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consciousness at the millennium

Thames & Hudson

consciousness art : attending to the quality of experience

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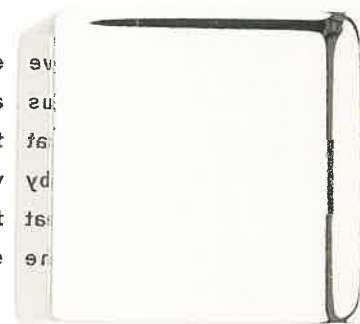
George Lakoff

Until quite recently consciousness was not considered a legitimate topic of scientific investigation. Cognitive science—the interdisciplinary study of the mind—has mostly focused on unconscious mental life. Cognitive scientists have discovered that most thought is *unconscious*, that we have unconscious conceptual systems, that virtually all of language and vision work by unconscious mechanisms, and that even *memories* can be unconscious. Most of the great discoveries about the mind over the past two decades have been about the cognitive unconscious.

But over the past few years *consciousness* has burst onto the scene as one of the most hotly debated topics in cognitive science, neurobiology, psychology, and philosophy. Given that different parts of the brain characterize color, shape, location, and motion, what brain mechanisms account for the unity of consciousness, for the fact that we perceive the world as a unified whole? What explains the subjective quality of an experience, say, the greenness of grass or the feel of velvet? How can we be aware at all, much less be aware of ourselves? Why are some memories conscious and others unconscious (or “implicit”)? What are the limits of consciousness; what parts of what is normally unconscious can be made conscious? Answering such questions through a general theory of the divide between the conscious and the unconscious has become the Holy Grail of cognitive science.

Consciousness, particularly that aspect related to vision, has also recently emerged as an important topic in art history and criticism. Much of the work of leading scholars such as Martin Jay and Jonathan Crary has focused on the “constructed” aspects of visual consciousness; that is, ways in which our perceptions are structured by cultural phenomenon such as language. As Jay points out, however, while science itself is subject to revision, there is new evidence indicating that “...certain fairly fundamental characteristics [of vision] seem to exist, which no amount of cultural mediation can radically alter.”¹

Consider the revelation that mental imagery is processed by exactly the same part of the brain that is devoted to vision. Even congenitally blind people have mental imagery, since their visual cortexes are, in most cases, intact. The visual images we have in dreaming arise in the visual cortex as well, although nothing is “seen.” Moreover, most of the information in what we “see” never passes through the retina. Instead, it is constructed by the brain on the basis of very fragmentary visual information together with other knowledge.





Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is a normal part of everyday consciousness. One can be aware or not aware of what one is saying, thinking, or doing. Self-awareness, as a faculty that one can cultivate, is a goal of psychotherapy as well as of Buddhism. The dark side of self-awareness is a form of paranoiac self-searching, an inward quest for our shortcomings in the face of what we perceive as the accusations of others.

Louise Bourgeois's large-scale sculpture, *Culprit Number Two*, creates a powerful image of this profoundly isolating form of self-awareness. Her work consists of a circle of tall, metal doors—some of which have been struck by arrows—surrounding a single, small chair. The chair faces a small, round mirror. In this work, self-awareness is expressed in terms of its opposition to the outside world: enclosed within a fortress-like cell, attacked from without, the self turns back on itself in a state of withdrawn contemplation.

Another negative form of self-awareness results when one knows and disapproves of oneself. The protagonist in Samuel Beckett's *Film*, played by Buster Keaton, is all too self-aware. The camera follows Keaton through the streets and into his apartment. At every turn, Keaton is confronted by the stares of others: passers-by on the street, his own cat and little dog, a mirror, a poster on the wall of his room, and, finally, the camera (and film viewer) itself. He shrinks from these confrontations in terror as if incapable of bearing the weight of another's observation of him, as if others can see in him what he sees in himself.

