

IMAGINED CONTEXTS — ART AND VISUAL PERCEPTION

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Each way I turn, above me and below,
tempting and terrible to the silence and the space.
By night God traces a knowing hand
unending nightmares on unending dark

Charles Baudelaire *The Abyss* 1867

What if death is nothing but sound?
"Electrical noise."
"You hear it forever. Sound all around. How awful."
"Uniform, white."

Don DeLillio *White Noise* 1982

The meaning of an artwork is always a direct function of its context. Whether we create or view an artwork, we automatically contextualise it in order position it and ourselves within a coherent complex of sensible parameters.

Without a sense of context it is not possible to determine a meaningful orientation either subjective, objective, temporal or spatial. An artist or audience must first contextualise themselves in relation to the world beyond the frame before they can begin to create or interpret an artwork. Indeed the processes of creative and interpretive contextualisation, both in relation to the artwork and the surrounding world, are absolutely coextensive.

A sense of context is never simply given but must be continually constructed anew as an integral part of the perceptual process. This is the case for each moment of artistic creativity and receptive interpretation. With each paint mark the artist, in some often indeterminate way, reconfigures the overall context within which she or he works. A viewing audience on the other hand, must reconstruct the context anew from moment to moment as they undertake to determine the underlying meaning and personal relevance of a particular artwork.

And yet for the most part this process of continual recontextualising occurs unconsciously. Indeed, it is a complex process which if examined can reveal how visual perception may seriously delimit its imaginative potential if it becomes repetitiously reactive rather than imaginatively constructive. If we are unaware that the larger world context within which we are able to focus upon the artwork, and by extension the self, is constantly reconfiguring its contextual field, its ground, then we may tend to rely upon habitual ways of seeing that eclipse the potential for imaginative renewal.

Certain art forms have the potential to reawaken habitual perceptive processes. They achieve this by producing an imaginative expansion of the range of the imagined context of creation, reception, and by extension, the sense of reciprocity between the individual and the world. However, this is dependant upon a favourable reception by an audience open to such a possibility. However, before discussing one exemplary work, it will be useful to briefly discuss the way in which a particular visual bias has developed concurrently with modernity which delimits the 'imaginative contextualisation' of the artwork.

In the act of visual perception we are constantly setting what we see in relief by focusing upon an object or group of objects which are contrasted against a background/context. This contrasting of figure or foreground and background/context has been described by David Shaner, who adopts a geographical metaphor, as the construction of 'contextual relief'.¹ The focus of attention upon say a gesture by an actor or a prominent figure in a painting is set in relief against a background which, although it is usually not given much attention, is nonetheless crucial to the determination of significant meaning within the overall visual Gestalt. The observer is able to distinguish the identity of a given figure, object, or gesture by setting it in relief and determining its difference, its identity in effect, from a background which usually has some degree of stability.

When an audience comes to an artwork it views the work within an imagined context which is taken to be framed in the first instance by the immediate environment. Yet this context incorporates a far broader field than may be immediately apparent. The background/context can also be thought of as extending beyond the frame of the artwork or the discourse of the contemporary gallery system. Such a background/context

encompasses a whole network of imbricated historical and cultural formations that are implicit to the more fundamental construction of immediate contextual relief by an observer before a painting.

Hence even within the confines of the painting frame the background is far more than simply an illusionary three dimensional field since its determination within the observer's construction of contextual relief involves a complex network of interfacing processes. Indeed the background/context is never actually stable or fixed but always transforming itself through time and space. And yet generally, an observer tacitly relies on the presence of a knowable background field as a stable basis upon which to construct a meaningful contextual relief. However, in contemporary visual culture this background context is highly transitory and prone to rapid transformation. This is often reflected in the metaphoric structuration of artworks.

The contemporary social theorist Fredric Jameson has noted that so called postmodern art works lack a sense of depth.² By this he means not only visual depth, since this was already apparent in modernist works, but also interpretive depth. Post modernist artworks are conceptualised, he says, in a way that no longer entails philosophical depth in which various hermeneutics are decoded to reveal an underlying reality. Moreover, he adds that the postmodern heralds both the abolition of historicity and what was once referred to as historical consciousness.

