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Returning the Radiant Gaze: Visual art and embodiment in a world of subjects

Beth Carruthers

Emily Carr University of Art + Design

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BETH CARRUTHERS

***Returning the Radiant Gaze:
Visual art and embodiment
in a world of subjects***

It is *only through the senses* that we experience what it means to be fully human. It is only through the engaged senses that we are able to feel desire and intimacy, the great longing to be fully, wholly, and utterly *in* the world. But it is only through *the honest and engaged* senses that we will come to appreciate the living world as it truly is, both wildly beautiful and endangered. Cultivating our perceptual capacity is fundamentally related to both the quality of our personal lives and restoring the quality of life on the planet.

Laura Sewall, *Sight and Sensibility* (14)

But what is Nature? From the Latin *Natura*, it is my birth, my characteristics, my condition. It is my nativity, my astrology, my biology, my physiognomy, my geography, my cartography, my spirituality, my sexuality, my mentality, my corporeal, intellectual, emotional, imaginative self. And it is not just myself, every self and the Self of the world. There is no mirror I know that can show me all of these singularities, unless it is the strange, distorting looking glass of art, where I will not find my reflection nor my representation but a nearer proof than I prefer. *Natura* is the whole that I am. The multiple reality of my existence.

Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects* (149-150)

Why is it important to re-embodiment vision—and what does art have to do with it? An introduction to the enquiry.

Vision is, many say, our most dominant sense. Our eyes move constantly, adapting, monitoring, locating us in relationship with the world. Through them we experience sunsets and gardens, disasters and conflicts, a single red poppy in the sun, the terrifying sight of a runaway truck on a crowded road.

Yet, in Western cultural tradition, vision is also suspect and denigrated. From Plato, through the Middle Ages, to the twentieth-century backlash against a so-called ocularcentric Western culture, debates on vision have figured large in our cultural landscape. Vision, as they say in marketing, has an image problem.

In the mid to late twentieth century, ocularcentrism and vision itself came to be heavily criticised within cultural practices, particularly the visual arts. As David Abram writes in his forward to Laura Sewall's *Sight and Sensibility*, "the objectifying gaze has become a cliché of contemporary criticism" (xiv). Visual art was easily targeted as problematic, and within art institutions, artists responded by scrambling to achieve the desired distance from visual pleasure, or to critique the gaze within their work. Artworks metamorphosed into configurations of signs and text.

As a visual artist, I found myself split. Taking up the stance expected of a successful artist at that time involved a disconnection from the lived experience of art-making—an experience joyful, engaged, intimately and ultimately sensual. How to reconcile the

intimate touching of visual contact with a discourse which, intent on its desire to critique objectification, in fact promoted further removal from world, self, and other?

While it could be argued that much has changed since the late twentieth century—for example, the re-embracing of the sensuous by way of “affect” and “new materialism”—vision and the visual remain troubled, reflecting the much discussed human disconnect from the body, as well as from places and other beings within the dominant, persistent, and reductive ontological frame of Modernity. Does such a disconnection in fact exist, or is it merely a stance taken—an ideal of disconnection constructed to support cultural beliefs and habits? I suggest the latter is the case and that this stance is continually reinforced by a number of behaviours within the culture.

It occurred to me that the internal splitting I was experiencing as an artist was mirrored in myriad cultural ways, and that the splitting of vision has a long history—one that has everything to do with our way of Being-in-the-world.

This essay is a response to the anti-ocular from inside the practice of visual art, through the lens of philosophy. It also constitutes an enquiry into a theory of visual embodiment and what I will call visual Being in the world. I believe that art has a vitally important role in cultures. By drawing us into a relational and sensual world, art denies dualisms while affirming difference. To quote writer and critic Jeanette Winterson, “art, by its nature, objects” (139).

My intention here is to unravel some prevailing cultural beliefs about art and the visual by way of a personal journey through visual art and arts practice. I also intend to show how art is embodied in the world, engaged with myriad others. To do this I consider the relationship between the lived and the visual through the practice and experience of art-making. I then follow with an enquiry into the nature of the artwork in the world and the relationship between the work and the viewer. There is no intention on my part to engage with an in-depth analysis of anti-visual discourse, but as much as possible to locate my enquiry within an exploration of lived experience. As an enquiry, this essay promises no final truths, but a process, a journey through the contested territory of the sensual world of art and vision.

