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# INSTALLATION ART



# MIMETIC ENGULFMENT

'He is similar, not similar to something, but just *similar*.' Roger Caillois'

## Darkness

Few of us have not lain in bed at night and felt ourselves slipping out of consciousness, our bodies enveloped in darkness as if by a soft black cloud. Yet in an age of pervasive electrical illumination we rarely experience darkness as a completely engulfing entity. Even at night, streetlamps and car headlights slip through chinks in the curtains to offer limited visibility. Stepping into a pitch-black installation may be one of the few times we experience total, consuming darkness. In most museum displays of contemporary art, an encounter with such spaces has become increasingly familiar. We leave behind a bright white gallery and step into a dark passageway that twists and turns on itself to block out the light. As we fumble for the reassuring presence of a wall to orient us, the blackness seems to press against our eyes. Even when the light of a video projection becomes visible as the main focus of the work, we still strain to locate our body in relation to the dark environment.

The kind of experience that such installations generate for the viewer is diametrically opposed to Minimalist sculpture and Postminimalist installation art. Rather than heightening awareness of our perceiving body and its physical boundaries, these dark installations suggest our dissolution; they seem to dislodge or annihilate our sense of self – albeit only temporarily – by plunging us into darkness, saturated colour, or refracting our image into an infinity of mirror reflections. Postminimalist installations are invariably spaces of light, where the body's physical limits are established and affirmed by their relationship to the sensible co-ordinates of a given space. By contrast, in the works discussed below, the possibility of locating ourselves in relation to the space is diminished, because this space is obscured, confused, or in some way intangible.

There is no 'placement' in engulfing blackness: I have no sense of where 'I' am because there is no perceptible space between external objects and myself. This is not to say that in darkness I experience a 'void': on the contrary, encounters, when they occur, are sudden and all too present; consider how objects become more jutting, awkward, unwieldy in a dark room. Yet until we do bump into someone or something, we can go forwards and backwards in the blackness without proof of having moved. At its extreme, this lack of orientation can even raise the question of whether it is accurate to speak of 'self-awareness' in these circumstances. Entering such rooms can make one aware of one's body, but as a loss: one does not sense one's boundaries, which are dispersed in the darkness, and one begins to coincide with the space.

The ideas above are indebted to the French psychiatrist Eugène Minkowski, who vividly describes in his book *Lived Time* (1933) how daylight is characterised by 'distance, extension and fullness', while the dark night has something more 'personal' about it since it *invades* the body rather than keeping its distance:

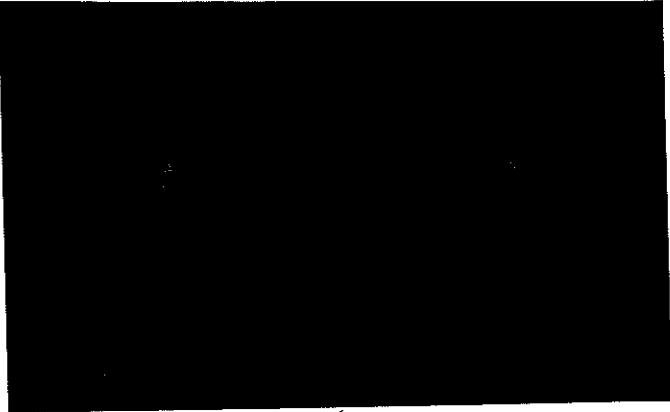
'I no longer have the black night, complete obscurity, before me; instead, it covers me completely, it penetrates my whole being, it touches me in a much more intimate way than the clarity of visual space.'<sup>2</sup> Minkowski gives a case study of schizophrenia and suggests that the patient's sense of being 'penetrated' by and dissolved in space may well be the overriding characteristic of human experience of darkness in general:

[dark space] does not spread out before me but touches me directly, envelops me, embraces me, even penetrates me completely, passes through me, so that one could almost say that while the ego is permeable by darkness it is not permeable by light. The ego does not affirm itself in relation to darkness but becomes confused with it, becomes one with it.<sup>3</sup>

Minkowski's ideas were taken up by the French theorist Roger Caillois (1913–78) whose 1935 essay 'Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia' analyses the phenomenon of insect camouflage or mimicry.<sup>4</sup> Observing that mimetic insects stand as great a chance of being eaten by predators as non-mimetic insects, Caillois concludes that what in fact occurs in the phenomenon of camouflage is 'a disturbance in the ... relations between personality and space'.<sup>5</sup> Insect mimicry is thus tantalisingly described by Caillois as a 'temptation by space', an assimilation to the surrounding environment that results from a *desire* for fusion between animate and inanimate. As with the human experience of dark space, argues Caillois, the mimetic insect is *decentred*: it no longer feels itself to be the origin of spatial co-ordinates, and its awareness of being an entity distinct from its external surroundings begins to disintegrate. The mimetic insect does not know where to place itself and is thus depersonalised: 'He is similar, not similar to something, but just *similar*'.<sup>6</sup> Caillois's argument is explicitly influenced by Freud's theory of the death drive, in which he posited an instinct of libidinal retreat, in other words, a desire to return to our primary biological condition as inanimate objects. Freud's theory is complicated and controversial – not least because the 'unbinding' work of the death drive can be experienced as both pleasurable and unpleasurable – but the idea of instinctual renunciation is key to the experience of mimetic engulfment structured for the viewer by the works in this chapter. The dualism of life and death drives, like that of conscious and unconscious psychic activity, was considered by Freud to destabilise the rational Enlightenment subject.

