

## “Perceptions and Their Mutability” in Siri Hustvedt’s Works

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay investigates how literature can provide insights into the ways human beings perceive the world and themselves. I discuss how Siri Hustvedt uses her fiction and nonfiction to explore questions of visual perception, focusing on its connection to perspective, embodied self, and context. I demonstrate that, being an intersubjective concept, perception in Hustvedt’s writings is always in flux and shaped by the “embodied minds.” The tracing of the mechanisms involved in perception provides insights into Hustvedt’s novels’ narrative unraveling and a key to understanding her characters.

**KEYWORDS:** Siri Hustvedt; Perception; Gender; Visual Arts; Body; Interdisciplinarity; Intersubjectivity

The problem is that we’re all blind, all dependent on preordained representations, on what we think we’ll see. Most of the time, that’s how it is. We don’t experience the world. We experience our expectations of the world. That expecting is really, really complicated. My expectations became crazy. I was never taken as seriously as I wanted to be. I started wishing I were a man. I wished I were ugly. (*Sorrows* 130-31)

Did I want to live as a man? No. What interested me were perceptions and their mutability, the fact that we mostly see what we expect to see. (*TBW* 35)

### Introduction

Siri Hustvedt thematizes “the complex workings of human perception” (*TBW* 1) throughout her fictional and nonfictional works. Of all senses, sight occupies the central place in Hustvedt’s oeuvre, which can already be seen judging from the titles of some of her most important books: her first novel *The Blindfold*; her essay collections *Living, Thinking, Looking* and *A Woman Looking at Men Looking at Women*; or her nonfictional work *Embodied Visions: What Does It Mean to Look at a Work of Art?*. Being interested in art, the author engages with

issues of visual perception, many of which remain unresolved and controversial. In my paper, I discuss the ways in which Hustvedt uses her fiction and nonfiction to explore questions such as: How do we see? How do we “perceive the out there” (*Mysteries* xvii)? What role do expectations, memory, and language play in the formation of visual perception? How do we judge art and “how [do] unconscious ideas about gender, race, and celebrity influence a viewer’s understanding” of it (*TBW* 1)? Delving into these questions in her works, Hustvedt arrives at her own answers and insights into human perception, which are worth close scholarly attention.

Although the criticism on Hustvedt published to date has been concerned with the practices of seeing and looking (see, e.g., Böger, Schulz-Hoffmann) as well as issues of literary visibility (see Hartmann; Reipen), the question of perception has not been explicitly addressed and thoroughly scrutinized, which is the gap I am attempting to fill. In this article, I bring together the writer’s various ideas about perception expressed in her interdisciplinary essays and five novels: *The Blindfold* (1992), *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (1996), *What I Loved* (2003), *The Sorrows of an American* (2008), and *The Blazing World* (2014). The central premise of this paper is, as the title already suggests, that perceptions, according to Hustvedt, are never fixed but shifting and “mutable.” I single out three points crucial to the author’s discussion and understanding of (visual) perception: perspective, embodied self, and context. Hustvedt uses her novels to demonstrate that, first, perception changes with perspective; it is an intersubjective and dialogical concept. Second, for Hustvedt, perception is always connected to the concept of embodied self; human beings experience the world through their bodies and embodied minds, shaped by their ideas, feelings, memories, past perceptions, etc., as well as language and culture. Third, perception depends on context and can change with it as well; images, when taken out of context, can distort, misrepresent, and provoke different interpretations. The tracing of the mechanisms involved in perception will provide an insight into the novels’ narrative unraveling and a key to understanding Hustvedt’s characters.

### **Perception and Perspective**

How one perceives and defines the world, in Hustvedt’s work, oftentimes depends on where a person is in space and from which angle she/he views and experiences it. Hustvedt argues that one perceives the world not only subjectively but always intersubjectively. The world is

not merely an object to be experienced but rather a subject acting upon an individual. The subjectivity of an “I” is thus derived from its susceptibility and relation to the world. Furthermore, this “I” tends to recede from the overall picture altogether. To illustrate, in *What I Loved* (2003), one of the protagonists, an eleven-year-old boy, speculates on the intersubjectivity of perception as follows:

I got this weird idea about how all those different people see what they see just a little different from everybody else. [...] I mean that because we were sitting where we were sitting tonight, we saw a game that was a little different from those guys with the beer next to us. It was the same game, but I could've noticed something those guys didn't. And then I thought, if I was sitting over there, I'd see something else. And not just the game. I mean *they saw me and I saw them, but I didn't see myself and they didn't see themselves*. (128-29; my emphasis)