This essay is primarily indebted to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on art and the visual in *Eye and Mind*, as well as to Martin Jay’s thorough study and critique of anti-ocular discourse in the twentieth century, *Downcast Eyes*. Other valuable resources include the writings and ideas of philosopher Glen Mazis and philosopher/cultural ecologist David Abram, the work of psychologists James Gibson and Laura Sewall on vision, and writer Jeanette Winterson’s essays on art.

While I cannot speak for all visual artists when I make the observations and assertions that I do within this essay, I am aware that observations that I make on the art-making process reflect the lived experiences of others, as well as my own.

Visual Being in a world of subjects

What do I mean by visual Being? What do I mean by subject? For the purposes of this essay a subject is a being with agency. This subject may be considered animate, inanimate, seen, or unseen. A subject may be an object, an other, a differently bodied force. Visual Being is the embodied visual. Vision is of the eyes, of the body, of the mind, of our entire selves. We are present in our vision, embodied within vision as vision is in us, so that when we extend ourselves into the world visually, we really are extending our *selves*, embodied. As we encounter others, and others encounter us, we may engage, and converse, through vision. We do not have to be within physical proximity to touch, to converse. Through vision we may be, as Merleau-Ponty points out, “everywhere at once” (187).

Vision itself has a mixed reputation in Western culture. We love it, vilify it, attempt to master it, pin it down for deconstruction, and use it as a tool for the deconstruction. Vision is culturally problematic because it ties us to the body as sensual beings. On the other hand, vision is also a problem by virtue of our insisting on its being disembodied and located in the mind. Anti-ocular discourse has claimed that vision is inherently distancing, objectifying, and even pornographic. Wildly diverse critics of a carnal sight, from St. Augustine to Irigaray, have argued that taking pleasure from the visual is spiritually, morally, and/or ideologically suspect. But visual pleasure is an integral part of who we are as beings embodied within a sensual world. Vision, along with the other senses, is how we locate ourselves within the vast matrix of Being. The visual is a significant aspect of a web of relationship linking self, other, and world.

The splitting of vision—a little historical context

Implicit in a quest to re-embody the visual is an assertion that vision has been disembodied. If vision *has* been disembodied, how did that happen, and which vision are we speaking about? There appear to be several. Psychologist James Gibson speaks of two aspects of visual perception: “the visual field” and the “visual world” (Jay 4). Lacan and Foucault differentiated between the eye and the gaze, while Plato spoke of differences between the inner eye and the eye of the senses.

Although the current critique of the visual insists that Western culture has been firmly ocularcentric, the reality is more complicated than that. We continue to believe that we have, in a sense, two visions—the embodied vision of the senses and the disembodied and objectifying vision of the mind. The boundaries of these are vast, shifting, and blurred, making any critique of vision a bit unstable in itself.

Current thinking on the visual continues to follow a pattern set at the beginning of Western philosophy. Plato asserts that “surveying through the eyes is full of deceit, and so is perception through the ears and the other senses” (Mazis 51). Yet he also recognizes the value and necessity of visual perception, and so he designates a kind of rarified, or true, vision to the realm of the intellect, or soul, maintaining that “we see

through the eyes, not with them” (Jay 27). This splitting of vision persisted through most of the Middle Ages with ecstatic visions as sublime gifts from God being valued, while at the same time vision, along with the other senses and the pleasures they gave, would lead one into sin. Inner vision brought one closer to God and immortality, while engaging through the embodied senses enforced one’s mortality, leading to death.

Descartes and the Enlightenment brought us so-called Cartesian dualism, establishing the supremacy of the observer over the things observed. From this perspective, the world becomes less threatening, being mere matter and mechanism—something absolutely different than what we conceive of as human, so completely devoid of soul, mind, or agency that we may legitimately seek to control it absolutely. In the Enlightenment dream Man arrives at the centre of the universe. Our eyes, mere tools, assist us in observing, from a safe distance, the mechanics of the world and the heavens—affirming once again that vision itself is of the mind. This insistence on distancing ourselves from the world promoted a disembodied, disembodied vision, and linear perspective—a celebration of distance—rose to prominence, becoming the true, the enlightened way of seeing.

