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Claude Glass Revisited

'... the largest down to the
smallest balls of mercury
reflect the entire universe'¹

Alison Dalwood

In December 2005, the Bode Museum in Berlin was opened for just one weekend and for the first time in three years so that the public could view the completed restoration of the interior. Although its treasures were still absent, the museum's empty space attracted many thousands of curious Berliners. I queued with them. After nearly an hour waiting in the rain, we were admitted to join the throng of awestruck spectators wandering from room to room, gazing at, and occasionally photographing, walls, floors, ceilings, doors and windows. The museum itself had become the exhibit. There was nothing there, but it felt as if we had all been gazing at the Mona Lisa. This experience of wonder has influenced my work ever since.

For Robert Irwin, the entire fourth floor of the Whitney Museum emptied of its contents became the focus, 'For actually the room is not empty at all. On any kind of perceptual level, it's very complex. It's loaded with shapes, edges, corners, shadows, surfaces, textural changes.'² Irwin wished to bring the viewer to an awareness of perception itself and 'to draw attention to looking at and seeing all those things that have been going on all along but which previously have been too incidental or too meaningless to really seriously enter into our visual structure, our picture of the world.'³

Ten years on, the experience still haunts the questions which define my relationship to practice-based art making: how to, in our age, generate 'attentive viewing',⁴ how to activate the picture plane as a site of tension between liminal and illusionistic space and how to locate the viewer actively and 'within the picture's performative zone's engendering an experience akin to wonder yet full of the sense of the contradictions that characterize our contemporary view of things.

It seemed to me that these questions must be explored in the context of relationship to site and location. For example, how our expectation of cultural sites – the site where a painting is encountered – plays a role in forming an experience of wonder when confronting the work. Robert Smithson's⁵ remarks questioning the 'whole notion of Gestalt, the thing in itself, specific objects', raise explicitly the question of the dialectic between gallery and site: 'The very construction of the gallery with its neutral white rooms became questionable. I became interested in bringing attention to the abstractness of the gallery, and yet at the same time taking into account less neutral sites, you know, sites that would in a sense be neutralized by the gallery'.⁷

My first response to the Bode Museum visit was to think about displacing surfaces from one architectural space to another and using a reflective, mirroring surface so that both places contained one another. The installed photograph, produced on an architectural scale would echo architectural elements of the artwork's location. *Bode Museum* (2006) is a computer simulation which combines the photographic image of the interior of the Hamburger Bahnhof as the 'container' for a digitally installed photograph. This photograph is made by taking into the landscape a small photograph of the Bode Museum interior printed on acetate and re-photographing this in situ to capture the landscape: a contemporary Claude glass which already contains an image. Given the opportunity, the final outcome of the artwork would exist physically with the architectural elements planned in such a way that they appear to mirror the architecture of the surrounding space. In the final simulation illustrated here, the two buildings (Bode Museum and gallery) are combined, or rather our perception of them is, by juxtaposing image with location and surface with light: a mirrored space and a mirroring surface. Writing about *Third Mirror Displacement*, Smithson (1996) says: 'The mirror itself is not subject to duration, because it is an ongoing abstraction that is always available and timeless'. But, he continues: 'The reflections, on the other hand, are fleeting instances that evade measure'.⁸ The effect of the combination of mirrored surface and reflection makes the work inseparable from the location, causing changes in the visual climate of the space itself as it fleetingly alters with the coming and going of the spectators. By using reflective surfaces, the viewer is introduced to a visual puzzle – does the photographic

image include a shadow or reflection of roof lights or windows in the actual space or are these elements in the photograph?

These large-scale works are, in effect, giant Claude glasses, although at the time I knew nothing of the Claude glass and so they were not conceived as such. Of course, the photographic panels can't be hand-held, like the original eighteenth-century mirror, but in every other respect they are designed to distil and distort, conceptually and perceptually, the immediate and distant spaces surrounding them. The series extends the visual field from the photograph to the space in which it is seen, and the Bode Museum became an exhibit inside an exhibit – a deliberate strategy to attempt to destabilize fixed representation focusing instead on all the things between. Writing about Rothko, John Elderfield⁹ describes this between space as 'The space between the viewer and the picture plane, in which the pictorial performance takes place', which 'is a liminal space, where public and private, visible and invisible meet', a space which opens 'like an airlock or a revolving door',¹⁰ allowing the viewer in, just so far. Elderfield also talks about the *picture's* 'pictorial performance, which takes place in the space between me, the grounded viewer, and the picture surface',¹¹ which is 'visibly present but unknown, only within reach of the visual sense',¹² an 'uncanny fusion' between what is internal and what is external to our response.

