

Spaces of Witness: Projection Art as a Site of Protest

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In “Of An Other Cinema,” Raymond Bellour notes that in the contemporary moment cinema “finds itself redistributed, transformed, mimicked and reinstalled.”¹ This “other cinema,” which includes projection and screen-based art, stages an explicit dialogue within the space it is located and situates the spectator as “dissolved, fragmented, shaken [and] intermittent.”² As Bellour’s observations suggest a central element of projection art is its potential to reconfigure different types of boundaries including those between bodies, spaces, and traditional forms of media. These reconfigurations expose the places in-between such boundaries, offering new sites for representation and spectatorship. I am particularly interested in how the aesthetics of projection art build spaces of intersubjective exchange between the spectator, artist, and artwork. In what follows I explore screen-based art that engage the site of projection as a space of protest opening up alternative forms of viewership and engagement.³ These spaces of protest can offer an intersubjective exchange that undermines the certainty of the viewing position, placing spectators in an ambiguous state that requires a more provisional, immanent form of engagement. In these alternative viewing positions spectators are cast as witness not just to the artwork but also to the screen as a performative presence that actively engages in a dialogue with the spectator. In this way, the projection space encourages a profoundly ethical viewing experience. Rebecca Schneider locates this experience within the fact that “live *and* medi-

ated” are “always *at work*” in the recorded image.⁴ She reads images as “durational events” that hail the viewer into the role of witness. Recorded media exist in relation to “other times and other places” which they both record and anticipate. Importantly, this “cross-temporal and cross-geographic” image requires viewers to be accountable for the recorded scene as “an ongoing live event.”⁵ Schneider makes her argument via examples of viewing civil war reenactment photos and the documented atrocities of Abu Ghraib. The need for viewers to be held accountable as witnesses to the image is very clear in these examples. They ask us to recognize the historically situated violence and conflict as represented as ongoing from within our present positions and embodied understandings of such difficult cultural events.

The intersubjective viewing spaces forged in contemporary projection art also foreground a durational presence that hails the viewer to witness. In this way, projection art’s formal constructions of the moving image often function as an important space of protest. A principle act of resistance in such projection art is how it imagines new symbolic spaces of possibility that requires audience to re-situate themselves in relation to social issues, aesthetic space, and their relatedness to the image onscreen. Projection art that calls the spectator to witness protests against the silencing of what is often invisible and unsaid, reorienting the habitual positions of spectator-consumers, and pushing them to a greater sense of responsibility as citizens within a deeply spectacle-laden world. It asks citizen-spectators to more deeply engage with realities that are often quickly silenced and written over in dominant culture. By reconfiguring us instead as embodied viewer-participants, such work reconfigures our sense of relatedness and calls us to recognition, greater awareness, and perhaps even action. This is something Davina Quinlian discusses in her recent reflections on the recuperative potential of embodied film aesthetics. For Quinlian cinema has historically functioned as a site where “cultural crises can be safely negotiated reconciled or reworked.”⁶ She argues that in the present moment we must consider “the effectiveness of the medium as a recuperative device and the increasingly varied ways in which it interrogates cultural experience.”⁷ I build on Quinlian’s framing of the diverse ways in which cinema presently examines and recuperates cultural practices by considering two examples of projection art – Shirin Neshat’s *Turbulent* (1998) and Kryzysztof Wodiczko’s *Queen Victoria* (2014). I read these two works as being engaged in recuperative acts that open up spaces of protest in order to call spectators to witness.

Shirin Neshat’s installation *Turbulent* is an early example of how contemporary projection art formally pursues spaces of intersubjective engagement

with the viewer. *Turbulent* reflects Neshat's ongoing critique of the limited gendered positions available to women in the public and private spaces of Iran.⁸ The installation places two film projections facing each other on opposite walls within a gallery space.⁹ The two projection screens map contrasting yet parallel images of a man on one screen and a woman on the other, each performing a song. The man performs to an all-male audience, the woman to an empty auditorium. In the nine minute piece the male sings first, offering a virtuoso performance of a traditional Sufi ballad finishing to a round of enthusiastic applause from his audience. After he is done, the woman begins to sing a haunting, unscripted melody to no one, but is noticed by the male performer and his audience who stare out of their frame at her performance on the opposing screen, both perplexed and uncertain. The viewer is intentionally situated between these two screens within the viewing space, bearing witness to both performances as well as to the isolation of the female performer and the destabilizing effect of her performance on the men.



