On Not Looking

Frances Guerin

ON NOT LOOKING:
Essays on Images and Viewers

Call for Papers

Submissions are invited for an edited book with the working title On Not Looking: Essays on Images and Viewers. Contemporary experience presents us with a contradiction: while we are at a historical moment when images have never been so readily available and circulated, we increasingly "don't look" at images. The collection will explore the myriad ways that not looking at images - as opposed to not seeing - is manifest in our burgeoning image culture today.

Contributions are sought that address practices and representations of "not looking," "turning away," and other manifestations of physical and mental distraction from material images. Our relationship to the glut of images that saturate the world is characterized by an ever-expanding contemporary form of iconoclasm. Again and again, while documentary images are touted as a reliable form of visible evidence, or as commensurate with the every day life they depict - due to their apparent mimeticism and their potential to be seen simultaneous with the event - we don't trust them, we question them, we continually go back to written words as a way of understanding and confirming what we have seen. This scepticism involves a looking away from the image. Even as the means of production become increasingly available, even as images are exhibited, published, seen and watched everywhere, we are either discouraged to turn away, or we are unable, or unwilling to look at what is pictured before us.

Not looking often comes as a result of privileging the other senses. Thus, we are directed to listen where we might want to look:in museums and art galleries, institutions apparently devoted to the idolatory of images, we are continually coaxed away from looking: we are enticed into following the audio guide, reading the texts on the wall, believing the written catalogue at the bookstore. Our eyes are constantly distracted from the supposed purpose of our visit: to look. Alternatively, looking with the eyes is devalued in the world of virtual reality: touching, hearing, smelling, even tasting challenge

visual perception as the measure of our bodily experience of the visual world. In another example, never before have the images that document the modern battlefield been so abundant and readily available - on television, the World Wide Web, Instant Messaging and so on. Yet, again and again these images are censored, prohibited, manipulated and disguised in an effort to quell their power and blind their audience. Like the turn away from the deceptive documentary image as evidence, the press and the powers they represent force us to look elsewhere for the truth.

Despite the wont to "not look," to look away, to look elsewhere, scholarship in the more traditional disciplines of art history, cinema and media studies, and the relatively recent interdisciplinary fields of visual and image studies have focussed on discussions of "practices of looking" "how we see," and, for example, the precision of vision in modernity. Within the fields of philosophy, psychoanalysis, and other critical studies, scholarship tends to understand iconoclasm as a form of blindness or metaphysical distraction, not seeing when we look. Artists and imagemakers today, however, continue the preoccupation with the habit of "not looking" "looking away," "turning elsewhere" in analogue and digital media. On Not Looking will bring the concerns of critics and philosophers together with those of artists and imagemakers: the essays will reinstate the image to its position of primacy in an interrogation of the contemporary tendency to look away. As such, the anthology will contribute to ongoing debates about the politics and aesthetics of looking, and better assess the role of images, and our relationship to them, within contemporary history and culture more generally.

The collection will be divided into a number of sections with essays from different theoretical perspectives that focus on the image, and our relationship to it, as sites of 'not looking". Potential areas to be discussed might include: Politics of institutional exhibition and perception of images (including museums, schools, prisons, and so on); Censored, repressed, and banned images; Transformations to practices of not looking as a result of new media interventions; The image in history and memory; Not looking at images of bodies and cultures on the margins; Religious and cultural prohibitions about looking at certain types of images; Responses to images of trauma; Images in everyday life (eg. Reality TV, the role of the image in travel and tourism, YouTube interventions; advertising, home movies and family photo albums); Embodied vision and visceral imagery (e.g. acts of violence and the mutilated body); Political interventions (including public protest, Photojournalism, ecological imagery, and so on).

Submissions that focus on a variety of material images are welcome.

These will include but are not limited to: painting, architecture, film, photography, video, television, museum exhibitions, the World Wide Web, cell phone images and the printed press. Essays that explore contemporary images that follow our habit of not looking, as well as the way older works have been revised and displayed within the contemporary moment are sought.

All inquiries, and/or 400-500 word abstract, and current CV can be sent to Frances Guerin: fjguerin@gmail.com by December 15, 2009. Full essays of 5,000-7,500 words will be due September 30, 2010

Reference:
CFP: On Not Looking. In: ArtHist.net, Oct 14, 2009 (accessed Sep 16, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/31934>.