

The Digital Figural

The Problems and Potentials of the Digital Moving Image in Contemporary Art of the 21st Century

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Declaration

The work presented in this thesis is the candidate's own.

Signed.....

David Panos

10.2.2023
Date.....

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Abstract

This thesis frames my ongoing artistic explorations into the potentials of digital moving image in the context of Contemporary Art. It outlines a critical appraisal of the last 20 years of artists' digital moving image practices, proposing that seemingly divergent trends – the 'cinematic' use of DSLR cameras and the 'post-internet' turn towards using 3D computer generated imagery (CGI) – have actually been united in their focus on criticality, abdication of formal innovation and avoidance of deeper engagement with technical questions related to their medium. I set this account of recent practice against a longer history of artists' moving image, tracing the shift from Modernist strategies, dominated by formal experimentation and medium reflexivity, towards the conceptual and 'political' frame of Contemporary Art.

I argue that the supersession of Modernist formalism has in fact precipitated a crisis in Contemporary Art, evidenced in recent discussions in the field. I trace an alternative framework using the notion of the figural, as proposed by Jean-François Lyotard, Rosalind Krauss and David Rodowick. These thinkers refuse the 'conceptualism' at the core of Contemporary Art and instead highlight an approach to art focused on visibility and the unconscious rather than textuality and criticality. To conclude, I demonstrate how the contextual problems and potentials raised in the thesis are addressed through my artistic experimentation into digital and volumetric video and 3D tools. Focusing on questions of form, engagement with the medium and the semiosis of the digital image, I attempt to highlight potential new pathways out of the current impasse.

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Introduction

“Power lies with the eye. To transform the unconscious into discourse is to bypass the dynamics, to become complicit with the whole of Western ratio that kills art at the same time as the dream” (Lyotard, 2011, 9).

This thesis sets out a critical perspective on art in the early 21st century, in particular the problems and potentials of digital moving image practice in the context of Contemporary Art. My reflections on the field have emerged through over fifteen years of practice and engagement with digital moving image technologies and the Contemporary Art context in which my work has been funded, created, exhibited and received. This period of study has enabled me to examine the impulses that have guided my practical artistic decisions and motivated creative exploration, as well as my reservations about the institutional context, and to realize them as a clear, determinate diagnosis of the field. It has also offered the opportunity to consciously refine the trajectory of my practice to address the issues I outline. Thus, this body of work represents a synthesis and extension of many years of observation, creation and critical thinking, and often mirrors my own artistic journey.

I have taken this study as an opportunity to produce a critical survey of recent artists' moving image practices in the context of Contemporary Art, documenting what I regard as a significant shift in intention and techniques that occurred between 2005 and 2020. To the best of my knowledge, this kind of overview has not been attempted before and I seek to explore both technological and social shifts that may account for these changes. I examine two seemingly divergent tendencies: Firstly, 'artist filmmakers' from the period between 2005 and 2015 creating long-form works that (although often produced using digital tools) owe a debt to the film languages of the 20th century. Secondly, 'post-internet'¹ artists that emerged since 2010 who engaged with the new 3D animation technologies and reference broader digital cultures such as gaming, Hollywood blockbusters and the internet. These are two currents I have to some degree actively participated in as a video artist and I have practical experience with the workflows and artistic forms of both. Where I have been critical of tendencies in digital moving image practice, it is often because I myself have followed the same

pathways made available by new technologies and have inevitably been influenced by the vicissitudes of artistic trends. I outline this recent history as a way of articulating a number of frustrations with the current field, but also seek to understand the motivations and conditions that might explain such a startling shift.

In attempting to consider such stark changes in artists' moving image practices, I have had to consider what these apparently different approaches have had in common – in particular the way that artists' use of digital moving image technologies is situated within the broader field of Contemporary Art. Following the work of theorist Suhail Malik, in particular his lectures *On The Necessity of Art's Exit from Contemporary Art* (delivered at Artists Space, New York in 2013), I wish to assert that Contemporary Art² is a definite genre (or 'meta-genre' (Malik, 2013a)), not merely a 'period', which gradually replaced Modernism from the 1960s onwards to become the dominant framework through which art is made and understood. Contemporary Art has definite characteristics; in particular it has established a 'post-conceptual' framework, rooted in the logic of Marcel Duchamp's readymade where framing and intention, rather than technique or form, determines what is considered art. This conceptual horizon shapes the way that all artistic work, including digital moving image works, are created and received today.

Like Malik, I am interested in an 'exit' from the logic of Contemporary Art. However, my conclusions differ radically to Malik's call for a more determinately political or even instrumentalised art (Malik, 2013d). My central argument is that since the 1960s, Contemporary Art has followed a trajectory explicitly defined against the formalism of Modernism and the Avant-Garde and towards a conceptually-oriented approach that privileges criticality and a 'textualised' academicism that has pervaded both art's reception and production. This can be seen in the importance of critical/political themes in both the framing and content of artists' work, the reliance upon text and writing in artworks, and the demand that artists clearly articulate and communicate their practice in academic terms through applications, secondary literature and in art education.

I maintain that Contemporary Art proposes an increasingly positivistic logic focused on the communication of explicit appeals and positions rather than, as Malik would have it, a retreat into 'indeterminacy' (Malik, 2013b). I argue that this radical rejection of poetics, visuality and form actually lies behind a current crisis of identity for Contemporary Art, as it secedes from the production of distinct aesthetic positions and formal techniques.

It is my contention that it is Contemporary Art's emphasis on critique and content over form and affect that is the common thread in recent artists' moving image movements, regardless of their divergent approaches, and ultimately it is this tendency that underpins what I see as a turn away from artistic and formal innovation. Moving image artists in the 21st century have tended to either reject artistic formalism and return to 20th century cinematic languages, or they mimic the visual modes of the culture industry through the use of computer generated imagery (CGI). Neither camp are particularly interested in formal or aesthetic innovation. Rather, artists making long form, somewhat cinematic works use existing narrative or documentary tropes to comment on social reality, while those who work with digital images frequently use them merely as cyphers for late capitalism, creating work that critiques associated issues such as financialisation, dematerialisation, or the deep alienation of a post-human world. Both approaches mean that artworks are increasingly seen as somehow probing social reality in the way that an academic text might; 'challenging', 'exploring', 'questioning', and engaging with distinct issues and themes. Whereas this critical, interpretative framework was once the preserve of critics and academics, today's artists frontload their work with such claims. I argue that it is this critical focus that means that artists often gloss over deeper 'material' questions about digital media, merely using digital equipment as a means to a communicative end, or they treat computer generated images as artistic readymades, to be reframed and deconstructed to generate critical positions.

The crux of this thesis is the question of how to establish a different logic for artistic production that could counter this critical, 'textualising' tendency of Contemporary Art. What might ground a different approach to digital moving

images? In order to address this, I look to what the critical/conceptual frame of Contemporary Art has (often aggressively) sought to supersede and suppress: the artistic modes of the Modernist Avant-Garde. While Modernist formalist strategies have been condemned as naïve and politically suspect, they provide a sharp contrast to the claims made for Contemporary Art. I provide a brief survey of 20th century Avant-Garde film, highlighting key attributes common across many of the different currents of experimental filmmaking and now largely banished from artist's moving image: an affiliation with the non-representational modes of music, a desire to establish distinct languages for new mediums, a focus on poetics, intuition and affect, and in particular a direct artistic engagement with the material and technical processes of making. Whilst the wholesale abandonment of such techniques does shed light on Contemporary Art's present predicament, it is not my intention to merely propose a retreat or return to Modernist dictums. Instead, I explore Modernist strategies in relation to vitalist readings of film that reassert the affective and visceral qualities of the moving image.

Following art historian Rosalind Krauss's alternate reading of the potentials of artistic practice that bypasses both the 'metaphysical' idealism of Modernist abstraction and the conceptuality inherent in the Duchampian readymade, I endorse Krauss's alternative, more 'Surrealist' reading of Duchamp as concerned with opticality, erotics, sensuality and affect (Krauss, 1996). Krauss engages with Lyotard and Deleuze's slippery notion of the 'figural' which is explicitly defined against the rationalising tendencies of discourse, and instead is rooted in viscosity and the desiring unconscious. Ronald Bogue has summarised Lyotard's notion of "two ontologically distinct spaces: a textual space of recognizable, coded entities, and a figural space of metamorphosing unconscious forces" (Bogue, 2003, 115). Bogue suggests that "Figural space is unmarked by the coordinates of a regular dimensionality... its objects defy 'good form'" (Bogue, 2003, 115). The figural can be experienced through visual experiences but "to the extent that the visual is recognized, comprehended, and assimilated within a rational order, Lyotard contends, its truth is lost, for it is thereby coded, made

‘readable,’ and textualized” (Bogue, 2003, 113). For Lyotard, art is a potential gateway to the de-structured, unconscious, desiring realm of the figural.

In the later stages of this thesis I bring these critical and theoretical insights into alignment with my own digital moving image practice, and demonstrate how the practical artistic experiments I have undertaken attempt to bypass the conceptual boundaries of Contemporary Art and current limitations inherent in digital tools. I outline attempts to follow a more materialist approach to engaging with digital making, as opposed to the often distanced, outsourced approach common to artists working with CGI. I demonstrate how I have attempted to go beyond the different visual logics inscribed in both lens-based digital imagery and computer generated 3D animation. I work with methodologies that seek to occupy a visual space that doesn't simply naturalise or obscure the question of the digital image (as often happens when working with HD video cameras) but also doesn't reduce 3D CGI to a digital readymade, always pointing towards a critical/conceptual horizon. To this end I document various techniques I have developed to achieve what I dub the ‘neither/nor’ image – where hybrid forms of two and three dimensional representational images create the kind of ‘incommensurable’ moments that might give rise to the figural. Many of the works created during this research share characteristics with the work of artists championed by theorists of the figural; painters like Paul Klee and Francis Bacon who sit between figuration and abstraction. My own work has been engaged in finding digital video techniques that might productively weave together and interpenetrate the corporeal energy of human movement with a sense of the abstractions inherent to digital postproduction. I am interested in the possibilities of a ‘digital figural’, breaking with the rigid boundaries of existing digital equipment and computer software, and echoing elements of the de-structured, de-forming gestures of painters like Klee and Bacon.

I divide this thesis into three sections: section 1 acts as a summary of current practice and contemporary discussions of digital imagery. Section 2 focuses on historical and theoretical discussion, zooming out to give a wider context on the prior discussion of artists’ moving image in the 21st century. Finally, section 3

focuses on my practice and the practical elements of the research for this Phd, drawing together and responding to the critical points raised in sections 1 and 2.

Section 1 opens with a discussion of the contradictions that emerge from film critic Jonathan Romney's assessment of Mike Leigh's 2014 film *Mr. Turner*. This digitally-shot film features a particular moment of CGI which effectively recreates Turner's most famous painting *The Fighting Temeraire* (1839) and raises a number of questions about how we read digital cinema, CGI effects, and their relation to the proto-abstraction of Turner's painting. In the following subsections I give critical accounts, referencing artists, critics and thinkers of the period, of what I outline as the two main currents in artists' moving image between 2005 and 2000: 1.3 explores what I see as the return to 20th century cinema, which encompasses artists using celluloid and HD cameras in long-form narrative or documentary works. 1.4 looks at the generation of artists that emerged after 2010 who primarily rely on 3D CGI in their moving image works. In the summary subsection 1.5, I conclude that both of these approaches to artists' moving image privilege 'content' and critique over form, sharing a certain unwillingness to explore new visual languages and maintaining a distanced relation to the tools of production – either adopting digital cameras uncritically or outsourcing 3D creative work to technicians.

Section 2 unravels ideas proposed by a quote from Sean Cubitt, which describes the experience of watching formalist film in visceral, vitalist language (in stark contrast to the dryly critical claims made for recent work in section 1) (Cubitt, 1995). I then set out an overview of the modalities of Avant-Garde and experimental film and video practice in the 20th century in subsection 2.2. I draw out the main tendencies and dominant characteristics of historical moving image works, giving an account of the way that the introduction of early video equipment in the 1960s decisively shifted artists' moving image away from the Modernist preoccupations with film as material, towards the 'post-medium', conceptual frame of Contemporary Art. Subsection 2.3 traces what I argue is a 'crisis' in Contemporary Art, evidenced by several thinkers and commentators who seem disillusioned with the potentials of art in the 21st century. I connect

this crisis to the instrumentalising influence of political claims and critical theory in relation to artistic practice, raising questions about how this has come to be an almost naturalised element of artistic discourse. I contest a general insistence on art's 'political' nature, drawing on thinkers such as Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, Italian architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri, as well as contemporary critics. Subsection 2.4 then sets out an alternative to Contemporary Art's discourse-driven, 'critical' mindset through a review of Susan Sontag's plea for "eroticised" art in her 1964 essay *Against Interpretation*, and a consideration of vitalist theories of film in the recent work of academics Inga Pollmann and Ute Holl. Finally, following the line of inquiry established in Rosalind Krauss's 1996 book *The Optical Unconscious*, I set out theories of the figural as proposed by Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze, which propose an alternative to Structuralism's distils reading of art.

Section 3 turns to my practice and begins with a summary of my individual and collaborative video work over the last fifteen years in subsection 3.2. I then move on to detail elements of my practice-based research for this PhD, in relation to the work submitted for consideration as part of this study. Subsection 3.3 deals with my attempts to avoid the pitfalls of current media, through working in a space between the 2D 'naturalised' image of video and the highly artificial image of 3D CGI. In subsection 3.4 I give an account of my material engagement with digital tools, returning to a more Modernist sense of an artistic immersion in the potential of each medium, as opposed to working with industrially produced software with its preset parameters and proscribed aesthetic possibilities. Finally, subsection 3.5 explores the notion of the figural in relation to my attempts to engage with the digital moving image outside of the conceptual logic of Contemporary Art. In summary, I ask whether a figural orientation towards art can replace Contemporary Art's dominant frame, and yield new possibilities in relation to digital moving image practice.

To conclude, I would like to clarify the scope of this thesis: it is my intention to explore the question of the digital in relation to artists' moving image, but focused on the context of Contemporary Art. Although I touch on what is often

called 'New Media' art (Bishop, 2012) in a number of places, and discuss its parallel evolution along a very different path to Contemporary Art in subsection 2.2, the vast field of literature and artworks produced within that context lie beyond the scope of this study. My discussion is also limited to certain forms of digital moving image: specifically, images made with digital cameras or with 3D CGI software. During the course of this research, the possibilities of AI-generated moving images have begun to be explored by artists. I am aware that the amorphous forms produced by this emergent semi-autonomous software pose very different questions than those prompted by the world of 3D animation, but again I am unable to tackle these in this research. Also, although I engage with the use of certain digital tools in my own practice (and the work of other artists), I am primarily interested in the practical and semiotic consequences of such tools and have not discussed the technical intricacies of coding and hardware that lie behind them.

My abiding concern remains with the aesthetic possibilities of different visual languages. I am interested in re-establishing a distinct terrain for art, and digitally-produced art in particular. I see art's potential as a domain of visibility and ambiguity – a figural art – decoupled from the critical theory and political claims which Contemporary Art has placed front and centre of practice. I am optimistic about the potentials of the digital moving image, and the possibilities of developing alternative languages with the new technologies available. I am motivated by a desire to push digital art into new spaces, to attempt to create work that does not simply follow the paths set by the tools and forms of market-oriented, industrial cultural production. I believe it is possible to establish a new Avant-Garde, and that artists can innovate and challenge the assumptions and aesthetic parameters baked into the digital tools of the present day. Artists need to get out in front of the culture industry and to confidently create new visual and affective formal propositions that are uncomfortable, contradictory, visceral, and even pleasurable, and cannot simply be folded back into the dominant instrumental logic of late capitalism.

Section 1

From Digital Cinema to the CGI Turn – Revisiting Artists' Moving Image, 2005-2020

1.3 Introduction

This section will outline a brief survey of tendencies in artist moving image (primarily focused on the UK scene but invariably including practices that have received global exposure), focusing on a transition over the past two decades from practices that revisited 20th century cinematic/filmic tropes, to practices that work primarily with the aesthetic of the digital and computer generated imagery (CGI).

Hal Foster has claimed that “There are usually two dynamics at...new technological moments. There are artists who want to push the futuristic freedoms of new media and others who want to look at what this apparent leap forward opens up in the past, the obsolete” (October, 2003, 73). I wish to complexify this argument, especially in relation to visual language and form. I want to show that artists using new digital technology, whether working in the language of 20th century cinema or 21st century interactive gaming, might both be trapped in a shared impasse that impedes or rejects the idea of specific artistic and formal innovation.

Through a critical engagement with contemporary currents in moving image that have often contextualised my own practice, I wish to frame the aporias that I have sought to tackle, both formally and conceptually, in my work. I will open this discussion with a set of questions about the relationship between naturalism and abstraction, painting and cinema, realism and CGI raised through a close reading of a single shot in Mike Leigh's 2014 film *Mr. Turner*. This reading will trace a dubious dichotomy between cinematic 'realism' and CGI images that I argue informs critical considerations of both cinema and contemporary art.

1.2 *Mr. Turner* and the Digital: Cinema, CGI & Painting



Fig 1: *The Fighting Temeraire, tugged to her last Berth to be broken up* (J.W. Turner, 1839).



Fig 2: Digital animation of *The Fighting Temeraire* in *Mr. Turner* (Mike Leigh, 2014).

Mike Leigh's 2014 biopic about J.M.W. Turner contains a notable moment where the director's conventional realist approach to cinema is punctured by a single computer generated moment – a landscape that could be read as a cinematic recreation of *The Fighting Temeraire, tugged to her last Berth to be broken up* (1839), Turner's most famous painting. Leigh's CGI image is not 100% computer generated: it is a composite, knitting together a camera shot of the Thames at sunset with a computer rendered ship and tugboat, cityscape and atmospheric elements created by London-based post-production house Lipsync. It has a strange effect on the film's viewer, occupying quite a different register than the rest of *Mr. Turner* which follows Mike Leigh's conventional cinematic language – naturalistic shooting and editing, sober, almost traditional in its approach. This shot was described by critic Jonathan Romney in *Screen Daily* as the only 'misstep' in the film and containing "the faintest edge of hyper-realist kitsch" (Romney, 2014).



Fig 3. Shot of the Thames before CGI compositing for *Mr. Turner* (Mike Leigh, 2014) by Lipsync Post Production.



Fig 4: Production Still of CGI Fighting Temeraire and Tug by Lipsync Post Production for *Mr. Turner* (Mike Leigh, 2014).

Romney's obvious disapproval at the intrusion of CGI into the film, as if it compromises its status as 'serious' cinema, stands in sharp contrast to his glowing appraisal of the rest of the film's more conventionally cinematic tone as 'moving, scholarly and serious'. It is clear that, for such critics, 20th century cinematic realism equates to high-mindedness and authenticity, where digital generation indicates a problematic and potentially dubious hyper-reality.

In fact, all of *Mr. Turner* was shot on an ARRI Alexa camera, a high resolution digital motion picture camera, and is the first of Mike Leigh's films to not be shot on celluloid film. Leigh's regular cinematographer Dick Pope, talking about the shoot, seems to regard the move to digital as something daring or already potentially compromised, and justifies it in reference to Turner's own attitude to technology:

"The film looks neither film nor digital. Painterly for sure, whatever that is.... To tell you the truth, I think philosophically the decision to shoot digitally was the correct one. Turner was a visionary, constantly searching for new techniques, intrigued by new technologies and had a passion for astronomy, physics and science, as we can see in some scenes from the film – with his experiments in prismatic refraction, the arrival of steam-powered trains and ships, and the very new Daguerreotype camera. So shooting in digital seemed

right to me, and I imagine it would not have been uncomfortable for Turner either. He'd probably have realised its future" (Prince, 2014).



Fig 5: Conventional shooting style of *Mr. Turner* (Mike Leigh, 2014).

Pope's assertion that the film's use of digital video is somehow analogous to Turner's own interest in new technologies of image capture raises a number of points that need unpacking. Turner's painting, *The Fighting Temeraire*, depicts the supersession of a 'heroic' age of sail vessels by the new industrial technology of steam. It is undoubtedly a depiction of the inevitability of scientific progress in the early Victorian period (Turner was well apprised of the changing image technologies that surrounded him), however the artist's treatment of the subject could be read as melancholic, echoing Romanticism's suspicion of rationalist science and yearning for a pre-industrial past. Nevertheless,, despite this sense of nostalgia, Turner's formal approach to *The Fighting Temeraire*, its collapsing of naturalistic conventions into vivid splashes of barely signifying colour, is an expression of his forward-looking search for a new role for painting. The picture sits between the artist's early, more 'realist' period and his progression into forms of proto-impressionism, representing the development of a new language of painting. It can be read as the beginning of the Modernist trajectory towards total abstraction, asserting a transcendental, almost metaphysical role for the medium, in reaction to the emergence of scientific, indexical³ methods of

representation (coincidentally *The Fighting Temeraire* was first shown in 1839 - the year that Louis Daguerre made public the details of his early photographic process).

So what role does the digital play in Mike Leigh's *Mr. Turner*? The film's use of digital cameras does nothing to disrupt narrative cinematic conventions established for almost a century. The ARRI Alexa was part of the wave of high-end professional cinema cameras of the early 21st century that broke with the 'video' aesthetic by emulating film as closely as possible. It is used in *Mr. Turner* to create an image that emulates the sensitivity and luminosity of film - these are images that stress continuity with the past, the quiet substitution of digital for analogue technologies in the service of the same fundamental visual language. However, the CGI 're-creation' of *The Fighting Temeraire* being towed up the Thames does represent a new order of image - it shares some of the characteristics of what has been called 'post-cinema' (Shaviro, 2010) - images from different workflows, indexical, algorithmic and computer generated, are knitted together to produce bricolaged, often impossible scenes. As this new order of images is most often represented in contemporary blockbusters (superhero films, apocalyptic action films etc.) they are often fantastical or surreal, but still required to be seamless and ultimately judged by their realism - they aim to mirror the physics and appearance of a photographic, indexical version of reality as closely as possible. So, like Turner's painting of *The Fighting Temeraire*, *Mr. Turner's* images are a complex knot of different temporal perspectives - responding to the present and future whilst romantically connecting to the past. Perhaps the evocation of Turner's painting can be read as digital cinema carrying celluloid in tow, the old medium now extinct, yet the future still shackled to its redundant carcass.

The CGI image in *Mr. Turner* that Jonathan Romney found so disconcerting was indeed an odd moment in the film - it has an undeniably surreal, weightless quality and even a sense of magic - but what is the image actually representing? It is ostensibly a recreation of the 'real' scene that inspired the painting, however it is not certain that Turner ever witnessed the towing of the ship, and it has

been ascertained that the painting does not faithfully reflect the reality of events (Esterson, 2020). Rather it has been argued that the painting aims to be symbolic (Egerton, 1998). In that sense, the CGI image of *The Fighting Temeraire*, with its strange luminosity and almost overblown attempt to provoke a sense of wonder, could be read as trying to express a moment of artistic reverie or 'inspiration'. Or is the image actually intended to be a kind of digital recreation of Turner's picture - an attempt to draw quite justified parallels between painting and the cinematic practice of digital augmentation and generative animation? If so, it appears to represent a reversal of Turner's path towards a kind of metaphysical abstraction, in favour of the logic of 'scientific' photo-realism.

Romney's dismissal of the scene as 'kitsch' feels rooted in this particular issue of artificial photo-realism. 'Kitsch' is characterized by Walter Benjamin as false or easy sentiment (Benjamin, 2008) - the byproduct of the insincere aesthetics of mass-produced objects in industrial society. Romney's distaste is focused on the image's echoes of blockbuster hyper-reality with all its connotations of industrial image production. Yet the critic doesn't find the ARRI Alexa's digital aping of analogue film, or the quiet costume drama 'realism' of the rest of the film, to be problematic. In the following subsections I would like to explore this fundamental but dubious dichotomy: viewing the use of 20th century cinematic language and digital images in the service of (indexical) cinematic naturalism as transparent and almost invisible, while digital animation/imaging is seen as a 'problematic' cypher for contemporary capitalist production. I wish to argue that this same dichotomy, established in this introduction by way of a mainstream critique of contemporary cinema, also haunts the field of artists' moving image today (despite its ostensibly more 'sophisticated' and theoretically rich approach to image making). At the same time, I want to look at how this problematic co-exists with the abandonment of the Modernist path opened up by Turner towards non-figurative abstraction - the productive distortion of reality, attention to the consciousness changing or affective effects of colour, rhythm and form, a sensibility that still lay at the heart of experimental and artists' film and video until the relatively recent shift into the post-conceptual terrain of 'Contemporary Art'.

1.3 The Return to 20th Century Cinema in Artists' Moving Image: 2005-2015

At the time of writing, it has been only a decade since one of the most visible tendencies in (UK) artists' moving image was summarized as "a move away from film installation or moving image practices that concern themselves with context and site, towards what appears to be a more unreconstructed appreciation of narrative cinema" (Kidner, 2011). Dan Kidner, conducting a panel interview for Frieze in 2011, was highlighting the trend towards long-form, conventionally shot works that shared multiple characteristics with different traditions of 20th century cinema, sometimes categorized as 'gallery films'. This wave of works represented a reversal of the prior trajectories of artists' experimental film work in the UK which had been characterized by Structuralist, Materialist, self-reflexive, or other formally experimental tendencies, aimed at interrogating the processes and technologies of their own construction, short-circuiting spectacle and identification, and working in total opposition to the conventions of mainstream cinema. I do not wish to produce an exhaustive history of this relatively recent moment, nor trace the many differences between the multiple practices that loosely fit under the rubric I'm proposing. Rather, I wish to sketch a brief overview to demonstrate that the most recent wave of artists in the 2010s exploring new technologies of digital mediation, CGI and 3D animation supersedes (or even overlaps with) a period of quite formally conservative, even nostalgic, filmmaking. I will argue that this 'neo-cinematic' wave of the late 2000s and early 2010s represented in part a return to 'naturalistic' dramatic representation that privileged narrative and thematic content over formal innovation.

If the UK's Jarman Award for artist filmmaking can be seen as a reflection of trends in contemporary moving image practice (or at least a prism for the swings in curatorial and critical fancy), then glancing back at the winners of the early days of the award in the late 2000s – Emily Wardill, Luke Fowler, myself and

Anja Kirschner, or other nominees such as Duncan Campell and Ben Rivers – it is notable that all these moving image artists either engaged directly with the language of narrative, essay or documentary cinema, or made extensive use of celluloid and archival footage in their work of this period. Other artists that could be said to fit this tendency include Melanie Gilligan, Shezad Dawood, Beatrice Gibson, Redmond Entwistle, Daria Martin, Ursula Mayer and Omer Fast. It could be argued that there was some precedent for this approach in the generation of internationally renowned video artists from the 1990s such as Stan Douglas, Matthew Barney, Douglas Gordon and Gerard Byrne – however, these artists, although they tended to work with naturalistic, often dramatic images, referencing cinematic modes of production and mise-en-scene, did so in a highly deconstructed way, quoting and subverting, rather than adhering to the normative conventions of drama, documentary and narrative. Dan Kidner has commented on how the prior generation of ‘cinematic’ artists “have disavowed cinephilia, viewing cinema as a cache of images to be repurposed, rather than a tradition within which to work. This is not the case with these younger artists, for whom, among others, Chantal Akerman, Jean-Luc Godard, Harun Farocki, Chris Marker and Jean Rouch are key influences” (Kidner, 2015).



Fig 6: *5000 Feet Is the Best* (Omer Fast, 2011), HD Video, 27'.



Fig 7: *Popular Unrest* (Melanie Gilligan, 2010), HD Video, 67'.



Fig 8: *The Empty Plan* (Anja Kirschner & David Panos, 2010), HD Video, 78'.



Fig 9: *Full Firearms* (Emily Wardill, 2011), HD Video, 80'.



Fig 10: *Piercing Brightness* (Shazad Dawood, 2013), HD Video, 77'.

A return to celluloid could be seen as one of the main features of this 'neo-cinematic' turn of the early 21st century. For many artists this meant a rejection of the portable, cheap, disposable aesthetics of analogue or digital video formats, which had become the hallmarks of 'video art' as distinguished from film - a lack of depth of field, low dynamic response, and a level of low fidelity. Video had always had its own aesthetic within artists' moving image work, precisely for not being film. 16mm had previously been the cornerstone of Structuralist or Materialist filmmaking, working to highlight the formal possibilities and structural qualities of the physical medium itself, but these new 21st century artists tended to gravitate to film as more of an 'artisanal' gesture, where the sensuous (and often nostalgic) quality of this near obsolete format was a

deliberate position against the ‘easy’ convenience of the digital. There’s no doubt that the dreamy luminescence of 16mm film provided a more visually pleasing medium than the DV (digital video) format that was dominant until the late 2000s. DV was ugly, lacking the fuzzy semi-analogue warmth of the Hi8 format that preceded it, with a flat, often colourless, corporate look about it. Film reintroduced all the qualities that digital sought to suppress: noise, grain, dirt, imprecision and visceral physicality. Writing in *Art Monthly*, Colin Perry highlighted this trend (and the often elaborate use of film projectors within galleries) speculating on the impulses driving this phenomenon:

“Contemporary Artists use film projectors as conduits of communal memory, as highly desirable consumer objects and in order to stir up historiographic resonance. One continual appeal, however – in the 1980s as now – is the material presence of film, which, unlike the immaterial ‘spectacle’ or garrulous chatter of modern digital media, suggests that the body has something to kick against, grasp and reorder” (Perry, 2009, 4).

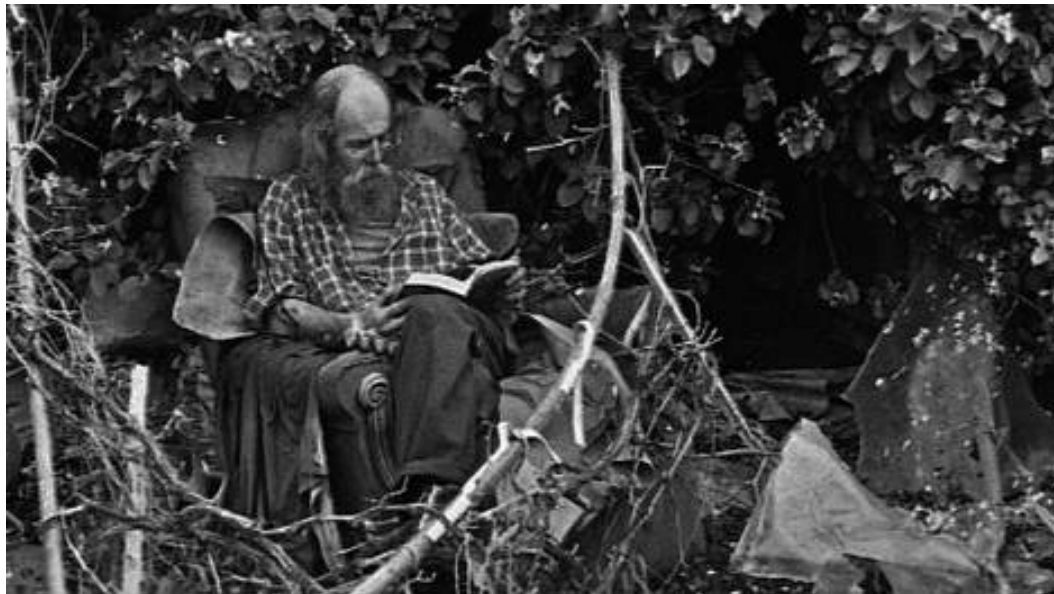


Fig 11: *Two Years At Sea* (Ben Rivers, 2011), 16mm, 88’.



Fig 12: *Monuments* (Redmond Entwistle, 2010), 16mm , 25'.



Fig 13: *Portrait of Luke Fowler*, (Alan Dimmick, 2015). This photograph, shot on film, perfectly captures the artisanal, nostalgic spirit of artists using celluloid in the mid 2000s.

Other writers have framed artists' adoption of celluloid in the 1990s and 2000s as a gesture that preserves and elevates celluloid into a material fetish – one that marks the preservation of a tradition of cinema assailed by digital culture. Erika Balsom claims that “there is an intimate connection between the increasing obsolescence of celluloid and its current configuration within the gallery space. Dispersed throughout the cultural field and in competition with new image regimes, the cinema finds sanctuary within the gallery – or perhaps a tomb where it might lay embalmed” (Balsom, 2009).

However, artists' ‘return to cinema’ in the 2000s was not just bound up with the authentic, auratic, physical tangibility of celluloid. The arrival in 2008 of the Canon 5D Mark II, the most notable of a new wave of DSLR cameras capable of shooting HD video, melding high definition digital video with established SLR (single lens reflex) technology. This married video to camera lenses that allowed for a ‘cinematic’ depth of field, superseded the previously flat, depthless, clinical quality of affordable digital video. Cheap enough to buy (rather than just rent for a shoot) and coupled with affordable digital editing software like Final Cut Pro or Adobe Premiere, the DSLR era meant that expensive film equipment that had previously been held collectively by organisations like the London Film Makers Co-op (which had been merged into Lux) and Four Corners was no longer needed to achieve a ‘film-like’ quality. DSLR video cameras were swiftly adopted by short film and promo video directors and soon after radically changed the appearance and production structure of artists' moving image. Across the board the cost of film production was slashed and this meant that artists were suddenly able to undertake more ambitious productions on lower budgets.

Dan Kidner, interviewing a number of artists in *Frieze*, observed “an identifiable shift towards a new kind of professionalism in artists' film in London, and in the UK in general. Artists here are increasingly using large crews, working with producers, employing Directors of Photography, and so on” (Kidner 2009). There was a noticeable convergence between the emerging ‘micro-budget’ feature films, new TV programmes, and new narrative works being made by artists. It was notable that artists' films increasingly tended to share formal

attributes with these kind of products because of the cross-over in equipment, and the fact that hired-in production crews often worked to achieve lighting and camera effects that were dominant in recent 'state-of-the-art' industry work. The HD/DSLR 'look' faintly evoked the era of pre-digital cinema, which film professionals tended to use as the bench mark for a desirable aesthetic – what constituted a 'good looking' film. It often seemed as if artists, often overwhelmed by the scale of production, were either uninterested in, or unconscious of, the aesthetic or structural issues associated with the images they were producing, or were happy to make them somewhat referential to cinema and TV.



Fig 14: Canon 5D Mkii. Essentially a DSLR camera with the capacity to shoot HD video with photographic lenses.

Artists used the new 'film-like' video to create 'film-like' works, abandoning artistic investigation of medium and form to focus on thematic and narrative content. Unlike the 'formal' approaches of prior periods they were more likely to work with scripts and actors, sometimes echoing mainstream story conventions, or staging emotional, dramatic situations, often using actors to perform or act out theoretical or political propositions. Artist Melanie Gilligan claimed that her

use of DSLR cameras to shoot narrative drama was “not about making reference to already existing forms, but finding a form that’s appropriate to the kind of communication that I want to make. I intend my work to give an ongoing commentary on the political events of our times” (Kidner, 2011). On the one hand, as Chrissy Iles has pointed out, there was a tendency to “engage with and perhaps influence, the connective tissue that [cinema] creates, and participate in a common language of communication” (Perry, 2009). However, there was often a clear desire for artists to articulate clear ‘textual’ propositions – defined themes, ideas, and statements were privileged over formalism and visuality. Film is taken here as addressing a theme, a communicative medium, or a platform for narrative unfolding, as opposed to a search for new ways of looking, or an engagement with medium and formal meaning.

An exception to these ‘textual’ or dialogue driven works was the (slightly later) wave of what could be dubbed ‘dance’ films – artworks that adopted the same digital DSLR or celluloid production techniques but in relation to contemporary dance choreography. Shahryar Nashat’s *Parade* (2014) made with choreographer Adam Linder, Grace Schwindt’s *Only a Free Individual Can Create a Free Society* (2014), Simon Martin’s *UR Feeling* (2015), and Duncan Campbell’s *It for Others* (2013) made with choreographer Michael Clark, all feature collaborations with dancers performing in settings that approximate traditional stages. Although mostly shot digitally, such works’ focus on the sensuous body seems to disclose some of the same romantic yearning for physicality and opposition to dominant dematerialized digital culture as that of the celluloid artist films of the period. Instead of alluding to cinema, the inherent theatricality and formalist nature of dance as content creates a kind of anti-naturalism, in contrast to the dramatic realism of many of the films that reference cinema. Nevertheless, at the level of filmic form the shooting style of these films is traditional – they are essentially documentations of stage performances where HD is used as a recording tool whose visual and semiotic qualities and creative potentials are not necessarily integral to the production (beyond providing the high gloss finish of a ‘proper’ film). They marry a quite conservative ‘cinematic’

shooting and editing style to the often familiar gestures of contemporary dance - arguably without innovating either.



Fig 15: *UR Feeling* (Simon Martin, 2015), HD Video, 18'.

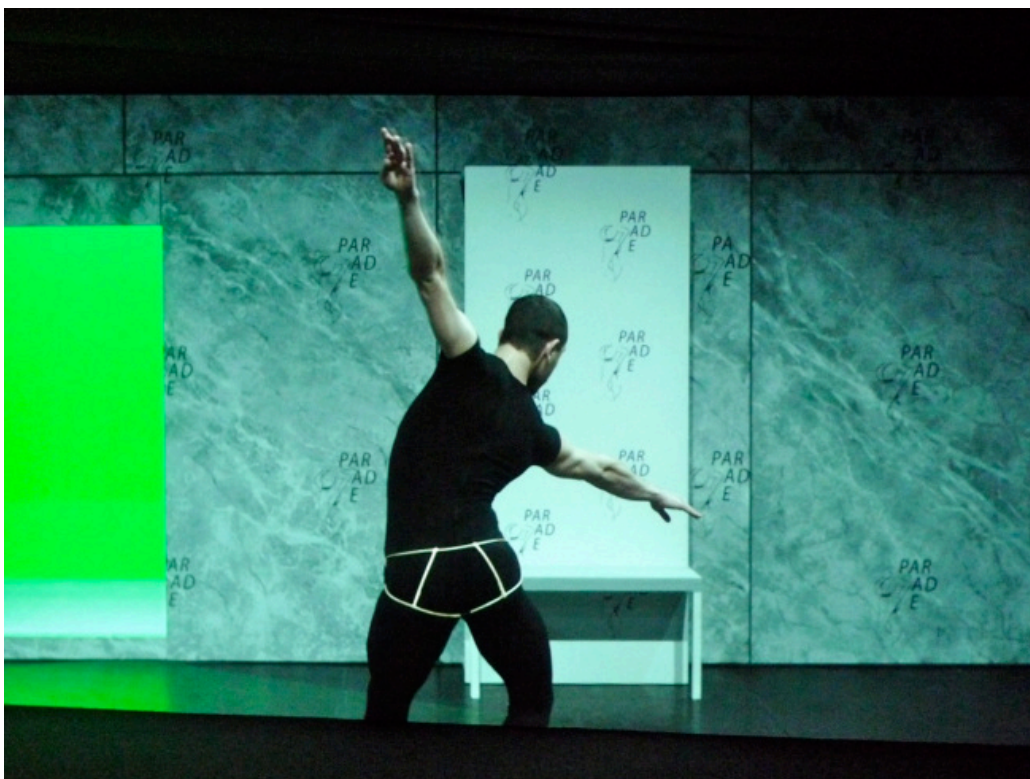


Fig 16: *Parade* (Shahryar Nashat, 2014), HD Video, 38'.



