

An Artist's Argument

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In this paper I shall explore the perception of familiar objects in relation to the experience of their spatial context from the point of view of an artist. I am interested in finding out why something ordinary can appear strange when it is placed in a different context, and also what element plays a role in affecting this relationship. My premise as an artist dictates that I begin with the representation of space and objects in relation to a viewer's perceptual experience. But can one's perceptual experience (an impression) be seen as other than what is given? Do our habits of experience (knowledge and memory) allow us to perceive that impression differently?

A representation of space and objects, as I perceive it, is the distinction between ground and figure. Space is relegated to the role of a ground in relation to the object as figure. According to Michel De Certeau, this representation follows the idea of a legible form or a "map". However, he advocates "a logic of ambiguity" to read space as a "tour" because people seldom visualise it in a grid format (as figure versus ground) but by habit, they identify space with their action and movement through it. For De Certeau, representation is a "spatial practice" of operations that activates the reading of a textualised place that is "constituted as a system of signs".¹

I envisage habit to be the re-experiencing of actions on objects (as signs) that have been established in a certain space. For example, I may feel detached from the familiar objects that I come across in a new place until I experience them more. Or in another instance, I may be asked to describe a familiar space but cannot find the words to do so. In a way, it seems as if I cannot grasp the sense of space as a definite entity.

When we see an object, that is, to represent it, we forget its space, tending to make the figure appear more important than the ground. However, I argue that space 'operates' rather than 'being'. Space to which the figure is usually contrasted should be seen as more than just a complement or as another 'object'. Space is the main component of the perception and experience of objects and their meaning. The structuralist critic, Rosalind Krauss, who suggested this feature of space,

draws a parallel to Robert Caillois's idea of animal mimicry: the body of an insect imitates its background, like the praying mantis which blends with grass. Caillois therefore re-pictures mimicry as a blurring between figure and ground.² The figure is now a ground, which is to say a ground on ground.

In a similar vein, Catherine Ingraham, writing about architectural representation, uses the idea of linear projection in a different way to what it was originally designed for: she stresses the horizontality and verticality of the line as interchangeable signs of representation.³ In her opinion, to 'resee' is to question the viewer's location and determine what is seen or unseen within the system of projective representation, that is, the spatial context.

Another structuralist critic, Ludwig Wittgenstein, holds the same view as Ingraham. In her analysis of Wittgenstein, Judith Genova shows that his case of 'reseeing' is more a form of comparing relationships (as differences) than a linear 'imprint' process in the mind (as one-to-one sameness).⁴ One form can be substituted with another through the viewer's perception and the projective representation (as a structure of operation on signs) for a multiple experience of the same space and objects.

Space is not a 'surfaceless' ground on which objects 'float' aimlessly. There is an ongoing relationship between the surface of reading (here, for sake of argument I take the wall or floor as the surface in question) and the viewer. The walls and floors are important elements which we tend to overlook in the perception and representation of space. In that distance between a surface and the viewer, objects are seen as either projecting from or merging into it.

Returning to Caillois's mimicry, Krauss points out that the object is not fixed by one view but one of multiple views which I deem to be a shifting trace on a surface of reading.⁵ The perception of objects in space is one of a constant shift between several views where one view is as good as the other. The common denominator is a surface from which space is projected and to which we refer. Other than an imprint in the mind, perception of space is a play of surfaces between a 'mould' or the surface that space holds out in the form of objects (as scaffolding), and a 'cast', the manner in which that form is projected (as an imprint) for our experience of it. An object can appear familiar or foreign to me by virtue of the 'mould' that recasts the object as figure-figure (close) or ground-ground (distant) to space. In this way, space acts as the mediating operation for a reversal of focus in perception.

I use the representation of stairs as an example to illustrate my argument. The work is a plan-view of a flight of steps that can also be seen in section-view. The image oscillates between the surface of a horizontal and a vertical reading. Noting my work (below), *Project Studio (Stairs)*, 2005, in Figure 1, the viewer can ascend the steps from right to left with the perception that the stairway is rising vertically and diagonally across the space of the canvas. However, the viewer can also descend the steps from left to right with the perception that the underside of the stairs is coming down across the space. After becoming familiarised with both perspectives, the viewer senses that a “second” flight of stairs is aligned beneath a “first”, thus creating the illusion that there are two, not one, flights of stairs, moving in opposite directions. Figure 2 shows the spatial perspective of a viewer standing in front of the stairs preparing to ascend (as in a section), but from another angle, the viewer may appear to be looking downwards with the stairs descending (as in a plan). In Figure 3, the viewer can ascend across the sectional cut of the stairs from left to right or penetrate into the picture plane by twisting up with each segment of the climb. (Figure 1, 2, and 3, Kheng Kin Yap, *Project Studio (Stairs) No. 1, No. 2 and No. 3*, 2004 – 5. Oil on canvas, each 152.5 x 152.5 cm.)

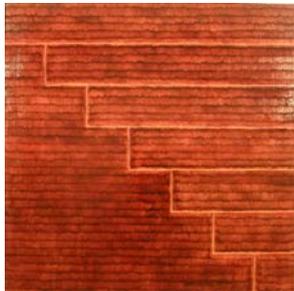


Figure 1

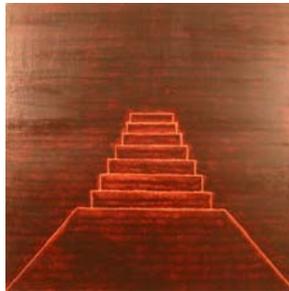


Figure 2

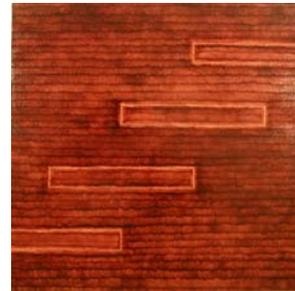


Figure 3

In response to this perceptual shift, the viewer is displaced from a certain viewing position as being closer in or further off. I am showing that space is more than planes perceived in depth, either receding or advancing on the surface of a visual field, it is now conceived as a ‘mould’ by the mind. The representation of the space and object is ‘recast’ onto the surface of this ‘mould’ and seen as another surface, as a ‘cast’, similar yet distinct from the former. We may have a shift in perception that is conditioned by a surface of reading which operates between interchangeable spatial contexts. Perhaps this explains why we can see things in a different light.

¹ Michel de Certeau, *Arts De Faire. English*

the Practice of Everyday Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 121 – 28.

² Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 155 – 56. Caillois said mimicry is a form of “psychotic yielding to the call of space. It is a failure to maintain the boundaries between inside and outside, between, that is, figure and ground.”

³ Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 48.

⁴ Judith Genova, *Wittgenstein: A Way of Seeing* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 58 – 59, Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), Section 67 and 99. Genova pointed to Wittgenstein's illustration of seeing logic (way of seeing) and its application (perception/ experience) overlapping: the analogy of locking a man in a one-door room which is of no use. Similarly we don't 'lock' perception in the mind (as 'imprint') although we perceive it as such.

⁵ Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, pp. 183. She pointed out an analogy of one distinct insect amongst many similar ones like a “tesserae in mosaic pattern”, an element in a picture seen as more of another (shifting from unit to whole and back again), a picture into which the insect as a part becomes a relationship to the whole, becoming camouflage-like, into a surface of “seamless invisibility”