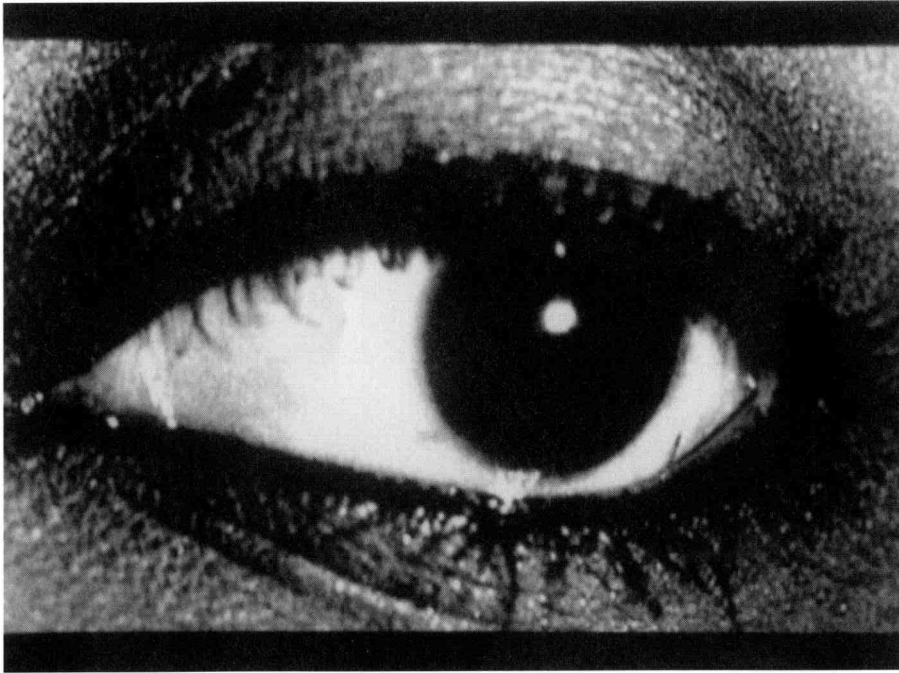


Vision and Insufficiency at the Turn of the Millennium: Rosemarie Trockel's Distracted Eye

CHRISTINE ROSS

It is safe to say that art of the 1980s and '90s, informed by feminism, post-structuralism, postcolonialism, queer studies, and the return to the body, has been preoccupied with the notion of identity. The quest for identity—the need to identify “the Self as itself”¹—has been critically rearticulated so as to problematize colonialist, masculinist, and heterosexual definitions of subjectivity, and to acknowledge the role of psychical processes, such as identification and abjection, in identity formation. This criticism has evolved in such a way that the representation of sexual, gendered, and cultural difference was soon seen as problematic in itself. In the mid-1990s, the impulse was to move beyond identity politics.² A specific conception of identity—what Stuart Hall designates as the great collective social identities of class, of race, of nation, of gender, and of the West, thought of as all-encompassing, homogeneous, and unified—started to drift away, to be gradually replaced by definitions of identity that integrate notions of process, flexibility, fluidity, and more important, performance.³ Yet, concomitantly, recent art and critical theory also expressed skepticism about the celebrated concept of performance in a society increasingly structured by performative entrepreneurial processes of normalization.⁴

I would like to suggest that one of art's most significant contributions to the identity debate is its exploration of the role of visual perception. Contemporary



Rosemarie Trockel. *Eye*. 1999. Video still courtesy
Barbara Gladstone.

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 10. For a brilliant elaboration on the role of identification in identity processes (using Nancy's definition of identity as “the Self that identifies itself”), see Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

2. See Linda Nicholson and Steven Seldman, eds., *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

3. Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, ed. Anthony D. King (Binghamton: Department of Art and Art History, State University of New York, 1991), pp. 41–68.

4. See, for example, Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Miwon Kwon, “The Wrong Place,” *Art Journal* 59, no. 1 (Spring 2000), pp. 33–43; and Emily Martin, *Flexible Bodies: Tracking Immunity in American Culture, From the Days of Polio to the Age of AIDS* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

art has developed a series of aesthetic strategies both to question the role of vision in identity and to investigate ways to enhance perceptual criticality in the viewer by considering the abilities, deficiencies, and disorders that shape perception in the era of the *performative*. What I am trying to argue here is that art's contribution to the identity debate lies in the awareness that one cannot speak about identity, much less about critical representations of identity, without addressing the viewer, without taking into account his or her ability to perceive critically, his or her limited ability to see. The counterpart of performance is insufficiency (for example, depression, sleep disorders, Attention Deficit Disorder). I contend that recent art rethinks perception in light of this insufficiency. In so doing, it re-actualizes Walter Benjamin's insight that the shocks of modernity have forced the subject to anaesthetize his or her perceptual faculties and that aesthetics could play a major role in the restoration of perception.⁵

To understand contemporary art's questioning of the viscosity of identity processes, one must consider what sociologist Alain Ehrenberg designates as the post-1960s shift from a Freudian/Lacanian form of subjectivity—a subjectivity defined through the Law of the Father, through *l'interdit*, guilt, and the threat of castration—to a neo-Janet form of subjectivity defined by norms of performance, responsibility, flexibility, and initiative.⁶ In other words, one has to be attentive to present displacements in the field of subjectivity: the subject in conflict between the forbidden and the permissible is gradually being replaced by a subject in cleavage between the possible and the not-possible. Constraints still pressure subjectivity, but the imperative today is to initiate one's own identity instead of being disciplined to do so. If the Freudian pathology par excellence was neurosis, the main pathology of the contemporary performative subject who has become the sole agent for his or her own subjectivity is depression. Depression derives from failure to perform, more specifically from identity insecurity, feelings of insufficiency, and responsibility fatigue. It is my contention that when contemporary art rethinks identity, it does so by addressing the contemporary depression-prone subject through what I would call depressed or insufficient images. Art integrates depression in the materiality and structure of the image so as to reach the contemporary viewing subject—performative yet insufficient, full of initiative yet tired, responsible yet anaesthetized, identified yet disidentified—so as to rethink and investigate new forms of critical perception. Pathology, deficiency, depression, fatigue, insufficiency, disidentification, failed recognition: those terms may

sound negative, but I would like to see how they could be developed—as they seem to be in contemporary art—as enabling and potentially productive.