### **Lost in the light**

In many of the installations made by the American artist James Turrell (b.1943) since the late 1960s, viewers walk through a disorienting pitch-black corridor that extinguishes all residual daylight before finally emerging into a larger, darker space infused with deep colour. This colour becomes stronger (and even changes hue) as the cones and rods of our eyes adjust to the drop in light, a process that may take up to forty minutes. For a long time, therefore, we cannot identify the boundaries of the room we are in, nor see our own bodies, nor even differentiate



external colours and shapes from those that seem to derive from inside our eyes. In some of Turrell's darkest pieces – such as *Wedgework III* 1969 – we become aware of a glowing deep-blue wedge of light beyond what appears to be a white dais, but the terrain between our body and this space of light is unfathomably dark. In his series of 'Space-Division Pieces' such as *Earth Shadow* 1991, a dark room is lit only by two dim spotlights; the room appears to be empty but for a glowing rectangular shape on the far wall. When we advance towards this rectangle, its colour seems opaque and yet too evanescent to be solid. If we try and touch this coloured block of light, our tentatively outstretched hands pass *through* the anticipated surface to an unbounded volume of coloured fog – a revelation that is both unnerving and exhilarating. Standing before such fields of colour, our bodies are immersed in a rich, thick atmosphere of coloured light almost tangible in its density.

James Turrell is usually considered to be paradigmatic of the 'Light and Space' art discussed in Chapter Two. Like his Postminimalist contemporaries on the West Coast (Robert Irwin, Maria Nordman, Bruce Nauman), he was influenced by the way in which Minimalism's reductive and literal forms forced the viewer into heightened awareness of perception as embodied and interdependent with its surroundings. 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.<sup>8</sup> 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. Although the installations contain light, and materialise this as a tactile presence, they also eliminate all that we could call an 'object' situated as distinct from ourselves. Turrell describes the works as situations where 'imaginative seeing and outside seeing meet, where it becomes difficult to differentiate between seeing from the inside and seeing from the outside'.<sup>9</sup> This borderline status is quite distinct from the heightened self-reflexivity induced by Minimalist sculpture: 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?*'<sup>9</sup>

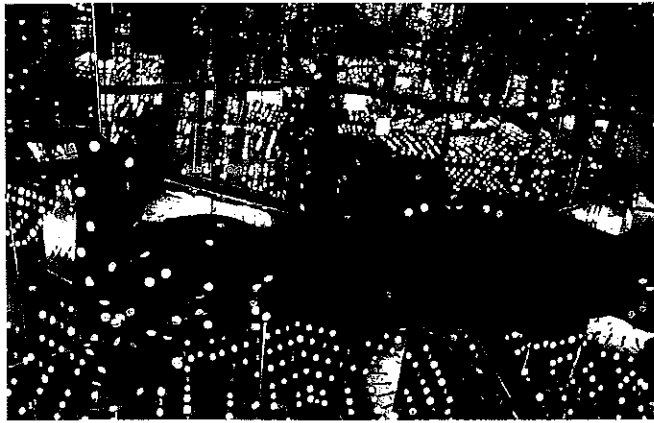
This mimetic elision of subject and environment is well demonstrated in accounts of Turrell's 1976 exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in which he adapted a series of four galleries to form a single installation, *Arhirit*. The work made use of research that he had undertaken with Robert Irwin during their joint participation in Los Angeles County Museum of Art's 'Art and Technology' programme in 1969. They had experimented with the perceptual effects of the Ganzfeld (a homogenous phenomenal space) and its aural equivalent, the anechoic chamber. *Arhirit* comprised a sequence of four Ganzfelds: the white

rooms were experienced by the viewer as a series of different coloured spaces, since the light entering each (through an aperture high on the wall) reflected particular objects outside the building (a green lawn or red brickwork). This gentle tinting of the white spaces was exaggerated in intensity by the sequencing of the rooms, so that the after-colour of one gallery space lingered on the retina to make its complement in the following room even stronger. Turrell could not fully have anticipated the physical response elicited by this installation: without form for the eye to latch onto, visitors fell over, disoriented, and were unable to keep their balance; many had to crawl through the exhibition on their hands and knees in order to prevent themselves from being 'lost in the light'.<sup>10</sup>

When *Arhirit* was reinstalled in single-room format as *City of Arhirit* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1980, several US visitors brought lawsuits against Turrell after having fallen through what they perceived to be a solid wall, but which in fact was just the edge of the Ganzfeld. In subsequent installations, Turrell divided viewers off from the Ganzfeld by a slim wall to create what he calls a 'sensing space' for the viewer to stand in. Even with the presence of this partition, the colour and darkness of his installations still seem to adhere to the body: as one critic noted, 'it is as though one's eyes were glued to this hazelike emanation, as though they were being sucked into it with deliberate determination'.<sup>11</sup> 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.

