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8 Video Projection

The Space Between Screens

Liz Kotz

How can we theorize the medium of video now, in the moment of its technological transformation – perhaps even its technical evanescence? Several years ago, I overheard a prominent curator acclaim the recent work of Tony Oursler, which used newly available data projectors to project footage of obsessively talking heads onto small, puppet-like props, making the animated figures eerily appear to chant and rant. In effect, Oursler's flickering sculptures took the small puppet-show dramas of his earlier videotapes, and moved them out into the gallery, where viewers could walk among the figures and encounter them in three-dimensional space and nearly lifelike scale. For the curator, Oursler's new projections succeeded in getting "beyond the box" – freeing video from its historical containment in the monitor or TV set. This long-standing desire of video art is not hard to understand: monitors are awkward, badly designed, and a constant reminder of the medium's links to broadcast television, domestic furniture, and all the degraded industrial uses of video technology. Mounted on the ubiquitous gray utility cart in institutional settings, monitors disrupt the gallery or museum space. Is it any wonder video is so often confined to the basement or the stairwell? Who among us would not prefer the luminous image freed from its ungainly technical support?

Although largely invisible in gallery-based art of the 1980s, by the mid-1990s video suddenly appeared everywhere, as increasingly monumental installations supplanted older, more modest forms like single-channel videotapes. In museum exhibitions, the divide became clear: while conventional tapes remain marginalized in physically segregated "screenings," installation and sculptural projects claim space on the main

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floor. Strolling through galleries, museum exhibitions, and the ubiquitous international festivals, artworld viewers now encounter all manner of electronically produced moving and still images that we refer to or recognize as "video." In physical presentation, these range from miniaturized hand-held gadgets and computer displays to closed-circuit systems and multi-screen projections that immerse viewers in room-sized image environments.

Projection—from the Latin *projectionem*, "a throwing forward, extension, projection" indicates displacement, dislocation, transfer.¹ At its core, projection is a form of geometry modeled on properties of light rays: it allows us to plot, from a fixed point, any number of regulated correspondences between two planes or between a two-dimensional picture plane and three-dimensional space. As a means of rationalizing vision and space, projective geometry underpins perspectival rendering, cartography, and architecture. Yet the concept of projection can imply a relation in both space and time, and the term carries old figural resonances of changing and transmutation, as well as scheming and planning. Like light, projection carries inherent capacities for distortion and illusion as well as rational correspondence (by extension, the psychoanalytic concept implies a confusion between inside and outside, between interior psychic life and external reality). With roots going back to the seventeenth century, modern forms of "screen entertainment" rest on these ambivalences, harnessing what film historian Charles Musser terms those "magical arts in which observers confused the 'lifelike' image with life itself."² By their nature, projected images elicit fantasy: we see things that are not there. And they elicit specific forms of spectatorship, engendering a psychic mobility paradoxically dependent on physical immobility.

In effect, techniques of projection offer ways of joining a space, an image and a subject. This relationship is curiously intertwined: not only does the fixed position of the viewer stabilize a system of visual relations, but decades of film theory have argued that the apparent unity and stability of this subject is itself a property of the optical system. While cinema most visibly demonstrates the power of this orchestration, its effects are everywhere in our culture. And while film exhibition remains confined to theatrical formats, severing the space of the image from other lived spaces, projected video potentially intersects these domains. With their greater mobility and technical flexibility, emerging video-based "screen practices" would seem to offer rich possibilities for rethinking and restructuring these core relationships — between viewing subject, moving or still image, architectural space, and time — that are so fundamental to modern visual culture.

In New York, the re-emergence of video projection reached a threshold around 1992, with a pair of exhibitions at David Zwirner Gallery that announced the spatial and sculptural ambitions of new work in video. In May, the Vancouver-based artist Stan Douglas presented *Hors-champs* (1992), an installation projecting two separate recordings of a free-jazz session onto opposite sides of a thin screen hanging diagonally across the middle of a room, empty except for two three-beam projectors mounted near the ceiling in opposite corners. It takes a viewer several minutes of circling around the work to register the differences between the two projections, which are loosely modeled on French vérité-style television documentaries. As Scott

