About looking

1
A few years ago, I gave a series of lectures within the MSc1 programme of the group Interiors Buildings Cities here at TU Delft that attempted to describe questions regarding fields of knowledge—*epistemes*—that were of special interest to the group's design teaching. These lectures concerned themes we set for all the design studios in the year, and issues that seemed be persistent: context(s), the complex question of experience, and the matter of attention. All of these tended to overlap, and carry within them questions of epistemologies, theories, and methodologies. And, as things in matters of thoughts about design, and attitudes towards the world that one makes work within are complex, these lectures tended to be quite long. What I will not do today is summarise the group's 'position'. Rather, I will touch upon its concerns through what we might regard as settings for our projects, the concerns that emerge, the ways we describe those concerns, the tools we tend to use to articulate them, and, I hope, what we try to 'unlock' by working in this way. There is no doubt that the connections between things, which I have been making for some time, are those typical of a meandering mind.

2
The first thing to say, is that our central method involves looking. 'About looking' is borrowed from the title of a book of essays by the late British artist, writer and critic John Berger, who looked at artefacts emerging from culture that proposed themselves as cultural artefacts, both critically and tenderly.

3
And this, the necessity to address the conditions or the artefact one confronts by inquiring deeply into 'what it is', is fundamental to what we are doing (what YOU are doing) in the Research Seminar, requiring a very careful inquiry into appearances, the contexts of appearances, the address of appearances.

4
In short, what is required is a kind of acute attention, which reveals, or hopes to reveal, significant facts. In becoming conscious of those facts, we, as architects—as cultural agents as much as technicians—may be able to act more precisely, responsibly, sympathetically.

5
I wish to get to that point by talking first about the matter of 'conditions'; those propositions of powers (they might be colonising or imperialist powers, or those soft powers of ideology) that have been, and remain, far-reaching and pervasive. These propositions, or projections, concern territory and the form of the city; they pervade institutions and are intent on the forming of the subject. (1 the making of the subject) There are a multitude of effects that ensue from these propositions, which we can describe as situating our activities and what we make: the effects of material culture: objects and artefacts, both long-lasting and ephemeral. We, as individuals, are also shaped by these propositions: how we see ourselves, in the world and in relation to others; or subjectivities. (2 reading material culture) I will talk about this through a few incidents, and the critical views and offerings of a few artistic practices, ending on what I think of as the positive possibilities germane to those practices, their essential character, and the place and necessity of attention. (3 attention and empathy)

6
1 The making of the subject
The architectural historian Leonardo Benevolo described a moment, in his History of the
Architecture of the Renaissance (1968), when the primacy of the body as a measure in
the design of architecture and cities was superseded by the primacy of the mind, and of
projection. He was discussing the case of colonies in the Americas…

7
…and the patterns superimposed on distant lands, whose spaces were both unknown
and occupied by hostile 'others'. Here, in the British colony of Savannah (now the state
of Georgia, named after George III). Note the grid used to organise the houses. It is a
system, apparently contained by the deep forest all around it. But like the Roman
military settlements of 1700 years previous, it is an index of a system which could be
repeated anywhere, establishing an order not only within its confines, but throughout
the territory beyond. That order would shape a space of agreement within, which was
antagonistic to the space without (and others within it). For its notion of its own
survival, it would have to subdue and master that other space, and those who dwelt
there.

8
This was the logic of the colonial settlement, established, after all, as a 'safe haven' for
the conduct of trade and export of resources extracted from the land subject to
colonisation. Here, the settlement of Batavia, founded by the East India Company, a
Dutch colony thereafter, now Jakarta, Indonesia. What is notable about the form of
these settlements is their resemblance to prevailing notions of administrative and
technological order in the mother country: in this case, as in New Amsterdam (now New
York) figured with canals.

