In 1966 Niki de Saint Phalle, in collaboration with Jean Tinguely and Per Olof Ullyeit, constructed a monumental reclining female figure, some 28 metres (92 feet) long, entitled Hon (sometimes translated as She: A Cathedral), in the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Though Hon was destroyed at the end of the exhibition, the figure has retained a vital place within art history, despite the fact that all we have left is documentation: relatively few photographs, written accounts and memories. The work itself can no longer be seen (except through photographs) nor sensually explored.¹

The reclining female nude has a long tradition in Western art going back to classical Greek sculptures and paintings; since the early modern period, it has developed into a tradition of representation of the ideal female figure through references to Venus, in contrast to the upright dressed figure of the Madonna with Child. Examples of this tradition can be seen in Titian’s Venus of Urbino (1538), Velazquez’ Rokeby Venus (1647–51), Manet’s Olympia (1863), and numerous figures by Matisse, Picasso and others, before and since. In his 1956 publication The Nude, Kenneth Clark suggests that Plato’s distinction between ‘vulgar’ desire and ‘celestial’ desire has been translated in the visual arts in terms of a distinction between the naked and the nude. He suggests that ‘since the earliest times the obsessive, unreasonable nature of physical desire has sought relief in images, and to give these images a form by which Venus may cease to be vulgar and become celestial has been one of the recurring aims of European art’ (p. 64).² According to Clark, the nude became a formalized genre in art, and that in itself keeps it at a distance from the desire of the viewer, both on the level of narrative (the references to a mythical rather than real woman) and through the necessary distance required in order to see the whole figure and appreciate it as art.

Much has been written on the topic of the nude in general, and on Saint Phalle’s Hon, from the perspective of feminism and sexual politics and I shall
not repeat it here. My own focus in this chapter is on vision, on the kind of
relationships this type of representation establishes between art and spectator
and its necessary distinction of subject from object, viewer from viewed, with
all the implications this holds for a theory of aesthetics grounded in Kant’s
theory of knowledge and self-knowledge. According to Kant’s early lectures,
vision is the noblest of the senses and, more than sound or touch, it leads ‘the
subject, by reflection, to know the object as a thing outside him’. Already in
these early lectures Kant notes that sometimes the sensation is so strong that
we are more conscious of the organ affected than the object. In such situations,
he admits, we are prevented ‘from arriving at a concept of the object’ and
we are fixed by the sensation. This is the experience Kant articulates as the
aesthetic in his later works. Nevertheless, what is clear from the above is that
for him, vision makes the subject/object distinction possible and by reflection
(the self-consciousness of the ‘I think’) allows the subject to know an object.

In *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) Kant articulates the process whereby
vision allows what becomes subject to gain knowledge of what is to become
object through the ‘I think’ and thus gain self-consciousness at the same time
and simultaneously. For it is the ‘I think’ that separates subject from object
and at the same time brings them together through judgement. It is thus
the ‘synthetic unity of consciousness’ that allows there to be ‘an object for
me’. In his later *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant further develops his earlier
argument into an account of the aesthetic which precedes knowledge and can
thus be seen as the condition for its possibility. Whereas the beautiful is that
‘which pleases universally without concept’ through judgement of harmony,
the sublime suspends even harmony, but only momentarily: the subject does
gain control and is able to place the sublime under some form of judgement
arising from the realization of the power of the idea of reason. Here the
experience of the aesthetic is presented as the condition for the possibility
of knowledge. For Kant, the aesthetic is a stage, not a goal. The aesthetic
has the potential to bridge the gap between knowledge and morality (ethics)
because it is neither knowledge nor morality, but in suspense between the two:
potentially, he argues, it can become the condition for the possibility of either.
In what follows I shall argue that the problem of the aesthetic is not vision
or visuality as such, but our understanding of vision through its Modernist
interpretation which severs it from knowledge and ethics and ignores Kant’s
utilization of the aesthetic towards knowledge on the one hand and to bridge
the gap between knowledge and morality on the other. Kant’s account of the
aesthetic, or more accurately a certain interpretation of Kant’s account of
the aesthetic, became central to Modernist aesthetics focused on vision. For
example, in Greenberg’s essay ‘Modernist Paintings’ it is visual perception
which is isolated as that through which the aesthetic is encountered via two-
dimensional flatness perceived purely visually. This emphasis on the purely
visual became problematic by the 1960s, when Modernist aesthetics could no
longer defend itself against growing criticism from many quarters; yet the 
debate was still informed by the residues of interpretations of Kant’s account 
which articulated the aesthetic in terms of subject mastery through visual 
perception alone. My argument aims to show how vision itself might lead 
towards an ethics which is not understood in terms of freedom and mastery: 
mastery of objects through knowledge and self-mastery by overcoming all 
otherness.