This idea suggests that visual perception depends on perspective and shifts when the angle, or the point of view, shifts. At the same time, a self becomes “a kind of hole” (129), “the true vanishing point, the pinprick in the canvas, the zero” (255). The “I” is already affected by the world while experiencing it. This susceptibility accompanies the subject-formation and the development of an individual's sense of self, which is experienced bodily. However, a body is always embedded in the world and in space. Hustvedt's approach draws on Merleau-Ponty's embodied intersubjective theory of perception. She quotes Merleau-Ponty in many of her essays and frequently mentions him in her novels, too. Thus, in her essay “Wim Wenders's *Pina*,” Hustvedt refers to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, where he writes: “To be a body, is to be tied to a certain world . . . our body is not primarily *in* space: it is of it” (46; emphasis original). Intersubjectivity in this sense precedes subjectivity and establishes the relationship between individuals and the world as a fundamental integrated system and mode of being-in-the-world. In her essay “Borderlands” (2013), Hustvedt cites Merleau-Ponty as well:

Between my consciousness and my body as I experience it, between the phenomenal body of mine and that of another as I see it from the outside, there exists an internal relation which causes the other to appear as *the completion of the system*. The possibility of another person's being self-evident is owed to the fact that I am not transparent for myself, and that my subjectivity draws its body in its wake. (qtd. in Hustvedt, “Borderlands” 119; emphasis original)

The passage suggests that self and other are internally connected and codependent. It challenges the idea of disconnected, self-emerging subjects. Hustvedt's understanding of perception is intimately linked to the concepts of the body, embodied self, and other. It is also

comparable to contemporary theories of visual perception, such as Gibson’s ecological approach<sup>1</sup> (see *Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*) and Noë’s enactive approach<sup>2</sup> (see *Action in Perception*). Hustvedt calls these models the “whole-body-in-relation-to-its-environment” theories of vision (“Embodied Visions” 348). As proposed by Merleau-Ponty, a person experiences the world from the perspective of her/his body, i.e. subjectively; however, it is the fact that another person perceives the world from a different perspective that is necessary to *complete the system*: there is a plurality of angles and ways to look at one and the same object, which allows for a more complete description and a better understanding of it.

For Hustvedt, perception is an intersubjective concept. The principal idea of intersubjectivity, which Christine Marks has called Hustvedt’s “philosophy of mixing” (9), is concisely summarized in the writer’s 2003 novel *What I Loved* by a character named Violet Blom: “It isn’t: I think, therefore I am. It’s: I am because you are”; “What matters is that we’re always mixing with other people” (91). In her essay “The Delusions of Certainty,” Hustvedt defines intersubjectivity as “our knowing and relating to other people in the world, our being with and understanding them, one subject or person to another, and how we make a shared world through these relations” (242). The idea of intersubjective mixing of perspectives is most

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<sup>1</sup> The ecological approach considers vision to be a flux, from which an observer extracts the invariants relevant to her/his life. Gibson criticizes the computational model of perception, which compares the mind to a computer, and claims it abnormal to investigate vision by means of experiments with the eyes and retina fixed “trying to make the eye work as if it were a camera at the end of a nerve cable,” for very little information can be picked up in that case (291). A person lives in an environment and the eyes are in the state of almost constant saccadic movement. Moreover, Gibson believes that the traditional approach is mistaken in its claim that “[i]n order to perceive the world, one must already have ideas about it” (291). It only makes vision more complicated and limits it. “When no constraints are put on the visual system, we look around, walk up to something interesting and move around it so as to see it from all sides, and go from one vista to another,” writes Gibson (xiii). That is what he calls ‘natural vision.’ The ecological theory thinks of a human being as of an animal in nature, which explores the world by discerning the relevant invariants from the dynamic flow of sensory changes.

<sup>2</sup> Alva Noë, one of the authors of the enactive approach, defines vision as “a mode of exploration of the environment drawing on implicit understanding of sensorimotor regularities” (*Action in Perception* 29-30; emphasis original). It is important to model vision “not as something that takes place inside the animal’s brain, but as something that directly involves not only the brain but also the animate body and the world” (30). Noë, like Gibson, criticizes the computational approach for its exclusion of the body and the environment. The importance of internal representations is questioned as well: “If the animal is present *in* the world, with access to environmental detail by movements [...] then why does it need to go to the trouble of producing internal representations good enough to enable it, [...] to act as if the world were not immediately present?” (Noë, *Action in Perception* 22; emphasis in original).

prominent in Hustvedt's inclusion and ekphrastic descriptions of visual works of art in her novels. It is often through these descriptions that the author explores questions of visual perception. I will discuss two examples of how literature can provide insights into the ways human beings perceive the world and themselves: the portrait of Mabel, Lily Dahl's elderly roommate from *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*, and the photograph of Iris Vegan from *The Blindfold*.