Conceptual Framing and Metaphor

Conceptual framing is an aspect of consciousness that determines the form of numerous works of art. Indeed, a conceptual frame can be understood as an integral aspect of a work itself, as much as the material it is made of: if you misconstrue the conceptual frame, you risk missing the point of the work altogether. Many works in this exhibition draw attention to the power of conceptual framing as an aspect of conscious experience. Among the most remarkable in this respect are pieces by Kristin Oppenheim, Imogen Stidworthy, Adrian Piper, and Jörg Herold.

Kristin Oppenheim's installation, *Hey Joe*, consists of two beams of light that pass back and forth in an empty room. "The viewer is hit by the lights," writes Oppenheim, "which might initially feel like circus lights, but gradually become more like prison-yard search lights."¹² The work is accompanied by a soundtrack in which the artist recites the lyrics of the song, "Hey Joe (where you goin' with that gun in your hand?)," popularized by Jimi Hendrix. "The voice," says Oppenheim, "which appears and disappears, is mysterious and drowsy, as if in a stupor and slightly possessed."¹³ Oppenheim's soundtrack leads us into a haunting experience of this simple environment. In this way, the artist helps us to experience the degree to which our engagement with a conceptual frame, in this case a psycho-emotional narrative, colors our experience of an event.

In Imogen Stidworthy's two-screen video installation, *To*, the viewer is confronted with multiple conceptual frames and must either reconcile them into a consistent experience or embrace their contradictions. *To* contrasts two images: a naked, elderly man sitting in a chair in an empty room as he recounts a series of autobiographical anecdotes as well as

the story of the film *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (based on the novel by Tennessee Williams), and a woman who appears periodically to type a flurry of words on a typewriter. Is she typing the words that he is speaking? Are his words fictional? Why does her typing seem so erratic and the clatter of the keys so aggressive while the man's speech flows smoothly and his nakedness suggests the ultimate vulnerability? By juxtaposing these two potentially related but distinct scenes, Stidworthy raises the viewer's awareness of framing in everyday life—the constant attempt to integrate disparate frames into an overall coherent narrative, and the ways in which the jagged edges of these competing conceptual frames create cognitive dissonance.

In Adrian Piper's multimedia work, *Cornered*, the artist directly addresses the viewer, appearing on a television monitor pushed into a corner of a room behind an overturned table. On the wall adjacent to the table hang two birth certificates for the artist's father: one that categorizes him as white and the other that describes him as octoroon, or one-eighth black. Drawing attention to her own racially ambiguous appearance, Piper questions the viewer's conceptual framework of racial categorizations.

Jörg Herold's film installation, *Körper im Körper*, evokes the nineteenth-century German legend of Kaspar Hauser to give form to the ambiguous relationship between language and consciousness. Kaspar Hauser was a young man who suddenly appeared one morning in the town square of Nürnberg, standing mutely and holding a simple note requesting that he be given care and shelter. Hauser, who had been raised as a kind of feral child without any exposure to the world or to education, was adopted by various townspeople and taught to speak, read, and write. As his consciousness began to be organized by language, however, Hauser became increasingly despondent and expressed regret that he had been robbed of his previous innocence.

In Herold's installation, evocative film shots of buildings, windows, walking figures, and other simple images are juxtaposed with a soundtrack in which a voice haltingly speaks the German word for each thing pictured. The shadowy atmosphere of the images simultaneously suggests an emerging into the light of consciousness and an apocalyptic darkening of the world. The piece was made as an allegory, after the fall of the Berlin Wall but before a full integration of the East German state into West Germany. As an East German, Herold uses this work to express his apprehension of an impending loss of innocence—like Kaspar Hauser's—on the eve of integration into the capitalist world.

Empathy

Another aspect of consciousness touched on in this exhibition is empathy. One form of empathy is the projection of consciousness onto another—another sentient being or even an inanimate object, such as a computer. Deep Blue, the computer that beat Gary Kasparov at chess, has filled many people with anxiety over what they have taken to be its "conscious" powers. Cybernetics theorist Valentino Braitenberg's observation that a machine needn't be complex to elicit such a perception is borne out by Paul Kaiser and Shelley Eshkar's simple computer animation, *If by Chance*, and by Pascale Wiedemann's anthropomorphized video knitting, *Heimlich*.