The Crossover of New Media Immersion and Site-Specificity:

Contemporary Art and Spatial Experience

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ABSTRACT

The Crossover of New Media Immersion and Site-Specificity: Contemporary Art and Spatial Experience

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In the literature on contemporary installation art, a conceptual paradox keeps rearing its head: frequently artworks are described as immersive *and* site-specific. But how can they be both? Although both terms have solid foundations within art history, they tend to be regarded as mutually exclusive categories, pertaining to very different kinds of aesthetic experience: "immersion" draws on our relationship with new media and engages a long history of illusionism and simulation, while "site-specificity" focuses on actual places as a way to circumvent illusionism and reveal the material or ideological forces that define a particular site. Given this difference, my objective is twofold: first to discover their respective usefulness and limitations, and then to ask, what happens when we think of them together?

In answer to this question I propose that the discourses of new media immersion and site-specificity have created a "crossover." That is, the two discursive zones have neared each other to the point that they have created a force field between them, thereby generating a new zone altogether. I am using the figure to suggest the drastic waning in prominence of new media immersion and site-specificity as discrete discourses within art history over the last decade: each falls away to the margins, falling by the wayside of validated art practices, leaving between them the expansive zone of the crossover.

This zone is explored through detailed analysis of five artworks: Olafur Eliasson's installation *Notion Motion* (2005); Philip Beesley's interactive environment *Hylozoic Soil* (2007); Mike Nelson's tri-part stage-set *Triple Bluff Canyon* (2004); Gregor Schneider's labyrinthine *Weisse Folter* (2007); and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's augmented city square *Under Scan* (2005). I propose that each artwork helps build critical theory around the issues at stake in the crossover, particularly with regard to contemporary spatial experience and its implications for subjectivity. The case studies have been grouped into three chapters in order to allow certain issues pertinent to the crossover to come to the fore more forcefully: interactivity, spatial facsimiles and augmented places.

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INTRODUCTION

In the literature on contemporary art, a conceptual paradox keeps rearing its head: frequently artworks are described as immersive *and* site-specific. But how can they be both? Although both terms have solid foundations within art history, they tend to be regarded as mutually exclusive categories, pertaining to very different kinds of spatial experience. This thesis set outs to interrogate what is at stake in their pairing and how we might define the relation between them as one of collusion rather than exclusivity.

"Immersion" is the buzzword of the new media environment, especially the virtual reality industry. It refers to experiencing computer-generated stimuli at the expense of an awareness of the actual world – to the extent that the virtual world becomes the source of the real. At its most extreme, this ontological relocation is achieved by wearing gear, such as helmets and gloves, which sense the body's movements and alter the data-world depicted on the screen accordingly. Pre-computer immersive experiences include architectural *trompe l'oeils* and panoramas, which equally stress the invisibility of the frame. Immersion is thus defined by the experiential breakdown of boundaries between actual and virtual emplacement, which is not new to, but taken to new heights by digital interactivity. For this to happen, the interface must become so natural as

to recede in awareness and effectively disappear. As Oliver Grau explains, immersion "is a history of frameless, even immeasurable images."[1]

"Site-specificity," by contrast, seeks to decorticate the meaning of a particular site -- whether in literal, functional or discursive terms -- in the hopes of rendering the stakes more visible. It is profoundly anti-illusionistic in the sense that it focuses on the interface itself -- on the relationship between the viewer, the artwork, and the site. If immersion has us crawling through the computer screen to merge with the digital world, variants of site-specificity are inseparable from the actual site and do not constitute their own "world." Instead, they make us investigate the site itself and how one significance of it nestles into, or competes with, another. Generally speaking, the objective is to break habitual patterns and conceptions of site -- to denaturalize it and stare reality in the face. This so called "reality" can be concrete or immaterial, but in every case, it is determined by competing frames of reference, whether economic, social, political or historical. As such, in contrast to immersion, it is intended to be decoded as a medium, not experienced "immediately" as a site "proper" allegedly would be. That is, it emphasizes the physicality, historical resonance and/or ideological underpinning of a specific site in order to open a discussion of its past, current or future uses and meanings.

Given their fundamental difference on the question of mediation, immersion and site-specificity seem like unlikely bedfellows; yet their frequent public appearance

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[1] Oliver Grau. "Immersion and Interaction: From Circular Frescoes to Interactive Image Spaces." Trans. Gloria Custance. Media Art Net. 12 [displays].
http://medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art/immersion/12/

together suggests that a relationship has developed that breaks their respective exclusivities. Both terms appear consistently in recent writings on installation art. These texts, and the term "installation art" itself, unsuccessfully try to rein the plethora of disparate contemporary practices into a definable "genre." Nevertheless, the over-simplified use of the rhetoric of both new media immersion and site-specificity provides the first clue as to what might be at stake in this project. In his book *Installation Art in the New Millennium*, for example, Nicolas de Oliveira starts with the premise that contemporary art has moved from being "medium specific" to "debate specific" and asserts that this "predicts the shift from objective critique towards a new subjectivity."[2] According to de Oliveira, the main question to ask of art is not, what does it mean? But rather, how do I feel?[3] In a single manoeuver de Oliveira bypasses the importance of media competence and visual literacy in the analysis of art and undercuts its potential to address issues that extend beyond the viewer's personal encounter with the work. As such, he aligns contemporary art with the idea that the medium disappears, as it does (rhetorically) in immersive experiences. Indeed, immersion is the operative word throughout his discussion. He writes, for example, that "the audience participates in the work by becoming fused with it."[4] This reveals his premise of framelessness; however, under this large umbrella, he discusses artworks that operate within the very real boundaries of actual sites, such as museums, subway stations, trade centres, and government buildings. To gloss

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[2] Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley, and Michael Petry. Installation Art in the New Millennium: The Empire of the Senses. Foreword Jonathan Crary. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003. 14. Here "objective critique" means an assessment of the art object itself rather than an assessment of the viewing subject's response to it.
[3] Ibid. 28.
[4] Ibid. 167.

over this seeming contradiction, de Oliveira shifts the attention onto the interactive dimension of artworks operating within the immersive paradigm. For example, he writes, "Installation is thus seen as moving beyond the physical boundary of a single space into a realm of negotiated interactivity and simultaneity."[5]

In *Understanding Installation Art from Duchamp to Holzer* Mark Rosenthal, like de Oliveira, bases his analysis of contemporary art on immersion. He writes, "there is no frame separating this art from the viewing context, the work and space having melded together into an approximation of a life experience."[6] His account is divided into two categories, which loosely align themselves with immersion and site-specificity as I am discussing them: "filled space" installations (including the subcategories "enchantments" and "impersonations"), and "site-specific" installations (including the subcategories "interventions" and "rapprochements"). By throwing his net a little wider than de Oliveira, Rosenthal points to differences within the canon of installation art that are important to maintain if we want to avoid over-generalization. Instead of articulating these differences, however, Rosenthal, like de Oliveira, emphasizes that installation art has become hegemonic, that it "has become an everyday occurrence."[7] In an admiring tone, he states, "Installation art threatens to become the predominant

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[5] Ibid. 5.
[6] Mark Rosenthal. Understanding Installation Art: From Duchamp to Holzer. Munich: Prestel, 2003. 25.
[7] Ibid.

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mode of expression for the modern world as we know it, with its global character, desire for sensory overload, and demand for non-elitist practices."[8]

De Oliveira and Rosenthal are far from alone in this effort to, first, define the commonalities that allegedly define installation art as a genre, and then establish this "genre" as hegemonic.[9] The erasures and confusions that result from this melting pot are especially evident in Claire Bishop's *Installation Art: A Critical History*. On the one hand she echoes the discourse of immersion: "Instead of *representing* texture, space, light and so on, installation art *presents* these elements directly for us to experience."[10] As such, she approximates De Oliveira's and Rosenthal's assumption that immersion is the underlying condition of installation art, in that there is no frame that signals the change of register from presentation to representation. Yet on the other hand Bishop avidly continues the rhetoric of viewer-engagement that site-specificity set in motion: "This activation is, moreover, regarded as emancipatory, since it is analogous to the viewer's ... active engagement in the social-political arena."[11] She suggests that these two approaches may be in conflict and addresses this in the conclusion by suggesting that it is an effect of the work, rather than an effect of her analysis. She states, "the majority of examples discussed in this book are underpinned by a more traditional model of political activation",[12] a model, which, according to Bishop,

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[8] Ibid.

[9] For example, De Oliveira states (citing Roberta Smith): "The final decade of the 20th century saw the passage of Installation art from a relatively marginal art practice to the establishment of its current central role in contemporary art. 'These days installation art seems to be everybody's favourite medium.' ...'installation has become a series of conventions.'" 13.

[10] Claire Bishop. Installation Art: A Critical History. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. 11.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid. 131.

cannot account for the decentred (poststructuralist) "self" on which her analysis is premised. Neither the potential for representation to "activate" the viewer, nor the potential for immersive presentation to demobilize the viewer, is explored.

As these recent survey books indicate, there is little precision within the scholarship on contemporary art about how the discourse of new media immersion and site-specificity interact in today's art practices, and what is gained (or lost) in the process. Secondly, by reducing the spatial dimensions of contemporary art to simply an indicator of its allegiance to the genre "installation," these texts fail to theorize the different ways in which these dimensions are articulated by artists and to what effect. "To install," after all, suggests a deployment of objects in space that is purposeful not arbitrary, and this spatial deployment implicates the viewer. Whether the viewer responds emotionally as de Oliveira suggests, or is "decentred" and "activated" as Bishop suggests, depends on the individual art project and cannot be taken for granted: different spatial/subjective dynamics need to be accounted for in order to understand the particular salience of a particular installation. Lastly, painting these differences with the same generic brush not only bolsters the hegemonic stronghold of installation art but also lends credence to the idea that the medium is somehow irrelevant or "immediate." Of course it is neither and media competence is as crucial for art historians as ever. For all of these reasons, the category "installation art" is of little use aside from signalling that one is contending with an artistic deployment of space.

In light of this paucity of critical evaluation and rigour with regard to artworks that implicate both new media immersion and site-specificity, my objective in this thesis is twofold: first to discover the respective usefulness and limitations of these two key terms, and then to ask, what happens when we think of them together? As both concepts suggest some form of spatialization, it is important to investigate the types of space that arise in this collision. This effort of defining these two terms and then questioning their interrelation constitutes the first part of this thesis, which is divided into three respective parts: new media immersion, site-specificity, and their "crossover." In the second part of this thesis I offer five case studies, each of which elaborates a different set of issues that are at stake in this collusion/confusion/collapse of new media immersion and site-specificity.

More specifically, in the first part of the thesis I will argue that, although we have tended to think of the discourses of new media immersion and site-specificity as incompatible or even exclusive, the theoretical concerns circulating in each hold implications for each other. These implications become more apparent as the decades unfold: each discourse was established at approximately the same time (the late 1960s) and gained in prominence during the 70s and 80s. During the 1990s, however, both terms were thrown into question and problematized by their respective key theorists. It is due to these internal debates, I suggest, that the implications of one discourse come to bear relevance on the other (and vice versa). Both, for example, struggle with questions of "presence" and the experience of imaginative spatial relocation.

For heuristic purposes, I have mapped this idea onto a diagram (fig. 1). When we think of new media immersion and site-specificity as discrete discourses, it is as if they form the mathematical figure "asymptote" in which two lines move toward convergence but never intersect. However, given their discursive instability during the 1990s, they have created a "crossover." Borrowed from mathematics, the figure "crossover" occurs when two zones get so close as to create a force field between them that generates something new altogether, and the lines diverge in different directions. I am using the figure to suggest the drastic waning in prominence of new media immersion and site-specificity as discrete discourses within art history over the last decade: each falls away to the margins, falling by the wayside of validated art practices.[13] It is their respective internal arguments and the consequent breakdown of their respective discursive boundaries that allowed for the issues integral to both to "cross over" and occupy a new inter-zone. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to this zone as "the crossover."

My objective in this thesis is to interrogate the new artistic spatializations that have emerged in this expansive zone. As such, this thesis is not concerned with art objects that are strictly "new media" or "site-specific," but rather with art objects that have implications for both discourses at once. The day-to-day new media environment penetrates every aspect of contemporary life, including social relationships, travel, work efficacy, entertainment, education and the dissemination of information in general. As such, it constitutes the context of

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[13] Let it be clear that this falling out of favour is not a value judgment. On the contrary, some of the most challenging artworks produced today continue to work in the vein of either new media immersion or site-specificity proper. However, I agree with the authors on installation art that it has become hegemonic.

production, dissemination and reception for almost *every* artist working today. Furthermore, almost *all* of the artworks that are currently validated by contemporary art institutions are ambitious in spatial terms: video installations and installations of (more or less) interconnected objects permeate every major biennale, while photography and painting are given relatively little attention in these mega-shows (though maintaining their centrality in the market), "new media" is cordoned off into its own area, and site-specific works take place mostly on the periphery of the institutionalized exhibition space. As such, the field from which my choice of corpus was made is fertile, to say the least.[14]

Let me state clearly that my intent is not to offer a survey of the art practices that occupy the crossover but rather to investigate, in depth and detail, how the theoretical issues at stake in the crossover of new media immersion and site-specificity play out in particular artworks to provoke or problematize new spatial experiences; therefore, I make no attempt to catalogue or otherwise index this plethora of work. This is what the books on installation art sought to do, to little effect. On the contrary, this thesis is interested in recovering two of the key terms that have been rolled into this category – new media immersion and site-specificity – in order to discover what at stake in their crossover. I want to discover how the theoretical concerns, assumptions and prejudices embedded in each of these terms continue to function (or not) in contemporary art. Because both "immersion" and "site-specificity" are now often used as random adjectives,

[14] However, very early on in the process of writing this thesis I narrowed the field by choosing not to contend with black box video installations. Although they frequently employ new media and their spatial dynamics arguably extend beyond the projection screen, I chose to concentrate on works in which the spatial dynamics are physically actualized by the viewer's perambulatory body.

it is necessary to add precision to the vocabulary of contemporary art, not its categorizations.

More specifically, this thesis will address how theories of space join theories of subjectivity. To borrow Jacques Rancière's words, I am "concerned with aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity."[15] This interest implies a particular methodological framework (and informs my choice of corpus). The intellectual context for this thesis thus follows the lead of several important studies that share this concern. One of these, for example, is Michel Foucault's influential study on Jeremy Bentham's architectural Panopticon and its consequences for the incarcerated subject: the physical space of surveillance instated acute self-surveillance.[16] Another is Michel de Certeau's widely read *The Practice of Everyday Life* in which he describes how a pedestrian's movements through a city constitute a source of subversive agency against those who hold the power to define space and establish its rules of use.[17] Perhaps Jacques Lacan's famous account of the "mirror phase" is the most influential example of how subjectivity is formed as a result of spatial positioning: it suffers internal dehiscence.[18] This list can of course be extended; I mention these authors here only to point to the interdisciplinary approach that a combined interest in space and subjectivity necessitates and the very plurality of ways in which space and

[15] Jacques Rancière. The Politics of Aesthetics. Trans. and Introduction by Gabriel Rockhill. Afterword by Slavoj Zizek. London and New York: Continuum, 2004. 9.
[16] Michel Foucault. Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.
[17] Michel De Certeau. The Practice of Everyday Life. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984, 1988.
[18] Jacques Lacan. Écrits: A Selection. London and New York: Routledge, (1977) 2001.

subjectivity have been defined. Alongside these three thinkers, this thesis also draws on the spatial/subjective issues raised by Jonathan Crary, Elizabeth Grosz, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, and Fredric Jameson.

Within art history there are also many examples of how artworks configure space in such a way as to establish a model of subjectivity. For example, Carol Duncan offers an account of the spatial layout of the Louvre and the construction of the post-revolutionary French subject in *Civilizing Rituals.*[19] Craig Owens provides an analysis of Diego Velasquez' *Las Meninas* (1656) in which he demonstrates ow the spatial dynamics within the painting position the viewer as subject to the King's authority.[20] Mieke Bal has also taken the layout of museum exhibitions as her object of study and has demonstrated that they, too, "speak" to the viewer and thereby invite particular (and sometime peculiar) relationships.[21] This link between spatial deployment and subjectivity is also apparent in Michael Fried's *Art and Objecthood,* in which he discusses the contingency of both the art object and the viewing subject to the "theatrical" situation that Minimalism introduces (in contrast to the almost transcendental experience that a more resolutely modern artwork elicits). [22]

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[19] Carol Duncan. Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums. London and New York: Routledge, 1995.
[20] Craig Owens. "Representation, Appropriation, and Power." Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman et al. eds. Intro. Simon Watney. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. 88-113.
[21] Mieke Bal. "On Grouping: The Caravaggio Corner." Looking In: The Art of Viewing. Intro. Norman Bryson. [Critical Voices in Art, Theory and Culture. Saul Ostrow, series ed.] London and New York: Routledge, 2001. 161-190.
[22] Michael Fried. "Art and Objecthood." Artforum (June 1967): 61-8.

By attending to the discursive consequences of a given form, artistic or otherwise, all such analyses establish ways of thinking that extend formalism. That is, they break formalism free from its association with "pure" form (in the reductive Greenbergian sense of the term) and articulate its implications for various cultural debates. Stated another way, such analyses enact a formalism that does not turn a blind eye to questions of context, but rather scrutinize the ways in which a particular form generates a model of viewership, such as the self-patrolling prisoner (Foucault) or the homo-erotic voyeur (Bal). Although the tenets of poststructuralism questioned the integrity of the link between a signifier and its signified, this understanding of form still holds: as Rosalind Krauss states, "the signifier is not just an empty, formal operation; it controls what sorts of meanings can arise in the work."[23] It is in this way that an artwork's "form" is integral to its "content." My thesis follows on the leads of such analyses by insisting that artworks can articulate very specific ideas through their formal configurations. At every turn I execute a painstaking formalism: I offer a very close analysis of an artwork in order to define how the viewer's spatial enactment of it constitutes a model of subjectivity.

With regard to my choice of particular artworks – which I will introduce in a moment – I am partly guided by my conviction that art, through its variety of forms, its material strangeness, its spatial demands, and its articulation of alternatives, can temper the demands of ideology and establish modes of viewing that are more in line with the subjects we might wish to be. Christine Ross

[23] Rosalind Krauss in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Silvia Kolbowski, et al. "The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation" October 66 (1993): 3-27.

touches on this belief and on the concern that it is becoming evermore difficult to maintain today. She asks,

> If one considers that the frame, or any staged scene whatsoever, was a means to articulate a distance vis-à-vis the social world in order to imagine it otherwise or simply to offer a space for thought, the critical question raised by recent media developments therefore becomes the following: how do new media articulate this distance? Do they still articulate it at all?[24]

This question is equally pertinent to all artistic media: the crossover compromises long-held assumptions about presence and emplacement, as well as interactivity, the artist's cultural role, and critical evaluation.

My choice of corpus is informed by this question. I am interested in how a wide range of spaces and subjects are envisioned by artists and to what effect. As Rosi Braidotti states, "There is a noticeable gap between how we live... and how we represent to ourselves this lived familiarity. ...Filling this gap with adequate figurations is the great challenge of the present. And I cannot think of a bigger one for the future."[25] I have deliberately chosen artworks that are not only endemic to and exemplary of the crossover but that also embrace this challenge. The art works in this thesis demonstrate five different attempts to establish such "adequate figurations" for the present, "adequate" in the sense of seriously engaging with contemporary issues: they are spatialized propositions for ways in

[24] Ross, Christine. "The Disappearing Screen: An Incomplete Matter." Trans. Bernard Schutze. Parachute 113 (Jan.-March 2004): 19.
[25] Rosi Braidotti. Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002. 1, 6.

which we can represent ourselves to ourselves and thereby participate in the construction of these "selves."

As such, the artists discussed in this thesis create models of "spatial experience," neither of which term can be taken for granted: "space" is contested in philosophy and physics alike, and "experience" resounds with assumptions of an ontologically secure "self-presence" that can do the experiencing. But as Jonathan Crary states, "There never was or will be a self-present beholder to whom a world is transparently evident. Instead there are more or less powerful arrangements of forces out of which the capacities of an observer are possible."[26] In his book *Techniques of the Observer* he demonstrates that optical devices "operate directly on the body of the individual"[27] to condition viewers for assuming a certain model of subjectivity. On a larger spatial scale this holds true, as well:

> If our subjectivity is immersed in the world and there is fundamentally a lack of clear distinction between the production of subjectivity and the building of the environment, we must be conscious of our investment in our built spaces.[28]

As Elizabeth Grosz states, "there is an historical correlation between the ways in which space (and to a lesser extent, time) is represented, and the ways in which subjectivity represents itself."[29]

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[26] Jonathan Crary. Techniques of the Observer: on Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century [October Book]. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1999. 6.
[27] Ibid. 7.
[28] Charles Stankievech. "Sewing/Sowing: Cultivating Responsive Geotextiles." Philip Beesley, Christine Macy, Andrew Payne et al. Hylozoic Soil: Geotextile Installations 1995/2007. Toronto: Riverside Architectural Press, 2007. 44.

The corpus of this thesis consists of such "built spaces" or "optical devices." The artworks I discuss are powerful precisely because they challenge, reveal and establish the spatial "arrangements" by which contemporary culture is experienced and understood, as well as our subjective investments in them: Olafur Eliasson's installation *Notion Motion* (2005) plays with the distinction between actual and virtual space and the viewer's position relative to both; Philip Beesley's interactive environment *Hylozoic Soil* (2007) is suggestive of the eroding boundaries between the body and its environment and the consequent dispersal of subjectivity; Mike Nelson's tri-part stage-set *Triple Bluff Canyon* (2004) investigates the overwhelming heterogeneity of objects and spaces that comprise everyday life and the difficulty of establishing meaningful conglomerations; Gregor Schneider's labyrinthine *Weisse Folter* (2007) pushes the desire for polysensorial immersion within simulacral sites to its (il)logical conclusion; and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's augmented city square *Under Scan* (2005) addresses public participation and surveillance in urban centres.

Following through on my insistence on formal analysis, through the case studies I take great pains to describe the artworks as propositions in their own right (rather than as illustrations of extrinsic propositions), that is, as "theoretical objects." As Mieke Bal defines it, this "term refers to works of art that deploy their own artistic and, here, visual, medium to offer and articulate thought about art."[30] In a footnote she explains that the term "theoretical object" foregrounds

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[29] Elizabeth Grosz. Space, time, and perversion : essays on the politics of bodies. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. 97.
[30] Mieke Bal. "Narrative inside out: Louise Bourgeois' Spider as Theoretical Object." Oxford Art Journal 22.2 (1999): 104.

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"both the theoretical thought and the visual articulation of that thought in visual objects."[31] Considering artworks as aesthetic articulations of theoretical ideas is also another way of ensuring that the old-fashioned "politics of the signifier" are adequately addressed, rather than jumping *immediately* to the register of important ideas to which it may or may not refer.[32] Theoretical objects propose and embody their own issues.

Furthermore, each of the theoretical objects I discuss in this thesis functions as a spatial model for subjectivity. Let me state clearly, however, that this thesis in not an exhaustive historical or theoretical account of how ideas of "space" or "subjectivity" have been manifest in the visual arts. Nor have I constructed or applied any comprehensive theory of "spatial experience." Rather, I have chosen the approaches that seem most relevant to the interpretation of the contemporary artworks that comprise my corpus, approaches drawn from the discourses of new media immersion and site-specificity, as well as from the literature cited above. Regarding the artwork as a "model" for space and subjectivity, it might be useful to remember the distinction between "ideal" and "empirical" viewers that Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson define in "Semiotics and Art History:"

> Empirical spectators are the actual, living, and breathing viewers of the sort we see...walking through the exhibition space, in couples or in groups, looking at the pictures around them and discussing what they see. The ideal spectator is a more abstract figure; broadly speaking, the term refers to the various roles ascribed to viewers by the painting

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[31] Ibid.
[32] See Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Silvia Kolbowski et al. "The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation."

they see, the set of positions of functions proposed and assumed by each of the images on display.[33]

It is precisely this abstract, "ideal" viewer that I try to discern in the artworks that comprise my corpus in order to understand what types of subjectivity they encourage and how the roles and positions they ascribe viewers might crystallize or distil, mediate or transform spatial experiences.

In this thesis I have deliberately chosen to include both artworks I have seen in person and those I have encountered in mediated form in order to actively signal, or demonstrate by example, that media competence is crucial, especially now that contemporary art is thought to be somehow "beyond" media. The current assumption that "you have to experience it yourself" undercuts the fact that an artwork is an act of communication that occurs within shared conventional parameters and can, therefore, be reiterated and translated. That is, artworks are never frameless and never immediate. They operate within legible conventions that allow the receiver to make sense of the artistic utterance. I am not interested in the inevitability that empirical viewers will bring personal memories and associations to the artwork. Rather, I am interested in the act of communication itself, in the art object as a theoretical object that puts in motion a set of propositions about the world we live in, that (to borrow Krauss' words) controls the meanings that can arise in the work. Of course my analysis of these propositions is limited to my current context of interpretation, but such is the case with all art historical analyses and it is no reason to succumb to an extreme

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[33] Bal, Mieke and Norman Bryson. "Semiotics and Art History." The Art Bulletin LXXIII.2 (1991): 185.

relativism where the artwork only means this/that to me, myself, an empirical viewer writing in 2008. On the contrary: as Michael Ann Holly argues in *Past Looking*,

> To acknowledge the hold that the past itself exerts on us, we need to focus on the way historical works of art position us as their ideal spectators, expect certain responses from us, and confirm in the exchange what they anticipated all along.[34]

That is, art exerts "an agency that compels viewers to respond in certain ways"[35] despite varying contexts of reception.

That being said, however, in art since Minimalism the viewer is *on stage*, so to speak, inextricable from the work (as Michael Fried so well articulated).[36] Thus, it is the nature of the work in question here and the nature of interpretation that these propositions I seek to discern *in* the art object are in fact established somewhere *between* – between subject and object, if you will, during and not before the act of communication. As Gavin Butt states, "the postmodernist critic found herself always already imbricated in the warp and weft of the cultural text."[37] As such, this thesis can also be read as an attempt to define a specific position *within* immersion rather than seeking a way out to an imagined exterior. In the crossover, artists and critics alike inhabit the art world as "outsiders

[34] Michael Ann Holly. Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image. Ithaca and London: Cornell U P, 1996. 9.
[35] Ibid. 11.
[36] Michael Fried. "Art and Objecthood." Artforum (June 1967): 61-8.
[37] Gavin Butt. "Introduction: The Paradoxes of Criticism." After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance. Gavin Butt ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004. 3.

within," to use Braidotti's phrase; "that is to say critically but also with deep engagement."[38]

With regard to the underlying structure of this thesis, I would like to note that it was through the effort of building an adequate interpretive context for my corpus that I arrived at the conclusion that the discourse of immersion and site-specificity have crossed-over to create a new zone. As such, the artworks generated the crossover as much as the crossover seems to generate them. Although for heuristic purposes I initially set up my two key terms against one another, at the end of each respective section I focus on the issues that are central to both. As such, I establish a platform for the thesis in which the two discourses are no longer polarized but are mutually implicated. Although some of my case studies have more to do with one or the other of these terms, I have not suggested, and do not wish to suggest, that artworks can be organized solely according to their relative proximity to either term. For example, to consider Eliasson's and Beesley's installations as site-specific is too much of a stretch; nevertheless, these artworks have implications for a contemporary understanding of "site." Similarly, Nelson's and Schneider's installations do not directly reference new media in any way; yet the paradigm of new media immersion is pertinent to understanding their cultural salience. As such, it is not a balance between immersion and site-specificity that I am seeking to articulate, nor a quantifiable range between them. Rather, this thesis takes its cue from the pervasive appearance in writings on contemporary art of these two terms together and digs into the literature to find

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[38] Rosi Braidotti. 7.

out why this might be and to what effect, especially considering that the artworks in question belong to neither category in any overt or predictable way.

Yet another reason for resisting the temptation to polarize my two key terms is to avoid falling into the "art" versus "technology" trap, with site-specificity aligned with the former and new media immersion with the latter. My thesis is not trying to demonstrate the widespread use of new technologies in the production of contemporary art. Artists have always used whatever technologies are available to them in order to expand their own creative practices and offer a celebratory or critical evaluation of the cultural impact of the technology in question. In other words, there never was a neat divide between "art" and "technology" for artists to now break down. Furthermore, such a division also suggests others, such as human versus machine, or the real versus the virtual. On all these counts I demonstrate a less oppositional relationship between the two in order to indicate their mutual imbrication.

I have grouped my case studies into three separate chapters – two pairs and one solo. Although a pairing suggests the compare/contrast model of interpretation integral to the two slide-projector art history lecture, my intent is somewhat different: by working with two artworks I am able to compile an interrelated set of issues from two different sources. Given my commitment to art objects as theoretical objects, it is first necessary to discuss each of the artworks independently in order to grant them their proper (theoretical) weight. The difficulty that subsequently arises is this: how can I then set them in relation with each other without externalizing the issues, without using the issues as an outside

set of measures by which each artwork is assessed and compared to the other? Because in fact the artworks have not only lent themselves to me in order to serve as an example but have also provided me with the very ideas that I seek to articulate. As such, my cho﹒ of corpus is theoretical: each of the artworks offers a different way to think about the crossover and how we, as viewers, are implicated within it. The artworks were grouped in order to allow certain issues to come into the fore more forcefully.

On this note, one could easily imagine a variety of pairings: *Notion Motion* beside *Under Scan*, for example, would emphasize the changing ways in which screens are sited and negotiated; similarly, *Hylozoic Soil* beside *Weisse Folter* would bring to the foreground their ambiguous structure as well as the military origins of virtual technologies. However, these are not the chapters I decided to write, as interesting as they, or others, might be. Instead, I chose to organize my case studies under the rubrics of "Interactive Spaces" (chapter 2), "Spatial Facsimiles" (chapter 3), and "Augmented Places" (chapter 4). These rubrics mark the points at which the crossover of new media immersion and site-specificity is the most volatile, or should I say the most saturated with theoretical implications for art historical analyses.

And the implications are many. As my case studies will indicate, in the crossover zone the evaluation of an object gives way to the sensations of the subject; accurate visual representation of a world is supplanted by kinaesthetic involvement in that world as a measure of its reality; "passive" observation is superseded by "active" operation; and historical awareness and narrative

development is compromised by an emphasis on simultaneity. Given that the discipline of art history, in its modern American incarnation, has been built on the visual analysis of discrete objects, Kantian disinterestedness, timelessness and critical distance, the crossover challenges its tools of analyses and the boundaries by which it demarks its object of study. In this light, we can speak of a "paradigm shift." That is, we are witnessing a shift in focus within art history from representation to simulation, from the experience *of* art to aesthetic experience, from material to interface, from observation to interaction, from reference to utility, from semiotics to (faux-)phenomenology, and from discourse to sensation. Art history, firmly grounded in the former term, now needs to contend with the latter, its nemesis, in order to sharpen and adapt its tools to the changing contexts of production and reception. It is to this end that I write this thesis.

Thesis Breakdown

Part One: Theoretical Context

#1 The "Crossover" of New Media Immersion and Site-Specificity

This chapter is divided into three sections: I begin by discussing new media immersion and site-specificity as discrete discourses and then question the implications of their crossover. The first two sections function as both a literature review and as a critical evaluation of the key issues that are common to both discourses. As such they provide the platform for my assertion that it is crucial to contend critically with their crossover.

My primary objective in the first section — *new media immersion* — is to trace the concept of immersion in writings on new media where it has been most rigorously theorized. I evaluate the ideas of the key theorists and put them in dialogue with each other in order to expose the issues that have not been resolved. Although new media practices are now widely accepted in contemporary art circles as "media art," they were marginalized within the discourse of art history until quite recently. As such, many of the issues raised in this section have not been taken up by "art" debates directly. For this reason, my references are drawn from other sources, specifically new media theorists, cultural critics, and science fiction. It is here, not in art history proper, that these ideas are explored most insightfully. I open this section by offering an account of how the concept of immersion is positioned within art history. I then discuss immersion as it develops consequent to the use of computer and digital technologies and eventually becomes firmly entrenched as a technological — and cultural — ideal. Lastly, I explore two key issues: the alleged "disappearance" of the frame that separates virtual and actual emplacement, and the implications of this experiential breakdown for theories of subjectivity.

This section draws heavily on Oliver Grau's *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*,[39] Marie Laure-Ryan's *Narratives as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*,[40] and Lev Manovich's *The*

[39] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion [Leonardo. Roger F. Malina and Sean Cubitt, eds.]. Trans. Gloria Custance. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2003.
[40] Marie Laure-Ryan. Narratives as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 2001.

Language of New Media,[41] as well as the essays that are collected in various anthologies, such as *Media Histories* (edited by Oliver Grau).[42] Science fiction writers have also contributed to the cultural understanding of immersion, particularly William Gibson's *Neuromancer*[43] and Neil Stephenson's *Snow Crash*.[44] Lastly, cultural critics such as N. Katherine Hayles have investigated these shifts in wider cultural terms.[45]

The next section -- *site-specificity* -- seeks to articulate the main issues at stake in the discourse of site-specificity. Unlike new media practices, site-specificity was born within the discourse of visual arts. Consequently, my sources are invariably art historians. I trace the propositions of site-specificity through four of its key practices, namely Minimalism, Earthwork, Institutional Critique, and what I am calling Resonant Sites. By reading both the authors and the art practices across one another, it is possible to discern what is of central importance to each of these movements, issues which form the "ideal" of site-specificity. This section also elaborates on the instability site-specificity faced as an artistic genre in the 1990s and the fallout of this internal fracturing. To close, this section explores the implications of the ideal of site-specificity (and its collapse) for theorizations of space and subjectivity.

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[41] Lev Manovich. The Language of New Media [Leonardo. Roger F. Malina and Sean Cubitt, eds.]. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2001.
[42] Oliver Grau, ed. Media Art Histories. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007.
[43] William Gibson. Neuromancer [Ace Book]. New York: Berkley Publishing Group, Penguin Putman, 1984.
[44] Neil Stephenson. Snow Crash. New York: Bantam Books, 1992.
[45] Katherine N. Hayles. How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1999.

This section draws heavily on Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*;[46] James Meyer's *The Functional Site*;[47] Rosalind Krauss' *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*;[48] Benjamin Buchloh's *Conceptual Art 1962-1969: from the aesthetic of administration to the critique of institutions*;[49] and Michael Fried's infamous *Art and Objecthood*.[50] Robert Smithson's conception of the "site" and "nonsite" is also invaluable to this section as it proposes the inseparability of the actual site and the artistic representation.[51]

It is in this third section of my opening chapter — *the crossover* — that the necessity of reading the theories of new media immersion and site-specificity together is first posited. As previously mentioned, art historians are now turning their attention to new media more frequently and rigorously; however, I have noticed a remarkable tendency in these accounts: they engage in sweeping acts of revisionism. In select writings by Hal Foster, Louise Poissant and Peter Weibel, for example, and exhibitions such as *Super Vision* at the ICA in Boston in 2006, it is as if the art movements of the sixties and seventies (such as Op Art, Kinetic Art, Minimalism and Happenings) foreshadowed or spawned today's artistic use of interactive media and imaging technologies.[52] Although their accounts contain

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[46] Miwon Kwon. One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2002.
[47] James Meyer. "The Functional Site." Documents 7 (Fall 1996): 20-9.
[48] Rosalind Krauss. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." (1979) The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture. Intro. Hal Foster, ed. New York: Bay P, 1983. 31-42.
[49] Buchloh, Benjamin. "Conceptual Art 1962-69: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1999. 514-37.
[50] Michael Fried. "Art and Objecthood." Artforum (June 1967): 61-8.
[51] Robert Smithson. The Collected Writings. Jack Flam, ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.
[52] Hal Foster. "Six Paragraphs on Dan Flavin." Artforum (Feb. 2005) : 160-1, 206. Louise Poissant. "The Passage from Material to Interface." Media Art Histories. Oliver Grau, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007. 229-50. Peter Weibel. "It is Forbidden N : to Touch: Some Remarks on the

many valuable insights, my discussion of the crossover is an attempt to avoid such narratives of influence and offer an account of the collision of issues that inform the crossover. Rather than suggesting a clear line of evolution, I explore the interpenetration of sources and ambitions.

More specifically, this section argues that, although artworks that fall strictly into the paradigm of either new media immersion or site-specificity continue to be produced, the new "hybrid" or "mutant" it getting all the attention. As Benjamin Buchloh states,

> if there are artistic practices that still stand apart from this process of homogenization, I'm less convinced than ever that they can survive, and that we as critics and historians are able to support and sustain them in a substantial and efficient manner, to prevent their total marginalization.[53]

Rather than adding these marginalized practices to the newly formed canon, I seek to characterize the crossover in detail in order to find out its implications for our understanding of contemporary spatial experience.

Part Two: Case Studies

In light of the crossover of new media immersion and site-specificity, it is important to ask: how is it expressed or materialized in the artworks and in the interpretive context? And how does art envision or challenge it in turn? How are

(Forgotten Parts of the) History of Interactivity and Virtuality." Media Art Histories. Oliver Grau, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007. 21-41. Nicholas Baume, ed. Super Vision. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2006.
[53] In Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois et al. "Roundtable: The Predicament of Contemporary Art." Art Since 1900. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004. 673.

the new media of immersion shaping what artists do and what audiences experience? What does it mean to make site-specific art in an era of telepresence? This part of the thesis explores these questions through a series of case studies.

#2 Interactive Spaces

The first set of case studies concerns the Janus-face of interactivity: interactivity implicates the viewer in the artwork and lends her some control over it, but simultaneously governs the rules of the game, so to speak. Interactivity goes hand-in-hand with new media immersion; in the discourse of site-specificity, by contrast, interactivity is often more a matter of reflection than action. That is, the viewer is physically implicated in the site in a way that framed artworks can only suggest but her interaction is often restricted to walking through the site and perceiving it sensorially; it leaves no permanent mark. Because theories of interactivity borrow more heavily from new media studies than site-specificity, this chapter also borrows more heavily from the discourse of new media. Indeed the term site-specificity almost falls from the pages altogether, although the issues it encapsulates linger.

In particular, this chapter will sharpen two different critical edges of the crossover by probing the implications of the models of interactivity established by two different artworks: Olafur Eliasson's *Notion motion* (2005) is a highly contradictory spatial experience: it demonstrates how the subject becomes immersed within a screen-based site while also suggesting that breaking out of this immersion is the premise of the "self." By contrast, Philip Beesley's *Hylozoic*

Soil (2007) does not offer a way for the "figure" to distinguish itself from the (technological) "ground;" rather, the subject is dispersed throughout a site that exceeds its ability to conceptualize as a whole. Although the difference between them suggests a progression toward increased immersion and away from site-specificity, in this chapter I highlight their simultaneity in order to suggest the radical heterogeneity of spaces that we inhabit through technological mediation on a day-to-day basis. In conclusion, I explore the imagery of nature that both installations evoke in order to launch their critiques of interactivity and discuss the debate between immersion and interactivity on a wider cultural scale.

#3 Spatial Facsimiles

The second point at which the crossover is particularly focalized is the point at which the artistic representation of a specific site slides over into its replication, raising questions about the relationship between actual and virtual emplacement. As such, in contrast to the previous chapter, this chapter strikes a balance between immersion and site-specificity and allows for a nuanced discussion of the critical distance that does or does not result, as well as the merits or demerits of all-encompassing polysensorial artistic experiences (as opposed to objective evaluations). As these case studies will exemplify, the discourses of site-specificity and new media immersion cannot be distilled one from the other. Furthermore, in the imaginative "trips" that these artworks structure for the visitor, it becomes clear how kinaesthetic involvement establishes itself as the measure of the facsimile's "reality" (as opposed to visual accuracy). This chapter also explores the implications of emphasizing the "immediacy" of experience at

the expense of the discursive register of experience, implications to which these two artworks demonstrate two different attitudes, one resistant and the other embracing.

In particular, this chapter explores two installations that are facsimiles of actually existing or once existing sites: *Triple Bluff Canyon* (2004) by Mike Nelson and *Weisse Folter* (2007) by Gregor Schneider. In the case of Nelson's installation, viewers undertake an imaginative trip to a defunct cinema, to his former studio space in London, and to Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) in Ohio. In Schneider's installation, viewers "travel" to the prison cells of the American military detainment camp in Guantanamo Bay. Given the *Partially Buried Woodshed*'s status as a political icon of resistance to the Vietnam war and Schneider's blatant reference to a contemporary war, the thick layering of representation that constitutes today's political mediascape is of foremost concern in both of these works. In conclusion, I explore the efficacy of the tactics that each artist adopts to launch his political critique by drawing on the difference in signification between the two German words for experience, *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*.

#4 Augmented Places

The last issue particular to the crossover that is under investigation in this thesis is how immersive technologies mediate specific actual sites to creative ends, prompting new understandings of place and civic engagement. Augmented space is a practical reality that is evinced in everything from cell phone use and

televisions to digital billboards, GPS, and medical imaging technologies. More specifically, this chapter deals with how the urban environment is increasingly mediated by a plethora of screens large and small and "connected" by tele-communication gadgets of all sorts. This chapter explores the marriage of surveillance and simulation technologies, the possibilities for connection and communication within the space of the media, and the consequences of augmented space for our understanding of historical narratives and "public" art.

In order to investigate these issues, this chapter focuses on a single artwork: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Under Scan* (2005). This interactive project was installed in five different public urban spaces across the East Midlands, UK and, in late 2008, was installed in Trafalgar Square. The work raises important questions about the possibilities (or lack thereof) of establishing a discursive "public" space with an immersive "private" space by way of personalized mediations of the city's inhabitants. Lozano-Hemmer has stated that the *singularity* of experience – what he calls "aura" – is back with a vengeance.[54] In the conclusion I tease out the implications of this "return" by exploring the concept of subjective experience as it was historically established in the discipline of art history.

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[54] In Jose Luis Barrios, Manuel DeLanda, Barbara London et al. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Some Things Happen More Often Than All of the Time. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Cecilia Gandarias, eds. Turner/A&R Press, 2007. 143.

Conclusion

Given its very contemporaneousness, all work in this area – mine, as well as the artists and texts I draw upon – is speculative. This is one of the ponderous things about doing contemporary research: it forces an acknowledgement that propositions and theories are always necessarily provisional. That is, they are never authoritative or proscriptive. Instead, as this thesis demonstrates, research into the art of "today" participates in an effort to make maps of the present that will hopefully illuminate possible avenues for the future, some of which may be more desirable than others.

In light of the hyper-mediated subjects we have become and the hyper-mediated spaces we navigate day-to-day, media competence is a necessary survival skill. As Joyce Culter-Shaw states,

> Visual literacy takes time, training, perceptual acuity, and a critical perspective. It is a necessary educational challenge, if we truly value depth in our understanding of the world around us, our place in it, as well as the ability to respond critically to our visually saturated, commercially co-opted environment.[55]

It is in this effort of honing media literacy – which includes spatial, material and technological literacy alongside visual literacy – that I offer a very close reading of the five artworks mentioned above. In particular, this thesis demonstrates how art contributes to the development of critical theory around two issues of the day – space and subjectivity. Eliasson, Beesley, Nelson, Schneider and Lozano-

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[55] In Deborah J. Haynes. "Interrogating New Media: A Conversation with Joyce Cutler-Shaw and Margot Lovejoy." Ethics and the Visual Arts. Elaine A. King and Gail Levin, eds. New York: Allworth P, 2006. 183.

Hemmer provide articulate "theoretical objects" that, in turn, provide an apt opportunity for art historians like myself to re-evaluate their own discipline. In total, these four chapters provide much-needed scholarship on the consequences of the artistic paradigm shift that has occurred over the last decade.

CHAPTER 1: THE "CROSSOVER" OF IMMERSION AND SITE-SPECIFICITY

Marie-Laure Ryan states, "The ocean is an environment in which we cannot breathe; to survive immersion, we must take oxygen from the surface, stay in touch with reality."[1] Site-specificity seeks to establish this contact while new media celebrates total immersion. But what happens when the two previously antagonistic approaches collude in a spectacular crossover? In this new zone, how do philosophies of space join theories of subjectivity? As stated in the Introduction, this chapter discusses new media immersion and site-specificity as discrete discourses before discussing the implications of their crossover.

New Media Immersion

Describing contemporary spatial experience, David Joselit states:

> What makes our present moment distinctive is the degree to which devices such as the iPod, the cell phone, and the personal computer allow our bodies to occupy two spaces at once while, conversely, our physical environments function more and more as

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[1] Marie-Laure Ryan. Narratives as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 2001. 97.

> mediascapes composed not only of surfaces of print and electronic signage but also of the inhabitable three-dimensional signs of architectural branding.[2]

What he is pointing to is the extent to which immersive technologies permeate the everyday environment: in today's urban centres few people persist without daily engagement with the Internet, GPS, palm pilots, as well as access to medical digital imaging if need be, video games and now Wii, on-line "worlds" and chat rooms, and various "infotainments." All these technologies participate to some extent in the dream of immersing ourselves in the image/information space by way of its interactive interface.

Immersion in Art History

However the idea of "transposing viewers into an enclosed, illusionary visual space"[3] is not as new as new media: immersion is grounded in art traditions dating back to the classical world and "forms part of the core of the relationship of humans to images."[4] According to Lev Manovich, VR is sits at the confluence of two distinct traditions: that of representations (framed images) and that of simulations (life-size images).

The history of *representational* immersive spaces is usually attributed to the discovery of perspective. As Marie-Laure Ryan explains, "Perspective painting immerses a virtual body in an environment that stretches in imagination far

[2] David Joselit. "Navigating the New Territory: Art, Avatars, and the Contemporary Mediascape." Artforum (Summer 2005): 276.
[3] Oliver Grau. "Into the Belly of the Image: Historical Aspects of Virtual Reality." Leonardo 32.5 (1999): 365.
[4] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion [Leonardo. Roger F. Malina and Sean Cubitt, eds.]. Trans. Gloria Custance. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2003. 5.

beyond the confines of the canvas."[5] Richard Wollheim's distinction between the observer *of* the painting and the observer *in* the painting[6] is particularly useful in understanding how the viewer is transported into the representation: "she simultaneously exists in physical space and in the space of the representation,"[7] split in two, as it were. According to Ryan, this tradition reached its high point in the *trompe l'oeil* of the Baroque age and then met its first serious challenge with Impressionism, which disoriented the eye with visible brushstrokes, and subsequently with cubism and the increasingly abstract art of the early 20th century.[8] However, as both cinema and computer screens depict three-dimensional space within the confines of a frame, the tradition of representation continues into the digital era. As Ron Burnett states, "Digital media are not seeking a different outcome from a painting or photograph. In all cases, the goal is to recreate a variety of environments that situate people, actions, and landscapes within the confined frames of images."[9]

The history of the second tradition – *simulation* – is well exposed by Oliver Grau in *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*. His research focuses explicitly on 360° image spaces in which the viewer enters physically, thus excluding framed representations, which are entered psychologically. Grau's primary historical example is the panorama, which is especially significant in the history of

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[5] Ryan, Marie-Laure. 3.
[6] Discussed in M. Carleton Simpson. The Cultural Context of Perception. PhD Dissertation. London, ON: U of Western Ontario, 1996. 165.
[7] Lev Manovich. The Language of New Media [Leonardo. Roger F. Malina and Sean Cubitt, eds.]. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2001. 113.
[8] Marie-Laure Ryan. 3.
[9] Ron Burnett. "Projecting Minds." Media Art Histories. Oliver Grau, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007. 326.

simulation because it was the first to depict an image on a circular canvas in correct perspective, and because this image-space was no longer continuous with the physical space in which it was situated, as earlier wall paintings and mosaics had been. "The panorama installs the observer *in* the picture," states Grau, albeit on a central platform at a particular elevation: "Building on the traditions and mechanisms of illusionistic landscape spaces, the panorama developed into a presentation apparatus that shut out the outside world completely and made the image absolute."[10]

Already in the early 1800s, the immersive effects of the panorama were controversial: the discourse was polarized between technophiliacs and -phobics. One prominent critic of the panorama states, "I feel myself trapped in the net of a contradictory dream-world... not even comparison with the bodies that surround me can awake me from this terrifying nightmare, which I must go on dreaming against my will."[11] According to Grau, the panorama's "game of deception was its chief fascination."[12] Through the course of its historical development, the panorama "sought to increase, or at least maintain, illusion by moving toward forms that addressed all the senses."[13] As Lev Manovich states, "From here we are one step away from VR, where physical space is totally disregarded, and all 'real' actions take place in virtual space."[14]

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[10] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 59.
[11] Ibid. 64.
[12] Ibid. 70.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Lev Manovich. 114. ("In the nineteenth century one of the criticisms of photography was that it was too real and therefore robbed people who were photographed of their integrity and their souls. In the same way new media are often described as overwhelming," explains Ron Burnett: "Digital

With the turn of the 20th century, inter-media projects continued to strive toward creating immersive spaces that sit between the traditions of representation and simulation. The various developments that eventually resulted in the technology of virtual reality are frequently cited in the literature: for example, the Stereopticon (1896) used sixteen slide projectors to project circular pictures, the Cinéorama (1900) briefly united the panorama with the new technology of cinema, the Teleview (1921) introduced 3-D film to the United States, and the Stereokino (a 3-D stereoscopic cinema), according to Sergei Eisenstein, had the power "for the first time ever, to 'involve' the audience intensely in what was once the screen and to 'engulf' the spectator in a manner no less real and devastating with what was formerly spread across the screen."[15] A 180° Cinerama eventually came to dominate its 360° prototype due to its commercial success.

In the same period radical futuristic visions of a cinema that could offer illusionary experiences to all the senses, including taste, touch and smell, were being developed by Morton Heilig, a Hollywood cinematographer who was the first to attempt to create what is now called virtual reality. His Cinema of the Future remained a futuristic vision but in 1962 he developed the Sensorama Simulator, which in addition to 3-D images and stereophonic sound, subjected the audience to vibrations and smells[16]: the objective was polysensorial experience and the Sensorama was quickly picked up by the entertainment

images seem to have enough power to overcome their inherent artificiality." In "Projecting Minds." Media Art Histories. Oliver Grau, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007. 332.)
[15] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 154.
[16] Ibid. 158.

sector.[17] Three decades later, in the 3-D IMAX (image maximization) with its curved screens of up to 1000 m2, "spectators are literally in the images."[18]

New Media Immersion

With the advent of the computer, the development of immersive spaces took a significant turn from immersing the viewer imaginatively (as in the tradition of representation) and physically (as in the tradition of simulation) to also necessitating his or her *interaction*. In 1963 Ivan E. Sutherland developed the first graphical user interface (GUI), which "offered the option of manipulating images directly on the screen: the basic prerequisite for interaction in virtual realities."[19] "Sketchpad," as he called it, replaced abstract *word*-commands with an interface of pointing at icons with a device – a physical *action*.[20] Now the GUI is commonplace: our virtual "desktops" are littered with "file folders" and other media objects that we can drag from one corner of the desk to another. Despite its current innocuousness, however, the development of graphical user interface marks an important turn from a concept of immersion that aims to sensually engulf the audience by the image to a concept of immersion that requires the audience to participate in the generation of the image. As Jeffrey Shaw states, interactive interfaces "achieve new levels of physical and imaginative assimilation of the viewer within the image space."[21]

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid. 160.
[19] Ibid. 162.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Jeffrey Shaw. "Introduction." Future Cinema: the Cinematic Imaginary after Film [Electronic Culture]. Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel, eds. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2003. 4.

The next major innovation in technological immersion was also by Sutherland: in 1966 he developed a head-mounted display (HMD), a helmet with binocular displays in which the images on two monitors positioned directly in front of the eyes created a 3-D image.[22] When connected to an infrared camera, the HMD made it possible for military pilots, for whom the HMD was first developed, to "see" at night. Soon thereafter, Sutherland replaced the photographic film images with computer graphics that were updated many times per second, and, in 1968, he developed the first computer-aided HMD. It showed 3-D computer images, and sensors inside the helmet tracked the user's head movements, known as "headtracking": "The fundamental idea behind the three-dimensional display is to present the user with a perspective image which changes as he moves."[23] As Philippe Codognet explains, "with virtual worlds we are moving away from the metaphor of the map to that of the path, from the third-person point of view ("God's eye") to the first-person point of view."[24]

The next sense to be integrated into computer systems was touch. In 1981 Thomas Zimmerman invented the prototype of the data glove, which he later developed together with Jaron Lanier and in cooperation with NASA. The data glove is basically a further development of the mouse: it is a "highly specialized sensor, which registers and transmits the position of the fingers, thus enabling movement and navigation in a virtual space."[25] With the data glove, the user can

[22] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 163.
[23] Sutherland in Ibid.
[24] Philippe Codognet. "Artificial Nature and Natural Artifice." Future Cinema: the Cinematic Imaginary after Film Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel, eds. [Electronic Culture]. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2003. 463.
[25] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 167.

touch or move computer-generated objects. As such, it pushed the connection between man and machine one step further. This is the typical and enduring dream of virtual reality: that by way of the HMD and data gloves we can be experientially emplaced in an alternative reality. In 1989, Jaron Lanier coined the term "virtual reality," and indeed this remains the predominant image: a person clad in a high-tech helmet and outfit that shuts out the "real" world and immerses them in the "virtual" world of the computer.

As we have seen, innovations in computer imaging technologies such as the HMD suggest that it is possible to "enter" the image and intervene in its generation. The more recent CAVE (cave automatic virtual environment) shares this technological goal "to give the viewer the strongest impression possible of being at the location where the images are."[26] Unlike HMD immersion, however, the CAVE is a surround-screen and surround-sound system that projects 3-D graphics into a 10' cube of display screens rather than onto close, small screens set directly before the user's eyes. Instead of a helmet, the user wears lightweight stereo glasses and she explores the virtual world by moving around inside the cube and "grabbing objects with a three-button, wand-like device."[27] This image, of a person enveloped in by screens and sounds, feeds directly into the home-entertainment and infotainment industry, albeit at a lower-tech, less interactive level.

According to Michael Heim, HMD and CAVE establish two different relationships with the immersant's body. As he explains,

[26] Ibid. 14.
[27] Michael Heim. "The Design of Virtual Reality." Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/ Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment [Theory, Culture and Society]. Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, eds. London: Sage Publications, 1995. 71.

HMD immersion results from the primary body giving way to the priority of the cyberbody, and a tunnel-like perception of the virtual world results. [...] In the CAVE... [t]he user enjoys an apperceptive experience. [...] Our freedom of bodily movement permits us to remain aware of ourselves alongside computer-generated entities. [...] To put it simply, HMD VR creates tunnel immersion, while apperceptive VR creates a spiral telepresence that allows us to go out and identify our cyberbody and the virtual entities it encounters and then return to our kinaesthetic and kinetic primary body, and then go out again to the cyberbody and then return to our primary body, all in a deepening reiteration.[28]

This "reiteration" not only implicates the user in the image-space but also implicates the image-space in the user. That is, the CAVE, even more so than the HMD, trains the viewer's body and her sense of "self": "apperception implies a reflectedness, a proprioception, a self-awareness of what we are perceiving."[29] Whereas Immanuel Kant in the late 18th century believed that apperception makes it possible to maintain a critical attitude toward what we perceive, in its technological translation, it more effectively enables "an experience of physical and imaginative relocation."[30] VR brings the enacted and the represented body into conjunction.[31]

New media artists have engaged these technologies to interesting ends and their projects help provide a more concrete picture of what the experience of immersion in VR might yield. Charlotte Davies' *Osmose* (1995) is an apt example that has received great amounts of critical attention and, according to Grau, "is

[28] Ibid. 72-3.
[29] Ibid. 72.
[30] Jeffrey Shaw. 4.
[31] N. Katherine Hayles. How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1999. xiii.

still unequalled."[32] He describes it as "a technically advanced and visually impressive simulation of a series of widely branching natural and textual spaces: a mineral/vegetable, intangible sphere."[33] It effectively offers viewers both HMD and CAVE immersion in a simulacrum of nature: a single user dons the helmet and thereby generates the imagery, while other users can watch (but not interact with) the resulting imagery on a large projection screen through polarized glasses. As Grau describes it, the images include "a boundless oceanic abyss, shimmering swathes of opaque clouds, passing softly glowing dewdrops and translucent swarms of computer-generated insects, into the dense undergrowth of a dark forest."[34] *Osmose* offers the user a seamless transition from one "natural" sphere to another that defies gravity and Cartesian coordinates and immerses her in a synaesthetic imaginary elsewhere.

The Ideal of VR

As new media immersion is dependent on the user's interaction with the imaged-space, the two ideals — the *naturalness* of the interface as well as *control* over it — need to be reconciled. Literary historian Marie-Laure Ryan establishes the *ideal of VR*, which for Ryan functions "as a metaphor for the fullest artistic experience, since in the Platonic realm of ideas VR scores a double 10."[35] That is, ideally VR earns a 10/10 for interactivity and a 10/10 for immersion. As Oliver Grau states, "The *suggestive* impression is one of immersing oneself in the image space,

[32] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 193.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Marie-Laure Ryan. 20.

moving and interacting there in 'real time,' and intervening creatively."[36] Similarly Don Ihde states, "The ultimate goal of virtual embodiment is to become the perfect simulacrum of full, multisensory bodily action."[37] It is because of VR's ability to engage "the imagined or physical presence of the appreciator's body in the virtual world"[38] that Ryan considers VR as a metaphor for a "total art"[39]: "in VR we act within a world and experience it from the inside."[40]

This, at least, is the ideal: VR models itself on the possibility of reconciliation between immersion and interactivity. Theoretically, however, this ideal cannot be achieved because immersion requires that we consider the text as a "world," whereas interactivity requires that we consider the text as a "game," and the two viewpoints cannot be occupied simultaneously, at least not as of yet. As Ryan explains, the world metaphor is based on a vertical conception of language in which words are to be "traversed" toward their referents. The sequence of signifiers is not just the superficial play of arbitrarily assigned meanings, but quite the opposite: "these meanings form a cosmos."[41] Immersion is thus "in stark contrast to the Saussurian and poststructuralist view of signification as the product of a network of horizontal relations between the terms of a language system"[42] — the "game" view of signification on which the ideal of interactivity is based. At its most basic, immersion focuses on the signifieds, while interactivity

[36] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 3. (my emphasis)
[37] Don Ihde. Bodies in Technology [Electronic Mediations 5. Katherine Hayles, Mark Poster and Samuel Weber, series eds.]. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002. 7.
[38] Marie-Laure Ryan. 19-20.
[39] Ibid. 20.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid. 91.
[42] Ibid. 92.

focuses on the signifiers. In immersion signs are said to disappear, while in interactivity signs are made visible. The immersive "world" is built on the transparency of representation, while the interactive "game" deconstructs it. In visual terms, the "world" offers a mirror-like image, while the "game" offers us a reconfigurable "cubist" picture.

It was the latter, the text as game, that became the dominant aesthetic and critical paradigm of the postmodern age,[43] and with it the ideal of interactivity rather than immersion. In VR, however, both are sought in equal measure. This, places the viewer in an ambiguous position relative to the imaged-world. As Mary Anne Moser explains (drawing on Timothy Druckery),

> Images that implicate the viewer in some way...as with interactive or immersive media, are unbounded. They require experiential cognition. The latter put the critical viewer in an unstable position: one must assimilate the image to comprehend it, yet it must also be dismantled in order to reflect upon it.[44]

Similarly, Ryan states, "Immersion cannot be reflected upon from within immersion – this would amount to destroying it."[45] According to Ryan, however, "the best compromise of all is simply to regard the concepts of game and world as complementary points of view on the same object."[46] We must engage both viewpoints because each reveals features that remain invisible from the other. Furthermore, each makes a different contribution to the aesthetic experience.

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[43] Ibid. 176.
[44] Mary Anne Moser. "Introduction." Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments [Leonardo. Roger F. Malina and Sean Cubitt, eds.]. Mary Anne Moser, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1996. xix.
[45] Marie-Laure Ryan. 171.
[46] Ibid. 199.

According to Ryan, immersion is a corporeal experience: "it takes the projection of a virtual body, or even better, the participation of the actual one, to feel integrated in an art-world."[47] On the other hand, interactivity is a "purely cerebral involvement."[48] It takes place "on the level of signs rather than things"[49] and downplays emotions and personal memories.[50] As Ryan states, "What is at stake in the synthesis of immersion and interactivity is therefore nothing less than the participation of the whole of the individual in the artistic experience."[51]

Maurice Benayoun's interactive CAVE installation *World Skin* (1997) explicitly plays with this ratio, shifting slowly from "bodily" immersion to "cerebral" interactivity. The 3-D colour imagery consists of a plethora of news pictures of many different armed conflicts, including buildings reduced to rubble, soldiers, tanks and the wounded. Users navigate this battleground with a joystick, entering various corners of the apocalyptic "world." They are armed with a camera with which they can "take" pictures, literally removing whatever is "shot" from the image-space and leaving in its stead a monochrome area with black silhouettes. A print of the image is given the user when they leave, and eventually all that is left of the virtual space is the white of the screen. It is at this point, perhaps, that the depicted violence implicates the user the most: her act of shooting the camera annihilates the subject and thereby suggests the violence inherent in reducing the world to a "picture."

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[47] Ibid. 21.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.

