

# “Sight Shifting”: Poetics of Perception with Annie Briard

Interview by Magnolia Pauker, January 10<sup>th</sup> 2014

Annie Briard's investigations into the subtlety of the moving image form part of her larger commitment to contemplation and conversation. In this interview, which took place in Vancouver on the occasion of Briard's solo show, "Sight Shifting," presented at Joyce Yahouda Gallery in Montréal, she elaborates some of the philosophical experiential inspirations for her work. Through an attunement to the poetics of perception stemming from her attentive and generous sensibility, Briard asks that we, her interlocutors, refine and distill our own perceptual practices in consideration of the interstitial spaces between seeing and imagining.

Magnolia Pauker: There are some core engagements and aesthetic connections shared by many of your recent works. However, these connections are not always so obvious. *Perceptual Moments* and *The Woods*, for example, appear quite distinct both theoretically and aesthetically, though I'm not sure that they really are very far apart. Do you see a connection between these two works?

Annie Briard: For me, the connection lies partly in my interest in the space between the physically visible and the imagined. There is a “common knowledge” version of the world that we each have, and yet there is no such thing as one universal point of view. Everything we are seeing is constantly being refreshed, remade, and reconfigured by the very fact that our bodies perceive with senses that are fallible, and are filled with their own memories, knowledge, and so on. My initial attraction to moving image and animation techniques stemmed from the ways in which they allowed me to create something that looked as though it spoke the same language as the physical world, in terms of unfolding over time. Also, and simultaneously, these techniques allow for standard conventions of the physical world to morph or disappear, and make things that are not normally accepted as possible take place in a sensible or perceptible way.

M: Your attention to the distinction between what is sensibly material and what is intuited or felt leads me to think about the space between our personal perspectives and our shared expectations with regards to how and what we see. It strikes me that one way to think about what you were saying just now is through affect theory, in that that which we sense is given to us through our socialization, but it is also taken up by each of us in different ways due to specificities of embodiment, positionality, and the individuality of experience. Is this distinction between the singular and the plural something you're playing with?

A: Absolutely. I think of my work less as trying to tell something to the viewer and more about creating an experience from which conversations can emerge. To that end, the works in the “Sight Shifting” exhibition each put forth a carefully considered viewing experience for the audience that is either private and possible for only one viewer at a time, or for small groups of people, like the anaglyph stereoscopic piece *Propos du néant*. The immersive work *After Image*, specifically invites small groups of people into a dark space simulating the internal visual plane. Within these experiences, I'm using

perception and affect theories to stimulate different affective responses. This is done through specific installation parameters and editing techniques, for example.

M: *Watcher* really made me aware of my own peculiarities, both in terms of vision and humour. I was watching the human figure and the subtle oscillations of the image, how it shimmers and dances somehow incongruously, and I laughed. Then I wondered if other viewers might find it funny or if I would be laughing alone. I do feel that there is humour in *Watcher*, but also darkness, and the seemingly incongruous sensation or affective charge produced is not unique to this work, but something that comes through in some of your other works as well.

A: Some of the works are made differently—the animated moving images are premeditated, beginning with a loose premise or scene which I then let unfold. With the *Perceptual Moments* series which includes *Watcher*, often the process begins with looking for these moments that happen so many times a day, points at which I suddenly become aware of some of my own biases, or the way that my body is playing with how I'm taking in a certain image. These works tend to start with an affective moment before being revised to produce something that isn't necessarily representative but rather offers an experience that can elicit a reaction, laughter for example, that can take each viewer somewhere different. *Watcher* began one day when I was walking in the forest and noticed that the way the light was coming into the clearing made for an unnerving and uncanny moment. So my process involves watching, shooting, and then playing the footage again and again while tweaking and adjusting so that I can find or elicit that feeling or sensation once more. For Spinoza, affect constituted a pre-emotional moment produced through an encounter with something else that could be transformative. This idea is exciting to me—that a perception, if alchemical enough, can produce a change in its viewer.

M: You describe the moment that inspired *Watcher* as uncanny, which is a concept that you're working with perhaps throughout your work. What does the concept mean to you? If you are referencing Freud's notion of the uncanny as the sense of being not quite at home, I wonder if your move from the East to the West Coast has some relevance here? Is the West Coast rainforest an uncanny space for you?