Time Visible as Moving Light, 2007, (Figure 14.1) is a continuation of this debate, but this time the photograph is sealed behind semi-opaque Perspex so that the mirroring effect is deliberately enhanced. Interior spaces are relocated, by transferring photographs of shadows and light from a derelict school in East Berlin to a permanent installation at the University of Ulster, Belfast. The sequence of five panels (280cm x 150cm) is located in a social space, a wide busy corridor at the link bridge between two buildings so that the captive audience moves past the mirrors on their way from one place to another. There are four panels on one side with the fifth opposite these.

These passers-by become conscious of each other as their reflection appears in the sequences of installed panels. This is a social area where the observer and the observed cross in space and time, reminiscent of Dan Graham's¹³ Pavilion Sculptures where: 'The observer is made to become psychologically self-conscious, conscious of himself as a body which is a perceiving subject; just as socially, he is made to become aware of himself in relation to his social group. This is the reversal of the usual loss of "self" when the spectator looks at the conventional artwork. There, the "self" is mentally projected into (and identified with) the subject of the artwork'. This being present and conscious, albeit with a 'palpable and specific social group', was my response to the requirements of the commission. But, the sub-text of *Time Visible as Moving Light* is something more closely



Figure 14.1 *Time Visible as Moving Light*, left to right: *Wallpaper*, *Striplight*, *Tiles*, 2007, University of Ulster. Photographs mounted under cloudy Perspex, 280 x 150cm each panel.

related to my continuing fascination with surfaces found within buildings and the liminal surface of the picture plane. The suspended magic of the reflections as they continue on and on, forming and reforming in a constant dialogue with light, movement and space, yet seemingly held in place by the subterranean photographs which hint at an outside, an elsewhere, are perhaps simultaneously the 'centre and the edge of things', which Smithson presented as the dialectic 'between the inner and outer'.¹⁴ Layering photographs under semi-opaque, milky white Perspex, which, in combination with light destabilizes the viewer's perception, materially produces this unviewable space in *Time Visible as Moving Light*.

This destabilizing effect in the spatial and liminal qualities of the work makes it difficult for the viewer to comfortably focus their eye on either the surface or the image beneath it, between the surface mode and the film mode. John Elderfield touches on this perceptual phenomenon in his discussion about seeing a work by Rothko: 'a visual tug-of-war between surface and film perception will occur, which quickly tires the eyes, whose fatigue manifests itself in a pulsation of the picture plane'.¹⁵ Sensations of disturbance register in the blurring effects and efface the stable features of the image, which draws the viewers in to an awareness of themselves looking and wondering. Andrews, in discussing the sublime, talks about an 'aesthetic disturbance', which is 'associated by Lyotard with a radical destabilization'.¹⁶ According to Lyotard, 'The art object no longer bends itself to models, but tries to present the fact that there is an un-presentable'.¹⁷

The subject of *Time Visible as Moving Light* is perception and how we perceive time through space and movement. For this reason, I was interested in the transitory effects I could achieve by experimenting with the interrelationship between the five photographs, the light-reflecting surface and the busy corridor. No two experiences of walking past the installation can ever be the same; there may be a passer-by in a bright red jumper, or a group of people, deep in conversation. Each event is visually collected at that moment in the surface of the work and in the virtual space of the disused Jewish school in Berlin (one of the locations of the 2006 Berlin Biennale), only to dissolve and reform seconds later into a new composition of reflected objects, people and light which exist beyond the borders of the panel – pictures constructed by the viewer. Both series of artworks, *Relocated Wall* and *Time Visible as Moving Light*, alter and blur representations of concrete reference points, echoing how things appear on the periphery of our field of vision and lead us to be aware of the invisible, underlying aspects of our experience and imagination, which are the unseen atmospheres of wonder that I work with. In my use of a reinvented Claude glass, the mirror has a new function from the one originally envisaged when the glass 'formed a subtle psychological protection to the tourist freshly exposed to daunting and often disorienting landscapes'.¹⁸ Instead of idealizing the view and rendering nature manageable, my landscape-mirroring device offers a point of axis, a point of consciousness, which transforms through heightened awareness. By capturing an image in the hand-held picture surface, the world is changed from one state to another as the cloudy, tinted 'glass' distils, exaggerates or edits experience. The captured light and shadow are sufficiently other than the actual experience to offer the contemporary spectator the experience of wonder or 'visions of imagination' that William Gilpin,¹⁹ an early advocate of the Claude glass, described.

Bode Museum Mirror at Hamburger Bahnhof, (Figure 14.2) was generated by tilting a mirror-like surface of acetate film printed with an image from the Bode Museum interior. This was positioned in such a way that the refraction of light captures an ephemeral image for the camera's eye. The grey-tinted film of the 'mirror' filters out certain things and focuses attention on others, partly dissolving the centre of what's perceived, echoing the way our peripheral vision is blurred or indistinct. A corner of reality is caught on the impure surface of the warped and coloured acetate and further distorted by the slightest movement of the 'mirror'. Writing about this series produced as photographs of 150cm x 200cm and sealed under acrylic glass and installed for an exhibition, Declan McGonagle²⁰ commented: 'objecthood is static and it is the world around it which changes, no matter how slightly, as images enter and leave the work's field of vision'.

