

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 1 *Volume 1 (2003)*

Article 4

2003

Between Battlefield and Play: Art and Aesthetics in Visual Culture

Renée van de Vall

University Maastricht, r.vandevall@lk.unimaas.nl

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics



Part of the [Aesthetics Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

van de Vall, Renée (2003) "Between Battlefield and Play: Art and Aesthetics in Visual Culture," *Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)*: Vol. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol1/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Liberal Arts Division at DigitalCommons@RISD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive) by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@RISD. For more information, please contact mpompeli@risd.edu.

[About CA](#)

[Journal](#)

[Contact CA](#)

[Links](#)

[Submissions](#)

[Search Journal](#)

[Editorial Board](#)

[Permission to Reprint](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Site Map](#)

[Publisher](#)

[Webmaster](#)

Between Battlefield and Play: Art and Aesthetics in Visual Culture

Renée van de Vall

Abstract

Mona Hatoum's video installation *Corps étranger* is an example of an artwork that critically comments on particular aspects of contemporary visual culture, such as the colonization of the body's interior by medical image technologies. It has indeed been interpreted in those terms by several authors from within the new academic field of Visual Culture. Here it is argued that the critical cultural impact of the installation might be more fully described when one grants art a relative autonomy within the cultural field and, moreover, draws on concepts from more traditional academic disciplines and approaches, such as aesthetics and phenomenology. Art is a cultural practice that is deeply involved in contemporary life and its hierarchies and differences, but that, nevertheless, can be critical by generating new experiences. I would like to describe this relative autonomy with the help of the concepts of play and of aesthetic reflexivity.

Key Words

Installation art, visual culture, medical image technologies, subjective embodiment, aesthetics, phenomenology, technological mediation, play, aesthetic reflexivity

1. *Corps étranger*^[1]

Mona Hatoum's installation *Corps étranger* (1994) consists of a relatively small, oval-shaped space with two entrances. On the floor of the installation visitors see a luminous circle consisting of moving video images. The images, hard to decipher at first, show close ups of the human skin and of the inner cavities of the body. The camera circles around body orifices, enters, explores subterranean tunnels with moist, sometimes hairy surfaces, and then leaves again. One sees soft, glowing colours, shiny surfaces, erotic images of what at the same time remains somewhat repulsive. As the space of the installation is quite narrow, the visitor is almost forced to stand upon the image. The ambiance is slightly suffocating, also because of the continuous sounds of heartbeat and breathing.

It is a troubling experience, bordering on the tasteless. Some critics have accused the artist of being facile, using the sensational impact of highly advanced medical visualization techniques to impress and shock the public. I think that she achieved a bit more than that. The installation stages an ambiguous experience that thematizes some very fundamental distinctions and boundaries involved in our feelings of subjective embodiment: those between inside and outside; feeling and seeing; self and other; intimacy and alienation; private and public; attraction and disgust; fascination and abjection. These distinctions are constitutive for all our experiential relations to our own bodies and those of others. Here they are mobilised to foreground specifically our relation to the body's interior. The installation evokes the highly ambivalent feelings we usually have with respect to our own

interior physicality, let alone that of others: ranging from fear or disgust to fascination, wonder or lust.

2. Visual art as visual culture

Hatoum uses a very sophisticated medical imaging technique, video-endoscopy. The endoscope is an instrument for the inspection of the inner cavities of the body, in its simplest forms consisting of a tube or cable, a light source, lenses and a viewer. It can be inserted through the natural orifices of the body, like the vagina or the rectum, or through a small incision. Since it has become possible to attach a very small photo or video camera, it is not only a perceptual but also a representational technique, providing stills or live video images on a television screen. It is used for diagnostic purposes but also as a technique for surgery, as the tube that conducts the television cable can also be used to insert surgical instruments. Endoscopy is used in a great variety of medical specialisms, such as internal medicine, gynaecology, urology and orthopedic surgery.^[2]

