

## ABSTRACT

Title of thesis:                   SHIFTING REALITIES AND THE ART OF  
  PERCEPTION

Anna Kathlene Cooper, Master of Fine Arts, 2004

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Through the juxtaposition of video and other media such as sound, photography and drawing my work challenges viewer perception of space and time. These installations involve abstract imagery and sound removed from everyday experience and given a new context through the capturing and editing processes. Re-presenting this sensory information in a layered format such as a projection on a drawing or a video with sound adds another dimension to the work. It plays on the human need to identify and understand. This particular combination of materials challenges the holistic understanding most humans seek by providing a fragmented, temporal, and ever-changing art experience.

SHIFTING REALITIES AND THE ART OF PERCEPTION

by

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*Audio Visual II.* color television, digital video, headphones. 2003.

*Ghosted Forms.* ortho-film, aluminum, monofilament. 2004

*Slippage.* digital video projection, vinyl transfer. 2004.

*Three Monitors* black and white televisions, digital video, plexi -glass.

“When a sight is sighted, the mind attempts to make some kind of idea out of that sign. If the mind is able to do it immediately, we have what is called perception. Essentially, a target is sighted and perception represents a bull’s eye...if we can’t hit the target, we will devise a model to find out how we can relate this to some kind of experience that we might understand”

Les Levine,  
*(New Artists Video: A Critical Anthology 77)*

Through the juxtaposition of video and other media such as sound, photography and drawing my work challenges viewer perception of space and time. These installations involve abstract imagery and sound removed from everyday experience and given a new context through the capturing and editing processes. Re-presenting this sensory information in a layered format such as a projection on a drawing or a video with sound adds another dimension to the work. It plays on the human need to identify and understand. This particular combination of materials challenges the holistic understanding most humans seek by providing a fragmented, temporal, and ever-changing art experience.

This body of work evolved out of an exploration of two and three-dimensional space. Earlier installations combined sculptural and pictorial lines that shifted between a flat and sculptural presence. For instance, one of the works involved a chair cut to fit into a corner and a drawing on the wall that completed the missing sculptural portion. The chair was outlined in black so that when the viewer stood in a certain place all of the drawn lines matched up, creating the illusion of a drawing in three-dimensional space. Through shadow, light affirmed the three-dimensionality of the sculptural objects. The pictorial elements, however, challenged this affirmation, creating a slippage in perception. I became increasingly interested in how everyday objects and occurrences

can be used to alter viewer perception of reality. Video and photography lend themselves well to this pursuit. Through these processes I can isolate certain aspects of everyday life, manipulate and re-present the information in a way that challenges the viewer's understanding of space and time.

This kind of investigation is grounded in the tradition of abstract video, a precedent set by Postminimalist artists and foreshadowed by earlier filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov. This early twentieth century Russian artist pushed the traditional use of film by placing less emphasis on a tight narrative construct supported by dialogue. His film *Man With a Movie Camera* (*Cheloveks kinoapparatom*) is a montage of bustling city footage and the cameraman filming it, accompanied by a musical score performed by the Alloy Orchestra. Through the juxtaposition and overlapping of film footage Vertov attempts to embody the "pulse" and "rhythm" of the city. The narrative of the cameraman documenting the film foreshadows later Postminimalist work in which the materials used become the subject. In Anthony McCall's film *Line Describing a Cone* (1973) an image projected on the wall of a circle being drawn creates a thin stream of light that slowly evolves into a large hollow cone between the projector and the wall. In this piece "the process of film becomes its realization" (Iles 45). Many Postminimalist artists looked to everyday life for inspiration and used it as a means to explore the viewer's role in the art experience. Whether their subject was urban landscape, the medium itself, or even the viewer, these artists expanded the use of video and film to include an investigation into perception of physical space.