A: When I moved here I was completely drawn to the forest—the trees in British Columbia are massive compared to those in Eastern Canada. I shot a lot of footage of the forest not knowing what I was going to do with it. It was a way to play with my vision of the trees through the camera. I was struck by feelings of wonder but also uncanniness. I think it may be because the scenario was familiar, but looked askew in terms of my regular perceptual experience and expectations. This is where the uncanny arises for me and in that way it can prompt the questioning of one's position.

M: The quiet stillness of the forest is also a space of subtle movement which is evidently a focus in your work.

A: The idea of subtle movement is something that I've worked through in making moving image works such as *Presence* for example; a blurred face made of manually morphing JPEGs. But Freud's idea of the uncanny also described the familiar as being perceived in such a way that it suddenly looks completely unfamiliar. I think this is what may happen with subtle movements—through them, you can bring an object to life, and animate it just by moving it a tiny bit. There's something unnerving about that.

M: Perhaps there's a link between the subtlety of movement and wonderment, which seems to have had a place in your experience and in your work long before you began theorizing<sup>1</sup> it?

A: One philosopher who offers a good starting point for me is Gaston Bachelard, who states in his *Poetics of Reverie* that wonderment is a “reverberation to the poetic image in the very sense of phenomenological resonance”. I feel that an image can be anything—physical or imagined—but there is an affective charge that can allow us, in a way, to almost transcend the present moment...

M: Or perhaps enabling us to make a connection beyond the present moment?

A: Yes. To me wonderment may form a point of connection with our surroundings and with each other by creating a possibility for conversation, a sense of positivity or openness, and maybe the potential for change to occur. I think what happens in such a moment is perhaps a suspension of disbelief, which is a concept that many media theorists and artists have explored. And the notion that if this moment is intense enough, it might offer the opportunity for that existentialist ‘leap into the void’ if only perceptually. I love this idea because it means if I can create a moment like that and encourage creative viewing, then suddenly all the structures that seem so fixed and immovable no longer have the same rigidity.

M: You have talked about how you are trying to have a conversation with your work, to provoke conversation, and it strikes me that those conversations are very much inquisitive, and about asking us to question.

A: Yes, I have an idealist vision or hope that if I could understand a multitude of people’s perspectives then maybe I could actually understand what’s really going on. I feel this line of enquiry might be generative for others as well.

M: As a child you had this question of perspective for others, especially for your brother, right? When was it that you realized not everyone sees in the same way?

A: I was fairly young. One childhood anecdote that I remember, which is alluded to in the print *Travers*, is when, riding in a car, I realized there were different depths at which I could see, and how exciting it was that I could ‘zoom’ into one little spot, while feeling frustrated that I could never get the full view. Then I realized that my brother, who was in the seat next to me, was likely seeing something very different. I began noticing intriguing perceptions—optical illusions and other perceptual phenomena. This is also when I began considering how imagined imagery is constituted. When I started making art I was painting images from ideas as opposed to producing representational work. I was inquisitive as to where those ideas came from and how they manifested for others. This mode of inquisitiveness remains central to my practice.

M: I am thinking about your questions around perception in relation to the primacy of vision in western culture and western philosophy, and also the way that a particular understanding and mode of vision has constructed not only what we see, but what we know. I feel that the subtle movement of

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<sup>1</sup> Briard, Annie. *Perceptual Moment*. MAA thesis. Emily Carr University of Art and Design, 2013. Web.

crystallization in your work presents a challenge not only to our ways of seeing, but potentially also to our ways of thinking and knowing. The film theorist Elizabeth Cowie has theorized the concept of *epistemophilia* as the pleasure in knowing. It occurs to me particularly in thinking through the *Perceptual Moments* series, but also the peephole works, that you are offering us an opportunity to consider the fetishization of knowing. Are you questioning that pleasure and perhaps also how it functions perceptually?

A: I think there's something true about that. Part of pleasure in this context is less about truly knowing and more about the 'pleasure' of having your own expectations delivered.

M: Absolutely. Knowing a system.

A: If anything, my works take away some of that pleasure and instead replace it with the unexpected.

M: I think so. In the same way that scopophilia hasn't been imagined as a positive pleasure but rather as a dominating gaze to be deconstructed. Let's talk about the relationship between the aperture and the peephole. Is this something you've thought about at length?

