Arts of Distraction

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[Review of Claire Bishop, *Disordered Attention: How We Look At Art and Performance Today*, London/New York: Verso 2024, 256 pages, ISBN 978-1-80429-288-4 (Hardback).]

New Left Review, no. 154, July-August 2025, pp. 161-8.

Viewers at the Frieze Art Fair, London, 2017

Anyone who has taken photographs in museums and galleries over the last few decades will be aware of how conditions for photographers have changed. In many places, photography was once forbidden; in some, permission had to be explicitly granted, and the relevant document even worn around the neck; in others, artworks could be photographed but posing with them was banned. While many performance artists welcomed photography, a few hated it. Once, in a darkened space packed with frenetic dancers and static viewers, I had my lens slapped away by one of Tino Seghal's performers. Yet, as Claire Bishop notes in her new book *Disordered Attention*, such rules have been swept away since the introduction of the iPhone in 2007. Now, almost every gallery-goer has a camera on them and expects to be able to use it whenever they like. Galleries feed off the free publicity of images circulating on

social media, and even Seghal has had to accept that his works will be photographed and videoed.

The result is a transformed gallery scene, one which bears little resemblance to the old model of the white cube, where autonomous viewers were meant to engage in quiet, solitary contemplation of equally autonomous objects, each separated by an expanse of plain wall. According to this old ideal, geniuses made masterpieces which deserved prolonged and singular attention, and the gallery environment ensured that the bourgeois viewers capable of exercising it could do so without interruption. It is no surprise, then, that the new environment, in which viewers are chatty, distracted, and at best sporadically absorbed as they shuttle between looking and recording, while posting selfies and snap-judgements onto social media, has been subject to a good deal of condescending criticism.

One task of *Disordered Attention* is to counter such attitudes by providing a more nuanced and historicized portrait of the contemporary scene. Rather than disparaging the changing etiquette of gallery-goers, Bishop focuses on the evolving practices of artists and institutions as they have responded to new digital technology, from the Internet to smartphones and social media. For Bishop, these developments have not destroyed art viewers' attention but 'reconfigured' it. Attention, she maintains, is not a 'universal, deep-rooted faculty' but a 'mutable' capacity, responsive to new technologies and shifting cultural norms; the term 'distraction', she argues, is little more than a moralizing insult used to describe a type of attention of which the speaker disapproves. She argues that the old, disciplined focus was a product of the darkest elements of Enlightenment ideology, synonymous with ownership, property and mastery and thus 'white, patriarchal, bourgeois, colonial.' In contrast, today's ways of seeing are 'incessantly hybrid', at once 'present and mediated, live and online, fleeting and profound, individual and collective'.

Disordered Attention contends that this apparently novel form of viewing is in fact a return to older collective experiences of art which were suppressed by both the gallery white cube and the 'black box' of experimental theatre, both 'purportedly neutral frames that steer and hierarchize attention', constructing a 'single-point perspective'. In theatres before the late nineteenth century, by contrast, the audience looked at each other as much as at the stage. Galleries were likewise sites of social preening and conversation. Early film screenings, as Gabriele Pedullà describes in *In Broad Daylight* (2012), were similarly merely episodes in variety shows where unruly, distracted audiences dined and conversed. The shift to a mostly silent, disciplined viewing was both social and technological, as electric light enabled the brilliant illumination of the stage or screen, and the rapid dimming of the auditorium. In the gallery, spotlights nudged the attention of the visitor away from fellow viewers and towards what was displayed on the wall.

In contemporary exhibition spaces, it is not only that viewers tend to be more 'distracted'—or less blinkered, depending on your point of view—but that over the course of a long process beginning in the 1960s many artworks have become less autonomous, less bounded by a perceptible frame. Artists now make performances and videos which are so long that no viewer can be expected to see the whole, or present a mass of documents that would take

weeks to read carefully. Spectators have come to expect that their view of such works will be fragmentary. Other artists, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija or Carsten Höller, stage unusual social situations as a passing salve for the deepening wound of capitalist alienation.