Fig 17: *It for Others* (Duncan Campbell 2013), 16mm transferred to HD, 54'.



Fig 18: *Only a Free Individual Can Create a Free Society* (Grace Schwindt, 2014), HD Video, 80'.

It is interesting the degree to which this wave of 'neo-cinematic' artist films created a level of uncertainty over their status as works as art, especially when contextualization in the gallery was often the only thing that separated them from more conventional filmmaking. This raised a host of issues around display and exhibition: the problem of hosting 'cinematic' films in galleries made for a more 'distracted' form of viewing, or the amount of time demanded of viewers in group shows to watch near-feature-length works (the *British Art Show* in 2010 featured so many long-form artists' films that it would be literally impossible for any viewer to see all of them on a day ticket). There was also a sharp contrast between the grandiose aesthetic discourse surrounding many artist films and

their often conventional formal attributes. Structuralist filmmaker Nicky Hamlyn, writing about Philippe Parreno's show at the Serpentine Gallery in 2010 distils a number of issues from this period, claiming that curators made over-inflated claims for the exhibition in order for it to sit within an art context. Hamlyn quotes the text for the show which asserts that "the visitor is guided through the galleries by the orchestration of sound and image ... Taking the exhibition as a medium, Parreno has sought to redefine the exhibition experience by exploring its possibilities as a coherent "object" rather than a collection of individual works" (Hamlyn, 2012, 265). Hamlyn rejects any idea that Parreno's show behaved like an installation, countering that the works were "precisely a collection of individual films... single screen, fixed duration works and the conventions for their display mirrored cinema conditions" (2012, 265). Writing from the perspective of a Structuralist concern with medium, and against the immersion of cinematic viewing, Hamlyn criticizes the cinematic seductiveness of Parreno's films which:

"took the spectator out of the gallery space and into the absorbingly illusionistic space of the film. Nothing caused the spectator to reflect on the relationships between the space in the film and that in which it was being shown, and, concomitantly, their own bodily relationship with the space of the gallery. All the work was frontal and designed to be seen in a conventionally cinematic manner, notwithstanding the absence of seating, variations in, the size and elevation of the screens, or indeed the spurious variety of video formats deployed" (2012, 266).

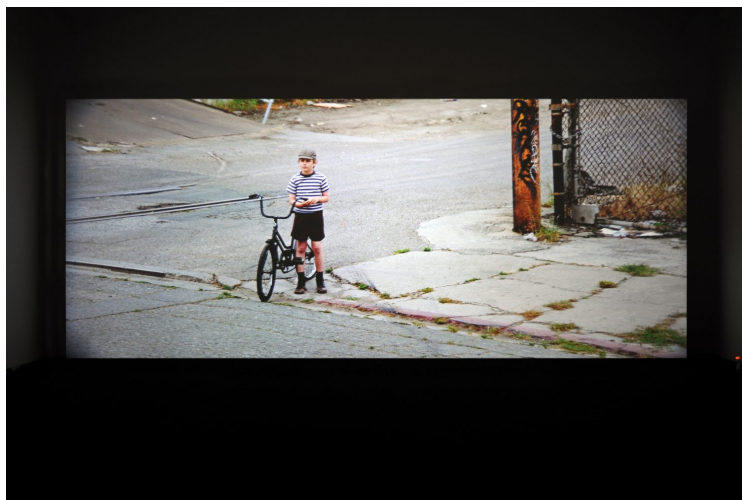


Fig 19: *June 8, 1968* (Philippe Parreno, 2009), Installation view, Serpentine Gallery, London, 2010-11.

Hamlyn's description of Parreno's show accurately captures the exhibition strategies of many of the 'gallery films' of this period. His obvious disdain for a lack of rigour in such gallery films' relation to medium and display shows the chasm between the formal traditions of artist film and video and the emerging practices of the 2000s. His concern about the lack of interrogation of the works' constitutive elements, and a general absence of material reflexivity can be also applied to the way that many artists' long-form HD films tended to naturalise the medium – they did not overtly deal with the 'digital' aesthetic nor the unique phenomenon of the digital emulating the analogue in DSLR cameras. The medium-blindness of this period of artists' films is remarkable in comparison to 'arthouse' cinema of the early 21st century. For example, in Jean Luc Godard's first fully digital film, *Film Socialisme* (2010), the director explores digital filmmaking in various forms – from DSLR to phone cameras – and meditates throughout the film on the meaning, texture and transmission of these media.



Fig 20: Digital artefacts and effects in *Film Socialisme* (Godard, 2010).

Why did such artists' films briefly flourish at the end of the 2000s? What motivated their creation and their break with previous, more formally challenging, artistic traditions? Beyond the sudden affordability of HD digital equipment that emulated a 'film look', what can explain why artists working

within the art world context sought to make feature-length narrative-driven works, more focused on narrative, script, and text than form and structure? Dan Ward's *The Politics of Production: A Report on the Conditions for Producing 'Artists' Moving Image* (2019) is one of the few accounts of the period, and one that attempts to reveal the socio-economic context behind the boom in long-form artists' films. Based on interviews with artists and institutional stakeholders, it speaks of a "shock therapy" of "restructuring" in the independent film sphere at the end of the 1990s as the ecology of networks supporting "experimental/avant-garde/alternative/community/collective/artists' film & video/artists' moving image and its numerous other extensions" (Ward, 2019, 10). A more individualistic, partnership-focused, business-oriented model started to pervade the arts, and in turn moving image funding began to favour films that more closely fit a commercial cinema model. According to producer Kate Parker [note: who produced my 2010 feature film with Anja Kirschner, *The Empty Plan*] new funding schemes like FLAMIN (Film London's Artist Moving Image Network) "demanded a production process approximating commercial film that was at odds with artistic production...unlikely to... allow an experimental or artistic process" (Ward, 2019, 5). Ward observes that such new models invert the relative autonomy and collectivity of the old order of film organisations and co-ops: "The aim of these schemes departs substantially from workshops or access to the 'means of production' historically, which tended to focus on a liberation from 'dominant' aesthetic operations, not a desire to patiently learn them" (Ward, 2019, 22).

There is no doubt that such funding structures lay behind a number of long-form artist's works of the period, and that there was an ideological bias in the works being promoted. My own experiences and criticisms of this period were largely reflected in *The Politics of Production*, and I was one of many artists interviewed as part of its research. However, the document, with its focus on funding and institutional structures, fails to account for the fact that so many artists were genuinely and passionately driven by a sincere desire to pursue a more cinematic, naturalistic form of filmmaking. One argument could be that individuals who might have previously pursued a career path in the independent

cinema structures of the 1970s and 1980s were now thrown back on the art world as the only context in which to make 'difficult' or non-commercial work. Perhaps the artists I am discussing in this subsection could be accused of being "mesmerised by mainstream – mostly Hollywood – cinema, and to that particular version of the cinematic" (Hamlyn, 2012, 268) but choosing to pursue their careers within the funding structures of the art world rather than the more competitive context of the film industry.

However, I think that such a simplistic accusation also misreads the situation. The cinematic artist films of the early 2000s had a nostalgic quality that was in no way trying to compete with the cutting edge of contemporaneous hi-tech Hollywood cinema, or even art house auteurs like Gaspar No   or Lars Von Trier, who in that period were confidently experimenting with digitally enhanced visuals and formal innovations that pushed the boundaries of cinematic language (see for example No  's *Enter The Void* (2009) or Von Trier's *Antichrist* (2009) and *Melancholia* (2011)).

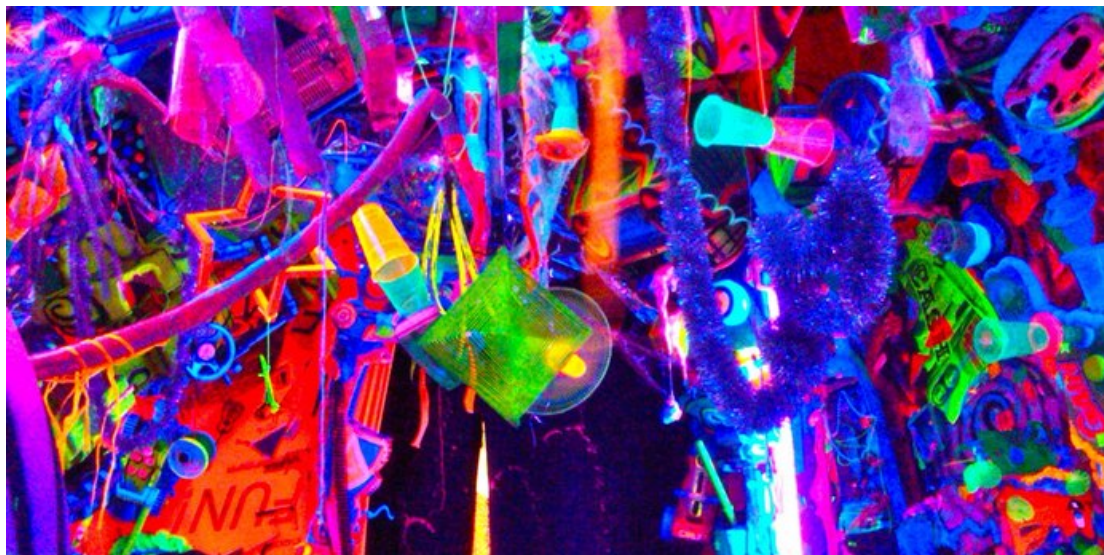


Fig 21: *Enter the Void* (Gaspar No  , 2009). The search for a 21st century 'post-cinema' aesthetic.

Rather, these artists' films frequently gestured back to 20th century cinematic conventions, and, paradoxically, despite often relying on digital tools, can be read as a reaction to the mainstreaming of digital media. They can be understood in

relation to a period which marked the end of the internet as a site of resistance and experimentation and saw its increasing domination by commerce, as well as the increasing influence of hyper-real, effects-driven Hollywood blockbusters over the culture. Artists' long-form films represented an attempt to return to the centred, realist image of humanist art cinema. They rejected the new forms on offer in the mainstream in favour of the relative familiarity of conventional shot structure and editing language, gesturing back to pre-digital eras.

These artists' films' subject matter often had a similar mood of nostalgia. Ben Rivers' early works sought out outsider figures, "latter-day hermits and pioneers – usually men – who have chosen to exist at an ideological and geographical remove from the rest of society" (Griffin, 2010). Luke Fowler, Duncan Campbell, and myself and Anja Kirschner avoided modern issues and tackled historical subjects, from the radical struggles of the 1960s and '70s to early modern period dramas. Melanie Gilligan, Omer Fast and Shazad Dawood played with science fiction or body horror traditions familiar from mainstream cinema and TV of the 1980s. Modes of distribution and display were similarly backward-looking, from screenings on film projectors or cathode ray box monitors, to recreations of cinema-like environments in the gallery. The overall atmosphere was one of timelessness.

The artist films of the 2000s seemed to be seeking to evoke an almost historic, artistic aura. As writer and reviewer for *Frieze* and *Spike Art* Dominikus Müller notes of Ben Rivers, "His films seem to come from a just-passed age: too young to be rediscovered, too old to be trendy, the lee-side of progress" (Müller, 2014). Melissa Gronlund, reviewing a number of films by female artists from the period for *Moving Image Review & Art Journal*, notes that an "anti-populist note is typical of these films, contrasting with the populism of the YBAs, and embracing a certain seriousness despite the apparent lightness of their technique" (Gronlund, 2012, 171). Erika Balsom in *Screen* claims that, in the context of the gallery, the formerly mass medium of cinema effectively becomes its opposite: "Transfigured by the light of technological change, it is now a privileged locus of historicity and takes on something it was once said to destroy: aura" (Balsom, 2009). This sense of weight could be seen to be intimately linked to the use of

celluloid; however just as *Mr. Turner*, shot digitally but using the conventions of 'serious' cinema, is considered "moving, scholarly and serious" (Romney, 2014), the use of a familiar conservative cinematic language itself can be seen as a bulwark against the spectacular accelerations of the digital age.

While this generation of artists sidestepped the commercial language of digital 'post-cinema' dominant in the multiplex, they could also be seen to reject the austere rigor of Structuralist or Materialist approaches to filmmaking championed by artist-critics like Hamlyn. There was a sense of exhaustion and familiarity attached to previously radical formal strategies. Artist duo Pil & Galia Kollektiv, writing in the journal *Benedictions*, criticise the self-reflexive orthodoxies of Peter Gidal's Structuralist Film manifesto (Kollektiv, 2011). They describe how Gidal sees formalist techniques as able to "shake the viewer out of the absorption required by the narratives of what he calls 'dominant' cinema" (Kollektiv, 2011). The artists refuse Gidal's notion that the "mechanism of identification demands a passive audience, a passive mental posture in the face of a life unlived" (Gidal, cited in Kollektiv, 2011). They cite Jacques Ranciere's refutation of reflexivity as political:

"In *The Emancipated Spectator*, he argues against the tradition that sees theatre, and the spectacle of cinema as its continuation, as an arena of passive spectatorship, which needs to be contested through aggressive disruptions from the avant garde onwards. Instead, he claims that the experience of watching a play, or a film, calls "for spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it" (Kollektiv, 2011).

Perhaps strategies of self-reflexivity are now such a permanent feature of the cinematic mainstream (reinforced by the ubiquity of 'making of' and behind the scenes featurettes that accompany films' releases) that they cease to feel radical. Many artists of the 2000s no longer considered exposing the ideology of narrative cinema an effective critique, as underlined in this exchange between artist filmmakers interviewed by Dan Kidner for Frieze in 2011:

"Anja Kirschner: The critical models that you refer to have largely been worn out or co-opted. If anything, 'criticality' itself has become an empty or aestheticized posture in Contemporary Art – shorn of any actual political position or engagement. What does it mean to expose narrative as 'inherently ideological', with the implied assumption that non-narrative forms aren't? Perhaps what we're now seeing are different attempts at dissolving or overcoming this impasse.

Melanie Gilligan: These experiments and their extended context have had an immense impact, producing a visual culture of fragmentation and disconnected parts in equal measure with narrative coherence – it's all mixed together. There's no denying that fragmented and disjunctive images are used in the service of power as much as the conventional narrative ones" (Kidner, 2011).

These are good arguments for evolving away from the austere, moralistic approach embedded in past formalist strategies, which patronisingly waged war on cinema to liberate the supposedly 'unconscious' spectator from mainstream ideology. They also underline the worn out claims to 'criticality' made at the level of formal innovation. But, was this generation of moving image artists actually successful in engaging with the new technology and culture of the 21st century and articulating a formally innovative or even 'critical' response?

It is notable that in the late 2000s, as many artist filmmakers looked towards forms borrowed from 20th century cinema and television to challenge and undermine the formal orthodoxies of Modernist film strategies, a new debate about the moving image was emerging. Writers like Steven Shaviro and Evan Calder Williams were beginning to articulate a new theoretical lens for understanding the massive shifts in digital filmmaking. The notion of 'post-cinema', a broad and loosely defined term, delineates "the emergence of a different media regime, and indeed of a different mode of production, than those which dominated the twentieth century. Digital technologies, together with neoliberal economic relations have given birth to radically new ways of manufacturing and articulating lived experience" (Shaviro, 2010, 2). The term encapsulates a broad selection of formal shifts; the 'post-lens' move away from the indexical capture of 'reality' by photographic cameras to the equal if not greater importance of digital manipulation and image generation in post

production; 'post-continuity' where the traditional naturalism of 20th century cinema is broken and "continuity rules are used opportunistically and occasionally, rather than structurally and pervasively. Narrative is not abandoned, but it is articulated in a space and time that are no longer classical" (Shaviro, 2016, 57-58); the move away from single screen, cinematic immersion where "sensors and screens have proliferated, [and] cinematic intimacy has become pervasive" (Miller, 2009) and the various interactive and algorithmic elements drawn from computer gaming and network culture.

As already noted, some of the new techniques of 'post-cinema' have been compared to the classic strategies of artists' experimental video: jump cuts, temporal/spatial dislocation, addition to an indexically captured image, and departure from the seductive power of the single screen theatrical experience. Shaviro notes how critic Bruce Reid has compared Michael Bay, director of the *Transformers* franchise, to Avant-Gardists like Stan Brakhage and speaks of "the same headlong thrill of the moment, the same refusal to dawdle over or organize their material" (Shaviro, 2016, 52). This gives force to the claim that such strategies have lost their Avant-Garde or critical power. In fact, the discussion around 'post-cinema' has focused almost entirely on innovations made within the mainstream culture industry. Shaviro and Calder Williams draw on examples from the large-scale productions and complex workflows of modern blockbuster movie making, mainstream pop videos and mass digital platforms – often the most extreme and commercial cultural products. Their discussions refer to 'lowbrow' films such as *Gamer* (2009), *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011) and *San Andreas* (2015).



Fig 22: *San Andreas* (Brad Peyton, 2015)



Fig 23: *Gamer* (Neveldine/Taylor, 2009).

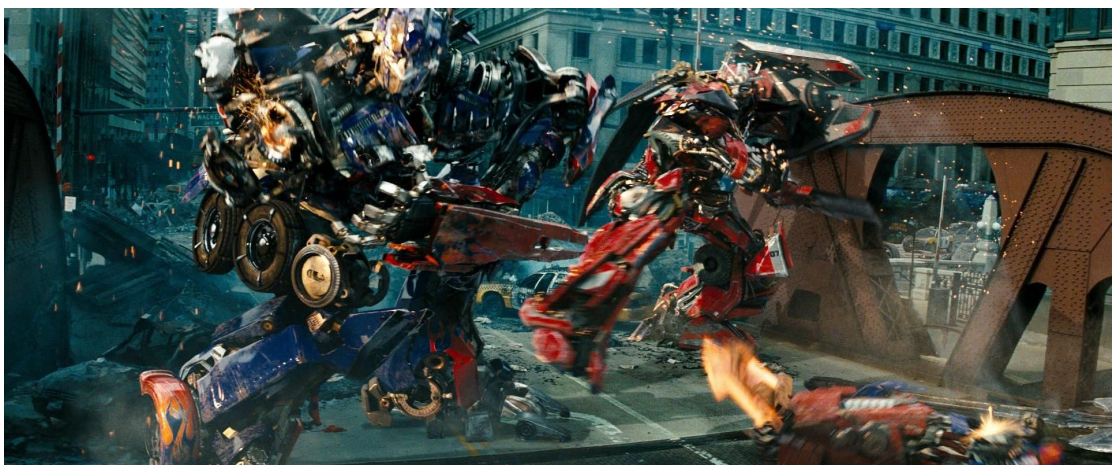


Fig 24: *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (Michael Bay, 2011).

It's not surprising that artists might look elsewhere than the 'post-cinematic' mainstream. Not only is the industrial scale and capital-intensive nature of such cultural productions largely out of the grasp of artistic budgets but the new 'post-cinematic' forms that excite writers like Shaviro could simply be seen as embodying and underwriting dominant techno-capitalist ideology. Shaviro himself, although he sees big budget Hollywood films as yielding new aesthetic experiences, also admits that they approach the limit of "the totalizing ambitions of real subsumption" (Shaviro, 2010, 135). Such cultural products represent the total domination of the commodity form. Patrick Corgan, writing about the blockbuster *San Andreas* (2015), points out how the 'post-cinematic', 'analogico-digital' frenzy in the service of Hollywood amounts to a "cartoonish, sensori-motor schema of 'action figure' hyper-activity". Corgan claims that even the self-reflexive nature of the marketing of such blockbusters, their reveals of technical prowess at jaw-dropping scale, feeds back into their fundamental ideological message: "The coordinated marketing release of the 'how they did it' (again) media serves to reproduce and reinforce the 'asocial', petrified repetition of this default mobilization of the potentials of digital imaging and animation" (Corgan, 2017).

It is therefore not surprising that, faced with the high budget 'post-cinematic' mainstream, the generation of artist filmmakers of the late 2000s sought to revive the traditions of humanist filmmaking. However, was this generation siding with 'highbrow' critics like Jonathan Romney in panning the 'kitsch' of 'post-cinema'? Did they take a reverential position towards the traditional signifiers of 'serious', 'sensual' cinema – the realist tradition of the 20th century? Echoing Jonathan Romney's take on Mike Leigh's *Mr. Turner* (see section 1.2 above), it could be argued that digital filmmaking was seen by artists as 'elevated' and successful when, as Lev Manovich puts it, "the use of computers is always carefully hidden. Commercial narrative cinema still continues to hold on to the classical realist style where images function as unretouched photographic records of events that took place in front of the camera" (Manovich, 2016). Certainly, rather than explore a digital aesthetic that could possibly yield new visual languages and effects, these artists

preferred to use convenient, accessible, affordable digital workflows to revisit the film language of the pre-digital era. Just at the point when the 'post-cinematic' digital cinema forced a total re-organisation of the aesthetics of the moving image, it seems that many artists sought refuge in the past. Looking back on the period, and my own involvement in it as an artist filmmaker, I feel it represents an avoidant response to the problems and potentials of new technology and a strange refusal to see the potential for forging new languages with new technology that could go beyond the commercial/industrial mainstream. It also signifies a potentially problematic move away from deeper considerations of form.

Shaviro makes it clear that 'post-cinema' (as represented by the Hollywood blockbuster) is a medium of 'affect', where new film forms communicate more than generic narratives (Shaviro 2010). As pointed out above, the artists' cinema works of the 2000s period tended to privilege thematic/critical statements, creating essay films or narrative dramas. It often feels as if the ideas conveyed in such film works are more important than their form. Where 'post-cinematic' works "are best regarded as affective maps, which do not just passively trace or represent, but actively construct and perform, the social relations, flows, and feelings that they are ostensibly 'about'" (Shaviro, 2010, 6), many artist films of the 21st century could be seen as moving away from non-verbal affective communication, or at least make form and affect a secondary consideration. Perhaps the move towards content-driven narrative works actually belies a similar contempt for the manipulations and stupefying seductive power of mainstream 'post-cinema' as the previous generations of Structuralist filmmakers. As I will go on to argue in section 2.3, overt textuality and criticality is a hallmark of Contemporary Art, which privileges discourse over affectivity. Moving image works in the context of Contemporary Art has become ever more focused around the delivery of verbal and theoretical statements and political positions rather than exploring the potentially utopian possibility of new formal strategies. This was especially true of the 'cinematic' artists' films of the early 21st Century.

1.4 Artists' Moving Image & The CGI Turn: 2010-2020.

At the beginning of the 2010s, the dominant trends in artists' moving image practice appeared to take a sudden turn. Interest in a new wave of artists devoted to exploring the digital world, some falling under the rubric of 'post-internet' art, seemed to almost completely supersede and overthrow the prior tendencies towards cinematic influences and narrative. An example of this shift in curatorial focus can be seen in the difference between the *British Art Show* (BAS) 7 in 2010 which featured hours of long-form cinematic, narrative and documentary work from artists like Emily Wardill, Duncan Campbell, Luke Fowler, and others, and the BAS 8th edition in 2015 which saw a move to increasingly non-narrative, digitally manipulated works as typified by Benedict Drew, James Richards, Laure Prouvost, Yuri Pattison, and Rachel Maclean, amongst others.

The use of computer-generated images (CGI) became a dominant approach in artists' moving image. Artists such as Ed Atkins, Sondra Perry, Cecile B Evans, Lawrence Lek and Jacolby Satterwhite were among the most prominent exponents of an approach to video-making that relied primarily on 3D animation, though such techniques were broadly adopted by a multitude of digital artists who moved between different media (Jon Rafman and Hannah Sawtell, for example), as well as by artist filmmakers that had previously worked with cinematic techniques in the 2000s (myself and Anja Kirschner, Melanie Gilligan and Ben Rivers all incorporated passages of 3D CGI in works made after 2010). In a few years the nostalgic cinematic strategies of display of the late 2000s (using film projectors, cathode ray box monitors, and cinema-like seating in the gallery) gave way to a dominant aesthetic that embraced the commercial aesthetic of new technology – consumer flat screens and installations that echoed the functionalist environments of late-capitalist production, leisure and logistics (references to gym equipment, theme parks, warehousing fittings, and visible network paraphernalia were recurring themes).

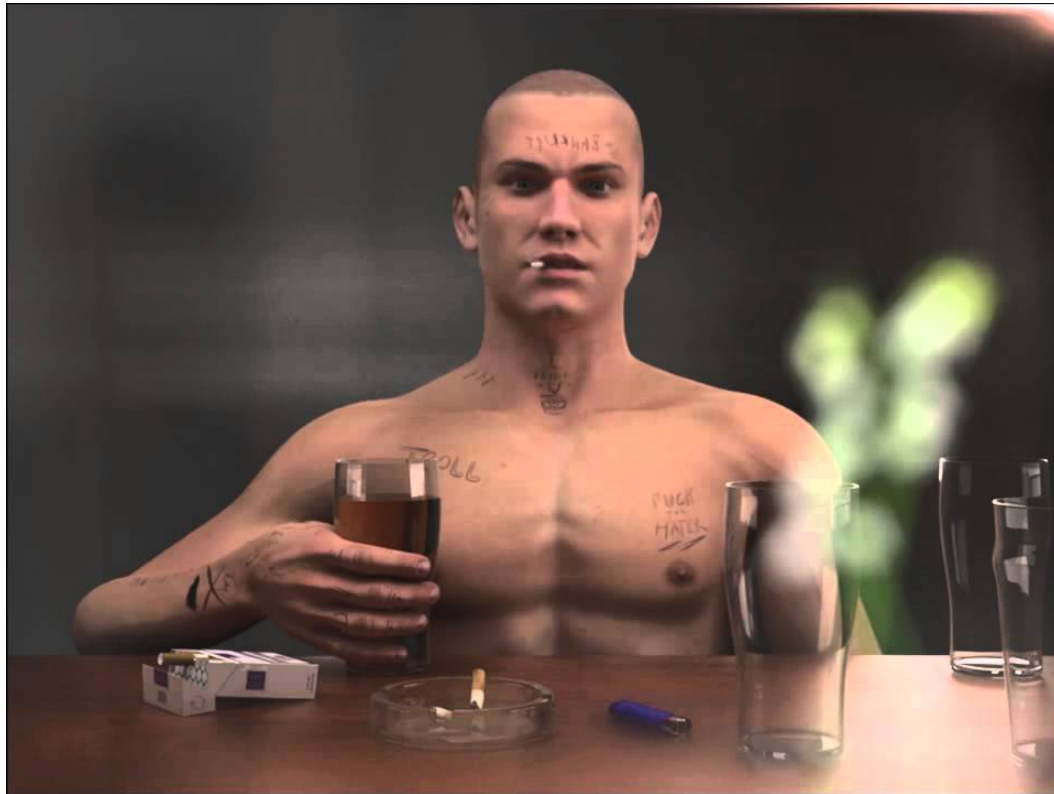


Fig 25: *Ribbons* (Ed Atkins, 2014), three-channel HD CGI animation, 13'18".



Fig 26: *Unreal Estate (The Royal Academy is Yours)* (Lawrence Lek, 2015), HD CGI animation, 18'.



Fig 27: *Mothership* (Jonathan Monaghan, 2013), HD CGI animation, 15'.



Fig 28: *Dream Journal* (Jon Rafman, 2016-17), HD CGI and video, 57'.



Fig 29: *Still Life (Betamale)* (Jon Rafman, 2015), installation view, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 2016.



Fig 30: *#STANDARDISER* (Hannah Sawtell, 2014), installation view, Focal Point Gallery.



Fig 31: *Graft & Ash for a Three Monitor Workstation* (Sondra Perry 2016), HD CGI animation, Bicycle Workstation 9'5".



Fig 32: *Amos' World, Episode One* (Cecile B Evans, 2017), HD CGI animation/installation.

Just as the widespread availability of DSLR HD cameras in the 2000s influenced the growth of the 'cinematic' artists, new 'prosumer' 3D animation software and game engines such as Maya, Blender, Houdini, Cinema 4D and Unity combined with increased processor power to facilitate this emergent movement. Though often realised with the same software tools used to achieve the seamless photo reality of 'post-cinematic' effects, artists' CGI works tended towards a less perfect, more artificial or 'clunky' aesthetic. This could be seen to be a byproduct of lower budgets, but is more likely a deliberate gesture to avoid the slick, naturalised world of commercial digital imagery, with its emphasis on virtuosic emulations of 'reality' that often concealed their digital footprint. These new videos instead drew inspiration from the more rough and ready elements of the new digital environment. Artist Alan Warburton, in a series of engaging video essays about the culture of CGI, points out that, unlike mainstream commercial digital practice which must outrun the effect of constant progress, where animation that was expensive a few years previously looks cheap today, Contemporary Art "embraces this cheapening... reveling in its bankruptcy" (Warburton, 2016). This generation of artists' use of CGI tends to draw on what Warburton calls "digital detritus" – meme culture, low grade graphics, corporate/industrial imagery, or instrumental simulation software like CAD (Lawrence Lek has a background in Architecture that inflects his 3D simulations of imaginary structures). The 'imperfection' and often rudimentary quality of these artists' use of CGI could also be seen to echo the early 3D animation of the 1990s, creating a possibly deliberate 'retro' atmosphere around these works. Reference to prior waves of techno culture, gaming and first wave digital art, echo a sensibility that could also be seen in fashion and youth culture's revival of rave and retro techno aesthetics of the 2010s. This could be read as a longing for the moment when technology seemed naïve, manageable and charmingly artificial rather than spectacular, ubiquitous and hyper-real.



Fig 33: Artists using video game play as material: *Finding Fanon 2*, (Blandy & Achimpong, 2015), HD video, from *Grand Theft Auto*, 9'13".



Fig 34: Artists using video game play as material: *Remember Carthage* (Jon Rafman, 2013), HD video from PS3 video games and *Second Life*, 13'.

The most frequent referent for digital artworks of the 2010s tends to be the computer-generated 3D worlds of gaming (with artists like David Blandy & Larry Achiampong, and Jon Rafman creating narratives with footage actually captured inside existing game environments, and many others working with game engines

like Unity). The shift to a focus on the aesthetics of gaming shows this new generation of artists rejecting cinema as a primary reference, and looking towards the new forms of interactivity and virtual realities represented by this increasingly culturally dominant medium (by the late 2010s the game industry was bigger than the film and music industries put together (Stewart, 2019)). The new wave of artists sought to explore and revalorise a widely reviled cultural form, as exemplified by Jon Rafman's 'ethnographic' approach to the cultures of gaming and the internet: "If we are frank, these environments are looked upon as low culture. It is also an ongoing feature of my practice to see the value within cultural practices that are not taken seriously" (Clarke, 2013).

The 'post-internet' moment in general represented a total volte face from the romantic turn to cinema of the 2000s towards a kind of 'trash aesthetic'. Rather than reject the ugly trappings and alienated culture of contemporary hyper-consumerism, artists made it their primary focus. Whether repurposing existing digital worlds or using software to build up new imagery from scratch, the dominant ethos of the new digital moving image practices was to highlight their participation in an emerging industrialised culture. Rafman describes how gaming images "exemplify contemporary capitalist cultural product even more than Hollywood Cinema" (Clarke, 2013). There is a sense that such artists felt that an engagement with this dominant culture would make art relevant to the 21st century again, using the generally available stock of images thrown up by the gaming and 3D industries. Artist Ed Atkins, who takes a more authorial approach to his CGI films, still points out how the male protagonists "are all from [the 3D models online store] Turbosquid.com... They're not made for me, but for as large a user base as possible" (Speed, 2017).

The repurposing and collaging of existing 'digital detritus' – echoing generic 3D images from gaming, the general resistance to total realism and focus on the more visibly artificial – can be read as 'alienating' devices, revealing the workings and broader context of the images. Although 'post-internet' art's use of contemporary technological elements had a very definite aesthetic, and could be described as a 'style', claims made for the work often pointed to a deeper

analysis. Artist and writer James Bridle, speaking about the confusion surrounding his term the 'New Aesthetic' asserts that it "is not superficial. It is not concerned with beauty or surface texture" (Bridle, 2013). Rather, the New Aesthetic is "not about the objects themselves but about the systems – technological, spatial, legal and political – which permit, shape, and produce them, and about the wider implications of seeing and not seeing such technological, systematic, operations; so the New Aesthetic is concerned with everything that is not visible in these images and quotes, but that is inseparable from them, and without which they would not exist" (Bridle, 2013). Bridle insists that these artistic digital images function more as a form of research or cultural study – a probe into a broader systemic horizon. Thomas Elsaesser also points out a fundamental difference between the 'aesthetic' horizon of cinema and the 'systemic/functional' nature of the digital:

"Whereas analogue filmmaking, centred on production, sought to 'capture' reality, in order to 'harness' it into a representation, digital filmmaking, conceived from the perspective of post-production, proceeds by way of 'extracting' reality, in order to 'harvest' it into a data-set" (Elsaesser, 2017).

There is always something of the instrumental, the 'extractive', haunting this period of digital artworks. Critic and academic Kirstin Stakemeier, writing in *Texte zur Kunst*, hints that the formal strategies of digital and 'post-internet' artworks lead invariably and directly back to the economic: "the question of media specificity can no longer be discussed as one immanent to art (or cultural production) alone, but one that relays between art and capital, with *digitality* lying at the core of contemporary financialized capitalism" (Stakemeier, 2015). Stakemeier's assertion that the digital is invariably a visual synonym for capital reveals the self-conscious distance built into its use by this generation of artists. The focus is on the construction of 'critique' - works are not so much positive formal proposals, but rather use the aesthetic material they corral in a subversive or critical relation to dominant systems. This agenda is clear in the claims made for this generation of CGI works. Critic Nora N Khan, writing on Lawrence Lek's *Unreal Estate* (2015), comments on how the work represents "the gamification of our world to reveal its rules, and a steady critique of art's live-in relationship with banking. He demonstrates how capitalism reproduces

itself through spectacular edifices” (Khan, 2015). Jon Rafman sees “virtual worlds as being more honest and transparent than the real world and thus they are able to indirectly expose hidden ideologies at work in the real world” (Clarke, 2013).

Even those artists who could be said to be “less interested in the practical applications of such technology than in the emotional fallout, identity confusion, and potential for moral ambiguity that it might generate” (Russeth, 2016) perform a kind of melancholic juxtaposition, with human affect set against the cold and inhuman signs of digital tech. Artists like Ed Atkins and Sondra Perry exemplify this tension: Atkins contrasts voiceovers overflowing with corporeal references with hollowed out CGI, his ‘dead’ images haunted by what he describes as “the recurring zero of digital video’s somatic lack” (*October*, 2016). By exaggerating the dematerialised realm of the digital as a hollow, negative sign, Atkins hopes to return the viewer to a kind of centred humanism – a route back to what has been repressed and erased: “I fart and I belch and tear up or go for a piss: my body insists on my re-engagement with it, with its story that might extend to all bodies and against all this apparent immateriality” (*October*, 2016). Nora N Khan describes a similar process in Sondra Perry’s work, which frames “technology as it allows us to dehumanize one another yet again, flattening race history and political context out in favor of a spectrum of slottable ‘markers’...in creating a sustained contrast between who is speaking – the thrown, disembodied voice – and the violence of what is being described – erasure and denial of hidden psychological suffering – the avatar forces us to think about what we cannot see” (Khan, 217). The digital image in many CGI works becomes a placeholder, with its aesthetic surface merely a veil over broader systemic structures, or the physical and emotional experiences that the digital is seen to suppress and erase.

Such CGI artists seemingly embrace new forms of digital viscosity rather than the ageing codes of 20th century indexical cinema. However, the negative valence they give to technological signs shows that they do not share Steven Shaviro’s enthusiasm for the affective potentials of digital ‘post-cinema’. Rather, they

actually reaffirm the pessimism of critics like Jonathan Romney who condemn CGI as a cypher of 'kitsch', emptiness and betrayal – a negative reflection of the 'state we're in'. Unlike the 'net' artists of the 1990s who saw the digital as a utopian frontier – where a positive 'techno aesthetic' might point towards liberation and progressive change, and digital avatars were seen as liberating vehicles for self-expression – artists in the 2010s were dealing with a fully circumscribed digital domain overtaken by corporate interests, and concomitant fears of the alienation created by the dematerialisation of reality. The digital has become a cypher for domination and control. Where artists like Rafman (as well as provocative figures like Jordan Wolfson or Ryan Trecartin & Lizzie Fitch) take an ambivalent attitude towards this situation – seemingly taking pleasure in the perverse, disorienting spectacles and ontological crises of mass digital culture, with a "dominant tonal register of irony" (Abse Gogarty, 2018) – Atkins and Perry are seeking to re-introduce a humanist horizon through dissonant juxtaposition. These works assume a kind of critical over-identification where their aesthetic content hovers between a certain affective enjoyment, and a fundamental horror of the alienation and emptiness that digitally generated images seem to sign. Discussing the work of Cecile B Evans, academic and writer Katharina Weinstock indicates that there is only so far that this critical reframing of the 'master's tools' might take us:

"Seeking to expose the ways in which our media – images, projections and disembodied voices – leave us paralyzed, Evans resorts to a two-fold strategy of immersion and alienation... how far can Evans's cultural critique succeed when rendered in the very same pop cultural tropes she sets out to critique? Can reproducing a pattern ever escape entrenching it further?" (Weinstock, 2017)

Both the apparently 'complicit' and the 'critical' approaches to digital imagery share a distanced, conceptual approach, where the formal and aesthetic qualities of the work, acting in bad faith, quickly reach a kind of impasse – a limit point with what can be achieved with contemporary CGI. Kerstin Stakemeier has claimed that the new wave of digital artists "no longer primarily engage the structures of contemporary culture in what could be called an act of *mimesis*, an emphatic simultaneity, but rather craft their works in acts of *mimicry* – as somatic reflexes to contemporary culture's overpowering protocols. While

mimesis (per Adorno's usage) is characterized as an 'indelible moment [...] in all knowledge,' a form of compassion that 'ties art to the individual experience' of 'being-for-itself,' *mimicry* converges with the 'spell of things'" (Stakemeier, 2015, 126). Stakemeier's analysis indicates, despite their critical claims, that at the level of form such CGI works might be unable to break the spell they seek to parody or undermine. They express a fundamentally pessimistic orientation towards the possibility of escape from the systems of finance capital that are homologous with the digital. Stakemeier is unflinching in drawing out the sense of capitulation that 'post-internet' artworks exude: "mimesis anticipates a liberatory experience *for* the subject, mimicry denotes a yielding" (Stakemeier, 2015, 126). For Stakemeier, this issue with contemporary 'post-internet' artworks is political – it reveals a prevalent perspective of complicity or, at best, defeat.

