

Tunnel Vision

“A single tunnel, dark and solitary: mine, the tunnel wherein passed all my infancy, my youth, my entire life.” Ernesto Sabato, *The Tunnel* ¹

A biennial is typically global in scope. Its artist roster is necessarily international. It’s an event that seeks to reach out to the whole world. Under the heading *Tunnel Vision*, Momentum 8 points in another direction. And that direction is down a path that blocks out all other possible paths. Tunnel vision literally designates a vision devoid of peripheral sight. It figuratively designates narrow-mindedness. Tunnel vision thus represents a view without a world. At Momentum 8, tunnel vision also represents a view of worlds within. Accordingly, this biennial does not deal with the world we all might be said to share, but rather the one each and every one of us inhabits on our own, or a world that exists in the margins of society.

The you loop

Techno-scientific development manifests itself today as hyper-connectivity. Information technology is weaving a web said to be as wide as the world. By accessing this web, we are supposedly able to access everything and everyone. The Internet unfolds the old project of the Enlightenment on a hitherto unknown scale. We are all ideally brought together to write one great encyclopaedia; ideally brought together in one single public sphere where Google translates one language into another language in real-time. We are ultimately contemplating a near future where everyone will be interconnected and capable of communicating with each other. Internet has caused a new kind of connectivity through phenomena like social media, and simultaneously created a new kind of social atomisation. Although the points of entry may differ, recent development of search engines has provided access to a large, ever expanding pool of data. On December 4th 2009, Google announced a new feature: ‘Personalised search for everyone.’ Turning a company name into a verb, we tell each other to ‘google’ something, ignoring the fact that the results provided will not always be the same. A user’s previous preoccupations anticipate their future ones. Data is collected and deployed in a manner that determines what we find, and subsequently also what we seek. Every web search query thus tends to confirm existing world-views. If the Internet has been a window to the world, it is now also our own mirror image on the screen.

According to activist and author Eli Pariser, ubiquitous algorithms and cookies customise our life and work online and thus risk leaving Internet users spinning in what he calls ‘you loops’. In his book *The Filter Bubble*, Pariser sends a warning: “Left to their own devices, personalization filters serve up a kind of invisible auto propaganda, indoctrinating us with our own ideas, amplifying our desire for things that are familiar and leaving us oblivious to the dangers lurking in the dark territory of the unknown.”²

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Sabato, Ernesto, *El Túnel*, first published in the journal Sur, Buenos Aires, 1948.

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What is endangered in the process, Pariser suggests, is amongst other things the public sphere where we discuss common concerns. As CEO Mark Zuckerberg has suggested, Facebook's News Feed might not be such a place: "A squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa."³ What is also endangered, according to Pariser, is creativity as such, due to "the collision of ideas from different disciplines and cultures."⁴

Meanwhile, creativity or artistic practice can also be said to grow from a withdrawal from this world where ideas collide. Artworks are objects of debate in the public sphere, but the artistic *practice* from which these works spring often unfolds elsewhere.

A room of one's own

The small city of Moss, where Momentum takes place, is situated half an hour from Oslo. Among other things, it is known as the place to which Edvard Munch withdrew from 1913 to 1916. Though it was part of his daily routine to go to the train station to collect his post, Moss seemingly also served him as a spot where he could block out the world and cultivate his eclectic and highly personal practice on his own terms.

The story of the modern artist is also the story of an aloof character, literally an *idiot*, who develops his or her own idiolect. We meet this character early on in Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece* from 1831. After years of secrecy, a painter named Frenhofer finally unlocks his studio and reveals a painting to his peers that they cannot decipher. They do not understand why the painter talks so splendidly of the woman that he has depicted. Apart from a foot lost in a swirl of colours, they only see paint in the paint.

Though the artist of the 19th century commonly is a mundane figure, a dandy, the artist is also a bohemian who floats around somewhere above and beyond society. A certain kind of distance and isolation from the world is considered a precondition for art making. Such considerations later, in 1928 and 1929, become key to Virginia Woolf's ideas about how women can write literature on an equal footing with men. Emancipation in the literary domain presupposes that women writers can afford and get a room of their own. This precondition for the development of great literature is accompanied by a particular view of the human condition: "...we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone and that our relation is to the world of reality and not only to the world of men and women..."⁵

Pariser, Eli, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You*, New York: Penguin Press, 2011, p. 15.

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Op. Cit. p. 5.

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Op. Cit. p. 15.