Vision and the Reclining Female Figure

The tradition of reclining female nudes developed in such a way as to be 
understood to produce and articulate a distance between the viewer and 
the image represented in the form of a female body desired by the spectator. 
Despite the emphasis on the body, vision was understood to offer a distance 
encouraging a distinction between viewer and viewed, subject and object. 
As Luce Irigaray suggests, ‘more than any other sense, the eye objectifies 
and it masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance’. Moreover, it 
invites the viewer to look from a safe distance: the desired can be mentally 
contemplated but possible physicality is blocked by visual distance. Kenneth 
Clark argues that the ‘purification of Venus could not have taken place had not 
some abstract notion of the female body been present’. Clark distinguished 
two types of nudes, those which emphasized female attributes and were 
thus perceived as ‘little more than symbols of fertility’ and those ‘in which 
the unruly human body has undergone a geometrical discipline’. For Clark 
distancing was not a function of vision, but of geometrical abstraction, which 
he assumes to be a form of universalism and thus akin to Plato’s ‘celestial’. In 
her 1992 publication The Female Nude, Lynda Nead argues that for Clark,

... the female body has been shorn of its formal excesses and, as Venus, 
has been turned into an image of the phallus. The transformation of 
the female body into the female nude is thus an act of regulation: of the 
female body and the potentially wayward viewer whose wandering 
eye is disciplined by the conventions and protocols of art.

It is hard to deny that Western tradition developed a form of representations 
of the female body which controlled female sexuality and female identity. 
Saint Phalle’s Hon can be seen as a critique of this tradition. However, this 
line of argument, crucial as it is, is not the focus of this chapter. My focus is on 
how, unlike touch and taste, vision appears to be perceived always from a safe 
distance; the image simply appears, and it appears to be unable to look back at 
us.Whilst it can be argued that generally we can choose what we are about to 
touch or taste, there seems to be less control over what appears in front of our 
eyes. On the other hand, because vision distances and distinguishes between
subject and object, to look at things seems less of an embodied commitment than to touch or taste which offers more intermingling between subject and object.

Saint Phalle’s *Hon* – and some of her other works in the *Nanas* series – refer to this long tradition of reclining female nudes. Yet at the same time *Hon* also resists this tradition. The sheer size of the work presented in a space which was not sufficiently large to allow spectators an overview of the figure – and thus enjoyment of the nude as an object of desire – blocks this relationship. The space was large enough to house the work and allow some circulation of people around it, but not sufficiently large to offer a distant position from which to view the figure as a whole and thus to view it as a reclining nude, another Venus. Since the tradition requires a proportional distance from the figure in order to view it in its totality, Saint Phalle’s work can be seen as a critique of the tradition that constructed a viewing subject through the experience of the look.

