

John Berger Would Have Been Appalled by a 'Ways of Seeing'-Inspired Show Staged in Abu Dhabi

Friends of the late critic have condemned holding a Berger-influenced show at NYU Abu Dhabi, given the region's human rights abuses

New York University's Abu Dhabi Art Gallery is currently hosting an exhibition titled 'Ways of Seeing'. Previously, it was on show at ARTER in Istanbul, and the Villa Empain in Brussels. As explained in the promotional [material](#), it is 'based' on 'John Berger's 1972 groundbreaking BBC television series and his respective critical book on [visual culture](#)'.

The original *Ways of Seeing* was a collaboration made with Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Jean Mohr, Richard Hollis and the filmmaker Mike Dibb. It opened with Berger apparently cutting into the canvas of Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* (c.1485), removing Venus's head, and declaring 'an allegorical picture becomes a portrait of a girl.' The essential idea is one of Walter Benjamin's, recontextualized for the age of TV: the technology for reproducing art and ideas in new contexts is often used to sell things and preserve the status quo, but it has the potential to bring about revolutionary change.



John Berger presenting *Ways of Seeing* (1972), video still.

Berger, who died in January 2017, knew Benjamin's work through his partner, the translator Anya Berger. [His proto-feminism also began with her](#), and developed via his novel *G.* (1972), which became the source of passages of *Ways of Seeing* on the male gaze. When *G.* was awarded the Booker Prize in autumn 1972, Berger discovered that Booker McConnell, the prize-giver, was connected to slavery and the ongoing exploitation of the Caribbean. He and his friend Anthony Barnett wrote an [acceptance speech](#) announcing that he would share half of the GBP£5000 prize money with the London Chapter of the Black Panthers.

The other half would help fund his next book, a collaboration with the photographer Jean Mohr documenting the experience of exploited migrant labourers in Europe. *A Seventh Man* (1975), Berger later wrote, was a book which, 'unlike its authors, grows younger as the years pass'. Recently, the phenomenon it describes has metastasized to Saadiyat Island, the 'Island of Happiness' in the United Arab Emirates which houses franchises of the Louvre (recently opened), the Guggenheim (construction currently suspended), and the NYU campus and art gallery.



'Ways of Seeing', NYUAD Art Gallery, 2018, installation view. Courtesy: NYU Abu Dhabi

One member of NYU staff, professor Andrew Ross, barred from the country for his work with the [Gulf Labor](#) group, edited a book on the island's working conditions titled [The Gulf: High Culture/Hard Labor](#) (2015). A key feature the book discusses is *kafala*, which researchers Paula Chakravartty and Nitasha Dhillon describe as 'a modern, and especially lucrative, visa-trading system', in which workers are forced to incur debt acquiring paperwork, and then spend years attempting to work it off under low-paid, often squalid and sometimes lethal conditions.

[When the New York Times broke the story of labour violations at NYU's Abu Dhabi site in 2014](#) – including allegations of violent crackdowns on strikes, withholding passports, and poor living conditions – that edition was not sold in the UAE. Ross argues that we should be wary of reproducing the neo-colonialist 'civilizing mission' rhetoric which the Louvre, Guggenheim and NYU have employed, and Chakravartty and Dhillon stress that the spate of labour protests their building sites have seen call 'for a politics of *solidarity* and not one of *rescue*.' But, as Berger's son, the filmmaker Jacob Berger told me, we cannot blind

ourselves to the [brutal colonial war the UAE is itself now prosecuting in Yemen](#). Most institutions and publications are compromised in some way, but this is an extremely acute situation.

