Seeing in Plain Sight – Installations in Flight

ABSTRACT

Observing from on high what from below remains unseeable is discussed and described in this article, examining specific instances in the writings of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, the novelist Marcel Proust, the earthwork artist Robert Smithson, and the author’s own 2012 art installation undertaken at the University of Toronto. In each case, an airplane offers a staging ground for the imagining of a more expansive kind of sight: one that, in the final account, may leave the one seeing caught and divided in the lofty dream of panoramic perception. With such imagined flight, one leaves the world while never having left it, living in its place a Hamletic dream of elevation and escape that keeps one securely “bounded in a nutshell . . . a king of infinite space.”

KEYWORDS: installation art, absence/presence, perception, temporality, performativity

Poetry does not fly above and surmount the earth in order to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man onto the earth, making him belong to it . . .

— Martin Heidegger, Poetry, Language, Thought

But ah! thought kills me that I am not thought.

— Shakespeare’s Sonnet 44

VARIOUS VANTAGE

An installation, art or otherwise, offers a determined point of view, a specific positioning by which something is intended to be specifically seen, engaged, and thought about, thought through. A separation or isolation is established by which a setting, a situation, an action, or an event has been set apart in order to be entered into, seen differently. A space of one kind or another, perhaps one that is otherwise undistinguished or indistinguishable, is temporarily rearranged, reconfigured, realized as something other than something otherwise familiar and known; the previously unseen becomes seeable, the unthought, thinkable; here becomes there, and back again. Often
also, time at such a site is slowly suspended or alternately energized, integrated into or alienated from the specific scene, as time’s movements are told differently, made to feel by being made to be felt. Still, as if upon a stage, at such a site, a kind of theatrical proscenium still functions, is still faintly present, unseen but unforgotten, abided by; though, in place of that known line that strictly demarcates divisions, that seam of separation that separates us from them – seeming from being, life from life’s image – now separates us from us. For such an installation affirms a frame less focused or fixed, a vantage less visible, more various, less vicarious, such that those inside the scene may wonder where to look, wonder what to see… made self-aware of their very looking as they, mirroring, see themselves see. Seeing that… there… where there is no there… no here… here. As if apart, as if above, looking from afar onto looking. While from such a vantage, separated, what’s still to be seen? What remains of a site so uncertain, so still unseen?
Now, to be described, four vantages onto installations, four scenes of flight that in their seeing describe a doubling division, a seeing in plain sight that seen, sees its own non-seeing.

VANTAGE NUMBER ONE

Wittgenstein, in his book *Culture and Value*, offers a vivid description of one such imagined installation, describing a scene of something simple, something everyday . . . a man in a room doing what he daily does; evoking the theatre, a theatre of thought, Wittgenstein presents such a familiar sight, one that is suddenly seen separately, an ordinary event, one that is generally overlooked but which is now looked over and upon, as if seen from above, as if seen in flight, as if, indeed, seen. In order to imagine such a site, Wittgenstein asks us to “. . . imagine a theater” in which, as he continues:

. . . the curtain goes up and we see a man alone in a room, walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down, etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of biography with our own eyes, – surely this would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself. – But then we do see

Figure 2: Biplane in the air, 1915. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.
this everyday without it making the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from *that* point of view . . . (*Culture* 4)

In Wittgenstein’s scenario, there is perhaps nothing extraordinary in his affirmation of the unseen ordinary, nothing new in his stated desire to observe that which is before him, that which is simply there. Still, an enabling component of this imagined theatre is, for Wittgenstein, the imagined curtain that is imagined going up, and from which anything or nothing (nothing in particular, or the particulars of nothing) is then set apart, a dividing of life, a separation of seeing, that allows “life itself” to be seen, or to seem so, a seeming to be seen.

Figure 3: Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1947. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

Wittgenstein imagines such an observed life as “more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange.” But, as imagined, to see such an unarranged scene, one that is otherwise indifferently seen, seen, as he says, “everyday,” and, as such, making not “the slightest impression,” to observe *that*, requires a particular, a theatrical, a *curtain-opening-onto* point of view, “*that* point of view” of an imagined theatre: a point apart, a point above . . . a point away from a life otherwise imagined, otherwise unseen, or un-seemed. Such seeing, as Wittgenstein imagines it, seems so simple, so plain, and so obvious. But in its imagining, how then to imagine that described curtain, once up, vanishing, the stage, once seen, disappearing, with life, as such, the man alone doing nothing, then remaining (in all its, and *his* . . . suchness)? While the scene being seen, without seeming so, is now unwritten, its writer erased; *that* scene stays in place, still there, still somehow seen.
Of this imagined new view, Wittgenstein speculates further on its attainment, offering a familiar command, familiar in its self-assurances of self-achievement, a point of view that still requires a singular self’s directed observation. For Wittgenstein goes on to assert:

\[\ldots\] only an artist can so represent an individual thing as to make it appear to us like a work of art. A work of art forces us – as one might say – to see it in the right perspective but, in the absence of art, the object is just a fragment of nature like any other… (Culture 4)

