The Engagement Aesthetic

Experiencing New Media Art through Critique

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CHAPTER ONE

The engagement aesthetic—An introduction

First, some notes on visual culture in connection with the title of this book, which is less about new art than how to experience it. The question that this book examines is how art or text created using electronic/mechanical media may resemble (or differ from) previous kinds of aesthetic encounters, and which aesthetic and literary criteria inform the character and structure of new works. These questions would not matter if we thought of new media as old media, that is, as the same, contemporary forms of art, literature, performance, and communication that we have always had, except utilizing new machinery and technology. But that feeling—new media as a "more efficient" version of old media—is not what electronic art and literature provide us. What confronts us in new media art and literature is not merely a "better" way to design, to see, to read, or to write. A pencil is more efficient than a chisel because it reduces the work required to make a mark, to write—yet with each, the creative effort in what is written is still entirely in the mind of the author. But in the new art and literary media that I am discussing here—a small sample of a growing category of creative systems variously called new media art, electronic literature, and other names—the aim is not to "produce" more efficiently, but to complicate the act of production itself, to transform it into a plural act, so that it emerges out of entirely new kinds of interactions and sources, perhaps between users and a work as in Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's public projections, or

between a viewer and a work as in Amaranth Borsuk's augmented reality literature, or between several media *within* one work, to include works that reflect their own structure, as we see in Andrew Neumann's electronic sculptures, the poetry generators of Nick Montfort, and the autonomous readers of John Cayley and Daniel Howe. In fact, the idea of a "work" is itself complicated by its appearance as a *practice*, such as by redefining architectural space, as does Paul Notzold's SMS-based art, or Mader, Stublić and Wiermann's spatial reconfigurations of existing buildings. The "when" and "where" of a work, too, is distributed into a pluralistic matrix of multiple "emergences" as in the work of Golan Levin, and Sheron Wray and Fleeta Siegel's interactive performances, or the electronic dance works of Jamie Jewett and Luke DuBois. None of these kinds of work is "already" finished, each has its own character, yet each is remade every time it is invoked, produced, viewed, or read. To experience such works is to look, read, think, and feel differently about art, literature, image, and text because the aesthetic focus is not on heightening our sense of an object or a work, but on what comes between us and the work—the act of engagement itself. It is an act that opens out to many possible directions.

And in order to explore some varieties of engagement as an aesthetic experience in depth, it is not necessary or possible to produce a compendium of electronic works of art and literature. The aim is, rather, on seeing, reading, thinking, and feeling—for these provide the three basic elements that viewers, readers, visitors of new media works have the power to produce: reflection, critique, and meaning. The essays here aim to foster at least one of these sensibilities, which is to say, to empower our experience and argue for the difference and integrity of a new aesthetic.

Reflection is the extended moment between perception and judgment, it occurs after seeing and before finally deciding that what has been seen is of *this* or *that* quality. Meaning is the extended moment after certain (positive) judgments that bring us back to reflection. To find something meaningful is to be able to reflect on it at length. Critique is the language by which perception comes to reflection, reflection arrives at judgment, and judgment ascends to meaning. Thus, critique is what I offer, it is the language of this book—reflection, judgment, and meaning are an opportunity, and a decision for each reader.

And so what is *critique*, in the sense meant, and as the method offered here? It is not an ideology, a school of thought, or an attempt to share my personal views on the work shown here. It is not a reduction of impressions down to a final verdict. It is the opposite of that, it is about conceptual integrity, about finding something behind and beyond the senses, beyond reading, beyond seeing. Judging work as good or bad, for example, is not critique; it is the *end* of any possible critique, it has a distancing effect. The judgment and the work are separate. But critique, when true to itself, is meditative, and therefore true to the art it considers. Strong critique is not synonymous with strong judgment; it is often the inverse of that. As a kind of truth, critique is not about secreting blunt and polarizing verdicts that either praise or dismiss creative work. Critique is a kind of *reasoning* that begins in sensory experience, and takes the work and the viewer somewhere new—beyond what the viewer may have initially seen. And in all of this, the point of departure is decreasingly textual and increasingly visual, because Western culture is now almost synonymous with the phenomenon of *the image*. The image is something so all-encompassing that it exists less as a specific kind of object than as an archetype; it speaks for what exists and makes claims about "what matters" as cultural reality because the production of imagery is of different kinds—and all are cultural products—to include the retinal image, the public image, the design image, the techno-scientific image, the fashion image, and the entertainment image. The once-pure connection between image and art (art being the institution where images were considered valuable because they had something unique, contemplative, and crucial to say to us about ourselves) has become thoroughly pervaded with and saturated by every other *non-art* creation and use of images. It is not that art has expanded outward to all aspects of social life—we know this because there is no evidence that the museum or gallery has entered the common interest of most people—but rather that the emergence of post-printing, post-text technologies that began with the invention of photography have carried the creation and delivery of imagery far beyond the secluded realms of art, with its expensive large-format books, its pristine white walls, and its climate-controlled galleries. If the image now defines human connection by way of social media, the entertainment industry, and other forms of technological conveyance, then art has come along

with it, of necessity. Breaking rank with the guarded traditions of painting, sculpture, theater, or literature, the image has launched on a major reversal through the expansion of its own function. It is no longer about its uniqueness, and no longer connected exclusively to ideals of the beautiful, the perfect, or the sublime. Unleashed on all corners of society, the image is sullied and compromised—and made real—as it returns to art with a chronicle of what it has seen and what it can show us. And so it is that art now follows media.

Consequently, museums and publications devoted to art regard the image in its new feral contexts. The art image in contemporary work may still be framed and hanging on the gallery wall, but it now disregards that context and operates as a window to worlds that are far from where art *was*. The contemporary images we find most familiar are those centered in action on the streets, fashion runways, rooming houses, police stations, brothels, cafés and bars, prisons, hospitals, morgues, and cemeteries, skyscrapers under construction, hallways in buildings, etc. Each milieu is more intensely common and intimate to us than the "old image" in its usual art contexts—the portrait, the nature image, and the image of still life.

The question of why the image is no longer defined by its place in art can be answered simply: it is created by technologies aiming to place it *within* popular culture rather than *above* it; these new systems aim for perfect *convenience* rather than perfection of *craft*, and so, visual products are no longer largely developed in the remove of a studio or developing room. Cameras now produce, transfer, and transmit images with contextual immediacy—at the moment and location of capture. Today's image-taking workflow is thus culturally embedded in a social setting: *seeing* leads to instantaneous *capture*; capture leads to instantaneous *transmission*, which in turn leads easily to instantaneous social *response* through equally mediated forms, as the image is again recycled back into the cultural stream.

Since we don't speak of art without reference to the image, and since we don't think of the image without reference to a medium, much contemporary art has become defined by its *methods* for appropriating or inventing visual work. What counts as *aesthetic* in what we see, therefore, is no longer based on affinity or preference alone. As technology entered artistic production, art became less exclusively concerned with producing objects, and turned

increasingly to the artistic obsession with production processes. And as we cannot apply questions of beauty to *processes* in the way that we could do with *objects*, endless variations of new criteria—or *scarcity* of criteria—have come to determine the artistic merit of art; if the process for creating it is unstable, the stability of consensual definitions (such as what constitutes a "masterpiece") is also undermined. Since art and technology have become codependent, *how* can we see and appreciate new kinds of art no longer based on conventional, object-based practices like painting? In fact, much of this new art isn't merely made *with* technological media, it exists only *through* the activation of such media, something that has been true since the first film. Film, unlike the photograph, can be experienced only while a (filmic) medium is recreating and projecting it. The evident conclusion here is that, if film is an art form (although categorical claims for arthood are, I think, deeply problematic—some films are aesthetically concerned, others not), then it is the first form of electronic art—it is art lacking the self-assurance of a standalone *object* and experienced only through a *process*. Regarding the art of film, as with the electronic, we can know that seeing a process rather than seeing *through* a process is unique in art history, and resembles the aesthetic of music and dance for which the audience must remain engaged differently.

To repeat the obvious, many forms of the (now electronically created) image have emerged outside of their place in art contexts and institutions, in fact, the primary production of images is independent of educational, publishing, news, business, or scientific institutions, even though these sources commission many of them. But as images continue to be created by all, with limitless abandon, and with unconstrained distribution, the standing of artistic convention and institutional art may continue to recede from the authoritative back to the nostalgic.

Connecting the cultural eruption of the image with electronic media, something extraordinary happens—this forest of symbol-creation systems also incinerates the clean boundaries that hold between technology, science, and art. All are now converging into a buzzing mélange of optical production. This also holds between what could be called "enterprises of image manufacture" such as the game, fashion, and entertainment businesses collectively known as the culture industry. For example, if we read between the lines of

all that has been written about the art of contemporary and technological media—however loosely one might define this—we find several fields or disciplines being strangely argued as "central" to digital art, others strangely absent from their indispensable relation to it. In the former kind of association—the extraneous—the recent connection between "digital" and "game" in the connotative space of artistic discussion can lead one to view these terms as synonymous with each other—evidence if nothing else of claims made without regard to history, since *art* and *game* are not only different words, they are different universes. But, with the exception of Fluxus and some experiments (e.g. *the exquisite corpse*), art's history has evolved quite distinctly from that of games. Art has experienced an unprecedented opening-up of its traditions, and in the digital sphere (which art historians have neglected), art has become more immaterial, more dynamic, without being contradictory, and more internally self-transformed without becoming displaced or ahistorical than non-electronic art. Yet for their part, digital art critics, too, have often neglected their own connection to art history, with the result that one world has remained unable to comment on the other intelligently. To be sure, what art history could share with electronic art is less an appreciation of physical materiality than an array of methodologies that can explore and explain varieties of style as they evolve through form. Lacking this, the cyber side of artistic criticism puzzles over lingering questions, such as what defines digital, electronic, or new media art in the first place without reviewing how modern art has grappled with questions of media aesthetics since the adoption of new expressive forms like photography, collage, film, and installation art.

I am not the first to assert that a *new* approach to address what is meant by digital or electronic or new media art is needed. It is a kind of criticism that attends not to surface or *sensory* questions like, "What does it look like?" or "Is it computer based?" but to conceptual probes about its hybrid origins, the reasoning and intent of some of its artists in choosing this creative direction, and how its processes may cause "art" or an aesthetic experience to emerge. These are, I think, considerably more interesting questions.

As its title suggests, this book's primary interest turns to several problems in how we think about—the aesthetic aspects of—works of art produced using new and electronic media, with relevance to earlier kinds of work. By "earlier" I don't mean *traditions* of art

alone, I also mean *industries* of art, as I will define shortly. The chief role of the artist is to create art; the patron and the collector sustain it; and the curator convenes and conveys it. All of these specialists have a role in the historical completion of the work, but the critic, theorist, or historian will elevate it, making it relevant to a time and audience other than the artist's own. But since, historically speaking, creation is continual, whereas understanding must follow what has been presented to the world, there is a temporal gap between what is made and what is understood. So the natural response is for public taste to apply older standards and criteria to newer work. Of course, as each epoch of art brings different aims to its viewers, one should first interpret works through *contemporary* sensibilities rather than older ones. It makes little sense, for example, to read modern abstraction in painting with a Renaissance eye. Likewise, the sculpture of the nineteenth century, still centered on appreciation of the chiseled image, offers little to the viewer encountering minimalist work from the 1960s, with its emphasis on fabricated symmetry and space-age materials over figurative representation. And if the artist creates work for the *now* while the public views that work through *tradition*, the critic must connect one age with the other not merely by expressing judgments but by making arguments about how to see the new in the now.

As I have just mentioned, the departure of contemporary sculpture from the rubble of its legacy did not come with the advantage that the contemporary sculptural reading could be extended to new forms in space. Instead, a decidedly traditional—not to say Romantic—sensibility has to this day prevailed as a centerpiece of sculptural interpretation. It is as if the modern pelican were judged as the reptilian pterosaur from which it emerged. If the universe of art evolves through media transitions like the animal kingdom evolves through genetic ones, the extinction of any specific form says nothing about the question of life itself, which for art is the ontological question. And so, to see something like Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*—that lengthy slab of steel that cut across a public plaza in the 1980s—with a Romantic's eye is to force a chapter of contemporary sculpture into a kind of prehistoric misreading. What interested Serra is not merely the *object*, namely the enormous metallic partition that he placed across the pedestrian flow, but more importantly, the *process* that is the experience of one's immediate encounter with it,

the phenomenological commitment of its physical order—an order that has taken the place of normal aesthetic convention, of seeing alone—and for this reason he imagined this enormous barrier of steel cutting the federal plaza on which it was placed as imposing a new way of thinking about oneself, an object, and the space surrounding both as three continuous variables, such that

> The viewer becomes aware of himself and of his movement through the plaza. As he moves, the sculpture changes. Contraction and expansion of the sculpture result from the viewer's movement. Step by step the perception not only of the sculpture but of the entire environment changes.[1]

Need we really state that this aesthetic articulation (where the problem of shifting positions in projected space becomes *the* experience of the work) is totally alien to earlier kinds of sculpture?

When, in history, a kind of art emerges that has something new to say, three reactions are possible. One can accept the new art, one can ignore it, or one can attack it. There are many possible permutations. Sometimes it can be accepted, and then ignored, as happened with Suprematist painting, the De Stijl artists, and most Abstract Expressionists. It can be largely ignored, as happened with Minimalism, which was primarily of interest only to critics and curators. It can be accepted but later attacked, as happened with Op Art, Pop Art, and even much of Andy Warhol. Or it can be attacked before being accepted—this is what happened to Marcel Duchamp's readymades and related constructions. And sometimes, if art is taken as a visual but not meditative form, it is attacked—sometimes destroyed—and only then ignored.

As the best-known case of artistic decommissioning of the last century, *Tilted Arc* was ordered demolished on the grounds that it made no sense as a sculpture for one federal bureaucrat who waged war against it—it is the *new* rather than the archaic that can be made extinct. Its destruction is a case of the troubling triumph of conventional expectations of art over open engagement. It is a view of art that is resistant to or unaware of engagement inherent in works where *process* is more important than the *object* itself. It signals an outmoded obsession with seeing art as a static form, seeing a work as a fixed point of expression, relating to everything as a sculptural constant—that is the enemy of new art.

If viewers of the 1980s (not so long ago) could not engage with *Tilted Arc* as legitimate art, how can a more contemporary art-viewing public be brought to engage with digital and new media as aesthetically legitimate? However we define new media—something I identify as media born outside of the traditions of material arts that include photography, sculpture, drawing, painting—my point is that we are not encountering work revolving around the idea of *viewing*, of a spectorial aesthetic alone, but an additional engagement aesthetic—or many—that defines the new. And so it is to a detailed critique of this expansive artistic experience and process that I turn next, by examining different works, positions, and analytic methods from which I hope new interpretive and critical attitudes may emerge. Each side of this critique, from formal, to psychological, to linguistic, provides a different facet of this overall engagement aesthetic.

As I mentioned, the book is not historical, although it contains retrospective references; it is not defending or attacking a theory, although it is speculative and theoretical in character. There are some constant positions, however. One is my disappointment with the nearly systematic way in which art historians have ignored or overlooked the artists, the art and literature, and the aesthetic issues described here merely because they were related to technological production in some way. Some artists like Manfred Mohr have been producing work since the early 1960s. In an October 1967 missive from ARTFORUM's editor, Philip Leider, to art historian Matthew Baigell, Leider rejects a manuscript on electronic artist Charles Csuri, adding that "I cant [sic] imagine ARTFORUM ever doing a special issue on electronics or computers in art, but one never knows."[2] ARTFORUM denied computer-related art at a time when it championed the work of Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, and other artists whose art was constructed by others, out of instructions, and with high-tech materials never forged by human hands. In any historical record, elitism and duplicity are sometimes indistinguishable.

And so, the forms of engagement aesthetic to which I refer throughout this book have largely escaped art history and criticism. As I show, however, Rosalind Krauss has come closest to extending conceptual and contemporary art criticism with the aims of rigorous new media art as I present here, and so her earlier writings provide an occasional bridge in this book, which nonetheless avoids

art history's canonical strictures. Another consistent position of the book is the defense of meditative suspension of judgment in the encounter with electronic art of any kind. I argue for immediacy of *feeling*, rather than of *verdict*, and this distinction is for me the point of separation between "better" and "worse" in art. When *all* electronic art is dismissed, as I later quote a major name in computer games, I have to ask why such dismissal is so quick, accompanied as it is, with the claim that computer games are themselves a legitimate form of art. I don't enter the debate as to whether computer games are art or not, because the question is not posed correctly: art emerges in expressive works, not in categorical abstractions or media. Additionally, if we can not exclude from the category of art the astonishing kinds of things that museums have chosen to exhibit lately, then we have also lost the ability to deny any claims by anyone to call art whatever they wish—and this includes commercial videogames. We can, however, proceed through critique, which is why I wrote this book. We could, for example, simply ask: Is there in claims for the arthood of anything a reasoned *engagement with an aesthetic*? If so, what is it? Or does the claim for arthood resemble more a reach for association with the *status* of art, perhaps as an attack against existing art practices? This book is entirely devoted to exploring the first two (and most complex) of these three questions, the last one belongs to the realm of individual inquiry thereafter.

Each chapter is a separate essay that appears to focus on specific works. That's not the main purpose for the writing presented here. I discuss works only as specific points in a grid of critique that is not viewable as a weave of loose ideas, or as a tightly reductive framework, or even as a theory. It is an endorsement of the belief that we should be open to new work, not because it is "new" but because it comes at us from a different world, one where image, text, and even communication itself (as the final chapter's statistical analysis suggests) is, at the level of deep structure, radically different from conventional expectations, and that perhaps if our view of electronic art and literature were as dynamic as the work itself, we might be more contemplative of *process* as an aesthetic necessity.

CHAPTER TWO

Engagement as subjective system in electronic art

Perception provides me with a 'field of presence' in the broad sense, extending in two dimensions: the here-there dimension and the past-present-future dimension. The second elucidates the first. I 'hold', I 'have' the distant object without any explicit positing of the spatial perspective (apparent size and shape) as I still 'have in hand' the immediate past without any distortion and without any interposed 'recollection'. If we want to talk about synthesis, it will be, as Husserl says, a 'transition-synthesis', which does not link disparate perspectives, but brings about the 'passage' from one to the other.[1]

– M. MERLEAU-PONTY

Of all the kinds of engagement that we can experience in the new art and literary work of electronic media, the first deals with a changed attitude about what images do for us. In electronic art, images are promoted from their conventional function as optical phenomena to devices for critiquing perception. I open with this complex epigram by Maurice Merleau-Ponty because his axiom,

and the essays in this book, together take the same point of departure. It states that, if there is more than a singular way of perceiving something, then, inevitably, perception becomes a kind of critique. And since electronic media are forms of perception, they contain the evidence and method of their own critique. Let us begin with Merleau-Ponty, who describes two kinds of seeing: spatial ("here-there") and temporal ("past-present-future"). Later, my argument will embrace several others.