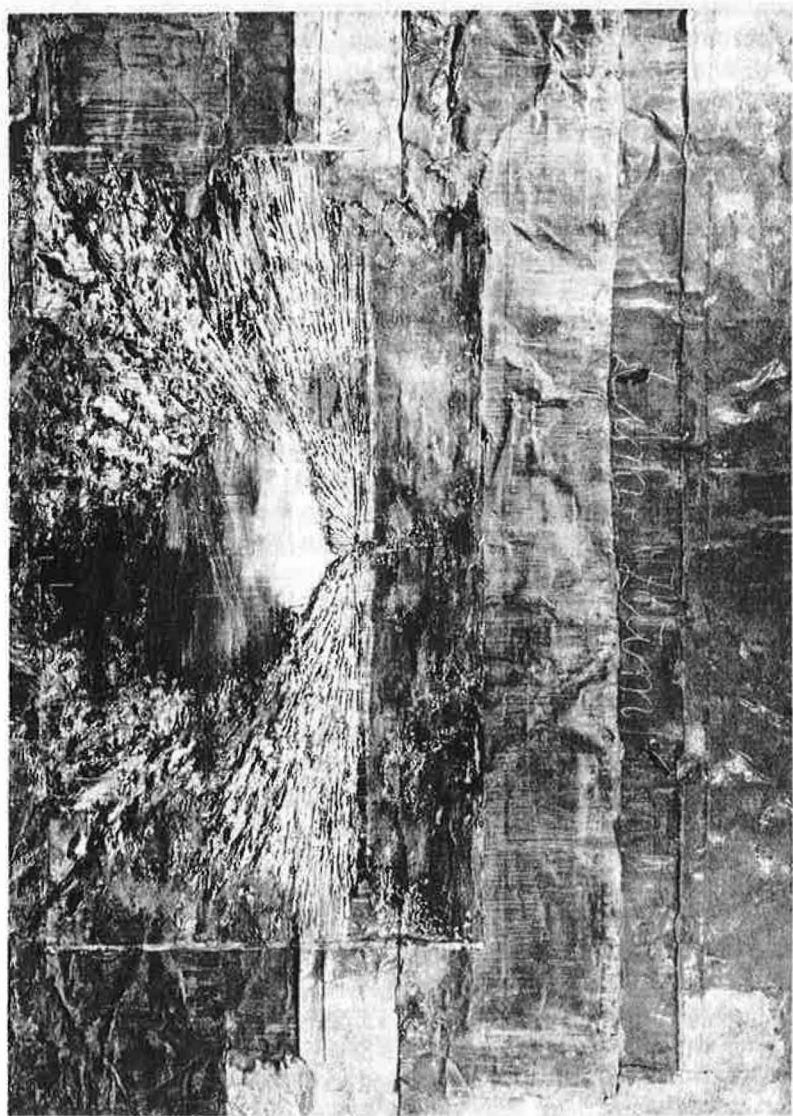
To explain this situation Jameson argues that visual metaphoric depth has been superseded by temporal discontinuity and fragmentation. This occurs to such an extent that a 'new logic of difference' has emerged in which the register of difference becomes a 'positive sign of something happening in the mind'.³ In other words the continual deluge of often discontinuous images and the subsequent sensual perception of heightened 'difference' becomes a positive quality in and of itself. The resultant speed of disappearance, the incessant passing away of imagery, replaces content. This situation in many ways reflects a condition in the wider cultural context of post modernity wherein time itself comes to be registered as a perpetual present. Henceforth, according to Jameson, time has become spatial. This particular experience of temporal relations plays a significant part in shaping the imagined context that is brought to visual perception.

The shift of temporal orientation in postmodern culture brought with it a concomitant increase in the register of difference

in the field of visual perception. This expansion can be discussed in terms of a broad reorientation in the visual bias of the contemporary observer. In Gestalt terms this involves a shift in concern by the observer away from the figure/background relation toward a heightened focus on the figure or foreground in isolation. This reorientation is coextensive with new temporal and spatial relations that have arisen as a consequence of the ubiquitous proliferation of new technologies. As Marshall McLuhan has noted, where the background field of perception becomes highly unstable and transitory due to the establishment of a wide range of technologically mediated spatio-temporal relations within post modernity, the only stable ground left is the self as a metaphoric figure in the overall Gestalt.⁴ Thus when the new logic of difference, devoid of content, becomes a value in itself the only stable ground left is the observer. This situation results in a heightening of focus upon the self, or in Gestalt terms, the figure and a decreasing concern with the background/context or wider world through which the self is realised. The perception of the self as the only stable ground results in an increasing reliance upon ego-centred subjectivity. This shift of focus can be further elaborated by contrasting different cultural and historical epistemes.

Consider, for example, the attitude to the experience of nihilism in contemporary occidental culture in comparison to its counterpart in oriental culture. The occidental culture has created nihilism as a problem to be overcome (Baudelaire, Sartre, Heidegger, Nietzsche) whereas in oriental cultures it is perceived more as a ground from which to base a religious philosophy — as is the case with Buddhism.

