

Jean Fisher "Inexorable dissolve: James Coleman blindsides art". ArtForum.

I am standing before James Coleman's *La Tache Aveugle* (*The blind spot*, 1978-90), a slide projection derived from a brief sequence, less than a second long, of the 1933 film *The Invisible Man*. I witness an outrageously attenuated and inexorable dissolve--20 minutes duration for each frame, the whole cycle taking several hours to complete. Virtually nothing happens except almost imperceptible shifts in perspective; nobody, of course, materializes.

This dramatized deferral of the moment of revelation that one anticipates from the image, from film, strikes me as immensely comic, in a Borgesian kind of way. Coleman's work, I think, shares with Borges' the thought that Western man's investment in the sovereignty of reason as the way to the truth and order of the world has led him into a labyrinth of chimeras. There is a profound absurdity in man's search for the "secret" or "truth" of existence when, in this groping ignorance, he can determine neither who he is nor what he is looking for. *Ignotum per Ignotius*, as Coleman called one work.

Coleman's production refers constantly to painting but itself consists of film, slide, and audio presentations, and of performed works: forms light years away from the "touch" (*tache*) of the painter, and media that do what painting materially cannot--temporalize vision through duration. Addressing fundamental questions about art as representation and presentation, the work refuses to present the picture as a unified, immediately apprehensible totality. *La Tache Aveugle* offers none of the closure of meaning one expects from narrative painting and documentary photography, or from orthodox cinema. The nonappearance of the invisible man provides a judicious visual complement to the work's structural relations of duration. Moreover, there is no attempt to disguise the mechanism of projection; we are more than conscious of both the machinery and our bodily relation to it. The work of art, in other words, becomes visible as production, as a process in which what exceeds the image contributes as much to its possibilities of meaning as what seems intrinsic to it.

Coleman's work is affiliated with the Duchampian and Brechtian insistence on the critical participation of the spectator in the production of art's meaning. His attention to the relations between the point of "origin" (the artist) and the point of "reception" (the spectator) has led to his self-suppression as the "author" of the work--the myth of the artist that had dominated Modernist esthetics--and may partly account for his use of nonartisanal, mediating technologies. In *Fly*, 1972, Coleman wittily debunks the myths of transcendent being. Watching a continuous film-loop projection of a view of a wind-blown tree through a window, we realize, only after some seconds, that the camera is following the erratic meanderings of a fly on the glass pane, and trying to make the insect's movements trace the tree's outline--a hint of the unbreachable distance that separates representation from its referent in reality. As in *La Tache Aveugle*, there is constant slippage away from any fixed point of view. When *Fly* was made, Hans Namuth's film of Jackson Pollock painting on glass was still familiar to young artists and students; Coleman's derogation of creative singularity to the fly/camera/viewer may be seen as a critique of Pollock's artist-hero role.

Fly explores the subjective visual perception by which the image and its construction are apprehended. Denying any exemplary knowledge possessed by the artist and to be uncovered by the viewer, it establishes a "democratic," nonhierarchical relationship between them. A concomitant concern of Coleman's was how the viewer might be implicated spatiotemporally in the picture. Several works of 1974 use the ambiguous figures of Gestalt psychology: in *Goblet*, for instance, the goblet/face profile, and in *Playback of a Dream*, the duck/rabbit shape. Given the impossibility of seeing both figures simultaneously, recognition depends here on a seesaw between past and future, memory and anticipation. To this destabilizing of time is added a destabilizing of space: the abolition of the figure/ground hierarchy established by geometric perspective destroys the spatial coherence that would center a viewing subject. Similarly, *Slide Piece*, 1973, presents a sequence of slides, each showing the same image of a city square but accompanied by a different man's description of the view. The work points up the range of possible subjective responses to the same scene, and to the lack--initially masked by the authority of the male voice-over--of any definitive, totalizing vision beyond that of the viewing subject itself.

Coleman's direction is essentially allegorical, doubly inscribed. On the one hand it critiques the idea of the autonomous artwork, exploring the artwork's relation to the institution of art, and to social practice in general; on the other, it is concerned with the socialization of seeing, the codification of visual and verbal

languages by which identities are structured both socially and historically. As the work developed, these contemplations were increasingly elaborated through narrational forms indebted to the artist's concern not only with television and other popular narrative genres (the photo-roman, the historical theme park) but with Irish storytelling traditions. The work emerges as a dialogical play of voices engaged in a contest for the interpretation and possession of the self.

Seeing for Oneself, 1987-88, for example, a work of projected images with dissolves and audio narration, examines the model of seeing associated with traditional geometric perspective, which was originally regarded as expressing a divine symbolic order. This view in turn mutated into rationalism's institutionalization of knowledge and of the subject according to functionalist principles, thereby dismissing the body and its sensuous experience as legitimate sources of "truth." In Seeing for Oneself, Coleman organizes black-and-white-slide projections like an 18th-century conversation-piece painting, in which the figures are *dramatis personae* pursuing their social roles in *tableaux vivants* within an interior space. Alongside the slides, a woman's voice-over narrates easily recognizable features of "mystery" fiction: a murder, an autopsy, a secret formula, a legacy, a romance. This narration is articulated with the depicted poses and glances, and with those of the viewer, to produce a multiplicity of subject positions.

The title Seeing for Oneself has a double meaning. On the one hand, in connection with "autopsy," it refers to a post-Enlightenment faith in reason: science, having displaced God as the bearer of "truth," is to reveal the enigmas of existence, bringing the chaos of the world to order. The body, with its passions and humors--the site at which chaos sediments--is to be dissected, laid out for the gaze, pictured and restrained; except, of course, that it has persisted in refusing to give up its secrets and disappear.

Also, the task of the central "character" in Seeing for Oneself is to free herself from the "legacy" of representations that have brought her close to death--to "see for herself." For Coleman, the formulaic structures of language constrain thought, limiting the self's potential to transform itself and the world. (This has been a constant theme in his work.) The commodified representations of mythologized histories lack any reference to lived experience and mask the realities of the present, stifling our capacity for renewal. The act of seeing, then, must also be an act of interpretation. If the personal dimension of experience is often at odds with institutionalized norms, Seeing for Oneself functions as an exhortation to trust in the "truth" of one's own experience. And if the "body" returns here, it is not as "nature" but as a referent to the conflictual sociopolitical narratives that constitute the real conditions of existence.

Insofar as it represents this inscribed "body," art is another enigma. Institutions may try to penetrate its equivocality, but in Coleman's work, with its puns and eccentricities, distractions and deliberate faux pas, meaning is not to be recovered "at a glance." Nor can the viewer locate the "secret" through an easy identification with some putative point of origin. The duration that Coleman insists on reflects the viewer's work in the real time and space of experience, and ruptures the fundamental illusion of Western painting that Norman Bryson has described as "twin revelations, one in the mind of its creator for whom the image is there fully armed from the beginning, the other mirrored in the mind of the viewer; two epiphanies welded together in a single moment of presence."¹ Moreover, Coleman's shifting viewpoints and multiplying subject positions resist the gaze--the Western transcendent or totalizing vision, the "blind spot" of *La Tache Aveugle*. Like the work of the blind poet Borges, Coleman's plays with words and images allude to the limits of the knowable; they work at the framing edge of the image, where meaning is to be sought not through mediated, inherited structures of knowledge but through the disjunctions and incongruities we discover in our own enunciations.