I wish to assert that this limit of digital artworks and sense of political hopelessness expresses itself in parallel with a general crisis of form in Contemporary Art. The inability to imagine a different world is an index of political defeat. Esther Leslie (Professor of Political Aesthetics at Birkbeck) describes this formal/political impasse in stark terms:

"this animated culture pushes into new forms of repetition, such as repeated backgrounds or segments or the deployment of cliché in the place of innovation, and new forms of disembodiment. Animation's petrified unrest is a formal sign of its ambivalent renderings of the real – it is stuck in a form of life and world simulation, which can be read symptomatically – or critically – as an inability to move on socially, to sketch out new lives and worlds" (Leslie, 2013).

Stakemeier's charge of 'yielding' in the field of digital art is intimately connected to the way that the post-Cold War notion that 'there is no alternative' to free market capitalism has permeated deeply into culture: the idea that there is 'no outside' to capitalism in our era of total subsumption has become commonplace and has been mirrored in the air of resignation around formal innovation. Recent digital artworks are testament to a deep crisis in the collective imaginary, and the lack of any means to picture a future beyond, or even within, capitalism. There is an extreme difficulty in finding a place from which to articulate

opposition or cultivate and envisage new autonomous forms – both political and aesthetic. If the narrative artist films of the 2000s were a nostalgic return to the past in order to reject the present, then the digital artworks of the 2010s represent an impotent or nihilistic acceptance of late capitalism which could be read alongside a liberal centrist/technocratic ‘yielding’ to the inevitability of the market or, at worst, a cynical, potentially right-wing, position. Art historian Larne Abse-Gogarty has called out the ‘post-internet’ tendency towards “flat-unmediated-aspirational-nihilism, which rests upon a totalizing and blended sense of the world” and which has the “possibility of coherence with the alt-right” (Abse Gogarty, 2018).

While such ideological tendencies can be seen in various ‘post-internet’ works, I propose that the digital moving image artworks discussed here are perhaps more in line with a kind of melancholic and impotent ‘academic’ perspective – where critical/cultural textual analysis takes the place of engaged formal innovation or a focus on affective experiences. An inability to conceive of new visual languages that don't lead back to the closed system of digitality/capitalism echoes the lack of any active political horizon for meaningful social change. Cultural material is used as an object for critique, not as a site of potential new visions of life. Just as the prior generation of cinema-inspired artists in the 2000s tended to suppress formal and medium-specific questions to foreground textual, thematic or narrative content, it is no coincidence that many CGI works of the 2010s tend to follow an analogous formula – using a critical voiceover to give meaning to the digitally-created imagery. Whether parodic (Lawrence Lek's mock-corporate language) or poetic (Ed Atkins' semi-psychoanalytic texts), these artworks very often depend on a textual intervention, a trope that could be seen as a lack of faith that CGI imagery could be used on its own to create a meaningful proposition. These works ‘say’ more than ‘show’, or at least rely entirely on the subverting effect of text to undercut their generic image material. Hito Steyerl uses a more bricolaged approach than most of the artists discussed so far, combining elements of CGI with found footage pulled from the internet and digitally shot live action, to make works that tackle the problematics of digital culture. Her work could be said to be the most prominent example of a

tendency to create illustrative essays akin to an (albeit subverted and disruptive) academic lecture or presentation. This notable reliance on voiceover in CGI/digital moving image works dovetails with Contemporary Art's intensified emphasis on determinate critical discourse at all levels, driven by a culture of funding applications, artist proposals, curatorial agendas, political claims, and contextualizing statements. This could be read as evidence of a generalised loss of faith in the communicative or experiential power of formal visual languages.

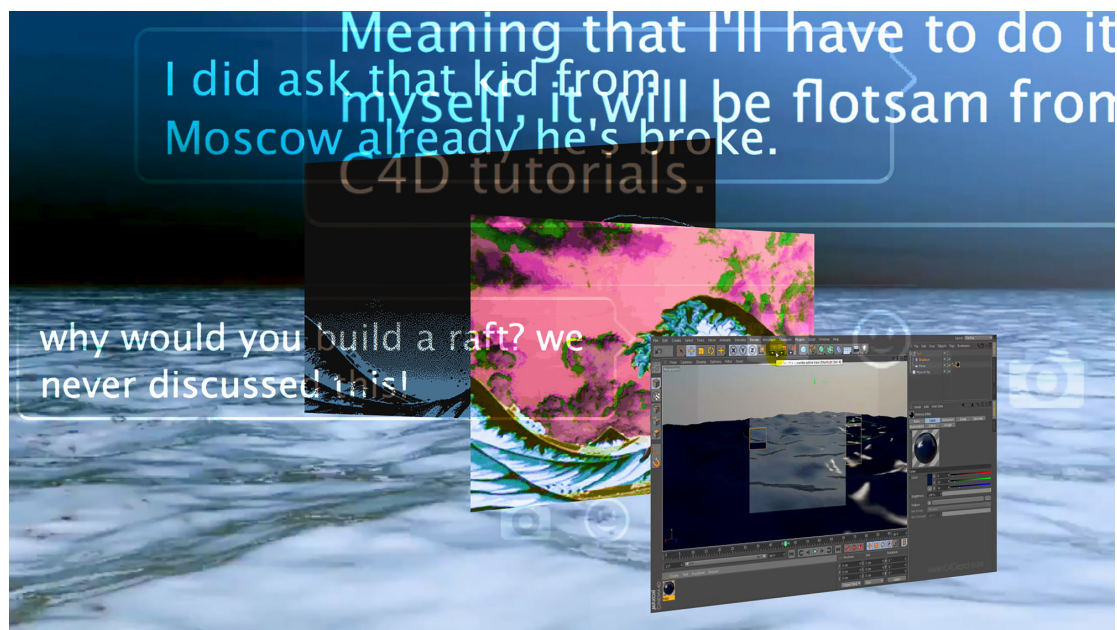


Fig 35: Breaking down the digital image in *Liquid Inc* (Hito Steyerl, 2014), HD video, 30'. This shows the tendency towards a 'presentation' form in many digital artworks.

Intertwined with this broader ideological issue is a more concrete, material limit to working with CGI. A reluctance to push at new, potentially progressive possibilities of digital language, or to really disrupt the medium, is partially a consequence of the limits of the software tools being used. On one level, the inherent limits and complications of 3D software creates a barrier to a more engaged or experimental approach. Warburton points out that the labour-intensive complexity of 3D CGI software has led to a distance between artists working with digital imagery, and the actual creation of that imagery: "their work talks about technology. They expose the process of wrangling technology

whilst at the same time wrangling the guy who uses the technology... they miss the cool things that happen when you use software” (Warburton, 2016).

Warburton deftly draws out the ‘managerialism’ inherent to this way of working, with artists rarely concerning themselves with the formal problems and possibilities inherent to software generated imagery. Instead they have their existing ideas realized in a frictionless way, or recontextualise generic footage as ‘example’ through text and narrative framing. Warburton, who is fully trained as a 3D technician, asserts that artists “don’t know how deeply and richly the software embodies the themes they discuss... simulation is interesting to use – not just to point at” (Warburton, 2016). He correctly diagnoses the conceptual/idealist detachment of Contemporary Art from the reality of production and praxis, leading to a negligent attitude towards the formal details that might constitute a work of art. However, it is evident from the work Warburton makes and endorses, that his focus is on artists understanding how to use *existing* software tools. He is interested in work that shares some of the ‘spectacular’ dimension of cutting edge digital effects but that also has a ‘self-awareness’ of its own creation. Since he won’t break with this horizon, his work ultimately shares the same contemporary CGI aesthetic as the artists he criticises.

Furthermore, Warburton’s interest in playing with the artistic potentials of software has seemingly been overtaken by the market demand for his critical essays. His 2020 show at Arebyte gallery, *RGBFAQ* evidenced that he is more like the critical commentators (such as Hito Steyerl) he dismisses than he would care to admit. Rather than show us how CGI might create interesting new propositions and experiences, he uses it to illustrate essays into the history of digital images. I would assume that Warburton has been converted into an artist-as-critic because the gatekeepers of Contemporary Art are more interested in his critical voice than his aesthetic propositions.



Fig 36: *Homo Economicus* (Alan Warburton, 2018), three channel HD computer generated simulation, 6'.



Fig 37: *RGBFAQ* (Alan Warburton, 2020). Warburton's illustrated exploration of the history of computer generated imagery.

If Warburton is interested in playing within the sandbox of contemporary software (albeit so that the “suite of Newtonian physics” is “pushed to breaking point and beyond” (Warburton, 2016) he doesn't really tackle the issue of the forms of representation that are already built into that software. Despite the supposedly limitless potentials of an *ex nihilo* digital world, the prosumer tools of 3D software return you to a highly standardized sense of space and form. At one level this is because of the instrumental logic hardwired in these fundamentally

commercial tools. As Jonathan Monaghan points out, “the software I use is essentially designed to make images that are intended to seduce and sell products, and so I work complicitly with this” (Monaghan, 2019). Software conforms to normalized ideals of physics and space at the deepest level, and these boundaries represent a limit to what can be represented by artists: “The deeper they go into the operational schematism governing the complex of manipulations for each defined element of variability, the more engaged they are in piloting the diacritical, discretized synthesizing of the moving images contributing to the production of the ‘cohesive scene’ of the analogico–digital image of mainstream film and media” (Corgan, 2017). 3D software thus pins you within a Euclidean field rooted in fixed point perspective.

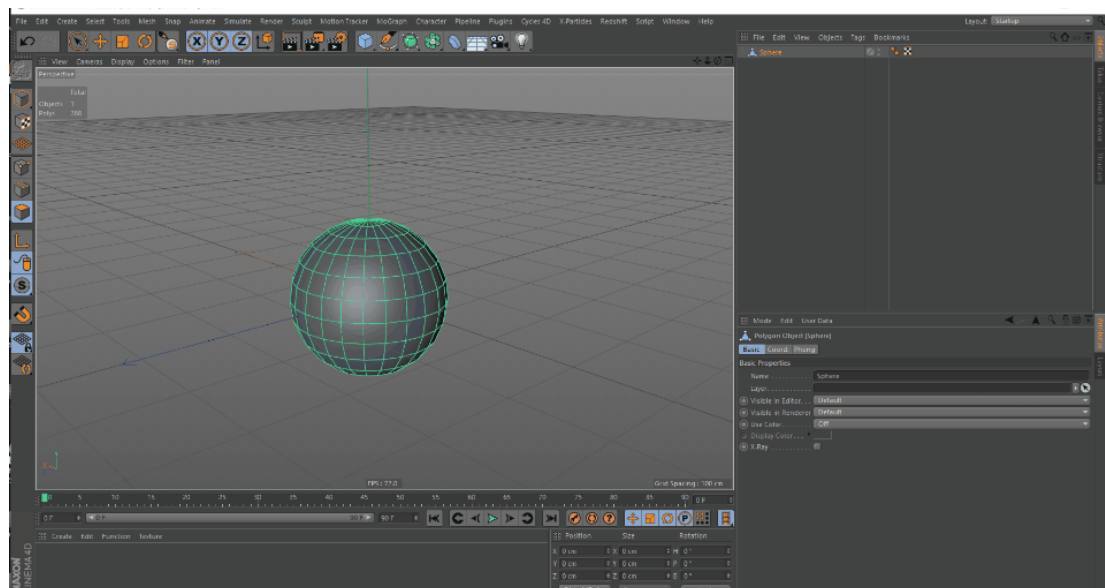


Fig 38: Screenshot of the Cinema 4D interface showing the underlying grid and a basic geometric form.

As artist and critic Mark Wilsher points out, “the virtual space you are operating in has no connection to real space as experienced by a human being. It is much closer to the mathematician and philosopher Henri Poincaré’s description of ‘geometric space’ as continuous, homogeneous and infinite, an abstract representation of the three dimensions of real space that is most suited to handling coordinates and geometric constructions” (Wilsher, 2019). One can change the physics and mutate the structures in industrial 3D software, but this perspectival limit is the fixed horizon of CGI. This is what makes CGI work

appear so uniform and homogenous – every image is fundamentally following the same underlying logic.

Warburton highlights how difficult it is to learn to use 3D software but he doesn't address the intense complexity and capital intensive structures that are needed to actually create (or disrupt) the software itself – to potentially produce different ways of creating images. Digital tools shift artists' relation to form by presenting as an impenetrable black box – a fixed limit. Ed Atkins frames the situation well by comparing his process to the materialist/formal practices of Structuralist filmmaking which sought to reveal and recode the machinery behind the image, making celluloid and projection equipment effectively the 'subject' of the work: "unlike structural film, my work can't be exposing the mechanisms of its making, because I don't know the mechanisms. I don't know how to programme this software or how to decrypt these acres of binary" (Kidner, 2011). In no other medium are the fundamental logics shaping work so hidden, inaccessible and inviolable.

In many ways I feel that the use of 3D CGI animation software as it currently stands represents something of a dead-end for artistic practice, a game of diminishing returns with the same negative, generic signifier. However, I want to briefly explore the work of Jacolby Satterwhite, whose video works are set within a 3D CGI space, but adopt a very different ideological position and formal approach than the works previously discussed. I contend that Satterwhite proposes strategies that might begin to point the way beyond the digital cul-de-sac. Firstly, his works are couched in a very different framework than the critical, nihilistic or melancholic perspective of most of his peers. Set in an "animated technofuture" that is "too much fun to be truly dystopian" (Kopel, 2018), he belongs to a new generation of artists who see digital tools as less of a sign of complicity and more as a potentially utopian space. Massimiliano Gioni, the associate director at the New Museum, observes "a generational shift in the way artists perceive computer-generated imagery as an artistic medium, and finds that it's losing its 'creepy' stigma... They're using video to create a new kind of humanity" (Atwood, 2015).



Fig 39: Two-dimensional video in a three-dimensional setting producing visual tension in *Reifying Desire* (Jacolby Satterwhite, 2014).

Satterwhite's departure point is a political perspective that sees the digital spaces he can create as a place of refuge for a gay, black man, "a metaphor for the safe space that I only understand being someone who was constantly externalized" (Osenlund, 2017). While one might want to critically probe Satterwhite's identitarian framework of queer politics, and uncritical take on digital space, his sensibility is arguably more akin to the original sense of possibility of early 'net' art, defiantly reversing the polarity of digital animation as a negative artistic signifier. Rather than sink into simplistic or pessimistic post-humanism, Satterwhite insists on the productive fusion of the human and the technological. This is manifested as a formal gesture inscribed into the process of creation, still aware of the implicit tensions between the corporeal and the digital, but opening up these contradictions in an engaged and positive way: "I like my relationship to technology to be super tactile, with every thumbprint embedded in every mark I make in a digital program," he explains. "A kind of subconscious poetry happens. If you add so much warm energy to such a cold artifact, it creates a nice tension" (Aima, 2019). Although Satterwhite's work is still set within the Euclidian grid of 3D software and uses many objects generated through classic CGI geometry, he eschews voiceover or

textual elements, instead returning to gestural, non-referential forms like abstract painting, music and dance:

“It allows me to expand on the formalist concerns I had as a painter. I was a formalist with quasi-pretentious, Bauhaus-y obsessions with texture, planes and lines, shapes and possibilities. But I can make them move now. I’m a twenty-first century kid with a 3D animation program at my disposal. My body allows me to do way more things. It lends itself to more dynamic drawing principles. When I trace my movements digitally I make very interesting things happen with line, composition, light, and shadow. In a time-based medium these things escalate in another dimension...I have more technique and more touch” (dis Magazine, 2014).

Satterwhite begins to break the crushingly totalising nature of a totally 3D CGI environment by introducing disruptive elements – crudely green screened captures of Satterwhite himself performing and dancing, often in multiples, are beamed into the grid, while the familiar CGI objects are augmented with traces of writing, and abstract hand-drawn scribbles, rendering the illusion of perspective less certain and (pseudo-)realist.

Any reservations I may have about his work are centred on the aesthetic and formal limits of these elements. For example, his use of music feels like an external soundtrack – conventional pop sitting on top of the image rather than finding connection with the work’s internal rhythms. His use of CGI revisits familiar textures, mixed with a slightly trashy sensibility reminiscent of online Tumblr subcultures like Vaporwave⁴ (a kind of lumpen digital retro-ism) that feels somewhat familiar. However, these elements lend a pop sensibility to the work, undercutting any ‘high art’ references and tapping into the less self-conscious cultures of the internet. Satterwhite’s achievement is the projection of a real sensuous joy into the work, the exact opposite of the frigid, inhuman visions of many of his peers. Satterwhite avoids a techno-fetishist accelerationism that heightens the worst excesses of capitalism’s alienated social relations in order to (supposedly) move beyond them. His work includes emotional references to a troubled family life, an celebration of queer sociality, and is grounded in a position of resistance, not acquiescence, to the system. By bringing all this social content into relation with the formalist impulses of his training as a painter, he begins to stretch the limits of the closed system of CGI.

1.5 Summary

This section has considered two apparently divergent movements of digital moving image making in the context of Contemporary Art in the 21st century. Despite their radically different stylistic qualities, discourses and claims, both tendencies seem unwilling or unable to innovate a distinctly new artistic moving image language: where the 'artist filmmaker' generation of the 2000s replicated conventions from cinema of the 20th century, the 'post-internet' artists that emerged after 2010 have created CGI videos that usually adopt the aesthetics and techniques of the mainstream culture industry.

Both movements actually echo critic Jonathan Romney's appraisal of digital imagery in Mike Leigh's *Mr. Turner* – the digital is acceptable when simulating the media and forms of the past but 'problematic' when overt and spectacular. Romney's blindness to the digital medium as long as it replicates conventional filmmaking is very similar to the lack of consideration of the question of the digital in the 'cinematic' artists' films of the 2000s and early 2010s, where narrative and/or dramatic content was the main focus of the work. Digital cameras and editing software are merely a more convenient, affordable set of tools that invisibly replace the old film cameras and editing suites. On the other hand, Romney, as a 'serious' critic, sees CGI as somewhat distasteful and 'kitsch'; an attitude frequently mirrored by many artists using CGI. Digital animation is most often used as a negative signifier in contemporary artworks – it evokes the inhuman aspects of digital culture and is used to 'interrogate' the alienating spectacles of the culture industry. Most artists deploy CGI as part of a 'critical' commentary, not in order to explore the affective or formal potentials of the medium.

Ironically, the horizon opened up by Turner and depicted in Mike Leigh's film – the beginning of artistic abstraction and formal innovation in response to new technologies – is fading today. Where the Modernist Avant-Garde followed the logic of Turner's breakthroughs in representation, seeking to outrun mainstream

mass culture, Contemporary Art feels like it is often in a rear guard relation to the culture industry, either adopting its tools and techniques or simply articulating a critical standpoint on mass culture without really providing alternative formal strategies. Where artists like Turner and Cezanne represented a break with the naturalistic, perspectival painting of the post-Renaissance period and inaugurated the beginnings of formalist abstraction, artists working with digital moving image technologies seem enmeshed in cinematic naturalism, or trapped in a limited critical dialogue with the photo-realist logic of 3D animation software.

I feel that the problems I have outlined in this section in relation to artists' moving image are evidence of a profound impasse in Contemporary Art. In the next section, I will examine the film and video culture of the 20th century in order to contextualise this impasse. I will compare the motivations and ambitions of the Modernist Avant-Garde and its supersession by the conceptual, critical logic of Contemporary Art which, I argue, is currently in crisis. I will set out a theoretical framework that may allow us to move beyond the current situation, towards a more embodied, affective, and formally engaged approach to art. This will return me to questions raised by the inheritors of the techniques developed by Turner – painters that sit between the figurative and the abstract – and how their approaches might inspire new possibilities in relation to the digital moving image.

Section 2

Modernism, Contemporary Art and The Figural

2.1 Introduction: Have We Forgotten?

"Have we already forgotten? Why we go into this in the first place? How it was that the moving lights, the washes of colour, first brought us to this world and thanked us, with their generous presentation of themselves, for being there with them? Has the memory faded so radically of those first inklings of beauty, scattering in all its ungraspable ephemerality across our skins as much as our eyes, beams traversing and dragging into motion muscle and bowel, as music drags us into the dance?" (Cubitt, 1995, vii)

This effusive, lyrical quote by theorist Sean Cubitt (from the preface to a mid '90s collection of writings by Avant-Garde filmmaker Malcolm Le Grice, titled *Experimental Cinema in the Digital Age*), can be read as a powerful, condensed statement encapsulating an approach to artists' moving image that has been completely abandoned in the 21st century. Cubitt speaks of something 'forgotten', and I want to argue that the last 25 years have indeed been about a palpable forgetting (or rather, rejecting) of considerations formerly at the heart of moving image practice. The formal possibilities of colour, light, rhythm and structure, as well as the effects of moving image technologies on sensation, perception and cognition are no longer aspects of the discourse or intentions surrounding artistic practice. The visceral metaphors conjured by Cubitt – the 'dragging' of 'muscle and bowel', or the notion of 'dance', speak to the corporeal nature of experience at stake in experiencing moving image artworks, and hint at a vitalist conception of experience and nonverbal communication long since banished from the field.

Comparing its passionate tone to the recent framing of digital moving image practice outlined in the preceding section underlines the dominance of thematic

content and critical discourse over form and affect in Contemporary Art. In 2015 I served on the Jury for the Tenderflix award for moving image works; every single entry had a voiceover, either providing a theoretical overview or somehow narrativising the image. Belief in the power of images, or the ability of form to set out an artistic position, appeared to be absent. The remit of art has drifted from the visceral to the critical, and from the revelatory to the academic. 'Formalism' has become a derisive term suggesting blithe naivety, or worse, apolitical complicity with a deeply unjust society. The 'autonomous' subject of Kantian aesthetics – now universally characterized as an instrumentalising European male bourgeois made free and 'disinterested' by the labour and exploitation of others – is immediately invoked by any hint of 'art pour l'art' abstraction⁵. Vitalism or interest in the corporeal is often deemed suspicious, irrational or mystical, unless rendered acceptable by being absorbed into a politicized discourse of 'bodies' or identitarian theory.

Cubitt's claims in this 1995 foreword could be seen as a last echo of artistic Modernism, a movement first challenged in the 1960s and subsequently implicitly rejected by the logic of Contemporary Art (although the disintegration of Modernist tendencies occurred somewhat later in the domain of experimental filmmaking). His prose is evidence of the persistence of vitalist thinking that has periodically been reconsidered since its emergence in the late 19th century. Cubitt's idea that experimental film and video can "return us to a primal encounter with the physical power of our first perceptions" (Cubitt, 1995, vii) seems like a problematic folly, yet can actually be seen as the cornerstone of the Modernist dream of an experimental, non-narrative cinema – the belief that new ways of seeing, of revealing the world without the overcoding of ideology, could be the 'role' of art – formal exploration itself as the aim of art, and providing its unique language and standpoint.

In subsection 2.2 I wish to briefly revisit such Modernist conceptions of film and video making, now so divorced from contemporary concerns, to unearth what has been 'forgotten'. The discussion will look at how Modernist approaches unravelled with the arrival of video, and how formalist practices in film and

video ultimately split off into a sphere that came to be known as New Media art. I hope to situate the previous section's discussion of 21st century moving image practice through re-visiting 20th century formalism in film and video. When such ideas, though superseded, are so manifestly alien to the current context, they might have some utility in breaking it open and reconsidering it. What has been forgotten and why has it slipped out of mind? I wish to remind the reader of modalities of practice that have been generally discarded, yet might hold clues to moving beyond the impasse I encountered while pursuing my practice in the contemporary moving image context.

I have a hunch that the baby has been thrown out with the bathwater. The lack of consideration of form, and the reliance on increasingly textualised content and critique, has drained something from art and moving image practice. Subsection 2.3 will consider some of the ways that Contemporary Art is discussed in the present moment and demonstrate that there is a palpable sense of crisis in the field expressed by a diverse array of commentators. Without the formalist logic that undergirded Modernism, I would argue that Contemporary Art seeks to find a purpose – a social role – or just dissipates itself within the broader culture industry. When art is no longer 'for art's sake', when it can stake no particular position in the world, it must by definition become instrumentalised, 'put to work', and lose its distinctiveness as a field of activity. There seems to be a general sense that 'something is wrong' with Contemporary Art, with many theorists suggesting the solution to the palpable lack of conviction or 'quality' in Contemporary Art is for art to become 'properly' political, doubling down on the idea that art should be 'in the service of' politics, or that political efficacy should itself become a new measure to evaluate its success or failure. Meanwhile, other commentators have begun to suggest Contemporary Art would do well to address its deficits by emulating the technical accomplishments or focus-grouped, consumer-oriented practices of the culture industry. No one seems prepared to allow art to have it's own space or logic, one that might not have to live up to the inflated conceptual claims of the present or just be folded into the broader offering of the culture industry.

It is notable that in the years since the Sean Cubitt's foreword to Le Grice's book was published, he has become established as a media theorist. He digs into the substructures and processes that facilitate (digital) images in books such as *The Practice of Light: A Genealogy of Visual Technologies from Prints to Pixels* (2014) or *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (2016). Cubitt sits alongside other writers who focus on the scientific underpinnings of new technologies and the alternative possibilities repressed by the standardization of hardware and software (e.g. Jonathan Crary on 19th century pre-photographic techniques and the history of optics (1999) or Rosa Menkman on resolution formats (2020)). This might seem quite a different, more analytic path for Cubitt to follow than his rhapsodizing, elemental prose of 1995 would suggest, however I would argue that there is a level of continuity in his overall concern with materiality and corporeality. Cubitt's 1995 introduction states that Malcolm Le Grice's insistence on the 'physicality' of art "is not a fading Modernism but a vital discipline for makers, one which, once forgotten, produces the thin post-physics of a metaphysical art in which even the materiality of the concept has been evaded" (Cubitt, 1995, vii).

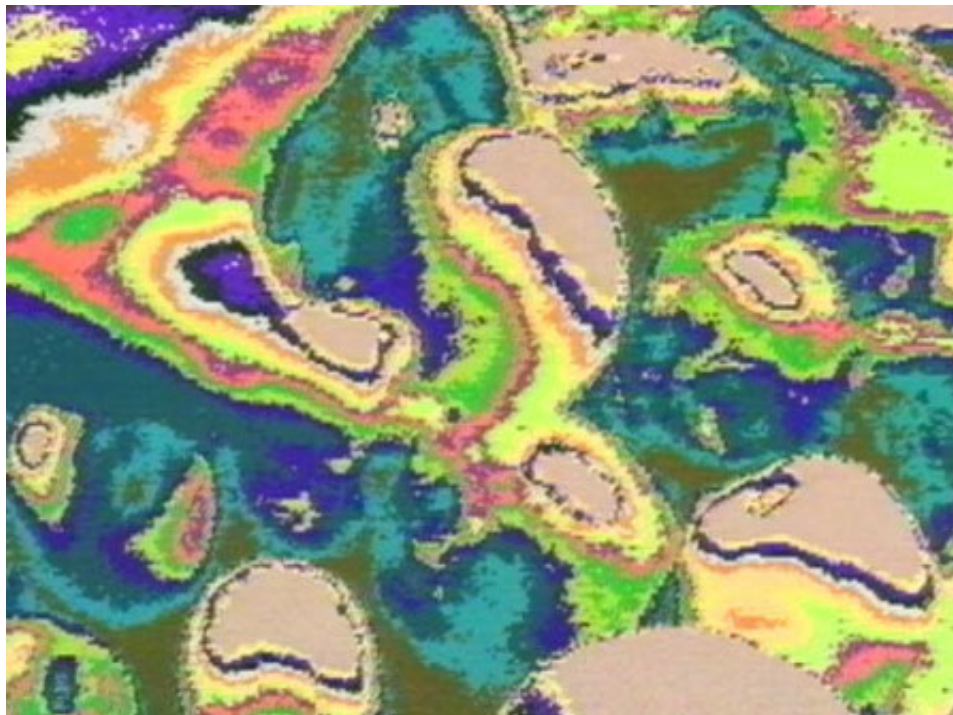


Fig 40: *Digital Still Life* (Malcolm Le Grice, 1984-6), Digibeta, 8'. Originally made with an Atari computer, this demonstrates the formalism inherent in Modernist filmmaking carried over into the emerging digital domain.

Cubitt's arguments for the 'materiality of the concept', his claims for the visceral effects of images, and his concern with the optical processes that undergird media, resonate with the arguments I wish to set out in subsection 2.4.

In response to the overview of Modernist and Contemporary Art, I shall explore an alternative reading of Modernism proposed by Rosalind Krauss, one where Marcel Duchamp is no longer posited as the cerebral godfather of the conceptual, but rather an artist rooted in the optical and the erotic. After tracing some of these claims in relation to vitalist readings of the moving image and its uniquely kinaesthetic affective qualities, I explore Krauss' use of the work of Jean-François Lyotard. It is Lyotard's related notion of the figural that I wish to take up as an alternative to the current 'sociologised' conception of Contemporary Art. The figural is posed as an essentially unrepresentable domain of energies related to libidinal and unconscious processes which can only be hinted at through art's formal and visual characteristics. Although Deleuze describes the figural in vitalist terms as "sensible form related to sensation; it acts immediately on the nervous system, which is of the flesh" (Deleuze, 2016, 34), for Lyotard this process is far more rooted in a psychoanalytic view of subjectivity. This section establishes a framework to think through the formal and conceptual impasse of Contemporary Art, and in particular the role of CGI and digital moving image tools. I have sought to ground my opposition to what I see as dominant strains of conceptualism and functionalism, and to propose a line of enquiry that explores the embodied thinking proposed by Krauss's re-reading of Modernism.

2.2 The Music of Abstraction: Modernism and Form

Today's concept of 'artists' moving image' is comparatively recent. Artistic experimentation in film and video in the 20th century was gathered under a diverse array of movements and approaches, sometimes called 'Avant-Garde', 'experimental', 'underground', 'Materialist/Structuralist', or 'poetic' (O'Pray, 2003, 5). I do not intend to engage in forensic detail with the well-documented history of 20th century artists' filmmaking but rather to sketch out dominant themes as a counterpoint to the discussions of recent moving image practice raised in section 1 of this thesis. Setting out these broad parameters of Modernist approaches will contextualise a further discussion of the conceptual parameters of Contemporary Art and the clear break with Modernist concerns in experimental film and video. However, to some degree, I *am* also re-examining Modernism as an act of reclamation. Revisiting this history has put into focus certain possibilities opened up in my own practice, and highlights how avenues that present themselves as potential solutions to frustrating dead ends in the present can sometimes return us to outmoded methodologies. Certainly, many of the conclusions I have arrived at through practice echo the procedures of the Avant-Garde. Awareness of this precedent brings clarity, but is also a caution not to simply retread routes exhausted by Modernism. Thus, this brief overview could be seen as cautionary – a reminder not to simply retreat into nostalgia for previous notions of film, video or moving image as art. My focus on digital moving image, and the potentials of the new array of tools and technique it presents, is primarily rooted in dismay at the relatively conservative and narrow parameters of that field today.

Despite the diverse banners and often bitterly opposed movements marking out particular approaches to artistic film making, there was, from a 21st century perspective, a surprising number of shared concerns across almost seventy years of experimental film history. From the seminal Avant-Garde that emerged in relation to developments in broader art movements, through post-war American underground cinema, to Structuralist film and early video art, moving image

practice tended towards formalism because it was explicitly defined (often in differing ways) against the dominance of narrative and representational form in commercial cinema or TV. Laura Mulvey characterised the film Avant-Garde as the “negation of dominant cinema” (O’Pray, 2003, 5). The ‘pure’ and abstract cinema of the 1920s and the later movements of poetic, experimental cinema and Structuralism all sought to oppose film’s “enslavement to traditional art forms, particularly theater and literature” (Gunning, 1986, 64). Louis Aragon called on a “new audacious aesthetic, a sense of modern beauty’ to rid cinema of the ‘old, impure, poisonous alloy’ which binds it to its ‘indomitable enemy’, theater” (Rees, 1999, 21). The Futurists insisted that cinema must “never copy the stage. The Cinema, being essentially visual, must above all fulfill the evolution of painting, detach itself from reality, from photography, from the graceful and solemn. It must become antigraceful, deforming, impressionistic, synthetic dynamic, free-wording” (Umbro, 1973). The later, more austere, intellectual movements around Structuralist film, might have rejected the “cinema of pure vision” (Rees, 1999, 72), but were even more devoted to a rigorous formal deconstruction of the process of cinematic apparatus and ‘reading’ and a thoroughgoing rejection of representation and narrative dominant in the mainstream.

As the Futurist manifesto reveals, film was both seen as a new medium with unique potential, but one still understood within the logic of painting’s evolution (Umbro, 1973). The birth of artists’ film is typically read alongside the emergence of Cubism in painting, a moment where representation becomes secondary, “gradually de-structuring portrayal” and a concern with “material and process... as content” becomes dominant (Le Grice, 1995, 20). Avant-Garde artist Hans Richter stated how “Problems in modern art lead directly into the film. Organization and orchestration of form, colour, the dynamics of motion, simultaneity, were problems with which Cézanne, the cubists, the futurists had to deal” (Richter, cited in Elder, 2007, 5).

If such Modernist preoccupations derived from Avant-Garde painting shaped the direction of Avant-Garde film, the Modernist drift away from representation in

both media could be seen as primarily inspired by music. Music's non-referential characteristics – its immanence of form and content – had been the inspiration for painting's attempt to free itself from the increasing influence of literature during the first stirrings of Modernism and abstraction. As early as the 1870s, designer and writer August Endell had written about "a completely new Art... with forms which signify nothing, represent nothing and remind us of nothing, which arouse our souls as deeply and as strongly as music has always been able to do" (Endell, 1992, 62). Writing about the origins of the Avant-Garde, Clement Greenberg noted that "Because of its 'absolute' nature, its remoteness from imitation, its almost complete absorption in the very physical quality of its medium, as well as because of its resources of suggestion, music had come to replace poetry as the paragon art. It was the art which the other avant-garde arts envied most, and whose effects they tried hardest to imitate... But only when the avant-garde's interest in music led it to consider music as a *method* of art rather than as a kind of effect did the avant-garde find what it was looking for" (Greenberg, 1992, 557).

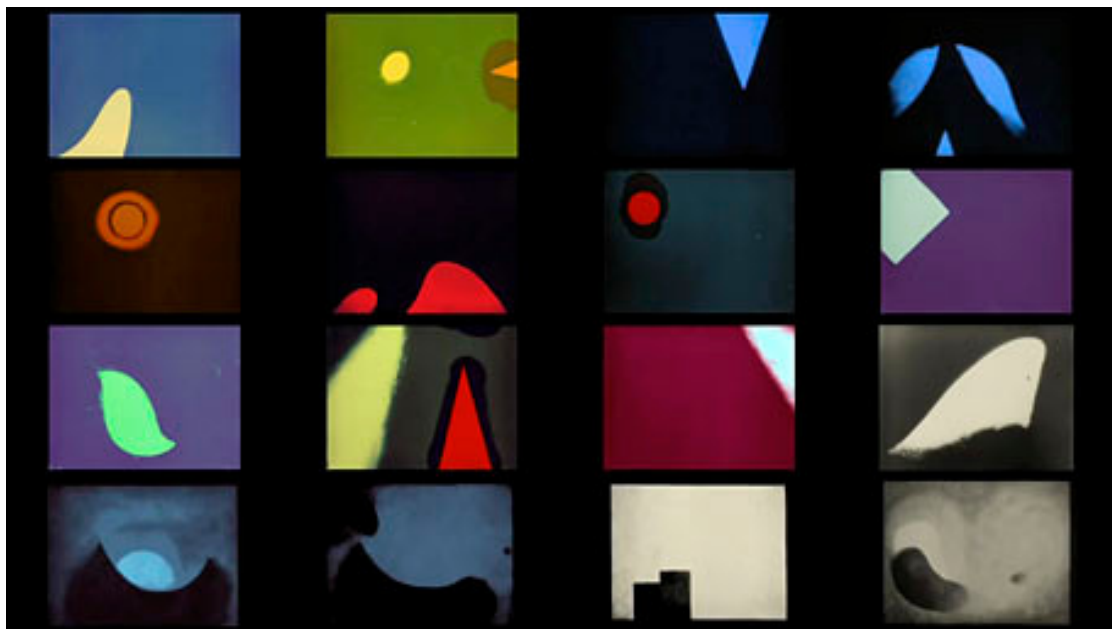


Fig 41: A series of frames from *Lichtspiel Opus 1* (Walter Ruttmann, 1921), 16mm film, 10'. Considered one of the earliest examples of formalist 'eye music'.

Music could be seen as the most dominant metaphor and reference for the seminal 'pure' or 'absolute' cinema works of the 1920s. The kinetic, temporal

nature of film meant it cleaved even closer to music's non-referential, formal qualities than painting ever could. Walter Ruttmann's pioneering abstract film *Opus 1* (1921) was described by the critic Bernard Diebold as "eye-music" (Leslie, 2004, 46). The Futurists set out an agenda for "cinematic musical researches (dissonances, harmonies, symphonies of gestures, events, colors, lines, etc.)" (Marinetti, 1916), while Richter and his collaborator Swedish artist Viking Eggeling based their theories of visual composition on formal principles inspired by music:

"In musical counterpoint, we found a principle which fitted our philosophy: every action produces a corresponding reaction. Thus, in the contrapuntal fugue, we found the appropriate system, a dynamic and polar arrangement of opposing energies, and in this model we saw an image of life itself" (Richter, cited in Elder, 2007, 25).