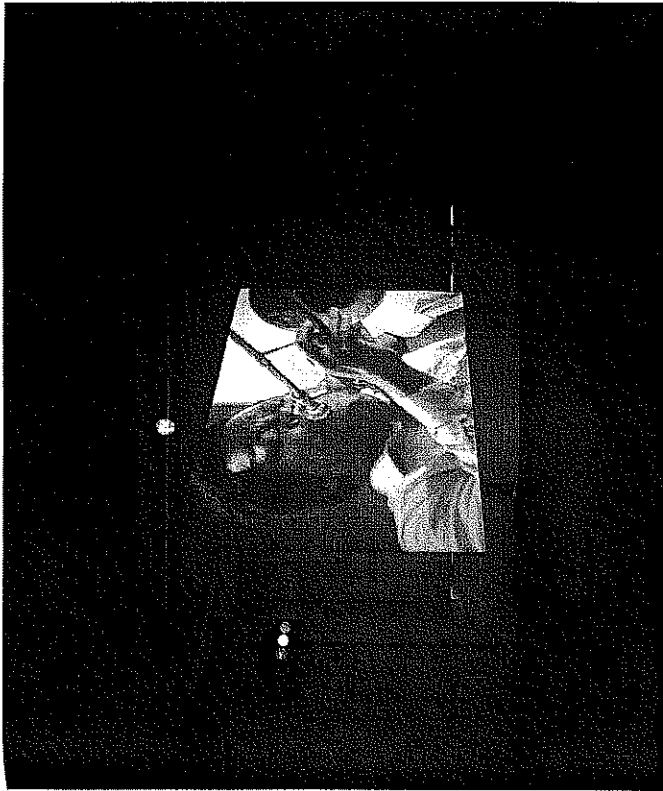


Figure 8.1 Stan Douglas, *Hors-champs*, 1992, two 2-sided CAV laser disks; 13:20 each rotation, edition of two, installation view at the ICA, London, September–October 1994. Courtesy of the artist and David Zwirner, New York

Watson glosses the piece: "On one side is Douglas's film of a session shot in 1960s style. The camera tracks each musician as the individual players take up the themes of the music and play. For the other side of the screen Douglas made a tape of what look like out-takes, the camera dwelling on players at rest."³ The work's title translates as "out of field" or "out of range," and as Douglas notes, the bifurcated screening "presents the spatialization of montage."⁴

In *Evening* (1994), Douglas continued the spatial juxtaposition of simultaneous tracks, projecting three fictional late 1960s newscasts side-by-side, causing their sound tracks to bleed and partly drown out one another. (Using multiple screens to demarcate irreconcilable cultural spaces, both *Hors-champs* and *Evening* activate site and viewing position as spatial analogues of larger social topographies. Yet as subsequent projects attest, Douglas's deeper interest lies in recreating the codes and conventions of dominant media. Like photographer Jeff Wall, Douglas carefully restages and films scenes crafted to resemble historical artifacts, rather than using found footage. Over time, the technical virtuosity of these re-creations has propelled Douglas toward filmmaking proper. In a 1997 interview, he describes *Hors-champs* and *Evening* as his

"most sculptural . . . in as much as everything is in the room, like the three zones of sound in *Evening*, and the screen that you walk around in *Hors-champs*," noting that his subsequent video projections have become "more like pictures, like old-time screen practice."⁵⁵ Douglas's more conventionally cinematic projects, from *Subject to Film: Marnie* (1989) to *Win, Place or Show* (1998), reveal his investments in the narrative and formal preoccupations of Hollywood, and stagier works, like *Der Sandmann* (1995), show pictorial preoccupations that lie closer to the staged photographic tableaux of Wall or Gregory Crewsdon than to the spatial or conceptual concerns of post-minimalist visual art.

Later that year, the Los Angeles-based artist Diana Thater presented *Late and Soon, Occident Trotting* (1993), a two-part projection that replicated the structure of her installation *Oo Fifi: Five Days in Claude Monet's Garden* (1992), shown in Santa Monica the previous fall [see plate 5]. In Zwirner's front room, psychedelically tinged landscape footage projected onto the gallery walls and out of the front windows toward the street. Covered in semi-transparent neutral density gels, the windows allowed ambient light in during the daytime - sometimes nearly washing out the projected footage - and permitted the projections to be glimpsed from outside. After nightfall, the silent pulsing patterns initially seemed to emanate from an empty club or dance space. As has become her custom, Thater threw the red, green, and blue beams of the projector out of calibration, distorting the colors and abstracting the image into overlapping series of monochrome fragments. In the back room, the second part of the installation inverted this schema, as three single-color projections converged to produce an off-kilter composite image.

Despite repeated nods to structural film, Thater's underlying formal and historical referents are closer to panoramic landscape painting. Using off-registration projection to render a sort of day-glow impressionism, Thater plays with the formal possibilities of ambient light and existing architecture. In contrast to the outdoor works of Krzysztof Wodiczko, who in the 1980s was known for projecting politically charged transparencies onto buildings and monuments, Thater's "natural" landscape and quasi-pastoral motifs exclude public urban space and overt historical referents. While her projections explore the interpenetration of interior and exterior spaces in industrial architecture, they largely employ these as scenic backdrops rather than as historical sites or structural parameters. The displaced bourgeois interior of Monet's garden is emblematic of Thater's installations, which often orchestrate dispersed interactions with those who move through the space. Yet while writers celebrate the "built-in instabilities" that disrupt Thater's system - the "skewed projector lenses," "strobing color separations," and "defective optical apparatus" and "distorted image"⁵⁶ - they neglect the extent to which these instabilities are programmed, controlled, and designed to generate pictorial effects. Like Oursler, Thater insistently foregrounds her technical apparatus - strobing monitors, projectors, cables, and equipment throughout the space - precisely because these function as props. Although viewers' bodies may temporarily block the projected images, throwing shadows onto the wall, such interruptions do not alter the work in any significant way. Despite a certain minimalist-derived rhetoric, these "interactive" elements have little in common

with, for instance, early video sculptures like Bruce Nauman's 1970-1 corridors, which required viewers to enter a pared-down architectural structure in order to activate the work.