The thesis that proposes a means for thinking about the kind of artistic work I'm describing here begins with this kind of "transcendental perception." It amounts to the conviction that there is a visual kind of experience, however fleeting, when three subsequent actions take place and become an aesthetic possibility, a kind of engagement that is extended and contemplative rather than immediate and conclusive. First, a moment emerges when *perception* no longer seems dependent on simple acts of *observing*; second, when perception begins to promote a sense or belief that feels like a seed of *understanding*, and third, when this idea or feeling that one has begun to understand something then itself becomes a reach back into the thing one is looking at as a kind of new perception, and this continual return is a basis for *contemplation*. But contemplation is a starting point in this book, not merely an aim. That potential is suggested in the quote above by the appearance of a personal verb: to *hold*, rather than to understand (this is not equivalent to *judging*). When artistic perception turns toward a kind of holding, the aesthetic in process moves from one of contemplation to one of complex engagement.

Contemplation has been the historically predominant goal of art. The term contemplation, which today seems antiquated and haughty, designates the activity of "thinking-about" prior to—and toward the development of—a *judgment*. By implication, the presumed greatness of a work of art or literature correlates with the length of this contemplative moment between observation and judgment. In great works like the *Mona Lisa*, judgment is almost indefinitely held back by contemplation. But in electronic art—at least the cases I'm probing here—this internal line from contemplation to judgment is made circular, oscillating, reflective, because the works I'm discussing (and there are many like these) are ones whose nature is always unstable; their structure becomes part of their content, and together this assembly fluctuates in

continual change. Since neither contemplation nor judgment, if we accept these terms, impart a sense of completion, they cannot individually portray a suitable statement or aesthetic of new media art. This art's circular rabbit-hole of structure-content melding and continual perception and holding is best understood as one of *engagement*. Engagement signifies a continual state, a relationship of progressive moments that persist without repeating.

And so, as contextualized by Merleau-Ponty in the opening thoughts above, there are two ways to take in Edmund Husserl's notion of a *transition-synthesis*—a passage from one perspective to another—as one variant of engagement. One way corresponds to transition-synthesis as a *concept*, an idea or notion "out there" like a geometric hypothesis; the other takes transition-synthesis as an *experience*, a moment when this principle becomes subjective and immediate to the observer. In the first case, a transition-synthesis is captured by the mechanism of language, it is articulated as a kind of universal observation that is external to the body, which is to say, it is *chronicled*; the second is by sensation, as something intimate, *felt*. A cinematic metaphor provides the analogy for framing the concept-experience spectrum visually in a work of art: in watching a film, the eye converges on psychological meaning around a very mechanical paradox—the whole emerges only through a series of momentary impressions, each overtaken by the next; a film's identity is constructed through an array of frames that lead to scenes. There is no single moment that encapsulates the entire meaning of a film. If the work is to bring the viewer into a here/there and before/after transition-synthesis, however, it cannot exclusively comprise a never-ending chain of sensations pouring from torrential change, since the viewer would not attain a stable perspective on the overall work. As change must oscillate with non-change, the term *synthesis* suggests transitions of *perspective* combining transformation with stasis, and as an opening example of the engagement aesthetic that transcends mere looking, the instrumental art of Andrew Neumann deploys two such transitions, specifically, of time, and of space.

As rationale for the radical character of so much contemporary art, Husserl's transition-synthesis points to something especially evident in the kineticism of mechanized and digital works, that is to say, in works where a series of perceptual shifts occurs as the work undergoes change. I refer to this not just in a *physical*

sense, for Alexander Calder's dangling mobile fins could easily fall within crude ideas of *shift*. But Calder's is a kind of "static shift"—the content (the propeller-like components) of the work changes while the overall structure does not. The perceptual shift in Calder—stationary objects that become rotating ones—can be described as a before-after change that is limited to one of motion, not to ontology, and the change in question is optical, but not one concerning alteration in the nature, essence, or being of the work. It merely rotates, albeit interestingly. But more fundamentally, how does one characterize artworks that bear a different kind of ontological structure-as-content shift of the kind I discussed above? One indication, as I will explore next, is whether description of changes in a dynamic work requires *different language* to describe each such change.

That is, works that convey change but which do not convey a transition-synthesis are those whose *structure* and core *perspective* remains static, despite a succession of flow or imagery. In this case, movement is not essence; it is a characteristic of an essence, so movement by itself is not enough to comprise the essence of a work of art, and it is that essence that must be altered. Thus movement or change alone is not the essential part of any work, any more than the movement of a celluloid strip is essential to the film being projected on a screen—the strip's movement is necessary to the medium, but not essential to the content.

Many artists working in new media relate this type of unidirectional transition of flow to interactive works by expanding the painterly metaphor of a canvas sustaining color fields in dynamic behavior to objects in motion. It is a metaphor; the principal ingredient is a background onto which visual activity is apparently projected, variations of events on the backdrop being the basis of new media works. Some artists, like Neumann, work with ideas of transition-synthesis by converting an expanded structure into expanded perspective. Consider how the more linguistically conjectural work, *Text Rain*, projects onto a wall a downpour of letters and words—crucially, in fact, a poem—rather than mere colors and shapes in a repetitious flow.[2] In this work the canvas metaphor has grown beyond two dimensions, capturing and reflecting the body of the viewer standing before it. As the work rehearses a poem line by line, each letter of every word descends delicately until any of its projected boundaries collides with some part of the

FIGURE 1 *Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv,* Text Rain, *2000. Interactive Computer Installation, size variable, video projection. Detail.*

viewer's body, also projected into the same representative space of the work on the wall. But even so, fully integrating the viewer into such a flowing experience still does not produce the meaning-preserving circularity implied in Husserl's transition-synthesis. Work in constant motion, discarding old states for new ones, but not reinforcing a cohesive spirit with a structure that is indistinguishable from its content, lacks the fulcrum necessary to such a moment.

Transitions of Time

Of course, one would be tempted to reduce much of new media art to temporal flow, like film.[3] Indeed, works of agitation and flow do follow aesthetic patterns in their own right, but the archetypal notion of a *torrent*, though compelling aesthetically, is not a very complete metaphor for depicting the transition-synthesis: *structure*

as distinct from *content* remains unchanged. Interacting with surging forces always implies *departing* from some original state of things and setting toward another that has not yet developed. Moving from an existent now to a potential later, such experiences convey less a balance between motion and stasis than of persistent procession. The viewer, continually awash in new modes, hues, and layers, nonetheless fails to detect any actual cadence or completion. But a transition-synthesis, anchored on the stability of memory as the basis for one's impression of change, demands a point of reference. And since the absence of a temporal fix renders such awareness impossible, memory and perception are indefinable without reference to one another. Perception alone is not enough.

> Perception is never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it.[4]

Bergson defines the dominant relationship between memory and perception, that momentary break between what *was* experienced and what is *being* experienced, as something temporal, linear, and metaphoric with cinematic projection, something whose principal meaning-making process concerns relative motion. Subjectively, as the capturing element of perception shifts, the recording sense of memory remains stationary, each fueling a kinetic contrast that forms both the original impression and all recollections of it. So, Bergson maps their consolidation in a two-dimensional way, representing memory along the horizontal axis, and perception along the vertical. Each impression thus captured from the event stream incorporates into something like a static collection, an archive of impressions, or a totality of recollections.

> If I represent by a cone SAB the totality of the recollections accumulated in my memory, the base AB, situated in the past, remains motionless, while the summit S, which indicates at all times my present, moves forward unceasingly, and unceasingly also touches the moving plane P of my actual representation of the universe.[5]

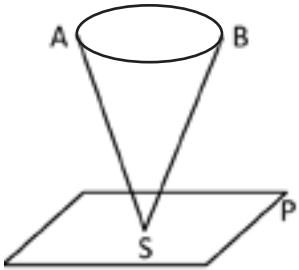

FIGURE 2

As perception and memory converge toward each other, a third process, meaning-making, begins to fill the juncture of the points. Between them, the depths of memory and the surface of perception define a space, outlined conically so as to emphasize its progressive nature, where primary observations evolve into full concepts. Drawing from the immediately acquired as well as from the previously established and memorized, initial perceptions oscillate between both poles, eventually resolving toward a final conceptual form congruent with, and incorporated into, what already dwells in memory.

> Let us refer once more to the diagram we traced above. At S is the present perception which I have of my body, that is to say, of a certain sensory-motor equilibrium. Over the surface of the base AB are spread, we may say, my recollections in their totality. Within the cone so determined the general idea oscillates continually between the summit S and the base AB. In S it would take the clearly defined form of a bodily attitude or of an uttered word; at AB it would wear the aspect, no less defined, of the thousand individual images into which its fragile unity would break up.[6]

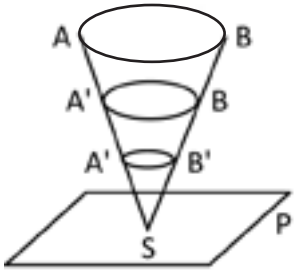

FIGURE 3

The first implication of this perceptual process is the heightened role that time plays. Not only does concept-formation through this memory model reflect a decisive break between present and past, where memory is to past events what perception is to present ones, but additionally, in this framework, what at any moment comprises perception or memory is precisely that: perception *or* memory. Both cannot emerge simultaneously. In the course of ordinary experience, this seems a rational assumption, what I see at first now is what I will remember later, recognition being the process linking one operation with the other. But the invisibility of this transition-synthesis is necessary to life experience so that one can assimilate and accommodate, that is, *learn*, seamlessly.[7] This instinctual invisibility underscores precisely what distinguishes the minimal, postminimal, and formal aspects of work in Neumann's perceptual sculptures from normal visual experience, where, in seamlessness, feedback and memory embrace so interdependently that it is unnatural to grasp any work in temporal seriality or linearity. In a visual work, things beheld come together gradually and with contemplation, but the sense of perception feeding memory or vice versa is not palpable. All that is felt is the sensation of *observing* and perhaps subsequently the *a-ha* that accompanies what is thought to be the *idea* of the work. There is a perceptual all-or-nothing that does not allow the privilege either of presentation or mechanism in beholding the work. In this perceptual mode of gradual familiarization, final judgment is what one keeps; all intermediate processing is opaque.

As an aesthetic framework, any such model that connects perception with memory will do so through the bridge of temporality. What comes first is absorbed purely through perception, where it is not yet memory, and then it passes into memory, where it is no longer perception. In Bergson's diagram, this temporal membrane is clear-cut: the isometrically laid-out plane represents a moving, shifting event stream with S as the point of subjectively focused individual awareness acquiring new information over time. And memory as a process is possible because perceptual input that occurs at one point in time is superseded by subsequent, different input at later moments, and displaced earlier impressions are retained. From the perspective of this model, one significant feature of minimalism is its atemporal and antisubjective nature. It denies the possibility of selective perception of its "subsequentness" by

forcing all reading of a work as something utterly without idiosyncrasy or irregularity. From a relentless sense of equivalence and symmetry, the same perceptual experience results, regardless of the angle or position of the observer, and impedes the possibility of encountering a work in a subjective, comparative, or relative-to-others way.

To experience the minimalist aesthetic is to experience separation. The unadorned symmetries of the box, minimalism's canonical geometry, bring the viewer all the intimacy of a numeric equation. The *subject* in this world is an option, and not one accommodated by the work. With its mute and featureless character, the possibility of *subjectivity*—the notion of a central and special position for the viewer—in minimalist art would remain out of reach, indefinitely suspended, were it not for Neumann's turn, a subjectivity-adding correction produced without altering the constants of minimalism (i.e., emphasis on formal qualities; the use of fabrication over evidence of the human hand; repeating, symmetric, or serial regularity of structure and placement). Neumann expands these constants by actually *embedding* subjectivity directly into the work while still employing a rather utilitarian minimalist vernacular. Rather than altering the formal circumstances that deny subjectivity, such as by *contamination*, that is, introducing symmetry-destroying

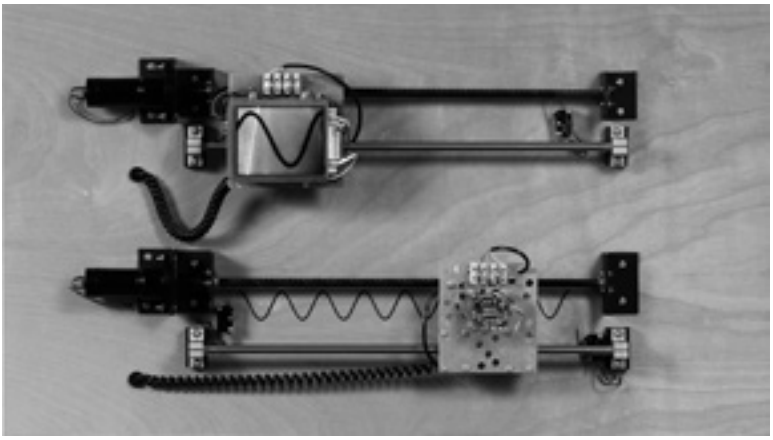

FIGURE 4 *Andrew Neumann,* Phase Cancellation with Sine Wave, *2005. Digital photo, LCD screens, solid-state video. 30″ × 40″ × 5″.*

eccentricities that can make one observer's perception of the work different from another's, Neumann moves in the opposite direction, by a kind of *purification* and thus reinforcement of the perceptual experience, in this case, by repeating the act of depiction-observation *twice* in the same work. In a structural view, if a work of art exists to illustrate anything, it can be understood as comprising elements that reinforce the unique rhetoric underlying its chosen form and appearance. Interpretation is always selective. The requirement is about choice, a process that moves from a view of the presented elements that appear to support the function of the work as a visually constructed statement or question, and gradually converges upon emphatic particulars that substantiate an assumed and preferred meaning.

This is all attained through the self-referentiality of cameras trained on the work itself, and these cameras, akin to the subjective perceptual points in Bergson's diagram, are integrated into the work without implying which, directly presented or electronically viewable, is the "real" focal object. They are in relative motion over a plane on which are screwed, nailed, painted, or hung pure shapes such as sine waves or working tools such as Phillips screws. Thus, simultaneously visible to human observers are the material elements embedded onto a panel; the hovering camera-eyes of the work watching itself; and finally, the optic perception of these camera-eyes themselves reflecting the objects over which they are moving onto small active-matrix displays. The Bergsonian perceptual model is rendered in a manner that is entirely minimalist and also temporal, because the work conveys its own subjectivity, which, in addition to its panel elements, it reports openly and continuously. In this process, the work makes explicit in the fullest sense the transition-synthesis whose condition of formal inner coherence we found elusive in other art conveying visual transition.

I want to return to the tension between perception and memory, and a critique of how Neumann engages it. One cognitive instinct in our encounter with any artwork is a kind of a commitment to definition, to reaching some interpretation of the work. Of course, such interpretive notions are dependent on moments of recognition, where the objectively presented and perceived, which is obvious to every observer, and the subjectively recalled, which is obvious only to oneself, blend into reflection. What is observed always stands objectively before us; only *what is doing the looking* can be

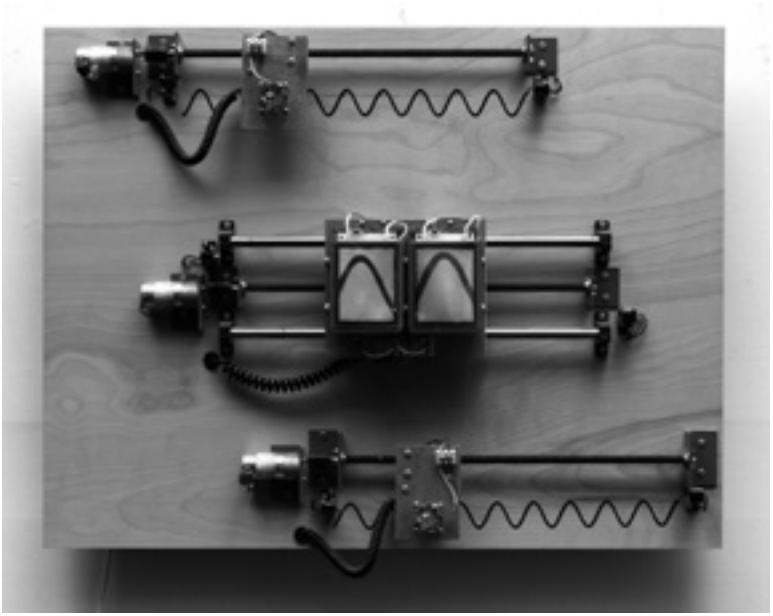

FIGURE 5 *Andrew Neumann,* Dual Asynchronous Sine Waves, *2001. Wood, video, motors. 24″ × 32″ × 8″.*

properly termed subjective. And this difference is the evidence that corroborates how a work possesses subjectivity, for in each work that self-observes there is the creation quite literally of a mediated replica which, because it observes itself, is not a replica of the work, but, instead, of the observer. And we might also note that in this dual subjectivity, the viewer's and the machine's, the forces driving recognition are twofold: mechanistic, borne in the work (as we see it moving, observing itself) and conceptual, borne in the viewer (as we struggle to define the focal object in the work).

