WAYS OF SEEING AFTER THE INTERNET

JOHANNA GOSSE

Adam Ferriss (minute 11) and Nick Briz (minute 15), *Ways of Something*, Episode 3 (2015), digital files. All images courtesy the artists.
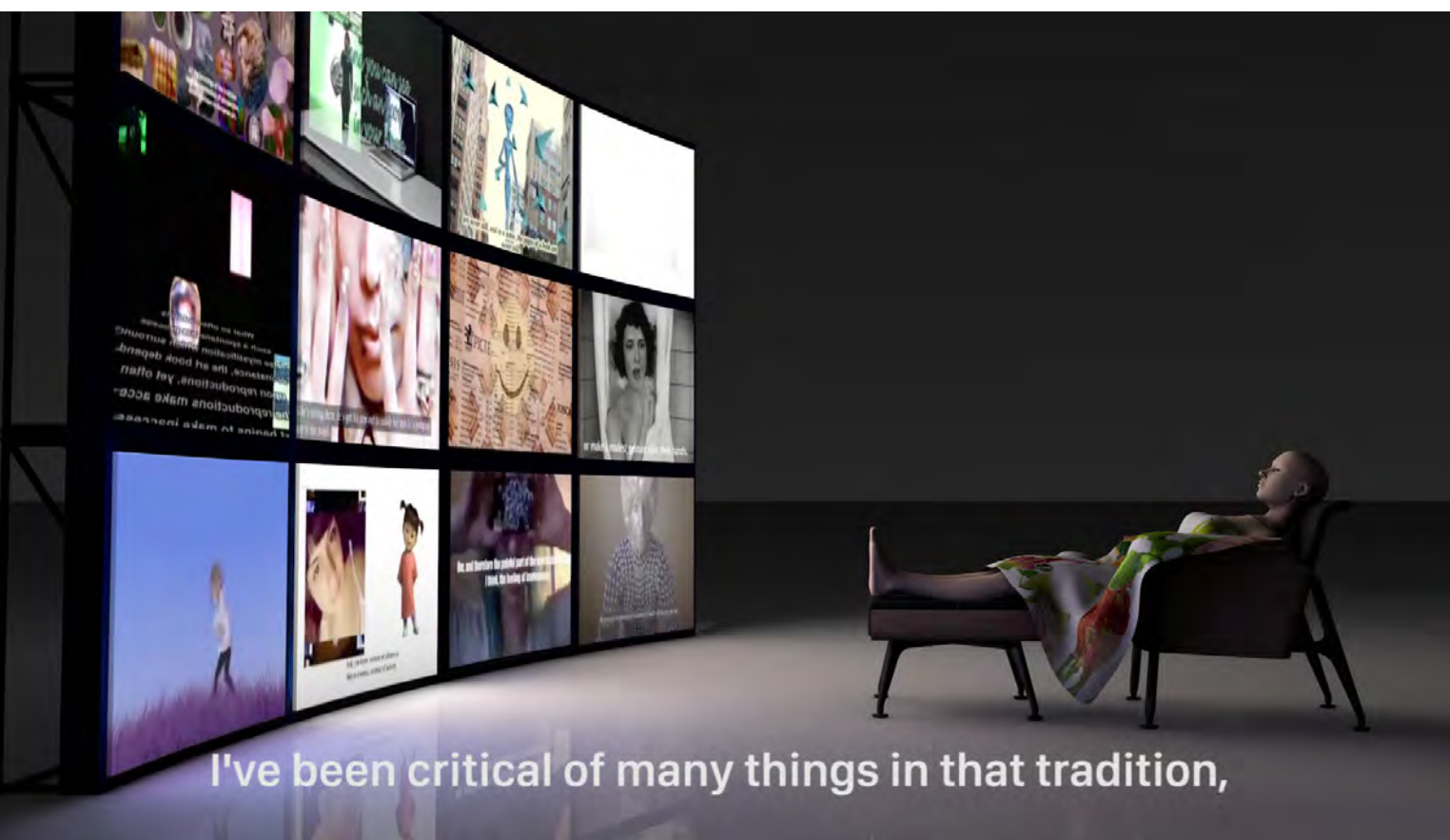
On January 2, 2017, it was announced that the English Marxist writer, artist, and public intellectual John Berger had died at the age of ninety. For many of his readers and admirers, the date of Berger's death, just past the threshold of the new year, seemed indicative of other ominous cultural and political shifts on the horizon. The news sparked a wave of eulogies, encomia, academic and critical assessments: in March, a memorial symposium was held at Columbia University in collaboration with the online journal *Public Books*; in September, a two-day conference was held at Canterbury Christ Church University in London; the next month, the British Film Institute organized a commemorative program of his work in television and film at London's National Gallery, accompanied by a short essay, "John Berger: Radical Broadcaster." If Berger's status as a radical public intellectual often positioned him as a school of one during his lifetime, it is his style of writing—unhurried, historically rigorous, and critically precise—that remains at odds with the click-baiting, attention-deficit economy of contemporary online discourse. Not one for hot-takes or think pieces, Berger preferred to concentrate on fundamental philosophical questions concerning how we encounter the world and make meaning from it, such as "What is storytelling?" or "Why look at animals?". But his perennial concern, the problem that drove all of his creative production, from fiction to drawing, poetry to criticism, was the relationship between art and politics.

