

# BINOCULAR

FOCUSING • MATERIAL • HISTORIES

*BINOCULAR / FOCUSING • MATERIAL • HISTORIES* is the third anthology in an ongoing series established by MOËT & CHANDON / CONTEMPORARY EDITION • EDITION CONTEMPORAINE at the beginning of the decade, to support writing which focuses on contemporary visual culture.

This edition includes nine essays: HARRIET EDQUIST on Rosalie Gascoigne; PAT HOFFIE on Eating the Balut — the material and the immaterial in the Philippines; ELOISE LINDSAY on Juan Davila; ELIZABETH GERTSAKIS on Narelle Jubelin; FAY BRAUER on the ecstasy of the open text and Bill Seaman's video work *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers*; MARGARET PLANT on Tony Trembach's Electrical Museum and Other Circuitries; TREVOR SMITH on Haim Steinbach; NATALIE KING on Rematerialisation, considering the work of Rosemarie Trockel and Kathy Temin; and VIRGINIA TRIOLI on music criticism/private history.

*BINOCULAR / FOCUSING • MATERIAL • HISTORIES* features contributions by Ian Burn, Fiona MacDonald, Kate Daw, Mutlu Çerkez, Fred Wilson and Mike Kelley. It includes a limited edition compact disc sponsored by Ernst & Young, the sound track from *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers* by Bill Seaman.

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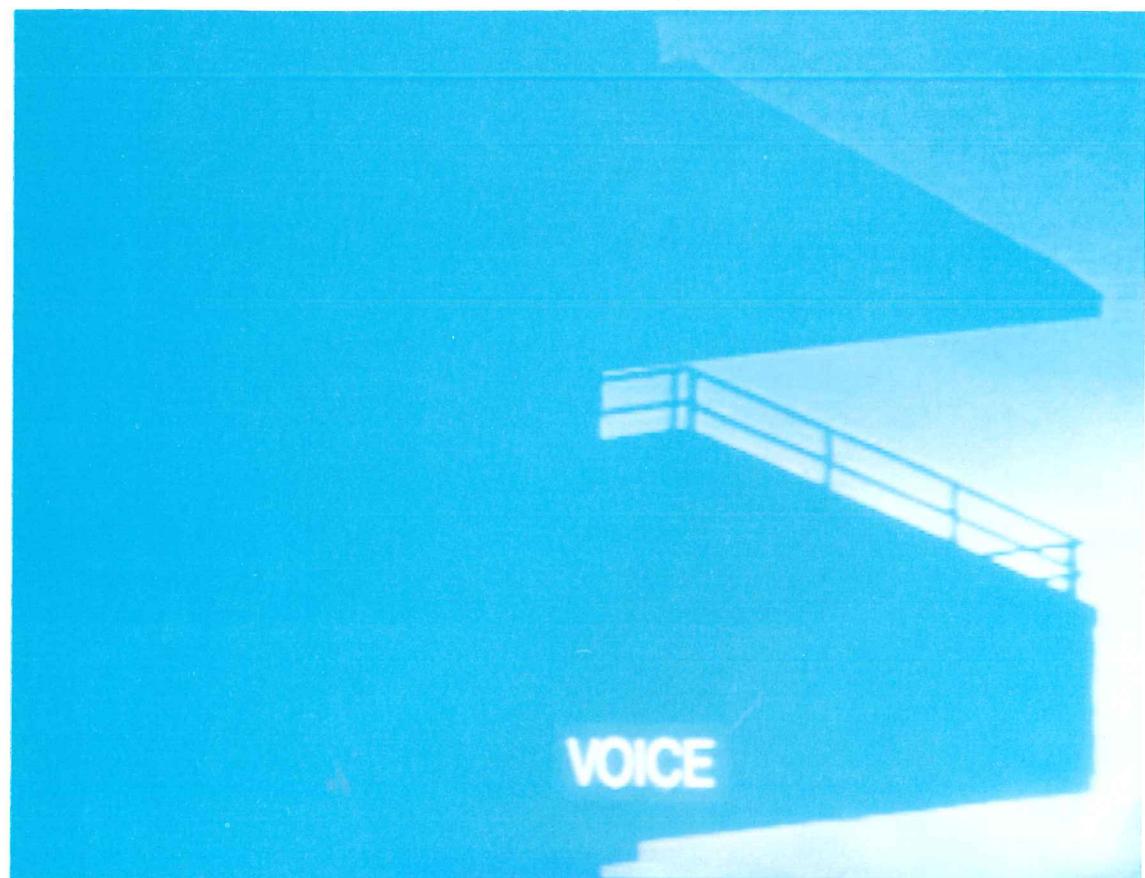
FOCUSING • MATERIAL • HISTORIES



MOËT & CHANDON

CONTEMPORARY EDITION • EDITION CONTEMPORAINE

1993



THE ECSTASY OF THE OPEN TEXT  
A READING OF BILL SEAMAN'S  
*THE EXQUISITE MECHANISM OF SHIVERS*  
FAY BRAUER

Text of ecstasy — the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of their tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis their relation with language.<sup>1</sup>

Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes? In perversion (which is the realm of textual pleasure) there are no "erogeneous zones" . . . it is intermittence as psychoanalysis has so rightly stated, which is erotic: the intermittence of skin flashing between two articles of clothing (trousers and sweater), between two edges (the open-necked shirt, the glove and the sleeve); it is this flash itself which seduces . . .<sup>2</sup>

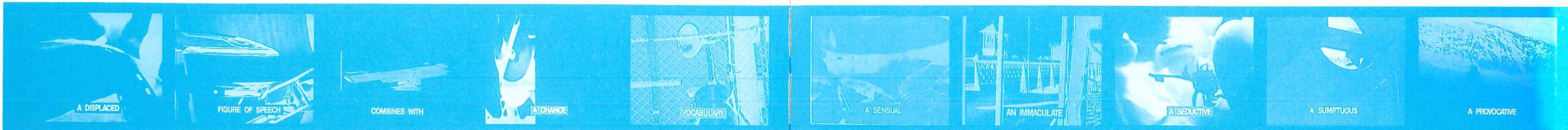
<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller, The Noonday Press, NY, 1992, p. 14. While this translation mostly follows Richard Miller's, I have made minor amendments.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

***The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers***

1990

Make a random choice from one column to the next, reading from left to right across the rows. Then begin Again. Continue.



<sup>3</sup> Barthes, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, pp. 4–7.

<sup>5</sup> Umberto Eco, 'The Poetics of the Open Work', *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> See p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> This term is used with reference to Martin Jay's connection of Albertian single-point perspective with Cartesian theories of subjective rationality, in his essay entitled 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity', in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. Hal Foster, Dia Art Foundation, USA, 1988.

<sup>8</sup> See Leon Battista Alberti, *Della pittura*, first publication 1435; *On Painting*, trans. John Spencer, Yale University Press, 1956. These devices are crucial for Alberti's theory given that the moral-narrative, the *istoria* is the greatest work of the painter, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> Cartesian perspectivalism was dependent upon the primacy of a disincarnated absolute gaze, a static, fixated

If the most erotic part of a body lies "where the garment gapes", if it is "interruption" which is erotic like a flash of pores at the nape of the neck or follicles in the crease of the thigh, then the ecstasy of the textual body may lie where the text gapes.<sup>3</sup> As such texts are 'writely' rather than 'readerly', texts which 'dance' rather than 'march', look at language not through it, 'unsettle' rather than 'comfort' and disrupt the passage of signification, they are reliant upon being open to a play of codes.<sup>4</sup> As 'Open Texts' they require, according to Umberto Eco, giving up a closed, single conception of an artwork, a hierarchy of fixed, preordained orders, a syllogistic logic of necessity.<sup>5</sup> Rather than imposing a defined order of readings upon the Reader, within a confined framework, the structure of the Open Text is deliberately incomplete to appeal to the initiative of the Reader. The Reader of the Open Text is not positioned as outside the text, nor presumed an innocent awaiting the divine word of God-the-Author, the omniscient source of all knowledge and language. The Reader is presumed to be complicitous with the Author. The Reader is not reduced to a lumpen body of the Everyday, nor an inert consumer subliminally responding to the media-ised imperatives of a bounded message. As the Open Text requires the Reader's intervention in order to complete the text, the Reader must enter into an interplay of stimulus and response, choosing variations, playing with permutations and re/moulding the Author's composition. In the Open Text, the Reader becomes a performer. Yet as the very act of re/inventing the text requires an intimate collaboration with the Author, it can offer not just the joys of performance as co-authorship but, at its disrupting moments of excess and transgression, the jouissance of orgasm. *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers*, Bill Seaman's interactive videodisc and ten monitor videowall installation excites the ecstasy of the Open Text.<sup>6</sup>

Amidst a cacophony of city noises and symphonic music, words are spoken while projected across moving images, in the videowall of *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers*, as installed for the 9th Biennale of Sydney. Accompanied by a musical fragment, these words (as listed beneath this text), are superimposed over an image, one module at a time, across the videowall displays. While they may seem syntactically arbitrary, once these words complete their cycles across ten side-by-side monitors, they congeal into sentences. After ten segments, the next sentence begins from the first monitor, erasing and overriding the last image as it travels, until all 330 segments have been played — at which point the process begins again. As the process begins with some linguistic structures — starting with AN IMMACULATE, AN EXQUISITE, AN ALLURING, A LUSCIOUS, A SUMPTUOUS, A SENSUAL, A SEDUCTIVE — analogous expectations are raised, only to be belied by the juxtaposition of voice-over, music and image in each modular island, as well as the relationship to the resulting syntax. AN EXQUISITE is syntactically juxtaposed with MODEL EMULATES AN INFORMED URGE, while AN IMMACULATE leads to OPERATION INCORPORATES AN ENIGMATIC GESTURE. Through an incessant decoding and recoding of image, text, word and music — like switching channels or snatching scraps from fast-forward — any anchoring of meaning is destabilised, whilst continuities of reading are disrupted. The prospect of a position ever becoming fixed and immutable within this relentless re/contextualisation is exploded, just as identity is only ever momentarily defined through an oscillation of difference. What is initially signalled by *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers* is a relativity of identity shaped by shifts in ontology and transformations of vision in the Reading and Observing Subject.

