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Dreaming Out Loud: Aphantasia and the Contingencies of Artistic Imagination

a response by Sophia Gimenez

Cole Graham's article "Inefficient, Unsustainable, and Fragmentary: The Rauschenberg Combines as Disabled Bodies" prompts us to consider disability as one of the precarious, suspended, and contradictive subversion zones that this volume explores. Framed through the lens of a cultural-critical disability model he calls sitpoint theory, Graham demonstrates how Robert Rauschenberg's Combines disrupt spatial, bodily, and sociocultural hegemonies, thus challenging existing ableist power structures and introducing the potential for new ways of living that do not center around conventional notions of ability. What if we were to apply Graham's sitpoint theory to other modalities of disability or neurodivergence? Take, for example, the imaginative process of visual artists with aphantasia, "a condition of reduced or absent voluntary imagery," known colloquially as "mind blindness."¹ How might mobilizing sitpoint theory in analyzing the artistic production of aphantasic artists challenge entrenched notions of "artistic genius" and expand the horizons of creative expression?

Graham's sitpoint theory draws from Anne Waldschmidt's cultural model of disability, which challenges a received dichotomy of ability/disability that juxtaposes prototypical correctness with derivative perversion. Waldschmidt suggests, rather, they are both neutral alternatives, *possibilities*, of being alive. These embodied possibilities

¹ Adam Zeman, Michaela Dewar, and Sergio Della Sala, "Lives Without Imagery: Congenital Aphantasia," *Cortex*, 73 (2015): 378.

of being alive across “health, functioning, achievement, and beauty” are transversal and intersectional contingencies that collide and contend with each other, offering “essential knowledge about the legacies, trajectories, turning points, and transformations of contemporary society and culture.”² Graham augments Waldschmidt’s disability model with the epistemic relativism of Sandra Harding’s feminist theoretical model, standpoint theory, thus arriving at sitpoint theory: a differently-embodied vantage point that instructs us to “not only to consider our own positionality, but also to sit and take stock of our bodies and minds.”³ Using Rauschenberg’s freestanding assemblage *Gold Standard* (1964) as a case study, Graham asserts that the work’s portrayal of a disabled mind-body challenges established norms of productivity, independence, and traditional masculinity by “expos[ing] the hierarchy that holds ideas like work, activity, and efficiency above those like rest, moderation, and care.”⁴ Graham continues, “To turn this hierarchy on its head is precisely the promise sitpoint theory presents.”⁵ What other hierarchies can be flipped on their heads with sitpoint theory? What other insights can we gain from the disabled or neurodivergent experience within the visual arts that challenge established norms? For me, the neurodivergent condition known as aphantasia is a compelling place to start.

Artists with aphantasia seemingly pose no higher challenge to the notion of artistic creativity: visual artists who cannot visualize. Coming from the Aristotelian term for the faculty to mentally generate images, *phantasia* (imagination), and *a-* denoting absence, aphantasia is a neurocognitive variation in which there is entirely absent or markedly impaired generation of voluntary sensory imagery.⁶ While aphantasics still experience a rich inner world of emotions and thoughts, the estimated 3.9% of the population with the condition cannot visualize images of the objects, people, or places

² Anne Waldschmidt, “Disability Goes Cultural: The Cultural Mode of Disability as an Analytical Tool,” in *Culture—Theory—Disability*, ed. Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo James Berressem, and Moritz Ingwersen (New York, NY: Transcript Verlag, 2017), 26.

³ Graham, this volume, 79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Within the broader scope of disability studies, the classification of aphantasia as a disability is still a matter of debate in neurology and psychology literature. Recent scholarship views aphantasia as a neutral neurodivergence rather than a disorder, critiquing medical and social models of disability to promote a more inclusive understanding of cognitive diversity and addressing the societal implications that individuals with aphantasia may face. For more, see Merlin Monzel, Carla Dance, Elena Azañón, and Julia Simner, “Aphantasia Within the Framework of Neurodivergence: Some Preliminary Data and the Curse of the Confidence Gap,” *Consciousness and Cognition*, 115 (2023): 103567. and Merlin Monzel, David Mitchell, Fiona Macpherson, Joel Pearson, Adam Zeman, “Proposal for a Consistent Definition of Aphantasia and Hyperphantasia: A Response to Lambert and Sibley (2022) and Simner and Dance (2022),” *Cortex*, 152 (2022): 74-76.

that accompany them.⁷ In simple terms, when prompted to imagine an apple, individuals with aphantasia cannot conjure a vivid mental image of color, depth, and form. The aphantasic sees nothing. Their mind's eye is "blind."