### **Mirror displacements**

Although Turrell's work is notable for its calmness and stillness, it also plays on a desire for abandonment, and this has led many critics to frame their response to his installations – with their unbounded, embracing opacity – in terms of spirituality, or a sense of the absolute. This is because it structures a subsuming *over-identification* with the void-like coloured space that engulfs and penetrates us. This provides a quite different challenge to the centred subject from that discussed in Chapter Two. In the installations of Dan Graham, we are made aware of the interdependency of our perception with that of other viewers: reflective glass and mirrors are used to disrupt the idea that subjectivity is stable and centred. For Turrell, the space in which such self-reflexive perception may take place is foreclosed, and we become one with the surrounding environment. The same mimetic engulfment may nonetheless occur with mirrors when set against each other to form a *mise-en-abyme* of reflections. From the early 1960s and throughout the 1970s there is a conspicuous rise in the number of artists incorporating mirrors in their work. Not all of these take the form of installation – one thinks of Michelangelo Pistoletto's ongoing series of *Mirror Paintings* 1962–, Robert Morris's *Untitled* mirror cubes 1965, Robert Smithson's *Minor Vortexes* of the mid-1960s, Michael Craig-Martin's *Face* 1972 and Lucio Fontana's *Cubo di*



Yayoi Kusama  
*Kusama's Peep Show or  
Endless Love Show*  
Castellane Gallery,  
New York, March 1966

*specchi* 1975. For the most part, this use of mirrors arises as a logical extension of the interest in phenomenological perception during this period: reflective surfaces were an obvious material with which to make viewers literally 'reflect' on the process of perception. But it is no coincidence that Jacques Lacan's paper on 'The Mirror Stage' was translated into English at this time (1968), and that his most significant discussion of visual art took place in his 1964 seminar 'The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis'.

Lacan's argument in 'The Mirror Stage' is underpinned by the idea that the literal act of reflection is formative of the ego. Unlike Merleau-Ponty's idea that consciousness is *confirmed* by reflection – 'seeing itself seeing itself' – Lacan instead stressed the fact that my first recognition of myself in the mirror is in fact a willed misrecognition, or *méconnaissance*: I am seduced by identification with the external impression of myself as a coherent, autonomous totality – when in fact I am fragmentary and incomplete. Lacan turns to the example of a person standing between two mirrors to show how the regress of reflections does not represent any progress in interiority and does not confirm the certainty of our self-identity; instead, the reflections destabilise the ego's fragile veneer. His thesis is easily affirmed if we situate ourselves between two or more mirrors. My sense of self is not corroborated by an infinity of reflections; on the contrary, it is unpleasant – even disturbing – to see the reflection of a reflection of myself, and stare into eyes that are certainly not anybody else's, but which do not feel commensurate with 'me'.<sup>12</sup>

This effect is well demonstrated in two installations exhibited within months of each other in 1966, both of which have (appropriately) doubled titles: *Kusama's Peep Show*, also known as *Endless Love Show*, by Yayoi Kusama and *Room 2*, subsequently retitled *Mirror Room*, by Lucas Samaras. Unlike the work of Robert Morris and Dan Graham, the mirrors in the work of Kusama and Samaras do not corroborate the present space-time of the viewer, but offer a mimetic experience of fragmentation. In these installations, our reflection is dispersed around the space to the point where we become, as Caillois writes, 'just *similar*'.

### Self-obliteration

In the work of Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama (b.1929), self-obliteration is a persistent motif – from her performances of the late 1960s, in which she used polka dots (painted or cut out of paper) to make herself and her performers blend in with an environment that had also been covered in similar dots, to more recent video work such as *Flower Obsession Sunflower 2000*, in which the artist wears a yellow hat and T-shirt and sits in a field of sunflowers; when the camera pulls back, she appears to be assimilated into her surroundings. In her return to installation art in the 1990s, such as *Dots Obsession 1998* and *Mirror Room (Pumpkin) 1991*, Kusama has designed and worn special outfits that integrate her into the colour and pattern of the room.

Of course, the experience of mimicry in these pieces exists primarily for the artist: it is hard for the visitor in everyday clothing to feel remotely 'similar' to an installation of enormous coloured balloons covered in dots. However, in Kusama's mirrored installations of the mid-1960s, such as *Kusama's Peep Show*—a mirrored hexagonal room with coloured lights flashing in time to a pop soundtrack that includes songs by The Beatles—the viewer does become 'one object among many' in a visual field. Kusama was photographed inside this room, as she has been inside most of her installations, but viewers today remain on its exterior (itself confusingly installed in a mirrored room), looking in through one of two peep holes to the interior. Stretching out as far as the eye can see are reflections of your eyes (angled from left, right and centre), interspersed with flashing lights and blaring music. Although the title and viewing holes allude to erotic peep shows, there is no gratification of voyeurism in this work: the only performers are your own eyes darting in their sockets, multiplied to infinity.

Given the work's alternative title, *Endless Love Show*, it would seem that viewers were intended to experience this installation in the company of someone who would look through the second peep hole; two sets of eyes would be cast around the room and be fused as one.<sup>13</sup> The title of this work—as with her other pieces and exhibitions, such as *Love Forever*, *Love Room*, *Endless Love Show*—is typical of a 1960s psychedelic sensibility in appealing to the fantasy of a shared social body whose intersubjective immanence would obliterate individual difference: 'all you need is love' to fight individualistic capitalism.<sup>14</sup> The 'endless love' ethos, although premised on self-obliterative impulses, is ultimately in the service of erotic fusion: 'Become one with eternity. Obliterate your personality. Become part of your environment. Forget yourself. Self-destruction is the only way out... I become part of the eternal and we obliterate ourselves in Love.'<sup>15</sup>

