On Seeing and Knowing. 
Entretien avec John Rajchman

Maxime Cervulle: In your 1988 essay ‘Foucault’s Art of Seeing’ (2018), you emphasize the central place that ‘ocular metaphors’ occupy in our understanding of knowledge – a central place that, as Ian Hacking (1983) noted, can be traced back to 1800 when a drastic change in vision occurred, as the observable and the real became sealed together. You underline, in particular, how in the positivist epistemology, the process of knowing is both visualized and spatialized. Some contemporary attempts to contest positivism, notably what is now known as ‘standpoint epistemology’ or ‘situated knowledges’ – to quote Sandra Harding (1992) and Donna Haraway (2017) – seem to use the exact same ocular metaphors, even if they push them to the extreme in order to destabilize the positivist model. Do the positivist and standpoint epistemologies eventually share a common basis: a modern conception of knowing that is fundamentally dependent on vision and spatiality? And what would be the implications of such a common basis?

John Rajchman: Ian Hacking was very interested in what Foucault called a ‘positivity’ – a multiple thing that goes beyond the strictly epistemological questions of particular interest to him. Thus, the relation between ‘the observable and the real’ which he sees being set up in 1800, is also to be found in relations of cameras to reality – in what it means to ‘observe’ or to ‘document’ in photography or film at the time. Hacking often himself pointed out many ramifications of such ‘events’ in how and in what we can know. When we look at the work of Donna Haraway, we can discern a multiple ‘positivity’ of this sort connected to anthropology and its transformations in our time. Even if she uses different terminology, in her challenge to the old framework of ‘anthropological knowledge’ and her development of a new ‘point of view’, we find many new
ramifications, in particular, with respect to animals, machines, cyborgs, etc., which, in turn, helped make her work contemporary in ways that would lead back to Foucault. We see this in the work of two of her students, who both went on to study or teach at MIT: Warren Sack, whose recent took on *The Software Arts* (2019), involves an elaborated re-engagement with Foucault; and Joseph Dumit, whose *Picturing Personhood: Brain Scans and Biomedical Identity* takes up Foucault’s ideas of image and identification this new area. Anthropology may no longer be what was when Foucault wrote, but new paths it has taken since are now engaging and elaborating Foucault’s ideas in new areas and in new ways.

Maxime Cervulle: There is a passage in 'Foucault’s Art of Seeing' that I have found very intriguing. It is the passage in which you explain that Michel Foucault “starts with the idea there may be no such thing, no such ‘essence’ as the visual, something that might be described by a ‘phenomenology of perception’ or a ‘theory of the gaze’ [...].” You then add that “rather, history presents us with many different singular sorts of visual intelligibility ways of seeing and making seeable, the unity of which is not to be found in the nature of the eye, empirical or transcendental, or in ‘the imaginary order’.” (2018, p. 68). I can agree on the idea of the necessity to historicize the gaze, and consequently to break with any biological or metaphysical notion of the eye. However, when we study the different sorts of visual intelligibility, don’t we need precisely to describe the imaginary order (or orders) that shape the gaze in a specific time and place? In a sense, it is what Stuart Hall underlines when he insists on the articulation of the “regimes of representation” with an imaginary order he calls ideology. The difference, here, between Hall and Foucault is striking, and is probably due to the fact that Hall felt the need to complete Foucault’s theory with the Gramscian theory of hegemony. Isn’t this refusal of any imaginary order organizing the gaze linked to the absence of the dimension of verticality in Foucault’s conception of power, to the absence of any notion of ideology in his work, and finally to the absence in his writings of what the Marxists call “the totality”?