Today, endoscopic images of the body's interior are hardly as spectacular as they were ten years ago, when *Corps étranger* was made. Since then, endoscopic images have become familiar to the public, for instance because they are repeatedly shown in popular medical television programmes. They have contributed to what José van Dijck has called "the myth of the transparent body": the idea that the body can be seen through completely without damage and is therefore also 'makeable' through and through, that is: can be repaired and improved upon at will.^[3] In contrast to this culturally dominant myth, however, another one has emerged, that of the fragmented and colonised body. Medical visualization techniques like endoscopy seem to fit seamlessly in critical discussions of the post- or transhuman. As they expose what was hitherto invisible to an objectifying visual regime, they are considered to further the colonization of body's interior by techno-scientific discourses and practices. In the context of the development of a global electronic and digital information and communication system, on the one hand, and the development of biotechnology and artificial reproduction techniques on the other, this would result in the final demise of what was still left of the modern subject.

It is very well possible to interpret Hatoum's installation as an artwork that criticises contemporary visual culture, its representational conventions and the power structures operative in these. It has been thus interpreted, for instance in two introductions in the new academic field of Visual Culture: Nicholas Mirzoeff's *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (1999) and Marita Sturken's and Lisa Cartwright's *Practices of Looking* (2001). Visual Culture as an academic 'discipline' (between quotation marks, because it claims to be an interdisciplinary endeavour) seems to exist in two varieties: on the one hand as a theory-oriented branch of art history working with poststructuralist semiotics and psycho-analysis; on the other as a part of the rather more sociologically based field of cultural studies, focusing on the predominant presence of the visual and the image in contemporary culture. What both strands have in common, is the questioning of the autonomous status and distinctive position of art. Bryson, Holly and Moxey,

for instance, editors of a well-known series on visual culture and visual theory, emphatically define their subject as a history of *images* rather than art works.^[4] And whereas they still choose relatively canonical works for their analyses, these are treated as representations with a certain cultural significance, rather than as masterpieces with distinctively and intrinsically aesthetic values. In the same spirit, Sturken and Cartwright write that their approach "emphasizes less the distinction of art and more its interactions with other aspects of visual culture."^[5] Mirzoeff tells us that there is no going beyond the cultural framework and that the assertion of the importance of art, as against other products of culture, should itself be explained in cultural terms.^[6] In these accounts aesthetics, in the sense of the philosophical reflection on art, is mainly portrayed as the traditional legitimization of art's distinctive status in terms of universal and intrinsic qualities such as beauty.

When we turn to Hatoum's installation, explanations that focus on its relations to the broader visual culture certainly bring us a lot. Mirzoeff places the work in a context of changing relations between the real and the virtual as a consequence of the digitalization of the image. In postmodern visual culture the body is no longer the obvious and natural boundary between the objective world outside and subjective inner experience. The body has become a fluid and hybrid zone in between inside and outside, just as changeable as other cultural artefacts, just as thoroughly determined by representational conventions, just as liable to manipulation. What the images of the camera show, according to Mirzoeff, is mainly absence. For centuries we have longed to look into the mind of the artist. Now we look into her body and find nothing but absence: the body has become virtual.^[7]

Sturken and Cartwright discuss Hatoum's work in the context of the scientific gaze, which they explain in Foucaultian terms. Modern knowledge practices privilege sight, especially the sight of what lies beneath the surface. Medical visualization techniques such as ultrasound, endoscopy and MRI do what photography did in the nineteenth century: visualise what was hitherto invisible and provide new means to categorise and typify human beings in terms of hierarchical differences. In this context, *Corps étranger* becomes a political commentary: the body is represented as an arena for a battle of meanings. The title would refer to the camera as the strange body invading one's own body and threatening its identity and existence.^[8]