Rirkrit Tiravanija, ‘La casa que el gato construyó’, Salvador Diaz Gallery, Madrid, 2009

Back in 2004, Bishop wrote an astringent and controversial critique of that tendency for *October*, questioning the emancipatory, ‘feel-good’ effects of interactive art that supposedly converts isolated, passive beholders into a community of engaged viewers, and recommending work that sought to confront or even exacerbate social antagonism rather than wishing it away. These arguments later formed part of her book *Artificial Hells* (2012), a history and defence of the kinds of participatory work which, often in charged and dangerous circumstances, thrust audiences outside of comfort and convention, aesthetically as much as politically.

Disordered Attention is not a systematic examination of the newly mediated forms of spectatorship, as Bishop concedes (‘My methods—in keeping with the book’s theme—are somewhat hybrid and disorderly’). The book comprises four essays, independently written

and published over the last decade—case studies in which Bishop examines a different 'genre' of contemporary artmaking, analysing how its practice and display have metabolized new technologies and their corresponding modes of attention, and considering what the effects have been upon the viewer. She begins with 'research-based art', a kind of 'archival installation' that emerged in the 1990s, and often features aggregations of documents and other textual ephemera, producing an 'information overload' that viewers tend to approach with a mix of skimming and sampling. She then turns to long-duration gallery performance, especially dance, of the kind that bourgeoned in the late 2000s around the time the iPhone was launched. These choreographed works may 'loop' and 'refresh', like digital media, and 'encourage photographic capture', often presented as a series of capturable stills which Bishop suggests has seeded a form of collective viewing that is both physical and online, 'a new way of looking with camera in hand'. In her third chapter Bishop addresses tactical interventions. Usually taking place outside the gallery, these are brief, unauthorized. disruptive, broadly political gestures, subject to the rapid growth, consumption and decay typical of viral phenomena, and often received with a cynical weariness with the exploitation of that familiar cycle. Finally, Bishop considers a form of 'citational practice' popular since the 1990s, involving tasteful engagements with modernist architecture and design in wistful reflections on lost ideals, which also turn out to be nicely tailored to scrolling on rectilinear online interfaces.

A professor of art history at the CUNY Graduate School, Bishop is a well-known critic who writes regularly for *Artforum*. The eye she turns on this nexus of artmaking, display, discourse and viewer behaviour is well-informed, historically and politically attuned, perceptive, critical and synthetic. As she notes, by tracking the larger movements of the scene, she offers an implicit counter to the tide of fawning monographs, the main role of which is to feed the PR machine and boost prices. Instead of dealing in exceptionalist celebrations of individual artists, *Disordered Attention* presents developments in artmaking and viewing as collective, historical processes, tied to the interaction of media, markets and institutions. In her sceptical take on the large number of artists at work on excavating forgotten corners of modernism, for instance, Bishop shows how the growth of residencies and biennial commissions, along with budget flights, came together to place artists in cities far from home where they have been enjoined to make something site-specific.

Bishop also illuminates the overlapping stages through which research-based art has proceeded, beginning with its formation in art-practice PhDs founded in the 1990s, mostly in Europe and the UK. In the first stage, exemplified by Renée Green's *Import/Export Funk Office* (1992-3), a mixed-media installation comprising metal shelving units filled with books, magazines, photographs, audio recordings and more, viewers are encouraged to interact with the predominantly textual materials on display to produce their own meanings, drawing out novel links on the model of endlessly reconfigurable hypertext. Without the sequential arrangement afforded by a gallery wall, spectators can create and follow their own narratives, as though clicking through a series of hyperlinks. Here, the artist surrendered authoritative control and empowered but also expected a lot from spectators.