Nowhere is this commitment to accessible humanistic inquiry on art and politics more evident than in *Ways of Seeing*, a four-part documentary series that premiered on BBC Two in 1972. Conceived in part as a response to the triumphant narrative of Western masterpieces presented in Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation*, which was broadcast on the same channel three years earlier in 1969, *Ways of Seeing* frames the history of Western art not as a product of individual genius, innovation or virtuosity, but rather as a dialectical process conditioned by intersecting systems of domination, namely capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism. *Ways of Seeing* places particular emphasis on how modern mass media has transformed the meaning and value of artworks through mechanical reproduction, and how advertising spectacle and

Everything suggests the solidity of a Dutch middle-class home,

John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Episode 2 (1972), screengrab.

I've been critical of many things in that tradition,

Shana Moulton (minute 23) and Rick Silva (minute 28), *Ways of Something*, Episodes 3 and 4 (2015), digital files.
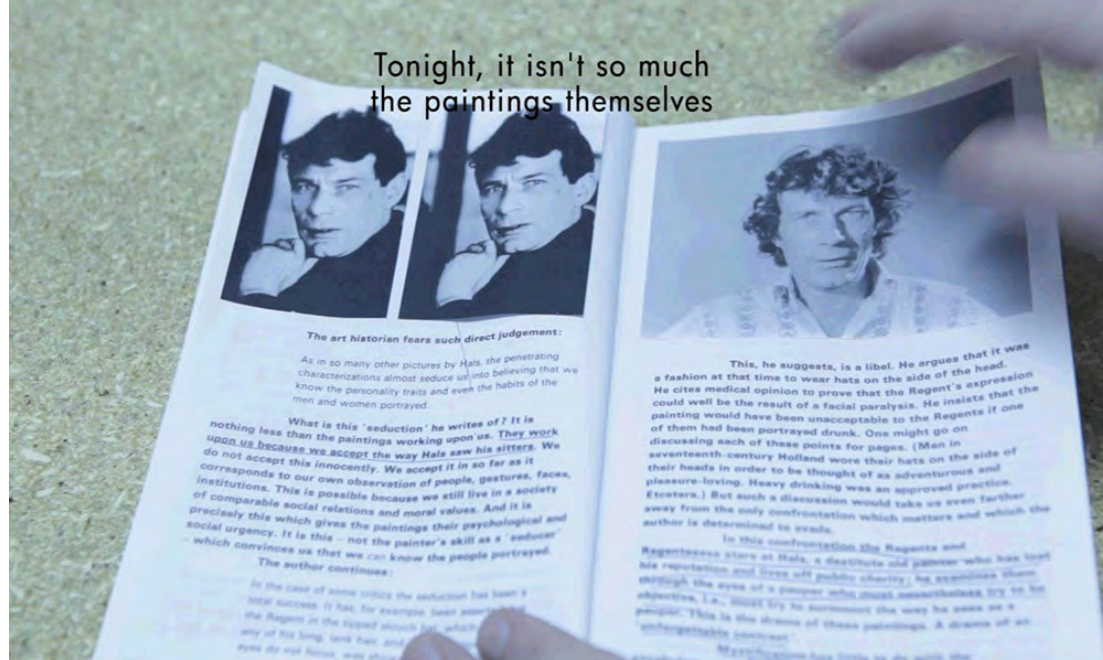
the male gaze work in tandem to consolidate the dominance of capitalist heteropatriarchy. Equally charismatic, eloquent and photogenic, Berger takes up the role of talking head narrator across all four episodes, with a tone at turns exploratory and revolutionary. Perhaps to compensate for potential channel surfing and inconsistent viewing, Berger's script is peppered with quotable lines that often sound less like a critical theory-infused manifesto than everyday commonsense. His assertive, straightforward rhetoric re-surfaces in the published version of *Ways of Seeing*, for instance, its opening line: "Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak," which resonates as a secular, anti-logocentric reversal of the beginning of John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word." Such seductively simple, quasi-Biblical formulations endow both the text and broadcast iterations of *Ways of Seeing* with a sense of universality and relevance that persists decades after its initial debut.