This relation between experimental cinema and music can be traced throughout the 20th century tradition of experimental film. Malcolm Le Grice's longstanding interest in the relation between music and film, or Lis Rhodes' expanded cinema works, in particular her 1975 piece *Light Music* (1975) which explored a synaesthetic relation between sound and vision rooted in the Avant-Garde tradition of 'eye-music' established in the 1920s, are only two such examples.



Fig 42: *Symphonie Diagonale* (Viking Eggeling, 1924), 16mm film, 7'. Exemplifies the Modernist search for universal formal language in film.

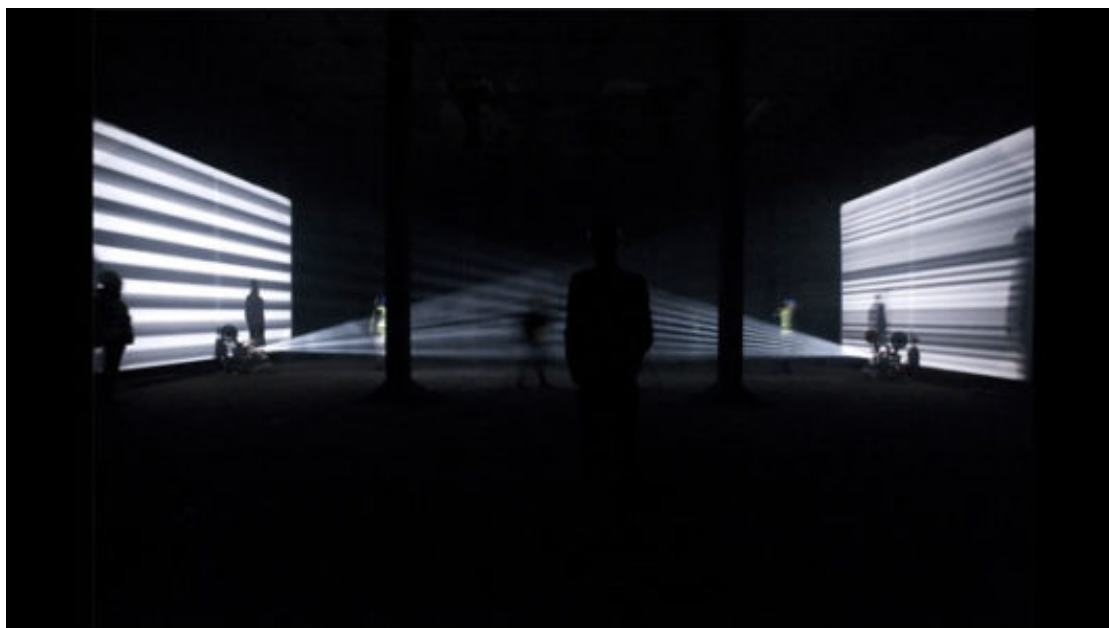


Fig 43: *Light Music* (Lis Rhodes, 1975), two 16mm film projections, 25'. Rhodes explores the materiality of film's optical sound strip and its potential to generate visual experiences.

The retreat of 'pure' film from reproduction and representation (inspired by music) was seen by many of the Avant-Garde as part of the great Modernist search for a 'universal' visual language, an "ideal form of expression" that "might even supplant ordinary language in many of its uses" (Elder, 2007, 36). This privileging of the visual inaugurated a 'hostility' to verbal language that persisted in Avant-Garde or experimental cinema throughout the 20th century (Wollen, 1982). Amongst the first wave Avant-Garde of the 1920s, this quest for a transcendent non-verbal language involved an inherent conflict between the "irrational, poetic, magical qualities" (Elder, 2007, 4) seen as inherent to cinema, and the Avant-Garde drive towards "an attitude of universality – clarity – reality" (Elder, 2007, 9) incorporating an "ascetic and disciplined presentation of the subject, wherein reason would triumph over feeling" (Elder, 2007, 36). However, such utopian/rationalist universality was always in tension with, and eventually gave way to, a more 'irrational' characterisation of abstract film as a language of the unconscious. Writing in the 1950s, Lithuanian-American filmmaker Jonas Mekas insisted that the 'art of cinema' could only be established on the basis of an individual, poetic approach:

“In American experimental-poetic films, Stan Brakhage or Kenneth Anger could serve as an example of the kind of modern film-poet who creates, not according to the technical rules of film-making... but rather according to the rules of his own subconscious – that is where the real creation begins” (Mekas, cited in Curtis, 1971, 62-3).

Historian of experimental cinema P. Adams Sitney places the ‘visionary’ and ‘mythopoetic’ films of lyrical film makers like Maya Deren and Gregory Markopoulos at the heart of his account of the American Avant-Garde, claiming that the “recurrent theme of the American avant-garde film is the triumph of the imagination” (Sitney, 2002, 102).



Fig 44: *Dog Star Man* (Stan Brakhage, 1961), 16mm film, 51'. A seminal work of the American ‘poetic’ approach to experimental filmmaking, seeking to trigger the unconscious.



Fig 45: *Meshes of the Afternoon* (Maya Deren, 1943), 16mm film, 14'.

The freeing of film language from determinant subject matter and its 'mining' of the subconscious allowed Avant-Garde filmmaking to be posed as an exploration of intuition at the level of technique and process. The relation between artist and camera was "one that embraced spontaneity, accident and the action of the body itself" (O'Pray, 2003, 63). The filmmakers of the London Film Makers Co-op, a hub for experimental and Structuralist approaches from the 1960s until the '90s, "began with no theories; theory was applied to films after they were made, as analysis of what had been made." (Rees, 1999, 82). Structuralist film represented a hardening of attitude towards the romantic humanist notion of the artistic subconscious prevalent in post-war American Avant-Garde film, marking the point where the "rhetoric of inspiration has changed to the language of aesthetics; Promethean heroism collapses into a consciousness of the self" (Sitney, 2002, 355). Structuralist filmmakers shifted to an approach exploring systems, theories, and "visual and cognitive ideas of structure, process and chance then appearing in the other arts (especially in the more conceptual side of Cage, Rauschenberg and Johns)" (Rees, 1999, 72). But Structuralist film's approach, although the opposite of 'intuitive' creation, still meant bypassing

rational intentionality or the idea of ‘thematic’ propositions. Paul Sharits described his flicker film *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* (1968) as dealing “with the non-understandable, the impossible, in a tightly and precisely structured way. The film will not ‘mean’ *something* – it will ‘mean’, in a very concrete way, nothing” (Sharits, cited in Sitney, 2002, 360).

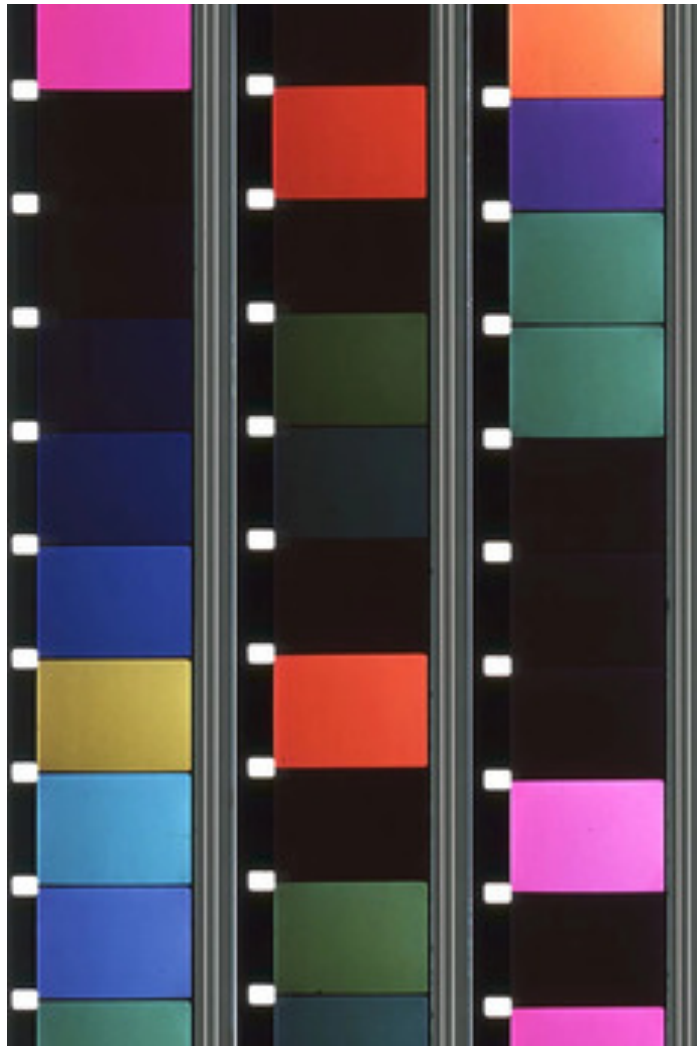


Fig 46: A series of frames from *N:O:T:H:I:N:G* (Paul Sharits, 1968), 16mm film, 36'. Demonstrates Sharits' systems-led, flicker film approach.

The consistent corollary of such an exploratory relation to process and equipment, whether rooted in a poetic notion of the unconscious or a more rigorous, purist formalism, was the Modernist pre-occupation with materiality – the “progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium” (Greenberg, 1992, 558). The early Avant-Garde “literally experimented with the mechanics of the camera, processor and printer... this allowed film-makers to control and

physically ‘interfere in’ the printing and processing process to achieve their own effects... This approach placed film nearer to the manipulations of painting and sculpture, and broke through the technological mystique of film-making lending it open to a fully-fledged Modernism, in the sense of a ‘return to the materials’” (O’Pray, 2003, 97). Where early abstract film had been preoccupied with using material experimentation in the service of “kinetic studies (abstract animation and single-frame photography)” (Curtis, 1971, 155), the American school engaged in radical acts, directly manipulating celluloid (Stan Brakhage’s painted film style is exemplary of such approaches) towards expressive, ‘poetic’ ends. The purest expression of Modernist self-reflexivity about the medium, rejecting the illusion and sensuality of ‘optical’ cinema or poetic ideas of affect and ‘expressivity’, culminates with the Structuralist movement’s focus on “the recognition of the physical properties of film – the ‘film as the (only) subject of film’ school” (Curtis, 1971, 155). Sitney identified four formal techniques that he argued characterised Structural film: the fixed-camera position, the ‘flicker’ effect, re-photography off the screen and loop printing (Meigh-Andrews, 2014, 90). The 20th century focus on medium and material meant direct engagement with the technologies of filmmaking. This often meant a ‘DIY’ approach exemplified by the co-op movement which, at its height in the 1960s and ‘70s, had its basis in “artisanal production, with film-makers who do as much as possible themselves at every stage of the film-making process” (Wollen, 1982). In the London Film Makers Co-Op, Malcolm Le Grice “made a home-made printing machine, Annabel Nicholson’s *Slides* (1971) had 35mm slides, light leaked film, sewn film... dragged through the contact printer, directly and intuitively controlled” (Rees, 1999, 78). This kind of direct control also typified the general tendency to avoid and reject the techniques and tendencies of industrial cinema at all costs.



Fig 47: A frames from *Slides* (Annabel Nicholson, 1971). "35mm slides, light leaked film, sewn film... dragged through the contact printer, directly and intuitively controlled" (Rees, 1999, 78).

Modernist devotion to formal innovation through experimentation and self-created machines and systems was often grounded in an idea that art, and the technology of film in particular, could innovate techniques to generate new forms which in turn would show the world anew. New ways of seeing register a change in general subjectivity and formal abstraction (beginning with Cubism and the 'Cubist cinema'), which emerges in part as an attempt to articulate and reflect broader social, epistemic, and technological shifts - where "scientists have gone beyond the three dimensions of Euclidean geometry", artists must engage with "new dimensions of space" (Apollinaire, 1992, 181). However, the transformative horizon of Modernist formalism primarily acted on individual perception, by making "forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged" (Shklovsky, 1992, 277). From early Avant-Garde filmmakers' search for techniques that generated primary geometric forms to replace existing structures of language and knowledge, to the poetic and optical cinema's

“attack upon the (pre-) conceptual nervous system of the viewer” (Curtis, 1971, 157), abstract film was an attempt to bypass the rational filters determined by culture and ideology. Such experimental film techniques could return the viewer to a state of ‘primary perception’, understood as “the liberation of subconscious processes and the transformation of human consciousness” (O’Pray , 2003, 13). David Curtis shows how the experience of Stan Brakhage’s abstract techniques could reveal truth, claiming that the “rhythm of his films is the rhythm of the camera, twenty-four frames per second, or more, or less; the eye – increased blink-rate in time of crisis – rapid change of focus; the memory – the rate at which image-recall operates and the body – breathing, heartbeat, childbirth contractions, etc. Their beauty is the beauty of the object revealed” (Curtis, 1971, 131). The idea of formal film’s ability to challenge perception mutated throughout the 20th century, with Structuralism rejecting the visceral subjectivity of poetic film for a ‘cooler’ approach, rooted in exploring the nature of the cinematic apparatus. This contained an implicit politics of anti-illusionism and ‘demystification’ proposed by artists like Peter Gidal, where the interdependence of all the elements of cinematic materials and technology would be “revealed as a model of how the viewer is intentionally connected to his or her world” (Krauss, 1999, 25). Malcolm Le Grice, whose approach was less doctrinaire, attempted to resolve the tension between the intuitive process of formalist practice with his political beliefs through the notion of the ‘politics of perception’. Le Grice saw his works as “not taking up political issues but attempting to make works that require the spectator to think in a different way outside dominant ideologies refusing fixity of meaning or systems of belief” (cited by Bovier and May, 2013). This in part echoes Theodor Adorno’s defence of Modernist formalism against charges of bourgeois complicity in his 1962 essay *Commitment*, where he asserts that “even in the most sublimated work of art there is a hidden ‘it should be otherwise’... The content of works of art is never the amount of intellect pumped into them: if anything, it is the opposite” (Adorno, 1998, 194).



Fig 48: *Berlin Horse* (Malcolm Le Grice, 1970) 16mm film, 8'. "Black and white footage was subjected to multiple superimposition using colour filters, creating a fluid ever-changing solarized image... an experimentation of the film medium with relation to sound, colour, dynamism and examining the concepts of time" (Breed, 2012).

The unravelling of Modernism in the plastic arts and painting began in the 1960s, and can be seen as related to this tension between 'pure' form and the politics of social reality. Modernist formalism was sometimes defended in terms of a complex praxis, a dialectical relation between material and idea proposed by sophisticated commentators like Adorno, whose dictum 'form is sedimented content' (Adorno, 1997, 144) and extensive aesthetic theories attempted to reconcile art's simultaneously 'pure' formal autonomy with its social/political potential. However, the powerful critical establishment (dominated by high priest figures like Clement Greenberg) that emerged to police the privileged position and correct comportment of Modernism as 'high art' often ossified into philosophical idealism or a positivistic and crude 'materialism'. One of the principle charges against Modernist formalism is its tendency to elevate a certain metaphysical purity, its desire to "express the grandeur of metaphysical forms" (Apollinaire, 1992, 182) where "recourse is made to a Kantian ontology (a

noumenal world ‘behind’ mere appearances) in order to justify abstraction” (Burgin, 1992, 912). This led to a sense of “an art of pure signifiers detached from meaning as much as from reference” (Wollen, 1982).

Debates about Modernism’s idealist divorce from social and political reality had raged since the 1930s in various guises (‘realism’ versus ‘formalism’, ‘commitment’ versus ‘autonomy’), but after the 1960s the emergence of Conceptual Art and Pop Art showed that artists were turning en masse to ideas, subject matter and commentary on contemporary culture in defiance of the narrowing Modernist dictats. Conceptual artists “began to focus attention upon the processes of art production rather than the art object itself” (Marshall, 1984). Minimalism and Conceptualism also dealt a blow to the materialist current, prevalent in Clement Greenburg’s Modernist formalist orthodoxies, his insistence on the “real and material” primacy of the medium (Larson, 1987) and the notion of “objecthood” or “pure presence” (Wollen, 1982). Conceptualism delivered

“a rebuff to the Modernist demand for aesthetic confections and for formal novelty for its own sake. It disregarded the arbitrary and fetishistic restrictions which ‘Art’ placed on technology – the anachronistic daubing of woven fabrics with coloured mud, the chipping apart of rocks and the sticking together of pipes – all in the name of timeless aesthetic values” (Burgin, 1992, 911).

Rosalind Krauss’ seminal essay *Grids* accuses Modernism of a sleight of hand, where a focus on materialism actually concealed privileged detachment: “Despite the [Modernist] grid affirming a certain materialism – of the surface of the painting – artists have always discussed it in terms of ‘Being, or Mind or Spirit’... From their point of view, the grid is a staircase to the Universal, and they are not interested in what happens below in the Concrete” (Krauss, 1979, 52). Krauss expresses frustration at “modern art’s will to silence, its hostility to literature, to narrative, to discourse... The barrier it has lowered between the arts of vision and those of language has been almost totally successful in walling the visual arts into a realm of exclusive visuality and defending them against the intrusion of speech” (Krauss, 1979, 50). She understood this narrowness as a “fortress”,

designed to sanctify art's special place in the world, but one that had "increasingly become a ghetto" (Krauss, 1979, 50).

It is easy to see how such currents of Kantian idealism permeated Avant-Garde abstract or poetic film (for example in the dreams of universal language or the notion of the 'object revealed'), or how Greenbergian strictures about materiality suffused the concerns of Structuralist film making (Rosalind Krauss described Structuralist film's focus on the medium itself as "Modernist to its core" (Krauss, 1999, 24)). Critics like Clement Greenburg's vision of Modernist formalism and filmmaker Peter Gidal's notions of Materialist/Structural film both share a kind of defensive puritanism – where the rigour of formalism was a means to shore up 'high art' so it remained distinct, separated and elevated from 'mass culture'. Although Structuralist film, rooted in a deep engagement with film as a medium (but increasingly justified through a political discourse of anti-illusionism or Le Grice's more Adornian 'politics of perception'), remained dominant in artists' approaches to film through the 1970s and '80s and still has adherents today, it was increasingly under attack. Such purist, formalist political positions were in conflict with the emerging radical "agit-prop collectives like Cinema Action, Politkino, the London Women's Film Group" (Rees, 1999, 78), who were dedicated to the idea of film at the service of street level activism and praxis, with hybrid films such as the Berwick Street Collective's *Nightcleaners* (1975) uneasily trying to reconcile both worlds. The equally fraught tension (and growing indistinction) between the strict formalism of the Avant-Garde and the increasingly experimental and political approaches of arthouse cinema also came to a head, leading Peter Wollen to write his famous 1982 essay *The Two Avant-Gardes*. The "pluralism" of the 1970s "produced an avant-garde cinema uncertain of its identity and uncomfortably suspended between political, economic, theoretical and aesthetic concerns" (O'Pray, 2003, 107). However, the Modernist, materialist/formalist approach to the moving image found its deepest challenge in the arrival of affordable video.



Fig 49: *Nightcleaners* (Berwick Street Collective; Marc Karlin, Mary Kelly, James Scott & Humphry Trevelyan, 1975), 16mm film, 90". Intended to be a straightforward 'campaign' film, but came to explore self-reflexive questions about the process of filming and the nature of viewing.

Analogue video's adoption by artists since the introduction of the affordable, portable Sony Portapak in 1967 was a prism for all of the anti-formalist tendencies already underway in the art of the 1960s; its "televisual effect was to shatter the Modernist dream" (Krauss, 1999, 30). Video lacked the immediate tactile materiality of film, and was taken up by Conceptual artists as it bypassed the need for specific technical skills or material interventions and "in the hands of some of its early practitioners like Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, William Anastasi, and others was merely another material put to use in the service of an idea; not an identifying material or medium that defined the artist" (Rush, 2007, 9). It was "more of an adjunct to, or expansion of, other media and practices" (Marshall, 1984), potentially a live or interactive medium, one that could be defined against cinema and would "lead to the eventual eradication of the 'spectator ritual' in art – the activity of, as he called it, 'the going to the temple'" (Douglas David, cited in Meigh-Andrews, 2014, 117). In fact, the primary

influence on the early adoption of video by artists came from performance art, another emergent field defined against Modernism:

“Just when pure formalism had run its course; just when it became politically embarrassing to make objects, but ludicrous to make nothing; just when many artists were doing performance works but had nowhere to perform, or felt the need to keep a record of their performances... just then the Portapak became available” (Hermine Freed, cited in Rush, 2007, 13).



Fig 50: Sony Portapak



Fig 51: *Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square* (Bruce Nauman, 1968), Portapak video transferred to 16mm film, 10'.

Even if video started out as a supplemental medium, and what came to be known as 'artist's video' represented the collapse in categories and boundaries between disciplines (and was taken up by artists who were "influenced by movements and ideas from Fluxism, Performance art, Body art, Arte Povera, Pop Art, Minimalist sculpture, Conceptual Art, avant-garde music, experimental film, contemporary dance and theatre, and a diverse range of other cross-disciplinary cultural activities and theoretical discourses" (Meigh-Andrews, 2014, 2), there was a moment when dedicated practitioners did follow the aesthetic possibilities inherent to video's specific 'material' qualities. A number of groups and organisations devoted to exploring the medium emerged, and can be read as somewhat analogous to the film collective and co-op models of the 1970s. Some had a social focus, becoming 'media activists' working with video's potential to democratise and radicalise broadcasting and television (Meigh-Andrews, 2014, 82), whilst others like London Video Arts dug into the technology and adopted a 'video art'⁶ approach "almost exclusively associated with aesthetic concerns

derived from Modernism” (Meigh-Andrews, 2014, 75), but exploring the distinct qualities of a medium very different from film.

Artists focusing on video sought to define its logic against film, but also against its commodification as mainstream television, and to evolve a distinct language for video that bypassed the emerging conventions of broadcast. Early video artists’ individual and collective practices therefore frequently followed formalist paths that echoed the approaches of the film Avant-Garde and their rejection of cinema. Modernist approaches to film can thus be seen to be echoed in the trajectories of early video. Mirroring the emergence of abstract film and its hostility to language, many of the principles and techniques of early video art were derived from music: John Cage’s compositional approaches were hugely influential on Nam June Paik, while tape loops and the signal modulations of electronic music were direct influences on artists’ video. The ‘pure’ signal approach to video was one where electronic pulses generated lens-free imagery that could be overlapped with electronic music sounds to create synaesthetic works – an idea that later evolved into ‘video synthesizers’. Early video artist Peter Donebauer saw an explicit crossover in these new ‘instruments’:

“As one plays a musical instrument the result is an immediate feedback through the ear of what the body and the mind has created. As one plays a video instrument the result is an immediate feedback through the eye of what the body and the mind has created. Video is the visual equivalent of music” (cited in Meigh-Andrews, 2014, 164).

Pioneers of abstract video Steina and Woody Vasulka came from a background in music, and were attracted by video as it “just let you work without a subject” (cited in Meigh-Andrews, 2014, 100). In focusing more on the ‘material’ apparatus of video, such artists were more concerned with the structural process of image creation rather than subject matter per se, and this led them to privilege exploratory, intuitive or chance processes in the process of creating images, just like the Avant-Garde filmmakers before them. Steina Vasulka speaks of the role



Fig 52: *Entering* (Peter Donebauer, 1974), 2" video master, 8'

of material exploration in relation to video effects and has noted how the new medium could be seen as facilitating experimentation, due to its immediacy (no processing involved, rather electronic pulses that lead directly to visual outputs). Vasulka also asserts the spontaneous, intuitive and chance processes that led to artistic breakthroughs with video:

"There is a danger of being infatuated with an 'idea' and then trying to impose it upon the material. Fortunately, the material has a way of confronting you with 'This is not very interesting, but let me show you something else that is.' If you are alert you can drop off all preconceptions and catch that moment" (Vasulka & Weibel, 2008, 500).

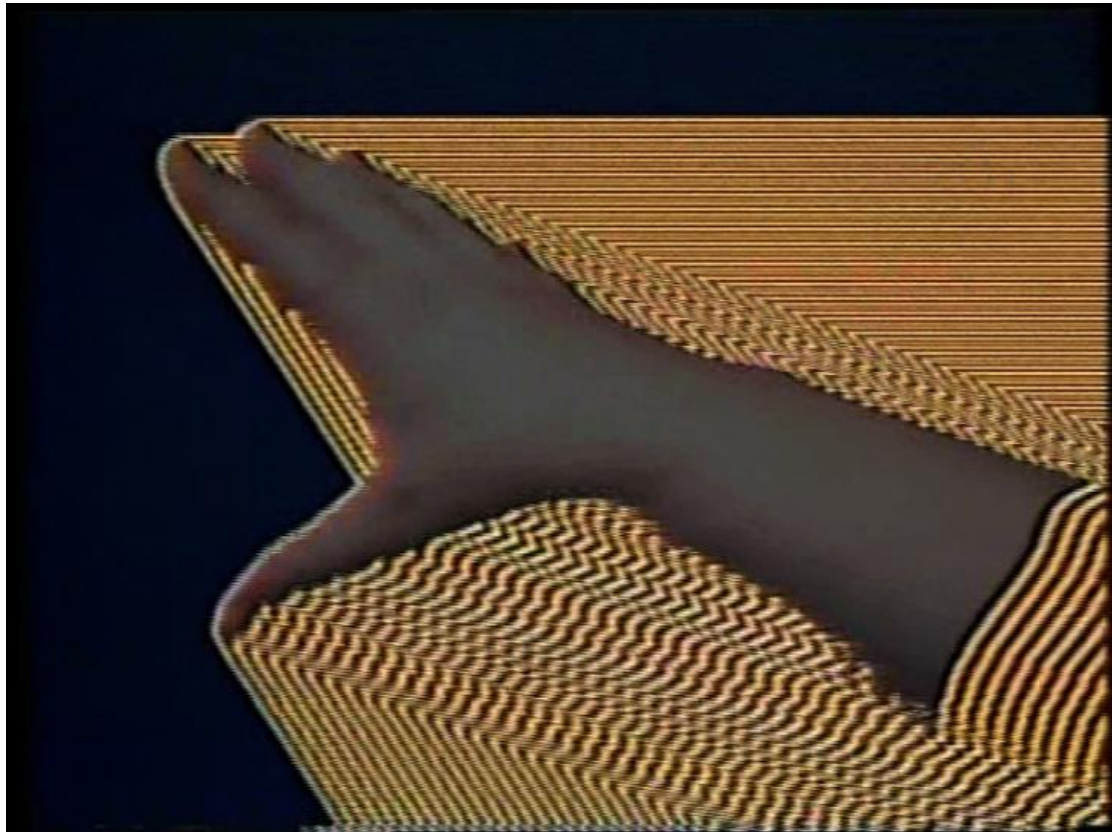


Fig 53: *Vocabulary* (Woody Vasulka, 1973), Video, 4'17".

Video art pioneers tended to be technicians, or collaborated closely with engineers to build machines, a direct result of this intuitive process of experimentation. Research artist and theoretician Don Foresta describes moving from “the playful phase, where they play with the machines” through “mastery” and finally to “the most important phase, where you start building machines yourself because you are dissatisfied with the limitations of the technology” (cited in Vasulka & Weibel, 2008, 500). Like the Modernist filmmakers, such technical journeys allowed for new visual experiences that frequently represented a transformative, idealistic horizon. Woody Vasulka created video images to show new possibilities in reality: “our reality should be the one that we can dream about, be utopian about” (Vasulka & Weibel, 2008, 396).

However, even in the 1970s such formalist approaches to video were out of step with the emergent formations in art making. Critical reception from the art world towards such video art could be damning, with work seen as retrograde that “linked to and perpetuated the outmoded clichés of Modernist

pictorialism” (Robert Pincus-Witten, cited in Meigh-Andrews, 2014, 134). Writing in the mid 1980s, Stuart Marshall, founding member of London Video Arts, asserted that there was “nothing inevitable” about “the entanglement of early British video with late Modernism”, and formalist approaches were simply a response to the institutionalisation of video and its need to stand on an “equal footing” with painting and sculpture: “Video not only had to develop its own practices but also had to argue for the aesthetic validity of these practices” (Marshall, 1984). In an argument reminiscent of Malcom Le Grice’s notion of the “politics of perception” (Bovier and Mey, 2013), Marshall saw Modernist strategies as leading directly to “the establishment of a critical relation to dominant technology and its representational practices” and in particular to subvert “the ideological effects of dominant televisual forms” (Marshall, 1984). Marshall’s subtext, that Modernist interrogations were only acceptable if firmly wedded to an explicitly ‘political’ agenda seems to define the then emerging horizon of Contemporary Art practice. It appears as if early experimental abstract video practitioners were side-lined from the main currents of the art world for being too ‘formalist’. I would argue that such positions ultimately led to a schism in video and digital moving image that has persisted into the present.

This schism is evidenced in the critical gulf between New Media art, often defined by technological/formal engagement, and Contemporary Art which is largely distinguished by its emphasis on conceptual/critical concerns. Even as recently as 2012 (ironically just on the cusp of the renewed ‘post-internet’ engagement with digital art in the Contemporary Art field), art historian and critic Claire Bishop declares the “sphere of ‘new media’ art” a “specialized field of its own” that “rarely overlaps with the mainstream art world” (Bishop, 2012). It is only in this separate world of ‘new media’ that critics and practitioners persist in a deep engagement with the precise qualities of technology as ‘material’: contemporary media theorists such as Lev Manovich insist on a deeper *material* understanding of code and hardware as integral to any practice (Manovich, 2013).

Some of the engineer/artists of the early period of video art, shunned by the art world, ended up in the culture industry, where capital investment in infrastructure allowed for a constant progression in techniques. For example, artists who had studied at the Slade School's Department of Experimental and Electronic Art during the 1970s went on to make "the first completely computer-generated TV ad in the UK for Michelin in 1983" (Rees, 199, 107). Whereas the film Avant-Garde of the early 20th century created innovations that were often adopted by the mainstream (if only in titles, animation and special effects) the evacuation of technically-minded creators from the art world means that today's 'moving image' artists often lag behind the developments of digital tools, only getting access to new equipment and techniques "a generation out of date". Sean Cubitt has written about how the "few technician-artists working with the emerging generations [of technology] are so constrained by the commercial imperatives of hugely expensive research and development programmes that the artistic potentials of the machines take second place, let alone their role as social rather than economic capital" (Cubitt, 1991, 185-6).

Despite this marginalisation of such 'video art' technicians into a 'new media' ghetto, there was a proliferation of artists 'working with video' in the 1970s and '80s, and video practice increasingly echoed the critical/conceptual, discursive, but sprawling and unclassifiable terrain of 'the contemporary'. Rosalind Krauss notes how Modernism was "routed by video's instant success as a practice. For, even if video had a distinct technical support – its own apparatus, so to speak – it occupied a kind of discursive chaos, a heterogeneity of activities that could not be theorized as coherent or conceived of as having something like an essence or unifying core" (Krauss, 199, 31). Video was a harbinger of the 'post-medium' condition – any history that tries to encapsulate the history of artistic or Avant-Garde moving image practice in the 20th century seems to invariably break down when it reaches the adoption of video. Video "is not essentially any one thing at all" (1991, 1) writes Sean Cubitt in his 1991 overview of video culture. Michael

Rush asserts that with video works “no handy ‘themes’ or ‘schools’ of artists present themselves as organizing tools”, instead attempting a non-linear thematic taxonomy in his overview of the field (Rush, 2007, 8-9). By the 1990s video art as a term begins to be “used interchangeably with artists’ film” (Meigh-Andrews, 2014, 3) and writer/curators such as Michael O’Pray observe how it has “come to occupy the very heart of the art world” (O’Pray, 2003, 119). Discussing the way that artists like Tacita Dean, Sam Taylor-Wood, Steve McQueen and Douglas Gordon borrow cinematic strategies or echo prior moments in experimental cinema, O’Pray notes how, despite a “disparity of style and attitude. The idea of experimentation or formal exploration is not central to their work at all. There is a strong sense of subject-matter external to the artist and their art” (O’Pray, 2003, 118). Between 1970 and 1990, experimental moving image practice went from being the last haunt of the Modernist Avant-Garde (in the form of Structural film or the Modernist approaches of technically-focused ‘video artists’) to being the exemplary expression of the critical, neo-conceptual logic of Contemporary Art.

2.3 The Crisis of 'The Contemporary'

For over fifty years the parameters of what has come to be known as Contemporary Art, exemplified by the move from film to video in the 1960s and '70s, have remained unchanged or could even be said to have been reinforced. Contemporary Art can still be understood as a thoroughgoing rejection of Modernist art practice, or at least the narrow Modernist orthodoxy that established itself in the post-war period. Rather than aspire to the 'pure formalism' of music or pictorial abstraction, it is led by textuality, as well as conceptual and thematic propositions. It eschews the idea of intuitive or experimental engagement and mastery over materials or the creation of new tools and methods for image-making in favour of approaches seeded by particular strands of the 1920s Avant-Garde, in particular Soviet movements such as Constructivism, and trenchantly political artists like Dziga Vertov and John Heartfield for whom "the artist was no longer seen as a self-confirming 'creator', but as a synthesizer and manipulator of extant signs and objects... a theory of montage as social praxis" (Roberts, 2007, 9). The "montage" of "extant signs and objects" echoes the idea that the era of Contemporary Art can be understood as a return to the logic of the readymade.

Contemporary critics tend to follow historian and philosopher of art Thierry de Duve in his assertion that after the 1960s "the whole Western art world reconfigured itself as 'post-Duchamp'" (de Duve, 2013). Duchamp's infamous 1917 entry of a urinal to The Society of Independent Artists' exhibition (the first of many of his readymades – unaltered industrially produced objects re-presented as works of art) is widely considered the ground zero of Contemporary Art, a gesture whose effects were only fully felt almost fifty years later. The contemporary as understood through the readymade represents "a withdrawal from traditional artistic agency" (de Duve, 2013) and "an irreconcilable displacement of the link between handcraft and skill" (Roberts, 2007, 2). Professor of Art and Aesthetics at the University of Wolverhampton John Roberts' work on art after the readymade is informed by de Duve's recognition that "the readymade has transformed the conditions under which

artists labour and spectators fashion judgments. And [de Duve] refers to this as a shift to a generic practice of art. The artist can now be an 'artist at large', rather than just a painter, sculptor, or composer etc." (Roberts, 2007, 59). De Duve echoes Rosalind Krauss' observations about the 'post-medium condition' of the 'contemporary', the idea that "Art is not a medium. Painting, sculpture, music, poetry, cinema are media, but art – art-in-general – is not." (de Duve, 2013).



Fig 54: *Fountain* (Marcel Duchamp, 1917).

The dominance of the logic of the readymade has the effect of rendering all Contemporary Art at least partially 'conceptual' – its possibility inheres in framing and intention, not in materials or experience. It is in part de-materialised, or at least represents the re-housing of concepts across different media, where "specific media are staging areas for the warping and weaving of

the process of semiosis across forms, genres and non-artistic disciplines” (Roberts , 2007, 14). In the passage from Modernism to ‘the Contemporary’, art moves away from a formal/aesthetic logic towards a conceptual/critical/discursive/socially engaged approach. However, this detachment of the idea of art from its specific engagement with the properties of a medium leads to an uncertainty about definitions and values. Whereas influential Modernist critics policed the domain of art and its cultural worth, today there can be no such clarity. Unlike the Modernist Avant-Garde, which proceeded on the basis of a constant negation, taking up positions against existing or prior styles, Contemporary Art has absorbed the negation of the art/non-art distinction by the readymade and therefore “has neither identity nor genre but it can be characterized as a genre of genre-less art... a meta-genre of art without identity because it is indeterminate” (Malik, 2013b). Suhail Malik asserts that Contemporary Art is “without common definition, style, content, medium, interest etc. Contemporary Art is an art of indeterminacy, indeterminate in its content and in its address. Contemporary Art has no definite criteria” (Malik, 2013b).

While the rejection of ossified and limiting Modernist dogma and the re-engagement with social critique could be seen as vital and necessary in the 1960s, I want to propose that today, in the third decade of the 21st Century, there is a palpable sense of crisis to debates and discussions around Contemporary Art. Many authors have bemoaned a general retreat from critical judgements in art discourse, itself a sign of crisis, and JJ Charlesworth speaks to the shift away from criticism to ‘art writing’ as a cover for the “growing indifference to writing’s polemic potential” (Charlesworth, 2005). However, I want to show that when writing informally and outside of the dominant art publications, some contemporary critics address a sense of profound lack – of position, of affect, of meaning or efficacy. The examples I use come from relatively diverse voices, and from within both the critical/conceptual field of Contemporary Art as well as the more technical arena of ‘new media’ or ‘digital’ art, but they evidence a broader frustration with the practice, reception and critical framework of art in the early 21st century and speak to a decline in arts aesthetic force or power.

In late 2020, The White Pube, the collaborative identity of writers and curators Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad, widely fêted since the late 2010s as the emergent voices of a new generation in the UK art world, published a piece on their website and social media dealing with the question of 'Bad Art':

"exhibitions where it looks like they ran out of time and fucks to give. Exhibitions where they put everything in the show without a moment to cull and figure out what they should take back to the studio. Bad art is in iffy compositions, unplanned awkwardness; an unpracticed performance that is lifeless, endless, adds nothing to the world and entertains no one. Crap drawings underneath traditional and digital paintings or embroidery that need better foundations of drawing or all of the work on top has been a waste. Short ideas, wide absences between artwork and audiences; and visitors left wondering why they came all this way to see something that should have been the first draft and not the only draft. Do you get the gist? Like, how many times can we see the same hurt idea in its shoddy little form?" (The White Pube, 2020)

The White Pube boldly state an open secret of the current Contemporary Art scene: that so much art increasingly feels weak, underworked or exhausted. The 'shoddiness' they identify could be understood as a symptom of the intensification of life under late capitalism where free time that could be used to develop emerging practices is swallowed by the demands of rent, work and the attention economy, especially in a deeply neoliberal setting such as London. But these writers firmly locate the problem of 'bad art' at the level of technique, of form, of the things that are not supposed to matter to a Contemporary Art that privileges ideas and politics. This could be seen to speak to a broader crisis.

