

On FAR MORE REAL

An essay by Liza Coviello

Careful control of the arts, Plato believed, is a necessity in molding the character of our youth. As a philosopher whose works have guided our moral compasses for generations, Plato was thoughtful, albeit conservative, when discussing art. His love-hate relationship with art kept him from appreciating works as useful interpretative, educational, and inspirational tools. As Plato's critiques of art spoke more to mimesis, this essay will shy away from delving too deeply into his theories on art and rather, focus on perhaps the most famous section of his 380 BC text *The Republic*. His Allegory of the Cave creates fertile ground on which to develop an understanding of how art plays a vital role in the collective conscious not only of society in general, but particularly in a collaborative environment such as that of NAPOLEON. The work gathered by the artist-members of NAPOLEON aims to speak to art as a tool and to address how the Allegory applies to our reasoning and motivations as a group.

Plato's Allegory takes the form of a conversation between Socrates (Plato's mentor) and Glaucon (Plato's brother), in Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine a scenario in which prisoners are chained in a cave in such a way that they are only able to see directly in front of them. They are born this way and die this way; the only things they experience are the shadows cast on the wall directly in front of them, the source of which remains indeterminate to them. Socrates asks Glaucon to imagine what would happen if one of the prisoners were to be freed from their bonds and brought out of the cave into the sunlight. What would they think of what they saw? How would they respond initially to this new information, and how might their initial reaction change?

"Consider, then, what would be the manner of the release and healing from these bonds and this folly if in the course of nature something of this sort should happen to them. When one was freed from his fetters and compelled to stand up suddenly and turn his head around and walk, and to lift up his eyes to the light, and in doing all this felt pain and, because of the dazzle and glitter of the light, was unable to discern the objects whose shadows he formerly saw, what do you suppose would be his answer if someone had told him that what he had seen before was all a cheat and an illusion, but that now, being nearer to reality and turned toward more real things, he saw more truly? And if also, one should point out to him each of the passing objects and constrain him by questions to say what it is, do you not think that he would be at a loss and that he would regard what he formerly saw as more real than the things now pointed out to him? Far more real, Glaucon said." Plato, *The Republic*, Book 7.

Glaucon's response to this question by Socrates—in which Glaucon affirms that the former prisoners may likely forever believe their experiences within their imprisoned state are the most authentic experiences they have had, in spite of the fact that they were, objectively, imprisoned—serves as our title and starting point for this project because it represents a liminal space between raw perception and the effects of experience.



Contributions from NAPOLEON's eight artist-members represent physical and cerebral moments within this Allegory, created to unpack how work was chosen and applied herein.

1. The Constrained Mind

Marianne Dages' *IWBKAYYWBQ* and Christina P. Day's *Casement #1* evoke a visually constrained two-way encounter that enables the inquisitive viewer to consider being restricted to seeing only what is directly ahead. Dages' technique of blind impression and mirror imaging is the two-dimensional representative of the prisoners' life before freedom. Likewise, Day's inwardly locked camera disallows the potential viewer from seeing outward.

(2) The Manipulation of Perception

The Imposition of constraint on experience is inherent in both of these pieces. Marc Blumthal's *Other (Untitled)* uses Marcel Duchamp's *Étants Donnés* as a framework through which the landscape within the print is made visible. The overlaid perceptual frame delimits how the underlying landscape is interpreted, interfering with any preconceptions the individual viewer might bring based on his or her subjective position.

Lewis Colburn's *The Correspondent* aims to create slippages in the historical narratives of museum displays, reflecting the artist's interest in the small shifts that are possible when histories are told and retold. There is a correlation between the unreal – the representation of everyday objects in unconventional materials – and the way in Plato's allegorical prisoners experience their reality: if the subject has only experienced the shadows cast before them, that—more than any other context—may forever remain the lens through which they understand the world around them.