Video 1 Shirin Neshat's "Turbulent"

By contrasting the two types of performance along gendered lines, Neshat comments on "how women are deprived of [the] public experience of performance." The piece considers, "what type of music or expression could be produced if women were not forbidden but

could instead go about expressing herself?"¹⁰ Viewers are interpellated in a variety of ways through the piece. They serve as an important counterpart to the all male audience on the left screen, and are given additional weight and responsibility by virtue of their association with Neshat's critique of the male audience. The viewers stand, while the male audience sits comfortably and somewhat smugly. The audience onscreen knows what they have settled in to watch a man skillfully performing a song rehearsed specifically for them. The viewers in the exhibition space are uncertain of their role because they miss out on the structural cues of the theater seating and the proscenium to guide them. They are also uncertain about what it is they are about to watch and what to focus on with the presence of two similar yet contrasting screens. This initial viewing experience prompts several questions: Why does

one screen contain an audience while the other does not? Will the performers sing similar songs? Why is the woman so isolated? Why is the man performing for us with his back to the theatre audience? This final question points to the second significant element of the intersubjective address in the work. By facing away from the onscreen audience, the male performer instead assumes the traditional role of the female performer for the voyeur in the gallery. The difference is that in classical cinema narrative, the offscreen viewer matches the sight line of the onscreen audience, thus collapsing the viewer in the audience into the role of the male gaze on screen. In this piece, spectators are not collapsed into the male viewing audience on the screen. Instead, the male performer initially acknowledges the audience onscreen but then turns his back on them and performs for the gallery spectator. Then once he is finished with his song, the performer shifts his position to one of a viewer himself, staring out towards the screen with the female performer.

The most unsettling point for the spectator in the gallery is the realization that there is no audience within the woman performer's diegetic world. Although she stands within a public space, she is isolated, alone, and unsupported in her effort at articulation and public performance. As the camera moves around her onscreen, the spectator becomes the implied audience or witness. Thus, as spectators we are given a great responsibility to bear witness to what is prohibited in Iranian society. We are hailed to both see her and see the limitations or cultural restrictions that surround her gendered experience of public space.

Neshat constructs a viewing environment that is a truly an "other" space, one that upends gendered viewing dynamics and calls both the male performer, his audience, and the viewers caught "in-between," to recognize the female performer's subjectivity and her legitimacy as an artist. As such, the space of the viewing encounter becomes a site of transformation. Through its liminal construction, the boundaries that separate art and life dissolve, allowing for a more meaningful relation between art and spectator. The space where the woman performs onscreen is a vital symbolic space of protest—making possible an image of a woman in public space that is otherwise not possible. The manifestation of the space, even as image, is significant. Despite the limitations of this work being situated in the institutionalized space of the gallery, the utopic gesture towards the audience, that such a space is possible—if only in our imaginary—translates into a clearer perspective on the gendered limitations of public space within the viewer more broadly. This relation of dialogue and exchange is, I believe, a central element of the work and is also a

strong impulse of politically oriented of contemporary projection art as well.

In *Queen Victoria*, Krzysztof Wodiczko, explores projection art as a site of protest in the context of public urban space. The piece projects interviews with seven new immigrants to the southern Ontario community of Kitchener-Waterloo onto a statue of Queen Victoria in one of the area's most