At roughly the same time in 2020, leading New Media theorist Lev Manovich, who has been writing about digital media since the early 1990s, posted an "Anti-digital Art Manifesto' on Facebook. Manovich notes that "feelings of sadness, disappointment, remorse and embarrassment have been provoked especially this week as I am watching Ars Electronica programs every day. I start wondering – did I waste my whole life in the wrong field?" (Manovich, 2020) He complains that digital art is 'anti-human art', and both too formal - "meaningless sounds of yet another 'electronic music' performance, or yet another meaningless outputs of a neural network invented by brilliant scientists and badly misused by 'artists' – but also too wedded to critique; 'It's about

"issues," "impact of X on Y", "critique of A", "a parody of B", "community of C" and so on" (Manovich, 2020). This informal, emotional post, which subsequently caused a huge backlash, articulates a sense of dissatisfaction that mirrors The White Pube's complaints about 'bad art', although the two parties could not be more different both in context and generation.

I wish to argue that this shared sense of lack might itself stem from the ongoing schism between the conceptual and the formal that opened up in the 1970s. Practices that valued material/formal experimentation were marginalised (see the last section's discussion of the split between video artists following Modernist approaches and 'Contemporary Artists working with video') and those dealing with 'political'/'critical' issues were elevated. Perhaps this separation of the conceptual from the technical, from art as praxis, is in many ways reflected by these tirades; where the White Pube bemoan a paucity of 'foundation' in skills or a general 'shoddiness' in the neo-Conceptual Contemporary Art context, Lev Manovich finds a lack of meaning or 'humanity' in the procedural, often 'scientific' experiments of New Media art. It might be possible to read the current 'crisis' as stemming from a fundamental split between 'form' and 'content'. In Contemporary Art an 'idea' is supposed to carry badly executed works while New Media art privileges technically 'brilliant', state-of-the-art craft over broader meaning. Does the split between Contemporary and New Media art and their respective shortcomings represent two halves of a divided whole?

Other frustrations coalesce around Contemporary Art's commitment to critique and politics. The often inflated claims to criticality sit uncomfortably within the current art context; John Roberts, while trying to construct a robust defence of the retreat from artisanal engagement in art initiated by Duchamp, bemoans the way that the logic of the readymade and the change in the status of the artist has intersected with a legacy of post-modern ideas about the 'death of the subject', so that "the debate on authorship in the 1980s has come down to us through a discourse of apocalyptic anti-humanism, unnuanced anti-aestheticism and undialectical social categories. The effect is to reduce the critique of authorship

either to the 'end-game' reproduction of preexisting artistic moments or styles, or to an eclecticized intertextuality" (Roberts, 2007, 10). Roberts insists that despite its critical posturing, art has become pointlessly stale and self-referential, suffused with a pessimistic 'bourgeois' outlook that has lost its social force.

More stridently, Suhail Malik's 2013 three part lecture series at Artists Space in New York represents a sustained attempt to both define the current art context but also a call for 'the necessity of Art's exit from Contemporary Art'. Malik suggests nothing less is required than a complete rethinking of our approach to art, and the abandoning of the dominant modes of the past half-century. In defining his proposition Malik traces a number of aporia that define Contemporary Art. He maintains that, despite its indeterminacy of position, Contemporary Art clings to an idea of idealistic criticality, what Malik calls the "Anarcho-Realist maxim" (Malik, 2013a). He claims that "actually existing art" always falls short of some potential dis-alienated, authentic ideal; "the dream of art is to be less private, narcissistic, inauthentic, socially detached; less abstracted from real, concrete conditions, life; etc." (Malik, 2013a) However, art always falls short of this goal, especially when it faces the existing (politically compromised) institutions, galleries, museums and collectors that actually constitute it as a field. This means Contemporary Art remains trapped in a contradiction – it wishes to detach itself from the conditions that precisely define it – and subsists in an idealistic 'criticality' that is at odds with its own material structures. Malik points out that whereas the critical discourses of Contemporary Art do not actually trouble its institutional foundations ("thank you for your critique, it's great, let's incorporate it"), Contemporary Art is actually a vehicle for propagating certain hegemonic effects of late capitalism in its "amenability to a culture of transnational elite formation" and "mobilization in the competition between global cities" (Malik, 2013d).

Malik's critique of this 'bad faith' aspect of Contemporary Art, its logic of 'incorporated negation' is echoed by other recent commentators. Artist and writer Morgan Quaintance, writing in *Art Monthly*, points out the intensification of the art world's focus on 'critique' or politics as its organizing principle through

the 2010s, in “a blatant attitudinal sea-change signaled by a switch in sensibility that took the UK art world from a pseudo aesthetic to an ethical regime... largely measured according to its perceived political, moral and ethical rectitude” (Quaintance, 2021, 6). However, Quaintance is quick to point out that this shift is only a “pseudo progressivism”, at odds with the entrenched interests of art institutions and leading to a “strangely duplicitous behavioural and psychological territory, where things are known but not known, where actions are supported and simultaneously undermined, and where hypocrisy is the base level from which seemingly all action stems” (Quaintance, 2021, 7). As Contemporary Art has become even more invested in the ‘political’, especially in reaction to the apparently apolitical, purist formalism of Modernism, the limits and contradictions of its critical reach have been starkly revealed.

Having drawn attention to the shortcomings of Contemporary Art’s affective and political potency in these pointed diatribes, these authors and critics also attempt to offer alternatives beyond the current problems. However, it is notable that these solutions tend to double down on current tendencies within Contemporary Art or New Media art that actually stem from art’s lack of ‘definite criteria’ – if Art can no longer establish its own criteria, it must look to other contexts to ground itself. Both the White Pube and Lev Manovich look enviously at mainstream industrialised culture as a possible template for better art. Lev Manovich notes that “after I watch Ars Electronica streams, I go to Netflix or switch on the TV, and it feels like fresh air. I see very well made films and TV series. Perfectly lighted, color graded, art directed” (Manovich, 2020). The White Pube look to the gaming industry and the role of “game testers and community managers” who effectively research cultural products, exposing them to consumer feedback in order to optimise their market success. They imagine a world of audience-tested artworks, where

“you could put up your new series of paintings in a private gallery space or big emptied-out studio, and wire it up so that when a varied team of chatty visitors walked in, you could see and hear exactly what they thought of your new work. The faces they pulled, initial comments, brewing words and afterthoughts. Imagine if you could do this twenty times in different places around the country or world with different groups of people covering all sorts of life experiences and proximities to art-chat too. Imagine if alongside

this, there were people who would write up more detailed thought-reports about your new paintings; writing about the size, colours, materials, compositions, subjects, memories, references, relevance to them as individuals and relevance to the world at large" (The White Pube, 2020).

Rather than push against the gradual encroachment of market-led approaches on the arts and the disempowerment of artists by bureaucratic structures of feedback, 'impact' or evaluation, The White Pube recommend a wholesale embrace of techniques of market research, while Lev Manovich yearns for the finely tuned proficiency of modern TV. As art after Modernism can no longer justify itself on its own terms, one option is that it slowly becomes indistinguishable from the culture industry. As it has no specific terrain to occupy, or formal approach to offer, the optimised experiences offered by gaming or television become a viable model, especially to try and resolve the lack of affective/formal power these commentators identify in contemporary artworks. The dream of Contemporary Art was to remove itself from the Modernist ivory tower, but the endgame of that trajectory is an inability to distinguish itself from the pop culture it engages with. Malik has argued (tangentially to his call for an exit from Contemporary Art) that Contemporary Art is already 'ex-Art'. He maintains that art students are no longer able to make special claims for what they create that might set it aside from design – it is all "just stuff". Meanwhile he contends that the 'cognitive', 'decorative' and 'social' characteristics formerly specific to Contemporary Art can now be seen in new niche commodities marketed to an emerging elite. This tendency to blur art and commerce can also be seen in recent moves to democratise artworks: making works available via social media platforms or online shops, bypassing the gatekeeping structures of the old art world and more closely resembling the normal economy for (artisanal) commodities (Malik, 2017).

Whereas those bemoaning the lack of affect in Contemporary Art (which already tends to draw on popular culture) turn to the culture industry for solutions, commentators that point out the inherent limitations to the purported 'criticality' or political claims of Contemporary Art tend to seek remedy in the 'actually political'. When Morgan Quaintance criticises the recent 'political turn'

in the art world he does so only on the grounds of its hypocrisy. It is not political art per se that he identifies as a problem. In fact, he condemns recent group shows for their “complete lack of societal concern”, and celebrates others for “defly combining artworks, artefacts, policy documents, government reports and archival material”. Quaintance is searching for expressions of ‘authentic’ political artworks and movements and claims to identify “an intrinsically politicised, aesthetically and theoretically advanced parallel sector growing, resisting and running alongside the centre’s gradual adoption of pseudo progressivism in the 2010s”. In many respects he adheres to the ‘Anarcho-Realist’ maxim outlined by Suhail Malik – that the ‘real’ art world, “the future of art”, which he sees as explicitly political, lies in “the creation of international collaborations from a subcultural level” and “belongs to the margins” (Quaintance, 2021, 17). Quaintance tries to create an ‘us and them’ situation of authentic actors in combat with compromised institutions, however he himself has to deal with the “paradoxical existential dichotomy” (Quaintance, 2021, 16) that is the reality of the blurred distinctions within the field. This seems to reinforce Malik’s proposition that such attempts to define an ‘outside’ to Contemporary Art always fall back into its logic, especially as they simply propagate an ‘Anarcho-Realist’ outlook, which he maintains is baked into the very ontology of Contemporary Art itself (2013a). Malik insists that this kind of search for authentic transgression, or for ‘real art’, is the very lifeblood of Contemporary Art.

However, Malik’s attempt to reject a fantasy of a ‘real’ beyond art’s institutionality, and assert a position that “admits to art as an institutional practice with all the power play that involves” also involves a move that seems to require art to become determinately political. He critiques Contemporary Art as merely “an art that speaks about a political situation, from which you can get a reward by being involved with the art, but actually doesn’t do anything in relation to the political situation itself. It’s a self-congratulatory model – I’m being political by being involved with this art” (Malik, 2013c). Malik asserts that Contemporary Art in its indeterminacy and open-endedness simply asks (often open-ended) questions: “Contemporary Art is a post-negational art... This is why

it cannot seriously contest injustices... It can only slide away from it in a cliff of greater indeterminacy” (Malik, 2013c). Against this he argues for an art of determinate judgments that “affirm art as a power of negation” (Malik, 2013c). He argues for art to have an “insurrectionary effect” (Malik, 2013d) and to return to modes of address that are currently anathema to Contemporary Art’s open-ended stratagems, such as didacticism and the assertion of positive propositions. He insists that “negating injustices requires intervention in objective conditions not just subjective judgment... this entails that we instrumentalise art, we attack the idea that art should not be instrumentalised” (Malik, 2013d).

It is notable that Malik, like other critics of Contemporary Art such as John Roberts, looks to Constructivism, and its politicized role in the Russian revolution, as a historical precedent for the potential future of art. For Roberts, both Constructivism and its closely-allied movement Productivism, transform the notion of artistic authorship in relation to a period of intense social critique:

“art becomes subordinate to a model of the collective intellect in which collaborative artistic practice and socialized labour converge. No distinction is made between revolutionary social praxis and revolutionary artistic praxis... This drive to convergence is reflected in the wide-spread theorization of the artist as a hybrid or composite figure; artist-engineer, artist-designer, artist-educator, artist-constructor, artist-worker. All the leading Soviet Avant-Garde artists and theorists – Vertov, Arvatov, Gan, El Lissitzky, Rodchenko – offer some version of this” (Roberts, 2007).

However, such admiration for the political avant-gardes of the revolutionary period of the early 20th century perhaps says more about the subject position and political inclinations of contemporary academics, and their understanding of what constitutes politics and the political. Marxist historian and architect Manfredo Tafuri’s pointed critique of the Avant-Garde in his book *Architecture and Utopia* (1976) maintains that Constructivism, among other Modernist Avant-Garde art movements, served to criticise “outworn values” and essentially anticipated the new ideologies of rationalist state planning that dominated the 20th century, innovating new subjective modes that were to become invaluable to the capitalist and social democratic, statist elites of the post-war period. He revisits the battle between formalism and the ‘committed’ Avant-Garde, rejecting

any characterisation of that conflict as one between “a reactionary ideological project that clashes with an ‘advanced’ [committed/political] one” (Tafuri, 1976, 65). For Tafuri, formalism recognizes “intellectual work as essentially *work* pure and simple, and therefore not something able to serve a revolutionary movement” (Tafuri, 1976, 65-6). Such works have a relative autonomy, but patronage and context can in part determine their social ‘sense’. Tafuri contrasts formalism to the committed Avant-Garde, an “intellectual work that negates itself as such, claiming a position of pure ideology, and that itself wants to substitute the political organization... Its objective, however is always to get out of productive work and stand before it as its *critical conscience*” (Tafuri, 1976, 65-6). Tafuri sees both Avant-Garde trajectories as ultimately compromised, but whereas formalism “with greater lucidity and courage, succeeded in confessing its own tautological character”, politically committed art “elected to set itself up as the emblem of an intellectual ‘bad conscience’” (Tafuri, 1976, 65).

Tafuri quotes the Russian futurist and formalist, Viktor Schklovsky, writing in the ferment of revolutionary Russia, who cleverly inverted the cry to save art from being instrumentalized: “I do not wish to defend art in the name of art, but, rather, propaganda in the name of propaganda... Agitation carried out in sung works, film, and art exhibitions is useless. It finishes by destroying itself. In the name of agitation, take it away from art” (cited in Tafuri, 1976, 64). In Schklovsky’s 1923 collection of essays, *Knights Move*, he uses the metaphor of attempting to drive nails with a samovar to further emphasise how collapsing art into politics (and vice versa) is a category error, where neither mode of engagement is suitable to the tasks of the other: “If you take hold of a samovar by its stubby legs, you can use it to pound nails, but that is not its primary function” (Schklovsky, 2005, 25).

Schklovsky maintains that “the most serious mistake of contemporary writers about art is, in my opinion, their tendency to equate the social revolution with the revolution in the arts” (Schklovsky, 2005, 21). In many respects Schklovsky’s fundamental question, proposed at the very start of the Avant-Garde, is still relevant. Why do theorists, critics and artists insist on, or dream of, art’s

purported political agency? Faced with the bad faith claims to radicalism of a Contemporary Art world that has collided the indeterminacy and ambiguity of poetics with the positionality of politics, neutering both in the process, why do writers like Malik prefer to attempt to remake art in the image of the 'political' – determinate, efficacious, didactic and socially functional – rather than defend the affective, slippery, unquantifiable, formal domain that art once represented?

The contemporary inclination to expect art to function 'politically' leads it to echo the mandates of socialist realism from the mid 20th century, where "abstraction or stylization of form, idealism or fantasy of subject where anathematized with such terms as formalism, Western decadence, leftist estheticism, petty-bourgeois degeneracy" (Barr, 1992, 661). However, whereas socialist realism was in support of broad based political movements, the radical political demands and claims made upon art in the present period could be read in inverse relation to the state of left/radical political projects in broader society. The inflation in political claims takes place against a backdrop of spectacular decline in organised mass political movements making radical material demands on society. Commentators like urban theorist Mike Davis have pointed out how socialist movements worldwide have tended towards embourgeoisement, becoming more and more detached from the daily lives and struggles of working people (Davis, 2006). Left social democratic parties in the West are now more popular amongst the professional middle class, a class which the theorists, curators and increasingly artists that make up the art world both belong to, and whose ideological outlook they shape. The field of art could be understood as proxy for 'real' working class radical activity, hence the ever more extreme claims for its political efficacy. When the political sphere has been evacuated, the art world is seen as an alternative site to pursue similar goals.

However, more forcefully, one could see the art world as a context where an emerging pseudo-left wing, progressivist politics shaped by, and representing, a professional class outlook, is developed and finds cultural expression. Current discussions revisiting the classic 1977 study of the Professional Managerial Class ('PMC') by John and Barbara Ehrenreich, see many of the ascendant 'radical'

political outlooks of identitarianism, anti-racism and abolitionism (the family, the police) as ultimately part of a proxy class war. A downwardly mobile professional class distinguishes itself through moralised political positions from what they see as a ‘regressive’ or even ‘proto-fascist’ working class or petty bourgeoisie, whilst tacitly or overtly giving support to new and powerful forms of neoliberal capital formation – the US Democrats’ alliance with Silicon Valley or the UK left’s sympathies with the European Union being just two examples (Liu, 2020) (Kyeyune, 2020). It is not surprising that the same political outlooks characterized as the new politics of the PMC are the ones reflected in the dominant currents of the art world. One could also argue that the dominant modes of ‘radical’ political engagement of the PMC – discourse wars on social media, symbolic gestures for movements like Black Lives Matter, and an overriding concern for representation over material demands – represent a strange convergence between the realm of the image and the domain of the political. A certain kind of art and politics are becoming indistinguishable⁷.

Writer Chris Crawford, writing in Cured Quail, has understood what he calls the “sociologization of art” in terms of a similar vector of ‘professionalisation’, where art emerges as a “subfield of the sober, distanced perspective of the academic sociologist” (Crawford, 2018). He traces a transition from a formalist Avant-Garde, committed to aesthetics, but politically aligned with the mass communist movements of the early 20th century, to an art of social commentary, aligned to academic critical theory:

“The aestheticization of bureaucracy, a turn to language as material, a move from a politics of class to that of institutions, the expression of non-class-based forms identity, a focus on inclusion, equality, and communalism without politics—all these strategies replaced the idea of revolution and the radical alterity of aesthetic experience with the question of how art should handle its immanence in society” (Crawford, 2018).

He maintains that culture becomes ‘cultural criticism’, where the “obliquely conceptual, ineffable, and socially irreducible quality of aesthetic experience is replaced with explanatory power, cultural *habitus*, and the maneuverings of cultural capital” (Crawford, 2018). Crawford holds to a staunchly Adornian position, revering the potential of the art object, in its ‘uselessness’ and its

relative autonomy, to have the power to show another world is possible: “Its hermeticism allowed for an experience beyond the horizon of everyday life, a sign that society was not the totality false consciousness took it to be” (Crawford, 2018). He shares Adorno’s convictions about art’s “ability to capture society’s contradictory dynamics in form’, and is similarly wary of the tendencies in capitalism towards positivism, mirrored in the way that, for today’s sociologised art world, “the social content contained in art is addressed in a positivistic manner – as *information*” (Crawford, 2018). This tendency to elevate the message over the medium, a reversal of Modernism, could not be more dominant than in today’s art world.

Arguably the kind of ‘determinate’, ‘instrumental’ and didactic art that Suhail Malik is looking for is already triumphing in the institutional art world. The widespread acclaim for exhibitions by Forensic Architecture, a multi-disciplinary research group that function more like a legal-observer or NGO, or the 2015 Turner Prize won by Assemble, an architecture and design collective, for their socially engaged community work, and the nomination in 2021 of socially engaged ‘artist collectives’ for the same prize, are just three of the most overt examples of the increasing tendency to reward socially instrumental practices. The ‘presentational’ or essay form of video art, delivering a clear critical message and exemplified by artists like Hito Steyerl, discloses the same tendencies in moving image works. John Roberts scathingly notes that “there has emerged a section of the new middle class cultural administration that defines its self-identity not through the idea of the museum as a place of historical record, generic creativity or humanist affirmation, but as a ‘research forum’, ‘post-exhibition area’, ‘exchange network’ etc.” (Roberts, 2007, 190). However, the desire for art to be a vehicle for ‘real’, ‘revolutionary’ politics, outlined by established academics like Roberts and Malik, could be seen as no less the position of a particular kind of professional, tenured outlook.

A small handful of art historians have begun to note the impact of such instrumental logic on art practices. Darby English, Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago, interviewed about the ‘renaissance’ of black art in the 21st

century (or rather, the tendency for institutions to finally course-correct and promote black artists) has noted a 'narrowing' of the range of expression in contemporary African-American art. He maintains that, looking at key group shows from twenty years ago, the "art and the ideas were so much more challenging. There was so much more nuance in the conversation. There was more comfort with discomfort" (Olugundudu, 2021). English understands this phenomenon in terms of the positivist demand for communication and the abandonment of form as a consideration in practice:

"the core project is communication, anything that resists the art communications apparatus fails to leave a mark. An ordinary encounter in the art world is an encounter with charisma and content. In a situation like that, form is an obstruction or a distraction. And, indeed, form has become increasingly irrelevant during these 20 years. When real art comes along, its import disappears in a message about the part that's on point" (Olugundudu, 2021).

This positivist problematic is ramified at every level of the art world's funding and institutional structures. The centrality of message in art, the culture of the curatorial statement, and the complex demands to pre-define artworks and practice in funding applications, all reflect the dominance of instrumental, socially functional logic in state funding. The folding of art schools into the increasingly metric-driven university system merely compounds this culture in the process of education – as classicist and critic Daisy Dunn has recently noted in an article on the radical shifts in the culture of UK art schools: "Out went practical, apprenticeship-style learning, and in came the need for endless self-justification" (Dunn, 2021). If Tafuri saw the logic of the Avant-Garde as concomitant with the emerging rationalist state, it could be argued that Contemporary Art operates as a vast bureaucracy, reinforcing the new ideological forms of late capitalist progressivism, or what has been called the "left-wing of neo-liberalism" (Reed Jr., 2015). Far from an unwillingness in the Contemporary Art world to embrace the didactic and the programmatic, it appears it might have a greater problem embracing or celebrating the ambiguity that lies at the heart of artistic form.

2.4 Against Interpretation: From the Visceral to The Figural

In her famous 1964 essay *Against Interpretation*, Susan Sontag condemns a burgeoning culture of literary and aesthetic criticism that privileges interpretation and excavation of the 'content' of artworks over any consideration of their sensuous manifestation. For Sontag, the contemporary drive to interpretation "amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, conformable" (Sontag, 1966, 17). Sontag sees the emergent urge to reduce art to content as a reaction to a culture whose "dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capacity" (Sontag, 1966, 17). Art, and its supporting structures, attempts to respond to mass culture's withering of intelligence by overstating its own commitment to reason and analysis. Thus, Sontag understands interpretation as the "revenge of the intellect upon art", and maintains that this is ultimately "impoverishing" or "depleting" - an instrumentalising gesture; "It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories" (Sontag, 1966, 19). This process flattens art into a world of use values, effectively mirroring the commodity. Countering this, Sontag claims the urgent task is to "recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to *feel* more" (Sontag, 1966, 23).

Written at almost the same moment when the emerging logic of Contemporary Art began to roll back Modernist formalism, Sontag could be seen to have been fighting a losing battle. Writing in the 1960s, she calls for the restitution of a "vocabulary - a descriptive, rather than prescriptive vocabulary - for forms" maintaining that the role of criticism should be to dissolve "considerations of content into those of form" (Sontag, 1966, 22), which makes it clear (as argued above) that the dominant and possibly accelerating tendency for over half a century has been to politicise and intellectualise artworks in order to use them as cultural tokens to address themes and positions. This has reached the point where artists are trained to have a command of critical theory and to pre-empt

the interpretative tasks of critics with elaborate press-releases and discursive events. Sontag closes *Against Interpretation* with a single, almost aphoristic, statement: “In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (Sontag, 1966, 23). The following will explore theories of the aesthetic and the moving image that trace the presence of ‘erotics’ in the visual – the impact of corporeality, desire and the unconscious, and structures of experience beyond the limits of language and rationality – as a counter to the rationalist/conceptual discourses of both Modernism and Contemporary Art. I will briefly review the vitalist thinking that determines many of the discussions of the erotics of art and the moving image, before a longer consideration of ideas of visceral visuality rooted in psychoanalysis proposed by Post-Structuralist thinkers like Rosalind Krauss, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard.

Thirty years after Sontag’s essay, Rosalind Krauss drew on French Post-Structuralist thinkers to re-read canonical Modernism. Krauss’ book *The Optical Unconscious* (1996) pits itself against Modernism’s purported faith in rational or metaphysical visuality (alluded to in subsection 2.2 above in relation to experimental film and the search for universal languages or Platonic ‘truths’). Setting aside the fact that Krauss herself represents one of art history’s most fervent ‘interpreters’ (she famously derided Clement Greenberg for his insistence that art is about self-evidence and feeling rather than ‘intellection or information’ (Kimball, 1993) and was instrumental in bringing French theorists to bear on art history), *The Optical Unconscious* attempts to reassess Modernism in relation to the idea that there is a “dimension of opacity” represented by the unconscious that will “map onto the Modernist logic only to cut across its grain, to undo it... fouling its logic, eroding its structure” (Krauss, 1996, 24). Krauss puts the erotic to work to unhinge the ‘purity’ of Modernist rationalism, producing readings of key artists, most notably Marcel Duchamp, largely seen by contemporary theorists as “detachedly cerebral” (Krauss, 1996, 108). Drawing heavily on Jean-François Lyotard’s work on Duchamp, Krauss insists that Duchamp’s vision of visuality is actually deeply embodied and erotic:

“When Lyotard speaks of the cuntishness of Duchamp’s model of vision, he is sticking it of course to all those idealists who want to turn Duchamp’s work into metaphysics. Among them the art historians, with their conceptual schemas built on the ideogrammatic foundation of central-point perspective. They point to the transparency of the Large Glass: as transparent—they declare—as a thought to the consciousness that thinks it. And they point to the insistence of the classical perspective through which the Glass’s objects are projected. Balls, says Lyotard, quoting Duchamp. The visuality Duchamp proposes, he says, is carnal, not conceptual. It views the body as a psychophysiological system” (Krauss, 1996, 119).

There is great irony in asserting that Duchamp, the ‘Conceptual’ artist *par excellence*, whose readymades are claimed to ground and prefigure the self-reflexive, discursive domain of Contemporary Art decades before its emergence, was deeply invested in a world view where “vision is demonstrably hooked up to the mechanisms of desire” (Krauss, 1996, 111). Curator and writer Matthew Poole echoes Krauss in asserting that “almost all of Marcel Duchamp’s artworks from around 1900 onwards are centered around love, sex, and erotics: penetrations of various kinds, rhythmic pulsations, and sexuality and gender relations in respect of sexual activity or sexual longing” (Poole, 2019). That the dominant view of art history occludes this fundamental aspect of Duchamp’s work in favor of his profile as an intellectual, whether through the conceptual operation of the readymade, or in the focus on the “diagrammatic mastery of a reality disincarnated into what has been called the ‘purely idea’ status of the perspective image” (Kraus, 1996, 111), speaks to the way that Contemporary Art has been formed and framed over the past half century. There is further irony that this occlusion of the ‘vulgar’ Duchamp echoes the general condemnation of Surrealism by Krauss’s former mentor, Clement Greenberg, who had “expelled it as illustrative, iconic, pre-Modernist and neo-Romantic” (Rees, 1999, 13). Both the arch-Modernist *and* many of the anti-Greenbergian champions of Conceptual and Contemporary Art rejected the Surrealist devotion to desire and eroticism.

Krauss’ discussion of Duchampian optics explores his focus on the psychophysiological system and his interest in ‘moving image’ technologies embodied in his *Rotoreliefs* (1935), a series of spinning disks adorned with geometric shapes and colours that both evoke “the images of industry: the

flywheels, the turnscrews, the propellers” (Krauss, 1996, 141) as well as creating a visceral, disorienting effect that is “devolutionary, destructive, dissolving the very coherence and stability of form” (Krauss, 1996, 206).



Fig 55: *Rotoreliefs* (Marcel Duchamp, 1935).

Krauss touches on the work of Jonathan Crary, a theorist who (along with Sean Cubitt) has continually explored the techno-scientific substructure of visual and optical technologies and how this relates to both their physiological *and* aesthetic impact. Duchamp’s *Rotoreliefs* are designed to have an affective impact that echo early moving image technologies, 19th century kaleidoscopes, thaumatropes and zootropes that predated the emergence of the cinematographic apparatus, and whose profound impact on notions of vision is explored in Crary’s *Techniques of the Observer* (1990). Crary demonstrates how early stereoscopic and moving image techniques, in splitting images and relying on optical illusion, break with the point of view implied in the static perspectival approach of post-Renaissance painting (echoed in the mirroring of reality of the camera obscura) that assumed and proposed a stable, self-transparent subject;

“The relation of observer to image is no longer to an object quantified in relation to a position in space, but rather to two dissimilar images whose position simulates the anatomical structure of the observer’s body” (Crary, 1992, 128). New technologies forced a consideration of the visceral mechanisms of apprehension. Theorists like Crary and Cubitt, in their concerns with the technical and affective substructures of moving image technology and its resultant aesthetic impacts, in some way mirror the Avant-Garde and Modernist obsessions with understanding and intervening in the material basis of image production – concerns that have largely evaporated in the era of Contemporary Art.

If the illusions generated by 19th century ‘phantasmagoric’ image technologies raised the question of the embodied processes of perception, Crary shows how this echoes the emerging biological, neurological and psychological analysis of perception of the period, which in turn was in dialogue with early vitalist philosophy. Anti-positivist thinkers like Henri Bergson and Gabriel Tarde, beginning with the problem of perception, proposed concepts to bypass the mechanistic scientism formerly dominant in the sciences – pointing to the presence of unconscious drives or life forces structuring and disrupting the transparency of experience. Inattention, intuition and rifts in the reliability of perception thus formed the basis for a new way of looking and representing. Crary’s *Suspensions of Perception* (1999) brilliantly unravels how these late 19th century technical, scientific and philosophic debates and their “constant re-creation of the conditions of sensory experience” (Crary, 1999, 13) are refracted in the subject matter and radical techniques of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters (Manet, Seurat and Cezanne) preparing the ground for the formal explorations of the early Avant-Garde. The often intangible concepts proposed by vitalist philosophy can be said to have influenced the emerging Avant-Garde; film scholar Inga Pollmann notes the correspondences between Kandinsky’s theories and Bergsonian principles: “Paralleling the relation that Bergson established between music and intuition, Kandinsky’s chapter on ‘The Language of Form and Colour’ began with a discussion of music as an art form that produces a direct resonance in the mind. For Kandinsky color and form

could only be harmonic if they rested on ‘a corresponding vibration of the human soul’” (Pollmann, 2018, 64).

The early cinema that evolved from the optical machines discussed by Crary, an ‘unholy’ combination of mechanical apparatus and extreme visual experiences, was often rejected by aesthetes (perhaps somehow echoing today’s overt and covert disdain for the mass media of digital imagery and CGI – see section 1 above). Russian formalist Boris Eikhenbaum reports that “in its first years of existence... cinema was judged to be a vulgar, ‘low’ art... The intellectual who had been enticed by the advertisements and had dropped in at a cinema would feel uneasy at meeting another intellectual there: ‘So you were lured in too?’ was the thought of both of them” (Eikhenbaum, 1982, 11). Critics described how early cinema, a sideshow of incredible vistas and impossible perspectives designed to thrill, upended and scandalised polite aesthetic considerations of the time. They bemoaned “the vertiginous temporality, the loss of cohesion, direction, and causality; the tearing at the nerves, the lust and sensationalism, the pure, sensual and non-sensical spectacle” (Pollmann, 2018, 177). However, it was the intense experiences of early film that further crystallised a radical reassessment of art and cinema in terms of vital forces. Media theorist Tom Gunning asserts that Avant-Garde art and filmmaking can be seen to be rooted in a more vital/affective register than the ‘contemplative’, idealist Kantian metaphysics that came to dominate the Modernist critical frame. Borrowing from Eisenstein, Gunning proposes that the first iteration of cinema, before the later imposition of narrative and literary elements, was a cinema of ‘attractions’ which embodied a mass culture of shock and spectacle but was actually a source of inspiration for artists: “it was precisely the exhibitionist quality of turn-of-the-century popular art that made it attractive to the Avant-Garde – its freedom from the creation of diegesis, its accent on direct stimulation” (Gunning, 1986, 66). Gunning notes how “an attraction aggressively subjected the spectator to ‘sensual or psychological impact’” (Gunning, 1986, 66) and describes it in terms of “primal power” and “energy” (Gunning, 1986, 70). He claims that this legacy of the cinema of attractions constitutes a continuous current in the history of the Avant-Garde, and can be “traced from Méliès through Keaton, through *Un Chien*

Andalou (1928) and Jack Smith”(Gunning, 1986, 70). Inga Pollmann’s reconsideration of the relation between film and vitalism revisits many of the Modernist precepts often characterised as ‘platonic’. Rethinking Eggeling and Richter’s purist formalism, frequently characterised as a ‘transcendent’ search for reason and universality (see subsection 2.2 above), Pollmann argues that “the meaning of this universal formal language had to be grasped intuitively, rather than intellectually. They founded this premise on Henri Bergson’s notion of intuition” (Pollmann, 2018, 59). She reinterprets this Avant-Garde abstraction as a ‘vitalist formalism’ (Pollmann, 2018, 49).

Many theorists have examined the optical/affective dimension of film, and use terminology reminiscent of vitalist thought. Media theorist Friedrich Kittler claimed that “Since its inception, cinema has been the manipulation of optic nerves and their time” (cited in Holl, 2017, 9). Pollmann revisits the film theory of writer and sociologist Siegfried Kracauer which saw cinema as having an “affinity” with the “flows of life” (Pollmann, 2018, 44). Ute Holl’s recent book *Cinema, Trance and Cybernetics* (2017) explores the complex relation between the machinic and the human organism and consciousness “in which our interiority is interconnected with an exterior apparatus, what we see is also our own shuddering and twitching” (Holl, 2017, 24). She explores the work of Maya Deren, associated with the ‘poetic’ turn in American Avant-Garde cinema, focusing on how her work suggests the relation between film’s pulsating potential and dance or trance states, charting how “Bodily movements and emotions fuse like dancers and the dance in or through the image” (Holl, 2017, 37). Holl explores the interchange between the fundamentally mechanical art form of cinema and the human body in rich, evocative neo-vitalist language, that has become more commonplace in the sphere of cybernetic theory which she clearly references. This discourse, a corrective to the positivist discourse that dominated early discussions of digital technology (Hayles, 1999), relates the flows of physicality and consciousness *and* the informatic flows of media systems within a holistic, borderless paradigm:

“The machinists in art... attempt to switch themselves in to the self-guidance of inner messaging systems in order to mobilize proprioceptors and

effectors, curves and arabesques, emotions and feelings, thus disturbing an inner system so that its vibrations react to this in their own way" (Holl, 2017, 46).

Vitalism has a long contested history. Despite the revival of Bergson in the Post-Structuralist theory of Deleuze and Guattari, the imprecision of many of its central concepts is often seen as suspect: "vitalists can only show that there is something that exceeds mechanical causality, but they cannot directly prove what, precisely, it is that distinguishes life from non-living matter" (Pollmann, 2018, 242). Vitalism rejects both positivistic *and* idealist metaphysical propositions, yet its own central concepts – life forces, intuition, energy flows – resemble a biological metaphysics. It sets aside the dualism and mediations of German Idealist and dialectical traditions for a monadic immanence – 'flows' of energy and impulse from the world to the body are direct and unmediated; desire is not constructed from negation. Pollmann notes that vitalist influences are evident in the work of theorists like Benjamin and Kracauer, but they, like many others, tend to reject them – vitalist ideas can "seem like atavistic specters from the past" (Pollmann, 2018, 16). The left/liberal tradition committed to progressive rationalism emerges in reaction to the proximity of vitalist 'life philosophies' to fascism's mobilization of irrational drives through aestheticized politics. In many respects the 'coolness' of Contemporary Art – its cerebral aspect and aloofness from emotional registers – can be seen as an attempt to bypass the dark forces unleashed by crisis capitalism and tapped by far right ideologies. If progressive rationalism has long been hegemonic in the post-war Contemporary Art context, it has been deepened in response to the wave of populist challenges to technocratic governance in the early 21st century. Critical claims rooted in the sensory or any notion of primordial drives feels suspicious and potentially reactionary. Despite the prevalence in Contemporary Art of post-structural political theory with its undercurrents of neo-vitalism (and the persistence of this in cybernetic and media theory), these are usually framed as thematic or political concerns within artworks rather than tools to evaluate the aesthetic or affective experience of artworks.

If the 19th century vitalist interest in the subconscious physical forces at the heart of perception has been related to the emergence of Freudian psychoanalysis, the experience of optical and moving image technologies has been closely linked to the unconscious. Psychoanalysis became the dominant intellectual framework for film theory and analysis in the post-war period. Yet much research has also been conducted into the psychological impact of the cinematic apparatus. Psychologist Hugo Mauerhofer's early studies into the perceptual experience of film proposed that it produces a state similar to daydreaming (Holle, 2017, 39). Eric Kandel, a Nobel prize-winning neurobiologist with a background in psychoanalysis, proposed that the imperceptible intervals between film frames continually plunge the cinema goer into darkness and that the flickering alternation between visual stimulus and visual absence provokes the brain into autonomous activity that resembles dreaming, filling this empty space with "a collective impression already created by our ancestors" (Kluge, 2007, 12). In *The Optical Unconscious*, Rosalind Krauss pushes beyond the biological conception of optics, following Lyotard to trace an opposition to the metaphysical framework of visibility. Starting with the fleshy and erotic, she ends up in a frame derived from psychoanalysis and the unconscious.

Krauss traces a line between Lyotard's writing on Duchamp towards the conceptual schema laid out in his 1971 book *Discourse, Figure*. She maintains that Modernism understands 'seeing' in two ways: the object as seen ("which Modernism spurns") versus the "formal conditions of possibility for vision itself, the level at which 'pure' form operates as a principle of coordination, unity, structure, visible but unseen" which Modernism seeks to "chart, to capture, to master" (Krauss, 1996, 217). Modernism overthrows the order of representation in search of a metaphysical, self-reflexive consideration of form itself. However, Krauss opposes this duality with a third order – that of the "Figure" or figural, proposed by Lyotard and understood as an essentially unrepresentable domain related to libidinal and desiring processes, operating "underground and out of sight", and "beyond the reach of the visible" (Krauss, 1996, 217). This concept of the figural, as defined by Lyotard, is an elusive

notion (and, as we shall see, is also taken up and defined in subtly different ways by Gilles Deleuze), yet I think it helps to make a case for a very different way of thinking about art than the ‘textualised’, conceptually dominated frame of Contemporary Art set out above. Krauss demonstrates how the idea of the figural emerges from Lyotard’s engagement with phenomenology with its “disdain for discourse, for language, for concepts, for the law” (Krauss, 1996, 218). It could be said to be a space of “unconscious forces” (Bogue, 2003, 115) that is to be contrasted to the legible coherence of ‘textual’ space. Ronald Bogue maintains that:

“Lyotard’s primary object is to counter structuralism’s rampant textualization of the world and to insist that the visual constitutes a domain unassimilable within codes and regulated oppositions... To the extent that the visual is recognized, comprehended, and assimilated within a rational order, Lyotard contends, its truth is lost, for it is thereby coded, made ‘readable,’ and textualized” (Bogue, 2003, 113).