Considering its lasting popularity, it is perhaps unsurprising that an artistic homage to *Ways of Seeing* was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art's blockbuster exhibition, *Dreamlands: Immersive Cinema and Art, 1905–2016*, in the months directly preceding Berger's death. This multi-author video essay, *Ways of Something* (2014-15) was conceptualized and compiled by Toronto-based internet artist Lorna Mills,

who invited over one hundred, mostly North American and European artists to produce a one-minute moving image sequence in response to an excerpt of equivalent length from Berger's original BBC program. Mills selected and edited these "crowdsourced" responses into a four-part video that mirrors the original program's episodic structure and is precisely synced to Berger's voiceover. More chance-based compilation than a straightforward collaboration, the video contributions to *Ways of Something* largely adhere to a postinternet formal vernacular of CGI animation, stock photography, screenshots, GIFs, memes, remixes and mashups, webcam footage, and glitch, which together constitute "something" like a digital *Cadavre Exquis*, a heterogeneous assembly that, according to Mills, "describes the cacophonous conditions of artmaking after the internet." As a postinternet update of postmodern pastiche, *Ways of Something* visualizes a new way of seeing, one that was anticipated by Berger's critical analysis of art, power, and spectacle, and later borne out by the complex and unruly media ecologies of digital culture.

Each episode of *Ways of Something* can be streamed online, and the entire four-part work is regularly screened at festivals and theaters from Seattle to Brazil to Bulgaria. But in its installation at the Whitney, all four videos were played simultaneously as a multi-channel installation. Thus, while Mills and various critics

The art historian fears such direct judgement:

Tonight, it isn't so much the paintings themselves

I the machine show you a world the way only I can see it.

JOIN US NOW !

Here's a painting by Caravaggio.

Daniel Temkin (minute 1), Sara Ludy (minute 3), and Eva Papamargariti (minute 18), *Ways of Something*, Episode 1 (2014), digital files.

have referred to *Ways of Something* as "internet art" or "net art" due to its visual content and the profiles of its contributors, the work's relationship to online, networked media is arguably more formal and representational than narrative, compositional, or platform-specific. Fundamentally, *Ways of Something* is a video essay; while it can be streamed online, it is not necessarily *resident* online nor was its production reliant upon the internet after its individual components were produced. As a cohesive work, it is no more net-based than any work of contemporary art that utilizes networked media at some point in its creation (i.e. email communications, online research, appropriated imagery, promotional outreach). Indeed, many of the participating artists—like Brenna Murphy, Sara Ludy, Sabrina Ratté, Shana Moulton, Rick Silva, Jacob Ciocci, Carla Gannis, Rosa Menkman, and Marisa Olson (who claims to have coined the unhyphenated term "postinternet" as a stylistic and methodological designation, as opposed to "post-internet" as a periodization, as far back as 2006)—work precisely in the inchoate zone between internet art and postinternet art, an intersection which is arguably still in formation, and that *Ways of Something* epitomizes.

If not an instance of internet art, but of moving image art that adopts a postinternet aesthetic sensibility, *Ways of Something*'s analog source material nevertheless keeps it tethered, umbilical-like, to the medium of broadcast television, Berger's weapon of choice for his long march through the institutions of mass culture. Unlike the BBC original, though, *Ways of Something* foregoes talking-head polemics in favor of the anonymously authored, nonlinear, algorithmic logic of digital media. Whereas Berger probed the incompatibility and tension between post-Renaissance painting and postmodern mechanical reproduction, *Ways of Something* points to an even more intractable competition, that between analog and digital visuality. This rivalry takes center stage in *Ways of Something* wherever digital aesthetics disrupt, displace, or overwrite the familiar cultural artifacts, practices, and sites that are foregrounded in Berger's analysis: the printed page (newspaper, magazine, book), broadcast television, cinema, painting, and even institution of the museum itself.