Mirzoeff and Sturken and Cartwright might be considered as examples of the cultural studies variety of Visual Culture. A somewhat older reading by Ewa Lajer-Burcharth (1997) comes closer to the art historical strand. Lajer-Burchart interprets the installation in terms of the Lacanian real: the psychic register that, as it is excluded from the symbolic order, remains inaccessible to the subject, but still determines its functioning to a large extent. In present day visual culture the monitor has replaced the mirror as the cultural site where the imaginary identifications take place that are formative for subjective identity or its displacement. We have become colonised by the technologies of the visual: "From internet to bioscan, visibility seeps into you, taking over your 'own' corporeal domain - you may have already become nothing but a website not just for

others but even for yourself." [9] In this context, Hatoum's installation reflects on this development by exploring the borders of what is culturally meaningful and what isn't. Her images are 'obscene', both in the sense of unclean, gross and sexually threatening, as in the sense of 'beyond the scene' - beyond the arena of shared meanings. The installation evokes and confronts three visual regimes, three institutionalised ways of looking that generate meaning but in this installation obstruct each other: the aesthetic gaze of the video projection, the clinical gaze of endoscopy and the pornographic gaze of the peepshow. But none of these gazes really works. The aesthetic gaze does not work, because the spectator is not allowed to immerse herself comfortably in the images and derive a narcissistic satisfaction from the experience - if only because she has to look downwards and almost stands upon the images. The pornographic gaze does not work, because the body orifices are divested of any erotic connotation and refuse phantasies of control, possession or penetration. Finally, the clinical gaze does not work, because the eye of the camera moves too erratically to get a grip on what is shown. Because all these signifying ways of looking are obstructed, the installation evokes what is beyond meaning: the Lacanian real, the kind of bodily experience that one does not recognise as one's own but tends to exclude from one's corporeal identity - a meaningless excess.

What these three commentaries have in common is that they 'read' Hatoum's work as a critical reflection on, and intervention in, contemporary visual culture. They interpret the work's cultural significance in broader terms than that of the artistic and biographical history of its maker, the history of art, or the subjective aesthetic experience of the recipient. Moreover, they conceive of visual culture not only in terms of representational conventions, but also in terms of constructive technologies and the visual regimes these technologies engender. This means that they are able to formulate a theory of visual culture that is more than a semiotic universe of representational contents: visual culture is also a matter of 'practices of looking', which means that it includes the corporeal and subjective involvement of its participants. This approach has the advantage of taking art seriously as a form of critical reflection on contemporary culture. But there is also something missing. As long as one primarily refers to dominant cultural discourses and practices to explain a work like this, one lacks a theoretical framework and vocabulary to articulate what new meanings it engenders. And indeed: Mirzoeff finds merely absence, Sturken and Cartwright focus on the invasion of the body by the camera and Lajer-Burcharth refers to what is inexpressible per definition: the Lacanian real. As they are not able to explain whether, why and to what extent this work succeeds in making one experience something new with regard to one's feeling of embodiment, they ignore a part of the work's critical potential.

3. Art as play

To be able to do so, one should claim a kind of *relative* autonomy for art and the history of its production and reception, and conceive of it as a meaning generating practice that at least partially works on its own terms. Not because that would be a universally valid constitutive condition for

something to be 'art,' issuing either from the works intrinsic properties or from the way it is contemplated. The claim does not imply a kind of essentialist definition. It is a normative claim: one wants art to have this relative autonomy because one values the kind of meaning making that it makes possible. Just because art is a cultural practice deeply involved in contemporary life and its hierarchies and differences, it needs its own momentum to be able to do what it is so very well able to do: to be critical by means of its experiential appeal. And I would like to describe this relative autonomy with the help of the concepts of play and of aesthetic reflexivity.

A fruitful way of thinking the critical potential of art has been proposed by Isobel Armstrong in her book *The Radical Aesthetic*. Armstrong advocates a re-evaluation of the aesthetic as a democratic and emancipating discourse. A radical aesthetic does not deny the reality of social and cultural conflict, as conservatism does, but neither does it get stuck in the unmediated confrontation of irreconcilable positions she reproaches poststructuralism (we might consider the Lacanian 'real,' that what remains outside all signification, as an example of such an opposition). A radical aesthetic starts from 'the broken middle,' a concept Armstrong borrows from Gillian Rose. This is a form of dialectical thinking that does not believe in a conciliatory 'Aufhebung' of opposites, but sees dialectics rather as a restructuring of relations starting from the place of this broken middle. This restructuring is often painful, but enables a transformation of both opposite terms without denying the conflict between them. Armstrong uses Rose's notion by grounding her aesthetics on the idea of *play* as an activity that is affective, imaginative and cognitive and that has the capacity to transform the structure of perception. In the play of the aesthetic new experiences may be generated in which the conflict between opposites is not resolved, but in which the categories in which the opposites are thought and experienced are being transformed. Art's political relevance is in learning to play with contradictions and paradoxes and in this way instigating cultural transformations. "The aesthetic is not the political, but it may make the political possible."[\[10\]](#)