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The pleasure of the mind

In a short story by Franz Kafka written a year before his death in 1924, the narrator has not just carved out a room apart, but an entire underground system of spaces interconnected by tunnels. “All this involves very laborious calculation, and the sheer pleasure of the mind in its own keenness is often the sole reason why one keeps it up”⁶, states the protagonist and narrator of *The Burrow*. The only source of environmental stimuli to which the narrator’s mental processes constantly respond is the solipsistic and maddening circularity of tunnel life. Thoughts lead to physical alterations of the underground system of tunnels that in turn lead to new thoughts and so on. The narrator finally perceives any architectural shortcomings as a personal defect. The construction work undertaken in a mole-like manner with “my forehead... that unique instrument”⁷ triggers pleasure in the narrator, but also paranoia. Sealing the entrance to the tunnels ensures safety from enemies above ground, while also making it impossible to leave in a hurry if attacked from below. “I must have a way of leaving at a moment’s notice, for, despite all my vigilance, may I not be attacked from some quite unexpected quarter?” the digger asks. “I live in peace in the inmost chamber of my house, and meanwhile the enemy may be burrowing his way slowly and stealthily straight toward me. I do not say that he has a better scent than I; probably he knows as little about me as I of him.”⁸

Consequentiality

Kafka’s short story originally titled *Der Bau* and symptomatically left unfinished, is also a story of building an impossible building. It is a work of literature that recalls how a writer works. However rational the calculations of the narrator may be, the very undertaking of all these calculations strike the reader as irrational. This is a theme of a loner’s reason gone awry that also can be found in the visual arts throughout the 20th century, not least in the work of Marcel Duchamp, who became a role model in the art world from the 1950s and onwards. The French artist cultivated other kinds of logic, insisted on the life of the mind of the artist with reference to René Descartes and Leonardo da Vinci, promoted artistic retreat and not least compared art to masturbation. In his wake, one finds a whole new generation of artists grouped under the title *Live In Your Head*, exemplified by the 1969 exhibition better known as *When Attitudes Become*

Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One’s Own*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1989, p. 114.

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Kafka, Franz, *Der Bau, Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente 2*, published by Jost Schillemeit, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1992, p. 576 – 632.

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Op. Cit.

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Op. Cit.

Form.⁹ The same year, one of these artists, Sol LeWitt, invokes how the new so-called conceptual artists can “leap to conclusions that logic cannot reach.” Such practice gives way to the articulation of a new imperative: “Irrational thoughts should be followed absolutely and logically.”¹⁰

Momentum 8 extends LeWitt’s conceptual paradigm by looking at artists who have either developed ‘a logic’ of their own or who investigate such logics at play in individual and collective undertakings. Whereas LeWitt and his conceptual colleagues were concerned with a certain circular modus operandi peculiar to art, Momentum 8 is rather interested in such circularity as a defining trait of art as well as in culture. The consequentiality defining someone who follows a thought all the way through is central to Momentum 8, but not only central to art. A conspiracy theorist might just as well as a conceptual artist be described as someone who follows an irrational thought ‘absolutely and logically’. Tunnel vision might be prone to cultural condemnation as alarmingly asocial, but it has for a long time also lent itself to artistic celebration as disarmingly eccentric. For this reason a biennial might be the right place to ponder the differences and overlaps between those who suffer from and those blessed with tunnel vision.

A reservoir inside

Immersion in self-referential loops is echoed in a renewed interest in psychotropic substances in society at large. Whereas the psychedelic movement of the 1960s was concerned with mind expansion, contemporary culture seems to value experiences of a *narrowing-down of the mind* – a state similar to that which one might achieve through trance or meditation.

The concern might no longer be with out of body and mind experiences but rather with lucidly accessing what is left inactive inside the body and mind. As Professor Norman puts it in the film *Lucy* from 2014, there are “100 billion neurons per human, of which only 50 per cent are activated. There are more connections in the human body than there are stars in the galaxy. We possess a gigantic network of information to which we have almost no access.”¹¹ In the film, a woman is endowed with access to a reservoir of supposedly inactive neurons. Since the release of the movie, neuroscientists have contested the existence of such a reservoir, but not the existence of the dream of it. A similar theme is found in *Limitless*, where the protagonist gets a life, a career and a

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Live In Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form was an extensive and highly influential exhibition dedicated to the amalgam of Pop, Minimal and Conceptual Art curated by Harald Szeemann in 1969.

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LeWitt, Sol, *Sentences on Conceptual Art*, first published in January 1969 in the magazine *0-9* (New York, NY), edited by Vito Acconci and Bernadette Mayer.

