

3 Showing and telling and seeing and reading

Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance.

Nelson Goodman *Languages of Art*, p5.

In order to define more precisely what is meant by the term 'picture', it will be useful to consider the extent to which the spectator's activity is a matter not only of *seeing* but of *reading* too. To represent the world necessarily involves a consideration at some level of the degree of resemblance between an image and its referent. It also involves an awareness of the context in which this representation is situated. If the context in which an image is seen can, to varying degrees, affect how it is perceived, then the 'outside' of the picture is as integral to the picture as the world represented within the borders of its frame. This 'outside' can literally be conceived of in spatial and/or temporal terms with the image being located, for example, in an actual space such as a gallery, in the pages of a book or in a sequence of film footage. As such, it posits the viewer as an onlooker, one who may simply observe, but who at the same time actively constructs or infers meaning from the relationship between the image and its surroundings. As an activity, viewing is never passive but involves the construction or inference of meaning over time. The 'outside' of the picture can, therefore, also refer to what could be called the space of interpretation.

Towards the end of his text entitled 'The Play of the Unsayable', Joseph Kosuth makes the following assertion: "The meaning of art is how we describe it."¹ The text as a whole relates Wittgenstein's philosophy to the practice and theory of art in order to postulate a possible mode of artistic operation which critically addresses the social and cultural conditions in which the artwork is conceived and realized and as such, it is of particular relevance to Kosuth's own practice. For him, the difficulty of distinguishing "the meaning of cultural forms outside of a network of power relations" entails that art risks losing sight of its critical role and thus descending into pastiche or fashionable decoration. To counter this danger, Kosuth proposes that art be reflexive, that it consider "the uses of its elements within the work and the function of that work within its larger cultural societal framework" and he sees in Wittgenstein's philosophy of the limits of language a useful model for structuring such an artistic method. What distinguishes art from informative language is that it can not only describe or show reality, but it can also describe *how* it describes. By using the artwork to present the gap between visual and linguistic forms, the work can articulate that which falls outside the scope of language. This 'unsayable' is the attribute which for Kosuth (and Wittgenstein) constitutes *value*. It is the element which, not

1. Joseph Kosuth 'The Play of the Unsayable, A Preface and Ten Remarks on Art and Wittgenstein', *Art & Design* 9/1&2, January/February 1994, pp66-69, p69. All further quotes from pages 66 and 69.



Figure 15

Jeff Wall *Jello* 1995

being tied to the *fact* of the artwork, its material expression, relates directly to the work's reception within the viewer's cultural framework. The work acts as a form of punctuation in that it orders the flow of discourse across its surface. Meaning becomes apparent through the process of viewer interaction rather than as the result of the work acting as a material container for content. Artistic activity (over and above production) engenders viewer activity, the artist's role being to structure and question the nature, type and purpose of this activity. Art as pictorial description which aims to contain meaning within itself - meaning as "direct assertion" in Kosuth's terms - inevitably implies an ultimate closure of interpretation and so for him discloses its "conservative institutionalized perspective." Rather, he sees art and the artist as imbricated within a network of relations and maintains that art's material and theoretical genesis should address the mechanisms at work within its intended context. Its potential lies in "putting before us a manifestation concretized as a cultural formation and not as a (primary) theoretic assertion." Meaning is revealed indirectly through the conjunction of viewer, work and world, in a process which is ultimately fluid, dynamic and mobile.

2. Arielle Pelenc 'Interview with Jeff Wall', *Jeff*

Wall London: Phaidon 1996, pp8-22, p9.