But Descartes’s world is a solitary place where the very existence of everything outside of the subject mind is suspect. There is no place in a disembodied world for the agency of the other. When we see only ourselves reflected, separated from the community of others and of the world, we make ourselves alone.

During the twentieth century a critical response to the longtime primacy of a subjective, controlling, and objectifying vision developed and rose to dominance. In the latter half of the twentieth century art and cultural theory were swept by a tsunami of extreme anti-ocular criticism, including the ideas of Sartre, Lacan, Foucault, and Debord. Vision came to represent all that was most tainted and oppressive as, in the words of Martin Jay, “The evil eye emerged from the realm of superstition to become the ruling metaphor of social control and political oppression at its most insidious” (378).

This critique itself remains located firmly within the ubiquitous authority of dualistic thinking, as a perversely objectifying analytic vision became an ever more powerful tool in the critique of the visual. Through its forms of isolation, obsessive examination, and intensive deconstruction, the practice itself embodies the form it seeks to critique, taking us ever farther from body and world.

Prevailing attitudes in the art world were significantly shaped by this mood of intense and suspicious regard. As may be imagined, in such a climate visual art has a rough ride. Throughout the twentieth century, as the practice of art-making itself was increasingly called into question, talking and writing about art came to be of more value than the works themselves. As writer and critic Bram Dijkstra put it, “contemporary culture has learned to glorify concepts of expression over expression itself. This realm of art as theory has become a fail-safe formula for the intellectual identification of what is

art . . .” (100). Not only was art made subject to the discourse, but within this framework, the discourse itself became art—a self-referencing cycle of discourse on discourse.

Artworks past and present became suspect, subjected to intense deconstruction as anti-ocular fervour raced through the cultural world like a virus. The anti-visual was also at the core of new feminist critique, as vision was deemed to be *essentially* objectifying. Vision and visual art were considered specifically representative of Western, male-dominated, imperialistic practice, while at the same time works that suggested an embodied, sensual, or essential relationship with the world, or nature, were harshly criticized and pejoratively labeled essentialist. While the intention of this critique has merit, it relies heavily on maintaining the convention of the mind-body split and actually reinforces existing systems of dominance and control.

Vision is not a tool. If we attempt to treat it as one, we may also become vision’s victims, as we objectify, dissect, pin down, and are pinned down by the disembodied gaze. Because we are not separate from the world, as we take apart the world in this way, we take apart our selves.

Attending and shining forth

If we are to redeem vision, we must look in other ways and in other places. The place where I have found a discussion of vision and embodiment that resonates most closely with lived experience is in the discipline of phenomenology, particularly in the work and writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. What occurred to me immediately on learning about the phenomenological attitude is its parallel with the way that I perceive the world as an artist. I call this process listening, or attending, and have often heard it referred to as a state of presence, or of being present-with.

The phenomenological attitude may be described as a focused attending to the other. In order to allow the world, or a being in the world, to reveal itself to us, to shine forth, as Heidegger put it, we must put aside our expectations, projections, objectifications, and judgements, allowing the world to speak. Allowing ourselves to see or to hear the other may be a better way of putting this, and since everything is, in its own Being, shining forth, it is our attention that requires adjustment. Martin Jay expresses a similar view.

The more benign version of sight, which refuses to stare aggressively at its objects, is dependent on a primordial opening to Being which is prior to the very differentiation of the senses Here the viewer is situated within a reflective, circumspect visual field, not outside it . . . (275)

This opening to Being may not be as far distant from our everyday lived world as we might like to think. Our own lived experience “forbids us to conceive of vision as an operation of thought that would set up before the mind a picture, or representation of the world, a world of immanence and ideality” (Merleau-Ponty 162).

Vision is powerful in both our ability to see and our ability to visualize—vision permeates our Being and extends us into the world, connecting. Seeing does not *innately* consist of the projection, or imposition of an interior vision onto the world. Neither does seeing appropriate the world; rather, vision is an opening to world and other. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, “Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens himself to the world” (162).

The senses are an opening within the world. They allow us to experience the other, and more than that, to engage in an intimate exchange, “the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives” (Abram 57). Presence is the necessary beginning of an intentional dialogue between self and other at the heart of the art-making process. The world is always speaking, but because we are primarily concerned with the human, most of the time we do not allow ourselves to listen attentively. What if we were to listen, attend, respond—knowingly participate in the conversation?