It is precisely this universe of *insufficiency of perception* that is interpellated in Rosemarie Trockel's triptych installation produced for the 1999 Venice Biennale, an installation composed of three films projected in three separate rooms entitled *Eye*, *Sleepingpill*, and *Kinderspielplatz*. The *Eye* section, which consists of a large screen projection of a human eye in a dark room, proposes a vision I would describe as insufficient: recognition has been replaced by somnolent (drowsy, sleepy) attention. Yet I want to insist that the installation produces insufficiency—a weakening of perceptual sharpness—both as a loss and as a state that might engender new cognitive possibilities. The strength of the installation resides in the questions it constantly raises: What is it, today, to recognize? What is it to see? What happens to the subject—in terms of identity, critical understanding of the world, empowerment—when his or her power of recognition drifts away to be replaced by an attention deprived of its functions of identification and differentiation? As I will try to demonstrate, the installation was produced as an attempt to understand cultural modalities of contemporary vision. Trockel's installation is one of the key art works at the turn of the millennium to have addressed the imperative to rethink visual perception (its sensorimotoricity, but also its potential for criticality, excitability, and sensuality) in light of the social changes affecting subjectivity. Its heuristic is to think perception in relation to the insufficiency of the contemporary subject.

The Insufficiency of the Eye

Eye plays a central role in the installation as a whole. Located between the two other rooms of the triptych, it welcomes the spectator at the entrance of the pavilion. When the viewer enters, s/he immediately faces a large screen entirely occupied by an image of an eye. Projected in black-and-white and in slow motion, larger than life-size, the eye is imposing. Yet, while it actively looks, it doesn't look at the space in front of it, an effect of the fact that the image is actually a gradual superimposition of seven left female eyes. The organ is in continuous mutation that progressively yet subtly modifies itself throughout the projection. Meanwhile, the eye moves in saccades (from right to left and from left to right) with an occasional blinking of the eyelid, but fails to anchor itself into a fixed position. It is also devoid of stable identity markers, for gender, race, and agency are persistently ambiguous. This uncertainty derives from the recording modalities of the image: the combined use of black-and-white, close-up, and slow motion, together with the absence of sound, abstract the eye from its environment, cutting off biographical, sexual, geographical, and cultural information. If the eye is indeed female, its femininity is never completely secured by the projection. A dark organ projected in black-and-white in a dark room, circumscribed by an ambiguous shadow—is it natural or artificial, makeup or skin?—the eye is, moreover, unde-

5. For an in-depth analysis of Benjamin's examination of the loss of apperception in modernity, see Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (Fall 1992), pp. 3–41.

6. For a sociological examination of identity insecurity in contemporary (post-'60s) subjectivity, see Alain Ehrenberg, *La fatigue d'être soi: dépression et société* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1998).

cidable in terms of racial identity. Is the subject white or black? The installation does not answer this question.⁷ Furthermore, the emphasis on the continuous motion of the eye puts its actual agency into question. In fact, two incompatible readings of agency come about. If the viewer focuses on the ocular movements, these appear to be controlled and activated by the image technology. The eye becomes a passive mass whose motion is manipulated by different technological procedures—slow motion, close-up, and framing—for the sake of scientific observation. Yet this lack of ocular agency is never confirmed, for when the viewer looks at the eye in relation to the outside of the image, imagining the rest of the face or situating it in the room's environment, the eye gains in agency as it gains in subjectivity.

In constant dissolution and regeneration, unable to fix itself in a single point in time or in space, endowed with ambiguous identity markers, *Eye* furthermore fails to fix the spectator's own identity. It looks, but does not see *me*, not sufficiently to recognise my presence or to assess my identity in unitary and exclusive terms: it sees without seeing *something* or *someone*, unable to confirm and indifferent to the presence of the spectator in front of the image. And this could also be said of the spectator who sees the eye yet cannot determine its identity. The recognition of the self through the other is not operative. Identification is faltering. Such a display is dominated by a feeling of perceptual insufficiency, one that doesn't express itself in terms of rights ("do I have the right to see it?") but in terms of *capacity* ("am I able to see it?"). In a society founded on initiative, the self is always on the threshold of being insufficiently itself, leading to chronic problems of identity insecurity and the substantial increase of diagnosed cases of depression in the last thirty years. Trockel's installation should be read as a staging of contemporary insufficiency. But, as I will try to demonstrate, it explores insufficiency so as to turn it into a radical rethinking of perception.

Absorption

One of *Eye*'s most noticeable characteristics is its monocularly. The projection inscribes *in* the image the viewpoint inherited from the Renaissance system of perspective. When the viewer faces the image, not only is s/he not recognized as self, s/he also sees the viewpoint as a vanishing point. *Eye* both signals the persistence of the tradition of perspective and shows us that once the viewpoint is absorbed, the viewer anticipates and awaits a recognition that simply cannot occur. So as to better evaluate the meaning of such a *deceived* anticipation—what it says about contemporary vision and how it may underlie new models of vision—it is useful briefly to recall the perspective tradition against which this deception articulates itself. I refer here to the studies by Hubert Damish, Martin Jay, and Norman Bryson on the positioning of the viewer in the system of linear perspective as it was theorized in Alberti's treatise *De Pittura* and subsequently in the writings of Della

Francesca, Uccello, Dürer, and others. In this tradition, painting is defined as a specular surface relating two visual symmetrical pyramids: one developing from the picture plane into the painting, with its apex corresponding to the vanishing point, and the other emerging from the picture plane outside the painting, with its apex corresponding to the viewpoint, a position that the viewer's eye must occupy if s/he is to see the scene as the painter has initially seen it. Martin Jay summarizes the disembodied, centered, and distanced nature of such a construction:

The beholder was now the privileged center of perspectival vision, a viewpoint, a monocular unblinking eye (an abstract point) rather than the two active stereoscopic eyes of embodied actual vision. This assumption led to a visual practice in which living bodies of both the painter and the viewer were bracketed in favor of an eternalized eye above temporal duration. . . . No longer did the painter seem emotionally involved with the space he depicted; no longer was the beholder absorbed in the canvas. The reduction of vision to the Medusan gaze and the loss of its potential for movement in the temporal glance was now ratified, at least according to the logic—if not always the actual practice—of perspectival art.⁸

Even if we accept that in its Albertian formulation, the viewer was recognized in his or her corporeality (the centric ray relates the eye to the vanishing point, but because it is axial, the position of the viewer is not confined to a specific point in space),⁹ monocular perspective has the effect of transforming the

8. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 54–56.

9. Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 106.



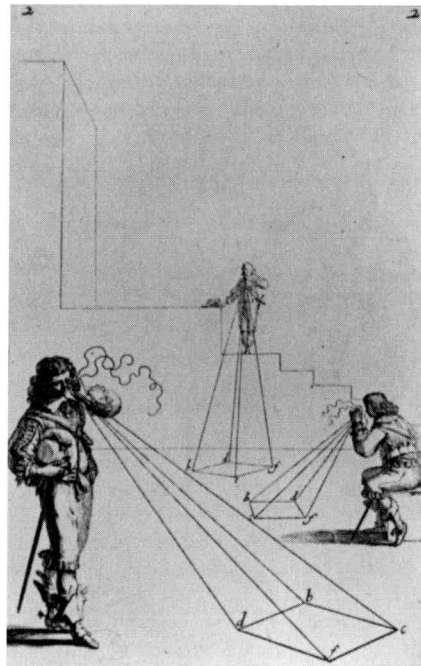
Albrecht Dürer. Print from *Unterweysung der Messung*, Nurnberg, 2nd edition. 1538. Bibliothèque National de France, Paris.

7. I thank Mieke Bal for having pointed out to me this persisting ambiguity.

eye into a theoretical infinitesimal point and the viewer into an object. Norman Bryson has convincingly shown how the vanishing point is precisely a geometrical point, an objectified unit, visible and measurable, a mirror of the spectator's viewpoint that allows the viewer to see him- or herself as such: "[Albertian space] solidifies a form which will provide the viewing subject with the first of its 'objective' identities."¹⁰ In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by adopting the camera obscura as a theoretical model of vision, proto-Cartesian and Cartesian pictorial systems increasingly positioned the viewer as a transcendent viewpoint, denying both the sensorial dimension of vision and the subject's mobility in space.

In Rosemarie Trockel's installation, the monocular viewpoint adopted by the viewing subject of the perspectival system is now on the other side of the mirror: it is now *in* the tableau. With this reversal, the film projection merges viewpoint and vanishing point. No longer is the viewing subject bracketed in favor of "an eternalized eye above temporal duration." On the contrary, it has been absorbed into the screen. But if this is so, it is under the action of technology: it is the camera that ingests and re-ingests the viewer it seeks to preserve. The camera has been endowed with a subjectivity that supports a phantasm of absorption, of losing one's sense of self—one's identity—by technological ingestion. The distancing effect of perspective

has been abolished in order to reinstate Freud's cannibalistic identification, in which the subject constitutes itself by ingesting the other s/he loves and hates (this is the fundamental ambivalence of identification) so as to compensate for its loss.¹¹ So the question emerges: if the viewpoint has been absorbed by the camera—a hypothesis that refers



10. Ibid., pp. 106–7.

11. Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), *Standard Edition*, vol. 18, p. 105. Freud defines cannibalistic identification in the following terms: "Identification, in fact, is ambivalent from the very first; it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone's removal. It behaves like a derivative of the first, oral phase of the

Abraham Bosse. *Les Perspecteurs*. Print from *Manière universelle de M. Desargues pour traiter la perspective*. 1648. Bibliothèque National de France, Paris.

directly to the present development of immersion and surveillance technologies—and if perspectival distancing has expired, how can visual perception be productive? More important, does Rosemarie Trockel's Venice projection propose such a productivity?

In many respects, *Eye* confirms the Lacanian definition of the gaze formulated in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, which positions the viewing subject (Lacan speaks more specifically of the viewer before Holbein's *Ambassadors* of 1533) not outside but inside the image. The subject sees only inasmuch as he is part of the spectacle of the world; he is *constituted* by the gaze that is the manifestation of the Symbolic in the field of vision.¹² "[I]n the scopic field," writes Lacan, "the gaze is outside, I am gazed upon, that is I am in the tableau. . . . What fundamentally determines me in the visible is the gaze which is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light, and it is from the gaze that I receive its effect."¹³ In his analysis of vision, Lacan introduces a chiasmus between the seeing eye and the unseeable gaze, which nevertheless always sees the human seeing eye.¹⁴ *The Ambassadors* represents this state obliquely, via the anamorphic representation of a skull that the two ambassadors do not see but that nevertheless abolishes their sovereignty. The gaze (in this case the skull) is "the first and foremost point of nothingness that marks a crack in the field of reduction of the subject."¹⁵ As Georges Didi-Huberman has superbly demonstrated, the gaze is an act of *évidence* (a voiding), which shatters the *evidence* of the visible, an impossible image that reminds the viewed viewer of his or her mortality, of the ineluctable, albeit inevitable, loss of the body:

Such would be the modality of the visible when its insistence becomes ineluctable: a working of the *symptom* in which what we see is supported by (and returned to) a *work of loss*. A working of the symptom which affects the visible in general and our own viewing body in particular. Ineluctable like an illness. Ineluctable like the definitive closure of our eyelids.¹⁶

But in Trockel's installation, does the blinking eyelid bring the viewer back to the ineluctable? Does it reinstate the Lacanian chiasmus between the viewing subject

organization of the libido, in which the object that we long for and prize is assimilated by eating and is in that way annihilated as such. The cannibal, as we know, has remained at this standpoint; he has a devouring affection for his enemies and only devours people of whom he is fond."

12. See Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 167.

13. Jacques Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (1964) (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973), p. 121. My translation.

14. For an insightful discussion of Lacan's division between the eye and the gaze, see Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 346–58.

15. Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux*, p. 96: "le point de néantisation premier où se marque, dans le champ de la réduction du sujet, une cassure." My translation.

16. Georges Didi-Huberman, "Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde," *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne* 37 (Fall 1991), pp. 34–35. My translation.

and the gaze? To say it bluntly: no. And why is this? Because there is no viewing subject to gaze at or to absorb: s/he has already been absorbed, the camera has already cannibalized the viewer's eye in the image—not only the viewpoint but also, potentially speaking, the spectator's eye(s) before the film. For Lacan, the experience of the chiasmus was a means to acknowledge the otherness of self and to distanciate the subject from primary narcissistic identification with the image, such as the one at play in the infant's attempt to achieve a coherent and unified sense of selfhood in the mirror phase. Yet, in *Eye*, because the perspectival monocular viewpoint is now in the image, the self and the other, the eye and the gaze have collapsed into one, so to affirm the sovereignty not of the human subject but of the camera. This forces us to conclude that: (1) it is technology and not the viewing subject who is now exposed to the condition of infinite desire; (2) subjectivity/agency is on the side of technology and not in the already absorbed human eye; and (3) perspectival distancing between viewpoint and vanishing point has collapsed.

