

## -scape

### O. FOREGROUND: Installation as symbolic form; figure and ground

In both representational and non-representational art the problem of the relationship between figure and ground remains – even when this dynamic is expanded exponentially, relationally, off the canvas, past the sculpture, into the gallery and out into the wider social field, into ‘the world’ as somehow beyond the limitation of the art object. This we know. These objects of knowledge, either objects or theories of knowledge themselves, occupy a landscape that is only temporarily and permeably bounded by the knowing subject. When the premise that bounds the subject is a contingent founding relation (between self and other, figure and ground), and, rather than a *subject of knowledge* s/he is a *subject supposed to know*, then we realize a relative, perspectival view of our place in the world and the order of things. Perspective (one’s point of view, as a confluence of knowing) is understood, then, as a symbolic form that reveals our own proclivities and beliefs. The posited external vanishing point (where lines of *vision as inference* appear to merge before us, but finally refuse to) and the internal vanishing point in reverse Byzantine perspective (where distinctions between this and that, and our embodied spatiotemporal relationship to this divergence) crisscross before us, in and through us. If the art object (in this expanded field) is a premise, and perspective itself is a symbolic form, so is installation – as a temporary embodiment of the sublime vanishing point.

### OO. MID-GROUND: A post-romantic landscape; the sublime

If the sublime is to be found in the formless, boundless non-object (here, symbolized as installation), then it relates to the pre-formation of the subject. The sublime appears to rush beyond the landscaped garden, beyond the gallery, towards the abyss, and hovers, there, before us. The senses are heightened; we are threatened with everyday oblivion. The sublime manifests ‘nature’s gleaming’ (Hölderlin and Heidegger); the subject is shattered and open to pure Being in the ‘clearing’. Nature is with the sublime, the non-form of the being of nature that exceeds us, somehow. Rather than reacting fearfully to the sublime presence of the other, we can act out of awe and ‘(com)passion’, and ‘wit(h)ness’ the other (Ettinger). We ‘tremble between nature and freedom’ (Adorno) when experiencing the sublime, but this opportunity for self-fragilisation is the potential for expression as a kind of resistance. This is not a resistance to the outside, but to the perspective of the tyrannical law of the inside that hopes to armour the self as if for war (as her/his majesty the ego; the sovereign self that occupies the centre of the cone of perspective). The primary non-object may be relational unity with the desiring mother, but she was there before us, *Stabat Mater* (‘Stood the Mother’), in her own fragile state within language. The reality that a non-identical other preceded us may be the decentred core of the subject itself: the not-I with the I. Our transitional unity with that not-I, beyond words but in language, becomes sublime awe.

000. BACKGROUND (to this text): Fragment of an email to the artists; the backdrop; the curtain; the skirt; this page

*'...I'm currently thinking about the idea of the formalised relationship between figure and ground and how it is deconstructed in the installation you are making (in relation to the idea of perspective in art as 'symbolic form'), to installation itself as a kind of symbolic form, when the viewing subject is decentralised in the viewing cone of perspectival vision, and is blocked from access to the birds-eye view of the floating, centred ego. Like looking up to the skirt-covered knee of a Byzantine icon, where the laws of perspective are inverted. This takes me to nature as a backdrop, a curtain, a veil, a skirt, with the viewer peering at the abyss from behind their mother's skirts. Then onwards to the idea of the sound of nature (the sound piece?) as the rustle of the Infanta's petticoat (Infant: from the Latin, meaning: 'Unable to speak') – as she moves in Velasquez' painting (with all that fucked up perspectival inversion that Foucault discusses); the skirt/curtain as the murmur of language, as the curtain around Freud's grandson's cot, where he threw a cotton reel on a string through the curtain then pulled it back saying 'ooo' at the abyss and the trick of language; art, appearing to make the absent present, to make that which is gone return (the imaginary unified figure/subject). If language serves that function, making absence return, then my text would be a letter (in portrait form, A4) that can be turned on its side to make a landscape. And that letter, symbolized as a single letter, is the letter 'O' – Freud's grandson's 'ooo' as he stares into the overwhelming abyss where words fail yet we try (invoking Casper David Friedrich, Romanticism and the landscape tradition). The speech marks or parenthesis around the 'O' become the legs that go and come, framing the abyss, or signifying the absent core of the split subject, the viewer.'*

Dr Alexander Kennedy

Alexander Kennedy is an art historian and critic. His books *How Glasgow Stole the Idea of Contemporary Art* and *The Use of Style* are available from [www.daatpress.com](http://www.daatpress.com).