Espace
Art actuel

Annie Briard: *Staring at the Sun*

Edwin Janzen

Numéro 114, automne 2016

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/83457ac

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Le Centre de diffusion 3D

ISSN

0821-9222 (imprimé)
1923-2551 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Janzen, E. (2016). Compte rendu de [Annie Briard: *Staring at the Sun*]. *Espace*, (114), 98–99.

Annie Briard: *Staring at the Sun*

Edwin Janzen

GALERIE JOYCE YAHOUDA
MONTREAL
APRIL 30 –
JUNE 4, 2016

We normally understand "staring at the sun" as a metaphor, meaning to entertain a bad idea and suffer its negative consequences, if not literal blindness. Vancouver artist Annie Briard's video installation of the same name is more nuanced; nevertheless, for the visitor, a subtle questioning of sensory perception and reality is certainly the result.

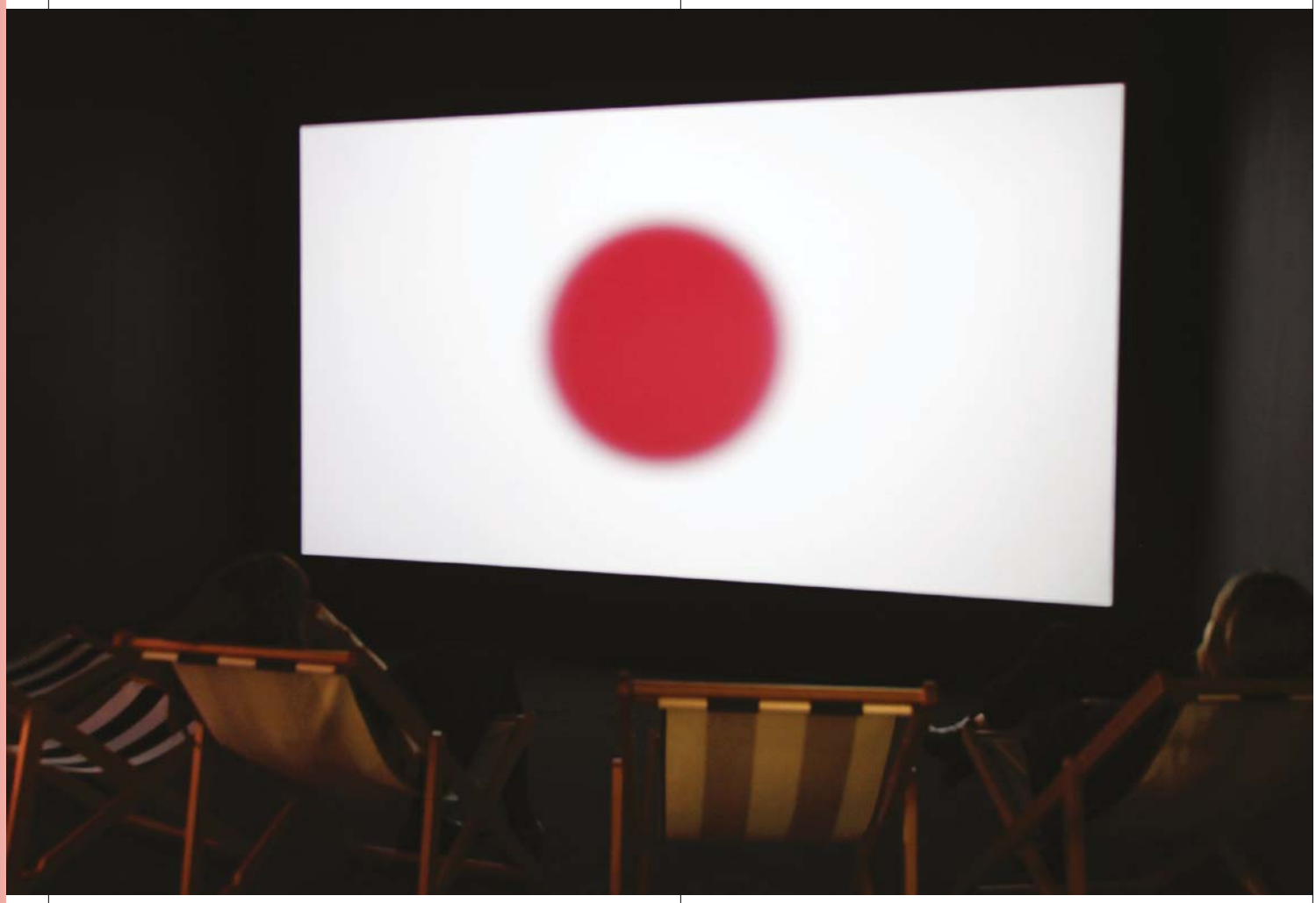
Visitors may sit in one of five black-and-white striped deck loungers. On a screen above, a circular solar disk changes colour against a white background, passing gradually from red to orange to yellow and so on, through the colour spectrum of visible light.

Rather than closing one's eyes and taking in the sun's baking rays (as one normally does in chairs like these), the visitor reclines in the darkened space and returns the solar gaze. Normally this ought to lead to blindness, but here the gaze of this particular "sun" has been parsed into its constituent colours.