Yet, to reduce Trockel's installation to this collapse would entail a denial of other important aspects of the work that attempt to rethink the agency of the

viewing subject. I want to argue that the Venice installation rethinks vision *from within* this absorption. In so doing, it takes technological absorption not as a necessary destination but as a point of departure—a factual reality from which to propose productive modes of viewing. The point of departure is the loss of distance between subjectivity and technology, the inability to focus, fatigue, and the waning of conflict. In short, insufficiency.

Absorption and Theatricality Revisited

The eye in Trockel's installation raises questions about the agency of vision precisely because of its main features: ingested by the camera, its identity is fundamentally ambiguous and its constant saccadic motion prevents it from focusing on anything specific. The eye is absorbed, but does it see? If it sees, what is seeing without focus and attention, without an object to look at? If it sees, who sees? If someone is seeing, who is this someone? Let us not forget furthermore that, as a response to *Eye*'s inability to recognize the viewer and constant saccadic motion, the viewer is incited to leave the central projection and to move on to the lateral projections of the installation. In Trockel's Venice installation, *Eye* is framed by two other video projections, *Kinderspielplatz* and *Sleepingpill*, that together evoke the contemporary world of distraction and release: childhood, entertainment, performance, consumerism, and noise on the one hand; and a public sanctuary for sleepers, silence, slowness, and the physiological need to sleep and dream on the other. In this, the installation articulates and rethinks one of the important dialectics of modern art, the dialectic of absorption and distraction. I want to argue that Trockel's installation integrates this dialectic so as to posit the inseparability of absorption and distraction, and to rethink the productivity of vision by considering the deficiencies and disorders that presently shape perception. In so doing, the work provides a critical reassessment of Michael Fried's theorisation of this dialectic in his study of modern art.¹⁷

In *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980), a study of eighteenth-century French painting, Fried postulates that the period opened by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin and closing more or less with Jacques-Louis David is one of pictorial absorption. Absorption is about the modern subject's ability *and* struggle to remove his or her mind from the outside world so as to fully engage in a specific activity. According to Fried, absorption is not only the prevailing subject matter of mid-eighteenth-century painting; it also came to represent what was expected of the beholder. Chardin's genre paintings, notably *Un philosophe occupé de sa lecture* (Salon of 1753), *Le Dessinateur* (Salon of



Hans Holbein the Younger
Jean de Dinteville and
Georges de Selve ("The
Ambassadors"). 1533.
National Gallery of London

17. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).



After Jean-Baptiste Greuze, engraved by Jardinier. *La Tricoteuse endormie*. Salon of 1759. Bibliothèque National de France, Paris.

1759), and *The Soap Bubble* (circa 1733), Joseph-Marie Vien's *Ermite endormi* (Salon of 1753), Greuze's sentimental narratives, the pictorial universes of Carle and Louis-Michel Van Loo, and Jean-Honoré Fragonard: all these works propose a form of absorption that involves both conscious attention and unconsciousness. The figures are so utterly engaged in their activities that they are oblivious to "everything other than the specific objects of their absorption."¹⁸ This explains why a critic from the *Journal encyclopédique* will interpret Greuze's *La Tricoteuse endormie* in the Salon of 1759—depicting a girl who has just fallen asleep while knitting—as a successful representation of absorptive condition: "Elle a laissé échapper son ouvrage de sa main & il pourra tomber à terre si la jeune fille ne se réveille [She has let her needlework escape from her hand and it will fall if she does not awaken]." This also explains why another critic will celebrate Greuze's representation of a little girl leaning on and crushing flowers in *Une jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort* (Salon of 1765), as a painting that succeeded in depicting self-abandonment "nearly to the point of extinction of consciousness."¹⁹

Fried's major insight lies in his postulation that the Enlightenment produces a form of absorption that is inseparable from distraction. In all the works he describes, with the exception of Chardin, painting struggles to render absorption. Fried observes that with Greuze, "extraordinary measures" such as sentimentalism, moralism, invention of narrative-dramatic structures, even exploitation of

Jean-Baptiste Greuze. *Une Jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort*. Salon of 1765, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.



sexuality were required "in order to persuade contemporary audiences of the absorption of a figure or group of figures in the world of the painting"; "consequently the everyday as such was in an important sense lost to pictorial representation around that time."²⁰

Fried does not examine the social, cultural, and economic factors that intensified the growth of distraction—the development of modern capitalism, the beginnings of urbanization, the rise of the bourgeoisie, the development of consumerism, the gradual affirmation of women's rights and consequential modification of gender definitions, the burgeoning of mass-attended cultural events—yet he does point out how persuasive representations of absorption lead to a paradoxical emphasis on the closure of painting to the beholder. The increased need to *persuade*, made manifest not only in Greuze's exploitation of sentimental, sexualized, or moralist dramatic structures, but also in the critical revalorization of history painting and its representation of significant action and strong passions, was a need to persuade the beholder to engage—like the figures in the painting—in absorptive activities. Yet this persuasion ensured that the presence of the beholder was not simply ignored but obliterated by the painting. The successful rendering of absorption *in* the painting was to function as a mirror of the absorptive state of the beholder *before* the finished work. Thus, eighteenth-century painting produced a new object—*le tableau*—and a new beholder—a new subject "whose innermost nature would consist precisely in the conviction of his

18. Ibid., p. 31.

19. Ibid., p. 61.

20. Ibid.



Above and opposite: Trockel. Kinderspielplatz. 1999. Video stills. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone.



absence from the scene of representation.”²¹ *Absorption and Theatricality* is a description of the beginnings of the modernist self-enclosure of art into its own world. Suffice it to say that Fried sees the *tableau* as a means to “de-theatricalize beholding and so to make it once again a mode of access to truth and conviction.”²² In other words, *Absorption and Theatricality* supports an extremely narrow view of art: any artwork that fails to support the modernist project of self-referentiality fails *tout court*. And yet, absorption is *the* operation at play in Trockel’s Venice installation. The *Eye* projection is absorptive: not in the sense that it is self-referential (the images, on the contrary, lead the viewer toward the two lateral projections), but because it institutes a viewer “whose innermost nature would consist precisely in the conviction of his absence from the scene of representation.” In contrast to early modern art, the agent of absorption is the camera, not the human subject in or before the painting. *Eye* is absorptive in the sense that the camera has absorbed the subject’s eye and that this absorption produces and is made possible by a distracted eye that has lost its ability to focus, to identify, and to recognize. The situation prompts this impossible question: how does one see—

21. Ibid., pp. 104, 130–31.

22. Ibid., p. 104.



Trockel. *Sleepingpill*. 1999. Video still. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone.

even more so, how can one see oneself—if one cannot perceive? I would like to suggest that the Venice installation as a whole is an attempt to address this question.