There is no better way that I can think of to illustrate this attentive Being-in-the-world than through a description of the experience of art-making.

The presence and Being of things—art-making as embodied conversation

Art-making is a collaborative process that begins with interaction, a conversation. The artist opens and attends to the world through focused, sensual, intimate, and often fruitful intercourse with another, or with many others. “The artist,” writer and theorist Jeanette Winterson tells us, “is looking for real presences” (147).

Imagine a large space filled with many conversations and opportunities for interchange; how do I choose with whom and what to engage? As I move about, I am attracted, not always understanding why. Even in an empty room, there is still a manner of light, of form and shape that will call to me more loudly, interest me more than another, requesting my engagement. At times, I intentionally listen for what calls to me the most, for the “voice” I find the most intriguing. Once the reciprocity of attentiveness and intention is established, I become acutely aware of my engagement with another force, or presence.

This experience of reciprocity and engagement is available to me always, not just as I approach with an intention, or an idea, of making art. As I move about and through the world, opportunities for engagement are continually presented to me. I may ignore them, hurry by, acknowledge the other quickly in passing, or sometimes I am called to attend, to focus. This may happen when the one-eyed cat arrives in my path, or when morning light hits the stone of the wall and the blue door. Then, if I desire more than a passing awareness of connection, if I desire focused engagement with this other, what is required is acknowledgement of that other—not as an object in my path, but as another

presence—and a willing slowness, as things not only take time, but make their own time.

Touching and being touched—perceptual reciprocity

In the space between self and other there may be a twinkle, a frisson, an electric song . . . here . . . or here It is this that I listen and feel for—this murmuring in between self and world. I stop, and attend. Then, as I attend, “the present expands to become an enveloping field of presence” (Abram 203). In practice, what this means is that I lose track of linear time—or indeed of any conscious awareness of time while I am engaged in this interchange with another.

The closest description would be that of a continuous present, where each detail is sharp, immediate, declaring itself without expectations. While working, whether I am drawing, painting, or photographing, my attention is honed and oddly expanded into an attentive focus that is both a participatory interchange and a sensual intercourse. I am drawn into the sensible mystery of the other, into strange languages, sensations, and a shared vision that is not only my own, but also other.

This communion assumes and acknowledges the agency, the real presence, of the other. In Western culture it is not usually supposed that so-called inanimate objects have agency. We relegate such ideas and experiences to the realm of fantasy, or childhood—and perhaps children do engage through a less clouded vision. As a child, the wind and the birds spoke to me, and I to them; this was not so much as I desired, but simply as the world was. In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram speaks often about the agency of things such as rivers, trees, and winds, noting that this recognition of agency is unremarkable in many non-Western¹ cultures—it is simply the way the world is. In the world of the artist, objects such as houses, shoes, and chairs have their own Being and their own stories to tell.

The artist is a translator; one who has learned to pass into her own language the languages gathered from stones, from birds, from dreams, from the body, from the material world, from the invisible world, from sex, from death, from love.
(146)

I recall a film of an elephant, gently and tenderly enquiring of an elephant skull on the plain. For a long time she touched around, through, caressing and gathering the stories of this other. As I am present, embodied within my vision, reaching out to another, I am reminded of this elephant carefully and lovingly touching and turning the skull.

¹It is worth noting that David Abram frequently explores resonances between the ideas and ontology of Merleau-Ponty and those of some North American and Australian First Peoples. “Non-Western” in this instance may be best understood as not embodying or embracing the peculiar and dangerous reductive ontology of Modernity, rather than referencing any specific cultural group.

We are all familiar with the sense of being stared at, when we literally feel the gaze of another—and not only of human others, but of the non-human as well. Visual touching is a subtle thing to our Western selves, yet we acknowledge it when we declare that we feel ourselves undressed by the gaze of another, or when I feel the eyes of the bear on me while walking in the forest.

We are always seen, as well as seeing. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, “. . . my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself . . .” (162). This self is also seen by the other, so vision begins with and returns to the self as a kind of circuit, a current cycling through self and other. Speaking about Cézanne and his dialogue with Mont St. Victoire, Merleau-Ponty observes that “. . . the same thing is both out there in the world and here in the heart of vision . . . It is the mountain itself which from out there makes itself seen by the painter; it is the mountain that he interrogates with his gaze” (166).