When we consider Hatoum's installation as a transformational play, we see that it does something that is not usual either in the clinical gaze of endoscopy, nor in the pornographic gaze of the peepshow, nor in the aesthetic gaze of the gallery: it presses the visitor upon the image and encloses her in too close an embrace, because its space is so narrow and the body sounds are so pervasive. It is impossible to distance oneself. And the images do not fit into these three practices either, as they are both distasteful and attractive. The spectator is sucked in, encapsulated in the voyage of the camera; a camera that is not only a strange invader, but also a fascinated, searching, touching and sensitive eye. The boundaries between one's own body and that of the other dissolve, making one more aware of the position of one's body against that of the other and against oneself. Considered as a play the work can be understood as creating room for new experiences by transgressing habitual distinctions and behaviours. It enforces a certain indeterminateness, but not because it is indeterminate: play is always formally structured and governed by rules. It is because these structures and rules are *different* from those applying to every day life, that a play constitutes

itself as play and creates an opening in time and space where the indeterminate may be sensed and valued as such and new experiences may arise.

But again the concept of play is not enough to articulate the experiences the work generates. One needs a phenomenological vocabulary to describe concrete and specific experiential situations and compare them with each other, both in terms of their sensuous, affective and perceptual contents and in their structures. One can come to interesting conclusions then. For instance: in clinical practice, visualization techniques as endoscopy and ultrasound do not function only as perceptual technologies, but are representational and communication technologies as well. What the camera sees is projected on a screen and made visible for more than one spectator and sometimes also for the patient. In that case, which becomes less and less unusual, the relation between the perceived and the perceiver is has a different structure than in the gallery or in the peepshow in which the perceived body does not see itself. Medical visualization techniques like endoscopy and ultrasound create a new experiential possibility, namely to watch your own insides in 'real time.' This is seldom an agreeable experience: maybe only in the case of a healthy pregnancy. The observation of one's worn-out backbone, blocked ovary or even healthy colon remains somewhat horrific. Moreover, it is an experience that takes place in a very specific setting: the objectifying and hierarchical setting of a diagnostic laboratory or hospital. One possible way to encounter the humiliation and the shame of such an experience is to talk about it. Another is to visualise differently. This is where the specific sensuous qualities of Hatoum's images, their montage and their projection acquire a positive cultural significance: as the articulation of a distinctive form of aisthesis that goes beyond culturally dominant conceptions of the body's interior.

4. Perceptual and communicative mediation

The critical impact of *Corps étranger* might be clarified by comparing it with the way endoscopic images mediate subjective embodiment in clinical practices, in terms of both perceptual structure and content. Don Ihde distinguishes two ways in which perceptual technologies mediate perception. In the *embodiment relation*, one encounters the world *through* a piece of machinery.^[11] The machine functions as a more or less transparent extension of the body and the mediated experience is of the same kind as the experience without the instrument. Typical examples are microscopes or glasses: they mediate visual experience visually. When we have the experience of perceiving a machine that perceives the world and have to *read* what it tells us to infer its perceptions, Ihde speaks of a *hermeneutic relation*. In the hermeneutic relation the signs indicating the experience are of a different kind than the experience itself. A typical example is the thermometer, which indicates temperature not by means of temperature, but by means of visual signs or digital numbers. Mediation is always to some extent transformation, as mediating instruments *amplify* some perceptible aspects of the world and reduce other aspects; invite some forms of action and *inhibit* other actions.^[12]

However, one could say that with the introduction of the photo or video camera something has changed in the phenomenological structure and the cultural significance of endoscopy. We are not only dealing with a gaze that through a piece of machinery is directed to a particular body part that is its intentional goal. What this gaze perceives is *expressed* as well: it is projected or otherwise made visible on a screen and thereby made accessible for other gazes than that of the endoscopist or surgeon. And in some clinical situations the image is indeed meant to be collectively scrutinised and discussed: with other members of the medical staff and sometimes with the patient as well. So what is mediated is not only the perception of the diagnostician or surgeon, it is also the *communication* between the doctor and other doctors or the doctor and the patient. The perceptual instrument becomes part of a medium and the image is not only mediated but also medialised.

