Dean Kissick: Visibility and Cultural Community

Art Appreciation · Semester 1

Overview:

Read December 5–7; return December 8 and 14. “Hello Darkness,” New Models (April 2021).

Before reading:

Kissick begins with an unwanted recommendation and concerns about opaque moderation. He then considers smaller online communities and local print or radio scenes. His examples and platform claims belong to 2021. This selection presents his position on visibility and exchange; it does not establish a universal history of the internet.

Mark one phrase for discussion. No separate reading report is required.

Source quotations:

Supplied eleven-page PDF, actual pages 6–8 and 10–11. Webpage footers numbered /15 are not PDF page numbers. Two nonconsecutive selections; intervening career and identity passages are omitted.

Source text: 590 words. Introductions, vocabulary and questions are course commentary. Paragraphs below retain the author’s wording; line wrapping is removed.

Since the turn of the century there have been warnings that the free internet would be gated by corporations. The Noughties brought the enclosure of the commons by tech giants, while the 2010s brought much more policing of the public by those giants. But at the same time, we have also voluntarily begun to gate the net ourselves. 2017 and 2018 brought the wholesale abandonment of Facebook by Millennials, in favor of more private and impermanent forms of communication like the small group chat and the finsta (pseudonymous “fake Instagram” account); but conversely, this was also when TikTok exploded in popularity among a younger generation. 2019, so far as I can recall, was a great year for subreddits. The big media trend of 2020, a time of pure hysteria, was the rise of paid, or invitation-only, Discord servers and other big group chats on WhatsApp, Telegram, Signal, and Slack; and side-chats where you complained about people in the group chat; and subscription-only Substack mailouts, Patreon podcasts and OnlyFans pages; and Close Friends Instagram Stories, which came into their own during lockdowns when many wished to keep their lives and indiscretions

more private. It was a year of fragmented content, and of slipping away into the internet's Dark Forest. Over the past year in Manhattan, attention has also been lavished on short-run, scene-specific print newspapers like Civilization and the Drunken Canal, and magazines like Dirty, which go a step further and don't publish anything online, as well as to platforms like Montez Press Radio, which broadcasts live but is otherwise hard to listen to. Hans Ulrich Obrist used to always say that it's important for an artist to create a "rumour". He'd circumnavigate the globe, chasing after rumours. Likewise, in an age of too much of everything, it makes a twisted kind of sense to publish a paper that few can ever read, or craft ambitious, obtuse radio shows that fade away into the waves. You can will your own scene into being by hyperstition; and once you have, can communicate with it directly through, like Drunken Canal, Close Friends Stories that lead to events, or, like Civilization, complicated metaphysical maps of everyone you've ever met Downtown. In cases like these, ideas from the gated internet are brought back into the real world to amuse, or annoy, everyone else. Sometimes readers are so frustrated that they print their own response paper; which raises the enticing prospect of a return to an 18th-century model, with the presses ever-whirring and everyone constantly publishing their own pamphlets slandering one another.

[Passage omitted.]

Our identities are formed in the relationships we have with others. Those relationships used to take place in public, and now they play out in private. The public sphere, Immanuel Kant thought, was made possible by printed journals, and the cafés and salons in which they were discussed. Such were the conditions in which the Enlightenment could begin. Now we have a far larger and more connected public sphere, and the Enlightenment project is being dismantled. We also have more and more communities thriving, out of sight, in the Dark Forest. These have a waning connection to each other, and the broader public sphere, but it doesn't matter. It's how things always used to be. It's been a nightmare hearing everyone's thoughts and opinions really. We don't have to live in public. We can shadowban ourselves. All we need to find are interesting people we can trust, and places we can speak without interference, free from the sick guiding hands of the attention economy.

Vocabulary:

- **Gating:** Limiting access to a space or its material.
- **Scene:** People connected through shared cultural activity.
- **Attention economy:** Systems that turn people's attention into commercial or social value.
- **Public sphere:** Spaces where people address shared matters beyond private relationships.
- **Hyperstition:** A story or belief that helps bring about the activity it describes. This is a working explanation for Kissick's passage about making a scene.

Discuss:

- Compare Kissick's limited audience with Steyerl's dispersed audience. What kind of exchange does each make possible?
- Who could be excluded by a small group, and what evidence would show that it supports more thoughtful exchange?
- Choose one of Kissick's examples. Separate his observation from the broader claim he draws from it.

Connection:

A community can share an interpretation without establishing whether an image is evidence of an event. Sontag helps distinguish those questions.

Full source / further reading.

Compare this qualified limit on visibility with Steyerl's account of access and value.

Printable handout:

Download the supported reading PDF.