> The recognition of a present object is effected by *movements* when it proceeds from the object, by *representations* when it issues from the subject.[8] (emphasis mine)

Transitions of Space

Neumann's work arranges out of a minimal set of recurring materials whose construction compares to the sparse but multi-perspectival sculpture that Anthony Caro developed during the 1960s. The panels and rails through which Neumann articulates a sense of depth and with which he provokes re-examination of images compare directly with the characteristic space-establishing planks and shafts of Caro's work just after he abandoned his figurative phase. In both artists, these elements project and reinforce the boundaries of the reconfigurable image; both alter the experience of perceptible motion. The strategy by which Neumann's statement claims this allusion, however, is distinct from that of Caro's. In the decade from the landmark 1962 up to the 1970s, Caro innovatively redefined sculptural projection by eliminating the plinth and placing the work in the real space of the viewer. But this is insufficient as a comprehensive description of Caro's strategy and its effect, because his effect is more than sculptural. It is innovatively perceptual, using the motion of the viewer around a sculptural object as an aesthetic operation for redefining the work itself. This happens simply: standing at each possible vantage point in relation to a Caro sculpture, one finds oneself before essentially a new work—no angle of view is similar to the previous one. With a minimal palette of steel planks, beams and rails, Caro achieves the improbable production of an experience of multiple works constrained as one physical object, the multiplicity of experiences emerges from changes in the observer's angle of view. In his panel works, however, Neumann establishes and maintains, by almost ironic contrast, the constant stability of formal qualities in a work. The irony is that such constancy is reinforced by two forms of observation, the viewer's role is technologically accompanied by artefactual self-observation in autonomous motion built into the work and entirely independent of the spectator's physical position. Caro's work is completely stationary, yet the spectator experiences a state of perceptual multiplicity. In Neumann's world, this strategy is inverted; the spectator need not move, as the work enacts a shift in perspective and impression through an oscillating series of state changes.

The preference for horizontal arrangement that is the typical orientation of both artists, Caro consistently placing his works

on the floor, Neumann's work consistently transposed onto the vertical plane of the wall but equally dispersed across a wider-than-tall landscape, operates centrally as ground to both artists, and in each case it is a ground whose chief contribution lies in its inconspicuousness. More than visual resemblance, however, is at play in the relationship between the work of Caro and Neumann. The production of changes in observer position demonstrates that the chief theme of that relationship is a progressive one, promoting *movement amidst stable objects* into a fully autonomous aesthetic operation. As with Neumann's roving eye, the rewards for the observer who moves and views the work from alternative angles are also evident in Caro. The reward of movement here is insinuated not only by the changing position of the observer, but also by the play of vectorial tension built into the work, which could be discussed separately.[9]

My point here is that the presence of sculptural objects is secondary to the idea of transition-synthesis, a progression of perspectives. The aesthetic emphasis for Caro and Neumann is less formal than conceptual. For each artist, the main perceptual grammar transcends the physical language of balustrades, sections, rails, meshes, or grids recruited and visually regulated for particular effect. It is, rather, a substrate, it is the power of the vector to signify and proclaim the fact of distance as a consequence of motion. This *here-there* antecedent to motion and perception is born in the viewer's quest for a point of reference. For each artist, the plane against which vectors project becomes the work's central statement around the same two-body problem, namely, that of locating the boundaries both of the work and of the viewer and then converging upon a signifying essence by the viewer's engagement with the work within a depth of field lying somewhere between both. The ballet of vectors that is *Hopscotch* (1962) is a geometric manifestation as far at the edge between motion and stasis as is possible to conceive symbolically. Likewise, the operation of spectatorship epitomized in *Early One Morning* (1962) evokes the process in comparison with Neumann's treatment of the same subject.

For here Caro fashions an upright panel into an irrefutable backdrop, arranging rails as reference points and a higher central cross beam assembly whose horizontality is tracked by the observer's eye. Seen in functional retrospective, this cross element setup recalls the scan of Neumann's camera through first-person

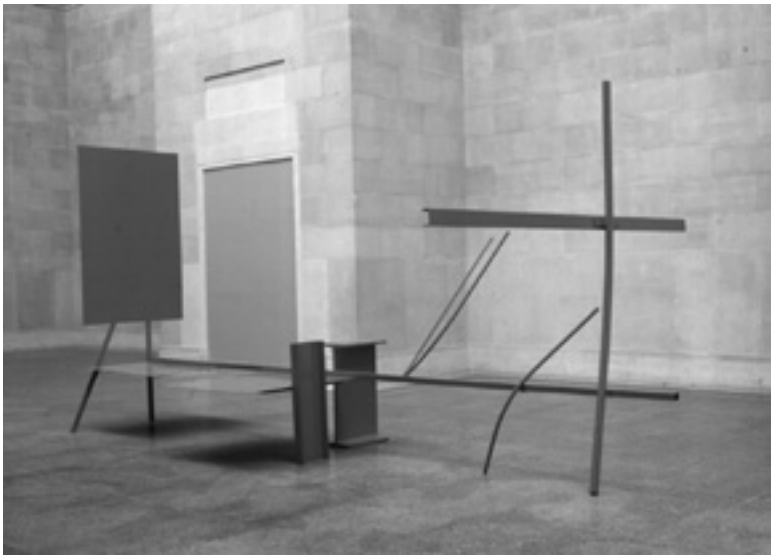

FIGURE 6 *Anthony Caro,* Early One Morning, *1962. Steel & aluminum, painted red, 114″ × 244″ × 143″/290 × 620 × 333cm. © Barford Sculptures Ltd. Photography: John Riddy.*

experience. In Caro's sculpture, all perspective is established by a shaft projecting from the rear panel to the T-cross beam almost 20 feet away. As visual rhetoric, all of these elements are canonical to Neumann's work, for instance, in *Industrial Fan Panel* (2002) which sets the scene with a similar backdrop, similarly providing a railing system and sense of depth, only in Neumann's case the latter works in reverse, for, rather than using distance as a telescopic element as Caro does, Neumann uses proximity microscopically in order to intimately magnify mounted images and objects. In this relationship, Caro can serve as the ultimate metaphorical reduction of Neumann, while Neumann transposes Caro's multipositional perspective to a more contemporary technological octave.

Openly nonfigurative works like *Early One Morning* preclude any sense of interpretive closure, and, less abstractly, also for perceptual resolution, that is, for arriving at safe assumptions as to the location from which to determine one's role as the ideal viewer. Such is the visual richness in Caro's sweeping stylistic vocabulary that one cannot justifiably summarize this work in a

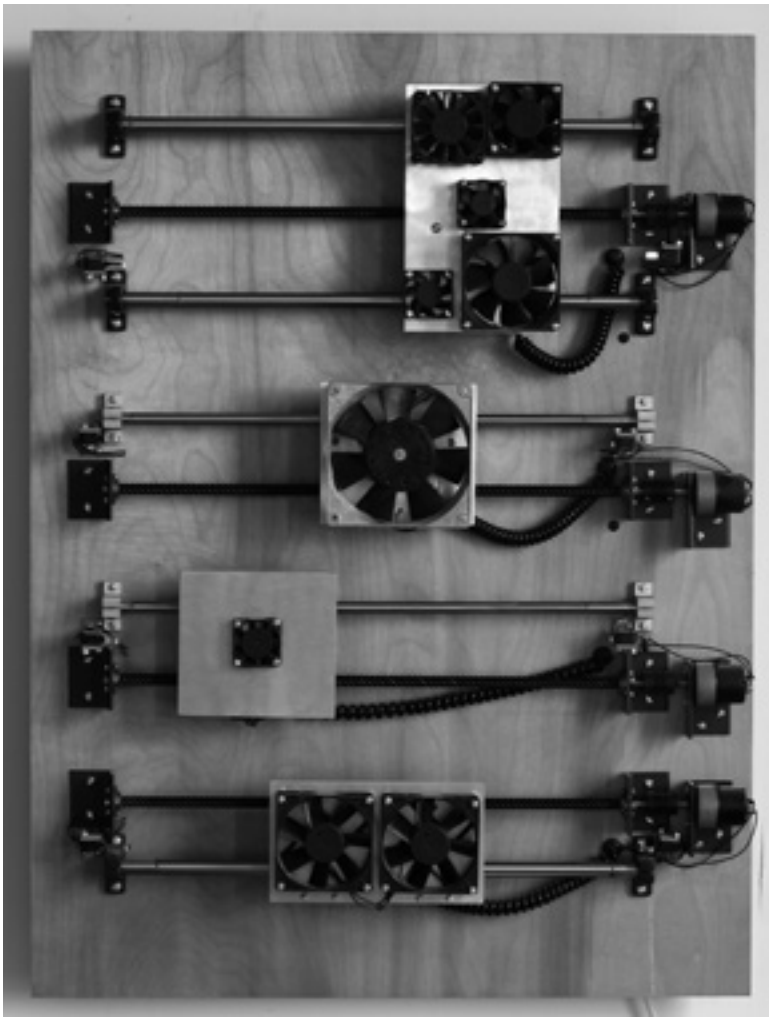

FIGURE 7 *Andrew Neumann,* Industrial Fan Panel, *2002. Plywood, LCD screens, video camera, misc. electronics. 32″ × 48″ × 6″.*

single photograph. As mentioned earlier, here again, each viewer position, no matter how near the next, renders a distinct representation built from a new proportion between near elements and distant ones. Such transitions of space are adopted in an opposing

way in Neumann, in whose works, conversely, no camera repositioning can produce an image of retinal rail works that conveys a reading in opposition to any other. The spatial transitions happen internally as each successive vantage point is generated, recorded, and reported via the ubiquitous display panel, such is the coherence of his neo-minimalistic articulation. Reducing further, to utter functionalism, the comparison between the kind of panelization evident in both artists, we arrive at Caro's *Aroma* (1966), again, a simple latticed panel with rails, and Neumann's *Screw* (2005). Of less interest here is the contrast between backdrop and foreground elements in both works than the intensification of a pattern emblazoned in material form as a result of that contrast, and the rich emphasis of perspective pluralism from such minimal structuration.

This contrast suggests that a secondary strategy of focal reduction underlies these works. The visual rhetoric at play here is reducible to the one cogent statement that such simplicity of sculptural composition underscores *one* formal feature in each work. In Caro's *Aroma*, it is the trellis; in Neumann's *Screw*, it is the spiral. In both cases, the case for this objective is made through physical means, rather than through implicit suggestion, the method, for instance, that both choose to impart depth. And the simplification of material,

FIGURE 8 *Anthony Caro,* Aroma, *1966. Steel, polished and lacquered blue, 38″ × 116″ × 58″. Courtesy Mitchell-Innes & Nash.*

the sublimation of the supporting casts into almost extraneous elements, makes clear the importance of that coherence in the works, as if everything existed for the purpose of conveying the allure of a singular quality over what is supplied with secondary context.

Materially, Neumann entrenches his works in the abiding use of industrial elements such as video displays, wires, and motors always overlaid on the natural surface of a smoothed and carefully chosen plywood panel. It would have been possible, reasonable, and in fact simpler to mount any of his sculptures on a metal alloy base and thereby coherently and fully extend the industrial character of the work. All contrasts pose questions and here, with robotics over pine paneling, we might logically ask, why this choice? Isn't wood out of place in a work made of forged energy-conducting materials?[10]

That wood should be the chosen platform for this highly synchronized gathering of electrokinetic components speaks to the importance of grounding the electronic aesthetic within an organic narrative, rather than vice versa. The aesthetic relevance of this organicity is obvious: it translates the idea or process under analysis

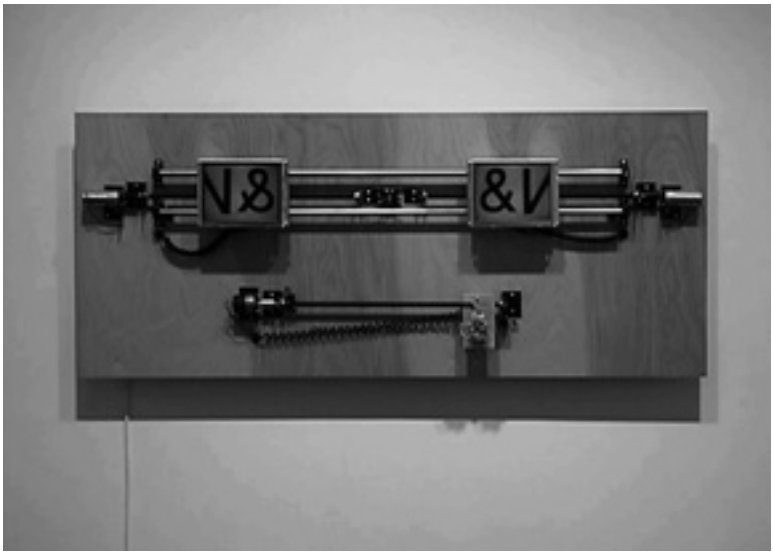

FIGURE 9 *Andrew Neumann,* Pan and Scan, *2002.*
Plywood, LCD screens, video camera, misc. electronics. 32″ × 48″ × 6″.

from something that is abstract and decontextualized into a world where it is recast as a tangible form entirely on its own terms. So while each of Neumann's works addresses a rationalized or geometric abstraction (e.g. a phase cancellation with sine wave), its transposition into—and our subsequent understanding of it as—an autonomous aesthetic act is what is on offer. For only through this reassignment, this reification, can we see that something abstract like *pan and scan*, because it is presented in a work of the same name and illustrated in the act of panning and scanning itself, exists not merely as a cinematic technique but also as an independent object. The transfer from the universal to the particular, from the act to the thing, traverses a spectrum between two poles, it is a statement that can only be conveyed through oppositions. In Neumann's case this statement lies between the dynamic abstraction of a process and its static base in the concreteness of a natural material. However long the meditative span of our engagement with his work, it lies in conversation between these two worlds.

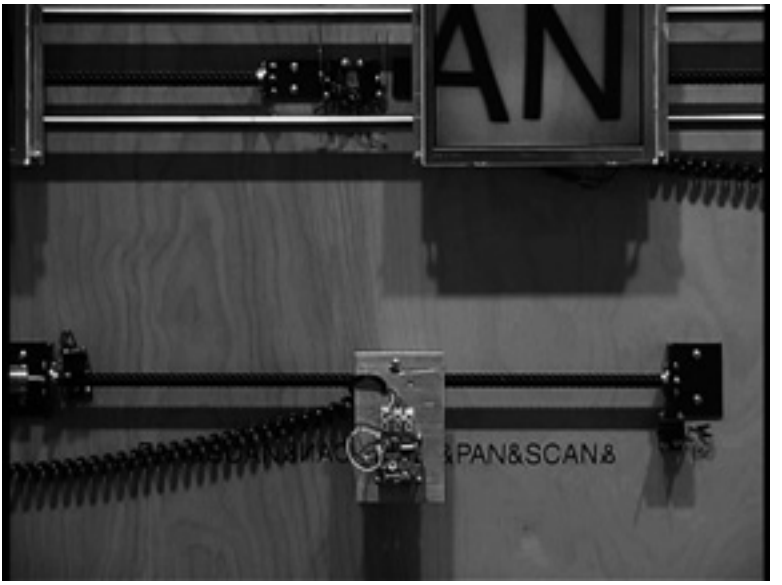

FIGURE 10 *Andrew Neumann,* Pan and Scan, *2002. Plywood, LCD screens, video camera, misc. electronics. 32" × 48" × 6". Detail.*

CHAPTER THREE

Transmodal engagement—Multiple media in singular works

I. The Private Image

So much of what we want from art relates to a wish for subjective, personal meaning, not *meaning* in objective terms, as in knowing the significance of a vocabulary term, but meaning as a kind of continuous internal conversation with an image—and few art forms know this more poignantly than photography. When an artist exhibits or publishes a photograph, the act of exhibiting it anticipates an infinity of gazes which will connect with it. It is a rapport based not only on production of the work, but on its exhibition as well. That is part of what makes it art—it must, in some way, become perceptible.

But what of the *private* photograph, that image taken only with the intent of chronicling a personal moment to a single person? This confidential image stands as the opposite of the art photograph; the dialogue or source of meaning in the personal object plays out in what emerges between the image and one's own private associations. The private image is always an utterance in one's "private language" in the sense meant by Wittgenstein, in whose *Philosophical Investigations* it is clear that meaning functions only in a subjective way: "[t]he words of this language are to refer to

what can be known only to the speaker; to his immediate, private, sensations. So another cannot understand the language" (§243).

As a public product, however, the photographic work of art initiates a conversation with history and with what transcends the personal (indeed, the world speaks back, but the image is frozen and impervious to judgment). Also, however, there is a third kind of photo-image, which we may call "migratory" to refer to photographs that begin as private objects and are later incorporated into artworks. A relationship with someone is a relationship with an experience—the experience that ties that person to oneself. But the photograph rather centers on the *memory* of its subject, and also therefore maps a complex relationship to the different materials of memory: images, impressions, music, moods. Contemporary art criticism which calls photography an indexical art, a photograph is *indexical* when it points to something rather than merely resembling it—is a claim that can be seen as a line, a path of interpretation leading from the direct perception of the image to a sense that the image has, by way of some context, something to say *about something*, and so its *visibility* is secondary to whatever it *implies*. But it's an implication beyond concrete *reference* in the way that a clock's hands are an index to the passing of time. It is one of *evocation*. The distinction is really about the poetic power of photography; a clock alludes primarily to *time*, not to *aging*; photographs can do both equally well. There is in our experience of the photograph, then, another way in which it can be understood, as a pointer to what lies beyond anything temporal; it centers on the process of memory-making itself. The photograph, when we speak of any meaning within it, is an index to association, to memory, and to everything that it points to its future as a possible world of meaning.

The photograph is the first art medium in which its subject is not fictive; what is photographed always preexists and predates the photographic image itself. And so, the photograph is never complete without conveying the aura of presence of the situation being shot. This belongs not merely to the spirit of the dilapidated rooms of a Francesca Woodman image, but categorically to the medium itself; its condition, namely that the artist must *be* in that space in order to acquire the image in the first place, is true of all representational photography, and the viewer is compelled to confront the image's multiple presences—the presence of place,

of what populates it, and of the photographer—with the corresponding feeling of communion.

The personal photograph points to meaning of a private nature. Not merely *uninterested* in evoking associations with a gazing world, this type of object *wants* to exclude public inspection. The art photograph, however, aspires for commentary on its quality of capture, of *signification*, not merely of its *imagery*, and so, in its exhilaration as a work of art, it presents a kind of image determined to foster commentary by "outsiders"—viewers unconnected to the image in space or time, but tied to it by a willingness to negotiate meaning with it through contemplation. In this, the art photograph's relationship to memory is more productively vague and more inclusive than the personal photo, whose meaning derives from the personally familiar.