Jeff Wall's photographic work and writing has reinvested the figurative pictorial tradition with a certain intellectual rigour. In an interview with Arielle Pelenc, he talks about the problem of the outside in his pictures.² Wall's work consists of large scale photographs which are presented as transparencies in light boxes, a medium familiar to us through the spectacular effects of advertising. While some of the images depict landscape motifs, often picturing the liminal, overlapping spaces between town and country, much of the work shows situations or encounters between people which appear to be records of particular events (figure 15). Wall's working process, however, which he periodically refers to as 'cinematographic', is deceptive in its effect. He meticulously researches locations or constructs sets for his tableaux which he subsequently populates with actors and props. Recent work has employed computer imaging technology to weave together discrete shots of parts of the compositions - with figures being posed and photographed individually in large group scenes - in much the same manner that the painters of historical themes would approach and structure their subjects. The situations Wall sets up are similarly premeditated and highly orchestrated, seemingly at odds with, in particular, the tradition of photography inherited from photo-journalism which offers us a fragment of the world as evidence of an event. Framing a momentary aspect of the world enabled a photographer like Henri Cartier-Bresson to create often powerfully-mysterious pictures which rely on our familiarity with bodily gesture, our sense of place or light and our ability

3. Henri Cartier-Bresson, extract from 'The Decisive Moment', *The Art of Photography* (ed. Mike Weaner), London: Royal Academy 1989, p266.

4. Pelenc/Wall, op.cit. p9.

5. John Berger *Ways of Seeing* Harmondsworth: Penguin 1972, p109.

6. Damisch, op. cit. p49.

7. Goodman, op. cit. p9. Goodman includes the following note: "And this is no less true when the instrument we use is a camera rather than a pen or brush. The choice and handling of the instrument participate in the construal." (p9)

8. Pelenc/Wall, op.cit. p14.

to read beyond the limits of what is presented as a picture and formulate the world from which the image was snatched during the photographer's *decisive moment*, that "one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance."³ Wall's process (and his dilemma), conversely, implies that only what is presented to the camera will be pictured. Sidestepping the implications of the decisive moment, he locates his work within a different tradition, that of Western painting. While photography may often "exaggerate the sense of the 'outside' through its insistence on itself as fragment", painting offers itself both as fragment, a bounded portion of the world, and as a totality where the "design of the picture implies a complete and profound statement about the subject."⁴ Wall sees this tension as a source of energy within pictorial art where meanings seem to be unified or totally embodied, while the pictorial form is recognized as being inherently bounded. The borderland of 'outside' and 'no outside' is seen as a condition of pictorialism. The picture is like a "safe let into the wall"⁵ which excludes an outside and is simultaneously a window onto an extensive world. The perspective schema itself implies an irrationality with the notion of a centred space and centric viewer seemingly at odds with the extensive, decentered space it implies. The bounded 'here' of the perspective frame hints at an infinite space embodied in the notion of the vanishing point yet the concept of a centred infinity itself seems mildly paradoxical. As Damisch has maintained, "Space, if it is homogeneous, the world if it is open... must be decentered: unless one proposes, with Pascal, that depolarized space is infinitely saturated with centres rather than being deprived of one, isotropism precluding all reference to a naturally privileged point of view."⁶ Of course, perspective as a system need not be burdened with assuming the sum of all possible viewpoints. It suffices to provide 'this' aspect of the world to 'this' artist or viewer. An aspect for Goodman, however, is not only the world or object from a given point of view in given lighting conditions. "[It is] the object as we look upon or conceive it, a version or construal of the object. In representing an object, we do not copy such a construal or interpretation - we *achieve* it."⁷

The relationship between representation and the world it represents proves a thorny issue. To talk of a sufficient relationship of resemblance between a picture and its referent is perhaps to misunderstand both the nature and process of depiction. Such a relationship implies an 'adequacy' of picture to referent, an adequacy in which the referent has precedence over its depiction. For Wall, however, depiction is "a process of construction; it brings the referent into being."⁸ What is necessary is to distinguish between the activities of seeing *representations* or seeing *things* and the process of artistic depiction which surely occupies a different space and adheres to different criteria and impulses, distinct

9. Dieter Peetz 'Some Current Philosophical Theories of Pictorial Representation', *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 27, Summer 1987, pp227-237, p232.