Lily Dahl's roommate Mabel, aged seventy-eight, leads a lonely life. That is why, when offered to be painted by their neighbor across the street, Edward Shapiro, she feels very excited and sees it as a sort of adventure. When Lily observes the unfinished portrait of Mabel, it strikes her as truthful and honest: "Ed hadn't flattered Mabel, hadn't turned her into someone younger or prettier. The woman in the painting was Mabel as Lily knew her" (*Lily* 170). However, there is something about the picture that she cannot grasp, something that "bother[s] her," that makes her feel "uneasy" (171). It takes Lily a while to realize that

she was looking at someone who was desperately happy, so happy that her expression could easily be mistaken for something else: craziness, pain, even fear. She's so happy, Lily said to herself, because she's talking to him. And although Lily had always understood that Mabel was lonely, she had never seen it so naked. (171)

On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, the given description of the painting highlights its truthfulness to reality: "Lily felt that Mabel was talking directly to her" (171). The picture is not represented as a distorted image. On the other hand, the description suggests the idea of being stripped. The artist saw Mabel's loneliness and made it evident to other people. Mabel's own perception of her image is ambiguous, too. She admits it makes her "feel upset" (208):

I'm well aware that no one's going to care one way or the other about the identity of the old lady in Edward Shapiro's painting, and yet I feel that I'm being pulled into a crisis a part of me willed and another part resists. I'm not sure Ed fully understands it. I'm not sure he even knows what he's doing, but there's something in him that's aggressive, not his manner, you understand, but the work—he strikes the heart. (208-09)

This baffling effect can be explained by the discrepancy between Mabel's perception of herself and the way other people see her, in this case the artist Edward Shapiro. The painting enables her to look at herself from the perspective of the other, to see herself in a different light. Therefore, a part of her accepts it, whereas "another part resists" (209). Mabel suspects that the artist himself probably does not understand this revelation he has offered her, the

possibility to become a spectator of her own self and feelings as someone else sees them, that is from the outside rather than inside. Mabel's last comment suggests that it is a sort of disclosure to her, that there is something in her she has neither admitted to herself, nor recognized before. The painting, playing with perspectives, invites an object to become a subject and look at one's self from the position of the other and, ultimately, serves as the intersubjective point where self and other mingle, offering a more comprehensive description.

Unlike painting, photography in Hustvedt's novels is oftentimes represented as a more distorting and even dangerous medium (see Marks). Iris Vegan, the protagonist of *The Blindfold*, has her photograph taken by a young photographer named George, an acquaintance of her then-boyfriend Stephen. In the text though, George is introduced as "an artist who took photographs, not as a photographer" (42). This "extraordinary" (59) picture of Iris allows her and the reader to see her from a male perspective. Inasmuch as the novel is a first-person narrative, the reader encounters the photo through the description by Iris herself.

The effect the picture produces is remarkable:

I wasn't prepared for what I saw. At first I didn't even recognize myself. The person in the picture seemed to bear no resemblance to me, and for an instant I thought George had made a mistake, had given me the wrong photo, but then I saw myself, and I had a peculiar sensation of recovery, of remembering a forgotten event, something unpleasant and disorienting. (62)

Interestingly, photography, which is traditionally considered the most reliable, unbiased, and objective medium, "freed from personal experience" (Richter qtd. in Hustvedt, *Mysteries* 151), is depicted as misleading. Iris cannot recognize herself at first and feels confused. Then she describes the photograph:

It wasn't a full-body shot. I was cut off below my breasts, and my extended arms were severed at the elbows. Photographs are cropped in all sorts of ways, and the results are seldom disturbing. The viewer fills in the missing pieces, but this picture was different. The convention didn't seem to work, and I had the awful impression that the parts of me that weren't on the photo were really *absent*. I didn't understand it at the time, but I've thought about it so often since, I've come to believe that this effect was created by the fact that what appeared of me inside the photograph was also *fragmented*. A long piece of hair was swept across my right cheek and part of my mouth, slicing my face in two. A dark shadow beneath my uplifted chin made my head appear to float away from my body. My whole face lacked clarity, in part because the light was obscure, but also because the expression I had was nonsensical, an inward leer or grimace that signified

no definite emotion or even sensation. It was a face without reason, and *I hated it. I am not that*, I thought [...]. (*Blindfold* 62-63; my emphasis)

First of all, the photograph is cropped in a way that suggests the idea of fragmentation and distortion. Second, it is out of focus, blurred, and obscure. Third, the light is set in such a way that almost half of Iris's face is not to be seen at all. The picture destabilizes her sense of self, of being whole: although human beings can only see their body parts and if they want to have a look at themselves as whole they need a big mirror, it does not mean they feel fragmented or have no sense of wholeness and integrity. It is generally in photographs or videos, apart from in the mirror, that people can see themselves whole as well, but this picture of Iris is different. There is a stark discrepancy between how she feels and what it looks like: the outer experience does not match the inner experience.