So it seems, to be seen, a curtain of sorts is still needed, an artist still called upon to overcome and arrange the “fragment[s] of nature.” For, apparently, in the “absence of art” perspectives lack perspective, points of view lack any points from which a view might form and sustain itself. And so, once more, back at the beginning, back in a theatre (perhaps never having left), we see that which has been seen for us, a writing prior to sight and, as staged, set apart from a life plainly lived, plainly seen. Still, as Wittgenstein completes his thought, another thought remains:

But it seems to me that there is a way of capturing the world sub specie aeterni (“from the viewpoint of eternity”) other than through the work of the artist. Thought has such a way – so I believe – it is as though it flies above the world and leaves it as it is – observing it from above, in flight. (Culture 5)

Of such a simple scene, of nothing being done (and, echoing Beckett’s Estragon, in Waiting for Godot, “nothing to be done”), if thought, the thinking can make it so… make it seen, or so it would seem, or “so [he] believe[s].” But Wittgenstein, long suspicious of such flights of thought, such flights of fancy, knew well that to think the thought was not to see it, and certainly not to be it. And that the thought of flight, to “capture the world,” is just that, a thought, a thought that as likely kills as captures, that, echoing Shakespeare’s sonnet, “kills me that I am not thought.” For such a thought remains an idea isolated and apart from a life lived, and as Wittgenstein laments elsewhere of such lofty thought, such elevated thinking is, after all, “like an engine idling,” rather than an engine in action, “doing [its] work” (Philosophical 44). With such imagined flight, one leaves the world while never having left it, living in its place a Hamletic dream of elevation and escape that keeps one securely “bounded in a nutshell… a king of infinite space.”

VANTAGE NUMBER TWO

For a long time I used to go to bed early, taking Proust’s Remembrance of Things Past with me. One night, I came upon a scene in the story where another instance of desired flight was depicted and from which,
involuntarily, I remembered Wittgenstein’s own depicted wish to leave the earth, “observing it,” as he said, “from above, in flight,” in order to see it “from the viewpoint of eternity.” Both writers are here writing of a shared desire to see beyond the gravity that grounds them, to attain a verticaled vantage above their horizontalized vision. In Proust’s short passage, the narrator is describing a small airplane that he observes one afternoon flying high overhead and the careful manner in which he watches it “convert its energy into vertical motion, glide over the sea and vanish in the sky” (Remembrance III: 159). Proust, it seems, was to recognize in that distantly diminishing sight of flight site-specific evidence of his own divisions of awareness, a fitting metaphor of his own elevated explorations of the depths of perception, of silence and of time, and the vanishings of vision. Continuing, he wrote:

Perhaps, as the birds that soar highest and fly most swiftly have more powerful wings, one of these frankly material vehicles was needed to explore the infinite, one of these 120 horse-power machines – brand-name Mystère – in which nevertheless, however, high one flies, one is prevented to some extent from enjoying the silence of space by the overpowering roar of the engine! (Remembrance III: 159)

Figure 4: Marcel Proust, 1900. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.
As if he were in two places at once, Proust’s narrator appears in this scene split between a view from below, and another from above, creating in the process a self-doubling effect in which he is both having the experience and, in the conversion of energies, watching himself have it from the outside. For as he observes from ground level the vanishing airplane, tracing the very movements of its disappearance in the sky, he simultaneously imagines himself within that airplane, listening for the sounds and silences surrounding him. Yet, while the one observing, now divided, may wish to “explore the infinite,” to enter and enjoy “the silence of space” (as Wittgenstein before had sought in flight a “viewpoint of eternity”), he cannot help but also hear the interrupting power of the mysterious machinery that has gotten him into the position to envision from below there being anything up there to hear at all. For those distant engines, roaring in flight, had in fact, like the noise of thought, overpowered the desired silence and serenity of the scene . . . the imagined seeing from above what he had thought from below. Returned to earth (while never having left), Proust’s reveries are then replaced by revelations of his own inescapable displacement and division, of his own enabling/disabling desires determining the limited range of his insight, his perceptions interrupted and exhausted in the energy needed to see them.