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Lucy, directed by Luc Besson, 89 minutes, Europa Corp Distribution / Universal Pictures, 2014.

rapidly increasing income, the moment he gets his perfect drug: “I wasn’t high; wasn’t wired. Just clear. I knew what I needed to do and how to do it.”¹²

Drugs to study

Submerged in a constant flow of information and distractions, new drugs and technologies are deployed in order to create a tunnel vision that narrows down the spectrum of information and our access to it. As such they are the chemical equivalent to the digital algorithms that personalise our life online. Throughout the last century in Europe and North America, the use of psychotropic substances that on consumption change the chemical composition of the brain has steadily increased.

One may think of rise in the use of entheogens such as *peyote* and *ayahuasca* as well as LSD and MDMA declared illegal in many countries when Richard Nixon announced the ‘War on Drugs’ in 1971. Yet, illegal drugs are not the primary cause of increases in consumption of psychoactive substances. The rise is also due to multinational pharmaceutical companies developing and marketing medications for all sorts of disorders. Among the most common diagnoses of our time, apart from depression, is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder also known as ADHD. Studying the legal medication produced by global corporations paints a picture of the psycho-active tendency of the past hundred years. Drug consumption today is not simply sub- or counterculture any longer; it is also a clean established multi-billion dollar business.

The reasons for this development are multifaceted. New times demand new drugs. ADHD has become a widely used diagnosis among doctors. *Adderall* and *Ritalin* are thus also widely used by their patients. Parents have the medication prescribed to their children. Office workers use these substances to be able to concentrate at work. In the US, students consume them on campuses, and private and elite universities host the largest proportion of such users. Whereas previously ‘party drugs’ allowed users to freak out, the new ‘study drugs’ help them to fit in and perform. Distractions in our environment, among them the Internet, challenge our ability to focus. Drugs create the synthetic tunnel vision necessary to function according to cultural and socio-economic demands.

Therefore, these drugs also tell the story of where, as a whole, society might be. A recent trend in ayahuasca tourism can also be read in this light. Whereas the experiences might be described as mind-expanding, the reasons to seek them out can also simply be private. Michel Foucault referred to drugs as technologies of the self, techniques we apply to ourselves, to adapt, become more productive or endure the world we live in. Likewise, ayahuasca trips to the Amazon now also can serve to overcome personal trauma, deal with depression or ‘find oneself’.

Both true and untrue

In both genuine and playful ways, artists can be said to be among the pioneers of such trips into mystical territories. In line with Sol LeWitt, Bruce Nauman affirmed in a work from 1967 that, ‘the true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths’. The artist believed his blue glowing neon statement to be simultaneously true and not true. Historically, a variety of artists have been drawn to mysticism, in order to make contact with the divine, and practiced it as a means to reach direct experience of its existence as well as their own. Mysticism, alchemy and astrology are often grouped under the moniker of the esoteric, which comprises mystical and magical ideas and movements focused on the pursuit of *gnosis*, a term which has been defined as “direct spiritual insight into cosmology or metaphysics.”¹³ Today, esoteric currents are again gaining ground in the art world and in mainstream society. However, techno-scientific developments that have nourished globalisation and individualism have fundamentally reshaped esoteric traditions from theosophy to New Age. Esotericism has thus also come to connote various practices concerned with that which is being concealed, hidden and still remains unknown. Accordingly, we now see how esoteric practices communicate with other domains of similar concerns from conspiracy theory to contemporary art.

Esoteric inside out

The term esoteric derives from the Greek εσώτερος, or *esôteros*, that translates to ‘inner’. Esoteric or inner thoughts and ideas gradually exit their enclosure and enter the world, they become exoteric, a secret becomes public. When such spiritual output has infiltrated the art world, it has often solely been perceived as art if qualified by the prefix ‘outsider’. However, the mysterious extra-sensory qualities that certain esoteric practitioners possess resemble the qualities art institutions attempt to cultivate. One such ability may be seeing auras, energy fields around humans, animals or other objects, manifested as colours. We find the phenomenon ‘aura’ in Walter Benjamin’s much cited writings on art and in the writings of the founder of the theosophical movement, Helena P. Blavatsky (1831-1891), who described it as a form of “psychic effluvium”¹⁴ alternating with one’s moods or feelings.

Perception of auras might be seen as an ‘outlier’ form of synaesthesia where two sensory modalities overlap. Some assert for instance that auras are both seen and felt at the same time. Blavatsky was also preoccupied by synaesthesia, which she regarded as a higher form of intelligence beyond the one dominating the natural sciences. For her, this phenomenon proved there was a world beyond the physical. Synaesthesia involves a superposition of one set of sensory information onto another, a perceptual process also at

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Versluis, Arthur, *Magic and Mysticism: An Introduction to Western Esotericism*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007, p. 1.