Nonetheless, in recent years sympathetic critics and curators have aggressively sought to position new work in video projection as reinvestigations of the phenomenological models articulated by artists of the late 1960s and early 1970s like Vito Acconci, Peter Campus, Dan Graham, and Nauman. While Douglas and Thater incorporate three-dimensional space and mobile spectators into their installations, their underlying structures derive from two-dimensional pictorial media (photography and painting, respectively) and not the procedural or durational structures that animated early video. Despite certain momentary resemblances to this earlier historical project, the pictorial and narrative orientation of artists like Douglas, Thater, Doug Aitken, and Douglas Gordon, for instance, aligns them all with the monumentally scaled color photographs of Jeff Wall, Cindy Sherman, or even Andreas Gursky [see plate 6]. It is no coincidence that Wall's work with enormous light boxes - staging a return to older pictorial functions with all the means of the contemporary mass media - is a touchstone for so many younger artists. With their carefully staged and makeshift "cinematic" tableaux, both large-scale photography and video projection are strategically suspended between the high culture aspirations of painting and the pop culture appeal of Hollywood. And both trajectories vector toward the large flat panel monitor or plasma screen - technical means of presenting luminous fields of color that are, ultimately, high-tech paintings.

This proximity to painting and cinema is among the key attributes of video projection that make it such an appealing choice for contemporary artists. Technically, this shift was facilitated by the availability of smaller, cheaper portable video and data projectors in the early 1990s. Designed for sales and display applications, these devices no longer entailed the visual distortion, fully darkened rooms, and quasi-theatrical exhibition spaces associated with older three-beam systems. In effect, the new projectors freed the video image from its historical container, the box-like television monitor - and from its secondary siting, in box-like viewing rooms modeled on cinema. Unhinged from these sites and the spectatorial conventions they inscribe, video footage proliferated in all manner of new and hybrid configurations. For artists like Oursler, the new devices were a crucial enabling condition, allowing the projected image to go beyond the box that had so long contained it. And although both Douglas and Thater used older, three-beam systems, their installations dislodged projection from conventional "theatrical" settings and viewing conventions.⁵⁷

Thater herself has called for work that would "allow video to speak about itself - in a language endemic to it. Just as the structuralist film makers used 'film' in such a way as to reveal a materiality, a shape and a form that characterize it, so we must be able to make the material 'video' speak of a signal, tape, camcorders, monitors and projectors."⁵⁸ Resorting to older modernist discourses of medium-specificity, Thater professes that video "played on a monitor like television . . . subordinates itself to the codes of another medium"⁵⁹ - strangely ignoring that TV founded video's "history and its language," even as video's forms and uses now extend far beyond the televisual.

This repression of the TV monitor and the medium's rather long entanglement with mass communication hampers work in video projection. While broadcast television derived from radio, not film, speech is curiously absent from what has become an emphatically pictorial practice. By configuring exhibition architecture to the size of the projection, artists de-emphasize the rectangular structure of the image, sidestepping their use of video as a surrogate "painting." The shift to the wall as a pre-existing frame not only naturalizes the rectangle via architecture, but also effaces the extent to which the structure of the tableau remains embedded in the very technology of video. Replacing a small box - the monitor - with a larger one - the room - hardly allows one to escape from the logic of the apparatus. By moving the mechanical device out of sight, projection routinely effaces the technology manifested in the monitor. Yet we can no longer convincingly turn to an older modernist strategy of "laying bare the device" as an antidote, since such displays have become mere mannerist gestures. As video technology moves toward incorporation into the wall and architectural container, artistic investigation of the medium must take this on.

However, the majority of recent video projections have moved toward cinema as content and form. For many artists, video itself is incidental, an efficient tool for delivering images, but not a medium per se. The narrative works of Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Shirin Neshat, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Jane and Louise Wilson, for instance, harness video to generate new permutations of simultaneous, multi-screen cinema [see plate 7]. In recent years, critics have regularly bemoaned the confusing array of awkwardly partitioned and darkened rooms in which video is shown - most memorably in the complaints about the mazes of darkened cubicles with increasingly indistinguishable projection pieces that greeted the 1999 Venice Biennale. The ubiquitous "black box" format of contemporary exhibitions suggests that video technology has been assimilated back into older filmic conventions - while simultaneously assimilating film to mobile and ongoing, rather than stationary and event-based, forms of spectatorship. Equipped with slow-scan and single-frame pause, video viewing invites us to read and reconstruct cinema - to break down the filmic flow, bring ephemeral passing frames to our attention, and recompose its pieces into other forms. Ken Jacobs's legendary *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969/71) - a projection performance later criticized as a rephotographed found footage film - required years of painstaking labor with an analytic projector and optical printer. Contemporary technology now renders such procedures vastly easier, yet so many current projects of time-based "rephotography" - the countless British and Canadian artists reshooting or restaging fetishized moments in classical cinema, or replaying the outdated codes of postwar-documentary photography in newer electronic media - remain banal academic exercises.