Beside the object's final *destination*—a gallery wall and collector's portfolio versus a family album—the aforementioned distinction might seem the major one by which to separate the art photograph from its confidential equivalent. But what distinguishes these two kinds of images—contrasts based on different takes on what "the familiar" means—is quite unstable, because what is unfamiliar can just as soon become entirely familiar, and vice versa. What is recognized but cannot be possessed—like the image of a celebrity—will bear a kind of familiarity that is very distinct from a personal possession, like a curio in one's living room, and yet both may seem legitimately familiar. This distinction could be seen as the geometrical contrast that separates the linear from the radial; the privately familiar—the photo image that has meaning for two people—suggests the kind of relationship between two points that defines a straight line between them. The private photograph is a dialogue, not a collective conversation, it suggests a relationship, and, as with all relationships, the associations to meaning may be private to one of the persons or shared between both. With this (linear) kind of familiarity comes the need to read the image in the context of something privately shared, it bears traces of a language of social intimacy. But the public photograph, which includes the photographic work of art, implies a different geometry of relation; its reception and interpretation by a large social sphere conforms to the notion of a central point with interpretive lines radiating from it out to the many contexts, moments, and associations in which it is viewed.

This applies not only to the art photograph, but to all public photographs, many of which exist purely for spectacle value. In reading an image as art, however, there is something that can only be called subjective *meaning*, of which spectacle is the opposite. The possibility of "meaning" in this emotive and personal sense depends on a conversion of interpretation from public to private. To meditate on an art image is to make it private; the image is made private by the emergence of a dialogue between two things—the viewer and the image—rather than a conversation among many viewers. As a personal object, the image acquires a power for me that others may not see or have, what is familiar to me can be invisible to others. To meditate on an art photograph is to make it personal, to transform the public and recognizable of what it gives everyone into the private and familiar of what I take from it.

How then does one set apart the nature of these two kinds of photographic images when one claims to be a work of art—a claim that the other, private, kind of image has no interest in asserting? A sculptural object embodies decisions about materials and techniques that are "more special" or at least unusual than those normally available to consumer culture (that "specialty," as it were, distinguishes artists from others). But a photograph can be produced as much by a trained artist as by anyone with a mobile phone; in its publication in a book or prominent destination on a gallery wall, each can be placed next to the other. Few who are not artists create sculptures; almost everyone, however, takes photographs. Artists understand that creating implies an act for the world; the work is always potentially destined to become the possession of someone else.

So, the promotion of any object up to the status of art depends on the intention that it be presented and interpreted as such, even if that intention might not have determined *why* the photograph was originally taken. Nor might the presentation of the photograph as a work of art have been the photographer's first intention—the work might have been appropriated for that end, as many artists have done. And so, as to the private photograph, what potential relation to the world might *this* kind of object possess? This is a question for migratory photographs, those whose origins are private but which, in their accommodation into works of art, have now entered the public sphere, and this is reflected in one work by Lyn Winter. Photographically derived, but permeated by

FIGURE 11 *Lyn Winter,* I LOVE YOU LOVE ME LOVE, *2009. 8″ × 48″ (six 8″ × 8″ panels). Photo collage, acrylic varnish on canvas with audio by iPod shuffle and headphones. © Lyn Winter. Courtesy of the artist.*

other media traces, the work is a series of six photocollage panels commemorating the hazy contours of an erstwhile romance.

Resembling a quasi-storyboard, Winter's work presents elements of a relationship, so that a kind of story is evoked, though never explained. It is a meditative reverie obscured by tones of dreamy vagueness not unlike those which marked Robert Rauschenberg's pictorial but private language. Winter's work has commandeered each of six private photographs into a series of panels that provide for the artist a means of remembering the space between what the depicted relationship *was*, as became evident in hindsight, and what, in its own day, it *seemed to be*. Rich in emotive tone, each panel plays on a juxtaposition of materials and media, to include the presence of photographs, the sparseness of collage-like adhesions of magazine text clippings, and tone strokes of cyan, red, and yellow paint applied in broad swipes across each panel. In the palette of the initial panels, the paint, as if representing both

FIGURE 12 *Lyn Winter,* I LOVE YOU LOVE ME LOVE*, 2009, panel 1.*

visual complexity and emotional opacity, is minimally applied. But since the images prove difficult to discern, the paint, seemingly disconnected from their composition in the panel, undermines the seeming placidity of each underlying image, playing out the kind of fruitful effect that visual distortion in dreams provides—affective amplification resulting from the uncanny tension between the distance of cryptic images and the immediacy of their presence for the dreamer.

The basis of all literary and film history is the intractable complexity of character tension. For four acts, before the explosive fifth, Shakespeare immerses us deeply in the drowning ambivalence of Hamlet, his suspicions torn by contradictory messages

FIGURE 13 *Lyn Winter,* I LOVE YOU LOVE ME LOVE*, 2009, panel 6.*

from both the world of the visible and that of the ghostly afterlife. In Winter's world, too, there is a sense of protagonism borne of the second life—from the private sphere to that of the work of art—that her images assume. In the memorializing function of photography, a medium whose exactitude to reproduction funnels our attention obsessively to the matter of the *detail*, the portrait becomes simultaneously the richest and most enigmatic statement of emotional presence—who is present to whom? Who, as viewing audience, are we meant to have been, in the original incarnation of these images? Since their initial objective was private, are we to understand ourselves as the very subjects of the photograph, as how they, in having captured these images, would have seen and

intended to remember themselves? Or are these scenes even more private than that, so private that they were destined instead for a closed album in the closed bureau drawer of a closed room? The enzymatic energy of a connection is indisputable, yet the target of its devotion is completely unclear, and not merely because of the blurry indistinguishability of the composition. Given that the extreme close-up is a direct reference to the physical intimacy of the relationship, but in its use, the fullness of the photographic image is lost, we must go beyond the visible to appreciate that relationships are often defined precisely by how the witting suspension of distance transforms into a chronic inability to take perspective, until there is only pure affect and little reflection.

But as we feel for a narrative train in this work, its image panels are accompanied by a musical recording – a reflection, a celebration, or a dirge. And, now there is text, as well: each panel vignette bears two epigrams:

Panel 1	I	able to see
Panel 2	A STATE OF MIND	love
Panel 3	FLYING HIGH	You
Panel 4	HIDDEN ASSETS	love
Panel 5	me	LAPPING IT UP
Panel 6	it is what it is	It Happened One Night Love

Three of the six panels contain the word *love*, as does the title of the song that plays through the iPod that accompanies the work; *I Love You Love Me Love*, by the English glam rocker Gary Glitter. As the first single to go platinum in the UK, this song fueled a nationwide ersatz romance, a multitudinous love projection among British teenagers of Winter's generation for Glitter—or more precisely, for the archetypal love object image that he embodied. And it is this "relationship" between a real and loving subject and a distorted love object that the playback of this song signifies in Winter's work, which, after all, documents in the open but not in a wholly legible manner the truth of one romance navigating itself through the complex dance and faint imbalance of incongruent identities—of a youthful lover and the older object of her affections. Glitter's lyrics are audible in the song accompanying the work:

We're still together after all that we've been through
They tried to tell you I was not the boy for you
They didn't like my hair the clothes I love to wear
They didn't realise that I was strong enough for two

I love you love you love me too love
I love you love me love;
I love you love my only true love
I love you love me love.

The things they said about the two of us were lies
I know they couldn't see the love light in your eyes
They said I wouldn't dare to show how much I care
They didn't know that we were just two angels in disguise

I love you love …

So here we are alone
we made it on our own
and though they tried they can't deny the way I really showed 'em:

I love you love …

The work brings four modalities of expression—photography, painting, music, and text—into a single structure. Yet the experience of the work is unified; there is not an obvious painterly feeling over the photographic, nor does the presence of a song constrain the visual reading; all four media forms become part of a singular aura, all four speak with the assurance of their own tradition, and together they suggest how the work, structured in this multiplicity, undermines attempts at describing the work through media-specific interpretations. But the painterly fields in the panels recall Abstract Expressionism's meditations, as does the photograph and the song that plays over the entire work—each perceptual mode provokes the same rich sensory stimulation without any overt evidence of narrative. This happens because of the substitution underlying the way the work is made: the narrative process is replaced by an interplay of methods for portraying it; distinct media thrust our attention from one modality to the next,

so that each dimension—the painterly, the textual, the sonic, and the photographic—exists in its own register, from auditory to abstract—as in the work's paint strokes—and from concrete—as in the work's photo images—to poetic—in the work's text and lyrics. Each medium presents on a physically independent plane, but within each, the mode of engagement between self and medium transports visual experience to a new feeling of the whole that cannot be attributed to or located within any medium, origin, or structure.

In this way, Winter's integral approach depends on our vacillation between the different mode of engagement that each medium provokes. Since we cannot experience the work *as* separate media, we have to take in the whole, which mirrors the emotive and overpowering character of the artist's own experience of the intense relationship memorialized here.

Here, then, is a transmodal work, and the importance of recognizing the new way of approaching such a work becomes evident in the more contentious case I present next. However, the crossing of modalities—in Winter's work, visual and auditory, contained by a single aesthetic statement (but allowing the experience of the message in one mode, of another in a second mode, or of both together)—impels us to attend not to the behavior or structure of a single medium, but instead to converge on what lies above any expressive mechanism: a new response where the insinuated distance between the externality of media and the intimacy of reflection aims for fragile balances between art and life.

A work of art that is transmodal, possessed of that conversation between modalities of representation conveyed by a conflux of media, makes its interpretive quality distinct from works that merely dazzle through *techné*, parading artistic skills at manipulating media. The main problem for the artist is to present something *integrated* rather than merely composed of separate media. The main challenge for the critic is to notice this and to explain it as a whole. One criterion—and its question—relates to the artist's realization of a kind of *productive aggregation* of media: does the viewer's participation, as prompted through digital, electronic, or technological operations, generate new experience if it merely reflects what is already observable through any *single* medium? Or is a new kind of feeling for the work, perceptible as a

larger, single experience, usefully conveyed through its layering of different media?

Used in a work of art as a documentation method, for example, photography is relegated to the *informative*; only when it transforms documentation by its insistence on a new reality in which I might *see myself seeing differently*—through new visual media, I become a different observer, and a different subject—do the photographic conditions of the artwork become original, novel, radical. Photographically, we experience this "I as a new viewer" through the lens of Francesca Woodman, Cindy Sherman, or Barbara Probst. That one must find this in new media comes directly from Walter Benjamin's reasons for suspecting the nature of the technologically born *work of art* as potentially annihilating the contemplative *conditions of art*. Of the film, his claim that "The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change" (Benjamin, 1969) is a critique not against change but against *suddenness of change*. A minimal, and essential, time of concentration is not attained because it is controlled by the work's succession of images, rather than the viewer's succession of thoughts. With Woodman, Sherman, or Probst, photography's method transforms from documentation of world (as was claimed of original photography) to construction of world, a move that, due to instinctive reliance on the realistic exactitude of the photo image, we are not inclined to feel is entirely fictive. Thus there is in this quasi-realism a vague tension between derivation and fabrication, and this tension extends to the observer, whose own position is caught between a process of correspondence and recognition and one of fantasy and confabulation. But the necessity of establishing the truth behind the photographic image is important to the observer. For if the image is documentary, mimetically reflective, photography operates as something from "our world," our reality. But if it reflects something constructed, fictive, then photography is alien, uncanny, "from another side." It is the need to know which role the photograph before us is playing that determines who we are when we see it, because we are constructed by what we believe.

Benjamin wasn't worried about what happens to the photograph or any medium. His concern was what happened in *us* as viewers confronted by art made and delivered through the phonograph and movie projector—the "new media" of his day. And to explore a

technical medium and its effect on aesthetic sensibility, his argument goes in various directions, reflecting several significant oppositions. One of these is between the conditions of artistic production, in which something of the creator's experience is embedded in the experience of the work's viewer or listener (the art-as-ritual argument), and those of mass reproduction through technology in which these two experiences are set too distantly from each other in space and time (the technical-reproduction argument). In another, the distance between the observer and the observed is too instantaneous, preventing the contemplative act from emerging. So Benjamin suggests not merely that visual technology reproduces the image, but that the rate of reproduction is anti-aesthetic because contemplation's nemesis is any process of interruption. Of course, this opposition is logical only for the kind of contemplation that *preceded* the rise of technological media for aesthetic means. This is the kind he imagines when he says that "[t]he painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations." We should note that for Benjamin, the word "contemplation" has two unrelated meanings: *thoughtful reflection removed from sensory experience*, as he hints in this quote where it is obvious that if "the spectator can abandon himself to his associations," he is not operating in the sensory here-and-now; and, conversely, an act of *explicit looking*, as in his later discussion of architecture, whose lack of tactile affordance presents special problems ("For the tasks which face the human apparatus of perception at the turning points of history cannot be solved by optical means, that is, by contemplation, alone. They are mastered gradually by habit, under the guidance of tactile appropriation." (Benjamin, 1969)). Here again he introduces another dialectical high-art/low-art premise around the act of absorption: whereas in the contemplative work of art, the viewer is absorbed, architecture, whose functional priority makes it less an object of contemplation than one of distraction, is *absorbed by* the public:

> Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture

> has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction (Benjamin, 1969).

Here is a critique of technology revolving around antagonism to introspection, to time for thought and for extended observation of a work of art. Benjamin wants to address the missing time of contemplation, the time that has been compressed into nothingness by the continual roll of impressions, those captured in the real time of the scene and played back at the same rate of speed by the subsequent kinoprojection which the filmic mechanism is best at producing. While the time of a scene is played back to the audience at the same speed—characters, would, for example, need to be seen to speak, gesture, and move at a realistic pace—there is of course a significant temporal jump between the date of the work's recording and its subsequent cinematic performance for an audience. Thus, the simultaneity of impressions projected for the audience is the same as in the original scene, and even with intensive editing, the aesthetic impression is that dialogue and action happen at the same speed both in recording and playback. Of course, the fact that the audience observes a ten-year story unfold within a two-hour film doesn't happen because the dialogue, for example, is accelerated but rather because the narrative world admits cuts between events. And *this* is central to Benjamin's critique, that in visual technology, the jumps *have now become the structure of the narrative*, not just compressing time, but also squeezing out the spaces of possible contemplation that emerge and occur precisely and exclusively in the interstitial gaps between milestone events. More importantly, even the temporal gap between recording and playback—a gap that film required—has been eliminated in the mechanism of video, film's subsequent stage of technological development, a gap that has been replaced by the complete simultaneity of live-action feed-through.

Incidentally, film is not the origin of this operation of two scenes playing simultaneously; Rosalind Krauss provides two other examples of this practice. Invoking the idea of the archetypal Medium in its ESP sense, the possessed interlocutor between the human world and that of disembodied spirits, as well as Freud's pioneering technique of eliciting and interpreting dreams in connection with simultaneous events in the patient's life, Krauss

points to the same word, "medium," in precisely these terms, approaching what she terms "temporal concurrence"—events happening in synchrony in two venues at once, being connected or channeled through the work of a medium. And she finds this association to be a good rationale for video's capacity for "the simultaneous reception and projection of an image." All three examples—that of extrasensory perception, of dream interpretation, and of the real-time feedback of video—perform with equal reliance on the human body, which is "therefore as it were centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis. The first of these is the camera; the second is the monitor, which re-projects the performer's image with the immediacy of a mirror."[11] This body-centering in simultaneous capture and playback—surely the very antithesis of Benjamin's conditions for aesthetic contemplation—has, however become co-opted into a work that heightens our understanding of that compression. It is the early video work by Richard Serra called *Boomerang*, in which the artist makes a video recording of colleague and artist Nancy Holt as she speaks into a microphone. She can hear herself through headphones, but these echo her utterances only after a short delay, which displaces her experience by doing the opposite of Benjamin's critique—the aural medium *inserts* a continual, contemplative interval between what is spoken and what is heard—even though the effect is one of almost total distraction. Holt observes this: "Sometimes, I find I can't quite say a word because I hear a first part come back and I forget the second part, or my head is stimulated in a new direction by the first half of the word."

> Because the audio delay keeps hypostatizing her words, she has great difficulty coinciding with herself as a subject. It is a situation, she says, that "puts a distance between the words and their apprehension – their comprehension," a situation that is "like a mirror-reflection … so that I am surrounded by me and my mind surrounds me … there is no escape." The prison Holt both describes and enacts, from which there is no escape, could be called the prison of a collapsed present, that is, a present time which is completely severed from a sense of its own past. Through that distracted reverberation of a single word – and even word – fragment – there forms an image of what it is like to be totally cut-off from history, even, in this case, the immediate

> history of the sentence one has just spoken. Another word for that history from which Holt feels herself to be disconnected is "text."[12]

What all of this points out is how a compression of aesthetic experience happens in the juxtaposition of real and virtual space, compressed even further by the act of real-time interaction. Like a relentless involution toward the center of a black hole, the singularity occurs at the point of performance. Without this act, Benjamin's procession of "images interrupted by sudden, constant change" produces mere disorientation. Only with it, however, can the conditions of narrative arise, best exemplified in dance performance, an expressive form that Benjamin does not consider. We could imagine dance as work done by professional dancers in a space distinctly set apart from that occupied by an observing audience. But historically, this division is predated by its opposition: dance was an activity engaging one and all. In this earlier context, dance retains a quality that is lost in the modern version—it is *participatory*. Observation and presence are co-reinforced in a singular chain of sensations, an integrated experience.

When I taught art theory, something happened one day that proved the notion of an engagement aesthetic—borne of media and the idea of art always created in a continuous present—as opposed to a stable, predetermined work of art with a single origin in time. It emerged when one of the graduate students in my department presented work for the all-important crit that accompanies art school rituals of semester completion. As is customary in crits, students present work for review to faculty, which includes some outside scholars and artists. One such visitor here was a scholar knowledgeable in art of the past century, but not of the equally significant history of electronic art and literature. This lapse proved important in critiquing work at our department—and our era—since both fuse digital media with photography, film, video, printmaking, performance, and sculpture. Of course, it isn't surprising that electronic art—often plural and complex in construction—is not prevalent in contemporary art history, which classifies art in terms of the categories that arose over time as each of its practices self-differentiated. The effort of historians in bringing each of these new lines of inquiry into a contemporary canon requires fierce acts of demarcation; since each new tradition

must be distinguished from any prior one and its media, creating a canon is about *differentiation*. Thus, art critique favors singular art practices, and underrates those that are hybrid in nature, fusing or incorporating *several* traditions.