If we follow Vivian Sobchack's analysis of the phenomenological structure of the film experience, we will have to introduce a third kind of embodied subject into the operation room, in addition to the doctors and the patients, and that is the endoscopic imagery itself as a technologically embodied gaze. According to Sobchack, watching a film is a dialectic exchange between two subjects: the spectator and the film. The film is an intentional subject in its own right, as it perceives a visible and audible world and expresses its perception in visible images and sounds. It displays an independent subjectivity, showing the activity of seeing "from inside." In its movements and transitions we see that it directs its attention, makes choices, and thereby values and *signifies*. The film is a stream of moving images that we interpret as a world perceived by a mobile and incorporated gaze. This is not the gaze of the filmmaker, nor that of (one of) the characters, because it has a particular embodiment through the technological mediation of the camera and the projection - an embodiment that allows it to see and express the world differently than human subjects do.

We have access to the gaze of the film as if "from within." Nevertheless, it is never completely our gaze, because it has its own, independent embodiment. There remains a certain distance between the viewing position constructed by the film and the viewing position occupied by the film's spectator: "the concretely embodied situation of the film's vision also stands against the viewer."^[13] The spectator, absorbed as she can be, never completely identifies the gaze of the film with her own gaze. Therefore, the spectator's experience of the film is always ambivalent. The spectator witnesses the film's seeing of the world as if "from within." Therefore he or she can experience the filmmaker's and the camera's perceptions as "quasi-mine," as a quasi-embodiment relation. But it is also hermeneutic: the spectator always sees both the film's world and the film's seeing of the world as distinct from his own seeing of this seeing.

The patient can be compared to the spectator of a film. She might have the same kind of quasi-embodiment/hermeneutical relation to what she sees as watching a movie, with one important difference: the world she sees expressed on the screen consists of her own body. She has an existential relation

to what she sees. On the one hand, the patient shares the endoscopic gaze. She sees - or learns to see, when the image is explained to her - to look at her body through the eyes of the camera. At the same time, she will always see the camera's seeing, that is, she will remain aware of the fact that what she sees is the camera's vision. Her experience of her body never completely coincides with the camera's perception of it. Which also means that it can never be reduced to it: subjective embodiment results from an exchange with, not a determination by a dominant representational regime. Even if "visuality seeps into you," as Lajer-Burcharth wrote, it does not inevitably take over one's entire corporeal domain.

5. *Corps étranger* as transformational play

But in what way does *Corps étranger* play with the ambivalent experience of this clinical practice? Firstly, by realigning the body's boundaries. If we take as a starting point the description of open surgery by medical anthropologist Stefan Hirschauer, we could say that in normal surgical operations the boundaries of the patient's body are extended. In "The Manufacture of Bodies in Surgery," Hirschauer describes (open) surgical operations as encounters between two kinds of disciplined bodies: parcelled patient bodies and aggregated surgical bodies.^[14] Both are corporate bodies in the sense of Latour: hybrid constellations of human and non-human 'actants.' Both kinds of bodies have undergone various perceptual and functional transformations. The patient's body is turned into an object, immobilised by narcosis, dissociated from her person; she is limited visually to the region to be operated. The surgeon's body as well is limited visually and in mobility by her uniform. She incorporates new executive organs, however, consisting of instruments and machinery and also of the hands and organs of other members of the staff, like assistants and nurses. The operating team acts as a "surgical body," internally articulated in terms of division of labour and hierarchy. The patient's body in contrast is externalised, in order to maintain and even increase its passive forces. Its muscles and joints, its breathing, the circulation of its bodily fluids and its life signs are dispersed over a number of external contraptions: the mechanisms of the operation table, a system of tubes, a respiratory machine, several monitors and digital displays. The boundaries of the patient-body have been extended - in fact the boundaries of the operating rooms, protected by a zone of sterility procedures, act as a substitute skin, protecting the patient body against outside dangers such as infection. When one enters the operating room, one enters the patient's body.