More generally speaking, VR fails to achieve its ideal ratio both practically and theoretically: as Ryan quips, it "is still largely science fiction."[52] Participants complain of high-tech vertigo and cyber-sickness due to a discontinuity between inner ear stimuli and sensory stimuli;[53] the sense of smell is not yet successfully integrated; tactile feedback is still limited; and update rates are as of yet too slow – they introduce a lag time, which diminishes the illusion by not offering quick enough feedback to the participant's movement. Don Ihde deflates the ideal of VR and its novelty with a matter of fact observation:

> Yet phenomenologically, this admittedly more actional technological space is but a small step from previous more passive audiovisual situations. The flyer remains seated, and the screen-world back-projects the framed action to the viewer. Action remains minimal in the movement and synesthetic amplification of the body through the joystick. It is all hand-eye coordination, enhanced in the context of hypergraphics, sound effects, and synesthetic amplification.[54]

Furthermore, as Murray and Sixsmith's research reveals, there is still doubt as to how far it is possible to relinquish a sense of being in the physical environment and replace this with a sense of embodiment in an artificial environment.[55]

Nevertheless, the possibility of VR eclipsing the ROL (Sherry Turkle's acronym for the rest of life) is a powerful cultural myth that brings with it a plethora of utopic and dystopic visions. Allucquère Rosanne Stone eloquently articulates the resulting ambivalence:

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[52] Ibid. 1.
[53] M. Carleton Simpson. 182.
[54] Don Ihde. 10.
[55] Craig D. Murray and Judith Sixsmith. "The Corporeal Body in Virtual Reality." Ethos 27.3 (1999).

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[This is] the adventure that is our future, as we immerse ourselves ever more deeply in our own technologies; as the boundaries between our technologies and ourselves continue to implode; as we inexorably become creatures that we cannot even now imagine. It is a moment which simultaneously holds immense threat and immense promise. I don't want to lose sight of either, because we need to guide ourselves — remember cyber means steer — in all our assembled forms and multiple selves right between the two towers of promise and danger, of desire and technology.[56]

Because the ideal of VR and the myths it propels can be more powerful than the facts in establishing cultural frames of reference, both the (alleged) disappearance of the interface in VR and the (liberated or determined) reformulation of subjectivity need to be addressed.

"Disappearance" of the Frame

The image of crawling through the frame that distinguishes the virtual world from the real world is frequently conjured (just think of the recent Fido ad in which a woman props herself up and out of the frame of the cell-phone screen in order to give her lover a kiss). But we have to go even one step further: in ideal VR we are not aware of a frame at all. Oliver Grau states, "the central phenomenon of immersion arises when work of art and advanced image apparatus, when message and medium, converge in an almost inseparable unity — the medium becomes invisible."[57] The merging of digital image and human consciousness features in much of the writing about VR. For this to be achieved, the interface must be imperceptible. Murray and Sixsmith put it this way: "the

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[56] Alluquère Rosanne Stone. <u>The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age</u>. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1996.
[57] Oliver Grau. <u>Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion</u>. 8.

hardware of virtual reality must recede and become transparent for this sense of presence (or "telepresence") to occur... the body-as-I in VR calls for an assimilation of both technological peripherals and the virtual (re)presentation."[58] In other words, the HMDs, data- and body-gloves become naturalized extensions of the human sensory apparatus and the participant enters the representation as if it were a live occurrence.[59]

This "disappearance of the frame is of course heavily contested. Far from celebrating it, as do most VR engineers, Grau insists that "the intended abolition of the interface becomes a highly political question."[60] Under the interactive aesthetic paradigm of postmodernity, cultural critics prized the ability to decorticate all given media in search of hidden curriculums; however, in the rhetoric of VR, viewers are simply to abandon themselves to the image without heed of the media that informs it. As Grau states, "If media competence results from the capability, or learned ability, to objectify a given medium, then this ability is undermined by virtual installations. The designers of this medium utilize all means at their disposal to banish this from the consciousness of the recipients."[61]

Regarding mediation, Marie-Laure Ryan asserts, "The traversal of signs is to be deplored only when it causes signs to vanish permanently, when immersion is so deep that it precludes a return to the surface."[62] An experience that rates 10 for

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[58] Craig D. Murray and Judith Sixsmith. 324.
[59] This is frequently echoed in the discourse on installation art.
[60] Oliver Grau. "Into the Belly of the Image: Historical Aspects of Virtual Reality." 369.
[61] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 202.
[62] Marie-Laure Ryan. 176.

immersion and o for interactivity would thus be deplorable. As such, in order to understand what is at stake in VR, it is necessary to characterize more specifically the interactivity that VR requires: does it only imply the body's hand-eye coordination or does it also imply the negotiation of signs in the construction of meaning? Ryan states that, in order to maximize the immersive and the interactive at the same time, the interaction must be unselfconscious and immediate, not conceptual. But what kind of interaction is it if we are not aware of it? According to Grau, "Psychobiological tests show that the more the participants are involved, the less they are able to differentiate between the artificial world and personal experience;"[63] therefore, the deeper their immersion. Thus a vicious cycle is set in motion: the user's interaction increases the immersion, which deemphasizes the interaction in favour of fusion. As Grau argues, in VR the audience interacts with the work by becoming fused with it.[64]

And so the question remains: how can VR heighten intellectual interactivity without breaking the illusion of immersion entirely? M. Carleton Simpson's research indicates that psychological participation is enhanced by an awareness of the props with which we "play the game," but that in immersion, we are not aware of the artwork, of the game, and so we are discouraged to imagine.[65] As such, in order to heighten imaginative involvement, VR would need to reintroduce the "surface" to weaken the illusion. There are clear reasons for insisting on this: media competency is perhaps the foremost concern. As Oliver

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[63] Oliver Grau. "Into the Belly of the Image: Historical Aspects of Virtual Reality." 369.
[64] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 13.
[65] M. Carleton Simpson. 185.

Grau asserts, "Although today the audience can exert its creative powers over the image, this control is counterweighed by the highly suggestive powers of the image itself."[66] It is for this reason that participants must be aware of whose interests their immersion serves and selectively cooperate or resist. Grau states,

> virtual immersive spaces must be classed as extreme variants of image media, which, because they represent a totality, offer an alternative reality. On the one hand, they meet the demands of the media-makers for a symbolic form of an all-embracing image experience, which admits no contradictions or alternatives, and on the other hand, they offer the observers – again because of their totality – the option of sensual and awareness-altering fusion with the image medium.[67]

Consequently, VR "enables us to regress, leading to an ecstatic symbiosis of onlooker and image."[68] Without an awareness of the power dynamics implicit in our participation in virtual reality, we succumb to its tactics and are reformed in its image.

Unlike the "conscious recognition" of 2D and literary mimetic deceptions, in which the viewer follows the protocol of "suspending disbelief," virtual reality and its historic precursors aim for "unconscious deception."[69] They "maximize suggestion in order to erode the inner distance of the observer."[70] As Grau states, "Aesthetic experience that requires distance or room for reflection tends to be

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[66] Oliver Grau. "Into the Belly of the Image: Historical Aspects of Virtual Reality." 370.
[67] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 13.
[68] Grau. "Into the Belly of the Image: Historical Aspects of Virtual Reality." 370.
[69] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 16.
[70] Ibid. 17.

subverted by immersive strategies."[71] He warns against the collapse of distance immersion implies:

> The further the illusionary symbiosis between work and onlooker progresses, the more it will weaken the psychological distance between the two. ... Yet the very experience of the subject *as* subject depends on distance. Traditionally, as Serres writes, the onlooker mentally activates the elements of fixed artworks. Virtual Reality... seem to turn this concept on its head: the objects move first, apparently activating the onlooker.[72]

As Ryan states clearly, VR "reconciles immersion and interactivity through the mediation of the body."[73] It is this enactment of the image's dictates that puts subjective autonomy at risk in immersion. Viewers may determine the image through their interaction but, given the experiential "disappearance" of the screen, they also incorporate it.

Subjectivity

In order to understand the implications of immersion for concepts of subjectivity it is important to stress that the disappearance of the screen is rhetorical: of course screens still exist, but now the viewer experiences both sides of the screen as if they were actual. In order for this to occur, subjectivity is – to some extent – decoupled from the body, but to what extent is a matter of debate. Erkki Huhtamo describes an extreme position: "According to the technocultural master

[71] Oliver Grau. "Immersion and Interaction: From Circular Frescoes to Interactive Image Spaces." Trans. Gloria Custance. Media Art Net. 13 [Dispositions of the Observers]. http://medienkunstnetz.de/themes/overview_of_media_art/immersion/13/
[72] Grau. "Into the Belly of the Image: Historical Aspects of Virtual Reality." 369.
[73] Marie-Laure Ryan. "Immersion vs. Interactivity: Virtual Reality and Literary Theory." Postmodern Culture 5.1 (Sept. 1994). http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue.994/ryan.994. 39.

narrative of the early 1990s, virtual reality represented a cultural and perhaps even an ontological break, announcing an era when bodies become obsolete and minds are freed to wander immersed into the immaterial realms of cyberspace."[74] On this note, Vivian Sobchack writes, "it is no historical accident that, earlier in our electronic existence, bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger played the invulnerable, hard-body cyborg Terminator, whereas, much more recently and more in tune with the lived body's dematerialization, the slightly built Keanu Reeves flexibly dispersed and diffused what little meat he had across *The Matrix*."[75]

Mark Poster expresses this tendency toward dematerialization dramatically:

> In the mode of information the subject is no longer located in a point in absolute time/space, enjoying a physical, fixed vantage point from which rationally to calculate its options. Instead it is multiplied by databases, dispersed by computer messaging and conferencing, decontextualized and reidentified by TV ads, dissolved and materialized continuously in the electronic transmission of symbols.[76]

Poster is not alone in his evaluation of subjectivity in the "Virtual Age," to use Stone's phrase. David Howes, for example, exclaims "Don't think disappearance

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[74] Huhtamo, Erkki. "Media Art in the Third Dimension: Stereoscopic Imaging and Contemporary Art." Future Cinema: the Cinematic Imaginary after Film [Electronic Culture]. Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel, eds. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2003. 466.
[75] Vivian Sobchack. "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic 'Presence.'" Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture. Berkley: U of California P, 2004. 161.
[76] Mark Poster. "Introduction: Words without Things." The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990. 15.

of reality in representation; think disappearance of the self! In postmodernity it seems that simulation has become the existential ground of personality itself."[77]

Still today, William Gibson's description in *Neuromancer* (1984) of Case's experiences in cyberspace – a matrix of spatially represented information in which the data cowboy's disembodied consciousness can roam freely – is the most prominent portrait of a dematerialized cyber-subject. Near the end of the novel, Case, the hacker, is confronted with a computer simulation of the body and personality of his beloved, Linda:

> There was a strength that ran in her... something he'd found and lost so many times. It belonged, he knew – he remembered – as she pulled him down, to the meat, the flesh the cowboys mocked. It was a vast thing, beyond knowing, a sea of information coded in spiral and pheromone, infinite intricacy that only the body, in its strong blind way, could ever read ... [Yet] even here, in a place he knew for what it was, a coded model of some stranger's memory, the drive held.[78]

This citation suggests that even the secrets of the "meat" can be coded to generate a virtual simulation of personality. In other words, the body is thought to be one prosthetic extension among other possible prostheses. As Case discovers, the embodied way of "effecting the transmission of the old message"[79] can also be transmitted digitally.

[77] David Howes. "Hyperesthesia, or, The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism." Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader. David Howes ed. Oxford: Berg, 2005. 297.
[78] William Gibson. Neuromancer [Ace Book]. New York: Berkley Publishing Group, Penguin Putman, 1984. 239-40.
[79] Ibid. 240.

"Virtual" thus aligns itself with the mind, while "reality" aligns itself with the body, with all the privileges accorded to the mind in Western thought still operative. In such a "reality," in the words of Doel and Clarke, "the real will connote the resistance and drag of matter [Gibson's 'meat'], whilst the virtual will connote the flight of the spirit: arduous voyages versus motionless trips; ontological fixity versus hauntological drift; real bodies versus virtual ghosts."[80] As Simon Penny explains, "The meat body becomes only a machine to press the appropriate buttons or to re-aim the viewpoint, driven by a desiring, controlling mind."[81] Or as the cover of *Wired* magazine stated in 2001, "Your body. Get over it. (Think mind over matter.)"[82]

Craig Murray and Judith Sixsmith, in their article *The Corporeal Body in Virtual Reality*, ask how it can be that, while we are physically sitting in a room at a computer, we can also be phenomenally (not just imaginatively) embodied in virtual representations. As previously discussed, virtual reality implies a substitution of "actual" sensory information with information generated by a computer. This deprivation of physical reality, Murray and Sixsmith argue, is integral to VR because it functions to destabilize the experiential boundaries of the person's body. Once destabilized, the tool — whether it is a mouse, glove, or another sort of sensor — can become part of the body's experience as an extension

[80] Marcus A. Doel and David B. Clarke. "Virtual Worlds: Simulation, Suppletion, S(ed)uction and Simulacra." Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations. Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 271.
[81] Simon Penny. "Virtual Reality as the Completion of the Enlightenment Project." Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckery, eds. [Discussions in Contemporary Culture 9, Dia Center for the Arts]. Seattle: Bay P, 1994. 244.
[82] Mischa Peters. "Exit Meat: Digital Bodies in a Virtual World." New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality. Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. 47.

of itself. According to their research, the mind maps to this new body almost effortlessly: it can incorporate and control the prosthesis within minutes.[83]

N. Katherine Hayles asks, "If it is obvious that we can see, hear, feel, and interact with virtual worlds only because we are embodied, why is there so much noise about the perception of cyberspace as a disembodied medium?"[84] Despite the precarious agency of the body, it is never abandoned as early euphoric pronouncements of virtual reality claimed it would be. According to Stone, "The "original" body is the authenticating source for the refigured person in cyberspace: no "persons" exist whose presence is not warranted by a physical body back in "normal" space.[85] Furthermore, the terms used to describe cyberspace imply the "original" body: everything exists as a metaphor *as if* it were inhabited by bodies,[86] such as "meeting rooms" and "smiles." Allucquère Rosanne Stone calls the desire to forget the body "an old Cartesian trick" that is politically fraught. Remembering the body, she asserts, may help us prevent virtual systems from becoming unwitting accomplices in new exercises of social control.[87]

Yet this reinvigorated Cartesianism does not account for how the body is "determined" by immersive technologies. As Michael Heim explains, "Virtual Reality in general immerses the user in the entities and events of the computer-

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[83] As Elizabeth Grosz states, "The limits or borders of the body image are not fixed by nature or confined to the anatomical 'container,' the skin." In Mischa Peters. 54. See also Simon Penny's extensive footnotes.

[84] N. Katherine Hayles. "Embodied Virtuality: Or How to Put Bodies Back into the Picture." Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments. Mary Anne Moser, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1996. 1.

[85] Allucquère Rosanne Stone. "Virtual Systems." Incorporations [Zone 6]. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, eds. New York: Zone, 1992. 609.

[86] Ibid. 618.

[87] Ibid. 620.

generated world, and the immersion retrains the user's automatic nervous system."[88] Similarly Philippe Codognet writes,

> Experiments have shown that sensory organs (in animals and humans) can be trained to better perceive expected signals before the brain considers them. There, by analogy, it would not be unreasonable to think that a key issue in understanding experiences in virtual worlds would be the ability to perform actions and observe their consequences in order to learn the rules governing the artificial environment — maybe simply by trial and error. This is obviously easier to do in a virtual world than in the real one, and this cognitive process is therefore put to use in many computer games and now intuitively performed by video-game-educated kids.[89]

Such kids exemplify N. Katherine Hayles' concept of the "posthuman." According to Hayles, when the user's sensory system is put into direct feedback loop with a virtual reality system, "the user learns, kinesthetically and proprioceptively, that the relevant boundaries for interaction are defined less by the skin than by the feedback loops connecting body and simulation in a technobio-integrated circuit."[90] Thus, she argues, "Questions about presence and absence do not yield much leverage in this situation, for the avatar both is and is not present, just as the user both is and is not inside the screen. Instead, focus shifts to questions about pattern and randomness."[91] Hayles defines the posthuman as follows:

> the posthuman... can be understood as the realizations that await us when the dialectic of presence/absence is integrated with the dialectic of pattern/randomness. Put another

[88] Michael Heim. "The Design of Virtual Reality." 68.
[89] Philippe Codognet. 465.
[90] N. Katherine Hayles. "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers." The Visual Culture Reader. 2nd ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, 2002. 153.
[91] Ibid. 154.

way, the posthuman represents the construction of the body as part of an integrated information/material circuit that includes human and nonhuman components, silicon chips as well as organic tissue, bits of information as well as bits of flesh and bone. The virtual body partakes both of the ephemerality of information and the solidity of physicality or, depending on one's viewpoint, the solidity of information and the ephemerality of the flesh.[92]

As such, due to interfacing with virtual technologies, "The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction."[93]

This "continuous construction and reconstruction" includes forever adapting to and developing new technologies that extend the body and its nervous system to unprecedented extents. Hayles states,

> ...the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.[94]

Rather than participating in the general acquiescence to ideas of technological determinism, or arguing a reactionary position, Hayles carefully articulates how posthumanism can offer a viable model of subjectivity: the radical heterogeneity that results from "amalgamating" with technology breaks once and for all with the myth of a self-sufficient and coherent "individual," while the emphasis on

[92] N. Katherine Hayles. "Embodied Virtuality: Or How to Put Bodies Back into the Picture." 12.
[93] N. Katherine Hayles. How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics. 3.
[94] Ibid.

bodies, including its technological extensions, effectively makes discourse contend with the immanent facts of the material world (thus counteracting Poster's subjective dispersal and lack of location).

If *Neuromancer* captured the promise associated with the introduction of immersive technologies, Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash* (1992) captures the ambivalence associated with their ubiquity. When a pusher in the Metaverse — "a computer-generated universe that his computer is drawing onto his goggles and pumping into his earphones"[95] — says, "Try it," Hiro responds, "Does it fuck up your brain? Or your computer?" To which he receives the reply "Both. Neither. What's the difference?"[96] Later he inquires about a friend who is in the neurological ward of a (actual) hospital:

> "Any diagnosis?"
>
> Juanita sighs, looks tired. "There won't be any diagnosis," she says. "It's a software, not hardware, problem."
>
> "Huh?"
>
> "They're rounding up the usual suspects. CAT scans, NMR scans, PET scans, EEGs. Everything's fine. There is nothing wrong with his brain — his hardware."
>
> "It just happens to be running the wrong program?"
>
> "His software got poisoned. Da5id had a snow crash last night, inside his head."
>
> "Are you trying to say it's a psychological problem?"
>
> "It kind of goes beyond those established categories," Juanita says, "because it's a new phenomenon..." [...]
>
> "Da5id's not a computer. He can't read binary code."

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95 Stephenson, Neil. *Snow Crash*. New York: Bantam Books, 1992. 24.
96 Ibid. 44.

> "He's a hacker. He messes with binary code for a living. That ability is firm-wired into the deep structures of his brain. So he's susceptible to that form of information. And so are you, home-boy."[97]

By Stephenson's pen, cyberspace is no longer a space that "data-cowboys" can roam while letting their "meat" rot: computer and biological viruses have become one and the same. Unlike Case, Hiro trains diligently in order to be able to wield his katana sword in both virtual and actual reality. In the violent episodes that Hiro encounters, *Snow Crash* evinces the deep ambivalence that marks the discourse of new media immersion at the end of the 1990s: virtual reality had left the lab and become mainstream but the oscillation between technophilia and -phobia had not yet stilled into a comfort zone.[98]

To close this section and build a segue to the next, let me underline yet again that the objective of immersion is "to give the viewer the strongest impression possible of being at the location where the images are"[99] – of dislocating from the material and phenomenological conditions of actual emplacement and relocating to the virtual world. As Don Ihde remarks,

> Here we reach one horizon from which the original techno-worry fed. Can VR replace RL? Only if theatre can replace actual life. Only if the bumpkin rushes to the stage to rescue the maiden from the villain, but the late twentieth century is apparently filled with willing bumpkins![100]

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[97] Ibid. 199-200.
[98] For example, Hiro states that the Metaverse "beats the shit out of the U-Stor-It" (24) in which he lives, but when faced with an actual herd of hicks clad in baseball caps and Confederate flags, "He turns off all of the techno-shit in his goggles. All it does is confuse him." (304-5).
[99] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 14.
[100] Ihde, Don. Bodies in Technology. 11.

Ihde, like Grau, Manovich and Ryan, stresses the importance of media competence at a time when the media threatens to disappear: immersive technologies are premised on making the interface between virtual and actual emplacement as sea. less as possible in order to instantiate a full-body experience of telepresence. As subjectivity is not extricable from the tools it uses to assert its agency, tools that rhetorically disappear are perhaps the most necessary to interrogate.

Site-Specificity

Site-specificity was introduced into contemporary art in the mid-1960s as a reaction against the idealist strictures of high-modernism. Douglas Crimp summarizes this turning point well:

> The idealism of modernist art, in which the art object *in and of itself* was seen to have a fixed and transhistorical meaning, determined the object's placelessness, its belonging to no particular place, a no-place that was in reality the museum – the actual museum and the museum as a representation of the institutional system of circulation that also comprises the artist's studio, the commercial gallery, the collector's home, the sculpture garden, the public plaza, the corporate headquarters lobby, the bank vault. ...Site specificity opposed that idealism – and unveiled the material system it obscured – by its refusal of circulatory mobility, its belongingness to a *specific site*.[101]

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[101] Crimp, Douglas. On the Museum's Ruins. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1993. 17.

The objectives of site-specificity are all apparent in this citation: to be contingent rather than "of itself;" to be grounded rather than "transhistorical;" to bypass the "institutional system;" to expose that system; and to resist commercial exchangeability and mobility. This section will first explore various phases or factions of site-specificity in order to elaborate on this list before tackling its theoretical (and practical) implications.

Minimalism

It is widely accepted in the literature that the "genealogy"[102] of site-specificity begins with Minimalism. Robert Morris' *Notes on Sculpture* are frequently cited to indicate the challenge Minimalism posed to the discrete modern *objet d'art* and homologous "independent" viewer:

> The better new work takes relationships out of the work and makes them a function of space, light, and the viewer's field of vision. The object is but one term in the newer esthetic. It is in some way more reflexive because one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work is stronger than in previous work, with its many internal relationships. One is more aware than before that he himself is establishing relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context.[103]

That is, rather than pointing to some sort of transcendental realm, the meaning of Minimalist work is established in terms of the *relation* it establishes with the surrounding space – its contingency on scale, placement, light, materiality and

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[102] See Miwon Kwon. One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2002.
[103] In Michael Fried. "Art and Objecthood." Artforum (June 1967): 62.

the time it takes to make sense of these determinants – which affect the art object and the viewer alike. In brief, Minimalism "explored the possibilities of less object-based and more experientially-based art."[104]

As Morris suggests, the "better new work" implicates the viewer in the artistic "site." Art historian and critic Michael Fried vehemently resented this infringement: he railed against Minimalism in his 1967 article *Art and Objecthood*, in which he describes Minimalism – what he called *literalist* art – as the negation of art. Fried states, "the experience of literalist art is of an object *in a situation* – one which, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*."[105] This inclusion, however, is not harmonious: "the things that are literalist works of art must somehow *confront* the beholder – they must, one might almost say, be placed not just in his space but in his way."[106] According to Fried,

> Here again the experience of being distanced by the work in question seems crucial: the beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended – and unexacting – relation *as subject* to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another *person*.[107]

In other words, the viewer is implicated within the site but nevertheless maintains her distinction from it: "the situation itself *belongs* to the beholder – it is *his* situation."[108] As such, Fried is among the first critics to remark on the art

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[104] Andrew Cross. "Grey Areas: Andrew Cross negotiates the blurred boundaries of installation art." <u>Art Monthly</u> 205 (1997): 3.
[105] Michael Fried. 62.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid. 63.
[108] Ibid. 62.

object's dependency on the viewer's participation: it is "incomplete without him.... And once he is in the room the work refuses, obstinately, to let him alone."[109] It is the *duration* of the beholder's experience of the situation, which is "endless and inexhaustible,"[110] that most perturbs Fried because it aligns Minimalism with theatre, with "what lies between the arts,"[111] rather than with the "perpetual present" the discrete disciplines of modern art.

In a more positive reading of Minimalism, this insistence on (stage-) presence and the contingency of perception marks a concerted effort to resist "a world of ubiquitous representation and intensive mediation."[112] Drawing on the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Rosalind Krauss, Minimalism's most vocal advocate, writes,

> the minimalist subject is in this very displacement returned to its body, regrounded in a kind of richer, denser subsoil of experience.... And thus this move is, we could say, compensatory, an act of reparations to a subject...who lives under the conditions of advanced industrial culture as an increasingly instrumentalized being.[113]

According to Krauss, Minimalism demonstrates the phenomenological tenet that the meaning of both the viewing subject and the viewed object "arises only from *this* position, and *this* perspective."[114]

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[109] Ibid. 66.
[110] Ibid. 67.
[111] Ibid. 66.
[112] Hal Foster. "The Crux of Minimalism." Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art: 1945-1986. Kate, Linker, Donald Kuspit et al. Howard Singerman, ed. New York: Abbeville P, 1986. 172.
[113] Rosalind Krauss. "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum." October 54 (1990): 9.
[114] Rosalind Krauss. Passages in Modern Sculpture. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1993. 240.

Thomas Crow counters both Fried's emphasis on duration and Krauss' emphasis on phenomenology:

> The champions of Minimalism in the mid-1960s had put forward the idea that the spectator's experience of sculpture should entail awareness both of the real time of the encounter and of the physical and institutional spaces in which it had been installed. But no actual trajectory of time was built into the installation of a Dan Flavin or a Carl Andre... For that reason, the experience of the work remained a matter of voluntary introspection and self-awareness on the part of the sensitive, well-prepared spectator, just as it had been under modernism's regime; the philosophical terms of phenomenology simply replaced those of modernist metaphysics.[115]

According to Crow, Minimalism is only "weakly" site-specific because it does not engage the place, even if it is made for the place (unlike "strongly" site-specific work, which builds duration into the installation). In diametric opposition to Fried, duration is absent in Minimalism, according to Crow, and thus points to an absence of discourse.

However, a site is arguably always already discursive, "a point that is often lost in discussions of site-specificity that narrate too clean a break between an early model of the phenomenologically based site and latter-day discursive practices."[116] As Craig Owens' asserts, Minimalism's emphasis on the specifics of a particular (artistic) situation can be understood as marking the moment when language begins to disrupt the purely visual territory of modernist art. He states,

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[115] Thomas Crow. "Site-Specific Art: The Strong and the Weak." Modern Art in Common Culture. New Haven and London: Yale U P, 1996. 135.
[116] Jill Dawsey."The Site-Specificity of Everyday Life." Art Journal (Fall 2005). 129-31. http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0425/is_3_64/ai_n15791975/pg_1?tag=artBody;col1. 3.

What his [Fried's] post-mortem actually discloses... is the emergence of discourse: after all, the pretext for Fried's violent reaction against minimalism was an artist's *text* (Tony Smith's infamous narrative of a ride on an unfinished extension to the New Jersey Turnpike). ...[T]he eruption of language into the aesthetic field... is coincident with, if not the definitive index of, the emergence of postmodernism.[117]

For Owens, the radical contingency of the Minimalist object on other sources of meaning, including duration, illustrates the splintering of the work of art into a fragmentary text. He states, "The work is henceforth defined by the position it occupies in a potentially infinite chain extending from the site itself and the associations it provokes."[118]

The Expanded Field

Soon after this "eruption" artists increasingly sought to implicate their work/texts (and later themselves) in cultural sites in more discursively explicit ways. Owens' primary example is the work of Robert Smithson, whose distinction between the "site" and the "non-site" is crucial to an understanding of site-specificity: the site is the actual place of the artist's intervention as it is encountered in "real life," whereas the non-site is a collection of various texts, images and material fragments as they are displayed in the gallery to represent the site. According to Smithson, site and non-site are never identical or fully commensurable (the non-site can never represent the site as it "is"), nor are they separable (the site only

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[117] Craig Owens. "Earthwords." Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture. Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman et al. eds. Intro. Simon Watney. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. 45. Also see Benjamin Buchloh. "Conceptual Art 1962-69: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1999. 514-37.
[118] Ibid. 47.

registers as art due to the non-site). As Anne M. Wagner explains, the term "non-site" "implicates the gallery as the locus of an inevitable return. So inevitable, in fact, that Smithson even suggests that landscape and gallery are coextensive."[119] Consequently, in Smithson's formulation, a site-specific work can never be experienced as a site pure and simple: it is mediated by the non-site with which it is "coextensive." As such he establishes a dialectical relationship between the two which is not resolved into a final synthesis but rather stays in perpetual oscillation: the non-site leads to the site and vice versa in such a way that neither can be experienced as a whole onto itself.

In *Sculpture in the Expanded Field* (1979) Rosalind Krauss is trying to make sense of artworks like Smithson's, which have left the confines of the gallery space to work outdoors in relation to the natural and built environment. Like Fried, she contextualizes it against the backdrop of modern sculpture; however, unlike Fried, she uses the negative condition of modern sculpture as "not-architecture" and "not-landscape" to open a more expansive "set of possibilities" for artists to negotiate. Krauss asks herself, if sculpture sits halfway between not-architecture and not-landscape, what sits between not-architecture and architecture (axiomatic structures), between not-landscape and landscape (marked sites), and between architecture and landscape as positive values (site-construction)? Alongside "sculpture," therefore, these new terms provide a historical context for the work without grasping for unlikely precedents like Constructivism or Stonehenge.

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[119] Anne M.Wagner. "Being There: Art and the Politics of Place." Artforum (Summer 2005): 267.

However, despite both Smithson's dialectic of the site/non-site and Krauss' diagrammatic distinctions, Michael Heizer once stated: "the work [of art] is not put in a place, it is that place."[120] Anne M. Wagner asks: "What does it mean for a work of art to *be* a place? What then happens to the work of art? Erasure or Expansion? Or both?"[121] As if answering this question, Douglas Crimp writes,

> For minimal sculptors, the interpolated context of the work of art generally resulted only in an *extension* of the aesthetic domain to the site itself. Even if the work could not be relocated from place to place, as is the case, for example, with earthworks, the materiality of the site was nevertheless taken to be generic – architecture, cityscape, landscape – and therefore neutral.[122]

This alleged "neutrality" of the site, like the "phenomenological" site before it, is of course not neutral at all, as the court-ordered removal of Richard Serra's infamous *Tilted Arc* (1981) demonstrates. As Wagner points out, "The demands of any site always translate into a politics steeped in the realities of place."[123]

However Crimp's point is well taken: the sites within the expanded field are frequently flattened to representing the "outside" of the institutional system, somewhere off the beaten path (only to be later added to the circuit of art tourism). It is from this alleged "exterior" place that artists launch their critiques of the "center," the art system, the status quo, and subjectivity. Perhaps Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969) as described by Rosalind Krauss makes this most obvious:

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[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Douglas Crimp. 17. (my italics)
[123] Anne M. Wagner. 269.

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It consists of two slots, each forty feet deep and a hundred feet long, dug into the tops of two mesas, sited opposite one another and separated by a deep ravine. Because of its enormous size, and its location, the only means to experiencing this work is to be in it to inhabit it the way we think of ourselves as inhabiting the space of our bodies. Yet the image we have of our own relation to our bodies is that we are *centered* inside them.... In this sense, *Double Negative* does not resemble the picture that we have of the way we inhabit ourselves. For, although it is symmetrical and has a center... the center is one we cannot occupy. [...] By forcing on us this eccentric position relative to the center of the work... [*Double Negative*] depicts the intervention of the outer world into the body's internal being, taking up residence there and forming its motivations and meanings.[124]

In this interpretation, Krauss effectively expands the artwork to incorporate the site "because we must look across the ravine to see the mirror image of the space we occupy."[125] Her conclusion is that "our bodies and our experience of our bodies continue to be the subject of this sculpture — even when a work is made of several hundred tons of earth."[126] As such, work in the expanded field has not affected a significant change on the level of content.

Institutional Critique

Crimp continues his criticism of both Minimalism and Earthwork by saying, "It is only when artists recognized the site of art as *socially* specific that they began to oppose idealism with a materialism that was no longer phenomenologically — and thus still idealistically — grounded in matter or the body."[127] Works of art that explore this social dimension of site constitute the third strand of site-specificity.

[124] Rosalind Krauss. Passages in Modern Sculpture. 280.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Ibid. 279.
[127] Douglas Crimp. 17.

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Such artists, writes Miwon Kwon, "conceived the site not only in physical and spatial terms but as a *cultural* framework defined by the institutions of art."[128] She writes:

> More than just the museum, the site comes to encompass a relay of several interrelated but different spaces and economies...that together constitute a system of practices that is not separate from but open to social, economic, and political pressures. To be "specific" to such a site, in turn, is to decode and/or recode the institutional conventions so as to expose their hidden operations...[129]

These "codes" and "operations" became the focus of what we now call Institutional Critique, which includes a variety of work ranging from Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *Hartford Wash: Washing Tracks* (1973), in which she literally scrubbed the museum's floor in order to indicate the (gendered) labour relations on which such "neutral" spaces are based; Daniel Buren's *Painting-Sculpture* (1971), which hung from the centre of the Solomon Guggenheim rotunda in order to obscure the view across it; Michael Asher's 1974 installation at the Claire Copley gallery, in which he emptied the space entirely, leaving only the gallery's administrative staff; and Hans Haacke's infamous *MoMA Poll* (1970), in which he questioned museum visitors about their political affiliations. Institutional Critique continued to be practiced through the seventies and eighties, perhaps reaching its endpoint in Fred Wilson's project at the Maryland Historical Society, *Mining the Museum* (1992), in which he reorganized the permanent collection to highlight issues of slavery (by placing silver shackles amid a silver tea set of the

[128] Miwon Kwon. One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. 13.
[129] Ibid. 14.

same era, for example, or a flogging post amid carpentry work). Generally speaking, after this point the artist's critical approach either became one more thing the museum could acquire to signal its own legitimacy or was tamed and reframed by books such as *Museum as Muse* (MoMA, 1999) and *The Museum as Medium* (James Putnam, 2001) as simply a new creative means.

Benjamin Buchloh discusses the rise (and eventual fall) of Institutional Critique in his article *Conceptual Art 1962–1969: from the aesthetic of administration to the critique of institutions.* Writing from the vantage point of the 1990s, he articulates its achievement as follows:

> Paradoxically, then, it would appear that Conceptual Art truly became the most significant paradigmatic change of postwar artistic production at the very moment that it mimed the operating logic of late capitalism and its positivist instrumentality... That was the moment when Buren's and Haacke's work from the late 1960s onward turned the violence of that mimetic relationship back onto the ideological apparatus itself, using it to analyze and expose the social institutions from which the laws of positivist instrumentality and the logic of administration emanate in the first place. These institutions, which determine the conditions of cultural consumption, are the very ones in which artistic production is transformed into a tool of ideological control and cultural legitimation.

In other words, when artists mimic the way that the legitimizing institutional system operates (such as rigourously gathering and displaying statistics and systematically analyzing artistic traditions) in the *production* of art, the resulting site-specific artwork is socially specific, rather than (or in addition to) phenomenologically specific. According to Buchloh, the system — the institution

that is the object of critique – is exposed for what it is: an arm of what Theodor Adorno called the "totally administered world."[130]

Andrea Fraser, perhaps more than any other artist, exemplifies the ambitions of Institutional Critique to reveal the administrative aspect of museums and galleries. In *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (1989) she plays the role of Jane Castelton, a docent at the Philadelphia Museum of Art who takes visitors on a tour of the building. Rather than discussing the artworks on display, however, Fraser mulls over the museum's funding structure, its Donor Recognition Program and volunteer system, its practical facilities, the museum's underlying ideology as a "one of the world's great repositories of civilization,"[131] its commitment to cultivating good taste, its disdain of the "lower class," and its commitment to high standards. For example, she states, "Let's not just talk about art. Because finally, the museum's purpose is not just to develop an appreciation of art, but to develop an appreciation of values..."[132] It is Fraser's insistence on the museum's cultural role as an arbiter of good taste and decent conduct, and the proposed homology between artistic and social harmony, that reveals the institution to be the training center as well as the repository "for a cultivated, governed, discriminating instinct."[133]

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[130] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." Media and Cultural Studies: Keyworks. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, eds. Malden, MA : Blackwell, 2006. 41-72.
[131] Andrea Fraser. "Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk." October 57 (1991): 107.
[132] Ibid. 122.
[133] Ibid.

Resonant Sites

On the heels of Institutional Critique emerged a more sensorial variant of site-specificity that bears the greatest affinity with today's installation art. These "resonant" sites seek to impress upon the viewer certain physical aspects of the site and the histories that resonate within it. Like Earthwork, these sites are off the beaten path of the art circuit, but unlike Earthwork, they are not posited as "neutral" or somehow "exterior." On the contrary: artists working in this vein of site-specificity explicitly use the techniques and institutions of art to perpetuate it as a viable model for thinking about the materiality and historicity of a given site. As such, the site is posited as undeniably social and ideological. What distinguishes Resonant Sites from Institutional Critique, however, is its insistence on the site's authenticity, on its power to signify, materialize or witness historical truth. It is, in the words of Claire Bishop, "integrally related to the specific history of the site in their structure and choice of material."[131] As such, the artist's role is to reveal this "authenticity" which is thought to be overlooked or otherwise obscured.

Perhaps the most illustrative example of a Resonant Site is *Indigo Blue* (1991) by Ann Hamilton, which was part of the groundbreaking exhibition *Places with a Past* in Charleston, South Carolina. The curator of the exhibition (Mary Jane Jacob) invited nineteen artists (including two couples) to respond to "the economic, social, and cultural history of Charleston, manifested in issues such as

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[131] Claire Bishop. Installation Art: A Critical History. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. 39.

warfare, slavery, class, sexuality, race, gender, religion and labour."[135] Ann Hamilton's work occupied a former garage on Indigo Street in the part of the city where the dye was manufactured in the past. In an effort to find a bodily tangible means of connecting to the site, she piled 1,400 pounds of blue work clothing (approximately 18000 items) on a slightly raised platform inside the garage. Each garment still identified its former occupant by a numbered tag. Behind the mountain of clothes was a big wooden table with a sole person sitting at it dutifully erasing passages in a history book: *International Law Situations*, a Navel War College publication pertaining to legally defined land and water boundaries. Off to the side was the elevated manager's office where he would have formerly surveyed his workers. Hamilton hung sacks of soya beans here, and strips of un-dyed cloth.[136] As Lynne Cooke asserts, "the power of the piece lay in its presence, in the singularity of the experience."[137] Hamilton's emphasis on sensory knowledge clearly distinguishes her from Institutional Critique, and yet, as *Indigo Blue* demonstrates, her emphasis on the senses does not compromise the discursive register: the installation makes reference to the cotton industry in the American south, the history of indigo as the first cash crop of South Carolina, the history of Charleston as a Seaport, as well as the more general history of invisible "blue collar" labour.

Writing about such site-specific works in hindsight, Irit Rogoff states,

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[135] Lynne Cooke. "Places with a Past." The Burlington Magazine (Aug. 1991): 573.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid.

Site-specific art seemed to me to function in the model of rapport. It goes into something that is apparently located and specific and it works at uncovering and unveiling and revealing hidden mechanisms and assumptions. The actual artwork that gets produced through that model has a whole set of assumptions about having an empathy with the local, and coming in and being able to expose and reveal and uncover and make explicit things that might have lain uncovered.[138]

This model of rapport is clearly at play in *Indigo Blue* and it is key to Resonant Sites in general. As such, the artist works as an anthropologist of sorts, revealing the historical resonance embedded in the layered sediment of the site, usually discursively, but sometime quasi-literally. This leads David Joselit to state "In site-specific art, it is the artist as diagnostician or itinerant consultant who signifies presence in materializing a hitherto-virtual discursive site."[139] As such, Resonant Sites plays it both ways, so to speak, or actually three ways: it emphasizes the phenomenological "theatrical" engagement of the viewer, it takes place "off-site," and it participates in the discursive understanding of the site in question.

The Ideal of Site Specificity

Despite their differences, Minimalism, Earthwork, Institutional Critique and Resonant Sites constitute the core of site-specificity: they share the objective of calling attention to the "frame" (in literal and ideological terms) and of critiquing this frame in turn. As Miwon Kwon states, "The 'work' no longer seeks to be a

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[138] In Claire Doherty, ed. Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation. London: Black Dog Publishing Ltd., 2004, 86.
[139] David Joselit. "Navigating the New Territory: Art, Avatars, and the Contemporary Mediascape." Artforum (Summer 2005): 277.

noun/object but a verb/process. provoking the viewers' *critical* (not just physical) acuity regarding the ideological conditions of their viewing."[140] This provocation occurs on several levels at once:

> The (neo-avant gardist) aesthetic aspiration to exceed the limitations of traditional media, like painting and sculpture, as well as their institutional setting; the epistemological challenge to relocate meaning from within the art object to the contingencies of context; the radical restructuring of the subject from an old Cartesian model to a phenomenological one of lived bodily experience; and the self-conscious desire to resist the forces of the capitalist market economy, which circulates art works as transportable and exchangeable commodity goods – all these imperatives came together in art's new attachment to the actuality of the site."[141]

Kwon's choice of verbs – exceeding, challenging, restructuring, resisting – speaks to site-specificity as an *oppositional* practice based on the revelation and subversion of values, immanent critique of the art world, or an attack of ideological edifices, whether blatantly (as when Hans Haacke displayed information on the individuals who previously owned Edouard Manet's *Bunch of Asparagus* (1880), (*Manet-PROJEKT 74*, 1974), or subtly (as when Buren connected the inside and outside of the gallery with a string of striped banners in *Within and Beyond the Frame* (1973)).

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[140] Miwon Kwon. One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. 24.
[141] Ibid. 12.

Site-specificity enacts a displacement "from work to frame"[142]: Minimalism shifted attention "from the portable modernist sculpture to an environmental practice located in the literal space of the viewer"[143]; Earthwork shifted attention onto the discursive frame by failing to escape it; Institutional Critique turned the logic of the frame against itself; and Resonant Sites enacts these three shifts simultaneously. In each case, the complex layering of factors – ideological, phenomenological and historical – that make any site "specific" are revealed in order to be reflected upon. As such, as James Meyer asserts, "Site-specificity had a more implicit, and less recognized, intellectual source: the modernist discourse of reflexivity."[144] As he explains,

> Minimalism displaced the object of reflection from the work's medium to its ambient
> space; institutional critique caused a further displacement, from the exposure of the
> "white cube" as a phenomenological space to a critical exposure of the art institution. Yet,
> for all its radicality, its materialist commitment, this work still operated within the
> Kantian cognitive model of reflexivity: it still confined its analysis to the "frame."[145]

According to Meyer, this restricts the relevance of site-specificity to the discursive limits of the art world, and he moves on to reformulate the genre to include cross disciplinary projects in which the concept of "site" is pluralized.

I will reflect on this later, but what I want to pick up on here is the question of *reflexivity* that goes hand in hand with the *critique* that site-specificity launched

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[142] See Craig Owens. "From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author'?" Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Cultr. . Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman et al. eds. Intro. Simon Watney. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992. 122-39.
[143] James Meyer. "The Functional Site." Documents 7 (Fall 1996): 24.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Ibid.

against the *frame* of art, for it is in the conjunction of these three words that the ideal of the genre can be defined. Generally speaking, as Craig Owens explains, "the *function* of the work of art – any work of art – is to conceal the multiple frames within which it is contained."[146] "This is what the dominant ideology wants," writes Buren, "that what is contained should provide, very subtly, a screen for the container."[147] In stark contrast to this *concealment*, site-specific art seeks to *reveal* "†" multiple frames within which it is contained." For example, Daniel Buren states that, "any work presented in that framework, if it does not explicitly examine the influence of the framework upon itself, falls into the illusion of self-sufficiency – or idealism."[148] Furthermore, for Buren, "the 'unveiling' of the institutional frame can take place only within the frame, and not from some imaginary vantage point outside it," as Earthworks sought to do.[149] That is, not only is a reflexive critique of the frame necessary to counter the "dominant ideology," it is the only type of critique possible: the impetus of site-specificity is deconstructive.

Michael Asher's 1979 exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, in which he relocated a twentieth-century bronze cast of Jean-Antoine Houdon's marble of George Washington (1785-91) from in front of the museum to inside it, is perhaps the most illustrative example. By recontextualizing the sculpture in its "proper" (but seemingly absurd) art historical category among paintings of the same era, Asher called attention to the museum as an active producer, rather than passive

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[146] Craig Owens. "From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author'?" 130.
[147] In Ibid.
[148] In Miwon Kwon. Once Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. 13-14.
[149] In Craig Owens. "From Work to Frame, or, Is There Life After 'The Death of the Author'?" 130.

container, of cultural value. The museum's practice of categorizing works of art, its methods of installation (medium specific), and its aesthetic criteria were all revealed by Asher's gesture.

Due to the "criticality" of site-specific projects like Asher's "George Washington," as well as Fraser's and Hamilton's projects described above, Kwon aligns site-specificity with the historical avant-garde:

> one could argue that throughout the twentieth century, the history of avant-garde, or "advanced" or "critical," art practices (however one might want to characterize those practices that have pressured the status quo of dominant art and social institutions) can be described as the persistence of a desire to situate art in "improper" or "wrong" places. That is, the avant-garde struggle has in part been a kind of spatial politics, to pressure the definition and legitimation of art by locating it elsewhere, in places other than where it "belongs."[150]

These other locations include actual locations (remote landscapes, across city streets, in a foyer or garage, etc.) and abstract spaces (in a different artistic classification or political system, etc.), all of which were once subordinate to the "proper" site of art – the museum. However, Kwon neglects to specify that the avant-garde sought to abolish the distinction between art and life and that it is due to the failure of this ambition, not the ambition itself, that site-specificity has emerged. That is, the ideal of site-specificity can be defined as a continuation of the avant-garde self-reflexive tactic of exposing the workings of the institution of art, as well as the material and political relations it embodies and obscures, but it

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[150] Miwon Kwon. "The Wrong Place." Art Journal (Spring 2000): 42-3. (This continuity with the avant-garde is debated by Owens and by Fraser.)

does not seek to integrate art and life. Rather, it seeks to perpetuate art as a viable model of critical thought.

The genre in crisis

Site-specificity as a genre lost its stronghold almost simultaneously with its formulation. For example, in 1993 Douglas Crimp writes, "What remains of this critique today are a history to be recovered and fitful, marginalized practices that struggle to exist at all in an art world more dedicated than ever before to commodity value."[151] The tactics of artists like Morris, Haacke, Buren, Fraser, Asher, Hamilton and Smithson were "systematically opposed or mystified, ultimately overturned."[152] But why was the criticality of site-specificity opposed and how was it overturned? The answer is entangled in two interrelated issues: the complicity of the artist who was taking the critical "exterior" position and the discursivity of the site rather than its "presence."

Irit Rogoff offers a concise description of how the artists' "rapport" with the site and their exposure of the codes and operations of the art system points to their complicity with it. Drawing on the cultural anthropologist George Marcus, she writes:

> The breakdown of that work in anthropology which is based in rapport, and I
> think the breakdown of that parallel work in contemporary art practices, comes

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[151] Douglas Crimp. 156.
[152] Ibid. 155-6.

with this emergent notion of complicity. Complicity is an understanding that all work is undertaken in the form of a collusion and that it's a collusion that is operating at several levels.[153]

Andrea Fraser directly addresses this "complicity" in her 2005 article *From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique*. "It's not a question of being against the institution," she states: "We are the institution." As Fraser explains, "Every time we speak of the 'institution' as other than 'us,' we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its conditions."[154]

Consequently, there is no position "outside" of the institution of art that artists can adopt to critique it. Rather, as Fraser argues,

> It is artists – as much a museums or the market – who, in their very efforts to escape the institution of art, have driven its expansion. With each attempt to evade the limits of institutional determination, to embrace an outside, to redefine art or reintegrate it into everyday life, to reach "everyday" people and work in the "real" world, we expand our frame and bring more of the world into it. But we never escape it.[155]

This is not to say, however, "that we have no effect on, and are not affected by, what takes on beyond its boundaries."[156] That the art world is severed from the "real" world is a myth: the "collusion" is multifaceted, as Rogoff suggests. Benjamin Buchloh, for example, argues that the critical assault on artistic conventions successfully weakens the traditionally separate sphere of artistic

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[153] In Doherty. 86.
[154] Andrea Fraser. "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique." Artforum (Sept. 2005): 283.
[155] Ibid. 282.
[156] Ibid. 283.

production and, thereby, facilitates its assimilation into the commercial stream. He writes,

> This [paradox of all conceptual practices] was that the critical annihilation of cultural conventions itself immediately acquires the conditions of the spectacle, that the insistence on artistic anonymity and the demolition of authorship produces instant brand names and identifiable products, and that the campaign to critique conventions of visuality with textual interventions, billboard signs, anonymous handouts, and pamphlets inevitably ends by following the pre-established mechanisms of advertising and marketing campaigns.[157]

Furthermore, according to Buchloh, the artist's collusion extends beyond the insatiable market to include the Enlightenment episteme of progress, which took as its objective "to liberate the world from mythical forms of perception and hierarchical modes of specialized experience."[158] In this light, it is not that the criticality of site-specificity failed; it is more that it eased its own cooption.

The second reason site-specificity lost its stronghold as a distinct genre is the waning of belief in the alleged authenticity of the site in question. James Meyer, for example, questions its "literal orientation:"[159]

> Thus the premise of site-specificity to locate the work in a single place, *and only there*, bespoke the 60s call for Presence, the demand for the experience of "being there." An underlying topos of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, of the Happening and performance, Presence became an aesthetic and ethical *cri de*

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[157] Benjamin Buchloh. "Conceptual Art 1962-69: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1999. 530.
[158] ibid. 533.
[159] James Meyer. 23.

cocur among the generation of artists and critics who emerged in the 1960s, suggesting an experience of actualness and authenticity that would contravene the depravations of an increasingly mediated, "one dimensional" society. An antidote to McLuhanism, to popular culture's virtual pleasures and blind consumerism, the aesthetics of Presence imposed rigorous, even Puritanical demands: attendance at a particular site or performance; an extended, often excruciating temporal duration.[160]

What is not accounted for by Meyer is the *dialectical* relationship that Robert Smithson articulated between the allegedly singular "site" and the perpetually incomplete "non-site:" in Smithson's formulation the two are co-extensive and therefore the "immediacy" and "presence" of the site-specific work is compromised by its counterpart in the gallery. Rather, Meyer seems to suggest that the site-specific artwork succeeds in becoming a site itself, rather than part of a "potentially infinite chain extending from the site," (to recall Owens' words cited earlier). David Joselit clarifies Smithson's dialectic in an updated vocabulary:

> Land art and subsequent site-specific work therefore share a deep structure. Belonging to a period of unprecedented media expansion (the television era), both sets of practices center on the mutual delimitation of virtuality and presence. In Land art presence is associated with remote territories, while virtuality inheres in mechanically reproduced documentation. In site-specific art, it is the artist as diagnostician or itinerant consultant who signifies presence in materializing a hitherto-virtual discursive site.[161]

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[160] Ibid. 23-4.
[161] David Joselit. 277.

As Joselit suggests, site-specificity keeps the relationship between "virtuality" and "presence" in play.

Nevertheless, the emphasis on the "presence" of a site persists. To circumvent it, Meyer emphasizes its virtual dimension instead. He puts forward the idea of a "functional" site, which he defines as "a process, an operation occurring between sites, a mapping of institutional and textual filiations and the bodies that move between them."[162] According to Meyer, "The 'work' was thus not a single entity, the installation of an individual artist in a given place; it was, on the contrary, a *function* occurring between these sites and points of view, a series of expositions of information and place."[163] In this way, Meyer argues, "Site as a unique, demarcated place available to perceptual experience alone – the phenomenological site of Minimalism or the Serra monument – becomes a network of sites referring to an *elsewhere*."[164] As Pierre Huyghe states, "What's interesting is how you create this conceptual displacement, the journey that brings you to this elsewhere, not the destination itself."[165]

To underline his point, Meyer offers the example of Christian-Philipp Müller's project for the Austrian Pavilion at the 1993 Venice Biennale in which he crossed the Austrian border into neighbouring countries without the proper visas, *Illegal Border Crossing Between Austria and the Principality of Liechenstein* (1993). As such, "he enacted a series of 'illegal' immigrations, recorded photographically and

[162] James Meyer. 21.
[163] Ibid. 26.
[164] Ibid. 28.
[165] In Tim Griffin, moderator, with Claire Bishop, Pamela M. Lee, Lynne Cooke et al. "Remote Possibilities: A Roundtable Discussion on Land Art's Changing Terrain." Artforum (Summer 2005): 290.

by postcards mailed from these liminal sites."[166] According to Meyer, Müller thus participates in the discursive sites of national identity, illegal immigration, globalization and capitalist organization, as well as the actual site of the border and the biennale itself.

Kwon develops Meyer's formulation in her influential text "Genealogy of Site-Specificity." She asserts "that in the advanced art practices of the past thirty years the operative definition of the site has been transformed from a physical location – grounded, fixed, actual – to a discursive vector – ungrounded, fluid, virtual."[167] This "virtual" vector, according to Kwon, has effectively eclipsed the "actual" site:

> the distinguishing characteristic of today's site-oriented art is the way in which the art work's relationship to the actuality of a location (as site) and the social conditions of the institutional frame (as site) are both subordinate to a *discursively* determined site that is delineated as a field of knowledge, intellectual exchange, or cultural debate.[168]

In Kwon's attention to the discursive register, however, she effectively sweeps the material history of the site in question under the carpet. This is no minor oversight: history marks sites with its political (often violent) ravages both physically and conceptually, thus making them "specific." Unhinged from the actuality of location, site-specific art threatens to obscure the lived consequences of the discourses it seeks to articulate. That is, if the site is reconceived as

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[166] James Meyer. 27.
[167] Miwon Kwon. One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. 29-30.
[168] Ibid. 26.

infinitely mobile, as purely discursive, then a consideration of the material relations that are hinged to this discourse are left by the way side.[169]

Of this newly dematerialized site of site-specificity, James Meyer states, "It is the kind of space the philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have described as nomadic, a shifting or deterritorialized site at odds with sedentary, striated space, the organized ambiance of the polis."[170] This statement implies that artists have shifted their attention away from the striations they sought to expose through the '60s, '70s, and '80s in the effort of challenging the organization of the "totally administered world" and on to the smooth space, which is associated with dis-organization, anti-author and anti-authoritarian aesthetic and political movements, linkage, assemblage and co-production, fluidity and potentiality. But as Deleuze and Guattari themselves make clear, the smooth space is not an actionable space on its own: it is only in relation to striated space, by tugging at it and breaking it down, that it comes to political effect. Furthermore, "the smooth itself can be drawn and occupied by diabolical powers of *organization*,"[171] which may be exactly what we are witnessing in the discourse of site-specificity: artists changed tactics but they are as ingratiated in the "striated" institution as they ever were.

Subjectivity

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[169] This is discussed by Gregory Sholette. "News from Nowhere: Activist Art and After." Third Text 45 (Winter 1998-99): 45-62.
[170] James Meyer. 29.
[171] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Trans. and Foreword Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987. 480.

Just as the concept of immersion had repercussions for subjectivity, so too does site-specificity. With the mention of Deleuze and Guattari in respect to the dematerialization of the site, the question of what kind of subject inhabits what kind of space jumps into the foreground: in this case, the "nomad." Kwon suggests this elusive figure when she writes,

> It is not only the artwork that is not bound to the physical conditions of a place anymore, it is the artist-subject who is 'liberated' from any enduring ties to local circumstances. Qualities of permanence, continuity, certainty, groundedness (physical and otherwise) are thought to be artistically retrograde, thus politically suspect, in this context. By contrast, qualities of uncertainty, instability, ambiguity, and impermanence are taken as desired attributes of a vanguard, politically progressive, artistic practice.[172]

Kwon describes the types of spaces that are associated with these qualities: the "right place" and the "wrong place," respectively. "Right" places, according to Kwon, "reaffirm our sense of self, reflecting back to us an unthreatening picture of a grounded identity." By contrast, "wrong" places are places "where one feels one does not belong – unfamiliar, disorientating, destabilizing, even threatening."[173] Kwon argues that "an encounter with a 'wrong place' is likely to expose the instability of the 'right place,' and by extension the instability of the self."[174] As such, she is effectively making an argument for alienation as the premise of self-recognition (rather than a "continuous relationship between a place and a person"): it is the wrongness, rather than rightness, of place that

[172] Miwon Kwon. The Wrong Place. 34.
[173] Ibid. 42.
[174] Ibid.

brings the subject "into focus."[175] In Kwon's account, the site becomes increasingly fragmented and discursive but the subject keeps focus and stays present: it does not succumb to the disorientation that Frederic Jameson associated with postmodern hyperspace.

Of course site-specificity was concerned with questions of subjectivity all along: Minimalism sought to challenge the ego-centered individual who transcends historical contingencies with an emphasis on the production of subjectivity as a social process, and with the subject's inextricability from its (phenomenological) surroundings. Likewise, "If minimalism returned to the viewing subject a physical body," writes Miwon Kwon, then "institutional critique insisted on the social matrix of the class, race, gender, and sexuality of the viewing subject."[176] On a similar note, Kirsi Peltomaki writes, "Beyond the generic viewer who… would complete the work of art, the 1960s and 1970s viewing subject had become an increasingly specific entity whose place in the work of art was scripted alongside material or processual relations."[177]

These "scripts" differ from artwork to artwork but one thing that is consistent in the discourse of site-specificity is the effort to wade through the mediating layers of the site in order to get a clear view of our "selves" and how we are situated in the world. Even when the site is allegedly dematerialized, site-specificity maintains its ideal: to expose the site and critique it by denaturalizing it, by

[175] Ibid.
[176] Miwon Kwon. One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity. 13. It is this emphasis on subjectivity that made site-specificity a viable practice for the artists pursuing identity politics in the early 1990s.
[177] Kirsi Peltomaki. "Affect and Spectorial Agency: Viewing Institutional Critique in the 1970s." Art Journal 66..4 (2007): 36-51.

making it seem alien, or by otherwise intervening in it so that it can no longer function as the "right place" and ground our identities. Much to Fried's chagrin, "it demands that the beholder take it into account, that he take it *seriously*."[178] This confrontation prompts viewers into recognizing their own estrangement from the "right" ideas that organize their lives, which — allegedly — will lead to a more "authentic" life.

On this existential note of "authenticity" it impossible not to understand site-specificity in the context of depth models of meaning: even if the site is laterally dispersed, the subject within it continues to function as an authentic presence. As Claire Bishop remarks, site-specificity is effectively "...grounded in the authenticity of one's first hand experience of a site"[179] — an authenticity that requires the artist's intervention in order to be revealed: the artist seeks to break with appearances (ideological layers of site) in order to get at essences (the underlying structure of the site) and push aside inauthentic (mediated) experiences of the site in order to experience it as it "truly is." This truth is variously deemed to be economic, political, ethnic or ethnographic, classist, racist, historical or all of the above.

Here we end at the opposite point from VR: in Kwon's formulation, regardless of the degree of virtuality of any given site, what is important is that the viewer's/user's experience of it is felt to be "wrong" so that the "right" can be uncovered. What defines "right," as earlier discussed, is no longer a secure

[178] Michael Fried. 63.
[179] In Tim Griffin, moderator, with Claire Bishop, Pamela M. Lee, Lynne Cooke et al. "Remote Possibilities: A Roundtable Discussion on Land Art's Changing Terrain." 289.

locational identity, but rather a critical relationship to its ideological workings –
an outside within. As Miwon Kwon states, "This precarious and risky position
may not be the right place to be, but it is the only place from which to face the
challenges of the new orders of space and time."[180] Thus, generally speaking, even
as the conception of site changed from being literal or remote to bureaucratic and
heavily mediated, the idea that the authenticity of the site could be revealed by
the artist, and subsequently be authentically experienced by the viewer, was not
questioned – "and in this, very little has changed over the course of a whole
century."[181]

The Crossover Zone

New media immersion and site-specificity appear on the scene at approximately
the same time, in the mid-1960s, with Minimalism on the one hand and
technological developments such as the graphic user interface (GUI) on the other.
Of course they can both be traced further back, and they arguably both have the
history of simulation as one of their sources. However site-specificity maintains
an integral tie to the site even when multiple, as Fraser's, Hamilton's and
Christian-Philipp Müller's projects demonstrate, while immersion severs it in
order to instate its own, fully encapsulated site, as the in-turned walls of the 19th

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[180] Miwon Kwon. The Wrong Place. 43.
[181] Claire Bishop in Tim Griffin, moderator, with Claire Bishop, Pamela M. Lee, Lynne Cooke et al.
"Remote Possibilities: A Roundtable Discussion on Land Art's Changing Terrain." 294.

panorama and contemporary VR systems demonstrate. Both discourses gain in prominence during the following decades, building a solid discursive edifice within academia.