Let's return to our crit. On display was an installation by Evelyn Eastmond, whose work consisted of a large suspended light box, a screen, divided into 24 translucent panels encasing coiled Mylar strips; these in turn refracted an adagio of formless, shifting colors that emitted from a digital projector above and behind the hanging armature. Moving gently, the palette of whirling colors rear-projected against the screen was indirectly determined by viewers, who could text words or phrases to a phone number displayed on a laptop computer positioned near the light box. The work employed software for the modal conversion of words into colors. Each word or phrase received by the work would be associated with an array of colors that at times seemed obvious ("Devil" producing red hues; "Ocean," aqua ones) but when the text did not convey visual reference, the projected color palette became more interpretive.

FIGURE 14 *Evelyn Eastmond,* Interactive Light Sculpture*, 2010. Japanese Mylar LightBox Java, Google Voice, COLOURLovers API, mylar, wood, vellum. Detail. Image courtesy of the artist.*

The work unites three separate media traditions. First, the suspended light box is an unmistakably sculptural object. Second, the abstract use of projected light references the tradition of abstract light and video works dating at least as far back as Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* and subsequent projective works like *You and I, Horizontal, III 2007* of which I say more shortly. And third, the use of SMS text messages to induce changes in a projected work is from the convention called *cell phone art*, but which falls into the much broader field of electronic literature. In a critique of this unique structure, we can engage the work subtractively—following separate sculptural, filmic, and interactive analyses—or in the same way as it is experienced—as a special whole. The latter approach requires us to bypass the tradition of each medium comprising the work. By entering it as something beyond specific histories, one experiences it as something new; it is post-historical because it is post-medium. And the viewing process should attend to the work, rather than to its component parts.

Viewing this electronic work with distaste, our visiting modernist dismissed it precisely *because* of its hybridity, rendering the work

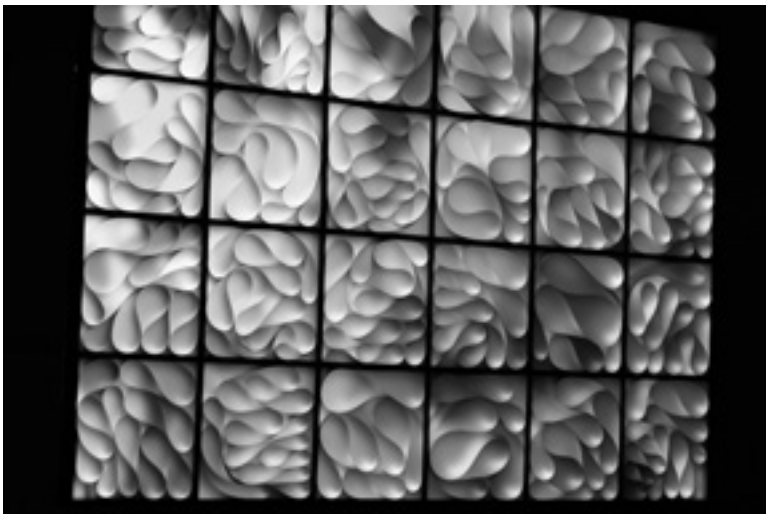

FIGURE 15 *Evelyn Eastmond*, Interactive Light Sculpture, *2010. Japanese Mylar LightBox Java, Google Voice, COLOURLovers API, mylar, wood, vellum. Image courtesy of the artist.*

unstable, as neither of one tradition nor of another. For her, its very interactivity (via viewer-contributed text messages) rendered it inadvisable in "serious" settings. Anyone, she admonished, could text profanities to the work and debase its artistic significance. No doubt, all interactive art, electronic or otherwise—as well as all public art—exposes itself to misuse. Less relevant than such judgments, however, is the larger question of whether any aesthetic line between intention of *art* and that of *world* is as valid for appreciating electronic art as it has always been for conventional art. Of course, one can "enter" a painting, but the engagement is of a unilateral kind, it doesn't change the work. It is effectively half-engagement. The aesthetic of electronic art such as Eastmond's, which blends media with interaction, realizes a much broader kind of engagement, and not only because it is interactive.

But in this afternoon's drama, our visiting historian's dismissals took aim less at the formal qualities of the assemblage than at a viewing experience whose interactive function had now become "the special complicity that that work extorts from the beholder," (Fried, 1968) as Michael Fried wrote decades earlier, of minimalism. It is a complicity that destroys the stability of the work because it is reconfigured with each encounter; it becomes an essentially different image with each textual conveyance; it changes with use, with *total engagement*. Fried's attack was misguided, and had the ironic effect of legitimizing minimalism in art critique. Likewise, our visiting scholar's complaints of the work's non-seriousness and the perils of its potential profanity were sustained, and after nearly a half hour of invective, a *call to action* emerged from many in the room, who, having been convinced of profanity as the work's aesthetic, then proceeded, mobile phones in hand, to produce a barrage of text messages to the system in response to her derision—many of which attacked her personally. The texted rejoinders functioned in effect as two kinds of demonstration. One was instrumental, a demonstration of the system's use; its interactivity being held up in exception to the scholar's judgment of the work along lines that speciously insisted on placing it in a conventional category as a *static* model of installation. This was a numbness to the act of emergence with the work, a feeling that what made it new—its engagement with beholders—is precisely what diminished its value. The other kind of demonstration became an affirmation of social action as artistic ingredient, a collective show

of feeling opposing critical traditionalism, and bearing witness to an antiquated orthodoxy before a gathering of artists whose work was itself founded on a broader notion of engagement, and whose own commitment to new art directions, therefore, had since traced many daring departures from old-world stances. In an artwork, the act of speaking back to the viewer constitutes an extension of aesthetic experience that raises it from the circumstances of *sentiment* to those involving *language*. And as it was true and essential for Wittgenstein to assert foundationally that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language," it is true and essential that to this new generation, a work of art is what emerges in *use*, so that, although contemplation remains an aesthetic aspiration for all artists, *use* alone, and what emerges from it each time—as in the collapsed present that speaks back to Nancy Holt in *Boomerang*—forms the guiding criterion for validity in a work. The tools may be technological, but the actual medium is engagement. Because use is the genesis for meaning, no normative judgment *other than use* can validate its aesthetic. So here, the lopsidedness of critiquing work that prompts viewers to speak back to it was the first retreat from the aesthetics of non-engagement that has circumscribed much—though not all—modernist art. Eastmond's crit may not be far from what it might have been like to review Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*: the aesthetic in each is framed by the conversational co-performance that defines the work's potential. Each work is not a statement of the responsiveness of a work of art, but of its *presence* as a dimension contingent on ours. And that presence, in Acconci, Winter, or Eastmond, to mark three entirely separate lines of effort, is the basis of use that language's engagement, in transmodal works of art, compels in order to create meaning.

CHAPTER FOUR

Engagement as media metonymy—The aural as visual

As a starting point for imagining the innovative success that is possible using one expressive medium as another—a sort of transmodal shift—we have only to think of one artist, for whom a city has given itself in curious fascination. I say "given itself" because it is beyond rare for three major art venues in one city to *simultaneously* exhibit the work of a single artist. Even in New York City, that metropolis whose many art spaces might accommodate such a possibility—and recently has—there is more to read into this confluence than assertive artistic promotion, but rather, this triple action must be taken as a full embrace of something about what the artist's work represents, as a compass on curatorial and art sensibility at large. The reference to a transmodal shift of media I make is because the protagonist of this interest, Christian Marclay, is not a visual artist by conventional definition; while he has created photographic and video documentation, his original medium is not visual at all. It is perhaps not even a medium as much as a practice, which is where the crux of urban attention lies and points to what we might briefly examine in that extraordinary co-optation.

If a work of art functions to engage us with both its uniqueness and familiarity, it is because of a kind of "circle-making" closure where what its aesthetic frame *excludes* is what cues the viewer on

what is to be read *back into* the work. More obvious for Marclay's practice, what is included within the frame of an object is its content, while what is excluded is often determined by limitations inherent in the chosen medium. This terminus enables an experience of crucial duality between what is perceived and what is felt, what is sensed and what is imagined. It is a boundary that Marclay, as maven of the phonograph more than any other mechanism, navigates. His principal strategy could be called the *metonymic filibuster*, it is designed to take part of a work for the whole, thus suspending the full performance of what its original expressive medium provides. The tactical move is twofold, involving first a partial or incomplete selection of aural or visual work amenable to sensory reception via the photograph or phonograph, and then impeding its reception by perturbing its playback or display. The array of expressive media subjected to these operations is itself a study in pluralism.

First in this procession of media is photography, at the Paula Cooper Gallery, where the recent Marclay solo show named *Fourth of July* featured a series of large-format torn color photographs of an eponymous parade in New York City which the artist photographed in 2005. The display set comprised seven portraits—although we never see any of the subjects in complete rostrum view—of members of a marching band, for the photos were torn into various shapes, each of which prevents us from observing but a fragment of the action. In the photographic medium, the image is always the center of reception, but when its physical reduction by tearing is so severe that its function as a sign of the world is negated, we put equal focus on the boundary, the frame, so that the shape of the image, its fragmentation, is in dialogue with what is captured photographically. Denying the holism of a scene upon which the eye depends, these works operate as anti-portraits, or at best, as scenes of scenes, visual *subsampling*, a term whose exploitation Marclay's musical vocabulary also understands.

Thus to imagine that this collection is a photographic show is to misread the larger aesthetic operating here; it is one in whose structure the medium is presented in staged engagement with something outside of it, and this engagement—here, both physical and retinal—identifies a reading bridging two distinct worlds. The fact that, as a logical step after collage, this selection of, bridging across, and playing through media is now a prevalent artistic

FIGURE 16 *Christian Marclay,* Untitled *(from the series* Fourth of July*), 2005. C-print 32" × 31½" (81.3 × 80 cm.) Framed: 38 ¾ × 38¼" (98.4 × 97.2 cm.). © Christian Marclay. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.*

practice for artists, sets it apart from most legacies of art making that precede it.

Similarly, there is *Festival*, a Marclay mid-career retrospective staged at the Whitney Museum. Looking as much as art school classroom as rehearsal space at an experimental theater company, the Whitney show presented a textbook case of how to structure the engagement aesthetic between form and frame. Enclosed video and exhibition spaces melded into a larger common area that was itself

reconfigurable into quarters by enormous black curtains, selectively drawn closed during live performances by musicians playing Marclay-made instruments. In this open plan, inscribed through the entire span of one wall painted as a massive blackboard was an array of musical staff lines with chalk holders allowing visitors to "compose" what the performers might wish to read. A pyrrhic gesture, since the wall is not positioned so that players could easily see it, but no less crucial to the exhibition's engagement aesthetic: the symbolic overlay of players using Marclay's instruments, performing to the visitors, ostensibly interpreting their "compositional cues"—all of this crossed the worlds of language, music inscription, and reader response to the exhibit-as-medium.

The third deployment of Marclay work in New York City, part of the *Haunted* exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, was in the company of a larger undertaking organized around the theme, increasingly topical, of part-whole relations investigating how a medium that captures only a portion of experience—itself modulated through artistic voice—can reconstitute larger memory and meaning. While the principal medium for *Haunted* was photographic, space was made at the top floors of the museum for three video works whose identity was about memory. The thematic concern of the *Haunted* show, which I would term the "conceptual afterimage" where photographic media use the past as an aesthetic function (rather than just one of information retrieval), is very much Marclay's own, as when, in his contribution to the show, the single-channel video work entitled *Looking for Love*, he creates juxtapositions of memory in the LP records and similar analog media, juxtapositions that are immediately set off to destroy memory or undermine the conventional aesthetic experience for which they were created. And this, he accomplishes by literally going against the grain of the medium's own structure and materials of reproduction: a video close-up of a phonograph needle is dragged over the grooves of a record, so that "looking for love" means looking for where the word "love" was sung.

One reading for both shows, the Marclay festival at the Whitney and the Guggenheim's *Haunted*, could circle around the interface between the potentials of aesthetic perception and the production of sensory triggers for them. In the case of the *Haunted* exhibition, the production is photographic; with Marclay it is aural. Each line of production is thus anchored to departures from the particular

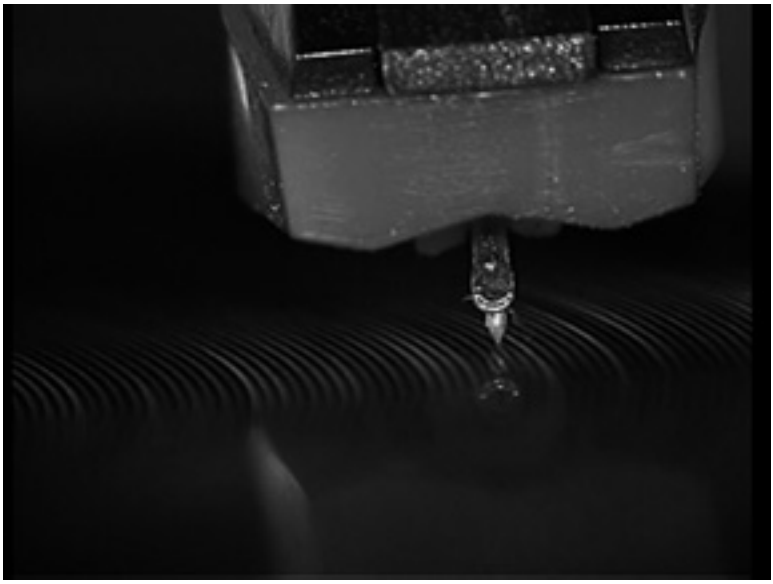

FIGURE 17 *Christian Marclay,* Looking for Love, *2008. DVD, 32 Minutes. Edition of 5. © Christian Marclay. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.*

character of specific media—the camera and the phonograph. But this interface reading between reception and production—the notion of memory as the target of media production, whose sounds or images evoke references to the problematic past and our inability to reproduce it clearly—is only a possibility for the total phenomenon of this larger relationship between self and media, a relationship that has come to dictate preponderant conditions of art today in which new media choices—Serra's cor-ten steel ellipses, Jessica Stockholder's retail plastics, Thomas Hirschhorn's low-grade material enclosures, Ilya Kabakov's dreamy closet-like rooms, Rachel Whiteread's blocks of architectural forms without faces, Tracy Emin's squalid *mise-en-scènes*, Damien Hirst's taxidermy of the grotesque, Matthew Barney's post-pagan carnival performances—all reflect an engagement between the status of art and the presence of the self, each contingent and seeming separate but with an ineffable connection to the other. More germane to this phenomenon is a different departure from the convention

whose historical reliance on the figurative and representational became tied to production practices that both artist and audience understood. That art until the late nineteenth century was judged on bases of taste meant that subjective and objective—that the experience of art and the quality of art—were determined together and simultaneously. It meant that art was a signifier of society because it was a matter of universal consensus, although this occluded an asymmetry that has augmented out toward all of contemporary art, because, like two circles that never overlap, the production of the work was entirely dependent on the artist, while the production of interpretation lay completely with the viewer. Today, this equation is no longer fixed.

This change has not merely affected art; it has by and large become the principal mode of experiencing of it, both via artistic production and the assumptions of viewerly response. The independence of these production-reception spheres is gone; they are no longer distinct or even sequential. Instead, they now emerge together; execution and context become dependent no less on audience than artist. And interpretation is no longer a matter of consensus—since the earliest Cubist work, or the subsequent articulations of abstraction variously adonized from Picasso to Rauschenberg, such work challenges the academic categorization of genres like landscape, still life, or portraiture. These historically elaborated categories have lost ontological weight, and the eye, schooled or unschooled, is equally confounded. Another factor emerges from the problems of boundary in works whose space or time can no longer be determined. And a third factor, which should be called aesthetic nominalism, points to the new practice of built-in measures against reproducibility of the work, so that it is performed uniquely each time. These are frequently present in a dual mode of existence, as indications, templates, or instructions for execution on one hand, and as specific but ever-unique instantiations in distinct occasions on the other.

The results of these divagations from the cogency of convention have been given simple names, perhaps "pluralism" being the most common, though least informative. If, as we know, it is clear that, in this variety, a century of art has gradually challenged sensory expectations against conventional modes of experience and historical categorization, it is also true that, together, the many varieties of this challenge alter the act of reception from

something passively convenient to that which, in order to complete the work, must engage it in new ways. Artistic sensibility predicted that, in order for this to happen—for the viewer to enter the space of production—standards of aesthetic convention had to be sacrificed. It is not that *aesthetics* has been expunged from modern and contemporary art, but that it has become redefined, the familiar mode of its experience—summarized as judgment from perception—is now less crucial to the experience of a work. Key now is the sense of, and commitment to, activating its world as constructed, as presented, and as possible at *this* moment more or less independently of any other, so that in order for the work to exist, it must exist *now*, without necessarily any reference to a history or a future. As this *now* is constructed from the overlap of the duality of production/construction and reception/interpretation, artist and audience collude in the contract of art making. The final outcome generates new experience connected less to disembodied universals like beauty or truth than to the immediate confirmation of one's own being by engagement with the work's statement. Replacing the old universals feeds new forms of artistic action that could group under an engagement aesthetic.

It is no longer possible to manage memory without managing media. We must again revisit the question of where memory happens. With the revived age of enlightenment that accompanied the Freudian psychological model, the principle of "repressed energy" has moved from its earlier center in narratives of religion, and later even fluid dynamics, to ones based on the function of the mind itself. Here, the problems of memory are exposed; it is meaning-laden but structurally flawed. In the mind, memory is woven into other memory, where associations are not accidental, and are instead motivated by subconscious processes. Incompleteness is augmented by imagination, and recall is not merely informational but reflective, serving as description of the thinker. An aesthetic line connects this phenomenon—Freud's principal insight—with one that Marclay evokes in an unrelenting part-whole engagement within and against emotive associations with the media of memory and recollection.

CHAPTER FIVE

Projective engagement—Transcending the modernist grid

Almost everyone seems convinced that life a hundred years ago was simpler than it is today. The relentless rise and prominence of industry and technology is blamed for complex existence buckling under mountains of details and rules that seemed blissfully absent from earlier times. But if there is one thing that became *less* convoluted in the twentieth century, it is the architecture that arose there, and which influenced all the design styles that came to be characterized as modernist. For a variety of reasons, including cost, new buildings abandoned the ornamental quality that typified nineteenth-century structures, and with the evolution of plated glass and steel-reinforced concrete, the new century turned to a minimal style that revolved around, and resembled, the simplest of forms: the grid. What ornament was to art and architecture of the nineteenth century, with its flowery complications and interwoven excesses, the grid, with its austere uniformity, became for the twentieth. Tempting in its economical simplicity, the grid eventually entered the dimension of painting and sculpture, and there, became a tradition unto itself. By the 1970s, therefore, this tradition had become well established, and Rosalind Krauss wrote the preeminent critique of the grid as the singular structure most emblematic of modern art. So, as the grid became the symbol of

skyscrapers with their windows arranged like the cells of a spreadsheet, it has also been adopted into major artistic movements, from Suprematism, to De Stijl, to Minimalism.