The first episode of *Ways of Something* opens with a one-minute contribution from artist Daniel Temkin. A hand, presumably Temkin's own, leafs through a paperback copy of *Ways of Seeing* in which all of the illustrations of Old Master paintings and contemporary advertisements have been replaced with dashing author headshots and TV stills of Berger. More than

just a winking acknowledgment of Berger's cult-like status and the self-reflexive nature of *Ways of Something,* Temkin's sequence literally illustrates the displacement of the printed page by the digital, with its seemingly endless capacity for image manipulation, layering, and reproduction. At minute three, Sara Ludy responds to Berger's discussion of an excerpt from Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) by creating a 3D animation of an abstract architectural interior rendered in a dull palette of greys and browns. Whereas Temkin uses Photoshop to produce a meta-commentary on how the digital has eclipsed older technical supports like the printed, illustrated book, Ludy's CGI rendering similarly visualizes the transformation of Vertov's early 20th century *kino-eye* into an early 21st century computer-eye, its gaze conditioned less by avant-garde techniques of confrontational montage and visual shock, and more by algorithmic processes that generate spatial dislocation, dematerialization, modularity, and virtuality.

Other contributors update Berger's commentary on Old Master paintings with jarringly surreal digital imagery. At minute eighteen of the first episode, Eva Papamargariti invites the viewer into a posthuman tableau populated by bizarre animated creatures and objects (including an oversized grenade), all gathered around a long banquet table. Instead of an opulent meal, the table displays various digital devices, while a neon sign in the background blares: "JOIN US NOW!" as if speaking on behalf of the party's zombie-like guests. This mutant *mise-en-scène* is a loose re-enactment of Caravaggio's *The Supper at Emmaus* (1601), which Berger analyzes in close-up and pairs with different orchestral soundtracks to demonstrate how audiovisual montage produces subtle transformations in mood and meaning. By substituting a motley crew of digital avatars for Caravaggio's ancient biblical subjects, Papamargariti articulates a fundamental distinction between painterly and postinternet visuality, wherein people, animals, and things are not represented so much as conjured from a digital (and soon-to-be artificially intelligent) imaginary that is liberated from the laws and contingencies of physical reality.

At minute twenty, Kristin Lucas composes a glitchy collage of open browser windows displaying online image searches for famous paintings like the *Mona Lisa*, alongside an assortment of seemingly arbitrary GIFs and YouTube videos. The sequence corresponds to Berger's discussion of the effects of mechanical reproduction on viewing works of art, which provides a distillation of Walter Benjamin's theories for a non-specialist audience: "When paintings are reproduced they become a form of information, which is being
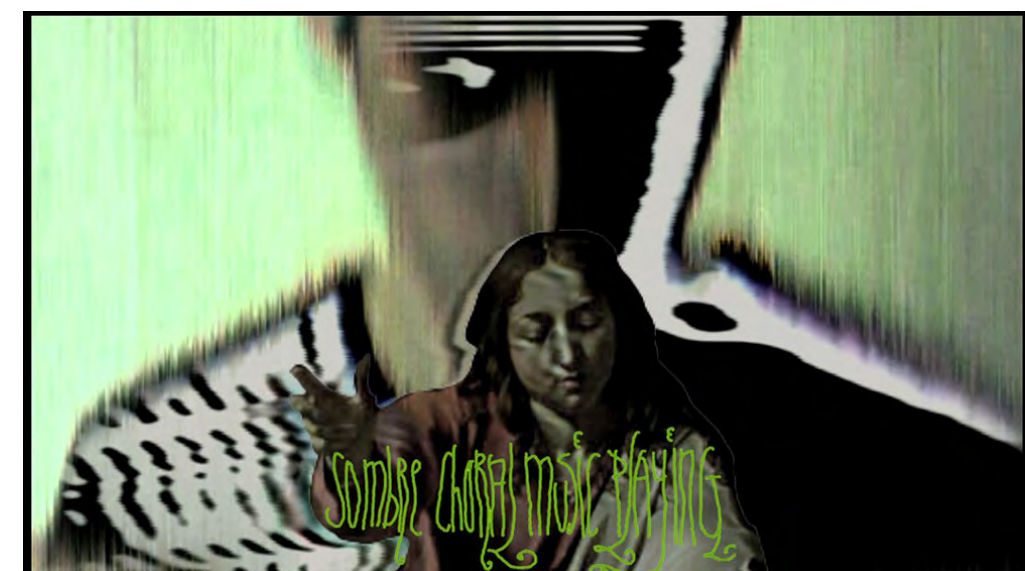
Lorna Mills (minute 24), *Ways of Something*, Episode 4 (2015), digital file.