By the late 1980s they had also secured their place in the cultural imagination, as the popularity of Cyberpunk fiction and videogames indicate, as well as the rise in off-site art festivals such as the Sculpture Project in Münster (1987) or *Places with a Past*. Furthermore, the two start to converge. According to Ron Burnett,

> Telepresence, immersion, and the exponential growth of videogames reflect an increasingly strong cultural desire for fully embodied experiences with screen-based media. In other words, it is not and never has been enough to just look at screens or even photographs from a distance.[182]

In line with this desire, museum-goers came to expect (rather than be surprised) at being confronted by "theatrical" situations. In 1985 Tom Krens, the Director of the Guggenheim, had an epiphany of

> A profound and sweeping change... within the very conditions within which art itself is understood. ...The synchronic museum – if we can call it that – would forego history in the name of a kind of intensity of experience, an aesthetic charge that is not so much temporal (historical) as it is now radically spatial...[183]

As Rosalind Krauss explains, such a museum "has a need for the technologized subject, the subject in search not of affect but of intensities, the subject who

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Ron Burnett. "Projecting Minds." <u>Media Art Histories</u>. Oliver Grau, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007. 328.
[183] Rosalind Krauss. "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum." 7.

experiences fragmentation as euphoria, the subject whose field of experience is no longer history, but space itself."[184]

By the late 1990s, each discourse had nearly met its limit: the concept of "site" fell apart under the pressure of new telecommunication (and transportation) networks, which multiply the experience of space and time. For example, Stephen Prina states:

> The site-specific seems to be grounded in a very particular location and a particular time, and all information is related to this. But when you take any of these coordinates, space and time, and you compound them, the model doesn't seem to hold up.[185]

This compounding results in the perpetual "wrong" place of a system that exceeds rational comprehension. Unlike the postmodern hyperspace that Jameson described, however, today's space is multiplied as well as fragmented, duplicated as well as cited. We do not need to worry about growing new navigational organs thanks to GPS and net-surfing Palm Pilots: our technologies will securely tether us to these new spaces. As Lev Manovich states, "Over the course of twenty years, the culture has come full circle. If with GUI the physical environment migrated into the computer screen, now the conventions of GUI are migrating back into our physical reality."[186]

In this light, site-specificity may seem rather archaic; however, as Jill Dawsey explains, its "legacy" is "currently evidenced across disciplines, in contemporary

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[184] Ibid. 17.
[185] In James Meyer. 20.
[186] Lev Manovich. The Language of New Media [Leonardo. Roger F. Malina and Sean Cubitt, eds.]. Cambridge, MA: MIT P. 2001. 214.

art, architecture, performance, and design, among other spheres of production, noting the extent to which it has been broadly assimilated by contemporary culture, 'beyond the overtly artistic framework'."[187] This assimilation goes both ways: the electronically augmented space of commercial culture has become the paradigm for the art world,[188] and art has been increasing called upon to refresh the perpetual momentum of commercial and technological "up-dates." Already in 1984 Fredric Jameson argued that "the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods... now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation."[189] More recently Blake Gopnik observes "how things have come full circle. The borrowings of fine art from pop culture – even borrowings like [Barbara] Kruger's that are meant to read as critique of their source – have started to come back into the world of commerce."[190] In this case, site-specificity's legacy of infiltrating the function of a site in order to reveal its inner workings is redirected to bolster the site instead.

Almost simultaneously, the concept of "immersion" met its limit: its virtual approximation did not succeed in supplanting or simulating our immersion in the ROL in full. Although arguably close on the level of information that can be gleaned, a tour of Venice in CAVE, for example, cannot encode the smell of the

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[187] Jill Dawsey. 1.
[188] See Lev Manovich. "The Poetics of Augmented Space." New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality. Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. 75-92.
[189] Fredric Jameson. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." (1984) Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. 4-5.
[190] Blake Gopnik. "Retail Imitates Art: is this a sincere form of flattery?" The Washington Post. (September 5, 2008). C01. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/09/04/AR2008090403288.html

water or the stings of the mosquitoes or the moment of fear when the heel of one's shoe gets caught between the cobblestones. There is as of yet an experiential difference between computer- and cultural/meteorological systems, even if they continue to become more and more entwined. As Myron Krueger states, "It is true that today's virtual reality provides very limited tactile feedback, almost no proprioceptive feedback (as would be provided by walking on a sandy beach or on rough terrain), rare opportunities to smell, and little mobility."[101]

What I am looking at in this thesis is the aftermath of this near convergence and the crossover it created. As stated in the Introduction, the figure "crossover" occurs when two zones approximate each other enough to create a force field between them that generates something new, in this case, a new discursive zone. As you see on the diagram (fig. 1), I am using the figure to illustrate the waxing and waning in prominence of new media immersion and site-specificity. That is, after the crossover, art works continue to be produced that indicate the endurance of site-specificity as an artistic approach, yet they fall to the side, marginalized by the rise of a "sensurround style."[102] Similarly, new media immersion continues to be explored and developed; however, as Lev Manovich argues, it has been marginalized in both laboratories and the public imagination by an increased emphasis on the practical, medical, commercial and scientific utilizations of virtual technologies for augmented reality systems.[103]

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[101] In Ron Burnett. 331.
[102] Hal Foster. "Double Exposure." Artforum (Dec. 2005). http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_4_44/ai_n27862387. 2.
[103] Lev Manovich. "The Poetics of Augmented Space."

Between these two marginalized discourses lies the new zone generated by the crossover. Here neither actual nor virtual emplacement is taken for granted and presence is no longer associated with direct witnessing but rather with telepresence. According to Ron Burnett,

> Everything from stereoscopic glasses to datagloves, sensors, and other tactile equipment, as well as the use of CAVEs, surround sound, multiple screens, and haptic devices, suggests that screens no longer exist as objects but are more of a "site" or an ecology within which humans learn to create, watch, participate, and interact.[104]

Regarding these new "sites" David Joselit states, "These are the symptoms of a new spatial order: a space in which the virtual and the physical are absolutely coextensive, allowing a person to travel in one direction through sound or image while proceeding elsewhere physically."[195] In more general terms, Otto Imken states, "This is where virtual and actual space open on to each other and become undecidable."[196]

Given the "undecidability" that characterizes the crossover, it is important to ask: how is it expressed or materialized in artworks and in their interpretive context, and how do the artworks envision or challenge it in turn?

Caroline A. Jones, for example, describes the contemporary art world as follows:

> Visitors to the world's biennials (and Documentas and Manifestas) are by now familiar with this shift from form to experience. Whether slurping water popsicles or Indonesian

[104] Ron Burnett. 329.
[195] David Joselit. 276.
[196] Otto Imken. "The Convergence of Virtual and Actual in the Global Matrix: Artificial Life, Geo-economics and Psychogeography." Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations. Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May, eds. London and New York: Routledge. 1999. 105.

curries, smelling carbonized paper or shuffling through mounds of coffee, wearing 3-D
goggles or headphones, art "viewers" in the new millennium are met with dramatically
synaesthetic and kinaesthetic scenarios... begetting current desires for (always mediated)
experience.[197]

Within the crossover it is also unclear to which space an art work belongs. As
Andrew Payne argues, we can

> take it as patent that today art labours under the sign of what Fried calls the literal, which
> is to say the theatrical. ...Today there is barely any art, let alone art object; it has been
> replaced by something called culture, as something we will know by the fact that it
> spreads out over everything like a scenographic syrup. ...Today, *pace* Fried, it is not the
> object but the affect it provokes when placed in its situation that counts. For better or for
> worse, perhaps for better and for worse, we live in an age of the work of art as rainbow, as
> cabinet of wonders, as perceptual marvel or special effect.[198]

It is as if Michael Fried's nightmare "that the arts themselves are at last sliding
toward some kind of final, implosive, hugely desirable synthesis"[199] has been
actualized.

Anthony Vidler contextualizes this synthesis in wider cultural terms:

> Now, the boundaries between organic and inorganic, blurred by cybernetic and bio-
> technologies, seem less sharp; the body, itself invaded and reshaped by technology,

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[197] Caroline A. Jones, ed. Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art
Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2006. 18.
[198] Andrew Payne. "Between Art and Architecture, Structure and Sense." Philip Beesley, Christine
Macy, Andrew Payne et al. Hylozoic Soil: Geotextile Installations 1995/2007. Toronto: Riverside
Architectural Press, 2007. 56, 57.
[199] Michael Fried. 65.

invades and permeates the space outside, even as this space takes on dimensions that themselves confuse the inner and the outer, visually, mentally, and physically.[200]

Although Vidler is speaking generally, his description holds for contemporary art. As Hal Foster explains,

immersive experiences of post-cinematic delirium in which representation and space, media and body, are no longer felt to be distinct... might attempt to engage the new intensity of spectacle that accompanies the new level of modernization, but often they do so in a way that only acclimatizes us to it aesthetically.[201]

As Foster suggests, art in the crossover facilitates these cultural changes as well as resulting from them.

Payne outlines five features that characterize contemporary art:

[1] an interest in the informational and simulacral potentials of technologically invested surfaces; [2] a studied displacement of the sensorial regimes that organized the subject/object nexus under conditions of modernity; [3] the post- or ultra-modern revival of the *Gesamkunstwerk* [sic.] in the guise of an immersive milieu; [4] the expansion of art and architecture's sensorial spectrum to include non-optical stimuli; [5] and the neo-constructivist conception of art as an organizer of novel forms of conduct conceived according to game-like criteria.[202]

Each of these points is clearly indebted to the influx of immersive technologies in the traditional sphere of visual art, which compromises its disciplinary integrity by including extra-visual stimuli and incorporating the viewer within the object

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[200] Anthony Vidler. The architectural uncanny: essays in the modern unhomely. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1992. 147.
[201] Hal Foster. "Double Exposure." 2.
[202] Andrew Payne. 57.

itself, as Fried decried. As Raphael Lozano-Hemmer states, "The collapse of the boundary is healthy for everybody."[203]

What I want to pick up on here is Payne's fifth point: contemporary works of art, by spatializing the crossover in model form, effectively model the viewer/user/participant. Vivian Sobchack writes:

> electronics of all kinds form an encompassing perceptual and representational system whose various forms 'interface' to constitute an alternative and absolute electronic world of immaterialized — if materially consequential — experience. And this electronic world incorporates the spectator/user uniquely in a spatially decentered, weakly temporalized and quasi-disembodied (or diffusely embodied) state.[204]

What are the consequences of this post-diachronic decentring and disembodiment of subjectivity? On a similar note, David Joselit argues that the guarantees of the subject's "presence" that were operative in site-specificity no longer convince:

> Landscape becomes mediascape whose contours and topography (as any Web surfer knows) are as unpredictable — even sublime — as an unmapped canyon in Utah; the body becomes an avatar, a presence beyond or beneath the threshold of identity that, like a sentient cursor, projects agency and mobility into a virtual world.[205]

As such, whether we approach it from the angle of new media immersion or site-specificity, subjectivity in the crossover, rather than coming into "focus" as

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[203] In Randy Gladman. "Body Movies: A Linz Ars Electronica Festival Award Winner on the State of Interactive Art." Canadian Art (Winter 2002)· 58.
[204] Vivian Sobchack. "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic 'Presence.'" Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture. Berkley: U of California P, 2004. 153.
[205] David Joselit. 277.

Miwon Kwon suggests, becomes a "function" of the virtual art work: like an avatar, its movements are dictated by the parameters set by the artist. As Nick Prior states cynically, in the "age of computer-aided perceptions and wall-to-wall visuals... consumers of the visual wear their brains on the outside of their skulls, maximally exposed to the post-aesthetics of titillation and sensation."[206]

Is there another way to view this cerebral dislocation? If art today is both the effect and the support of this new comfort zone (which is not always so comfortable), then what can we learn about the world we live in from the models of space and subjectivity that artists build for us to experience? As Deborah J. Haynes states, "We live in a poly-centered world, where virtual technologies have created new definitions of self, place, and community."[207] How are new concepts of subjectivity -- which have resulted from the loss of traditional spatial, temporal and bodily references -- spatialized in artistic form?

The old new zone and Minimalism revisited

But this new zone is not exactly new, even if the crossover is. If we look again at the diagram, we can see that there has been an inter-zone -- a space between two organized zones -- for at least as long as the new media and site-specificity demarked their respective areas. Artists that ventured out into it were labelled "inter-disciplinary" or "experimental" as they worked outside of these sanctioned

[206] Nick Prior. "Having One's Tate and Eating It: Transformations of the Museum in a Hypermodern Era."Art and Its Publics. Andrew McClellan, ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. 56-7.
[207] Deborah J. Haynes. "Interrogating New Media: A Conversation with Joyce Cutler-Shaw and Margot Lovejoy." Ethics and the Visual Arts. Elaine A. King and Gail Levin, eds. New York: Allworth P, 2006. 175.

discourses. The infamous *9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering* (1966) is a case in point: it was deemed as a both a technological and critical failure.[208] The performances brought together some of the world's best artists, such as John Cage, Deborah Hay, Yvonne Rainer and Robert Rauschenberg, and paired them together with engineers from Bell Laboratories. The results were mixed: Rauschenberg, for example, staged a tennis game in which the rackets transmitted the sound of the ball's impact to the lights in the armoury, gradually dimming them as the game progressed, and when the space was dark, several hundred performers entered the court, invisible to the "naked" eye but visible on large screens due to infra-red. But the reviews were consistent: *9 Evenings* was accused of selling out the avant-garde, and, as for the technology, the audience was "ready, able willing for a lot more than they were given."[209] In her review of the event, Lucy Lippard states, "The opportunity to use certain technical devices overcame esthetic feasibility, and if all had gone more smoothly, the works of art would have become showcases for technological progress."[210] As it was, however, neither the art-types nor the technophiles were satisfied.

A lot of recent scholarship tries to claim such experimental artworks as the precursors for today's art. Peter Weibel, for example, asserts that kinetic art and op art "are being rediscovered" because "Everything that would later characterize computer art and the interactive virtual environment was there already, albeit in

[208] See Catherine Morris, Michelle Kuo, Clarisse Bardiot et al. 9 Evenings Reconsidered: Art, Theatre, and Engineering, 1996. Cambridge, MA: MIT List Visual Arts Center, 2006.
[209] Michelle Kuo in Ibid. 38.
[210] Lucy Lippard in Ibid. 65.

purely analog or mechanical form."[211] He provides the example of Jean Tinguely, whose motorized sculptures, when in movement, gave the impression of "virtual volumes."[212] In a similar vein, Louise Poissant looks at experimental theatre in the early 1900s, as well as the "happenings" of the 1960s, and argues that they, like today's technologically interactive environments, aim "for an increased empowerment of the spectator."[213] Curators have also reached back in time in search of forerunners: the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston opened its new building (designed by Diller Scofidio + Renfro) with an exhibition titled *Super Vision* (2006), which contextualized Bridget Riley's painting *Pause* (1964), for example, among contemporary artworks that investigate nano- and macro models of vision. "Now it is easy to see *Pause*, with its volumetric illusion, infinite curvature, ambiguous space, and pixilated composition, as an image that in some ways anticipates the familiar visual effects of computer-animated virtual space,"[214] states the curator. Perhaps, just as now it is easy to see Robert Rauschenberg swinging his high-tech racket as an anticipation of Wii interactive sports video games.

Such straight lines are an effective means of including contemporary practices in the canon of avant-garde practices, thereby masking the utter ubiquity, innocuousness and all too frequent banality of this type of work today. Furthermore, these straight lines effectively protect the art historian from asking

[211] Peter Weibel. "It is Forbidden Not to Touch: Some Remarks on the (Forgotten Parts of the) History of Interactivity and Virtuality." Media Art Histories. Oliver Grau, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007. 38.
[212] Ibid. 35.
[213] Louise Poissant. 230.
[214] Nicholas Baume, ed. Super Vision. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2006. 29.

whether the avant-garde art as such any longer exists. What life is left in its oppositional tactics struggles to survive on the sidelines of the integrated spectacle, or, alternatively, sacrifices its status as art per se in order to exert its operations in another discipline altogether.

Hal Foster makes an argument with regard to Minimalism that demonstrates this set of problems facing the art historian. His observation is worth citing at length:

> Twenty years ago, I wrote a text titled "The Crux of Minimalism" where I argued
> that, in its break from the frame of painting and the pedestal of sculpture,
> Minimalism opened up a line of work in which actual bodies and actual spaces
> were tested, defined, demarcated. Along with many others, I thought that line –
> the line of process and body art, of site-specific and institution-critique art, and
> so on – was of primary significance. Yet it is now clear that the Minimalist
> opening allowed not only for a progressive differentiation of bodies and spaces,
> but also for the partial dissolution of those terms. …Today this seems to be the
> desired effect of so much art – digital pictorial photography, say, as well as
> projected image installations – so much that this secondary line of art after
> Minimalism now appears to be the dominant one. And people love it, of course,
> in large part because it aestheticizes, or rather artifies, an "experience" already
> familiar to them, the intensities produced by media culture at large. For the most
> part, such art is happily involved with an image space that goes beyond the
> distractive to the immersive.[215]

Foster effectively takes Minimalism from its secure place in the discourse of site-specificity and moves it into the inter-zone. From this point half-way between the

[215] Hal Foster in conversation with Marquard Smith. "Polemics, Postmodernism, Immersion, Militarized Space." Journal of Visual Culture 3.3 (2004): 326-70.

two discourses he draws two lines: one merges with the established site-specific line and suffers its fate of marginalization, and one cuts straight across the field into the crossover. What is interesting in Foster's move is not only that it revises the literature surrounding Minimalism from developments that occurred afterward (for better and for worse), but also that it emphasized Minimalism as a watershed moment in art history for both avant-garde practices and mainstream practices. As such, Foster's argument reveals that it is the discursive boundaries of the interpretive context that prevented Minimalism's flirt with illusionism from being recognized, not the artwork itself. As Rosalyn Deutsche states, "objects of study are the effect, rather than the ground, of disciplinary knowledge."[216]

This is the power of hindsight. Nevertheless, no matter how relevant all of these previous artworks are to the issues that artists are now exploring, to draw straight lines across the zone is an act of historicism akin to claiming that the origin of Minimalism lies in Constructivism or that the origin of Earthwork lies in Stonehenge. Too much has changed and the lines of influence and paternity are multiple, dotted, and indirect. As Rosalind Krauss acerbically stated in 1979: "Never mind that the content of the one had nothing to do with, was in fact the exact opposite of, the content of the other. ...The rage to historicize simply swept these differences aside."[217] Minimalism, for example, as Foster makes clear, sought to define and demark actual bodies and spaces; it did not seek to make

[216] Rosalyn Deutsche. "Agoraphobia." Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1996. 279.
[217] Rosalind Krauss. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." (1979) The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture. Intro. Hal Foster, ed. New York: Bay P, 1983. 32-3.

them indistinguishable. The fact that, in the words of Frank Stella, "it didn't do what it was supposed to do"[218] is another problem, which does not warrant throwing the baby out with the bathwater. [219]

Homogeneity

Assuming that art can play a role other than further "aestheticizing" the intensities of media culture, it is precisely such differences that need to be articulated. For what *is* new is the imperative of working in this crossover zone: it is now all there is, or at least all that appears on the radar. Benjamin Buchloh, for example, bemoans the neglect which artists otherwise experience, rendering their practices ineffectual:

> Look at Michael Asher, in many ways the most radical of the figures involved in institutional critique from the late sixties onward...: his work is now mostly neglected; the very radicality of its contestation appears forgotten. Clearly the complexity of Asher's work seems to pose, now more than ever, insurmountable obstacles to its reception within the present parameters of the art world. So, as with social repression at large, the way to respond to the work is simply to eradicate it from historical memory and to isolate its producer as an outsider.[220]

Buchloh is equally critical of art that *is* recognized under the present parameters. Daniel Buren's current work, for example, fits in neatly: rather than connecting gallery spaces to spaces "outside" by way of his characteristic stripes, he now

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[218] In Anna C. Chave. "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power." <u>Arts Magazine</u> (Jan. 1990): 44.
[219] Rosalind Krauss discusses the revision of Minimalism in "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum."
[220] In Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois et al. "Roundtable: The Predicament of Contemporary Art." <u>Art Since 1900</u>. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004. 674.

makes ambiguous spatial environments of coloured and mirrored reflections (as exemplified in his 2005 *Eye of the Storm* in the Solomon Guggenheim rotunda). Speaking of Buren's success, Buchloh writes, "Daniel Buren, another radical artist of institutional critique...has now transformed himself, willingly, into an affirmative state artist in order to avoid the fate that has befallen Asher."[221]

Oliver Grau considers the new media of immersion to be the primary medium of the "information society"[222] and David Joselit optimistically states, "this transformation has produced new opportunities for art."[223] However, as Margot Lovejoy remarks, it is not necessarily a matter of choice: "for artists there is a paradox: Those who wish to comment on the contemporary are also bound to use the new media tools that are available to them because they are expressive of our time."[224] Furthermore, given the unavoidable ubiquity of these tools, there are few gradations or distinctions within the crossover: whether something is technological art or artsy technology makes little difference to its cultural reception: it is all part of the same "scenographic syrup."

Hal Foster asks: "what might these technologies render on the other side of their capitalist deployment? ...Is there another side to this culture of immersive experience? Might there be a cultural politics that doesn't leave it to our masters to control every aspect of these terms?"[225] In order to begin formulating an answer it is imperative to define new artistic positions that are neither

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[221] Ibid.
[222] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion. 3.
[223] David Joselit. 276.
[224] In Deborah J. Haynes. 176.
[225] Hal Foster in conversation with Marquard Smith. 328.

oppositonal (like Asher) nor ingratiating (like Buren), seeing as both positions are no longer viable. As Jill Dawsey suggests, "In contemporary culture, which seems too often characterized by an oppressive sameness, we may need to ask how the differences and distinctions that produce legibility might be discovered again."[226] By taking a close look at contemporary art practices that sit firmly in the crossover, such differences and distinctions can be discerned and articulated, thereby making their salience legible and more effective. This is the objective of the case studies that follow in Part Two.

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[226] Jill Dawsey. 4.

CHAPTER 2: INTERACTIVE SPACES

"Interactivity," the buzzword of the digital revolution and postmodern aesthetics alike, promised to connect the inside and outside of experience in a way that is, allegedly, de facto political. The viewer/user is "activated" by these artworks in a way, critics says, that is akin to "real life."[227] The problems with this assumption are glaring: how are technological prompts and theatrical set-ups akin to personal and social volition, and who says that we are all that "alive" in real life anyway?

This chapter will look at two artworks that demand the viewer's interaction in order to cohere: Olafur Eliasson's *Notion motion* (2005), which was included in the retrospective exhibition *Take Your Time* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (2007) and PS1, Queens (2008), and Philip Beesley's *Hylozoic Soil* (2007), which was presented at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts as part of an exhibition celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Daniel Langlois Foundation for Art, Science and Technology (*E-art: new technologies and contemporary art*, 2007). These two artworks allow us to better understand the shift from "passive" observation to "active" participation that is endemic to new media immersion and site-specificity alike, as well as the emphasis on the subjective experience of an art object rather than an objective evaluation of it.

This chapter first investigates the concept of "interactivity" as it circulates in art history in order to then ask: how does the viewer's interaction with both *Notion*

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[227] Claire Bishop stresses this point in Installation Art: A Critical History. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

motion and *Hylozoic Soil* inform her understanding of the artwork and, more specifically, how does her engagement with them define a particular model of space and subjectivity? I have chosen to loosen these artworks from their professional and generic categories — artist/installation (Eliasson) and architect/new media (Beesley) — and set them side-by-side as a way of exploring the implications of interactivity in the crossover. As such, this grouping does not oppose the high-tech to the (seemingly) low-tech in search of commonalities or differences; rather it highlights the assumptions made about subjectivity and its relationship to spatial experience in the heavily mediated technosocial context that these artworks share.

In particular, the questions that inform this chapter concern the precarious tenets of a human-centered universe in which subjects and objects are clearly distinguished and agency is defined in terms of individual volition. The rationality and security of such a world picture has been challenged by the widespread recognition that the cultural effects of technology exceed a vocabulary of utility. Consequent to this shift, the body, once a clearly demarked carrier of an individual "mind" or "consciousness," is now considered to be radically contingent to the energetic and technological flows that run through it. Concepts of "site" have likewise become unhinged from actual geographic locations due to the technological possibility of being (tele-)present in more than one place at a time. Given this splitting and multiplying of both the subject and its location, the question follows: how can we understand our relationship to a space that

immerses us, given that immersion eradicates the distinction between "subject" and "site"?

This chapter will sharpen two different responses to this question by probing the implications of the models of interactivity established by two different artworks: Olafur Eliasson's *Notion motion* is a highly contradictory spatial experience: it demonstrates how the subject becomes immersed within contemporary screen-based culture while also suggesting that breaking out of this immersion is the premise of the "self." Overall, we could say that the subject is imbricated. By contrast, Philip Beesley's *Hylozoic Soil* does not offer a way for the "figure" to distinguish itself from the (technological) "ground;" rather, the subject is dispersed throughout a system that exceeds its ability to conceptualize as a whole. Therefore it is not so much imbricated as it is indistinguishable. Despite these differences, both artworks explore the implications of interactivity through the iconography of nature. To close this chapter I will probe the reasons why nature provides such an interesting lens to explore this issue and what interactivity might mean on a larger cultural scale.

Interactivity

Interactivity as a creative ideal wed itself to technology in 1963 when Ivan E. Sutherland developed the first GUI (graphical user interface). This invention

marked the turn from a concept of immersion that was aimed to sensually engulf the audience to a concept of immersion that required the audience to participate in the generation of the image. In the visual arts at that time there was an equally marked emphasis on interactivity. Ideas of co-production through interpretation, such as those articulated by Umberto Eco in *The Poetics of the Open Work* (1962) and Roland Barthes in *The Death of the Author* (1968) were widely embraced by the (neo) avant-garde. Minimalism emphasized the object's contingency to the viewer's interaction in space; Fluxus and Happenings tried to actively integrate the audience into the production of the work; and Kinetic art and Op art demonstrated a more mechanical variant of interactivity: the viewer was asked to push buttons, move components or move themselves in order to experience optical changes. Also in the 1960s, artists started to experiment with technological interactivity, as the exhibition 9 *Evenings* demonstrated.

In all these examples, the creative potential of interactivity was explored as well as its social implications, but doubts were quickly cast over the initial euphoria. Allan Kaprow, for example, states

> to assemble people unprepared for an event and say that they are 'participating' if apples are thrown at them or they are herded about is to ask very little of the whole notion of participation. ...I think it is a mark of mutual respect that all persons involved in a Happening be willing and committed participants who have a clear idea what they are to do.[228]

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[228] Allan Kaprow. "Notes on the Elimination of the Audience." (1966) Participation. Claire Bishop, ed. [Documents of Contemporary Art. Iwona Blazwick, ed.]. London and Cambridge, MA: Whitechapel and MIT P, 2006. 103.

By the end of the 70s many artists had grown suspicious of the audience and returned to a clear model of authorship. "I mistrust audience participation," Bruce Nauman once stated.[229] Dieter Daniels describes Nauman's well-known closed-circuit installation *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1970) as follows:

> Immediately upon entering this installation, the viewer sees his own image at the other end of the corridor on one of the two video monitors, while the second monitor shows a pre-recorded tape of the empty corridor. The attempt to re-assure oneself of one's presence in the image and/or space is rendered almost impossible due to the fact that movement towards the video monitors entails movement away from the camera installed at the entrance, causing the self-image to vanish almost imperceptibly. This hopeless to-and-froing makes of the viewer a guinea pig rather than creative co-player.[230]

Daniels concludes that by the 1970s, "audience interaction was either no longer desired, or else underwent severe ritualization and formalization."[231]

It is on this understanding of interactivity that site-specificity is premised: whether walking around Minimalist objects or Earthworks, or imaginatively engaging with the intellectual or sensorial propositions of Institutional Critique or Resonant Sites, the viewer's role is *not* as a creative participant but as, precisely, a viewer. The viewer walks through the site and among its constituent parts or objects, but leaves no lasting mark of her presence on the artwork: her "interactivity" is limited to a spatial exploration of the site in question. This exploration constitutes the raison-d'être of the artwork, yet the parameters

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[229] In Dieter Daniels. "Strategies of Interactivity." Trans. Tom Morrison. Media Art Net. http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/source-text/65/
[230] Ibid.
[231] Ibid.

established for the exploration will hold in precisely the same way for subsequent viewers, as well. As such, viewers can be thought of co-habiting the site with the artwork, so to speak, but not co-authoring it.

By the time we hit the 1990s, "interactivity" had become an obnoxious buzzword of new media and site-specificity alike, cliché for everything that required pushing buttons or other actions (as basic as walking) on behalf of the user/viewer. As Mark Poster observes,

> "interactivity" has become, by dint of the advertising campaigns of telecommunications corporations, desirable as an end in itself so that its usage can float and be applied in countless contexts having little to do with telecommunications.[232]

In an essay titled *Strategies of Interactivity* Dieter Daniels asks the question whether interactivity is an ideology or a technology. He follows the argument through two key periods: the 1960s, which demonstrates an emphasis on social interactivity, and the 1990s, which demonstrates an emphasis on technological interactivity. He makes a pointed comparison between John Cage and Bill Gates: "Cage's concept of interactivity stems from an aesthetic and ideology leading to the dissolution of the boundary between author, performance and audience;" by contrast, "Microsoft treats human users like it does computers: it programs them."[233] Cage's approach can be considered "bottom-up" in that it allows the musicians the freedom to modify the structure,[234] whereas Microsoft's concept of

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[232] Mark Poster. "Postmodern Virtualities." Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment [Theory, Culture and Society]. Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, eds. London: Sage Publications, 1995. 88.
[233] Dieter Daniels.
[234] Ibid.

interactivity is "top-down" in that the users of the programs work in line with the patterns of interaction established by the software company.[235] Daniels concludes that,

> ultimately their conflicting models of interactivity stand for two different blueprints of society. The respective principles of openness and closedness could act as a leitmotif for the changing meaning of the term 'interactivity from the '60s to the '90s.[236]

In other words, the 1990s redefined the 1960s paradigm of "interactivity" as one of both electronic technology and late capitalism.

In order to rescue this term from the emptying-out effect of over use, and in order to determine what positive social dynamics may still be at play in interactive artworks, it is important to look again at the origin of the term: critical understandings derive from human-computer interaction (HCI), communication studies, and grassroots concepts of democratic exchange,[237] which each continue to resonate in art historical accounts. The technological ideal of interactivity owes most to HCI: "interactivity" is defined as the "interactive mode" of computer use. It is essentially an idea of *interaction as control.* Lev Manovich offers a useful summary of HCI:

> In relation to computer-based media, the concept of interactivity is a tautology. Modern HCI is by definition interactive. In contrast to earlier interfaces such as batch processing, modern HCI allows the user to control the computer in real-time by manipulating information displayed on the screen. Once an object is represented in a computer, it

[235] Ibid.
[236] Ibid.
[237] Discussed in Martin Lister, Jon Dovey, Seth Giddings et al. New Media: A Critical Introduction. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. 40-44.

automatically becomes interactive. Therefore, to call computer media "interactive" is meaningless — it simply means stating the most basic fact about computers.[238]

In brief, HCI is the "ability to intervene in the computing process and see the results of your intervention in real time."[239]

This idea of computer interactivity is at odds with the idea of face-to-face reciprocal interaction that art history has inherited from sociology and communication studies. Andy Lippman, an early researcher at MIT, offers a five-point definition of technological interactivity: 1) mutual interruptibility (implying a complex back-and-forth exchange), 2) graceful degradation (so that unanswerable questions do not halt the interaction), 3) limited look ahead (so that none of the partners can foresee the future shape of the interaction), 4) no default (there is no preplanned route to follow), and 5) the impression of an infinite database.[240] As Allucquère Rosanne Stone summarizes, "Thus interactivity implies two conscious agencies in conversation, playfully and spontaneously developing a mutual discourse, taking cues and suggestions from each other as they proceed."[241] But, despite this implication, as Lister states: "This sounds like a pretty good description of conversation, but a very poor description of using a point-and-click interface to 'interact' with a computer."[242]

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[238] Lev Manovich. The Language of New Media [Leonardo. Roger F. Malina and Sean Cubitt, eds.]. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2001. 55.
[239] Martin Lister, Jon Dovey, Seth Giddings et al. 41.
[240] In Allucquère Rosanne Stone. "Introduction: Sex, Death, and Machinery, or How I Fell in Love with My Prosthesis." The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1996. 10-11.
[241] Ibid. 11.
[242] Martin Lister, Jon Dovey, Seth Giddings et al. 42.

The idea of face-to-face interaction also feeds the common assumption that interactivity enables grassroots democratic exchange, an assumption still at play in recent accounts of installation art. This belief is largely based on the 1960s call for lateral dialogue as a way of challenging established power systems. Martin Lister explains:

> In this reading 'interactive' media are constructed as a potential improvement on passive media in that they appear to hold out the opportunity for social and political communications to function in a more open and democratic fashion which more closely approaches the *ideal* conditions of the public sphere.[243]

As such, interactivity is posed as a means to communicate with other people by way of the computer, not with the computer "itself."

Art historical accounts of interactivity emphasize this assumption that interactivity is a more emancipating engagement with media than with "mass" broadcast media (or discrete objects) and stress "active" operation as opposed to "passive" observation. Louise Poissant's essay *The Passage from Material to Interface* is a case in point. She argues that "the passage from material to interface" that the arts now evince is the result of many conceptual steps and technological discoveries over the past century. According to Poissant, artists' search for new materials (and eventually for the immaterial) points "to the reorganization of the relationship between artists and spectators aiming, for over a century, for an increased empowerment of the spectator."[244] Poissant outlines

[243] Ibid. 44.
[244] Louise Poissant. "The Passage from Material to Interface." Media Art Histories. Oliver Grau, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007. 230.

the historical forerunners of interactive art, starting with experimental theatre in the early 1900s and following through to the usual suspects of 1960s, Allan Kaprow's Happenings and Bruce Nauman's corridors and video environments. Based on this evolution, she states, "We are now entering the era of the interface, which allows the users or the spectators to feel part of the process."[245]

Poissant is far from alone in her emphasis on interactivity. Claire Bishop, in her book *Installation Art: A Critical History*, supports Poissant's argument that "it is no longer sufficient to give something to see, nor to touch transformed material. It is necessary to have spectators experience other forms of sensations."[246] Site-specificity, in general, is premised on this idea. As such, these analyses favour full-body immersion and supersede art history's traditional evaluation of an object with an emphasis on the sensations of the subject. For example, Poissant argues that the "aesthetics of action" has now supplanted the "aesthetics of taste": "From now on, this quest for meaning will be of secondary importance, replaced by the primacy of a relation that counts on the active and creative role of the spectator."[247] Bishop modifies this argument in an effort to understand the various ways in which these "relations" determine the viewer's experience and shifts the locus of meaning onto the emotional register of particular individuals. Poissant, like Bishop, opposes interactive art to art that "was meant to be thought about and not felt, or to be felt through the many detours of

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[245] Ibid. 236.
[246] Ibid. 234.
[247] Ibid. 233.

intellectualization."[248] Both authors, therefore, assume an anti-intellectual stand

that sweeps under the carpet the intentions of many of the artworks they cite.[249]

Arguably interactive art is more "active" than a static *objet d'art*; however, this

activity is still subject to the parameters of the artist or programmer. With regard

to the later, many media critics have addressed the implications of "top down"

programming. For example, Eku Wand suggests that interactivity "begins where

interaction ends."[250] Allucquère Rosanne Stone argues that the "electronic

instantiation of a particular definition freezes the conceptual framework of

interaction in a form most suitable for commercial development – the user moves

the cursor to the appropriate place and clicks the mouse, which causes something

to happen"[251] – poke-and-see technology. According to Stone, "the potential for

interaction is limited, because the machine can only respond to an on-off

situation, that is, to the click of the mouse."[252] Similarly, as Dieter Daniels avers,

"the interaction of user and apparatus is integrated into the medium itself"[253] –

thereby yielding "interactivity." Jean Baudrillard goes as far as to assert that

interactivity is a simulacrum of activity that conceals the passivity of the user.[254]

[248] Ibid. 246-7.
[249] For example, the forerunners that Poissant lists (Nam June Paik and Peter Campus, in addition to Kaprow and Nauman) are each well established in the discourse on conceptual art, yet she only pulls forward the interactive element of the work. Similarly, Bishop's account of conceptual artists such as Michael Asher, Dan Graham and Marcel Broodthaers stresses the "disruptive force of the viewer's unconscious desires and anxieties" (35) rather than their critiques of the institution.
[250] Eku Wand. "Interactive Storytelling: The Renaissance of Narration." New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative. Martin Rieser and Andrea Zapp, eds. London: British Film Institute, 2002. 165.
[251] Allucquère Rosanne Stone. 10.
[252] Ibid.
[253] Dieter Daniels.
[254] In Marie-Laure Ryan. 31.

Despite the fact that interactivity is unavoidable when operating a computer, and that this "interactivity" is a far cry from what is commonly understood as "interaction," we are not off the hook: new media immersive environments may display interactivity by definition – thus compromising any strict opposition between the two terms – but the type of interactivity is an important factor in accessing how the viewer is implicated within the environment. Similarly, "old" media immersive environments may require a degree of interaction that static objects do not, but the claims made for this activity cannot be borrowed from the rhetoric of new media without accounting for the limitations of the concept. Furthermore, whether "old" or "new," low-tech or high-tech, interactive artworks need to engage the debates surrounding the status of the "self" as a bounded entity at a time when the tenets of posthumanism and soft-determinism have compromised this boundary to an unprecedented extent. A close look at Olafur Eliasson's *Notion motion* and Philip Beesley's *Hylozoic Soil* will help clarify these issues and illuminate different approaches.

Olafur Eliasson: Notion motion

(Figures 2-9)

"If leadership in installation art for the masses were an elected position, the Icelandic-Danish dab hand would be a shoo-in"[255] announced *The New Yorker* in 2008. Olafur Eliasson (b. 1967) is a denizen of the "discotheque" Robert Smithson anticipated museums would become.[256] His "studio" in Berlin employs a team of thirty architects, engineers, craftspeople, and assistants who help him conceptualize, design, and construct installations, sculptures, large-scale projects, and commissions. Eliasson is perhaps best known for his *The Weather Project* (2001): he filled the Tate's Turbine Hall with an artificial sun, misty clouds and a mirrored sky, under which viewers were happy to sunbathe, nap, or study their own reflections. The artist himself acknowledged the danger that this work might slip "from an artistic experience to mindless entertainment."[257] As I write this chapter, Eliasson is making his next big international splash, *The New York City Waterfalls* (2008): this project for New York's Public Art Fund consists of four freestanding waterfalls in the East River. It is contributing (an expected) fifty-five million dollars to the city's revenue.[258]

Eliasson's notoriety also earned him a touring mid-career retrospective, *Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson*, which sprawled across both the MoMA and PS1 in

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[255] "Goings On About Town." The New Yorker (May 14-20, 2008): 14.
[256] Robert Smithson. The Collected Writings. Jack Flam, ed. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996. 44.
[257] Dorothy Spears, "Thinking Glacially, Acting Artfully," The New York Times, (September 2, 2007).
[258] Charmaine Picard. "Olafur Eliasson's Waterfalls for New York." The Art Newspaper 188 (2008): 4.

2008 after its run at the San Francisco Museum of Art the previous year. Wandering through the show was like reliving the little wonders that interrupt everyday routine – such as watching the gentle movement of dust particles in a beam of sunlight, catching our image reflected ad infinitum in a many-winged vanity mirror, or drawing on the wall with the light bouncing off a wristwatch – but on the scale of IMAX. In *Your strange certainty still kept* (1996), for example, water droplets fall from a ceiling-mounted sprinkler and become visible in the rhythmic, frozen moments of a strobe light. It is like watching a downpour lit by lightning, only now the art work asserts itself as a referent for the natural occurrence rather than the other way around. In these "devices for the experience of reality,"[259] as he calls them, or alternatively, "phenomena-producers,"[260] Eliasson illustrates the promiscuous exchange between the real and the virtual that defines the contemporary moment.

However, Eliasson's two descriptions are not interchangeable: the first suggests an essential being that can have the "experience" and an equally certain external "reality." By contrast, "phenomena-producer" suggests no such philosophical grounding. Rather, it suggests the staging of immersive spectacles that have no integral relation to the world off-stage. Eliasson's critical edge hinges on this ambivalence. His installation *Notion motion*, as it was shown in San Francisco, is a case in point as it establishes a productive tension between the two – between a

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[259] In Madeleine Grynsztejn. "Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson." [exhibition brochure] San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2007.
[260] In Daniel Birnbaum. "Interview: Daniel Birnbaum in conversation with Olafur Eliasson," Olafur Eliasson. Madeleine Grynsztejn, Daniel Birnbaum and Michael Speaks. London and New York: Phaidon, 2002. 14.

phenomenological experience of a virtual world and the all too real devices that produced it.

The viewer approaches *Notion motion* through a long darkened corridor. The floor is not the usual gallery slick but is overlaid with roughly hewn planks that release their wooden odour and creak underfoot. At the end of the hall, at the back of the room onto which it opens, is a wall-sized screen. It looks like a video installation, perhaps by Bill Viola: on the screen appear wavelike patterns in black and white. Upon entering the room, the waves occupy our entire field of vision. Floor to ceiling and wall to wall, the undulating pattern of light is seductive and soothing. Of course it is not the sea nor a Viola video, but the cultural values attributed to water – as renewing, vital, cleansing and, above all, as pure and natural – are impossible to avoid.

On closer inspection (on the cue of a few jumping kids) several raised floorboards become apparent: the rate and force of stepping on them determines the intensity of the wave pattern. The viewer thus determines the image: the screen changes from just a few lines of a long calm frequency to a saturated field of staccato, bright and luminous, if agitated. It is this *interactive* component of the work that changes it from being thematically immersive to functionally immersive: there is a feedback loop between the image on the screen and the viewer-cum-participant that binds them together into a new combinatory entity.

This immersion, however, is fleeting: opposite the entrance by which we entered is another hallway leading out of the wave-space. The floor is the same rough

wood, but suddenly it ends and we find ourselves back on the gallery's regular surface as if to mark the end of the shimmering experience we left behind. Here is an opening onto another room, literally the other side of the screen. Inside is a shallow pool of water with a bright light directed on its surface at a sharp angle. The magic is gone: by revealing the mechanism responsible for the image's generation, Eliasson returns us to the mundane world governed by the laws of physics. Here, behind the scene, we see just nuts and bolts, which are obdurately material compared to the effects they generate.

In *Notion motion,* the back-lit screen thus establishes an arbitrary boundary between two very different spatial experiences: on one side, the viewer's movement is integrated into the image-space; on the other, her movement is stilled in favour of conceptual clarity. The artwork consists of both these experiences, thus I will analyze them separately only to then probe the conflation of the two ideas they so neatly keep apart: sensual immersion and intellectual alienation. It is this play across two different modes of experience – "subjective" boundarilessness and a vantage point from an external "objective" distance – that leads the discussion to the sublime and to Jacques Lacan. First, however, it is important to contend more specifically with the constituent elements of the installation: an interactive interface, a screen, light, and water.

Interactivity, narcissism and the screen

The relationship between the viewer and imaged-space is determined by the installation's interface: jumping on raised planks in order to create a vibration

that is transmitted to the pool of water and consequently creates waves. As such, the installation is *interactive*. But what kind of interactivity is this? Parallels can be drawn between jumping on Eliasson's floorboards and HCI: to borrow Söke Dinkla's distinctions, both require *purposeful* action on the part of the viewer/participant.[261] That is, the viewers make conscious decisions about how to engage with the interface depending on the results they want to solicit. Eliasson's inclusion of an interactive component points to his awareness of the viewers' culturally conditioned aptitude to project themselves into imaged-spaces through technological mediation, as well as their desire to "feel" the spectacle rather than just "see" it.

Eliasson's emphatically physical interface reiterates the dual role of interactivity discussed in Chapter One: it facilitates immersion while also dividing attention enough to prevent the user from getting "lost" in the image. The viewer thus becomes aware of her control over the image. As such, *Notion motion* is an example of what Lev Manovich calls "metarealism:"

> Like classical ideology, classical realism demands that the subject completely
> accept the illusion for as long as it lasts. In contrast, the new metarealism is based
> on oscillation between illusion and its destruction, between immersing a viewer
> in illusion and directly addressing her... The user invests in the illusion precisely
> because she is given control over it.[262]

[261] In Marie-Laure Ryan. 205.
[262] Lev Manovich. 209.

On a similar note Oliver Grau asserts that interactivity within art projects is often subordinate to immersion, rather than being its equal counterpart. His words are worth citing again:

> Although today the audience can exert its creative powers over the image, this control is counterweighed by the highly suggestive powers of the image itself. Maybe we are regaining a relation to the image that reaches far back into precivilized history, giving it a power that transcends a psychic as well as physical boundaries and enables us to regress, leading to an ecstatic symbiosis of onlooker and image.[263]

In other words, rather than peering into an illusionistic space from outside its frame, the viewer/user becomes fused with the simulated reality itself in "ecstatic symbiosis." Their "control" is thus relinquished to the overpowering illusion.

Mieke Bal describes this dynamic well in an essay on an earlier version of *Notion motion*:

> ...no longer representing movement, relying on the viewer to mimic it, the installation makes it "real." The viewer is inside movement yet also makes it. Suddenly there is that tension, that unsettling sense of the self as necessarily related to "your intuitive surroundings" (of which the painter could only create the illusion). Yet, in spite of the presence of actual water, nothing is real. The rivalry does not concern the sun and the sea, all of this is artificial, theatrical.[264]

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[263] Oliver Grau. "Into the Belly of the Image: Historical Aspects of Virtual Reality." Leonardo 32.5 (1999): 370.
[264] Mieke Bal. "Light Politics." Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson. Madeleine Grynsztejn, ed. New York and London: Thames and Hudson, 2007. 158.

However, the theatricality that Bal evokes does not beckon the discursive mode of address that Michael Fried had in mind in 1967; rather, it binds the viewer in what Manovich calls a "narcissistic condition." He argues that

> most new media, regardless of whether it represents to the user her image or not, can be said to activate the narcissistic condition because they represent to the user her actions and their results. In other words, it functions as a new kind of mirror that reflects not only the human image but human activities. This is a different kind of narcissism — not of passive contemplation but action.[265]

Manovich's description is equally applicable to *Notion motion*. As Madeleine Grynsztejn states, Eliasson "understands their [the viewers'] kinetic involvement in his work as yet another, embodied and maximally individuated, way of seeing."[266] Specific to this "way of seeing" is the fact that the individual viewer's physical movements and the "what" of what they are actually seeing coincides.

Given this coincidence, the screen in *Notion motion* can be defined as belonging to the third type of screen after "classic" and "dynamic" that Manovich defines in his genealogy – the screen of real-time. He explains that

> What is new about such a screen is that its image can change in real time, reflecting changes in the referent, whether the position of the object in space (radar), any alteration in visible reality (live video) or changing data in the computer's memory (computer screen). The image can be continually updated *in real time.*[267]

[265] Lev Manovich. 235.
[266] Madeleine Grynsztejn. "(Y)our Entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, The Museum, And Consumer Culture." Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson. 17.
[267] Lev Manovich. 99.

As such, the real time screen shows the *present* of the user's interaction, rather than a static, permanent image (classical) or a moving image of the past (dynamic):[268] the viewer has to move in actual space to experience movement in virtual space. Similarly, in *Notion motion*, the viewer needs to jump around in order to create waves on the screen, effectively turning themselves into giant joysticks.[269]

What is unusual, however, is that the viewer's movements are not represented by an avatar; rather, they are integrated into the pattern reflected on the screen. If there are a number of participants, then one viewer's movements become indistinguishable from another's. It is on this point of integration and lack of distinction that the installation's theme of immersion (merging with the waves) and its immersive functioning (using an interactive interface to implicate the viewer in the image) correspond most directly. As Mieke Bal writes, "the artist is invested in keeping viewers actively engaged by the works as long as possible – long enough, that is, for them never to be able to return to an ideological state of separation."[270] Grynsztejn takes this idea further:

> In encouraging performative action in this way, *Notion motion* connects object to subject. Located fully in neither the object nor the actions of the subject, the piece is situated instead in an elastic unfolding "between the spectator and the machine" – in experience. Ultimately *Notion motion* proposes an evocative cancellation of the line along which each

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[268] Ibid. 103.
[269] Ibid. 110.
[270] Mieke Bal. 164.

body understands itself as apart from its surroundings, a reduction of our estrangement from a new more fully enveloping universe.[271]

In other words, in this first room of *Notion motion* the distance on which the spectacle is premised is compensated for by immersion.

Light

By focusing only on this immersive unity of subject and object that the first room of *Notion motion* suggests, critics have neglected attending to the potent metaphors associated with light and water. Such oversights are common in discussions of artworks that focus on their interactivity: it is as if the dynamic of interactivity itself were enough to legitimize the artwork in a message-is-the-medium kind of way, as if interactivity were always a positive end in itself. However, given the contemporary preoccupation with the dematerialized realm of square waves flowing through fibre-optic networks, investigating Eliasson's use of light and water further defines the space of the installation and the viewer's experience of it.

As Geert Lovink remarks, "Light – the symbol of physics, rationalism, the spectacle, of heaven and eternity – is a funny substance to play with. It is abstract yet visible, bringing clarity while retaining its religious dimensions."[272] Ken Hillis discusses metaphors of light as they changed over the centuries, starting with the

[271] Madeleine Grynsztejn. "(Y)our Entanglements: Olafur Eliasson, The Museum, And Consumer Culture." 18.
[272] Geert Lovink. "Real and Virtual Light of Relational Architecture: An Interview with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer." Uncanny Networks: Dialogues with the Virtual Intelligentsia. Geert Lovink, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2002. 304.

"primordial view of the world as darkness and light" and Plato's later repositioning of light as a metaphysical truth "conceptually withdrawn from the *kosmos*."[273] Hillis then turns to Augustine's differentiation between divine *Lumen* and earthly *Lux*, and between intellectual vision and physiological sight, with the value placed on the former. With the Enlightenment came the assertion that "humans also constitute a light source," an "illuminating source of the Good."[274] By contrast, earlier medieval Neoplatonist mystics sought "to be flooded by the universal light of God, a state of 'direct perception' achievable only by suspending the reflexivity and critical distance that normal cognition operating within a cultural milieu provides."[275]

Hillis argues that many aspects of these philosophies of light still resound in today's virtual environments, especially the idea of suspending cultural awareness in order to "directly" perceive a mystical truth. Most relevant to *Notion motion* is his observation that,

> In Neoplatonic fashion, users look into a virtual world composed of light. However, by then relocating a part of these individuals' sense of self to an icon located both in and of the light, VR collapses the Neoplatonic distance between light and self. ...by positioning the seer of and in the light, as both wherein and illuminated, VR goes beyond the stereoscope to suggest a transcendent doubling: both it and that part of the seer's iconised self 'within' the technology might now form a natural place.[276]

[273] Ken Hillis. "Toward the light 'within': Optical technologies, spatial metaphors and changing subjectivities." Virtual Geographies. Mike Crang, Phil Crang and John May, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 34.
[274] Ibid. 38.
[275] Ibid. 39.
[276] Ibid. 41.

The user's interactive engagement with screen culture that Hillis exposes here is highly relevant to understanding the significance of the viewer's double role in *Notion motion* — as looking into the light and being rendered visible on the screen by it. In the integration of bodily motility and screen image, the participant is metaphorically positioned as merging with the light. Here she allegedly forms a "natural place" akin to Grynsztejn's "totally enveloping universe."

Certainly Eliasson is not alone in bathing viewers in light: such spaces are common in contemporary art and are indebted to the Light and Space artists working on the West coast in the 1970s, especially James Turrell. Consider his *Wedgework IV* (1974) for example, which seems to dissolve a solid wall into an abyss of red light that the viewer might fall into if nearing too close. Claire Bishop describes Turrell's work as follows:

> The argument that Turrell's installations are objects of perceptual enquiry – like the Minimalist sculptures of Morris or Andre – has therefore tended to dominate readings of his work, backed up by Turrell's own assertions that 'perception is the object and objective' of his art. Far less attention is paid to the way in which his installations in fact *undermine* the self-reflexivity of phenomenological perception. Rather than grounding the viewer's perception in the here and now, Turrell's installations are spaces of withdrawal that suspend time and orphan us from the world. ...Turrell's works do not make us 'see ourselves seeing' because, as Georges Didi-Huberman has observed, 'how, indeed, could I *observe myself losing the sense* of spatial limits?'[277]

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[277] Claire Bishop. 85.

According to Bishop, "The extreme effects of these colour fields frustrate our ability to reflect on our own perception: subject and object are elided in a space that cannot be plumbed by vision."[278]

As Eliasson is frequently associated with Turrell and the contemporary resurgence of interest in phenomenology in the arts, Bishop's observation is important to bear in mind: like Turrell's *Wedgework,* in the first room of *Notion motion,* self-reflexivity is undermined. Furthermore, given that light is not projected *onto* the viewer but that the viewer is projected *into* the light, this loss of spatial limits is transferred onto the virtual register. That is, that part of the viewer that is jumping on the boards might know exactly where he or she is positioned in the gallery, yet the part of the viewer that has entered the experiential space of the waves is disoriented by being submerged: it is impossible to locate the results of one's input with any degree of precision or to distinguish it from another viewer's. On both these counts – disorientation and a departure from the reflexive tradition – this particular site departs from the discourse of site-specificity.

This sense of spatial disorientation and dedifferentiation is part of the appeal of immersive experiences. As Hal Foster states, "In this art we get the rush of special effects along with the surplus-value of the aesthetic."[279] It is also a recurring theme in contemporary art. Consider Daniel Canogar's work, for example, in which viewers enter a darkened space filled with projections of normally invisible

[278] Ibid. 87. Also see Rosalind Krauss. "The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum." October 54 (1990): 3-17.
[279] In Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois et al. "Roundtable: The Predicament of Contemporary Art." Art Since 1900. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004. 676.

in-vivo cells and substrates (*Blind Spot*, 2002) or astronomical imagery such as the moon and planets (*Memory Theatre*, 2004). Once within these macro- and micro-worlds the viewer's shadowy silhouette is superimposed somewhere between the plethora of overlapping projections in a way that suggests his or her immersion in the microscopic or telescopic spaces. As Canogar states, "Technology is not only a mechanical engine: it has changed the way we see reality."[280]

Clearly *Notion motion* taps into this dream of entering into unison with an energetic source greater than our own, whether that be the coded sine waves of digital technologies, the rays of "divine" light, or the energetic flows that constitute the universe as we know it through quantum physics. He translates this dream into its most simple form — light waves reflecting off of waves of water. As Rosalind Krauss observes of one of Viola's artworks, "Once physical space is converted to psychological space... (notice I'm not say phenomenological space), all connection to the reality of his artistic means is dissolved."[281] This description applies to *Notion motion*, as well: in the first room, the physical space is effectively absorbed into the psychological space represented by the waves. As such, we can also think of *Notion motion* as an apt example of what Hal Foster derisively calls "faux-phenomenology," which he describes as "experience

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[280] In Gloria Picazo. "Gloria Picazo Interviews Daniel Canogar." Sentience. Lerida, Spain: El Roser Exhibition Gallery, 2001.
[281] In Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois et al. 677.

reworked, keyed up, given back to us in a very mediated fashion – as immediate, spiritual, absolute."[282]

Claire Bishop's description of one of Eliasson's works touches on Krauss' and Foster's distinction:

> In *Your intuitive surroundings versus your surrounded intuition* 2000, the effect of a changing sky as clouds pass over the sun is recreated through electronic dimmers on an irregular schedule – but the lights are not concealed, and the mechanism is laid bare for us to see. Eliasson makes a point about our perception of nature today (as something we more frequently experience through mediation than first-hand), but the fact that such a point about mediation is made through installation art (a medium that insists on immediacy) is paradoxical.[283]

This paradox between its form (a medium that aims to be immediate) and its content (the mediation of nature) is what characterizes Eliasson's "return of phenomenology"[284] as *faux*: it operates at the third remove. That is, it is not about the nature of our perceptions, but rather, it is about the mediated nature of perceptions about mediated perceptions. "Real" phenomenology, by contrast is precisely not removed but "primary:" In Krauss' influential reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, sh. illustrates how perceptual "truth" and cognitive "truth" are irreconcilable, as there are certain phenomena (especially those of one's own body) that the mind cannot correlate.[285]

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[282] Ibid.
[283] Claire Bishop. 77.
[284] Claire Bishop. 76.
[285] See for example Rosalind Krauss. <u>Passages in Modern Sculpture</u>. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1993. 239.

Notion motion, however, allows an escape from the primary world by absorbing the body into the image. On this point Bishop's description of Turrell's work cited earlier becomes crucial. By "orphaning" the body from the here and now of the world, the body into which we are pushed in Turrell's work is not negotiated in relationship with any alternate agency or definable exterior (as it would be in "real" phenomenology). Similarly in *Notion motion*, the virtual body merges with the waves as though returning to the "regressive symbiosis" that Grau defined. Thus in Turrell's and Eliasson's installation alike, "faux-phenomenology" borders on the oceanic: the viewer's experience is allegedly pre- or extra-linguistic and her body is posited as pre-differentiation.

On this count Eliasson's affinity with VR is clear: Hillis, for example, states that, "Whether positioned as a transcendence machine or a utilitarian prosthesis enhancing thought, VR reflects a desire for a return to either a pre-linguistic or a pre-lapsarian state, or both."[286] He is not alone in this observation: as discussed in the first chapter, many new media critics have remarked that VR might be the latest manifestation of a regressive fantasy to enter a "pre-symbolic" space. Ryan recounts that the radically anti-semiotic mode of communication sought after by VR was called the "language of the angels" by 18th century mystics.[287] Lev Manovich characterizes the dream as "the desire to see in technology a return to the primitive happy age of pre-language, pre-misunderstanding."[288] Indeed, it resonates with the Lacanian Real that is forever out of reach but forever desirable.

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[286] Ken Hillis. 31.
[287] Marie-Laure Ryan. 59.
[288] Lev Manovich. 59.

The "dream of a natural language," as Ryan calls it, is a dream of living among the referents without the interference of signs.[289]

Water

Here we touch directly upon the second metaphor at play in *Notion motion*: water as a recurring motif of the sublime. The most famous image is perhaps Caspar David Friedrich's painting of a man standing high on a cliff above a sea of fog that threatens to engulf him on his precarious perch and drown him in the abyss (*Wanderer above a Sea of Fog*, 1817). As catalogued by Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century, characteristics of the sublime include "power, deprivation, vacuity, solitude, silence, great dimensions (particularly vastness in depth), infinity, magnificence, and finally obscurity (because mystery and uncertainty arouse awe and dread)."[290] Unlike Immanuel Kant, who focused on natural phenomena, Burke also considered human constructions – the industrial "second nature."[291] This shift in attention marks the beginning of what we now call the "techno-sublime:" the subject conceptually reaches out in the effort to understand the complexity of technological processes that, although a part of everyday life, seem to exceed rational comprehension.[292]

On a more contemporary note, consider the work of Bill Viola, whose recent video installations use the latest plasma screens and special effects in order to

[289] Marie-Laure Ryan. 59. Also see Mike Featherstone. "The Aestheticization of Everyday Life." Consumer Culture and Postmodernism. London: Sage Publications, 1991. 65-82.
[290] Nick Bingham. "Unthinkable complexity? Cyberspace otherwise." Virtual Geographies. Mike Crang, Phil Crang and John May, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 246.
[291] Ibid.
[292] Also see Fredric Jameson on the sublime. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." (1984) Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. 34.

immerse the viewer in religious imagery. *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001), for example, surrounds the viewer with five screens in a dark room filled with ambient sound. On the screens, which are individually titled *Departing, Birth, Fire, Ascending* and *Creation*, we see water imagery, rippling waves as seen from below or above the surface. Suddenly the figure of a person leaps straight out of the depths, dramatically breaking the surface. Of Viola's work, Hal Foster states,

> [Viola] seems to want to deliver what Walter Benjamin once called, in the thirties in relation to film, "the blue flower in the land of technology" – that is, the effect of spiritual immediacy through the means of intensive mediation. This effect is a kind of techno-sublime that overwhelms the body and space alike, but which today goes well beyond simple distraction (Benjamin's concern in the thirties) to outright immersion.[293]

Viola's depiction of the sublime may be more overtly religious than Eliasson's; however, the similarity is striking: as in *Notion motion, Five Angels* immerses the viewer in order to establish a parallel between the figure on the screen and the viewer in the darkened room. This heightens the effect of passing through the screen or the water's surface to enter the wave space, virtually in the case of *Notion motion* and actually in the case of Viola's actors.

Scott Bukatman summarizes the effect of the sublime on the viewing subject as follows:

> The sublime initiates a crisis in the subject by disrupting the customary cognized relationship between subject and external reality. It threatens human thought, habitual signifying systems, and, finally, human prowess: the mind is hurried out

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[293] In Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois et al. 676.

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of itself by a crowd of great and confused images, which affect because they are crowded and confused. The final effect is not a negative one, however, because it is almost immediately accompanied by a process of, and identification with, the infinite powers on display. The phenomenal world is transcended as the mind moves to encompass what cannot be contained.[294]

The identification of the viewer with the waves of *Notion motion* and the resulting confusion between subject and object has already been discussed, but the philosophical implications of this confusion have not yet been named a "threat." The threat is this: if the ontological "disruption" that is experienced as a temporary pleasure in *Notion motion* becomes a permanent state, then the sovereignty of the subject is effaced. Within the safe confines of the gallery, the viewer can enjoy this threat, knowing that there is nothing to fear: it is just a "set-up."