Modernist aesthetics emphasizes Kant’s articulation of the visual in his account of the beautiful and thus points to the connection made in his earlier critique between vision (sensual perception), knowledge and self-knowledge; in short, subjectivity is constructed through vision, subject/object distinction and mastery through knowledge. This relationship between the visual, knowledge and subjectivity became problematic by the second half of the twentieth century. As Irigaray has argued, ‘In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations’.13

The Critique of Aesthetic Modernism by Conceptual Art

A year after Saint Phalle’s *Hon* was exhibited, Sol LeWitt declared that ‘conceptual art’ was the kind of work he was involved with, as distinguished from ‘perceptual’ art. Though LeWitt did not explicitly present perceptual art as Modernist aesthetics – art evaluated on the merits of the aesthetic experience it produces in the viewer – it is nevertheless clear from his account that conceptual art is a critique of Modernist aesthetics. For LeWitt, ‘Art that is meant for the sensation of the eye primarily would be called perceptual rather than conceptual’.14 Conceptual art, LeWitt argued, does not appeal primarily to the eye; hence it matters less what it looks like, nor is it dependent on artistic skill, as it appeals to the mind and it seeks to be mentally interesting, not visually engaging. LeWitt’s insistence on art that addresses not the visual but the conceptual – albeit in a visual work which might include text – constitutes an attack on the art object as the catalyst of the look which raises many difficulties, not least the one that art thus claims to offer philosophy.15 The need to appeal to intellectual conception rather than visual perception
suggests that at issue was not only a crisis in the understanding of sense
perception – with a focus on the visual – but knowledge, identity, mastery,
subjectivity, and above all ethics.

A year after LeWitt’s 1967 essay, Lucy Lippard and John Chandler published
an article on ‘The Dematerialization of Art’, later developed by Lippard
as a book. ‘The Dematerialization of Art’ added a more social aspect to the
critique; Modernist aesthetics, through its emphasis on individual aesthetic
experience, returned the artwork to the capitalist market by producing an art
object to be bought and sold, rather than allowing art to act as a critique of
capitalism. As she argues:

No one, not even a public greedy for novelty, would actually pay money, or
much of it, for a xerox sheet referring to an event past or never directly perceived,
a group of photographs documenting an ephemeral situation or condition, a
project for work never to be completed, words spoken but not recorded.16

In Lippard’s writing it becomes clear that if the visual facilitates subject/object
distinction, the work of art, by becoming an aesthetic object in a capitalist
society, also becomes an object for exchange, a commodity amongst many;
the work of art is not operating as a critique but is ‘mastered’ by the capitalist
market. The artist becomes a producer of consumable goods, rather than a
generator of social critique, including critique of the ever-growing power of
capitalism.

Saint Phalle’s Hon was a female figure whose belly bulged and rose well
above her hips. It was not presented as an object of sexual desire to be viewed,
or as an aesthetic or beautiful object; and by being intentionally destroyed
at the end of the exhibition it was prevented from entering the art market.
Hon was offered as a grotesque maternal figure of plenitude to be enjoyed
conceptually both as a critique of earlier art and of contemporary society. Its
exterior was crudely made with papier maché and painted in bright primary
colours, in simple shapes cutting across the figure rather than emphasizing its
features. As LeWitt suggests, conceptual art is usually ‘free from dependence
on the skill of the artist as a craftsman’,17 since the focus is conceptual not
perceptual. Whilst Saint Phalle’s Hon did not rely on traditional sculptural skills
it also did not have the documentary ‘look’ associated with conceptual art, but
rather, with its low-tech, colourful and monumental approach, it seemed to
reference the primitive and the collective. For Clark, Hon may well fall into
what he refers to as the type of prehistoric sculptures of ‘bulging’ women
emphasizing ‘the female attributes till they are little more than symbols of
fertility’.18 However, Saint Phalle’s Hon was not a sculpture in the traditional
sense, as it also enclosed an environment of some 25 metres (82 feet) long, 6
metres (20 feet) high and 9 metres (30 feet) wide, inviting the public to enter its
interior through a staircase/vagina; unlike traditional female reclining nudes,
this figure lay on her back, legs apart, exposing her vagina rather than hiding
it. Inside, Hon contained several rooms and multiple environments, including a cinema for Greta Garbo movies, an aquarium, a planetarium, restaurants and a milk-bar positioned inside one breast; these not only emphasized the plenitude of the female body, they also defied the established museological distinction between exhibition and café, places to look and places to touch, smell and taste.¹⁹