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Blavatsky, Helena P., *Theosophical Glossary*, Hollywood, California: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1918, p. 44.

play in metaphors. In this regard, much art is synaesthetic, causing slippages between the senses, and many artists through the ages, such as Edvard Munch, are synaesthetes.

If artists are channelling perceptual approaches that touch on the esoteric, there is a case for bringing discourse stemming from such fields of knowledge to the interpretation of works; to look at certain works in terms of their *auratic* potential, or the flows of energy they conduct and emit, irrespective of how they are made and attentive to how they are received. If there is an odd equivalence between contemporary art and esotericism, perhaps a topology of art that separates inside and outside is inappropriate. Perhaps a topology like a Möbius strip, a folded loop where the outside is simultaneously the inside, is more apt; a space where insiders are simultaneously outsiders and mystic truths are simultaneously non-truths.

Common senses

The effects of such a Möbius approach might involve leaving behind the world where ideas are shared between individuals endowed with common sense and senses that they have in common. Though, for instance, synaesthesia affects one in twenty people, it does not necessarily affect them in the same way. The Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov, who was obsessed with his own synaesthesia, told the BBC in 1962 how this ability could atomise his family – and yet reunite it: “my wife has this gift of seeing letters in colour, too, but her colours are completely different. There are, perhaps, two or three letters where we coincide, but otherwise the colours are quite different. It turned out, we discovered one day, that my son, who was a little boy at the time — I think he was 10 or 11 — sees letters in colours, too. Quite naturally he would say, ‘Oh, this isn’t that colour, this is this colour,’ and so on. Then we asked him to list his colours and we discovered that in one case, one letter which he sees as purple, or perhaps mauve, is pink to me and blue to my wife. This is the letter M. So the combination of pink and blue makes lilac in his case. Which is as if genes were painting in aquarelle.”¹⁵

According to German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, isolation from the world does not oppose a connection to it. In his trilogy, *Spheres*, he proposes that the creation of a human interior means that we never live outside of nature or our surroundings, but rather create a protective shield within it to encapsulate ourselves. After the Copernican revolution, heliocentrism – the view that Earth and planets revolve around the Sun – was established, Sloterdijk believes that a *spherological crisis* set in. As a response, we have in our *shellless state* created technological replacements for the loss of this protective shell. Referring to architect Thom Mayne’s concept ‘connected isolation’, he proposes that media and communication technologies are tools that allow us to communicate with the outside, while protecting us from it inside our domestic space.

Nordic seclusion

The Nordic region is both geographically and linguistically secluded. Looking inside reinforces such seclusion. A retreat from *polis* into nature is found in Norwegians' love of their small cabins in the forest or on the mountainside. They talk of their 'hytte', the way Swedes' cherish their 'sommarstugor', the Icelanders' and Danes' their 'summerhus' and the Finns their 'mökki'. Perhaps the long periods of darkness in the Northern parts of Europe, stretching from October to March, make Nordic people seek shelter, both physically and mentally. Indeed, the Swedish word 'lappsjuka', literally meaning 'Sami-disease' [the indigenous Sami people inhabit the most isolated Northern parts of the country] embodies the feeling of having been isolated or deprived of contact with others for a long time. It comes close to a state of depression and the experience of panic attacks due to loneliness, desperately craving social interaction. An easy cure for 'lappsjuka' is meeting people. Nordic seclusion might thus explain why so many artists move abroad. Sauna culture necessitates sudden rushes outside. Seclusion is also a recurrent theme in Nordic literature. Jo Nesbø states "I much prefer to isolate myself"¹⁶ and Halldór Laxness' novels often reflect upon rough physical conditions and inner spiritual experience. Henrik Ibsen's plays overflow with descriptions of darkness and solitude. His writings transmit a sense of isolation and alienation. Many of his plays focus on private interiors, homes into which people withdraw and where psychological drama unfolds behind closed doors. Ibsen himself was known as being sensitive and he shied away from the world: "But, curiously, isolation was necessary to a spirit such as his; he was endowed with the gift of seeing better from afar [...] and by his isolation he was enabled to form a perspective without which he could not have developed."¹⁷

As curators of Momentum 8 we have gone through a process of identifying and commissioning artists from around the globe who address the topics dealt with above. In this reader, which is the first catalogue of two, we have also interviewed a number of people as part of our common research. Through these diverse tunnel visions, the world has paradoxically opened up. Indeed, this condition – this state of mind, is both art-historically rooted and yet so very contemporary.

It now seems to manifest itself everywhere.

Jonatan Habib Engqvist

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