The obliteration of self-image has also been an enduring motif in the work of Lucas Samaras since the late 1960s.<sup>16</sup> In his *Autopolaroids 1970-1*, he double- and triple-exposed his naked image in order to present his profile, his hands and body fading in and out of the holes in his furniture, embracing himself in his kitchen, or obliterated in shadows and pools of light. This doubled and mimetic relationship to both his image and environment takes three-dimensional form in his *Mirror Room*, first shown at the Pace Gallery, New York, in 1966. Unlike the hexagonal *Kusama's Peep Show*, Samaras's work comprises a cube into which the viewer enters. The room is large enough to contain not just the standing visitor but a table and chair, also covered in mirrors. If Kusama's work has an expansive coherence in its illusion of infinity (the octagonal walls reflect enough to keep the viewer's multiplied face identifiable in the darkness), Samaras's panelled room, made of hundreds of smaller mirrored plates, dissolves the viewer's perception of both body and space into a kaleidoscope of fragmented shards.

Kim Levin has described the experience of walking into this work as yielding 'the disorienting precarious feeling of seeing yourself endlessly receding, a feeling

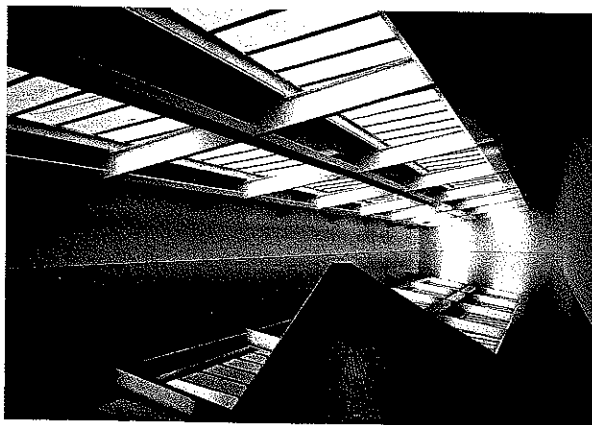
of vertigo, a dropping in the pit of your stomach as from a dream of falling'.<sup>17</sup> The director of Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, which acquired the work in 1966, described it in more euphoric terms: 'When you're inside it, you feel you're floating on a cloud. Infinity stretches out in all directions. You see yourself reflected thousands of times.'<sup>18</sup> But if Kusama's use of mirror reflections was in the service of 'endless love', Samaras's work derives from more violent and morbid impulses. In a statement to Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Samaras writes that 'the idea for a completely mirror covered cube room occurred to me around 1963 when I incorporated the idea in a short story, *Killman*'. Levin has also recorded how Samaras, growing up in Greece, recollected the 'scary' custom of covering the mirrors of a house while a corpse was in it.<sup>19</sup> More important for the artist, however, was the way in which a mirror, during adolescence, 'was used to inspect portions of one's body identity, and it was also used as an aid in the physical mimicry of adults and the opposite sex. Sometimes one's image in the mirror became an audience but most of the time it was a source of perplexion.'<sup>20</sup> For the viewer too, *Mirror Room* structures an experience of the body fragmented into separate pieces:

Samaras continued to pursue the theme of mirrored space, now with sadistic intent. *Corridor 1* 1967 comprises a mirrored corridor that turns back on itself twice as the ceiling slopes lower, until the viewer must crouch down to exit the work; *Room 3*, made in Kassel in 1968, returned to the cube format but was armed inside and out with protruding mirrored spikes. Entering via a low door, visitors invariably bumped their heads on a spike above the entrance as they tried to stand up. Arnold Glimcher, director of the Pace Gallery, vividly described the disorienting character of this work: 'You didn't know where the points really were in the slick wet dark light, you were totally inhibited, your perceptual faculties were completely confused. It was terrifying.'<sup>21</sup>

It is noticeable in discussions of the work of both Kusama and Samaras that viewers' accounts of this work fall into one of two categories: oceanic bliss or claustrophobic horror. This is not something that the artist can predict, and there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to experience such a work. Because the pieces use mirror reflections to dislocate our sense of self-presence and play with our orientation, they solicit an individual response that reflects the dual role of the ego as understood by Lacanian psychoanalysis: as a comforting defence against fragmentation, or as an all too fragile mirage.

### **Through the looking glass**

Since first being exhibited in 1987 at Matt's Gallery in east London, the installation *20:50* by British artist Richard Wilson (b.1953) has acquired a media reputation verging on cult status. The installation comprises a room half filled with 200 gallons of used sump oil, and entered by viewers – one or two at a time – via a narrow wedge-like walkway that runs from one corner diagonally into the



Richard Wilson  
*20:50*  
Saatchi Gallery,  
Boundary Road, London,  
1987

centre of the space. Visitors are requested to leave coats and bags behind before entering, and this unburdening of chattels inadvertently charges the experience with a quasi-ritualistic character; as one critic has noted, entering the installation is like 'a journey half-way across the River Styx'.<sup>22</sup> This deposit of baggage also serves an aesthetic purpose, since it heightens awareness of the way in which the wedged steel walkway closes in on the boundaries of our body (the sides are waist high but appear to fall away as the ramped floor rises). As you walk along the gangplank, you seem to rise gently above this turbid lake of oil whose reflective surface provides a perfect mirror of the room.