10. Norman Bryson *Vision and Painting, The Logic of the Gaze* London: Macmillan 1983, p171.

11. *Ibid.* p130.

from the arguments of aesthetic theories of representation. 'Non-representational' seeing of an object X under the description of object Y entails that the viewer *believes* that X is Y. Such belief is non-voluntary. 'Representational' seeing on the other hand, involves seeing an aspect of object Y in object X - a picture, for example - but not believing that X is Y. Dieter Peetz maintains that since "belief is not involved, such aspect seeing is voluntary. We can choose to see the cloud or ink-blot with the roughly appropriate shape as, say, an elephant or camel."⁹ Drawing on Gombrich, he goes on to propose what he calls a 'projection' theory of representation where the picture (X) is seen as representing an object (Y) for a viewer (Z) if, without any belief by Z that X is Y, Z sees X, the picture, as containing aspects of Y which enable Z to successfully project the overall aspects of object Y. The point is that a picture is always, to an extent, incomplete and that it should therefore give enough clues to the viewer to enable him or her to construct or project a perception of what is not there, to fill in the gaps. Projection implies an activity of representing or seeing representations fundamental to which is self-deception or an awareness of being deceived, the willing suspension of disbelief: an acknowledgement that the object I perceive is, indeed, a picture.

What such theories of representation seem to exclude from their formulations and what Wall implies in his argument, is the degree of *intent* with which an artist brings a picture into being. In this respect, Norman Bryson's book, *Vision and Painting*, provides an interesting and effective deconstruction of the implications certain attitudes or habits of analysis have for our understanding of Western painting even if at times his analysis of specific works seems limited. Like Kosuth, Bryson is intent on relocating discourse about painting within the social and cultural context that determines its practice and formation. His argument is essentially a claim for recognition of the artist's body as the locus of representation, the "invisible musculature" from which images flow, and that the owner of this body is a social, political and temporal creature, structured through cultural and linguistic codes.¹⁰ Bryson relates Jakobsen's analysis of the sign as operating along both a 'vertical axis' (of selection from the "repertory of available forms") and a 'horizontal axis' ("along which the selections are combined") to the iconographic and temporal dimensions of painting.¹¹ The thrust of his argument is to recover painting's status as a signifying practice, to re-present the painting as a *sign*. His attention is focused particularly on the type of Western painting he characterizes as 'painting of the gaze', which he describes as an image which conceals its formulation in material and semantic activity. Apparently, the viewer of such images is presented with a *fait accompli*, an instantaneous 'fixed' picture in which the primacy of the artist's founding perception of his subject

is intimately connected with its reception in the viewer's gaze, a relationship which occurs outside duration. For Bryson: "To understand the painting as sign we have to forget the prosenic surface of the image and think behind it: not to an original perception in which the surface is luminously bathed, but to the body whose activity - for the painter as for the viewer - is always and only a transformation of material signs."¹²