9
Benevolo was particularly affected by the implications of a 'disembodied' idea of the city
and territory contained in the American Thomas Jefferson's Land Ordinance of 1785,
which imagined and projected a system for surveying, ordering, and organising a
territory in the North American continental interior that was unseen and unknown. The
system would define the boundaries of these territories, of future states, of land
holdings, of townships, their subdivisions, individual pieces of property and the
dimensions of building materials from which they were made. It would work regardless
of local circumstances or local occupants of the land, who would, by necessity for the
survival of the project, be eliminated. The settler would assume the place of, and replace
the other, as original occupant.

10
The Land Ordinance was a system that allowed the entire unknown territory to become
part of an interior, whose spaces and resources could be owned and exploited. The grid
which ensued caught everything within it, even the Eden on Earth of Yosemite,
photographed here by Carleton Watkins in the early 1860s, by which time it was used as
evidence of God's approval of the American project, proof of Americans' 'manifest
destiny'.

11
The imaginary grid as projection became a grid of method, a grid of land-division, a grid
of social order, a figure mapped across American sensibilities, free of the histories or

realities or presence of any other. The ideological project, in which land became the space of exploitation and self-realisation through labour, had a spatial character, whose condition shaped its subjects, who could believe within this condition that they were self-reliant, autonomous and individual. This idea is imprinted upon the American sensibility, as is clearly evidenced today, essential to the ideology of the American Right in particular.

12
Bringing the matter of shaping the subject closer in space and time, the programme of re-shaping Paris between 1850 and 1870 engineered by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann had a profound effect on the city's citizens and how they related to its fabric and each other.

13
Following a 'model' established by Louis XIV, of straight streets cut through existing urban districts and new and orderly squares designed for graceful displays of power, Haussmann planned a series of cuts, intended to define and divide the city into a set of administrative units, or arrondissements, eliminate the city's dark spaces, seen as breeding grounds of social and political dissent, enable the movement of military and police units to quell any such demonstrations, establish a city-wide, multi-faceted infrastructure system, alter the character of existing districts and define the character of new districts, and shape the urban subject.

14
The building works, which could be described as a programme of demolitions, involved the expropriation of properties and the dark interiors of ancient *îlots*, exposing them, in the words of Marshall Berman (*All That is Solid Melts into Air*), to the light. The denizens of the dark, the fomenters of unrest, would have nowhere to hide.

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The programme of demolitions would enable complete reordering, and correspondingly, complete disorientation, through which a new order of control and subjection might be achieved.

16
The shaping of the urban subject through a new idea of the city, bearing little resemblance to what was known or experienced by its citizens previously, was the object of Ildefons Cerdà's Ensanche Plan for Barcelona. A condition was created in which the city could expand as much as it needed to, with the object of eliminating the distinction between city and countryside. Both would be subject to *urbanizacíon*, and its subjects formed by this new condition.

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The urban block is not solid but punctured by air and gardens; an opposite of the known and dense historical centre; the entire fabric is repetitive, diffuse. This, like Ludwig Hilberseimer's *Großstadarchitektur*, would create new kinds of people.

18
Returning to the case of Paris, new streets and boulevards would provide imagery and a catalogue of equipment for citizens to interact with, and spaces in which they were visible.

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The buildings were subject to sets of regulations regarding their colour, materiality, order, disposition of building elements, all creating an image of homogeneity…

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…which masked ordered economic and social heterogeneity within. Here, Edmund Texier's well-known section through a Parisien *immeuble*, illustrating, in its internal hierarchies, the stratification of society itself, each floor the proper place for an echelon of the social order, visible, yet veiled, from the street.

21
The painter Gustave Caillebotte, in his views of Paris streets and interiors, described the experience of its realties, alternating between asperity and spectacle…

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…an element of which was its display of organisation and technology. One could talk about this paradigmatic nineteenth-century metropolis *ad infinitum*,…

23
…but I would like to return to its framing and limiting of its citizens, as subjects. Richard Sennett, in the Fall of Public Man, writes of an enforced conformity, in the way people dressed in public, without demonstration of individuality, but subtle indications of their station in life, the imprint of their position, much like how they would be defined by the floor they occupied in the Haussmannian *immeuble*.

