

Claudine Isé

Notes on The Annual: New Visualities aka Permanent Fall

“Imagine you are falling. But there is no ground.” This is the proposition made by German filmmaker and writer Hito Steyerl to readers of her 2011 essay *In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective*.¹ The essay asks us to consider the disoriented and disorienting God’s-eye view of a body or object in free-fall as an emerging visual paradigm, one that is rapidly supplanting traditional linear perspective. This new visual modality operates without “a stable paradigm of orientation, which has situated concepts of subject and object, of time and space, throughout modernity.”

As firm ground yields to “multiple perspectives, overlapping windows, distorted flight lines, and divergent vanishing points,” and once stable horizon lines “shatter, swirl around, and superimpose,” there is also a strange sensation of floating, arising from “the loss of any sense of above and below.” Yet at the same time that the loss of ground dis-orients and de-familiarizes, Steyerl’s supposition suggests that it may also empower us to envision ourselves and the world around us through new constructs, or old ones that have been liberated from past assumptions.

“In many of these new visualities,” she notes, “what seemed like a helpless tumble into an abyss actually turns out to be a new representational freedom. And perhaps this helps us get over the last assumption implicit in this thought experiment: the idea that we need a ground in the first place.”

As I take stock of the roughly two dozen artworks that Alexandria Eregbu and I have selected for the inaugural version of *The Annual*, I can’t help but feel a bit vertiginous myself. Part of a curator’s job is to situate artworks and, in the process, viewers, to lay the groundwork through which each becomes legible to the other. But what if the artwork resists that process by refusing to be situated, “oriented,” in traditional ways? And if the artwork refuses to be situated, where does that leave its viewers?

In permanent fall, of course.

As *The Annual*’s organizers, Alexandria and I wished to highlight the output of artists we admire and whom we believe have staying power (whatever that means), artists with strong Chicago ties whose works feel timely and even

¹ Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” *e-flux* (2011), accessed August 31, 2015, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>

urgent, and who in many cases have not yet received widespread recognition. We did not curate to a predetermined concept or theme, yet in nearly all of the works we've selected, I see reflections of the groundlessness that Steyerl's thought experiment posits.

In the irregular channels of black paint that traverse the radiating stripes of Jean Alexander Frater's painting *Orange, Green, Gold, Pointed Bands*, I see a process-based enactment of horizons shattered. I see contingency, a refusal of mastery, and the embrace of failure in the unpredictable trajectories that powdered pigment took when Susy Bielak gently blew it across a sheet of watercolor paper to create *Ventifact: Breath Drawing 1*. In Michelle Anne Harris' decidedly abject, hand-sculpted lumps of clay, I recognize perception shifts of a different sort: these portable ceramic sculptures are marijuana pipes in disguise, used for palliative relief and mind-altering excursions.

Where are we positioned when looking at the composition of Sherwin Ovid's painting *Spit Shine Heirloom*, or Kiam Marcelo Junio's inkjet print *Dona Nobis Pacem*? Are we viewing them head-on, as if looking at objects placed before us on a shelf, or are we gazing at them from above? Ovid's use of translucent tape and Junio's plays of light also encourage us to try and look at the space inside, even beyond, their surfaces. How much of what we see in these artworks is material, and how much is due to the way the human eye perceives light? The question is fundamental to Jeroen Neleman's *Homage to the Cube*, a lightbox containing layers of clear cellophane sandwiched between polarizing filters (the same as those inside your computer screen) attached to Plexiglas. Here, color is not a given but is activated by your movement—as you walk by, the color and composition change according to the direction of the light hitting it.

Collage practices, numerous examples of which appear in *The Annual*, induce and evoke varied other experiences of groundlessness. The architecturally framed, found paper constructions of Esau McGhee; the hybridized, genderqueer bodies Phaedra Call culls from glossy magazine cut-outs and bristly Astroturf; Anna Martine Whitehead's spare delineation of decontextualized facial features that appear to float within and outside a vast occupying whiteness; Meg Leary's "remixed" oil painting, comprised of pieces of other, previously-made paintings patched together like a crazy quilt—each in its own way disrupts traditional perspective while undermining the assumption that identity rests on stable ground.

I invite you, as viewers, to embrace the terror and wonder of permanent fall for yourselves, by approaching the assembled works here as a kind of thought experiment too. As you consider the manner in which each has been constructed, consider also the ways in which these works may be constructing you. Where do you stand? At what point do you fall?