The Buddhist philosopher Kenji Nishitani argues that this radical difference in cultural positions is largely due to the central role of an ego-based subjectivity in the occidental culture which is absent from Buddhist philosophies.⁵ Since the rise of modernity, the individual has increasingly focused upon the outer world as a distanced spectacle that consists of mostly dead matter. Nishitani discusses this bias in terms of the tendency of occidental culture to construct the ego as the central pivot of existential grounding — a grounding which can never circumvent the problem of nihilism precisely because the ego is fundamentally groundless — a construct. In large part the maintenance of ego identity has been realised via the reciprocal construction of the outer world as a

ZIM ZUM (1991) - ANSELM KIEFER

distanced spectacle to be mapped and conquered by modernist practices and their concurrent technologies. This can be traced historically through such prescient instances as the rise of Cartesian perspectivalism which initiates a regime of scientific rationalism. This in turn leads to the domination by humans (who become the subject) over nature (which becomes the object).

Cartesian perspectivalism underpins a series of techniques that extend the horizons of perception according to presuppositions based upon Euclidean geometries. With the invention of linear perspective the observer is both distanced from the world as it converges to a vanishing point and yet is also, within the same action, removed from it behind a geometric window or frame. The focus of the gaze through linear perspective and all of the resultant technologies it initiates — from the camera obscura to atom smashers which prove the existence of anti-matter — creates both a reduction in the overall field of vision and yet a powerful focusing of the gaze.⁶ This mode of seeing is able to split the world into its respective parts and begin the modern reign of scientific rationalism which is dependent for its success upon the determination of a range of stable parameters which all rely upon a focal gaze initiated by an ego centred subject. And yet the subject centred gaze has become increasingly suspect given its role in the failure of a range of modernist practices from state administered social engineering to ecological management projects, most of which have patently been unable to deal with the speed of changing contextual relations.⁷

This visual bias, based upon ego centred subjectivity, may be contrasted with the Buddhist conception of the self as being totally empty. From the Buddhist 'point of view' there can be no subject centre from which to initiate a gaze because the self is fundamentally empty. This emptiness or nothingness is not a relative nothingness however, but rather it is an absolute nothingness beyond relativisation within the contextual relief. A remarkably similar conception of a nothingness can be found in the writings of the early Christian mystics some of whose works have informed the work of the contemporary German artist Anselm Kiefer.⁸ Indeed much of Kiefer's work implicitly draws upon arcane, pre-modern concepts in order to reformulate conventional contextual relations that are implicit to the metaphorical structuration of paintings. His reformulation of the relation between a relative abyss and the more radical concept of

nothingness beyond relativisation is implicit to the following discussion of a seminal painting by Kiefer entitled *Zim Zum* (1991)

Zim Zum consists of a series of frames within frames which serve to lead the viewer's eye toward a vanishing point at the lower middle of the work. Presumably this point refers to the title of the work which is named in the Kabbala as the point where God recedes or disappears from the world so that the world can appear. Just beneath this point the painting opens out to reveal what appears to be a form of abyssal other world that might exist on the far side of the canvas in another dimension perhaps totally unknown to humans.

The inventor of linear perspective Leon Battista Alberti had initially named what later would become known as the vanishing point, the *punto di fuga*, the point of flight. This term might well have served as an ironic description of Kiefer's attitude to humans and their fatally bathetic utilisation of Cartesian perspectivalism. The incorporation of battered and partly melted lead along with ashes, burned canvas and paint is indicative of his concern with an aspect of the alchemical process in which fire was applied to lead in order to purify the base metal to create Gold, or in symbolic terms, the philosopher's stone — the secret of eternal life. But in Kiefer's lexicon the process is not undertaken by the alchemists but rather by those who historically supersede them, the creators of a scientific rationalism which has gradually removed all sense of reverence for the natural world. Thus when seen through the refracting lens of Cartesian perspectivalism the painting depicts a world which has been recreated at a distance whilst the observing subject has been removed to a point behind the geometric grid of Alberti's window, the rectangular frame of the painting. This frame enables the construction of an imaginary view-point made stable at the expense of the outer world's increasing chaos: Nietzsche's world of nihilism unchained from its centre.

Over time this technique and its associated practices results in a loss, or disappearance, of reciprocity between humans and the natural world. This continues until a stage is reached wherein all that remains of that othered world are its ashes and the entropic remnants of base metal beaten into an uneasy middle ground between emergent chaos and limp order. Seen thus, the vanishing point in *Zim Zum* can be taken to represent not only the eternal desertion of God as Mark Taylor has recently suggested, but the

concurrent departure of the observing subject behind the perspectival grid of modernity.⁹ The vanishing point is the point where ego-centrality discovers its own empty centre, its relative nothingness, its meagre identity discerned at the expense of both incessant white noise and impending ecological disaster.