John Rajchman: Stuart Hall’s great engagements with Foucault and Gramsci in Birmingham – I’m not sure I see him as ‘completing’ Foucault with Gramsci – raises the larger question of Marx and Marxism in Foucault’s work and in the destiny of his ideas. I don’t think we see Marx or Marxism today in the same ways as when Stuart Hall wrote. David Scott, a colleague at Columbia in Anthropology, is very interested in just this question; it forms part of the new biography of Stuart Hall he is now working on. He suggests we see Stuart Hall as part of a larger unwritten history of ‘Black Marxisms’, which would include, for example, Franz Fanon and his role in Algeria, and would ask how to understand and continue this legacy without the ‘Revolutionary Romance’, which at the time
inspired it? How, for example, can we see this legacy in the recent ‘uprisings’ in Algiers or Khartoum? In effect, that was the question Foucault was himself already asking in relation to Iran, in 1979, when he contrasted ‘uprisings’ with the grand story of Revolution. But in the context of ‘Black Marxisms’ we also find a striking link to questions of the arts of seeing. How do visibility, invisibility, and making visible function in this long, multiple, on-going history in radical Black thinking? There is what Ralph Ellison called ‘Invisible Man’ (2002 [1952]), for example, a key influence in James Kerry Marshall’s remarkable use of the colour black to help make such black lives more visible. But there is also what Édouard Glissant called ‘opacity’ and the question of a new art of ‘relations’ that would defeat the kind of ‘transparency’ through which we imagine we can tell from someone’s looks who he or she is. Achille Mbembe has in turn taken up Glissant’s ideas in relation to questions of ‘decolonization’ today and the role of ‘de-racialization’ in them; and, in the process, he has gone back to Foucault’s idea of ‘biopower’ and the way life and death have figured in the long fraught changing history of the African continent.

Maxime Cervulle: In 1992, in the introduction of an issue of October dedicated to the theme of identity, you addressed the difficulty of describing “what sort of politics is ‘identity politics’ – what kind of ‘struggles’ or ‘antagonisms’” it involves (1992, p. 5-6). Since then, identity politics have vastly spread in the US, in the academic field as well as in left politics and social movements, generating a number of concerns and controversies, largely coming from academics criticizing what they perceived as the risks of essentialism and of the dissolution of the social agenda. How do you perceive these debates today? And, most importantly, what do you think identity politics has helped us to see and what did it obscured?

John Rajchman: ‘The Identity in Question’ was an attempt, in the early 90s, to bring together young critical theorists in New York to talk about the rise of ‘identity politics’ and ‘multiculturalism’, which then seemed to be acquiring such importance. The idea was not to simply take sides, but to help formulate and complicate the questions and their aesthetic and political implications. It is remarkable how the participants, much less known at the time, have all gone on to develop these ideas in new ways, often related to visual arts and arts institutions. Jacques Rancière, for example, in what was his first appearance in an ‘art-world’ context of this sort, raised questions of ‘subjectivization’ and ‘dis-identification’ that he would take up in striking ways. Indeed, I think that what Rancière (2000) calls le partage du sensible (the distribution of the sensible) and ‘the part of those with no part’ in it represents one of the most pertinent contemporary elaborations of the ideas in Deleuze’s study of Foucault (Deleuze, 1986) which
I was trying to spell out in ‘The Art of Seeing’. Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, Chantal Mouffe, of course, would take other tacks, each with Foucault connections.

If I were to imagine taking up these questions again today, I think it would be useful to focus on two inter-related developments: the rise of a sort of ‘rightwing populism’ tied up with questions of nationalism and globalism, and the associated attempt, using new media, to recast ‘identity politics’ or ‘multiculturalism’ in this framework. Of course, ‘the US in the academic field’ has come to play an important role in this larger formation, but perhaps a rather different one than back in 1992 when we first carried on these discussions; and it is part of a larger formation affecting Europe as well. How might we then extend what Rancière was calling ‘dis-identification’ and ‘subjectivization’ at the time into this larger global or transnational context and the questions of the new migrations, displacements, borders, with which it confronts us today? How, for example, should we now see question of the politics of ‘victim-identity’ which Mbembe (2007), for his part, now worries about in questions of de-colonization in Africa.

Alexandra Saemmer: Let’s go back to ‘Foucault’s Art of Seeing’. Another intriguing passage is when you discuss Foucault’s affirmation that there is a kind of ‘positive unconscious’ of vision which determines not what is seen, but what can be seen’ (92). In some ways, this leads us back to the issue of ‘imaginary orders’ previously discussed, and the necessity to historicize the gaze. But the term ‘unconscious’ also resonates with a psychoanalytic legacy; a legacy which poses, moreover, the question of how to develop a critical art of seeing as an analytical method. In your article you cite Foucault’s quote when he describes his theoretical works as the ‘fragments of an autobiography’ (Foucault, 1981), and you qualify it as ‘an exercise or ascesis of disengaging himself from himself in his work (se déprendre de soi-même), through ‘essays’ that try to alter his way of seeing things’. What place would you give to self-analysis when a researcher tries to work on the ‘unseen evidences’ of his or her own generation?