My vision extends as my very self, never disembodied, so that when I am attending to the shape and contour of a stone with my eyes, my hand on the paper is translating the story of that stone. I feel this other tactilely—the surface, the texture, the temperature, the form. This stone is telling me about its own stoneness, as distinct from any other stone. This stone is engaged with me.

Art-making is always collaboration. One must be, or become, good at listening—attentive to the murmuring between self and other, self and world. This attentiveness is always present in creative process and in the interchange among myriad others, oneself, and the work. Working with these others regularly requires more and different ways of listening, of negotiating languages of process.

Jeanette Winterson describes the role and process of the artist as that of translator, and in speaking of this practice she asks us to reflect on related questions: “What is the language, the world, of stones? What is the language, the world, of birds? Of atoms? Of microbes? Of colours? Of air?” (146). Some listening occurs with effort, but the place where listening and hearing become effortless is the place to find, because there is the intimate connection of intention—the new life of the work.

The place of the manifestation of the work is where inspirations and visions come together, at times collide; but it seems to me that the invisible murmuring of shared process leads form to resolve itself to this intention (murmuring)—and then interesting things happen. We can see and hear that the piece has its own life and desires its own form. Sometimes I am visited in a dream, or a vision, or on waking from sleep know exactly what is next wanting to resolve itself.

We speak of inspiration, and the word should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, action and passion so slightly discernable

that it becomes impossible to distinguish between what sees and what is seen, what paints and what is painted. (Merleau-Ponty 167)

A kind of immersion in pleasure is inherent in the intensity and immediacy, the sensuality of this coupling with another. Such a coupling requires active surrender—the naked presence of the self.

The language I use to describe the process of art-making is loaded with words like intimacy, intercourse, gestate, and birthing, because it is like carrying the intention and growth of a new form until it is born—which is sometimes difficult—and then there is the postpartum sadness when it is no longer moving within me. The experience bears out Merleau-Ponty's observation that "the painter's vision is a continued birth" (168).

Art, image, and agency

What is this artwork manifested, born into the world? What is this other, this new presence? Is it a mere document, a record of ideas and theories, a spectacle? Or is the artwork a subject, a being unto itself? "It is a spectacle of something only by being 'a spectacle of nothing,' by breaking the 'skin of things' to show how the things become things, how the world becomes world" (Merleau-Ponty 181). Jeanette Winterson comments that "a fully realised work has an identity that is not the identity of its characters, or the identity of its author" (170), supporting the understanding that the artwork is its own self, with its own presence in the world.

There are, in my experience, two basic ways by which I might approach an artwork complete or in process. The first way is the way of objective distancing and deconstructive analysis. Approaching in this way, I have already distanced myself, set and limited the terms of engagement. This objective analysis keeps me on the surface of things, away from depth and from the dizzying experience of intimate knowing. The other way is the way of presence—of open attending without expectation—in acknowledgement that here is a shared being-in-the-world, a common ground of Being, and an opportunity for conversation and interchange. Heidegger's distinction between wonder and curiosity comes to mind—wonder being an open allowing of manifestation, and curiosity being an imposition, a kind of forcing of oneself upon the other in order to pry forth secrets.

Although artworks may not be considered "nature" as we have defined both, neither are they merely human productions, or predictable artefacts. It is, I believe, important to approach artworks with some respect. As Jeanette Winterson comments, "Art is odd, and the common method of either taming it, or baiting it, cannot succeed. Who at the zoo has any sense of the lion?" (5). When I regard the lion, do I experience a spectacle, an object, or another intelligence, strange but familiar, meeting me gaze to gaze?

If an artwork is a presence and so, in the terms of this discussion, a subject, what of the mass-produced images ubiquitous in our culture? Images and fragments of artworks are

re-worked in the context of marketing and political persuasion. Images, aside from our own intentions when using them, are not innocent of an inherent presence and intention. If they were, they could not be as effective as they are—and as a marketing tool, an image would be no more valuable than a line of text. In reality, images, being more than signs or objects, do not always affect us as we would choose or predict. In *How Images Think*, Ron Burnett considers the intimacy generated between viewer and viewed, and the agency of images.

