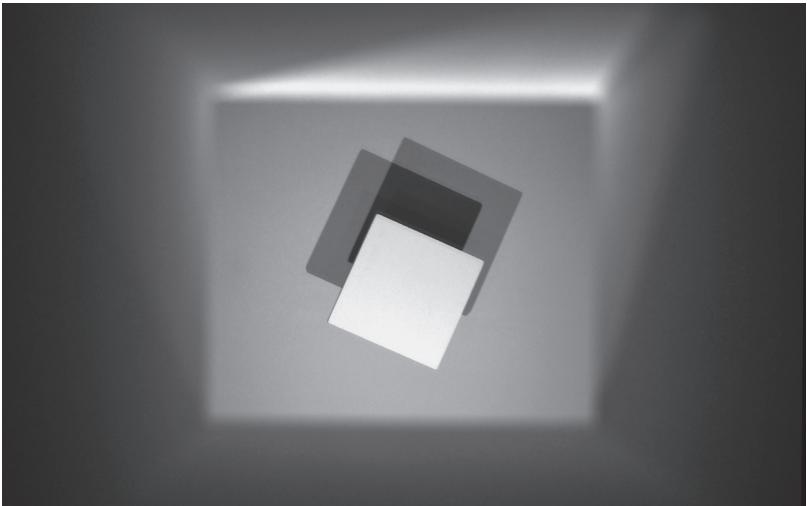


natasha

johns-messenger:

threefold



1. Installation view, *InTheFold*, 2015. MDF, LED lighting, mirror, viewing aperture. Dimensions variable

International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP)

Natasha Johns-Messenger: ThreeFold

Melissa Bianca Amore, Curator
September 18 - November 22, 2015

Organized by ISCP & El Museo de Los Sures

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Foreword

This publication accompanies the exhibition *Natasha Johns-Messenger: ThreeFold* presented at El Museo de Los Sures in partnership with the International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP). ISCP fosters the creative development of artists and curators, and promotes exchange through residencies and public programs.

Since 2010 ISCP has produced off-site art projects with the aim of assisting its residents and alumni develop outreach into the public realm of New York City. This exhibition is the sixth collaboration between Los Sures and ISCP, and its most ambitious to date. El Museo de Los Sures was born by a partnership between Southside United with Cornell University and Churches United for Fair Housing to preserve the history of the neighborhood's residents. Natasha Johns-Messenger's residency, supported by the Australia Council for the Arts, brought her to ISCP for the first time in 2007. I was thrilled when she approached ISCP in 2014 to explore possible future public art projects and to seek ways we could support her New York practice. She and independent curator Melissa Bianca Amore had just begun working together at the time. While I was familiar with and intrigued by Johns-Messenger's previous practice, I looked forward to the challenge and surprise of collaborating on an installation that would not be experienced until the opening of the exhibition. She is best known for her immersive pieces which require a heavy allotment of time and artistic access to a particular site, in order for her to study the particular spaces. El Museo de Los Sures generously offered Johns-Messenger and Amore the opportunity to work independently from many institutional constraints, and to develop the artist's first solo exhibition in New York City.

I would like to thank Natasha Johns-Messenger for pursuing this project with such integrity and determination; Melissa Bianca Amore for her catalog essay, conceptual vision, and enthusiastic coordination of this exhibition; Thomas Servello, Director of Communications at Southside United HDFC for his dedicated attention to our fruitful institutional collaboration; Kathryn Deyell, Director, Public

Diplomacy, and Cameron McCarthy, Cultural Affairs Officer for bringing the generous support of the Australian Consulate-General to this project; the American Australian Association for their promotion of the exhibition; Anne Bardas, Andrew Chan, Natalie Goldberg, Ayline Olukman for their support; Gaberial Meldahl, Izzi Galindo and the team at Stand and Build for their production work; and ISCP Studio Assistants Nima Behravan and Ashley Ludkowski for their help and Jiaqi Liu and Yang Yang for their design of this catalog.

Juliana Cope, Development and Programs Manager, ISCP



2. Installation view, *ThreeFold*, 2015. MDF, LED floodlight, mirror, viewing aperture.
Dimensions variable

What do you see your eyes looking at? by Melissa Bianca Amore

By these words, "the primacy of perception," we mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values are constituted for us; that perception is a nascent logos; that it teaches us, outside of dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty¹

Is it imaginable to observe observation while observing? This inquiry is the basis of artist Natasha Johns-Messenger's primary examination. Her practice, which began in the 1990s, is complex and difficult to categorize within the rubric of contemporary art discourse. That is because the artist deals with spatial and oneiric principles often found in architecture and film; visual theories commonly associated with physics, including light, optics and space; and ontological questions mostly attributed to the field of perception and phenomenology.²

And while these discursive fields of enquiry, alongside other forms of classification, such as "site-specificity," "embodied environments" or "installation art" are extraneously employed in contemporary art today, albeit without much thought, to describe any arrangement that reveals light, spatial activation and audience participation, Johns-Messenger occupies a different position within the realms of artistic practice. This is not to say that the artist is estranged from such terms, however Johns-Messenger is developing a new kind of work primarily invested with representations of "site" and of "cognitive spaces." The artist employs space as a tangible medium—interrupting it, creating it and shaping it—often revealing the buried elements found on the site itself. She assembles a visual mechanism that reduplicates *itself* for and of *itself*.

