

Allegory of the Cave  
*or*  
Why Night Gallery Paints Its Walls Black

On Sunday, May 20, at 6:48 pm, the residents of Los Angeles gazed upwards to witness the sun become obscured by the orbiting moon, which drifted across the sun's path and put us in its temporary penumbra. The dangers of witnessing this solar event were duly noted and ignored by most stargazers (for the sun is our star), and twice as many retinas were burned as there were people watching. It didn't matter that 'Solar-Specs' were distributed at prime viewing locations or that special filters were placed over our telescopes by wise men eagerly anticipating another notch on their celestial belt - most people were desperate for a makeshift glance at the heavens.

That same week, similar warnings against gazing upwards went unheeded. People sauntered into the shower room at Night Gallery imagining a good scrub (perhaps with that cute girl in the corner?), ready to cleanse themselves once and for all of the filth that had accumulated on their bodies and minds up until that point. Unfortunately the shower handle broke off once a modicum of anticipatory pressure was applied. The mold crept out of the corners, encroaching on the would-be scrubbing nudes. "If only water could be piped through here. . ." thought the bearded dilettante. No matter that the drains were fake.

He moved on to the colored male nudes. Red and purple skins slid across an isolated leg, chest, or shoulder. Muscles undulated in the soft light of the gallery. All ingrown hairs, folds, and asymmetries were heroically engulfed in a Platonic form, smoothing and idealizing instead of scrutinizing. Where the shower suggested a *removal* of filth as a mode of excellence, and then couldn't deliver, these portraits suggested that all imperfections of the human form could be covered, glossed, and forgotten. Delivery seemed guaranteed.

Next up, the sauna. Like Kubrick's Monolith, it was surrounded by hairy organisms of the genus *homo* squawking and gesticulating wildly. Drinks were spilling. He approached and entered. Should I lock it? The chatter outside was growing unbearable, and the affirmation of voluntary isolation seemed appealing. Click. Head back. Smells good.

*Your words, thoughts, and actions are not autonomous.*

Ok. . .

*Your self is produced and evaluated by all other selves.*

The door rattles from the outside.

*The tendency to construct physical and psychic barriers between yourself and others is common but self-deceiving.*

I continue rattling the door.

*Will you feel purpose, validation, legitimacy when your only audience is you?*

“Someone locked themselves in there.”

*Will your needs, desires, and appearance still be of significance when those that constructed them no longer exist?*

“This is a bomb shelter apparently.”

The man unlocks the door and emerges. A woman enters.

*Your words, thoughts, and actions are not autonomous.*

Ok. . .

*Your self is produced and evaluated by all other selves.*

Maybe I shouldn't have locked the door.

*The tendency to construct physical and psychic barriers between yourself and others is common but self-deceiving.*

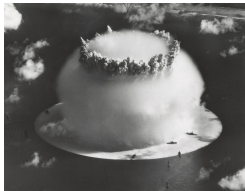
Don't hope to drive a stake into empty space.

*Will you feel purpose, validation, legitimacy when your only audience is you?*

Once the world is cleansed, the self falls apart.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See screenshot of her mind at this moment:



*Will your needs, desires, and appearance still be of significance when those that constructed them no longer exist?*

She heeds the sauna's advice. Time to go back to the shower and be among the bathers. However upon returning, there is a more pernicious loss of self. Thoughts of ethic cleansing suddenly bubble to the surface. The shower anonymizes. It treats equally.<sup>2</sup> In striving to eliminate impurities (of the earthly and of the moral variety), the shower undermines any difference among the people in the room. Cleanliness isn't next to godliness, in this instance.

Across the gallery, there is a box that has no spotlight shining on it despite its status in the show as Art. It contains dead skin cells and bits of fallen hair. Someone has seemingly tried to find themselves in a very literal way, but the glass box looks unfortunately nothing like the passive creator of its contents. Once again, self is lost. However, this same creator is also responsible for the square beam of light projected onto the central wall, which I will get to after a brief divergence to ancient Greece.

Beams of light were cast onto similarly cavernous walls, or so it goes in Plato's *Republic*, and the dancing shadows that resulted were mistaken by chained prisoners for reality; it was only after turning around and viewing the sun itself that these prisoners could be freed from the chains of ignorance and grasp the truth. Illumination was the name of the game, and all endeavors, according to Plato, should seek the ideal form of the Good. All striving was upwards, towards the Gods, the Good, and the capital-T Truth.

Yet Aristotle objected to this idea - he argued that the forms of the good, the abstract idealizations of human qualities, had no practical application and distracted us from a kind of living in which true flourishing could happen. What was interesting was not the 'true' form but what happened in practice, thus liberating people from a normative struggle and freeing them to seek a good life, rather than *the* good life.

---

<sup>2</sup> Notice, I did not say 'as equals.' For treating 'as equals' is an affirmation of self and of autonomy, whereas treating *equally* is an intentional ignorance of meaningful delineation. Grammatical, yes, but this is a form of control that did not go unnoticed by the Nazis, or suburban gym coaches.

Would Aristotle chastise or commend the maker of the video projected on the wall then? The sun never leaves the frame; the person filming walks, and walks, and walks, always gazing (through the camera) upwards. All around this projection are the effects of this sort of gaze - mold, decay, death - yet the video seems blissfully unaware. Up, up, up. Yet we know that the maker of the video sought not only to film the sun, but to film the sun *until he could no longer*. And in this, we as viewers are offered a way out: what is interesting is what happens when the camera finally swings down to earth; when the moon briefly mediates our relationship with the sublime and casts a shadow on us. Maybe the walls are painted black in this gallery so we can remain as the people in Plato's cave, content to watch a flickering version of reality cast onto our walls without the impossible burden of turning around and facing the harsh glare of the sun.