John Rajchman: What is the ‘legacy of psychoanalysis’ in all this, and in Foucault’s fraught and changing relations with it? Today it seems that psychoanalysis no longer plays the key role in thinking and debate that it enjoyed at the time; and conversely, that role now seems to be part of a more multiple and complex field than it did then, thus harboring many ideas yet useful for us today. It is in this larger field that we find, for example, in 1977, Deleuze’s differences with Foucault over desire and the politics of truth, differences themselves reflecting alternative paths taken with respect to Lacan, who, in the ’70s, had
himself tried to qualify his views of the *jouissance* of women and the ways that
talking about it stands outside a logic of sets and predicates. We know of course,
that, at the same time, there was the invention of a new kind of ‘psychoanalysis
and politics’ in feminism and the question of a new ‘feminine writing’ raised
by it. We also find new developments in the role of psychoanalysis within
the larger ‘alternative psychiatry’ movement, exemplified by Félix Guattari at
La Borde, or, for that matter earlier, with the influence François Tosquelles on
Fanon’s attempt to work out a psychopathology of colonialism with its masks
and mimicry (Fanon, 1952), or again, with Fernand Deligny’s striking work with
autistic children, revived today. The post-war translations of the writings and
transformations of the practice of Freud, themselves transplanted from Vienna,
would help give rise to this sprawling multiple alternative field, no longer with
us as such, yet still a multiple resource for our thinking today. In France — and
especially for Foucault’s changing views — a key role in the development and
transformation of this larger field was played by Lacan. In his obituary, Foucault
said of Lacan that he was the first to re-orient psychoanalysis around questions
of this strange ‘truth’ betrayed in all our symptoms that we can never fully know
or master.

Foucault’s idea captured in the phrase’ fragments of an autobiography’ can
be seen in this light; it forms part of a larger examination of ‘subjectivization’
in ways and techniques of thinking, in which Foucault moved away from
psychoanalysis and modern Europe, looking back, via Christianity, to
Greek and Roman practices. This turn in Foucault’s work now seems more
complicated — and more contemporary — to us today than it did right after his
death, when Deleuze was offering the striking new ‘portrait’ of Foucault, whose
implications I was trying to spell out in ‘The Art of Seeing’. The annotated
publication of Foucault’s 13 Courses, along with the writings brought together
in the four volumes of *Dits et Ecrits*, and now the Nachlass deposited at the
Bibliothèque Nationale, have served to give us a new sense of Foucault’s work in
this last phase. In effect, it has given us a ‘new Foucault’, focused not simply on
questions of ‘bio-power’ (sovereignty, neo-liberalism, and the European ‘welfare-
warfare’ state) but also the attempt to develop a new politics of truth of the sort
found in Cynical *parrhesia*, and the ways it would later be taken up by anarchists,
nihilists, artists and Revolutionaries in the 19th century. How then might
this ‘new Foucault’ help update Deleuze’s great portrait, focused on questions
of ‘the visible’ and its relations with ‘the discursive’ alone (a new archivist, a
new cartographer)? How might we imagine ‘the art of seeing’ also figuring
in the larger unfinished politics of truth that runs throughout Foucault’s
‘autobiography’, itself increasingly displaced or ‘transnational’, leading to many
aesthetic and political questions today? How did it already figure in Foucault’s
‘autobiographical’ principle that the only sort of curiosity worth pursuing is the
one that takes one away from oneself and what one has taken for granted? How might this principle be taken up anew in the expanded geographies and altered media environments of today, and through ways we devise from within them to refuse the workings of the powers that be?

Maxime Cervulle: Between the publication of this essay, in 1988, and today, research focusing on the history of vision, on the politics of the gaze, and on the social conditions of visibility have consistently and greatly developed, to the point of forming a field called Visual Studies or Visual Culture Studies. For that matter, your essay has been recently published in a Reader of Visual Studies, edited by Maxime Boidy and Francesca Martinez Tagliavia, under the name *Visions et visualité: philosophie politique et culture visuelle*. How do you situate your work in relation to this still growing field of research?