Johns-Messenger's work is predominantly about perception and what it means to be awake in your own consciousness. She questions, directly, how perception is structured and how we learn to

perceive. Her installations, which I'll describe as "optical prisms" or "spatial apertures," are created directly in response to the architecture of the site, as both a subject and as a medium. This exchange, whereby the artwork is directed by the particularities on the site, where there is a direct reciprocity between art and architecture, signals a new mode of "perceptual architecture." In other words, the artist observes each space as a pictorial object or image, and disrupts the spatial configuration by remaking abstractions and virtual simulations of the environment, including doorways, walls, flooring and panels. Each body of work is constructed on site and in most cases, demolished after the exhibition. Yet the artist has been commissioned to produce many sculptural interventions that can still be seen around the world including her work *Alterview*, 2013, at Hunters Point, New York and *Through to You*, 2008, in Keukenhof, Holland.

The installation *ThreeFold* (Fig. 2), 2015, is not about a traditional art object or a single concept; rather it is a momentary encounter designed to actively orient the viewer within a world of appearances and to disrupt the way space is traditionally perceived. The site, at El Museo de Los Sures in Brooklyn, New York, has been reimagined into three passageways, crafted from MDF boards, mirrors, LED lighting and plexiglass. It is designed as a labyrinth, comprised of multiple reflections, floating images and traveling light. And by physically modifying the kinds of spaces we occupy on a daily basis, Johns-Messenger destabilizes the mind, the body's automated memory and perceptual orientation within the site. She provides a space for the activity of perceiving and interrupts, both psychologically and physically, our "preconditioned" visual and spatial certainties. "There is an automated thing going on with space," Johns-Messenger explains. "We learn space from a young age and we think we know how to negotiate it and as soon as it's disrupted everything you thought you knew is challenged."³

The artist attempts such an ambitious undertaking by extending the space beyond the physical—into a mystifying simulated echo—which appears as an infinite horizon and as a new kind of vision. Within this illusion, Johns-Messenger creates a sensation of being

both inside and outside simultaneously; a type of architectural mimesis. She progressively plunges the viewer into a state of oscillation within the refraction, an optical prism, revolving around itself and returning, back to the point of origin, that being, the doorway. As a result, the body becomes continuous with the space itself, tracing as it were, the cyclical movement.

In this distorted reflection, both an impression of the site and the site itself is presented, which stimulates an internal dialogue between “what is” and the impression of the “what is.” And by challenging the laws of optics and modes of representation, time is also controlled and suspended, creating a cognitive disorientation. Johns-Messenger places the viewer in an intermediary space of binary oppositions between what actually exists and what he or she perceives to exist. These projected images of the doorway and window are not manipulated in any way: they are pure representations, activating pure form, though once the form is reflected its authenticity is challenged. It is at this point, that the artist provides valuable insights as to what generally occurs within the operation of perception. The mechanism reflects, at a deeper level, the ways in which reality is constructed and perceived, that is, by a set of categorical associations and by a multiplicity of representations. Nothing is understood independently of the thing that is being represented.

That is to say, through a sophisticated optical device, the artist alludes to being inside the illusion of perception itself. Not inside the apparatus but rather, inside the operation of perception—the very thing that teaches and confines, as a system of data or “nascent logos” and inside the visual frameworks that condition a particular way of seeing and reveal how perception is actually constructed.⁴ Viewers are presumably aware that they are inside an illusion, hence, the result is not so much to mislead them, as it is to reveal the hidden mechanisms that limit perception.⁵ Johns-Messenger, consequentially, deals with what I call a type of “information ontology,” which is directly related to the operative function of perception itself.