This "set-up" is didactically emphasized in the second room of *Notion motion*, which shatters the dream of a natural language and spiritual transcendence by revealing the mechanisms of illusion. What begs to be discussed, therefore, is the *mastery* of the sublime that is part and parcel, not antithetical, with its experience and central to its cultural salience: like Friedrich's protagonist who stands on firm ground or Viola's actors who press through the water without losing balance, the sublime threatens to overwhelm but never does: the very idea of the sublime is premised on a incontestable distinction between man and nature, subject and object, and so drowning is not a narrative option. In the first room of *Notion motion*, the subject experiences an exhilarating crisis due to the

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[294] In Nick Bingham. 246.

fact that this distinction threatens to dissolve, but when we enter the second room a safe distance is re-established and the mastery of the self is regained. As Mieke Bal explains: "When considered in its temporality, sublimity is nearly overwhelming, an experience of finitude in the face of infinitude -- yet crucially, in the end, mastery is restored."[295]

Considered as such, Eliasson's two-part installation correlates perfectly with the two-part experience of the sublime: threat and control, dissolution and resolution, immersion and alienation. Nick Bingham describes this story of confrontation and mastery succinctly. Drawing on several other authors, he writes:

> as the initially destabilizing moment of being faced with the 'unthinkable complex' is transcended, the position of the observer and the observed are reversed, leading to a 'renewed and newly strengthened experience of the self' which is now 'free' to apprehend 'the whole' all at once. This, of course, is the masculinist 'god-trick' par excellence: the dream of a disembodied viewpoint that yields an (imaginary) totalisation, of an (impossible) 'august position' – the place of Critique – in which 'one is always in the right, the most knowledgeable and strongest.'[296]

If in the first space of *Notion motion* the viewer transcends earthly *Lux* in an imaginative union with *Lumen*, then in the second space the viewer transcends the contingent effects of her perceptual and proprioceptive experience to enter the realm of Reason -- rhetorically.

[295] Mieke Bal. 163.
[296] Nick Bingham. 250.

Considering this transcendence, the second space of *Notion motion* can be understood to function according to the tenets of "critical realism" rather than the "virtual realism" of the first space.[297] Now we are back on solid ground, so to speak, where the world is explained (away) by matters of fact, by our most "cherished weapons," explanations.[298] "Critique" is the cultural safeguard against immersion. It protects us from facing, in the words of W.J.T. Mitchell, "the ineradicable fragility of our ontological distinctions between the imaginary and the real, and the tragic elusiveness of the Cartesian dream."[299]

Eliasson relies on the armour of critique and seeks to polish it:

> to step out of ourselves and see the whole set-up with the artefact, the subject and the object – that particular quality also gives us the ability to criticize ourselves. I think this is the final aim: giving the subject a critical position...[300]

This may sound like a site-specific gesture, but there is a catch to his revelation of the mechanism of illusion. He articulates this well: showing the machinery allows the viewer to see the work as a *representation*, rather than as an unmediated *presentation*. He states: "there's a certain moment where people go 'Aha!'; the moment they say 'Aha!' they see themselves."[301] But simultaneous with this eureka moment is a loss in the power of the illusion to disturb ontological boundaries: "Something more artistic can make the work representational, and it

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[297] Marcus A. Doel and David B. Clarke. "Virtual Worlds: Simulation, Suppletion, S(ed)uction and Simulacra." Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations. Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 267.
[298] Nick Bingham. 257.
[299] In Marcus A. Doel and David B. Clarke. 265.
[300] In Daniel Birnbaum. 21.
[301] Ibid. 14.

would lose its ability to question,"[302] he says. Herein lays the catch: "giving the subject a critical position" also means saving it from being in "question," as it would be when faced with total immersion. In brief, Eliasson provides a way out of the abyss of immersion to a safe position from which we can assess the waters, but he does so at the expense of leaving ontological distinctions between subject and site firmly in place.

On this count, Eliasson states that "exposing the representational layer sort of clears the experience and makes it possible for us to see ourselves seeing."[303] This idea that art can reveal some sort of masked "truth" is longstanding and integral to site-specificity but instead of dismissing it as conventional or impossible, it is important to ask: how does Eliasson's "exposure" help the viewer understand her "critical position"? In the process of staging this elaborate contraption to teach viewers that "reality" is obscured by "representational layers," he effectively makes a representation of the representational layer, a representation in which the wave pool denotes natural phenomena and the screened waves denote its mediation. However, we can only experience the waves of water and light by way of this mediation, for when we look down from the edge of the pool we see only a volume of water and the dark plastic below. Consequently, our experience of the waves occurs at a representational remove. Contrary to his statement, this suggests that the experience cannot be unmasked or "cleared" as it is reliant on the very representational layers that Eliasson seeks to peel away.

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[302] Ibid. 31.
[303] In Gitte Orskou. "Inside the Spectacle." Olafur Eliasson: Minding the World. Gitte Orskou, Carsten Thau, Marianne Krogh Jensen et al. Aarhus, Denmark: ARoS Aarhus Kunstmuseum, 2005. http://www.olafureliasson.net/publ_text/texts.html. 5.

As Mieke Bal states succinctly, in this way Eliasson "drastically severs the relationship between 'real' and 'natural.'"[304] Intentionally or not, Eliasson is pointing to the mutual imbrication of humans and technology in a way that eschews any simple humanism or determinism. In response to this effacement of the clear distinction between humans and "their" world, however, Eliasson's *Notion motion* proposes that viewers learn to snap out of it, so to speak – that they learn to put aside the pleasures it offers and view it from an imagined exterior. In an interview with Daniel Birnbaum, for example, Eliasson states, "our surroundings are being taken to a higher level of representation, and therefore taken away"[305] – and he seemingly wants to give them back. As such, his stance vis-à-vis the culture of immersion is nostalgic for a site-specific model of subjectivity in which there is still a "real" reality to be found somewhere underneath the layers. The second room of *Notion motion* effectively repositions the subject as the alpha agent over a beta object.

There is yet another catch to Eliasson's "exposure": given that the viewer cannot physically be in the two rooms of *Notion motion* at the same time, she cannot see herself in the screened-image from behind the screen. This is important because it creates a blind-spot in the installation: the viewer cannot stand in the external position of Critique with regard to her own actions. But what happens if we change the mode of our encounter of *Notion motion* from temporal to spatial? The narrative of the sublime, which relies on one room of *Notion motion* being

[304] Mieke Bal. 159.
[305] In Daniel Birnbaum. 10.

experienced *after* the other, obscures the simultaneity of these two spaces. Following the ideas of Henri Bergson, Marianne Krogh Jenson states:

> ...it is only for us that the time-interval exists: outside ourselves there would only
> be space. Consequently, space can, after all, only be simultaneous, because
> whenever we speak about direction, movement and extension, we have started off
> by separating the segments from each other and subsequently collated the places
> they occupy: that which we call 'before' and 'after' actually exist simultaneously,
> side by side.[306]

Thus if we spatialize our experience of the installation, the passage from one room to the next cannot be divided into different Cartesian coordinates occupied at different moments in time, as we are accustomed to thinking. Instead of here *or* there, we are left with one continuous movement that is seized in the mind as one spatial extension -- and actually is one gallery room divided in two by a screen.

Here is the crux: if conjoined as such in simultaneity, the two rooms of *Notion motion* look remarkably like Jacques Lacan's famous diagram of two overlapping triangles that intersect at the boundary of the screen, or, in Lacanian terminology, the Screen. This Screen is the permeable membrane that mediates between the sum total of culturally acquired codes of language and vision, and the Real, the material conditions of existence that are forever beyond its powers to encode.[307] The Screen has the function of translating the latter into the communicable form

[306] Marianne Krogh Jenson. "With Inadvertent Reliance." Olafur Eliasson: Minding the World. http://www.olafureliasson.net/publ_text/texts.html. 6.
[307] Keith Moxey. The Practice of Theory: Poststructuralism, Cultural Politics, and Art History. Ithaca and London: Cornell U P, 1994. 53-4.

of the former as best it can while also preventing the Real from overwhelming the Symbolic and worrying away its tenuous hold. *Notion motion* illustrates this in almost didactic fashion: in the first room the viewer is continuous with the screened waves but then, by turning the corner and entering the second room, she is given the conceptual handles to make sense of her experience: she passes into the Symbolic. From this side of the screen/Screen, however, she can no longer access her experience in the "more fully enveloping universe" of the other side, although it continues to seep through: the price of gaining knowledge is to forever contend with internal dehiscence.

In sum, if one room is experienced after the other, the work oscillates between two different spatial experiences. As Jonathan Crary states, "while there is this distinctly de-mystifying character to the mundane concreteness of these elements, it is paradoxically at odds with the highly evanescent and even sublime effects that these elements produce."[308] As such, the viewer moves from a phantasmagoric space to a rational space: the viewer goes from seeing reflections of her own wavelengths to seeing the world as external and knowable. Which room a viewer (or critic) privileges depends on her own philosophical outlook. However, what cannot be avoided in either of these two spaces is that both lead to transcendence: Light and Reason: are these not one and the same in Western thought? The place of the enlightened mind, the place of vision rather than sight, the place of the Good and the True and other such Platonic Ideas?

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[308] Jonathan Crary. "Olafur Eliasson: Visionary Events." Olafur Eliasson. Kunsthalle Basel, 1997. http://www.olafureliasson.net/publ_text/texts.html. 7.

Furthermore, the first room of *Notion motion* suggests that the viewer is a creative agent capable of generating space through physical movements, yet in the resulting space, no definitive position is attributable: she is immersed. In the second room, the viewer is no longer part of the play; rather, she becomes part of the audience that watches how others interact with the set-up: she has no role. Amid all the contractions *Notion motion* sets in motion, this is incontestable: in neither room can the viewer assess her own entanglement in the specifics of the site. She is alternately everywhere and nowhere. Eliasson's installation thus offers a false sense of agency: with the body lost, banished or both, the subject cannot act in the virtual/actual site in which it is nevertheless imbricated. In *Notion motion* the double empowerment of creating our own wave space and assessing this space with the tools of cultural reason turns out to be a double disempowerment.

By contrast, when thought of in its spatial simultaneity, *Notion motion* privileges neither the apparatus nor the "natural" elements, neither the Light nor the Critique, but rather investigates the "indeterminate limit" between them.[309] In Jonathan Crary's words, "It is a question of mobile and non-hierarchized relations between spectator, apparatus and milieu – elements out of which a non-identifiable and non-localizable phenomenon coalesces and subsists."[310] Given this non-hierarchical non-identifiable non-location, *Notion motion* opens an interstitial space in which the subject can experiment with its pre-subjective

[309] Jonathan Crary. "Your Colour Memory: Illuminations of the Unforeseen." Olafur Eliasson: Minding the World. http://www.olafureliasson.net/publ_text/texts.html. 4.
[310] Jonathan Crary. "Olafur Eliasson: Visionary Events." 6.

status. In Lacanian terms, this shifts the emphasis off of the graduation into the Symbolic and on to the transitional mirror "phase," which is not yet or no longer here nor there. As the curator of the exhibition Madeleine Grynsztejn states, "This 'in-between' space is the crucial space of process, creativity and agency that Eliasson wishes both his work and its viewers to inhabit."[311] It is to this end that he insists on interactivity.

But can the viewer feasibly stay in this "in-between" space without falling into the pitfalls of disorientation or transcendence? Jonathan Crary's premise in *The Techniques of the Observer*, like Hillis', is that optical technologies, by conditioning viewers to see a certain way, function as the "training ground"[312] for assuming a certain model of subjectivity. Hillis states that,

> Though the forms and cultural contexts of the camera obscura and VR differ, all address an ongoing Western desire for transcendence from 'this earthly plane', and each suggests that this might be obtained, if only virtually, through the fusion of images and reality, and abandonment of the embodied constraints of real places. ...both offer imaginary access to a parallel world in which, as if by magic, users might become the creator of their own ontological ground.[313]

In the first room of *Notion motion* the "parallel world" to which the viewer "transcends" is characterized as an undivided "nature" before figure/ground distinctions: the viewer is reflected as a particular wavelength among waves: subject and object are made of the same substrate, so to speak.

[311] Madeleine Grynsztejn. "Attention Universe: The work of Olafur Eliasson." Olafur Eliasson. 39.
[312] Ken Hillis. 27.
[313] Ibid. 28.

Yet there is a question still left hanging:

> How can a reflective individual absorption in the fringes, transitions, pulses of one's own
> particular 'pure experience' be effectively reconciled with 'experience' as immersion in the
> tangled confusion of a shared, mutually inhabited world?[314]

That is, if in the first room of *Notion motion* the viewers interact with the artwork by becoming fused with it (as Grau suggests), how can they subsequently "see themselves" as part of a specific site? The second room proposes to do just that; however, it only succeeds in replacing the fusion of the subject and object with the domination of the subject.

Philip Beesley: Hylozoic Soil

(Figures 10-14)

Philip Beesley's installation *Hylozoic Soil* offers a very different model of interaction and spatial experience, and, consequently, a very different model of subjectivity. Beesley (b. 1956) is a practicing architect in Toronto who designs public and residential buildings, as well as stage-sets and exhibitions. He also co-directs the Integrated Centre for Visualization, Design and Manufacturing (ICVDM), where he researches the integration of flexible lightweight structures

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[314] Jonathan Crary. "Robert Irwin and the Condition of Twilight." Robert Lehman Lectures 3. Bettina Funcke and Karen Kelly, eds. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2004. 83.

and interactive systems in architecture. Beesley has earned several prestigious awards and grants for his architectural work (including a Governor General's Award in 1998 and the Prix de Rome for Architecture in 1995). He is also known for his architectural scale geotextiles, which are inspired by the organic world but created with the use of highly specialized visualization tools and digital technologies.

Hylozoic Soil is one of these large scale geotextile installations. Walking into the artwork is like entering the recesses of a forbidden forest, or the deep contours of moist cave: it seems to be alive with hidden life forms and ancient secrets. Webs of plastic mesh hang in stalactite and stalagmite formations. Small fern-like appendages furl and unfurl themselves gently. Geodesic organizations and latticework arch overhead to create a porous, provisional enclosure. Clusters of fleshy balloons inhabit its lining like barnacles or a colony of an unidentified species. As curator Jean Gagnon describes it, "These quasi-plants – all synthetic – come to life in the space, retracting, contracting, slackening and opening as we pass."[315]

Indeed, they seem alive despite their origin in acrylic and silicon rather than protein and carbon. Whether primordial or beckoning the future into early arrival, *Hylozoic Soil* is a highly functioning assemblage of material bits and digital bytes. According to Beesley, the various twitches and turns of the members of this strange ecosystem function like the parts of a body: he describes "breathing

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[315] Jean Gagnon. E-art: new technologies and contemporary art. Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and the Daniel Langlois Foundation, 2007. 13.

pores" that sweep through the air, "kissing pores" that cup and pull, "swallowing pores" that expand and contract, and "whiskers" that ripple and spin.[316] Following this analogy, the visitor inside the installation is like the prey of giant Venus Fly-Trap, being tickled and ultimately digested.

As the title suggests, Beesley is an advocate of Hylozoism, a belief that matter is animate and possibly even conscious, and that therefore life is inseparable from matter.[317] Here he has animated standard manufacturing materials with electronics: it uses sensors and proximity detectors, muscle wires, actuators, and networks of microprocessors to sense and respond to the viewer's movement. As such, *Hylozoic Soil* is an example of *reactive* interactivity: it does not involve the user's purposeful action (as does *Notion motion*) but results from her movement and position in space, for example, or from her volume, speed, temperature, etc. By walking through the "body" of the installation, the viewer is feeding data to its artificial intelligence, which is fed back in a seemingly erratic way.

Tim McKeough recounts his encounter with *Hylozoic Soil* in the magazine *Wired*. Here is his announcement (nearly) in full:

> "The first impression is that it's very benign," Beesley says. Indeed the columns – made of over 70,000 delicate laser-cut components that converge in a skeletal canopy – appear harmless. Then you notice them swallowing like a forest of mechanical throats. A system of proximity sensors, microcontrollers, strands of titanium nickel memory wire, and custom circuit boards help *Hylozoic Soil* zero in on victims. Hundreds of frondlike fingers

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[316] Philip Beesley. Hylozoic Soil: Geotextile Installations 1995/2007. Philip Beesley, Christine Macy, Andrew Payne et al. Toronto: Riverside Architectural Press, 2007. 158.
[317] Christine Macy. "Disintegrating Matter, Animating Fields." Hylozoic Soil: Geotextile Installations 1995/2007. 30.

made of serrated Mylar, acetate, and polycarbonate reach out to greet you, as dense colonies of whiskers wave excitedly overhead. But don't get too close: Needles attached to tiny latex bladders are poised to pierce your skin, and collector barbs grab hair and clothing. "It has a lot of hunger," Beesley says. "It treats you much like any wild animal would treat a human: You're its food."[318]

This brief description opens up several interrelated issues that are important to explore in the context of this chapter: the relationship between reactive interactivity and our awareness of bodily and spatial limits; the installation's mimicking of "natural" forces and its exemplification of the technological sublime; and the cultural implications of the model of subjectivity that is homologous with this "digested" body and indefinite space.

Interactivity

In the discourse of immersion, the rate and quality of feedback is of utmost concern: with head-tracking and other devices which survey the body's position in order to map it onto the digital space, interactivity becomes the primary means of implicating the user within the virtual world. In *Hylozoic Soil*, feedback is seemingly erratic: its software is organized into "local behaviour affecting isolated groups of devices, coordinated behaviour between neighbouring groups, and global behaviour running throughout the whole system."[319] Contingent but not interdependent, "[e]ach board produces its own response to local sensor activity"[320] while also listening for messages from neighbours and headquarters.

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[318] Tim McKeough. Wired 15.11 (Nov. 2007): 134.
[319] Philip Beesley. 159.
[320] Ibid.

Consequently information flows through the system in a decentralized way, dispersing its pulses rather than gathering them for organized action.

Of particular interest here is N. Katherine Hayles' argument that through the ubiquitous use of digital technologies, the understanding of information as pattern and randomness (rather than presence and absence) has become a feature of everyday life. As previously cited, with regard to VR systems she writes: "In these systems, the user learns, kinaesthetically and proprioceptively, that the relevant boundaries for interaction are defined less by the skin than by the feedback loops connecting body and simulation."[321] *Hylozoic Soil*, rather than allowing the viewer to see a mirror image of her movement in an altered form (like when an elbow corresponds to an extra appendage in the virtual reality), responds to our movements in a way that makes it impossible to incorporate its algorithms into our own body. Consequently the boundaries for interaction remain unclear and we cannot gain control over its responses even as we sense that it is we who are instigating the subtle frissons and vibrations.

Andrew Payne describes the interaction with *Hylozoic Soil* differently. He writes: "these works...construct a kind of eerie simulacrum of the inter-subjective encounter, one in which the object/milieu gestures by turns seductively and ominously to the viewer/occupant."[322] With neither the installation cohering as a distinct entity, nor the viewer's feedback reflecting her seeming physical integrity, the distinction between one and the other is blurred. As Beesley states, this is "an

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[321] N. Katherine Hayles. "Virtual Bodies and Flickering Signifiers." The Visual Culture Reader. 2nd ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, 2002. 153.
[322] Andrew Payne. "Between Art and Architecture, Structure and Sense." Hylozoic Soil: Geotextile Installations 1995/2007. 57.

intertwined world that moves beyond closed systems."[323] The boundaries of

neither "it" nor "I" are clear in *Hylozoic Soil's* "extended physiology."[324] Here we

touch on the second issue: just as the distinction between user and installation is

blurred, so too is the distinction between "technology" and "human." Half

organism/half microchip, *Hylozoic Soil* can be described as a *biometric*

environment that seeks to "reconcile natural processes and the artificial

world."[325] It is also *biomimetic*: it aims to replicate existing biological

functions.[326]

In the epigraph to the catalogue, Eric Haldenby goes so far as to state that, "This

wonderful piece refreshes, or, even, restores the fundamental relationship

between the built and natural environments."[327] This "fundamental" relationship

is of course highly debatable. Momentarily disentangling *Hylozoic Soil's* dual

iconography of organic life and technological networks will open two different

trains of thought and bring the implications of their synthesis into greater relief.

"Nature" and networks

Describing *Hylozoic Soil* without reference to natural figures such as caves,

forests and bodies would be difficult: the allusion is slippery yet too clear to deny.

In the context of Beesley's previous work, these references gain in credibility.

Several of his installations were even inserted into the natural environment, such

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[323] Philip Beesley. 20.
[324] Ibid. 21.
[325] Jean Gagnon. 15.
[326] Caroline A. Jones. "Biomemetics." Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art. Caroline A. Jones, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2006. 115.
[327] In Hylozoic Soil: Geotextile Installations 1995/2007.

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as *Haystack Veil* (1997) and *Erratics Net* (1998). These projects consisted of fabricated mesh textiles that hovered above the ground. Over time, they mimicked the process of soil composition and decomposition like "alien appendages to nature's body."[328] *Implant Matrix* (2006), by contrast, is an interactive geotextile that acts like a terrestrial prosthesis. Unlike soil, the "implant" displays "mechanical empathy," which Beesley defines as a kind of "architectural eroticism": "The components of this system are mechanisms that react to human occupants as erotic prey. The elements respond with subtle grasping and sucking motions."[329]

What is evident in these previous works is Beesley's interest in the "ground" – both literally and in the artistic sense. Beesley states, "In terms of figure-ground relationships the figures I compose are riddled with the ground."[330] In this way his work is akin to Walter de Maria's *Earth Room* (1977), in which the viewer becomes the only visible "figure." But to consider his work as an example of Earthwork would be misleading: rather than moving the concerns of sculpture out into the "expanded field" that Rosalind Krauss maps out, in which a sculptural "figure," whether minimally apparent (like Richard Long's walks through the English countryside) or intrusive (like Michael Heizer's *Double Negative*), still reigns over the "ground," Beesley's concern is more in line with Robert Smithson's: both artists are determinedly non-figural. As Rosalind Krauss states of Smithson's *Enantiomorphic Chambers* (1964), for example, in which

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[328] Philip Beesley. 22.
[329] Philip Beesley.
http://www.philipbeesleyarchitect.com/sculptures/0610implant_matrix/implant2.html
[330] Philip Beesley. 20.

mirrors are positioned in a way that the viewer visually disappears from the space, "It is not just the viewer's body that cannot occupy this space, then, it is the beholder's visual logic as well; *Chambers* explores what must be called a kind of 'structural blindness.'"[331] Similarly, when within *Hylozoic Soil*, the viewer cannot define their position in relation to the space as they are effectively dispersed throughout a structure that exceeds figuration: it appears as all ground.

As such, perhaps Beesley's work is better compared to a modern painter like Alberto Giacometti, who "tried to eliminate the notions of a distinct object and empty space,"[332] In his sculptures we see the flesh torn open and extending outward to the world as if melting and pulled by a non-localizable force of gravity. Or perhaps Surrealism is a more apt comparison: its adherents played with the lack of distinction between humans and machines already in the early 20th century. For example, think of Max Ernst's collage of a strange looking aircraft with thick human arms flying over a field that is empty except for two small soldiers carrying a wounded third (*Murdering Airplane*, 1920). According to Richard Serra, however, the subversive effects that Surrealism generated at the time have now been commodified into normative thrills, now, that is, that the human/machine distinction is no longer clear cut. He dismisses it by saying, "There is nothing cheaper than cheap Surrealism."[333]

Aspects of surrealism are continued in the 1990s postulation of the *informe*. Originally theorized by Georges Bataille, the *informe* acts to de-class matter,

[331] Rosalind Krauss. "Entropy." Formless: A User's Guide. Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss. New York: Zone Books, 1997. 76.
[332] Lev Manovich. 255.
[333] In Mark Godfrey. "Pierre Huyghe's Double Spectacle." Grey Room 32 (Summer 2008): 59.

submit structures to entropy, and otherwise "bring things down in the world."[334]

He writes, "What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm."[335] His ideas were picked up by Rosalind Krauss and Yves-Alain Bois, whose exhibition *L'informe: Mode d'emploi* (1996) discredited the opposition of form and content on which modernist art history is based. Instead, the *informe* seeks to liberate art and its interpretation from questions of style and iconography and, rather, focus on its value *as an operation*, "which is to say, neither as a theme, nor a substance, nor a concept."[336] It also discredited the modernist segregation of the arts according to their primary perceptual modality, in this case vision. Instead, the *informe* participates in a fantasy that experience could be unmediated by the "hegemony of the visual."[337]

If we put the ideas of the *informe* to use with regard to *Hylozoic Soil*, the operation that the installation enacts through its reactive interface is to decentralize the subject by dispersing its input across the installation and outputting it in various perceptual modalities, and thus offering a "thrill." Jean Gagnon calls Beesley's projects "probes into an aesthetic of reception."[338] "Aesthetic" is the appropriate word as it is the viewer's proprioception that, when dispersed throughout the system, becomes sensible by another organ, such as a whisk of air on her skin, for example, or a quiet "click" of plastic parts. As such,

[334] In Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss. 5.
[335] Ibid.
[336] Yve-Alain Bois. "The Use Value of 'Formless.'" Formless: A User's Guide. 15.
[337] Caroline A. Jones. "The Mediated Sensorium." Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art. 18.
[338] In Hylozoic Soil: Geotextile Installations 1995/2007. Epigraph.

the subject is de-classed, lowered to the level of an organism whose organs express themselves independently of a central nervous system. As described by the mid-twentieth century philosophy of Orgonomy, "milliards of organisms functioned for countless thousands of years before there was a brain."[339]

Given this dispersal, the *informe* also helps make sense of *Hylozoic Soil's* affinity with vast information networks. Here a discussion of iconography meets it limit: these networks are most often thought of in terms of their "unthinkable complexity"[340] and their inability to cohere as a visible or cogent "form." The great military powers – and the fibre-optic channels they carved across the globe to transfer information at the speed of light from one node to the next – are equally difficult to hold in the mind as a distinct figure. As Fredric Jameson states,

> the technology of our own moment no longer possesses this same capacity for representation. [...] [Furthermore] I want to suggest that our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism.[341]

Resistant to representation or faultily figured, digital information networks and the late capitalist system they support evoke the technological sublime.

The parallelism between "natural" nature and "technological" nature inherent in the idea of the technological sublime is not lost on Beesley; perhaps it is even the

[339] Ibid. 20.
[340] Nick Bingham. 244-60.
[341] Fredric Jameson. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." (1984) Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. 36-7.

premise of *Hylozoic Soil*. What is clear is that the installation exceeds "the binary oppositions of our traditional ways of thinking: oppositions such as subject/object, self/other, form/function, organic/inorganic, static/dynamic."[342] The crux of the issue is that, if both terms are figured in the mind as "nature," bio-nature and metric-nature, how can we hope to disentangle them? Bruno Latour argues that this desire to separate the scientific from the political and laboratory experiments from public experience is "one of the most tragic intellectual failures of our age."[343] He writes:

> This is what has changed so much: there are still people who oppose the notion of splitting science and humanity into 'two cultures', but their efforts have now moved inside the sciences themselves, which, in the meantime, have expanded to cover the whole of culture and politics. The new political, moral, ethical, artistic fault lines are now inside the sciences and technology, but to say 'inside' no longer means anything since it is also everywhere in the collective experiments in which we are all involved. If nothing is left of the trickling down model of science production, nothing is left of the two-culture argument either, even though our best minds still dream of keeping scientific facts and human values apart, or — even stranger — expect to 'build a bridge' between the two domains as if they were not totally entangled. Perhaps it is less a tragedy than a farce.[344]

According to Latour, distinguishing between an external, unified, scientifically factual "nature" and the grey domain of human values is "farcical" because it

[342] Jean Gagnon. 14.
[343] Bruno Latour. "Atmosphère, Atmosphère." *Olafur Eliasson: The Weather Project, The Unilever Series*. Susan May, Bruno Latour, Israel Rosenfield, et al. London: Tate Publishing, 2003. 33.
[344] Ibid. 34-5.

defers a degree of responsibility to nature as though it were not a product of the same cultural deliberations that govern the rest of our environment.

Instead of trying to distinguish between them, the question then becomes, what do we get when we integrate them? It is now widely accepted that nature is a culturally constituted category, but arguments running the other direction are less common. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's idea of the "machinic phylum,"[345] Otto Imken argues that we need to start thinking about the Matrix – the name he gives the "the power grid"[346] of global telecommunications networks that link and combine heterogeneous virtual and actual communication spaces – as a new artificial-life form, not just *as similar to a life form*:

> [The Matrix is] not a mere organism (which is still trapped by its limited
> functionalities and restrictive stratifications) but a non-linear, asymmetrical,
> chaotically-assembled functionality with much more potential freedom than that
> of an entity encased in skin or limited to being an agglomeration of discrete
> organs. A new being made up of widely distributed hardware, software, and
> pulses of electricity coursing through its nervous system is now stretching its
> exoskeleton across the planet, into the upper atmosphere crowded with satellites,
> and even out to incorporate data from sensors on the Galileo space probe
> currently orbiting Jupiter.[347]

[345] Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Trans. and Foreword Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987. 409-10.
[346] Otto Imken. "The Convergence of Virtual and Actual in the Global Matrix: Artificial Life, Geo-economics and Psychogeography." Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations. Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 93.
[347] Ibid. 92.

According to Imken, consumer-friendly interfaces disguise "the raw chaotic flux of digital bits with multicoloured tree-structures, imaginary desktops, and self-descriptive graphics"[348] in order to represent the Matrix in the guise of a machine that is under human control, coherent and unified.

But neither "bio-" nor "artificial-" life are as organized as we would like to figure them. The Matrix is not like a "mere organism" but neither is this "organism" the "mere" discrete entity we once thought:

> Life does not occur in a state of equilibrium, but has been shown to be a chaotic, self-organizing process emerging out of the increasing complexity of a given population. ...Complexity arises when increasing connectivity creates dynamic new possibilities amongst previously isolated components: new processes such as competition, reproduction, mutation and especially evolution.[349]

Bio- and artificial-life processes are thus remarkably similar. In light of this similarity — and in light of the current revival of a soft technological determinism — ascertaining whether we have become more like digital life forms due to their pervasive influence on all sectors of life or whether we never were different from them in the first place is of little use. The end result is the same: the distinction is hard to maintain. As Donna Haraway states, "the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-

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[348] Ibid. 94.
[349] Ibid. 97.

developing and externally designed" has become "thoroughly ambiguous."[350]

Claude Fischer encapsulates the premise of soft determinism well:

> According to this school of thought, new technologies alter history, not [solely] by their economic logic, but by the cultural and psychological transfer of their essential qualities to their users. A technology 'imprints' itself on personal and collective psyches.[351]

Given this "impression," the question then follows, what does it mean for subjectivity? According to Jonathan Crary, the "loss of autonomy due to the increasing integration of the individual into various electronic networks and assemblages.... is a question of the ongoing prosthetic subsumption of the nervous system into becoming simply a relay or conduit amid larger systems and flows."[352] Furthermore, given that these larger systems and flows of various electronic networks constitute "an evolutionary, spatio-temporal process of connection and intertwining, not a virtual geography,"[353] the question of how we can inhabit its space becomes all the more urgent.

On these two counts – space and subjectivity – Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's tome *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* provides the most apt theoretical frame for understanding *Hylozoic Soil*. As Elizabeth

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[350] In Anthony Vidler. The architectural uncanny: essays in the modern unhomely. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1992. 148.
[351] In Nick Bingham. 249-50.
[352] Jonathan Crary. "Olafur Eliasson: Visionary Events." 7.
[353] Otto Imken. 93.

Grosz states, "Deleuze is a cartographer of force rather than form."[354] Together with Guattari, he outlines a concept of the "body without organs" (BwO) that describes the non-transcendent dispersal of subjectivity or, rather, functionality, throughout *Hylozoic Soil's* "extended physiology," as well as its implications. Here is their advice on how to become a BwO:

> We are in a social formation; first see how it is stratified for us and in us and at the place where we are; then descend from the strata to the deeper assemblage within which we are held; gently tip the assemblage, making it pass over to the side of the plane of consistency. It is only there the BwO reveals itself for what it is: connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities.[355]

Rather than an *organized* entity in which each part fits into its proper slot or contributes to the final goal, a *dis*-organized body functions by establishing provisional, ephemeral linkages with other bodies without organs in a continuous process of "becoming." Connections are made; connections are broken; new patterns develop; new possibilities emerge. But reaching the stasis of "being" is off the horizon altogether as it would require a hierarchical organization of parts to the whole: a stratification rather than dispersal of energy.

Still the question remains, how can a "stratified" entity – a subject, the viewer – inhabit the "smooth" non-geography of *Hylozoic Soil?* With regard to the Matrix, Otto Imken asserts that, "In order to survive and prosper along with the ever-

[354] Elizabeth Grosz. Space, time, and perversion : essays on the politics of bodies. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. 128.
[355] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. 161.

expanding Matrix, we must destratify, de-homogenise ourselves and our thinking even further."[356] Similarly, with regard to *Hylozoic Soil* Christine Macy writes,

> the installations are able to respond to people entering the room, further blurring the boundary between the viewer's sense of self and the textile's 'sense' of the viewer. The result is a decentralized, unsettled and dispersed consciousness.[357]

Beesley's installation suggests that the viewer's body outputs and inputs information that exceeds its organization as a singular bounded being; instead, it merges with other bodies without organs – in this case, the installation – in energetic patterns that we are only beginning to imagine.

Deleuze and Guattari probe the implications of the fact that all particles are in constant motion and know no such boundaries as "my" body and "this" plant. Instead, these particles form "assemblages" or "multiplicities." On this point, as well, Imken's description of the Matrix is an equally apt description of *Hylozoic Soil*:

> The global Matrix exemplifies a smooth space which effectuates complex, non-linear interaction between the virtual and actual, thereby creating new and unexpected possibilities. The most distinctive feature of the Matrix is undoubtedly its distribution of control and communications, which are dispersed throughout a meshwork web of interconnected but heterogeneous multiplicities. Multiplicities exhibit emergent properties that cannot be deduced from an

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[356] Otto Imken. 96.
[357] Christine Macy. 32.

individual part, properties that will not emerge until the process is actually run through.[358]

Beesley creates unexpected multiplicities in a similar non-linear way: *Hylozoic Soil* instigates a feedback loop between the haptic and the fibre-optic, between a proprioceptive sense of space and computer code, and between the organic and the metric in a way that cannot be predicted until interaction occurs. As such, it exceeds the boundaries of organized beings, creating "new and unexpected possibilities."

Not that humans ever were independent, but that now it has become urgent to shed this protective philosophical dermis in order to probe the implications of our mutual contingency and intricate intertwining with the techno-social environment that is now our "nature." *Hylozoic Soil* suggests that we need to think of the space we inhabit as part of our very bodies and our bodies as part of the bio-geography and digital non-geography we inhabit simultaneously – not by being "present" in the way a "being" is present, and not by harnessing both bodies and their environments in the service of the cerebral machine, but by understanding the self as being in a continuous process of actualization and undoing. As Robert Pepperell states in the catalogue, "We can think of ourselves not as isolated agents trapped in a dermal shell, but as boundless clusters of activity blurring into space and time."[359]

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[358] Otto Imken. 98.
[359] Robert Pepperell. "Posthumanism and the Challenge of New Ideas." Hylozoic Soil: Geotextile Installations 1995/2007. 36.

This is in sharp distinction to the autonomy of the modernist subject. As Caroline A. Jones writes, "Neurasthenic fragmentation or normative segmentation – these seemed to be the ego's only possible responses to the mediated modern sensorium. Yet fragmentation into depression or madness was not always a one-way street; sometimes the auditor could reframe the experience of dissolution as sublime."[360] Beesk, s installation suggests the sublimity that results from a lack of containment; however, such freedom in fragmentation is, as Jones remarks, "an option we can explore in art if not in reality."[361] Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of the relationship between the "plane of organization" and the "plane of consistency" is especially pertinent on this point:

> The plane of organization or development effectively covers what we have called stratification: Forms and subjects, organs and functions, are "strata" or relations between strata. The plane of consistency or immanence, on the other hand, implies a destratification of all of Nature, by even the most artificial of means. The plane of consistency is the body without organs. ...The plane of organization is constantly working away at the plane of consistency, always trying to plug lines of flight, stop or interrupt the movements of deterritorialization, weigh them down, restratify them, reconstitute forms and subjects in a dimension of depth. Conversely, the plane of consistency is constantly extricating itself from the plane of organization, causing particles to spin off the strata, scrambling forms by dint of speed or slowness, breaking down functions by means of assemblages or microassemblages.[362]

What this means with regard to *Hylozoic Soil* is that, when the viewer enters the installation, she is effectively passing from the plane of organization to the plane

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[360] Caroline A. Jones. "The Mediated Sensorium." 31.
[361] Ibid. 39.
[362] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. 269-70.

of consistency: the subject, as we have inherited it from humanism, becomes scrambled into new patterns and dispersed along new lines. Thus we are in a perpetual process of "becoming," as Deleuze and Guattari argue – of *becoming other*.

But it is crucial to understand that "one continually passes from one to the other, by unnoticeable degrees and without being aware of it, or one becomes aware of it only afterward."[363] Otherwise the plane of consistency would be a plane of "abolition" or "regression to the undifferentiated"[364]: it would mean complete immersion. As Deleuze and Guattari ask, "Is it not necessary to retain a minimum of strata, a minimum of forms and functions, a minimal subject from which to extract materials, affects, and assemblages?"[365] In this light, *Hylozoic Soil's* dispersal of the viewer through the cybernetic circuit pushes the experience to the pole of immersion, thus suggesting the sublime effect of deterritorialization without addressing the need – and inevitability – of reterritorialization.

In the essay *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia* Roger Caillois also addresses deterritorialization, but from a different perspective. The essay explains how mimetic species of insects are "assimilated to the surroundings" by the "process of the generalization of space at the expense of the individual."[366] He writes:

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363 Ibid. 269.
364 Ibid. 270.
365 Ibid.
366 Roger Caillois. "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia." (1936) Trans. John Shepley. October 31 (1984): 31.

...along with the instinct of self-preservation, which in some way orients the creature

toward life, there is generally speaking a sort of instinct of renunciation that orients it

toward a mode of reduced existence, which in the end would no longer know either

consciousness or feeling -- the inertia of the élan vital, so to speak. ...this attraction by

space...and the effect of which life seems to loose ground, blurring in its retreat the

frontier between the organism and the milieu and expanding to the same degree the

limits within which, according to Pythagoras, we are allowed to know, as we should, that

nature is everywhere the same.[367]

Caillois explains that, like the "Carausius Morosus," for example, "which by its

form, color, and attitude simulates a plant twig," a schizophrenic invariably

responds to the question "where are you?" by stating, "I know where I am, but I

do not feel as though I'm at the spot where I find myself."[368] Caillois concludes

that "The [schizophrenic] individual breaks the boundary of the skin and

occupies the other side of his senses. He tries to look at himself from any point

whatever in space. He feels himself becoming space."[369]

As Rosalind Krauss observes, this description of psychasthenia itself seems "to

blend imperceptibly into that clamor for the erasure of distinctions"[370] and recalls

the *informe* discussed earlier, as well as deterritorialization; however, as Caillois

demonstrates, unlike the theories of Bataille or Deleuze and Guattari,

psychasthenia is dependent on vision – on "a disturbance in the perception of

space."[371] *Hylozoic Soil*, as already noted, allows us to explore radical

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[367] Ibid. 32.
[368] Ibid. 30.
[369] Ibid.
[370] Rosalind Krauss. "Entropy." 75.
[371] Roger Caillois. 28.

dedifferentiation – in the context of art not life – precisely by representing it visually. As Krauss states, cancelling the distinction between figures and their surrounding spaces in actuality would "produce a continuum unimaginable for our earthly bodies to traverse, but to which we as *viewers* might easily slide – or glide – in an effortless, soaring, purely *optical* movement."[372]

What the installation does not address, however, is how a newly "psychasthenic" visitor would be "reterritorialized" in the world outside the museum. As Jones states, "Leaving us open, unbounded, or fragmented is not meant to produce us as psychotic, but to make us available for re-organ-ization in terms we might be able to negotiate for ourselves."[373] Deleuze and Guattari suggest that this fragmentation is instated by capitalism in order to produce a "self" in need of bureaucratic reorganization. This echoes Guy Debord's assertion in the late 1960s that "'stimulated' viewers are already everywhere"[374] as they are called forth by capitalism itself and thus offer no opposition to it. To find more positive assessments of *Hylozoic Soil*'s technophiliac dispersal of subjectivity, especially the potential for creativity, we would need to look at theorists such as Rosi Braidotti, who, in Donna Haraway's words, "searches for figurations that can guide us to emergences more attuned to justice, pleasure and historical

[372] Rosalind Krauss. "Entropy." 75.
[373] Caroline A. Jones. "The Mediated Sensorium." 39-40.
[374] Guy Debord. "Editorial Notes: The Avant-Garde of Presence." Trans. John Shepley. Guy Debord and the Situationist International. Tom McDonough, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2002. 141. Discussed in Dore Bowen. "Imagine There's No Image (It's Easy If You Try): Appropriation in the Age of Digital Reproduction." A Companion Guide to Art since 1945. Amelia Jones ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006. 539.

specificity;"[375] however, as the installation leaves viewers in a state of "ego-pulverization," to use Jones' dramatic phrase, assuming that it (as a "theoretical object") is positing its own counterargument would shift the experience of the installation onto an ironic register, which, I think, is wandering too far from the work "itself". Rather, the fact that reterritorialization is not suggested reveals the installation's weakness: how can an experience of *Hylozoic Soil* serve as a model for interacting with the actual world if the "self" no longer harbours a minimum of intentional actions?

To return to the question of spatial experience, *Hylozoic Soil,* unlike descriptions of cyberspace that extend a homogenizing Cartesian grid out into infinity, has no such uniformity. Rather, like the Matrix and the *informe,* as well as the work of Giacometti, *Hylozoic Soil* attempts to depict what Lev Manovich calls a space-medium: "an environment in which objects are embedded and the effect of these objects on each other" – precisely what is missing in from computer space.[376] Whereas the space-medium assumed a certain stickiness in (anti-)modern work, in Beesley's high-tech organism, this chunky, thick, resisting spatial matrix is translated into a fluid process of continuous linkage. Drawing on the ideas of Deleuze's reading of Henri Bergson, Elizabeth Grosz describes this sticky yet smooth space as follows:

> perhaps space, too, needs not be construed as even, homogeneous, continuous, infinitely the same. Perhaps space also has loci of intensity, of compression or elasticity, perhaps it

[375] Rosi Braidotti. Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002. Back cover.
[376] Lev Manovich. 255.

needs no longer be considered a medium. Perhaps it can be considered lumpy, intensified, localized, or regionalized. ...Perhaps, in other words, there is a *materiality* to space itself, rather than materiality residing with only its contents. This implies that space itself, if it is heterogeneous, is multiple, differential, specific.[377]

In other words, in the spatial experience that Beesley offers in *Hylozoic Soil*, the certainties of the subject's position on a grid are subsumed by a process of localization that knows no such abstract demarcations. Instead, both subject and object are constituted in a "connection of desires, conjunction of flows, continuum of intensities."[378]

"Nature" and the Culture of Immersion and/or Interactivity

If we compare Philip Beesley's *Hylozoic Soil* and Olafur Eliasson's *Notion motion*, then it quickly becomes apparent that these two installations are addressing many of the same issues, albeit from different angles. Consider, for example, the role of interactivity: Eliasson's interface is purposeful while Beesley's is reactive. As such, one offers the illusion of control while the other denies its possibility. Or consider the prominence of the mediating screen in *Notion motion* and the (alleged) absence of mediation in *Hylozoic Soil*; consider Eliasson's rhetorical alienation and fusion of subject and object and Beesley's collusion of the two; the

[377] Elizabeth Grosz. "The Future of Space: Toward an Architecture of Invention." Olafur Eliasson: Surroundings Surrounded: Essays on Space and Science. Peter Weibel, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2001. 266.
[378] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. 161.

emptiness of the space in *Notion motion* and its palpability in *Hylozoic Soil*; and the primacy of the visual in the former and the primacy of proprioception in the latter. Together these installations demonstrate Caroline A. Jones' observation that "Our dreams of eluding hegemony are fed by complex desires to escape language, to escape signification, to escape *sense* for *sensation*."[379] Eliasson tries to return us to our senses, so to speak, while Beesley shows that the idea of escape is premised on boundaries which are no longer operative.

Clearly these two installations express two different attitudes toward the culture of immersion in which we live today and the resulting crisis in conceptions of space and subjectivity. Eliasson's division of *Notion motion* into an experience of sensual immersion and, subsequently, an experience of intellectual alienation reiterates the core tenet of site-specificity – that it is necessary to break with naturalized conceptions of a specific site (in this case, the "site" is the virtual image-space) in order to reveal its ideological functioning. Due to this "break" in experience, it becomes apparent that the "self" is equally conceived as a result of breaking with immersion. However, as Jones asks, "In our increasingly mediated sensorium, is the self building on this reflexive tradition, or radically departing from it?"[380] If we deduce Eliasson's answer to this question from the second room of *Notion motion*, it seems to suggest the former – the necessity of maintaining a distinction so as to allow for contemplation.

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[379] Caroline A. Jones. "The Mediated Sensorium." 20.
[380] Ibid. 38.

By contrast, Beesley's *Hylozoic Soil*, rather than oscillating between an "immersive" and an "alienated" relation to technology, adopts an "interrogative" one, to borrow Jones' taxonomy.[381] She defines interrogative artworks as "work that repurposes or remakes devices to enhance their insidious or wondrous properties; available data translated into sensible systems."[382] *Hylozoic Soil* does both: it visually enhances interactive systems to the point of mystification and it translates data into sensible form. As such, in response to Jones' question cited above, *Hylozoic Soil* seems to suggest the latter — the necessity of departing from the reflexive tradition in order to account for the radical contingency of the "self" and the post-human condition. Instead of illustrating the tenets of site-specificity, Beesley offers an experience of site *par excellence*. As Claire Bishop states, "the space in which such self-reflexive perception may take place is foreclosed, and we become one with the surrounding environment."[383]

Despite illustrating two different takes on interactive technologies, both *Notion motion* and *Hylozoic Soil* explore these issues through the lens of nature. To summarize the implications of their work, I want to bring this subtheme into the foreground in order to determine why nature is such an interesting lens through which to explore ideas about space, subjectivity, immersion and site-specificity.

I have already addressed how both Eliasson and Beesley employ the iconography of nature — waves and caves — to articulate a complex understanding of the

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[381] Ibid. 6. "Immersive — the 'cave' paradigm: the virtual helmet, the black box video, the earphone set" and "Alienated — taking technology and 'making it strange,' exaggerating attributes to provoke shock, using technologies to switch senses or induce disorientation"
[382] Ibid. 6
[383] Claire Bishop. 87.

square waves of digital information and the "cave" paradigm of technologically mediated immersion. This parallelism in the vocabulary is easily explained in technical terms: frequencies of light are reduced to sequential points on a graph that can be coded into strings of ones and zeros, and CAVE is a recursive acronym for "cave automatic virtual environment." However, there is more to the parallelism than the choice of terminology. As already discussed, the sublime is evoked by both installations: once as a technologically mediated experience of the natural sublime (*Notion motion*), and once as an experience of the techno-sublime represented through the iconography of nature (*Hylozoic Soil*).

This association of "nature" with the sublime touches on an important issue: Eliasson calls attention to the technological mediation *of* nature, thereby demonstrating their imbrication, whereas Beesley stresses that nature is always already technologically mediated, thereby demonstrating their indistinction. That is, *Notion motion* teaches us how to intellectually extract ourselves from the sublime effects of screen-based immersion – the opposite of the "penetration" theorized by Allucquère Rosanne and actualized in the installation's first room. By contrast, *Hylozoic Soil* searches for a way to turn mutual inter-penetration toward creative ends. [384]

[384] These two different approaches to immersion through interaction exemplify a much larger cultural debate: how can contemporary art (its production and its criticism), which is so thoroughly indebted to the "old fathers" of the Frankfurt School, especially Adorno and Horkheimer's essay "The Culture Industry," embrace the insights of the prominent "young women" writing today, such as Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles, who have taken up the lack of distinction between technology and nature to further (post-)feminist thought, without compromising its status as "art" as opposed to "spectacle"?

The new relationships that artists have forged with the longstanding tradition of "critical" thought are explored in the following chapter. Here I want to stress the lack of distinction that marks contemporary theory in order to return to the question already on the table: why are debates around "nature" particularly "fertile" for exploring questions of technology? In a way, the question is already answered: creative potential. However, looking again at *Notion motion* and *Hylozoic Soil* and the relationships they establish between the viewer's body and the space of the installation will bring the implications of this debate into greater relief.

Both *Notion motion* and *Hylozoic Soil* demonstrate what Bruno Latour has described as "a delicate sphere of climate control"[385]:

> the tired old divisions between wild and domesticated, private and public, technical and organic, are simply ignored, replaced by a set of experimentations on the conditions that nurture our collective lives. Seen through this approach, climate control is not inspired by a mad ambition for total mastery of the elements, but by a reasonable wish to ascertain what sort of breathing space is most conducive to civilized life.[386]

According to Latour, "nature" is not a pre-given condition common to all humankind, which, in its singularity, holds out the promise that humankind may one day be united again and thereby regain its "natural" status. (He refers to the entrenched idea that Nature is unified as a second Tower of Babel, which like the first – Culture – is crumbling apart into many different natures, or

[385] Bruno Latour. 40.
[386] Ibid. 30.

multinaturalism.) Rather, the *conditions* that create our collective "atmosphere" are always plural – natural and cultural, scientific and political.

"The problem is," writes Latour, "that while we know how to conduct a scientific experiment in the narrow confines of a laboratory, we have no idea how to pursue collective experiments in the confusing atmosphere of a whole culture."[387] As such, these "experiments" are *de facto* political. The clincher is that, whereas formerly "[o]utside the laboratory was the realm of experience – not experiment" – today "[t]the laboratory has extended its walls to the whole planet."[388] That is, today there is no longer a clear distinction between human *experiences* and technoscientific or technocratic *experiments*: "experiments are now taking place on a life-size scale and in real time."[389]

Latour's observation that the distinction between the inside and outside of the laboratory "is simply evaporating before our eyes"[390] is an apt description of the crossover: now "[a]rtists have perforce become white coats amongst other white coats."[391] The installations *Notion motion* and *Hylozoic Soil* are a case in point: the body of the viewer is not a pre-given "natural" condition against which to measure the vicissitudes of technology. Rather than being the (disavowed) "ground" of experience, it is contingent on the terms of the "experiment." As Caroline A. Jones writes,

[387] Ibid. 31.
[388] Ibid.
[389] Ibid. 32.
[390] Ibid.
[391] Ibid. 30.

The new sensorium is seductively alive. Composed as it is of what Haraway dubs our 'technoscientific naturecultures,' its liveliness does not depend solely on organic compounds, but links prosthetically and aesthetically to silicon-based machinic phyla.[392]

In other words, in both Eliasson's and Beesley's installations, the body "is not a closed unity but rather an open, unfinished set of possibilities, even of possibilities that have yet to be invented."[393]

In *Notion motion* this radical opening is quickly closed when the viewer is forced back into a space structured by the binaries inside/outside and subject/object. By contrast, in *Hylozoic Soil* this radical opening is too open to be actionable. To use Haraway's words, this machinic phyla is "disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert."[394] Yet both Eliasson and Beesley play with the "edge" of immersion afforded by interactivity in order to probe the ways in which the subject is implicated in the experimental/experiential sites that are now ubiquitous – the flickering light of digital screens and the pulsating rhythms of "intuitive" and biomimetic technologies.

This chapter opened by noting the tendency of art historians and cultural critics to reinstate interactive ideals in an immersive world (in its actual and virtual manifestation), but the opposite is also evident, in fact more prominent – the tendency to reinstate a degree of immersion in a culture characterized by ever-increasing interactivity. To close, I want to shift the discussion to broader terms: similar to the way immersion tends to win over interactivity in both *Notion*

[392] Caroline A. Jones. "The Mediated Sensorium." 43.
[393] Jonathan Crary. "Olafur Eliasson: Visionary Events." 8.
[394] In Anthony Vidler. 148.

motion and *Hylozoic Soil*, so too is the danger that immersion will dominate interactivity in a cultural sense. This is the sticker: *On the one hand,* despite the inflated rhetoric and the technological fact of interactivity, the participant might be relinquishing the last vestiges of intellectual and creative independence. Lev Manovich describes this predicament well:

> Mental process of reflection, problem solving, recall, and association are externalized, equated with following a link, moving to a new page, choosing a new image, or a new scene.... In short, we are asked to follow pre-programmed, objectively existing associations. Put differently, in what can be read as an updated version of French philosopher Louis Althusser's concept of 'interpellation,' we are asked to mistake the structure of somebody else's mind for our own.... Interactive media ask us to identify with someone else's mental structure.[395]

In other words, in the "more fully enveloping universe" the viewer/user is recreated in the image of the installation's "program." As such all *inter-* is removed from the *activity.*

On the other hand, as Marie-Laure Ryan suggests, in a culture of interactivity some degree of immersion is useful in grounding "the hypertextual imagination."[396] She suggests that, "as long as it is a temporary game and not a permanent condition, the mind's exile in the nowhere of incessant travel from sign to sign *may* lead to a deeper appreciation of what it means to have a body

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[395] Lev Manovich. 61.
[396] Marie-Laure Ryan. 353.

and to belong to a world."[397] This suggestive hope can lead us in two directions: like Allucquère Rosanne Stone argues, remembering the body can be an effective way of challenging the "old Cartesian trick," which needless to say, continues to forget the body. This is an urgent task. As previously cited, "Remembering the body may help us to prevent virtual systems from becoming unwitting accomplices in new exercises of social control."[398] It also has philosophical implications: it prompts us to remember that the world "looks back," that substance cannot be "mastered," that everything is embedded in the same dense "flesh." Technological immersion can thus be seen as an antidote for postmodern fragmentation, "schizoid" subjectivity, and the sense of perpetually being in the "wrong place" or a "smooth space."

Alternatively, if the challenge leads to the obliteration of the opposition – if it leads to immersion at the expense of interactivity – then we would enter the regressive symbiosis of subject and image that fuels the dream of a pre-symbolic pre-misunderstanding immersive world. Here we would land straight in the hands that control the technologies of immersion for profit and coercion.

In the case of Olaf r Eliasson's *Notion motion* and Philip Beesley's *Hylozoic No*, the experimental interactive spaces they structure for the viewer result in a seemingly benign immersion; however, let us not underestimate the impact of artistic figurations on the ROL. Art is a powerful means by which a culture

[397] Ibid. 355. (my italics)
[398] Allucquère Rosanne Stone. "Virtual Systems." Incorprrations [Zone 6]. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, eds. New York: Zone, 1992. 620.

represents itself to itself, and thus these figurations have practical political consequences. Citing Elaine Scarry, Vivian Sobchack writes:

> "we make things so that they will in turn remake us, revising the interior of embodied consciousness." ...More recently (although no longer that recently), we have been radically "remade" by the perceptive (as well as expressive) technologies of photography, cinema, and the electronic media of television and computer – these all the more tı rmative of "the interior of embodied consciousness" (and its exterior actions too) because they are technologies that are culturally *pervasive*. They belong not merely to scientists or doctors or an educated elite but to all of us – and all of the time.[399]

With regard to the things we make of late, Anthony Vidler states:

> Such objects are no longer subject to subjects; they counter attack. As in the collages of Max Ernst, they unionize in revolt, but now in the form of critical machines that pose new identities for their subjects. As apparatuses they both work on and fuse with once-separate bodies, they, like the cyborgs that "use" them, scramble all the recognized codes. Such objects fight back, they machine us as much as we machine them.[400]

What both Sobchack and Vidler make clear is that cultural/technological/artistic objects are "critical machines" that not only help us build critical theory around the crossover we are currently experiencing (both inside and outside the arts, if we hold onto this distinction) but also transform us from within. Eliasson's and Beesley's installations, as figurations of contemporary spatial experience – as "cognitive maps" for navigating our tethered carbon and silicon bodies through spaces that are at once geo- and techno-, actual and virtual – "machine us"

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[399] Vivian Sobchack. "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic 'Presence.'" Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture. Berkley: U of California P, 2004. 135.
[400] Anthony Vidler. 158.

according to their spatio-mental constructions. This reconfiguration of space and subjectivity, as Sobchack asserts, transforms our exterior actions, too.

To close this chapter let me pose two "what if" questions in order to approach the practical and political consequences of *Notion motion* and *Hylozoic Soil*:

What if we really believed we could extricate ourselves from the seductive and insidious effects of our immersive technologies and stand outside them like a Romantic on an isolated perch? Would we watch as others are washed away by a sea change and celebrate our distance, like Friedrich's gentleman holding onto his hat? Would we dive into it for the thrill and risk drowning ourselves?[401] Or can we think of some other position to occupy that is *actually* actionable?

Alternatively, what if we really believed that we were indistinguishable from the various networks in which we are technologically enmeshed? Would we resign ourselves to being a transmitter without volition or a flow without destination and let the "programs" run as they may? How would this impact our understanding of our position in the "global" network? Would we feel more responsible toward the relentlessly *material* realm in which most of the world labours and hungers or less? What agency could we exert from the position of Bataille's earthworm?

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[401] See Martin Jay. "Diving into the Wreck: Aesthetic Spectatorship at the *Fin-de-siècle*." Critical Horizons 1:1 (Feb. 2000). 93-111.

"These subjects are no harmless fictions."[402] Depending on how we answer these questions, we will define ourselves as either sovereign, "stimulated," indifferent, or redundant – none of which deliver on the promise of political action that the buzz of "interactivity" managed to sustain from the 1960s through the 1990s. Now in the crossover, as Olafur Eliasson's *Notion motion* and Philip Beesley's *Hylozoic Soil* articulated in spatial form, interactivity is an end to itself, like Yves Klein's blue or Jackson Pollock's drips after the height of fame: an artistic material, pliable to the hands of the artists, but with no inherent meaning of its own. In the hands of Eliasson and Beesley alike, interactivity solicited bewonderment, which lead to disillusionment in the former and captivation in the latter. However, if indeed interactivity points to the most recent "reorganization of the relationship between artists and spectators aiming, for over a century, for an increased empowerment of the spectator,"[403] then we should ask whether it leads to empowerment in either. As Vidler states, "This complex and impure system of existence, indeed, offers neither the luminous promise of technological utopia nor the dark hell of its opposite."[404]

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[402] Rosalyn Deutsche. "Agoraphobia." Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1996. 296.
[403] Louise Poissant. "The Passage from Material to Interface." Media Art Histories. Oliver Grau, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007. 230.
[404] Anthony Vidler. 148.

CHAPTER 3: SPATIAL FACSIMILES

In 1998 Maria Lind published "Some Reflections on Site Specificity in Contemporary Art" in *Parkett* magazine. In this text she supplements Miwon Kwon's description of "site-oriented" work by defining "other attitudes and modes of working in relation to site,"[1] namely "spatial facsimiles" and "ambient spaces." In the former, artists "choose a certain place with particular social, economic and emotional implications and then move it in the form of an exact – and unique – copy to another, often institutional context."[2] In the later, an atmosphere is created and feelings are invoked that give the sensation of being transported to a place that is entirely different from the one we entered. It is experiential and affective, totally absorbing and all-encompassing."[3]

In 2000 Martin Jay published "Diving into the Wreck: Aesthetic Spectatorship at the 'Fin-de-siècle'" in the journal *Critical Horizons*. In this text he discusses how "[t]he contemplative, distanced viewer who is able to judge from afar the spectacle before him or her, has been replaced by a more proximate, involved 'kinaesthetic' subject whose body is stimulated as much as his or her eye."[4] He observes that

> Presentation rather than representation, transgressive desublimation rather than symbolic sublimation, incorporating the abject rather than facing the extruded object,

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[1] Maria Lind. "Spatial Facsimiles and Ambient Spaces: Some Reflections on Site-Specificity in Contemporary Art." Parkett 54 (1998-99): 191.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid. 193.
[4] Martin Jay. "Diving into the Wreck: Aesthetic Spectatorship at the *Fin-de-siècle*." Critical Horizons 1:1 (Feb. 2000). 93.

identifying with destruction rather than contemplating creation: all of these are evidenced in a wide variety of recent modes in contemporary art.[5]

The conclusion he draws about such simulacral immersive experiences is dire: "If aesthetic judgment is to be a model for its political counterpart... it cannot do so on the basis of this aesthetics of violent immersion."[6]

Both these authors belabour what they consider to be a lack of *specificity* in contemporary art. Lind states, "Specificity seems too strong a notion in relation to their approach. It is rather a question of working associatively, of being sensitive to a site."[7] Jay argues that such "sensitivity" is effective only sensationally, not critically or discursively, and asserts the need to reintroduce the "much-maligned contemplative eye" that is

> able to judge and weigh the merits of specific event and objects, the eye that ultimately provides the material for a process of discursive communication about the wrecks that have occurred in the past and the ones in the future that might perhaps be forestalled.[8]

In other words, if a specific relation to a site (or event) is replaced or overshadowed by a sensitive relation, then the distance that specificity implies is collapsed in favour of the proximity of borrowed emotions.

Certainly artworks that operate at this additional remove have the potential to make a great impact on current ways of thinking; we can call it the truth value of fiction. However, this potency is reliant on contextualizing one's experience in the

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5 Ibid. 105.
6 Ibid. 93.
7 Maria Lind. 193.
8 Martin Jay. 109.

simulated world after the fact. In this process of reflection, the "immediate" experience of artwork is negotiated discursively in order to determine its relevance and applicability to the actual world. That is, we interpret it by breaking the hermeneutic seal and allowing the virtual and actual world to interpenetrate. As Martin Jay bemoans, however, there is a trend in contemporary art to preclude reflection and interpretation and indulge instead in the immediacy of the (simulated) situation.