The notion of the figural is in some way an attempt to point beyond representation. It can often feel like it echoes vitalism’s articulation of a primordial space, urging us to reconnect to something originary that has been obscured or abandoned. Deleuze writes how painting can “*make visible* a kind of original unity of the senses, and would make a multisensible Figure appear visually” (Deleuze, 2003, 42). Lyotard understands his project in opposition to the “vast project of rationalization carried out by the Platonic-Christian tradition aimed at covering up desire” (Lyotard, 2011, 18). Lyotard sides with ‘the eye’ over the text and, quoting Andre Breton, maintains that the eye “exists in its savage state” (Lyotard, 2011, 5), and is thus less blocked by “Western ratio” (Lyotard, 2011, 14) and the “gray pall” thrown by “the word” over the “sensory” (Lyotard, 2011, 5). He proposes stripping back the imposition of “geometrical optics” and other cultural frameworks to “see the originary bestowal in its obliquity, in its ubiquity” (Lyotard, 2011, 16). Lyotard uses the vitalist language of “energies” and “jouissance”, albeit couched within a psychoanalytic understanding of the unconscious, which philosopher David Rodowick understands as ultimately related to desire: “the unrepresentable force of primal

phantasy where the figural expresses the disarticulatory powers of the death drive” (Rodowick, 2001, 6).

Deleuze’s reading of the figural (set out in his 1981 book on Francis Bacon, *The Logic of Sensation*) also has this sense of pre-conscious primordality but adopts a more explicitly vitalist and corporeal framework, seeing the figural as “the sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh, whereas abstract form is addressed to the head, and acts through the intermediary of the brain, which is closer to the bone” (Deleuze, 2003, 34). Both Lyotard and Deleuze, in different ways, use the figural to demarcate a space beyond rational logocentrism: the figural is an explicitly pre-conscious, anti-dialectical terrain, unmediated and immanent, not assimilable within philosophic discourses on perception, nor even the idea of ‘the unconscious as a language’, which would immediately erase it through the process of translation and mediation, inevitably folding the perceptual into a textual, universalising structure. This attempt to articulate the inarticulable, or to gesture outside the limits of language, raises the question of its status as a claim. Lyotard and Deleuze both deploy the imprecise language and almost mystical schema often associated with vitalist thinking, but Kiff Bamford insists that positing the figural is “not a romantic or nostalgic search... but rather draws attention to the need to find a mode of presentation for that which has been repressed” (Bamford, 2012, 21).

It is notable that both Lyotard and Deleuze approach the figural, although not strictly an aesthetic category, primarily through the frame of art and artists. The zone of sensuous non-rationality designated by the figural is inhabited by those figures seen as ‘false’ and ‘untrue’: “the painter, the condottiere, the libertine, the materialist” who all operate in a “half-light” (Lyotard, 2011, 5). Lyotard wishes to revisit and celebrate “the suspended attention, the negligence, enforced as a rule” of artistic pursuits (Lyotard, 2011, 12). The aesthetic is the place where the figural, although “fugitive at the heart of discourse and perception, as that which troubles them” (Lyotard, 2011, 135), comes to light – “the proper space of desire, the stakes in the struggle that painters and poets have ceaselessly launched

against the return of the Ego and the text” (Lyotard, 2011, 135). Professor John Mowitt in the introduction to *Discourse, Figure*, claims that Lyotard “produces a theory of the subject that deploys aesthetic experience as the means by which to pursue the critique of dialectical reason” (Mowitt, 2011, xxi).

Lyotard traces a history of the figural in relation to art, claiming that in the European Middle Ages there was a “unity of the figure and the text” (Lyotard, 2011, 164); discourse and images were united through the myth structure of Christianity, as literally exemplified in the example of illuminated manuscripts. All Medieval representation was structured through the deep signifying structures of religion where the poetic and phantasmatic are ever present; “The Christian tale... cannot dispense with allegory, metaphor, synecdoche, and all the tropes to convey the Other or Elsewhere of which it speaks” (Lyotard, 2011, 175). These deep structures of religious signification refer to a “primordial story of past actions” which form “a narrative figure, occupying a subterranean realm, set back from the surface of immediate discourse”. (Lyotard, 2011, 173). God constitutes the world, and the ‘vision’ of God “pierces” and unifies all oppositions but at a plane of existence ungraspable by human thought. Lyotard argues that as scientific rationality slowly displaces the Medieval Christian mindset during the Renaissance, the unity of image and text, previously tied together by religion, becomes broken. This purges the recessive, unconscious figural from textuality and drives it into images, but at the same time radically alters conceptions of seeing and spatiality – a shift registered in pictorial theory before philosophy. Lyotard discusses artworks that sit between the metaphorically-structured representational logic of Medieval European painting where space is organised according to myth, and the emergence of mathematics and fixed point perspective as organising visual principles. Geometry displaces Christianity to become the new language that makes sense of the universe/world, and the depiction of the human figure is no longer defined by its situation in a complex, meaningful, mythic structure, but rather by appearances and verisimilitude. However, despite this dominance of the “geometric organisation of the field of vision” (Lyotard, 2011, 187), the phantasmatic force of the figural, driven from

discourse and textuality, still haunts art and lends it an ineffable force previously found in religion:

“If, at the beginning of the Quattrocento, the West elevates painting—which until then had been a minor craft, a “mechanical art”—to the dignity of art par excellence, this is because the West must now re-present: represent what is absent to it (reality), but was once present to it, and what is not signifiable in discourse. The world, from the Renaissance onward, withdraws into the silence of the foreclosed. Yet great artworks still manage to show this silence, which is that of the figural itself” (Lyotard, 2011, 194).

Lyotard maintains that under the surface of perspectival logic lurks the figural previously embedded within Christianity. Following the logic of geometric optics, the painted image becomes conceived of as a “theatre or mirror, carving out behind its glass pane a deep stage where the phantasmatic becomes hallucinatory... For one stages what one cannot signify, and one makes visible what is unsayable” (Lyotard, 2011, 192). However, the figural is repressed, held in check by the dominance of geometry and regularised ‘realist’ form, which becomes naturalised and ubiquitous in European art, until the structural rules of perspective are deconstructed by Cezanne’s and the Impressionists’ radical reconsideration of representation.

It is notable that Lyotard and Deleuze define the figural in relation to two particular 20th century painters – Paul Klee and Francis Bacon – who, following Cezanne’s breakthrough, sit at the intersection between abstract and figurative depictions. Both artists sought to break free of the structuring principle of perspective and naturalism, but do not embrace total abstraction. Deleuze views abstraction as a necessary step to break with the prior regulations of ‘figuration’ which are under threat from both photography and the secular collapse of the “religious possibilities” that gave a “pictorial meaning to figuration” (Deleuze, 2003, 8) but he asks if there is not “another path, more direct and more sensible?” (Deleuze, 2003, 11) Deleuze sees Bacon as following a “third path, which is neither optical like abstract painting, nor manual like action painting” (Deleuze, 2003, 110). Lyotard posits Klee as an artist who has abandoned the ‘universality’ of geometric form, but is interested in the specific ‘energetics’ of the line – neither reduced to the “text of visible appearance” nor the “geometric

script". Adopting such textual metaphors, Lyotard sees the artist in semiotic terms – as a figure capable of breaking with the 'good form', the coded nature of the textual image, constantly attempting to gesture towards the wanton libidinal energy of the figural:

"Klee never was a cubist. What he learned from Cézanne was not to script with geometric volumes, but rather to deconstruct representation and invent a space of the invisible, of the possible. Klee is closest to Cézanne when he sets out to locate the painting's polyphony, the simultaneity of different perspectives, in a word, the interworld" (Lyotard, 2011, 231).

Lyotard and Deleuze's definition of the figural draws heavily on Klee's notion of an aesthetic 'Interworld' (zwischenwelt): the conjuring of another world through painting's 'bad forms', described by Ronald Bogue as "coexisting incommensurable moments and perspectives... shifting curvatures, topological twists, unreconcilable reversals, distensions, contractions, ablations, excrescences, and so on" (Bogue, 2003, 115). This allows art to render visible the invisible; Deleuze understands Bacon's painting as directly attempting to "release the presences beneath representation, beyond representation. The color system itself is a system of direct action on the nervous system" (Deleuze, 2003, 51-2). For both theorists, painting gestures towards the viscerally uncontainable, the unsayable and invisible, but not the platonic metaphysical transcendental of Modernist abstraction:

"'Good form' is the Pythagorean and Neoplatonic form, heir to a Euclidian geometric tradition. Upon it rests a philosophy, even a mystique, of the number and its luminous cosmic value. This form is Apollonian. The unconscious figure-form—form as figural form—would instead be an anti-good form, a 'bad form.' As an energetics indifferent to the unity of the whole, one could qualify it as Dionysian" (Lyotard, 2011, 275).

Neither writer sees painting as a communicative medium – it must eschew narrative or 'feeling', in favour of an art of 'sensation' (Deleuze, 2003). For Lyotard, painting avoids the structure of knowledge and "the most precious function of art is to create the last preserve of nonideological meaning" (Rodowick, 2001, 2).

If the notion of the figural as proposed by Lyotard and Deleuze is defined in relation to Avant-Garde Modernist painting and literature, what is its relevance to the contemporary era? David Rodowick's 1999 book, *Reading the Figural, Or, Philosophy After the New Media*, reconsiders the Post-Structuralist definitions of the figural from the 1970s and '80s. Rodowick attempts to go beyond the frame of Lyotard and Deleuze, which is ultimately tied to the artworks of the early 20th century Avant-Garde, to show that in the present era the figural resides in emerging digital media. From the heterogeneous riot of colour, line, form and register of MTV logos, to the emerging visual logic of the internet, Rodowick traces the displacement of older aesthetic categories and transformation of the relation between text and image in what he calls the "spatial images" of new media and 'post-cinematic' forms. If, as Lyotard outlines in *Discourse, Figure* (see précis above), the Renaissance saw the splitting of textuality and visuality, driving the figural to the interstices of perspectival representation, signs in the contemporary era return to a 'hieroglyphic' logic - "a dynamic field in perpetual movement that calls upon the resources of both text and image, but is reducible to neither" (Shaviro, 2003).

For Rodowick, the "figural is the electronic and digital era par excellence" (Rodowick, 2001, 72) and he uses it to propose a new way to think about images suitable for an epoch where signs float and mingle freely with shifting textuality, and the spatial becomes simulacral as digital media flattens the distinction between the visual, textual and musical into a plane of "pure simulation" underpinned by computation:

"The electronic and digital arts are rapidly engendering new strategies of creation and simulation, and of spatial and temporal ordering, that linguistic philosophies are ill-equipped to understand. In the physics of language, semiology represents Newtonian mechanics and we already inhabit an increasingly dynamic and nonlinear discursive universe. Conceptually, the sign describes a thing; it must be replaced by a 'becoming.' Provisionally, I recommend the figural" (Rodowick, 1990, 12).

It is not entirely clear how Rodowick valorises the uncontainable, unrepresentable, desiring forces of the figural as embodied in contemporary media. Whereas for post-structural writers, highlighting the figural was part of a potentially liberatory project to undermine the rigid, exclusionary logic of logocentric rationality and reveal the repressed currents of the desiring unconscious in artworks, Rodowick is far more ambivalent. He reserves a degree of uncertainty about whether the figural, as a “diagram of power”, is either “producing an image of utopia or of nightmare” (Rodowick, 2001, 51). This is because the figural no longer resides exclusively in the Avant-Garde artwork, but can be traced in the ‘social hieroglyphics’ of the commodity and mass culture. Rodowick is clear that the figural “is not an aesthetic concept, nor does it recognize a distinction between the forms of ‘high’ or ‘low’ culture. It describes the logic of mass culture itself; or rather a culture of the mass” (Rodowick, 1990, 12). He echoes Sigfried Kracauer’s sympathy towards the potentials of mass culture – the idea that the commodity as ‘mass ornament’ harnesses new technologies, and offers the possibility to articulate liberation as well as alienation and reification. In this move, what is clear is that the figural force of new media, embedded as it is within the circuits of capital and informatics flows, displaces the old distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture:

“capital has placed itself in direct competition with art for all that used to be called aesthetic experience. For Lyotard, the avant-garde is always at risk through either rejection, repression, or co-optation, but its place now has never been more fragile. Not only does capitalism collude with the avant-garde and seduce the artist, but now that the Idea of capital identifies itself with the sublime, it wants to render the avant-garde in art unnecessary” (Rodowick, 2001, 26).

Whereas the Post-Structuralist theorists of the figural could still see hope in strands of the Avant-Garde – in particular in painting – locating the subversive power of the figural in the deviant (and often decried) strategies of Surrealism and artists working between figuration and abstraction, today, Rodowick claims, the figural lurks in the logic of mass digital culture. Rodowick asserts that the “culture of the mass, despised by traditional aesthetics, contains a measure of reality in the form of social knowledge no longer accessible through Art or

Philosophy” (Rodowick, 2001, xiv). This notion is echoed in the way that the attempt to trace new forms, and to comprehend the workings of the contemporary image as revealing of contemporary reality, often coalesces around industrial digital cinema rather than Contemporary Art. Recent attempts to analyse the digital image in relation to mainstream films (see subsection 1.3), such as Steven Shaviro’s influential *Post Cinematic Affect* and Evan Calder Williams’ *Shard Cinema*, both deal with blockbuster films and music videos, not ‘high’ artworks. Shaviro openly sees potential and possibility in a digital image of pure affect, seeing them as explicitly prophetic of the changing world of the 21st century. Much like Kracauer, Shaviro believes that the only way beyond the commodity is to pass through it, and celebrates, rather than scorns mass culture.

Rodowick’s idea that the figural has been driven out of art and philosophy and into mass digital culture might go some way to explaining the crisis at the heart of Contemporary Art. One could argue that Contemporary Art responds to this ‘appropriation’ of the figural by capital through the two strategies for ‘saving’ art proposed by contemporary critics and outlined in subsection 2.3 above. One strategy is to define itself in sharp contrast to the affect-driven culture industry, doubling down on a rational, ‘textualised’ approach that forecloses the figural - a defence of the intellectual, the instrumental and the political in the face of the aesthetic, affective delirium of capitalist culture. As outlined in section one’s overview of recent art, we can see this in the overt use of textual claims, voiceovers in video work, and explicit intentions of political change communicated in artworks. This purging of the figural in the textual/conceptual logic of Contemporary Art could be seen as the fulfilment of the Hegelian enlightenment schema explicitly attacked by Lyotard, which saw art as “fundamentally unstable and doomed to disappear... the fate of art is its already quasi-realized disappearance... the beautiful figural, sensory, Greek totality is lost and can be restored only as *Wissenschaft*, only as real discursive, linguistic, modern (and obviously clerical-bureaucratic) totality” (Lyotard, 2011, 48).

The second strategy that critics recommend to ‘improve’ Contemporary Art in light of the figural’s flight into the digital cultural industry is to precisely seek to

ape and adopt mass culture's formal tropes and terrain of engagement (as noted in *The White Pube's* recommendation that art become more like the games industry or Lev Manovich's envy of Netflix's slick aesthetics in subsection 2.3 above). In the first section of this thesis I argue that artists' digital moving image is engaged in a rear guard (rather than Avant-Garde) engagement with the affect-driven innovations of industrial culture, with 'post-internet' moving image borrowing forms from gaming, CGI cinema or online pop culture (even if it ultimately subjects them to critical framing). In both these strategies we see how Contemporary Art retreats from the visual altogether or attempts to borrow from pop culture. In either case Contemporary Art fails to carve out its own distinct space of visual or formal engagement, collapsing itself either into textual critical theory or critically mimicking the culture industry. But is there another route? Could digital art still reclaim the figural for itself? Could it go beyond the contemporary figural as a 'diagram of power' ensnared within capitalist image circuits, what Rodowick potentially sees as a 'nightmare' (Rodowick, 2001, 51), and return to engage with the liberatory potentials of the figural set out by Lyotard and Deleuze, the project of proposing through deforming visibility, an aesthetic interworld?

Digital media, whose screens and projectors throw out a constant relentless image, no longer composed of the flickering frames of filmic images that give space for the subconscious to fill the void, can feel like it has no unconscious. The decline of psychoanalysis as a theoretical tool to decode modern digital imagery runs parallel to the disappearance of the 'dreaming' image of cinema. The affect-driven films beloved by Shaviro (see subsection 1.3 above) feel as if they operate as mechanisms of biopolitical control – acting directly on the body in a disciplining, pacifying function – rather than releasing a repressed level of desire. Writers like Shaviro attempt to bypass the 'nightmarish', alienating consequences of the commodity images inherent to the blockbusters they celebrate by subscribing to an accelerationist logic. Shaviro argues that Hollywood films bring the sensory delirium they embody to its logical end point; "None of these works discovers an 'outside' to capitalism; and none of them offers anything like revolutionary hope. But they all insist, at least, upon

exhausting, and thereby perhaps finding a limit to, the totalizing ambitions of real subsumption” (Shaviro, 2016, 135). Is accelerating the banality of the commodity image the best we can hope for? Rodowick, despite his enthusiasm for the new digital media also demonstrates how the figural is profoundly hamstrung by the systems of digitality. He notes that affect and movement is now itself a code, overcoding the potential of the non-ideological, deforming figural dreamed of by Lyotard. The hieroglyphic image has become a condensed ideological unit, and its transmission over the networks of communication is analogous to the circuits of exchange that dominate the world: “one invests no longer in things but in the power of unlimited exchange. The explosion of signs is here the global circulation of international capital itself” (Rodowick, 2001, 71). Far from the ‘bad form’ of the figural, 3D computer generated images are produced within a Euclidean grid, echoing the spaces of finance and control, more binding than that of any Renaissance painter.

Can we ask for more? Is there another logic, perhaps in an art beyond Contemporary Art, where the digital figural can point beyond the instrumentality of the commodity without having to push it to its nightmarish limit, or without being instrumentalised itself into a ‘revolutionary’ project? What is the space that digital art might hold that can distinguish it from the general economy of digital images? Could it tap into a different logic of the figural – the production of the wild ‘non-ideological’ bad forms that can break with the incipient rationalist positivism sweeping our culture, in a tradition more closely linked to the painterly gestures of Klee and Bacon than the Hollywood action films of Michael Bay?

2.5 Summary

This historical and theoretical section covers a broad range of ideas, brought into a measure of coherence by the Sean Cubitt quote that prefaces it. I have tried to construct a reminder of what has indeed been ‘forgotten’, and hope that the discussion of the Modernist antecedents to today’s moving image artists provides a stark contrast to the present day discourse; it shows that how we make and consider moving image art has changed profoundly. The once tight-knit circles around artists’ filmmaking feel as if they have come undone over the last decade, and many former peers who were once deeply committed to form have drifted into other forms of practice. Moving image as a discipline has truly become ‘post-medium’ – merely part of a toolkit of diverse media rather than a distinct genre with specific skills and fluencies.

This section has been written to provide a reminder of the past, so that we might see our own period more clearly. This is especially necessary if, as I claim to have identified, Contemporary Art is in a state of advanced crisis. I base my claims on a number of discrete, often unpublicised, proclamations, however they are from key critical figures and ring true to informal conversations between artists and curators. And yet the machine of Contemporary Art continues to reproduce the trajectory it has been locked into for several decades – and in fact, as commentators like Darby English (see 2.3 above) astutely note, the tendency towards politicisation and critique seems to only grow stronger. I suggest that this logic is in fact itself the result of the loss of nerve around the aesthetic, the formal, and the visual as sufficient and important domains, as artists cede this ground to ‘semio-capitalism’ and the culture industry.

I also hint that it might have something to do with the outlook of elements of a Professional Managerial Class wedded to a culture of institutionality, credentialism and rationalist solution-seeking. I have questioned the critical orthodoxy about how we might go about ‘fixing’ Contemporary Art – I do not

believe that the instrumental, the political or professionalism provide the answers we are looking for.

I have proposed vitalism and the concept of the figural as ways to consider art that may begin to address the current issues and establish a space for art distinct from 'textual' disciplines. I have alighted here not because I fully endorse or grasp such elusive concepts to their core, but because they come closest to reposing or undermining the deeply established rationalism that seems to block the often unaccountable complexities of form. These concepts counter the pervasive literalism and coarsening of a culture that claims to be 'visual' yet, as Sontag points out in *Against Interpretation*, lacks a language to discuss visuality or form.

Many of the claims I make in this section address themselves to the broadest possible questions of what art is, what it is for, how it can be nurtured, and how it might develop. I hope they might stand alone as valid conclusions developed from this period of study. However, the next section seeks to pick up on many of these threads and apply them concretely to questions of practice – ways of working, of using tools and media and how to create new forms.

Section 3

The Digital Figural: Practice Beyond Contemporary Art

3.1 Introduction

The previous sections have set out a broad historical and theoretical framework, first critically tracing the last twenty years of digital moving image practice in Contemporary Art, and then pulling back to consider the broader history of artist's film and video and some of the practical and theoretical frameworks that have contextualized it. I set out a number of critical points and potential possibilities that I wish to build on in the next section. I characterise artists' general use of the digital moving image in the context of Contemporary Art as fundamentally disinterested in formal innovation or experimentation, instead privileging content and discourse. I show how the increasingly academicised, critical/political approach of Contemporary Art can be contrasted to the dominant formalist modes of experimental moving image in the 20th century. I have argued that a reading of Duchamp that sets aside the conceptuality of the readymade and instead privileges his carnal, optical, desiring preoccupations, points us towards a reassertion of visibility and a non-rationalist, non-textual, almost vitalist notion of Art as a vector for corporeal energy and unconscious jouissance (embodied in Lyotard's notion of the figural). I believe Contemporary Art is in crisis precisely as it has largely eradicated many of the potentials of formalism and Modernism and any vitalist conceptions of art, and yet it responds to this crisis by either doubling down on its critical and political claims, or dreaming about dissolving itself into the professionalism of the culture industry (as outlined by the critics I cite in subsection 2.3). I wish to contend that, in particular in the domain of the digital, other pathways are possible.

In this concluding section I wish to bring together the various assertions and questions opened up in this theoretical account in relation to the practice-based outcomes of work undertaken during this study. I seek to demonstrate how my practice has evolved in response to the framing of digital practice in the Contemporary Art context, and attempt to locate pathways that move somewhere beyond the current limits I have identified. It offers an account and a reading of the practice-based elements of my research, describing processes, motivations, practical outcomes and potential solutions to my critiques of current practice and exploring the question of the possibilities inherent in the digital moving image in relation to artistic production.

It is important to stress that the theoretical arguments set out in the preceding sections have themselves emerged from my ongoing artistic practice, and that the practical research outcomes presented in this section are not attempts to explicitly answer the questions posed by this thesis. If this thesis seems to set out theoretical questions which are then responded to by practice, that is the result of a process of post-rationalisation. In reality, my practical research raised the questions in a far less linear fashion – everything has flowed, often in an inchoate and unconscious way, through practice. My theoretical claims and observations are as rooted in the direct experience of digital production processes and tool use, or in the working relation with institutional structures, as they are in more scholarly or ‘academic’ research.

This discussion poses a number of problems and potential contradictions – this thesis represents an attempt to set out a clear, academically rigorous theoretical argument *against* the primacy of clear arguments, academicism and theoretical justifications in the current art field. I assert that textuality has drowned out the importance and potency of form and visuality. There is a certain irony in attempting to give an account of work that I would prefer remained far from textual framing, inhering instead in the irreducibility of aesthetic encounter.

I will begin with an overview of my practice, whose course largely follows the schema set out in section 1 above – a transition from cinematic to more CGI-

orientated approaches to moving image. Many of the assertions and ideas encapsulated in this thesis emerged at an unconscious level over many years of practice, and have now been given voice.

This will then be followed by three subsections where I discuss digital tools, workflow and artistic decisions in relation to my practice. Firstly, in subsection 3.3 I will look at my motivations for moving beyond the two currents dominant in digital moving image practice – the use of HD video as a proxy for conventional film making versus the creation of 3D CGI in specialist software. My work has tended to search for aesthetic and technical possibilities that sit between these two pathways, what I call the ‘neither/nor’ image. Secondly, in 3.4, I will take up the question of praxis in relation to digital moving image workflow, the ways that I have tried to get beyond the pre-packaged, industrially produced software and hardware platforms which often enclose and limit digital practice. I also discuss my desire to establish an open-ended practice that is not guided by an initial ‘big idea’, but rather, is able to ground artistic decisions in a relation to medium and materials in a fluid and dialectical way. Finally, in 3.5 I trace the ways that my practical research can be read through the notion of the figural (as set out in subsection 2.4 above), and look at the ways that many of my practical outcomes re-trace strategies of certain artists championed by figural theorists like Lyotard and Deleuze.

The discussions of practice in this section will make reference to a number of video works, made during the period of study and submitted for examination. These can be found online at <https://www.gem.rip/david-panos>

Page one features a complete body of work, *The Searchers* (2018) Page two (<https://www.gem.rip/david-panos-2>) contains a number of tests and studies made during research. Page three (<https://www.gem.rip/david-panos-3>) presents five short videos grouped together under the title *Unform Views* (2020-21), all made using techniques and technologies I have developed as part of my PhD.

3.2 A (Personal) History Of Practice

As a backdrop to the research and practice presented in this thesis it seems apposite to sketch out a brief history of my work and collaborations leading up to this research, as they are relevant to understanding the way that this thesis emerges from experience, but also because they inform the specific research undertaken during this doctorate study. Such an account of my past practice has been made possible through the theoretical reflections facilitated by this research, allowing me to situate shifts and decisions within a coherent narrative and in relation to a broader cultural context and theoretical logic. It has led me to confront some fundamental questions about digital moving image practice and the current state of Contemporary Art, culminating in the arguments embodied in the two preceding sections of the thesis.

Although I have been working with digital video since the late 1990s, I didn't begin to operate within the Contemporary Art context until the mid 2000s. Between 2006 and 2010 my collaborative practice with Anja Kirschner yielded four long-form video works produced within fairly conventional production structures and closely mirroring the 'return to cinema' approach outlined in section 1.3 above. These were films made with scripted narratives, realised with medium-sized crews, including multiple departments – camera, lighting, sound, production design, art direction, hair & makeup and costume. They were digitally produced – shot on DV, HDv and HD DSLR cameras and edited with Apple's Final Cut Pro software. Early on we used green screen and digital compositing techniques to create an anti-naturalistic approach distinct from any 'authentic' auratic qualities suggested by the return to celluloid film dominant at that time among many notable artist filmmakers.

The works appropriated the language of 20th century television and cinema, and aimed to create complex tapestries of references and aesthetic modes, often exploring the use of contrasting approaches – high versus low cultural references, amateur versus professional casts, quoting mainstream cinema

tropes versus a resolutely political, 'DIY' approach to making. In retrospect, although we were careful to brief crews to get aesthetic results with a particular, flat, often comic-book quality, and to not reproduce familiar tonal references from film or TV of the 2000s, the films' look and feel, their anti-naturalism and use of certain theatrical devices and disruptive greenscreen strategies, can be seen to echo the aesthetics of independent films and videos of the 1980s. In short, we were ourselves subject to the backward-looking tendencies of that period, a retreat to past filmic languages in the face of the mainstream cultural innovations of the 21st century.

We understood our adoption or retooling of familiar, popular forms as part of a project in defiance of the protocols of art, seeking to reach wider audiences. Whereas 'video art' seemed rarified, its formal languages obscure or exhausted, we were aiming to create works involving people from beyond the art context, and that could be more widely screened. We explored themes that were relevant to our lives in the 2000s, such as the urban politics and gentrification of London or the 2008 financial crash. Art's reified formal strategies seemed compromised, irrelevant and part of a dubious project of class power. Roger L Taylor's book *Art, An Enemy of the People* (1978), which sees art as an elite, exclusive structure, at odds with working class interests, was an influence on an attitude of suspicion towards art making, and underpinned our attempts to adopt a 'popular', accessible approach to culture that used existing film forms.



Fig 56: *Trail of the Spider* (Anja Kirschner & David Panos, 2008), SD Video, 54'. Influenced by Cinema Westerns, the film features East London residents playing out a classic 'end of the West' narrative about land rights and the collapse of social solidarity in the face of a changing economic context, echoing their own experience of gentrification.



Fig 57: *Ibid.* An example of a stylized sequence, drawing on mainstream cinematic tropes of the 20th century.



Fig 58: *The Last Days of Jack Sheppard* (Anja Kirschner & David Panos, 2009), HDV Video, 56'. Rooted in references from early 18th century visual culture (this frame is a reconstruction of a Hogarth print), the film explores the abstracting influence of finance on popular culture.



Fig 59: *Ibid.*

The contextualization, reception and discourse surrounding these collaborative films often focused on their critical and political propositions. The films' visual worlds and scripts were rooted in dense layers of research, and we accompanied the works with self-published pamphlets detailing the web of references they explored. I recall feeling a degree of unease about our own production strategies, in particular around the reception of our works; after shooting there were regularly moments where footage suggested interesting formal possibilities such as short abstract montages, or non-linear multiscreen modes of display, yet such opportunities were abandoned in the service of a single screen narrative structure. There was little room for 'play' with material, as the ideas and discourse contained within the script dictated its ultimate form. Our artist talks or discussions in that period inevitably led back to the ideas and themes behind the films – the historical/social context and research that informed their narrative – and almost never dealt with the formal qualities of the films or their 'digital' production processes, which were often rendered invisible. I was aware that our research-driven, scripted production approach suited the funding regimes encouraged at the time (such as FLAMIN's (Film London Artist Moving Image Network) encouragement of more 'industry'-derived practices, discussed in subsection 1.3 above) which were inimical to more exploratory, formally based artistic experimentation. Also our almost didactic, supposedly 'political' themes, rather than standing against the orthodoxies of Contemporary Art, actually dovetailed neatly with curatorial concerns: we were widely exhibited and funded, culminating in our receiving the prestigious Jarman Award for artist filmmakers in 2011.

The Empty Plan (2010), the collaborative film for which we won the Jarman Award, was itself a reflexive attempt to deal with some of the frustrations, both formal and political, that emerged from our practice over the previous four years. The film focuses on the work of Bertolt Brecht, and explores both the concrete realization of his radical ideas about theatre in the form of performance training and exercises, but also details Brecht's own struggle to reconcile art and politics in a period of global war and political defeat. For the first time we used improvisatory techniques, breaking with the 'top down' principle of a scripted

approach, and allowed the ideas explored in the film to propose themselves more immanently, through the forms of different performance modes. In *The Empty Plan*, based on Brecht's unfinished, semi-theoretical book *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (1963), we depict the writer grappling with the vexed relationship between politics, knowledge and art; Brecht concludes that "there is no artistic form for knowing" – that art resides in "unclarity". *The Empty Plan* begins to trouble the very idea of 'political art' which we had become associated with. This film and the experiences it allegorised to some extent sowed the seeds of my unease about the relation between art and politics in Contemporary Art, discussed in subsection 2.3 of this thesis.



Fig 60: *The Empty Plan* (Anja Kirschner & David Panos, 2010), HD Video, 78'. This scene imagines Brecht and his collaborator, Helene Weigel grappling with theoretical questions related to art and politics whilst in exile in Los Angeles in the early 1940s.



Fig 61: *Ibid.* A reconstruction of one of Brecht's early didactic plays *The Mother* (1931), based on documentation from a performance in 1932.

The Empty Plan represented a decisive break in our practice: after this point I never returned to narrative cinema within the Contemporary Art context. The final collaborative works made with Anja Kirschner – *Living Truthfully Under Imaginary Circumstances* (2011), a multi-screen, affective, improvisatory work that examined acting techniques developed by Sanford Meisner; *Ultimate Substance* (2012), a film-poem of fragmented imagery gathered and constructed in Greece in the midst of the Euro crisis; *Uncanny Valley* (2013) which looked at the relation between performance and digital capture – all followed a looser, more imagistic approach to film-making. We worked without script, allowing each film's form to be influenced by the material gathered. I had begun to think of editing in terms of musical scoring, allowing images to find rhythmic and tonal affinities rather than following a strictly thematic and intellectual logic, so that meaning could emerge through more intuitive processes. *Ultimate Substance* saw a transition away from working with actors and towards collaborating with movement and dance performers, working within the less narrative-driven logic of choreography. In seeking solutions to the frustrations and limitations of narrative film, I was unconsciously re-treading the pathways of 20th century

Modernist experimental filmmaking, towards a more formal approach rooted in music, intuition, kinetics and poetics.

These films also began to experiment with computer generated imagery, impacted by the broad trends and available software influencing many moving image artists in the early 2010s (and written about in subsection 1.3 above). In both *Uncanny Valley* and *Ultimate Substance*, we hired CGI programmers to build 3D image sequences, conforming to the dominant tendency for artists to commission such imagery and treat it as an outsourced element within video production (in other words, these were images made to order, based on a prior 'idea', rather than something made through direct artistic experimentation). *Uncanny Valley* explored the logic of performance and film language in the era of digital 'post-cinema' and contained an aerial sequence of animated crowds racing through a minimal 3D landscape, echoing the impersonal CGI crowd and battle scenes that had begun to dominate mainstream Hollywood cinema in the 2000s. In *Ultimate Substance*, digital filmmaking, in the form of visible green screens and a CGI reconstruction of a nugget of silver ore, became a motif of abstraction, loosely related to images of ancient coinage and contemporary crisis in Greece, with dancers' bodies set in relation to these abstracted digital backdrops and objects. The newly attainable 3D CGI imagery felt appropriate to a period dominated by financialisation and the invisible logic of its digital transactions.



Fig 62: *Uncanny Valley* (Anja Kirschner & David Panos, 2013), 2 Channel HD Video, 10'. The film explored the role of actors in the motion capture and video effects industry.

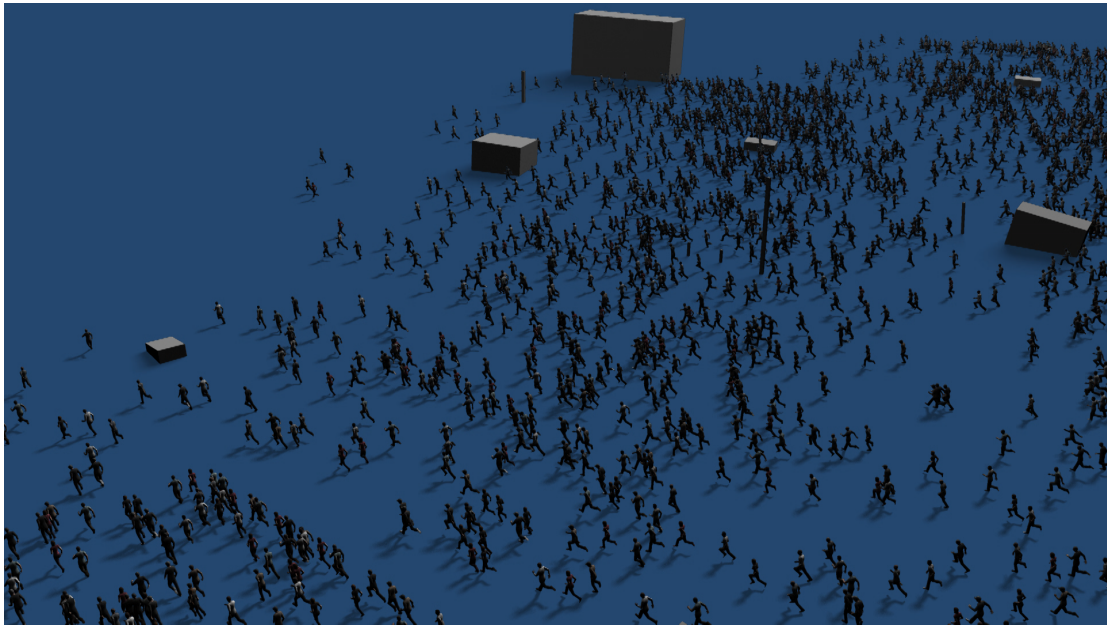


Fig 63: *Ibid.* An entirely animated sequence of a running crowd, echoing the frequent use of aerial shots of massive crowd and battle scenes in Hollywood blockbusters of the early 2000s.

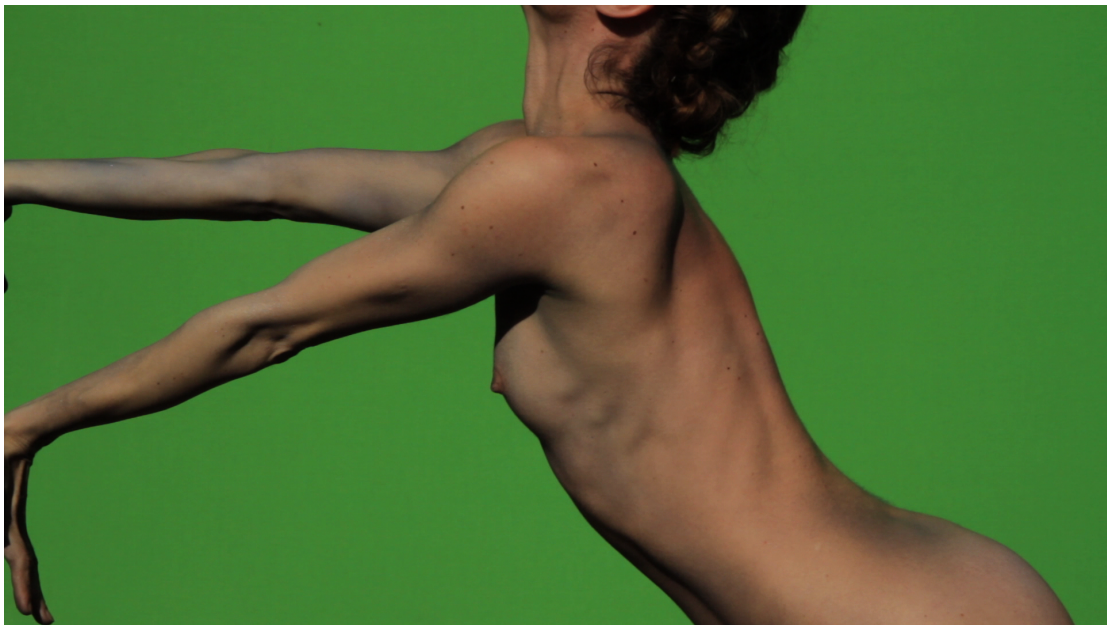


Fig 64: *Ultimate Substance* (Anja Kirschner & David Panos, 2012), HD Video, 34'. Dancers performing against a greenscreen are a repeated motif, creating a tension between the physical movement and the abstract, 'fungible' space behind them. This motif of corporeality versus dematerialisation runs throughout the work.