24
Interestingly, Caillebotte also painted those subjects involved in the maintenance of its framing imagery.

25
The working metropolis, resplendent with its representations, its very own imagery, was also an elaborate device or machine, whose workings could only be admired and endlessly improved upon. Here, Eugène Hénard's improved street of apartments, integrated with an underground infrastructural system, the surface of the street acting as roof for an elaborated and invisible 'engine'.

26
The city as machine was an extension of ideas of reform arising out of the Enlightenment, in which every aspect of the administration of a state was to be quantified and designed, and through which 'faults' could be treated, isolated, eliminated: faults, such as disease, insanity, or criminality. These ideas shaped not only administrative processes, but the architecture of state institutions themselves, whose processes upon subjects were given form by architecture. Here, Bethlem Hospital for the Insane, in London.

27
Another insane asylum, in Morristown, New Jersey, which offered plenty of fresh air and, crucially, distance from the city, and a corresponding invisibility.

28
A conventional hospital, in which processes of treatment were tied to isolation, manifest administrative organisation, all articulated through architectural sequences.

29
Similar principles would be tied to other institutions dedicated to repair and reform. A house of detention in Clerkenwell, London

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A prison in Paris

31
A state penitentiary in Pennsylvania, United States of America. One notes, within the plan, the device of a central point of control, echoing…

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…Jeremy Bentham's idea for a prison—a *panopticon*—in which people would behave well if they sensed their movements and activities were under surveillance at all times, whether they were or not. The panopticon featured a central tower, ostensibly manned by a guard, who remained invisible while being able to watch inmates in their cells arranged around the tower. As in these other institutions, behaviour was controlled; part of the regime of punishment (or cure) was complete surveillance. The critical theorist Michel Foucault wrote, in books such as *Discipline and Punish*, and *Knowledge/Power* of these institutions' shaping of the subject. The subject could be reformed, or cured, through subjection, or subjugation, of the body and the mind.

33
The reform could be imposed on the body for the simple sin of poverty or being unable to pay debts; the presence or the very idea of such institutions, such as debtors' prisons, reinforced norms of behaviour and the idea of limits upon actions of individuals.

34
This notion of reform, even in the service of social liberation, tended to the erection of institutions whose physical forms were intended to elicit ideal and predictable behaviour. Here, Charles Fourier's idea of a model society, articulated by Victor Considerant, within a *phalanstére*, the word derived from a phalanx, a military grouping, all dedicated to one cause, the reform of society, accommodated in a 'palace'…

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…which was realised in some way by Jean-Baptiste Godin in Guise, in a *familistère*, in which men and women—working in a local factory, and so tied to it in the manner of a company town— would be 'liberated' in their daily lives: from their children, from each other; yet they would be drawn together in this commune shaped by ideology.

36
That ideology would find itself reinforced in all manner of institutions of the state, but also in those places one does not think of as institutions, such as the Opera. Here, Charles Garnier's Opéra de Paris, and its renowned staircase, performing like a theatre itself, where people could see themselves and others…

37

The design of its circulation systems in fact segregated various parts of its public, based on social position, with an entire system dedicated to the Emperor Louis Napoléon III. A machine of spectacle, certainly, but one that reinforced, subtly and almost invisibly, the structures of power.

39

…whilst providing imagery of 'universal' access and agency (for those classes privileged to access its illusions).

39

The invisible organisation of ideology is reinforced through its typical scenes, in places that embody notions of freedom and agency, such as the *grand magasin*. Here, Le Bon Marché, developed by Aristide Boucicault, inspired by his visit to the Great Exhibition's Crystal Palace in London, 1851,…

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…where goods were visibly accessible, including, for the first time, their prices. Its glass bazaar offered palatial delights, and transformed all its visitors, notably from a variety of social classes, into consumers.