A year after Hon was exhibited, Artforum published both LeWitt’s ‘Paragraphs on Conceptual Art’ and Michael Fried’s essay ‘Art and Objecthood’ in the Summer issue of 1967. In contrast to LeWitt, Fried attempted to articulate a revised Modernist aesthetics. His essay offers an interpretation which develops aspects of Kant’s account of the sublime, in which the experience of the beautiful produces the subject/object distinction, while the experience of the sublime offers a stage in which the subject/object distinction is suspended momentarily. While the subject is overwhelmed no subject/object distinction is experienced, and for a moment subjectivity does not matter. But, as soon as the subject is able to articulate that which overwhelms it in terms of infinity, the experience is mastered in terms of subject/object relationships, though the sublime object remains un-representable to the senses.

Fried seeks to defend the work of Noland and Caro against the work of Judd and Morris, which he calls ‘literalist art’. For Fried, ‘literalist art’ theatricalizes the relation between object and beholder, art and viewer; and compromises the experience of perceptual ‘presentness’ – an experience where there is no clear subject/object distinction, which he saw as crucial to the experience of art. Interestingly, Fried argues that literalist art belongs ‘to the history – almost the natural history – of sensibility’.²⁰ Fried seems to be suggesting that the senses are crucial for the one and not for the other. Literalist art, he argues ‘conceives itself’ as neither painting nor sculpture, so it becomes theatrical rather than an aesthetic experience of perceptual ‘presentness’ which suspends ‘objecthood’ and thus presents us with the experience of ‘duration’.²¹ Fried’s objection to the theatre needs to be seen in the context of Greenberg’s earlier objection to theatrical elements in painting. In his 1961 essay ‘Modernist Painting’, Greenberg argues that these are distinguished from earlier paintings in their attempts to offer an immanent critique of the discipline by focusing on its essential qualities. For example, in paintings which illustrate literary narratives, focusing on literature, the ‘enclosing shape of the support was a limiting condition, or norm, that was shared with the art of the theatre’;²² hence this is not an essential quality of painting. The essential quality of painting, he argues, is two-dimensionality. Greenberg’s essay can be read as a response to a particular concern: that painting will become mere entertainment rather than ‘the kind of experience … valuable in its own right and not to be obtained from any other kind of activity’.²³ Hence, when Fried argues that literalist art does not conceive itself as either painting or sculpture, he also implies that it is not authentic art which addresses its own proper sense perception of
vision, and that theatricality can only reduce art to mere entertainment. In this analysis, Hon would be but a glorified fairground attraction.

Fried’s essay was seeking to offer a defence of Modernist aesthetics at a time when Modernism was under threat theoretically and practically. Painting and sculpture were no longer the dominant forms of art, and artistic practices included happenings, performances, installations, environments and other forms, including a new sculpture in the expanded field. On one level, it is possible to see these as a critique of the dominance of vision promoted by the dominance of painting. On the other, the dematerialization of the art object seemed to offer the possibility for an art form that was not mediated primarily by any of the senses. As Lippard argues, 1966 marks a turning point: art no longer focuses on the art object and on constructing the subject/object distinctions central to Modernist aesthetics. What we are encountering in the emergent art of 1966–72 is the ‘dematerialization of art’: art becomes concept, and no longer appeals to the senses. The debate on vision, however, did not disappear, but simply shifted its focus. Despite the centrality of the senses for Modernist aesthetics, its focus on painting also meant a focus on vision and its implied references to knowledge and universality. The collapse of Modernist aesthetics highlighted this focus and thus opened the debate.

The Debate on Vision

In 1987 Hal Foster organized a conference at the Dia Art Foundation on the topic of ‘Vision and Visuality’, and within a short period of time many of the participants published influential books on the topic, including Martin Jay’s Downcast Eye (1993), Jonathan Crary’s Techniques of the Observer (1992), and Rosalind Krauss’s The Optical Unconscious (1993). In Vision and Visuality, Hal Foster points out that the debate on vision focuses on what became articulated as ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ which separates subject and object and renders the subject transcendental and the object inert. Though Foster does not elaborate on this, at issue is an argument already present in Descartes, but further developed in Kant: vision, which distances subject from object, allows the subject to master the object through knowledge. The process itself also allows the subject to gain self-knowledge, self-consciousness and self-mastery simultaneously. Greenberg’s essay ‘Modernist Painting’ might have been written in 1961 but takes its cue from Kant and perhaps exemplifies precisely this Enlightenment approach with its emphasis on autonomy: the autonomy of the art work as well as of the subject viewing it. Thus, the critique of Modernist aesthetics can be seen in this context as part of the wider critique of Enlightenment articulations of autonomy and self-mastery.