Renée Green, *Import/Export Funk Office*, 1992-3

In the next stage, of which Tacita Dean is a prominent example, artists return to singular narratives but without claiming any authority other than the privilege of their own subjectivity. In their handling of often obscure scraps of analogue material, the artist's self, as Bishop puts it, is a temporary glue that holds together shards from 'the debris of history'. The most recent stage is distinguished by a 'complete inhabitation of digital logic': online and offline material are presented without hierarchy, and the integration of the work into digital systems of production, distribution and reception is assumed from the outset. One of Bishops's key examples is Wolfgang Tillman's continual reconfiguration of digital and physical material in his 'Truth Study Centre' series (2005–), an installation, which has been presented both in galleries and online, consisting of slim, glass-topped wooden tables displaying print-outs of online articles among ephemera such as bus tickets and food wrappers. In this phase of research-based art, the artist acts as an aggregator of archival fragments, and the viewer sifts through the information—each of Tillman's tables 'is effectively a material reformatting of an Internet search'—in a reflection on the contemporary production of knowledge. In these last two stages, the works may raise questions but they will never answer them, and under the aegis of the artworld cult of individualism, it is the artist's exceptional persona that enlivens the materials and renders them worthy of our attention.

Wolfgang Tillmans, ‘Truth Study Centre’ exhibition, Maureen Paley, London, 2005

Bishop tests these new ways of seeing—skimming and sampling, viral attention, scrolling—not against digital art, where one might think they would take on their clearest form, but against art that is obdurately physical, or site-specific, or made by artists enamoured with analogue media—aged type-written documents, vinyl, film and monochrome prints. This meeting point, especially in performance, throws up sharp, paradoxical oppositions of digital mediation and the privilege of physical presence.

Lengthy performances made to cover museum opening hours are often executed by trained dancers, working in shifts. It is demanding work and not well paid. In a pronounced division of labour alien to early gallery performances in the 1970s, these hired professionals follow a score, a commercial object which can be purchased. As Bishop notes, Seghal, pioneer of this type of performance, studied economics as well as choreography. Once again, she pushes back against the older critics who would condemn, for example, the re-performance of works by Marina Abramovíc as commodifiable simulacra of a once-radical art. Rather, in a return of a long-repressed, ‘pre-modern’ social spectatorship, the black box and the white cube converge to form a ‘grey zone’ of networked viewing. So, in Maria Hassabi’s performance, *PLASTIC*, staged at MoMA in 2015, professional dancers moved with glacial slowness, yielding a series of still images avidly snapped by onlookers. Likewise, in Anne Imhof’s *Faust*, shown at the 2017 Venice Biennale with an extraordinary burst of publicity, models were viewed behind glass barriers as they self-consciously produced a spectacle of disaffection and decadence, calculated to go viral on social media.

Maria Hassabi. *PLASTIC*, 2015. Installation view, The Museum of Modern Art, February 21–March 20, 2016. Pictured: Maria Hassabi. Photo: Thomas Poravas.

Alert to the strategies at work here, Bishop refrains from criticizing the viewers of such pieces as distracted, seduced or complicit. Rather, she regards the combination of watching, recording and conferring online or with other audience members as 'a way to look more closely'. This may well be the case—consider, for example, the extremely close looking that goes into the often-elaborate preparations for taking a selfie. Yet sometimes such work is also greeted with the jaded shrug prompted by art plainly made for Instagram: all those installations using mirrors, or those works featuring branded cartoon characters or involving celebrities. The logic of the selfie, actual or implied, is at play in such cases: digital circulation is offered as proof of physical presence in a parade of conspicuous consumption. Rescuing mediated viewing from reflex condescension is a salutary move, but much gallery recording, even when people are omitted, is closer to snapping oneself cavorting on the edge of a remote precipice than some might like to think.