This chapter explores two such "site-sensitive" and "proximate" works – *Triple Bluff Canyon* (2004) by Mike Nelson (b. 1967) and *Weisse Folter* (2007) by Gregor Schneider (b. 1969). Both installations are facsimiles of actually existing or once existing sites and both establish a strong sense of ambience. As Maria Lind states, such installations

> would be hard to imagine without techno-culture and digital worlds, where reality can be constructed. They contain a vision of another liberating condition based on an intensely individual experience, involving as many senses as possible. It is a trip to somewhere else.[9]

As both *Triple Bluff Canyon* and *Weisse Folter* exemplify, the discourses of site-specificity and new media immersion cannot be distilled one from the other. In the "trips" that they structure for the visitor kinaesthetic involvement becomes the measure of the facsimile's "reality" (as opposed to visual accuracy). Furthermore, both installations provide a platform for discussing the implications of emphasizing the "immediacy" of experience at the expense of the

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[9] Maria Lind. 194.

discursive register of experience, implications to which they demonstrate two different attitudes, one resistant and the other embracing.

In the case of Nelson's installation, viewers make a trip to a defunct cinema, his former studio space in London, and Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) in Ohio. In Schneider's installation, viewers are imaginatively transported to Cuba, not to the ocean front playground pictured on tropical vacation advertisements, but to the prison cells identified in the catalogue as the American military detainment camp in Guantanamo Bay. Given the *Partially Buried Woodshed*'s status as a political icon of resistance to the Vietnam war and Schneider's blatant reference to a contemporary war, the thick layering of representation that constitutes today's political mediascape is of foremost concern in both of these works: Schneider addresses the de-sensitization and de-realization that results from a continuous stream of (biased) media coverage by having us climb through the television or computer screen into a model prison, and Nelson updates Smithson's anti-war icon with references to the US administration that is orchestrating Guantanamo, or "gitmo" as the Americans positioned there call it. Thus "GWOT" – the military acronym for the Global War on Terror – provides the broadest interpretive context for these two works.

Other contexts that are necessary to consider in relation to these two artworks are, of course, art history – specifically the crossover of site-specificity and immersion – and the artists' own practices. It is within this more intimate circle that this chapter begins, gradually increasing its parameter and opening the discussion outward to include the contemporary mediascape. My hope is to define more

specifically the stakes at play in the "eclipse of the spectacle"[10] that these two

installations exemplify and to conjecture as to where we might go from this

"somewhere else."

Mike Nelson: Triple Bluff Canyon

(Figures 15-21)

There are indeed three bluffs in Nelson's *Triple Bluff Canyon*: a cinema foyer, a

Victorian living-room/studio, and Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*. Each

admit to their game of deception, but what can be potentially gained or lost by

their bluff? And is the canyon between them impassable or bridgeable? The title

of the installation is apt: double-entendres multiply and spin it into a vortex of

meaning that can take off in flight or bore its way into the ground until it hits

rock bottom. The trick is to lay a floor underneath our feet as we move along so

that we can anchor our associations and slowly build a match-book house of

meaning.

This is what Mike Nelson does himself: he is first and foremost a builder. Take

The Coral Reef (2000) that he built for Matt's Gallery in London, for example. He

constructed room after room of small reception areas that amounted to a maze of

[10] See Jonathan Crary. "Eclipse of the Spectacle." Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation. Brian Wallis, ed. Foreword by Marcia Tucker. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984. 283-94.

various decrepit and illicit places: taxi offices and greasy mechanic shops, gathering rooms for Americana fanatics, bikers and Mecca pilgrims, and hideouts for porn-addicts and dope-smoking bank robbers — each complete with the dank and detritus of use and forlorn ambitions. The inhabitants of these rooms were long gone: they left in a rush before we got here, leaving behind a scattering of clues. As viewers, "We are cast in the role of part trespasser, part archaeologist, and part detective — a person moving through the traces of others' existences, trying to understand what catastrophe may have caused this emptiness and what condition may have shaped the inhabitants' lives."[11]

For another example, take *2.4a Orwell Street* (2002), the location of the installation he built for the 2002 Sydney Biennale. In this reptilian pet shop the cages are all open and the scaly slithering creatures are nowhere in sight, only the pathetic mise-en-scene of their "natural" habitats, perverse dioramas of life in the wild. The Biennale's creative director describes the view looking out from the pet shop window: "there's a small square with turquoise metal seats where an Aboriginal couple are nodding off, bulging plastic tartan laundry bags at their feet, syringes carefully placed on the wall beside them."[12] In a land once governed by Aboriginals and marsupials, which continue to face threats of cultural or actual extinction, an unbearable noise begins to build in the empty silence of the dusty cages — the noise of fears: dispossession, miscegenation, contagion, entrapment,

[11] Mike Nelson in Simon Grant. "Maze Maker." ARTnews (Mar. 2002): 94.
[12] Richard Grayson. "2.4a Orwell Street." Mike Nelson: Between a Formula and a Code. Peter Eeley, Richard Grayson, Ralph Rugoff et al. Cologne: Walther Konig, 2006. 18.

poison. We oscillate between imagining ourselves taxonomically labelled and locking the key to the cage.

These two installations, alongside *The Deliverance and the Patience* at the 2002 Venice Biennale, his Turner prize presentation at the Tate *The Cosmic Legend of the Uroboros Serpant* (2002), and his recent Creative Time project in New York, *A Psychic Vacuum* (2007), have earned Mike Nelson a reputation, alternatively, as "the artist that we expect to construct a thrilling, affective parallel world,"[13] as a "maze maker,"[14] and as a "British Kabakov."[15] One critic wonders "if it is his ultimate intention to build a work of art so va‹ . it consumes the reality around it."[16] Another critic quips that "Brecht has built his very own city."[17] And yet ‹ other states, "It was brilliant theatre, which is not always the best thing you can say about art."[18]

Clearly critical opinion is as multifarious as the references in Nelson's fabricated spaces, perhaps because of them. "Nelson's work delights in an ebullient over-coding," writes Dan Fox: "I feel dizzy."[19] Rather than taking these issues in turn as so many parts of a puzzle, which, if properly decoded, would supposedly make his work transparent to our analyzing eyes, my approach will be different: I will accept the premises of his work as my own and proceed from there. That is to say, if non-linearity, opacity, concatenation, duplicity and repetition form the basis of

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[13] Dean Kenning. "Mike Nelson." Art Monthly 298 (2006): 23.
[14] Simon Grant. 94.
[15] William Feaver. "Turner Prize 2001." ARTnews 101.2 (2002): 134.
[16] Jonathan Jones. "Species of Spaces: Jonathan Jones on Mike Nelson." Frieze 53 (2000): 75.
[17] Dave Beech. "Mike Nelson." Art Monthly 234 (2000): 37.
[18] Jonathan Jones. 76.
[19] Fox, Dan. "Mike Nelson." Frieze 85 (2004): http://www.frieze.com/issue/review mike_nelson. 1.

Nelson's work, I want to discover the salience of these tactics more so than the individual or conflicting meanings of innumerable details.

The difference I am outlining here between the significance of details in their own right and their functioning within Nelson's three-dimensional tableaux allows me shift the focus ever so slightly onto how an artwork establishes a structural pattern that determines its reception, rather than recounting singular experiences of viewing. Nelson's work is so open to associations that every viewer could potentially establish very different frames of reference for the objects he includes. As Clare Manchester writes, "it is the multiple narratives that can be woven from the physical clues left behind by the artist that are really the main focus of the work ...these readings are ated primarily by the viewer's own frame of reference, her own personal memories, history, and culture."[20] Similarly Claire Bishop asserts that "The inevitably subjective streak in all these accounts once more asserts the fact that works of installation art are directed at and demand the presence of the viewer."[21] But this does not get us very far in terms of describing the relevance of his work to current artistic and cultural debates. There needs to be some sense of the work below or above or beside this volatile layer that can provide a platform for such a discussion.

To this end I propose that we accept the poststructuralist tenet that subjects are constituted by acts of communication. It then follows that all artworks, as semiotic objects, constitute their "ideal" viewer. It is the account of the

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[20] Clare Manchester. "Mike Nelson: The Uroboros of Illusion." Artext 76 (2002): 69.
[21] Bishop, Claire. Installation Art: A Critical History. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. 11.

installation from this "ideal" position that I am interested in analyzing in order to avoid falling wholesale into the conceptual trap of the "experience economy" and its premises of the "authenticity" and "incommensurability" of experience. We can deduce this "ideal" viewer by the structure of the space with which it is homologous and, as such, bring to light the installation's political salience.

Cinema

Upon entering the Modern Art Oxford (MAO) visitors see a defunct ticket booth bearing a faded poster of *Alien*. Through the door to the side is a dank corridor with purple walls that leads to a foyer. Either time has rolled back or we have strayed far from family entertainment: this is not some futuristic multi-level Cineplex with bright lights and kaleidoscopic décor: the ceiling is low; the walls are dark red; the carpet is thick; the lights are dim; the trimming is solid wood; the glass is dirty. Three more doors lead from here, suggesting three different imaginary universes we can enter. But only one door opens and, instead of fulfilling the expectation of a voyage to some fantastical cinematic elsewhere, we are thrown back into the stark white gallery space. All that is to be seen is the bare wooden construction of Nelson's bluff. No poly-sensorial immersion. No alien "other." Back to square one but not quite: we are still on the other side of the ticket booth, in the belly of the exhibition.

Do the gallery walls look different for having passed through the rabbit's hole or does disillusionment reign in the absence of illusion? As Nelson states, "the foyer functions almost like a trailer, intended to build up the suspense, the sense of

expectation, yet you step outside it into the empty space of the gallery, and I am sure that after raising so much expectation a lot of people were disappointed."[22] And this is precisely the point of the "return" to the gallery. By not catering to expectation, Nelson denies imaginative indulgence in "the 'hidden other' behind the white walls of the main exhibition space."[23] Instead, expectation roams unmoored through an empty space in search of some other tantalization. But what if there is none, and we are left standing here looking at a plywood wall?

In the effort to fill in the space left by our deflated expectations, the details of Nelson's first tableau take on their full weight. For example, consider the suggested age and status of the space together with the fact that no alternative world opens up: rather than being positioned as the disembodied consumer of mass spectacle, the viewer is cast in the role of Roland Barthes' "perverse" body,[24] the part of the viewer that never merges with the screened world but stays behind eating popcorn, grazing the knees of neighbouring spectators, kissing in the dark, and scanning the crowd for other sights and other ways to satiate desires. Not only does the foyer allude to the history and seedier side of this popular form of entertainment, but also, by stopping short of narrative fulfillment, Nelson prevents the sublimation of this "perversity" to the dictates of filmic immersion.

In this light, the tattered poster for *Alien* takes on new significance: in addition to denoting the genre "science fiction" and, more specifically, the encounter with an exotic and dangerous "other" in its most blatant and paranoid form, it also

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[22] Patricia Bickers. "Triple Bluff [interview with Mike Nelson]." Art Monthly (July-Aug. 2004): 4.
[23] Catherine Grant. "Turner Prize: Light's On – Anyone Home?" Flash Art 34.222 (2002): 40.
[24] Discussed in Martin Jay. Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variation on a Universal Theme. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005. 384.

suggests an encounter with the "other" that occurs within the parameters of "self." Barthes' bi-part model of a cinema-goer is akin to the psychological compartmentalization at the heart of Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud writes: "This uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression."[25] As Anthony Vidler explains, "The uncanny, in this sense, might be characterized as the quintessential bourgeois kind of fear"[26] and its favourite motif is "the fearful invasion of an alien presence."[27]

If we take this a bit further, the viewers' *exit* out the other side of the cinema foyer is analogous to leaving the perverse body behind and repressing this alien "other" that is the object of so much filmic and psychological fascination. By occupying the narrative space habitually reserved for the screen, however, the gallery is pulled into the artwork as one of its constituent elements. As such, what is commonly understood as a neutral container for artwork becomes a fictional element among other fictional elements. Arguably this is the case with all artworks — context becomes/is content — but by this explicit exchange of the cinema auditorium for the empty gallery, Nelson sets into motion a productive conceptual contagion between the two: both are spaces in which the viewer is called upon to enact a script, whether imaginatively, physically, or both.

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[25] Anthony Vidler. The architectural uncanny: essays in the modern unhomely. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1992. 14.
[26] Ibid. 4.
[27] Ibid. 3.

Studio

The idea of conceptual contagion becomes even more evident as viewers confront Nelson's second bluff. Here is another make-shift plywood room set inside the gallery walls. This time there is no door; instead, we look inside it through the missing bay window, a modest apse supported by a pair of metal joists and a two-by-four. The interior, by contrast, is completely realistic: plaster mouldings define the living-room walls; a light bulb hangs down from a ceiling rose; an eclectic collection of objects covers every surface – books, a fan, metal stools, maquettes, fake monkey's head, a tiny skull, a wall-mounted mask resembling a cow and various other sculptures, packages labelled in Arabic, filing cabinets, a work bench and a desk lamp. As Nelson states, it looks like a "nutter's den."[28]

This Victorian front room once served as Nelson's studio in South London. Rebuilt in the MAO, it is an autobiographical gesture that aligns his personal working space with the abandoned underground spaces he is known to construct, such as the reception rooms of *The Coral Reef*. As one critic describes it, "its litter of props – animal masks, human bones, sci-fi paperbacks, and religious knickknacks – intimated that this was the den of an authentic subscriber to cult mythologies rather than of an artist who treats them as raw material."[29] This "nutter" is evidently also a *bricoleur*, combining this cacophony of stuff into some sort of syntax. He ignores Victorian mores of propriety and rationality and quietly gnaws at them from the inside, like a renter not at home in his house. The room

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[28] In Patricia Bickers. 4.
[29] Rachel Withers. "Mike Nelson." Artforum 43.3 (2004): 238.

seems to be filled by some sort of code that is impenetrable to us but palpable, as though we could potentially crack it wide open – and thereby dispel with this uncanny presence.

As such, the viewer wears the hat of a detective. However, whereas viewers of Nelson's previous installations walk through the spaces gathering clues that help them re-establish the presence of the departed occupants, here we are kept outside by the barrier of the window sill: looking in from the edge of the window, we are cast in the role of a nosey neighbour rather than a forensic expert. Private space is revealed as infinitely public: this pane-less architectural feature frames our view of the internal space that is on display like a picture,[30] or like the world on the other side of the computer screen that we can finally embody "for real." As such, the viewer also wears the hat of a flâneur or a cyber-cowboy exploring digital worlds.

By peering in this virtual world we also notice that the studio is not entirely vacant: it doubles as a projection booth for a US conspiracy theorist named Jordan Maxwell. Through the double doors at the back of the room, which open onto the gallery space, we see Maxwell "bounced off and distorted through a convex mirror."[31] He is giving a "Basic Slide Lecture." This tirade is "an explanation of the occult symbolism he sees in government and corporate logos: Exxon's double cross, all-seeing eyes on dollar bills, the rising sun of the new

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[30] See Ann Friedberg. "The Virtual Window." Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition. David Thornburn and Henry Jenkins, eds. Brad Seawell, assoc. ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2003. 337-53.
[31] Mike Nelson in Patricia Bickers, 4.

world order in Shell's logo, the pentagram that forms the Pentagon."[32] He rants about the Illuminati, the Knights Templar, freemasonry and "secret cabals of evil masterminds running the world from a bunker in Switzerland. At one point he says: 'The people who are running this country are some of the biggest criminals the world has ever known.'"[33]

Adrian Searle writes, "Artists, like conspiracy theorists, need to make connections, however implausible. They need to deal with mental space as well as physical objects, history as well as the present."[34] Identifying the artist with an obsessive is remobilizing a longstanding cliché, but as Nelson states, "you can use those structures to articulate something in an elegant and unexpected way."[35] In *Triple Bluff Canyon*, Maxwell's continuous spout of far-fetched fantasies and unsubstantiated theories is displaced from the creative source – the mythic artist's studio – to the negative space of the gallery that surrounds it. In this ambiguous position, Maxwell hangs like a spectre over the entire exhibition.

Once implanted, Maxwell's paranoiac associations keep their stronghold over the viewer's imagination. In the wooden shack that constitutes the third bluff, for example, we come across oil drums half-buried in sand, which now resonate with Maxwell's semiotic analyses and his allegation of "plotting a New World Order with roots in ancient Egypt."[36] Viewers enter this shack through a rickety wooden

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[32] Dan Fox. 1.
[33] In Adrian Searle. "Riddle of Sands." Guardian Unlimited Arts (2004): http://arts.guardian.co.uk/features/story/0,11710,1213872,00.html. 1.
[34] Ibid. 2.
[35] In Patricia Bickers. 2.
[36] Ossian Ward. "Mike Nelson at the Modern Art Museum." Art in America (Nov. 2004). http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_/ai_n7069950. 1.

structure that carves out a narrow passageway in a giant dune. The windows are unusually high but sand pours in just the same, and we can see nothing but sand through the slats in the wood. "The shed looks [like] the sort of out-of-the-way forgotten byre where someone might have been kept kidnapped for months or years, or where Saddam might have hidden himself,"[37] writes Searle, updating the paranoia to today's mediascape.

"The Woodshed"

There is no other door in this sand-filled shack, so we have to turn around and go back through the tunnel... back through the cinema foyer... and out by the ticket booth. From here we can walk up a different set of stairs and see the shed from afar. "The space seems to hide a terrible enormity,"[38] writes Searle. At this distance, from this vantage point, Nelson's shed is a perfect rendition of Robert Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) as it appeared on the cover of *Arts Magazine* in May 1978 – except for the sand, for the location, for the historical context and the resulting significance.

Robert Smithson made the *Partially Buried Woodshed* on an invitation from Kent State University in 1970. When his original plans for a mud-slide fell through, he started working on the idea of burying a building. A small woodshed was chosen on an abandoned farm at the back of the university grounds, which was now only used to store dirt, gravel and firewood. He hired a local contractor to backhoe truckloads of dirt on the shed until the central beam cracked – twenty

[37] Adrian Searle, 2.
[38] Ibid.

in total. Smithson donated the work to the university and insisted that no further alterations be made to it.[39] The woodshed and the surrounding area were thus left to fallow: it was a monument to entropy.

When, several months after the earthwork was installed, four students were killed by the National Guard during a protest following the American invasion of Cambodia, the *Partially Buried Woodshed* was widely embraced as a memorial for the tragedy and as an icon of the anti-war movement in general. In hindsight, Nancy Holt describes it as follows:

> I think one of the most shocking things, when I look back, were the Kent shootings. It shocked me more than the president getting assassinated. I think it changed everybody's mind, even those who were conservative. So many people just switched overnight after that. Everything just became very, very clear. [...] [T]he students obviously recognised the parallel. Piling the earth until the central beam cracked, as though the whole government were cracking. Really, we had a revolution then. It was the end of one society and the beginning of the next.[40]

While the campus was closed, someone painted "MAY 4 KENT 70" on the shed.

Renee Green, in an installation titled *Partially Buried* (1996), presented archival footage of Smithson's assistants producing the earthwork intermixed with other texts and videos, concrete remains of the woodshed's foundation, interviews about the Kent State massacre, news footage of the event, an auto-interview, images of the university's Afro-American student union (which was committed to

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[39] See Jeremy Millar. Triple Bluff Canyon: Mike Nelson. Short story by Brian Aldiss. Oxford, UK: Modern Art Oxford, 2004.
[40] In Ibid. Non-paginated.

non-violence), and a soundtrack of the Jackson Five. As such, she presents a more ethnographic sense of time and place than Smithson's earthwork captured on its own.

Green's multilayered montage is in sharp distinction to Tacita Dean's ironic film *From Columbus, Ohio to the Partially Buried Woodshed* (1999). Dean uses the same archival footage together with contemporary shots of herself and a friend searching for the shed on the university campus. Maps and hand-written instructions did not suffice to ascertain its exact location, but eventually a concrete foundation of a small building is found. The search ends abruptly with Dean and her friend nestled in the tall grass surrounding the site, gazing off into the distance as if basking in the residual "aura" of the earthwork. As such she produces a "pastoral sense of time"[41] that runs contra to both Smithson and Dean. Pilgrimages to remote Earthworks have become a type of tourism onto its own and the politics of the site are all but invisible.

Nelson's contribution to this quagmire of meaning is not straightforward. There is no sense of ethnographic or pastoral time, nor is there a sense that Nelson is reasserting Smithson's adherence to the law of entropy: after all, he has revived the woodshed by building it here in the MAO. In the words of Michael Wilson, his remake is an effective meditation on "the space between reality, representation, and replication."[42] It is due to the introduction of the term "replication" that it is important to contextualize *Triple Bluff Canyon* at the crossover of immersion

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[41] Alex Coles. "Revisiting Robert Smithson in Ohio: Tacita Dean, Sam Durant and Renée Green." Parachute 104 (2001): 136.
[42] Michael Wilson. "Mike Nelson." Artforum 46.3 (2007): 368.

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and site-specificity, rather than pursuing the site-specific vector alone (as did Green and Dean). When Charmaine Picard asked him, "Do you want your audience to recognise that they're looking at art?" he answered, "I want them to immerse themselves. One hopes that the work would allow you to forget that you are looking at art. You're in something that feels real, but it's somehow not real."[43]

Triple Bluff Canyon marks the exact point at which it no longer makes (enough) sense to speak of specificity in relation to a site that is itself highly mediated. Standing on the edge of the sandy desert, the woodshed appears as an image, organized within the constraints of a rectangular frame.[44] Nelson states, "As an image on a magazine cover it somehow became more distanced, yet more tangible. I don't know if that sounds odd, but it almost became the reason, the most absurd and banal reason, to rebuild it."[45] Given Smithson's resistance to "the inevitable subsumption of the temporal patterns of the site-specific work beneath those inherent to the technological medium,"[46] this is particularly ironic. Smithson always insisted that non-sites could only be grasped by a combination of references, thus eradicating "the possibility of the earthwork being frozen" by photography.[47] Perhaps that is why the image of the shed, as the sole available reference, made it appear 'more distanced.'

[43] Charmaine Picard. "Mike Nelson Meets Manhattan." The Art Newspaper 183 (2007): 45.
[44] See Lev Manovich. The Language of New Media [Leonardo. Roger F. M. ina and Sean Cubitt, eds.]. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2001. 265.
[45] In Patricia Bickers. 4.
[46] Alex Coles. 130.
[47] Ibid. 131.

The tangibility of the woodshed, however, is not more accessible in Nelson's remake than in the image of Smithson's "original." Walter Benjamin, in his renowned essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, argues that the aura of a unique work of art can only be experienced at a distance: once it is brought closer to the viewer by way of the camera, this aura/distance is destroyed. Many years later Paul Virilio makes a similar argument in "Big Optics," this time in the context of new telecommunication technologies. Whereas the "small optics" shared by human *and* camera vision position objects in human perspective, with clear distinctions of near and far, the "big optics" of electronic transmission erases these distinctions: it travels at the speed of light, making every position accessible from every other position on earth, at least in principle. As Lev Manovich summarizes, "So, if for Benjamin the industrial age displaced every object from its original setting, for Virilio the post-industrial age eliminates the dimension of space altogether."[48] In light of these essays, one could say that Nelson's remake of the *Partially Buried Woodshed* allows viewers to experience a physically remote (and no longer standing!) work of art – in short, to experience telepresence.

Telepresence, however, is endemic to what Virilio calls the "derealization of the terrestrial horizon."[49] Lev Manovich uses the concept of modernization to contextualize Benjamin's and Virilio's discussion in broader terms. He cites Jonathan Crary: "Modernization is the process by which capitalism uproots and makes mobile that which is grounded, clears away or obliterates that which

[48] Lev Manovich. 172.
[49] In Lev Manovich. 172.

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impedes circulation, and make exchangeable what is singular."[50] Reproductions (like Nelson's woodshed) are thus part of "the continual process of turning objects into mobile signs."[51] The sign-value of Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* and its mobility is what Nelson toys with in *Triple Bluff Canyon*, not the idea of an original artwork (Dean) or an authentic site (Green). Moving the anti-war icon into the present political context of the Global War on Terror rekindles the idea of "cracking the central beam" while representing in material form the aridity of the current political climate: unlike mud, sand cannot support life and does not stick together. Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* implied a parallel between the weight of the dirt and the weight of popular opinion, but sand slips through the cracks. It is bedrock already crumbled and at the very end of its cycle, just before dust.

Returning to Benjamin and Virilio, both authors argue that spatial distance – the distance between the subject who is seeing and the object that is seen – is an inherently positive and "necessary ingredient in human culture."[52] As Manovich summarizes,

> For Benjamin and Virilio, distance guaranteed by vision preserves the aura of an object, its position in the world, while the desire "to bring things 'closer'" destroys objects' relations to each other, ultimately obliterating the material order altogether and rendering the notions of distance and space meaningless.[53]

[50] Ibid. 173.
[51] Ibid. 174.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid. 175.

This positive appraisal is in sharp distinction to the widespread tendency to consider distance negatively. Manovich summarizes this attitude succinctly:

> Distance becomes responsible for creating the gap between spectator and spectacle, for separating subject and object, for putting the first in the position of transcendental mastery and rendering the second inert. Distance allows the subject to treat the Other as object; in short, it makes objectification possible.[54]

Many of the issues at stake in this debate are apparent in the crossover of immersion and site-specificity: the negative understanding of distance is used to promote the ideal of sensual proximity on which immersion is premised, while its positive understanding is used to promote the necessity of alienation to critical thought on which site-specificity is premised.

All of these terms bear directly on *Triple Bluff Canyon*: it is a poly-sensorial environment that immerses visitors rather than placing an object before them, yet at the same time it plays with the gap between spectacle and spectator in a way that makes it impossible to reconcile the two: not only can the shed, which is made of wood, not be defined as "the woodshed" until we see it from afar, but also the two experiences are not congruent. For example, if we imaginatively project ourselves inside the shed on the basis of an image and walk around, the floor is in one place, but if we enter Nelson's set from behind, the floor is much lower. This may sound like a minor detail but it creates a significant rift in our understanding of the woodshed. It makes one wonder which is more deceiving,

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[54] Ibid. 174.

the set or the image, relative to Smithson's "original," and thus instates doubt that kinaesthetic involvement is necessarily more "true" than visual analysis.

History, space and subjectivity

Perhaps this discrepancy accounts for Nelson's "odd" observation that the photograph of Smithson's work on the cover of *Arts Magazine* made it more distant yet more tangible: he plays *between* alienation and immersion rather than positing one over the other and thereby casts a double role for visitors as both insiders and outsiders. But how can we begin to describe this in-between space in theoretical rather than practical terms? How does the oscillation that *Triple Bluff Canyon* sets in motion between spectacle and immersion contribute to the political salience of the installation? In order to answer this question it is necessary to consider the remade *Partially Buried Woodshed* within the context of the other two tableaux. When taken as a whole, *Triple Bluff Canyon*'s opened-ended plethora of details begins to coalesce into a more definitive model of the visitor's participation, as well as subjectivity, narrative, history and space in general.

In *Triple Bluff Canyon* the viewer walks in and around three distinct sets. As Ralph Rugoff states, "Like theatre sets at intermission, Nelson's architectural environments are littered with telling clues that conjure unseen actors and histories."[55] In other words, we might imagine the actors on stage but we are not their understudies who follow their lines on the side. Similarly Richard Grayson

[55] Ralph Rugoff. "The Pumpkin Palace." Mike Nelson: Between a Formula and a Code. 36.

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states, "we are no longer direct players in the piece – moving through corridors and spaces as stand-ins for the previous inhabitants seemingly just departed [as in most of Nelson's work.]"[56] He is referring to *24a Orwell Street* but his observation holds for *Triple Bluff Canyon*, as well: despite the fact that the installation requires perambulation, the viewer is never in the position of being able to break the fourth wall of the theatre and partake in the actions that Nelson depicts: there is no cinema beyond the foyer, no invitation to enter the studio, and no way to traverse the sea of sand. As Nelson states, "it kind of forces you to stay outside it."[57]

As such, the dynamic the installation establishes with the viewer is not one of total immersion, nor is it one of calling attention to the functional aspects of a given site. The viewer may be an integral part of the theatrical piece (as Michael Fried bemoaned), but as Rugoff states, "though we may be more than mere 'viewers,' our role in not quite that of fully realized *dramatis personae*. After all, it is up to us to concoct our own speeches."[58]

This responsibility for concocting narrative coherence where there are only disparate fragments is crucial to understanding how narrative functions in *Triple Bluff Canyon* and what kind of model of subjectivity it establishes. Dan Fox describes the installation as follows:

> The artist's twilight zone of methodology folds swathes of references back on themselves. It's a nervous system constantly firing pulses of information – allusions to historical

56 Richard Grayson. 19.
57 In Patricia Bickers. 4.
58 Ralph Rugoff. 38.

moments, nods to literary or cinematic sources – making intertextual leaps of logic with almost the same degree of autistic lucidity as the paranoid Maxwell.[59]

Then he asks, "...what does it mean to be unable to read the references in Nelson's labyrinths...?"[60] As if answering this question, Clare Manchester writes, "Nelson's constructed reality leaves the viewer continually between states, between worlds, between narratives."[61] As Ralph Rugoff suggests, "...they engage us on a kind of narrative treadmill".[62]

Despite this fracturing, however, there is an underlying structure to Nelson's installation that guides the viewer in a particular way. Thereby, it also suggests a particular (precluded) narrative structure, as Adrian Searle observes:

> The entire experience of *Triple Bluff Canyon* has the manner of a quest, with pitfalls (the wrong door), disillusionments (the breakdown and loss of illusion, when we see that the corridor and foyer are but a stage set), traps and beguilements (the lecturer, making us believe in the untrue, as though to frighten and mislead us), and a long dark corridor into the unknown, where we end up at a miserable dead end, with only a very limited view of what might lie beyond. And then, having begun again, the revelation of the desert, a vision as agoraphobic and empty as the earlier spaces were claustrophobic.[63]

Similarly, referring to HP Lovecraft, Nelson states: "Rather than writing a clear narrative or adhering to a linear structure, he runs one story into another, creating an atmosphere that conjures up the sense of a narrative unfolding."[64]

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59 Dan Fox. 1.
60 Ibid. 2.
61 Clare Manchester. 69.
62 Ralph Rugoff. 38.
63 Adrian Searle. 2.
64 In Patricia Bickers. 3.

But this unfolding is only a chimera and the quest is never fulfilled: we end up back in the beginning, literally and figuratively.

Due to this denial of narrative closure – despite its suggestion – the fragments pile up on top of one another rather than following in a line that the viewer can follow in turn. In this description we hear many echoes of the postmodern subject that is fractured and multi-tasked to death. In 1984 Fredric Jameson stated:

> If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but "heaps of fragments" and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory.[65]

In light of this radical heterogeneity, Jameson asserts that the viewer is asked "to rise somehow to the level at which the vivid perception of radical difference is in and of itself a new mode of grasping what used to be called relationship: something for which the word *collage* is still only a very feeble name."[66]

As if following up on Jameson's search for an adequate way in which to understand the postmodern subject, Barbara Maria Stafford states:

> Unlike twentieth-century cut-and- aste collage techniques – juxtaposing recognizable snippets of the world – ...new electronic recombinant media are seamless and endless. Such aggressive repurposings are not about creating physical and spatial adjacency

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[65] Fredric Jameson. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." (1984) Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. 25.
[66] Ibid. 31.

among incongruent bits. Rather, their intent is to procure morphed synchronization across complex multidimensional data.[67]

She then asks: "Has the paradigm of the computational remix, in fact, subtly warped our view of the self as being no different from the customized bit whose meaning derives from the automated link-up?"[68] According to Stafford, the "self" emerges in the process of correlating this unconnected manifold, not by smoothing it over into a cohesive narrative or establishing hierarchical relationships, but rather by assembling the bits "by means of associative jumps and synchronized recurrences."[69]

With the inclusion of the simulated *Partially Buried Woodshed*, Nelson's "collage" does not only conjoin disparate references, it conjoins disparate historical eras. As such, Nelson's articulation of a "deeply stacked strata of experience that cannot always be distilled or conveyed on a flow chart"[70] is equally an articulation of a model of history that cannot be charted. As Ralph Rugoff suggests, Nelson's work is "...testifying to a type of contemporary history that, rather than progressing, appears trapped in a vicious cycle."[71]

What kind of history is this? Rachel Withers writes that "Nelson's self-consciously citational assemblages reference the morphing of historical myths (Maxwell's conspiracy theories, for example) to the point where even the artist's

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[67] Barbara Maria Stafford. "Picturing Uncertainty: From Representation to Mental Representation." Media Art Histories. Oliver Grau, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007. 456.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid. 459.
[70] Dan Fox. 2.
[71] Ralph Rugoff. 37.

own work becomes a recyclable artefact, yet every return is different."[72]

Elsewhere she adds, "For Nelson, one suspects, the reframing of past motifs in present contexts is rather like moving a magnifying glass over a specimen: Focus is gained, lost, and regained – with added insight. ...Present contingencies and the accretions of myth compel adjustments to the picture."[73] In other words, in Nelson's tableaux history is in a constant process of revision as facts or myths from the past are incorporated into the events of today and vice versa. Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed*, for example, is given added political value when repositioned in the context of the Global War on Terror. Similarly, the *Woodshed*'s status as an icon of the moment when the government's involvement in Vietnam collapsed under public pressure is transferred onto today, as if optimistically waiting for a similar turn of events, or at least a turn in public opinion.[74]

The model of history that Nelson presents also departs from Robert Smithson's. "History," Smithson wrote, "is a facsimile of events held together by flimsy biographical information."[75] Nelson's associative links are equally flimsy but, "[w]hile Nelson deftly blends this factual and imaginative material, his work never reiterates the stale idea that history is mere fiction. Instead, its multifarious thematic construction seems designed to accommodate the complexities of a time

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[72] Rachel Withers. "Mike Nelson." 238.
[73] Rachel Withers and Mike Nelson. "A Thousand Words: Mike Nelson Talks about his recent work." Artforum 40.6 (2002): 105.
[74] Nelson quips, "I mean really, how on earth could that man have been voted in again?" (in Charmaine Picard). A few months after writing this chapter "the man" lost the election.
[75] In Brian Wallis. "Excavating the 1970s." Art in America 85.9 (1997): 97.

when all places are interconnected and no history is strictly 'local.'"[76] As such, Nelson expands upon Green's local site-specific ethnography to include disparate connections that update the work for the "globalized" present. This runs counter to Smithson's adherence to the principle of entropy, in which energy slowly drains out of system, leaving only a pile of dirt. As Rachel Withers conjectures, "Though the idea of history as an infinite, Borgesian hall-of-mirrors carries a claustrophobic frisson of its own, on balance it seems a more tempting notion than the [Smithson's] eschatological thesis."[77]

It is on this idea of history as a hall-of-mirrors that Jameson's explanation of postmodern history, space and subjectivity as heterogeneous (and schizophrenic) needs updating for the contemporary: as Vivian Sobchack argues, heterogeneity has by now become so pervasive as to be effectively experienced as homogenous. She states, "Temporality is now constituted and lived paradoxically as a *homogenous experience of discontinuity.*"[78] This transformation of temporality also impacts our understanding of space. As Sobchack explains,

> space becomes correlatively experienced as abstract, ungrounded, and flat – a site (or screen) for play and display rather than an invested situation in which action counts rather than computes. Such a superficial space can no longer precisely hold the interest of the spectator/user but has to constantly stimulate it.[79]

Jonathan Crary makes a similar point regarding the resulting superficial space:

[76] Ralph Rugoff. 37.
[77] Rachel Withers. "Mike Nelson." 238.
[78] Vivian Sobchack. "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic 'Presence.'" Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture. Berkley: U of California P, 2004. 156.
[79] Ibid. 158.

as reproductive technology attains new parameters of mimetic 'fidelity' (holography, high-resolution TV) there is an inverse move of the image toward pure surface, so that whatever drifts across the screen of either television or home computer is part of the same homogeneity.[80]

Both Sobchack and Crary attribute this homogenization to electronic spaces in which "Saturation of color and hyperbolic attention to detail replace depth and texture at the surface of the image ..."[81]

Triple Bluff Canyon manifests this homogenization of spatial and temporal heterogeneity. Time is suspended: narrative fragments pile up but narrative development is precluded. As such, to evoke the longstanding opposition between description and narration, we could say that Nelson emphasizes details, rather than stories. Lev Manovich's analysis of computer-based game-play addresses this emphasis, and he concludes by suggesting that the opposition no longer stands. He writes,

> [W]hile from one point of view, game narratives can be aligned with ancient narratives that are also structured around movement through space, from another perspective they are exact opposites. Movement through space allows the player to progress through the narrative, but it is also valuable in itself. It is a way for the player to explore the environment.[82]

[80] Jonathan Crary. "Eclipse of the Spectacle." 289.
[81] Vivian Sobchack. 158.
[82] Lev Manovich. 247.

When walking through Nelson's installation, as when playing a computer game, the plethora of details on display is akin to the "extent of knowledge"[83] a user can glean about the virtual environment, and thereby bolsters its realism. However, as Crary and Sobchack suggest, this realism is not grounded in temporal or spatial depth.

Manovich's discussion of the "navigable space" of computer games is crucial in this respect, as well: computer space cannot offer the *continuity* that joins objects together in a singular "real" space. Although designed on a Cartesian grid, "What is missing from computer space is space in the sense of medium – an environment in which objects are embedded and the effect of these objects on each other."[84] Rather, as Manovich asserts, it is "aggregate." He writes, "Although new media objects favour the use of space for representations of all kinds, virtual spaces are most often not true spaces but collections of separate objects. Or, to put this in a slogan: There is no space in cyberspace."[85]

Despite this Cartesian grid work, "computer-generated worlds are actually much more haptic and aggregate than optic and systematic."[86] In Manovich's use of these terms he is borrowing from Aloes Riegl, who outlined two ways of understanding space: "Haptic perception isolates the object in the field as a discrete entity, whereas optic perception unifies objects in spatial continuum."[87]

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[83] See Paul Milgram, Haruo Takemura, Akira Utsumi et al. "Augmented Reality: A Class of Displays on the Reality-Virutality Continuum." SPIE [Telemanipulator and Telepresence Technologies] 2351 (1994): 282-92.
[84] Lev Manovich. 255.
[85] Ibid. 253.
[86] Ibid. 254.
[87] Ibid. 253-4.

Note that Manovich asserts a positive valuation of optic perception, with which Jonathan Crary agrees. Summarizing Riegl's distinction, Crary writes:

> For Riegl, a tactile art (or *haptic* art, deriving from the Greek word for "touch") is one in which the world is made present in an eternal, unchanging objective form. His example was ancient Egyptian art, the self-evident tactility of which was posed against the idea of opticality. Optical art, in contrast, incorporates into it the distortions and concealments of light and shadow, the relativization of distance, and above all the subjective experience of the eye itself. Leonardo da Vinci's paintings, with their effects of sfumato, would be a decisive example of work that defined the optical mode: they affirm that vision is not about a grasp of stable and discrete forms, but about a dissolution and blurring of identities, about the nebulous intervals between and among objects.[88]

In the absence of the optical "relativization of distance," computer space becomes "flat" as Sobchack suggests.[89]

A parallel can be drawn with *Triple Bluff Canyon*: moving through the installation is like navigating through a haptic space: it consists of three distinct virtual objects that we can explore in great detail yet the gallery space in which they are constructed falls into emptiness: it is not "programmed" and therefore not "used." As such, "space" in Nelson's installation is more "aggregate" than continuous, and the viewer's body is given little space in the resulting flatness – it is not embedded within a continuum but rather pushed to the surface, forced to

[88] Jonathan Crary. "Robert Irwin and the Condition of Twilight." Robert Lehman Lectures 3. Bettina Funcke and Karen Kelly, eds. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2004. 73.
[89] "Its flatness – a function of its lack of temporal thickness and bodily investment – has to attract spectator interest at the surface." 158.

stay outside, as it were, where it projects *onto* the virtual world on display rather than investing *into* it.[90]

Of this navigable but not inhabitable space, Manovich writes, "It is also an expression and gratification of a psychological desire, a state of being, a subject position — or rather, a subject's trajectory."[91] But how can we connect this trajectory through haptic space (whether in a computer or through an installation) to the widespread idea that the user's/viewer's movement through an artwork is more "active" than their "passive" observation of it, given that according to Riegl, it is *optic* space that allows relationships to be established between one object/subject and another? How is the viewer's trajectory significant in itself, if it is?

If we answer this question with deference to Michel de Certeau (who Manovich claims is the best theoretician of navigable spaces[92]), the viewer's movement through the space of the installation is akin to his or her movement through the city:

> it is a process of *appropriation* of the topographic system by the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and assumes language); it is a spatial *realization* of the site (just as the act of speaking is a sonic realization of language).[93]

In other words, "their trajectories form unforeseeable sentences."[94] According to de Certeau, this is how pedestrians substitute "the technological system of a

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[90] See Jonathan Crary. "Eclipse of the Spectacle." 289.
[91] Lev Manovich. 274.
[92] Ibid. 268.
[93] Michel De Certeau. The Practice of Everyday Life. Trans. Steven Rendall. Berkeley: U of California P, 1984, 1988. 97-8.

coherent, totalizing space" with "a narrative cooked up out of elements drawn from shared sites, an allusive, fragmented tale whose gaps fall into line with the social practices it symbolizes."[95] But there is a catch: linking a selection of unrelated objects, images and references is like writing without conjunctions. As such, given the type of space that *Triple Bluff Canyon* establishes for the viewer – a space that is "more haptic and aggregate than optic and systematic"[96] – it proffers a "spatial sentencing" of an "elliptical" kind "made up of gaps, slips and allusions."[97]

In light of this lack of grammatical coherence, the viewer's trajectory through *Triple Bluff Canyon* can be thought of as analogous to navigating through digital hyperlinks. As Marie-Laure Ryan states (drawing on Arthur Kroker), "the hypertextual imagination" – "fascination with the discontinuous, the analogical jump, the chance encounter of heterogeneous elements, and the poetic sparkles caused by their collision" – is a major force in contemporary culture.[98] "Like Baudelaire's flâneur, the virtual flâneur is happiest on the move, clicking from one object to another, traversing room after room, level after level, data volume after data volume."[99] For better or worse, most computer sites are so overwhelmed with navigational options that only the most persistent user will be

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[94] Ibid. xviii.
[95] Michel De Certeau. "Practices of Space." On Signs. Marshall Blonsky, ed. Baltimore: John Hopkins U P, 1985. 137.
[96] Lev Manovich. 253.
[97] Michel De Certeau. "Practices of Space." 137.
[98] Marie-Laure Ryan. Narratives as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 2001. 353.
[99] Lev Manovich. 274.

able to grasp the logistics of its (limiting) code — just as the viewer is unable to tie together all the loose ends in *Triple Bluff Canyon*.

As such, due to the weak syntax and discontinuities of the viewer's trajectory through the installation, Nelson demonstrates that our navigation through the aggregate spaces in which we spend more and more of our time are more like the autistic leaps of logic Dan Fox refers to than coherent narratives. But does this "autism" differ from the model of culture as schizophrenic? Jameson wrote,

> When that relationship [between signifier and signified] breaks down, when the links of the signifying chain snap, then we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers. ...the schizophrenic is reduced to an experience of pure material signifiers, or, in other words, a series of pure and unrelated presents in time. ...[T]hat present suddenly engulfs the subject with undescribable vividness, a materiality of perception properly overwhelming, which effectively dramatizes the power of the material — or better still, the literal — signifier in isolation.[100]

Jameson describes how these "unrelated presents" *penetrate* the schizophrenic due to his/her inability to correlate them with their respective signifieds. He makes it clear, however, that this is not a diagnosis of postmodern culture as somehow pathological, but that the linguistic malfunctioning particular to schizophrenia can function as a useful aesthetic (rather than clinical) model for understanding the implications of the cultural tendency to emphasize "pure and unrelated" experiences.

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[100] Fredric Jameson. 26-7.

If we use autism as an aesthetic model instead, we see that there is likewise a breakdown in signification: the relationship between one signifier and another is obscured, so to speak, rather than the signified to which it refers. Barbara Maria Stafford explains that the autistic can easily memorize discrete facts but has difficulty in binding these particulars into a coherent concept.[101] "In short," she states, "this want of cross-cortical cooperation looks a lot like an *extreme* form of nonnarrative experience."[102] Due to the absence of "the binding drive that connects the topographically distributed sensorial packets in our cognitive field into linked association," it is as if the autistic "sees the world pixelated or "parceled."[103] According to Stafford, the autistic lacks the process "of compacting the heterogeneous and the anomalous into the coherent."[104] Furthermore, given that "the *story* of the self" emerges from "the ordered integration of many and varied sensory elements into a subjective experience,"[105] the autistic "self" is more "episodic" than narrative.

According to Stafford, understanding this "episodic self" "is essential for dealing intelligently with the discretely autonomous as well as the coalescent aspects of our polymodal information age."[106] Like Jameson, she is not suggesting that culture is pathological, but rather that an understanding of autism allows for a better understanding of the "uncertainty and instability of self-consciousness"[107] that is common to all human minds but has previously been overlooked. Art

[101] Barbara Maria Stafford. 457.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid. 465.
[105] Ibid. 457.
[106] Ibid. 465.
[107] Ibid. 453.

history, as well, has overlooked "episodic" authors and "patchy" artists.[108] Art has been primarily concerned with the "compacting" process, with "unifying the manifold into a coherent image," with *illusionism*, and the postmodern analogy of the schizophrenic continued this tradition despite its emphasis on subjective fracturing. But how does the analogy of the autistic serve to elucidate contemporary art? What are the ideological effects of this (new) model?

To close this section, I would like to read this model across Michel de Certeau's conception of "spatial sentencing" discussed earlier. According to de Certeau, the pedestrian's negotiation of strategic space through the lens of personal associations is a "tactic" by which the "weak make use of the strong."[109] A similar tactic that is also relevant to *Triple Bluff Canyon* is the consumer's navigation through the sea of goods and services that constantly beckon our attention. De Certeau writes,

> It [the tactic] must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into "opportunities." The weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them. This is achieved in the propitious moments when they are able to combine heterogeneous elements (thus, in a supermarket, the housewife confronts heterogeneous and mobile data – what she has in the refrigerator, the tastes, appetites, and moods of her guests, the best buys and their possible combinations with what she already has on hand at home, etc.); the intellectual synthesis of these given elements takes the form, however, not of a

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[108] Ibid.
[109] Michel De Certeau. The Practice of Everyday Life. xvii.

discourse, but of the decision itself, the act and manner in which the opportunity is "seized."[110]

The clincher is that, with autistic logic, the products on the supermarket shelf are more likely to be stacked into a precarious tower than "synthesized" into a meal, for it is precisely the ability to combine the heterogeneity that is lacking. As such, if we think of the episodic self as a contemporary model of culture, we would be relinquishing the idea that our personal trajectories and phrasings form "tactics" by which we can bend "strategies" to our own ends. Instead, they remain just that: personal trajectories and phrasings.

Gregor Schneider: Weisse Folter

(Figures 22-37)

Gregor Schneider continuously transforms his house on Unterheydener Strasse in his home city, Rheydt, Germany, into a labyrinth of uncanny spaces: a "coffee room" that slowly revolves and a tiny windowless "guest room" with a dirty mattress thrown on the ground, for example. As Philip Auslander describes it, *Haus Ur* (1985-) is "an architectural representation of a psyche so turned in on itself that the journey into it leads to dead ends, hazards, and conundrums like windows that open only onto other windows and rooms bathed in light that

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[110] Ibid. xix.

appears natural but is actually artificial."[111] The visitor goes "through certain rooms only to come unexpectedly upon more rooms tucked into the body of the house, amorphous and organic in its depths and defying comprehension."[112] Gregor Schneider himself states, "of course I can't know what will happen. Someone might open the wrong door at the wrong moment and plunge into an abyss."[113]

When Schneider moved "this gigantic and obsessive total art work"[114] into the German Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2001, his reputation in the art world as "a specialist for rooms and their effects"[115] was cemented. *Totes Haus Ur* ("dead" *Haus Ur*), which was awarded the Golden Lion, entirely invaded the neo-classical, fascist architecture of the pavilion with the inglorious architecture and broken morale of post-war gloom. As Ulrich Loock states, "Thus he takes over and affirms an existing building, constantly seeking to make a connection with what it is not, with an uncanny deeper level that fundamentally questions the existential possibility of dwelling, of finding refuge in a house."[116] After the ravages of the Second World War, "dwelling" and its impossibility was a major cultural and philosophical theme: modern man was considered to be perpetually alienated and essentially homeless.

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[111] Philip Auslander. "Behind the Scenes: Gregor Schneider's Totes Haus Ur." PAJ 75 (2003): 86.
[112] Ulrich Loock "The Dead House UR." Parkett 63 (2001): 141.
[113] In Ibid. 143.
[114] Jens Hoffmann. "Gregor Schneider." Flash Art (Jan.-Feb. 2001): 107.
[115] Jan Thorn-Prikker. "Gregor Schneider: When Violence Takes the Form of a Room." Goethe-Institut: http://www.goethe.de/kue/bku/thm/en2192661.htm
[116] Ulrich Loock. 138.

Already in these two works, some of the issues that I want to explore by looking at Schneider's more recent work are apparent: What does it mean to show the dark underbelly of modern domestic "bliss" and architectural "transparency" and bring to light the "uncanny deeper level"? And what is gained by subjecting the visitor to strong, uncomfortable physical stimuli? Allegedly "the artist himself is not entirely sure whether he is building a refuge or a prison, whether his activities will lead to isolation or to liberation."[117] Although normally considered to be polar opposites, Schneider demonstrates that there is only a thin line between them, a line which can easily be crossed.

These questions accrue even greater urgency in relation to Schneider's *Weisse Folter* (2007) at the K21 Kunstsammlung in Düsseldorf. Here he constructed an actual prison – the American Camp V in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba – which is known to most of the world only through media images. In this installation, the oscillation between depth and surface that Nelson sets in motion leans to the side of sensual engulfment: space is rendered more continuous than aggregate, and the viewer is more akin to an explorer of an unknown frontier than a hyperlinked flâneur. Furthermore, just as Nelson fills the Victorian front room with the most un-Victorian of figures (the *bricoleur* and the conspiracy theorist), Schneider changes the museum – symbol and upholder of "civil" society – into the least humane of places: "Weisse Folter" means *white torture*, that is, torture that leaves no lasting mark on the body, such as extended isolation, extreme sensory deprivation, and shame. Each of these points need elaboration in order to

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[117] Renate Puvogel "Negative Spatial Sculpture." <u>Parkett</u> 63 (2001): 129.

approach the most pressing question: how does this installation relate to the political crises and the all-too-real reality of torture that it takes as its aesthetic and conceptual source?

The viewer enters the installation by descending to the cellar level of the museum, passing through a metal door, and then immediately through a second door. The only evidence that distinguishes the installation from the museum architecture is the staff member who kindly asks if you are familiar with Schneider's work, so as to offer a subtle warning. Otherwise, there is no indication: "the museum and prison building are indistinguishable from each other."[118] As Jan Thorn-Prikker states: "One does not have the feeling of entering a model, but rather of being shunted through a real prison, although one in fact knows better and is holding one's entry ticket in one's hand, after all."[119]

The entry ticket, however, does not seem to suffice to keep the waves of immersion at bay once within *Weisse Folter*: viewers report intense fear and disorientation. Crossing the second threshold we enter a hallway, with heavy, dark-red sliding doors to the left and right. With trial and error, some open, some do not. Inside are small cells, with a raised platform for a bed and a small metal toilet and basin in the corner. The walls are pristine white and everything is brightly lit, but there are no windows: just blind slits in the thick outer wall. There is not the slightest trace of human occupancy to be found.

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[118] Jan Thorn-Prikker.
[119] Ibid.

One of these doors leads to a second corridor as bright as the first and also with sliding doors – white not red – to the left and right. Already the architectural layout begins to evade the perambulatory viewer. Here one of the doors opens into a pitch black, sound-proofed room sealed off from all glimmers of light; there is not even an emergency exit sign. The viewer is left to grope in the dark. Thorn-Prikker describes his experience as follows: "One cannot enter this room without an immediate feeling of anxiety. One feels one's way along the wall like an insect, in the hope of finding an exit. At the same time one struggles against panic attacks in the hope of regaining some orientation. There are two exits, but these again only lead to further passage-ways. More rooms containing more horrors align them."[120]

One of these passage-ways is identical to the first, yet noticeably different for the fact that the doors open into different types of cells: one has a green chain-mesh door that cannot be opened – a "cage for human beings;"[121] another is triangular in shape, with a one-way mirror at its apex for an unseen eye to observe its occupant from the other side of the divide. Penetrating further into the prison, we come across another room lined in shiny metal, which is dramatically over-heated by a powerful light source. If you want to turn around to avoid this discomfort, too bad: the doors only open one-way. The viewer is forced to enter a dark room chilled to nearly freezing – a cold-storage area complete with hanging plastic sheets to help seal off the space. Again, we cannot turn around.

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[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.

Eventually the labyrinth opens onto a large space, which appears like a ceremonial hall compared to the severe restrictions of the other spaces. But this hall is as accommodating as a steel barn, with corrugated sheet metal walls and concrete flooring. It is not a place to stay but a place where – if coming from the outside – the viewer's status changes to livestock. As Thorn-Prikker states, "It is like a garage where human beings are handed over or taken away."[122] The heavy metal door is fortunately unlocked: it "expels the visitor out into the open space outside the building."[123] Here, Dominic Eichler observed a "sharply dressed young man [who] looked palpably relieved as he gathered his wits outside by the lake."[124] This garden and the infinitely more coherent architecture of the museum provide the counterpoint to Schneider's prison: *Weisse Folter* itself is conceived without an exterior.

Spatial practice

No wonder Icarus risked his neck trying to fly away on makeshift wings: a bird's-eye view would help make the experience of traversing this labyrinth more digestible. As Michel de Certeau writes, "The person who ascends to that height leaves behind the mass that takes and incorporates into itself any sense of being either an author or spectator."[125] *Weisse Folter*'s absence of legible form – made all the more glaring in contrast to the clinical hyper-rationality of the individual rooms and the museum's relatively transparent architecture – precludes the

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[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Dominic Eichler. "Gregor Schneider: K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen. Frieze Magazine. http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/gregor_schneider
[125] Michel De Certeau. "Practices of Space." 123.

possibility of making sense of the space, thus pushing the sensations even deeper into the body. This is Schneider's *forte*: to keep the mind's organizational power at bay long enough for impressions to bore their way into the psyche rather than being presented to it in intelligible form. As one critic states, "his work is a speculation on perception without recognitions."[126]

De Certeau, however, interprets Icarus's flight negatively. He states:

> Can the vast texturology beneath our gaze be anything but a representation? An optical artefact. The analogue to the facsimile which, through a kind of distancing, produces the space planner, the city planner or the map-maker. The city-panorama is a 'theoretical' (i.e. visual) simulacrum: in short, a picture, of which the preconditions for feasibility are forgetfulness and a misunderstanding of processes.[127]

The analogy de Certeau draws between vision and distance clearly runs counter to Benjamin's and Virilio's positive evaluation of these same terms. Furthermore, he equates them with pictorial representation and spectacle – with surface and simulacra – rather than with depth and actuality, the "mass" as he calls it.

If we consider *Weisse Folter* from De Certeau's perspective – from "the threshold where visibility ends"[128] – then our descent into Schneider's labyrinth reflects "another spatiality." He describes it as follows:

> Eluding the imaginary totalizations of the eye, there is a strangeness in the commonplace that creates no surface, or whose surface is only an advanced limit, an edge cut out of the

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126 Ulrich Loock. 148.
127 Michel De Certeau. "Practices of Space." 124.
128 Ibid.

visible. In this totality, I should like to indicate the processes that are foreign to the 'geometric' or 'geographic' space of visual, panoptic or theoretical constructions.[129]

It is easy to argue that *Weisse Folter* allows for this sense of strangeness and foreignness to reign: despite its clear lines, the architecture of this prison is unmappable; the eye is rendered inutile as we grope our way in the dark or pull and push on the doors in hopes that they open; and the "surface" of the media representations of Guantanamo Bay – which are as flat in form and content as the US government can make possible – is rendered as an immersive depth. Here the viewer is not offered a panoptic view but is, rather, confronted by profound opacity.

Aesthetic vocabulary

However, despite the viability of this line of interpretation, I think it is equally important to look (yes, *look*) at all the ways in which Schneider's installation plays between such conceptual pairings as surface/depth, optic/haptic, light/dark, and geometric/amorphous rather than asserting the primacy of one over the other. Unlike Claire Bishop, who claims that the history of installation art must be structured "not on theme or materials, but on the viewer's *experience*"[130] – thereby shifting attention away from formal analysis and toward subjective testimonials – I would like to assert that "materials," or, more generally, the artwork's form, is crucial to consider if we want to understand how the artwork functions as a set of (irresolvable) propositions. As Mieke Bal argues, an art

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129 Ibid.
130 Claire Bishop. Installation Art: A Critical History. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. 8.

object is a "theoretical object" in its own right. In order to discern the theoretical propositions that *Weisse Folter* asserts, we need to look at what it sets before us in the visual field and the explicit references it makes to previous art movements and artists, specifically Minimalism and Bruce Nauman.

Minimalism is relevant to *Weisse Folter* not only because it shifted the attention off of discrete objects and on to the experiential space of the viewer, as Fried complained, but also because of its "minimal" visual vocabulary: shiny metal surfaces of various colours, clean geometric shapes, serial repetition of forms, and standard manufacturing materials devoid of overt signs of authorship. As Clement Greenberg states disparagingly, "Minimalist works are readable as art, as almost anything is today — including a door, a table, or a blank sheet of paper."[131] Artists such as Donald Judd, Carl Andre and Dan Flavin chose to work in this style partially due to the universal, transhistorical values attributed to such forms and materials at the beginning of the 1960s. Of course this appears naïve in hindsight, and, as the easy cooption of minimalist forms by corporate powers demonstrates, fatally flawed. Anna C. Chave has gone farther than any other critic in arguing for the latent aggression that Minimalism exerts upon the viewer. She writes, "With closer scrutiny... the blank face of Minimalism may come into focus as the face of capital, the face of authority, the face of the father."[132]

In this (anachronistic) light, the visual analogy between Minimalism and *Weisse Folter* is the perfect summary to Chave's accounting: "Minimalism... might well

[131] Hal Foster. "The Crux of Minimalism." Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art: 1945-1986. Kate, Linker, Donald Kuspit et al. Howard Singerman, ed. New York: Abbeville P, 1986. 163.
[132] Chave, Anna C. "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power." Arts Magazine (Jan. 1990): 51.

be described as perpetuating a kind of cultural terrorism, forcing viewers into the role of victim."[133] On a less dramatic note, Zöe Brant observes, "We have all been in warehouses or storerooms with exposed metal beams, concrete floors, and florescent lighting, where our footsteps echo and the atmosphere is one of cold, hard industry."[134] Part of Schneider's power is to make these common, "mundane spaces seem sinister and foreboding,"[135] thus unleashing their latent aggression. Gerd Blum describes *Weisse Folter* as follows:

> One is pushed back onto oneself, onto one's own body. No contact, no objects in the room, generate this feeling of utter shapelessness. This feeling, produced by the arrangement of the rooms, correlates with the meaning of the rightless space of Guantanamo: the inmate is degraded to the body, in contrast to a person with their rights.[136]

In this light is seems that Minimalism's insistence on embodied experience in the effort of demonstrating greater social contingency and responsibility has backfired: its aesthetic vocabulary now functions as a means of degradation, coercion – and torture.

It is due to this alleged violence against the viewer that it is necessary to specify more precisely the relationship that *Weisse Folter* establishes with those who walk its halls. In this regard, Bruce Nauman's "corridor" works, which occupy a

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[133] Ibid. 49.
[134] Zöe Brant. "Gregor Schneider's Süßer Duft at La Maison Rouge." Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art. http://whitehotmagazine.com/whitehot_articles.cfm?id=1191. 2.
[135] Ibid. 4.
[136] Blum, Gerd. "Gregor Schneider, Weisse Folter, K21 Kunstsammlung." Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg [course handout], 2008. www.offermanns-galerie.de/ftp/HandoutWeisseFolter.pdf. 3. My translation. (Man ist auf sich selbst, auf den eigenen Körper zurückgewiesen. Kein Kontakt, keine Gegenstände im Raum erzeugen das Gefühl des Null-Zustands. Dieses durch de Gestaltung der Räume erzeugte Gefühl korreliert mit dem Inhalt des rechtslosen Raumes des Guantanamo: der Insasse wird zum Körper degradiert, in Gegensatz zu einer Person mit ihren Rechten.)

pivotal position between Minimalism and what we now call installation art, provide a more apt comparison. Take his closed-circuit installation *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1970) as it was described by Dieter Daniels in the previous chapter, for example, which Dieter Daniels argues makes of the viewer a guinea pig rather than a creative co-player.[137] In *Weisse Folter* the viewer has a similar difficulty of ascertaining her position relative to the installation, her movements are controlled, and she has the feeling of being simultaneously isolated and watched. Regarding Schneider's work, one reviewer states, "From the very beginning, Schneider tests the limits of his viewers, forcing them to experience feelings and situations that many consider uncomfortable."[138] Another is "annoyed at being so manipulated."[139] The words "force" and "manipulation" indicate a drastic shift from Minimalism's "relation" with the viewer (and other "participatory" art movements in the 1960s) to a dynamic between cat and mouse, where the viewer is batted around to make a point.

Referring to Gregor Schneider's 2008 work *Süsser Duft* at La Maison Rouge, which contains several similar features such as a hot room, a cold room, a bright room and a dark room, Zöe Brant writes,

> what is remarkable about Schneider's work... is the way that Schneider, unpresent, of course, is able to control his visitors within his domain -- everything from their path

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[137] See Dieter Daniels. "Strategies of Interactivity." Trans. Tom Morrison. Media Art Net. http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/source-text/65/
[138] Zöe Brant. 1.
[139] Dominic Eichler.

