

Introduction



1. Ilya Kabakov *Ten Characters* London 1989: ICA, p7 (all further quotations share the same reference).

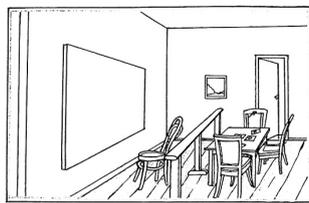


Figure 2
Ilya Kabakov *The man who flew into his picture* 1981-88

In 1989, the Russian artist, Ilya Kabakov, exhibited a series of works at the ICA in London entitled *The Untalented Artist and Other Characters*. Each work depicts or tells the story of a different fictional resident in a communal apartment of the type found in large cities in Russia after the 1917 revolution. In the accompanying exhibition catalogue, Kabakov describes the experience of living in such an apartment block, a place teeming with characters who argue and squabble and yet where an occupant often knew little about his neighbour and what he or she was up to in the privacy of their own room. One work, *The man who flew into his picture* (1981-88, figures 1 & 2), recounts the story of a man who has drawn a small picture of himself on a large white board which is crammed into his tiny room. Kabakov's text, which forms part of the work (other elements include the chair and large board mentioned in the text), explains how, as the man stares at the small grey figure he has drawn, the board appears to change at first into a white fog and then into a "bright expanse pierced by an even, sparkling light".¹ The man feels drawn into this expanse and feels himself merge with the little figure which then appears "entirely alive and real (though small, many times smaller than he...)" Gradually, the depicted figure appears to move away from the surface into the depths of the light eventually becoming indiscernible from the white expanse. Yet while the artist feels himself drawn into the picture, part of him realizes he is "sitting completely immobile in his lonely room" staring at a large, badly painted board with a small drawing on it. He is caught between reality and its representation and loses track of where he actually is - in the picture or in the room? His solution to this puzzling dilemma is to invent a fictional third person, a kind of witness who understands what is happening and why it is necessary "to sit on the chair and to fly into the depths, to be bored and to fantasize wildly..." An explanation is written for this observer and is placed next to the painting for reference.

The man who flew into his picture articulates the duality involved in looking at a representation where we both project ourselves imaginatively into pictorial space with the help of the figures and spaces represented but at the same time, where we remain anchored in the real world, subject to the physical necessities of everyday living. Moreover, the installation, which incorporates real objects, drawings and texts in a manner redolent of a museum tableau, seems to be inviting the spectator to participate as the notional 'third' person, the witness and validator of events. We are, it would appear, all that prevent Kabakov's artist from disappearing entirely into his picture. The work seems to be as much about

the mechanics of the narrative illusion as it is about the illusion itself, being on the one hand a meditation on imaginative potential and on the other, a poetic evocation of the gap between reality and fantasy, a division constituted in and by the viewing subject.

It also neatly posits the relationship between artwork and viewer as involving participation at one level or another. A central concern of this project has been to consider *where* the significance of the work resides, that is, if the work requires a viewer in order to fulfil its function, is its significance to be found in the object itself, in the viewer's perception of it or the space or interval between the two, and can any observations about this relationship be used to both structure the work and investigate its context? Obviously these questions have been of concern throughout the history of art - this thesis seeks to contribute to the debate by exploring the issue in the light of new technology. A requirement is therefore to discuss what such images *are* and how they relate to the objects or world they represent. When the term 'picture' is used, I am referring to images which in some way represent or refer to something in that they mimic the appearance of that thing. Pictures are real objects, material things, but they are deceptive in that they also show things which are absent. Pictures can also exist within one's mind. That is to say, perceptions of the visual world - including perceptions of pictures - occur somewhere within a viewer's perceptual system as do the mental images experienced in dreams, memories or hallucinations. I particularly want to explore the types of pictures which prompt us to ask *where* the illusion is taking place and also how that sense of place or space, the physical location of the viewer and image, can affect how the image is understood in terms of meaning or narrative.

The system of linear perspective developed in 15th Century Italy provides a useful model for considering the relationship between viewer, picture (in the sense that I am using it) and pictured world as it is intended to produce an image of that world which appears comprehensible or correct to that specific viewer, or ideally, to a viewer at a predetermined distance from the picture. Although I will be looking at some well-known examples from the history of Western representational art - the classic art historical set pieces such as Dürer's 'window' engravings or Velazquez's *Las Meninas* - as well as less familiar images, I do not intend to merely revisit the many commentaries on and examples of perspectival practice but to look at some of these in response to recent developments in computer imaging technology. This technology has provided both a context for the textual research (although the historical and theoretical work also offers a means of situating the technology) and a tool/medium with which my own visual work

has been executed. Considerations of perspective, viewpoint, subjectivity and narrative have evolved directly out of a practical involvement with technology. Indeed, the computer forces us to reconsider and question many of the issues and assumptions surrounding the topic of representation.