In her exploration of tactical interventions, which takes in works from Pussy Riot to Tania Bruguera, Bishop comes closest to extending her critique of artists and institutions to viewers and their behaviour online. She describes Voina's *Dick Captured by the FSB* (2010), in which the offending member was painted on a drawbridge which, when raised, displayed it to the FSB Headquarters in an animated, vulgar protest against the Putin regime. Since the paint was quickly expunged, the main life of the work was online, but there, says Bishop, the effect was double-edged, spreading knowledge of the action but also reducing discussion to 'the

lowest common denominator'. Likewise, when Bruguera planned a provocative work in Havana in 2014 about the denial of political freedom—an open letter proposing to give members of the public a minute of free speech on Plaza de la Revolución—she was arrested before the project could take place. The controversy gave rise to what Bishop describes as 'capricious' online discussion, which centred on the artist as an individual, especially on suspicions about her 'attention-seeking' motives and her supposedly outsized ambition.

Voina, *Dick Captured By The FSB*, 2010, painted onto the Liteiny Bridge, St Petersburg

This is more than caprice, though. When it comes to the apparatus enabling and shaping such online responses—the smartphone, the physical infrastructure of the Internet and the social-media monopolies—Bishop can be less attentive than she is to art and its situation. In the second chapter on performance, for example, she writes:

> *all* performances prior to the 1870s were social occasions with an expansive, multidirectional understanding of attention. Today, the technological prosthesis has simply changed—we no longer wield opera glasses but tablets and smartphones.

While opera glasses certainly altered the behaviour of their users, they did not record anything or use AI to alter those records, spy on or manipulate theatregoers, or train algorithms. Bishop rightly criticizes some of the more extreme pronouncements against social media, particularly Jonathan Crary's *Scorched Earth*, which she sets alongside Neil

Postman's famous critique of the erosion of attention by television. Yet the systemic effects of both technologies—which have the same material underpinnings (the sale of adverts)—were and are profound. Both atomize information, foster rapid switching between topics and aim to hold viewers for as long as possible. On social media, users are actively manipulated by platforms over which they have little knowledge or control—with dire consequences, including a huge rise in mental-health problems. Recordings of and comments about art are thrown into this monopolized realm, fuelling a system of immediate feedback that does much to form its users. Yet of all this, Bishop has little to say beyond a passing reference to the 'antidemocratic manipulations of social media'. Technology has 'scrambled' old hierarchies of distribution, she claims. This is surely true, but we should add, following Evgeny Morozov, that new hierarchies have been swiftly established, more powerful and less visible than the old. On social media platforms, distraction is no side-effect or illusion but a core part of their profitable design. If you look at something too long, the flow of novelty, and of advertising, might be broken.

If Bishop neglects some of the far-reaching societal effects of contemporary technologies, she nonetheless shows an astute understanding of the wider political, economic and social situation in which the art of her case studies is made and perceived. For each she traces a general trend: the domestication of their radical or subversive potential. With research-based art, Renée Green's empowering of the viewer was intended to enact feminist and postcolonial critiques of linear history. This becomes much less potent with eccentric individualist takes on unearthed cultural fragments, as we saw with the work of Dean and Tillmans. Museum-based performance has similarly moved away from its radical roots in feminism, transgressive body art and protest, towards market-friendly, temporary, repeatable sculpture designed by an artistic master. Rather than a means of waging cultural guerrilla warfare, interventions are now staged by biennials as sanctioned spectacle. Engagements with modernism gave up their scepticism towards its totalising utopianism in favour of a nostalgic reverence for a past set of now-powerless ideals. The resultant depoliticized displays of vacuous déjà vu elevate the artist who does the framing. Bishop describes Amie Siegel's video *Provenance* (2013), which traces the trajectory, in reverse chronological order, of Pierre Jeanneret's modernist furniture made for Chandigarh, its original public use long passed, now restored and sold to wealthy collectors. Bishop argues that *Provenance* fails to provide 'a blistering critique of the elite co-option of communal luxury' because it employs the same lavish visual language as the pristine homes of the private collectors.