In my work I use the camera to abstract my subject by isolating certain events or parts of events from everyday life. Zooming in on a particular visual element and

layering clips during the editing process can skew the viewer's perception of a normally identifiable subject. The piece titled *Audio Visual II* involves two layered clips of an abstracted nature. The top clip is a static, watery form of blurry monochromatic gray shapes thickening at the bottom of the screen. The main visual element of the underlying clip is a single line rising and falling behind the first clip. While the visual elements of these layered clips are not purely representational, there are some familiar attributes. The rising and falling movement is similar to focusing on the horizon while standing on a boat, and the gray blurry quality is like looking through a window on a rainy day. Because this video is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar the viewer may struggle with identifying its exact nature.

A more extreme example of abstracted video image is apparent in *Three Monitors*, an installation of three small black and white televisions mounted in the wall, each behind a small piece of plexi-glass. The main visual element of each screen is a round, white form swinging in and out of view on a plain black background. The source footage has been converted to high contrast black and white, making the forms look blocky and pixilated. Reduced to its very basic formal elements, the video barely resembles its original form. However, for a short moment the round form bends as if it is a light shining on a point where floor and wall meet. This one occurrence in the looped sequence brings the viewer closer to a context of the image, but not close enough. The origin of the footage remains a mystery.

Because the video footage is so far removed from its original context, an emphasis is placed on its formal qualities rather than on a narrative dialogue. The videos are more like animated drawings than altered scenes from everyday life. My intention

with this body of work is similar to the work of early video artists Steina and Woody Vasulka who “were interested in the mechanisms of video as they function artistically not how they can enhance the transmission of images of a commercial product” (Rush 91). Nam June Paik, a contemporary of these artists, also sought to redefine the television and video medium. He made his own “collage of images from a range of multiple television cameras, transforming, as Calvin Tomkins wrote, “the familiar screen into an electronic canvas for an artist whose brush consists of light” (Wheeler 256). In both instances the artist expands the notion of video, allowing more emphasis on the medium rather than what it represents. Similarly, I am using the camera and editing tools to isolate everyday occurrences and turn the images into an art experience quite distant from its source.

Although the images in *Three Monitors* are abstracted and unfamiliar, the very fact that it is video means that it came from something real and tangible. The flat, pixilated forms may look more like computer-generated images, born out of ones and zeros in a computer program, but they came from real life. The images, filtered through a video camera and editing software, always conceal their own true identity. As a result the viewer is continually searching, trying to discover this information. It is essential, however, that the viewer *not* unearth this mystery. The anonymity of the video prolongs the moment of recognition, drawing the viewer into a chase for truth.

Without the crutch of an easily recognized subject the viewer may look for other elements in the work with which to identify. In this body of work the abstract formal elements create visual and audio rhythms that the viewer may notice. *Rhythm* as defined in Webster’s New American Dictionary is “a movement or activity in which some action or element recurs regularly” (Merriam-Websters 450). Here it is applied to a visual or



audio element with a repetitive movement or fluctuation. For example, in *Three Monitors* the white circular form passing back and forth across the screen is of a sweeping movement similar to that of a clock pendulum. Each monitor contains the same clip, only each is of a different speed and length. The result is an ever-changing combination of rhythms falling in and out of sync with one another. This disruption in regular pattern, which can perhaps be described as *arhythmic*, meaning off of or against rhythm, draws the viewer into a psychological dialogue with the work. Plagued by a need to catch the three at a point of intersection, the viewer will try to make sense of the work.

A very different response is elicited by the installation *Slippage*, which involves a single culminating moment when a video projection matches up with a drawing on the wall. In this installation high contrast black and white forms contained in a horizontal band shift over the static lines of the drawing in a predominantly horizontal movement. As with *Three Monitors* this installation creates a kind of anticipation for the elements to intersect. In *Slippage*, however, there is one anticipated moment when the two elements coincide, while in *Three Monitors* there are multiple moments of near intersection. The former experience involves one complete looped sequence with a consistent end result. Its cyclical nature continually leads the viewer on a path of expectation and fulfillment. On the other hand, *Three Monitors* involves an ever-changing combination of rhythms, reducing the odds of seeing the same sequence twice and perhaps creating a more agitated response in the viewer.

