“Our Fine Arts,” explained the poet Paul Valéry in 1928, “were instituted at a time very different from ours.” The main difference between Valéry’s interwar world and the time when the fine arts were instituted during the Renaissance resided mainly in the discovery of new ways of transmitting, reproducing, transporting, and reconstituting images. Valéry witnessed stunning developments in means for producing images and reproducing them. But most importantly, he was able to see a revolution in the way in which images were transmitted. “As with water, gas, and electric current that come from afar . . . so we will be fed by visual images or auditory ones, born and disappearing at the faintest gesture, almost by a sign.” The poet was fortunate to see for the first time visual and auditory images sent through telecommunications networks, first through telegraph and telephone wires and then through the air. Valéry was at a loss when trying to explain the repercussions these change would have on art. “I do not know if any philosopher has dreamt of service for the home-delivery of Sensible Reality,” he wrote.

How, may we ask, does the work of Sharon Harper deal with the contemporary transformations marking her career—changes which are even more momentous than the ones that Valéry witnessed?

On April 4, 1925, only a few years before Valéry wrote his essay, AT&T started the first commercial public service for sending photographs by telegraph wire, charging $50 for a 5 x 7 transmission from New York to Chicago and $100 from New York to San Francisco. Now many more images can be made, copied, transformed, sent, and received with greater ease, but the home-delivery service of “Sensible Reality” dreamt of by the poet has still not reached us. Valéry predicted that, because of these changes, works of art “will no longer be in themselves, but all will be one, and which apparatus.”

The apparatus involved in transmission and reconstitution, he surmised, should be henceforth considered part of the artwork itself.

Valéry’s essay, tellingly titled “The Conquest of Ubiquity,” inspired the writer and critic Walter Benjamin to pen his famous “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin selected a few lines from Valéry’s text and included them as an epigraph. He then continued his essay by exploring how art and technology changed alongside time and space. With the development of mechanically reproducible photography and phonography, he explained, “the cathedral leaves its locale” only “to meet the beholder halfway.” These technological developments warped our traditional view of space and time as well as orthodox conceptions of art. Harper’s experiments convey an additional lesson: her images do more than simply meet us halfway. The cathedral lost its place in the mid-nineteenth century with the invention of mechanically reproducible photography. But now at the turn of the second millennium, the whole universe has lost its footing.

Benjamin’s paradigmatic essay consolidated a theoretical framework for thinking about photographic and cinematographic work in terms of “its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions”—throughout the essay he assumed a stable Earth. Benjamin also defined close-up and slow motion in terms of these surface spatial and temporal transformations: “With the close-up, space expands; with slow motion, movement is extended.” Since its invention, the microscope was considered as a means for expanding space. With the invention of flash and strobe, time was considered to expand and contract in the same way as space did. Time and space, in Harper’s work, no longer functions in this way.
Benjamin’s method of analysis appeared stunningly close to the work of experimental psychologists. It is not a coincidence that Hugo Münsterberg, who used a bevy of cinematographic-like instruments in his laboratory of experimental psychology, also wrote one of the first books defending the artistic value of film. For decades, the main task of experimental psychology was to explain the link (or disconnect) between reality and perceived reality. Perception and reality were installed as privileged topics for analyzing the relation between art and science. For certain artists, they were two categories that revealed the power of art and the deficiency of science. For some scientists, they often revealed the power of science and the deficiency of art. Many practitioners and critics settled on a neat division of labor where art was charged with investigating perceived reality and science with reality tout court. Science and art, in the work of Harper, no longer function in this capacity.

From the first decades of the nineteenth century onward, many writers, philosophers, and scientists lamented the increasing transformation of the world into an illusion. In the twentieth century, Oliver Wendell Holmes’s exclamation that with photography “form is henceforth divorced from matter” seemed more prescient than ever before. During the post-war period, many continued their endless complaints and investigations of the gap between the world as it was actually perceived and the increasingly rarified scientific descriptions of it. The dominant philosophical school that developed during that period—phenomenology—was wholly designed to reverse contemporary hierarchies between reality and perceived reality. Even artists themselves were enlisted into this mission—buying into the global task of revealing, twisting, or playing with the laws of perception. Early scientific laboratories focusing on spectacle, like Münsterberg’s, gave way to amalgams between factories, studios, and laboratories. The century ended with the paranoid fight against the simulacra described by Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida’s obsession to join “the world” and “lived experience” with what he called the “trace.”

Harper’s work no longer revolves around the tired intrigue of perception versus reality. In her art, the central plot—and the main categories of inquiry—are radically different.

In the 1960s the entire plot of a blockbuster movie could revolve around the theme of reality versus perception. A scene would climax with the camera’s zooming-in on a photograph that was successively enlarged for the thrilling search for more and more information. The plot would start to unwind after reaching a critical point, when the selfsame photograph became so grainy that nothing more could be seen. In this way, viewers were captivated by Michelangelo Antonioni’s film “Blow Up” (1966), when the main character found evidence of a gun murder by enlarging and enlarging photographs.