41

I go on about this because the project to shape the subject has continued through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It is not isolated to building types or urbanisation, but pervasive as an idea, an idea attached to prevailing ideologies. Here, workers were subject to a regime of Taylorist management, which one could describe as another attempt at reform, the reform of work, the maximisation of performance, and specifically, the transformation of individuals into workers whose efficiency in production could be endlessly honed. This efficiency, or its aura, has effects beyond the individual's work. It affects the life of that individual, their relations, their sense of power, agency, and ultimately, their expectations and environments. The whole environment is subject to the imposed rigours of efficiency.

42

The notion of shaping the subject, or the worker's behaviour and myriad measures of performance remains a potent idea within the post-war Western capitalist and neoliberal order. In the aftermath of the Second World War in the United States, which could be said to lead that order, great plans were made to simultaneously activate the regional economy, populate the interior, exploit energy resources, and serve the interests of the American automobile, oil, and construction industries. Ideas developed before the War were realised after its conclusion, based on the country's quadrupling of its industrial capacity, its new-found wealth, and the 'problem' of returning soldiers, many suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and emasculation. These circumstances presented the opportunity for a great reconstruction: the GI Bill offered soldiers credit to buy homes—the arrival of the 30-year mortgage—consumer goods to fill them, and automobiles to drive to and from those homes…

43

…across the landscape to work, shop and partake in the leisure attached to individual mobility. It was a package that gave GI's purpose. It also sent women back into domestic environments form the factories in which they had worked during the war and proposed

the notion of the 'nuclear family' with set-in-place gendered roles, reinforced by the mediated imagery of advertising, film and eventually television.

44
The policy, which had assumed a variety of physical forms, from the tract house to the multi-lane freeway, yielded new typologies that served the diffused and socially neutered environment. The indoor, air-conditioned shopping mall—this is the first, the Southdale Center, in the Minneapolis region, designed by Victor Gruen—presented a simulacrum of a village square or a small-town centre, poised between the place of dwelling—the tract house—

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…the place of entertainment…

46
(the images and typologies of which were remarkably consistent despite their functions)…

47
…and the place of work, forming a continuous environment of experience tied together by the freeway's umbilical cord and the automobile as roaming living room. The effects of the total environment—all of them, including reinforcement through publicity—could and can be described through readings of 'material culture'.

48
My own work in art and design, research, writing, and teaching is founded on readings of conditions manifest in things that are made, from ordinary objects to architecture and mediated representations. This awareness of material culture and its forms is directed towards reaching some understanding, and insight into how one might act. In thinking of material culture, one looks at things, their sources, influences, meanings, and significance. Often, if not always, that significance comes from those things' relation to other things. Things are among things, and their resemblances, differences, relations, allow one to discern their use, their import, their place among other things. The ability to see things as themselves and in relation to other relevant things (artefacts) both enables and demands their interpretation.

49
For example, in his essay 'The Rhetoric of the image' (1962), Roland Barthes analysed a 'thing', an image from a French advertisement for Italian food products, by reading the representational character of its varied elements in relation to other images known within French culture; in this case, those that signified what he called 'Italianicity'. The advertisement was speaking to its viewers with a language of 'signs' that could be recognised by a specific audience. The colours of the scene—red, white, and green—the string bag, the tomato and other vegetables, the various products with the name 'Panzani', all signified or pointed to something with Italian character, which, presumably, was meant to stimulate desire for food from that warmer, sunnier place. The reading of the image, or the ability to understand what it might be hinting at, was possible because of a common knowledge of such things: the simplicity of Italian cooking, the colours of the Italian flag, the identification of the string bag with shopping there.

50

In the past, I have used a reading and interpretation of a simple artefact, a chair, as an illustration of how such an artefact is connected to other artefacts and the culture in which they are situated and through which they acquire meaning.

51

In this case, a chair designed by Gio Ponti for the domestic market in Italy, in the period of its 'Economic Miracle'. The 'superleggera' or super-light chair was clearly modern, evident in its thin profile. But it also carried a sign of some other, familiar, chair.