At first glance *20:50* appears to be an object of phenomenological enquiry in the tradition of Nauman's corridors discussed in the previous chapter. It can also be read symbolically (in the style of the 'dream scene' installations of Chapter One), since the title refers to the viscosity of standard engine oil: as an elegaic embrace of industrial waste, *20:50* has been seen to encapsulate the tension between technological production and nature.<sup>23</sup> However, the disorienting reflections that form such an integral part of *20:50* align it with the mimetic concerns of Freud and Caillois. As with Turrell's tangible abysses of light, the oil of *20:50* is both threatening and seductive: it has been compared to a 'terrifying void' that 'draws you down into its still and fathomless depths'; it is 'forbidding' and 'sinister', even 'menacing', yet challenges you to 'brave its velvety surface'.<sup>24</sup> The ambiguous character of the oil mimics the room in which it is installed and in doing so appears to evacuate us from the space. Indeed, standing at the narrow tip of the walkway – wide enough for one person only – we seem weightless, hovering above the oil, which in turn seems to disappear, present only through its prickly smell and the occasional speck of dirt on its surface. The stilled reflection of the walls and ceiling adds a morbid touch (one critic compared the experience of this work to the sailor's fate of 'walking the plank'). The dense inertia of the oil is marked by a lucid, hyperreal stasis; one moment it is overproximate, a mass of stagnant liquid matter that threatens to spill over to where you stand, the next it is all but invisible, disappearing beneath its reflection.

When installed at the former Saatchi gallery in north London, the glass ceiling gave viewers the impression of being suspended over a void: at a certain point the reflections ceased to be the spectral double of the room and actually assumed the uncanny solidity of a darkened world. This oscillation between presence and absence, threatening and seductive, draws the viewer into a dizzying, disembodied state – not unlike the 'syncretistic' vision described by Anton Ehrenzweig as crucial to the 'oceanic' experience of artistic creation. In *The Hidden Order of Art* (1967), Ehrenzweig describes how, in syncretistic vision, the libido is not drawn to meaningful configurations (gestalts) but surveys everything with an 'open-eyed empty stare', in which the artist is unable to extricate him or herself from the work as a separate entity ('as we reach the deepest oceanic levels of dedifferentiation the boundaries between the inside and outside world melt away

and we feel engulfed and trapped inside the work of art').<sup>25</sup> The dark and simulacral mirror of the oil exerts a similarly irresistible pull on the viewer's unconscious, and this is especially acute when the work is seen at night: the dark windows form the final veil between the night sky below and an oceanic chasm beneath.

### **Video Atopia**

In his article 'A Cinematic Atopia' (1971), the American artist Robert Smithson (1938–73) describes the engulfing lethargy of sitting in a cinema and watching films. The consuming darkness removes us from the world, suspending us in an alternative reality in which our bodies are subordinated to eyesight:

Going to the cinema results in an immobilisation of the body. Not much gets in the way of one's perception. All one can do is look and listen. One forgets where one is sitting. The luminous screen spreads a murky light throughout the darkness ... The outside world fades as the eyes probe the screen.<sup>26</sup>

Smithson revels in the sheer number of films in existence; for him they swarm together in a celluloid mass to cancel each other out in a pool of tangled light and action. In the face of this 'vast reservoir of pure perception', the viewer is 'impassive' and 'mute', 'a captive of sloth' whose perception descends into 'sluggishness'. Indeed, the ultimate filmgoer, Smithson notes:

would not be able to distinguish between good or bad films, all would be swallowed up into an endless blur. He would not be watching films, but rather experiencing blurs of many shades. Between blurs he might even fall asleep, but that wouldn't matter. Sound tracks would hum through the torpor. Words would drop through this languor like so many lead weights. This dozing consciousness would bring about a tepid abstraction. It would increase the gravity of perception ... All films would be brought into equilibrium – a vast mud field of images forever motionless. But ultimate movie-viewing should not be encouraged.

Initially Smithson's text seems to be derogatory, as if he – like so many of his contemporaries – is deriding the passivity of mass-media spectacle. But the evident pleasure that he takes in his writing makes it impossible to align him with denigrators of mass-media consumption in this period. Instead, Smithson's vocabulary is permeated by a fascination with entropy, the idea of the physical and spatial energy drain that he took from the second law of thermodynamics, and which underpinned his artistic practice and theoretical interests. The inevitable dissolution of entropy was for Smithson a manifestation of the Freudian death-drive; the latter's dual aspect of unpleasurable disintegration and pleasurable retreat into nothingness is clearly visible in Smithson's droll and vivid language.<sup>27</sup>

Smithson wrote this essay just before film theory was to undergo a radical upheaval through the influence of Marxist and psychoanalytic thinking in French and English leftist intellectual circles during the 1970s. Focused around the magazines *Communications*, *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Screen*, this new and

heavily theorised discipline culminated in two key articles, written in 1975: 'The Imaginary Signifier' by Christian Metz and 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' by Laura Mulvey. Both writers were concerned with the 'apparatus' of cinema itself – the way in which viewers identify with the camera's eye – and the ideological pacification that this engenders. Both essays are more concerned with our psychological relationship to the content of a film than to our experience of viewing it in a cinema. However, Metz's tutor Roland Barthes discusses precisely this latter situation in 'Leaving the Movie Theatre', an essay that can only be regarded as a riposte to his former student.<sup>28</sup> Since he accounts for our experience of cinema in spatial (rather than simply psychological) terms, Barthes's essay permits a consideration of video installation as a practice distinct from cinema. His starting point is an evocative description of how we leave cinemas: in a slight daze, with a soft, limp and sleepy body. He thus compares the experience of watching a film to being hypnotised, and the ritual of entering the dimmed space of a cinema as 'pre-hypnotic'. Unlike Metz and his generation, who are suspicious of the ideological hold film has over us, Barthes is willing to be fascinated and seduced. This is because he does not consider cinema to be solely the film itself, but the whole 'cinema-situation': the dark hall, the 'inoccupation of bodies' within it, viewers cocooned in their seats. Unlike television, whose domestic space holds no erotic charge, cinema's urban darkness is anonymous, exciting, available.