But what remains in the divisions and depletions depicted by Proust, of the plane high above, the person far below, and the expanse of space between them; doubled, what’s still to be seen in the separations, in this seeing so out of sync with itself? The author offers elsewhere a kind of reconciliation, a described détente between those persistent divisions of the subject seeing and the object seen. He writes:

When I saw an external object, my awareness that I was seeing it would remain between me and it, surrounding it with a thin spiritual border that prevented me from ever touching its substance directly; for it would somehow evaporate before I could make contact with it, just as an incandescent body that is brought into proximity with something wet never actually touches its moisture because it is always preceded by a zone of evaporation. (Swann’s Way 85)

Here the awareness, within the “zone” of our seeing – those separations that prevent the touch of contact with the substance of what’s seen – are rendered still, in their very divisions, as arising at and finally defining a “thin spiritual border.” For that now hieratic line, that proscenium-like division of space is, it appears, the boundary that incites the desire, the very desire to touch that moist object at all; to erase the line, Proust suggests, to cross that curtained “border,” would be to erase the desire, its sacred spatial separations. If suddenly done, suddenly seen, if approached too closely (flying, like Icarus, too close to the sun), there’d be nothing there, nothing remaining; everything would instantly evaporate in the
effort to touch an object, to see a substance that is only substantiated by the desire to see it.

VANTAGE NUMBER THREE

To see the artist Robert Smithson is now to see him as if superimposed upon his Spiral Jetty, that monumental earthwork that extends out from the shores of the Great Salt Lake and which, to this day, is known primarily from photographs taken from an airplane flying above it at the time of its completion in 1970. The two, Smithson and his earthwork, now effectively appear, like a double-exposure, as image onto image; to say the one is to think the other; to think the one is to see the two together. Further, seeing

Figure 5: A crashed biplane. Photo via WWI Resource Centre.
and thinking the *Spiral Jetty* has, from its beginnings, long been complicated by the meteorological fact of its own persistent disappearance, its tons of shaped boulders more often than not hidden beneath the risen waters that (betraying its early photographs) cover the earthwork like a curtain. For only briefly over the years has the *Jetty* reappeared and been visible to any who have travelled to the distant site, to climb the hill up from the shore to see the spiraling form below; more likely, once there, what’s been seen of the *Jetty* is nothing at all, with its veiled vacancy, equally vivid, spread out below. Smithson also vanished long ago, in 1973, when the plane that took him up over his final installation in Texas, to survey from above the shaped earth of his *Amarillo Ramp*, crashed into the ground, killing instantly all on board. So, to think the two, Smithson and his *Jetty*, is also to think the play of appearances, and of two disappearances, of flight and of sight, of water rising and of the hardness of ground, of vantages sought and of vantages vanishing.

Where Proust, from below, had seen an airplane above—placing himself within it “to explore the infinite,” feeling then doubled and divided by the imagined flight—Smithson had often actually gone up in his planes, entering into Proust’s atmospheric “zone of evaporation.” Once there, he examined the sites of his earthworks in order, in part, to incite his doubled vision so as to deliberately split, like an infinitive, the site from the non-site, the air from the land, the seer and the seen, to induce the divisions of sight arising at that

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1 I discuss my own travels to the Great Salt Lake to try to find Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* in “Quiet Catastrophe: Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*, Vanished.” *Discourse* 24.2 (Spring 2002): 84–118.
“thin spiritual border” separating the viewer from the installation below. Observing from above allowed Smithson, like Proust, to imagine being in two places at once, but also, simultaneously, in neither at all, of dissolving in the divisions, of seeming to see everything, while, blindsided by the evaporating sight, seeing himself see, seeking to see.

Also, hearing aloft the mysterious engines of thought was to cause, synesthetically, sight’s overexposure, too much light allowed into the mirroring reassurance of sight’s fulfillment, of the site’s very certainty, of the self at the site seeing. To see such movements, to feel such a fall into oblivion, giving what Smithson called “passing shape to the unconsolidated views,” this negative capability required “a type of ‘anti-vision’ or negative seeing” that was to affirm finally “one’s inability to see” (130). Smithson, saying elsewhere that “to see one’s own sight means visible blindness” (40), included in his finally blinded perceptions the object (and his own) impending dissolution, the scene and the self’s disappearance, like a plane vanishing in a distant sky (or crashing into the immediate ground), disintegration encrypted into the present site and from which, as if by default, with nothing more to see, Smithson concluded, “It is the dimension of absence that remains to be found” (133).

