

P E R S P I C U O U S : work on space and



image

Perspicuous: work on space and image emerged from a series of conversations Michael Eng organized and led as the Academic Initiatives Committee Chair during the 2006-2007 academic year. Professor Eng invited Pratt faculty members, staff, and students to articulate what concepts such as “communication,” “space,” “interdisciplinarity,” “critical thinking,” and “image” mean, specifically, in their various fields and disciplines. By rendering these concepts in detail, Institute members could potentially see the ways in which their work links with and distinguishes itself from the practices and discourses of other departments. “Perspicuous: Work on Space and Image” furthers and develops these conversations by revealing that Pratt students are doing much more than working with these concepts, and are actually working on “space,” “image,” and the forms of their appearance.

The exhibition is shaped by the provocative concept of a “perspicuous representation,” which comes out of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s posthumously published *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), his argument that philosophy can be realized only through an attentive understanding of how language functions in everyday life. In proposition 122, Wittgenstein writes:

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words. -our grammar is lacking this sort of perspicuity. a perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists of ‘seeing connexions.’

[49]



This exhibition has been conceived of and organized as a “perspicuous representation” that will help us “see connexions” across Pratt’s various disciplinary spaces. We chose “space” and “image” because of their prevalence in the worlds of art, academia, and everyday life, but also for the multiple ways these concepts are inextricable from each other in artistic practice.

The work chosen for “Perspicuous” does not create explicit statements about “space” and “image,” but rather thoughtfully explores the ways in which these concepts inform, reflect, and subtend each other. Therefore, it is important to underscore the fact that in *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein does not call for us to pin down, with absolute precision, the meaning of the words we use, but to highlight the contexts in which words appear, how they are put to use, what sort of work they perform, and how they shape our vision of the world. In fact, in an earlier proposition, Wittgenstein poses a series of questions that work against the commonsense assumption that clarity necessarily brings greater understanding. Interestingly enough, this proposition also reveals the pictorial and perceptual dimensions of his thinking: “‘but is a blurred concept a concept at all? is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need?’” [34]

Indeed, many of the pieces in “Perspicuous” suggest that the blurred line or the indistinct form could lead to a deeper understanding of the ways in which space and image operate—in art, culture, and politics—which in turn can reveal how the concepts can be rethought, reimagined, and redeployed. One of the things I find most compelling about this work is that the artists create images to defamiliarize space and in turn, compose representations of space to unmoor, rip, layer, expand, blur, and flatten our habitual expectations of images.





The defamiliarization at work in these pieces is more subtle than drastic, and I believe their subtlety can be linked to these artists' recognition that "space" and "image" can never be perceived, rendered, or understood in raw, unmediated ways. Lauren Culbreth's work rendering the materiality of the image, highlighting how it functions as a concept, a visual text, and a form of writing, asks us to consider how we see the spaces through which images appear. Natalie Lanese's collage works call attention to the thick mediation of space and image quite explicitly, as her juxtaposition of images from old magazines and retro designs suggest an attempt to rework the seemingly endless layers of images, as well as the cultural logics and narratives that accompany them, we inherit by simply seeing from within contemporary culture. But again, these pieces are not representations of "space" and "image" transposed from "the outside world," but are, in and of themselves, productions of these concepts. Yori Han's _____ can be read as an attempt to transcribe, with thoroughness and precision, a forest scene, but her decision to keep the layering of newspaper print visible, and the edges of the work uneven, highlights her particular production of a visual text that represents, rather than simply reflects, spaces and images that signify the natural.

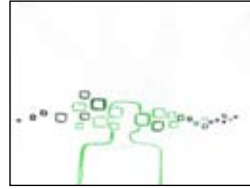
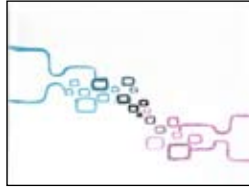


spaces



Perhaps because of the capaciousness of “space” and “image,” they serve as productive frames and thresholds for exploring other concepts. With a wide range of methods and an array of found and recycled materials, Miranda Kridler has crafted a body of work that explores the various ways in which images and spaces contain and produce forms of remembrance. Looking at Kridler’s sustained visual narrative, which focuses on a barn and its transformations in time, we see an intricate play between spaces filled with images and densely layered images of spaces. This play highlights the rich depths and surfaces an artist can discover with a malleable and idiosyncratic “language” of space and image.

For many of these artists, reconfiguring expectations of space and image involves defamiliarizing concepts of the body. Perhaps this is the case because, most simply, the body is often perceived in spatial terms, but also because, as Frederic Jameson points out, understandings of space have been founded upon naturalistic and anthropomorphic analogies between space and the body. According to Jameson, the body is, “in reality a social body,” which means a “pregiven body” does not exist. In other words, the body does not precede ideas about its meaning. Rather, concepts and histories produce it. Formulations such as these, which productively undermine entrenched understandings of what is natural, help to highlight the historicity of space and image. This does not necessarily mean alluding to events, but working within and against the commonsensical and habitual constructions of space and image that contribute to our assumption that there are no “pregiven” bodies, spaces, and images. The various ways Joy Whalen disrupts, and works—quite physically—within the designated square of the video image, and the objects and images it contains, can be understood as part of an extended effort to reimagine the body’s role in the visual construction of space, that is, how space is produced primarily as an image. Work such as Whalen’s, I would argue, indexes feminist efforts to clearly see how ideas about gender and the body work within seemingly objective categories like space.



Increasingly, space is understood as an economic and political issue, and living and working in Brooklyn might make us more aware, on a day to day basis, of the thorough commodification and politicization of space. The value of this fact is perhaps the realization that "space" has always been an artifact of these forces. So while the work in "Perspicuous" does not create explicit arguments about capitalism's conceptualization of space, its careful, skilled attention to the dense layers of images producing our understanding of space implicitly argues for the important role the visual arts can play not only making concepts clear but reworking their appearance in the cultural syntax of visibility.

Kimberly Lamm, August 2007