If Hirschauer is right in considering the boundaries of the operating theatre as a kind of second skin around the helpless and scattered fragments of the patient's body, endoscopy creates a situation in which the patient can be a spectator in the spectacle of her own dispersed embodiment. Her embodiment is doubled: her physical body is part of a larger hybrid body. And in this larger, hybrid body, the visualization of her insides is a spectacle within a spectacle. But although she can neither control what is going on in this larger body, nor the visualization of her insides, her presence and her perception cannot be ruled out. With local anaesthesia and in front of a screen, she has to make part of the situation and of

the discourse in the operating room. The images have to be explained to her; and she and the operating staff have to find a way to deal with the difficult feelings that may be generated by the public display of one's insides.

In open surgery, the patient is subject to a double kind of treatment. During the induction of narcosis, she is on the one hand manipulated as a body and marginalised as a participant. On the other hand she is talked with, and taken into account as a person. Once she is 'gone', however, she is no longer talked with, but only talked about. Yet, even then she is a virtual participant. Although the patient is not present as a social actor, she is not completely absent either. In this talk about her, she is referred to in an indeterminate way by the operating team, "comparable to our style of talking about a third party without being sure s/he is out of earshot."^[15] The patient's absence as a person is partly necessary to facilitate the operation. But it is also necessary to protect her as a person. "A body cut open and laid bare internally - with organs hanging out or dragged out - is more than naked. Its inhabitant would be seized with fear and dismay, but would also act with a different social affect already required for states of lesser disarray of one's appearance: shame. Patients may lose all sorts of organs in the operating theatre; without narcosis they would lose their face. So what seems to sever patients as persons from the social situation also serves to *protect* them as persons."^[16] Although an endoscopic operation is less messy than open surgery, the feelings involved can be very ambivalent as well. Maud Radstake has reported, for instance, that in the case of endoscopic examinations of the rectum, patients feel embarrassed when their bowels are not free from excrements.^[17] This suggests that the myth of the transparent body, pervasive as it might be, has not resulted in a dispassionate view of one's own insides and its workings.

As visitors of *Corps étranger* we are in a different situation than the patient in the operating room: it is after all Hatoum's inner body we see, not our own. But displaying the images in the way she does, Hatoum makes us feel the awkward intimacy of this constellation. Whereas in the apparently neutral constellation of the operating room the patient's body is fragmented, here the boundaries of the room are too close to forget that we have entered the zone of another's privacy. And that awareness could be reversed as well: that other body also intrudes upon our own corporeality, as it encapsulates our bodies and gazes and hearing. Moreover, it needs very little empathic effort to imagine that these images might have been made of our own body. Within this enforced intimacy, however, our sensuousness is mediated as well. One could say that the possibility of visualising the body's inside mobilises two contrasting cultural definitions of the inner body that are both equally alienating: the inner body as functional instrument that can be made transparent objectively, and the inner body as the unspeakable and abject that falls outside all cultural conceptualization and visualization. Hatoum's installation may be seen as an attempt to transform this contradiction by providing a different form of gaze and a different aesthetics in which the awkwardness of the experience is not denied but transposed to a different sensuous mode. In *Corps étranger*, the object is eroticised - but not in terms of possession or

penetration, but of a sensuous fascination.^[18] It becomes attractive without losing its strangeness or dangerousness, seductive in its repugnance.

So, on different levels, Hatoum's installation allows its visitors to articulate an experiential relation to their interior bodies that is distinct from, and therefore critical of what happens in clinical practice. But this articulation only works in so far as we engage in the installation as art: that is as an experiential play in which the nature and development of our sensuous and affective experience is noticed as such and is considered to be meaningful. The sensuousness of the work is self-reflective, not because it is so by nature, but because that is part of the cultural practice of art.

