

# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE SEPTEMBER 2017

Pauline  
Oliveros

Okwui Enwezor

The  
Ashbery  
Riff-Offs

88  
Dreams

Slow Art

Yvonne  
Rainer

Darcey  
Steinke

Cowboy  
Stories

Ruth  
Kligman

Chris Kraus

Lili Chopra

# The Eyes

# of Statues



Standing Male Worshiper (detail), Sumerian, ca. 2900–2600 B.C. Gypsum alabaster, shell, black limestone, bitumen, 11 1/4 x 5 1/4 x 3 7/8 in. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

BY HUNTER DUKES

The statues are now only corpses from which the living soul has flown...

—G.W.F. Hegel  
*Phenomenology of Spirit*

The man who contemplates is "absorbed" by what he contemplates; the "knowing subject" "loses" himself in the object that is known.

—Alexandre Kojève  
*Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*

A sculptor carves a woman out of ivory—beautiful, silent, immobile. He's sometimes not so sure. He checks for a pulse, a beat or breath. Nothing. Still, he carves no further, for it might bruise. One day something changes. Pygmalion has been praying to the gods. Returning home to his candlelit studio, he finds it lying on the sofa. He kisses his creation. She opens her eyes.

Statues have a tendency to flicker between the quick and the dead. Lucian of Samosata describes a young man who spent his days before the Venus of Praxiteles, his sight fixed *uninterruptedly* upon her. The statue's vitality, Lucian argues, comes from her eyes, with their "gaze so liquid, and at the same time so clear." In a 1798 essay Goethe suggests viewing a Hellenistic sculpture by torchlight. "If one were to stand in front of the *Laocoön*, close one's eyes, then reopen them, it would seem as if the figures had actually moved." What if they had?

Writing about idols, social anthropologist Alfred Gell tries to explain why people attribute agency to these objects. Collating examples from dozens of

cultures, he finds that animism relies upon things that contain or imply an interior. These "homunculi" replicate the classical divide between body and soul. Imagine a spherical stone, he says. Now drill two holes in its surface. Once the rock has orifices it becomes easier to presume that it also has intentions and perceptions. These "imaginings" map onto the contrast between the sphere's surface and its interior, to which the apertures give access. Eye contact creates intersubjectivity—to see the idol, you must see it *seeing you*.

Consider the twelve statues recovered at Tell Asmar. Unearthed in 1933 near modern-day Baghdad, the "hoard" belongs to the Early Dynastic Period in Mesopotamia. They are made of gypsum and limestone, votive icons of priests and worshippers. There are bald women with gored skirts, wide shoulders. Men with terraced beards that recall Babylon's tiered gardens. All have one feature in common: heads tilted back, pupils the size of grapefruit, they gaze out at whomever will meet their eyes.

Discussing the hoard, psychologist Julian Jaynes—known for his wild theory of *bicameralism*—describes eye contact as capable of producing "a kind of stress, an unresolvedness about the experience, and withal something of a diminution of consciousness." An encounter between a person and a statue can create an equally uncanny sense of reciprocal looking. To stare into a pair of eyes (human, stone) is to be pulled out of ourselves, what John Donne describes as having your "eye-beams twisted." In a poem about the ecstatic, he imagines two lovers who "like sepulchral statues lay," their souls floating intertwined in the space between. The poem reveals how animation is a fixed quantity, affirming the first law of thermodynamics. Spiritual vitality feeds off their sepulchral bodies.

If icons flicker or pulse, it is because their witnesses are stone-faced, inert. A living statue relies upon a statued life. To look away is to revitalize, taking back the agency lent to the object world. Pygmalion, who had lived a solitary life, feels desire for the first time through his handiwork. The admirer of Venus finds in marble what Narcissus glimpsed in water. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl calls this *mystical participation*: the encounter with oneself beyond the body's borders. Those familiar with HBO's *Westworld* know that projective identification has a darker side. Narcissus drowns before waking from his trance. To see something *seeing you* is the primal face-to-face encounter out of which vulnerability and ethics arise. While we may no longer worship idols, Jaynes and Gell agree that sacred gazing bleeds into secular looking. When Leopold Bloom visits the Venus of Praxiteles in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, his experience is not altogether different from that of Lucian's devotee. An artwork that *catches our eye* creates a space for contemplation, revealing the ocular etymology behind this once religious practice.

In Samuel Beckett's *Film*, an aged Buster Keaton shuns the gaze of others while a camera trails behind. He avoids passersby and their reflective eyes, darts into his apartment, and covers the parrot's cage, his fish's bowl. On the wall, there is one image: a face from Tell Asmar. He tears it to pieces. Without perceivers, Keaton can relax. Suddenly, for the first time, the camera rotates to face him. He lets out a silent scream of recognition, as he sees himself seeing. To be is to be perceived. The eyes of statues are our own. ☹

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