*The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers* is immersed in linguistic texts and scopic regimes encompassing a different vision of the world to that regulated by a

eye, and an ahistorical, disinterested and disembodied subject, which could be manipulated by single point perspective.

<sup>10</sup> If scopic regimes are intertwined with understandings of ontology and cosmology, as my line of argument suggests, then vanishing points or centralised axes with orthogonals which cajole the eye towards a centre, complementing vertical and horizontal meridians of a grid — such as Alberti prescribes through the *velo* — to frame the eye would appear to be, in a post-Copernican world, superfluous. That such a theory has been hotly contested and repressed since conception, is poignantly encapsulated by Brecht in *The Life of Galileo* with its analogies to be drawn between the papacy of Urban VIII and the Third Reich.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, An October Book, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass., 1990. What would appear to remain relatively unproblematised is how

An immaculate	operation	incorporates	an enigmatic	gesture	to embrace	the slippery	momentum of	an eternal	desire
An ingenious	drive	becomes one with	a streamlined	slight of hand	to approximate	the resilient	field of	a lost	dream
An obscure	reproduction	displays	an abandoned	arrangement	to amplify	the changing	atmosphere of	a transcendent	vision
A forgotten	certainty	breaks down	an esoteric	perspective	to resemble	the shifting	area of	an articulate	reflection
A muddled	investigation	merges with	an indexical	vocabulary	to map	the uneasy	concept of	a guarded	obsession
A cacophonous	motion	blends with	a ponderous	aim	to navigate	the stubborn	wing of	a vacant	architecture



*distinctions may be theorised between particular moments of observation and points of reading. While semiological tools can identify contextual and subjective complexities between reading a shop window (including one's reflection in it) and reading an artwork sanctified within a museum, there would appear to be phenomenological differences in the acts of observing and reading, just as there are differences between the 'glance' and the 'gaze' as Norman Bryson has identified. Such a problematisation would beg the question as to how it would be possible to link the Observer/Reader of the new arcades to the Observer/Reader in the new museum — a presumption lurking amidst Jonathan Crary's excellent thesis. As I am presently unable to disentangle such a knotty question, I shall assume for this argument — as Crary assumes for his thesis — that observing presupposes reading.*

<sup>12</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith, Routledge, London, 1989, p. 330.

spatio-temporal order of representation as embodied by Cartesian perspectivalism.<sup>7</sup> Single point perspective was instrumental to Cartesian perspectivalism in conveying a microcosmic window on the world, to intensify the verisimilitude and psychological impact of an *istoria* and extend the observer's spatial (and emotional) link between the observed and the observer.<sup>8</sup> Protagorean *Man as the measure of all things*, as the humanist centre and point of departure of all investigations, can also be correlated to this construction of a visual field, where an overseeing gaze from a vantage point occupied by the Reader was necessarily located outside the mobility of duration.<sup>9</sup> The closed conception of this Cartesian perspectivalism — where the artwork is constructed as a pedagogical vehicle prescribing the position of both creator and observer, author and reader — may in turn be correlated to a closed syllogistic system and conception of the cosmos — of Ptolemy, not Copernicus. Earth was positioned as a fixed star by Ptolemy, an immovable centre of the world (or solar system as we know it) within a hierarchy of fixed, preordained orders, signalling a central point of co-ordination and a scopic vantage point. Yet following the heliocentric theory of Copernicus, there could no longer be an ontologically fixed centre, a privileged space, a prescribed point of view for the observer — every position was perceived as relative to another.<sup>10</sup>

With the proliferating range of optical and sensory experiences from the early moments of modernity, what we are also dealing with, as Jonathan Crary has identified, is a rupturing of vision — the locus of which is the Observer Subject.<sup>11</sup> As the Observing Subject intersects with the commodities, technologies and institutions of modernity, they become the site of new procedures of subjection. As such everyday optical and sensory experiences of modernity as artificial lighting, sheet-glass, museums and arcades remap the body, they provide the conditions for a new ambulatory observer — a mobile

consumer of illusory, commodity-like images. As vision becomes inseparable from transience, speed and flux, it becomes fractured, never cohesive. This is particularly so with the mobile technologies of looking generated by the moving image in cinema and television. As this mobile gaze overlaps objects, desires and vectors, it is frenetic — never contemplative. At the same time, given the infinite variability of experience and viewing positions such relativism and modes of relationality embrace, and the relationship of identity to discontinuities of time and place, this invariably poses a problematic about just how one would represent such experience in visual images and verbal languages. Merleau-Ponty asked:

How is it possible . . . for me to experience the world as a positively existing individual, since none of the perspective views of it which I enjoy exhaust it, since its horizons are always open, and since moreover no knowledge, even scientific knowledge, provides us with the invariable formula of a *facies totius universi*? How can any thing ever really and truly present itself to us, since its synthesis is never a completed process . . .<sup>12</sup>

If the thing and the world is then only a "concatenation of our perspectives" as Merleau-Ponty postulates,<sup>13</sup> and if everything is perpetually temporalised and localised, it begs the question as to how can one ever experience the world as a synthesised whole, let alone coherently represent the fracturing and splintering of experience? As Merleau-Ponty concludes:

It is thus of the essence of the thing and of the world to present themselves as 'open', to send us beyond their determinate manifestations, to promise us always 'something else to see'.<sup>14</sup>

In order to represent modes of relationality in *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers* as "open", it may then be strategic that ambiguity is deployed rather

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>14</sup> Meleau-Ponty, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

<sup>15</sup> Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1976, p. 262.