6. Aesthetic reflexivity

The point is that it is not only important that such experiences occur, but also that they are noticed and understood as being meaningful. Aesthetic appeal only becomes critical when its appreciation is in some way or another self-conscious. One has to be aware that something is happening with one's feelings and perceptions and that that is significant in one way or the other. One should not only have experiences, but experience them as experiences. There has to be a form of relatedness to oneself, a self-reflexivity. Usually this relatedness or self-reflexivity is conceived of as being mediated by a form of representation: by the concept (or deictic term) 'I,' for instance, or by an image, such as Lacan's mirror image. I would argue however that the kind of self-relatedness that is mobilised in aesthetic reflexivity is not mediated by representations, and is in that respect immediate. It is, however, mediated in another way: in its performance, attitude, style or form. In arguing this, I will turn to Lyotard, but also extend his thinking in a phenomenological direction.

Writing about the receptivity of reflective thinking, in his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Lyotard introduces a notion that allows for a certain orientation of thinking in its sensitive mode: the *tautegorical*. In reflective thinking the soul is in a state of pleasure or displeasure and at the same time it is aware of its state. Thought finds here a subjective, sensible form of heuristic orientation. Not by taking distance and overlooking the scene, but by sensing its own state in being affected by its own activity: "Any act of thinking is thus accompanied by a feeling that signals to thought its "state." But this state is nothing other than the feeling that signals it. For thought, to be informed of its state is to feel this state - to be affected. [. . .] Such is the first characteristic of reflection: a dazzling immediacy and a perfect coincidence of what feels and what is being felt."^[19] According to Lyotard, the secret of Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgement is that it discloses how critical thinking in general proceeds: by sensing the state in which it finds itself in the occurrence of thinking. The distinction between active and passive is not at issue here. There is something of both, as it is in the activity of thinking that the soul is being passively affected.

This means that thinking implies a sentient form of relating to itself that is not itself a form of thinking. The difference of the tautegorical self-relation with Kant's "Ich denke" of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* is that the first is not mediated by a

conceptual or other kind of representation. Whereas Kant's "Ich denke" is a thinking that thinks itself in its activity, the tautegorical is a thinking that feels itself in its activity. The first self-relation asks for a representation: "die Vorstellung *Ich denke* (. . .) die alle anderen muß begleiten können,"^[20] the second doesn't. The relation of feeling that is at issue in the tautegorical might involve a form of mediation, but not necessarily a mediating concept or image or idea intervening in between the sensing and the sensed. Moreover, it is a form of reflexivity that does not require a mental or optical distance to be discriminating. Quite the contrary, the distinction between pleasure and displeasure can only be felt in the coincidence of the sensing and the sensed.

The concept of the tautegorical is not necessarily confined to the act of thinking. One may apply it to the domain of the aesthetic as well (think of the reversibility of perceiving and perceived in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy) as the awareness of feeling oneself seeing, touching, moving or listening. Whereas Lyotard's tautegorical was a thinking that felt itself in its activity, here we could talk of a feeling that thinks itself, or is at least aware of itself as it occurs. When this awareness is mobilised in the appreciation of art, I would like to call it aesthetic reflexivity. Aesthetic reflexivity is of course mediated in that it is part of a cultural practice, that of art. But an experience can be mediated in some respects and immediate in others. On the level of the experience of the individual spectator, it is both. The relation to one's own feelings is a coincidence of the sensing and the sensed and is immediately felt. But - and here I depart from Lyotard - what is immediately felt is at the same time mediated, because the feeling is performed in a certain way and this performance is staged. The play one engages in is carefully structured by the work, the images possessing the sensuous qualities they have, the editing displaying a certain rhythm, the projection on the floor and the placement of installation walls bringing the spectator close. Moreover, one is aware of one's feelings as being meaningful in the act of performing them. It is by virtue of this mediated immediacy that aesthetic reflexivity is a necessary constituent of aesthetic appreciation and interpretation, but also of any possible experiential transformations engendered by artistic play.