Perhaps the most famous defence of the visual at the symposium was Martin Jay’s. His conference paper ‘Scopic Regimes of Modernity’ focuses
on Descartes rather than Kant, enabling Jay to argue for the importance of science to our well-being, and to suggest that there may well be a link between the absence of scopic regimes in Eastern cultures and their ‘lack of indigenous scientific revolution’:

Growing out of late medieval fascination with the metaphysical implications of light – light as divine *lux* rather than perceived *lumen* – linear perspective came to symbolise a harmony between the mathematical regularities in optics and God’s will.

For Jay, this connection led to the establishment of perspective in the West, creating a rationalized space which could be rendered on two-dimensional surfaces and understood by everybody: thus objective spatial representation was made possible. Jay admits that there are today some problems with the model that offers God’s eye view in the singular eye of perspective, an eye which is static, unblinking and fixed. However, he argues, whilst ‘we may regret the excesses of scientism’, Western science was made possible by ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’, and we must not throw away the baby with the bathwater.

In his book, which elaborated his conference paper, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993), Jay offers a monumental survey of the centrality of vision in Western culture since antiquity and its recent critiques in French thought. As in the earlier paper, Jay attempts to defend Cartesian perspectivalism against what he identifies as a growing critique of the visual from French philosophy: Bataille, Sartre, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Irigaray, Levinas and Lyotard. Jay’s concern is that contemporary critiques, in their refusal to accept the relationship between vision, knowledge, rationality and ethics, point towards relativism and loss of any organizing values (ethics), since their critique of vision is but a critique of rationality itself. Jay’s 600-page long historical survey ends up claiming that if we allow recent critical voices to have their way, we shall be losing not only the priority of the visual but also the priority of reason itself. Jay argues that such critiques of vision would place us forever in the gallery of images but never able to make any sense of them. For Jay, if we follow contemporary French thought, we would lose the possibility of knowledge as well as the importance of vision, and we would be left without reason and its guidance; if the dominance of reason is questioned, morality and ethics disappear. And yet, this overwhelming power of reason and its conflation with vision, autonomy and self-mastery is precisely what many contemporary thinkers and artists were seeking to circumvent and why appeals to senses other than the visual became visible and audible in both theoretical and artistic works. For unlike vision, touch, smell and taste are undeniably embodied and cannot be conflated with reason and distant mastery in the way vision has been in the European tradition.
Installation Art and Crary’s Account of ‘The Visual’

In their 2003 book Installation Art in the New Millennium, Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry argue that installation art is fundamentally different from earlier art since it aims at stimulating the full range of our sense perception, and that as such it offers a critique of earlier visual, modernist art. They support this argument with a quotation from the opening page of Crary’s 1999 book Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture, claiming that:

Western modernity since the nineteenth century has demanded that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of a capacity for ‘paying attention’, that is, for a disengagement from a broader field of attention, whether visual or auditory, for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli.\(^\text{30}\)

According to Crary, a distinction between the different arts was based on their capacity to focus their address to specific sense perceptions, thus distinguishing the visual from the auditory and the tactile as well as smell and taste. As each art sought to focus on one sense stimulus, it also demanded its audience to do the same.