<sup>16</sup> This pivoting bridge was filmed at Glebe Container Port in Sydney. This bridge is electronically directed to reroute land-based vehicles around sea transport.

<sup>17</sup> Ambiguity, as theorised by both Paul Valéry and Stéphane Mallarmé, generates a text which is never singular nor complete, defined nor confined but infinite and unlimited; where for Valéry "il n'y a pas de vrai sens d'un texte". Its dependence upon devices of evocation and suggestion may be summed up in Stéphane Mallarmé's much quoted words: "Nommer un objet c'est supprimer les trois quarts de la jouissance du poème, qui est faire du bonheur de deviner peu à peu: le suggérer . . . voilà la rêve".

<sup>18</sup> This game of random association was played with folded paper passed from one person to another, with either

An exquisite	model	emulates	an informed	urge
An enthusiastic	misinterpretation	imitates	a contradictory	atmosphere
A paradoxical	program	cuts to	a forgotten	quality
A spiritual	awareness	reorganizes	a measured	coincidence
A crystalline	occurrence	marries	a self reflexive	framework
An alluring	invention	melds with	an indefinite	perception

to interpret	the invisible	history of	a delicate	device
to ignite	the underground	physics of	a technological	apparition
to sway	the awkward	ambience of	a temporary	identity
to connect with	the ambiguous	realm of	a flawless	template
to agitate	the subliminal	luxury of	an empty	sensation
to speculate on	the oscillating	presence of	an elegant	assembly



words or images added. The technique was named by André Breton (or Paul Eluard) 'Cadavre exquis' after one of the phrases obtained from this random method: 'The exquisite/corpse/shall drink/the young/wine'.

<sup>19</sup> These are forms of ambiguity which Tzvetan Todorov identifies in his *Grammaire du Décaméron*, Mouton, The Hague, 1969.

<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes uses this term as a spatial metaphor for ways in which the signification of myth is only constituted through constant movement between a language-object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers, Palgrave Books, London, 1973, p. 123.

<sup>21</sup> As trans. by Grange Wooley, *Stéphane Mallarmé 1841-1898*, Drew University, New Jersey, 1981, p. 175.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 187.

than certainty, metaphorical suggestion rather than empiricist description, nonsensical discourse rather than verifiable rhetoric, and self-reflexive terminology interdispersed with games of randomness and chance.

"Semiotically speaking ambiguity", according to Umberto Eco, "must be defined as a mode of violating the rules of the code".<sup>15</sup> Because of an absence of conventional signposting, the ordered world of supposed, universally acknowledged laws is displaced by a defamiliarised, disorientating world of palpable signs where directional centres are missing, while signifiers are cut adrift from any habitual referent. It is then not by chance that a pivot-bridge is the opening image for the first word of *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers*.<sup>16</sup> It sets the scene for metamechanisms of strategic ambiguity, with non-mimetic relationships of words and images and an exploitation of unexpected encounters in which readings seem to emerge from chance associations between signifiers, while identities pivot around shifting images, as meaning pivots off — especially when these images are belied, as in this frame, by the text AN IMMACULATE spoken quietly by an unidentified man amidst the sombre droning of a cello.<sup>17</sup> This contrapuntal relationship of word and image, voice-over, music and sound, continues in all the following frames. The next words OPERATION INCORPORATES are set against cars narrowly avoiding collision when overtaking on a two-lane roadway. Set against a brass pendulum swinging in front of an Edwardian wedding portrait, AN ENIGMATIC could literally denote the relationship between these two objects, while obliquely suggesting an immaculate conception. GESTURE is imaged by a man dressed in white on a bowling green kneeling to scoop one ball while another rolls onto his feet. A Sony video camera filming coral underwater accompanies the words TO EMBRACE. THE SLIPPERY is projected as a camera fleetingly pans the urban landscape. An antenna on top of a high rise building, slicing the horizon accompanies the

words MOMENTUM OF — possibly signalling the momentum ignited by transmitting information in a globalised media environment — while the rotating turbine which follows could seem the opposite of the last words in this segment, AN ETERNAL and DESIRE. While these words finally form a syntactically correct sentence, it is as linguistically nonsensical and seems as random as the Surrealists' *The exquisite/corpse/shall drink/the young/wine*,<sup>18</sup> with ambiguities at the levels of proposition and sequence, as well as modes of relationality.<sup>19</sup> Yet while the pivot-bridge may appear to bear little relationship to other images on a denotational plane, metaphorical relationships are suggested between pivoting, a pendulum, a collision, slippery, momentum and a rotating turbine in relation to a turnstile of meanings,<sup>20</sup> together with the navigational act of driving as an operation and engaging a video camera as an embrace.