52

The chair featured a wicker seat, the kind that one would find in a more common, rustic chair, …

53

…a type that existed all over the country but was associated with the farm, the peasant, or one's own childhood in the home of one's parents, modest and homely.

54

Yet unlike the heaviness associated with the past and its things, this chair was so light that it could be lifted by a child with one finger (the imagery formed part of the chair's publicity and marketing).

55

And it could even be lifted by the lady of the house (here the woman, the housewife, weighs the chair in the manner she might weigh the rabbit for dinner). The implication was that the chair was labour-saving, and therefore modern, and so, 'liberating'.

56

In a period of economic growth and corresponding changes to the form of the city and dwelling within it, the chair was presented as something which appealed to needs, aspirations, anxieties about loss of the past, and a balm to those women who, at the time in Italy, chose to remain at home; in a paper by Francesca Romana Forlini 'Salotto Buono' (2021), this was more common than not. A chair, as an artefact of material culture, could be 'read' and interpreted because of what it signified in relation to both other things, and cultural-economic contexts.

57

John Berger, who I have mentioned earlier, thought that the art object could also be thought of as a 'thing' among other things, whose significance could be derived from its relation to other objects, conventions, forms of appearance and cultural and economic contexts.

58

Berger was provoked by the art historian Kenneth Clarke's readings of painted 'nudes' as being somehow distinct—and at a nobly elevated distance from—pictures of naked women painted for the pleasure of men (such as the artist, the commissioner of the work, the invited viewer). Clarke's renowned television series 'Civilisation' (1968) looked at art as a singular and exalted expression of culture. In Berger's view, expressed in his own television series and publication 'Ways of Seeing' (1972), art was connected to other systems of value and other uses.

59

His critique looked at the use-value of art, and made connections between modes of representation in 'high' and 'low' art: between Velasquez (who knew all about the expression of power structures)…

*(One could go on about Michel Foucault's essay on this particular painting and the position of the painter, his subject and meta-subject, the patron of the image.)

60

…and the base motives of commercial advertising, here, from the period contemporary with Berger's analysis. In this category of imagery, women have no power; they are objects, vehicles for other, specifically male, narratives. Berger made a large television audience aware of this, and furthermore, of its manifestation in cultural fields that were supposed to be apart from it.

61

This was a consistent tradition—one that was culturally endorsed—that reinforced male and dominant notions of women's 'place' in relation to men and their 'natural' desires, and women's powerlessness or lack of agency. The questions of other genders were not yet present in mainstream discourse.

62

In her analysis of cinema, Laura Mulvey, in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) wrote of women being looked upon, framed and pictured as subjects of the 'male gaze'; their 'use' as such subjects,…

63

… and in *film noir* in particular, in which men are often suffering through crises of emasculation (a post-war effect, as I described earlier), was as objects (as much as beings) to be feared and subdued. In early photographs of the artist Cindy Sherman called 'Untitled Film Stills', what could be construed as scenes from such films, with women as their subjects, are 'recreated', or more precisely reconstructed.

64

In these stills, Sherman dresses as the gazed-upon woman-object-subject, framed by her environments, her circumstances, all the constructions of men, who are assumed to hold the gaze.

65

However, she transcends her object-ness, her status as decoration, and the subjection of the image, to become a protagonist, a real person, a woman at the cusp of agency.

66

John Berger pointed to, in his analysis of pictures of denuded (rather than nude) women, the persistence of their objectification in popular imagery, in which they were ciphers, vehicles for other purposes and narratives: selling cars, alcohol, lifestyle fantasies. His analysis, a classic material culture study, benefitted from Marxist and feminist critique. At its root was a deep humanity. And it was photography, of people, its dependence upon attention, and the meeting of the subject and the photographer, or rather between the photographed subject and the idea of being photographed, that allowed him to expose the methodology of attention and care. His looking at the photographs of August Sander

in particular, found that moment, such as was acted out by Cindy Sherman, of the subject revealing themselves (despite the confines of their clothing and its meanings) and becoming living subjects, living agents, living others, given space and met by the empathetic photographer.