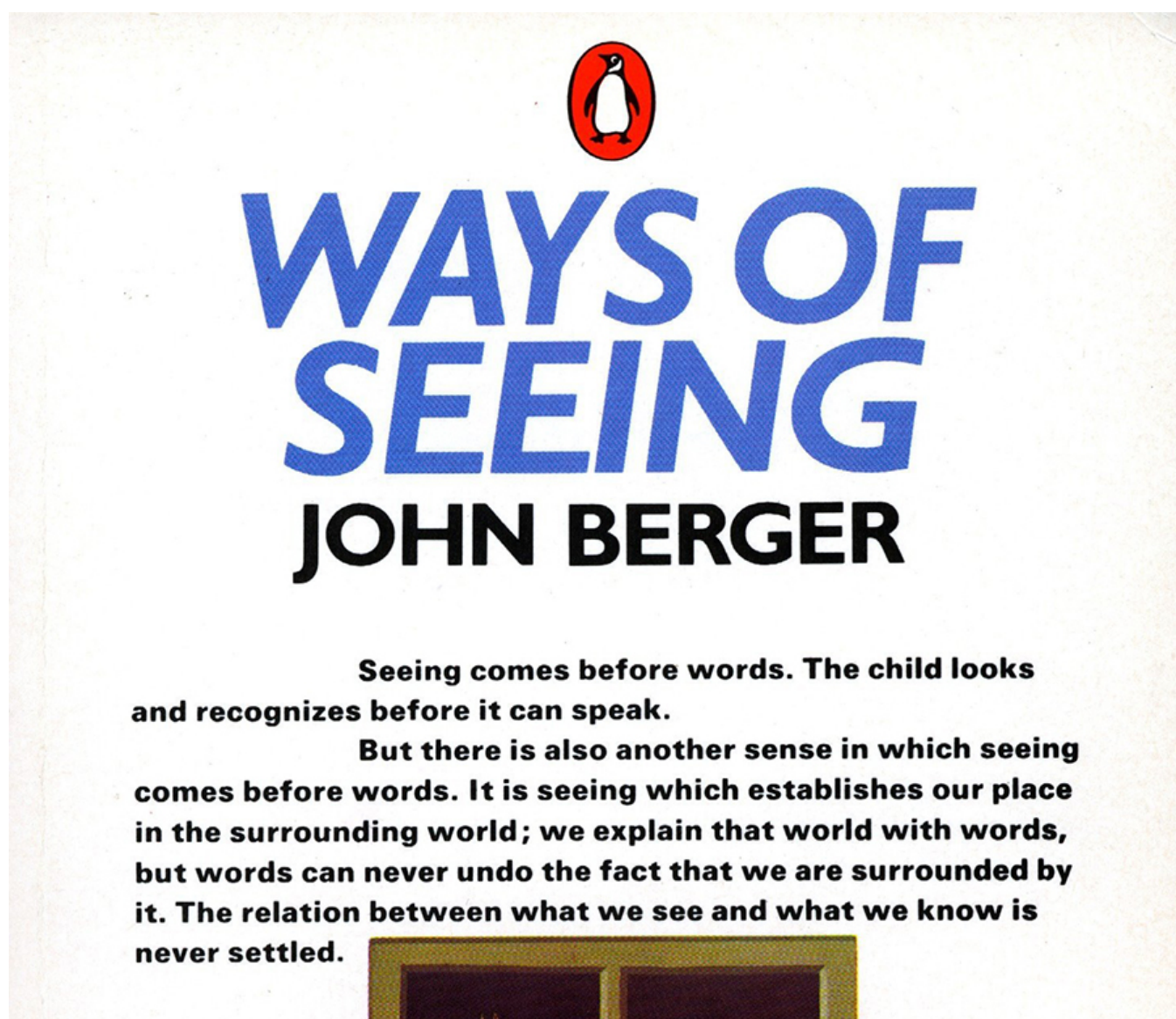


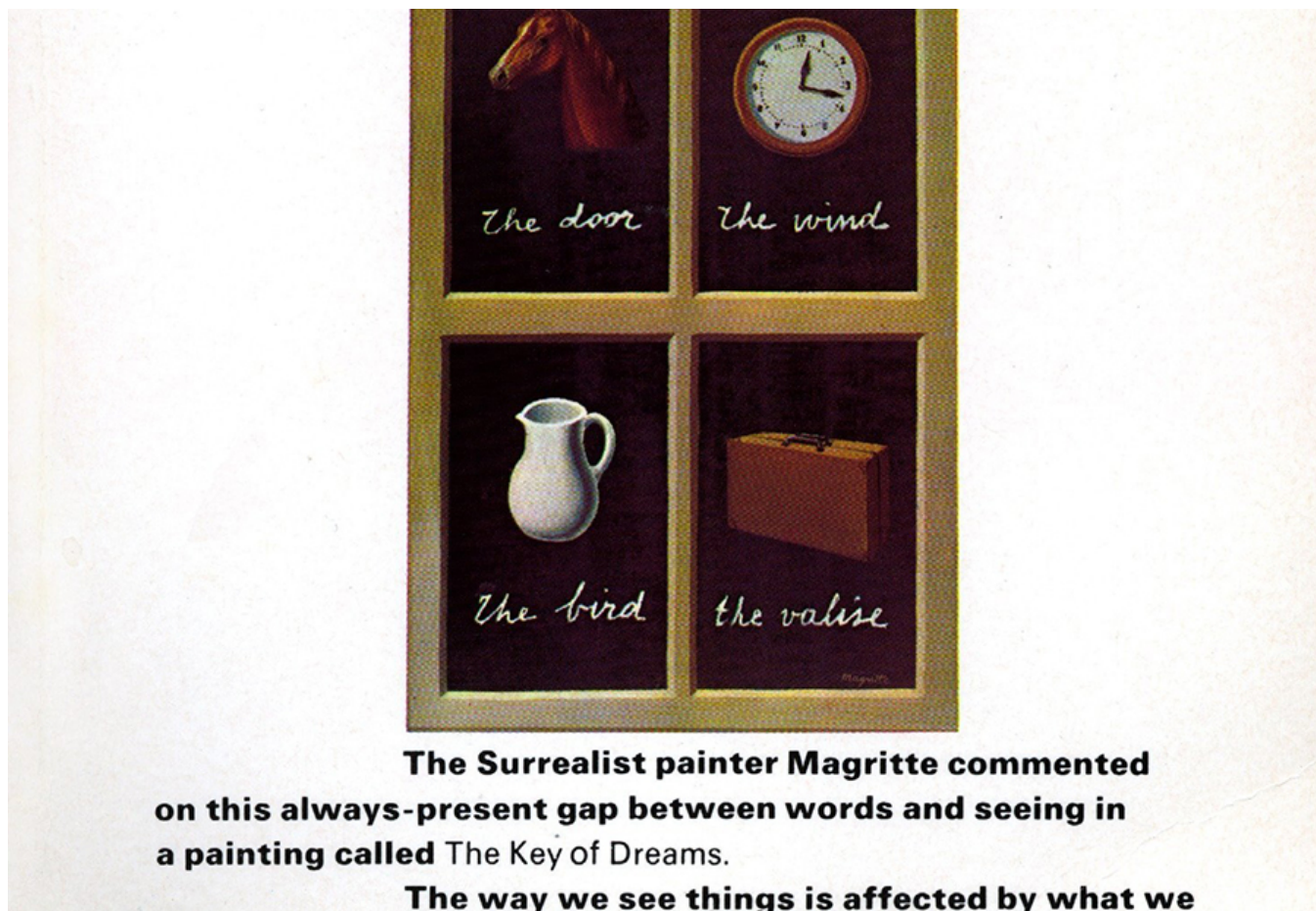
'Ways of Seeing', NYUAD Art Gallery, 2018, installation view. Courtesy: NYU Abu Dhabi

When I contacted the curators of 'Ways of Seeing', Sam Bardaouil and Till Fellrath, they described their exhibition – which includes works by Salvador Dalí, Mona Hatoum and Cindy Sherman – as 'a platform for critical reflection and discussion'. The NYUAD edition includes works which they say 'grapple, in an honest and critical manner, with the rewards, but equally the complexities of global modernization within the context of Emirati society's accelerated cosmopolitanism.' They pointed to how Gustav Metzger's *To Crawl into - Anschluss, Vienna, March 1938* (1996) invites viewers to crawl under a yellow sheet across a photograph of Jews being made to scrub the streets of Vienna, and a mirror piece by Pistoletto in the same space 'implicates [viewers] as well and thrusts them into the heart of the matter'. Yet the only traces of local 'complexities' are photographs taken by a member of the Emirati royal family, [Lateefa bint Maktoum](#), showing men in Arab dress looking at

skyscrapers.

On the death of Frederick Antal (1887–1954), the art historian who taught Berger about 'the very important question of patronage' in art on which his Booker speech was based, Berger wrote an obituary for the *Burlington Magazine* lamenting the tendency of other art historians to separate Antal's critical insights from the Marxism which made them possible. It would be contradictory to argue that Berger's *Ways of Seeing* should not be