Through the metaphor of a ship caught amidst an overpowering storm, Mallarmé positioned the author in *Un coup de dés* as a navigator trying to steer a course "as one menaces a destiny and the winds"<sup>21</sup> amidst the chaos of some "near tempest of hilarity and horror".<sup>22</sup> The maelstrom of thought to be configured into writing and reading becomes, according to Mallarmé, as chaotic as a tempest and as indeterminate as throwing a dice. As the language of art, like thought, is like a game of risk fraught with unexpected encounters, as "every thought gives forth a throw of the dice",<sup>23</sup> the author cannot have perfect control just as there can never be an ultimate meaning. In this case, the reader as much as the writer is caught in the act of navigation.<sup>24</sup> The reader as navigator is seminal to mapping out seemingly random modes of relationality in *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers*. Meta-images beyond the pivot-bridge are interwoven like leitmotifs throughout the video intertext, alongside keyworded signposts for the reader TO MAP, TO NAVIGATE or TO DECODE the installation as an INVESTIGATION and DISCOVERY. Within this chaos

<sup>24</sup> Mallarmé's irregular typography, graphic physiognomies and configuration of the white page as an instrument of meaning, together with his free verse without syntactical logic and organising rhetoric, positions the reader as a navigator, as exemplified in the opening lines of *Un coup de dés*. While in Mallarmé's *Igitur*, art may be produced to outlive or contravene chance, chance is an integral part of the production and reading of *Un coup de dés*. Despite the author's calculation and ordering process involved in producing art it can, as Mallarmé suggests in *Un coup de dés*, never abolish chance — in either writing or reading.

<sup>25</sup> I am referring to Lacan's essay entitled 'L'Instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient' or 'La Raison depuis Freud', translated as 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious' or 'Reason since Freud', first published in 1957. As the lover's letter to the Queen of France in Poe's story intriguingly circulates in a signifying chain amongst those unconsciously aware of what is hap-

A repulsive	contraption	collapses	a fluctuating	scheme	to elude	the cantankerous	energy of	a drunken	gaze
A silent	action	mimics	an unintentional	turn of phrase	to influence	the hovering	parameters of	a precise	hypothesis
An artificial	discovery	exhibits	an inadvertent	construction	to explore	the pliant	boundary of	a golden	intuition
A tranquil	sensation	avoids	an unlikely	inclination	to be immersed in	the sublime	nature of	an eccentric	inquiry
An incoherent	gadget	evades	a numb	strategy	to accentuate	the subtle	regions of	a substantial	set of rotations
A lascious	event	echoes	a cryptic	inspiration	to assimilate	the floating	surface of	a liquid	transmission



*pening, it becomes a mobile signifier.*

<sup>26</sup> The mobile text, in Mallarmé's project for a 'pluridimensional', 'deconstructible livre', consisted of individual units which could be broken-down into sections to be increasingly reformulated into smaller units. As such it was 'Un livre ni commence ni ne finit; tout au plus fait-il semblant'. In his letter to Verlaine dated 16 November 1885, Mallarmé described this 'livre qui soit un livre' as 'le jeu littéraire par excellence'.

<sup>27</sup> The meaning to be teased-out from a semiological reading at the third, less immediate level of connotation, according to Roland Barthes, op. cit., p. 119.

<sup>28</sup> The term mechanical reproduction has been deliberately drawn from Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, first published in German in 1936, in which he theorises how the aura of originality enframing art would wither in the age of mechanical reproduction, and how the

of rotational and floating signs, which becomes like following the signifying chain spawned by Poe's *Purloined letter*,<sup>25</sup> the Reader/Investigator is in constant danger of losing the scent, like losing the plot, and being thrown off course. Yet these meta-images, like meta-texts, provide a pathway for the Reader/Navigator to negotiate their way through fields of possible meanings.

The first screening of water which appears in many different guises, is in the second sentence against STREAMLINED where the source of white-water splashing and sloshing is in fact a washing machine. The organ of pipes which appear to be pumping water in AMPLIFY is in fact a fountain turned on its side. Mountainside water in A VACANT flows alongside dotted signs of human habitation. Small boats are charted through a sea of tranquil water in A SPIRITUAL, A SELF-REFLEXIVE, and LUXURY OF, only to be displaced by a hydrofoil levitating above the surface in TURN OF PHRASE and FRAME OF MIND. Different views of a metal template angel designed to pivot with the direction of the air flow and act as a lightning rod persistently reappear with the words MODEL and TEM-PLATE, as does a Swiss army knife flicking different blades, along with propellers, driven cars and lifts. The constant movement of these objects and the pivot-bridge suggest, as with Mallarmé's *Livre*, a text conceived as a mobile apparatus where each section can become polymorphous in its different inter-relationships.<sup>26</sup> At the more 'obtuse' level of meaning,<sup>27</sup> these meta-images can act not only as self-reflexive metaphors for navigating *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers*. Yet with such meta-texts as A PARADOXICAL, A PUZZLING, A NONSENSICAL, along with THE OSCILLATING and LESS THAN STABLE, they also self-reflexively signal its construction as a 'mobile text'. At the same time, the selection of signifiers and their play of signification can also act as self-reflexive metaphors for the long absence of the arts of 'mechanical reproduction', from what has been museologically 'placed on a pedestal' as

art and what has been historicised within Eurocentric master-narratives.<sup>28</sup>