Amie Siegel, *Provenance*, 2013

For each of the artistic strategies explored in *Disordered Attention*, Bishop holds up a few works as models of more engaged and critical practices: John Akomfrah's eloquent video work about Stuart Hall; Liberate Tate's hijacking of gallery performance to protest BP sponsorship; Tania Bruguera's effective tactical interventions; and Thomas Hirschhorn's radical reactivations of modernism. Bishops highlights his participatory installation *Gramsci Monument* (2013), set up in a housing project in the Bronx, which presented a 'library of Gramsci's writings, an exhibition of objects belonging to him while in prison in the 1930s, a radio station, a bar, an internet corner, a lounge, a workshop space, and a "platform" (open-air auditorium)', marking a shift 'from formalism to social experiment, from nostalgia to imagination, from historicity to futurity'. Even so, Bishop presents these works as outliers amid an institutionalized and politically neutered scene.

While the artists of Bishop's case studies are not openly driven by moneymaking (with the exception of the celebrity-festooned end of performance), all of their art is formed to some degree, even if only by contrast, by the money-making populism of the gigantic global stars (Koons, Hirst, Cattelan, Murakami, Banksy and Zeng Fanzhi, among others), who wear their ideology on their sleeve, in displays of hyper-individualism, Nietzschean exceptionalism and service to the super-rich. Artists who dig among archives, ponder modernism, choreograph performances and 'unauthorized' interventions are generally not like that, and make a point of not being so, just as their viewers distinguish themselves from those who take selfies with cartoonish creations by KAWS. Perhaps, then, there is some snobbery drifting around in the

viewing and recording of this more refined art, which is not immune to the ideologies of ownership and mastery through photographic capture.

The book's subtitle is 'How We Look at Art and Performance Today'. We may ask: who is we? Bishop says, simply enough, it is the art audience. Yet if the critic's ground is a common public sphere, that sphere is plainly eroding as platforms pursue their profits through the fervid engagement stimulated by magnifying identity-based grievances, threats and the hatred of enemies, along with conspiracy and florid invention. As Bishop writes, artists' fancies as they play with history and the archival record are cast into a different light by the spread of far-right conspiracy theories.

Bishop's analysis of viewers' behaviour is based on her own perceptive observations; she stops short of anything that nears sociology. When she surveys works that mine modernism, her conclusions are not computational but qualitative, 'driven by questions of tone and attitude'. Yet there is value in talking to a wide art audience to find out what they think and feel about their forms of engagement, or in analysing their social-media feeds to see how they depict and describe art, and how those posts are received. We may look to Kaija Kaitavuori's *The Participator in Contemporary Art* (2018), which investigates the experiences of those who take part in artistic performances; or *When Art Meets Money* (2015), in which Franz Schultheis and his collaborators detail the views of visitors to the Basel Art Fair, revealing their assumptions about hierarchy and taste; or Carla Kessler's recent PhD, 'Unofficial Evidence', which examines new spectatorship by integrating findings from in-depth interviews with gallery viewers and attendants, with quantitative analyses of images and texts on social-media feeds, including those about the few places, such as Walter de Maria's *The New York Earth Room* (1977), where photography is still forbidden. Through attending to how viewers themselves describe their experiences—what words they commonly use, what photographic approaches they take—such studies build a more concrete, variegated understanding of the new culture of spectatorship.

In the epilogue to *Disordered Attention* Bishop writes that spectatorship has 'settled into a continual flow of actual and virtual'. Given the rapid changes social media platforms undergo as their algorithms are honed to further engage and manipulate their users, and the continually evolving ways that phone cameras alter images, there is reason to doubt that the relationship between reality and its mediated expressions will remain as it is. What does seem settled for now, and has become steadily more embedded over the long era of financialization, is art as luxury, asset and investment, with all the economic, environmental and ideological consequences. Against this, a truly collective social viewing—a mode of spectatorship that the online apparatus could in principle enable—might have some critical purchase, but not so long as it is hosted and massaged by monopolies that have their own reasons to foster conspiracy, lies, division, hatred and, of course, distraction.