Images . . . are an integral component of everything that we define as sensual . . . “to see an image” does not have to mean that the “it” is outside of or beyond vision. No sooner seen than a part of the seer. And strangely, yet also wondrously, images form as well as deform in a circular fashion within and outside of bodies, marking us in a variety of ways which are sometimes predictable and often times, not. (75)

The ways we are marked by images are unpredictable, in the same way that we cannot predict how we are marked by any interchange. Our very use of images and fragments of artworks admits to the embodied potency of the visual, of images—and of art.

Opening the eye of the heart—reciprocity and the embodied gaze

CaNte Ista. Those are the words used to describe a way of seeing that is good and true . . . the true place of the heart is—in that circle where all things are connected . . . CaNte Ista, through the eye of the heart.

Joseph Bruchac, “The Place of the Heart” (85)

There is no denying the potency of art. We have outlawed art, burned art, and glorified art. This is not because art is a mirror, a line of text, or a representation, but because art is something more. “Art has deep and difficult eyes and for many the gaze is too insistent. Better to pretend that art is dumb, or at least has nothing to say that makes sense to us” (Winterson 11). We have turned art into pictures in an effort to mask its potency.

A painting, an image, is not a tabula rasa on which I write, a passive recipient of my gaze, an object onto which I project whatever meaning I desire. Neither is the world a collection of lifeless objects onto which I project meanings. Images speak to us. Art speaks to us. Art proves an intimate, animate world. Art invites us in—at times, seduces us. We are seduced because we desire connection, and perhaps this seduction is a very spark of life between self and other, requiring us to be present and attentive. In its very being, art bears the traces of intimate contact, tells us stories of interconnections and strangely familiar intimacies. We enter the image. The image enters us. Through vision, we experience the world as a place of intimate connections, of constant interchange among self and others. This intimacy frightens and entices, we want to hold it back; but this intimacy does not have to be one of control, of taking, or of appropriation. Real intimacy is not about power over another, but of power with an other—or with many

others. “Love is reciprocity and so is art (Winterson, 139); . . . its true effort is to open to us the dimensions of the spirit and of the self that normally lie smothered under the weight of living” (137).

The world is a place of agencies and powers, continually mysterious to us, since we cannot know these agencies and powers by denying their existence or by reducing the world to matter and mechanisms to be deconstructed and thereby understood—as if things were inanimate, and completely at our disposal.

These other powers do not reveal themselves to us through denial or deconstruction. Things look back at us. The world returns our gaze. We are held within that gaze as we hold the world in ours.

The sensibility of the artist and the act of art-making deny notions of separation. To participate in the process is to participate with many others, to acknowledge agencies and powers seen and unseen. The artist brings back visions—visions recounting the stories of others, visions holding traces of Being outside the human, and ultimately, visions that hold meanings and messages that remind us of our entanglements with and in a world much larger and complex than we consciously acknowledge. The artist dwells in the mutable boundaries between human sensibility and the more than human. She negotiates and mediates, engaging passionately and fearlessly with other powers.

As all beings hold in themselves their genesis, so art bears witness to relations and correspondences outside reductive notions of what is true or acceptable. Art opens the eyes of the heart, and the world returns our gaze. “Vision alone makes us learn that beings that are different, ‘exterior’, foreign to one another, are yet absolutely together” (Merleau-Ponty 187). Choosing to acknowledge our innately inter-relational Being in the world is to welcome uncertainty, relinquishing illusions of control. It is to meet and return the radiant gaze of the world.

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BETH CARRUTHERS is a philosophy-based environmental humanities scholar and artist best known for her work investigating the role of the arts in human-world and interspecies relations. For more than two decades, through presentations, publications, and pedagogy, she has brought a uniquely Canadian perspective to global conversations on culture and sustainability. More information at bethcarruthers.com

Notes

“Returning the Radiant Gaze” was first written between 2003 and 2006. It was motivated by a desire for an alternative to the mainstream philosophical/theoretical framework, or language, in which to consider the role and presence of art and art-making in the world, which is, after all, a world far greater than the human. This version has received very minor revisions, ensuring it remains the same essay that has been taught, studied, and cited over the past decade. I am very pleased to see it published in *The Goose*.