The sculpture of a nude male torso, cut without hands within the frame SLIGHT OF HAND, and three rectangular phallic blocks, like Robert Rauschenberg's Factum I and 2, in REPRODUCTION are the first of many tongue-in-cheek references Seaman makes to sculpture. A TRANSCENDANT, PERCEPTION, AN EROTIC, and THE SUBLIME set up expectations of Burkean aesthetics,<sup>29</sup> only to be short-circuited by the image of power lines converging on a missile looming out of a sublime mist in THE SUBLIMAL. This juxtaposition becomes even more jarring when set against such technological terminology as CUTS TO, A SONIC and A CYBERNETIC as well as televisual images. An incessant oscillation of television images follows the flight of birds captured in SHIFTING, along with the minutiae of 1000 different marks exposed in a blown-up TV screen with the words AREA OF. As each still shimmers like a colour-field canvas, it raises questions about the infinite dimensions of the televisual to generate colour images by comparison to the limitations of manually manipulating paint. Such a meta-narrative seems corroborated by the interwoven image of a workman manually sweeping dust off the streets against the words A TRANSCENDENT, and workmen operating grinding machines which splatter their clothing and milk-stain their boots in frames named both REPULSIVE and TO MAP. While such juxtapositions disrupt the Burkean nexus between nature and the sublime, they also appear to travesty the anachronism of applying an aesthetic language of transcendent contemplation and Kantian judgement to videoart.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, this jarring relationality also exposes salient differences in the forms of labour required to produce images without the intervention of machines, together with their material capacity for reproduction on micro and macrodimensional scales. As the flashing of images and sequencing shifts also acknowledge, *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers* is not just a mobile

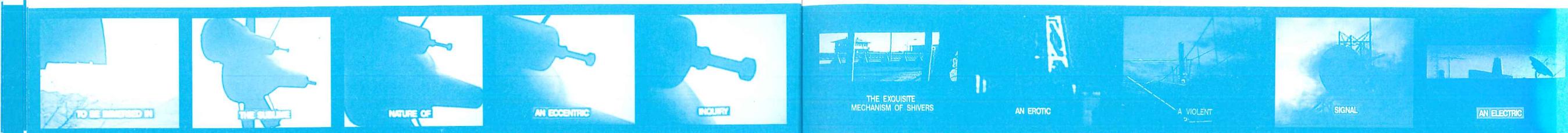
arts of mechanical reproduction would supplant the specialised labours of fine arts, activating the consumer into becoming a producer. Yet if one considers how mechanical reproduction has not only reinforced the aura surrounding fine art, but also helped entrench it more firmly within the art history industry, it is then possible to deduce how Benjamin's emancipating theory of art in the age of mechanical reproduction back-fired — in ways that even Adorno could not anticipate.

<sup>29</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, first published in England in 1757.

<sup>30</sup> In Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, first published in Berlin in 1790, in which he examined the so-called faculty of taste in relation to aesthetical judgement, he draws a distinction of judgement between the beautiful and the sublime. As videoart arguably embodies a different relationship of taste and aesthetical judgement, let alone Kant's distinctions be-

A sumptuous	machine	observes	an edgy	movement
A displaced	illusion	reproduces	a distorted	slip of the tongue
A sensual	transformation	tampers with	an unruly	guidance system
A timeless	collection	moves through	an erotic	game
A mathematical	phenomenon	triggers	a tarnished	magnetism
A logical	metamorphosis	dismantles	an elaborate	network

to transcend	the delicate	laws of	an egocentric	signal
to circumvent	the sliding	home of	a puzzling	vehicle
to skirt	the luminous	world of	an obsessive	series of pivots
to touch	the sensuous	trajectory of	an ambitious	communication
to register	the bumbling	push of	a violent	force
to access	the negative	ramifications of	a misinformed	voice



*tween the beautiful and the sublime, and represents a substantially different artform to painting and sculpture, the dominant arts at the time when Kant and Burke were formulating their theories, the application of such criteria let alone language for examination of videart, would constitute a somewhat absurd historicism. In this case, what may be ironically hinted by Bill Seaman's framing, is the inadequacy of a language of aesthetics, as it 'evolved' from Baumgarten, to critically grapple with videoart.*

<sup>31</sup> This phrase appears in the context of Paik's lament for poor Joyce in *Nam June Paik: Afterlude to the Exposition of Experimental Television*, 1963 in *Ubi Fluxus ibi Motus*, 1990-1962, ed. Achille Bonita Oliva, Mazzotta, Milano, 1990, p. 386.

<sup>32</sup> Bill Seaman visited Yugoslavia in 1985, when he was awarded First Prize at the Second International Biennale/CD 85 held at Ljubljana.

<sup>33</sup> As Michel Foucault theorises in his chapter on 'Panop-

text in terms of strategic textual devices, but a corporeally mobilised text which self-consciously breaks the confines of what Nam June Paik called "one book with one-way direction".<sup>31</sup> Yet while the mobility of video may cast static art into the realms of anachronism, it takes on an ominous hue when aligned with other channels of technological communication.