After a consideration in the Introduction of the project's rationale, subsequent chapters will discuss the following areas:

- perspective and viewpoint - how perspective structures the relation between viewer and illusory world in spatial terms and how it relates to seeing.
- seeing and reading, and the relationship between the real and the illusory in terms of resemblance and similitude.
- how perspective frames the world and how its positioning of the viewer in relation to the frame can affect narrative motivation and the reading of pictorial space.
- the extent to which the viewer makes or completes the picture, particularly with regard to 'eccentric' or exaggerated forms of representation such as stereoscopy and anamorphosis.
- finally, the construction of narrative space in the fiction film which is predicated on the camera's inherent relationship with perspectival, viewer-centred modes of representation.

A section devoted to my own visual work produced in conjunction with the textual research will follow the main body of the text where documentary images of specific artworks will be catalogued in order to point out areas of correspondence between visual and textual research.

2. Mikhail Bakhtin, from *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, quoted by Simon Dentith in 'Bakhtin and Contemporary Criticism', *Bakhtinian Thought: An introductory reader* (ed. Simon Dentith), London: Routledge 1995, pp88-102, p92. (Dentith provides the original reference as follows: *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (trans. & ed. Caryl Emerson), Manchester University Press 1984, p184.)

3. Mikhail Bakhtin 'Heteroglossia in the Novel', *Bakhtinian Thought*, pp195-224, p197. Originally from 'Discourse in the Novel' (1934-35), *The Dialogic Imagination*, (trans. & ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist), Austin: University of Austin Press 1982, pp 259-422.

"Dialogic relationships are absolutely impossible without logical relationships or relationships oriented toward a referential object, but they are not reducible to them, and they have their own specific character..."²

Aspects of structuralist theory and criticism are concerned with questioning notions of the author as the originator of meaning within a work or of that work referring unambiguously to a world external to it in favour of a text whose meaning is determined by the discourse it engenders within the codes or conventions in which it is inscribed. Mikhail Bakhtin, on the other hand, acknowledges the subtle relationship between the authorial word "which directly embodies... the semantic and axiological intentions of the author" and the prevalence in the novel itself (particularly the comic novel) of a variety of different types of language which *refract* authorial intention.³ He posits a relationship between 'normal' language and these differing language strata (i.e. professional, clerical, or 'common' language) which is essentially dialogic and uses the term 'hetero-

4. 'Heteroglossia' is termed in the glossary to *The Dialogic Imagination* as: "The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any given utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions - social, historical, meteorological, physiological - that insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve. Heteroglossia is as close a conceptualisation as is possible of that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide; as such it is that which systematic linguistics must always suppress." Editors' note, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p428.

5. Bakhtin, 'Heteroglossia in the Novel', *Bakhtinian Thought*, p209.

glossia' to describe the coexistence of and dialogue between different types of language in the novel.⁴ For Bakhtin, the author is not to be found in specific utterances (in 'normal' or other language types) but makes use of them as and when it suits him: "he [the author] makes use of this verbal give-and-take, this dialogue of languages at every point in his work, in order that he himself might remain as it were neutral with regard to language, a third party in a quarrel between two people, (although he might be a biased third party)."⁵

Bakhtin's conception of the text as necessarily rooted in a particular social and cultural fabric, a *mêlée* of different genres, types and ways of speaking, and of the author as a presence behind the text who subjects him or herself to varying degrees of visibility will be referred to later in relationship to film and particularly *La Jetée* and *Rear Window*. For now, his emphasis on dialogue as an inevitable and necessary aspect of novelistic discourse provides a useful analogy for the relationship between the visual and textual aspects of this project. The project has not been concerned solely with the *textual*, with historical and theoretical considerations of space, representation and the viewer; visual work has been produced from the outset in tandem with textual research and there has been an inevitable and necessary interplay between the activities of thinking, reading, writing and making. If formal research is to be of use in terms of creative art practice as well as theory, it must be acknowledged that the relationship between practical and theoretical work is complex and, at times, elliptical. The visual research has been concerned with making and also with considerations of artistic precedents and sources, the drawing of analogies with other media and disciplines. As such there is a constant dialogue between visual and textual concerns with one activity refracting or pulling into focus ideas brought to light by the other. The visual work stands as autonomous and is not regarded as a means of articulating the text in an illustrative sense - actual illustrations fulfil this function - nor is the text intended to decipher or interpret specific visual pieces.