But the story doesn't end there, because what the grid initiates with its symmetry and its abstract purity, the circle extends, in a form that approaches a Western mandala, something stressing *radiality* from its center. The circle's compositional integration is a mirror, a simile for the universe as an expansive principle where, as with the mandala, any notion of a center is subservient to the form's overall order.

But in order to understand the circle, we must consider the allure of its predecessor, the grid. In its latticed form, the grid is a pattern whose mystical overtones modern art criticism doesn't deny, for two crucial reasons. Reason one: the first artists to employ grids spoke to the transcendental ontology of its creative form—we note Krauss's acknowledgment, that "Mondrian and Malevich are not discussing canvas or pigment or graphite or any other form of matter. They are talking about Being or Mind or Spirit."[1] Second—and more forcefully—it is in the grid's transcendence that the idea of symmetry finds a way *out* of form and into an interpretive rabbit hole of possible pathways—as again Krauss affirms: "The grid's mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction)."[2] Thus, in its embrace of this visual archetype, the art historical record is clear: the grid signals modernity's engagement with formalism.

And so, again and again, in the drawings, paintings, and prints of Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondrian, Georges Vantongerloo, Ellsworth Kelly, Donald Judd, Kenneth Noland, Sol LeWitt, Robert Ryman, Agnes Martin, Chuck Close, to cite ten artists in the twentieth century, there was a marked and persistent return to the grid, exploiting its seductive significance and archetypal purity. Unmistakably, this procession traced its lineage through the mainstays of the modern and contemporary canon. Of course, a grid painted by hand, declaring the commitment of artistic reduction to repetitious formalism, conveys the same attention to its form as can a machine-programmed grid, realized through the iterations of algorithmic generation. So, even though the grid is, as Krauss notes, a shape somehow dependent on the obviousness of

a material support and the presence of labor for its transcendence, it is nonetheless an abstract form, and it fascinated many digital artists. In the grid, this equivalence between conventional and programmed ways of producing art renders its bias against the computer as an art medium inexplicable. Art history has commemorated its favored paint and print artists, while denying the same in the work of others who used computers to make art based on that same grid. But, despite being ignored by art historians, the artists who used electronic media to investigate the grid did so in a manner that used it less as an immutable altar (as did the Minimalists) than as a catapult for new formulations. Working at the same time as their famous counterparts who used physical

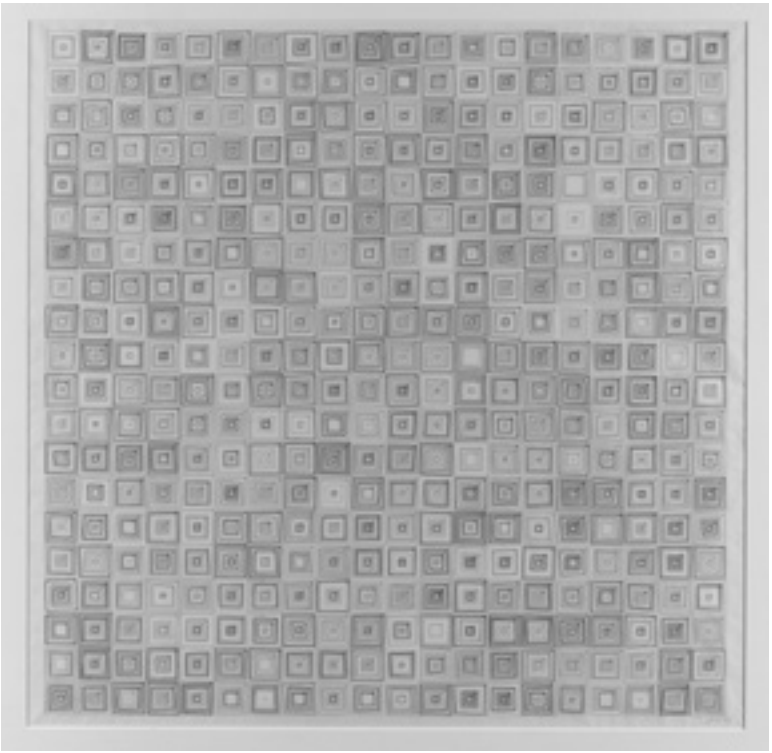

FIGURE 18 *Vera Molnar,* Untitled, *1971–4. Plotter drawing, ink on paper. Computer: IBM; Plotter: Benson. 40½" × 40" framed. From the Anne and Michael Spalter Collection.*

media, these electronic artists, to include Vera Molnar, Edward Zajec, Kenneth Knowlton, Jean-Pierre Hébert, Georg Nees, Roman Verostko, and others, took the grid into individual and radically reconfigured terrain.

Thus, of particular (and historically overlooked) relevance is the means by which new-media artists have offered up new directions after the abstract geometry of the grid reached its repetitive exhaustion. An array of new possibilities emerged. In one, as Edward Zajec's or Ken Knowlton's work captured, the grid undergoes a partial shift from within, so that its structure remains unchanged, while revealing the beginnings of a new core undermining its own perfect symmetry.

FIGURE 19 *Kenneth Knowlton,* Untitled, *1972. Silkscreen after plotter drawing. From the Art Ex Machina portfolio 197/200. From the Anne and Michael Spalter Collection.*

In another, the grid retains its emblematic uniformity, but this has been splayed out like a rainbow over successive curvatures, a transformation that is the signature of Mark Wilson's sweeping work.

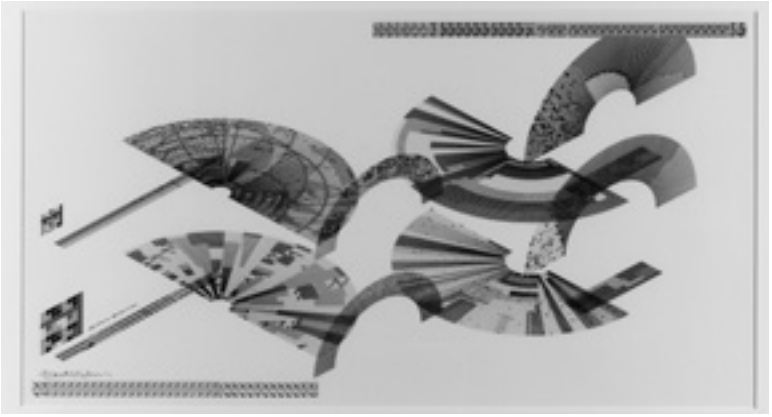

FIGURE 20 *Mark Wilson.* SKEW FF10, *1984. Rives Offset rag paper, with a Tektronix 4663 plotter using pigmented inks and an IBM PC 43⅛" × 27" framed. From the Anne and Michael Spalter Collection.*

In yet another move, the grid is exploded altogether, its structure remaining as an echo, almost as if it followed a creative big bang—this is evident in the delicate work of Jean-Pierre Hébert or Roman Verostko.

Of course, it is folly to imagine the grid as a modern structure; what I am arguing for is its ubiquity as a design archetype. Perhaps its debut as a meme begins obliquely, in the book, where text is arranged in regular galley margins and read in a singular direction page by page. It is not only an X-Y grid of letters, but as a mountain of paper, it is also an X-Y-Z grid of bulked-up signifiers. There is nowhere to go but *out*, and the explosion to which I referred earlier has occurred in literary art as well, in the tradition of authors from the early Futurists through concrete poets in work that assumes visual dimensions while preserving its textual legibility.[3] So, while Verostko, Hébert, and those other post-grid visual artists known as the Algorists explore *form* as the point of departure from the grid, we might imagine both shape *and* text as simultaneous catapults from the grid. This emerges, for instance, in the work of Henry Mandell, whose strategy is the adoption of texts—essays, poems, or even quantitative data—into visual abstractions which nonetheless evoke the spirit of their original context. The meditative aims of Abstract Expressionists like Mark Rothko re-emerge similarly in

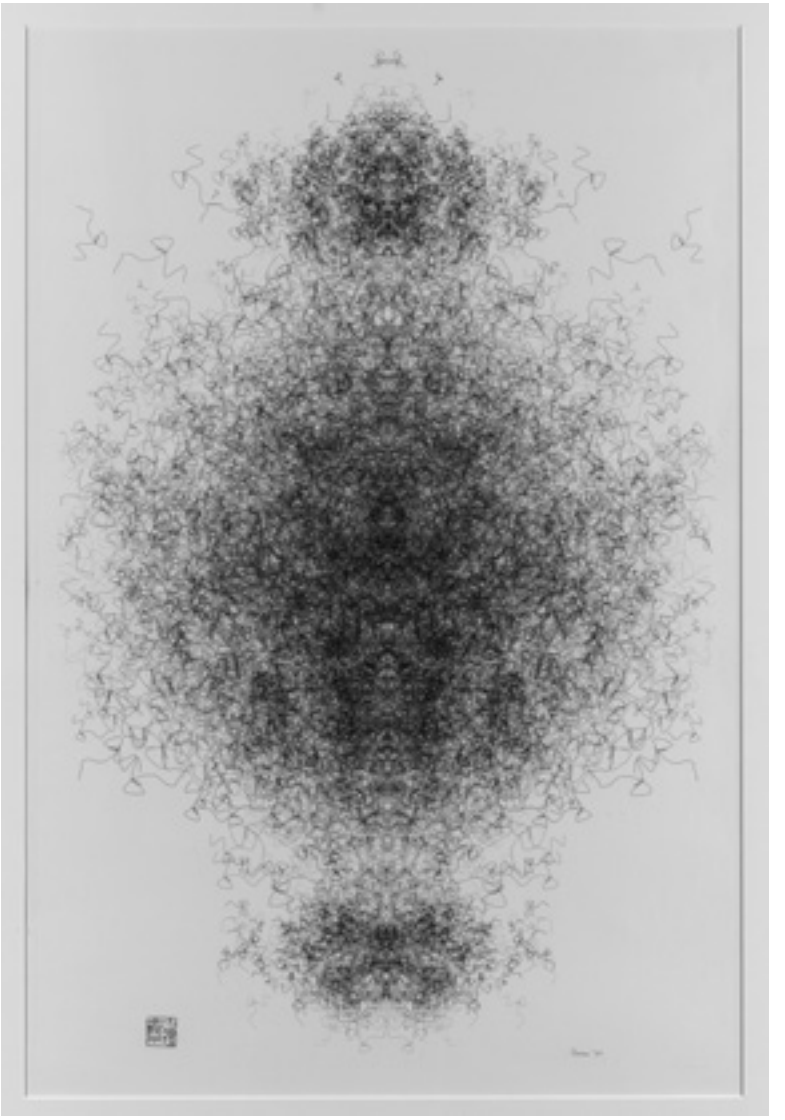

FIGURE 21 *Roman Verostko*, Untitled, *1990. Plotter drawing, ink on paper, 31¾" × 43¼", framed. From the Anne and Michael Spalter Collection.*

Mandell's landscapes—the viewer's attention oscillates between a sense of the text (a sense that is without direct reference, since the text can no longer be discerned) and the originality of the shape. The mystery of the text's meaning lies not only in its illegibility, but in a story of extraordinary origins. In *Tamahagane*, for example, Mandell references seven centuries of masterful production of Samurai swords borne of Tamahagane steel's organic purity, as he stretches and folds the vectors of a text on the subject in the same way as the masters forged their own material.

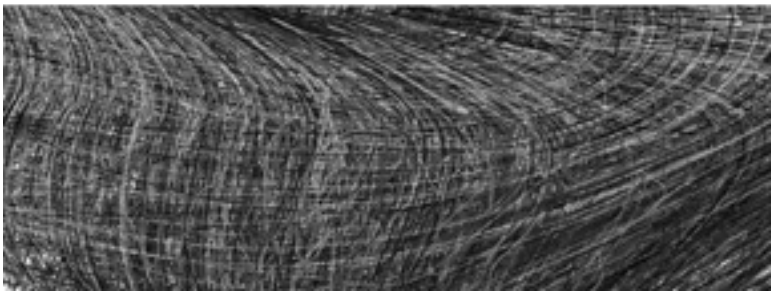

FIGURE 22 *Henry Mandell.* Tamahagane*, 2011. Ultrachrome archival pigment on canvas, 44 × 126″. Image courtesy of the artist.*

Tamahagane, the first canvas painted with digital media to enter the permanent collection of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, is a historic predecessor on several levels of *Soundings*, one of a series of works composed from text and information about climate change as it has been recorded over five hundred years, explaining Mandell's semiotic transformation from the symbolic level of text to the iconic one of image, as for him, *Soundings 5C*'s shape is doubly evocative: "of high altitude weather balloons whose soundings of the atmosphere inform specialists of its health and well being."[4] And to this, he began with "the unformed idea of producing a vital vessel in which to contain an essence of life."[5]

In any case, as the grid has been transposed, it is frequently also into circular form. That transposition is necessary to bring fresh artistic energy to an overused essence. Today, grid composition is no longer innovative, and, since material support itself is, in a technological epoch, no longer a precondition of creative production, we find how, in much electronic art, this new shape has borrowed the distant abstraction of its earlier rectilinear variety,

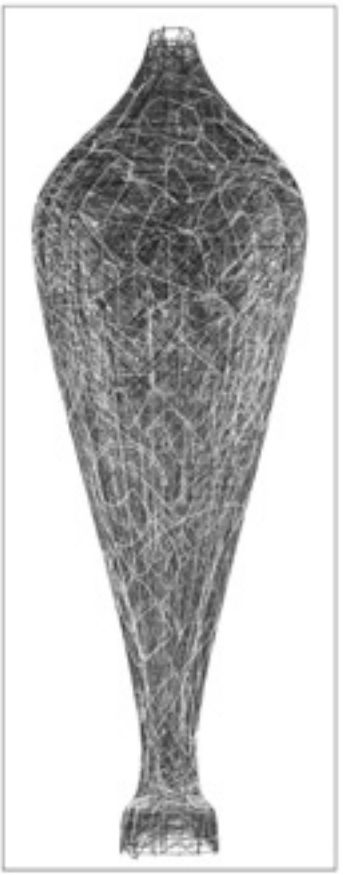

FIGURE 23 *Henry Mandell.* Soundings 5C, *2012. Ultrachrome archival pigment on paper 57 × 22″. Image courtesy of the artist.*

but has learned how to transcend it. The circle's trigonometric correspondence with the engineering of the cathode ray tube, the computer monitor, and many kinds of projection, lathing, and impression systems raises the status of that shape and renders it as the *new grid*, the palette and co-ordinate system for contemporary electronic art. Of course, non-digital art, too, has long used the circle's fertile promise—we could in fact draw a second historical timeline from Duchamp's first filmed rotoreliefs in action up to Anthony McCall's projections, where the viewer changes from an

FIGURE 24 *Anthony McCall,* You and I, Horizontal, *III, 2007. Installation view at Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, 2007. Solid light installation, 32-minute cycle in two parts. Computer, QuickTime movie file, two video projectors, two haze machines. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York. © 2007 Anthony McCall. Installation at the Serpentine Gallery, London (30 November 2007–3 February 2008). Photograph © Sylvain Deleu.*

image to sculpture by *entering* and disrupting the work with his own body. Incidentally, McCall also illustrates that electronic art need not be digital.

Rather, the insistent abstraction of the circle, for example, characterizes the analog signal, in works like John Whitney's *Permutations*, a series of short films illustrating the dance of dots in a progression of circular rearrangements over the spatial void of a CRT screen. But to reach the height of an art machine's play with the archetype of circularity awaited the work of one of its quietest pioneers, Desmond Paul Henry. Henry used the targeting systems and sights of bomber planes to construct mechanical drawing machines powered by their electrical servo motors. This resulted in a kind of spirograph on steroids, a complex arrangement of gear trains and cogs. In its original use, the sight mechanism calculated a parallax that anticipated the impact point of a bomb from a

certain altitude and speed. Thus, a bombardier entered information on height, bomb weight, velocity and direction into the (analog) computer, which then calculated the bomb's release point for best accuracy. Henry's adaptation added a means by which the mechanism would trace a succession of partial curves and mark them on paper. Each machine-generated drawing took from 45 minutes to three hours to complete. The process, while manual and mechanical,[6] also incorporated chance in the final drawing.[7] What emerges is the eye's inescapable pursuit of the lines through their radial orbits, a trace which the grid forbids.