The notion of a visualization-impaired artist may seem counterintuitive as it contradicts Western paradigms of artistic creation. Contemporary Western culture is permeated with implicit assumptions about artists that are inherited from Renaissance ideals. In the sixteenth century, Italian artist, architect, and art historian Giorgio Vasari recorded an account of Leonardo da Vinci explaining the art of painting, with the latter defining artistic geniuses as those who are "thinking out inventions and forming in their minds the perfect ideas which they subsequently express and reproduce with their hands."⁸ The stereotype of a virtuosic artist—specifically one who generates fully-formed visions from an internal cognitive process before realizing it in the world—persists well into the twentieth century. When tracing the history of aesthetic theory across classical, medieval, and Renaissance philosophy, iconographer Erwin Panofsky predicates his analysis of the dialectics of artistic value and production on the notion that an artist conceives from their "inner eye" or an "inner image."⁹

Yet, Panofsky's neurotypical model does not explain the genesis of creativity or artistic production for all artists. For example, the Oscar-winning Disney animator Glen Keane has aphantasia.¹⁰ When Keane first sat down to draw character designs for films including *The Little Mermaid* (1989), *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *Pocahontas* (1995), *Tarzan* (1999), and *Tangled* (2010), his mind was blank, devoid of any preconceived perfect images forming in his inner eye. Keane describes his initial markings when designing a character study as "an explosion of scribbles," then incorporates external references from photographs or objects into an on-paper feedback loop, adding and detracting elements until he reaches a rendering to his liking.¹¹ When drafting the Beast character from *Beauty and the Beast*, he combined features he observed from a wall-mounted buffalo head in his workspace, the mane from a reference of a lion, the ears from a reference of a cow, and finally, human eyes

⁷ Aphantasia is a spectrum condition, with some experiencing a range of visual imagery deficits while .8% experience the severest form in which visual imagery is entirely absent. For more population statistics, see Carla Dance, A. Ipser, and Julia Simner, "The Prevalence of Aphantasia (Imagery Weakness) in the General Population," *Consciousness and Cognition*, 97 (2022): 97.

⁸ Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists: Volume One*, rev. ed., trans. George Bull, ed. Peter Murray (New York: Penguin Classics, 1988), 354.

⁹ Erwin Panofsky, *Idea: A Concept in Art Theory* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1968), 13-18.

¹⁰ James Gallagher, "Aphantasia: Ex-Pixar chief Ed Catmull says 'my mind's eye is blind,'" *BBC News*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-47830256>.

¹¹ Glen Keane, "How I Created Disney Princesses," *Google Zeitgeist*, September 19, 2016, video, 27:19. <https://youtu.be/1ftHVPJJ26I?si=LOXd-d9iYz11KqUd>.

resulting in a breakthrough moment that was like “recognizing someone you know.”¹² Keane’s solely externalized visualization process reveals that generating a prototype dwelling from within is not a prerequisite for artistic creation, thus undermining the established paradigm of the imagination as an internal function into a more expansive network that bypasses presumed cognitive borderlands.

Matthew MacKisack, cultural historian and co-curator of the 2019 aphantasic and hyperphantasic artist exhibition *Extreme Imagination – Inside the Mind’s Eye*, effectively articulates how aphantasia offers new spatial understandings of the creative process.¹³ Alongside co-curator Susan Aldworth, MacKisack analyses the exhibiting aphantasic artists’ strategies as alternative pathways in lieu of internal imagery. British figurative painter Michael Chance, for example, must “physically work” via improvisation and discovery, using his aphantasia as motivational stimulus for artistic production that “bypass[es] conscious decision making.”¹⁴ Australian collagist Susan Baquie says she works “blind,” concentrating on the “energy of the process” of “cutting and tearing papers and applying the mixed media in abstract forms.”¹⁵ Baquie’s process refers to a collage she made in response to her learning of the suicide of an acquaintance, stating, “As I have aphantasia, there were no images in my mind of the distressing events, but it seems that a figurative representation of them emerged unintentionally, growing from the action of making and the subliminal or subconscious knowledge of the death of the young man.”¹⁶

