

Figure/Ground and the Politics of Attention

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“Nothing can become intelligible unless seen against a background, a horizon, a surrounding field, a periphery. A figure without limits is unthinkable.”—Jan Bouman, Author, The Figure-ground Phenomenon in Experimental and Phenomenological Psychology

One set of concepts we’ve learned from our art colleagues (especially our first artist-in-residence, Judith Leemann) is that of figure and ground. Figure being the form or shape intended to grab our visual attention. Ground being shorthand for background, the shades and lighting out of which the figure appears, is rendered visible. We’re organized to notice the figure and simultaneously ignore the ground.



Mabel by Judith Leemann

We see this as an apt metaphor for the organization of our collective attention. For example, in our political lives, the figure is the person; the personal and the personality. We like or dislike (or even despise) the figure--how they speak, what they say, even what they wear. We find them worthy or unworthy of our vote. We might be asked to look at *their* background, but not at the much larger backdrop of voter suppression, campaign finance, gerrymandering, racism, sexism and more. Even their very own policy ideas are rendered ground--barely visible--compared to the figure they cut through the scene.

Similarly, with each police shooting of a Black person, the figure is the victim or the immediate tableau of the deadly event. We are tasked with inspecting the victim's every action--past and present--to assess whether they were deserving or undeserving of life. The immediate drama of the scene is reviewed countless horrifying times, as if inspecting the literal figure(s), actions, and location could tell the whole story. Unnoticed in the background is the history, the policies, the carceral system, the "urban development" projects, the myriad elements of violent and passive white supremacy that render the scene possible.

At DS4SI, we talk about how ideas get embedded in arrangements, which in turn produce effects. To us, the figure stands in for the negative effects that we are so actively fighting. We can focus our attention on the figure--whether it's Trump or Biden, Breonna Taylor or George Floyd, Californian wildfires or the escalating deaths of Covid-19. The ground that we are organized not to notice is made up of the social arrangements that produce these effects--from city budgets to tacit cultural agreements, social media algorithms, health inequities, grand jury protocols, consumer spending habits, the rush of everyday life, and more.

Part of our work is helping people sense these arrangements that shape our lives. We are trying to pay attention to the arrangement of our attention. We want to explore how the arrangements of our attention produce effects. What leads our attention towards a focus on figure (the focal point worth our attention) and away from ground (that which is unidentified)? Are there ways we can switch this up, and what would doing so make us pay attention to?

We find value in looking to artists not just for what they directly depict, but to keep our own minds limber when it comes to sensing and hacking the arrangements that get pushed to the background. In this case, we are interested in what tools visual artists use when trying to nudge us out of our figure/ground habits.

We wonder:

*What can we learn from art techniques that **entangle** the figure with the ground? (With appreciation to cultural activist Roberto Bedoya for this language of "entanglements".)*

*What techniques would **redirect** our attention from figure to ground?*

*How could we better **contextualize** the figure that draws our attention?*

Entangling Figure and Ground (Kehinde Wiley)