In his 1992 publication Techniques of the Observer, Crary argues that:

A history of vision depends on far more than an account of shifts in representational practices. Vision and its effect are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product and the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification.\(^\text{31}\)

For Crary, Western art developed alongside scientific development and art became valued because of its capacity for innovation by testing and expanding the experience of human sense perception at a time when new scientific explorations were taking place, much of it depending on optical developments. Though Crary offers a very different interpretation to Jay, they both share an argument which emphasizes the centrality of Descartes’ mechanical approach to vision which connects the development of art and science in the seventeenth century. As the Introduction to this volume suggests, a history of the senses could not be established purely on the basis of scientific knowledge. Both Crary and Jay are aware that such a history is heterogeneous and that culture, discourse and social issues cannot be ignored. For Crary, the scientific revolution accelerated the search for workable explanations for understanding the interplay of vision and appearance. Hence,

Innovative art has frequently taken shape within an awareness of the double-sidedness of perceptual experience: that it is formed both through external techniques and practices and through the subjective capacities of the observer’s own body and nervous system.\(^\text{32}\)
Crary goes on to argue that whilst art and vision continued to develop alongside industrialization, art could offer innovations which responded critically to the process of industrialization. However, he argues, we are now in a material environment where these early models are inadequate and the separation between the arts on the basis of sense stimuli is no longer sustainable. The Enlightenment, Crary says, supported the belief ‘that universal access to knowledge and communication tools ought to have been the basis for conditions of freedom and participatory democracy’ (p. 7). However, he admits with implicit references to Kant, access to knowledge and communication tools did not lead to universal freedom and transnational cosmopolitanism.

For Crary, the crucial paradox today is that ‘the greater the technological capacity for connection, speed, and exchange and circulation of information, the more fragmented and compartmentalised the world becomes’ (p. 6). What we find today, he argues, is not a ‘trans-national community with shared set of aesthetic and perceptual foundations’ but ‘the spread of relatively self-sufficient micro-worlds of affect, meaning and experience, between which intelligible exchange is less and less possible’ (p. 7). The type of art that best responds to such change is installation art, which challenges ‘hegemonic uses of media’, tests ‘new ways of assembling and presenting information’, and ‘directly engages the patchwork, composite character of contemporary experience’ (p. 7). Capitalism today seems to be independent of actual geographical locations, as wealth, he argues, operates with a mobility and fluidity beyond specific locations. There is thus a dislocation between what he calls ‘spaceless electronic worlds of contemporary technological culture’ and ‘the physical extensive terrain on which our bodies are situated’ (p. 8). For Crary, installation art is one way in which this dislocation can be addressed in art. Technology, he argues, might not lead to universal cosmopolitan democracy as envisioned by the Enlightenment, but contemporary art as installations that address the above may well play a role in leading towards plural participating communities as part of more egalitarian global future.

Saint Phalle’s Hon was described at the time as sculpture, and I am not sure the term ‘installation’ was fully in use in 1967. ‘Installation art’ seems to suggest that it is different from other visual art forms in that it addresses not only the visual sense but the full range of multi-sensory experience. Moreover, in installations the relationship between artist and audience is closely linked to the continuing debate around ‘theatrical space’. For in installations the division between actors and audience is no longer clear: ‘the “theatricality” of the work, once seen as a weakness because of the reliance on entertaining the audience, has become a virtue’ (p. 18).

From this perspective Saint Phalle’s Hon fulfills the criteria of an installation. The documentation available certainly confirms that the audience was invited to enter the interior of the reclining nude, and within this interior sound, touch,
smell and taste were, literally, central to the work. For inside the reclining female nude the audience was confronted with an environment which invited not mere visual aesthetic appreciation, but also participation, albeit in the consumption of what was on offer, food, drink, warmth, entertainment, scientific information, etc. In short, every sense perception was involved.

As I showed earlier, Saint Phalle’s Hon does not invite visual contemplation of the exterior and the interior presents the audience with a multi-sensory experience. And yet, I feel uneasy with the interpretation presented by Crary, Oliveira et al. which on one level at least simply replaces the visual with multi-sensory experience, widening our Modernist conception of aesthetics to multi-sensory. My concern is not in the introduction of the multi-sensory as a revised aesthetics, but in the claim that this alone will solve our problem in the relationship between art and vision. For the problem of the aesthetic is not merely a question of replacing one sense perception with another or with many, but the close connection between vision, knowledge, reason, mastery and subjectivity. I would like to return to Jay’s account and disentangle his conflation of vision and reason, when reason is also understood as mastery, self-mastery and as the guardian of ethics: reason that operates as the guardian of the subject’s authority and centrality.