Moreover, the fact that she "hated it," alludes to the idea that, as blurry and fragmented as the shot is, it exhibits something, some trait, feeling, or emotion in Iris that she does not want to accept (63). It is noteworthy that Stephen ends up falling in love with this photograph and personifying it: "Ever since I first saw *her*, I've wanted to know how *she* works, how it works. I've wanted to take it apart, break the code, but *she's* a mystery" (69; my emphasis). The shot gains a life of its own, is being "in circulation" in the city of New York, and then Iris learns that some "Derridian fellow with the ponytail" called it "[a] study in eroticism" (73). There are even rumors that the photograph depicts Iris naked, when, as a matter of fact, she is wearing a dress. Although the novel does not provide a direct answer concerning what it is exactly that Iris hates so much in this picture, one of the possible interpretations could be that it is her sexuality and the fact that she is very attractive to men, which prevents them from seeing what she perceives as her real identity. The way she describes her facial expression—"nonsensical," "a face without reason" (63)—strengthens this interpretation. In my discussion of perspective in its relation to perception, Iris's photograph taken by George also demonstrates the discrepancy between the protagonist's self-image and the image other people have of her, in this particular case—the male characters. At the same time, it provides an insight into her failed relationships with men who perceive Iris mostly as a sexual object, Stephen being among them. However, unlike Mabel's portrait, which offers a different perspective in a comparatively gentle manner and results in an overall positive intersubjective experience, Iris's photograph is represented as distorting, exploitative, and hostile, which ends

up alienating the characters from each other (Iris and Stephen break up) and destabilizing the protagonist's sense of wholeness.

### **Perception and Embodied Self**

Even though the self is missing from visual perception, being “a kind of hole” (*WIL* 129), “the true vanishing point, . . . the zero” (255), one perceives the world through it and this “hole” is not barren but loaded with ideas, experiences, feelings, and expectations. Hustvedt conceives of the self as embodied. Defying a Cartesian mind-body dualism, she advances a more holistic “corporeal” approach (“*The Delusions*” 336) to the concept of the self. In one of her essays, Hustvedt quotes Freud, for whom “[t]he ego is first and foremost a body ego” (qtd. in Hustvedt, “*Inside the Room*” 125). Throughout her fiction and nonfiction, Hustvedt shows the close connection between the mental and the physical. In her discussion of such psychosomatic disturbances as conversion, seizures, the phenomena of mirror-touch synesthesia, placebo, false pregnancy, etc., she ponders how “ideas, beliefs, wishes, and fears transform bodies” (“*The Delusions*” 205) and how these embodied ideas and wishes interact with the neuronal systems. Therefore, perceptions, too, are embodied, inasmuch as they are part of the embodied self.

In “*Embodied Visions*,” Hustvedt describes an episode from her own life, when one sunny day she was walking down the street with her daughter. She “felt like singing” and, looking up, read a sign HAPPY ORTHODONTICS (349). She was surprised by such a ridiculous name but when she looked up again it said KARPOV ORTHODONTICS (349). She misread the street sign, having subliminally projected her feeling of happiness onto it. This example of parapraxis<sup>3</sup> proves that, first, emotions are embodied; as Hustvedt writes in another essay, “We all live our emotions (supposedly psychological faculties) bodily—in a flash of shame, in the genital burn of lust, in hot, breathless fury, or the lift of elation when a good idea hits” (“*I Wept*” 309). Second, people’s emotions can influence their perception of things. At the same time, this

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<sup>3</sup> The term belongs to the terrain of psychoanalysis and usually refers to the slips of the tongue or pen studied by Sigmund Freud in relation to his theory of the unconscious mind. Parapraxis includes various minor mistakes, such as forgetting or mixing up names or reading instead of the word that is written a different one which looks alike. It is believed to reveal certain sub- or unconscious motives of the person who makes a gaffe.

gaffe suggests that human beings are not just passive observers but active recipients and meaning-makers. The famous illusion used by the American psychologist Joseph Jastrow, which can be seen as both a rabbit or a duck (fig. 1), supports this argument; so do other visual illusions, including stereograms, or ‘magic eyes,’ which require using special techniques of looking and playing with the focus, in order for a three-dimensional image to appear visible.