Although by now the idea of a snapshot, a view framed by a handheld object on a screen has become a ubiquitous aspect of contemporary culture, the original purpose of the Claude glass – to produce a live experience, which is 'seized' in the process of being experienced – seems to me still to be significant in generating an experience of wonder. I have designed and produced a contemporary version of the Claude glass: a half-hemisphere of grey-tinted glass that fits in the palm of your hand (Figures 14.3 and 14.4). As with the original glass, the convexity of the surface distils and edits the experience of landscape, transforming light and space in the process.



Figure 14.2 Bode Museum Mirror at Hamburger Bahnhof, 2012. Computer simulation of mirror panel at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin.

The feeling in your hand of the weight of the small, domed, half-globe of glass produces a kinaesthetic, tactile experience, as if the world itself is graspable and the entire universe sits in your hand. This is quite unlike the experience of a photograph or the image in a viewfinder. This contemporary Claude glass project is not about a discrete, fixed artwork, but instead a visually dynamic, fluid system, a compelling experience of working on location with a hand-held reflective picture surface that responds to and captures in miniature the surrounding world and its ever-changing light.



Figure 14.3 Claude Glass Prototype, 2013, glass, 9.5cm diameter.



Figure 14.4 Claude Glass Prototype, 2013, glass, 9.5cm diameter.

There is an aspect of all these projects that locates the artist as a proposer, propositioning the viewer to catch a vision of wonder for themselves, engaging them in the process of perception and emphasizing their role in the authorship of the resulting experience. A project in the planning stage, which develops the relational

possibilities of the Claude glass, is a Claude Glass Wilderness Trail. A series of oscillating, tinted glass hemispheres is fixed to posts at intervals across the landscape. The slightest hand movement twists or tilts the domed glass so that the refraction of light captures an ephemeral image in the cloudy and grey-tinted surface, catching the light and prospects of landscape. A comparison can be drawn with original Claude glass, which was convex and made with grey or black-tinted glass of about four inches in diameter.

Photographing this reinvented version of the Claude glass and presenting this as a large-scale photograph depends on a series of editing and cropping stages, which begin with the properties of the device when located in the light and space of the landscape. But, it is the live experience of the reflective surface combined with the installed photograph, or the mirror on the Claude Glass Trail, that is key to an experience of wonder and which leads the viewer to focus on liminal space. Andrews writes: 'The sublime happens anywhere, once the film of familiarity is lifted or pierced'.²¹ And it is this de-familiarization produced by the Claude glass that interests me. Smithson argues, 'Photography squares everything. Every kind of random view is caught in a rectangular format so that the romantic idea of going to the beyond, of the infinite is checked by this'²² and 'I'm not particularly an advocate of the photograph. It's sometimes claimed that the photo is a distortion of sensory experience'.²³ And if, as Smithson concludes, 'we are now into such a kind of soupy, effete thing' which is 'one sided and groundless', the imperative is to deal again directly with physical references: 'being on the ground, thrown back on to a kind of soil'²⁴ becomes paramount in order to engender a meaningful experience of wonder. The dialectic of site, mirror and traveller in search of the picturesque with a reinvented Claude glass is perhaps once again a trigger for those experiences of wonder, which were so much the focus of William Gilpin and his fellow travellers.

Notes

1 Arnaud Maillet, *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*, translated by Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 138.

2 Irwin, cited in Lawrence Weschler, *Seeing Is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees: A Life of Contemporary Artist Robert Irwin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), 47–49.

3 Ibid., 183.

4 John Elderfield, *Transformations*, in Glen Phillip and Thomas E. Crow, eds., *Seeing Rothko* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2005), 106.

5 Ibid., 108.

6 Robert Smithson, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Jak Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 296.

7 Ibid., 108.

8 Ibid., 122.

9 Elderfield, *Transformations*, 109.

10 Ibid., 109.

11 Ibid., 107.

12 Ibid., 108.

13 Dan Graham, *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on His Art*, edited by Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1999), 158.

14 Smithson, *Collected Writings*, 296.

15 Elderfield, *Transformations*, 107.

16 Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 149.

17 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader*, edited by Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 206.

18 Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, 67.

19 William Gilpin, *Remarks on Forest Scenery, & Other Woodland Views, by the late William Gilpin*, edited by Sir Thomas Dick Lauder (Edinburgh: Fraser & Co., 1834), 225.

20 Declan McGonagle, *Selector's Statement, Eisteddfod Catalogue* (Cardiff: Eisteddfod, 2012), 22.

21 Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, 149.

22 Ibid., 188.

23 Ibid., 251.

24 Ibid., 188.

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