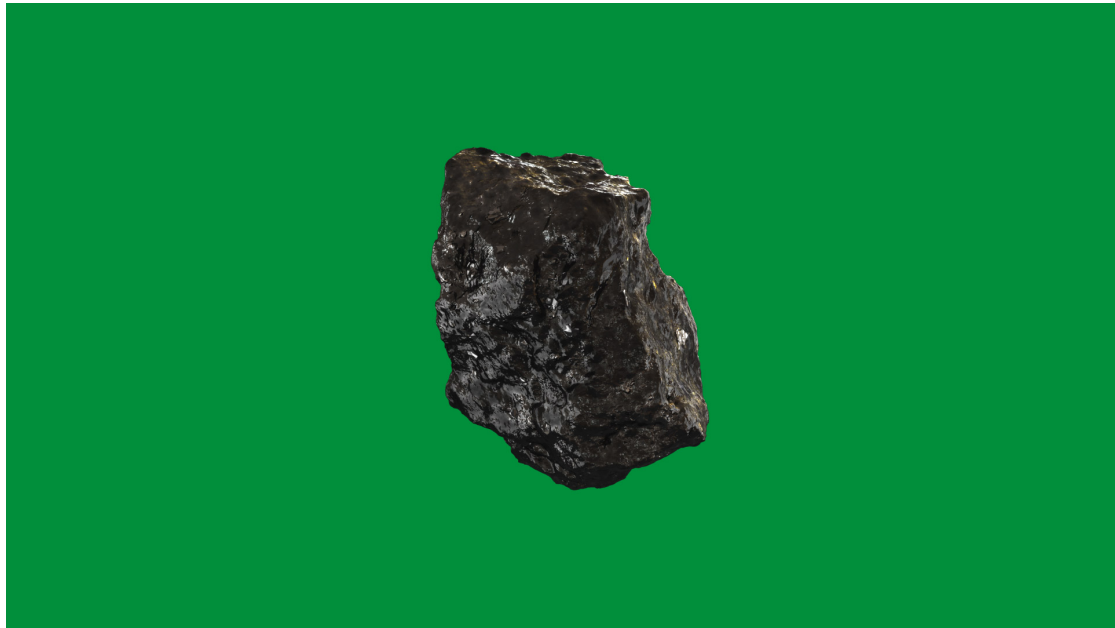


Fig 65: *Ibid.* A piece of silver ore from Lavrion near Athens, the original source of the wealth of ancient Greece, 3D scanned to be a weightless digital artifact. Again this contrasts with the solidity of extractive labour with the abstraction of value.

The relation between the physicality of choreographic movement and the weightlessness of the digital, first proposed in *Ultimate Substance*, became the loose foundation for a set of preoccupations and formal experiments that continued into my solo work of the next few years, culminating in two main bodies of work: *The Dark Pool* (2015) and *Time Crystals* (2017). My work continued to involve movement artists, and I became increasingly interested in the embodied approach of dancers, whose training made them much more sensitive to the potentials of meaning and form contained in tiny changes in gesture and pose (in sharp contrast to the often intellectual/conceptual preoccupations of visual artists). I continued to experiment with the green screen as both sign and working process. Returning to a long tradition of artists misusing tools (see the Avant Garde's manipulation of film equipment in subsection 2.2 above) I manipulated and misused the parameters of the software Keylight (designed to remove green screen backdrops from digital footage). This evolved novel techniques that formed the basis of works where bodies and objects could be occluded and consumed in hazy digital mists, indicating a corrosive, dematerializing abstraction. I extended the logics of video imagery into sculptural elements, continuing a dialogue between the physical and the virtual.



Fig 66: *The Dark Pool* (David Panos, 2015), HD Video, 6'55". Video sequences created by misusing settings in the chroma key software Keylight, creating a number of shifting effects where objects appear consumed by an almost tangible green ghostly 'substance'.

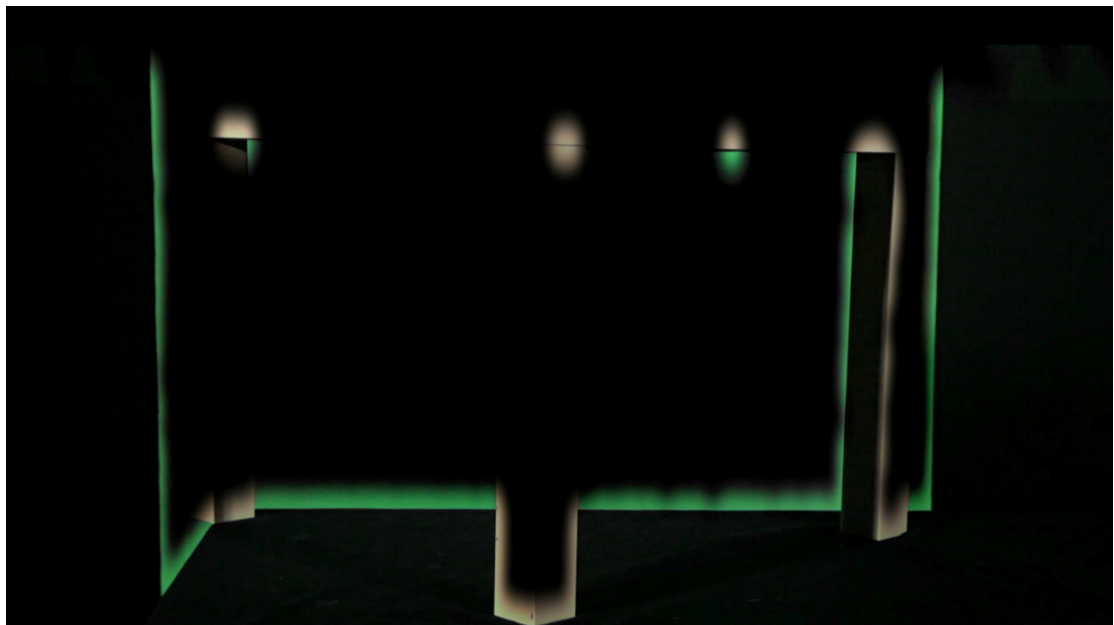


Fig 67: *Ibid*



Fig 68: *Time Crystals* (David Panos, 2017), Installation View, Pump House Gallery, London, 2017.

My solo work sought to propose meaning, not through an overriding concept or thematic sphere of research, but rather by developing sets of techniques derived from formal, technical or choreographic processes. Playing with the potentials of software and the ambiguous suggestions of choreographic gesture dictated a number of outcomes which would then inform a process of post-rationalised framing. This was a ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ approach. It became more ‘formal’ – reliant purely on immanent, self-generated forms to communicate, rather than references borrowed from popular culture or an overarching thematic. The work became increasingly and explicitly visual, with no textual or linguistic element, no script, subtitling or voice-over (a deliberate reaction to the dominance of such modes in the Contemporary Art/moving image sphere as discussed in subsection 2.1 above).

I moved away from working with crews and took more direct control of camera work, where the instinctive decisions of shooting and framing became more personal and were not mediated through a director of photography. I had always dealt with the technical aspects of post-production in most of my works, handling all aspects of editing, sound design and digital compositing, and I

sought to avoid the outsourcing logic of complex CGI imagery, continuing to try and squeeze new techniques from the software within my grasp rather than rely on hired animators. I continued to break away from single screen cinema, working with installations of multiple video works, often shown alongside with objects related to the moving image content – a form of expanded filmmaking oriented to the exhibition format – where the viewer could make connections between different registers of material and visual information. Overall this was a shift even further away from the logic of the cinematic film made with a large crew and into a more ‘artisanal’ (or even ‘artistic’) mode of production, privileging my direct involvement and experimentation with every element.

In many ways this sea change in my practice away from the narrative/cinematic works of the 2000s informed my shifting understanding of the place and value of art. Where I had previously privileged a political approach and sought to bypass art in favour of ‘popular’ forms, it was evident that such strategies were in no way inimical to the dominant currents in the Contemporary Art field. If anything, Contemporary Art seemed explicitly to draw its energy and formal approach from other disciplines and fields. Through retroactively considering my evolving practice I have become convinced that the contemporary casting of art as a bearer of critique, thematic research, political statement or social function was more in line with a dominant elite idealism and positivism – what I have referred to as a ‘managerial’ approach – where work is conceived conceptually and its execution is secondary (a prevailing approach to many digital moving image works in Contemporary Art as outlined in section 1 above). In a sense, if there was to be any ‘political’ claim for art, it is that it potentially represents a bulwark against a world increasingly suffused by instrumental logic, which demands that art must justify itself as socially useful, enlightening or transformative (echoing the Adornian ideas developed by Chris Crawford and referenced in subsection 2.2). This instrumentalising approach to art, enforced by neoliberal funding regimes that seek to put art to work, has been internalised by Contemporary Art’s institutional custodians such as curators and educational institutions over the past decades and increasingly, I feel, has been quietly accepted by artists themselves.

My research for this PhD has sought to set out and explicate positions articulated through my ongoing practice, often unconsciously formed in opposition to what I see as the dominant logic of Contemporary Art. In its practical dimension, this research has built on and extended certain techniques and processes already inherent to my practice, pushing into new territories with emergent technological possibilities.

3.3 The 'Neither/Nor' Image

In section 1 I explored the divergence between two very different currents in artists' digital moving image practice: one borrows language and workflow from traditional cinema and TV; the other deals with tools designed for creating 3D special effects, animations and gaming. In this section, I want to discuss how my practice attempts to transcend what I perceive to be limitations inherent to these approaches, which can be understood as at least partially rooted in the logic of the digital tools adopted by artists. To begin this section I will make a quick detour to consider the fundamental logics 'baked in' to digital tools and workflows, analysing the way in which the assumptions and limitations built into HD video and 3D CGI software present a problem for artists trying to evolve beyond current techniques.

HD digital video cameras, DSLRs and video editing platforms like Final Cut Pro or Adobe Premiere can be read as 'remediating' devices. New media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have written about the way that digital media 'remediates' older media (to some extent echoing previous shifts in media, for example how early film mimicked the theatre). This 'remediation' can be understood as a device to aid users orientate themselves around unfamiliar new media, but one that ultimately distorts our sense of the potential of these new technological advances. Rather than create a distinctive new formal language, digital platforms "can best be understood through the ways in which they honor, revive, and revise linear-perspective painting, photography, film, television, and print" (Bolter and Grusin, 1998, 15). This describes how digital media 'rehomes' previous imagery (i.e. by embedding it online) but also applies to the tools made available to create new media, including cameras and postproduction software.

The familiar image generated by HD cameras and lenses is oriented around maintaining continuity with the film and television images of the 20th century – adding a level of higher fidelity or resolution and convenience, but generally attempting to mimic and compete with the ideal of a celluloid film image (see subsection 1.3 above). However this 'remediation' also leads to what I see as an

‘erasure’ of the notion of media specificity: artists’ use of film or video in the 20th century often connoted a specific position in relation to media (16mm or 8mm film had previously been associated with the tradition of experimental filmmaking and evoked an artisanal or poetic approach, whereas the look and feel of video had been broadly associated with more pop-culture affiliated, ‘DIY’ or conceptual practices). I would like to suggest that artists’ adoption of digital video, which comprises and ‘remediates’ elements of both film and video yet is unlike either, has led to a kind of ‘medium blindness’. It could be perhaps argued that HD video in its ubiquity has become a non-medium – simply a conveyor of more or less high quality imagery – with no specific attributes or associated artistic positions. Unlike the very specific experience of watching celluloid or analogue video, widely available HD digital video somehow has become a default and naturalised neutral medium.

Any attempt to manipulate video imagery and push beyond the realism of conventional film language and innovate new image techniques (in the manner of Modernist Avant-Garde filmmakers or video synthesists) is inherently limited in the context and workflows of digital video. Editing software has made processes like colour keying, matting and cropping footage relatively easy; however, in general, the suites of effects available in these software platforms continue to be limited to ‘remediated’ versions of film and video effects which are often decades old. For example, a tool like green screen chroma keying, often associated with contemporary digital filmmaking, has actually existed in some form since 1925 in its celluloid form, and video colour separation overlay was invented by NBC in the 1960s. Effects like colour inversion, matting and mirroring also restage the analogue video effects of the recent past. Such effects would have previously required outboard technology in the form of video mixing desks or rack processors (which themselves formalised and made available techniques that arose from the more ad hoc, ‘DIY’ experiments of the prior generation of technician/artists developing new video techniques (discussed above in section 2.1)). Such techniques now have a curiously ‘retro’ quality, with their digital version being nothing more than a gesture towards an aesthetic now familiar from old music videos or artworks, thus limiting artistic innovation.

Analogue video effects were the result of signal processing, altering a video image by means of electrical currents. This meant they were operable in real time and had an often chaotic, open-ended quality. Such effects, when remodelled and transcribed into the digital space, take on very different characteristics – they are ‘applied’ from a menu to digitised footage and then must be rendered. One must wait for this computation to happen before seeing any outcome. This means that image manipulation has been transposed from the spontaneous direction of analogue flows (which could be augmented and altered and disrupted with enough technical knowledge of electronics, as in the case of video pioneers like the Vasulkas (see subsection 2.2 above)) to a kind of ‘dead’ digitality where presets are selected, everything has to be plotted in advance and then calculated before a final image can appear. This might be a small distinction to make, but it means that the idea of improvisation and play at the heart of early video experiments has been made more mediated, calculated and procedural in a digital setting.



Fig 69: *Colorful Colorado* (Phil Morton, 1974). A good example of the fluid, sensuous and volatile nature of analogue video effects. Made with the Sandin Analogue Image Processor, an early video synthesizer, black and white footage is coloured and combined with video feedback techniques.

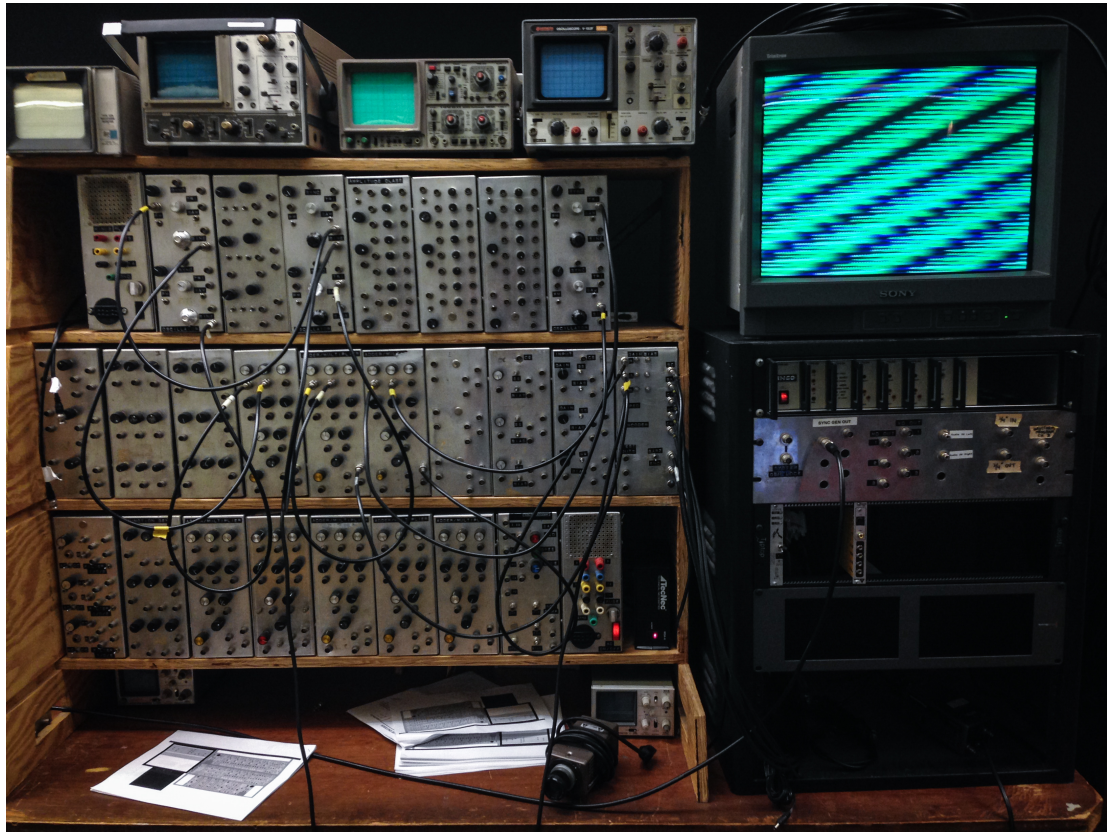


Fig 70: Sandin Analogue Image Processor video synthesizer (invented by Dan Sandin and designed between 1971 and 1974), exhibited at School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

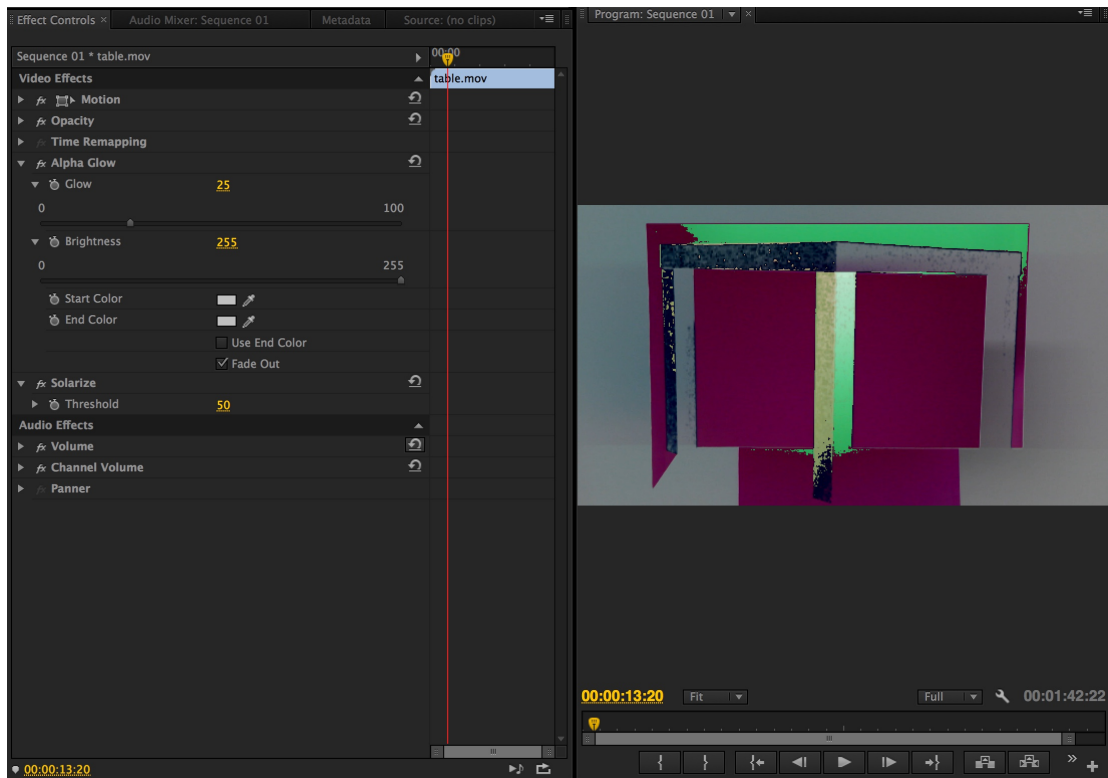


Fig 71: Simulated or 'remediated' effects applied in Adobe Premiere Pro Video Editing Software (before rendering). The outcome is designed to mimic classic analogue video effects, however is invariably colder and less fluid in its outcome.

Software for producing 'lens-less' 3D CGI animation also embeds a specific visual logic: it 'remediates' the language of cinema including "the techniques of cinematography such as user-defined focus, the grammar of camera movements (pan, dolly, zoom), the particular lens that defines what part of a virtual scene the camera will see, etc." (Manovich, 2013, 199-200) The tools and algorithms that are used to build up a totally constructed picture of 'reality' are thus based on a logic of photo-realism. CGI constructs what I would designate as a 'hyper-mediated' image; a 3D composite image may contain shreds of 'real world' information in the form of motion capture data or embedded objects (3D software allows you to place video material or other lens-based artefacts within a 3D virtual environment), but it will always be enfolded into the totalising virtuality and artificiality of the computer generated environment. Fundamental assumptions about physics, optics and geometry are hardcoded into these tools, and the notion of three dimensions is locked to an underlying matrix of a strictly measured Euclidean three-dimensional grid (standardised across all 3D software platforms from architectural modelling to 3D printing). The hermetic architecture of CGI tools means that every generated image is at a fundamental level shaped by the algorithmic possibilities of the software, which in turn rest on dense layers of pre-existent embedded labour. Each CGI image created is to some extent always enmeshed within operations hard-coded into the software that created it. It appears as an object susceptible to control by the technician using software interfaces, but simultaneously is always ultimately still part of the systemic back end that yielded it.

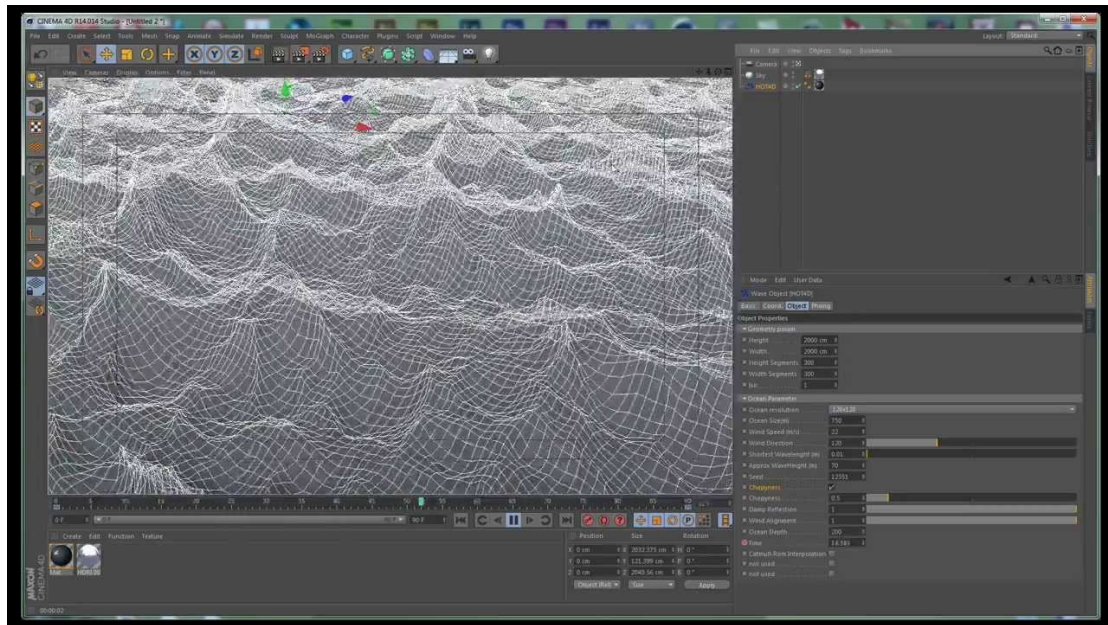


Fig 72: A water simulation algorithm in Cinema 4D.

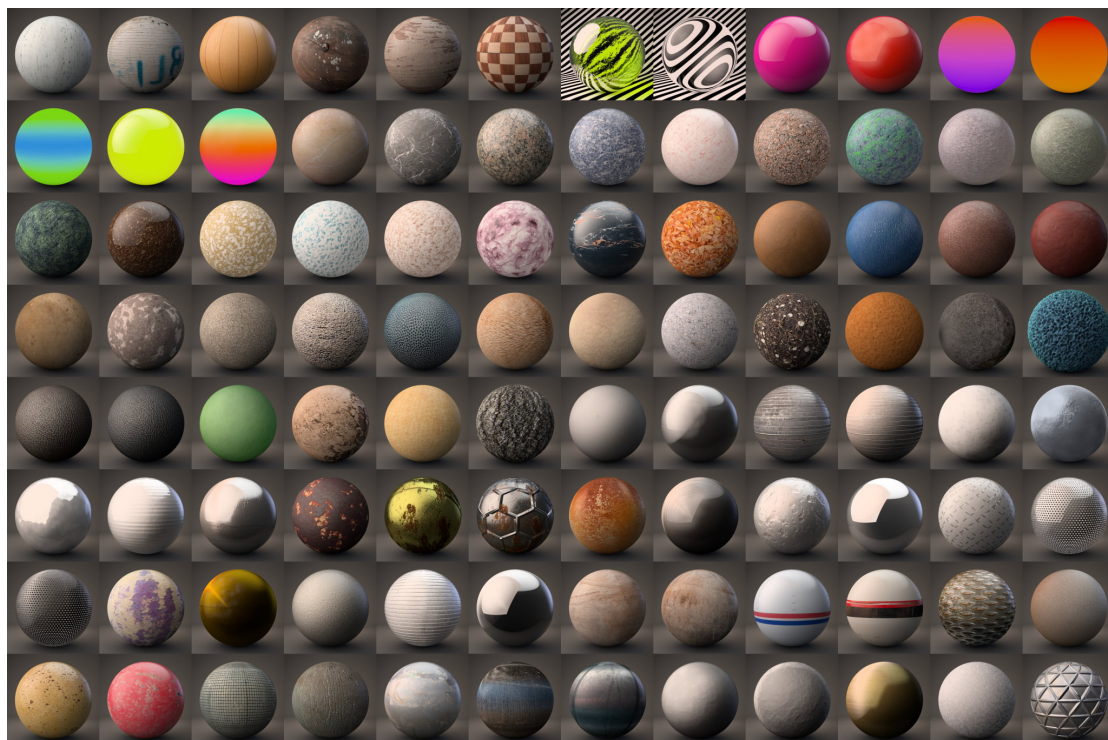


Fig 73: Texture Kit Pro plugin for Cinema 4D produced by Grayscale Gorilla. A resource for animators providing a number of algorithmically generated 'natural' textures.

It could be asserted that this fundamentally systemic aspect of the CGI image lies behind the famous problem of the digital 'uncanny valley'⁸ – the fact that photorealistic CGI representations are often seen as 'creepy' and produce a reaction of revulsion in the viewer (frequently linked to the instinctual horror

felt when seeing a corpse or zombie). No matter how many leaps forward have been made in computing, or how many ameliorating techniques have been created to 'humanise' digital animation, it is still relatively easy to spot CGI. The infinite complexity of reality has so far been impossible to emulate, and every 3D simulation somehow bears the mark of the technologies that comprise it. Unlike lens-based film and video which inscribe and encode the movement of reflected light in an 'indexical' fashion, lens-less CGI must simulate every element that is seen. CGI movement is either preprogrammed frame by frame or is dictated by motion capture, where original movement is recorded using worn tracking devices and captured as data sets that trace discrete points along a body – and then mapped onto a wire frame 'rig' located 'inside' an animated 'character'. As with the creation of photorealistic surfaces, convincing CGI movement requires vast computational resources and hours of manual adjustment to appear in any way natural, and even then is usually recognisably unreal. The translation of motion capture data into animation seems to somehow simplify or rationalise the complexity of organic motion, leading to subtle cues that signal it as somehow processed and uncanny.

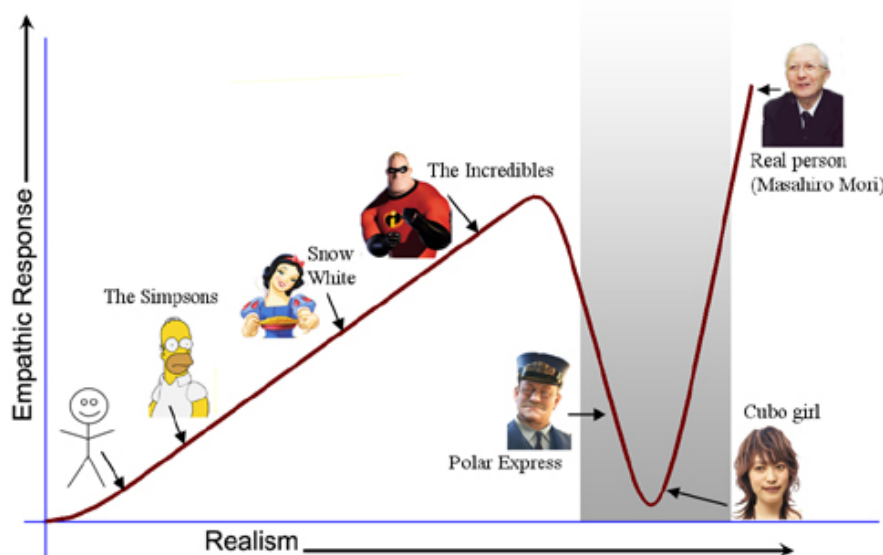


Fig 74: Diagram illustrating the theory of the 'uncanny valley' – as human representation becomes more and more 'realistic' it becomes increasingly less likely to provoke an empathetic response, and dips at the point of 'almost real' typical of hyper-real special effects and robotics.



Fig 75: Comparison of Peter Cushing in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) (left) and the CGI reconstruction of the actor in *Rogue One* (Gareth Edwards, 2016) (right). Although *Rogue One* deployed the most advanced technology to recreate the actor, critics and audiences were often unconvinced and frequently found the animation unnecessary and distracting (Goldberg, 2016).

I contend that a crucial aspect of the use of CGI software in the context of artists' moving image is the tendency for such images to be primarily read in relation to the artistic readymade. If Duchamp's conceptual gesture can be read as the foundational moment of the logic of Contemporary Art (as discussed in subsection 2.3 above), then the use of 3D CGI in artists' moving image can be understood as an evolved instantiation of that same logic. Whether outsourced by an artist/manager to a technician to build (as is most frequent, since very few artists have the time or inclination to learn to use the highly sophisticated software required), or purchased from an online marketplace for existing digital models, the logic of the CGI image displaces direct artistic participation in the creation of images. However, it is also because the CGI image is industrially produced at a granular level, so that every element of algorithm or code embeds prior labour and definite parameters, that it can function as a readymade. It is always something other than just an image; artists in particular, often uninterested in the deception of making a CGI image that 'looks just like reality', draw attention to the 'CGI-ness' of the images they create. The fact that they are

using CGI is conceptually interesting, and no matter what is being represented in a CGI it is always also self-consciously 'CGI'. Being CGI is meaningful, a part of the meta-conceptual aspect to any CGI artwork.

It could be argued that the logic of the readymade in Contemporary Art is actually homologous with the logic of digital CGI as coding and workflow. Both often establish the artist as conceptual manager, putting into place a 'creative' idea, which is then executed or instantiated at a degree of separation from any immanent artistic praxis or free play between a single creator and their artistic material or medium. If Contemporary Art is fundamentally motivated by a deep-seated rejection of the Modernist concern for an individual engagement with material or medium, the CGI workflow of 'outsourcing' frequently enforces the same separation between 'concept' and execution. Literary critic N. Katherine Hayles has written about the ways digital culture, premised on an 'erasure' of embodiment, tends towards philosophical idealism. Hayles shows that at key moments in the evolution of digital culture and cybernetics, decisions were made to privilege information and 'language' over other complicating aspects of human experience, whether corporeal or psychoanalytic, establishing the logic of the digital and simultaneously re-casting human subjects as 'information-processing systems' (Hayles, 1999). In the creation of cybernetics, homeostasis (self-regulating response to contextual influences) was seen as an integral aspect of human behaviour that could be emulated by machines to guarantee effective functioning, whereas the complexity and indeterminacy of self-reflexivity threatened to create confusion and noise:

"the common ground that humans and machines share is identified with the univocality of an instrumental language that has banished ambiguity from its lexicon. Through such 'chunking' processes, the constellations of homeostasis and reflexivity assimilated other elements into themselves. On the side of homeostasis was instrumental language, whereas ambiguity, allusion, and metaphor stood with reflexivity" (Hayles, 1999, 67).

Hayles' framing of formative moments in the evolution of digital cybernetics, and its reductive implications for our conception of the 'human', has a structural affinity to the logic of increasing instrumentalisation at the heart of

Contemporary Art. As I argue in subsection 2.3 above, writers like Darby English and Chris Crawford have pointed out the ways that the ambiguous, indeterminate aspects of art are rejected in favour of increasingly clear and determinate critical statements. Contemporary Art is re-structured as a domain of ideology critique and construction, a practice with more in common with the rationalist, 'interpretative' approaches of academia outlined by Susan Sontag in *Against Interpretation* (see subsection 2.4). Once this homology between the logic of the digital and the logic of Contemporary Art is made clear, it is possible to see how the current use of CGI as readymade leads to a cul-de-sac. Contemporary Artists deploy CGI as a readymade element, in which each image is not merely representational but also points towards a conceptual horizon, often implicitly critical or at least consciously interrogative of the broader issues of digital instrumentality and its relation to capitalism and the culture industry. However, this critical operation does not reverse the logic of instrumentality and the dominance of 'information'. Rather, it redoubles it; the conceptual framing of digital images does not create a bridge to the complexities embodied within "ambiguity, allusion, and metaphor" or the sensuous domain of the material. It leads directly back to the same logic of increasing instrumentalism.

Hayles' assertion that "at the inaugural moment of the computer age, the erasure of embodiment is performed so that 'intelligence' becomes a property of the formal manipulation of symbols rather than enaction in the human lifeworld" (Hayles, 1999, xi) could equally be applied to the 'post-conceptual' tendencies latent in all Contemporary Art. While Hayles sees this erasure of the physical as symptomatic of the liberal humanist subject (Hayles, 1999, 4), it could be thought of more specifically as a feature of a particular educated class from which software engineers, academics and artists tend to be drawn. In subsection 2.3 I argue that it is the class outlook and proclivities of what has been called the Professional Managerial Class (PMC) that drives the conflation of art and politics through the shifting of political away from the material and towards the representational sphere. That same outlook can be seen as underpinning the elite tendency towards dualistic philosophical idealism. Historian Christopher Lasch, an early critic of the rationalist, progressivist strain in liberal thought,

highlights the tendency of the PMC to favour disembodiment and logics of control:

“The thinking classes are fatally removed from the physical side of life... Their only relation to productive labor is that of consumers. They have no experience of making anything substantial or enduring. They live in a world of abstractions and images, a simulated world that consists of computerized models of reality – “hyperreality”... Their belief in “social construction of reality” – the central dogma of postmodernist thought – reflects the experience of living in an artificial environment from which everything that resists human control (unavoidably, everything familiar and reassuring as well) has been rigorously excluded... the thinking classes have seceded not just from the common world around them but from reality itself” (Lasch, 1995, 20).

That the protocols of ‘data’ and ‘culture’ or ‘art’ have converged in a space inimical to human complexity, ambiguity and a sensuous relation to the material world is a symptom of the deep undercurrents of positivistic, functionalist thought and social organization that have only intensified in recent years. This has reached an apotheosis with the recent transposition of culture and social life into a digitally mediated setting due to pandemic fears. That the ‘symbolic’ classes have appeared relatively comfortable with this shift, or rather have been willing to accept safety and control as a higher priority than embodied social life, (Green, 2021) is testament to the subterranean affinities between the logic of the digital and the ‘post-conceptual’ nature of contemporary culture.

I now wish to return to the practical implications of these structuring issues, and the ways in which I have sought to bypass or transcend them. My prior practice and artistic instincts have driven me to establish a set of techniques that could produce images which avoid the familiar registers of either lens-based media or 3D CGI. Retrospectively, it is clear that I have been attempting to navigate a course beyond both; I was uncomfortable with the ‘unmediated’ nature of lens-based video (remediating prior cinematic naturalism and rendering itself an almost invisible medium) as well as the ‘hyper-mediated’, artificial, ‘readymade’ logic of CGI. If HD Video seems to often naturalise the image and obscure its status as a medium, with CGI images the medium dominates and the image is to some extent always a secondary consideration.

For some time I have been seeking to create video works which are anti-naturalistic – foregrounding the manipulated nature of the image and not collapsing into a familiar ‘film-like’ quality – but also wanting to bypass any reading that stresses the uncanny inhuman qualities of virtuality or existing cultural references like gaming. On reflection, I have been searching for a semiotic space that cannot be easily read, that disrupts the familiarity of the ‘straight’ video image and the easily legible language of CGI. I call this a ‘neither/nor’ image – creating a less legible approach, unconstrained by the familiarity of existing media.

Another way of reading the signifying potentials of these media – the opposition of naturalistic/unmediated/remediated vs artificial/‘hyper-mediated’/readymade – is through the opposition of humanism and post-humanism. In subsections 1.3 and 1.4 I allude to the way that the two very different currents in digital moving image practice approach picturing bodies: video creates ‘humanist’ representations that hold up an ideal of a fully transparent, accessible, naturalised body (as exemplified in the phenomena of artists’ dance videos), whereas 3D CGI tends to suggest ‘post-human’ bodies – evoking a future of total synthesis and modification. In some sense, I have been aiming for a visual language that steers away from these two poles, or could be seen to resolve them. I want to create images that make the viewer aware of the abstracting element inherent to digital representations of humans, but that do not entirely cancel the human (in the way that the dystopian, melancholic images of much artists’ CGI work of the 2010s seems to occlude human elements (see subsection 2.4 above)).

My long-established experiments with green screen software like Keylight always strove to disrupt any naturalism inherent to video, allowing me to layer and interpolate footage, or disrupt it with noise and artefacts. In a series of works for *The Dark Pool* (2015), I wished to take a ‘remediated’, longstanding technique like colour keying and see if its distinctly digital iteration could offer new types of imagery. Rather than simply use the tool as designed (to remove a

particular colour e.g. blue or green) so it simply achieved a familiar effect, I was interested in what would happen if I worked *with* the software's digital feel and set of controls (see fig 76). I wanted to break with any nostalgia for past iterations of analogue video effects, but also refuse to set aside such tools in favour of the newer techniques of 3D CGI. Although the green screen has become a familiar sign (to the point that during the 2010s many exhibitions used green/blue screen paint to replace the familiar white of gallery walls – the neutral 'non space' of the 'white cube' being exchanged for a new signifier of 'replaceability'), I wanted to see if its signifying capacity could be extended. I sought to create new strategies for representing objects in HD video that would go beyond straight compositing – so the green of the green screen itself protruded into the image and created artefacts through pushing the software beyond its intended uses (see fig 77). I hoped this could create new affective possibilities and potential meanings. In some ways, this can be read as a 'neither/nor' image that sits between conventional applications of HD video and the full animations of 3D CGI, also attempting to use the remediated digital effects available for software like Final Cut Pro in new and interesting ways.