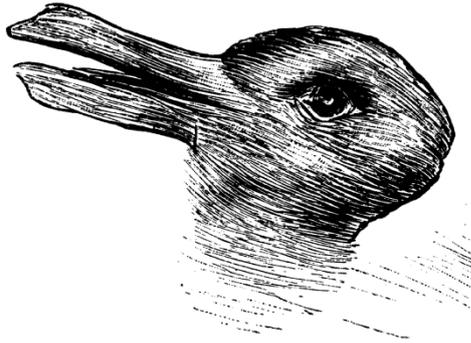


Fig. 1. Jastrow, Joseph. “The Duck-Rabbit Image.” In “Duck or Rabbit? The 100-year-old Optical Illusion That Could Tell You How Creative You Are.” By Chloe Farand. Web. *Independent.co.uk*.

Nevertheless, why some people see Jastrow’s optical illusion as a rabbit, whereas others may see it as a duck, or why some people are more attentive than others is not easy to explain. There is always a certain ambiguity and controversy surrounding questions of visual perception. One theory is that people see the way they see due to their experiences, expectations, past perceptions and feelings, memory, and language, i.e., due to many un-/sub-/non-conscious factors (see, e.g., Hustvedt, *Living; Shaking*). To Hustvedt, these factors are embodied as well; she conceives of human beings as intersubjective embodied situations embedded in the world. “Each of us is a different situation. [...] And my sex, race, class, age, my sexual desires and idiosyncratic habits, the language I speak, and my particular past experiences all affect my view of things” (Hustvedt, “The Delusions” 309). However, not only do these factors make human beings active meaning-creating perceivers, they can also put certain limitations on the practices of seeing. In “Embodied Visions,” Hustvedt writes:

We are born into meanings and ideas that will shape how our embodied minds encounter the world. The moment I walk through the doors of the Prado or the Louvre, for example, I enter a culturally sanctified space. Unless I am an alien visitor from another galaxy, I will be permeated by the hush of greatness, by a sense that what I am going to see has the imprimatur of those in the know, the experts, the curator, the

culture-makers. This idea of grandeur made physical by big rooms, rows of paintings and sculptures, affect my perception of what I am going to see. An expectation of greatness is apt to be part of my perception, even if I consider myself unprejudiced and am not aware that my view of a work of art has been subtly altered by *where* it is. (345; emphasis original)

Likewise, the visual culture scholars Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright point out “the producer function” and define it as “a set of beliefs that lead us to have certain expectations about a work of art with regard to the status of its producer” (53). When looking at a work of art, one inevitably has “the idea that ‘someone’ (an artist, a company) must stand behind [the] image” (Sturken and Cartwright 53). Hustvedt explores this hypothesis in her most recent novel *The Blazing World*. The central character Harriet Burden decides to challenge the New York art world, which has ignored her work, refusing to recognize her as anything but the widow of a famous art dealer, least of all an artist. Testing the New York critics, Burden makes three different shows which she exhibits under three different masks of male artists. “I wanted to see how the reception of my art changed, depending on the persona of each mask,” writes the protagonist (*TBW* 252). Interestingly, her experiment proves expectations and stereotypes, which might be unconscious but are always embodied, to play major roles in the perception, interpretation, and evaluation of art.

Angry and obsessed as Harriet Burden is, her main purpose is not only to prove her art worthy of attention and recognition but “to uncover the complex working of human perception and how unconscious ideas about gender, race, and celebrity influence a viewer’s understanding of a given work of art” (Hustvedt, *TBW* 1). Before I engage in the analysis of the novel, I would like to discuss these “unconscious ideas” in more detail. Hustvedt’s “[w]e are born into meanings and ideas” (“Embodied Visions” 345) can be understood as a variety of complex factors, including culture, language, and society. Heidegger’s renowned argument that “language speaks man” (qtd. in Hustvedt, “Borderlands” 118) suggests people’s dependence on language as a system and as a means of communication. From a grammatical point of view, human beings cannot just say one word after another in any order they like but have to follow the rules of a particular language in order to articulate an idea or formulate a sentence; otherwise, they would be unintelligible. At the same time, as Lakoff and Johnson argue, “[a]bstract concepts are largely metaphorical” (3), and these metaphors and phrases reflect how language shapes embodied minds and the way people speak and form ideas. Heidegger’s

dictum links language to understanding and emphasizes the human need to define and describe things in order to recognize and comprehend them. Bernstein claims that “visual experience is only validated when accompanied by a logico-verbal explanation,” which makes language “the lens of sight” (125; 119). Likewise, Hustvedt argues that “language, which is both outside and inside the subject, plays a crucial role in our reflective self-consciousness” (“Three Emotional Stories” 180) and that “[w]e perceive the ‘out there’ through language and the whole symbolic level of human experience it brings with it—long-established cultural hierarchies and pictorial codes that shape expectation, recognition, and memory of what is seen” (*Mysteries* xvii). All these hierarchies and codes are embodied, and a person un-/non-consciously carries them and turns them on when judging art.