Gordon's *24-Hour Psycho* (1993) is perhaps emblematic of artworks that employ video technology to dissect classic films - in effect, replaying the classic moves of early 1980s photo-appropriation in a time-based medium. If the appeal of "postmodern" photography rested on its partial spectacularization of earlier conceptual practices, electronic image technologies allow artists to go all the way. Using his low-tech "eight track mix" (cropping, color-shifting, shooting out-of-focus, and so forth), Richard Prince framed and resequenced generic images from advertisements and amateur

sources. Working with familiar materials, he produced real discoveries. With projects drawn from John Ford's *The Searchers* (*Five Year Drive-By*, 1995) and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (*through a looking glass*, 1999), Gordon has used video to arrest narrative and render its flow as a series of graspable instants and sustained durations. But these moves become formulaic, as Gordon brought increasingly arbitrary procedures to already canonical films - before his recent shift to original footage in *Play Dead*, *Real Time* (2003, shot *in situ* at Gagosian Gallery and projected life size). In a marked departure from his peers' aversion to more difficult "process" oriented operations, Steve McQueen's Documenta installation *Western Deep* (2002) compellingly introduced present-day historical experience (a nearly 25-minute descent into a Southern African diamond mine) into durational models drawn from experimental film and early video. In comparison, *24-Hour Psycho* reads like the fortuitous discovery of a late-night VCR addict. And Gordon's cultish ignorance of the avant-garde precedents that made his work possible furthers their institutional erasure.¹⁹

Besides providing a way to remake cinema, video allows artists to investigate projection itself as a kind-of-medium or material. Projection offers a seductive immateriality: the projected image both is and is not there. Recounting an early program of expanded cinema at the Film-Makers Cinematheque in 1965, Jonas Mekas noted the "almost mythic drive toward pure motion, color, light experience" that animated the work.²⁰ In video too, glowing beams of light spray color onto surfaces, yielding evanescent images seemingly freed from any technical support. And while TV monitors and theatrical film projection tend to position viewers in a relatively fixed, frontal relation to the image, environmentally scaled projections envelop viewers, allowing them to enter image spaces not overtly mediated by the formality of frame or screen.

In so doing, the immersive environments produced by video projection and new imaging technologies extend and reconfigure 1960s projects of "expanded cinema" that arose out of work in performance, experimental film, and kinetic sculpture. Coming out of multimedia happenings and environments, dancers and artists affiliated with New York's Judson Church used films, slides, and projections to accompany movement; their collage-based aesthetics tended to favor a profusion of images and overlays. At the same time, "structural" filmmakers like Tony Conrad, Ken Jacobs, Paul Sharits, and Michael Snow explored basic properties of the cinematographic apparatus, isolating every aspect - grain, filmstrip, frame, flicker, motion, screen, etc. - and subjecting them to sustained analysis and attention. In contrast to this medium-specific investigation of film, new "multimedia" artists like Stan Vanderbeek, Jordan Belson, and Scott Bartlett used multiple means - film, slides, light, motion, sound - to produce maximum sensory impact. In an optimistic embrace of new perceptual capacities that merged McLuhan-esque techno-futurism with hippie drug culture, 1960s light shows harnessed projection to create audio-visual analogues of hallucinatory states, collapsing exterior and interior worlds. Championing "the intermedia network of cinema and television, which now functions as nothing less than the nervous system of mankind," Gene Youngblood foresaw the perceptually enhanced synaesthesia of new electronic technologies replacing older art forms like painting,

Miss Conroy
1

Richard Prince
of
re-sequencing
film
works

and facilitating new forms of subjectivity in their wake: "when we say expanded cinema we actually mean expanded consciousness."¹²

As film historian David James has argued, the expanded cinema movement was organized around two poles—more formally oriented films providing "meditative practice or visionary experience" and ritualistic works "integrated into social situations more dynamic than those of the conventional theater."¹³ Both these "visionary" and "social situation" models resurface forcefully in the present—witness the integration of video into the kinds of recreated social spaces that periodically inhabit art fairs, museums, and alternative spaces. Yet unlike their 1960s precursors, who sought technical means to generate new forms of collective life, current multimedia artists have largely appropriated pre-existing narrative models, commodity forms, and gallery-based exhibition formats.

