

1. VIRTUALLY REAL

*"For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face".
Now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.' Corinthians
1:13*

This infamous labyrinthine phrasing that was St Paul's love letter of the metaphysical to a Corinthian religious sect two millennia ago, still today evokes a subdued chamber of endless mirrors offering brief glimpses of self and the unknowable "other" with a prediction that through these oblique reflections, the "I" will somehow meld with this unreachable entity lurking somewhere in this place of refracted depths.

Age old theological interpretations aside this sense of watching through glass darkly has distinctly modern-life-experience allusions. These days we have a new religion. Daily we peer into an array of dark "windows", from the screens of news and entertainment to the plasma fields of information and social networking. Along with our door keys we cannot leave the house without our mobile phones from which we can gaze through at other cyber worlds while on the move. Over such a short period of time we have suddenly hypnotised ourselves with an endless choice of computer gadgetry with which to experience the world.

There is no doubting the advantages of all this great technology, but like anything too much of a good thing can cause unwanted side affects. This hypnosis through a screen darkly can sometimes overtake us. Reality can become comfortably unreal as blood runs through digital streams rather than through pulsing veins. The distance of the real opens up like a gulf of unbridgeable non-existent highways; life becomes a daily mantra in an obsessive labyrinth of virtual truths.

What then, when we find ourselves thrust into a "real" situation staring through a glass door at a "real" person who does not appear to be aware that we are there watching them? And what if that person has no clothes on and is going about their daily business as if in an office, like some bizarrely displaced piece of internet pornography?

Perhaps the premise sounds ludicrous but maybe not as ludicrous as some of the situations we find ourselves in, when traversing the virtual world. And like all powerful performance art, this premise that is Gretta Sarfaty's newest work offers up the idea that we are all voyeurs ultimately trying to find something of ourselves through the act of gazing.

2. THE WORLD IS GAZING BACK TO YOU

The idea of the mechanics of the gaze through flattened pictorial fields has an established art historical unfolding that really took a firm hold at the birth of modernism. Its champion was the painter Edouard Manet. Manet turned the relationship between viewer and artist on its head by insinuating through his work that the viewer was implicated into the mirroring construction and narrative of a painting.

The most famous and didactic example is "Un bar aux Folies-Bergere" (1881-1882) in which we see a young woman serving drinks in a Parisian bar. She stares out at us from behind the bar as if she is about to serve us. But behind her there is a large mirror that fills most of the picture plane. Here we notice a man, a rather dandyish looking character, she is about to serve. But through a clever use of perspective trickery we realise that Manet's intention is that that man could be us. Further more, as the critic and curator Thierry de Duve has noticed, the bar maid is blushing at "our" looming approach. The blush, that most involuntary and sign/signified of human responses. The emotional response of the "other" reflecting back at us in a labyrinth of a different possible narrative origins and consequences.

This repositioning of the spectator in relationship to artist/author was momentous in its influence on modern art and still holds a huge sway on the most interesting aspects of contemporary art. In terms of performance art it is crucial. Gretta's performance work has always and continues to explore this relationship.

With her performance "Through a Glass Darkly" the array of potential emotional and intellectual responses are endless as we peer through the murky mirroring glass at the naked "office worker". And most of all it is ourselves watching ourselves through that most vulnerable states of the "other" in this strange place of the virtually real.

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For more on Manet in relation to the notion of the contemporary gaze see: Thierry de Duve, *Look, 100 Years of Contemporary Art*, Ludion, 2001