Coming back to *The Blazing World*, Harriet Burden attempts to do away with these codes and, like Kierkegaard, wants to “deceive [a viewer] into what is true” (Kierkegaard qtd. in Hustvedt, *TBW* 36). The protagonist is fighting the antifemale bias that shapes the New York society of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is not so much the open misogyny and obvious cases of sexism that Hustvedt is concerned about, although she brings up these issues as well, e.g., in the written accounts of the art critic Oswald Case, who *is* a sexist and a misogynist. The author is more interested in the “unconscious ideas” (*TBW* 1) that people are not fully aware of but that influence perception. The prejudice about women being submissive and even inferior to men is one of those unconscious ideas about which Hustvedt writes: “there are ideas that become so entrenched that we are not even aware of them any longer. They lie beneath the controversies about what and who human beings are and remain unarticulated. They hide in metaphors and in phrases, in biases of one kind or another that we may fail to recognize and therefore rarely examine” (“The Delusions” 149). Art pieces by women are still cheaper than pieces by their male counterparts; women are underrepresented in the museums; phrases like “woman artist” or “woman writer” are frequently used, whereas phrases like “man artist” or “man writer” are not used at all; there is the word “masterpiece” but there is no a-great-book/painting/movie/etc.-by-a-woman equivalent. All these examples reveal the implicit and often unconscious prejudice and bias against women rooted deeply in language and culture. Harriet Burden experiences this bias and sees it as one of the reasons why critics have ignored her art and failed to recognize her artistic talent. Harriet, whom close friends often call Harry, admits that “[she] did wonder

about other paths, the alternative existences [...] a Harry who had been born a boy, a real Harry, not a Harriet" (TBW 30). At the same time, she writes: "Did I want to live as a man? No. What interested me were perceptions and their mutability, the fact that we mostly see what we expect to see" (TBW 35).

When the critics evaluate Burden's art represented by a "skinny kid in loose jeans" (TBW 39), i.e., twenty-four-year-old Anton Tisch, who does not have any reputation in the art world, they are not interested in his knowledge or background. Immediately, they proclaim him "a buff little boy-genius" (110). No one questions the authorship of the prodigious works of art; no one even bothers to inquire how a young man who has never even heard of Giorgione, makes an allusion to him in his art, or how he includes the untranslated complex French texts without speaking the language (20). "[A]n ever-present hunger for youth" (72), multiplied and rounded by Anton's good looks equals good sells and turns out to be his formula of success. Hustvedt makes her reader contemplate questions like: What is it that art critics like about Harriet's art masked by a handsome young artist? When judging the pieces, have they not projected their own expectations and ideas about the author and their own understanding of success? How do they interpret Harriet's art and create meaning? Meaning is always "in the eye of the beholder," rephrasing the famous dictum; it is embodied, subjective, and thus indispensable from the concept of the embodied self. This concept is essential for understanding Hustvedt's ideas about perception, inasmuch as it contains a number of discursive threads that bring together major issues of language, cognition, meaning-making, and many others. The perception of art and its interpretation depend on many factors, the embodied self and the ideas about the artist being among the most significant. Context, as my further analysis of Harriet Burden's *Maskings* project will show, is crucial in that respect as well.

### **Perception and Context**

Richardson argues that "images, like words, have meanings both in isolation and in context" (qtd. in Kundu 12); therefore, the perception of pictures can change depending on the circumstances. Like the "expectation of greatness" Hustvedt writes about in "Embodied Visions" (435), which one is likely to experience when being in a world-famous museum or gallery, context activates certain conscious and unconscious ideas and biases as well. Hustvedt

shows that people see in patterns. Bernstein explains that “we see in terms of pictures because we *look for* what we have seen” (132). These past perceptions and expectations accompany perception from the very beginning. Different contexts provoke different associations; therefore, the critics perceive Harriet Burden’s art works so differently, depending on the persona who presents them and the historical situation.

