

What does the surveyor do? She surveys the land. She makes the cuts and apportionments that make the land legible. That's a rock, she says, slicing a section from the unbounded swirling chaos. That's a tree and there's a mountain. It's this many meters tall. Over here is a glade and beyond that a river. If animals come to water she counts and classifies them. When she finishes chopping and slicing she has made the land and it is nearly whole and the only missing piece is herself.

The sea is trickier. First of all there are the waves! That's a wave, that's a wave, that's a wave; and yet, are they waves? How can she cut all these waves that are waves and are 'are they waves?' She needs a sharper tool. She uses the stars. With them she notches degrees and spins lattices to walk upon. Soon the empty horizon before her becomes West and like magic she feels East at her heels. Now at last she's found her footing but the end result is the same. To survey the sea she's had to excise herself, another keyhole with the outline of a monk.

It's no small business this surveying. To see the world, to represent it to herself, the surveyor first needs a self to represent it to. Therefore her first cut is always the cut between herself and the world she surveys. No small wonder that she feels alienated. Try as she might none of her subsequent slicing can help. No form of knowledge can overcome the alienation which is its condition of possibility.

Lucky for us art is not a form of knowledge. Its goal is not to slice the universe into a sequence of known quantities but to engender sensation, to make sensible the relations that precede them. To do so it eschews cutting and opts for connecting. It reorganizes knowledge's objects according to new principles. They can be as provisional and subjective as 'I like blue' or as rigorous and purposeless as a time signature. In so doing, art revels in and reveals the eternal malleability of the universe that knowledge seeks to fix. When it's good at least, you could say that art reminds us surveyors to feel the currents moving through the waves and the 'are they waves'. At least I think Viola's art does.

SB

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