However nostalgic they may seem, James's accounts of 1960s expanded cinema resonate uncannily with claims made for present-day video and multimedia. "Projection itself becomes the site of creativity," he asserts, "where the somatic passivity of theatrical consumption is replaced by ecstatic engagement."¹⁴ "In place of the confining rectangle of the film frame and the closure of narrative . . . light shows offered a three-dimensional visual field, matrixed neither spatially nor temporally, which dispersed rather than unified subjectivity."¹⁵ In this view, the new participatory spectacles held at counterculture venues and underground film spaces provided an atmosphere of collective improvisation and sensorial overload: "all combined in a continuously transforming, enveloping, pan-sensual experience that could be entered and exited at will" indistinguishable from "the interior projection of hallucination."¹⁶ Nearly identical statements could be culled from critical texts on video installation, which unquestioningly assume that newly immersive media spectacles provide genuine forms of desublimatory, anti-disciplinary experience. Repressing the very psychoanalytic and theoretical models they cite, recent art-critical accounts employ emphatically reductive understandings of the filmic apparatus, equating spectatorial position with a viewer's literal physical position—mobile, stationary, throwing a shadow on the image, etc.¹⁷

By now, we are perhaps all too familiar with the contradictions Walter Benjamin diagnosed more than 60 years ago between "exhibition value" and the aura-producing attributes of the fine art object. Yet the situation of video vis-à-vis the museum manifests a new set of structural conflicts, arising among different historical modes of "exhibition." As curator Chris Dutton suggests, part of the appeal that "media-oriented displays" hold for museums is their capacity to attract different audiences addressed as spectators by techniques drawn from popular entertainment, retail display, and information delivery.¹⁸ But as museums stretch to accommodate new media forms, transforming conventional white cubes into ubiquitous black boxes, the high-tech formats of modern display culture merge awkwardly with the older forms of connoisseurship and exhibition value associated with unique objects. Presented by growing museum education and publicity industries as technological supplements to conventional exhibitions, an ever-expanding apparatus of audio tours, exhibition web sites, publications, and guides gradually supplant the objects on view.¹⁹

If earlier experimental film, video, and performance practices ostensibly sought to disturb the form and function of the gallery and museum—replacing a collectible unique object with a temporal experience that could be completely ephemeral or endlessly reproducible—newer, media-savvy art (including painting and sculpture) is designed for reproduction and display. Artists produce mural-sized video projections to fill the giant industrial spaces of contemporary museums, spaces themselves sealed to hold minimal and post-minimal sculpture. Of course, this move—art's active incorporation into the display apparatus of industry and media culture—is hardly new. It was Dan Graham, after all, who targeted art magazines as one of the crucial sites of contemporary art practice; and the reproductive- and publication-based forms of late 1960s conceptual and post-minimal art systematically set out to unravel the hierarchy between what the art dealer Seth Seigelaub once termed "primary information" (the actual art) and "secondary information" (its circulated representations). Yet in a publicity-driven artworld without any means of determining value except the market, a shrewd joining of technical skill, mannerist sensibility, and photographic appeal prevails. It is hardly a coincidence that media artists often rely on "secondary" products, particularly color photographs, to subsidize their large-scale installations. Acutely stylized and designed for display, many recent video projections look staged to produce the striking color photos that will appear in magazines, catalogues and gallery back rooms. Present-day "ephemeral," "environmental," and "site-specific" art forms have their bases covered: like all good tourist attractions, they offer a complete line of subsidiary products for collectors to take home.

The awkward incorporation of video into the gallery and museum attests to a deeper shift: the larger assimilation of media art to display culture. It is perhaps a telling historical irony that the press response to Documenta XI (2002) so often berated the abundant films and videos as part of what one French critic termed "a very politically correct and fatally austere exhibition."²⁰ Despite the long association of media-based forms with some type of "critical" or politically oriented practice, current gallery-based video art is all too eager to please—even as this requires total submission to the dictates of spectacle culture. Early projects by artists like Accorci and Nauman re-enacted the subjective experience of late capitalism as endurance, submission, and disciplinary subjection. But when recycled by contemporary artists like Matthew Barney, even these durational tropes can be cleaned up, prettified, and made entertaining. The very reproductive media typically seen—in art critical discourses of the 1980s—to offer possibilities for a more critical, reflexive, and "demystifying" art practice may now be the avatars of the total embrace of spectacle (since entry into public art-critical discourse requires some degree of market success, in the 1990s even Martha Rosler started showing giant color prints). This trajectory for new work in video projection, however, was not initially apparent—nor is it as exclusive as the all-too-visible success of certain types of work might imply. After all, the early, lower-tech works of artists like Aitken, Barney, and Thater were initially embraced as efforts to integrate procedural and pictorial dimensions. And despite the rapid turn to monumentality, the period of 1993–4 also saw exhibitions of more demanding, durationally based video projections by Lutz Bacher, Steve McQueen, and Gillian

Normal School
Catherine
Seth

Thomas
McQueen
Barney



Wearing, whose work evidences deeper links with earlier minimalist and conceptual projects.