The two lateral projections contextualize the *Eye*, but also put in play the dialectics of absorption and distraction structuring the installation as a whole. *Kinderspielplatz* is a slow-motion video film projection of a public playground filmed between sunrise and sunset. It stages children's cart-riding as the central activity around which other leisure activities unfold. In this delimited space—which should be seen as a microrepresentation of society as a society of entertainment—children and adults play, yet at the same time learn the social rules of coexistence between self and others. Actors include joggers, walkers, picnickers, demonstrators, lovers, photographers, passersby with cellular phones, and a multiplicity of different players, including children riding carts, skateboarders, rollerbladers, Ping-Pong and ball players, jugglers, and a guitar player. The sound track plays a major role in this representation of the world-as-playground. Sound recording has been orchestrated to intensify specific sounds—the sweeping of the ground, the footsteps of a group of children, the rolling of a skateboard, the music of the guitar player—which multiply throughout the day and fade only toward sunset. Background noise is therefore composed of a growing multiplicity of intensified sounds. This multiplicity gradually becomes a form of aggression, of pollution, as the sounds intensify and diversify, coexisting in a cacophony unnoticed by the players yet increasingly perceptible for the observer. The coexistence of heteroge-



Trockel. *Sleepingpill*. 1999. Video still. Courtesy Barbara Gladstone.

neous sounds—footsteps, skateboards, church bells, tape-recorded pop music, the click of the photo camera, horns, guitar playing, the barking of a dog, the movement of the carts, voices—defines community life as a matter of entertainment and noise pollution. It also manifests how leisure is about work. *Kinderspielplatz* enacts Charles Goldfinger's insight that contemporary Western societies are increasingly defining themselves through the dissolution of the division between work and nonwork, as they adopt, in both realms, entrepreneurial norms of performance, flexibility, responsibility, and initiative.²³

As a dialectical counterpart, *Sleepingpill* is concerned with the clinical observation of a public dormitory filled with mattresses spread out on the floor and large plastic bags used to suspend sleepers from the ceiling in a vertical position. Filmed in slow motion and supported by a sound track that filters the local sounds so as to turn them into background noise, gestures and activities are represented with a slowness and sonority that emphasize the state of sleep and drowsiness. Some individuals are already sleeping while others gradually enter the room (a female cyclist, three young men, an elderly woman with her granddaughter). The shelter allows for the coexistence of action and sleep. Shadows of men and

23. Charles Goldfinger, *Travail et hors-travail: vers une société fluide* (Paris: Éditions Odile Jacob, 1998).

women are regularly projected on the walls of the tent, indicating that this is a public sanctuary located in a public space, a shelter for passersby in need of sleep.

The distraction that Fried relegated to the *outside* of the viewing experience of the painting (in contrast to the *inside* of the work characterized by an absorption that obliterates the presence of the beholder) is now on the fringes of the absorbed and absorbing *Eye*, contextualizing the eye but also attempting to care for it and re-empower it differently. This means that distraction, which Fried has also designated theatricality (art's reliance on the beholder's experience), has become a condition of possibility for art. Indeed, if the viewer is absorbed, unrecognized, and unable to focus, art's answer to distraction cannot be self-referentiality, but theatrical distraction. The challenge is not how to persuade the viewer to engage in absorption, but how to make the artwork dependent on the viewer so as to make seeing possible. Fried's modernist beholder is stillborn—attracted yet ignored, absorbed yet denied, recognized yet unrecognized. Trockel stages this failure, rescues it, as it were, to think the conditions of possibility of contemporary vision.

The Sheltering Effect of Distance

For the 1997 *Documenta*, Rosemarie Trockel produced an installation with Carsten Höller that anticipates the Venice intervention in many ways, and helps to explain the artist's valorization of a vision that could bypass the act of recognition. In *A House for Pigs and People* (1997), humans and animals are invited to share a space that is nevertheless divided by a thick one-way glass for human observation only. Because of the one-way transparency of the partition, the pigs cannot see, smell, or hear the visitors, and the viewers can contemplate but cannot touch or otherwise interfere with the pigs. The house is therefore—and I believe this to be one of the important features of the work—both a prison (the pigs are captive animals already fed and raised for market purposes) and a shelter. At least for the duration of the exhibition, the pigs were protected from the humans they couldn't perceive, and from their own destiny as processed meat for human consumption. The shelter effect is crucial for the understanding of the Venice installation, where *Sleepingpill* is also a shelter project, in this case a shelter for passersby in need of sleep. In both cases, sheltering is made possible by a display that blocks intersubjectivity. As Richard Shusterman rightly observes, *A House for Pigs and People* prevented any "communicative meeting of the eyes"; "identification" was constantly "frustrated."²⁴ This privileging of distance became explicit in Trockel and Höller's statement about the work, which insisted on the value of looking at the animals from the other side of the one-way glass:

Watching pigs alive must remind the gaze that it is always life which is at stake. That one should look at a distance. With caution. With respect. And with the thoughtfulness which might create room for one's own survival. In all its vulnerability.²⁵

The positioning of the spectators as distanced viewers observing from the outside is seen as a prerogative for the preservation of animals.