Both Chance and Baquie’s accounts reveal that the aphantasic externally improvises and plays with pre-existing material in the physical world through involuntary action. Notable as well are the artists’ remarks of decisions and actions that draw from subliminal or unconscious spaces. Comparable to André Breton’s advocations, the aphantasic’s creative process is perhaps akin to a waking dream, a surreality of “certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought.”¹⁷ In light of the knowledge that many aphantasics do, in fact, dream, MacKisack believes that it confirms a “significant dissociation between voluntary and involuntary imagery,” contending that aphantasic visual imagining is a

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hyperphantasia is aphantasia’s antithesis, the condition of experiencing extreme mental imagery vividness. For more, see Rebecca Keogh, Joel Pearson, and Adam Zeman, “Aphantasia: The Science of Visual Imagery Extremes,” *Neurology of Vision and Visual Disorders, Handbook of Clinical Neurology*, vol. 178 (Elsevier, 2021): 277-296.

¹⁴ Matthew MacKisack and Susan Aldworth, *Extreme Imagination: Inside the Mind’s Eye* (Exeter: The Eye’s Mind Press, 2018), 35.

¹⁵ Ibid., 44.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism (1924),” in *The Routledge Companion to Surrealism*, ed. Kirsten Strom (Taylor & Francis, 2022), 98-99.

process that can exist both in the realm of dreams and via an “extended cognitive process” while awake.¹⁸

Identifying this externalized cognitive process as a “surrogate for the ‘mind’s eye,’” MacKisack employs the concept of *extended cognition* proposed by philosopher Andy Clark and cognitive scientist David Chalmers.¹⁹ Clark and Chalmers describe extended cognition as a cognitive function in which the brain delegates some operations that it finds difficult or impossible out into the surrounding environment as an “active externalism” for problem solving.²⁰ MacKisack argues that aphantasic artists, demonstrated by the processes of Chance and Baquie, “have extended image-making as a cognitive process to include paper, paint, and canvas, using those materials for a task that their brains in particular find impossible.”²¹ With this considered, the aphantasic imagination is not at all absent. Rather than being an internal experience, aphantasic creativity is outsourced beyond the borders of the brain where paper, paint, and canvas act as neuroreceptors and neuropathways for the artist’s mind. The aphantasic artwork and the means of its production are the artist’s brain incarnate, an ectopic phenomenon in which an organ transgresses, grows, and lives outside the borders of the human body within exterior environmental materials.

This is where Graham’s sitpoint theory offers us fresh perspectives of the aphantasic experience beyond conventional understandings of the creative process. His framework encourages us to reposition normative notions of how the human imagination can function: rather than visualizing what we wish to create in Platonic perfection before it safely enters the world, why not externalize the nascence of creation and witness our thoughts, feelings, and ideas clash, grapple, and synthesize with each other? Why not conceptualize artistic creation not as cognitive proxy, but as cognition made manifest? Rather than emphasize those collected, complete, and premeditated virtues entrenched in patriarchal and capitalist values of effectiveness and control, what can the vulnerability of being unformed, inefficient, and disjointed reveal to us? Similar to what the automatists reached for, what if we dreamed out loud?

¹⁸ Matthew MacKisack, “Artists with Aphantasia: Extended Imagining?” *The Junkyard: A Scholarly Blog Devoted to the Study of Imagination* (blog). April 17, 2019.

<https://junkyardofthemind.com/blog/2019/4/14/artists-with-aphantasia-extended-imagining>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Andy Clark and David Chalmers, “The Extended Mind,” *Analysis*, vol. 58, no. 1 (1998): 7–19.

²¹ MacKisack, “Artists with Aphantasia: Extended Imagining?”

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