Video 2 Krzysztof Wodiczko's "Queen Victoria"

popular parks. The audio recounts each interviewee's personal experiences of immigration and diaspora. Meanwhile, the video projects the faces and bodies of each interviewee onto the large and imposing figure of Queen Victoria situated high above the viewers, effectively transforming her figure into a screen for the bodies of the storytellers. The narratives share intimate lived experiences with the audience. One woman talks about her experiences of living in a war-torn region and her daily fear that her baby would die of hunger prior to immigrating to Canada. In another, a young boy tells of a recurring nightmare he has had since arriving in Canada that has deeply affected his experiences of happiness and trust. The different narratives mark out embodied experiences that occur within, and also actively name familiar spaces of the city. In turn, these narratives encourage an embodied awareness in viewers who recognize the interviewee's experiences within these shared and familiar spaces of daily life. The intersubjective experience is further marked and unsettled by the way in which the bodies are visually projected onto the statue of Queen Victoria. On the one hand, the projection of the speakers' bodies are filtered and displaced through the colonial figurehead of Queen Victoria. However, rather than overshadowing the speakers, the projection critically destabilizes Queen Victoria's symbolic veracity as an insurmountable power as it is also *she* who shares these personal, vulnerable, and difficult narratives. The overlap is apt as all the narratives directly address problems of displacement that are tied to various histories of colonialism; colonial power is upended as Queen Victoria speaks the critical post-colonial narratives. In addition, these stories of displacement directly address the spectators as witnesses. In the projection onto Queen Victoria, the gestures of speakers come alive as the viewers are directly addressed as her "subjects."

In this sense, the marginalized experiences of the interviewees also hail their broader public. Thus, the audience members are hailed both as Queen Victoria's colonial subjects and as witnesses to lived experiences of diaspora expressed by those speaking through the statue. The quotidian space of the park is transformed into a site where speakers from the community can protest the legacies of colonialism both within and outside of Canada for an audience that must then importantly re-think and expand their understandings of nation, citizenship, and cultural identity.

My reading of these very different pieces by Neshat and Wodiczko speak to various ways that projection art can function as a space of protest. In *Turbulence*, the *mise-en-scene* of the performing woman illuminates what cannot be seen in Iranian public space. Neshat utilizes the dialogue between the two screens and its placement of the viewer as witness to forge her critical intervention. The spectator, caught between the two spaces, witnesses the woman's performance and in doing so validates its legitimacy as an ongoing protest. Meanwhile, the deliberate hailing of the spectator as subject in Wodiczko's *Queen Victoria* seeks to transform the public park into a space of engagement that fosters a greater understanding of the lived experiences of diaspora and the devastation of colonial violence. By situating this difficult dialogue within the figure of a Canadian colonial power, the projection undermines her stature and the historic discourse she symbolizes. This emphasis on spectator and space in the two works exemplifies politicized performative gestures within projection art. These gestures reconfigure the spectator's viewing practices towards a more embodied experience of art, defamiliarizing the spectator's regular viewing habits and locating them as ethical agents capable of action. Whether the audience complies or not, this call to witness of the spectator in both examples can be read as a call to action. Neshat and Wodiczko's examples of projection art taken up here function as spaces of protest from which both the artists and their audiences can imagine the reconfiguration and emergence of provisional sites, images, and communities of viewers dedicated to promoting future critical discourse and action.

Notes:

- 1 Raymond Bellour, "Of Another Cinema," in *Art and the Moving Image: a Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate, 2008), 407.
- 2 Ibid., 408.
- 3 Jon McKenzie defines liminality as an aesthetic strategy "whose spatial, temporal and symbolic 'in-betweenness' allows for social norms

to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed.” This definition of liminal space underscores the important intersubjective exchange that occurs between viewer, artwork, and artist. Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 50.

- 4 While Schneider speaks of photography exclusively in the essay, she also acknowledges her position can be applied to moving images. Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 138.
- 5 This is described by Schneider as “the images’ theatre,” who looks towards the aspects and technologies of the live (tableaux vivant) and wonders how photography (and thus film) can be seen as “technologies of the live.” Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 140-141.
- 6 Davila Quinlivan “Film, healing and the body in crisis: a twenty-first century aesthetics of hope and reparation,” *Screen* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 104.
- 7 Ibid
- 8 *Turbulent* is part of a trilogy that also includes *Rapture* (1999) and *Fervor* (2000). All three works juxtapose two different moving image projection screens as a means of commenting on gender relations
- 9 A digital version of the installation is available online and on DVD with the two screens placed side by side—a different formal arrangement which actually produces incredibly similar effects and address of the viewer. This reading can apply to both instances.
- 10 Neshat describing *Turbulence* in documentary, “Expressing the Inexpressible,” (Jorg and Ralf Raimo Jung, 2004).