A: I think that from a feminist perspective, the complicated history behind that apparatus must necessarily be acknowledged.

M: The apparatus of the peephole, or of the aperture?

A: Both can be just as problematic in terms of scopophilia, exploitative modes of vision and representation. At the same time, what attracts me to these devices is that they can create a more personal experience than the context in which we regularly see. These curious objects seem to propose a viewpoint to the secretive, and it is precisely here where the expectations – that have been constructed by systems of representation, and particularly through the male gaze – need to be dissembled. I've been working with this premise and how it changes the viewer's response to the content.

M: What the viewer actually sees inside the box is of course as important as the context or form of the peephole. What are you offering them in *Clairière*, for example?

A: *Clairière* wasn't premeditated in the same way as many of my other animated moving images. I built elements and shot them without a script to see what would unfold. The outcome may be telling of my own biases and ideologies, which is the exciting part of such Surrealist processes, as is thinking about what my audience's expectations may be and how I might employ them. The work begins with an emulation of another uncanny forest, in which a nude character awakens and attempts to escape through several different means before realizing that she cannot. I experience a sense of discomfort when I watch the work and I'm hoping it makes my viewers uncomfortable as well.

M: I hope so too. I'd like to talk about your interest in Surrealism and especially Surrealist processes. When you were describing your desire to offer wonderment along with your attunement to the uncanny, I thought about the Surrealist project. Many Surrealists felt that by unhinging normative

relations and opening perception toward the unconscious we would and could change the world. Would you describe your process as Surrealist? Are there political implications that you feel are attached to or develop out of your process? And I also want to ask specifically about another perhaps Surrealist link found in *Clairière*. Did you have Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* in mind when you were making this work?

A: I'm uncertain as to whether or not political implications are apparent in my process. What I can say is that I see the potential for a political stance in wonderment's ability to push back against defined constructs, and my approach makes use of wonderment in this way, either as starting point for the work or as inherent within it. Although I sometimes borrow Surrealist approaches and considerations, I would not qualify my work as part of that movement as I openly seek to question the constructed ideologies it often replicated.

*Étant donnés* wasn't in my mind as I was making *Clairière* because I was focused on leaving the scene open-ended, and hadn't yet made the choice to display the work in a box. But of course, once I looked at what I had shot, it made me think of Duchamp's piece. A number of things bother me about that specific work, part of which is the perpetuation of a fetishistic male gaze on the female body in a way that I don't believe subverts conventional modes of representation, which makes me uncomfortable. So there is something about *Clairière* that responds to the problem of exploitative voyeurism by laying it bare. As well, the very fact that my character is animated grants her an ability to express her displeasure with the situation, suggesting a fraught sense of agency.

M: And yet she is also not let out.

A: That's right. As the person manipulating the character, I feel a sense of responsibility for both her captivity and the vulnerability of her position. I hope that the viewer, in turn, might think about their responsibility towards their own acts of voyeurism and what they may perpetuate.

M: There is a piece waiting to be written about *Clairière* as a critique of *Étant donnés* actually—wrestling with the constitutive force of the male gaze and its fetishization of the vulnerable female body. I don't think many people would feel comfortable viewing this. I hope not. The question is then, what does discomfort offer as a perceptual experience?

A: For me, the experience of discomfort takes us back to the possibilities for affective provocation, in that it prompts similar questions about the relationship between cultural context and individual perspective.

M: Perhaps we can shift now from discussing *Clairière* to *The Woods*, which I see as intimately related. I know that you are always thinking about what people will see and how they will respond to your work, but usually with the intention of leaving the experience open for each individual. With *The Woods* you had to actually code people's responses in order for the work to be interactive.

A: Yes, the *Perceptual Moments* series is about offering an experience. My production process makes use of vision science and psychology to create a space where strange things can occur, putting into

question what it is that we are actually seeing. *The Woods* was different in that it needed to be a bit more prescriptive, and it was targeting another audience, too. I created it with the support of *Limbic Media*, a programming group in Victoria, as an interactive piece meant for a street-front window. It was produced to beckon to passersby through a waving character. I didn't want it to be about button pushing, but instead to open a conversation between the viewer and an imagined world.