(...[by] preventing any back tracking) to their bodily systems (one room is so hot that I began to feel faint in my winter jacket), and most significantly, their emotions.[140]

Referring to *Weisse Folter*, a blogger states,

> Powerlessness and inhumanity are the message of *Weisse Folter* — just as prisoners are completely at the mercy of the guards and bureaucrats who control what they experience, museum visitors are, for a short while at least, completely at the mercy of Gregor Schneider, an absent but all powerful god.[141]

As these two statements make clear, visitors to *Weisse Folter* are more like Schneider's guinea pigs than equal participants, yet the distinction between feeling a little faint and the utter mercilessness of the actual prisons needs to be maintained.

Architecture

But the coercion is not limited to the domain of the physical. As Renate Puvogel states, Schneider's installations are "designed so that visitors will sense subtle changes in their own behaviour without being able to recognize their cause."[142] This *internalization* of the coercion sets off alarm bells: it marks the shift from power to bio-power that Michel Foucault analyzed so thoroughly. Following Foucault, it is possible to see the mechanics of this shift in architectural form, especially prisons and other state institutions, such as hospitals. Most famous is

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[140] Zöe Brant. 2.
[141] Andrew Hammel. "Gregor Schneider's Weisse Folter." German Joys. (July 9, 2007): http://andrewhammel.typepad.com/german_joys/2007/07/gregor-schneide.html
[142] Renate Puvogel. 124.

his description of Bentham's panopticon, in which the prisoners internalize the all-seeing eye of power and self-survey their own behaviour.[143]

However, as Michel de Certeau remarks, "One *inhabits* only haunted sites – the opposite of what is set forth in the *Panopticon*."[144] A close look at the architecture of *Weisse Folter* reveals the ways in which it purposefully confuses two architectural principles as they are defined by Anthony Vidler: *light space* – "that paradigm of total control championed by Jeremy Bentham and recuperated under the guise of 'hygienic space' by modernists led by Le Corbusier" – and *dark space* – the initial fear of "'darkened spaces, of the pall of gloom which prevents the full visibility of things, men and truths'" on which the transparent spatial paradigm is based.[145] As Vidler states, Foucault's "insistence on the operation of power through *transparency*, the panoptic principle, resists exploration of the extent to which the pairing of transparency and obscurity is essential for power to operate."[146]

The residual and constitutional presence of dark space within the light is precisely what Gregor Schneider demonstrates and exploits through his architectural collusion of the panopticon with obscure, intrauterine and literally dark spaces. This collusion is apparent in the following blogger's description:

> Like a medieval hilltop fortress, the installation is filled with strange twists, dead-ends, and doors that lead nowhere. The featureless uniformity of the space offers no clues; you

[143] Michel Foucault. Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison. (1977) Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. 195-228.
[144] Michel De Certeau. "Practices of Space." 143.
[145] Anthony Vidler. 168.
[146] Ibid. 172.

sometimes believe you have backtracked to a part of the installation you thought you had escaped, until you notice a subtle change...[147]

The medieval "dark" ages was precisely what the Enlightenment sought to eradicate, yet as Vidler explains, the "fantasy-world of stone walls, darkness, hideouts and dungeons" featured prominently in the late eighteenth century imagination. Fortresses (and the prisons at Guantanamo) make their assertion of power overt despite their opacity – one is subject to the King's (or the States') authority. So too is the viewer subject to "the mercy of Gregor Schneider" in his labyrinthine passages. The "featureless uniformity" of Schneider's prison, by way of the "blankness" previously discussed, also suggests that one is subject to "society's steeliest face; the impersonal face of technology, industry, and commerce; the unyielding face of the father."[148]

Critics of Schneider's previous works have expressed this dark hell well. Speaking of his exhibition *26.11.2006* at the Morra Greco Foundation, Filipo Romeo writes: "You felt as if you were in the bowels of the earth, far from the world of the living."[149] Speaking of the *Totes Haus Ur*, Renate Puvogel writes: "[W]ith no way of understanding the layout, one feels as though sucked deeper and deeper into a vortex..."[150] Also speaking of *Totes Haus Ur*, Ulrich Loock writes, "Gregor Schneider takes the visitor with him into an interstice between the abyss and banality, pointing to the uncanny foundations of domestic living and thereby

[147] Andrew Hammel.
[148] Anna C. Chave. 55.
[149] Romeo, Filippo. "Gregor Schneider." Artforum (May 2007): 386.
[150] Renate Puvogel. 129.

raising the possibility of a way of dealing with this unfathomable element that shatters any existential stability."[151]

Ask yourself a simple question: if given the choice, would you prefer to stay in Schneider's pitch-black sound-proofed room or in the interrogation room under the eye of the one-way mirror? My guess is, neither, which reveals the potential for both light and dark space to participate in white torture. Furthermore, following Anthony Vidler's argument, *Weisse Folter* appears to be the perfect manifestation of the inherent "darkness" within "light" space, and as such, it expresses a return of the repressed. On this point Hal Foster asks, "What are the social effects when artistic forms and cultural institutions are desublimated...? It's not always a liberatory event: it can also open up those spheres to a depoliticized rechanneling of desire by 'the culture industry'."[152] Whether *Weisse Folter* participates in this "rechanneling" or whether it succeeds in liberating the repressed is – unfortunately – a question that begs its own answer: gallery-goers can indulge in the momentary sensation of repression precisely because their life is lived far from the fortified walls of Guantanamo.

The "dark" and "uncanny" is "located on the other side of familiar places: as the unfathomable basis of the latter it is the place where one cannot be," writes Ulrich Loock of Schneider's work.[153] The reason "one cannot be there" is because this "there" obscures all spatial limits and thus breaks the parameters of the individual "self" along with it. As such, we can understand *Weisse Folter* as

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[151] Ulrich Loock. 149.
[152] In Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois et al. "Roundtable: The Predicament of Contemporary Art." Art Since 1900. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004. 672.
[153] Ulrich Loock. 153.

indulging in the current academic fashion of celebrating the subject's dissolution. As Hal Foster explains, "for many of us 'autonomy' is a bad word – a ruse in aesthetic discourse, a deception in ego psychology, and so on. We forget that autonomy is a diacritical term like any other, defined in relation to its opposite, that is, to subjection."[154] Considering that detainees in Guantanamo have had all the legal rights that are associated with autonomous subjectivity forcefully removed, Schneider's installation is not without irony: we can only assume that he is complicit with the theoretical and experiential dissolution of subjectivity for the sake of critique of the torture that dissolves it literally.

Hal Foster discusses such "immersive experiences of post-cinematic delirium in which representation and space, media and body, are no longer felt to be distinct."[155] He states that

> you're somehow lost in relation to your body, and you stumble not only into the work but through it as well. It's an effect, beyond distraction, of disorientation, of being lost in space, and one has to wonder about its ideological effects – that is, beyond its sheer aestheticism, which is what attracts people, for again it gives the rush of media intensity with the surplus value of art.[156]

This general description is equally apt for *Weisse Folter*: stumbling is the mode of exploring its hallways, sometimes literally groping in the dark; the sound- and light-proofed room render the ways in which we habitually orient ourselves –

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[154] Hal Foster in conversation with Marquard Smith. "Polemics, Postmodernism, Immersion, Militarized Space." Journal of Visual Culture 3.3 (2004): 325.
[155] Hal Foster. "Double Exposure." Artforum (Dec. 2005). http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_4_44/ai_n27862387. 2.
[156] Hal Foster in conversation with Marquard Smith. 329.

through hearing and sight – inoperative; and it explicitly plays off the media intensity surrounding Guantanamo Bay within an artistic context.

So what are its ideological effects? Tellingly, someone emailed Schneider and told him that his artworks were "degenerate." Indeed, the homology between subject and space is perhaps nowhere more tightly conceived than in the "pure" neo-classical forms of the Nazi "civilization." Subtly approaching this topic, Dave Beech writes (of *Family Schneider*, 2004), "its bleakness plants his work in a world of real contradictions, not sublimated out of contention by aesthetics."[157] However, this knee-jerk assumption that aesthetics is always on the side of a repressive power or the coercive "culture industry" is clearly in error. As both *Weisse Folter* and *Triple Bluff Canyon* make explicit, aesthetics can unleash the suggestive, emotive and political power contained in the repressed.

That being said, however, the question still hangs: what are its ideological effects? Claire Bishop suggests that "the idea of instinctual renunciation is key to the experience of mimetic engulfment structured for the viewer [by such all-encompassing installations]."[158] Like Caillois' insect mimicking its surroundings, viewers surrender their distinction from the surrounding environment, thereby "decentring" themselves. In brief, according to Bishop, the effects of immersive installations are renunciation, withdrawal, non-reflexivity, and being out of time, precisely the effects that site-specificity sought to remedy by grounding the viewer both spatially and temporally. With Freud and the uncanny already on the

[157] Dave Beech. "Gregor Schneider." <u>Art Monthly</u> 282 (Dec.-Jan. 2004-05): 28.
[158] Claire Bishop. 84.

table, it not a great leap to associate these effects with the "death drive," which Bishop summarizes as "an instinct of libidinal retreat... a desire to return to our primary biological condition as inanimate objects."[159]

The conceptual alignment of immersion with the regressive desire to return to a pre-symbolic union with "nature" has already been discussed; the twist added by *Weisse Folter* is the state of terror – rather than bliss – that such dissolution can solicit when it leaves the realm of wishful-thinking and becomes physically actualized. Zöe Brant describes these emotions more specifically: "Schneider aims to inflict upon visitors pure, unabashed emotion; emotion that the average viewer experiences only occasionally; emotion that is rife with anxiety, fear, panic, and at the end, relief."[160] This is not to suggest that every visitor experiences *Weisse Folter* according to Schneider's alleged intent; it is only to say that a negative emotional response seems to be the desired response, more so than the gratification of "penetrating" a virtual world, to recall AR Stone's choice of verb.

"Issues"

As such, Schneider's work exemplifies a second major trend: as Nicolas de Oliveira argues, subjective experience is what characterizes contemporary art, rather than addressing issues. But are we satisfied with this intensification of the personal at the expense of the discursive? As Jan Thorn-Prikker remarks,

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[159] Ibid.
[160] Zöe Brant. 3.

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> The fact that Schneider abstains from making any political references to his rooms only serves to heighten their effect. There are no accusations here. Here, all that is shown is what can be done. ...What he shows in Düsseldorf is the produceability of desperation.[161]

This suggests that the only predictable response is emotional, whereas political responses will vary widely. As Blum states, "The political statement of the work is left to the interpretation of the viewer."[162] *Weisse Folter* may be "quite enough to give one an idea of how hells can be made,"[163] but how does this generalized emotion relate to the very specific political reality of Guantanamo? Are we left with an extreme relativism on the level of the political?

Probing this question, Dominic Eichler asks, "Was Schneider's intention to dent the barrier that prevents people (himself included, presumably) who haven't experienced such deplorable places and practices from empathizing with those who have?"[164] It may be tempting to answer positively to this question; however, if/when keeping an eye on the art object, it is hard to imagine empathy as its *modus operandi*: no where in these prison cells is there the slightest hint of human occupancy. Nor is it that the guards and inmates have "just left," like the personae of Nelson's tableaux: they never walked these halls in the first place. This point, I think, is crucial: empathy cannot cross the boundary that separates life from death. If there is a human presence to empathize with in the halls of *Weisse Folter*, it is that of a ghost from which all humanity has been methodically extracted. Given that white torture breaks the individual's sense of "self," not

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[161] Jan Thorn-Prikker.
[162] Gerd Blum. 3. My translation. (Die politische Aussage des Werks ist der Auslegung des Betrachters überlassen.)
[163] Jan Thorn-Prikker.
[164] Dominic Eichler. 1.

their body, this is not as far-fetched as it might sound: inmates can be literally living *and* dead. Perhaps we need to rephrase the question of empathy: how do its *limits*, which are so palpable in *Weisse Folter*, speak to the politics of incarceration?

It seems to me that Schneider structures a political response as well as an emotional response, which becomes evident in his deployment of form (rather than in his suggested content, if we can temporally separate the two for the sake of analysis). This is evident in three related aspects: *Weisse Folter*'s context within the gallery, its status as a simulacrum, and its negotiation between two- and three-dimensional representations.

Institutional Critique

As mentioned before, when one descends to the basement level of the museum, one enters *Weisse Folter* almost directly – almost. Although convention may dictate that we suspend our disbelief in order to enter the imaginary realm of an artwork, we are nevertheless aware of our secure location within the museum. These two spaces – the artwork's and the museum's – coexist, nestled one within the other, just as the museum is nestled within Düsseldorf, within Germany, within continental Europe, within Western culture. The fact that the prison is "inside" the gallery cannot be overlooked, and Schneider draws particular attention to it by making viewers leave by an emergency exit, thereby making them reorient themselves in relation to the museum.

Museums (according to Dave Hickey) are also "therapeutic institutions,"[165] instruments of the state that have for their intent the governance of a populace, not its freedom. Like any effective ideology, they work discretely and disavow their own heart of darkness: the construction of the "good" citizen necessitates the construction of its "bad" opposite – the terrorist, the anarchist and the revolutionary. The enlightened individual who joins the *sensus communis* through his contemplation of art finds his home upstairs in the gallery, whereas downstairs in the hidden depths of the cellar his repressed "other" is alienated from the *communis* and spit out into the street. Luckily viewers are allowed back in, if need be, to retrieve their coats and use the facilities – and reclaim their position in society.

This path of movement that Schneider establishes – in the front door, out the back – emphasizes the architectural frame of the museum. Schneider also emphasizes the ideology of the "white cube" by echoing it in the white cells of *Weisse Folter*. As Blum states, "The uncanniness and mysteriousness of this work counts for the penal system as well as the art system."[166] This analogy makes Brian O'Doherty's famous words ring in a different key:

> Unshadowed, white, clean, artificial – the space is devoted to the technology of esthetics. Works of art are mounted, hung, scattered for study. Their ungrubby surfaces are untouched by time and its vicissitudes. Art exists in a kind of eternity of display, and

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[165] Dave Hickey. The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty. Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993.
[166] Gerd Blum. 3. My translation. (Das unheimliche, geheimnisvolle in diesem Werk gilt sowohl dem Straf- als auch dem Kunstsystem.)

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> though there is lots of "period" (late modern), there is no time. This eternity gives the
> gallery a limbolike status; one has to have died already to be there.[167]

As we know, there is no time in Guantanamo, just the period marked by the Global War on Terror, and the detainees are held in a limbolike status, literally suspended between life and death. *Weisse Folter* is also unshadowed, white, clean and artificial and devoted to a particular technology of aesthetics – that of alternating sensory overload and deprivation.

But while O'Doherty asserts that "The space offers the thought that while eyes and minds are welcome, space occupying bodies are not,"[168] *Weisse Folter* welcomes (if we can call it that) the body and not the eyes or mind. Therefore, we could easily say that Schneider participates in the "return of the repressed," and it is true to some extent – the body with all its uncanny contours is brought home to the museum, so to speak. But it is equally true to say that Schneider's intense emphasis on the body divides it from the mind yet again, this time to make a political point: *the mind cannot survive in a place like this.*

Facsimile

Richard Frances asks, "So what to make of this faultlessly persuasive and blatantly gimcrack illusion? How to parse an undeniably physical reality that both mimes and vitiates realism?"[169] So far I have discussed *Weisse Folter* as we experience it in the basement of K21. I have gone along with its premise of

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[167] Brian O'Doherty. Inside the White Cube. Intro. Thomas McEvilley. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999. 15.
[168] Ibid.
[169] Richard Frances. "Gregor Schneider." Artforum (Feb. 2004): 148.

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immersion – to participate in the virtual world as though it were real – in order to figure out what is at stake in the construction of this world. In this light, Schneider has built the equivalent of a roller-coaster: fear is packaged and sold as raw, but the safety-belts are securely buckled. Mike Featherstone explains, "Today fun fairs and theme parks such as Disneyland... provide enclaved environments for the controlled de-control of the emotions, where adults are given permission to behave like children again."[170] According to Featherstone, this is a higher level of control, rather than a regression. Furthermore – crucially – "it bears the offprint of desire for the expelled other... Hence we have the attractions of the forest, fair, theatre, circus, slum, savage..."[171] ...torture and Guantanamo.

This particular theme park is a simulation of an actually existing institution in the American military camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. It is necessary, therefore, to change registers and consider *Weisse Folter* as a three-dimensional representation of the images circulating on the internet by which we have come to "know" it. That a visitor to K21 could be ignorant of these images is difficult to imagine (yet possible); I would hazard to guess that for the majority of people who enter the installation, these images – of chain-link walls and fences, hallways blocked by guards, and cells with unnamed orange-clad inhabitants – are brought before our mind's eye and linger there throughout our visit. The question

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[170] Mike Featherstone. "The Aestheticization of Everyday Life." Consumer Culture and Postmodernism. London: Sage Publications, 1991. 80.
[171] Ibid. 81.

is: what happens when we see installation through the images and the images through the installation? How does one inform our interpretation of the other?

Jan Thorn-Prikker suggests that, "Here, the vague impressions of newspaper readers and television viewers are given a jolt."[172] Two things come up in this observation. First, the idea of "jolting" the viewer aligns Schneider's work with the long-standing avant-garde tactic of "shocking" their viewers into realizing their complicity with mass media. Grant Kester explains this well:

> Here aesthetic shock or dislocation counteracts the false reality conveyed by dominant cultural forms. Although it operates in a somatic or bodily register, its effects are not purely physical. Rather, the experience of shock becomes the catalytic agent for a "heightened presence of mind," as Benjamin contends. We meet the epistemological challenge posed by aesthetic shock not by abandoning ourselves to the pleasures of ontic dislocation but by renewing, and expanding, our efforts to grasp the complexity of the surrounding world. "Alienation," as Brecht writes, is "necessary to all understanding." Thus the experience of shock (which is necessary to overcome the anesthetic haze of modern life) is followed by a reconsolidation of the subject around a heightened capacity to perceive the hidden operations of political power.[173]

What becomes strikingly clear in this explanation is that the claims made for "shocking" installations are utterly conventional. What is also clear is that in installations like *Weisse Folter*, the reconsolidation of the subject is jeopardized

[172] Jan Thorn-Prikker.
[173] Grant Kester. Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art. Berkeley: U of California P, 2004. 84.

by an emphasis on immersion at the expense of alienation – by an emphasis on "ontic dislocation" at the expense of reconciliation.[174]

The second part of Thorn-Prikker's observation that needs to be addressed is Schneider's concrete materialization of "vague impressions," which results in an irreconcilable tension between two- and three-dimensional representations of the prisons in Guantanamo Bay. Dominic Eichler suggests that, in *Weisse Folter*, "the transition from the real to the simulated hyper-real is potent."[175] However, this assumed "real" is itself only known through media representation for it is, in reality, located at an impassable distance — the other side of the military border. As such, *Weisse Folter* effectively allows us to pay a virtual visit to a site that we cannot visit in actually.

Referring to *Totes Haus Ur*, Philip Auslander states,

> The experience of clawing one's own way through the house in Venice is so immediate and immersive that it isn't voyeuristic... Voyeurism requires distance and detachment, neither of which is possible here. This space encourages its audience to surrender its purely spectatorial position and become performers as well.[176]

Again, distance is valued negatively and automatically associated with voyeurism. Yilmaz Dziewior observes that "photographs of his installations tend to be as unspectacular as the work itself," [177] thereby also suggesting that a "purely spectatorial position" is impossible to maintain, even in a photograph of a

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[174] I will pick up this discussion a little later on, as Nelson and Schneider differ in their approach to the negative dialectics of the avant-garde.
[175] Dominic Eichler. 1.
[176] Philip Auslander. 87.
[177] Yilmaz Dziewior. "Gregor Schneider." Artforum (Summer 1998): 142.

simulacra based on a photograph. Both of these descriptions seem to support Mark Rosenthal's understanding of installation art, which, he asserts, takes immersion as its underlying premise: "there is no frame separating this art from the viewing context, the work and the space having melded together into an approximation of a life experience."[178]

However, it is important to acknowledge, first, the constant framing that Schneider builds into his installation — the many doorways and windows, open or closed — that break up the flow of perambulation into so many framed vistas. And second, most crucially, it is important to pursue the possibility of being "voyeuristically immersed."[179] That is, immersion may be a way to undermine purely "retinal" art, as is frequently asserted, yet it may also be a way *into* a purely visual space. By this I mean that immersion, in the case of *Weisse Folter*, does not collapse the distance between Guantanamo and Düsseldorf, nor does it even suggest that this could be possible. Rather, we walk through its maze sharply aware that we are walking through a picture. Here we are literally the "viewer *in* the painting," as opposed to the "viewer *of* the painting" who remains planted on the ground outside its frame (to use Wollheim's distinction). What Schneider has built in the K21 is a depiction of a mediascape: it is a simulacrum of a series of images, not a series of existing spaces as they "are" in "reality."

The reason I am emphasizing this point is because it tugs at all the slip-knots I have tied in this complex web of meaning. For regardless about what we say

[178] Mark Rosenthal. Understanding Installation Art: From Duchamp to Holzer. Munich: Prestel, 2003. 25.
[179] Iwona Blazwick. "Psychic Spaces: Enter at your own risk." Art Monthly 248 (2001): 30.

about our phenomenological encounter with *Weisse Folter*, this installation operates at a secondary remove: it exemplifies Hal Foster's conception of "faux-phenomenology:" "experience reworked, keyed up, given back to us in a very mediated fashion -- as immediate, spiritual, absolute."[180] And regardless about what we say about empathy, this additional remove makes it even less possible than it already was: it is more like entering television and internet representations of Guantanamo than the prison "itself."

What this three-dimensional tableau of a specific mediascape amounts to, therefore, is more akin to computer space than actual space. When Richard Frances writes that "Schneider did not so much fool the eye as dupe the mind and body,"[181] we can read this as saying: our eye knows exactly what we are looking at -- a simulacrum -- yet, like every convincing Virtual Reality, we are experientially transported "there." In our culture, viewer's have become adept at tele-transporting themselves into a virtual space by way of technological mediation. Gregor Schneider (like all the artists in this thesis) plays off of this aptitude. In *Weisse Folter* the viewer is like an explorer who is pushing forward into unknown territory -- an (American) cowboy rather than a (European) dandy.[182] This explorer defines his subjectivity through conflicts with his enemies and an invariably hostile "nature," both of which are conjured by Schneider: unseen guards populating an inhospitable environment.

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[180] In Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois et al. 677.
[181] Richard Frances. 148.
[182] Lev Manovich. 273.

Furthermore – most importantly – like a computer rendition, nothing outside the walls of *Weisse Folter* exists: it falls into emptiness, neither programmed nor used. As such, the prison is not part of a "continuous" space but is like an isolated object suspended in "aggregate" space. Here we have come back around to the fact that Schneider's prison is conceived as pure interiority, without its own exterior, like a hermit crab within the architectural shell of the museum or a digital object floating within a data-space empty of data. In relation to the museum, I argued that *Weisse Folter* functions as an "institutional critique" of sorts, demonstrating the repressed "other" on which Western Civilization is premised and the mutual constitution of the two. In relation to computer space, however, the emptiness surrounding the representation appears like an expansive conceptual void. On this point *Weisse Folter* takes on its full weight as a "theoretical object." With the political actuality that is Guantanamo pressing on our minds, it becomes urgent to ask: how can we begin to make sense of this vast empty space that is not "programmed" according to any known legal or ethical codes? How can we build a bridge across this abyss to the dark heart of light space? To rephrase the question of empathy yet again, how can we refuse its limits and connect the inside of Guantanamo and the torture that occurs there with the outside of Western "freedom"?

"Critique" and "Experience"

Mike Nelson's *Triple Bluff Canyon* and Gregor Schneider's *Weisse Folter* are similar on many counts: both address the distinction between spectacle and immersion, both resist suggesting a coherent narrative; both require perambulation; both fabricate 3-D simulations of 2-D representations; both outline a conception of space that is heavily influenced by computer culture; both take the already virtual "mediascape" as the foundational "reality" to which it refers; both make overt reference to the Global War on Terror; and both suggest that the oppositional tactics of the avant-garde are still alive, although their effectiveness is cast in doubt.

It is these tactics and these doubts that I want to develop in conclusion: if the "shocks" afforded by immersive installations such as Nelson's and Schneider's are to have a therapeutic effect beyond the pleasures of "ontic dislocation" – to follow the tenets of the traditional avant-garde – then the experience must be integrated into a meaningful historical narrative, either on the level of the individual or on the level of the cultural. But what happens if such over-arching narratives are no longer plausible or desirable? And the shocks no longer dislocate but rather implicate the viewer even deeper in "The Culture Industry" or "The Society of the Spectacle"? What if the long-held opposition no longer stands?

On the question of "experience," the distinction between the two German words *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* is useful: "*Erlebnis* generally connotes a more immediate, pre-reflective, and personal variant of experience than

Erfahrung, ...[which is] a more temporally elongated notion of experience based on a learning process, an integration of discrete moments of experience into a narrative whole or an adventure."[183] Thus, *Erlebnis* denotes an unmediated, instantaneous "intensity of feeling"[184] that is "irreducible to the rational workings of the mind,"[185] whereas *Erfahrung* denotes "integrated narratives"[186] that mature over time through the process of memory. The avant-garde tactic of "shock" can therefore be understood provoking an *Erlebnis* in hopes of creating more historically insightful *Erfahrungen.*

With this distinction in mind it becomes clear that Gregor Schneider's installation *Weisse Folter* offers an experience that is more in line with the meaning of *Erlebnis*: he stresses the immediate, the emotive and the sensual, over the rational processes that seek narrative coherence. Martin Jay expresses some of the risks involved in emphasizing *Erlebnis*:

> turning the subject into a totally passive receptacle of external influences... short-circuits
> the constructive moment that allows experience to transcend mere sensual stimulation. It
> also can obliterate or at least suppress the role of memory and past experience on the
> present, abetting the reduction of experience to little more than momentary excitation,
> which Benjamin and Adorno found so problematic in *Erlebnis*. It also fails to register the
> ways in which experience may have a powerful future-orientation as well, thus

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[183] Martin Jay. <u>Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variation on a Universal Theme</u>. 11.
[184] Ibid. 96.
[185] Ibid. 225.
[186] Ibid. 153.

complicating any belief in absolute presence or immediacy as the quintessence of "an experience."[187]

With regard to *Weisse Folter*, the viewer's "suffering of the object" (to use Vivian Sobchack's phrase) is most blatant, as is the suppression of the discursive register of experience in favour of sensual immediacy. This results in a lack of protensive temp. rality. Jonathan Crary states,

> In its overwhelmingly pervasive forms within contemporary technological culture, perception coincides with an individ.ial evasion of both history and memory. In its myriad commodified modes, it becomes an imaginary deletion of all that is unbearable or intolerable in collective and individual experience.[188]

In the absence of historical knowledge and futurity, the potential of *Weisse Folter* to mobilize political action is undercut: the perpetual present of immersion traps us in what we could call a political melancholy, "an obsessive acting out rather than working through of the simulated trauma."[189]

This "immediacy" also calls the status of art into question. Ryan states, for example, that "If there is such a thing as a 'truth universally acknowledged' by literary theorists, this truth is that attention to the rhetorical devices through which a world emerges out of words is an essential aspect of aesthetic appreciation."[190] Oliver Grau is unwilling to accept the fusion implicit in total immersion as an acceptable model of aesthetic and subjective experience. He writes:

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[187] Ibid. 406.
[188] Jonathan Crary. "Robert Irwin and the Condition of Twilight." 83-4.
[189] Martin Jay. "Diving into the Wreck: Aesthetic Spectatorship at the *Fin-de-siècle*." 107.
[190] Marie-Laure Ryan. 176.

> In virtual environments, a fragile, core element of art comes under threat: the observer's act of distancing that is a prerequisite for any critical reflection. Aesthetic distance always comprises the possibility of attaining an overall view, of understanding organization, structure, and function, and achieving a critical appraisal.... Notwithstanding the longing for "transcending boundaries" and "abandoning the self," the human subject is constituted in the act of distancing.[191]

Without critical distance and reflection, all is sensation, and when all is sensation, there is no coherent subject to speak of. As Claire Bishop states, the subject is dislodged or annihilated.

This is not to say, however, that an emphasis on *Erfahrung* instead comes without risks. Quite the opposite: as Martin Jay explains, *Erfahrung* "connotes a progressive, if not always smooth, movement over time, which is implied by the *Fahrt* (journey) ...and the linkage with the German word for danger (*Gefahr*)."[192] As a cumulative process, *Erfahrung* is thought to "produce a kind of wisdom that comes only at the end of the day."[193] As "totalized, holistically integrated narratives,"[194] however, *Erfahrungen* are inevitably premised on exclusions and repressions. The question of what gets included and what does not, and whether a normative narrative is adopted or a new one is established, will determine the relative merits and risks of a particular *Erfahrung*.

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[191] Oliver Grau. Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion [Leonardo. Roger F. Malina and Sean Cubitt, eds.]. Trans. Gloria Custance. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2003. 202.
[192] Martin Jay. Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variation on a Universal Theme. 11.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid. 153.

Mike Nelson, I would suggest, despite his purposeful foreclosure of narrative coherence, offers the opportunity to build meaningful yet non-normative *Erfahrungen*. As previously discussed, Michel de Certeau's theory of how individual "tactics" fill "strategic" spaces with layers of unintended meaning provides a useful model for understanding how the viewer negotiates *Triple Bluff Canyon*. In light of the distinction between *Erlebniss* and *Erfahrung*, the full significance of the fact that the viewer's "phrasing" is built without conjunctions comes to the fore: distinct *Erlebnisse* are composed by an "autistic lucidity" that is irreducible to the ideological pressure of normative narratives of the "self," the "nation," or any other such totalizing concepts. This can be seen positively: it maintains the model of the *bricoleur* who constructs meaning in the present tense instead of following habitual flows and patterns of established relations. Or negatively: it paralyzes agency with the inward-looking logic of autism. In either case, *Triple Bluff Canyon* maintains a radical heterogeneity that has the potential to demonstrate cracks in homogenous *Erfahrungen*. These cracks appear suddenly when the fragments remain disconnected long enough to generate new leaps of logic that might, perhaps, be less coercive or even potentially fuel alternative narratives.

The question returns, however: how is this narrative articulation or lack thereof related to the installations' political positions? As already mentioned, the avant-garde tactic of shock is intended to provoke a temporary disturbance in conventional *Erfahrungen* in order to allow thought to take a new form thereafter. The premise of this approach is alienation or estrangement and its

approach is dialectical: it instigates a back and forth argumentation of thesis (convention) and anti-thesis (shock) in the hopes of reaching a sustainable resolution or synthesis. Both Nelson and Schneider continue this legacy, albeit with significant differences from the "traditional" avant-garde and from each other. It is evident in Nelson's evocation of the alien, the pervert, the fanatic, the *bricoleur*, and the paranoid theorist – all of whom are figures on the outer fringes of "normality." It is equally evident in Schneider's simulation of Guantanamo Bay's Camp V *within* Western civilization – in the basement of its revered house of contemplation, the museum.

On this count we could say that, generally speaking, both Nelson and Schneider conjure up the uncanny as a way of corroding the security of the "homely" from inside. According to Anthony Vidler,

> its [the uncanny's] re-emergence as an aesthetic sensibility since the mid-sixties seems at once a continuation of its privileged position in the 'negative dialectics' of the modernist avant-garde – a role given double force by the self-conscious ironization of modernism by postmodernism – and a product of the new technological conditions of cultural representation.[195]

This "double force" is debatable, given the political indeterminacy of irony, the homogenizing effect of digital technologies, and the collapse of the hierarchies of power against which the avant-garde pitted itself. Now "the world is flat," to use Thomas L. Friedman's phrase, and power is disseminated along lateral lines.

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[195] Anthony Vidler. 9.

Furthermore, as Hal Foster asks, "Can the abject be represented at all? If it is opposed to culture, can it be exposed *in* culture?"[196]

A few pages later, Vidler's tone is less optimistic. He writes:

> But it is in this very confrontation with social and political practice that the aesthetic theory of estrangement finds an apparently intractable and unyielding test. The formal and critical *expression* of alienation, as the first avant-gardes found to their chagrin, does not always neatly correspond to the work of transforming or even ameliorating such conditions in practice. Formal explorations of defamiliarization based on carnivalesque reversals of aesthetic norms, substitutions of the grotesque for the sublime, the uncanny for the domestic, can all too easily be construed as decoration or caricature. Faced with the intolerable state of real homelessness, any reflection on the "transcendental" or psychological unhomely risks trivializing or, worse, patronizing political or social action.[197]

Certainly artists and critics cannot change the world through their installations and words alone, but neither will it change without them. *Triple Bluff Canyon* and *Weisse Folter* are both serious artworks that demand serious attention. Their political implications need defining in order to prevent their premature dismissal as yet another example of the violence of "the aesthetic ideology."[198]

I will return to Nelson, but with regard to Schneider's wholesale embrace of immersion, I want to cite Martin Jay's biting words:

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[196] In Martin Jay. "Diving into the Wreck: Aesthetic Spectatorship at the *Fin-de-siècle*." 108.
[197] Anthony Vidler. 12-13.
[198] See Martin Jay. "'The Aesthetic Ideology' as Ideology; Or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?" *Cultural Critique* 21 (Spring 1992): 41-61.

> Simulacral shipwrecks and virtual dives give us a frisson of horror, but when we compare them to the non-illusory traumas of actual disasters, there is clearly something lacking. ...We are perhaps lucky that we are spared this fate; no, we are certainly lucky that we are spared it. But reflecting on it as spectators from afar, removed from it by time and space, is a useful reminder that an aesthetics of virtual immersion in the simulated wreckage of pseudo-disasters may well prove to be an anaesthetics when it comes to reacting to the traumas outside of the aesthetic frame.[199]

We can visit and revisit *Weisse Folter* as often as we like, indulging in the thrill of ontic dissolution it offers, yet this will bring us no closer to the horror that the actual prisons in Guantanamo instate: white torture may leave no physical scars but the psychological trauma it incurs is actual, resulting in a loss of identity, of productivity and even of the "self." If we consider a virtual approximation of this trauma to be Schneider's objective, it fails miserably and borders on trivialization, as Vidler feared, by turning it into location-based entertainment.

Jay's assertion of an anaesthetic haze borders on another problem: the artwork's assimilation into the stream of capitalism, spectacle and "The Culture Industry," which is all the more easy when it is "stimulating." Benjamin Buchloh describes the situation as follows:

> The postwar situation can be described as a negative teleology: a steady dismantling of the autonomous practices, spaces, and spheres of culture, and a perpetual intensification of assimilation and homogenization, to the point today where we witness what Debord called "the integrated spectacle.[200]

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[199] Martin Jay. "Diving into the Wreck: Aesthetic Spectatorship at the *Fin-de-siècle*." 108.
[200] In Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois et al. 673.

According to Buchloh, and other leading art historians such as Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss, the "double force" that Vidler attributed to avant-garde tactics has dwindled to a very low rumble that borders on mannerism.

Buchloh continues:

> The artistic capacity still might exist not only to reflect on the position that the art work assumes within the wider system of infinitely differentiated representations (fashion, advertisement, entertainment, etc.), but also to recognize its susceptibility to becoming integrated into those subsets of ideological control.[201]

With regard to *Triple Bluff Canyon* and *Weisse Folter*, both demonstrate a keen awareness of their position in the contemporary mediascape in ways I have already discussed. However, on the second count -- integration into "the integrated spectacle" -- only Nelson overtly resists: he continuously breaks the illusionistic space so as to require constant renegotiation on the behalf of the viewer in relation to the work.

Schneider's *Weisse Folter*, on the other hand, does not have an overt defence system and the viewer's indulgence in the dark space of the prison easily aligns itself with the "experience economy" that indiscriminately turns everything into aesthetic experience, "recasting trauma as ecstasy, accident as adventure, death drive as joy ride."[202] Certainly *Weisse Folter* demonstrates the narrowing of the gap that Buchloh so clearly articulated, especially given that simulation of the "wreck," not spectacle, can be thought of as its most successful model. However,

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[201] Ibid.
[202] F. T. Marinetti in Martin Jay. "Diving into the Wreck: Aesthetic Spectatorship at the *Fin-de-siècle*." 104.

this is not to suggest that Schneider capitulates to this flattening of the cultural field, nor that he is reaping the rewards of "Shoah business" by turning political torture into entertainment. Rather, he is working within it in an effort to work with it towards new ends.

It is this working with and within immersion that needs defining in hopes of finding a way through to the other side of its capitalist deployment (to recall Foster's words) and it is this point that I want to develop in closing. In a "roundtable discussion" Benjamin Buchloh asserts,

> Today we are in a political and ideological situation that, while it is not quite yet totalitarian, points toward the elimination of contradiction and conflict, and this necessitates a rethinking of what cultural practice can be under the totalizing conditions of fully advanced capitalist organization.[203]

Hal Foster makes the observation that,

> Many artists – perhaps most under fifty – assume that that dialectic is now overwhelmed, that they have to work within a condition of spectacle. That's not to say they capitulate to it... Some artists also find productive cracks within this condition; it's not as seamless as Benjamin [Buchloh] makes it out to be.[204]

Yves-Alain Bois conjectures:

> Yet perhaps conditions have changed again now, and, instead of a polar opposition à la Adorno between resistant high art and mass-cultural trash, both have become, in the

[203] In Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois et al. 676.
[204] Ibid. 675.

context of global media, so many bits in the planetary web. The paradigm isn't resistance versus dissolution any more: resistance is immediately dissolved in the new situation.[205]

This constant shifting of boundaries between resistance and dissolution and the very mutability of the terms of critical thought means that artists and critics need to constantly shift their position so as to place themselves at a nexus in the "planetary web" that has the potential to transmit their ideas most widely and most forcefully.

It is to these three imperatives — rethinking the totalization and homogenization of contemporary cultural practice, finding productive cracks, and adapting to a forever changing cultural situation — that *Triple Bluff Canyon* and *Weisse Folter* answer: they demonstrate two different ways in which "aesthetics" can be annexed to "politics" without falling into the pitfalls normally associated with the "aestheticization of politics" and its violent consequences, "the beautiful ideas that kill," as futurist F.T. Marinetti called them.[206] In an essay titled "'The Aesthetic Ideology' as Ideology; Or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics," Martin Jay outlines the ways in which "the aesthetic is variously identified with irrationality, illusion, fantasy, myth, sensual seduction, the imposition of the will, and inhumane indifference to ethical, religious, or cognitive considerations."[207] Thereafter he offers ways in which the lack of distinction between aesthetics and politics can be viewed more positively, two of which correspond to the installations under discussion.

[205] Ibid.
[206] Martin Jay. "'The Aesthetic Ideology' as Ideology; Or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?" 44.
[207] Ibid. 45.

One critic describes Mike Nelson's *Triple Bluff Canyon* as "an oblique but no less angry confrontation with the barren nature of much contemporary political thinking, and the resultant desolation that is visited upon entire peoples."[208] This confrontation, I suggest, lies in Nelson's "ebullient overcoding,"[209] the resulting polysemy, and his overt reflexivity. As Rachel Withers states, "Serpentlike, Nelson's installations are forever nipping at their own tail."[210] *Triple Bluff Canyon* simultaneously constructs and deconstructs meaning, dangling its possibility before the viewer who needs to work hard in order to "phrase" all of Nelson's loose odds and ends into a semblance of coherence, while foreclosing the possibility of a totalizing narrative. However, due to the "autism" that threatens to result, it is unclear how anything beyond a deconstructive critique can be established. But at least, as Jay states, "a politics informed by the skills of reading literature deconstructively will be less prone to tyranny than one that is not."[211]

Gregor Schneider's *Weisse Folter* establishes a different relationship between aesthetics and politics. In this installation the viewer is bereft of the normative ways of negotiating a space and experiences her senses more forcefully. This emphasis on *Erlebnis* over *Erfahrung* prevents the viewer from assimilating her experience, thereby resulting in a (simulated) trauma: the cognitive structures cannot be found to make sense of the experience. In this light, it becomes apparent that Schneider is attempting to represent the unrepresentable – the loss

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[208] Jeremy Millar.
[209] Dan Fox. 1.
[210] Rachel Withers and Mike Nelson. 104-5.
[211] Martin Jay. "'The Aesthetic Ideology' as Ideology; Or, What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?" 53.

of subjectivity that results from torture. As Martin Jay explains, following the ideas of Jean Francois Lyotard,

> the result is a politics that can be called aestheticized in the sense of an aesthetics of the sublime. That is, insofar as the sublime acknowledges the unpresentability of what it tries to present, it stops short of attempting to realize theoretically inspired blueprints for political utopias.[212]

It is precisely a blueprint of the halls and cells of *Weisse Folter* that Schneider prevents the viewer from drawing in their mind. As such, they are pushed back onto the subjective register of experience – but there is drawback. As Jay states, "Not all political problems, after all, allow the luxury of an indefinitely deferred solution. The sublime may be useful as a warning against violently submitting incommensurable differends to the discipline of a homogenizing theory, but it doesn't offer much in the way of positive help with the choices that have to be made."[213]

This is not to say that *Triple Bluff Canyon* and *Weisse Folter* are effective as political "actions": Nelson's embrace of polysemy prevents a clear position from being articulated, and Schneider's emphasis on sensational immediacy at the expense of discourse prevents the installation from functioning as a political allegory. It is to say, however, that their resistance to any sort of totalization – their refusal to close the process of meaning-making (Nelson) or to proffer blueprints (Schneider) – invokes a model of aesthetic judgment that equally refuses to reduce particulars to rules and conventions. This type of judgment,

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[212] Ibid. 54.
[213] Ibid.

based on Immanuel Kant's judgement of taste, is in urgent need of rediscovery: within the political realm, it can mediate between the general and the particular[214] so as to avoid flattening specificity to an immersive homogeneity. It is for this reason that *looking at* these two installations from all different perspectives has political implications, even if subsequent action is not dictated, or perhaps because subsequent action is not dictated. Nelson and Schneider make no prescriptions; yet *Triple Bluff Canyon* and *Weisse Folter*, and the tentative narratives we concoct in order to traverse the sea of references or the wash of intensities, "ultimately [provide] the material for a process of discursive communication about the wrecks that have occurred in the past and the ones in the future that might perhaps be forestalled."[215]

[214] Ibid. 55.
[215] Martin Jay. "Diving into the Wreck: Aesthetic Spectatorship at the *Fin-de-siècle*." 109.

CHAPTER 4: AUGMENTED PLACES

Surveillance never tires of taking possession of our words and images. In my recent work I ask what would happen if all the cameras became projectors and gave us words and images rather than taking them away from us?

— Rafael Lozano-Hemmer

How we define public space is intimately connected with ideas about what it means to be human, the nature of society, and the kind of political community we want.

— Rosalyn Deutsche

Lev Manovich's work on new media investigates the impact of immersive technologies on the way we negotiate contemporary culture, what he calls "transcoding": "the projection of the ontology of a computer onto culture itself."[1] In 2003 he wrote:

> It is quite possible that the emphasis of the first decade of the 2000s will turn out to be about the physical — that is, physical space filled with electronic and visual information. While enabling further development of virtual spaces... computer and network technologies more actively enter our real physical spaces.[2]

According to Manovich, technologies now "make the physical space into a dataspace: extracting data from it (surveillance) or augmenting it with data

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[1] Lev Manovich. The Language of New Media [Leonardo. Roger F. Malina and Sean Cubitt, eds.]. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2001. 223.
[2] Lev Manovich. "The Poetics of Augmented Space." New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality. Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. 76.

(cellspace, computer displays)."3 This results in what Manovich calls "augmented space," derived from the already established term "Augmented Reality" (AR). Rather than being posited as opposite to VR, however, augmented space is premised on the continuity between VR and AR. That is, whether the technological effects are all encompassing (as in VR) or supplementary (as in AR) is a matter of scale – the relative size of the display – and of investment in the information/simulation it adds to our experience.4

David Joselit describes common occurrences of augmented space as follows:

> It's the electric whisper bleeding from earphones in subway cars, and it's the disarming experience of believing for a minute that the well-dressed guy talking to himself on the street is crazy – until you see his headset. Or it's the zombie dance, visible through the glass enclosure of a video arcade, of two adolescent boys whose virtual adventure is being conducted through their actual movements on a platform in front of a screen.5

Clearly this spatial confusion or overlap poses problems for ideas of site-specificity. The previous chapters outlined in great detail how artists and art historians working in the crossover have contended with the collapse of subject/object distinctions and the loss of "critical" distance that immersion implies, as well as the viewer's fully embodied participation in the artwork. This chapter looks again at this nexus of problems, this time with an emphasis on actual (augmented) places – specific sites – as they are negotiated by physical (also often augmented) bodies by way of technological mediation.

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3 Ibid. 77.
4 Ibid. 79.
5 David Joselit. "Navigating the New Territory: Art, Avatars, and the Contemporary Mediascape." Artforum (Summer 2005): 276.

To restate, this stress on "real" places and people is not in opposition to their allegedly dematerialized and disembodied "virtual" counterparts; rather, it assumes that we can be "pod" and "ped" interchangeably or even simultaneously, like the guy with the headset. Which is the "right" and which is the "wrong" place to be, to use Miwon Kwon's vocabulary, is difficult to assert given their new degree of interpenetration: our subjectivities are now embedded in this plurality of site just as we/they now incorporate the technological peripherals (or in-vivo technologies) by which we interface with this plurality. As such, the emphasis in this chapter on real people and places takes as a given the virtual dimensions of both as part of the actuality of augmented space.

In particular, this chapter investigates an artwork that "takes place" in situ: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's outdoor installation *Under Scan* (2006) as it was presented in the East Midlands, United Kingdom. Lozano-Hemmer (b. 1967) is a Mexican-Canadian "media" artist who is perhaps best known for his project *Vectorial Elevation* (1999), in which he installed robotic aircraft search lights in Mexico City's Zócalo Square and his exhibition in the Mexican Pavilion at the last Venice Biennale (*Some Things Happen More Often Than All of the Time*, 2007). The particular project under investigation in this chapter – *Under Scan* – raises important questions about contemporary experiences of public space, mediascapes, and the conditions of communication under increased technological surveillance – questions which are highly relevant to an understanding of the crossover as it is evinced outside of the specialized domain of the gallery. As Lev Manovich states,

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> For a few decades now artists have already dealt with the entire space of a gallery; rather than creating an object that a viewer would *look at*, they placed the viewer inside this object [as did Eliasson, Beesley, Nelson and Schneider]. Now...artists have a new challenge: placing a user inside a space filled with dynamic, contextual data with which the user can interact.[6]

More specifically, my concern lies with how the radical plurality of augmented space and the similar hybridity of our tethered techno-bodies interface and negotiate with each other to establish a similitude – or dissimilitude – of a (posthuman) public (augmented) sphere.

Ron Burnett observes that, "One of the impulses at the heart of this evolution is the desire to be *inside* images and screens, that is, to share the stories and events from within the space and time of the medium."[7] According to Lev Manovich, "The computer age brought with it a new cultural algorithm: reality>media>data>database."[8] The question then follows, how can we work backwards to access the reality that the medium turned into data? Or is the community we might create based on these shared experiences limited in purview, scope and relevancy to the space and time of the medium alone?

These kinds of questions make it necessary to consider recent theoretical approaches to computer games when contending with interactive art projects in augmented space such as Lozano-Hemmer's: it reconfigures aesthetic engagement as it has been traditionally understood due to its dual emphasis on

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[6] Lev Manovich. "The Poetics of Augmented Space." 82-3.
[7] Ron Burnett. "Projecting Minds." <u>Media Art Histories</u>. Oliver Grau, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2007. 328.
[8] Lev Manovich. <u>The Language of New Media</u>. 224-5.

simulation and interactivity, and it participates in a "cultural space of surface play and neo-spectacle"[9] that site-specificity seeks to redress. An underlying effort in this chapter is thus to see if a conceptual link can be built between the "kinaesthetic performance"[10] of computer games and radical democratic definitions of a public sphere that is premised on conflict, such as that posited by Rosalyn Deutsche. This "link" may sound preposterous, and it is, especially since conflict in computer games more likely calls for a "shoot-'em-up" solution than open-ended discursive exchange. What I am investigating, rather, is whether or not the way in which space is represented and navigated in artworks that are akin to computer games has any value for how we can visualize a public sphere at a time when "the electronic realm contaminates our quotidian reality."[11]

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Under Scan

(Figures 38-45)

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's outdoor installation *Under Scan* disrupts the viewer's daily routes and reveries through urban space with evocations of telepresent entities and unconnected memories. The installation floods an urban square with white light streaming from high-powered projectors; a surveillance system tracks

[9] Andrew Darley. Visual Digital Culture: Surface Play and Spectacle in New Media Genres. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. 149.
[10] Ibid. 151.
[11] Daniel Canogar. "Rafael Lozano-Hemmer." 2006 Biennale of Sydney. 172.

the passers-by. Custom-made software crunches the data and then projects a video-portrait (one of a thousand such portraits in the system's database) onto the ground in the pedestrian's path, aligned and to scale with the pedestrian's shadow. If the pedestrian moves away, the portrait turns away, fades into the light, and becomes dormant again. Every seven minutes, the grid of the tracking system is projected onto the space, revealing the installation's technological workings – its integration of surveillance and simulation technologies.

The video-portraits included in *Under Scan* were made by Lozano-Hemmer in collaboration with local filmmakers. He invited random people he encountered at concerts, on campuses and at community centres in the five cities in which the work was shown (Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Northampton and Nottingham) to come to the studio. They could represent themselves any way they want, as long as they make eye contact with the camera at some point so as to effectively make eye contact with the eventual viewers of the portrait. The individual self-representations/portraits that resulted vary widely: they deliver messages of political protest, sexual innuendos, playfulness, scrutiny or detachment. In one we see a lady flailing her arms and legs like a toddler in a fit, for example, and in another a man calmly flips through snapshots before flinging them at the camera/viewer. We see people rolling over, dancing, flashing a pen light, or simply waving at the camera.

Pedestrians who walk through *Under Scan* quickly learn that their shadows constitute the interface by which they can access the database of portraits. This interface is exceptionally "intuitive" and easy to manoeuvre, requiring no

specialized skill, coordination or dexterity. Shadows seemingly become computer cursors that roll over the concrete "screen" underfoot, thereby causing portraits to "pop up." This is not how the system works: it tracks the pedestrians and projects the images in their path, thereby denying them active control over the image-space. However, the sense of navigating an interactive screen that is connected to a database of images persists.

Lev Manovich theorizes both "database logic" and "navigable space" in *The Language of New Media*. He argues that the database is "a new symbolic form of the computer age...a new way to structure our experience of ourselves and of the world."[12] He writes,

> Indeed, if after the death of God (Nietzsche), the end of grand Narratives of Enlightenment (Lyotard), and the arrival of the Web (Tim Berner-Lee), the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as a database.[13]

According to Manovich, narrative is now only one method of accessing data among many others.[14] In computer games, for example, narrative is suggested, but winning the game is a matter of learning its hidden logic – its algorithm. This leads him to conclude that

> computer programming encapsulates the world according to its own logic. The world is reduced to two kinds of software objects that are complementary to each other – data structures and algorithms. Any process or task is reduced to an algorithm...[a]nd any

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[12] Lev Manovich. The Language of New Media. 219.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid. 220.

object in the world — be it the population of a city, or the weather over the course of a century, or a chair, or a human brain — is modeled as a data structure, that is, data organized in a particular way for efficient search and retrieval.[15]

Database logic thus understands the world at "interface value."[16]

Under Scan is clearly an example of the world turned into data. In this case, city inhabitants are turned into video-portraits and subsequently accessed by an algorithm: the computer tracks, sizes and then projects a portrait according to a pre-programmed code. According to Manovich,

> The database becomes the center of the creative process in the computer age. Historically, the artist made a unique work of art within a particular medium. Therefore the interface did not exist. With new media, the content of the work and the interface are separated.[17]

In this light, the people's public expression that is recorded in the portraits comprises the "content" of *Under Scan*, which is subsequently accessed by a particular interface (one among other possibilities).

More specifically, the interface that *Under Scan* uses is akin to what Manovich calls "navigable space." As discussed in the previous chapter, computer space is "aggregate" rather than continuous: it is comprised of discrete data-entities, which are positioned on an XYZ grid, but have no knowledge of each other. Furthermore, borrowing from game theory he writes, "rather than conceiving space as a totality, one is dealing with a set of separate places."[18] Despite

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[15] Ibid. 223.
[16] This is Sherry Turkle's phrase.
[17] Lev Manovich. The Language of New Media. 227.
[18] Ibid. 257.

differences between the genres of computer games, they all consistently choose a navigable space interface. That is, the player/avatar seemingly moves through the aggregate computer space in order to interact with the data-entities, whether they be the gamer's "enemies," walk-through architectural designs, scientific visualizations, or models of abstract information.

The ubiquity of the navigable space interface leads Manovich to argue that it is "a cultural form in its own right."[19] He writes,

> Of course, both the organization of space and its use to represent or visualize something else have always been a fundamental part of human culture. Architecture and ancient mnemonics, city planning and diagramming, geometry and topology, are just some of the disciples and techniques that were developed to harness space's symbolic and economic capital. Spatial constructions in new media draw on all these existing traditions — but they are also fundamentally different in one key respect. For the first time, *space becomes a media type*.[20]

Lozano-Hemmer explores the city as a communication device that not only includes spatial constructions that speak about "official" history and "proper" behaviour by way of their architectural monuments and layout, but also spatial constructions that incorporate massive screens or "information architecture"[21] and portable screens that deliver information to the site. It is due to this dual emphasis that Lozano-Hemmer's work cannot be contextualized within the discourses of site-specificity or new media alone. As Priamo Lozada and Barbara

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[19] Ibid. 251.
[20] Ibid.
[21] See Marc Steinberg. "Building Perceptions: Media Architecture and the Hypersurface Experience." Parachute 113 (Jan.–March 2004): 128–38.

Perea state, "Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's artistic practice forges a new kind of space; an interstitial terrain, wherein the aesthetic equation is re-defined and disciplines are reconfigured."[22]

The new kinds of spaces Lozano-Hemmer forges within the city are set in contrast to what he calls "vampire buildings" – the perpetually restored edifices of a bygone era that no longer hold the symbolic force they once did – and "default buildings" – the new "generic, defeatured buildings that reflect market forces and not local specificity"[23] Both are inadequate figurations for contemporary urban reality. He states: "Cicero said, 'we make buildings and buildings make us'. Our situation in the globalized city says the opposite: the urban environment no longer represents the citizens, it represents capital."[24] According to Lozano-Hemmer, the homogenization of the built environment "has reached a crisis of representation that carries with it a tremendous avidity of connection."[25]

Fredric Jameson lamented the breakdown of urban coherence and interhuman connection in his famous description of the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles, in which the passer-by loses her sense of spatial and subjective coherence.[26] Lozano-Hemmer, however, does not lament this "loss." Rather, he sees it as an

[22] Priamo Lozada and Barbara Perea. "Prologue." Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Some Things Happen More Often Than All of the Time. Barrios, Jose Luis, Manuel DeLanda, Barbara London et al. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and Cecilia Gandarias, eds. Turner/A&R Press, 2007. 97.
[23] In Geert Lovink. "Real and Virtual Light of Relational Architecture: An Interview with Rafael Lozano-Hemmer." Uncanny Networks: Dialogues with the Virtual Intelligentsia. Geert Lovink, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2002. 307.
[24] In Jose Luis Barrios. "Reflections around Loose Ends." Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Some Things Happen More Often Than All of the Time. 146.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Jameson, Fredric. "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism." (1984) Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

opportunity or motivation to intervene in public space in order to establish new communicative gestures that are more representative of the relationships that people have with places today — and with the people who share these places. As such, he agrees with Jameson's conclusion: it is imperative to establish new representations that contend with changing spatial experiences. For Jameson, this was postmodern "hyperspace;" for Lozano-Hemmer this is today's mediascape, with its multiple layers of virtual messages emanating from various electronic devices, the codes of the built environment itself, and the inseparability of the two. He states, "The old idea of a site is problematic when we think of the Internet, globalization and our era of non-location. We now live in multiple realities and works that use new technologies are somehow overlaying this electronic reality onto the everyday."[27]

In this volatile terrain, Lozano-Hemmer uses technology "to reactivate our city, to make it our own."[28] He has set up various projects that seek to provide the public with the ability to interact with the site on new terms. As he explains, "In relational architecture, buildings are activated so that the input of the people in the street can provide narrative implications apart from those envisioned by the architects, developers, or dwellers."[29] His 2001 project *Body Movies* is a case in point: in front of the Old City Hall in Rotterdam, he set up a 1000-square-metre interactive projection screen on which the shadows of passers-by appeared fully in focus regardless of their distance. Also projected onto the screen were random

[27] In Randy Gladman. "Body Movies: A Linz Ars Electronica Festival Award Winner on the State of Interactive Art." Canadian Art (Winter 2002): 60.
[28] Ibid. 58.
[29] In Geert Lovink. 307.

snapshots of pedestrians in the area. When a shadow and a silhouette in the photograph fell into alignment, the projected image changed.

Some of the narratives that emerged in *Body Movies* were quite comical, even carnivalesque:

> A 25-metre shadow, cast by a man and his wheelchair, moves across a public plaza. The wheelchair's occupant is having an inordinate amount of pleasure as his large shadow crushes smaller shadows cast by others in the area. At another time, a kid enjoys stomping on a little shadow cast by her teacher, or a monstrous Chihuahua looms over a small crowd of human silhouettes huddled beneath.[30]

Little stories like these demonstrate the degree to which participants used *Body Movies* for creative expression. According to Manuel DeLanda, "...Lozano-Hemmer has taken over some of these spaces ["born from the desire to express authority, such as central plazas and monuments"] changing their affordances."[31] In *Body Movies*, the space is "made responsive to commands not emanating from a central authority."[32]

Similarly in *Under Scan*, the space of city square becomes a site of impromptu encounters. Lozano-Hemmer's artworks, in the words of Cuauhtemoc Medina, "involve a re-distribution of powers; they provide the location of modified subjective interactions."[33] As such, we can compare *Under Scan* to other instances in which public space was taken over by the public in ways that run

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[30] Christine Redfern. "Rafael Lozano-Hemmer." Contemporary 91 (2007): 56.
[31] De Landa, Manuel. "The Expressivity of Space." Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Some Things Happen More Often Than All of the Time. 105.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Cuauhtemoc Medina. "From Within Shadows." Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Some Things Happen More Often Than All of the Time. 119.

counter to the rituals that the authorities envision (whether commercial, religious, or nationalistic) and try to instate architecturally (if not forcefully). Take Krzysztof Wodiczko's 2001 work in Tijuana, Mexico, for example, in which he set up "a situation for others to animate monuments and project themselves."[34] Wodiczko created a live projection system which would project the face and voice of a speaker onto the iconic spherical architecture of the Omnimax theatre at the Centro Cultural Tijuana (CECUT). The stories that emerged told of the violence, disempowerment, sexual abuse and family disintegration that women working in the "maquiladora" industry face on a day-to-day basis. According to Wodiczko, "via this architectural form we somehow build a bridge, link with other people."[35] The public plaza, containing an audience of more than fifteen-hundred, became a place of testimony rather than control during the two consecutive nights of the installation.

In *Under Scan* the portrait's "testimony" is pre-recorded in the studio to be later replayed in situ. Nevertheless, a degree of "intimacy" is achieved. According to Lozano-Hemmer,

> One could argue that the contribution of personal interactivity is precisely the transformation of intimidation into 'intimacy': the possibility for people to constitute new relationships with the urban landscape and therefore to re-establish a context for a building's social performance.[36]

[34] Krzysztof Wodiczko. "Interview: Architecture and Therapy." Art in the Twenty-First Century. (PBS) http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/wodiczko/clip2.html
[35] Ibid.
[36] In Geert Lovink. 306.

This sounds like a classic site-specific gesture — empowering the audience to forge more "authentic" relationships to the site, rather than following official rites from rote. Certainly it is the case with Wodiczko's work. However, as Medina states,

> Lozano-Hemmer's works induce their users to deviate from the customary aims of contemporary public space (transit, trade and consumption, and advertisement) and instead promotes a form of spectral intersubjectivity, the meeting of visual fantasies in the guise of social illusions.[37]

What Medina is highlighting here is the virtual dimensions of Lozano-Hemmer's work — the ways in which it has been mediated by personal stories and incorporated into tangential memories — dimensions that site-specificity sought to cut through in order to reveal the site's official script and ideological force.

Lozano-Hemmer states,

> I am interested in distancing my practice from the notion of the 'site-specific,' particularly from the postmodern attempts to find and deconstruct essential constituent characteristics of a particular space: I am very committed to the idea that a site consists of an indeterminate number of intersecting imaginary, socio-political, physical, and telepresent spaces."[38]

This very indeterminacy is key to understanding *Under Scan*: the installation actively resists the idea that a site can be adequately decorticated to render it knowable and intelligible. Instead, Lozano-Hemmer has created a space in which

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[37] Cuauhtemoc Medina. 118.
[38] In Geert Lovink. 308.

video-spectres, military technology, commuters, loiterers, shadows and literally concrete space intermix to establish a site that evades reification. As he states, "In my work I try to encourage exceptionalism, eccentric reading of the environment, alien memories (meaning, those that don't belong to the site)."[39]

However, Lozano-Hemmer is equally keen to distance himself from the adjective "virtual." He states,

> [Relational] was a good word in counterpoint to the term 'virtual', which emphasizes the dematerialization of experience and asks us to create in simulacra. 'Relational' emphasizes the dematerialization of the real environment and asks us to question the dissimulation.[40]

The fact that the urban environment is (partly) dematerialized due to its splintering into disparate "pods" or "cells" and it perforation by a plethora of virtual windows is incontestable. As Jonathan Crary states:

> All of us in the present-day technological culture inhabit a shifting mix of new and old perceptual modalities, of hybrid zones composed of Euclidian space and dimensionless experiences of electronic networks that often appear to be seamlessly connected.[41]

But is this dissimulation? Can this spatial hybridity be de-hyphenated or dissembled to reveal the "real" environment, as site-specificity sought to do?