The turn from ornament to grid was not the only change in the art of the last one hundred years. Much modernist art from the twentieth century is a gradual departure from academic perfection of the image and a portrayal of the psychology, even the *trauma*,

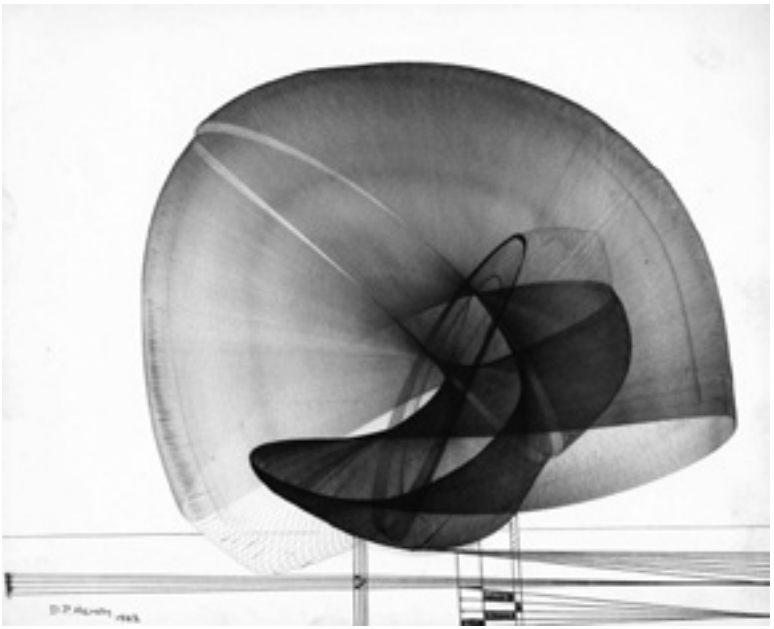

FIGURE 25 *Desmond Paul Henry,* Radar Beam Sweep, *1962. No. 053. Black and orange biro on smooth, white card, hand embellishments: vertical and horizontal lines in ink. Executed using Drawing Machine One. 19cm × 26cm. Exhibited at Henry's Solo Exhibition at Manchester's Central Reference Library, 1964.*

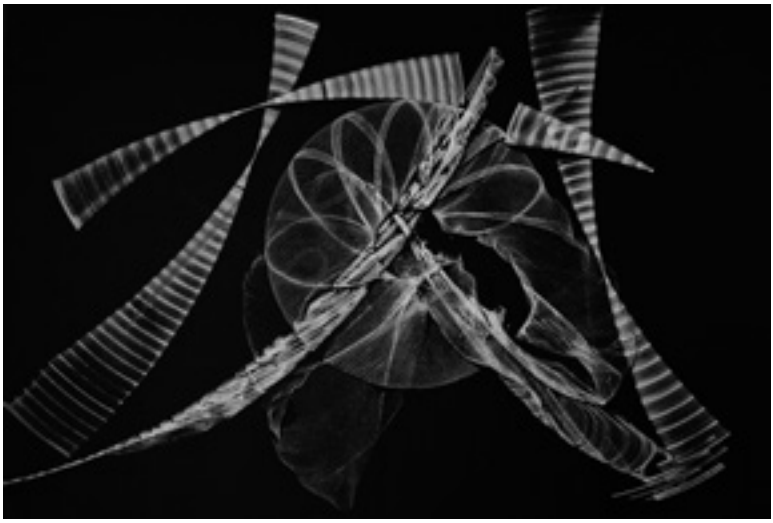

FIGURE 26 *Desmond Paul Henry,* Tractatus 6.2322 (Wittgenstein) no. 069, *1967. White Indian ink in tube pen on black cartridge paper. Hand embellishments: some white highlighting in Indian ink and sweeping lines in bronze-colored marker pen. Executed using Drawing Machine Three. 72cm × 50cm. Picture submitted for inclusion in Cybernetic Serendipity, 1968.*

behind it. The project begins just before Impressionism culminates in forms of abstraction, where a physical object and its represented image are no longer connected. But what arose from the ashes of Abstract Expressionism is different. *That* postmodern art is characterized by a return to the real, drawing from societal conditions the materials for aesthetic production. So how feasible is an artistic union between the detached perfection of the circle on one hand and contemporary art's connection with the real, imperfect world on the other? How can a form like the circle be used in *this* world in conditions of photorealism, of motion, and of what a technological art form can bring to them? This is the question that Anne Spalter's digital projective work considers, and in so doing, resolves a missing vector between the creative lineages of the grid and the circle. The end result, it turns out, is not founded on material supports, but rather on the technology of filmic realism, computationally modulated.

Spalter's approach begins with architectural observations, capturing a succession of events over time using a very constrained cinematic grammar, namely the linear pan, the zoom, and the steady shot of urban settings. Before us lies the transposition of the world from its natural Cartesian perspective as our eyes see it—horizontal motion across the x axis and vertical, running up and down—to one whose co-ordinate system is *radial*, using a fragment of the visual field as a slice that weaves into itself around a circle. This doesn't merely yield a polarized fugue of somewhat recognizable scenes and objects. It also resolves a long-standing problem of how to unify the abstract promise of the circle with the pragmatic and embodied realism of cosmopolitan life. It brings together the quasi-tessellated rabbit-hole of immersive order that we encounter in artists from M. C. Escher to Andreas Gursky, with the visual stimulation of a filmic setting, recalling from other traditions in the twentieth century—for example, in literature—the turn away from formalism and toward realism; William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, and Hunter S. Thompson come to mind. But Spalter's visual assemblages also propose a new trope that starts in Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema*, with its classic rotorelief mechanism, up to the mathematical symmetry that Benoit Mandelbrot discovered in the structure of natural forms from small scale to large, so that a video shot of a highway, in Spalter's mutations, reveals an uncanny similarity not to an object

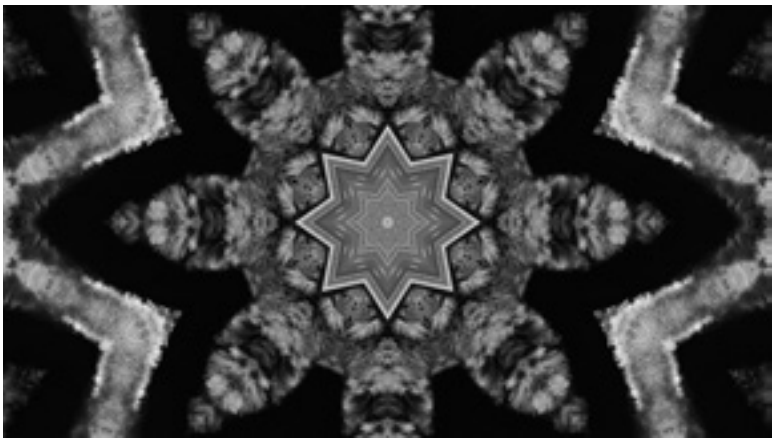

FIGURE 27 *Anne Morgan Spalter,* Circular Highway, *2011. Video projection. 00:13.*

but to an entire *range* of them, to include at one moment, the floret seeds in a dandelion that in turn explode to the multidirectional obduracy of a star.

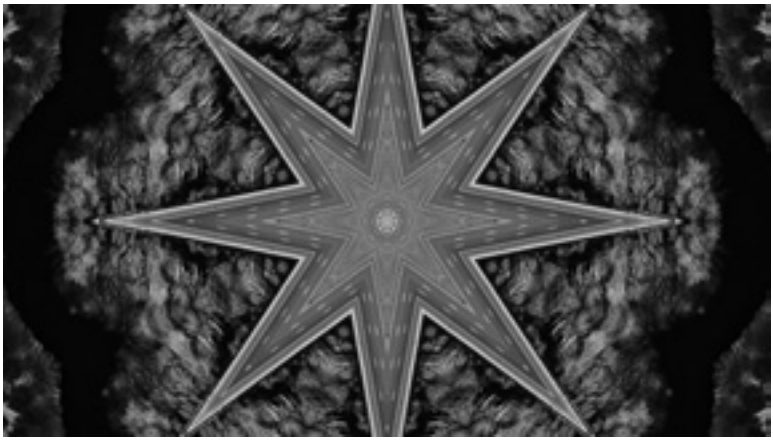

FIGURE 28 *Anne Morgan Spalter,* Circular Highway, *2011. Video projection. 00:23.*

And as this shape expands, its inner membrane dissolves, so that the points transform into spokes where separation between inner and outer form yields to that of an open nexus.

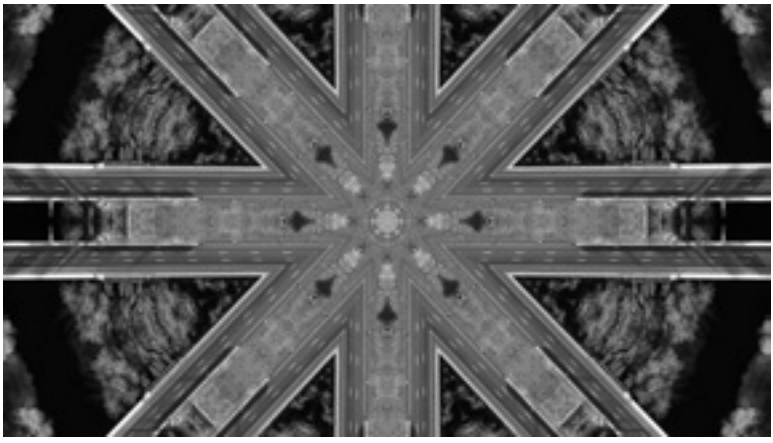

FIGURE 29 *Anne Morgan Spalter,* Circular Highway, *2011. Video projection. 00:26.*

In turn, this image's radial augmentation again returns to the star, but now as its negative, a space *between* points, and pointed to by them:

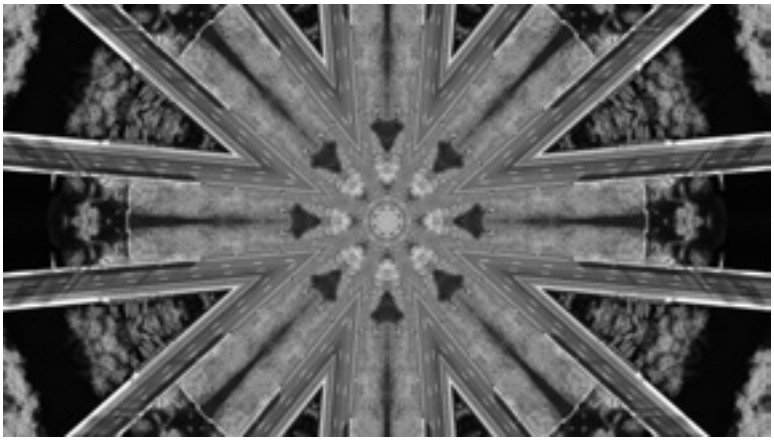

FIGURE 30 *Anne Morgan Spalter,* Circular Highway, *2011. Video projection. 00:30.*

FIGURE 31 *Anne Morgan Spalter,* "Sky of Dubai," *2012. 3-minute looping 1080p HD digital video. Shown on Digital View 96" × 54" panel wall. Image courtesy of the artist.*

Spalter's eye for submitting horizontal linearity to applied movement in a single continual direction produces a chain of transformations that resolves, as I have said, not toward a single image but rather to the presence of a *principle of translation*, sometimes imposed directly over urbanscapes, as in *Sky of Dubai*, which was shot from a helicopter as a portrait of that city's skyscrapers.

It is one whose essence is both abstract and *in* the world of physical phenomena. This is the intersection, between the worldly and the pure, that mandala makers understood, as they gave us fleeting visual monuments as aphorisms of contemplation that would use *form* as a way to move toward everything that lies *beyond* form. And it is the same meditative process into which Spalter's transcendent motion draws us, and whose form of engagement reveals images as evolutionary, rather than static, phenomena.

CHAPTER SIX

Engagement from objecthood to processhood

Not long ago, a colleague pointed out a paper sign tacked on a wall of the classroom where I taught theory. Its handwriting read, "Can computer games be art"? Optimistically, he suggested that the answer has been confirmed by internet discussions. I was less convinced.

For a long time, museums, galleries, historians, and critics were the only authority for determining the aesthetic status of something (its monetary value was and is determined by art auction or private sale). But the question of whether something is or is not art can no longer be dismissed by merely asking whether it resides in a museum or gallery exhibit. New art has rarely emerged through these institutions, much more often it has been excluded by them. Infamously, Marcel Duchamp's first readymade, *Fountain*, was included in a gallery exhibit, although the show's curators placed the urinal in a separate room. It was included but not shown, it was therefore excluded. While *Fountain* changed modern art, neither that exhibit nor its organizers are important to art history. As far as the record goes, they are neither included nor shown.

The question of art status, of course, resembles an earlier chapter in modern art when, in the early 1920s, Alfred Stieglitz struggled to legitimate photography within the gallery system and wrote to the man who most infamously undermined that system—Duchamp himself—to ask whether a photograph can possess the status of art. The consequence of this for new media art is something I have

considered elsewhere.[1] Here we see Stieglitz, working as more than an artist, and for 15 years managing a gallery devoted "to advance photography as applied to pictorial expression," continually assembling and promoting exemplars for a growing canon of photographic art. Yet here he, Stieglitz, becomes the ironic outsider posing the categorical art question about the product of a revolutionary medium—photography.

Stieglitz, unlike Duchamp, did not come to photography through an art school education. His artistic development followed another trajectory. Mechanical engineering, his primary field, was central to his development of the photographic medium. Regardless of the engineer in him, something coalesced in Stieglitz such that mechanical precision progressed through artisanal perfection and arrived finally at mature consciousness of the photograph's aesthetic promise. At that point, Stieglitz's own attitude changed; photography became less the medium to be perfected than the art form to be cultivated. This isn't unique to Stieglitz or even to photography; the progression from instrumental craft to legitimate art form is the same one that Stanley Cavell's philosophy locates in the origins of another medium: film. As it was with Stieglitz's interrogation of photography, it is also true for Cavell's questions of film's aesthetic, whose genesis he finds, with Panofsky's own and in opposition to Bazin's, that it was not "an artistic urge that gave rise to the discovery and gradual perfection of a new technique; it was a technical invention that gave rise to the discovery and gradual perfection of a new art."[2] That is, the processual art always evolved from the objective medium.

The more intricate the machinery of an expressive medium, the less dependent it is on art institutions to legitimize it as an art form. Film, much more dependent on complex technology than is photography, has never been defined by the gallery system. It is a medium capable of thriving within as well as outside it. As film became "the movies," it grew into a commercial empire not through the institutions of art but of entertainment. And thus, each world—art and entertainment—has adopted its own relationship to it: if we can consider *films* as an art form, we can also speak of *movies* as entertaining for its viewers, and profitable for its producers. The commercial film has evolved to serve the industry whose adjective describes it. The presumable integrity and depth of art and artist that emerges from images of solitude and sacrifice

stood against the shallowness of commercial film's evolution in the 1930s as a product of a draconian studio system—each emerged from a very different kind of studio. The artist created the demand for his work, but commercial film is led by the expectations of a general audience, which drives the demand for popular entertainment. In this sense, the term "mass market," and not just the word "commercial," is also an inverse of high art. Not without irony, this distance from the masses allows high art to become profitable without losing claims to integrity, since now many works of art, contemporary as well as classical, fetch auction prices exceeding the production costs of many commercial films. This speaks to the contrast between *creation* and *production,* one that we will visit shortly.

The comparative view of fiscal relations with which I have opened here is the beginning of several contradictions about the computer game. It is fundamentally an entertainment apparatus. Historically, photograph and film have seen a family of critics arise, writers balanced by complex positions, names that include Panofsky, Bazin, Metz, and Cavell, and promoters like Stieglitz—exploring the problem of each medium's own legitimacy as art. Games are only now developing that lineage, although the legitimacy of any art form always depends on the solidity of the critique that engages it. However, arguments for games as art are expressed through sheer declaration, an authority akin to the sort of baptismal claim that allowed King Henry VIII to annul his own marriage by creating the religion that permitted it. This does not lessen the integrity of the game in itself, but knee-jerk endorsements deny the role that history can and must play in determining the status of any expressive form as art—not as commerce. Indeed, proponents of photography and film emerged shortly after the medium had already been developed and explored principally as an optical device. Any claim that photography and film were from the outset motorized by an aesthetic program is patently untrue. Their development traced, in Panofsky's view, a "technical invention that gave rise to the discovery and gradual perfection of a new art"—not vice versa. But the massive system that games have populated—the global entertainment empire—was already in place at their birth; it followed commercial film's own invention of that industry—largely by itself. This is the same industry that replaced an existing culturally integrated entertainment institution—theater.

It is an industry that, even further back in time, did not exist at all during photography's infancy, which is precisely why Stieglitz created the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, a name whose agenda we would do well to reflect upon. The overlap of distinct stages of culture industry with the evolution of a technical art form's products, then, is the question to probe, rather than whether any such form, by commercial emancipation, can claim arthood through institutional relationship.

Which brings up one of the more often-cited apologias for the art status of the computer game, the essay *Games, the New Lively Art*.[3] The position taken there champions games as art on normative grounds. Its author relates the experience of attending two panel discussions at a conference. In the first panel, we are told, the discussion was "sluggish and pretentious"—and, it seems, amenable to telepathy: "I knew exactly what they were going to say before they opened their mouths." By contrast, the discussants in the second panel "were struggling to find words and concepts to express fresh discoveries about their media; they were working on the very edge of the technology, stretching it to its limits, and having to produce work which would fascinate an increasingly jaded marketplace." We don't know what was sluggish, pretentious, and predictable about the first discussion; no quote of this account is given. The article identifies the disfavored speakers not as theorists but as digital *artists*. The second group, we are told, comprises game designers. Now, it seems to me that claims for the art status of any medium ought to be made in a manner that integrates, rather than rejects, the experience of its artists. But if, as the contrast between digital artists and designers implied, creativity marks the accelerated pace of the designer, how should we understand the common frustrations of game designers whose creative work is constrained, controlled, or curtailed by constraints of game industry structure rather than being properly free?[4]

Jenkins's essay, whose title alludes to a 1924 defense of popular culture as an art form, references cultural critic Gilbert Seldes's *The Seven Lively Arts*. Seldes wanted to present not a defense of the moving picture as *art*, but rather to "establish the picture as a definitely accepted form of *entertainment*" (emphasis mine).[5] "Lively art" here must be read synonymously with the latter term; the defense was important by itself, it did not seek to relocate

the moving picture into the legitimizing context of galleries or museums. In fact, art and entertainment differ less over legitimacy than *topicality*—art aspires for timeless relevance; entertainment aspires to be relevant *today*. So, an art medium like painting is organized in genres—landscape, portrait, abstract, still life—that are transcendent, academic, and not from the fashionable trends and tides of cultural taste. An entertainment form, however, is always a direct echo of the contemporary *moment*; it is a frame from a cultural skein reflecting the self-determination of a society, not of an artist, a genre, or a medium. Seldes's essay should be read through our evolved understanding of the film medium not as art but as entertainment, since its archaic proclamations of artistic merit, such as that "the drama film is almost always wrong, the slap-stick almost always right"[6] are not credible except as portrayal, however legitimate, of a bygone time. It sided with the relevance of its day, not with timeless concerns.

Jenkins's essay also asserts that "games have been embraced by a public that has otherwise been unimpressed by much of what passes for digital art." The premise is that a very *particular* public—one which expresses disdain of new-media art—has decided what can become art within the digital medium, while excluding whole-cloth the products of any currently evolving practice. The next passage is more striking: "contemporary efforts to create interactive narrative through modernist hypertext or avant-garde installation art seem lifeless and pretentious alongside the creativity and exploration, the sense of fun and wonder, that game designers bring to their craft."