To explain further, recent developmental studies hypothesize that perception is like a type of “data” that is programmed into the

brain. Things, objects and forms are understood, primarily, by associating what we see with this data, *per se*. We learn to perceive, and this “pre-conditioning” occurs during the early stages of childhood development. According to physicist Arthur Zajonc, perception is something that is a pre-condition for seeing and is acquired by training and development. He suggests we “learn” how to see and this learning is what shapes and frames our perception throughout life. In his book, *Catching the Light*, Zajonc re-stages a story that was told by surgeons Moreau and Le Prince, who in 1910, successfully operated on an eight year-old boy who was blinded from cataracts since birth. The surgeons were able to grant him sight but not teach him how to see. The boy could only comprehend shadows of light, nothing more. Forms, objects and figures were perceived as strings of light, and without knowledge of what he was looking at, his world comprised of pure light.⁶



3. *BlackWay*, from the series *Bushwick Backyard*, 2014. Archival pigment print, 50 x 33 inches

To put rather simply, learning to perceive is predominantly about making associations with things, and perception is, rather a paradox as it provides a particular way of seeing, though it also restricts sight within these sets of limitations. So, the definition of perception as “becoming aware” is a tautology, as we need to know what it is that we are actually becoming aware of, as in the case of the eight-year old boy. Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, clarifies the difficulty of perception as follows:

We make perception out of the things perceived. And since perceived things themselves are obviously accessible through perception, we end up understanding neither. We are caught up in a world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world.⁷

Historically, only a handful of artists have provided a clear understanding of what it means to perceive, by introducing a slight interruption into ordinary spaces or more specifically, by revealing the “thing in itself,” as in light or space removed from its cavity or frame. Many of these artists emerged in the 1960s, most notably in southern California, and were associated with the Light and Space movement. These artists were producing a new phenomenal art medium that raised direct questions about the effects of light and space in relation to human perception. Affiliated artists including James Turrell, Doug Wheeler and Robert Irwin built structures to frame light and space, rather than produce discrete art objects. These artists were returning to the crux of aesthetics, a term which originated from the Greek words *aisthēta*, “perceptible things,” and *aisthēsthai*, meaning “to perceive.”⁸ This progressive shift in observation—from representing the symbol of light to presenting pure light or space—signaled a new interaction with the object of art and as a result, questioned what it means to perceive pure form comparatively to the appearance of form.⁹

Johns-Messenger is amongst these artists who provide a space to examine perception, though, in many ways, she extends the

exploration even further by providing a space that visually presents both the limitations and the possibilities of perception, in chorus, as a visual architecture of the mind. And, there is no doubt that Johns-Messenger is influenced by artists like Turrell and Wheeler, who poetically manipulate space and light, to construct magical illuminations that hit consciousness right in the face and produce a particular perceptual awareness. However, Johns-Messenger composes something mysteriously independent: she reveals the paradoxical nature of perception itself by its employment as a medium and as a concept, as well as providing a space not only to perceive but to directly interact with the inner workings at play in the construction of perception. She sets up a system that visually emphasizes a distinction between *pure form* and *form* concurrently, both, belonging to the same perceptual illusion.

To further explore this visual system, Johns-Messenger has included a selection of digital paintings titled *LightBodies*, 2014, and a photograph from her *Bushwick Backyard* series, 2014, as part of the ThreeFold mechanism. The photograph, *BlackWay* (Fig. 3), which resembles a vertical oblong saturated blur, is presented twice within the installation as a type of "double becoming:" firstly, it is *represented* as a reflection of an image of a doorway and secondly, it is *presented* as an image that is representing a doorway. This complex re-imaging and re-doubling signals the space of perception and the enchantingly seductive nature of illusion. Relating to the artist's background in painting and film, Johns-Messenger's *BlackWay* carries a sense of the "mise-en-scene" or sculptural motion as a complete Gestalt.

Through images, reflections and impressions, Johns-Messenger takes us into the world of illusion and into a space that resembles the reality we make up for ourselves. Her work reveals the challenges faced when one is asked to observe and to objectively distinguish the shadow from the form. The "pre-conditioned" world is understood primarily as a set of limitations. This is inescapable. It just means that in order to understand what we are looking at, we must objectively step outside or directly inside these parameters.

When one recognizes these limitations, a certain awareness arises; one can “see.”¹⁰ By offering a three-fold dimension and by revealing perception as an enigma, Johns-Messenger prompts us to reexamine space in the world. Whether you are inside or outside the illusion of perception, both sides are constructed by the same hand. So, as to the question: *what do you see your eyes looking at?* It can be answered rather simply: *I can see my eyes looking at perception.*

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 25

2 *Oneiric* is a psychoanalytic term often used in film theory to discuss the intermediary space between being awake and dreaming. It is also commonly discussed in relation to the study of images. The Oxford Dictionary Online, “Oneiric,” accessed March 13, 2015, www.oxfordbibliographies.com