12. Ibid. p171.

The history and practice of realist representation, in its advocacy of a relationship of resemblance between picture and world, points beyond its borders to a transcendent model - nature - under the influence of what Bryson dubs the 'Natural Attitude'. Nature is seen as an organising and enlightening source out-side the artist's orbit, a validating model towards which he aspires in his efforts to produce the 'Essential Copy', the perfect transparent likeness. Perception is the organising principle behind this activity. Observation enables the painter to refine his depiction, and in doing so, to overturn accepted artistic precedents and move ever closer to a state of pure representation. Bryson regards this orientation or more precisely, its historical interpretation, as essentially misguided in that it fails to take account of the picture's evolution within a social and cultural framework. He concedes that Gombrich's notion of 'schema' - where artistic activity is likened to a quasi-scientific process of falsification or verification, with received modes of representation, schema, being improved, updated or overturned through the pressure of observation - acknowledges the artist's position within an historical pictorial tradition but asserts that the impulse to transcend convention through empirical observation betrays a utopian longing for the perfect copy. Implicit in such a picture's claim to truthfulness is an understanding or *order of the real*, a benchmark against which success is measured. A society's sense of the real, its *vraisemblable*, dictates what is or is not effective as a truthful representation. The juncture between Nature and this sense-of-the-real is seen as existing at a layer below the level of conscious apprehension: if the join is visible, the real is placed within quotation marks. Recognition of what could constitute a sense-of-the-real admits the possibility of other criteria, other benchmarks or standards of measurement, and therefore the conventional nature of such distinctions. Bryson sees in certain Western painting traditions an impetus to conceal its origins in material practice, to erase evidence of its evolution in order to foster this sense of the truthful likeness which denies the possibility that representations are separated from nature by the intermediary of society. If *seeing* an object or scene - or for that matter, a picture - is a natural function of an observer's perceptual system which draws on their experience and skill in constructing sensible impressions of the visual world, it does *not* rely on the cultural conventions in which this observer



Figure 16

René Magritte *Les Trahisons des Images*
1928-29

13. Pelenc/Wall, op.cit. p14.

14. Bryson, op.cit. p42.

15. see Roland Barthes 'The Reality Effect', *The Rustle of Language* Oxford: Blackwell 1986, pp141-148.



Figure 17

René Magritte *Les Deux Mystères* 1966

16. see Michael Fried *Absorption and Theatricality, Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* Berkeley & London: University of California Press 1980.

17. René Magritte quoted in Suzi Gablik
Magritte London: Thames & Hudson, 1985,
p11.

is steeped. However, the motivation and ability to incorporate such perceptions within images and works of art could legitimately be said to reflect the culture of which that observer or rather, *image-maker*, is a part.

Recognition is a key term in Bryson's discourse. If perception dictates the apparent standard and level of truthfulness in a picture, it denies or at least ignores the intentional aspect of representing. Recognition of what a picture conveys, presents or shows, implies an understanding of what is intended. Recognition of intention as opposed to perception of form acknowledges the trace of the artist's mind, not just his eye and hand. It locates the picture within the wider context of social organisation as an articulated proposition. The material practice of picture-making involves not a matching or mimicking of 'this' with 'that' (an external and validating model outside) but a process, as Wall puts it, of *construction*.¹³ This relies inherently on what is initially intended. Intention determines what is in and what is outside the picture and is necessarily bound up with social convention and to some extent, therefore, language. We do not look at the picture in order to merely grasp the original to which it refers but to understand what is intended by its being there. Recognition of intention occurs in the domain of society. As Bryson maintains, "It is a fully material and observable action."¹⁴ The discrepancy between what is indicated by a picture (denotation) and the way in which that indication is presented (connotation) can lead to a concealment of the picture's status as a representation. An excess of connotative information, its effects of likeness, may swamp the picture's denotative function and engender a 'reality effect' in the viewer which pulls the painting-as-sign rug from under their feet and propels them into a free-fall of verisimilitude.¹⁵ Transported into the picture, or to use Michael Fried's term, *absorbed* by it, one may encounter a loss of the sense of the picture as an object, a misapprehension or blurring of its location as evidence of material practice within a semantic network.¹⁶

What characterizes Bryson's critique of art historical discourse is his charting of the shift from resemblance as a criterion for adequate representation to *similitude*, a condition of 'a-likeness', ordered by an image's location within a network of more or less similar images. This shift is similarly perceived by Michel Foucault in his study of Magritte's familiar painting *Les Trahisons des Images* (1928-29) which depicts in a no-nonsense manner redolent of a signwriter, a pipe and a text which reads 'This is not a pipe' (figure 16). Magritte's paintings constitute a concerted effort to disrupt our viewing habits, to provoke our anxiety in finding a use for pictures, a sense or meaning in what he has called "the mystery of the image."¹⁷ *Les Trahisons des Images* is more particularly a picture about both picturing and the relationship of picture to language.

