

Looking for Distractions

The act of looking is a relatively simple, everyday occurrence. Something which is taken for granted and goes unquestioned as we move through our daily lives. Yet, when we consider the dictionary definition of the word ‘look’ it almost certainly includes the word ‘see’. These definitions¹ assume that upon looking we are seeing and fully comprehending what is around us. Looking can be distracted, or absent minded, yet when we lend our full attention, we can truly see. In everyday life, with its myriad distractions and occupations, the definitions can become confused, blurring the lines between looking and seeing, distraction and attention; raising questions about the things that we give our full attention to. Cultural theorist Dominic Pettman asks, ‘what happens to a world in which distraction becomes the rule rather than the exception?’²

Christian Marclay’s ‘LOOK’ (2016–2019), mixes the documentation of urban environments with conceptual art, and questions what it really means ‘to look’. Is the artwork encouraging us to focus solely on the film itself, to give it our undivided attention? Perhaps it is a reminder to look around us, look away from our phone screens and take out our headphones to really see things for what they are. In ‘LOOK’, Marclay combines strategies of street photography, conceptual art and serial production, producing a portrait of the urban environment, in a style reminiscent of the movement of flipbooks or early camera experiments. Surrounded by everyday discarded items, the artist has collated thousands of images of the word ‘LOOK’ from London’s streets. This combination of image and text is not something unfamiliar to us. In a world dominated by attention grabbing advertisements we are accustomed to brightly lit screens and bold, eye catching text. There is something about the film that captures the attention, forcing us to pause and focus. Perhaps ‘LOOK’ is the ultimate distraction; the exception to the rule.

The exception here is the presence of Marclay’s photographic analysis of a single word. Nicholas Mirzoeff suggests that only the ‘correct’ combination of

¹ “Look/See”. Dictionary.cambridge.org. 2020.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/see>.

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/look>. 06.01.2020 [Online]

² PETTMAN, D. (2016) ‘Infinite Distraction’. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 19

‘the known and the new’ can create something beautiful to hold our attention.³ By combining these elements Marclay allows us to recognise the image as something we have seen before, everyday signage in the urban environment, whilst also acknowledging the nuance in each photograph. Employing the ‘correct’ amount of ‘the recognisable’ re-directs our focus and challenges our understanding of it. ‘The known’, seen by Jean Baudrillard as the banal,⁴ or a repeated everyday occurrence, is recontextualised within Marclay’s work, all possible distractions are removed and each variation is captured to hold our attention. Slight differences in font and size become captivating, the yellow hues of leaves and parking restrictions catch the eye and the similarity of it is no longer banal. It is engaging, the real world seeming slightly more real, now that it can be seen through a digital screen.

Within Marclay’s meticulous documentation, could it be the word itself that prompts such focus? We are told to look by this artwork, encouraged to focus on the word and do as it requests. Focusing on this instruction seems vital and unquestionable; ‘if you dare lift your eyes from the screen even for a moment, you might miss the tweet or the post or the update that promises to change your life’.⁵ This addictive quality is somewhat replicated within Marclay’s fast moving screen, captivating and challenging our ability to look. This four-letter word, in all its simplicity, provides two possible audience responses: an opportunity to consider, analyse and understand the impact of distraction – the chance to truly see. Or, the removal of all agency, staring unblinking at this instruction from the information machine of the screen – the ultimate distraction.⁶

French philosopher Simone Weil once said ‘attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity’ and perhaps today her words are even more prescient.⁷ Weil’s words may fall upon deaf ears in a society addicted to technology and distracted by the banal sphere of everyday life. Acknowledging Weil’s statement, it seems important to consider that Marclay’s film does not suggest that we look solely upon his work, but that we look around us and see. Could the intention be to direct our eyes to the things that most require our attention? Since the advent of social media, smart phones and life online, distraction has

³ MIRZOEFF, N. (2015) ‘How to See the World’. London: Penguin Random House, p. 4

⁴ BAUDRILLARD, J. (2013) ‘The intelligence of evil or the lucidity effect’ London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 104

⁵ PETTMAN, D. (2016) ‘Infinite Distraction’. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. xiii

⁶ BAUDRILLARD, J. (2013) ‘The intelligence of evil or the lucidity effect’ London: Bloomsbury Academic, p. 104

⁷ WEIL, S. Cited in: PETTMAN, D. (2016) ‘Infinite Distraction’. Cambridge: Polity Press, p.17

become digital, the compulsion to refresh our screens is an addiction shared by many and the screening out of everyday life is all too easy.⁸ The continuously refreshing image of Marclay's 'LOOK' somewhat satisfies this need, yet it also removes the blindness brought on by this incessant distraction. Challenging what we choose to lend our attention to, 'LOOK' acts as a reminder of our situation, not as an isolated solitary figure, but as a member of a community. Marclay's instruction and Weil's suggestion allow us to consider the value of attention and the cost of distraction. Distraction's arch enemy is the key focus here: attention. Capturing our attention, 'LOOK' establishes a connection between Marclay and ourselves that seems to transcend its digital boundaries. It is a 24/7 reminder that to look is to glance, but to see is to pay attention to what is around you.

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⁸ PETTMAN, D. (2016) 'Infinite Distraction'. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. x