The text discusses theoretical and historical issues surrounding the subject of representation and the viewer with regard to specific works ranging from visual art to cinema; visual work is structured around different interpretations or aspects of this subject and explores how variations in the relationship between viewer and picture/artwork can affect meaning. If a sentence is described as elliptical, it is seen as having omitted a word or phrase which is needed to complete the sense of the expression. With the visual/textual relation, the practice of working in parallel activities has meant that the visual has an elliptical relationship to the text and vice versa; that is, each activity can be seen as completing or contributing to the sense of a particular train of thought, a meaning or argument indicated in the corresponding activity. As the project has developed, textual research



Figure 3

Tim O'Riley *Here, there, over here, over there*

1996

6. J.-A. Miller 'Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)', *Screen* 18/4, 1977-78, pp24-34, p24.

has supplied me with a number of ideas and a context for specific visual pieces which I have subsequently made. For example, perspective is discussed in terms of its separating or distinguishing the viewer in some way from the represented world with that separation having a potential narrative function. A particular visual work made in tandem with the text articulates this distinction (literally) by removing the viewer from the immediate vicinity of the picture; they access the image via a telescope or pair of binoculars (figure 3). The text does not attempt to interpret the image - this would be of limited interest - but to present the conditions and the context in which it was made. A dialogue is conventionally understood as a written or spoken conversation. Drawing on Bakhtin's use of the term, if a dialogue of sorts can occur between two *activities*, then the relationship between the visual and the textual is both *dialogical* and *elliptical* with either practice finishing the sentence implied by the other.

As there are few precedents in creative practice-led research within Fine Art, it has been necessary to look at other disciplines and approaches and to apply knowledge and insights where appropriate. Just as historical and theoretical texts have been consulted in order to map a context for the visual element, so work in the fields of art and film are considered as an equally valid source of ideas and, in research terms, are treated as an intrinsic part of the reservoir of potentially relevant, available knowledge. The project has incorporated work from a variety of disciplines including art history, psychoanalysis, film and literary theory, philosophy and experimental psychology as well as artistic practice and it draws analogies with ideas originating in differing fields which are, on occasion, unified by the terms used. When references are made to other disciplines the intention has been to understand and communicate (where necessary) the context in which those ideas were developed but not necessarily to offer an interpretation in terms of that discipline, rather to look at how its terms and ideas can contribute to an understanding of the subject and context in hand, namely, art practice and theory. The general approach to varying disciplines has been *synthetic* in that I have attempted to combine disparate or differing types of knowledge into a coherent whole. I am aware that such a project is fraught with difficulties, not the least being the problematic isolation of ideas from their specific context. Jacques-Alain Miller warns of the danger in his preface to a lecture on Lacanian psychoanalysis where he addresses an audience not made up exclusively of members of the profession.⁶ Invoking Freud's assertion that "No-one without those precise conceptions of analysis which only a personal analysis can provide has any right to concern himself (or herself) with it", Miller goes on to question the audience's right to be there as he himself is neither analyst nor analysand, asking of analysts and laymen alike "What are you doing here?" With this in

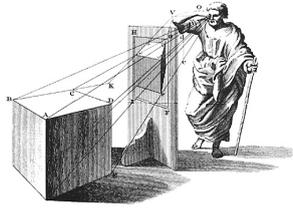


Figure 4
 Brook Taylor Plate from *New Principles of Perspective* London 1719

7. 3D modelling refers to the process of constructing objects within a virtual space organized around a three dimensional Cartesian coordinate system. The surface attributes of these objects can be manipulated in terms of colour or texture, for example, and then arranged and lit much as a photographer would organize a studio shot; perspective views can be created by manipulating virtual 'cameras' which offer control over viewpoint, frame proportion and angle of view. The initial work referred to was made during my M.A. Fine Art course at Chelsea in 1991-92.

mind, I have endeavoured to comprehend in a broad sense the various texts I have consulted and to limit my use to those which can be assimilated with due regard for their particular context.

A central aim of the project has been to consider how the construction and interpretation of a world or space from a two dimensional image is related to the activity of seeing. Although research into vision has informed the research to a certain extent, my interest has been less in terms of the perceptual and physiological aspects of seeing than in the relation between one's perception of an artwork or picture and what could be called the *narrative significance* of looking. Perception is never isolated from either the psychological implications of the viewed image or its resonances within the viewer's particular cultural and emotional make-up. The viewer brings to the work an individual history, including particular sets of associations, pretexts and opinions which affect how the work is

read. An artist cannot be expected to account for how his or her work may affect its audience but he can effectively anticipate and structure the relationship between the two. I am broadly concerned with looking at various ways in which this can be done and with applying the insights gained to the conception and construction of specific visual works. My aim is to investigate the relationship of the spectator to the image and consider how the spatial position and interpretive faculties of this viewer can contribute to the image's meaning. I am interested in how different media and strategies for representing the world control or direct the play of associations, in how the image resonates within the viewer. A representational picture presents a framed or bounded portion of space and so prevents visual access to an implied space beyond the frame. The dialogue between these two spaces - the visible and the invisible - sets up in the viewer a process of interpretation which draws on their experience of perceiving the world. If perceptual activity involves the constant (perhaps unconscious) positing of hypotheses about what is seen - that this object, for example, is nearer to me than another because it partially occludes it - the perception of images and what they represent involves a similar process of decoding and projection: decoding what is apparently represented and projecting an interpretation regarding its significance. Why are some objects in the image only partially visible? From what or from whose viewpoint are we looking at the represented scene? What does this viewpoint imply?