John Rajchman: I don’t know enough about the field of ‘visual studies’ to offer a considered opinion on this. It’s not a field very well represented at Columbia – we’re much more interested in instituting ‘media studies’ programs today. The ‘art of seeing’ essay was also published in French translation in the journal *Trafic*, and I’ve followed with great interest the discussions with which it was associated there. They lead me to one question about how the essay might be useful for ‘visual culture’ and those who study it, which concerns how the question of ‘the people’ (and therefore ‘popular culture’) is formulated in it. Deleuze’s film theory (written in tandem with his study of Foucault) is often accused of ignoring ‘the audience’ in favor of the ideas of great film-makers. But in fact, the principle that ‘a people is missing’, in its contrast with the earlier cinematic engagement with ‘the masses’ in Soviet and Nazi film, is posed in a very striking way, which in turn involves the role the dispositif of projection plays in it; and, of course, Deleuze’s essay on the idea of dispositif in *Foucault* is an important extension of his analysis of Foucault’s art of seeing. It is the development of such questions about ‘the visual’ and ‘relations among images’ today which Raymond Bellour elaborates in his *Querelle des dispositifs* (2012) in film and visual culture; and, in Dork Zabunyan’s *L’insistance des lutes* (2016), we find one way of extending these questions to the role of cinema in a time of smart phones, social media, and the sort of political role they assumed in the Arab Spring. In such approaches, questions of aesthetics and politics take precedence over a merely ‘sociological’ or ‘culturalist’ view of the audience. How then do such questions figure in the field of visual and cultural studies?

Alexandra Saemmer: You mentioned Warren Sack’s *Software Arts*. This book leads us to another field of inquiry: the place of digital technologies and of the ‘calculation of meaning’. In your preface to *Software Arts*, you
first come back to approaches such as Noam Chomsky’s, which consisted in deducing a universal ‘neural cognition’ from the syntactic structures of language. Recent developments in machine learning make us reconsider this idea. As you say, the question now is less about whether or not our brains function like computers, but how computer programming ends up shaping our brains to fit their operations. Franco Berardi discusses in his writings devoted to linguistic capitalism particularly violent forms of shaping, applied to language by ways of auto-completion and automatic translation. These automata are programmed to take charge of our modes of expression in order to standardize and rationalize them. At the end of your preface, you plead for the development of ‘software as a mode of thinking’; activists such as Berardi would reply that, given the dominance of algorithmic governmentality, one should rather imagine the reverse of this way of thinking?

John Rajchman: I’m not sure exactly what Bifo has in mind – or indeed more precisely what is meant more generally by ‘algorithmic governmentality’. I tend to see such ideas as a part of ‘digital pessimism’, in which we are told that ‘financialization’ or ‘big data algorithms’ have so completely taken over our brains that the only option that remains for us is anarchistic disruption, perhaps accompanied by a little old-fashioned poetry. This dramatic sort of pessimism is useful as an antidote to the ‘digital optimism’, popular in the early days of the internet in California, exemplified by the fate of Edward Snowden’s enthusiasms and the ways they would lead him to the situation he describes in his recent Moscow memoire (Snowden, 2019). But I suspect that the melancholy that infuses this digital pessimism in fact has as much to do with changed political conditions as with new software programs alone. Things in Italy today after all look very different than Bifo’s Bologna of the ’70s, when there was a sense of an on-going radical movement and the role of art and vision in it. This much altered environment has more to do with the ‘globalization’ of labor and wealth and the new questions they pose than anything that can be inferred from the new number-crunching algorithms alone; and it involves not simply our brains, but also a whole new politics of borders and displacements and the role that our media or technology plays within it.

Warren Sack’s *The Software Arts* strikes me as coming from another source, of which one aspect is the larger question of the impact that digital media have on ‘visualization’ – for example, the way GPS-type technologies have completely taken over earlier forms of cartography, leading to many new uses or functions, at once political and aesthetic. For his thesis in the Media Lab at MIT, Warren Sack wrote code to visualize ‘internet exchanges’ (of the day) and the ways they were departing from earlier linguistic views on face to face
conversations. Christiane Paule would show this early work as itself an example of ‘digital art’. In *The Software Arts*, the question of the role ‘writing code’ might play today in the arts and the politics of art, is developed in ways that take up recent debates on these topics, notably by Bruno Latour in France. That’s what interested me in talking of software ‘as a mode of thinking’ – the attempt to go back and look at how ‘software’ or ‘programming’ or ‘writing code’ itself arose in a complex history of the present done in the manner of a Foucauldian archeology. How then might software play a new creative role today in our ways of thinking and thinking together – in particular, in confronting and analyzing the ‘algorithmic turn’ in digital visualization and the expanding role it plays in so many domains, at once in commerce and government, now on a global scale?

What indeed, in the first place, is an ‘algorithm’ and how does it work?