Visual art is indeed a form of visual culture and should be understood in terms of visual culture, but not all forms of visual culture work in the same way. As W.J.T. Mitchell has recently written: "The fact that some scholars want to open up the domain of images to consider both artistic and non-artistic images does not automatically abolish the difference between these domains. One could as easily argue that, in fact, the boundaries of art/non-art only become clear when one looks at both sides of this ever-shifting border and traces the transactions and translations between them."^[21] In comparing Hatoum's use of endoscopic images with the way these images function in clinical practice, a crucial distinction between artistic and non-artistic use of images emerged. In clinical situations we try to avoid or forget or resolve awkward feelings, in art we cherish them. We enter an installation with the expectation of being affected and of treating our feelings as being part of the work's meaning. This attitude is of course not enough: the work has to provide us with a *mise-en-scène* and

an imagery that is rich and fascinating enough to instigate feelings we can reflect upon. And this is what makes Mona Hatoum's installation not only a work of art, but a good work of art as well.

Endnotes

[1] This article is a revised and extended version of an article published in Dutch under the title "Strijdperk of spel. Over esthetica als tactiek," in *Krisis. Tijdschrift voor empirische filosofie* 3,4 (2002), 47-57.

Apart from the literature quoted in this text, I have greatly profited from M. Archer, G. Brett, and C. de Zegher, *Mona Hatoum* (Londen & New York: Phaidon, 1997) and Frances Morris, "Mona Hatoum," in S. Morgan and F. Morris, *Rites de Passage: Art for the End of the Century* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1995), 102-1055. I thank my colleagues of the research project, *The Mediated Body*, for their comments and Maud Radstake and Jenny Slatman in particular for the permission to use their findings.

[2] José van Dijck, *Het transparante lichaam; Medische visualisering in media en cultuur* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2001), pp. 69-74.

[3] *Ibid.* pp. 9-15.

[4] Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly and Keith Moxey (eds.), *Visual Culture. Images and Interpretations* (Hanover & London: Wesleyan University Press, 1994) pp. xv-xxix.

[5] Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 5.

[6] Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1999) p. 23.

[7] Mirzoeff, *op. cit.* pp. 119-120.

[8] Sturken and Cartwright, *op. cit.* pp. 306-307.

[9] Eva Lajer-Burcharth, "Video in the 1990s," *Art History*, 20, 2 (1997), 185-221; ref. on 191.

[10] Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford & Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000) p. 43.

[11] Don Ihde, *Technology and the Life World* (Bloomington & Minneapolis: Indiana university Press 1990). Ihde also distinguishes mediation from two other human:technology relations - the background relation, in which technology is not noticed as such (e.g., a functioning central heating system) and the alterity relation, in which technology is experienced as alien (e.g., a computer that does not function).

[12] Amplification and reduction are terms of Ihde's; for invitation and inhibition, see Peter-Paul Verbeek, *De daadkracht der dingen; Over techniek, filosofie en vormgeving* (Amsterdam: Boom 2000), p. 191-192.

[13] Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye; A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton

University Press 1992), p. 10.

[14] Stephen Hirschauer, "The Manufacture of Bodies in Surgery," in *Social Studies of Science* (London, Newbury Park and New Delhi: SAGE) 21 (1991), 279-319.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 288.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 305.

[17] Maud Radstake, "Views from within: configuring patients's endoscopic gaze." Unpublished manuscript.

[18] Jenny Slatman has pointed to the haptic qualities of Hatoum's images, referring to Laura Marks's *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC, & London: Duke University Press 2000). Jenny Slatman, "L'imagerie du corps interne" (forthcoming 2004).

[19] Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Elisabeth Rottenberg, trans. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 11.

[20] Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Nach der ersten und zweiten Original-Ausgabe neu herausgegeben von Raymund Schmidt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1976) p. 141b.

[21] W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing seeing: a critique of visual culture," *Journal of Visual Culture*, 1 , 2 (2002), 165-181; ref. on p. 173.

Renée van de Vall

University Maastricht

J.J. Cremerplein 46-HS

Amsterdam

r.vandevall@lk.unimaas.nl