In an essay on video first published in the mid-1980s, the critic Fredric Jameson proposed that a "medium" is defined by the conjunction of three distinct components: "an artistic mode or specific form of aesthetic production"; "a specific technology, generally organized around a central apparatus or machine"; and "a social institution," including a set of vernacular forms, functions, or uses.²¹ Unlike older forms such as painting, whose historically entrenched role stabilizes a relatively coherent field, for newer media these conditions perpetually go in and out of sync, producing different momentary formations of "video" that soon dissolve into technical obsolescence. The incessant technical mutations of what we might call its "material support" render efforts to define or theorize video particularly precarious – especially now, as videotape, monitor, and cathode-ray tube give way to DVDs, digital storage devices, and electronic screens. In the emerging world of "digital cinema," the differential specificity of video vis-à-vis film (and vice versa) all but disappears, as the necessary relations between recording, storage, editing, and release formats are eroded. How can video be a medium if it no longer has a central apparatus or machine, much less a specific form of aesthetic production or set of social/vernacular uses? We might follow Rosalind Krauss's early diagnosis and decide that video is not a medium at all, but merely a structure, the way that narcissism is a psychic structure. Yet to do so seems to prematurely close down a still emerging form.

For anyone who has studied the history of early cinema – sometimes provocatively generalized into a "history of screen practice" – the present moment indeed seems unannually familiar. As Charles Musser notes, moments of profound technological transformation and disruption tend to provoke trafficking with other media: "when the screen enters a period of flux, it is particularly receptive to new influences from other cultural forms."²² Early in the twentieth century, the new motion picture adopted myriad exhibition formats, from panoramas and vaudeville shows to individualized, jukebox-like booths. Initially oscillating between peephole devices and projective formats, and between private viewing and collective spectatorship, cinema gradually achieved the codification of exhibition formats that grounds its current form. Musser argues that by its second decade, American narrative cinema "established a relation between producer, image and audience that has remained fundamentally unaltered ever since"²⁴ – a relation whose structure and limits are now rendered more apparent through the incursions of "interactive" and computer game models.

As Krauss has proposed in recent texts on "the post-medium condition" of contemporary artmaking, cinema manifests a fundamentally "aggregate" condition that cannot be reduced to its physical support:

The medium or support for film being neither the celluloid strip of the images, nor the camera that filmed them, nor the projector that brings them to life in one motion, nor the beam of light that relays them to the screen, nor that screen itself, but all of these taken together, including the audience's position caught between the source of the light behind it and the image projected before our eyes.²³

Precisely because of its internal complexity and variability, the cinematic apparatus offers a non-reductive means of understanding a medium as a set of procedures, structures, and operations – a kind of relation to the viewer – that allows artists to probe and articulate its structures in critical, compelling yet self-referential ways. This may be precisely what contemporary video lacks, in its quest for maximum "aesthetic impact" of a very different sort, one that harnesses the televisual capacity for the profuse diffusion of images – what Richard Dienst terms TV's "all encompassing putting-into-view of the world," producing "a field of near total instantaneous visibility"²⁵ – and that uses new digital and projective technologies to proliferate these throughout architectural space.

Such images find their natural home in the emerging world of "information architecture," in which every building functions as a kind of image, and every built surface promises to contain some type of networked display. As the newer flat screen technologies allow the picture to return to the space of the wall from which it had long ago been detached, it does not reinsert this image into a wall whose architectonic solidity and immobility remain intact. Indeed, one of the key lessons of decades of "experimental" architecture has been the historical interpenetration of the tectonic and the semiotic. A host of functions for the transmission of information, light, heat (properties of signage, windows, corporate logos, transparency, etc.) once peripheral to the structural, load-bearing capacities of the wall, have now been integrated into the building's interior and exterior surfaces. The emergence of public urban space as a computerized convergence of surveillance, communication, and entertainment might propel other critical projects in video, as artists attempt to address the internal structure of the electronic image and its mutating relation to new forms of architectural space and subjectivity.

New media theorist Lev Manovich argues that transcoding – the technical possibility of transferring an image or composition or "work" from one format to another – is "the most substantial consequence of the computerization of media."²⁷ Despite the lure of electronic transfer without loss, Manovich acknowledges the technical impossibility of absolute fidelity. What artists since John Cage have understood, however, is not merely that transfer and transcoding entail distortion, but that this breakdown, reprocessing, and information loss (which occurs across digital and analogue modes) is remarkably generative and productive. In Lutz Bacher's *Olympiad* (1997), for instance, a modestly scaled projection of a "corrupted" tape of a walk-through the Olympic Stadium in Berlin displays myriad tracking problems and signal disruptions that erratically destabilize the video image. As the artist recounts, the resulting tape was "resurrected" through reprocessing by a time-base corrector, "leaving it playable only in black and white due to signal loss."²⁸ Drawing on the Cagean principle that "once anything happens it authentically is," Bacher embraces the artwork as a structure that can incorporate accident, damage, and decay. The difficulty of the work – its jarring perceptual disruption – results from the unanticipated investigation of the "degraded" video image and video signal, and "the ways in which these recurring technical breakdowns both enhance and disrupt the classical aspirations of the site." Nothing could be further from the mannerism of Thater's increasingly contrived