Sitting with the work for a few hours, it becomes apparent that certain themes keep coming up. Part of the fun is that what you text to the character is displayed on-screen, which at times means that the conversation can become banal, like when twenty people in a row say hello. There also seems to be a general interest in triggering responses that are shocking or inappropriate. The work asks people to consider the dynamics of the relationship between the tangible and the imagined world. Part of how the work is structured is for the character to have a bit of its own agency in way—what you text will not necessarily yield a response appropriate to your...

M: Apparent desire?

A: Yes. There is also a certain level of randomness, so you can't fully control the situation; the character will at times have its own course of action.

M: I want to ask you then, what are your responsibilities and commitments as an artist?

A: I am making moving image works at a time that is dominated by the primacy of vision, and also by the oversaturated promulgation of digital media.

M: It's not about subtle movement!

[laughter]

A: That's right. My main responsibility, or the standard to which I want to hold myself accountable consists of not taking up space for redundancy. This may mean that at times my works aren't following the established movement, but for me it's about being genuine and staying true to the exploration I am committed to. I feel that I need to be adding a new approach, a new point of inquiry, and so on, with each work. My second responsibility is to strive to be as open as I'm asking my audience to be. As much as I want to be heard, I want to hear and listen.

M: I appreciate that you refuse redundancy. I think a refusal to take up resources and space in this way is really important. I also have to say that this ethic is, I think, evident in your aesthetic of subtle movement. What inspired this commitment?

A: One text that has marked me and which I keep thinking about, though it may no longer be popular, is Jean Baudrillard's *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* Just thinking about all this oversaturation of noise make me feel affected. The excess seems so magnified.

M: If you have that subtlety of vision it must be excruciating to live in this world, to be subject to a constant barrage.

A: Though Baudrillard is perhaps writing about the loss of affect. On the one hand it's about the death of the real, the referent, and the tangible world and that can be terrifying—the constant rain shower of noise can make it difficult to pinpoint individual experiences or connections.

M: It occurs to me that your work rarely includes audio and often takes up silence. Is this part of your commitment to the distillation of perception?

A: Part of the decision to leave out sound stems from my thematic focus. I sometimes feel envious of musicians because there's a certain affect music can create for anyone within earshot, whereas with vision you need to be focused and there, with open eyes—it's not as all-encompassing.

M: We're generally more aware of vision, perhaps, than sound, which is often working on us from the background.

A: I think so. I enjoy working with sound, but I have noticed that it can be leading in terms of constructing specific responses to my works, whereas the moving image seems more open-ended. We of course aren't all affected the same way by sound, but I feel that my intentionality becomes more perceivable with sound. For now, I'm still working through so many questions about vision that in order to focus on them I feel the need to exclude sound. The immersive installation in this show, *After Image*, does make use of sound, but it is purposefully white-noise based in order to create a cocooning effect and to remove distractions from the outside. I use a similar treatment for the ways in which I process my images—distilling color, zooming in, blurring extraneous details, and intensifying lightness and darkness to let go of greyness or the midtones.

M: You seem to use isolation as a way of simplifying the relation between the viewer and the work, perhaps crystallizing our sensuous perception. We began today by talking about your interest in the space between the physically visible and the imagined. How do you conceive of the between?

A: I'm not sure. That's partly why I'm making these works. The space between frames, for instance, fascinates me. That's why I classify my works as moving image as opposed to video or film. First of all, they are somewhat removed from video art and the cinematic in that they are generally not narrative or referentially mediumistic. In working with the moving image, I am less constrained by the structure and expectations imposed by its counterparts. That said, the way in which we access moving image—image by image—has as much to do with the space between the frames as with the images themselves. And so, that's something I make strong use of as a device. The interval<sup>2</sup> is made visible in a representational format in the print *Travers*, but also in my moving image works, such as *Perceptual Moment #8*. I see this space between as an existential void. It's at once black, empty and devoid of anything, while at the same time being oversaturated with noise and possibility. The space of the between remains dualistic.

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<sup>2</sup> Two theorists dealing with the interval in moving images have been particularly influential to the *Perceptual Moments* series. Gilles Deleuze talks about that space in terms of its affect as an element in and of itself as opposed to talking about it solely for its facilitation of montage and narrative. Trinh T. Minh-ha elaborates on its ability to open space for the viewer to consider what is underrepresented in the image in her book *Cinema-Interval*.

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