continually transmitted, and so there they have to hold their own against all the other information jostling around to appear on the same page, or the same screen." Berger is of course referring to the flow of information through analog media like printed text (books, magazines, newspapers), cinema, and broadcast television, but today, these formats have been condensed and collapsed into the pages, windows, and screens of the digital interface, like the portable apparatuses strewn across Papamargariti's banquet table. Alongside these image searches, Lucas's collage also includes stock photographs of people donning virtual reality headsets, some while standing in gallery-like environments. This juxtaposition suggests a comment on the future of museum viewership as an extension of immersive digital entertainment and pushes *Ways of Something*'s latent institutional critique to the surface. Adapting Berger's tutorial on mechanical reproduction for the post-internet age, Lucas and others remind us that the museum is not, and never has been, a sanctuary from spectacle, but is simply a more elite and

privileged locus for it—as the hordes of camera-wielding tourists at the Louvre amply demonstrate.

Arguably, the force of *Ways of Something*'s institutional critique was dampened by the work's inclusion in the Whitney's blockbuster exhibition. As critic Erika Balsom noted in her incisive review in *Artforum*, *Dreamlands* was ultimately "little concerned with [the] socio-political stakes" of how and why an anxious desire for immersive experience drives the entwined histories of modern art and media technologies, nor did the show examine the broader paradigm shifts that this preoccupation implies.[1] Extending Balsom's critique, I would argue that *Dreamlands* is also indicative of a broader shift in the institutional logic and historical role of the contemporary museum. Specifically, *Dreamlands* illustrated the museum's transformation from a fortress-like repository of "masterpieces" and guardian of elite culture for the public good (the role it plays in *Ways of Seeing*) to its current adaptation to fit the experiential needs and expectations, not of a general public,

Kristin Lucas (minute 20), Marisa Olson (minute 14), and Rosa Menkman (minute 19), *Ways of Something*, Episode 1 (2014), digital files.

or said by art experts encourages this confusion –

What surrounds the publicity image
is us, as we are.

but of individual consumers, ones who, as Mike Pepi argues, "treat institutions not as a storehouse of physical objects but rather as a data set of image files."

Today we find the museum organizing itself for transmission and retrieval, anticipating the final aspirations of an algorithmic regime. The resulting database logic aligns the institution with interests originating from the model of the Silicon Valley enterprise—in constantly updating streams/cycles, the museum reformats its content towards structured, indexed, or digitally stored data sets or sets of relations among data. That this information is designed for queries, updates, algorithmic manipulation, and mass scalability is of central importance. [2]

Pepi describes a contemporary museum that increasingly functions as both an experiential platform and a database, wherein the visitor is re-branded as a "user," its permanent collection as image files, exhibitions as search queries. His analysis raises questions about whether a work of postinternet pastiche like *Ways of Something* has the capacity to critique the institutional logic and economic imperatives of the contemporary museum, or if it simply reinforces it. For, inasmuch as Mills' project visualizes a cultural shift from visitor to user, spectacle to database, Old Masterpiece to digital "something," as noted above, its political purchase as a work of institutional critique is constrained to the level of representation. In other words, by adhering strictly to the linear, essayistic structure of Berger's original script, *Ways of Something* does not actually inhabit, embody, or enact the "database logic" that Pepi diagnoses, it simply depicts it.

Clearly, Mills comprehends the representational character of her project when she states that it "describes the cacophonous conditions of artmaking after the internet." As a *description* of a condition rather than an *instantiation* of it, *Ways of Something's* critical limitations are built into its compositional formula as a

multi-author, moving-image homage. By contrast, Berger pursued a more system-immanent form of critique when he purposefully infiltrated the medium of broadcast television to produce a work of radical, public pedagogy. If *Ways of Something* were to follow Berger's lead, it might, for instance, take on a nonlinear or networked narrative structure, integrate metadata, or engage other forms of interactive or algorithmic organization associated with the logic of the database. In other words, it would be a work of network-reliant, web-resident, data-driven art, rather than a work of moving-image art that can be readily exhibited across multiple platforms and contexts. The fact that *Ways of Something* is not web-based is not a failing per se, though it is an important point of clarification to the extent that it illuminates precisely which "cacophonous conditions" and cultural logics the work claims to describe.