Obtaining new evidence through the successive expanding and sorting of photographic images concerned astronomers and nuclear physicists as much as Hollywood producers in a society that revolved as much on spectacle (as described by Guy Debord) as on surveillance (as described by Michel Foucault). It seemed utterly thrilling to realize that images contained information and that a noise-to-signal ratio impeded total recall. It was exciting to see how this logic was based on the laws of thermodynamics—the same ones that explained why the countercultural lives of artists in the ’60s also ended in dissipation and disarray. Like all good stories, this one had its own moral. Blow up, or in broader terms, the thrill of thinking that something can be found in an image—even at a price—seems quaint when we consider Harper’s work. Not only does her work ask...
viewers to consider an entirely different plot, it asks them to consider a completely different moral order.

Harper does not use a photographic camera, since we cannot know when the instrument begins and ends or when the work of the artist starts and finishes. When the movements in the work become extreme from gliding on train tracks, powered by jet-turbines, or moved by the rotation of the earth at the vertiginous speed of 300,000 km, they are part of the photographing instrument itself. Beginning with the astronomer Johannes Kepler and ending with the psychologist James J. Gibson we have come to think of vision in terms of camera-obscura optics. But in Harper’s work the eye is no longer a camera and the camera is hardly an eye—both are salient singularities in a much larger set of systemic transformations.

We see the rotating Earth, not in the slow indications of a swinging pendulum, but instantly, by the starlight that scratches a negative. She thus produces snapshots of an order of magnitude comparable to the very scale of the solar system. Triggers, so closely connected to cameras (since Daguerre), guns (since Marey) and murderplots (since Antonioni), are suddenly viscous—grabbing onto a finger on a body on a planet on an infinitely expanding system. The violence of the image and the technique is no longer that of a singular shot; rather, the terror of both is indefinitely extended.

Harper plays with sequential photographs to expand time. Images sometimes appear vertically instead of horizontally and sometimes go right to left. Her sequential images are also uniquely singular, taken at a glance. The order is poetic, in the sense of literary experiments with anagrams or palindromes. With them we are drawn to question the tired practice of reading sequentially from left to right, a habit hammered into counter-reformation viewers by proliferating representations of the stations of the cross and by increased literacy. Yet we no longer inhabit a world where time is seen as expanding like space.

Harper’s work is temporal and historical. But it is a history that is anonymous, unconstrained by dates and calendars, and eternal. Nothing is lost, nothing discarded. Yet this plenum is “framed” in the tradition of classic, modern art. Her work is iconic—but in a different way. We absorb it in the context of the repertoire of stock astronomical images, from Galileo’s to Hubble’s, that surround us. Yet her work disturbs this tradition. Testing out her images again and again to find one that “proves” to be a moon, tacitly comparing this view of the moon against an implicit set of bona-fide images known from science, we are in a world where we cannot trust our memories, our scientists, or our nature. Against what do we compare an image of the moon, while we are really looking at it? We can safely assume that the iconography NASA has provided us is accurate, but when Harper uses a camera and a telescope, we are no longer so sure.

Harper continues a tradition (represented by the paintings of J. M. W Turner and Caspar David Friedrich among others) that explored (and sometimes contested) traditional boundaries of science and art. By using a variety of technologies (analog, digital, video, high-speed) and coupling these instruments with lenses and telescopes, Harper’s work provides us with visual imagery clearly connected to well-known scientific icons, but that differs from it in essential ways. In her work, the moon may appear imperfect (cloudy, blurry, or in daylight), and its sequences are not cinematographic: frames disappear and the indicated time is that of the artist—not of the phenomena. Astronomical iconography is deliberately profaned. The
romanticism of Friedrich and Turner in which
tone and vision, science and art, merge, gives
way to a technical sublime of an undifferentiated
and unnatural kind. Her photographs recall
tradition, but not in the form of pastiche, satire
or irony. When thinkers ranging from Jürgen
Habermas to Frederic Jameson lamented some
of the consequences of postmodern art as
excessively idiosyncratic, Harper finds a different
solution while dressing her photographs in
history’s best.

Harper does not photograph. Events impress,
sometimes by scratching (with starlight), other
times by suffocating (with clouds). The results
are portraits of the artist as much as of the
apparatus, the weather, the cosmos. Harper
offers work that invites us to think beyond the
image, beyond the tired categories of reality
and perception, beyond a mechanical analysis
à la Benjamin “of lowerings and liftings, its
interruptions and isolations, its extensions and
accelerations, its enlargements and reductions.”
Benjamin developed these investigations after
lamenting the loss of the “aura” in art. The “aura”
attached an image to a historical here and now,
authentic and historical, vouchsafed by the
connoisseur and the expert. This loss, already
evident in the analysis of the ubiquity of the
image described by Valéry arising from new
telecommunications networks, only intensified.
This loss, which started as mechanical at the
dawn of the nineteenth century and became
electromagnetic by the twentieth, appeared
decisively biocybernetic by the time Harper
started to work.6

With Harper’s work, we are finally closer to the
task that Valéry proposed but did not fulfill,
that of thinking of art and of the apparatus. We
can return to Benjamin’s concern with thinking
of art in terms of broader transformation in the
fabric of time and space—but with an important
difference. Harper’s work regains the “aura”
which was lost in the twentieth century—but it is
no longer the aura of the “here” and “now” safely
captured on the surface of the Earth. It is the aura
of the “never” and “nowhere.”

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