The original impetus for the project resulted from an encounter with computer imaging technology and the subsequent desire to incorporate it into my own practice. I initially started using 3D modelling software to assist in the production of paintings and prints.⁷ Simple domestic objects such as a stool

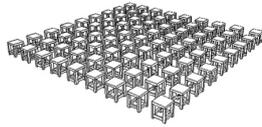


Figure 5

Tim O'Riley *81 stools* 1992

were created in plan and elevation and from these virtual models, a variety of perspectival views could be produced with comparative ease (see figure 5). Aside from the pragmatic aspects of the new medium, the experience of working with such technology and the access to the alternative space which it afforded (via a two dimensional representation on a monitor screen) led me to reconsider the relationship between the representational picture and what it 'pictured', and moreover, how this picture could relate to the individual looking at it. Drawing on these observations, it was a logical step for the present project to look at the history of (Western) representation, particularly the development and theory of linear perspective, in order to inform the ways in which the new technology could be used and positioned in relation to art practice. The computer enables us to construct and manipulate digital models of real or imaginary objects and spaces and to visualize these from multiple viewpoints. Although essentially described through sequences of digital code, these objects and spaces have an appreciable dimensionality. Their construction within a virtual three dimensional grid logically accords with geometric principles and their representation on the flat screen of a monitor similarly draws on the principles of geometric or linear perspective. That is, our access to this digital space is via a representational device which has been in use for over five hundred years and which has helped define Western visual culture through painting and subsequently, photography and cinema. Our relationship to virtual space can therefore be seen as analogous to the relationship which we have with the world via such pictures.

Linear perspective treats the picture as a window onto a space and is predicated upon a notional ideal viewer positioned at a specific point in front of the picture. This viewpoint implies some distance between this viewer and the illusory object of their gaze. Such a gap can be meaningful. It may have a narrative function or it could signify a mental or physical state encompassing anything from alienation to desire. The term 'perspective', beyond its literal definition as a representational device, implies an awareness on the viewer's part of the relationships between things when considered or seen from a particular point of view. Although originally derived from the medieval science of optics - *perspectiva* - the term need not be confined to the purely visual but can imply, in a figurative sense, an insight into or a specific angle on a subject. It suggests that the viewing subject is part of events but at the same time has a particular sense of the priority of events. Hubert Damisch has proposed that since a perspective construction is organized around the principle of a viewing subject (taken to be the centre or origin of the construction) posited in relation to a here, a there and an over there, it could be regarded as "equivalent to a network of spatial adverbs, if not personal pronouns: in other words, to what linguists call an *expressive*

8. Hubert Damisch *The Origin of Perspective*

Cambridge, Mass. & London: MIT 1994, p. xxi.

9. The poignancy of Roland Barthes' book, *Camera Lucida* (London: Cape 1982), in which he ruminates on the nature of photography and in particular, over photographs of his recently deceased mother, derives in part from his acknowledgement that the photograph shows us what is no longer present. It will be discussed later with regard to film, particularly Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962).

apparatus".⁸ Indeed, one of the most striking things about the art of linear perspective as it was formulated by Alberti in 1435, is its implication for the viewer of being part of the picture. While it provides a rational and quantifiable method for creating the illusion of space on a two dimensional surface, it also enables the artist to precisely specify the ideal viewpoint from which the picture and therefore, the pictured world, should be viewed. Acting as a window, the picture sets out the relationship between a spectator occupying this central viewpoint and the world onto which they look and provides the 'correct' aspect of that world as it would appear for that viewer. This intrinsic characteristic of the perspectively-based image indicates an important aspect of the nature of such a picture: it embodies, defines, even anticipates the distance between us and it. What is pictured in the illusion is that which is distant from us. Indeed, the physical gap between the viewer and picture surface can be as full of narrative and evocative potential as the implied space behind that surface. Distance precludes the possibility of involvement in a situation or the likelihood of changing the course of events. The picture plays on the attraction of the slightly-out-of-reach: we are presented with a world only to find an image in its place.⁹ Participation does, however, take place on two levels. We are both deluded by the illusion and yet simultaneously collude in its interpretation; to use a familiar term, we willingly suspend our disbelief. To be deceived by an illusion such as a *trompe-l'oeil* can be seen either as an instance of the *failure* of one's perception - the brain mistaking picture for pictured thing - or as a demonstration of the brain's collusion in the construction and interpretation of perceptual events. That is, we are somehow aware that we are looking at a picture but go along with the trickery all the same.