Erudition is an easily and frequently misused term, either conflated with dilettantism in its dismissal, or too liberally applied to any endeavour which appears to stray beyond one rigidly bound disciplinary identity to another. Both approaches may be seen to operate as defensive measures, fending off perceptible threats of a genuine and profound erudition to the epistemological foundations of any scholarly discipline. Describing Jay Johnston’s book *Angels of Desire* as ‘erudite’ could imply that it is too slippery, too challenging or too broad in its scope; however, it is this combination of scope and intensity that invites a meditation on the concept of erudition, and the implications of erudite literature on the practice and understanding of scholarship, not only within academia, but throughout the meditative and reflective practices that are considered throughout the work.

*Angels of Desire* is an immense work. This is not due to excessive length (it comprises 270 pages) or laborious prose. On the contrary, Johnston’s engaging, flowing prose invites the reader to enter into an earnest and occasionally seductive engagement with a broad range of fields, encompassing a range of European philosophers, contemporary scholarship on Vedic texts and the Boddhisatva, and critical work on subjectivity in relation to aesthetics and human ethics.

My entry into Johnston’s book was principally through aesthetics, and a critical interest in scholarship that explores the often-paradoxical relationship between a deconstruction of the viewing subject with the ethical imperatives embedded in certain situations of spectatorship. Johnston introduces the work of feminist philosopher Kelly Oliver on witnessing to a critical consideration of the alternative or emergent subjectivities proposed by Luce Irigaray. She examines both in relation to a Deleuzian consideration of the ontology of the aesthetic encounter as a time–space encounter slipping beyond a fixed subjectivity or subject position.

Johnston’s key interpretation in this encounter leads to the consideration of spectatorship as a practice, rather than an event or an ontology (such as the male gaze trope of psychoanalytic feminist aesthetics). Johnston uses Oliver’s exploration of witnessing in order to develop an account not only of what happens in spectatorship, but what could happen in the deliberate practice of a present, self aware, engaged form of spectatorship that is able to move consciously through relationships of proximity and distance:

> The look of love is not a passive enamoured gaze, it is an active practice that embraces the discomfort of not knowing, not recognising and not being able to master or control the Other. Looking is an artistry and it is work. The way one looks is an ethical choice: one does just not perceive, one chooses how to perceive (p. 215).

The call to witnessing articulated in the sentence above provides a glimpse of an inter-subjective relation that can be extended from an ethical practice of aesthetics to a broader cultivation of inter-subjective relations in the world. Johnston repeatedly refers to subjects of difference, as a way of articulating the space where difference (and *différence*) emerges in our encounters with ourselves and the worlds that emerge as ‘others’, as alterities: points of difference, distinction, desire and incomprehension. This allows for a temporal account of subjectivity as differential and emergent, which does not deny broader historical and social relations, but is not determined by or representable within such
forces. Subjects of difference emerge in the *durée* of the encounter, and in the practice of awareness and perception; they belong to the *durée* of that conscious awareness.

Johnston’s aesthetic account of subtle subjectivity has many resonances with the work of art practice. Artists frequently describe the confounding experiences of delving into dumb matter, spending time in an (often painful) awareness of the edges of their own capacity or understanding, in a mute but deeply sentient and contemplative encounter with materials. This *durée* occasionally allows the fleeting moments of alchemical magic to occur, where the art object takes shape as an entity that is of and not of the artist, and both of and not of the contemplative viewer. It is in this particular practice of making and witnessing that the ‘other’ of the artwork is able to emerge as unspoken for.

In addition to witnessing and aesthetics, Johnston explores a range of other considerations of inter-subjectivity, particularly the Buddhist concept of *sunya* as a practice of awareness based not so much on an absence of the subject or a state of emptiness, as on a particular cultivation of subtle subjectivity. Within this framework, difference between subjects, or subject and non-subject, becomes multiplicitous, hovering between spirit, matter, desire, sensation, affect and percept as a shimmering of possibilities, just beyond the realm of comprehension as any particular form. Johnston explores the multiplicitous condition of subtle bodies in a range of religious and esoteric practices, including conceptions of angels and other subtle beings in a number of spiritualist accounts.

Beyond the study of comparative religion, the subtle bodies and ‘inter-subjective’ conditions explored in *Angels of Desire* invite the reader to consider the practice of knowing (and not knowing) as a deliberate, conscious and reflexive practice. This is described as holistic practice of mind and body, where conscious mind–body cultivation is required, as well as the patience to ‘sit’ with the unresolved, unrecognisable, unknown. As Johnston states:

> To enter into relations of subtle subjectivity—being conscious of the third—is both to acknowledge one’s extensive boundaries—one’s soft edges—and to acknowledge the hard edge of the unknowable, the mystery which this nebulous matter—consciousness—interpenetrates. It is these hard edges that call for the surrendering of discourses of mastery and recognition and for the cultivation of witnessing (p. 260).

*Angels of Desire* exemplifies this epistemology as a generous and genuine erudition. The book invites us to cultivate our capacity to sense the soft edges of our own awareness, and presents a myriad of fields where readers may encounter the hard edges of fields that we do not understand. It invites us to be present with this hard edge of incomprehension, to cultivate a witnessing, as a practice of being present over time, on the thresholds of presence and absence of understanding, complete and utter bewilderment, and delight at the extent and marvellousness of the worlds in which we find ourselves.

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