For Kiefer, the iconic wars between the eighth and eleventh centuries still have a great resonance today. Indeed it would 'appear' that the fear of the iconoclasts that with the proliferation of icons God would be turned into an image, (or conversely that God was only an image) has been realised in the current climate of image saturation and commodification. As a consequence the contemporary artist now has a crucial role of both the critical resistance and imaginative revision of this situation. And yet all too often the metaphoric structuring that artists utilise, encloses the painting image so that it appears to be decontextualised from the world rather than being of the world. Their work, as Jameson has observed, lacks interpretative depth. This is due to a delimitation of the contextual relief in which the image — albeit the often blurred image of incessant differentiation — becomes the stable ground according to the logic of difference. Temporal relations are flattened to a surface of both intense differentiation and yet inert indifference. To counteract this contextual limitation Kiefer inverts conventional formal relations in number of ways.

In terms of the hierarchical framing of the subject within the contextual relief in Kiefer's paintings, the human figure is generally absent apart from the trace of its passing. It is instead replaced by a variety of often desolate landscapes that convey some historical trace usually in the form of an allegorical scarring or tearing. Herein, conventionally inferred hierarchies within the figure/ground relation such as the sovereignty of human progress or the centrality of the human figure are inverted. Moreover by removing humans and replacing them by a historical trace which is a ripping or cleavage rather than a sign of immanent order, Kiefer is able to reorganise the dominant spatial organisation of time which separates the past as a form of linear distance relative to the living. Conversely the perpetual present in postmodern culture that Jameson describes is riven to reveal its palimpsest of both cultural and historical, contextual originations.

Such a revisioning is indicative of Kiefer's incorporation of allegorical references to pre-modern mythical attitudes toward

the passage of time and its relation to space. In cultures which adhere to mythical cycles the retelling of the mythic story often provided a means of expiating the damage done in the past. In this sense such cultures were not distanced from the past but were actively engaged in reconstituting it as a significant presence. Seen thus, it can be argued that in *Zim Zum* Kiefer attempts to return to the site of disappearance and reconstitute it as a material presence that invites the viewer to envisage a space beyond or behind the focal point of the perspectival grid — the origin of the subject's separation from its context within the wider world. This is not to invite the possibility of an aestheticised transcendence but rather to evince a return to the alchemist's reverence for not only the natural world but also that mysterious unknown, the numinous, which lies beyond immediate perceptual horizons.

Beneath the central vanishing point in *Zim Zum* lies a vast open space which suggests that beyond this centre point there lies another region that is totally indeterminate. Herein Kiefer intimates that behind each perceptual horizon or image of God there is always another horizon or image of God. In Kiefer's spatial lexicon space curves in accordance with a pre-modern, mytho-cosmological motion which is diametrically opposed to a contextual relief delimited by the ego centred subject of modernity and its attendant visual techniques which limit vision to its delimited aims.

Herein Kiefer infers that as one follows the sight lines of the perspectival grid toward the vanishing point, the horizon, or the rainbow, they each will relentlessly 'appear' to recede. In a like manner the demand that God appear within the limits of the perceptual horizon of repeatable technique is the very contradictory desire that forces his disappearance.

Likewise the demand for a stable ego-centre from which to map the evolving world forces the disintegration of the central viewpoint and reveals an opening rather than a ground. This opening or cleavage is a 180 degree inversion of McLuhan's foregrounded subject in the contextual relief. It not only foregrounds what conventionally is taken to be the background but places a secret hole, a crypt, in the Cartesian/Euclidean continuum which underpins the subjective centre.

Since the burned painted areas around the vanishing point appear to be both exploding outwards and inwards along perspectival lines within the one motion it might be that Kiefer is

tacitly referring to that theoretical origin of the world according to the dominant scientific discourses of modernity, the Big Bang. If this is the case then he has managed to figure within the space of the two dimensional frame both a before and after time as a coherent circularity. Moreover in doing so Kiefer implicitly proposes an allegorical means of situating the viewer in relation to their own before and after time.

The viewing subject standing before *Zim Zum* is, by inference, thrown forward into the groundless region beyond the stable construct of the perspectival grid. Herein Kiefer can be seen to be using conventional painting's formal relations against themselves. This inversion opens the way for a vast expansion of the imagined contextual parameters which both situate the work in relation to the world of the viewer and the viewer in relation to the world of the painting.

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