This is not to say that Barthes is unwary of 'cinematographic hypnosis' and its hold over us: indeed, it 'glues' us to the screen, fascinating and seducing us, just like our reflection in the mirror (Barthes deliberately alludes to Lacan's article). Following contemporary film theorists of that decade, he suggests that film's ideological hold can be broken by arming ourselves with a counter-ideology, whether this be internal (such as a critical vigilance to what we are watching) or external, via the film itself (as in Brechtian alienation, or the chopped-up narratives of Godard). But for Barthes these are not the only ways with which to break the spell of cinema; the strategy that interests him most, he says enigmatically, is to 'complicate a "relation" by a "situation"'. In other words, he advocates that we be 'fascinated *twice over*' by cinema:

by the image and *by its surroundings* – as if I had two bodies at the same time: a narcissistic body which gazes, lost, into the engulfing mirror, and a perverse body, ready to fetishise not just the image but precisely what exceeds it: *the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of the other bodies, the rays of light, entering the theatre, leaving the hall.*<sup>29</sup>

This enthrallment with the 'surroundings' of cinema is the impulse behind so much contemporary video installation: its dual fascination with both the image on screen and the conditions of its presentation. Carpeting, seating, sound insulation, size and colour of the space, type of projection (back, front or freestanding) are all ways with which to seduce and simultaneously produce



Isaac Julien  
*Baltimore*  
Installation at FACT,  
Liverpool,  
Feb–April 2003

a critically perceptive viewer. Works like Isaac Julien's three-channel installation *Baltimore* 2003 make manifest the psychological and physical split that Barthes describes: we are enticed by the smooth play of images across the screens, but also by the intense blue walls that surround them. In Douglas Gordon's free-standing projections, such as *Between Darkness and Light* 1997, viewers circumnavigate a large screen on either side of which two different films are simultaneously projected. The video installations of Eija-Liisa Ahtila (such as *Today* 1999) and Stan Douglas (*Win, Place or Show* 1998, for example) both use multiple screens to present alternative versions of a narrative. Tellingly, many of these works do not immerse the viewer in darkness: dark space (with its mystical and mystifying atmosphere) would run counter to the focused rationality and concentration needed to investigate and elucidate these narratives. The viewer's split and desirous relationship to both the image and the physical 'cinema-situation' is integral to all of these artists' works.

Addressing what exceeds the cinematic image, then, provides an important alternative to the model of 'activation' discussed in the previous chapter, together with a different modality of destabilising the viewer. The split focus of moving image and surrounding situation together serves to distance art from spectacle – yet this distance is ambiguous, since contemporary artists are (like Barthes) as smitten with the cinematic object as they are critical of it. This is a significant difference between contemporary video art and its 1970s forebears, for whom the medium of video was often deliberately contrived to frustrate the viewer and thwart visual pleasure as a direct opposition to the mainstream use of the moving image – as exemplified in Joan Jonas's *Vertical Roll* 1972, Vito Acconci's *Red Tapes* 1976, or Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* 1975 and *Domination and the Everyday* 1978.

### Technological fragmentation

One of video installation's pioneers, the American artist Bill Viola (b.1951), has recently come under attack by the art historian Anne Wagner. She has suggested that unlike Acconci, Jonas and Rosler, who refuse 'any guarantees of pleasure, whether bodily or artistic, or offers of entertainment, whether passive or voyeuristic', Viola has no mistrust of his medium.<sup>30</sup> Wagner argues that for the 1970s generation, such scepticism was a necessary rejection of 'the public pleasures of television, which, like the offers of advertising, centre on illusions of presence, intimacy, and belonging'. One way of refusing the pacifying comfort of mass-media, she suggests, is for artists to create a discrepancy between 'what the viewer sees and feels, and what she can be sure she knows'. For Wagner (and for many of her colleagues writing in the journal *October*), it is our relationship to video's content that must be tackled, not its presentation in an installation. For them, the redoubled, eroticised fascination that Barthes proposes – 'the bliss of discretion' in the cinema-situation – is not a critical alternative.



Bill Viola  
*Five Angels for the  
Millennium 2001*  
Collection: Tate, London

Even so, Wagner is right to suggest that Viola's recent work emblematises a certain complacency with regard to video as a medium. His imagery has become increasingly religious, often deriving from or suggesting paintings, and the work is ever more slick and populist, employing the latest plasma screens and special effects. In *Five Angels for the Millennium 2001*, a vast dark room filled with ambient music accompanies five large-scale projections; an absorptive darkness and immersive imagery combine to engulf and soothe the viewer. Each screen is saturated in richly coloured watery imagery (it is hard to ascertain if they are filmed from above or beneath the surface), and on each one in turn we are shown the figure of a man falling through or leaping out of the fluid depths. The screens are individually titled – *Departing, Birth, Fire, Ascending* and *Creation* – and these metaphysical names suitably reflect the portentous mood of the imagery. The work clearly aspires to an immersive experience for the viewer, where we are fused with the darkness and identify with the figure passing through sublimely elemental colour.