Vision and Ethics

Martin Jay’s Downcast Eyes opens with a chapter which argues that from Plato to Descartes vision was regarded as ‘the noblest of all the senses’. Whilst Jay is careful to show that what was celebrated was not simply the capacities of our sense perception of vision, he does distinguish between those who celebrated vision – and by implication reason – and those he interprets as ‘anti-visual’ and by implication not supporting reason. For Jay, since reason is the ground of Western civilization and morality, critiques of vision are implicitly critiques of reason with the danger of leaving us with relativism and nothing else.

We are all familiar with Plato’s celebration of vision and with Plato’s warning that the vision achieved by our two imperfect eyes is illusory. However, Plato’s account of vision is more complex than it might appear at first sight. In the Timaeus Plato also explains that whilst vision ‘is humanity’s greatest gift’, this gift was given to us so that ‘we should see the revolutions of intelligence in the heavens and use their untroubled course to guide the troubled revolutions in our own understanding, which are akin to them’. For Plato, the gift of vision is but a stage towards ethics: to see the Good. Vision can thus guide our path to ethics.

In what follows I shall use the case of Lacan’s account of the gaze and show that it does not advocate relativism but offers us an approach towards ethics. Though I am using Lacan’s account of the gaze as my example, I could have
equally chosen Derrida’s account in *Memoir of the Blind*, 36 or Irigaray’s account of the caress, 37 or Levinas’ account of ethics. 38 Jay offers all, and more, as attacks on vision. Whilst the accounts above do differ at times radically, they all share an attempt to disrupt Modernist aesthetics in its appeal to vision as control; and the subject as autonomous and master.

Jay opens the chapter in which he discusses Lacan with a quote taken out of context: ‘there is no good eye, but there are evil eyes all over the place’. 39 Though he follows this up with a long and detailed discussion of Lacan’s account of the gaze he concludes with a discussion of the ‘evil eye’ which holds fascination but arrests movement ‘literally … killing life’ (p. 367). Whilst for Lacan, vision holds a seductive illusion and has a hold over us, this should not be seen simply negatively. For it is precisely because vision has ‘a hold over us’, I would argue, that Lacan is able to develop his account of the gaze, as an account towards ethics. 40

Norman Bryson, in his essay ‘The Gaze in the Expanded Field’ – presented at the conference *Vision and Visuality* – suggests that in Lacan’s account of the gaze ‘vision is portrayed as menaced … threatened from without, and in some sense persecuted, in the visual domain, by the regard or Gaze’. 41 The account in Lacan is of a fishing trip in which one of the fishermen asks: ‘you can see that can? Do you see it? Well it doesn’t see you’. 42 The remark disturbs Lacan, he feels there is a sense in which the world of inanimate objects looks back and as such disturbs the subject position of the one looking, the master in control of what is in front of its eyes. Bryson interprets it as a ‘displacement of the subject in the field of vision’ and he goes on to explain that ‘For human beings collectively to orchestrate their visual experience together it is required that each submit his or her retinal experience to the socially agreed description(s) of an intelligible world’. 43 For Bryson, the displacement of the subject comes about in the field of vision because vision is socialized: discourse mediates between subject and world, the field of vision is not mere visual perception, and visuality includes discourse. This account allows Bryson to argue that because vision is mediated we can make sense of visual disturbances, hallucinations and misrepresentations. For Bryson, Lacan’s account points towards ethics but does not go far enough.