sampled, challenged or updated in the digital era. But this technology makes it possible to understand the symbolic effect of this exhibition from installation photographs and promotional material. An audience well beyond Saadiyat Island will now see it 'artwashed' by association with John Berger.





John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972, book cover. Courtesy: Penguin Books

Anthony Barnett compared reading the NYUAD exhibition press release to the adverts he saw immediately after the failed revolutions of 1968, co-opting the slogan 'power to the people' to sell Duracell batteries. 'Berger's writing', Barnett pointed out to me, 'showed how the proximity of money eroded art's ability to tell the truth'. Mike Dibb, the television series's director, had heard nothing about the exhibition until I contacted him. He thought the curatorial language 'a complete negation of everything *Ways of Seeing* stood for'.

This episode shows the continued urgency of Berger's work, but not in the way which is being advertised. The basic principle of Gulf Labor, Andrew Ross told me, was that 'No one should be asked to exhibit, curate, or perform in a building constructed on the backs of abused workers.' Yet, he continued:

'Emirati elites have used the 'liberal' veneer of high-profile arts and

education to polish their national brands, while relying on the forced labour of an army of migrant workers to service their every need. John Berger would have been among the first to condemn and unmask this deep hypocrisy.'

Main image: John Berger, 2009. Courtesy: Getty Images; photograph: Ulf Andersen