered triplet of lines that helps us to conceive of three-dimensional space similarly from the outside looking in.

The transparency of light is particularly seductive in these schemes, and a powerful metaphor for objectivity, clarity and truth. Light unveils, illuminates and reveals a way through. It facilitates seeing and knowing, helps us to negotiate space and makes objects present for the gaze. Through light we define our sense of being in space, and our sense of self. Both filling space and revealing its voids, light simultaneously separates and integrates the realm between the perceiving subject and the world of perceivable things. Hence to Emmanuel Levinas, 'Light makes objects into a world, that is, makes them belong to us.'<sup>i</sup> But when we try to make light itself belong to us, it quickly evades our grasp. As a

constant fugitive, it leaves only traces of its presence in its relation to the objects and vapors that surround us, or through the shadows and reflections that it creates.

The artists Natasha Johns-Messenger and Leslie Eastman have a particular interest in such complexities, and in their multifaceted work, *XYZ-NYC*, construct a series of architectural, optical and technological webs for capturing light's traces and allowing us to study them at close range. Johns-Messenger is an Australian artist, currently living and working in New York, with an ongoing interest in disrupting pictorial space. In *XYZ-NYC*, she joins forces with Eastman, a fellow Australian artist of light and space, to raise questions about perception and its relation to light, architecture and technology.

The close connections between light, embodied perception and representation are a key starting point for this exhibition. However, in *XYZ-NYC* lines of light are never as fixed as they seem, and may challenge as much as aid perception. With the use of the most simple of tools, the camera obscura and the mirror, the artists coax the formerly hidden relations between light, space and perception to the surface. In some ways, the camera obscura reinscribes myths of stable, productive and objective light. Its ability to restructure a three-dimensional scene on a two-dimensional surface made it an invaluable tool for painters, astronomers and philosophers since the seventeenth century. This device offers a means of observing solar phenomena such as sun spots and solar eclipses without risk of blindness, and by channeling rays of light through a tiny hole to project an image in its darkened interior, it forces light to conform to the predictable and rationalized laws of geometry. The projection of an image of the world into this darkened room also dramatizes the relations between the internal world of the observer and the observable world that lies outside, providing an evocative metaphor for rationalist philosophies and the Cartesian co-ordinates after which this exhibition is named.

However, as it turns an image of the outside world upside down and twists it back to front, the camera obscura also destabilizes the axes of light around which such philosophies revolve. The familiar high school art task of copying an image turned upside down demonstrates how such a reversal can radically shift our perception of space, form, light and shade. These shifts become all the more dramatic in Eastman's room size camera obscura where we can witness the world outside turned topsy-turvy on a cinematic scale. Philosophers have made much of this reversal and its power to alter perception. For Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche, the camera obscura's light does not offer truth and objectivity, but becomes a symbol of various political, ideological, perceptual and psychological processes that conceal, invert, contort, forget or confuse.<sup>ii</sup> In its ultimate failure to seize reality, the camera obscura reveals the contingency of light and its

connection to embodied perception. These reversals are amplified in Eastman's installation, which utilizes the internet to project video of the Australian sky into the New York space. When this digital image is projected on the reverse side of the screen on which the camera obscura image floats, a conversation is established between southern and northern light, and the old and new technologies, that encourages us to question the veracity of light and perception in both digital and analogue realms.

Mirrors offer a different way of shifting perception that draws the viewer more deeply into the game. The mirrors that help to form Johns-Messenger's corridor warp our perception of space, simultaneously structuring it and opening it up. According to the conceptual artist Ian Burn, mirrors separate 'what is seen from what is'.<sup>iii</sup> They transform three-dimensional space by locking it within a flat plane and invite the complexity of that space to float on its surface. At the same time that the mirror structures our seeing, it deflects attention away from itself as an object and focuses our attention on our own relation to the space that we occupy. In creating a misalignment between real and reflected spaces, it makes us question our experience of space and alters our perception of its architectural features. The temporality of spatial perception is also revealed in the two screens of stretched mirrored film that cut through the main space in XYZ-NYC. When we walk through the space bisected by the mirrors, the continual movement of our point of view is made strange and exaggerated by the mirrored film's taught, quivering surface. Apertures breaking through the mirrored surface enhance this tension, playing off the gap between the real and the reflected, and breaking the coherence of the image once again.

Light, images and perception forge a confused, contradictory relationship on the mirror's surface. In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson suggests that the interruption or deflection of light that allows an image to emerge in reflection can be likened to perception itself, which can similarly only occur through interruption. In reflection:

The luminous point gives rise to a *virtual* image which symbolizes, so to speak, the fact that the luminous rays cannot pursue their way. Perception is just a phenomenon of the same kind . . . Perception therefore resembles those phenomena of reflexion which result from an impeded refraction; it is like an effect of mirage.<sup>iv</sup>

This notion of virtual or interrupted perception takes on added connotations with the use of wearable video headsets in Eastman and Johns-Messenger's participatory events, which allow participants to see a video image of the space viewed by another. By creating a disjunction between the view seen and the space occupied, the work creates a rupture between embodied and visual perception, while collapsing the positions of the observer and the observed.

Using an array of technologies, both old and new, light's trajectories are manipulated in XYZ-NYC to shift our perception and create a condition of indeterminacy where we are both feeling subjects and objects in space. As it moves through space, shines through apertures, bounces off the surface of mirrors and is channeled through a camera obscura, light cannot simply function as an agent of truth and clarity, but becomes a powerful tool for affecting our perceptions and revealing the complexity of our embodied relations to space, our sense of self and one another.

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### Endnotes:

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<sup>i</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*. Trans. A. Lingis, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 2001, p. 40.

<sup>ii</sup> Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology: Part One, With Selections from Parts Two and Three and Supplementary Texts* Ed. C. J. Arthur, New York, International Publishers, 1976, p. 47; Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*. Trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. New York: Zone Books, 1988, pp. 37-39; Sigmund Freud, *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*. New York: Pocket Books, 1975, pp. 305-06. For an analysis of the camera obscura metaphor in philosophy see Sarah Kofman, *Camera Obscura: of Ideology*. Trans. Will Straw, London: Athlone, 1998.

<sup>iii</sup> Ian Burn, *Minimal – Conceptual Work 1965 – 1970*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, 5 February – 29 March 1992, exhibition catalogue, p 31.

<sup>iv</sup> Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p. 37.