

## ***PREcognition | REcognition: Examining the Reciprocal Gaze in Godfrey Reggio's Film VISITORS***

**James Rutherford, *Curator***

In his latest film *VISITORS*, Godfrey Reggio takes his place among some of the most significant artists in history – from Velasquez to Manet and Kahlo to Abramovic – who have engaged and provoked audiences by employing the reciprocal gaze. Reggio's images set up “a dynamic whereby the audience themselves completes the story – completes the relationship of the gaze” explains the filmmaker. Residing at this intersection of precognition and recognition are the intuitive, self-conscious responses activated by this relationship. “I would call those metaphysical, I would call them transcendental, I would call them the vivid unknown,” Reggio says in referring to “that aspect of ourselves which is most present but unknown to us still.”

It is no surprise that our responses come from such a primal and instinctual place since the exchange of the reciprocal gaze with our mother is likely among our first experiences as human beings. “Each person's face is like a mask that has been developed over a lifetime that can reveal what's inside that person” notes Reggio. “However, when you look at a face long enough – like someone you know very well...or yourself, to the point where that face starts to look strange – then perhaps you're starting to see it for the first time, because all of us will be the last to know ourselves in some fundamental way.”

Reggio says that these images are “not aimed at your intellect”, but are “aimed at another center...aimed to elicit the aesthetic triplets that exist within each person, and that are different for each person. Those are sensation, emotion, and perception. All of us experience those in a different way.” He suggests we if we are open to seeing and hearing what the images are telling us, those triplets “can start to speak to us.” To illustrate the understanding of the images as more of “a metaphoric form, or a poetic form” Reggio paraphrases the 18<sup>th</sup> Century poet Goethe: “in the measure that it's least accessible to intellect, in that measure it's most efficacious.”

The decision to feature faces of everyday people, engaged in mundane tasks, was a conscious choice that reflects Reggio's belief that “virtuosity, genius, gift, and vital animation exists randomly among all of us.” The effect, according to Reggio, is to “take us right out of ourselves and put us into another state”

as we question the “appearance of normality...the normality of daily living.” The images have a multitude of meanings – as many as there are people that see them. It is up to the audience themselves to seek the answers to the questions they raise.

The watermark left on us as we become more aware of the stories and questions our mind conjures up is enhanced by the specific qualities of the black and white photography. As Reggio states “black and white allows you to see and feel what is present but can’t be seen.” Replacing the background with deep black – emphasizing what he calls the “background” – creates a depth that serves to isolate and bring the faces forward, which in turn makes them stay in our memory longer. The starkness of the images reinforces the refrain of self-examination that permeates the exhibition as it compels us to consider how the reciprocal gaze manifests.

The inclusion of face of Triska, a lowland gorilla from the Bronx Zoo, animates the impact of these images and adds another dimension for the audience to consider. In explaining his decision to cast Triska, Reggio cites this quotation by anthropologist Loren Easley: “We have not seen ourselves until we have been seen through the eyes of another animal.” Our blind spots are further illuminated and layers of our ego are laid bare as we encounter the gaze of another also closely related species – the great apes.

In this techno-world we live in, where connections with others are frequently empty and superficial and our awareness of the blessings that fill our daily life are often obscured, we humans are looking for a more visceral engagement. In this age of selfies, in which our quest to know ourselves is seemingly of prime importance, our desire to have a deeper connection with our fellows may be best served by asking ourselves what we want the precognitive response of others to be when they gaze upon our own face. By taking time to slow down and be mindful of what lies within our own “vivid unknown,” perhaps we can discover the reality behind our own appearances – and glimpse the true freedom of a world devoid of preconception and prejudice.

//