Two years latter, for the German pavilion of the Venice Biennale, Trockel proposes a shelter for fragile humans. For this, she favors the act of observation and discourages the "communicative meeting of the eyes." Indeed, the eye sees (scans, blinks) but does not look out. Reciprocity is denied. The viewer might search for recognition, but the mutable, ambiguous, and unfocused eye will not confirm the spectator's body. The display articulates a major break with the intersubjectivity that Amelia Jones has convincingly identified as the principal characteristic of body art. Adopting Merleau-Ponty's conception of the self/other as embodied, reciprocal, and contingent, Jones has shown how body artists of the 1960s and '70s established a relationship between the self and other as enabling "the circulation of desire among subjects of making and viewing," which marks "the contingency of . . . meanings and values on the interpretative relation."²⁶ This intersubjectivity entailed the acknowledgment that one is never fully present to oneself—one always needs the other to form one's subjectivity. It also articulated a relationship of mutual recognition and interdependency between the artist and the viewer. In contrast to body art's search for intercorporeality, however, Trockel's installation encourages the more distancing act of observation. This is the case not only in *Eye* (which prevents empathy and exchange) but also in the two other film projections of the Venice installation. *Sleepingpill* shows a public shelter for sleepers, yet this place is brightly lit. The high intensity of the light transforms the sanctuary into a clinic for the quasi-scientific observation of sleeping activities. If the lighting display must be understood as emphasizing the surveillance function of contemporary technology, it cannot be reduced to this mere operation. Trockel uses surveillance technology (film, video, one-way glass), paradoxically, to provide shelter for the vulnerable, a sheltering effect made possible by the distance that surveillance or scientific observation institutes between the viewer and the object. On the opposite side of the installation, *Kinderspielplatz* concentrates on the daily activities occurring in a public playground. Again, the spectator is not only looking at a representation but at a space under observation, as s/he hears the voice of the cameraperson filming the scene and witnesses the

25. Carsten Höller and Rosemarie Trockel, "In the Next Millennium Everything Will Be Better. Then We Can Let the Pigs Watch Us. Notes on *Haus für Schweine und Menschen*," in *A House for Pigs and People*, p. 4.

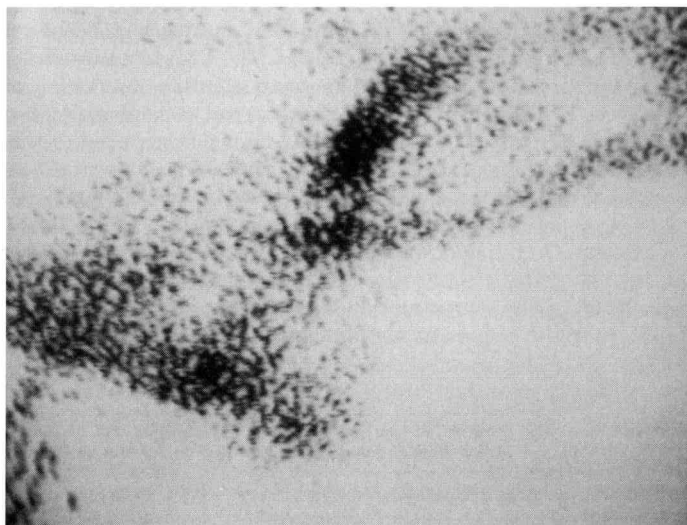
26. Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 52, 36.

24. Richard Shusterman, "A House Divided," in *A House for Pigs and People*, ed. Carsten Höller and Rosemarie Trockel (Cologne: Walther König, 1997), p. 34.

focusing process occurring throughout the projection and marking the film's different sequences. This is the laboratory aspect of the installation.

The positioning of the viewer as an observer has to be understood in the context of Trockel's preoccupation with *pattern*, an interest manifest literally in her industrially produced knitting pictures, made by repeating motifs to create all-over two-dimensional patterns of logos (such as the Woolmark, the hammer and sickle, the swastika, the sailboat and castle, and the Playboy bunny). Yet for Trockel, a pattern is not just a logo or an industrial textile motif; it is, as she states in a 1987 interview with Jutta Koether, a "model to be copied"—a prototype, a stereotype, a norm, a *behavioral* pattern. This understanding is at its most explicit in *Napoli* (1994), a videotape of hundreds of birds flying in the sky as a group, forming a structure maintained by the self-positioning of each bird. Each bird's behavior is a pattern to be followed for the sake of the orderly functioning of the collective. The pattern more precisely corresponds—and here I am adopting Judith Butler's performative conception of subjectivity—to the set of norms that a subject must copy, repeat, imitate to constitute him- or herself as a social subject.²⁷ Trockel's work is a sociological attempt to *observe* social agents and the patterns

27. Judith P. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).



Trockel. Napoli. 1994
Video still. Courtesy
Barbara Gladstone.

they must follow in order to inscribe themselves in society. Yet this observation is simultaneously a look from the outside and through technology. It uses distance to protect the observed from observation and to transform patterns into subversive strategies.

So how can the eye in Trockel's installation be productive if it can't assert and secure the viewer's identity, if it cannot focus, if it cannot see *something* or *someone*? Is this vision deficient, completely submitted to the gaze? The saccadic movements of *Eye*; the inability of the image to fulfil its identity function in terms of fixation, coherence, and unification; the viewer's inability to find self-recognition through the image; the public dormitory of *Sleepingpill*; the sequences of *Kinderspielplatz* representing children riding carts in an amusement park full of people and noise: the whole of the installation deals with the dialectic of absorption and distraction. By imagining a shelter where passersby may stop and rest for a while at any time of the day—a prototype that could be installed anywhere within the city—Trockel's installation thinks vision and identity in relationship to the growing field of investigation in cognitive science and neurobiology dedicated to the study of attention and sleep disorders.²⁸ The study of sleep disorders such as insomnia, obstructive sleep apnea, narcolepsy and circadian rhythm disorders (disorders of sleep schedules) is still in its infancy, yet scientific publications show a growing interest in sleep-wakefulness mechanisms; "high-risk" hours for accidents caused by driver sleepiness (said to be between 3:00 and 6:00 a.m. and 3:00 and 6:00 p.m.); the prevalence and incidence of sleepiness in shift work (estimated to affect 75 percent of the total population working on night shifts); changes of sleep patterns over the life span; and the hygiene and pharmacology of sleep.²⁹ There is a certain consensus to the effect that, as Peretz Lavie explains, "sleep is an accurate barometer of the subject's mental condition, responding rapidly to situations of tension and anxiety, sometimes even before any other bodily system does so," depression being *the* mental illness in which sleep is significantly affected.³⁰ As a counterpart to the busy *Kinderspielplatz*, and as a lateral extension to the unfocused, generic, saccadic *Eye*, *Sleepingpill* is a nonpharmaceutical device through which to rethink vision in relation to the deficiencies of attention, learning, perception, and memory that sleep disorders may entail.