67
I should elaborate. August Sander made photographs of people, for a project he worked on from the early 1920s until his death in 1964, called Meschen des 20. Jahrhunderts, or People of the Twentieth Century. It was meant to be a portrait of the entirety of German society. This person is a circus performer.

68
Begun in the Weimar years after the First World War, and interrupted by the Second World War, when tens of thousands of his plates and negatives were destroyed, Sander made pictures of individuals and groups of people from all walks of life, professions, and strata of society, from aristocrats to people on the margins.
This is 'A painter's wife' (Helene Abelen, c. 1926)

69
A retired farmer and his wife.

70
Two girls from a country family.
Country girls (c. 1925)

71
What Berger describes in the photographs of Sander, and particularly in three photographs studied together, in his essay, 'The Suit and the Photograph', …

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—of a country band, a group of farm workers dressed in suits on a Sunday, and a gathering of a group of mayors—all dressed in suits—demonstrate either their comfort or discomfort in the pose, and in their dress: the country band, almost forced into their costumes; the three farmers in their Sunday best, and playing roles, the mayors completely at ease in their uniforms and their privilege.

73
The photographs also demonstrate something of the relation between the photographer and the subject, in which the subject, even in the limitations imposed or freedoms gained by their costumes, presents themselves and appears before the photographer in the world on their own feet, in the light.
Young farmers (1914)

74
And there are subjects for whom the matter of appearance is a discomforting performance.
Country band (1913)

75
And those subjects for whom appearance, and all its instruments, are 'natural' extensions of their position in society. Sander seemed to reach a point, in the moment of

meeting with the subject, when the drama of the subject in their relation to the photographer, reached some sort of resolution.
Group of Mayors (1928)

76
To achieve this resolution, for the subject to appear, attention, respect, empathy, tenderness, and a movement towards the subject, involving an absenting of the self, is necessary.
A mason's assistant, bricklayer (1928)

75
Empathy, rather than projection.
The architect (Hans Poelzig) (1929)

76
Empathy, rather than judgement.
A soldier (1940)

77
To conclude, I see this as a model for our practices as architects, in approaching, appreciating, accommodating the conditions in which our work is situated, and those who 'dwell' there.

78
It may not be possible to see how your own work may be affected by this: there is no direct correlation between what Berger describes in a specific kind of photography and the making of architecture. It is, instead, an attitude, an obligation that one brings to one's task.

79
One might see, for example, the topographic photographs of Thomas Struth demonstrating this attitude in relation to cities, people and things, seeing in their outward appearances something of their significance.

80
The photograph of Düsselstraße, is familiar to me, as it might be to you, despite the fact that I had never been there. Its directness echoes the ways I had seen the world as a child, and it appears in the view mad eby the photographer in all its complexity, ordinariness, and emptiness. The photograph shares a quality of stillness, of silence, with nineteenth-century urban topographic photography, that of Charles Marville and Eugène Atget. The street itself, photographed centrally from a slightly elevated perspective, is unexceptional, but it has an appearance, or rather, an accumulation of incidents within its physiognomy that modestly utter the facts and ideas of life and its organisation. The photographer accepts and re-presents these utterances, for all their incompleteness and imperfections.

81
Sometimes, the significance of what appears remains elusive, but in allowing the subject to speak of its own existence, we may also be able to meet it.

82

This attention to the world as it is made is central to my own approach in making photographs: I move towards my subject, and try to come to know that subject, for what it is, and what its appearances might suggest about its conditions. A city is, after all, an artefact that is marked by ideas, by other places and dreams of them, by circumstances that have befallen other places, by ideas that have been only roughly stated, by mistakes, errors, or hopes fallen short. All of it offered by people. When we speak of the conditions of our work, it is those conditions in their entirety that we must approach, meet, and speak to.

83
Merci.