But which specific works are "lifeless and pretentious"? Which ones might be "*passing*" for digital art? Might the presumed impostors be the raster-based creations of early artists like Charles Csuri or Manfred Mohr, or Desmond Paul Henry? Or perhaps, more recently, the two-dimensional screen-based work of Mark Napier? Or the interactive poetry of Stephanie Strickland? Or the participatory projections of Camille Utterback? Or works whose input *is* the live conversation of the internet, like Pentametron, or real-time data sculptures like Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin's *Listening Post*? Or the kinetic-semantic installations of David Rokeby or Jeffrey Shaw? Or the conceptual work of Caleb Larsen? These are but the most obvious names in a plurality of contemporary traditions whose art status has not been dismissed but rather

FIGURE 32 *Desmond Paul Henry,* Androbulus, *1962. White India ink technical tube pen on black cartridge paper; hand embellishments. Drawing Machine Two, 15.35″ × 20.47″. From the Anne and Michael Spalter Collection.*

critiqued, theorized, and, because of that deliberation, secured in the evolving canon of digital media art. Nevertheless, games are, for Jenkins, not merely superior to such art, but to all arts, as the essay quotes another apologist who, describing important characteristics of the computer game, nonetheless adopts a competitive view of aesthetic merit in which games excel at art better than art does:

> Because the videogame must move, it cannot offer the lapidary balance of composition that we value in painting; on the other hand, because it can move, it is a way to experience architecture, and more than that to create it, in a way which photographs or drawings can never compete [sic].[7]

This broadside comes from a book on videogames and entertainment, not art, but the presumption is that the first can eclipse the second if we believe that visual motion is a superior aesthetic criterion to any other. The method is obvious: raise the aesthetic status of computer games by diminishing art's. But with Jenkins there is also a critique of how the institutions of art have excluded digital works. Some reference to the historical works of Ken Knowlton, Manfred Mohr, Charles Csuri and so many others who worked in the 1960s and 70s would have made evident the time span—numerous decades—before any expressive medium attains the maturity necessary to be co-opted into the museum. In 2010, London's Victoria and Albert Museum hosted such an exhibition of digital art, which included the seminal work of these early artists and more contemporary examples. Perhaps Jenkins faults not art but an outdated stereotype of its tradition—and in this, he may be right. But the premise that reducing electronic art and dismissing its artists raises the status of videogames is harmful.

The crafting of videogames involves aesthetic elements, but these must fit within other engineering priorities which are another kind of demanding craft. If we think that we know art by merely thinking it out, without real inquiry into the difficult process of the artist, it is easy to conflate artistic craft with computational craft. As Hal Barwood explained to readers of *Game Developer* magazine in February 2002, "Art is what people accomplish when they don't quite know what to do, when the lines on the road map are faint, when the formula is vague, when the product of their labors is new

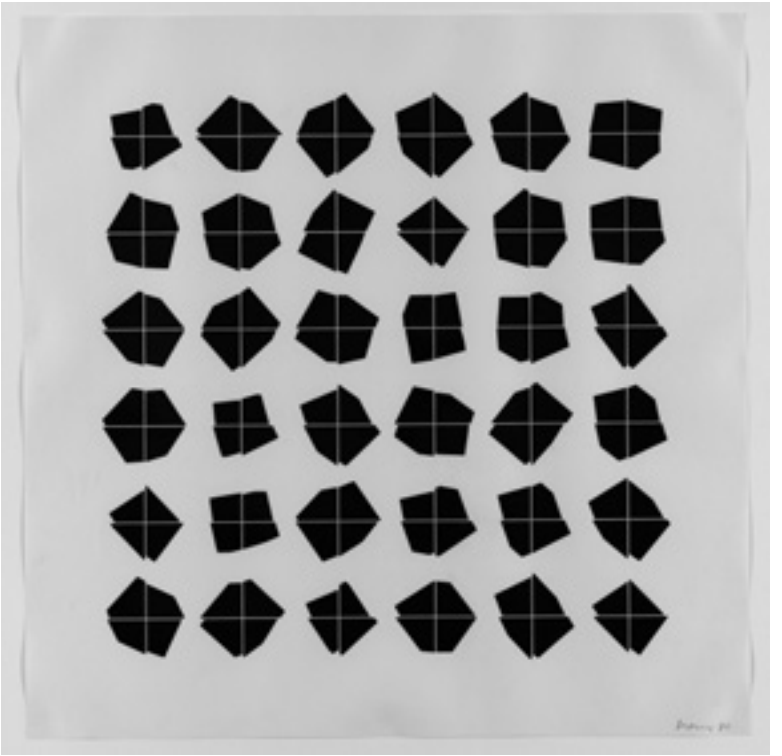

FIGURE 33 *Manfred Mohr, p-300b, 1980. Plotter drawing, ink on paper, 27½" × 27½", framed. From the Anne and Michael Spalter Collection.*

and unique." Art exists, in other words, on the cutting edge and that was where games had remained for most of their history. This portrayal resembles an outsider's idea of what serious artists do. It overlooks, for instance, the role of already-developed artistic skill and craft as it is brought to bear on new work.

In art programs and studios, art is its own goal. It is what happens when people *do* know what to do; it is not a side effect of frivolity. Beyond approaching a prosecution of art, Barwood's last quote seems a wish-fulfillment to invert the outsider role of games vis-à-vis art by summarily recasting the past century of art as somehow belonging at the center of game activity's motives. Again we could feel the annoyance of comprehensive characterizations

about art, devoid of reference, nuance, or balance, dropped into a discussion of games that should not be absorbing itself in self-demeaning and specious competitions about the "better" art. These are biases, not rigorous notions of the burden of art making in any medium—or across media.

Yet a third, unstated implication of that position—but the most decisive—is worthy of consideration. It relates not to the institutionality of the work of art, to include the computer game, but rather to its objecthood. Generically speaking, the presence of the object has been a major constituent of the value function attached to any artwork. The appreciable mastery of the aesthetic object combines with the conditions of its being, namely as a *unique* or one of a small series, and this puts into play a tension between the extended history of visual art, of which this work is a member, and the irreplaceability of the singular object, which is controlled by its owner. Through this tension, the desirability of the work derives from two separate but integrated roles—spectatorship and ownership. This is the historiographic model of art value that has been contested by conceptual art in the twentieth century, art assembled from low-grade materials, art whose works are intentionally non-unique, and art whose objecthood is denied by immaterial conditions of being. What has *not* happened yet is the freedom of such art from another aspect: its exchange value. There are instructive ironies about art's commodity status at a time when an artist like Lawrence Weiner can assert that "the work of art need not be built," but where the statement, itself part of a work, remains subject to the same commercial and licensing proscriptions as any other artwork.

But the most characteristic inference we may draw from this is that art history rarely mentions but continually relies on every work's exchange value. Membership in the annals of visual history, for a work that cannot be sold, is especially difficult, since, however indirectly, its value also relates to its provenance. The uniqueness of the object, in other words, becomes more interesting as the number of owners of the work increases, the implication being that the work possesses *some* value that endures through a lengthy succession of exchange agreements. There is no issue here, except as an inversion of the situation with the computer game, whose commercial character is more akin to the literary work—rather than existing as a unique work with successive collectors, the game

and book are released in the form of many identical copies, one for every possible owner, so that the value of those works accrues not through their uniqueness but through their *non-uniqueness*, their multiplicity, for any book or game that has sold millions of copies becomes valuable for a company, and a culture, not a collector. Exchange value, it seems, has a role to play in determining aesthetic value regardless of whether a work's distribution is unique or innumerable.

This brings us to massively multiplayer games created *around* their distribution model, with aesthetic decisions falling under those of profit maximization. It is difficult to advocate for any abstract status of an object created and produced principally to sell as many copies as possible, as are many slickly packaged games based on sequels, sports stars, or big studio feature-movie-based computer games. If this is the kind of production that, to counter-quote Jenkins, "passes for digital art," while other art is not, then there is a smoke-screen here. The game can produce and sell one copy for every person who wants one, and as it does so, it gains in monetary value. The value of a work of art derives from the opposite—its rarity. To hold a Pissarro means that others cannot have it. One category—games—thrives on the reproduction of its experience; the other—art—from the uniqueness of its presence. Electronic art is between the two—another reason that game critics and contemporary art historians should be considering the new. Games are valued by the richness on interactivity, which is to say, engagement. Art's richness is its aesthetic history. Electronic art's bridge is, as I have already argued, an engagement aesthetic.

And while we might think that books—including literary masterpieces—conform to the videogame's pattern of mass reproduction, there is one important difference relating to integrity of creation. There are countless works of literature—one thinks immediately of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*—created under conditions where sales and profit could not possibly have been motivating forces. Although crafted in the grueling conditions that artists know too well, once published, these works would come to assume a new incarnation based on mass reproduction, and through it, capture a world audience. This chrysalis, through which it makes sense to produce a maximum number of copies, does not detract from the art status of any such work: all that it tells us is that a work like Solzhenitsyn's is *created* in one reality and *produced* in

another. But games of the arch-commercial kind I mentioned earlier are not of that ilk. Their *creation* is beholden from the outset to conditions of maximal commercial *production* to such a degree that the first of these modes is functionally indistinguishable from the second. Creation in this collapsed creation/production sphere is controlled, budgets are made, resources are assigned, marketing plans are written, and timelines control every stage of the game so as to guarantee a punctual release and the anticipated profit margin. This mill has frustrated creative workers in game companies, film and design studios, and publishing companies. As this is not the reality of the artist, the critical crossroad is inevitably encountered when creative individuals who work for such companies must decide whether to follow the path of the game artist, perhaps forged from previous art school education, or of the game designer, an employee of a corporate environment's conduit of creation in the cubicle. One of the articles I critiqued above portrays that reality, neglecting how their own steady employment in a commercial system of that size also allowed them to be less tentative about their craft. Perhaps designers are less theoretical not because they disdain theory but because they must operate under the utilitarian/temporal constraints of commerce, rather than the discursive/meditative spaces of art. And the distinction ought also to be made between the corporate game designer and the independent creator. For the latter, game studies and theory comprise an ever-important dimension—we can see in individualists like Jesper Juul or Gonzalo Frasca examples of the autonomous designer-theorist. But even as regards the corporate sphere, there is no objection to this line of work, which is like that of the graphic designer or stage designer for any theater company. Integrity and constraints are endemic to every profession. What is problematic is the presumed elevation of that kind of practice over another in the name of *art*, particularly when history's trajectory has run so polemically opposed to it and when an argument is more fully opinionated than fully informed.

And so, this distinction between creation and production, obfuscated in discussions of the computer game, is at the crux of conceptual artists' jamming of the commercial aspects of art, who in the 1960s and 1970s purified the value of art by creating works out of ephemeral materials defeating resale, reproducibility, and the auction system in general. This is not lost on electronic artists. The creation, for example, of digital poetry as a non-object points

to a similar substitution in new-media art: one in which process becomes *the* object.

An example of this arose with Nick Montfort, the MIT scholar of electronic literature whose series collectively titled *ppg256* is a case of constrained poetic practice in digital media. Each *ppg256* software poetry generator is a Perl-based program whose source code is exactly 256 characters long and which produces an endless procession of verses rigorously consistent in form, meter, and occasionally rhythm. The invocation of each program is the first part of the performative act, the second being the output produced in real time. In a recent conversation at a café, Montfort stressed that *ppg256* does not—and should not—store its output. There is no object to print or archive, there is only potential literature signified by the code and the process as aesthetic statement. The line between process and product is thus totally eliminated. He produced his mobile phone and, connecting to his remote server, invoked one of the *ppg256* programs, which composed poetic stanzas in a continuous, unending stream. This production illustrated how the *potential* aesthetic work referenced by the *code* became *real* in the *process*. We might, as we would have done with the works of any of the Fluxus artists, regard *ppg256* as not only a game but also as play, and as art—in other words, something that is no less art within and beyond the literary.

The *ppg256* generators are closed poetic systems, they generate poetry in real time to specific meter constraints using a meta-dictionary, a system of rules that composes real English words. An open version of this, one whose input draws from the most open source of all—internet chatter—is comparably illustrated by Pentametron.[8] This site hosts a program which scans real-time tweets and joins those written in iambic pentameter on the basis of their rhyme. Each invocation of the program produces a 14-line sonnet that is both Shakespearean in form and contemporary in character:

To speak of it as poetry without play is to reduce it to an old, insufficient category, as does the question on the wall with which I opened this chapter. For play here is to be understood synonymously not with the place of expression in any institution, or with the specific vocation that the creator engages, or even the status of an object, but with *process alone*, something that remains ubiquitous to all media forms and genres of digital creativity.

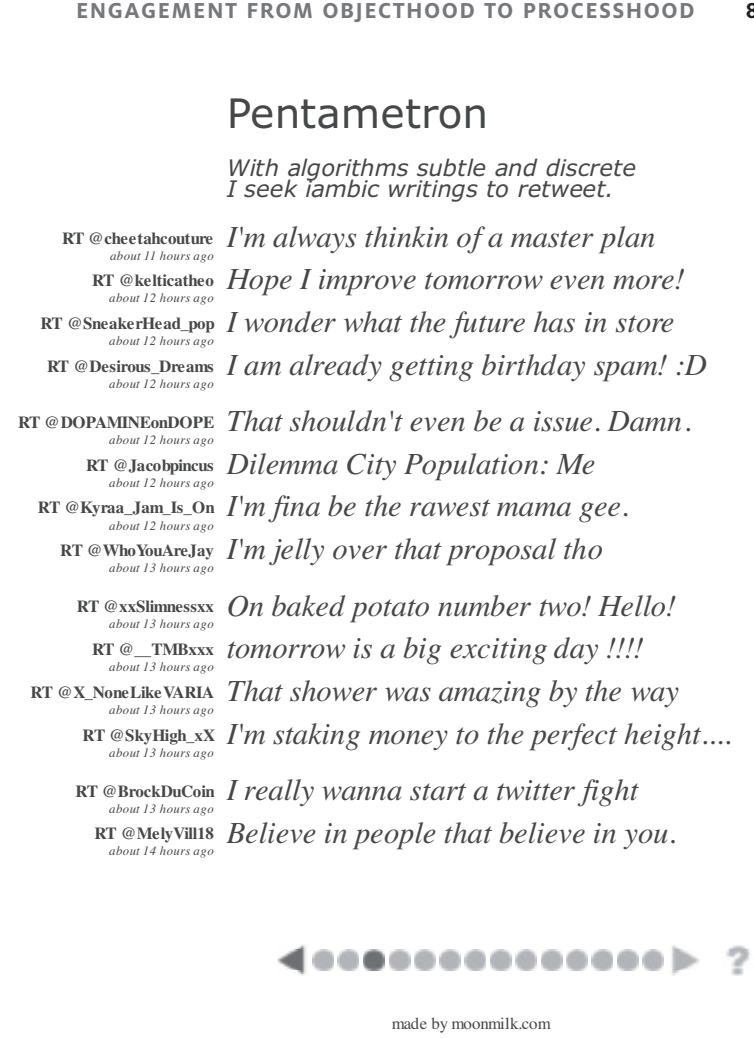

FIGURE 34 *Pentametron output, captured 31 July 2012*

And, as with play, art, too, is being increasingly presented as process and outside physical institutions, principally the gallery, which as the next chapter demonstrates, is itself is becoming virtual.

FIGURE 35 *Nick Montfort invoking* ppg256 *via mobile device.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Engagement in virtual and actual gallery space

To work in the world of art is to embrace few strict rules, even in a forest of ideologies. One of the apparent constants, however, could be articulated by an equation, or more accurately, an equivalence relation that sustains between the ideas of *art* as one term, and *freedom* as the other. The artist is free to create openly, the collector is free to gather or dispose of a collection freely, the viewer is free to engage, interpret, or dismiss work. There is, however, one region of the art world where this equivalence is more problematic, less value-free, in fact, less *free*, than elsewhere. It happens in the role of the curator.

Much has been made, correctly, I think, of the blows to apparent neutrality that curatorial activity implies. The sequence of work that underlies the exhibition sets into motion not merely the procession of examples aligned within a singular theme—usually perceptual or by school of practice—but by necessity, also the universe of assumptions that the curator reads into this motorcade. Such assumptions, always inferred because they are never articulated, color every constructive dimension within the challenge of erecting a show, down to the selection of wall colors, with the added complication that presentation and representation occur in different discursive worlds. For, what is presented in one space, namely, the gallery, museum or other venue for exhibition, is typically critiqued in another, normally, the newspaper, journal, or other venue for discussion.

Embroiled in this asymmetry, one new-media affordance provides a third kind of venue in the form of the virtual gallery. A recent survey of such software[1] brings several thoughts and questions to mind. To begin with, we might ask why a virtual gallery makes sense, given that the very non-physical status of the virtual world and its "objects on display" makes feasible the reduction of gallery experience to an array of URLs with descriptive captions. In this minimal possibility, the gallery would be entirely replaced by its function as the basis for a show, something that is in turn the product of curatorial statement. But these virtual galleries do not merely (re)present work in digital space, they reproduce the gallery itself as an object of reception. Why, then, is it necessary to envision artwork in a simulated gallery?

To be sure, the display of a single work, sculptural, filmic, or painterly is an experience already fraught with loss in translation from the physical to the virtual. We know that when a work—even a sculptural one—is brought into the digital screen, several facts take place. It retains all of its recognizable features as a medium; the work does not fail to register as an instance of sculpture, for example. To the inverse extent, however, that the notion of a work's *medium* is preserved, its *materiality* is entirely lost within digital mediation. Gone is the weft in the canvas, the nick in the marble, in fact all evidence of the work as a process and its evolution toward becoming a product disappears. Here, while we can see the work—often with greater clarity—we can no longer touch it with our eyes.

But this transformation, because it is shared by all digital reflections of material objects, can be neither an endorsement nor indictment of the virtual gallery situation, and is therefore not part of the rationale for such a mechanism as the virtual gallery. The answer lies elsewhere, for the experience of an exhibit revolves not around the *presence* of images but rather their *adjacency* within a singular spatial context. The theatrical contribution of a gallery simulation is necessary not to the individual integrity of work but to the curatorial operation that accompanies the collective property of *works* in a show. Beyond being possessed of its autonomous character, every artwork suggests itself in this plural connotation as well. The walls and spaces that provide the reinforcing ground for the ad hoc collection make the sense of a curated show possible, a supporting reality that lends more to each work than critics of

"the gallery system" can account for, even with the rather stilted simulated space of the virtual gallery, one of the software genres that replaces architecture with interface design. The question is whether the work is replaced by anything that converts it into its own simulacrum, for it seems to me that something is lost when we choose to replace the verb "to exhibit" with the verb "to display."