(3) Encountering the Real

Leslie Friedman's three prints feature different women wearing sunglasses, their eyes visibly returning the gaze of the viewer through tinted lenses. Each projects a different persona, and thus a different filter through which the world is perceived. Though these prints recall the Allegory's references to the subjectivity of visual perception, they also suggest subtle differences between how we believe we are seen by others, and how we see ourselves. The faces return the viewer's gaze through the glasses, challenging us to move beyond the pop aesthetic of the work and consider more closely the subtle registers available.

(4) Choosing Whether to Pursue Change

Tamsen Wojtanowski's *SOMA* is a pictorial representation of mania, and how the human body finds relief from such a condition in rest. In the context of the Allegory, this is one of the most liminal works: the introduction of new existential knowledge often has the potential to make us feel overwhelmed—manic. Humans and other animals tend to take comfort in the familiar, and are often hesitant about departing their comfort zone. *SOMA* portrays those familiar objects that are returned to when comfort in the familiar is sought. These objects may tether the unwilling subject to a blind, albeit complacent past, or may offer the subject solace, in the form of a talisman, as they face the fear of change.

H. John Thompson describes the series of four collages, *Astronaut Faces*, drawn mostly from NASA images, as evoking the "humanistic sense of wonder of the 'Space Race'." These images—which show astronauts in helmets, their faces obscured by their reflective glass lenses—are aspirational in their reflective, futuristic gear, and suggest the unrealized potential of a mind that is willing to be open to anything. At the same time, however, the "faces" are vacant, reflecting only what is on the exterior of the self—including the logo for a Holiday Inn, a symbol of American middle class comfort and mobility during the golden years of the race for space. It is here, in this tension between aspiration and

complacency that the conflict between confinement and freedom—and what is at stake in making a change—draws closest to our contemporary American experience.

(5) Moving Forward With an Open Mind.

Alexis Nutini printed *Streamer* from plates that have been carved over the last eight years. *The* aleatory nature of the process allows the work to evolve without anything but material interference from the artist. The resulting work is not only a step removed from the control of its producer; it also alters the viewer's experience of the environment, cutting through the white, open space of the gallery with seemingly uncontrolled color.

Plato asserted that an ideal city would contain no art, because alongside the ability to shape society for the better, it also holds the power to pervert and corrupt. This conflict is one Plato returned to time and again, and generations of his successors have continued to struggle with these same questions. But the domain of the philosopher and artist alike, it seems, will forever be to understand their own ignorance and to cede that there is no transcendental morality or truth to be discovered. In short, the role of the artist and the philosopher alike means perpetually returning to an understanding: that they do not know what they do not yet know.

One further assertion made by Plato is that art is a copy of a form, an illusion, and not an experience. Art is thus an illusion (at best) or a dangerous delusion (at worst). And yet, these polar absolutes seem ill fitted to our contemporary work, which is much more complex than Plato's time. Plato believed that most of humanity could be likened to the tethered prisoners in the cave, and that the freed prisoner who returns to release others becomes the philosopher, showing those in the dark the way to the light. This sounds very similar to the role of the artist, who similarly is compelled to share with others their perspective.



By exploring boundaries, both of intellectual and physical, we aim to stay conscious of our theoretical fetters, remembering that they are not absolute. The bonds of a stagnant mind preclude us from being able to accommodate the new or different. It is in this way that we strive together to be wary of what seems far more real to us; for what seems most real to us is often that which we have become inured to. The Allegory of the cave not only cautions against this, but also shows us what is possible through collaboration. As individuals within a society and members of a collective, we should strive always to be the freed prisoner, reaching back to help others.

About the Author:

Liza Coviello, a really interesting woman living in Philadelphia, is an arts administrator for the Institute of Contemporary Art and independent curator for NAPOLEON. Her undergraduate degree is in Fine Arts, focusing on ceramics and art history, and her graduate degree is in Non-profit Leadership. Her curatorial interests are heavily concentrated in issues of social responsibility, justice, and reform.

**All images courtesy of Robert Chaney.