Burden makes her second show for one of her friends, the gay biracial performance artist Phineas Q. Eldridge. Projecting her feelings of being suffocated and discriminated against as a woman and also Phineas’s analogous feelings as black and homosexual, Harriet builds *Suffocation Rooms*. The audience, however, cannot help but interpret the pieces in the context of 9/11, an event shortly after which the show takes place, even though the works had been finished before it happened. Interestingly, neither the critics, nor the reviewers mention the inscriptions on the walls saying “*Phineas Q. Eldridge is really Harriet Burden*” (TBW 129; italics in original). Harriet calls it “inattentional blindness” (129). In her “Notes on Seeing,” Hustvedt elaborates on this phenomenon. She describes the following cognitive experiment: an audience watches a film showing a basketball game where, in the middle, a person disguised as a gorilla shows up for a little while and then leaves. Since the viewers have to count the number of times the ball changes hands, half of the people do not notice the gorilla (“Notes on Seeing” 223). This paradox shows how much visual perception depends on the context and the expectations of the embodied self. No one notices the inscription on the walls of the exhibition just as no one sees the gorilla because the context does not allow for these perceptions. People do not expect someone dressed up as a gorilla to appear in the middle of the basketball game, especially when they are concentrating on counting the hands. Likewise, in *The Blazing World*, Hustvedt shows how people ignore the message on the walls, which is somewhat odd to say the least, because they project the world’s and their own tragedy onto art exhibited shortly after September 11, and what the inscription says does not fit into that context. The critics fail to question the authorship because they do not expect it to be an elaborate hoax.

Harriet’s third exhibition *Beneath* is an even better example of how closely perception is connected to context. This time Burden’s art is masked by the famous, but mysterious and controversial, artist Rune. The reviewers *do* notice that this show is different, but interpret it

in line with its supposed author's previous work, which has been about technology. When Harriet argues with the art critic Oswald Case that "[she] [doesn't] see how *Beneath* is about technology," he states it to be "obvious to everyone" (189). Based on the example of two dancing figures, that are part of the exhibition, Hustvedt shows how differently art can be interpreted depending on the context. The reviewers who believe Rune to be the artist mention the figures' movements as "the robot dance" (189), whereas Harriet's partner describes them as her "own private dance of grief" (175). The show becomes a sensation and, even though there are rumors that a widow of a rich art dealer might be behind the works, the critics, "[b]linded by context" (190), refuse to see it that way. They keep insisting that no one else apart from Rune could possibly have made the pieces. Hustvedt uses this episode to show how people's ideas and expectations limit the perception and interpretation of art. After Rune's refusal to reveal the true author of *Beneath* and his following later death, there is no one to take Burden's pieces out of the context of his art.

In *The Sorrows of an American*, Hustvedt reveals the underlying interrelatedness of perception and context as well. In this novel, the writer explores what happens when an image (in this case, a photograph) is taken out of its context. Like *The Blindfold*, *The Sorrows of an American* also represents photography as something that has the power to distort and deceive. This time the story is narrated by a middle-aged psychoanalyst called Erik Davidsen. One night, he wakes up hearing an intruder's footsteps in his house in New York. Having dialed 911, confused and disoriented, Erik remembers the hammer he has in the closet, which he grabs and is ready to use in case of necessary self-protection. As the person approaches, the narrator feels out of breath and almost dizzy. "[Leaping] into the hallway, hammer raised," Erik yells: "What are you doing in my house!" (*Sorrows* 111). The intruder turns out to be the photographer Jeffrey Lane, who does not respect the boundaries of other people's private lives and gains pleasure from crossing them and taking pictures. That is what he does to Erik. Lane takes a photograph of the yelling protagonist with his hammer raised, after which he flees before the police arrive.

Towards the close of the novel, Erik learns from his patient Ms. W. that a picture of his is displayed in a photography show in Chelsea, and, humiliated, he immediately pays the show a visit. Like Iris from *The Blindfold*, Erik does not recognize himself in the photo at first: "I

wasn't sure who I was looking at. Anger had contorted my face to such a degree that I was almost unrecognizable" (263). He then describes the shot which Jeffrey Lane, as a matter of fact, has photoshopped and entitled *Head Doctor Goes Insane*:

Like a rabid dog, my eyes bulged and my teeth shone. I was dressed only in a threadbare pajama top unbuttoned to the waist and a pair of boxer shorts. The cowlick jutting from my hairline stood at attention, my Adam's apple protruded, and my long naked legs and bony knees glowed pale in a dim light that had an unreal glint. In my lowered right hand, I gripped the hammer I had hastily retrieved from my closet. As I looked more closely, I noticed that the picture appeared to have been taken outside rather than from the stairs above the second-floor hallway. I saw the fuzzy outlines of parked cars, a sidewalk, and the street. Lane had altered the setting. Ms. W. had been mortified, not only by my vengeful expression and the sight of her analyst stripped of his dignity, but the photograph made it appear as if I had been raving half naked in the street, wielding a hammer. Beside it was an image of Lane with a large bruise on his forehead. Could I have caused it? No, I thought, he looked fine when he left. Near my own image, I saw one of Lane's father, a photo of George Bush, the Twin Towers, a hospital corridor, and war images from Iraq. (*Sorrows* 263)