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[39] In Jose Luis Barrios. 146.
[40] Ibid. 147. Also see Geert Lovink. 307.
[41] Jonathan Crary. "Robert Irwin and the Condition of Twilight." Robert Lehman Lectures 3. Bettina Funcke and Karen Kelly, eds. New York: Dia Art Foundation, 2004. 69.

Surveillance and Simulation

Rather than as site-specific or virtual, Lozano-Hemmer defines his work as "technological actualizations of urban environments with alien memory,"[42] and this is indeed what comes to pass in *Under Scan*: the viewers are interpolated by video-portraits that burst into their shadows like foreign ideas or flashbacks. The project intervenes in the site only ephemerally, without any suggestion of historical validity or propriety. In order to understand the significance of this interruption or eruption in the urban fabric, it is necessary to first understand how surveillance and simulation technologies are used in *Under Scan*, practically and symbolically.

Lozano-Hemmer states, "My position is that technology is an inevitable aspect of society, and it is a key challenge for the media artist to develop it or misuse it to break the stereotypes and create new technological languages."[43] Lozano-Hemmer's introduction of video-projections in an urban plaza not only multiplies the already multiple space by adding the "space" behind the screen; it also subverts the language of spatial control by allowing the audience to play with the parameters of surveillance technology. As Medina states,

> instead of keeping the individuals under a permanent but secret structure of control and
> detection, he establishes a mirroring with the surveillance device that turns it into a

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[42] In Jose Luis Barrios. 148.
[43] In Geert Lovink. 310.

mimetic device, where the subject observes his or her actions as effected on a visible mechanism.[44]

This description sounds rather utopian, as if the technology is now under our control, in our power, and as if the simulations serve to neutralize the violence of surveillance.

However, two problems arise: first, there is no way *not* to interface with the system, no way to slip by undetected: we are under a scanner, quite literally. Our movements are tracked and our next movement is already predicted. Clearly *Under Scan* is benign: Lozano-Hemmer "allows us to physically engage these surveillance technologies, and reconnect to the electronic soci.. body in more playful ways."[45] Yet his gesture of revealing the technology that generates this playful arena – of "disabling their stealth activity"[46] – does not undo the fact that the audience is subjected to the dictates of the device. As Lozano-Hemmer states, the audience "becomes the target of extremely predatory electronic detection".[47] In the words of Victor Stoichita, "In the old manuals of perspective, it was the eye that was trapped; this time, it is the enti.. body."[48]

The predatory capacities of electronic surveillance have been boosted since 9/11 and the introduction of the Patriot Act in the United States. As Lozano-Hemmer states,

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[44] Cuauhtemoc Medina. 118.
[45] Daniel Canogar. 172.
[46] Ibid.
[47] In Jose Luis Barrios. 146.
[48] Victor Stoichita. "Technology, Magic and the Re-enchantment of the World." Rafael Lozano-Hemmer: Some Things Happen More Often Than All of the Time. 127.

What is new is the degree of computerization that the new surveillance systems, which

invade our public and private spaces, possess. ...It is literally about technologies designed

to discriminate based on a series of innate prejudices. This new intensification of

surveillance is extremely problematic... [49]

In his project *Subtitled Public* (2005), for example, the viewer walks through a

trac i. . .em that randomly chooses a verb conjugated in the third-person

(. ismisses," "benefits," or "quiets down") and projects it onto her

wherever she goes, effectively branding her. Given that it is difficult to read the

label projected onto one's own body, viewers look at each other to make sense of

their experience. The only way to rid oneself of the nagging label is to touch

another person, in which case their two labels switch (for better of for worse).

According to Lozano-Hemmer, "The system pretends to have the ability to

identify moods, gesture, desires and actions, but in the end it is chance that takes

this to an absurd level."[50]

As Stephen Graham explains, the intensification of surveillance involves systems

that "can now provide the data inputs necessary to develop electronic simulations

of 'reality' used by a number of powerful organizations such as the military, the

state and large firms."[51] Furthermore,

The computerized linkage between surveillance and simulation helps to reconfigure and

intensify surveillance practices because simulations become continually updated

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[49] In Jose Luis Barrios. 143-4.
[50] In Ibid. 151.
[51] Stephen Graham "Geographies of Surveillant Simulation." <u>Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations</u>. Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 134.

representations cybernetically connected 'backwards' to extending webs of data capture

and 'forwards' to (attempted) disciplinary and consumer practices.[52]

In the United Kingdom where *Under Scan* was first installed, the wide-area

public CCTV surveillance system, currently "manned" by security staff, is also

being digitalized. As Graham explains, "New, digital systems are algorithmically

programmed to scan for certain 'unusual' events or targeted individuals or

vehicles, thus withdrawing opportunities for human discretion in the tracking

and monitoring of individuals."[53]

Harun Farocki, perhaps more than any other artist, has addressed this

intensification of surveillance from a critical perspective. Consider his multi-

screen video installation in Documenta XII, *Deep Play* (2007): a striking green

soccer field is overlain with graphs of data, dynamic diagrams outlining the

players' every move, arrows tracking the ball, computer renditions of the players

(all with the same generic face), and a continuous stream of sports reportage.

These various simulations of the game imprint themselves on the retina as

though we ourselves were a surveillant oculus. The power implied in this transfer

is quickly eroded, however, as our attention is fractured over the twelve

competing screens. The technology does not provide access to a "deep" truth;

instead, the simulations seem to obliterate their real-life referents.

This now-common combination of surveillance and simulation makes the second

problem in *Under Scan* all too apparent; that a surveillance device can also

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[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid. 136.

function as a "mimetic device," as Medina suggests, does not in itself subvert the technology. Simulation is now part and parcel with surveillance and lends it new force. In both *Subtitled Public* and *Under Scan* "[t]he body is inscribed into the system; it is monitored, studied, assimilated, subverted and converted into a tool..."[54] However, as Lozano-Hemmer states, "Next time a person stops in front of a surveillance camera they might expect to have words projected on his or her body, and know that it is highly likely that they will not agree with the subtitle assigned to their public body."[55]

Participation and Communication

In *Under Scan* the body/tool/avatar provokes the appearance of a video-portrait. According to Medina,

> *Under Scan* behaves, in that sense, as a modified *agora*, where individuals engage again in the game of interpellating each other, interrupting their business and monologues, and appearing for themselves and others; this is the pleasure involved in their public existence.[56]

In their engagement, authorship is handed over, so to speak, to the participants – the individuals who appear in the video-portraits and the passers-by who are interpellated by them. On a similar note Daniel Canogar writes,

> This layering of new media over public space has paradoxically reawakened behaviours that have traditionally been present in these spaces. For example, people have always

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54 Priamo Lozada and Barbara Perea. 97.
55 In Jose Luis Barrios. 151.
56 Cuauhtemoc Medina. 119.

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explored their identities as citizens in the marketplace, agora or forum, and have used these settings to figure out how to incorporate themselves into the social body.[57]

As such *Under Scan* changes the ecology of a generic urban space, a "non-place,"[58] of minimal social interaction, into a thriving "public sphere" – allegedly, and relatively speaking.

Both these aspects – participation and the modified *agora* – need to be probed further in order to understand how communication occurs in *Under Scan*, if it occurs as Medina suggests. According to Lozada and Perea, "the *mise-en-scene* proposed by the artist becomes a space of potentiality, as stage for possibility where 'audience' become 'actors'."[59] This idea is cliché by now. Perhaps Victor Stoichita's account allows us to go beyond it: "We are no longer *before* a work, we are *in* a work. *We are the work*," he states: "Therein lies the trap."[60] For if we are the work, how do we then get out of ourselves enough to gain some perspective on our own participation, enough at least to participate in an *agora*?

Medina suggests this narcissistic trap when he states,

> The central tenet of such an operation is, in fact, the active illusion of an apparition: one walks in a public square and, as if invoked by a spell, a character emerges before our eyes on the pavement, and addresses us as if materialized from a dream.[61]

He continues by describing the "gothic feeling" *Under Scan* provokes:

[57] Daniel Canogar. 172.
[58] See Marc Augé. Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity. Trans. John Howe. London: Verso, 1995.
[59] Priamo Lozada and Barbara Perea. 97.
[60] Victor Stoichita. 129.
[61] Cuauhtemoc Medina. 17.

those images come to meet us very much as if they were the dead, emerging from inside the shadows on the pavement projected by the powerful beam necessary to the mechanism, in order to follow, describe and interact with our movement.[62]

If this is a modified *agora* as he suggests, what/who exactly are we engaging with? As if to answer this question, Stoichita writes, "...the observer simultaneously faces his *shadow-self* and the image of the *other*."[63]

The idea of me-and-my-shadow was explored extensively by Peter Campus in his work of the early 1970s, in which he used closed-circuit video-feedback systems to instantaneously project images of the gallery visitors back to them in modified form. Campus' 1974 work *Shadow Projection* is particularly relevant to *Under Scan*. When the viewer enters the room, her shadow as well as a video image of her are simultaneously projected onto a screen. David Joselit describes the effect as follows:

> The viewer is keenly aware that she or he can increase the size and clarity of both shadow and video image by moving closer or further away from the camera eye. The 'work' which is required of the spectator is therefore to superimpose one image perfectly upon the other in order to resolve their difference in size.[64]

This proliferation of non-self-identical images is, according to Joselit, endemic to the media environment, which asks of consumers to continuously strive for identification with their "image." In *Shadow Projection* viewers are given the

[62] Ibid. 118.
[63] Victor Stoichita. 127.
[64] David Joselit. "The Video Public Sphere." The Visual Culture Reader. Mirzoeff, Nicholas, ed. 2nd ed. London and New York: Routledge, 1998, 2002. 454-5.

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choice whether to reconcile the disparate images and claim them as a singular "self" or allow them to diverge.

In this light, both Campus' shadowy works and *Under Scan* may resemble a *phantasmagoria* more than an *agora*; however, given the facility with which we now engage with the media environment and the extent to which image-based telecommunication technologies have been naturalized, as well as the continuation of the belief that images deliver to us their referents, the ethereal and under-worldly flavour of *Under Scan*

> is in fact a heavily mediated means of intersubjective interaction, where a group of people remotely interpolates another group through a repertoire of body gestures, which although recorded and played back at random to casual passersby, manages to meet the eye of another subject.[65]

In this statement Cuauhtemoc Medina is not contradicting his earlier observation; he is simply accounting for the paradox of this work, which reveals the paradox inherent to augmented space in general: communication, which is usually understood according to conceptions of face-to-face interaction, occurs in augmented space in spite of or because of spatial displacement, heavy mediation, and quasi-disembodiment/diffused embodiment.

Lozada and Perea go so far as to state that "The interface can thus be understood as a surface, territory, or place where two things touch each other or meet enabling people to act together or affect each other."[66] Here we land squarely

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[65] Cuauhtemoc Medina. 117.
[66] Priamo Lozada and Barbara Perea. 97.

within the space and time of the medium, where the pedestrian's movements turned into data by way of surveillance technology affect the data already stored in the system's database. As David Joselit states, "the body becomes an avatar, a presence beyond or beneath the threshold of identity that, like a sentient cursor, projects agency and mobility into a virtual world."[67] In *Under Scan* the pedestrian's projected agency engages with the video-portrait who/which seems responsive: the portrait gestures at the viewer while it has her attention but turns away and eventually disappears if the viewer loses interest and walks away.

Can we call this communication? Medina suggests, yes. He writes:

> Sure, this emergence is virtual or hallucinatory in part, and it requires that some of its "participants" (the images and the shadows) be reduced to a routine consisting in being activated by the steps of another person as they walk in the square, and then performing a pre-recorded action. But this remoteness, technically specified and randomly chosen, constrained and physically absent, is not any less poignant. For their actions...are aimed at another; and no matter how remote and delayed, they ought to reach their destiny.[68]

However, even if the portrait's message is "received" as Medina suggests, the portraits and the pedestrians cannot interact with one another in a more significant way than turning each other off or on, technically and figuratively. This ON/OFF mode of communication is not very effective in itself, but it is compensated for by the high degree of illusionism: the video-portraits emerge from the concrete underfoot as if we have disturbed their grave and released their

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[67] David Joselit. "Navigating the New Territory: Art, Avatars, and the Contemporary Mediascape." 277.
[68] Cuauhtemoc Medina. 119.

data-essences. As Medina writes, "Lozano-Hemmer's production would seem to suggest that under the present social circumstances, communication is a byproduct of an excited and at times fetishistic engagement with *media*."[69]

As discussed in the second chapter, often the fascination with interactive art projects such as *Under Scan* is to discover their underlying algorithm, as with computer games, in order to test their limits and capacities. Can I walk through *Under Scan* without being detected? If I walk huddled together with another person, will our expansive shadow provoke the emergence of a portrait of a bigger person? If I pretend to turn away, but then turn back, will the portrait re-emerge? Will it repeat if I just keep standing there? Questions like these, of which there are many, turn the installation into a game, the fun of which is to learn its rules. Whether exotic zoo animals appear or humans trying to communicate may matter less to the overall effect than we would like to think.

On this count, game theory is particularly pertinent, for although computer games are structured around a bare-bone narrative (for example, kill your enemies to win the treasure), they are not about complex character relationships.[70] Andrew Darley explains that there is relatively little psychological identification or voyeurism, as was the case with classic cinema: "What counts far more is the actual playing, and this involves a certain kind of *kinaesthetic performance* that becomes almost an end in itself."[71] Gaming is about "learning

[69] Ibid. 118.
[70] Andrew Darley. 153.
[71] Ibid. 151.

how to become proficient with controls."[72] As Darley states, "the relative control that the player has over time in a game, the *de facto* sense of present-tense involvement — the impression of being there, responding and being responded to — is central to the genre."[73]

In *Under Scan*, as in computer games, the pedestrian/avatar (or ped/pod) explores an unknown territory over which it seeks to gain control. Michele White observes that "Narratives about interactivity produce spectators and replace visual contemplation with a discourse about agency and participation."[74] But what kind of agency is this? As if answering this question Stephen Horne states: "It may be that our delight in the rhetoric of 'action' rests on the modern conception of subjectivity as a will-to-power, a part of the modern desire for domination regarding any 'other.'"[75] If in video games we simply do away with obstacles and enemies that stand in the way of our assumption of power, in *Under Scan* the domination is more subtle: we have the power to let the portraits "speak" or not, according to our whim. The violence inherent in turning the world into "a picture" — of externalizing it and objectifying it as a knowable other — comes to light in this gesture: the "subject" (passer-by) reigns over the "object" (video-portrait). As Rosalyn Deutsche states, "The autonomous subject is produced only by positioning others as object of the look."[76]

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[72] Ibid. 13.
[73] Ibid. 154.
[74] Michele White. The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2006.
[75] Stephen Horne. "Acting On: Acted Upon." Unpublished manuscript. May 29, 2008. 17.
[76] Rosalyn Deutsche. "Agoraphobia." Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1996. 302.

There is a catch, however. As if wanting to pre-empt this very domination, Lozano-Hemmer subjects the viewer to the same process of objectification she exerts over the portraits: as she scrutinizes the image, the surveillance system scrutinizes her, assessing her size and movement and effectively turning her into an image, and then correlating this data with information stored in its database. In this artistic space, the database contains video-portraits that were recorded upon the consent and volition of their subjects. However, in real-life applications, as previously discussed, a system such as this would be correlating data gleaned from the passers-by with known suspects, programmed stereotypes, and other prejudicial statistics.

(Posthuman) Publi Augmented) Sphere

On a more positive note regarding augmented space, Lev Manovich states,

> if the messages communicated by traditional architecture were static and reflected the dominant ideology, today's electronic dynamic interactive displays make it possible for these messages to change continuously and to be the space of contestation and dialog, thus functioning as the material manifestation of the often invisible public sphere.[77]

This statement reveals the assumption that technological information spaces are somehow equally accessible to all, rather than limited to the use and control of a technological elite; however, what I want to pick up on in particular is Manovich's hope that the plethora of displays can open a "space of contestation and dialog" rather than simply stimulation and commercial coercion. If aggregate space is the

[77] Lev Manovich. "The Poetics of Augmented Space." 87.

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new norm as Manovich suggests — both literally (in computers) and metaphorically (in the "real" world)[8] — then how can it offer a figuration of a public sphere?

To ask this question is to go against the grain of "decline" narratives which assume that, for one, "new electronic technologies must invariably have negative effects on public life and community," and that, secondly, "a continuing erosion of the public sphere goes hand in hand with the privatization of city streets and other 'public' spaces."[9] The space most representative of the public sphere, according to Jurgen Habermas' formulation of the term, was the eighteenth-century European café: here white bourgeois men would gather in order to rationally and "impartially" debate "public" concerns, having left all of their "private" interests at home. If we fast forward to a typical experience of the 'real' Starbucks, the scene is quite different: given the prices, it is arguably still classist; however, it is the absence of communication (yet alone debate) between its caffeinated occupants that decline theories lament. Kazys Varnelis and Anne Friedberg describe the scene well:

> A woman next to you is browsing the Internet on her laptop while a late-career executive is thumbing his Blackberry, two students are studying together, some teenagers are hanging out listening to their iPods and periodically breaking out in giggles and loud exclamations as they get text messages from their friends on their mobile phones. ...You are all somehow drawn together by the lure of the generically acceptable coffee and the

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[8] Lev Manovich. The Language of New Media. 257.
[9] Jennifer S. Light. "From City Space to Cyberspace." Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations. Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 109-10.

desire to share a similarly generic, but nonetheless communal space with other humans with whom you are likely not to have any interaction.[80]

If we consider this generic space filled with interactivity but little interaction as representative of today's public sphere, how can we characterize its political salience?

Clearly such a characterization will be an abstraction, but so too was Habermas' public sphere, and so too are alternative appeals to some sort of essential "publicness" coming from both the left and the right. In her influential essay "Agoraphobia" Rosalyn Deutsche counters all of these definitions by drawing on political theories of radical democracy. Following Claude Lefort, she argues that the dethronement of the French monarchy, which claimed power on absolute terms, left an empty space – a public space – that has no claim to transcendental authority. Therefore, society needs to continuously define itself in the present tense and decide through continuous, open-ended debate what is and is not legitimate to its rule. She writes, "Conflict, division, and instability, then, do not ruin the democratic public sphere; they are the conditions of its existence."[81]

Deutsche's conception of the public sphere as volatile and discursive, rather than absolute and essential, is more amenable to the divided spaces in which we find ourselves in today's augmented space than Habermas' insistence on collective experience and consensus: we can now be in two places at once, participating in a

[80]Varnelis, Kazys and Anne Friedberg. "Networked Place." Networked Publics. Annenberg Center for Communication, University of Southern California. http://netpublics.annenberg.edu/. Subsequently published as "Place: The Networking of Public Space." Networked Publics. Varnelis, Kazys, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2008. 15-42.
[81] Rosalyn Deutsche. "Agoraphobia." Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1996. 289.

chat room on the web while bargaining the price of an item at the local market. However, as with the model of the Internet as the "new" public sphere, the lack of dialectical links between all of these different micro-spheres[82] can impede rather than foster discourse: they fall short of Deutsche's conception by remaining disconnected. It is precisely to the end of establishing connections that Lozano-Hemmer is working, or should I say, positioning his work. He states:

> In contrast [to the concept of the *collective*], I really like the concept of the *connective* – a much less problematic word because it joins realities without a pre-programmed approach –. What's interesting is that this concept doesn't convert realities into homogeneity. ...I would even go so far as to define the connective as those tangents that pull us out of the collective.[83]

According to Lozano-Hemmer, connection does not lead to consensus or establish a stable space. Rather, it is more like a principle – the principle of interrupting the space of the status quo in order to prevent it from ever stabilising into an all embracing homogenous spatial totality.

Deutsche asks:

> How do images of public space create the public identities they seem merely to depict? How do they constitute the viewer into these identities? How, that is, do they invite viewers to take up a position that then defines them as public beings? How do these

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[82] See Martin Lister, Jon Dovey, Seth Giddings et al. New Media: A Critical Introduction. London and New York: Routledge, 2003. 176-81.
[83] In Jose Luis Barrios. 147.

images create a "we," a public, and who do we imagine ourselves to be when we occupy the prescribed site?[84]

If we ask these questions of Lozano-Hemmer's *Under Scan*, we can deduce two answers, one of which is seemingly ideal from a Habermasian perspective, while the other is more in tune with Rosalyn Deutsche's understanding of radical democracy.

Consider the person who portrayed themselves to the camera, and by extension to the viewers, *any way they wished* (within the parameters of the project). Some danced, some stripped, and some made political statements by holding up a poster or flaunting a T-shirt. The premise is self-expression, self-representation and the freedom of expression – concepts based on subjective autonomy. In return, a respectful, equally autonomous viewer tries to discern the "essence" of this portrayed "self" from the representation. This is the modern model of art viewership: the medium delivers the message immediately, as though it were a window the viewer could look through and see the soul of the person in the portrait. Medina suggested this transparency when he stated that the message ought to reach its destination no matter how remote or delayed. Here then, is a model of two autonomous subjects meeting in public space to communicate face-to-face, thereby overcoming social alienation.

Alternatively, consider the fact that the person represented by the video portrait is dependent on the viewer, in fact *needs* the viewer, in order to come into being in public space at all. A viewer respectful of the person's/portrait's vulnerability

[84] Rosalyn Deutsche. 286.

and her/its radical contingency on the viewer's own shadow plays with this interface, thus interacting as much (or more) with this process of subjective co-production as with the portrait's "mer-- ge." As Lozada and Perea suggested, *Under Scan* opens and "interstitial terrain" that reconfigures the aesthetic equation: subject and object are mutually constituted. In some cases a reverse puppetry even occurred similar to Campus' work, where the viewer aligned her shadow with the moving limbs of the portrait in order to allow it to come into full visibility. Here then, is a model of public space that occurs without recourse to essentialism. The portrait's and the viewer's *partial* "selves" are negotiated, aligned, incorporated, or disavowed. As Rosalyn Deutsche states, "In the phantom public sphere, man is deprived of the objectified, distanced, knowable world on whose existence he depends and is presented instead with unknowability, the proximity of otherness, and, consequently, uncertainty in the self."[85]

Furthermore, given that the surveillance system has an eye on the viewer just as the viewer has an eye on the portrait, there is no way out: the viewer is fully implicated in the space. As such, *Under Scan* calls attention to the potential of surveillance technology to "capture" the entirety of urban space through an interlinked digital network. This network has the computing power to integrate various sources of data into an accurate real-time simulation of the activities –– and identities – of the people who come under its scanner. It is this simultaneous experience of objectification that Lozano-Hemmer has built into the installation

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[85] Ibid. 325-6.

that, I suggest, encourages the viewer to recognize her status an object of the gaze as well as its subject, a dual status she shares with the video-portrait. As both subject and object, the "ideal" viewer that *Under Scan* establishes is thus contingent not essential, and discursively constituted not autonomous -- that is, this viewer is *public*.

It is for this reason -- how it invites viewers to take up a position that then defines them as public beings -- that *Under Scan* is "public art," not because the space in which it is installed is *de facto* public for being outdoors, and certainly not because it suggests some sort of mythical coherence of the "public" or equal accessibility to "the" public. Lozano-Hemmer states, "Although I am conscious that the scale was 'spectacular,' I am happier to compare the work to a public fountain or to a park bench than to a 'son et lumiere' show."[86] He stresses inter-human exchange and the singularity of individual experience rather than immersive spectacles in which audience members meld into a collective experience of the given show. The viewers of *Under Scan* are not part of a crowd, nor are they feeding off its   esthetic energy like a flâneur: it is experienced in small micro-spheres in which two partial image-selves overlap and the dynamics of the exchange can be negotiated. To cite Deutsche once again, "Publicness emerges as a quality that constitutes, inhabits, and also breaches the interior of social subjects. It is a condition of exposure to an outside that is also an instability within."[87]

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[86] In Geert Lovink. 310.
[87] Rosalyn Deutsche. 303.

However, regardless of its status as a public art project that is installed *in situ*, *Under Scan* is not site-specific. The project was designed to be flexible so that it can be installed in very different urban settings. In fact, it can range in size from 500 to 2000 square metres and the staging is independent of architectural support. The only criteria for its location are that it be "a large pedestrian space with clear, accessible ground surfaces... in close proximity to areas of cultural redevelopment."[88] In both Derby and Northampton, the main Market Square areas were chosen; in Leicester it took place in a busy pedestrian thoroughfare; in Nottingham a location adjacent to the court was chosen; and in Lincoln, it was installed on the university campus.[89] Furthermore, the projection "towers" and surveillance devices are discrete enough to almost disappear during the day. As such, they purposefully do *not* interfere with the functions and symbolic resonance of the chosen sites and the entrenched daytime habits of its occupants.

But *Under Scan* can be thought of as site-specific in one particular way: its antagonism to habitual uses of site. Lozano-Hemmer states, "I look for the 'special defects' that allow me to activate the imperfections, the disruptions; 'to disrupt' seems to be the most precise term for describing what I want to do."[90] In *Under Scan* this "disruption" is played out by turning a substrate for movement — the concrete underfoot — into a screen for moving images, and by forcing "perfect strangers" to interact by way of their respective projected images — the shadow and the video. As Lozano-Hemmer states, *Under Scan* sought "to question the

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[88] David Hill and Emma Jones. "Production." Under Scan: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. Timothy Druckery, Mirjam Struppek, Beryl Graham et al. Rafael Lozano-Hemmer and David Hill, eds. Nottingham, UK: East Midlands Development Agency, 2007. 21.
[89] Ibid.
[90] In Jose Luis Barrios. 151.

predatory nature of visual technology or to invert the paradigm where the virtual

takes place on the other side of the mirror and instead invades our own corporeal

space."[91] By instigating this invasion, we could say that Lozano-Hemmer

continues the avant-garde tactic of "shocking" the audience into a new

understanding of their implication in public space (not a specific site) and their

engagement with imaging technologies.

Media Ecology and the Return of Subjectivity

In the words of Theodor Adorno, "Homesickness results from distancing. The art

would be to experience it at the same time as staying at home, which requires

illusionistic virtuosity."[92] As *Under Scan* illustrates, his wish is now

technologically supplied: we can now be on both sides of the "mirror" at once, in

virtual and actual space. Contemporary homesickness, which is no longer

saturated with modern connotations of "inauthentic" experience, is part and

parcel with the spatial decentring, weak temporalization and quasi-

disembodiment/diffuse embodiment that results from our engagement with

virtual technologies. As Pierre Huyghe states, "You need to be corrupted by the

[91] Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. "Inspiration and Precedents." Under Scan: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. 14.
[92] In Anthony Vidler. The architectural uncanny: essays in the modern unhomely. Cambridge, MA:
MIT P, 1992. 243.

context but without forgetting that you're not from it."[93] That is, some distance from the site, whether virtual or actual, must be maintained.

This kind of mediated contemporary homesickness results, in part, due to the changed context of reception that artworks such as *Under Scan* engage. Ron Burnett states, "embodied forms of interaction through augmented reality systems, CAVEs, and immersive forms of entertainment suggest that some fundamental changes are underway, re-creating notions of audience and participation."[94] In the later half of the twentieth-century, assumptions about the corrosive effects of the mass media prevailed in the art world, defining a clear role for the neo-avant-garde *in opposition*. Now, however, as Burnett asserts, "critical strategies derived from the study of mass communications in the 1960s and 1970s may not be useful in understanding the breadth and impact of this new media ecology."[95]

There are several reasons for this. For one, the audience itself is no longer "mass;" it is intensely differentiated. As Burnett explains,

> This change in the audience reflects both the rise in importance of networked
> technologies and the World Wide Web and the fragmentation of the very notion of
> audiences into smaller and smaller interest groups. ...Conventional notions of audience

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[93] In Tim Griffin, moderator, with Claire Bishop, Pamela M. Lee Lynne Cooke et al. "Remote Possibilities: A Roundtable Discussion on Land Art's Changing Terrain." Artforum (Summer 2005): 292.
[94] Ron Burnett. 310.
[95] Ibid. 315.

break apart with unpredictable results because there are so many different ways in which individuals can now establish small communities with shared concerns.[96]

Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Under Scan* demonstrates this well by stressing the intimacy of encounter rather than group spectacle, by creating the opportunity for thousands of mini-narratives rather than an overarching one, and by speaking one-to-one, as it were, rather than one-to-mass.[97] In so doing, he also departs from the site-specific model.

Secondly, in this new media ecology, audiences' expectations "are closely linked to greater control and participatory activity,"[98] which are now part and parcel with everyday life: gadgets such as multi-media cell phone devices and pod casting have given ever-greater creative means in the hands of ever-greater numbers of people. (Not to mention the contemporary penchant for interactive multi-media exhibitions in museums and trade fairs alike, as well as for location-based entertainment such as Disneyland.) Again, Lozano-Hemmer is keenly aware of this new ecology. He purposefully allots viewers a participatory role in the artwork as instigators of their own experience rather than as consumers of another's. Furthermore, he provides viewers with the opportunity to understand the workings of the technological systems involved rather than sealing them off in a black box, thereby empowering them to engage with the technology on their own terms.

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[96] Ibid. 330.
[97] Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. "Concept." Under Scan: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. 11.
[98] Ron Burnett. 330.

Thirdly, as Gavin Butt states, the "immersion of the spectator within the space of the work has been seen as heralding a dissolution of the very conditions of critique."[99] Thus he seeks models of aesthetic spectatorship that "might encourage a long overdue, and productive, opening out of critical subjectivity to its embodied – and *performative* – condition of production."[100] One such model is established by Irit Rogoff in her essay *Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture*. She states,

> It seems to me that within the space of a relatively short period we have been able to move from criticism to critique to criticality – from finding fault, to examining the underlying assumptions that might allow something to appear as a convincing logic…to operating from an uncertain ground which, while building on critique, wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames.[101]

The shift that Rogoff articulates emphasizes the positive, creative potential of critical engagement with art. She is explicitly concerned with how "empirical" viewers become the subject of the work itself, rather than "following the roles allotted to us as ["ideal"] viewers and listeners."[102]

This goes hand-in-hand with *Under Scan*, as well as many of Lozano-Hemmer's other projects. Neither the self-portraits' nor the public's participation is scripted or censored. Unlike site-specific works, there is no didactic narrative and no

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[99] Gavin Butt. "Introduction: The Paradoxes of Criticism." After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance. Gavin Butt ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004. 9.
[100] Ibid. 9–10.
[101] Irit Rogoff. "Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture." After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance. 119.
[102] Ibid. 121.

privileged viewpoint that positions the viewer as an "ideal." As such, it is not "top down" as urban planners would have it but rather, in Lozano-Hemmer's words, "side-by-side."[103] What is of utmost importance to the success of project is that viewers can build their own relationships with the work and with the portraits it contains. As the artist states, "The piece was intended as a public takeover of a city by its inhabitants, linking high technology with strategies of self-representation, connective engagement and urban entitlement."[104] The viewer's understanding of the particular site is not crucial, only their temporary performance within it. That is, for the duration of the project (ten nights in each location), the day-to-day functions of the site are overshadowed, literally, by an opportunity to engage with the city and its inhabitants in a more fantastical way. For each individual, the project transpires in an acute present-tense, making and remaking partial "selves" continuously.

This shift in emphasis off of the discrete art object and onto the subject's subjective experience of the project is not new to the history of art. I have already outlined the "theatrical turn" *pace* Michael Fried and its more contemporary appearance in the literature on installation art. However, this emphasis on the subjective engagement goes much further back to the origins of aesthetics and this history is key to understanding the implications of this shift. In his book *Songs of Experience* Martin Jay discusses how, in the eighteenth century, the long-standing assumption that beauty was an objective quality of objects began to fade in favour of locating aesthetic value in the bodily responses of the viewers

[103] Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. "Concept." 11.
[104] Ibid. 9.

and their consequent "tasteful" assessments. Furthermore, during the Enlightenment objects of political power or religious worship were described in terms of artistic merit alone. But, paradoxically, in this new taxonomy of "art" they also lost "their integrity as self-sufficient entities in the world" replete with cultic "aura."[105] The object was no longer considered to be "an incarnation of ultimate value that was prior to the beholder's response to it."[106] Consequently, the door was opened to subjective judgments of the beholder "and away from objective criteria of value."[107] With David Hume's 1757 essay *Of the Standard of Taste*, aesthetic discourse was firmly located in the subject and his experience, rather than in the object.

Now that the subject reigns, there is a subsequent trifurcation to consider between *aiesthesis, noesis,* and *poiesis. Aiesthesis* implies subjective sensual responses to objects. By contrast, *noesis* implies pure conceptual thought separated from the senses, and *poiesis* implies the active production of objects.[108] As Jay explains, of these three approaches, *aiesthesis* was privileged in aesthetic discourse:

> But even here the emphasis remained on the emotional, even irrational, reception of art epitomized by the "*je ne sais quoi*" attitude of ineffable felicity and mysterious grace that became emblematic of the retreat from conceptualization and production. It stressed what has been called the "mutism" of the initial encounter with art, the "sense of running out of words or of not knowing how or where to begin speaking in the face of the

[105] Jay, Martin. Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variation on a Universal Theme. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005. 135.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid. 136.
[108] Ibid. 138.

artwork." Along with the loss of words went a certain willingness to be overwhelmed by the encounter.[109]

In brief, *aiesthesis* renders aesthetic experience as perceiving rather than performative, as passive absorption of an art object rather than a creative self-fashioning, and as immersion in the (allegedly) autonomous realm of art rather than an encounter with the world at large.

Clearly Lozano-Hemmer is not proposing a renaissance of the *je ne sais quoi* attitude. His interest in performative engagement confirms his interest in discourse. In *Under Scan* the "self" opens itself to the encounter: as in *aiesthesis*, the subject subjects itself to the object. However, the opposite is equally true: this "self" subjects the object to the dictates of the subject, as in *poiesis*. As Irit Rogoff states,

> Being so active and volatile an entity we, as viewing audience, can no longer be positioned as the observers of work from the outside, and having understood how we remake work in relation to the subjectivity we project upon it, we cannot unlearn this when confronted with the work of "art."[110]

As such, it is useful to position *Under Scan* between *aiesthesis* and *poiesis*: the creative contribution of the subject to the evaluation of the object is considered to be transformative of both that object and the subject. As Mark Poster states, "subjects now float, suspended between points of objectivity, being constituted and reconstituted in different configurations in relation to the discursive

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[109] Ibid.
[110] Irit Rogoff. 123.

arrangement of the occasion."[111] This is precisely the kind of involvement that, according to Michael Fried, threatens to obliterate the integrity of the artwork altogether. *Under Scan*, contra Fried, is premised on this complicity.

Angelika Rauch articulates this shift in reception as follows: "If the exterior (beautiful) object is abandoned for the subject as the object of reflection, the 'object' must be the subject's body as it 'suffers' the affects."[112] At the end of the preceding chapter, I discussed Martin Jay's criticism of the contemporary penchant for immersion in (virtual) sufferance. Vivian Sobchack, however, moves the idea of sufferance in a different direction: "insofar as it suggests a lack of intentional agency, the passion of suffering brings subjective being into intimate contact with its brute materiality".[113] This seems to be exactly what Lozano-Hemmer wishes to affect in *Under Scan*: a return of the subject to an embodied awareness of the specific relations in which it is embedded. Sobchack continues:

> [T]he passion of suffering not only forces recognition of oneself as an *objective subject* always immanently and substantially "here" and open to being externally acted on regardless of one's volition — but it also enhances the awareness of oneself as a *subjective object*: a material being that is nonetheless capable of *feeling* what it is to be treated *only* as an object.[114]

The peril involved in sufferance is clear: on the one hand, it implies a reversibility of subjects and objects that, upon reflection, can lead to ethical behaviour toward

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[111] Mark Poster. "Introduction: Words without Things." The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990. 11.
[112] In Martin Jay. 142-3.
[113] Vivian Sobchack. "The Passion of the Material: Toward a Phenomenology of Interobjectivity." Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture. Berkley: U of California P, 2004. 287.
[114] Ibid. 288.

other "objective subjects" and "subjective objects" like us. *Under Scan* demonstrates this reversibility well in its combination of surveillance and simulation. But on the other hand, it implies a "diminution of subjectivity"[115] that can also lead to sufferance plain and simple. With regard to the video-portraits, the peril is adequately clear: they can be robbed of subjective agency entirely and objectified by passers-by.

What becomes apparent in this shift in the critical discourse of reception and the artworks, like *Under Scan*, that actively engage it, is the emphasis on non-unitary subjectivity: *reception in the crossover zone is necessarily an inter-subjective/inter-objective encounter*. As Rogoff explains, "we affect a creative *bricolage* of art works and spaces, and modalities of attention and subjectivities, that break down the dichotomies of objects and viewers and allow for a dynamic manifestation of the *lived* cultural moment."[116] Lozano-Hemmer emphasizes this "lived-ness" by stressing the present-tense of the viewer's engagement with *Under Scan* and the project's ephemerality, rather than its historical significance in a specific site at a specific time.

To close, I want to suggest that this idea of *bricolage* also echoes N. Katherine Hayles' definition of contemporary subjectivity: "The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction."[117] Reception, therefore, can be thought of as a feedback loop that flows *between* the

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[115] Ibid.
[116] Irit Rogoff. 133.
[117] N. Katherine Hayles. How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1999. 3.

viewer and the artwork. As Hayles states, "the idea of the feedback loop implies that the boundaries of the autonomous subject are up for grabs, since feedback loops can flow not only *within* the subject but also *between* the subject and the environment."[118] Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Under Scan* establishes a feedback loop that is endemic to posthuman spatial experience: the portrait's and the viewer's partial "selves" inter-relate to create a tenuous multi-temporal and multi-spatial construction.

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[118] Ibid. 2.

CONCLUSION

Irit Rogoff states,

> when something called 'art' becomes an open interconnective field, then the potential to
>
> engage with it as a form of cultural participation – rather than as a form of either
>
> reification, representation, or contemplative edification – comes into being.[1]

In the interconnective field of the crossover, artists and critics as discourse-makers participate in the process of establishing and debating new figurations for space and subjectivity. Given the "theatrical" premise of each of the artworks in question in this thesis, participation is mandatory. In each installation, the viewer is on stage, so to speak, and the artist has called "action." Roles are ascribed for the "ideal" viewer to follow, which I have described in detail in the previous chapters in order to evaluate the types of subjectivity the artworks encourage. As Rosi Braidotti states, "subjectivity is a socially mediated process... Consequently, the emergence of new social subjects is always a collective enterprise, 'external' to the self while it also mobilizes the self's in-depth structures."[2] By positioning the viewer in a particular way in relation to the artwork – by demanding a certain type of physical engagement and psychological investment – these five case studies demonstrate a homology between conceptions of space and conceptions of subjectivity.

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[1] Irit Rogoff. "Looking Away: Participations in Visual Culture." <u>After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance</u>. Gavin Butt ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004. 126.
[2] Braidotti, Rosi. Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002. 7.

Whether or not we accept the particular subjectivities they propose as a relevant model for our "selves," however, is a question each of us will answer for ourselves: Olafur Eliasson's *Notion Motion* functions like a maquette of the process of trying to extricate the "self" from the "site": we enter into the mysterious waves and then step back to rationalize them. Philip Beesley's *Hylozoic Soil*, by contrast, does not provide such easy handles for the comprehension: as we (unsuccessfully) try to distinguish cause (our physical presence) from effect (the system's ticks and twitches) we come to realize our mutual production. Mike Nelson's *Triple Bluff Canyon* precludes systematic analysis altogether and relies instead on the sparkles of an "autistic lucidity" that joins disparate stimuli into a meaningful amalgam rather than a totalizing narrative. Gregor Schneider's *Weisse Folter* similarly precludes our attempts to grasp its structure and overwhelms the viewer with the relative rawness of the space, which penetrates us and threatens to dissolve subjectivity altogether. Last but not least, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Under Scan* casts digital spectres onto our path who address us directly, coming into being and fading again as image-objects subject to our actions.

Caroline A. Jones writes, "The blandishments of present-day technologies are usually subtle, some would say insidious. Artists play with this edge and help us develop critical theory around it."[3] These five artworks pushed at the edge of our comfort-zone with technology, exploring aspects we may not (yet?) be so cosy with, such as the threat of sublime dematerialization, bio-mimetic technologies smarter than ourselves, "autistic" re-orderings of the world of bits and bytes,

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[3] Caroline A. Jones. "The Mediated Sensorium." <u>Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art</u>. Caroline A. Jones, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2006. 43.

sensual overload, and tracking "eyes." As such they made us strangers at home, so to speak, and the preceding chapters articulated how this enables us to gain perspective on the contemporary actual/virtual sites in which we are immersed.

Regarding these sites, Jonathan Crary remarks that "Unavoidably, our lives are divided between two essentially incompatible milieus: on the one hand, the spaceless electronic worlds of contemporary technological culture and, on the other, the physical extensive terrain on which our bodies are situated."[4] He is commenting on their alleged exclusivity. However, as the artworks by Eliasson, Beesley, Nelson, Schneider, and Lozano-Hemmer demonstrate, it is the very discrepancy between them and the impossibility of one eclipsing the other that opens a zone where the two can negotiate a relation of collusion rather than incompatibility. As such, we can think of these artworks as enabling us to establish a site-specific relationship *within* immersion – a relationship that is critical but not negative, challenging but not oppositional, engaging but not overwhelming.

In order for the discourse of new media immersion and site-specificity to be able to join forces in this way, significant changes occurred in the assumptions and ambitions of both. Site-specificity needed to relinquish the idea that a more "real" site is somewhere hidden under the mediating (ideological) layers, an authenticity of site that only the artist as a marker of "presence" can reveal. New media immersion, by contrast, needed to

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[4] In Nicolas De Oliveira, Nicola Oxley, and Michael Petry. Installation Art in the New Millennium: The Empire of the Senses. Foreword Jonathan Crary. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003. 8.

moderate its endeavour to instate a new site altogether and seek, instead, a less totalizing relationship between the user/viewer and the artwork.

Furthermore, in the zone opened up by the crossover of these two discourses, we see an effort on the behalf of artists to understand, challenge and configure contemporary spatial experience in a way that privileges neither the agency of the viewer nor that of the artistic site they inhabit. In the words of Martin Jay,

> redeemed experience, undamaged experience, authentic experience, if indeed such a condition can ever be attained, would not mean a restoration of innocence before the fall into language or a harmonious reconciliation in a utopian future, but rather a non-dominating relationship between subject and object.[5]

Different ways in which this non-dominating relationship between subject and site is or can be negotiated are proposed by the artworks discussed in this thesis: Eliasson oscillates between them; Beesley demonstrates their behavioural contingency; Nelson frustrates the subject's attempt to integrate the objects in a totalizing narrative; Schneider exaggerates the object's potency but provides a conceptual safety railing; and Rafael Lozano-Hemmer presents objects in the guise of subjects in order to probe the promise of intersubjectivity and its limits.

I would like to explore the implications that these artistic configurations hold for subjectivity in a more speculative way by looking at two opposing anecdotes of a *dominating* relationship. Jean Paul Sartre's account of the "horrible ecstasy" that

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[5] Martin Jay. Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variation on a Universal Theme. Berkeley: U of California P, 2005. 359.

his protagonist in *Nausea*, Roquentin, felt when in the grips of unmediated sensations is perhaps even more gripping today, now that immersive technologies promise to deliver spatial relocation and "authentic" experiences at the push of a button:

> So I was in the park just now...The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes. Green rust covered it half-way up; the bark, black and swollen, looked like boiled leather. The sound of the water in the Masqueret Fountain sounded in my ears, made a nest there, filled them with signs; my nostrils overflowed with a green, putrid odour...I did not simply *see* this black: sight is an abstract invention, a simplified idea, one of man's ideas. That black amorphous, weakly presence, far surpassed sight, smell and taste...I sank down on the bench, stupefied...my very flesh throbbed and opened, abandoned itself to the universal burgeoning. It was repugnant...I hated this ignoble mess...I shouted "filth! what rotten filth!" and shook myself to get rid of this sticky filth...[6]

This account of the emergence of the subject in Roquentin's refusal to let the object penetrate and in his deliberate preference for mediation seems to go against the grain of contemporary thought, in which the breakdown of all sorts of boundaries is celebrated. But imagine for a moment what would happen if he had surrendered to the tree. Then the object would dominate and mould the subject to its contours, consequently obliterating the subject as a definable agency.

At the other extreme, in "The Age of the World Picture" Martin Heidegger explains how the world is replaced by its picture when the object of representation is reduced to the subject's explanations:

[6] Jean-Paul Sartre. Nausea. Trans. Lloyd Alexander. Intro. Hayden Carruth. New York: New Directions, 1964. 126-34.

> The interweaving of these two events, which for the modern age is decisive — that the world is transformed into picture and man into *subiectum* — throws light at the same time on the grounding event of modern history, an event that at first glance seems almost absurd. Namely, the more extensively and the more effectually the world stands at man's disposal as conquered, and the more objectively the object appears, all the more subjectively, i.e., the more importunately, does the *subiectum* rise up, and all the more impetuously, too, do observation of and teaching about the world change into a doctrine of man, into anthropology. It is no wonder that humanism first arises where the world becomes picture."

What would Heidegger say seventy years later when pictures have taken on a life of their own and no longer offer the human a secure place as their source? Where does the posthuman *subiectum* stand in the new "world picture"?

Jean Baudrillard asserts that, "Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum."[8] In Heidegger's terminology, this would mean that there is no longer a "world" to which the "picture" refers: it has been annihilated and, along with it, the hope for an immediate or "authentic" experience that would allow Roquentin's tree trunk to press itself upon us. Brushing Baudrillard aside, Lev Manovich states: "We may debate whether our society is a society of spectacle or simulation, but,

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[7] Martin Heidegger. "The Age of the World Picture." *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays.* Trans. William Lovitt, ed. New York: Harper and Row, 1977. 115-54. http://www.culturaleconomics.atfreeweb.com/Anno/Heidegger%20The%20Age%20of%20the%20World%20Picture.htm. 23.
[8] In Marcus A. Doel and David B. Clarke. "Virtual Worlds: Simulation, Suppletion, S(ed)uction and Simulacra." *Virtual Geographies: Bodies, Space and Relations.* Mike Crang, Phil Crang and Jon May, eds. London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

undoubtedly, it is a society of screen."[9] The screen stands between us and that gnarled chestnut tree either literally, ideologically, or even perceptually, given that the senses, too, are "never thems   s and nothing but themselves," as Roquentin discovered.

Screens can never screen-out the actual world entirely, no matter how small or large or seductive or coercive, and, like the black root, the world resists being explained away. It is this resistance of the world that theorists such as Baudrillard exclude from their account of a world that has become entirely "picture."[10] Although the "real" world may seem dilapidated in comparison to the dematerialized realm of digital phenomena, even "humiliating" as Crary suggests,[11] the fact that it can neither dominate nor be dominated opens a gap where the relationship between subject and object can be re-envisioned.

Such gaps speak of trauma (the fact that our "selves" are never completely congruent with the world), and they speak of utopia (as long as things do not match up exactly, things can always be different). Somewhere between melancholy, wishful thinking and the fear of annihilation, a theoretical investment in the potential of the gap as a site of transformation – a creative zone where the "picture" of the world in which we live is reconfigured according to ways we deem ethical, just and nourishing – brings with it an acceptance of the

[9] Manovich, Lev. The Language of New Media [Leonardo. Roger F. Malina and Sean Cubitt, eds.]. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2001. 94.
[10] Jonathan Crary. "Eclipse of the Spectacle." Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation. Brian Wallis, ed. Foreword by Marcia Tucker. New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984. 290.
[11] In Nicolas De Oliveira, Nicola Oxley, and Michael Petry. 8.

collusion of the dematerialized realm of information and the actuality of the ROL on the "terrestrial horizon."

It is this investment in the gap that the artworks in this thesis articulate: by offering five different ways in which a model of subjectivity can be spatially established, Eliasson, Beesley, Nelson, Schneider and Lozano-Hemmer demonstrate the constant negotiation that occurs between subject and object, viewer and artwork, in the crossover zone. The particular consequences of this inter-connective process varied from work to work, but in every case both the viewer's and the artwork's participation in the cultural negotiation of subjectivity was explored and neither was reduced to a shadow of the other. Instead, they crossed-over in ways that demonstrate the stakes involved and the potential for creativity that arises in non-dominating relationships.

To return to the summary of the overall achievements of this thesis, let me state again that it provides much-needed precision to the literature on contemporary art: it defines and re-evaluates two central ideas -- new media immersion and site-specificity -- thus discovering their respective usefulness and limitations, as well as investigating the dynamics of the relation between them. I argue against their discursive exclusivity and propose, instead that they have created a "crossover." I demonstrate this by way of detailed cases studies which each contribute to an understanding of this new zone and how the theoretical issues it implies play out in particular artworks. As such, this thesis reinvigorates formalist analyses of art by insisting that artworks are theoretical objects that can articulate very specific ideas through their formal configurations. In particular,

this thesis discusses at length three points at which the crossover bears the most implications for art history: interactivity, spatial facsimiles and augmented places.

Through my demonstration of how the crossover is articulated by five contemporary art projects, this thesis provides scholarship on the consequences of the artistic paradigm shift that has occurred over the last decades. It also enacts a critical theorization of the hegemonic status of the crossover, thereby challenging revisionist and over-simplified accounts of contemporary art. This is achieved by stressing the importance of media competence at a historical moment when media are seemingly interchangeable or transparent. In so doing, it emphasizes the subjective agency that art objects exercise on their interpreters, thus working against the tendency to reduce art objects to the interpreter's personal "feeling." Overall, it suggests that art history must establish a non-dominating relationship between subject and object.

FIGURES
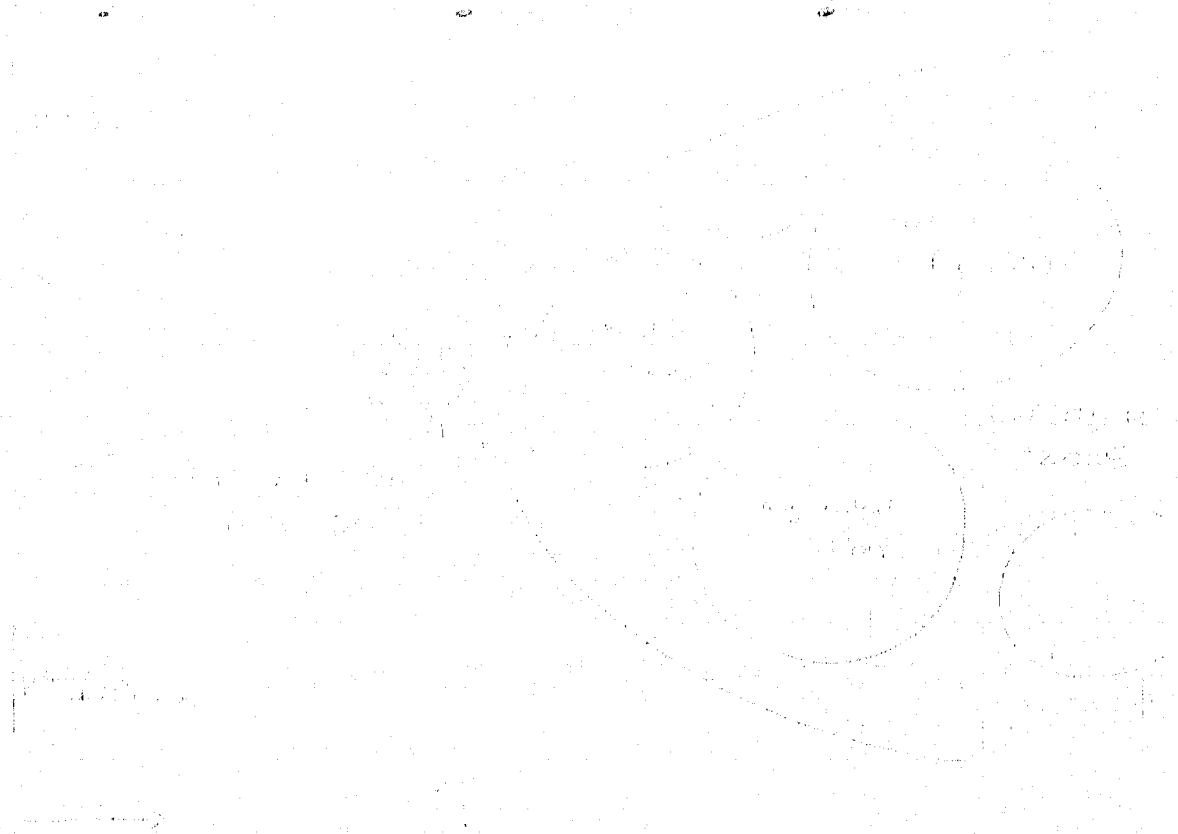
Figure 1: Diagram: The Crossover of New Media Immersion and Site-Specificity
in Contemporary Art
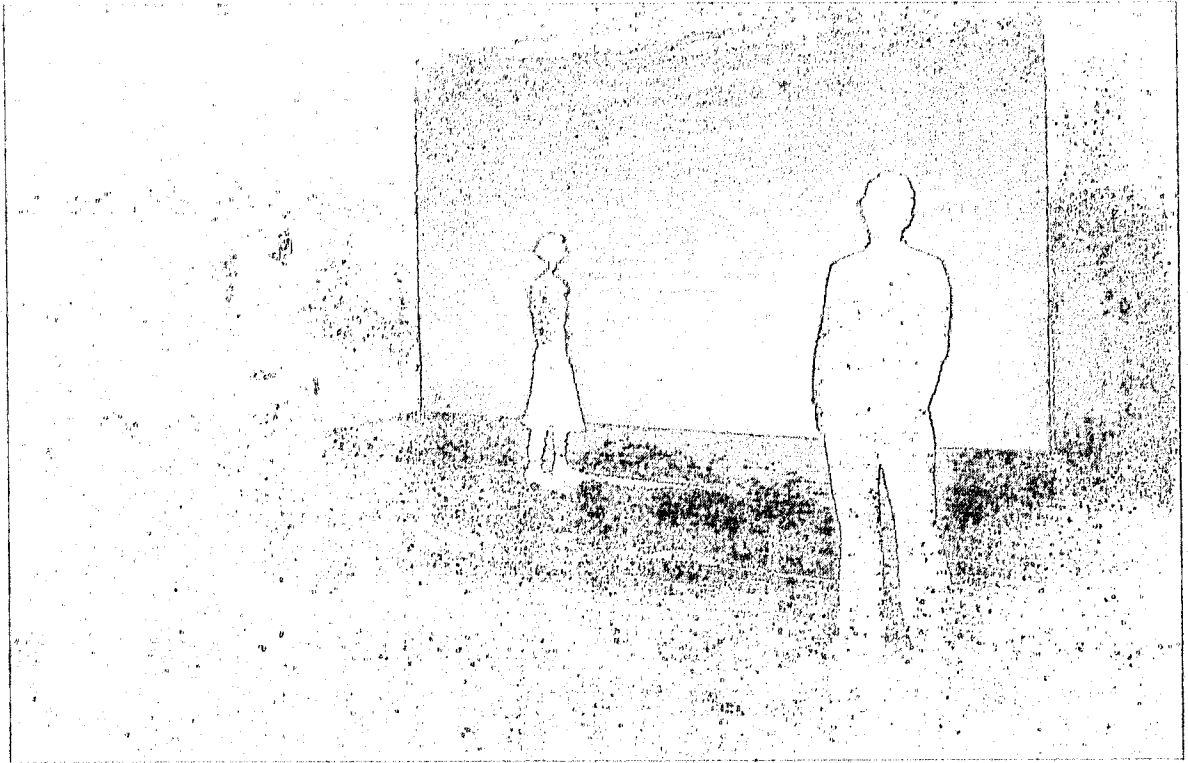
Figure 2: Olafur Eliasson. *Notion motion.* 2005. (first room)
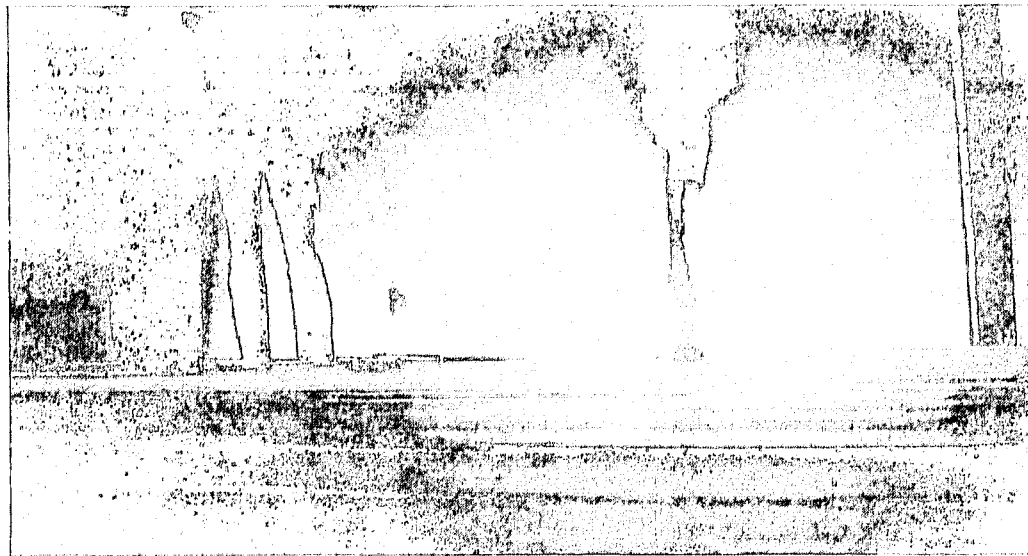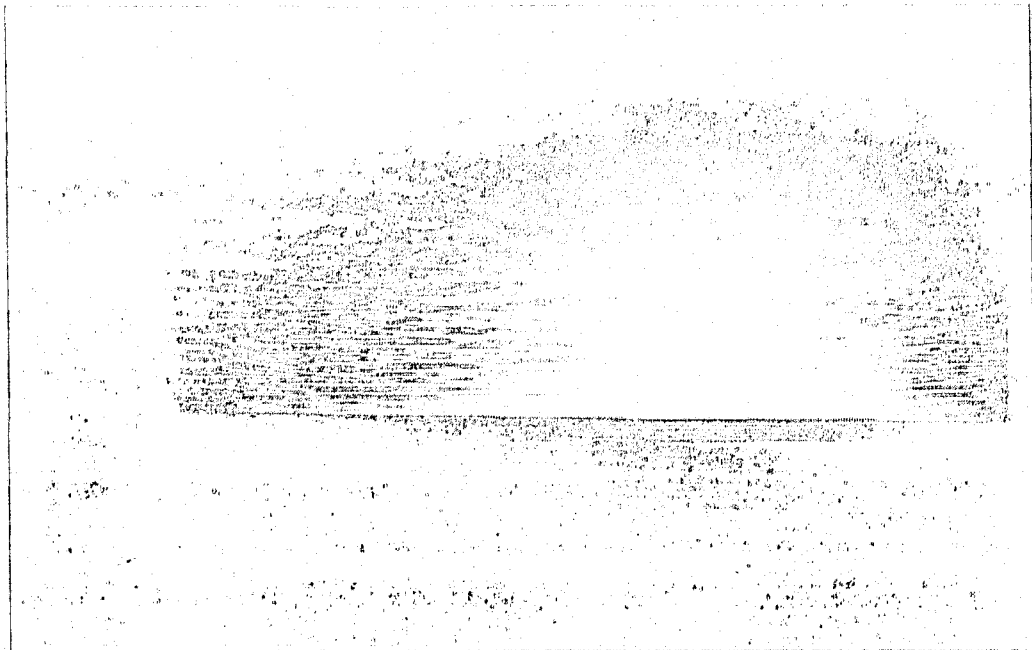
Figures 3-4: Olafur Eliasson. *Notion motion*. 2005.