While A TRANQUIL SENSATION AVOIDS AN UNLIKELY INCLINATION is pictured by the misty mountains of what was Yugoslavia,<sup>32</sup> these postcard shots encapsulating the word SUBLIME are set against sound-machines which, when silhouetted against the light, take on the foreboding aura of surveillance devices — at disturbingly close range. The words STRATEGY, MANOEVER, MECHANISM, TRANSMISSION and SURVEILLANCE appear with life-size rolls of barbed wire across the urbanscape, while power wires cut into foliage and grid the skyscape. While a papal figure offering benediction is watched by the hidden gaze of surveillance cameras, streets are stalked by shadows, bulbous gas tanks are set against fiery explosions, transmitters and antennae reconfigure the stratasphere, while the windows of impregnable buildings are as closed as the eye of a panopticon.<sup>33</sup> Centrepoint Tower looms over Sydney City, while huge hospital expulsion machines, microwave towers and technological receptors are etched against black clouds. While oblique camera angles defamiliarise these images, these chillingly Kafkaesque spaces are still all-too-familiar. Shot from the window of Bill Seaman's inner-city terrace house, they signal the way informational technologies have transfigured lines of vision and visuality, while weaving an insidious web of carceral networks around Observing Subjects. As everyday routines have become constructed around technology, these communications and information technologies have become absorbed and domesticated to the point where they seem inconspicuous, omnipresent and invisible. What may then be revealed by delineating

what has become indecipherable is "the inconspicuous omnipresence of the technical"<sup>34</sup> — but not in terms of technological determinism nor paranoid fantasies of global control. As in Mallarmé's work *in movement*, the Reader is positioned as performer, not passive spectator, just as the Observing Subject is positioned as a navigator, not victim of technomania. This is transmitted not just through the videowall mechanisms as an open text, but more pertinently through the videodisc interactive. In this case, the navigator is caught not so much in a double-bind predicament but a double-edged *dénouement* where technology becomes as much controlling as it is protecting, subsuming as innovating. As the performer is challenged to continually reinvestigate and renegotiate the 'open technologized text', *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers* follows a trajectory traced by Brecht's *verfremdungseffekt*,<sup>35</sup> where the strange and unexpected are planted to awaken the dreamer from a reified sleep of commodity fetishism — or in this case, jolt the viewer out of the neutralising stupor of the televisual and produce a transforming praxis.<sup>36</sup> Yet this is not just provoked through the videowall installation. As 54,000 frames on the videodisc interactive can generate juxtapositions of word and image, sound and music which could not have been projected, it provides the possibility for not only actively intervening in the apparatus, but for playing the game — albeit with a loaded dice — to produce unpredictable relationships out of the tools at hand. In this case, the carceral nature of institutions and technological instruments of surveillance are located, like Brecht's 'social structures', not as all-invasive and inescapable, natural and eternal but as culturally constructed, manipulable, and therefore capable of reconstruction.<sup>37</sup> What may be ultimately suggested is that the impermeable armour of omniscient technocratic control is merely polyester cladding capable of being pierced to expose the chaos of random intersections and, where it gapes, to reveal the ecstasy of

*ticism in Discipline and Punishment', *The Birth of the Prison*, Peregrine Books, England, 1979. The efficacy of surveillance in Bentham's prison is dependent upon the watchtower, of the panopticon (the eye of power) being impermeable to the inmates' gaze.*

<sup>34</sup> Herman Bausinger, 'Media Technology and Everyday Life', *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 6, no. 4, 1984, p. 346.

<sup>35</sup> Brecht's estrangement effect, was required, as Brecht put it, "to see one's mother as a man's wife". Brecht's estrangement effect complemented his notion of the open text whereby art needs to be open-ended, to be completed by the audience and not closed by the author's reconciliation of contradictions. Berthold Brecht, 'Der Dreigroschenprozess', *GW*, vol. 18.

<sup>36</sup> The determining factors, such as social background, special events, etc., must be shown as alterable. By means of a certain interchangeability of circumstances and occurrences, the spectator must be given the possibility of assem-

An ersatz	combination	mixes with	a perplexing	philosophy
A veiled	incident	alters	a flexible	tactic
A fleeting	impression	takes over	a confused	situation
An ambidextrous	expression	collides with	an irresponsible	significance
A provocative	breakthrough	matches with	a cybernetic	intention
A seductive	apparatus	fragments	a nonsensical	positioning

to establish	the dangerous	edge of	a sensitive	manoeuvre
to decode	the ambiguous	coordinates of	a single	focus
to explode	the transparent	detail of	an electric	mechanism
to illuminate	the muscle-bound	make-up of	a less than stable	structure
to stimulate	the migrating	geographies of	a resonant	passage
to evade	the poignant	memory of	a misguided	theory



bling, experimenting and abstracting. Extract from Brecht's notes to 'Die Mutter', *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett, Methuen, London, 1987, p. 60.

<sup>37</sup> This is a position which also seemed to emerge from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibition entitled *Thresholds and Enclosures*, May & June 1993. Yet while such video-artists as Dara Birnheim, Gretchen Bender and Julia Scher engage the surveillance industry and scrutinise its flaws, they do not necessarily provide interactive tools for its rearticulation.