The popular reception of Viola's recent work as 'spiritual' is reminiscent of writing on Turrell, and for similar reasons: Viola's work has always consorted with the metaphysical, but for a brief period he produced a more aggressively bleak type of art. In his video installations of the early 1990s, a tougher, more existential approach to the video medium (and the darkness in which it is projected) is adopted. In these works, Viola does not encourage a fusion with the absolute (as is implicit in *Five Angels*) but explores a more annihilating brand of subjective fragmentation. The four-screen installation *The Stopping Mind* 1991 offers a dark, protean rush of images (operations, barking dogs, owls flying, desert roads at night, figures tossing in their sleep) in a way that only just keeps disintegration below the surface. The camerawork is not slick and polished, but harnesses the glitches and errors inherent in video technology to exaggerate its affective impact. The staging of these screens reinforces this fragmentation further: entering into a black chamber, you encounter the four hanging screens, each showing frozen imagery. Moving towards the centre you hear a man whispering a description, at high speed, of his body's progressive loss of sensation in an unknown black space. A loud grating noise suddenly sets the images on the screens into motion and we are harried by jolting camerawork. The shock of this movement catches us off-guard. Just as suddenly, the screens become still and silent, and the whispered voice resumes its description of sinking down into blackness. *The Stopping Mind* has been seen as a metaphor for consciousness – the coloured 'external' world of the video screens contrasting with the 'internal' and 'unconscious' whispered voice of the artist. But the two realms remain disconnected, and suspend the viewer in an uneasy hiatus. We may be 'centred' in the installation (it is only by standing at its very middle that one can fully hear Viola's voice) but our relationship to the sound and the images on screen is perpetually on the verge of collapse.

The three-screen installation *Tiny Deaths* 1993, addresses our experience of darkness more directly. We are plunged into total blackness before emerging into a penumbral space: on the three walls ahead are projections, dimly lit and barely visible in the darkness. A low-level murmuring of indecipherable voices can be heard. The screens do not emit enough light to enable us to see where we are in the room, nor to identify the presence of other visitors. On each wall we gradually become aware of the dim shadow of a human form, flickering in slow motion. Gradually a light source appears on one of the figures, increasing in intensity until it is consumed in a flash of white light. During this burst of brightness, the whole room is momentarily illuminated; then abruptly, everything is plunged back into darkness until the cycle begins again. Viola's work does not give one's retina time to adjust to the drop in light, and one is repeatedly made to undergo the experience of being plunged into darkness. This disorientation is integral to the installation, since it oscillates our attention between identification with the figures on screen, the silhouettes of other visitors visible against them, and the darkness into which we are submerged. Each burst of light momentarily illuminates the room, but plunges us deeper and more irreparably into the blinding darkness that follows. Viewers are mimetically engulfed by the work on two levels: in the consuming darkness, and as shadows merging with the silhouettes on screen.

#### **Aural engulfment**

Sound can be as immersive as darkness, and the work of Canadian artist Janet Cardiff (b.1957) demonstrates this well. Cardiff uses the Binaural recording method – in which microphones are placed inside the ears of a dummy head – to create an uncannily intimate relationship with the viewer. Taking the form of installations and walks in which the viewer listens to a pre-recorded soundtrack on headphones, Cardiff's work has primarily been discussed in terms of its affective impact on the viewer – its unnerving, eerie vividness, its eroticism and menace – rather than on the level of theme or structure. This is because the work is mesmerisingly vivid, to the point where critical distance is almost entirely foreclosed in the overwhelming immediacy of entering the aural situations she creates. These experiences are particularly strong when they take the form of individual audio-walks, such as *The Missing Voice – Case Study B* (London, 1999).

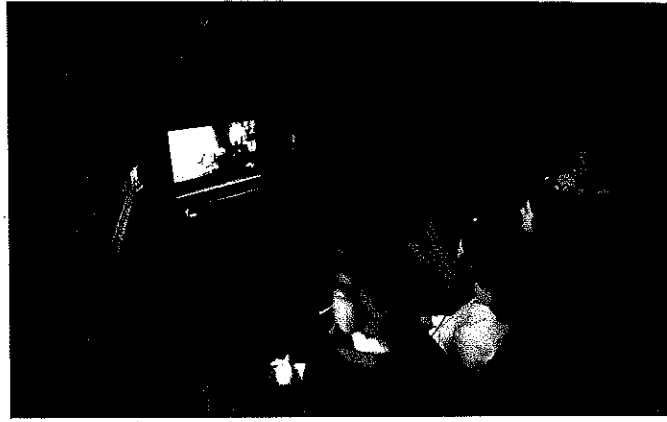
Many critics have observed that Cardiff's audio-walks are cinematic, transforming the world into a film set with the viewer as its central protagonist, but Cardiff has also produced a series of installations that deal explicitly with the experience of watching film. Perhaps more than any other contemporary artist, Cardiff is infatuated with what Barthes calls the 'cinema-situation': her installations *Playhouse* and *The Paradise Institute* both place the viewer inside miniature cinemas, and are preoccupied less with the action on screen (which is deliberately enigmatic and fragmented) than with the experience of being in

a dark public space. The sound of other viewers whispering, taking off their coats, answering mobile phones and eating popcorn are integral to the work's immersive effect. Ironically, these sounds are the ones that we conventionally shut out in order to lose ourselves in a film; the darkness of cinema theatres is designed to promote absorption and separation from the physical proximity of other people. Yet this apparatus is precisely what Cardiff draws our attention to, paradoxically by reinforcing our isolation through the use of headphones.