Both *Slippage* and *Three Monitors* engage the viewer in a psychological dialogue through a purely visual experience. In *Audio Visual* and *Audio Visual II* a similar goal is

achieved, using a combination of visual and audio components. *Audio Visual* is composed of a bleary red and yellow pulsing form and a hollow ticking sound. The throbbing red light and echoing sound are almost embryonic in nature. The sound seems to echo behind the viewer's head, in a space insulated by quiet and surrounded by a low, wavering hum. As the warm red form blurs and pulses in and out of focus, the hollow ticking falls in and out of rhythm with it. The viewer is drawn into this slow consistent intersection of sound and image, into a quiet, reflective state.

In *Audio Visual II*, the sound and video elements serve a different purpose. The two sound components correspond to and inform the movement of the two video layers. The static, gray layer blurs in and out of focus almost in sync with a constant pulsing sound, and as the second video clip shifts up and down, a second sound element fades in and out along with it. Postminimalist artist Paul Sharits uses sound in a similar manner in his installation *Shutter Interface*. There is a large horizontal band of projected light consisting of several overlapping rectangles of color that shoot from left to right, and is accompanied by an abstract soundtrack mimicking the motion of the colored forms. This combination of moving forms and an "abstract soundtrack that punctuates each shift in hue, creates a percussive composition, each flicker is like a beat or musical note" (Iles 47). In both cases the addition of sound heightens the rhythm of the visual components, perhaps bringing the viewer to a new level of awareness.

This psychological engagement of the viewer is extended in *Slippage* as the viewer becomes an active participant in the art experience. The angle of light from the projector to the wall starts from a height of 11 feet and ends at the opposite wall at around 59 inches. The horizontal strip of active video is at the bottom of the projection, centered

at an average eye level. As the viewer enters the room and walks toward the projected image he/she may do so without interrupting the projected light until standing up close to the wall. Upon blocking out the light the viewer will discover a series of tiny gray dots on the wall underneath the moving image. The video projection slides over this drawing, eventually matching up with it for a brief second before a figure in the actual projection passes through, blocking out all of the light. This creates a strange layering of virtual figures in the video itself and actual viewers maneuvering within the space, thus adding to the shifting nature of the installation.

Viewer involvement in the art experience is a hallmark of the Postminimalist artists as many made the viewer the subject of their work. In Peter Campus' installation *Negative Crossing* the viewer was taped while performing actions in front of a mirror and the images then projected on a nearby wall. Bruce Nauman instigated a similar situation when he recorded viewers walking in a maze and displayed the recordings on monitors within the passages in *Corridor Installation*. When the viewer becomes the subject in this way, "video installations take an active role in energizing the viewer to respond to the object viewed" (Rush 122). In *Slippage* then, perhaps the virtual form blocking out the projection will inform the viewer that there are multiple layers to the installation. Maybe those viewers first unsure of walking in the light of the projector will be prompted to do so.

I have continued to explore the viewer's role in the art experience in an installation titled *Ghosted Forms*. The piece consists of five large transparent and highly reflective prints hung in a staggered formation within a backlit, darkened space. From afar the viewer can discern a ghostly, darkened lung-shaped form filling each three by six

feet print. However, as one approaches a print the ghostly form recedes and one's own reflection surfaces. Simultaneously the print seems solid and intangible, as the film is easily rippled by the viewer's breath, distorting the reflection. One observer commented that the rippling sheets made her feel as though she were breathing under water. This installation extends the viewer's involvement with the work to include both a psychological and physical exchange as the viewer is both intimidated by the looming forms and drawn to them by their own reflection.

This body of work is an exploration into viewer perception of space and time through a combination of digital and analog materials. Building on a foundation laid by film and video artists, the work uses both modern technology and traditional materials to capture and recontextualize the familiar. Each installation is a kind of intellectual puzzle that plays on the viewer's need to understand and classify the external world. The temporal nature of the work simultaneously constructs and deconstructs the possibility of this understanding. While the work contains no clear answers "to get," it offers open-ended experiences in which the viewer may choose to participate and perhaps gain a new understanding of his/her surroundings.

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