28. Harold E. Pashler, "Attention and Visual Perception: Analyzing Divided Attention," in Stephen M. Kosslyn and Daniel N. Osherson, eds. *Visual Cognition: An Invitation to Cognitive Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

29. See, for example, *Sleep, Sleepiness and Performance*, ed. Timothy H. Monk (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1991); *Understanding Sleep: The Evaluation and Treatment of Sleep Disorders* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1997), ed. Mark R. Pressman and William C. Orr; and *Sleep Disorders: Diagnosis and Treatment*, ed. J. Steven Poceta and Merrill M. Mitter (Totowa, N.J.: Humana Press, 1998).

30. Peretz Lavie, *The Enchanted World of Sleep*, trans. Anthony Berris (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 105, 186.

Attention and Sleep Disorders

Jonathan Crary has recently shown how science has been preoccupied with inhibitions of perception since at least the mid-nineteenth century.³¹ Yet, notions of distraction and fleeting attention have become increasingly important for cognitive scientists, especially in the context of the growing concern with ADD (attention deficit disorder). The originality of present experimental research lies in its analysis of the interaction between mechanisms of inhibition and stimulation in relation to attention.³² The role of attention is posited to be so central to perception that some cognitive scientists are now postulating that there cannot be conscious perception without attention.³³ Research by Eileen Kowler, for example, seeks to demonstrate that eye movements are a cognitive activity (and not simply a mere reflex) that responds to the selective and discriminatory nature of attention. Movements of the eye—akin to those in Trockel's *Eye*—serve, when the movements are regular, to keep the targets relatively stable on the retina and to move the eyes at the right velocity to ensure an optimal resolution of vision, whereas saccadic movements (at play in the perceptual localization of objects) are ocular rotations of high velocity activated to move the line of sight to different sites in space and to land the target object on the fovea.³⁴ Yet, if attention is a selective activity, this means that it *selects*. In other words, as the psychologist Harold Pashler maintains, "the mind is continually assigning priority to some sensory information over others."³⁵ For cognitive science, the subject can only be attentive to a restricted number of data, and detection elaborates itself to the detriment of other data, which cannot be processed simultaneously. Studies tend to demonstrate that if the visual system can process different information in a same-detection task, only a moderate number of simple objects (such as letters) may be identified simultaneously, while recognition of more complex objects (such as words) must unfold in sequence.³⁶

In Trockel's installation, attention is deficient *from a cognitivist perspective*: the eye is without anchor and is unable to fix a targeted object. However, I want to contend that *Eye* proposes a form of perception that can be characterized as attentive even though it fails to recognize and see *something* or *someone*. This is not to say that cognitive science is wrong in its conclusions about attentive perception,

31. Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

32. See Kimron Shapiro and Kathleen Terry, "The Attentional Blink: The Eyes Have It (But So Does the Brain)," in *Visual Attention*, ed. Richard D. Wright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 306–29.

33. Arien Mack and Irvin Rock, *Inattention Blindness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

34. Eileen Kowler, "Eye Movements," in *Visual Cognition*, p. 243.

35. Harold E. Pashler, *The Psychology of Attention* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), p. 2.

36. Pashler, "Attention and Visual Perception: Analyzing Divided Attention," in *Visual Cognition*, pp. 71–100.

but rather to point out that the cognitive model much too easily equates distortion, dysfunction, and impairment.³⁷ Other models of attentive perception do exist, especially if one considers phenomena that are less measurable and predictable, such as mental imagery. The installation should be seen as analogous to Luce Irigaray's "nothing to see," an anti-oculocentric model of perception theorized in her 1974 *Speculum de l'autre femme*.³⁸ The productivity of Irigaray's *nothing to be seen* or *nothing to see* lies in the fact that it is both a critique of phallogocentric metaphysics and a philosophical project to rethink vision. As it discloses how psychoanalytical discourse has reinforced a way of seeing that excludes different categories of being from the realm of subjectivity on the basis of nonvisibility (the interiority of female genitalia versus the exteriority of masculine genitalia), it proposes a vision that inscribes difference within the symbolic order. Rather than reducing the seemingly formless to mere nothingness, the *nothing to see* would correspond to an act of looking that actively fails to see "something" so as to be altered by the nonvisible, the nonlegible, and the unrecognized. If woman's sex is the *nothing to see* of patriarchal oculocentrism, to "see nothing" is a symptom of a different libidinal economy.

Eye proposes a model of attentive vision (the eye is in motion, it seeks) which does not have a fixed, differentiated object: it has been relieved of its function of targeting outside objects. The ocular movements of the blinking and scanning eye therefore redefine visual perception by integrating drowsiness and sleepiness in the process of attention. In so doing, Trockel relies on another model of attention, a type of attention that comes into play in what neurobiology calls "paradoxical sleep." Michel Jouvet, one of the leading theoreticians of paradoxical sleep, has shown how this specific form of sleep occurs when we dream. It is characterized by muscular atonia and rapid eye movements (REM), which are directed toward internal visual stimuli, even if the brain continues to be in contact with

37. For a thorough critique of the cognitive model, see Paul Gilbert, *Depression: The Evolution of Powerlessness* (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), especially ch. 13.

38. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1974). For the English translation, see *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 47–48: "The gaze is at stake from the outset. Don't forget, in fact, what 'castration,' or the knowledge of castration, owes to the gaze, at least for Freud. The gaze has always been involved. Now the little girl, the woman, supposedly has *nothing* you can see. She exposes, exhibits the possibility of a *nothing to see*. . . . This is the odd, the uncanny thing, as far as the eye can see, this nothing around which lingers in horror, now and forever, an overcastration of the eye. . . . This nothing, which actually cannot well be mastered in the twinkling of an eye, might as well have acted as an inducement to perform castration upon an age-old oculocentrism. It might have been interpreted as the intervention of a difference, of a defecent, as a challenge to an imaginary whose functions are often improperly regulated in terms of sight. Or yet again as the 'symptom,' the 'signifier,' of the possibility of an *other* libidinal economy. . . . Woman's 'castration' is defined as her having nothing you can see, as her *having* nothing. In her having nothing penile, in seeing that she has NO Thing. Nothing *like* man. That is to say, *no sex/organ* that can be seen in a *form* capable of founding its reality, reproducing its truth. *Nothing to be seen is equivalent to having no thing. No being and no truth.* . . ."

the outside world.³⁹ By representing an eye in constant scanning, oblivious to the outside viewer, Trockel explores the similarity between awakening and paradoxical sleep⁴⁰—both are said to be attentive activities—to propose a model of vision in which the eye sees without seeing *something*, a way of looking that simultaneously relates to a stimulus (the eye moves in saccades, it seeks and blinks) and suspends identification of the stimulus in terms of fixedness and differentiation.