Its limitations as a self-reflexive analysis of post-internet artistic production notwithstanding, *Ways of Something* still manages to level a potent critique of identity politics and essentialism, especially when it homes in on Berger's analysis of the patriarchal function of the male gaze. Berger opens the second episode of *Ways of Something* with a series of succinct but provocative assertions about the male gaze, such as this one (a slightly modified version from the print edition): "Men 'act' and women 'appear.' Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." Berger argues that women experience this perpetual state of surveillance and self-surveillance as existentially crippling. In this respect, his analysis anticipates (and potentially influenced) the argument advanced by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," written in 1973 and subsequently published in *Screen* in 1975. Yet from a contemporary vantage, Berger's feminism seems both ahead-of-its-time and strikingly problematic.

To start, there is Berger's sweeping style of rhetoric—particularly, his propensity for, mantra-like pronouncements—which risks framing social conditions as ahistorical, totalizing, static ontologies rather than contingent phenomena that remain open to transformation. As a result, Berger risks freezing

but it's a very *outer* thing by which you gain relationships with

Envy becomes a common emotion in a society which has moved towards democracy and then stopped halfway,

LEFT Jesse Darling (minute 24), Ways of Something, Episode 2 (2014), and BELOW Will Pappenheimer (minute 6), *Ways of Something*, Episode 4 (2015), digital files.

and essentializing the social relations of looking rather than destabilizing them. Moreover, as the program proceeds it becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile Berger's on-screen persona as a masculine, authoritative, seemingly omniscient narrator with his critique of the gendered gaze. This is especially apparent during the scene where he interviews a panel of self-identified feminists (including his spouse Anya, a brilliant intellectual and accomplished translator) about their experiences under patriarchal oppression—a televisual prototype for the #MeToo movement. Though clearly intended in the spirit of equity and inclusion, the panel scene still positions Berger as the central, dominant figure by casting him as lead interrogator, coaxing and cross-examining his female witnesses with probing and often uncomfortable intensity. Throughout the scene, his taut body language and cat-like attention to the female panelists place

him solidly on the side of "looking" and "acting" over feminized "appearing," and in turn renders the women as reluctant and passive objects of his analytical gaze. The cinematography is even less subtle; with its lascivious framing, languid pans, and slow, predatory zooms, the scene offers a comprehensive illustration of what Mulvey famously termed the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of women on screen, in spite of stated intentions.

In the second episode of *Ways of Something*, artist Jesse Darling responds to Berger with a queer re-enactment of the feminist panel scene. Donning heavy stage make-up for their solo webcam performance, Darling lip-syncs the commentary of the eldest female participant, underscoring and implicitly undermining the evidentiary status and ontological authenticity of her testimonial. As a trans-masculine identified artist, Darling's queer drag caricatures and destabilizes the panel's binary understanding

of gendered experience and the gaze, while also poking fun at Berger's masculine bravado, suggesting that he, too, is simply performing for the camera. Darling's playful performance is critical, but not condemning; rather than castigating Berger as a condescending mansplainer or mocking the panel as a retrograde second wave exercise, Darling "drags" them into the present, with equal doses of humor and affection.

Politically speaking, *Ways of Something* is neither classically Marxist nor feminist in orientation, and instead opts for an irreverent, darkly funny, and especially in Darling's case, queer approach grounded in aesthetic procedures like mimicry, re-enactment, remix, pastiche, glitch, and drag—modes of critical scopophilia that regard pleasure not as a reactionary symptom (*pace* Mulvey), but as a political necessity. Berger helps clear space for this revisionist project when he states, in the final line of the

first episode of *Ways of Seeing*: "I hope you will consider what I arrange, but be skeptical of it," and then later, concludes the final episode by stating: "like everything else that is shown or said through these means of reproduction," his words "must be judged against your own experience." By posing complex questions about vision, power, and knowledge while also inviting the audience's skepticism, Berger set the terms for the perpetual renewal of his critical project into the future. In his wake, it is left to artists, viewers, and "users" alike to continue identifying, analyzing, and challenging the emergence of new ways of seeing, not only within the elite spaces of the museum or academia, but most importantly and urgently, online.

Notes and citations are online at
http://www.mfj-online.org/gosse-seeing-notes/