I want to take further Bryson’s account by referring to Lacan’s 1959–60 seminars *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. In this, he explains that ethics begins ‘at the moment when the subject poses the question of that good he had unconsciously sought in the social structure’. 44 Moreover, he argues that the good (happiness) is expressed in politics since ‘there is no satisfaction for the individual outside the satisfaction of all’ (p. 292). Ethics, for Lacan, is always within a social and political context. In his 1964 seminar, Lacan suggests that in the scopic field there is a split between the eye and the gaze. Whilst we cannot see the gaze, we become an object to the gaze, for we are, Lacan says, beings ‘who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world’. 45 Our look is always
caught up as if to be judged. For Lacan, ‘any picture is a trap for the gaze. In any picture, it is precisely in seeking the gaze in each of its points that you will see it disappear’ (p. 89). Lacan articulates an experience of the gaze as something which I cannot master, rather it grasps me. His visual example is Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*. Lacan suggests that the painting catches the observer, it traps the viewer, ‘as subjects, we are literally called into the picture, and represented here as caught’ (92). Moreover, he suggests that the desire caught is fixed in the picture. For Lacan, as Dylan Evans explains, ‘desire is essentially “desire of the other’s desire”, which means both desire to be the object of another’s desire and desire for recognition by another’.46

When *Hon* was exhibited, participants had enough clues that they were confronted with a work playing with the artistic tradition of the reclining nude, but also that if they were invited to look, this was not a model of vision that rendered the subject transcendental and the object inert. Rather than sublimated into distanced visual contemplation, any desire was mobilized as active participation, as beholders were invited to literally enter the figure through her vaginal opening. To gain knowledge of her insides, people had to do more than just look. In this way, *Hon* did more than just dramatize and subvert the image of the reclining woman as passive object of a mastering gaze, it acknowledged the beholder’s desire to be desired back, trapping not only their gaze but their entire bodies, literally within herself. She not so much looked back, as ‘ingested’ back, in the reverse of birth, via her vaginal opening (which gave access, amongst other things, to restaurants and milk bars). If subjectivity was being enabled, this was a subjectivity gained not through distanced visual mastery but through an embodied looking, which rendered participants subject to, rather than masters of, the experience of the gaze.

Whilst Western tradition focused on aligning vision with knowledge and mastery, in Lacan and in *Hon*, at least, it is possible to see another aspect of vision, vision as the gaze that can also be inverted. As Evans notes, ‘the gaze becomes the object of the act of looking … the object of the scopic drive. [It is] no longer on the side of the subject; it is the gaze of the other’.47 For Lacan, there is a gap between the eye and the gaze: ‘the eye which looks is that of the subject, while the gaze is on the side of the object’.48 There is no coincidence between the two, since ‘you never look at me from the place at which I see you’ (p. 103).

I am suggesting that simply replacing the aesthetic of the visual with an aesthetic of multi-sensory experience does not solve the problem of Modernist aesthetics and its focus on the visual. For the visual is problematic in its deep connection to autonomy and mastery, to reason and knowledge. But it is not enough to suggest that this would be changed or resolved by a multi-sensorial aesthetic, and by giving up reason and knowledge with it. Through Lacan’s account of the gaze it is possible to see an account of the visual that is also that of being hostage to the gaze, not only master of it. Whilst in Lacan being
hostage to the gaze is not explicitly presented as ethics, it nonetheless leads towards ethics, an ethics of the other through the gaze. This is not an ethics of reciprocity, but an asymmetrical ethics of the relationship to the other. This in turn might allow us to not only celebrate a multi-sensorial aesthetic, but also prompt us to rethink models of rationality and knowledge based not on distance and objectification, but on the ethics and aesthetics of fully embodied beings.

Notes

5. Kant, Anthropology, p. 35.
10. Clark, The Nude, p. 64.
11. Ibid.
18. Clark, The Nude, p. 64.
19. On the development of this distinction, see Di Bello in this volume.
21. Ibid.
32. Crary, ‘Foreword’, in Installation Art, pp. 6–9, p. 6; subsequent references are to this text.
35. Ibid.
39. Lacan in Jay, Downcast Eyes, p. 329; subsequent references are to this text.
44. J. Lacan, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 76; subsequent references are to this text.
45. Lacan, Four Fundamental Concepts, p. 75; subsequent references are to this text.
47. Evans, Introductory Dictionary, p. 72.
48. Ibid.