3 Natasha Johns-Messenger, interview by author, New York, July 11, 2015

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964) 25

5 Natasha Johns-Messenger, interview by author, New York, July 11, 2015

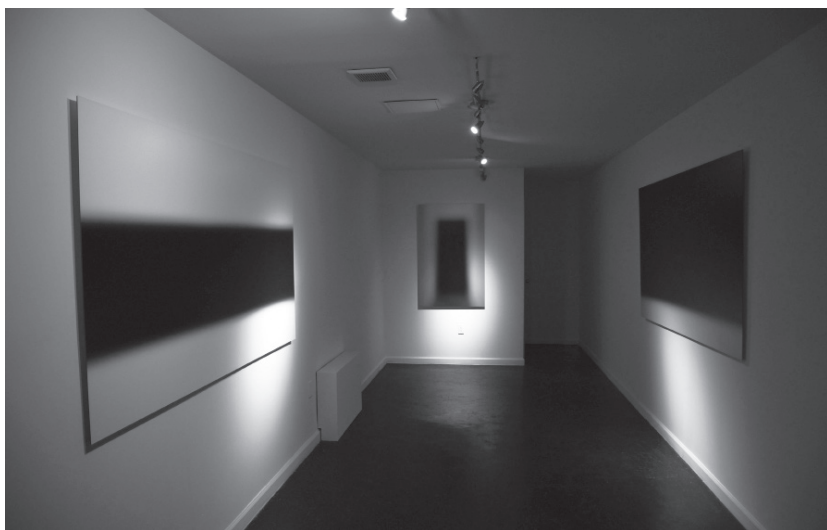
6 Arthur Zajonc, *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind* (New York: Oxford Press, 1993) 1

7 Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, 7

8 The Etymology Dictionary Online, “Aesthetics,” accessed August 10th, 2015, <http://www.etymonline.com>

9 This time marked the beginning of a new interactive art-form that obliterated the art-object altogether and extended observation to the space, light and to the body as an interactive medium, and from the “thinking being” to the “perceiving being.” Many of these artists were turning the pages of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, which was translated into English during the late ‘50s. Merleau-Ponty extended German philosopher -Edmund Husserl’s notion of “intentionality” and “embodiment,” and Martin Heidegger’s concept of “being” even further, with a greater emphasis on the role of bodily motion and bodily intertwining with space, as the basis for the origins of perception. John Coplans, *Doug Wheeler* (Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1968)

10 Longchen Rabjam, *A Treasure Trove of Scriptural Transmission: A Commentary on The Precious Treasury of the Basic Space of Phenomena*, ed. Susanne Fairclough, Jeff Miller, Mary Racine, and Robert Racine, trans. under the direction of His Eminence Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche by Richard Barron (Lama Chokyi Nyima, Padma Publishing, 2001) 3



4. Installation View, *ThreeFold*, 2015. Dimensions variable

Natasha Johns-Messenger is a visual artist based in Brooklyn, New York. She was recently commissioned by Percent For Art and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs to produce *Alterview*, 2013 for Hunters Point HS/IS 404 Public School, New York; and her work is the subject of a solo exhibition curated by Linda Michael at the Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, Australia, in 2016. Recent exhibitions include, *Yellow*, 2011, The Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, Australia; *The Sixth Borough*, 2010, No Longer Empty, Colonel's Row, Governor's Island, New York; *Through to You*, 2010, The Netherlands Commission, Keukenhof; *Of Water*, 2008, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia; *U-Turn*, 2006, Glendale College Gallery, Glendale, Los Angeles; *Zilverkamer (Silver-room)* and *Trappenhuis (Stairwell)* installations, 2007, Den Haag Sculptur, Escher Museum, The Hague, The Netherlands; *NEW06*, 2006, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, Australia; *Primavera*, 2004, Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney, Australia; and *Drift*, 2004, Perth Institute of Contemporary Art, Perth, Australia.

Melissa Bianca Amore is a curator, art critic and independent scholar based in New York. Her primary areas of exploration include the study of phenomenology, interactive spatial aesthetics and the limitations of perceived space. Amore's curatorial projects have been presented at institutions including The Jewish Museum of Australia, Melbourne, and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne. In 2012, she was appointed the Senior Curator and Creative Director for a non-profit organization, NotFair Melbourne. The author of numerous articles and catalogue essays, Amore has been a critic in Australia since 2006. She received a MFA in Art Criticism & Writing from the School of Visual Arts, New York, 2014; and a BA in Philosophy and Creative Writing from Deakin University, Melbourne, 2005. She participated in the Emerging Writer's Program, in 2006, at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne.

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International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP)
1040 Metropolitan Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11211
T: +1 718 387 2900 | F: +1 718 387 2966
www.iscp-nyc.org

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El Museo de Los Sures
120 South 1st Street
Brooklyn, NY 11211
T: +1 718 387 3600
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