

## Threads Of Vision

Rory Hyde

At the time of the invention of perspective, it was still undecided how vision worked. One prominent theory suggested that invisible filaments projected out of the eye, latching onto objects, drawing in the mind what we perceive. The Renaissance polymath Leon Battista Alberti wrote in 1435, “Let one, without doubt, then, conveniently imagine the rays as certain extremely fine threads, connected as straight as they can be in a single extremity as in a bundle and accepted in the same place and at the same moment inside the eye, where the sense of sight resides.” [1] An etching by Abraham Bosse from 1648 shows three men in princely garb – ruffles, boots, hat, sword – appearing to cast shapes on the ground from different vantage points. Stray ‘threads’ of vision, squiggle out of their eyes, randomly, unable to find objects to affix to. This ‘Emission Theory’ of vision held for over 1,000 years, from the Ancient Greeks to Issac Newton, where lines of perspective were thought to be made physical, a network of taut vectors with which to describe the world.

By making lines of perspective visible, Ian Strange has in a way retrieved this idea from history’s pile of discarded concepts. The installation ‘Light Intersections II’ reveals the lines of perspective as they collide through a terrace house in the Sydney suburb of Surrey Hills, reimagining it as an abstract geometric composition. Dozens of glowing sticks dive effortlessly through the shell of the house, tracing imagined paths through space, illuminating the invisible lines of construction. We see the simple artifice of this intervention – LED tubes propped up by scaffolding, bolts and cables – and yet it appears as something from the digital realm, as though we are looking at the city through the screen of 3D modelling software. The sticks of light are immaterial, lacking weight or substance, slicing improbably through the house’s heavy brick walls.

Renaissance perspective is not just a way of viewing the world, it is also a worldview, bound up in ideas of religion, mercantilism, imperialism and power. Perspective is used not just to accurately draw the world, but to claim it. [2] Wealthy landowners commission paintings of their estates, reinforcing authority and ownership. Explorers and cartographers trace coastlines as they sail by, the mere act of drawing constituting a claim to sovereignty. In this way, the world is ordered by those who hold the pen. Perspective places the individual at the centre, in the seat where only God once sat, where everything is revealed, and all lines of sight converge. The mistaken belief in lines of vision projecting from the eye was founded on this powerful feeling of being at the centre of all things.

But what happens when these lines of perspective don’t converge? When there is no clear vanishing point? In Strange’s house in Sydney different ordering principles are at work, something more chaotic. Viewed from the front the lines appear random, colliding at odds to one another, like a giant game of pick up sticks. The lights reveal graffiti and the missing panels of cast iron balustrade, giving the feeling of aggression. If these are lines of perspective, they don’t lead anywhere, but instead they disrupt and clash, dissolving any claims to authority. Viewed from the side, there is a more intentional logic at play. The glowing struts appear to be trained on a common destination, obeying the strict rules of projection. The spacing of the struts echoes the proportions of the building, creating a resonance between the Victorian parapet, and the bluestone foundations. A diagonal strike can be glimpsed through each of the five windows, creating a dialogue between these



[Fig.1]  
Abraham Bosse, illustration from *Manière Universelle*, 1648.

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two seemingly incompatible systems of order: the compressive and the vectoral. In this way, Strange's installation undermines the easy link between perspective and authority. By intersecting the building at odd angles, these lines of projection don't seek to control and claim this building, but explode it. Its solidity is dissolved, at once drawing our attention to this object, while directing it somewhere else far off where these lines converge.

By casting the vanishing point out of scene, we are free to bring new eyes to this house. We can view it as an installation, as a piece of public art, as a performance, as a disruption to our routines, a distraction in lockdown. Most crucial of all is what it is not: an asset. For once it doesn't matter who owns it, or what it's worth. As the average price of a house in Sydney rushes past \$1.3m, the dominant perspective today is that of the real estate website. The images of domain.com.au has replaced our urban imaginations, packaging up homes as assets to be traded, stripping them of their domestic role, no longer places to be lived in, but to be flipped. The booming market has overwhelmed all other forms of value – cultural, artistic, exploratory, propositional – so that the only thing we are left to be curious about is what it will sell for.

This is the transformative alchemy of Strange's intervention. Through the simple addition of these lines of light, this unremarkable terrace house, once a product to be acquired, is transformed into something which resists. It asserts another future for the city, one guided by possibility and ideas, rather than mere speculation. In this way, Strange not only transforms the house, but he transforms us. He gives us new eyes, projecting invisible threads, to see the world not as it is, but as it could be.

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### Notes

[1] Rocco Sinisgalli, Leon Battista Alberti: On Painting: A New Translation and Critical Edition, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p.26.

[2] Sam Jacob, Disappear Here: On perspective and other kinds of space, RIBA exhibition catalogue, 2018.



Ian Strange, Light Intersections II, 2021  
Art and About Sydney  
Surry Hills, Sydney, Australia.  
Photograph: Ian Strange, 2021