This picture is even more disturbing and distorting than the photo of Iris; Erik's and his patient's reactions to it suggest a complete misrepresentation. Having altered the setting and the context, Lane turns into a confused and scared man, woken up in the middle of the night by an intruder, into an insane person, hostile and "stripped of his dignity" (263). Moreover, having juxtaposed this photograph with the images of war and violence, Lane makes the spectator perceive the image in a similar vein. Even Erik himself starts wondering if he could have possibly caused the bruise on the photographer's face in the picture beside his (263), although he has never touched the intruder. Once again, Hustvedt makes the reader doubt the trustworthiness of the photographs and demonstrates the significance of context and the crucial role it plays in the perception of images.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In my discussion of "perceptions and their mutability" in the works of Siri Hustvedt, I have shown how literature can accumulate and produce knowledge about the ways human beings relate to the world and perceive themselves and others. Having analyzed Hustvedt's fiction through the lens of her theoretical essays, I have singled out three major points crucial to the author's concept of perception: perspective, embodied self, and context. Considered in relation to perspective, perception shifts with the angle and varies from one person to

another. Therefore, perception is indispensable from Hustvedt's notion of an embodied self, which comprises a person's background, experiences, feelings, emotions, past perceptions, memories, language, and culture that all play major roles in shaping the subjects' embodied perceiving minds. Perception is also inseparable from context; different contexts provoke different associations and can thus endorse or discourage certain interpretations. These three factors are important to take into consideration when examining Hustvedt's understanding of how human perception 'works.' All of them are closely related to the author's intersubjective theory of mixing, which suggests that people act upon each other and simultaneously are acted upon by others and the world. Hustvedt shows that human beings are intersubjective embodied situations embedded in the world. The intersubjective mixing of perspectives accompanies the processes of subject-formation and meaning-making from the very beginning; therefore, perception is an intersubjective concept.

Hustvedt is concerned with questions of perception on many levels: she explores them both as a theorist in her interdisciplinary essays and as a fiction writer scrutinizing them in her novels. The answers she discovers deserve close scholarly examination, for not only do they untangle the intricate and sophisticated workings of human perception, but they illustrate how the implicit knowledge of literature can reveal and change the ways people view and relate to the world as well. Understanding human perception for Hustvedt is part of "the big question [she] care[s] most about: *What are we?*" ("Borderlands" 111; emphasis original). Understanding what mechanisms are at work when perceiving an image, an art piece, or a person is part of the quest, inasmuch as perception reveals much about 'human nature' and self-consciousness.

Hustvedt's novels oftentimes illustrate the points she makes in her nonfiction, whereas her interdisciplinary essays give a clue to the interpretation of the narrative unraveling and of the characters. Blurring the boundaries between genres and disciplines, Hustvedt shows that, in order to arrive at the requested answers and explanations, "'diverse points of view' when examining the same object are not optional but necessary" ("Borderlands" 132); so she advocates interdisciplinary approaches to the study of perception, building the bridges between otherwise separated spheres of knowledge, such as philosophy and psychoanalysis, cognition and media studies, literature and medicine, etc. Hustvedt maintains that "all human

knowledge is partial” (AWLAMLAW xii); therefore, different disciplines can complement each other and contribute to a better understanding and a more complete description of various phenomena, especially of those about which little is known. Issues of visual perception belong to these obscure phenomena, which are hard to pin down. Perception is an elusive concept also because it is not fixed but shifting and mutable, which returns me to the central premise of this paper. It can be characterized as “a moving target,” borrowing Hustvedt’s expression from *The Blazing World* (272). Yet many authors claim to have definite answers explaining how perception and human mind work, which Hustvedt criticizes throughout all her works. She sets out to “interrogat[e] certainty and trumpet doubt and ambiguity, [...] because we must examine our beliefs and ask where they come from” (“The Delusions” 149). For Hustvedt, “[d]oubt is fertile” (“The Delusions” 149) and “a question generator” (150) and “ambiguity is a rich not impoverished concept” (“Borderlands” 132). This indefinite interdisciplinary position that Hustvedt argues for suggests that there may be multiple answers and ways to view various phenomena and encourages a more critical perspective, vigilance, and open-mindedness.

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