**Alexandra Saemmer:** For a long time, the main objective of research in Artificial Intelligence was to extract from a text, an image, information considered as inscribed in their materiality. Yet, as Warren Sack shows, the mode of operation of these “calculi of meaning” has been outrageously simplified since it became mainly statistical; for example, the issue is no longer to conceptualize the “meaning” of a word in order to make it “comprehensible” to the computer: “language meaning is pushed aside”. A few years ago, you wrote a text about this, entitled “What is Abstraction?” (published in Rajchman, 2018b). Has Warren Sack’s archeology of software as a mode of thinking led you to reconsider your definition of abstraction, or on the contrary, has it led you, more than ever, back to a Deleuzian approach?

**John Rajchman:** What is abstraction? What can it still do? Citing Lygia Pape’s *Divisor*, Briony Fer (2011) remarks how restrictive the once dominant post-war New York ‘modernist’ idea of abstraction has been, especially in relation to social questions. In some sense, that was the question I was trying to get at in ‘What is Abstraction?’ at the time – how to develop a new idea of abstraction itself, drawing on Deleuze’s attempt to link the ‘diagrammatic’ abstraction in Pollock (lines freed from contours) with the way Francis Bacon’s faceless ‘figures’ exist in a ‘figural’ rather than ‘figurative’ space dominated by a logic of the pictorial diagram. But, as Briony Fer’s notion of ‘abstraction against itself’ suggests, we now need to look at these questions outside the framework of Europe/New York alone. Lygia Pape is part of a larger post-war story in abstract art outside the European ‘center’, which we see as well in Japan or India or Africa, mixing abstraction with new and extrinsic elements drawn from other traditions in ways that now seem contemporary to us. Thus, the sort of ‘violence of sensation’ Deleuze (1981) saw in Bacon, for example, is found in a striking way in Japan in Kazuo Shiraga, who invented a new abstraction using the body in a way that went
beyond Pollock’s practice of casting paint down onto a canvas. Since writing the essay on abstraction I’ve been increasingly interested in this case and in many others. In fact experimentation with other traditions in abstraction also long played an important role in ‘the center’ itself as with what was called ‘calligraphic abstraction’ – in France, for example, with the great work of Henri Michaux, which so inspired Deleuze.

The immediate impetus for the essay ‘What is Abstraction?’ had in fact come from a group of abstract painters in New York, who themselves were looking for a way out of the dominant ‘modernist’ views; and, already in the ‘High Times, Hard Times’ of the ’70s in New York, on which Katie Siegel and David Reed would focus, we find new uses of found materials in the work of Howardena Pindell and especially by Jack Whitten, already experimenting with an abstraction that Gerhard Richter would develop only later in Europe. The recent exhibition of Jack Whitten’s work, juxtaposed with African artifacts from the Met, helps show how this great abstract painter in New York, who befriended Édouar Glissant and devoted a painting to him, also belongs to a history of African ‘diaspora’ art that includes the singular fate in Europe of the South African artist, Ernest Mancoba, all part of the larger expansion of the field in which the question of abstraction is posed today.

But there is another side of the question of abstraction in the heady days of post-war modernism – how it was made to contrast with ‘realist’ or ‘figurative’ art in a way that seems to mean so little to anyone today. Perhaps the time has come to get rid of the cold-war in art theory and art history, which overdetermined this division. It is remarkable, for example, how much Lygia Pape’s work with print and books draws on more ‘realist’ strains in the Soviet avant-garde than ones coming from Malevich, referenced by Briony Fer; and as a striking recent exhibition about Chagall and Malevitch in Vitebsk just after the Revolution suggests, the cold-war lines, dividing abstraction from realism, were at the time much more mixed and debated at the time even in Russia. The story of how Russian ‘realist’ traditions would then be transported to the new Art Academy in Beijing and give rise, after Mao, to new contemporary forms, or again of the fate of realist practices in the Minjin movement in post-war Korea, or with murals in Mexico – all this strikes me as part of a still unwritten history of realisms, their multiple forms and practices of social intervention, going back to Paris and the Commune and Marx’s own view of it. We now have many new globalized stories of abstract art; but what would it mean to complicate and ‘globalize’ the story of realism in turn –what might realism yet do, freed from the restriction of its gross opposition to abstraction? What role in particular have ‘media’ or ‘technological’ advances played in it (as already, with Hacking, the relations of cameras to the real in 1800), leading up to our digital situation today? How
did new media or technology figure in changing questions of document and documentary, for example? What role might these questions yet play in the ways we see and respond critically to what is happening to us?
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