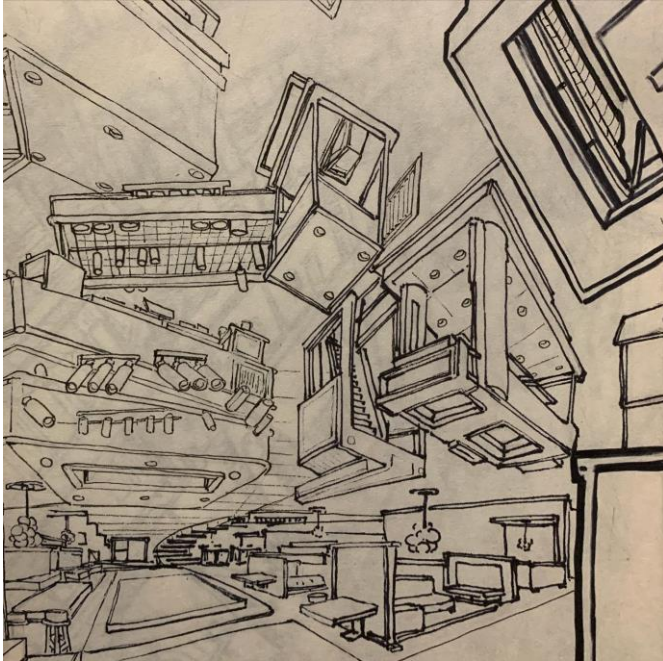
Perhaps artist Kehinde Wiley creates the most literal and exuberant entangling of figure and ground. His work entangles the modern and the classical, the backdrop and the action, the formal and informal art worlds, not to mention the viewer's preconceptions of Blackness and masculinity. What techniques might he inspire as we create social interventions that entangle the effects we are fighting against with the arrangements that produce them? How could we make the overlooked arrangements of daily life--say the "work day" or grocery stores--as conspicuous as these flourishing curlicues in Wiley's painting?

Redirecting Our Attention from Figure to Ground (Chloe Bass)

Chloe Bass's Wayfinding exhibit in St. Nicholas Park (Harlem, NY) literally redirects our attention to the background with signs that mirror the landscape. More subtly, it also invites passers-by to pay attention to slower changes, ranging from the external (gentrification in Harlem, seasons in the park), to the internal (emotions, family life, and even dementia). How might we use her elegant technique of figure-as-mirror to redirect attention to the complexities of budgets, policies, or assumptions that underlie the injustices we are fighting?



Disorienting Figure/Ground (Barrington Edwards)



Comic book author/illustrator Barrington Edwards' work reminds us that our notions of figure and ground--or even up and down--are just that: shared assumptions about the world we live in. What other techniques might we use to "make the normal strange"? How can we invite disorientation as a generative strategy? How could we use notions of distortion and disorientation to help whites, say, understand that the necessary inverse of white wealth is Black poverty?

Ground-ing the Figure through Process (Faith Ringgold)

In her story quilt *Double-Dutch*, artist Faith Ringgold certainly has a figure that catches our attention. That said, one of her techniques for "grounding" the jump-roping heroine seems to be embedded in her intentional choice of craft. Ringgold's use of quilting--and her more traditional quilted squares around the border--root her figure in a lineage of African American art and storytelling. It makes us wonder how else we might use symbolic materials or traditional processes to ground (and contextualize) our tendencies to focus on figure?



Towards a New Politics of Attention

There is a saying that we like: “Don’t hate the player, hate the game.” It reminds us that all too often we blame people instead of the many arrangements that are at play producing the effects that we are fighting against. (In some cases, we do appreciate hating both the player and the game...) Understanding the politicization of our attention, however, we might adapt this saying to “Don’t hate the figure, hate the frame.” The frame is the orientation device, telling us where to pay attention.

So we need to be critically suspicious of this arrangement of our attention: probing the effects of what we see and what is left out of the frame. We are arranged to overlook quotidian infrastructures like bureaucracies, regulatory regimes, and protocols. These are the things that don’t make the news, and frankly, to most people, they are just flat out boring. And yet they do the daily work of producing the social worlds we experience. These “uneventful” and unseen arrangements are where the work of producing social injustice meets the road.

So when attention architects like media outlets and politicians place an intriguing figure in front of us, we need to stop to notice what is being asked of our attention and why. Let’s work to imagine a new politics of attention. Let’s look at what is foregrounded and backgrounded for us with an ethics of suspicion, and let’s entangle them with the exuberance of a Kehinde Wiley. Let’s work to disorient ourselves like Barrington Edwards, to reflect the ground like Chloe Bass and to recontextualize the figure like Faith Ringgold. But perhaps most important in this new assignment for ourselves is the work of expanding that frame to include the mundane, the seemingly innocent, the dreadfully boring, and even ourselves. In doing so, we may yet disrupt this entire dichotomy of figure/ground.