Andy
of
Video

projection distortions, or Aitken's over-produced spectacles of post-apocalyptic collapse and decay, in which his own technology (after a crucial early piece) never fails or falters.²⁹

In *Olympiad*, signal breakdown foregrounds the video image as a pixelated grid structure - technically termed the "raster" - bringing to mind visual art analogues like Sigmar Polke's 1960s "rasterbilder" ("dot paintings") or Warhol's early silkscreens, which systematically explore the strange poignancy produced by the image degradation. No mere pictorial device, the pixelated grid is the structure of the transmissible image. It is the matrix through which images must pass before they can inhabit the same surface as printed text; pixels also comprise the screen through which the two-dimensional image must pass before it can be transmitted electronically. As Dienst notes, the "transmission of a moving picture," by broadcast, metal wire, or laser technology, entails "the *de-screening* and *re-screening* of light through a video signal":

What is transmitted, at the simplest level, is simply a stream of pulses that scan a field at a certain speed. Light entering the camera hits a plate where it can be registered line by line, translating a two-dimensional spatial arrangement of light into a sequential signal. When this signal reaches the other end, it is translated back into a field by projecting the electrical intensities line by line onto another screen.³⁰

In video, scanning and projection are means of translating electronic signals into a two-dimensional picture: what was previously inside the monitor (phosphorescent pixels on an enclosed glass screen) is now transferred to the larger container of the room/screen. As Dienst notes, "scanning mediates at both ends between visible screens and electrical currents; it is above all a way of translating and framing light as information."³¹ Thus the pixel and scan lines are the visible mark of the intervention of technology and its abstracting effects (hence the very goal of "high definition" television is to repress this structure, to make video look more like film by reducing pixelation below the threshold of visibility). Video, as a temporally generated grid, produces a continual transformation of the image. Signal interference and disruption are integral to its workings, as are the decays and distortions introduced by recording and storage processes. It is in the interplay between this screen of scanning - that translates electrical signals into moving images - and the screen of projection - that transmits these optical images into architectural space - that video occurs. As we continue to wait for more artists to explore the many unpredictable things that happen there, perhaps we are beginning to see that the video projection work that was so celebrated during the last decade was less of a disruption of mass-media signal than a sign of the times.³²

Notes

- 1 *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edn. (1989), from *proicere*, *proicere* to throw forth, stretch out, expel, reject, give up, etc., from *pro* + *iacere* to throw.

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2 *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (New York: Scribner, 1990), p. 16.
3 Scott Watson, "Against the Habitual," in *Stan Douglas* (London and New York: Phaidon, 1998), p. 59.

4 Stan Douglas, "Interview: Diana Thater in Conversation with Stan Douglas," in *Stan Douglas*, p. 12.
5 *Ibid.*, p. 15.

6 See, for instance, Colin Gardner, "No Guarantees, They're Wolves: Structure, Movement and the Dystopic in Diana Thater's *China*," and Timothy Martin, "What Cyan said to Magenta about Yellow," in *Diana Thater: China* (Chicago: Renaissance Society, 1996).
7 Despite the limits of purely technical explanations, the availability of consumer equipment has been crucial. No longer requiring specialized technical training or expertise, video becomes "a tool like any other." Just as the postwar profusion of cheap 16 mm equipment and educational devices like analytic projectors opened a space for amateur and experimental filmmaking in the 1950s and 1960s, and the late 1970s availability of consumer-grade cameras and photo-processing helped liberate "artists using photography" (like Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince) from the codified domains of "fine art photography," the new array of camcorders, VCRs, and desktop editing systems helped propel video outside the ghettoized domains of "video art" that had consolidated by the 1980s in isolation from wider visual art practice.

8 Diana Thater, "I wanna be your dog," in *Diana Thater: China* (Chicago: Renaissance Society, 1996), p. 12.
9 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

10 Particularly in the UK, a studied ignorance of the recent past seems to provide endless license to refashion viewer-friendly knockoffs in the present. While a degree of historical amnesia can sometimes free artists from blatant academicism, it also deprives them of the conceptual underpinnings of the strategies they use. For all the protests surrounding Martin Creed's 2001 Turner Prize for his installation *The Lights Going On and Off*, no one in the art press even noted the work's resemblance to early 1960s projects by artists George Brecht or David Tudor - both close affiliates of John Cage, who of course cleared the ground for such durational acts of empiricism. Embracing ignorance, successful younger artists all too often demonstrate their complicity with these patterns of historical erasure. It would be hard to imagine Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art, which recently sponsored a retrospective of Douglas Gordon (then only 34), mounting career retrospectives of generative artists like James Benning, Simone Forti, or Yvonne Rainer. See Russell Ferguson, et al., *Douglas Gordon* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art/Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

11 Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal: The Rise of a New American Cinema 1959-1971* (New York: Collier Books, 1972), p. 209.