*Playhouse* 1997, is designed for one viewer at a time, and begins from the moment we don a set of headphones, pull apart the red velvet curtains and enter the box of a miniature theatre. This 'pre-hypnotic' situation, which Barthes discussed as crucial to the experience of cinema, is exaggerated further in *The Paradise Institute* 2001, a larger installation designed to seat seventeen people simultaneously. The events that follow taking a seat in this work are so completely disorienting that it becomes impossible to distinguish real-time peripheral noise from Cardiff's pre-recorded ambient soundtrack. In both *Playhouse* and *The Paradise Institute* the noise of the 'cinema situation' is only one of three levels of the soundscape: there is also the film soundtrack (re-recorded in a large cinema to give a false impression of space) and a narrative that unfolds in the form of Cardiff's voice, implicating the viewer within a noirish mystery that competes with the entertainment on screen. If 1970s film theory imagined our identification with cinema via an internalised 'camera' in the back of our heads, then Cardiff pulls our attention in three directions simultaneously in order to expose this mechanism. Our absorption in the performance on screen before us is constantly thwarted by the fragmented and unbelievable plot, the stock characters and hammy acting, but also by the artist's own femme-fatale persona, whispering breathily in our ears and sweeping us into a competing subplot.

By inverting our conventional experience of cinema and its imaginary hold over us, Cardiff exposes us to the 'cinema-situation' – the peripheral space that goes beyond the image on screen. However, in doing this she could be said to force another identification, this time with sound – and to replace one dominant sense with another. Cardiff's use of sound is undeniably hypnotic – few are able to break the spell and remove their headphones once the piece has begun, and the sheer seductiveness of this *trompe l'oreille* immediately makes us yield to her directorial will. Unlike the immersive 'dream scene' installations of Chapter One, Cardiff leaves no space for our own fantasy projection: we are at the sway of her instructions for as long as we wear the headphones.<sup>37</sup> Although she speaks of a desire to heighten the viewer's awareness and to sharpen our senses, we are consumed by her sound to the point of invisibility, reduced to a disembodied ear. (Reading transcriptions of the installations afterwards, one is struck by whole parts of the script that did not stay in one's mind.) This complete yielding of control to another voice has prompted reviewers to describe the work as both menacing and erotic. Indeed, in the most vivid moments of her work it is

Janet Cardiff  
*The Paradise Institute*  
Installation at the  
Canadian Pavilion,  
Venice Biennale, 2001



as if we become indivisible from Cardiff's own body, as she herself has observed. Although she inverts the cinema apparatus by refusing identification with the image, it is ultimately the seductive escapism of mainstream cinema that she aspires to replicate: 'I think that my work allows you to let go, to forget who you are ... What I, and I think many other people, love about movie theatres is that you can forget about "the real world" and just let the film carry you along with it.'<sup>33</sup>

The works of art discussed in this chapter problematise the idea of subjectivity as stable and centred, by fragmenting or consuming the viewer's sense of presence within a space. Cardiff's audio-installations enact a similar eclipse of the viewer through a form of aural hypnosis. Her embrace of the seductive and escapist can be (and has been) criticised for its shameless manipulation of the viewer and for its uncritical compliance with spectacle: although the work seems to offer active participation, our experience inside it is one of powerless obedience. But Barthes's article reminds us that literal activity is not necessarily a prerequisite for criticality: he notes how we may free ourselves from the ideological hold that film has over us by becoming 'hypnotised by a distance' – not simply a critical/intellectual distancing, but an 'amorous', fascinated distance that embraces the whole cinema situation: the theatre, the darkness, the room, the presence of other people. Cardiff's installations foreground this situation, even while they risk replacing one seductive apparatus with another: Barthes's 'bliss of *discretion*' – as both separation and discernment – is jeopardised by Cardiff's over-proximate collapse of our body and world into hers.

The installations in this chapter, then, do not seek to *increase* perceptual awareness of the body but rather to *reduce* it, by assimilating the viewer in various ways to the surrounding space: in these works, the viewer and installation can be argued to collapse or (to use Ehrenzweig's term) 'dedifferentiate'. This type of mimetic experience may be an effect of dark space (where you cannot situate your body in relation to the room, its objects, or to other visitors), of mirrors that reflect and refract one's image, of submerging us in an unbounded field of colour, or of consuming us in sound. Unlike the call to activation that motivates the other types of installation art discussed in this book, the viewer in these works is often intended to be passive. This dedifferentiating passivity is in keeping with the libidinal retreat that marks Caillois's understanding of mimicry. His observations about 'psychasthenia' are apt for such installations, particularly those of Cardiff: the ego is 'penetrated' by sound (rather than space), and is dissolved, as a discrete entity, into its environment. This raises the question of how it is possible to reconcile installation art's drive to 'decentring' with its persistent emphasis (explored in the previous chapters) on activated spectatorship. This conflict – which will be explored further in the conclusion – suggests that such modalities might well be incompatible with each other, and might problematise the apparently smooth rhetoric that accompanies installation art's historical and theoretical development.