Figures 5–6: Olafur Eliasson. *Notion motion*. 2005.
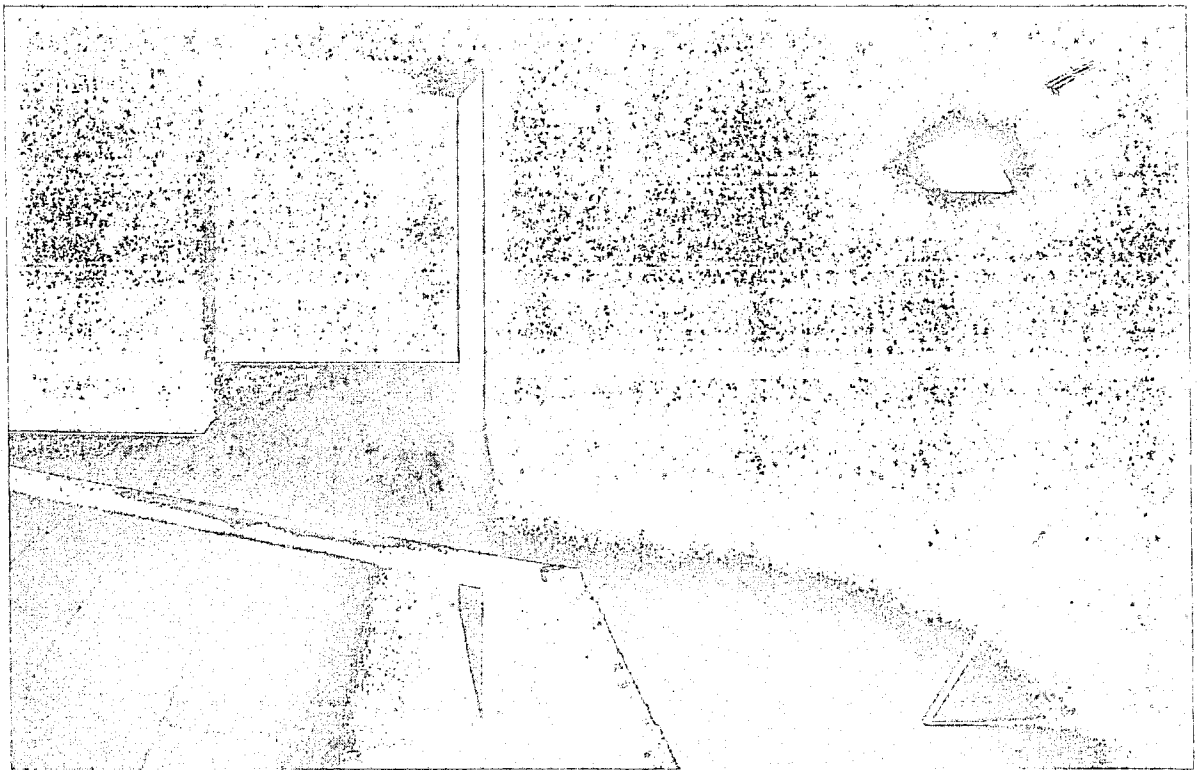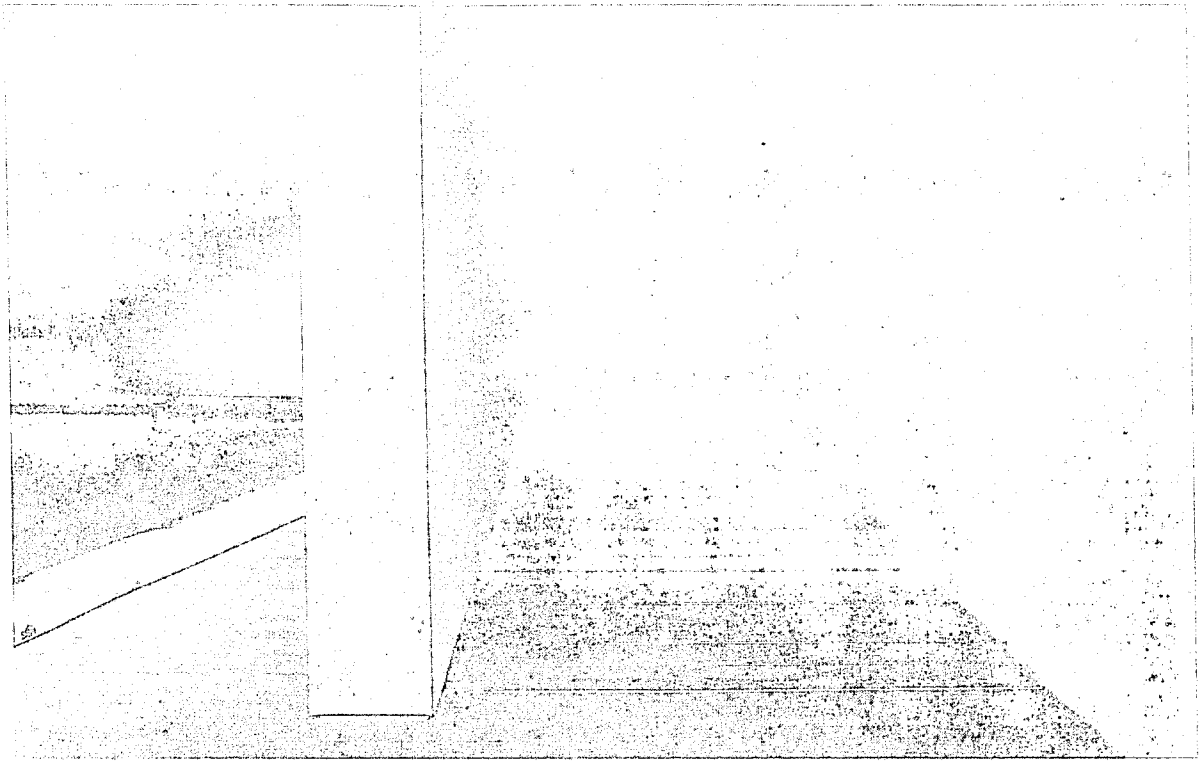
Figures 7-8: Olafur Eliasson. *Notion motion*. 2005. (second room)
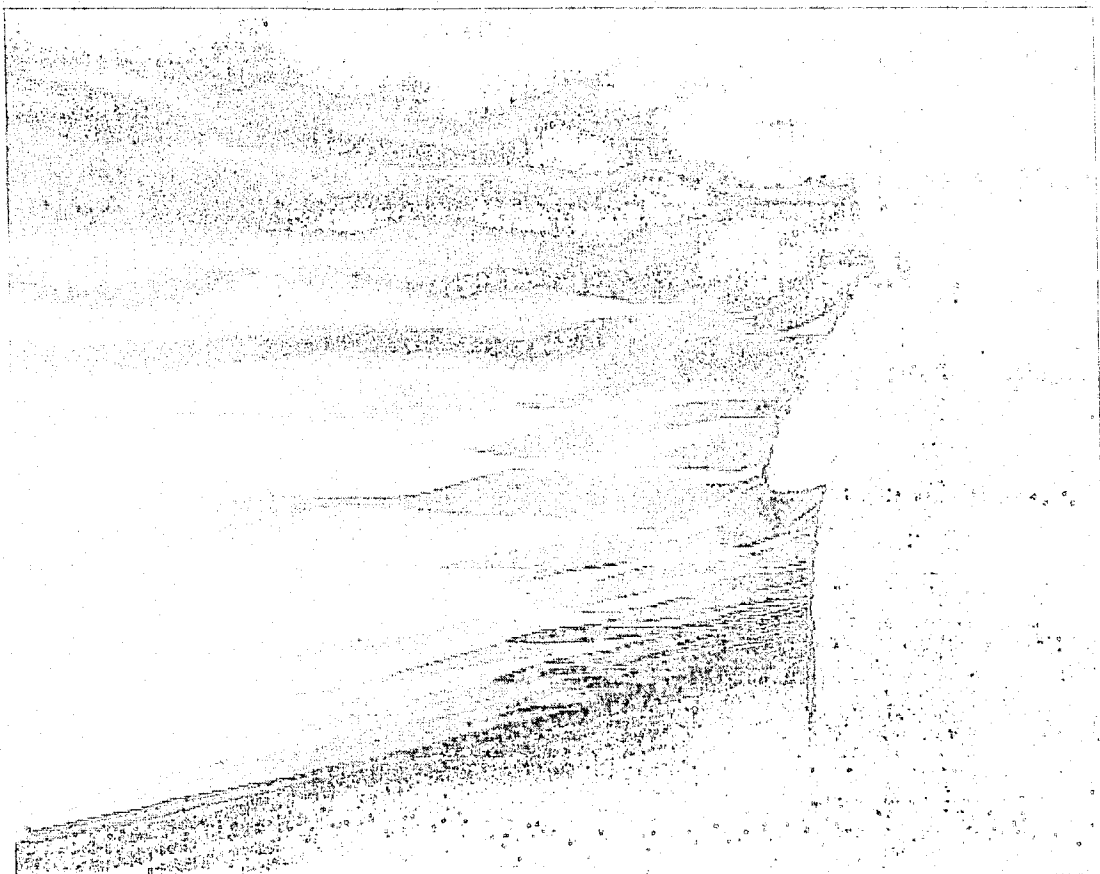
Figure 9: Olafur Eliasson. *Notion motion*. 2005.
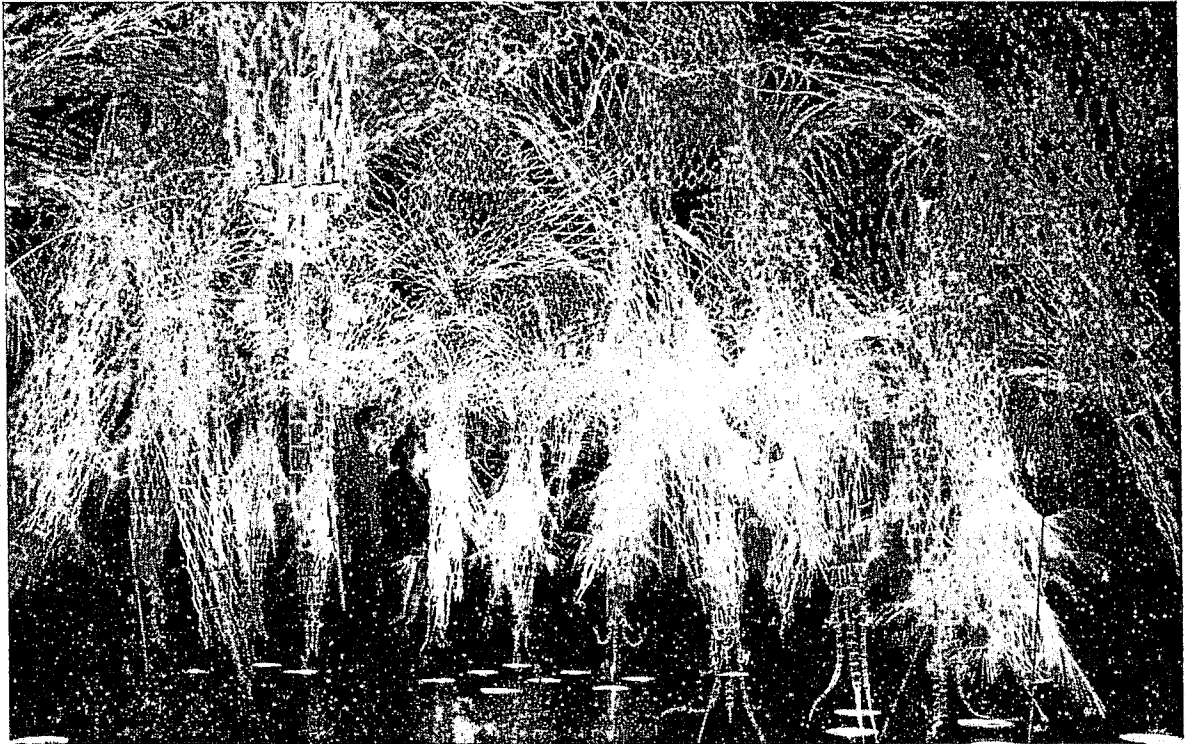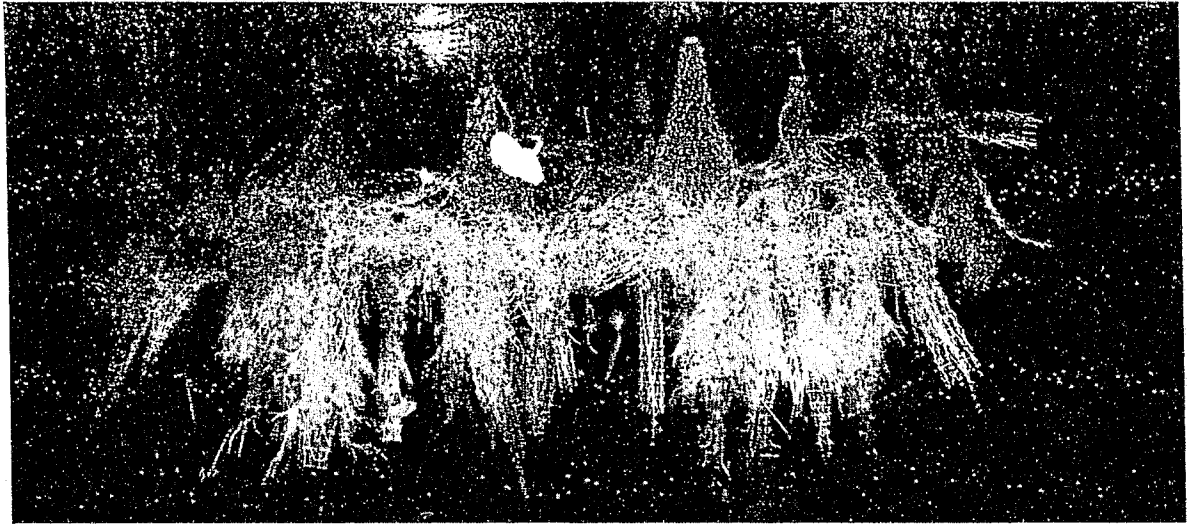
Figures 10-11: Philip Beesley. *Hylozoic Soil*. 2007.
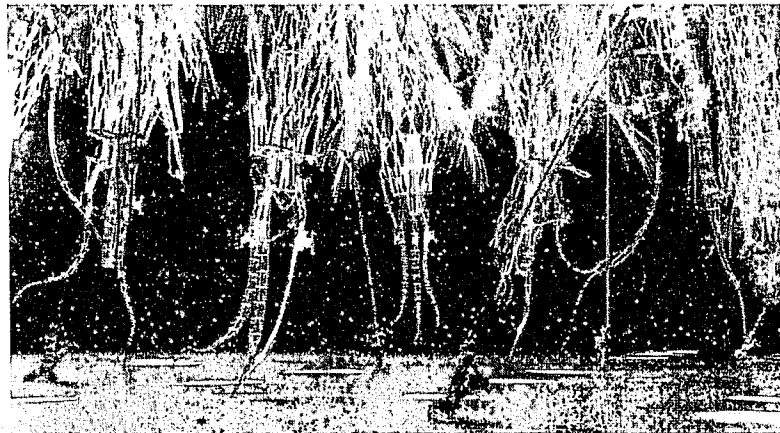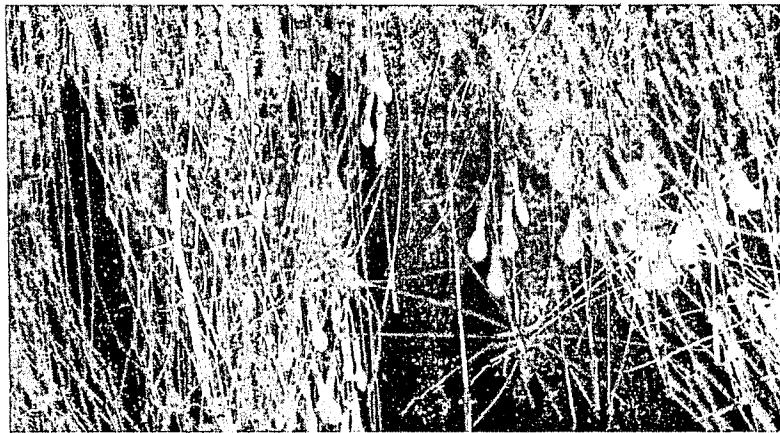
Figures 12-14: Philip Beesley. *Hylozoic Soil*. 2007. (details)
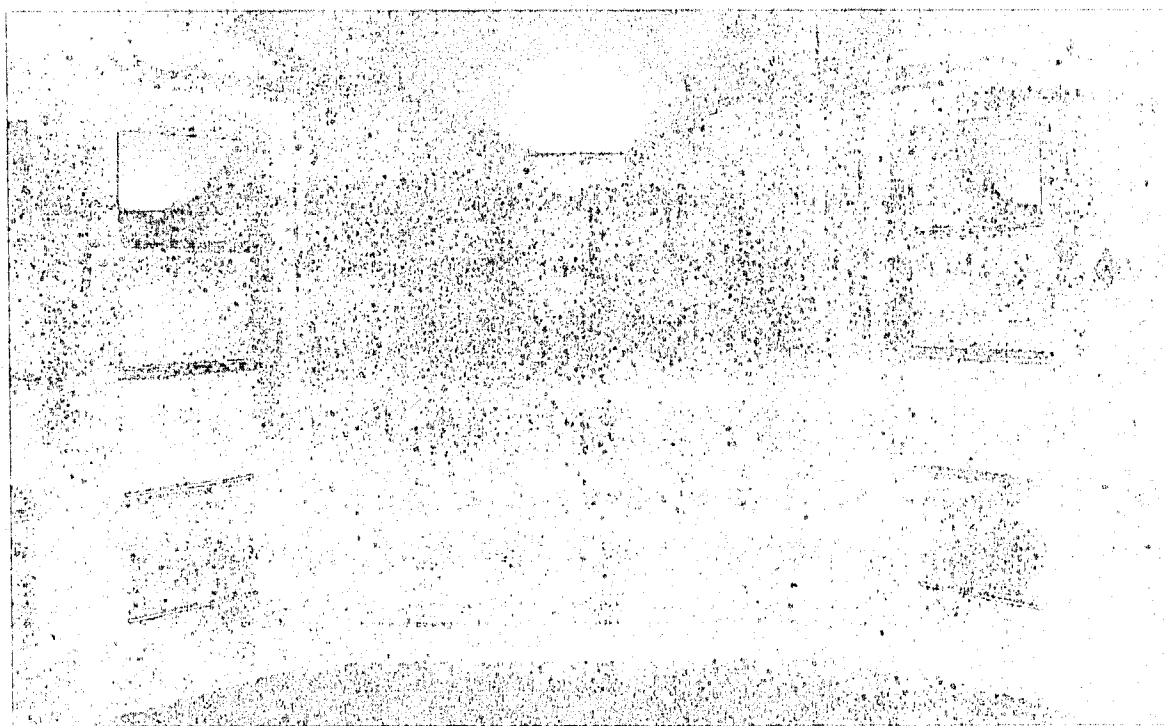
Figures 15-16: Mike Nelson, *Triple Bluff Canyon*, 2004. ("cinema")
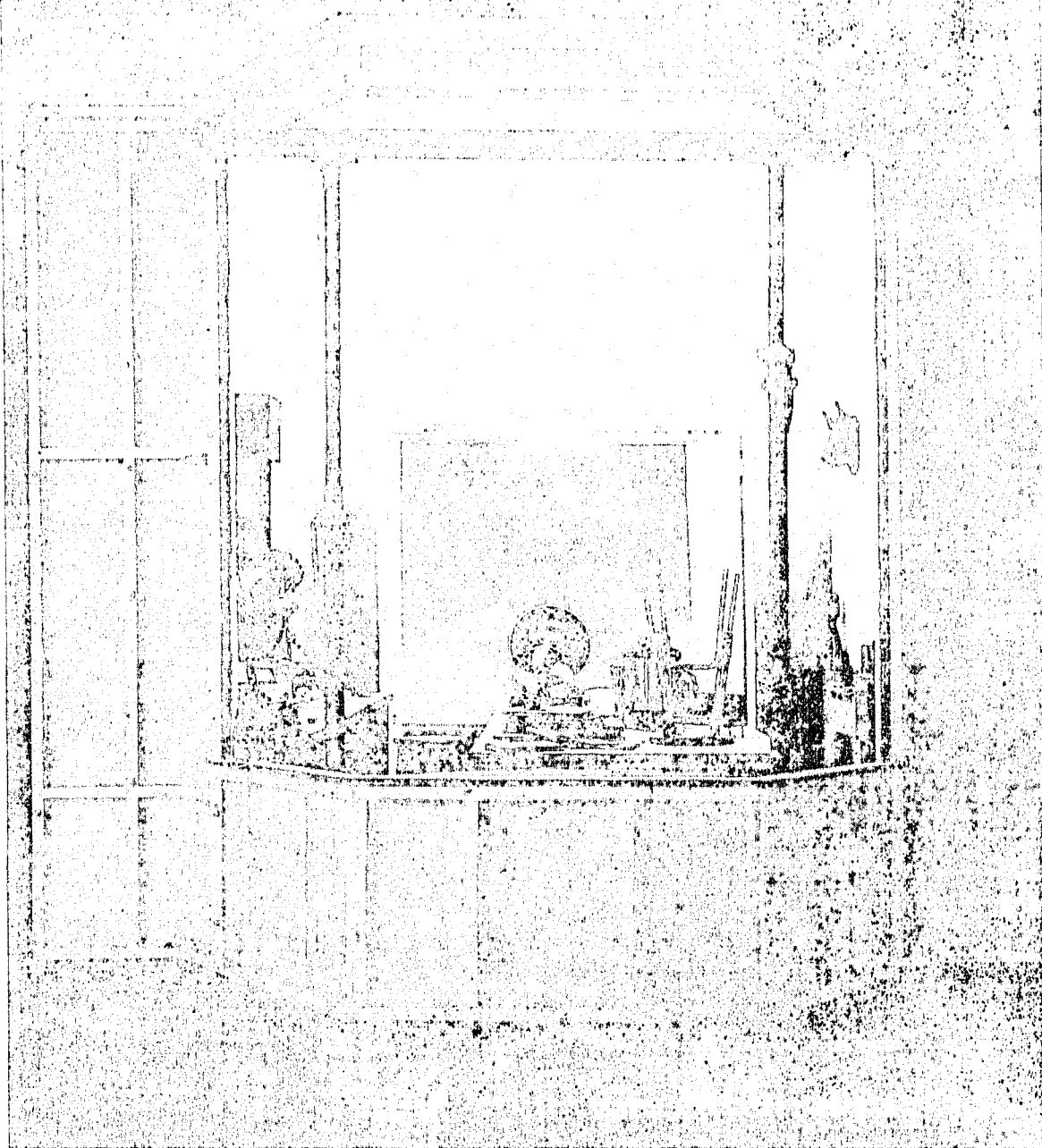
Figure 17: Mike Nelson. *Triple Bluff Canyon*. 2004. ("studio")
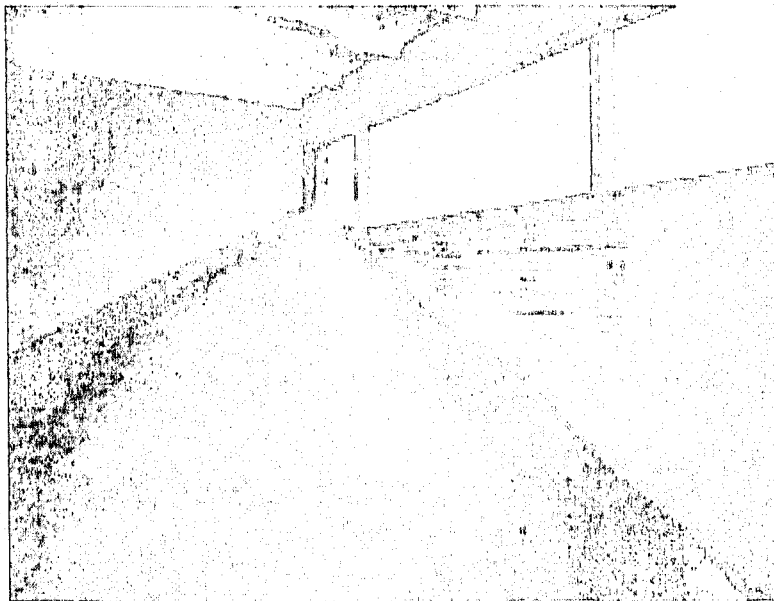
Figures 18–19: Mike Nelson. *Triple Bluff* Canyon. 2004. ("woodshed")
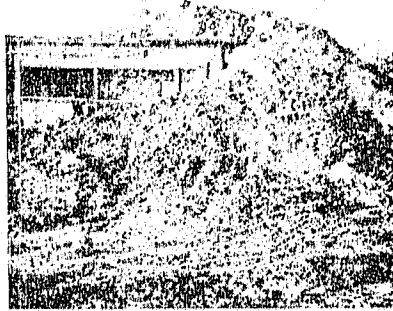
Figure 20: Mike Nelson. *Triple Bluff Canyon*, 2004. (catalogue cover)
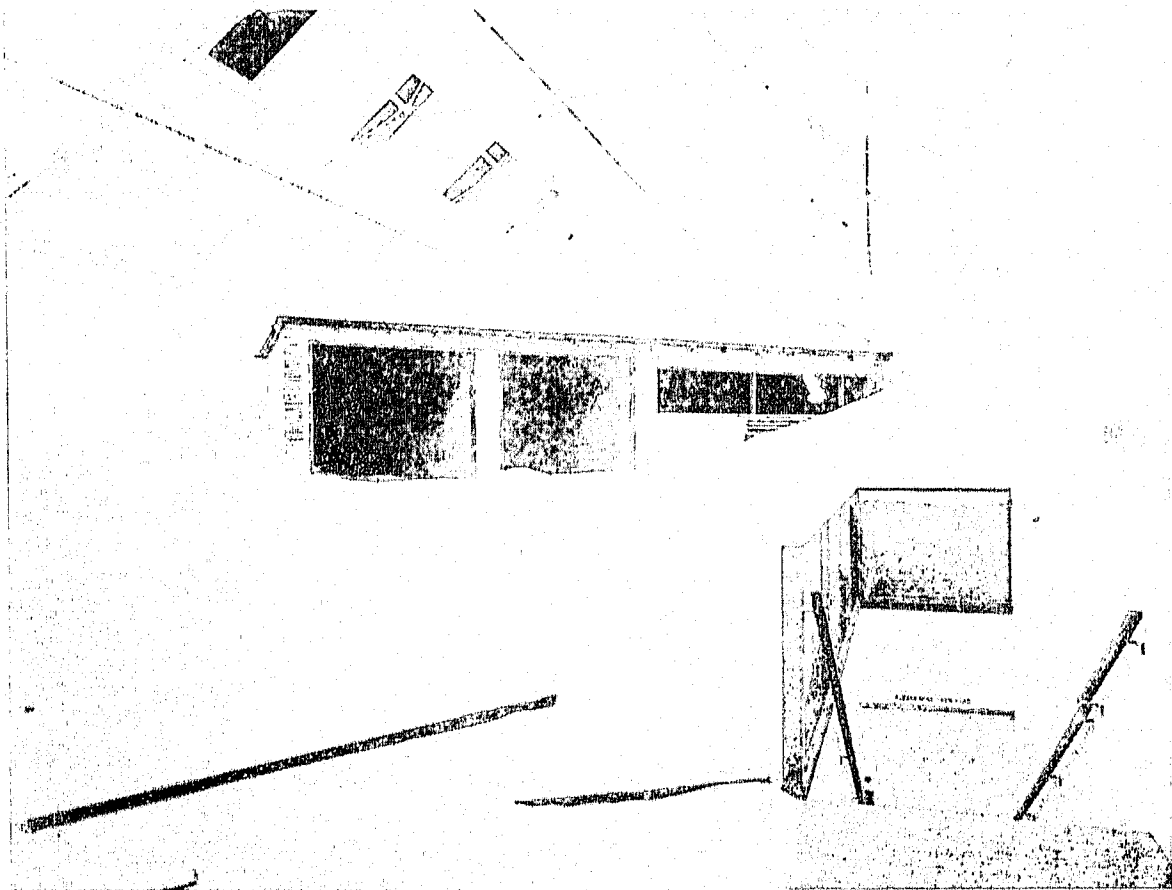
Figure 21: Mike Nelson. *Triple Bluff Canyon*. 2004. ("woodshed")
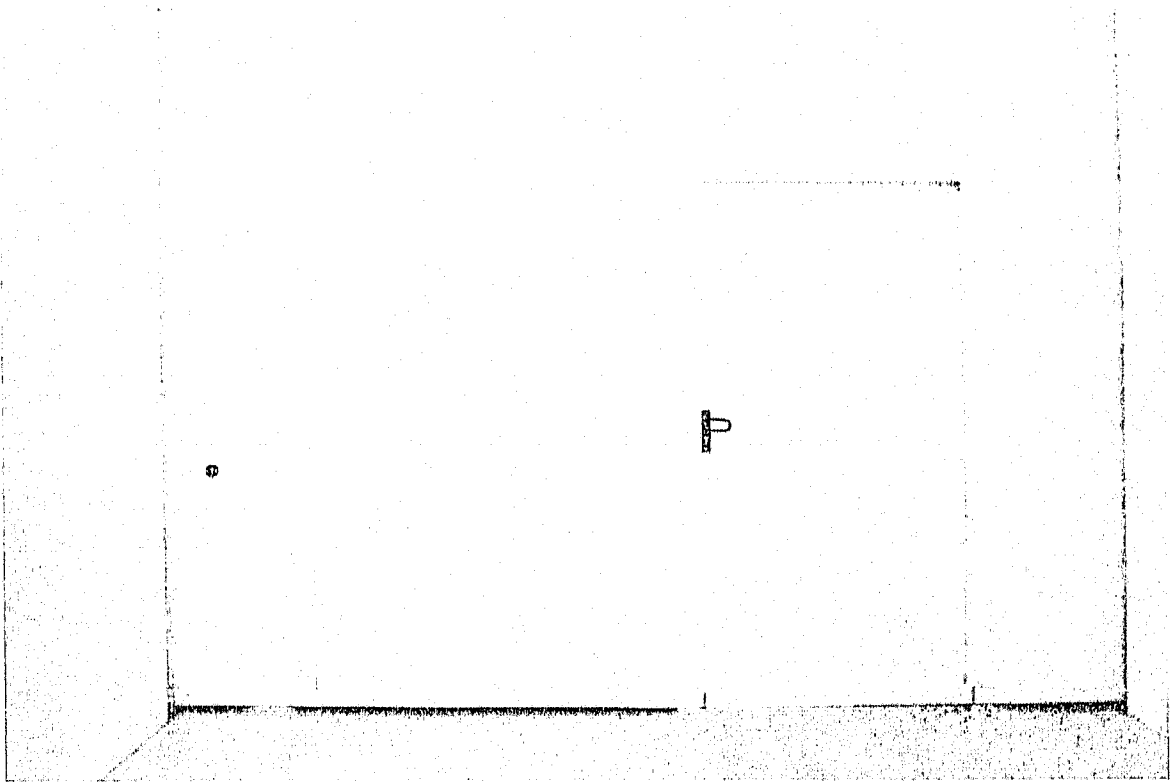
Figure 22: Gregor Schneider. *Weisse Folter*. 2007. (entrance)
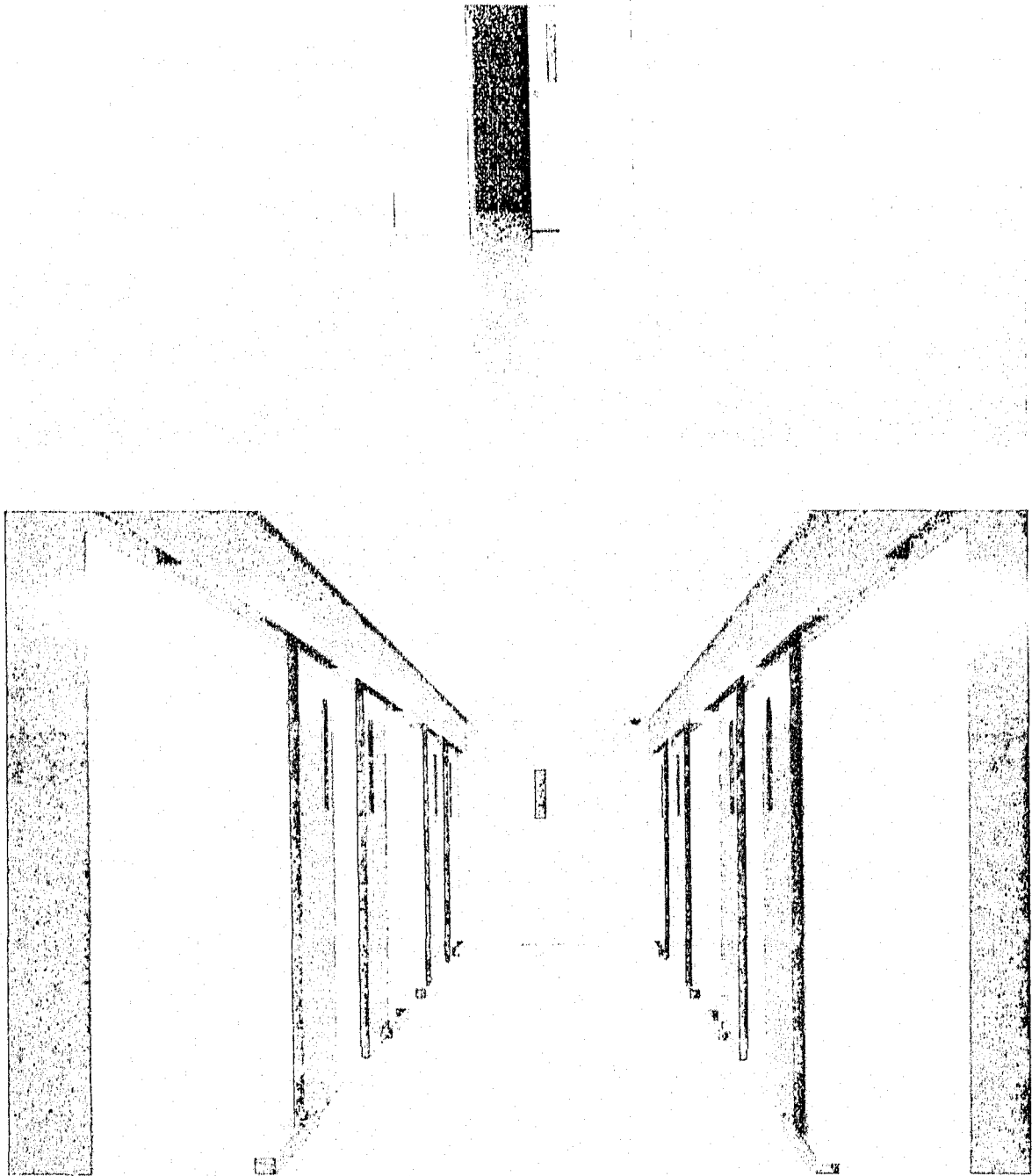
Figures 23-24: Gregor Schneider. *Weisse Folter*. 2007.
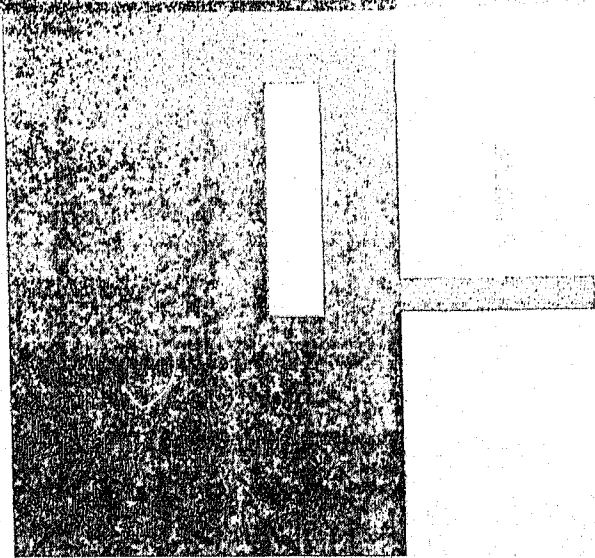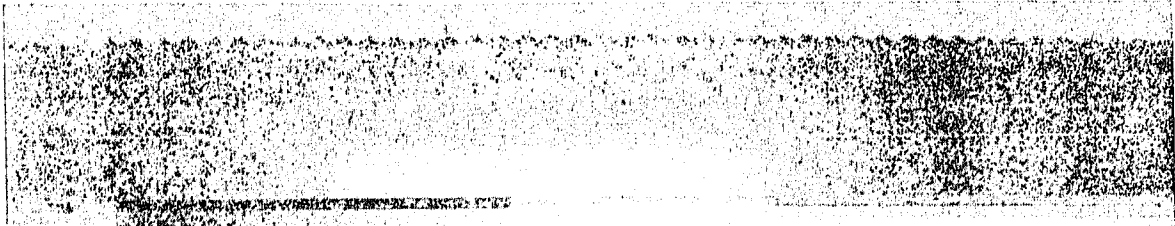
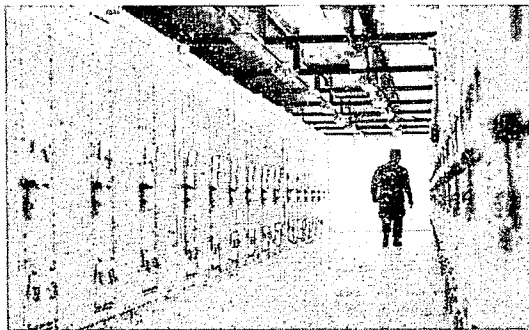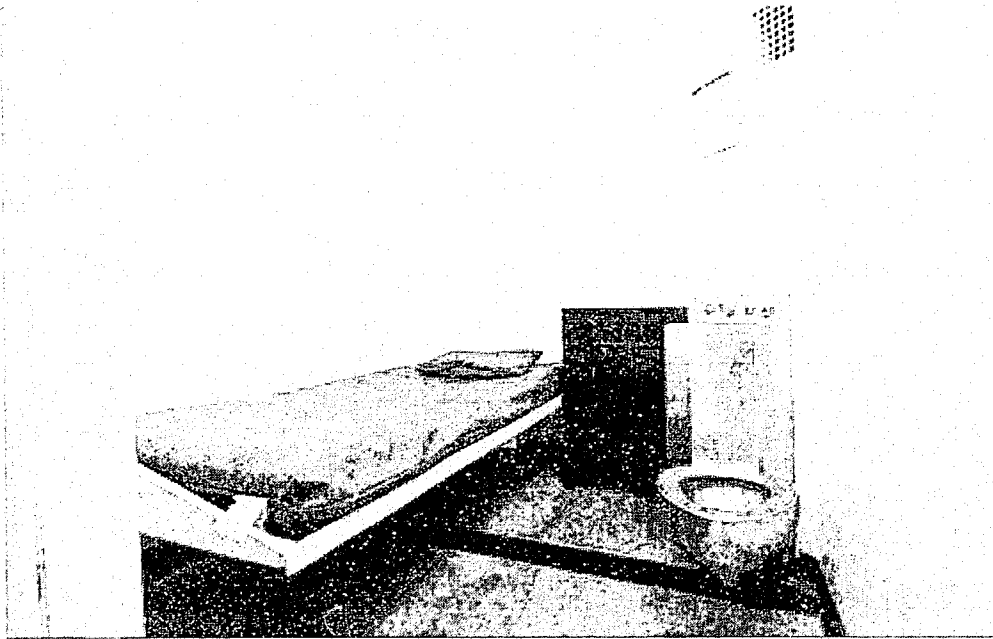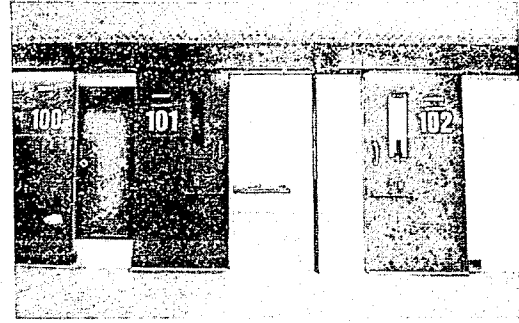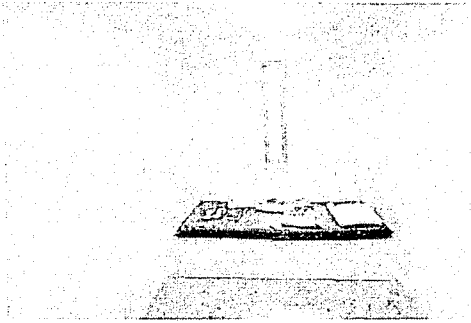**Figures 25-26**: Gregor Schneider. *Weisse Folter*. 2007.
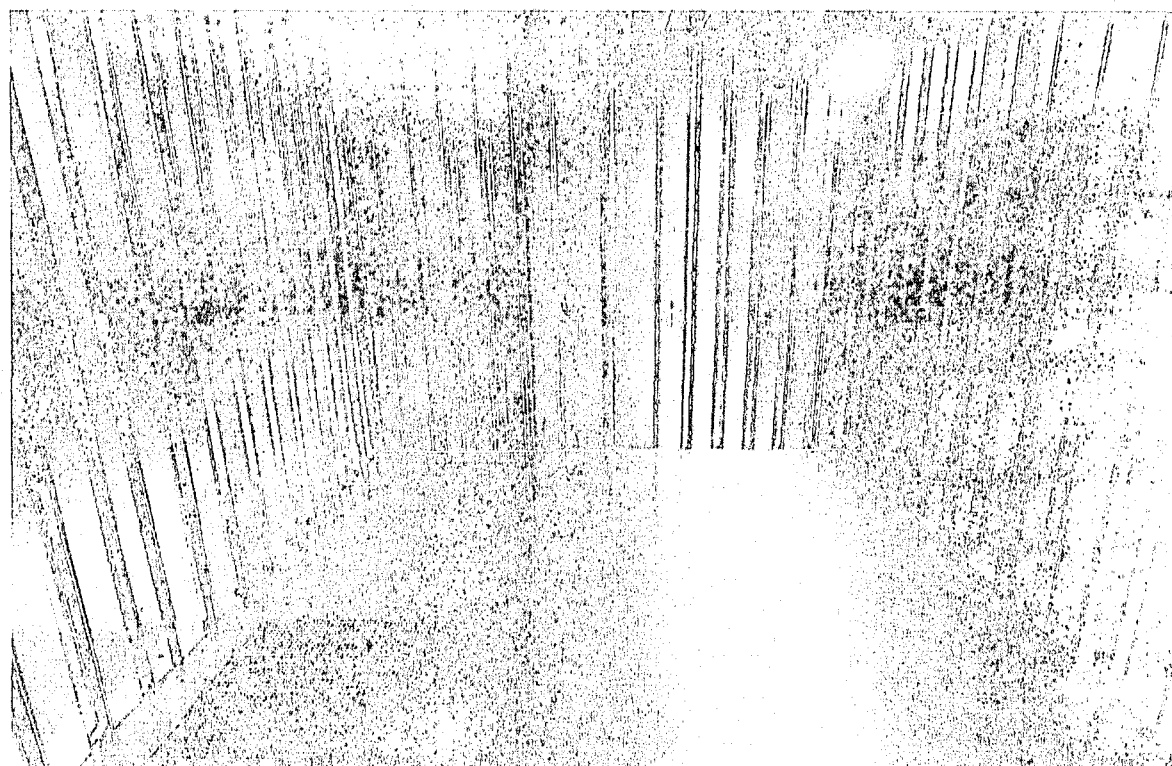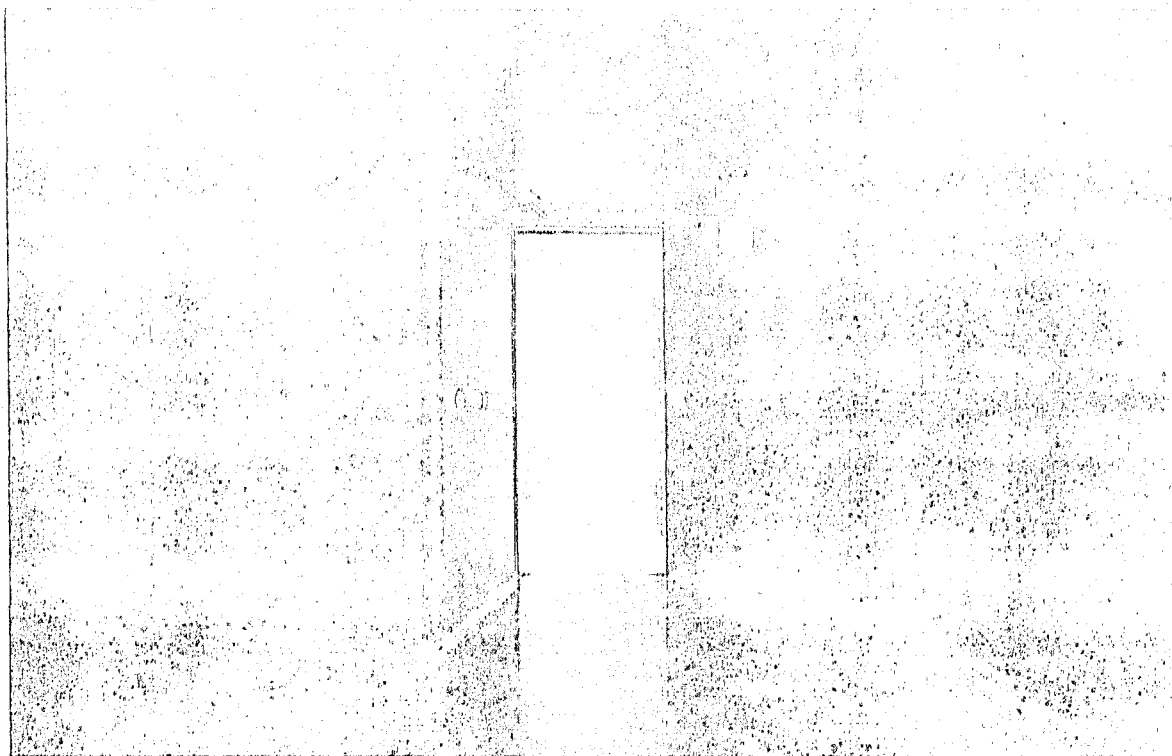
Figures 27/28: Gregor Schneider. *Weisse Folter*. 2007.
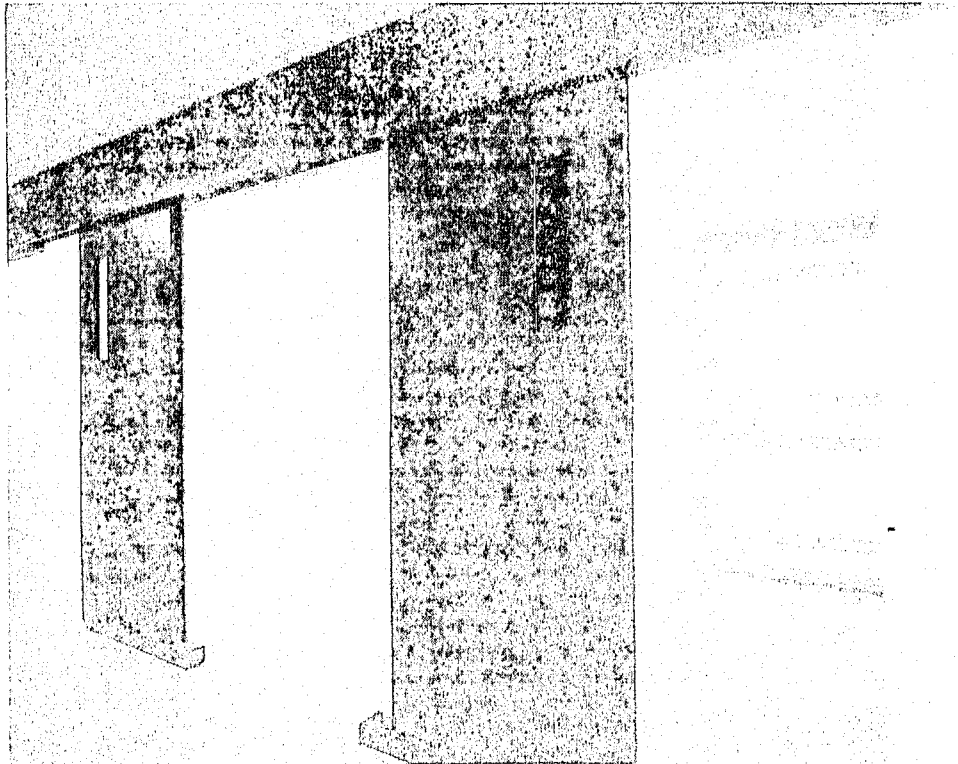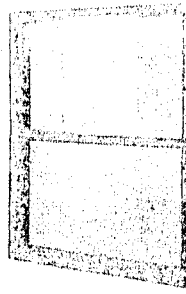
Figures 29-30: Gregor Schneider. *Weisse Folter*. 2007.
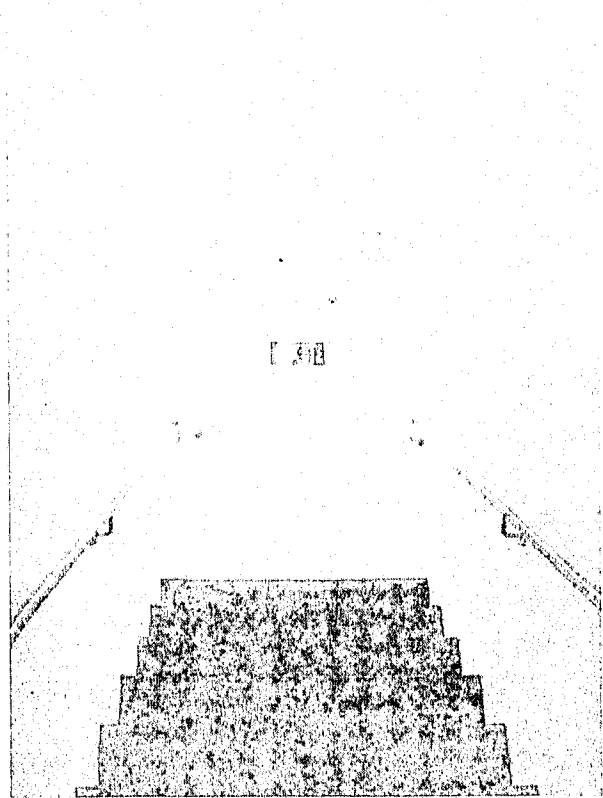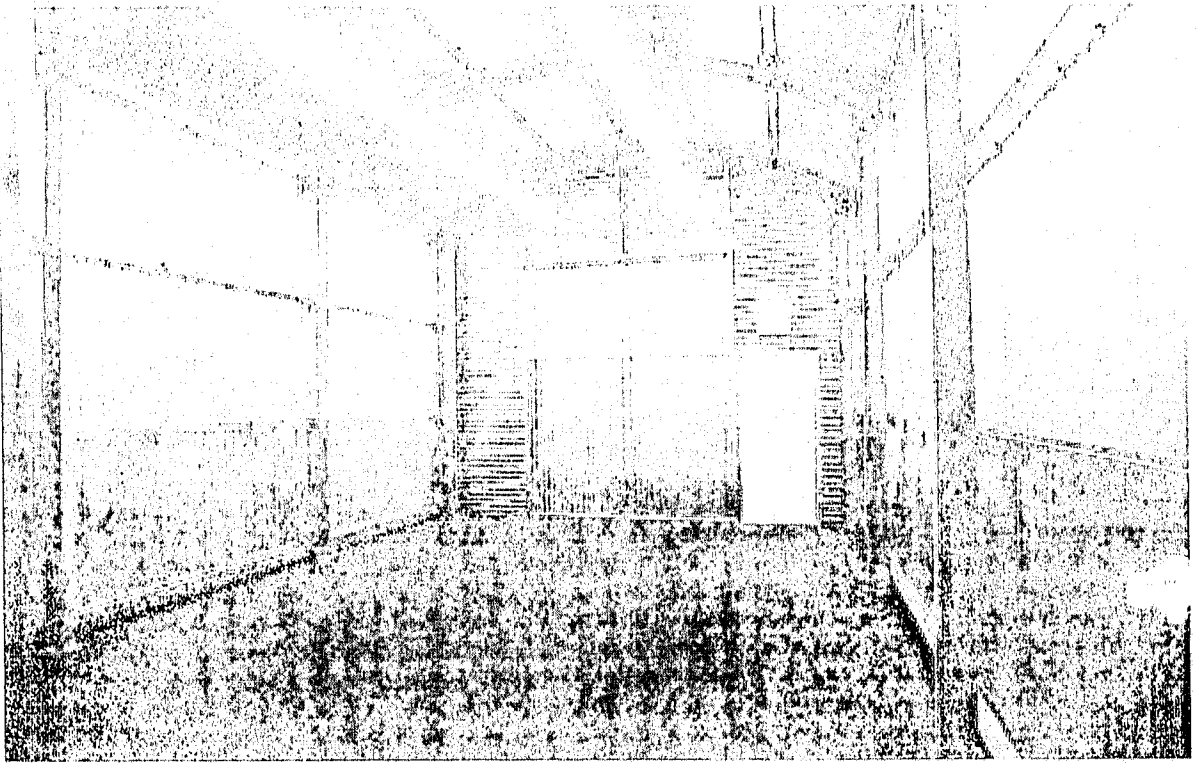
Figures 31-32: Gregor Schneider. *Weisse Folter*. 2007.
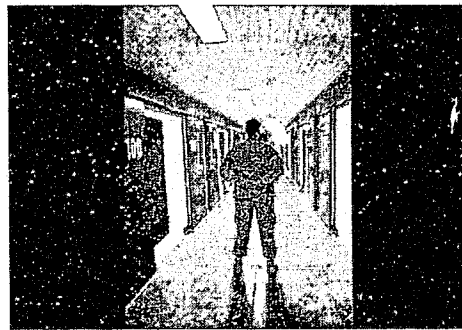
Figures 33-37: Images from the Internet of Camp V Delta, part of the long-term detention facility at U.S. Naval Station, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Figures 38-39: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. *Under Scan*. 2005.
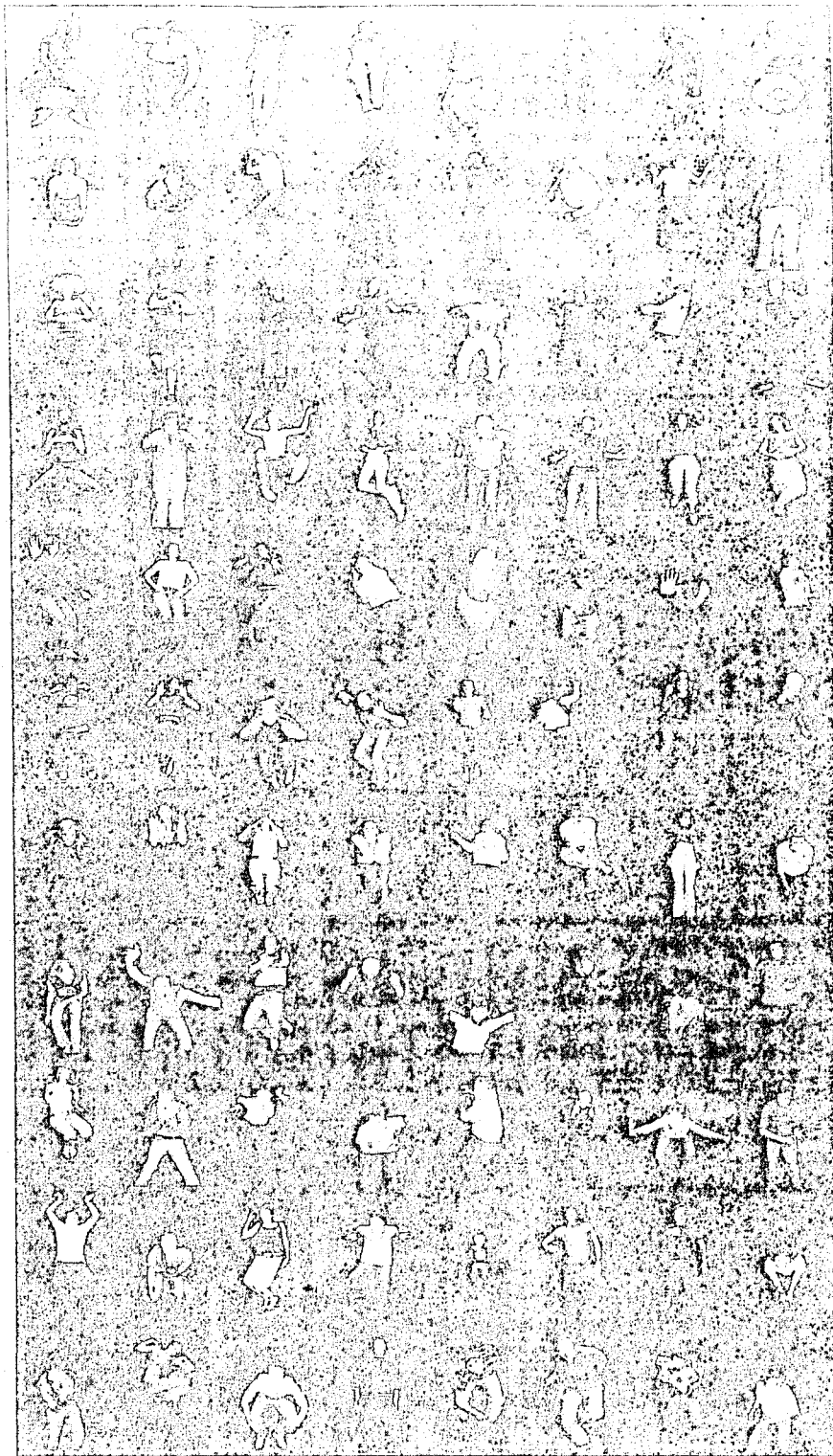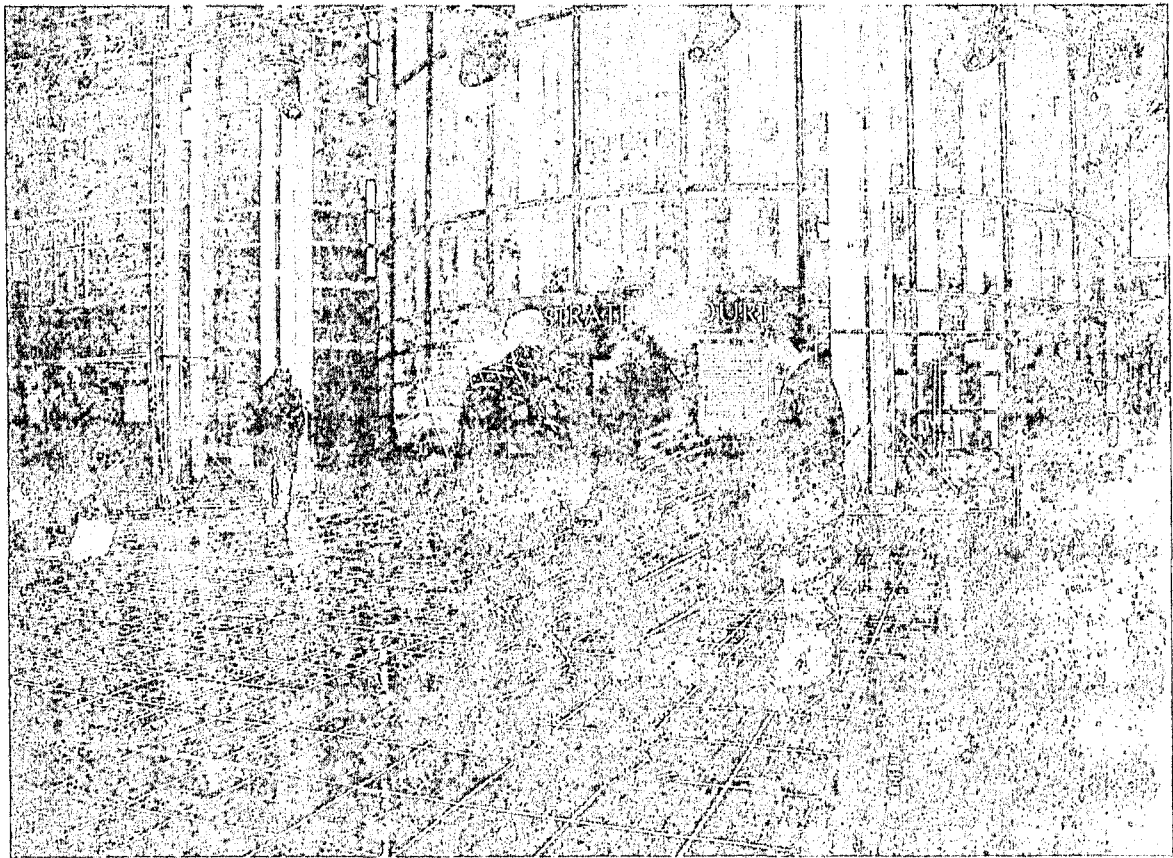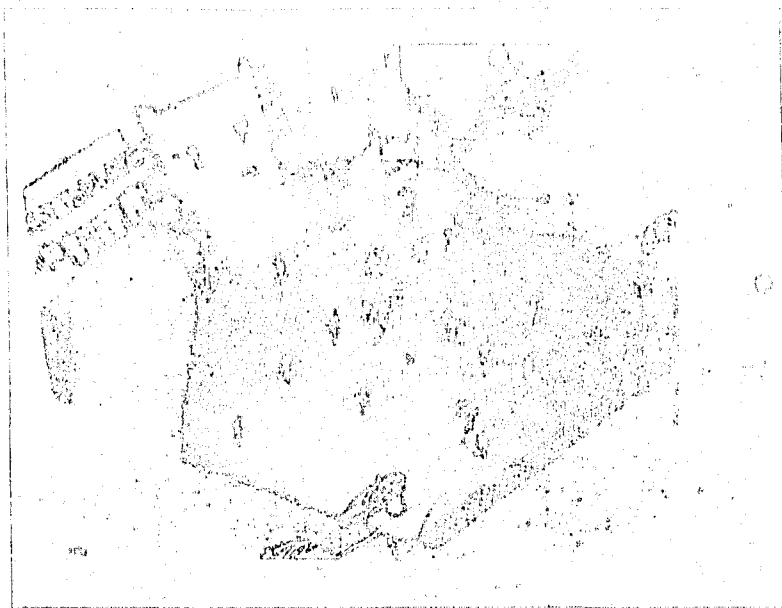
Figure 40: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. *Under Scan*. 2005. (database)

Figure 41: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. *Under Scan*. 2005.

Figures 42-43: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. *Under Scan*. 2005.

Figures 44-45: Rafael Lozano-Hemmer. *Under Scan*. 2005.

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