12 Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: Dutton, 1970), p. 41.

13 David James, *Allegories of Cinema: American Film in the Sixties* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 127. For James, the reconfigured exhibition formats and radically altered viewing experiences of the 1960s avant-garde represented a necessary extension of the New American Cinema's utopian project. Yet James's tendency to equate physical arrangements with social and psychic relations leads him to overestimate the liberatory potential of these "expanded" modes. Decrying the constrictive viewing booths that Austrian filmmaker Peter Kubelka designed for Anthology Film Archives, that "immobilized and imprisoned the spectator as a monadic visual consumer, repressing

even the social interaction allowed in the commercial theater," James applauds the improvisatory, utopian dimensions of expanded cinema: "Interrupting the history of cinema as authority and discipline, the multimedia light show discovered itself in a dance against somatic repression" (p. 132).

14 *Ibid.*, p. 132.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 134. Despite his apparent embrace of such liberatory rhetoric, James is well aware of the complex techno-futurist entanglements of expanded cinema: "The opening of the optical field, and the conceptual and kinetic liberation of the spectator within it, was often constructed as either analogous to or premonitory of" shifts in which "the engineering of consciousness would parallel developments in the electronic communications industries" (*ibid.*).

16 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

17 Daniel Bimbaum, for instance, suggests that Doug Aitken's mobile camera work "pushes the viewer's subjectivity to the point where the phenomenological model of experience breaks down," arguing that, in Aitken's multi-screen installations: "This more complex space allows for the participation of the viewer but also brings the viewer's unity and stability into question. In works such as *electric earth* and *into the sun*, the complexity not only has to do with the multiple projections, but with the active involvement of viewers who decide their own pace when moving through the installations. Such kinesthetic and perceptual multiplicity can no longer be thought of in terms of a harmonious experiencing subject." ("That's the Only Now I Get. Space and Experience in the Work of Doug Aitken," in *Doug Aitken* (London: Phaidon, 2001), p. 67.) That even the most normative products of classical Hollywood cinema can hardly be said to produce such a "harmonious experiencing subject" seems to have escaped such commentators.

18

As Dercon notes, many museums prefer to collect the secondary pictorial and photographic objects of media-based artists, rather than their more complicated (and more physically demanding) media installations. He mentions Douglas and Barney in this context, and one could add many others. "Still A Novel," in *Still/MOVING* (Rotterdam and Tokyo: Foto Instituut Nederland, 2001), pp. 28-31. Just as the current ascendancy of photo-based art depended on escaping the narrow purviews (and limited budgets) of museum photography departments, a more central role for video, film, sound, and other media arts would require institutional reorganization as well as architectural reconfiguration.

19

As the Guggenheim organization circulates its old-fashioned assets (collections of unique objects) to generate new forms of exhibition and sign exchange value, it appears that a suitably glamorous architectural container - that ideal fusion of exhibition value and unique aura - outpaces whatever objects it happens to house at the moment. With star-driven programming clumsily modeled on the blockbuster logic and entertainment values of Hollywood movies and big-ticket amusement parks, museum exhibitions must either fully differentiate themselves from the disposable novelty of the mass media, or mimic their spectacular effects. Of course, the most reliable best-sellers - Van Gogh, Impressionist painters, or the semi-annual David Hockney exhibitions that are a fixture in Los Angeles - always succeed in having it both ways at once. For video art, the viewer-friendly technological sublime of Bill Viola and Gary Hill has long filled a similar role, albeit to smaller audiences.

20

Geneviève Breerette, "La Documenta ne rigole pas avec l'art, miroir des malheurs contemporains," *Le Monde*, June 19, 2002.

21 "Reading without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-text" (1986), reprinted in *Postmodernisms: Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

22 "Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism," *October* 1, 1 (Spring 1976), reprinted in Gregory Barcock, ed., *New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1978).

23 Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907*, p. 16.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

25 "A Voyage on the North Sea": *Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999), pp. 24-5.

26 Richard Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time: Theory After Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 4, 5.

27 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 45.

28 Bacher, unpublished notes (1998).

29 In *Inflection* (1992), Aitken launched a small rocket with a film camera attached; the footage, played back on slow motion, records the blurry and enigmatic landscape viewed from the rocket's flight. As Daniel Bimbaum notes, "Here, essential elements of Aitken's work are already present: a moving vehicle; speed made tangible; an abstract landscape unfolding through contemporary technologies of vision." ("That's the Only Now I Get," p. 40). What he fails to note is that after this piece, accidental and process elements drop out of Aitken's work, replaced by the aestheticization of the ruin. And while Thater's early projects appear organized around unforeseen accidents introduced by process, technology, and site, such disruptions seem to recede in her recent, more technically polished works.

30 Dienst, *Still Life in Real Time*, p. 17.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

32 My thanks to Eric DeBruyn, Simon Leung, and Federico Windhausen for discussing these materials with me.