Foucault suggests that there is certain tension in classical painting constituted by its simultaneous drive towards the purely visual and an inevitable seepage of language into its representational mechanisms. If painting's ultimate intention is to transparently represent the world in purely visual terms, it encounters a problem of discursive affirmation.

By proposing that "this is that", that this picture has a relationship of resemblance to an external object, it introduces an element of linguistic affirmation into a configuration which purports to exist entirely outside language. Foucault suggests that this unspoken link provided a kind of common ground beneath the painting's surface where the bond between language and image could be restored or maintained. Magritte's painting dislodges this relationship by obliterating that common ground, turning the space between word and image into a vacuum which is revealed by our inability to settle on a decisive affirmation that this, indeed, is a pipe. The two formations hover uneasily in a problematic space, the relationship shifting with each change of emphasis in interpretation. The statement at first seems unmistakable, transparent in its simplicity: obviously this is not a pipe but an image of one. But then again, is not the function of such an image "to allow the object it represents to appear without hesitation or equivocation?"¹⁸ Still again, these words are not really words but an image in the form of writing. Neither formation's claim to truth appears valid but then again, neither manages to free itself from an endless to-and-fro, a battle in which the viewer or reader tentatively wavers in a no-man's land of indecision. Foucault notes that what is unsettling is the "inevitability of connecting the text to the drawing... and the impossibility of defining a perspective that would let us say that the assertion is true, false or contradictory."¹⁹ A later version from 1966, *Les Deux Mystères* (figure 17), in which the Pipe appears twice, once in familiar partnership with the text on the surface of what could be either a painting or blackboard perched on an easel and again, hovering on its own above its relative in a state of apparent suspension, serves to increase the confusion provoked by the painting of 1928-29. As Foucault notes, it "multiplies intentional ambiguities before our eyes."²⁰ Whereas the earlier version oscillates between assertions of truth or falsity by the respective elements of image and text, Magritte's multiplication of his protagonist in the later version enables a reading across the surface of the picture. Pipe is compared with pipe, each denying the other's claims to truth: the text is now understood as referring to the smaller of the two pipes, thereby validating the upper pipe's claim to essential 'pipe-ness' and now, as a refutation of both pipes' aspirations.

The affirmative link between depiction and its referential object is destroyed by what W.J.T. Mitchell calls the "multistability" of the picture, its incessant

18. Michel Foucault *This is not a Pipe* (trans. James Harkness), Berkeley & London: University of California Press 1983, p20.

19. *Ibid.* p20.

20. *Ibid.* p15.

21. W.J.T. Mitchell 'Metapictures', *Picture Theory* Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press 1994, pp35-82, p74.

22. Foucault *The Order of Things, An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* London & New York: Routledge 1989, p9.

23. Mitchell, op.cit. p64.

switching of aspects and plays of signification.²¹ By denying the connection between the assertive image and its textual counterpart through the incorporation of the negative, *not*, and presenting these states of depiction and description within the same space, that of the picture, Magritte severs the picture's link with an external and validating model. We, the viewers, become the site of comparison about relative similitude. The process makes a nonsense of the idea of a primal sign which is able to pierce the fabric of context and refer coherently to an external model. The picture becomes an arena for the lateral play of signs operating within the context of other signs, meaning arising through conjunction rather than embodied essence. This play relies on the primacy of the viewer's discursive activity. Foucault's method essentially encourages, as he puts it, the "life of interpretation" over the cul-de-sac of closed definition. He sees the relationship of image to language as "infinite" in that "neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say."²² The incompatibility of the linguistic to the visual should act not as an obstacle but as a starting point for speech, discourse and interpretation which renews itself by acknowledging its essential status as propositional. For Mitchell, this strategy "allows the representation to be seen as a dialectical field of forces, rather than a determinate 'message' or referential sign."²³