VANTAGE NUMBER FOUR

Flying into Toronto in March of 2012 for the conference on absence, I had, approaching the city and alerted by the pilot, seen from the airplane’s window Niagara Falls way off in the distance, looking, in the expanse of

Figure 7: Niagara Falls. Photo by Dylan Kereluk from White Rock Canada, CC-BY 2.0, Wikimedia Commons.
Figure 8: University of Toronto aerial view. Photo by Cmglee, CC-BY-SA 3.0, Wikimedia Commons.

Figure 9: University of Toronto map. Map by OpenStreetMap contributors, CC-BY-SA 2.0, Wikimedia Commons.
their surroundings, remarkably unremarkable, small and insubstantial even, like a tiny stream going over a bit of a ridge; in fact, the famous scale of the falls was so radically reduced by my elevated vantage that I almost couldn’t locate it, nearly vanished in that vast flat landscape, at that seam of separation between two nations. And once I did place them, those falls known so majestically from their photographs made little impact except to demonstrate their relative insignificance and the difficulty, lost in space, of actually seeing them at all from so high up in the sky.

I was on my way to the University of Toronto for, as I said, this conference on absence, and I’d been asked by its organizers to create a site-specific poetry installation for the event, what I’ve come to call a “writing on air” in which designed transparencies are placed onto designated windows, their language, thus presented, seen through, cast against the scene beyond them. With absence in mind, in the weeks leading up to the conference, I’d been working on my designs and, in my research of the site – one that I did not know and had never visited – I spent considerable time examining photographs and maps of the location, especially the area where the conference was to be held, at and around the university’s landmark Romanesque building known locally as “Old Vic.” Having looked so long at these images (details of which would end up in one of my installation’s design), prior to my arrival, I already felt an oddly anterior knowledge of the campus, especially the stately spires and arched windows of “Old Vic,” as if, in a sense, like a local, I had already been there, already seen it, already knew what was there to be seen.

Figure 10: Old Vic. Photo by B. Sutherland, CC-BY 2.0, Wikimedia Commons.
So, descending into Toronto, I was astonished when, looking out of the plane’s window, I saw, directly below, the very site, with the very building of “Old Vic” that I had been for so long scrutinizing; from above, I recognized it all immediately. Indeed, down below, what I saw looked for all the world just like the familiar photographs, like the images that I’d used for my not-yet-installed “writing on air” installation. Even the chosen words for one of my projects, with the phrase “Neither Here / Nor There” printed onto transparency, suddenly seemed to have site-specifically anticipated aspects of its own translucent language onto its physical location, presciently defining my split situation and my now divided eyes. For the lines of the maps, even the bold presence of “Old Vic,” were, in an uncanny and wonderful manner, aligning in my sight onto the images of landscape and the landscape of images – such that I, absent from the scene, felt in two places at once (and neither at the same time), above and below, in a kind of double-exposure, seeing and seeming to see what I’d already seen, and never seen before.

Safely landed and soon after arriving on the University of Toronto campus, I found myself standing before the very “Old Vic” that an hour before I had flown over. Taping the transparencies of my installation onto adjacent windows from which that grand building is so prominently seen, it seemed as if I were then standing in a map, having entered into an image. And, neither here nor there, I was, in a sense, seeing double, being doubled, with my own superimposed sight printed like a photograph onto the transparent scene, a “type of ‘anti-vision’ or negative seeing” immanent to the eye, while feeling, in that space between – at that “thin spiritual border” separating sight from non-sight – something of the precise dimensions of an absence forcefully present before me.

Figure 11: “Neither Nor.” Photo by Clark Lunberry.
Figure 12: “Neither Nor.” Photo by Clark Lunberry.

Figure 13: “Neither Nor.” Photo by Clark Lunberry.
Figure 14: “Neither Nor.” Photo by Clark Lunberry.

Figure 15: “Neither Nor.” Photo by Clark Lunberry.
Figure 16: “Strikethrough.” Photo by Clark Lunberry.
Figure 17: “Strikethrough.” Photo by Clark Lunberry.

Figure 18: “Forty Eight Absences.” Photo by Clark Lunberry.
Figure 19: “Forty Eight Absences.” Photo by Clark Lunberry.

CLARK LUNBERY
Associate Professor, Department of English, University of North Florida
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