At this stage, it is important to point out that Trockel's projection is punctuated with subliminal images (the duration of which is approximately one-half second) hardly visible to the human eye. *Eye* evokes a state of near-blindness or random perception. *Eye* is also a site of fleeting dream images for the eye. It is difficult to say exactly how many of these images there are, for most of them—most often all of them—will go unseen by the viewer. Too short, too random, too rare, too sudden and unpredictable, these still images exist at the threshold of perceptibility. Fleeting images, they emerge after a blink of the eye, and belong to the Surrealist world of dreams. They stage a woman in different contexts: leaning against a vertical surface with her eyes shut; sitting down looking in front of her; lying with her eyes shut and mouth open to be fed; lying on her back, legs crossed, one hand on the stomach, the other holding a luminous object resembling a large keyhole. The point here, however, is not to decrypt those images but to acknowledge that perceptibility is at play, redefining attentive vision in a social context of increased distraction and concomitant need for sleep. Out of necessity—how could this be otherwise for the distracted, weary contemporary subject?—those sheltered images will only randomly be seen by the viewers of the installation. It is, however, in this randomness that Trockel's radical redefinition of attentive perception in terms of drowsiness, dream, and unfocused vision lies. To see *nothing*. This model subverts cognitive science's reiterated objective to measure, predict, and control the supposed failures of attention, such as inattention blindness (the failure to perceive in conditions of inattention),⁴¹ inattentional amnesia (the failure to memorize perceived stimuli in conditions of inattention),⁴² and inattentional blink (the failure to detect two successive visual targets when they are separated by less than 500 milliseconds).⁴³ Insufficiency is not necessarily a failure, for perception may be active (albeit dreamlike) in all its inattentivity.

In 1991 and 1995, the National Sleep Foundation commissioned surveys from the Gallup organization to assess the frequency and nature of sleep problems in the United States. The two reports confirmed that between one-third and

one-half of the American adult population experiences at least occasional sleep problems, and that 9 to 12 percent have regular or frequent problems with insomnia. The 1995 survey also found that adults with significant sleep problems reported a lower general physical health rating. About four out of ten adults reported daytime napping, with 12 percent reporting dozing off during daytime activities.⁴⁴ It is safe to conclude that sleep has become a problem for a significant portion of the population. The most obvious question emerging from such an assessment is the following: what is the relationship between sleep and perception? This is still under debate. There is consensus, however, to the effect that the brain requires sleep to function.⁴⁵ Studies by J. Steven Poceta and Merrill Mitler attest that "we sleep to reverse the negative effects of extended periods of wakefulness on the body and brain and to restore the metabolic capability of neurons."⁴⁶ Within this debate, many theories have been advanced to explain the function of sleep, including the adaptive theory, the energy-conservation theory, the restorative theory, and the programming-reprogramming theory.⁴⁷ More significant to Trockel's installation, recent neurobiological and cognitivist studies have concluded that one of the main functions of sleep is to prepare the energy conditions necessary for the irruption of dream,⁴⁸ while paradoxical sleep is perceived by many as playing a significant role in the process of memorization: we dream to allow better access to stored memories and to forget those that are false or useless—a form of unlearning to favor learning.⁴⁹ For Llinás and Paré, "REM sleep can be considered as a modified attentive state in which attention is turned away from the sensory input, toward memories."⁵⁰

In post-'60s Western societies, argues Alain Ehrenberg, entrepreneurial norms of performance have become *the* norms of socialization. This means that the subject is increasingly prone to depressive states that result from the individual's inability to meet the entrepreneurial demand for speed, flexibility, responsibility, motivation, communication, and initiative. It also means that the subject is more and more compelled to define and redefine *itself by itself*, and to choose his or her life as though any identity were possible. Depression results from the inability to follow this perpetual quest for the re-invention of self in a culture where "no moral law, no tradition shows from the outside who we have to be and how to conduct ourselves."⁵¹ Today's subject is confronted not so much with an illness of guilt, as in Freud's model of subjectivity, as with a pathology of

39. Michel Jouvét, *Le Sommeil et le rêve* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1998), pp. 93–96.

40. This similitude has been postulated by Rodolfo R. Llinás and D. Paré, "Of Dreaming and Wakefulness," *Neuroscience* 44, no. 3 (1991), pp. 521–35.

41. See Mack and Rock, *Inattentional Blindness*.

42. Jeremy M. Wolfe, "Inattentional Amnesia," in *Fleeting Memories: Cognition of Brief Visual Stimuli*, ed. Veronika Coltheart (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), p. 75.

43. Shapiro and Terry, pp. 324–25.

44. S. J. Enna and Joseph T. Coyle, eds., *Pharmacological Management of Neurological and Psychiatric Disorders* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), pp. 215–16.

45. See Pressman and Orr, *Understanding Sleep*.

46. *Sleep Disorders: Diagnosis and Treatment*, p. 20.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–31.

48. Jouvét, p. 137, and Lavie, p. 140.

49. Jouvét, p. 160–64.

50. Llinás and Paré, p. 523.

51. Ehrenberg, p. 14–17. My translation.

insufficiency. By thinking vision through the dialectic of absorption and distraction, Trockel's work acknowledges that perception needs to be rethought in light of the insufficiency of the contemporary subject. If sleep and depression disorders impair memory and learning—as recent research tends to confirm—it becomes crucial to find ways to assess and regenerate perception.⁵² My hypothesis has been that the Venice installation proposes a model of perception that finds its productivity not in acts of recognition and identification but in dreamlike attention. Its eye is not only endowed with ambiguous identity markers, it is also absorbed by the gaze of the camera, fails to recognize the viewer's presence in front of the image, struggles between sleep and distraction, and is haunted by quasi-imperceptible dream images. All those aesthetic choices—all those ocular operations—are about the need to restore perception by going *with* contemporary fallibility instead of attempting to suspend it.

52. On how depression affects memory, learning, and perception, see C. Douglas McCann and Norman S. Endler, eds., *Depression: New Directions in Theory, Research, and Practice* (Toronto: Wall Editions, 1990), and Gilbert, *Depression: The Evolution of Powerlessness*.