<sup>38</sup> According to Jacques Lacan, it is in the Name-of-the-Father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law. Jacques Lacan, 'Function and field of speech and language', *ECRITS*, trans. Alan Sheridan, W. W. Norton & Co. Inc., NY, 1977, p. 67.

<sup>39</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice

transgressing the 'Name-of-the-Father'.<sup>38</sup>

From Kristeva's decoding of the signifying apparatus in *Massacre of the Innocents* at Assisi, she deduces that Giotto's fresco only reaches completion with the reader, as "it steers the subject towards a systematic cutting through its foreclosure".<sup>39</sup> For Kristeva, this begs the question as to whether such an act manifests "precisely the mechanism of jouissance whose economy Freud locates in the process of removing prohibition by making one's way through it".<sup>40</sup> Yet to remove prohibition and go beyond the Name-of-the-Father entails exceeding the myth of Oedipus and its appropriation by Freud, in order to reach the Phallic Mother. As "no language can sing unless it confronts the Phallic Mother",<sup>41</sup> what Kristeva postulates through revisiting the Oedipal complex, is the possibility of re-scripting Sophocles' tragedy of destiny. Here Oedipus would refuse to accept his blindness, would retrace his steps to demystify the sphinx, deflate the riddle and replace the Greek myth "by a non-Oedipal incest that opens the eye of a subject who is nourished by the mother".<sup>42</sup> The joy achieved by such stripping away of mystery and elusion of codes would be playful, laughing and Dionysian — which, like Dionysius, would be like being born a second time. This could be related to a dismantling of the Symbolic Law governing syntactical and social constraints, to embrace Kristeva's notion of the *chora*<sup>43</sup> — given that as Barthes observed, the child invents the sentence narrative at the same moment as the Oedipus complex.<sup>44</sup> In this case, the text has an equivalence to a body, particularly so with video installation which entices the observing body into a spatial relationship within the text as a corporealised, heterogeneous body — and an Other body to that of the Father. It would then follow that "if this heterogeneous body, this risky text provide meaning, identity and jouissance", they would "do so in a completely different way than a Name-of-the-Father. Not that they do not

operate under the shield of a tyrannical, despotic Name-of-the-Father . . . ". But if it is, according to Kristeva "only a question of power", then "the important thing is to see what exceeds it".<sup>45</sup> In this case unveiling becomes not so much a reduction as a passion, while violating the rules and exceeding the Symbolic Order, rewriting and reinventing the text, turns the Reader into ecstatic performers. This is what can transpire with Bill Seaman's *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers*. While its modes of relationality, metaphor, strategic ambiguity, nonsensicality and chance associations can generate a dialectics of blissful transgression, it also alludes to ways in which the machinery of surveillance, including video, can be rearticulated "to pierce through the paternal wall of the superego" to re-emerge from it decentred, consumed with anxiety and pleasure "with a desire to know, but a desire to know more and differently than what is encoded-spoken-written".<sup>46</sup>

The ecstasy of this text then arises when the Reader becomes not just a performer seeing the world differently, but a navigator able to create a world anew.

Jardine & Leon S. Roudiez, *Basil Blackwell*, Oxford, 1987, p. 231.

<sup>40</sup> Kristeva, op. cit., pp. 231-2.

<sup>41</sup> ibid., p. 191..

<sup>42</sup> ibid., p. 193.

<sup>43</sup> The 'chora' as encapsulated by the Mother and receptive, entails acknowledging ways in which social and family structures make their imprint through the maternal body, as well as how they have been suppressed in the Name-of-the-Father.

<sup>44</sup> No doubt following Lacan. Roland Barthes, 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives', *The Semiotic Challenge*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1988, p. 135.

<sup>45</sup> Kristeva, op. cit., p. 163.

<sup>46</sup> ibid., p. 165.

An ephemeral	figure of speech	fuses with	an indeterminate	replacement
A displaced	broadcast	shatters	a sonic	proposition
A clumsy	decoy	combines with	a chance	frame of mind
to approach	the subconscious	construction of	a secret	surveillance
to escape	the solemn	biology of	an exacting	channel
to unleash	the clear	touch of	a fly by night	temptation

Bill Seaman, who has a Master of Science in Visual Studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is currently based in Sydney, where he is Senior Lecturer in Time Based Arts at The University of New South Wales College of Fine Arts. His most recent awards include First Prize at the 1992 Cadiz Film & Video Festival in Spain and a distinction for Interactive Art at the 1992 Prix Arts Electronica, Linz, for *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers*. In 1993 *The Exquisite Mechanism of Shivers* was installed as an interactive at Artificial Games in Munich, Tomorrow's Realities, SIGGRAPH, in Anaheim, California, The Virtual Garden—International Exhibition of Interactive Works, Tapiola Finland, The 9th Biennale of Sydney, 1992-93 and the Experimental Arts Foundation in Adelaide, 1992. It was also projected in linear form at the World-wide Video Festival in Den Haag Holland, was broadcast in French for the Liege Carré noir in Belgium and was sold to the Helsinki Museum of Contemporary Art.