After the passage of a few moments, the outlines of a tricky situation come into view. We do indeed confront saturated, primary colours, yet our eyes mislead us into seeing afterimages—so-called "chimeric" colours experienced in the mind only, impossible to reproduce outside the brain.

Furthermore, even though the video's circular disk is motionless in reality (the solar disk image is a single jpeg), it evinces by turns the sense of *possible* movement and even perpetual movement. The video medium, of course, offers no clarity; even the white background seems to shift and moil.

The soundtrack's two tones enhance the effect: the first, a low-frequency bass tone fills the space with waves, seemingly causing the air to thicken and deepening the embodied nature of the experience. This deep tone



Annie Briard, *Staring at the Sun*, 2016. Installation view. Photo: Alana Riley.

corresponds to a frequency NASA discovered in the 1970s as being present in cases where people claimed to experience paranormal visions. (Why this happens is unclear, but one hypothesis suggests that the deep sound causes the iris to vibrate.)[1] For the second, the artist incorporates recent research in biofeedback, according to which certain frequencies can affect human brain function; this second tone corresponds to the Theta brainwave, which occurs in the brain during particular states of imagination.

Confronted with this binaural stimulus, the visitor to Briard's spectacle is more receptive than usual to a certain sensory upending or uncanniness. Together, sound and video function as a psycho-affective machine, which clears the viewer's sensory terrain as she or he reclines beneath the gaze of the video-eye and may yield experiences of emotional uncertainty and tribulation (and even physiological responses in some people). The viewer squints and blinks, focuses and refocuses but to no avail. The solar eye's power is not to be resisted; indeed, the result can be thought of as a blindness of sorts.

Accompanying *Staring at the Sun* is a light-box drawing, titled *Lighted*, which depicts five divergent, broken lines as rays extending from a human eye. Using early (1500s–1700s) scientific drawing conventions, Briard creates a diagrammatic representation of extramission, an obsolete theory of vision according to which vision happens because our eyes emit rays of light or "fire." Early advocates included Plato, Euclid and Ptolemy. The theory seems preposterous today, yet extramission continued to find scientific proponents into the modern era.[2]

According to advocates of extramission, our eyes are like miniature suns ("fire in the eye," as Plato put it). Here again we encounter this rather common and seemingly ageless identification of the gaze—and its subjective authority—with the sun. *Lighted* is thus situated in the history of science, and certainly this history is as much the story of bad ideas as good ones; the scientist, too, stares at the sun. The practice of science is rife with private gain, bias and other fallibilities, and authoritative diagrams, convenient proofs and attractive data sets lend traction to good and bad ideas alike. As with everything, time will tell.

In its title, and together with the deck loungers, *Staring at the Sun* humorously situates viewers in the cliché position of "sun worshippers"—the bemused colonial "getting away from it all" in the tropics, appealing to the Ultra Violet to intercede and mitigate one's conspicuous pallor. But sun worship was once serious business; we need not wonder that the visible solar disk, or "Aten," first emerged in Egypt's Middle Kingdom period as the world's first expression of monotheism. To the Aten-cult's adherents—like the pharaoh Akhenaten (c. 1353–36 BC), who incorporated this term into his own name—the nighttime was to be feared, whereas the daytime, spent under the watchful, life-giving eye of the Aten, was the period specially granted for human activity. The sun is the gaze of gazes; everything that is thinkable for human beings, even our own gaze, is possible because of the light it apportions.

In some ways, in *Staring at the Sun* the viewer has more in common with the ancient sun worshipper than the contemporary bon vivant. Not unlike the Aten-cult, Briard's installation reveals that how we experience sensory perception, which early in life we train ourselves to accept as ordinary and is anything but. Confronted with the complex, overlapping systems of light, sound and other metrics that underpin our sensory world, the "commonsensical" recedes, leaving us with the contextual, the provisional, the unstable.

In the context of the installation's uncanny colour play, the black-and-white stripes of the deck-lounger chairs seem rather neutral in their binary juxtaposition. White, the colours combined—a unifying impulse—interrupts black, the absence of colour, the existential nothing. By this Manichaean dichotomy, stretched across a wooden frame, our bodies are supported as they (we) consider this spectacle of the instability of perception.

Thus, even as we contemplate epistemological concepts—our continual fleshly acts of seeing and hearing—ontological ones surround us, assuming the form of furniture, cradling and supporting our bodies. For one reason or another, contemplating the "big ideas" is something we as human beings have been equipped to do. Fortunately, building sturdy, comfortable chairs is another.

1. Morton K. Ohlbaum, "Mechanical resonant frequency of the human eye in vivo," NASA Technical Report 19770013810 (August 1976).
2. Charles G. Gross, "The Fire That Comes from the Eye," *Neuroscientist* 5, no. 1 (1999): 58–64.

Born in Winnipeg and based in Montreal, Edwin Janzen is a writer, editor and interdisciplinary artist, working in digital print, video, artist books and other media. He has exhibited and worked as artist-in-residence at diverse locations across Canada, and has written for numerous publications, galleries and other clients. Edwin completed his MFA at the University of Ottawa (2010). He also holds a BFA from Concordia University (2008) and a BA (Byzantine history) from the University of Manitoba (1993).