

*Bridget Riley Rétrospective,*

extracts with annotations from a recent catalogue.<sup>1</sup>

‘... phenomenology has often proved that perception is not an unchanging fact but is instead the condition of both a context and an individual...’ (Anne Montfort 2008: 23) ‘After all,’ writes Montfort, how can one fail to observe that in most of her writings and interviews, Riley likes the word ‘sensation’ better than she does ‘perception.’ Sensation conveys a more ambiguous notion, meaning both sensing and feeling. (2008: 23) Riley notes, ‘I have always believed that perception is the medium through which states of being are directly experienced.’ (Riley, 1999: 66<sup>2</sup>)

Scorning the use of masking tape, she trains her assistants to apply paint in a precise and neutral manner with the brush, thus deliberately retaining a fine handmade finish to the work. Her decision to leave the final execution of a painting to assistants can be explained by her intention to concentrate entirely on the exercise of critical judgement. Adopting the role of the first spectator of her own work also seems to be linked to Riley’s belief in the radical isolation of the modern artist, which she sees as both a token of social alienation and the instrument of freedom. She gave the following explanation to Neil MacGregor: ‘An artist today has to make his entire context, his own criteria, has to explain, has to account his procedure as it evolves. It’s almost as though he has to take on the role of being his public, his own critic, his own everything.’<sup>3</sup> Somehow, it seems that the artist has to come up with a value system on his own, while at the same time paradoxically admitting the impossibility of objective criteria. This statement is reminiscent of Beckett ... in his novels, written in the first person, Beckett allows his characters to freely wander away from the course of the plot, thus becoming the delegates of the author, who then turns into his own first reader.’ (Montfort 2008: 26) ... *Cataract 3* is based on an identical curve descending diagonally at regular intervals. This formal structure carries a paired modulation of two contrasting colours. Their contrast almost disappears where the colours are degraded in a common grey - along the top and the bottom of the canvas. Conversely, where the grey tones recede the contrast of pure hues is fully exposed. This occurs across a wide passage in the lower part of the painting, giving rise to a pinky red tint. The perception of the painting operates in this to and fro between its stable factual structure and the surprising sensation of a flush of disembodied colour. (Montfort 2008: 27)

‘My freedom,’ Riley notes, quoting from Igor Stravinsky, ‘consists in my moving about within a narrow frame that I have assigned myself for each one of my undertakings. I shall go even further: my freedom will be so

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<sup>1</sup> *Bridget Riley Rétrospective*, Musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, London: Ridinghouse, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Riley, *The Eye’s Mind, Collected Writings 1965-1999*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> Riley, ‘The Art of the Past. Talking to Neil MacGregor’, Robert Kudielka (ed.). *Bridget Riley. Dialogues on Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 1992, p. 30.

much the greater and more meaningful, the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles.' (Riley quoting Igor Stravinsky's *The Poetics of Music* <sup>4</sup>)

Jonathan Crary notes that Cézanne's 'work is marked by the creative discovery that looking at any one thing intently did not lead to a fuller and secure grasp on its presence or immediacy. Rather it led to perceptual instability, to the breakdown of fixed form or positions. And his experience of that breakdown was one of the conditions for his invention and discovery of previously unseen relations and forces.

'We all know from our own experience what happens when we look at some unchanging object or form for too long: our visual hold on it begins to dissolve in a series of perceptual modulations. As the eye fatigues, the constancy of colours and shapes undergoes various transformations. As Riley clearly understands, attention is never some timeless exchange between a rapt spectator and an inert object. Rather, she creates conditions within which viewers become aware of their own attentiveness as part of a dynamic continuum, in which the identity or even the physiognomy of the individual work is always in the midst of a process of self-differentiation. Early on Riley must have realised the impossibility of assuming the unmediated givenness of sensorial-data and at the same time realised that she could not make visual art predicated on notions of perceptual constancy.' (Jonathan Crary 2008: 41)

... Seurat was working with considerable knowledge about the physiological capacities of the human eye, specifically the way in which the retina could synthesise the appearance of several adjacent colour sensations into the optical impression of a new colour that existed only subjectively. In this sense much of what is fundamental to our experience of a Riley painting has a related *atopic* or placeless character. The stunning perceptual events, which in various ways define her work, provoke us to ask not only *what* exactly we are seeing but *where* in fact it is 'taking place'. And Riley makes clear that the answer to [the] latter question will never be clear cut or categorical. There is always an indissoluble and active play between eye, mind and the artwork itself. (Crary 2008: 42)

The human body, being the only entity we can simultaneously view from the outside and somehow experience from within, seems to hold the clue to any structural penetration in rendering appearance.

(Robert Kudielka 2008: 53)

Riley tells Cooke, 'My mother made a habit of looking, and she taught me to look. She would always point things out: the colours of shadows, the way water moves, how changes in the shape of a cloud are responsible for different colours in the sea, the dapples and reflections that come up from pools inside caves. All beautiful things. It was a constant pleasure just to look. I started to see what happens when you look.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Riley, 'Perception and the Use of Colour', talking to E.H. Gombrich, Kudielka (ed.). *Dialogues on Art*, 1992, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Riley in interview with Lynne Cooke, Cranbrook Art Museum, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, September 24, 2005, Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2008: 119.