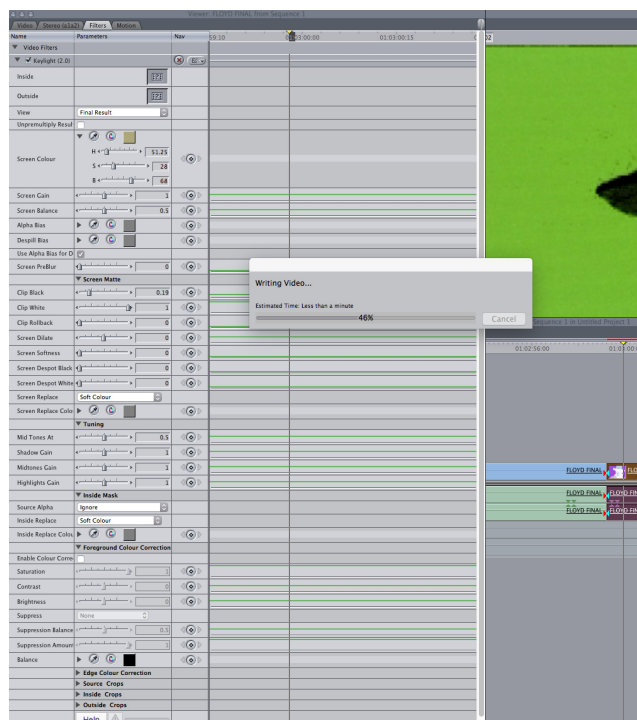


Fig 76: 'Remediated' chroma key software Keylight, produced by The Foundry, shown in the process of rendering.

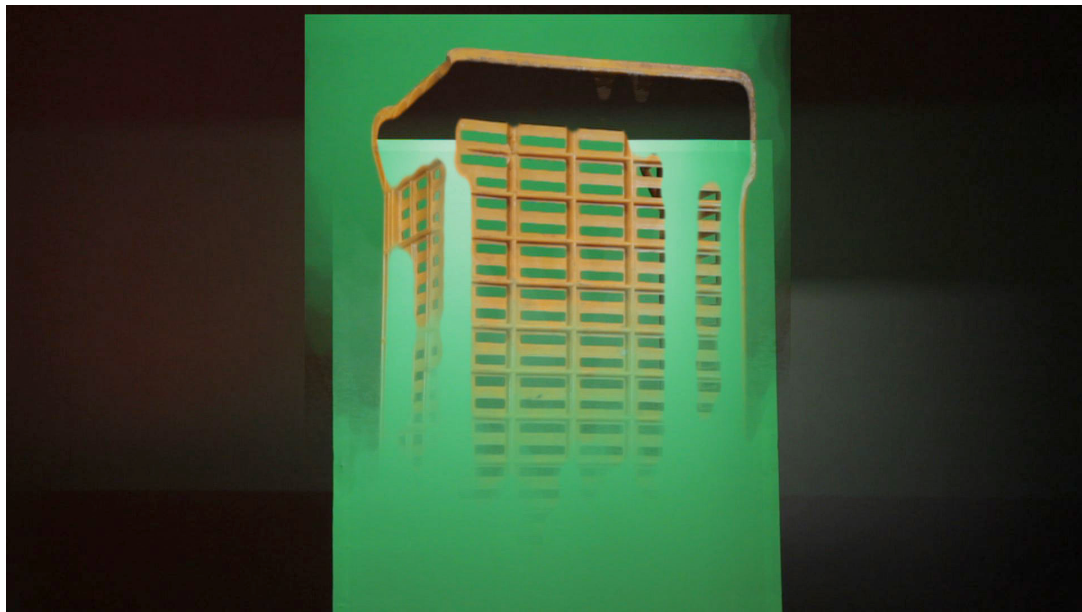


Fig 77: *The Dark Pool* (David Panos, 2015), HD Video, 6'55". Made with techniques developed through experimenting with Keylight.

Other works made during this period of study have sat at the intersection of video and 3D CGI. Several videos for my 2017 exhibition *Time Crystals* sought to locate themselves somewhere between 2D and 3D, taking 2D video footage and nesting it within 3D virtual environments, trying to create a 'neither/nor' image that might disrupt viewers' expectations of either media. In these pieces, 2D cropped video footage of subcultural garments were rendered into 'hieroglyphic' elements that in turn were situated in 3D space (see figs 78 and 79). The visual field was spatially defined by hazy colour gradients, with only a hint of a shadow from the 'flat' objects providing any sense of depth or dimension. The image was designed to create a number of contrasting propositions: the voluminous structure of clothing recast as 'flat' linguistic elements, and the flatness of video footage contrasting with the 'volume' of virtual space. This oscillation between flatness and depth creates an overall effect that can be read in terms of the re-contextualisation of historical cultural signs through digital media, signalling their uncertain status in relation to language and code, object and image, space and time.



Fig 78: *Time Crystals* (David Panos, 2017), HD Video. Two Dimensional, cropped videos positioned in a quasi-three-dimensional CGI environment created with Cinema 4D.

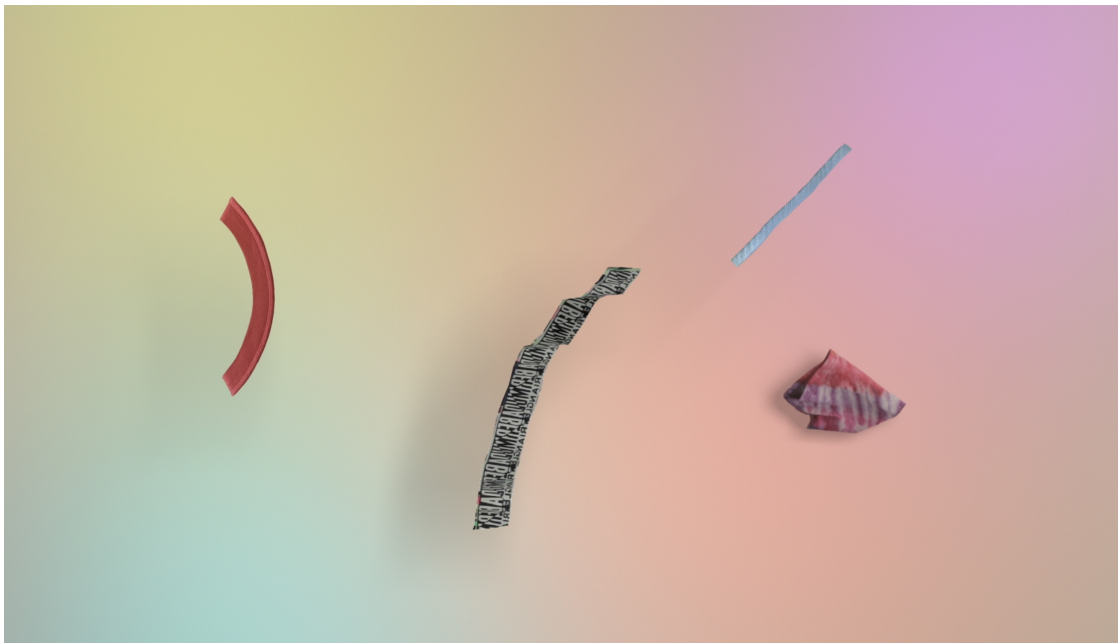


Fig 79: *Ibid.*

During this period of research I had continued working with the colour keying plugin Keylight, discovering that further ‘misusing’ the software in relation to footage of performers shot against green screens would produce odd linear and ambiguous outlines of bodies – that I will refer to as ‘body lines’ (see figs 80-82, videos of these studies are available to view as part of my submission at <https://www.gem.rip/david-panos-2>). These shifting linear elements still bear the physicality of video footage (subtly but distinctly different from the oddly machinic feel of motion captured movement) and can also be placed in very simple 3D environments where, as with the objects from *Time Crystals*, they acquire a strange dimensionality, perpetually shifting from line to volume, and creating unreadable abstract forms that could not be easily apprehended. A sense of total abstraction collides with traces of very human physicality, and the overall, hybrid effect feels entirely different from conventional CGI animations.

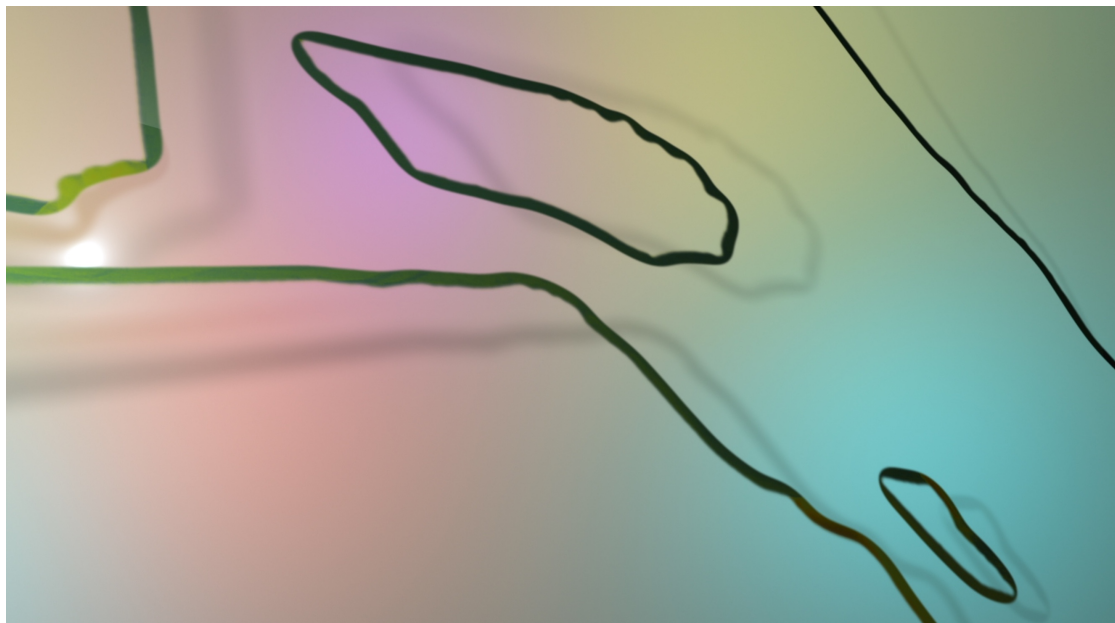


Fig 80: Research experiments with ‘body line’ techniques I developed through misusing Keylight, set in a 3D environment. HD video (David Panos, 2017). Available as video at <https://www.gem.rip/david-panos-2>

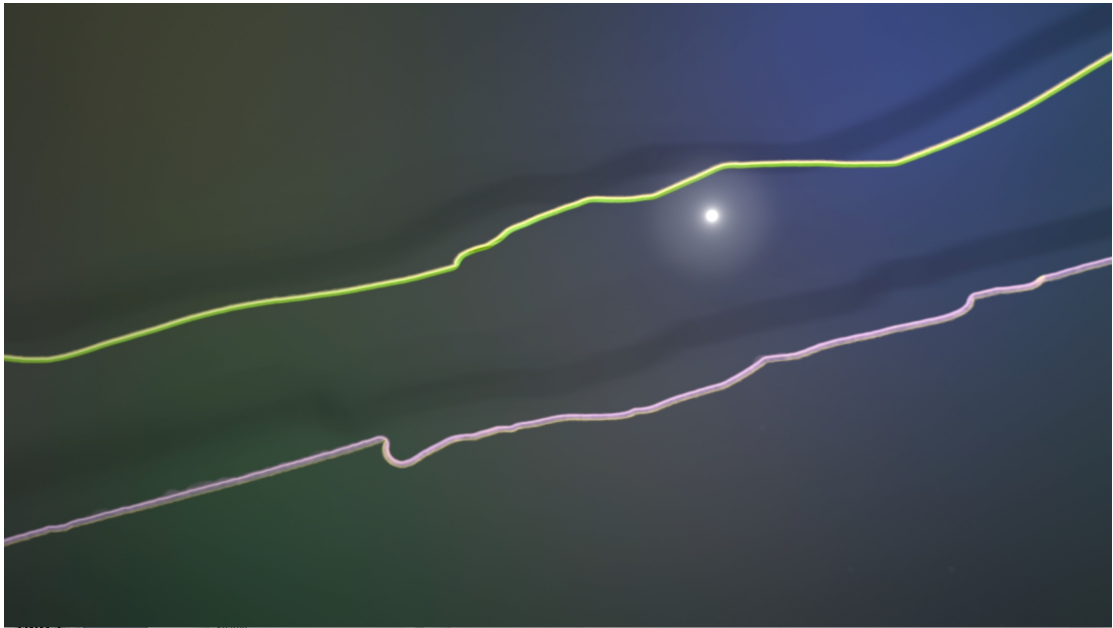


Fig 81: *Ibid.*

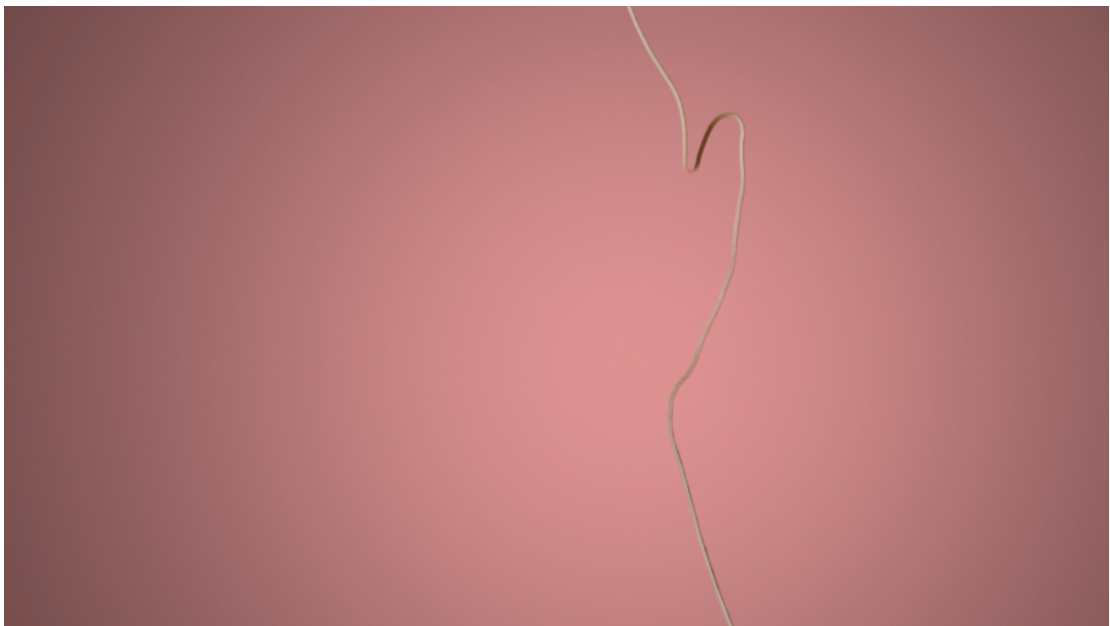


Fig 82: Research experiments with 'body line' techniques, but positioned in a 'flat' environment. HD video (David Panos, 2018).

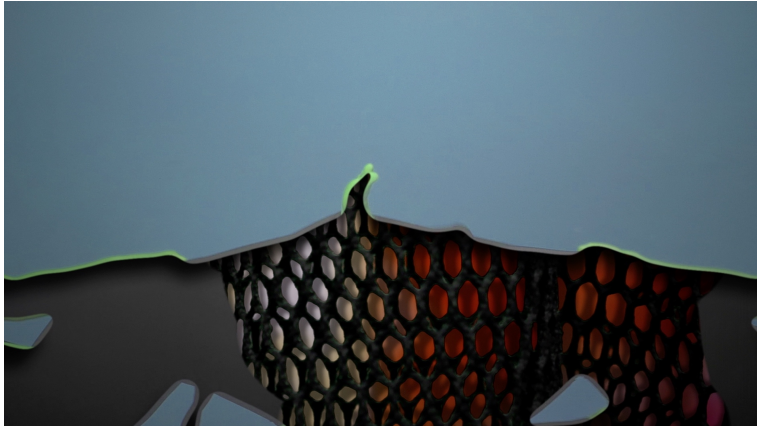


Fig 83: Research experiments with 'body line' techniques, interpolated with video footage of garments. HD video (David Panos, 2017). Available as video at <https://www.gem.rip/david-panos-2>

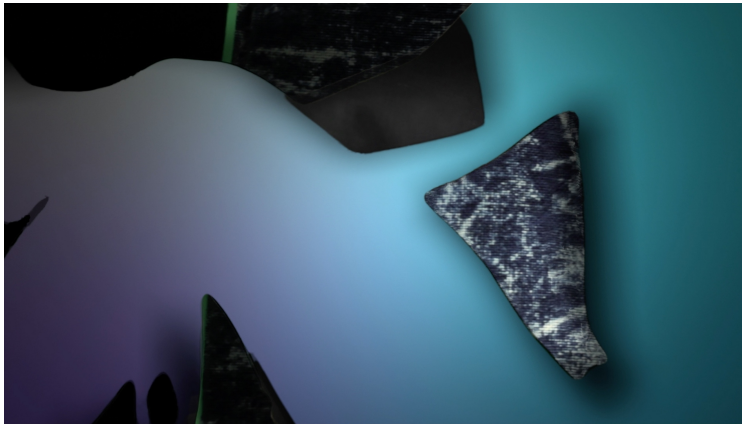


Fig 84: *Ibid.*

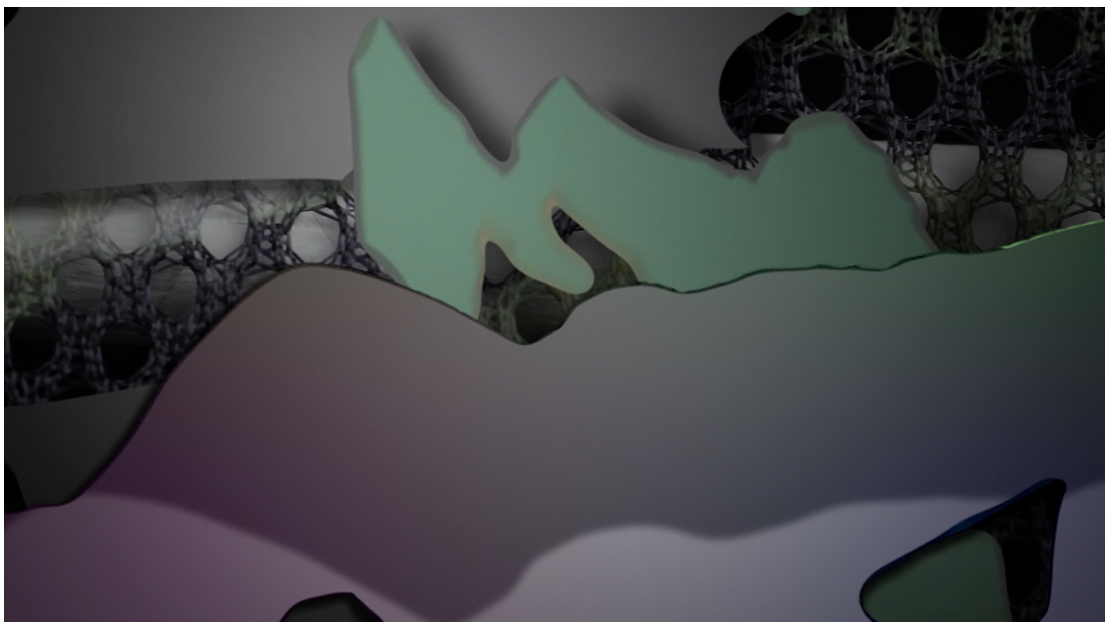


Fig 85: *Ibid.*

In experiments for the exhibition *Time Crystals*, I interpolated the 'body lines' with footage of fabrics and garments, setting these planes within a quasi-3D space where each plane was flat but cast shadows. Physical forms wrapped around other registers of footage to create amorphous shifting images where materials were given biomorphic outlines. In a video installation for the exhibition, I projected elements of these linear/physical renders in relation to and overlapping with low grade iPhone footage of dancers. Here, 'naturalistic' video, and 'abstracted' footage literally converged to produce a doubled image. The iPhone footage, highly pixelated from being shot in low light and in slow motion, also suggested a variety of media almost resembling old analogue video as much as modern portable HD capture, again in keeping with the uncertain temporalities conjured by the *Time Crystals* show.



Fig 86: *Time Crystals* (David Panos, 2017), Installation View, Pump House Gallery, London, 2017. Showing interpolated 'body line' imagery projected over iPhone footage.



Fig 87: *Ibid.*

Later in my research, and searching for other possible modes of working beyond the more familiar greenscreen and 3D tools, I began to experiment with volumetric moving image capture. Considered in retrospect, this represents the ultimate resolution of the dichotomy between HD video and 3D CGI, essentially melding both together to produce a ‘neither/nor’ image. Volumetric capture uses an infrared sensor to read spatial points from what is being ‘filmed’ and create a ‘point cloud’ image model. The series of captured, plotted points creates a 3D image that conforms to standard 3D image space and can be exported across all compatible platforms (see fig 88). This point cloud data is gathered while simultaneously shooting HD video footage so that in playback the video image can be then ‘projected’ onto the point cloud structure to create a hybrid image where video appears to have three dimensions (see fig 89). When shot from a fixed position with one device, the footage can be rotated across three dimensions in postproduction, although anything in shadow that is not visible to the sensors or lens is left blank. This creates an oddly incomplete image containing tears and voids, as well as a trembling, oscillating quality in the video as it is constantly being re-mapped onto the shifting point clouds (see fig 90).

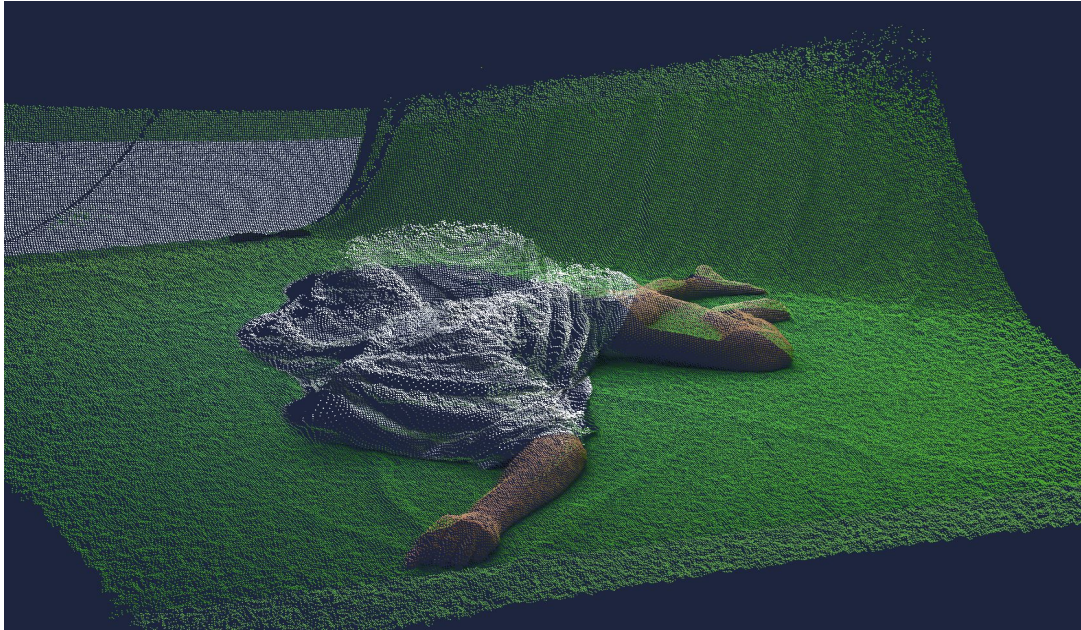


Fig 88: Volumetric point cloud test for research, captured using an adapted Kinect sensor and working with two dance performers (David Panos, 2019).



Fig 89: Volumetric footage with HD material 'projected' onto point cloud data (David Panos, 2019).



Fig 90: A 'close up' using a virtual camera, showing artefacts and distortions and 'shadow' created as the HD footage and point cloud attempt to resolve (David Panos, 2019).

The volumetric moving image tends to lose resolution and coherence, giving it a fragility quite different to the often inert solidity of conventional computer generated animation. Volumetric capture is rigidly mapped onto a Euclidean representation of reality that underpins all 3D digital imagery, yet the images it produces feel disrupted and at times painterly. It captures movement as a video camera, but the complexity of the point cloud capture means that it has an internal sense of movement, the image shifting and strobing as the relation between HD video and the point cloud is constantly remapped, frame by frame. Although 3D modelling of static objects has an increasingly familiar 'look' and various electronic artists have worked with point clouds as still representations that can be 'animated' in relation to a moving virtual camera, volumetric moving image capture is very much in its nascent state and represents many opportunities for new visual or aesthetic languages. It has elements of the liveness and indexical lens-based qualities of a video image, with none of the tendencies to resemble (or 'remediate') prior film language. In its current, imperfect state it disrupts the tendency for HD video to constantly increase in resolution, from 1080p HD to 4K and beyond⁹. As the viewing perspective on

volumetric footage can be manipulated via a 'virtual camera' in 3D postproduction, it shares more with 3D animation or virtual reality. It suggests a language of shifting perspectives and spatial drift rather than the edits, cuts, dissolves, pans, and tracks of conventional film.

3.4 Workflow And Praxis

My technical research and practice for the last decade has been consistently driven by a desire to avoid a 'managerial' approach to image making. I have been seeking to bypass the enclosed nature of current software, and find new tools and techniques that can offer different outcomes to the increasingly familiar visual modes of existing workflows, returning to a more Modernist approach where an engagement with materials offers up new visual experiences and propositions. My research is part of a deliberate attempt to roll back Contemporary Art's privileging of the conceptual over the material (as outlined in subsection 2.3 above) and the logic of the readymade, especially as it relates to the use of digital CGI imagery. My interest is in the generation of techniques that might stretch the borders of aesthetic and linguistic possibilities within the broad domain of the digital media. I still have an abiding belief that aesthetic encounters with 'new' images and forms can open up space in consciousness, and point to other possibilities and alternative worlds (see the utopian claims made by artists' like the Vasulkas outlined in subsection 2.2). If artistic engagement with digital tools cannot push beyond the current parameters of industrial software, we are trapped in registers of images familiar from mass culture, and the possibility for an arresting aesthetic 'shock' that might force new thinking is barred.

My ideal here would be to return to a model of artistic 'praxis'. If the current conceptual bent of Contemporary Art practice is to privilege idea over execution, and to encourage a managerial disposition, outsourcing image creation to expert technicians, then I have been drawn to a more artisanal approach, where formal experimentation exists in constant dialectical relation to any ostensible content or idea. This is a reassertion of the artist as a subject in a unique relation to 'labour'. Rather than the current convergence of the figure of the artist with the cultural values and outlook of the Professional Managerial Class, privileging intellectual labour, I am interested in the potential of the artist as the mediating figure between intellectual and manual labour – standing between work as

engagement with the physical world, rote tasks and tactile making (typified by the working class) and the thinking and planning roles habitually associated with the managerial elite. The artist reconciles these roles, collapsing the capitalist division of labour and the problematic distortions of experience and epistemology that results from this artificial separation between spheres. This echoes Marx's use of the term 'praxis' to denote the constant movement between theory and practice, where neither is privileged (Marx, 1977).

Although I claim in subsection 2.3 above that one of the problems with Contemporary Art is that it is continually being converged with 'the political', this is actually because the spheres of 'Art' and 'Politics' have both been largely reconceived through the 'idealist' outlook of the Professional Managerial (or academic) class. I am not arguing for art to be reconceived in relation to political praxis, but rather for both spheres to displace the current imbalance between thought and action, and to re-engage with the processes of material reality. For politics this would involve the social interactions of building organisations and movements, addressing material demands, and creating propaganda, whereas for art this might involve a different form of 'praxis'; one of the relation between materials and mediums, gestures and the inchoate processes of artistic decision-making. However, in *Discourse, Figure*, Lyotard maintains that the very notion of praxis, as a dialectical form, itself still involves preserving a "constituting negativity" that maintains the "invariant intervals between terms" (2011, 30-1). This means that a more conventionally Marxist approach to praxis as theory and practice will still cleave towards the fundamentally linguistic/rational, which will always contaminate or overcode the optical/figural/artistic. Lyotard seems to indicate that artistic practice is not about resolving into language, or communicable theoretical notions, but rather remains at the level of an embodied formal process:

"there is another kind of movement than the mind's acting in the order of signification, going through the semantic subsets where it can sample the concepts it needs and articulate them in an intelligible discourse. There is a kind of movement that cannot be reduced to the activity Roman Jakobson calls selection and combination. The movement by which the sensory presents itself is always a gesticulation, a dance, a movement that, assuredly, combines with itself, since to designate and to see require the constitution of

a space, an order of the coexistences... The negativity that opens its distance between the eye and the object is that of form, not of category" (Lyotard, 2011, 40).

Lyotard suggests a more ludic approach: abandoning oneself to instinct and controlled contingency, playing with the possibilities of materials and feeling through what visual possibilities they yield, a process maintained at a gestural or formal level without recourse to the linguistic form of conceptualization. For him (as mentioned in subsection 2.4) the "work that is the purview of the artist" can be understood as "suspended attention... negligence, enforced as a rule, toward what is instituted" (Lyotard, 2011, 12). I have directly experienced this need for "negligence"; when making works to serve an existing idea or concept all decisions are made to service this concept, preventing the intuitive and 'negligent' moves that could be described as properly 'artistic'. This hamstringing any creative process, deadening it through subservience to the positivistic demands of 'clear communication'.

The question of what 'praxis' as an engagement with materials might mean in relation to moving image practice, and in particular one increasingly mediated by digital technology, is complex. In some respects I have looked to figures of the early period of Modernist video art such as the Vasulkas (discussed in subsection 2.2 above) as a model for innovative practice in electronic moving image work. Woody Vasulka "understood right from the beginning, that the systems [he] needed were not part of the available hardware" (Vasulka and Weibel, 2008, 430) and endeavoured to create new tools in a workshop setting. The duo stress the open-ended and contingent process of unfolding creation in this media environment, one where the creation of tools and the creation of artworks was largely inseparable. As established in subsection 2.2, whilst immersing themselves in the technical, they still maintained an absolutely instinctual openness to artistic outcomes.



Fig 91: Steina and Woody Vasulka in their studio in Buffalo NY, circa 1977.

As I have argued, this more material and engaged notion of artistic labour was largely superseded by Contemporary Art's focus on the political and conceptual, while the more Modernist relation between material innovation and practice of early video pioneers was driven into its own category, often known as 'Media Art', New Media Art or 'Electronic Arts'. In this domain, processes more akin to 'research and development' (R&D) and new technology development are encouraged and given institutional form. In particular, since the 1990s an ecology of media labs, conferences (Transmediale, Ars, Electronica, the Zentrum für Kunst und Medien (ZKM) Centre for Art and Media etc.) has grown up to support practices which have a closer relationship to the functional aspects of technology, hardware, and software production.

To some extent the direction of my practice does suggest a deeper engagement with the back end of digital infrastructure, whether software or hardware. During the process of research, believing that the 'conceptual' approach of the Contemporary Art context needed to be realigned with the more concrete and

practical approach of the New Media sphere, I began to wonder if I needed a deeper understanding of digital infrastructures. I took a course in Processing, a development software that uses Java programming language to allow control of media and visual outputs. I attended a number of conferences and events exploring the process of designing new technical interfaces. These experiences underlined the fact that, if Contemporary Art has lost sight of practical experimentation, New Media art suffers from the opposite problem: a privileging of functionality and process over any aesthetic and semiotic considerations. Creative work in the New Media context frequently feels superficial or 'decorative', with the excitement of being able to achieve novel effects privileged over aesthetic value. Often work in this context has a self-consciously 'digital' aesthetic – futuristic, minimalist, or aestheticising the visual aspects of code and technological equipment in a way that has remained somewhat static since at least the 1990s. If the use of elements like CGI in Contemporary Art almost always proposes a 'critical' reading of the digital as complicit with capitalist logics, then New Media art often adopts a straightforward techno-utopianism, more akin to the rationalist, 'boosterish' outlook of the tech industry.

The possibility of going deeper into the substructures of digital technologies felt like an undertaking that would require far greater resources, and possibly a long-term collective effort, far beyond the scope of my research. The outcomes yielded by returning to programming tools like Processing felt less sophisticated and aesthetically interesting than the techniques I had been developing by wrangling the tools of modern video and CGI technology. As outlined above, I had already developed a number of methodologies for the 'misuse' of colour keying software, working with controls designed to produce a 'perfect' green screen image. These techniques were derived from time spent simply playing and testing different outcomes, allowing the technical process to guide creative decisions. Such processes already broke me out of the inscribed workflows of video making or the outsourcing logic of CGI and into a more open-ended process where formal ideas thrown up through loosely-guided investigations proposed ideas for works. They allowed for a working approach alive to the

possibilities during technical work, rather than searching for a definitive, pre-planned outcome.

One example of work that emerged from an attentive, open-ended relation to the digital moving image process, was a series of choreographic studies created during my research. While producing the 'body line' works discussed in subsection 3.3 above (where Keylight settings allowed me to reduce the outlines of performers into oddly unreadable linear elements) I worked with dancers and asked them to cover certain body parts with fabric, obscuring the legible silhouettes of faces, hands and feet and enhancing the ambiguity of the final output. I worked with two performers as a 'duet', further hoping to disrupt any anthropomorphic reading of the final 'body lines'. The performers were instructed to explore movements that would produce the most interestingly linear outputs – they were moving in relation to the demands of the digital workflow that I had by now established and was seeking to refine.

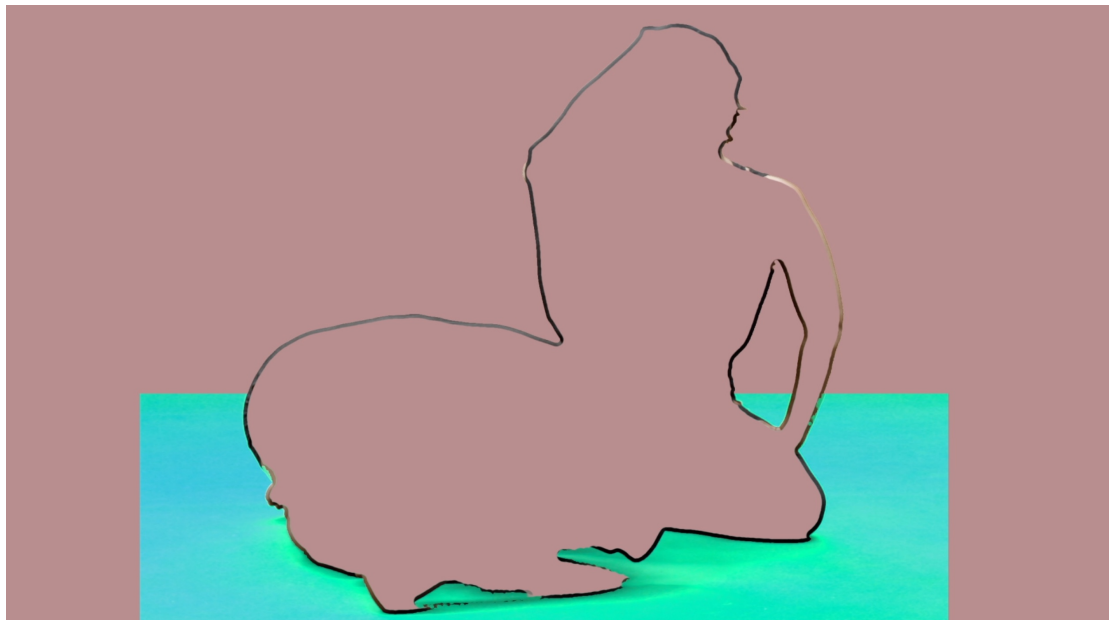


Fig 92: Early 'body line' experiment in chroma keying showing a more 'anthropomorphic' outline (David Panos, 2016).

However, when reviewing the footage shot to create my abstract outputs, I realised that the process of accommodation to a technologically mediated outcome had unexpectedly produced a distinct choreography. The two performers, forced to constantly consider the outlines of their bodies and produce movement that would best suit 'becoming line', began to relate in unusual ways that would have been almost impossible to consciously describe or direct. After creating a number of linear outputs, I 'correctly' keyed the source footage to reveal the dancers (see figs 93-96 and available as video at <https://www.gem.rip/david-panos-2>). This created a number of curious short choreographic studies that produced some unintended meanings, yielding shifting arrangements that had a hieroglyphic quality, or were reminiscent of classical tableaux or religious rituals (see fig 97). They evoked a feeling of partial blindness, of shifting relations or desires, echoing the work of Surrealism or other artistic movements of the past (see fig 98). However, ultimately they had no determinate, planned meaning, and became an intriguing auxiliary to the more digitally mediated work, when read in productive relation to the hyper-abstract 'body line' images they were designed to create.



Fig 93: Test outputs in HD video of dancers performing for 'body line' technique (David Panos, 2017).



Fig 94: *Ibid.*



Fig 95: *Ibid.*



Fig 96: *Ibid.*



Fig 97: Moodboard reference images collected after research experiments. The unexpected choreography produced by the 'body line' techniques suggested associations with religious imagery and classical sculpture.



Fig 98: Moodboard reference images collected after 'body line' research experiments. Left: *Le Fantôme* (Daumier, 1835). Right: *The Lovers II* (Magritte, 1928).

If these choreographic studies demonstrated the potential for aesthetic and formal discovery within a praxis-oriented relation to digital processing, it was my experiments with volumetric moving image capture (already detailed in subsection 3.3 above) that came closest to an imagined ideal of creating new tools for image making and integrating technical and aesthetic decisions. Although elements of volumetric capture have been incorporated into certain consumer-facing technologies (for example, the iPhone camera allows for the cropping of backgrounds using the same infrared scanning that facilitates facial recognition), it has not yet been fully formalised into a set of industrially packaged hardware and software. However, dedicated online communities of programmers and creatives have developed ‘DIY’ software that works with the Microsoft Kinect device, a peripheral originally designed as a motion-sensing device to accompany the Xbox gaming platform first released in 2010.

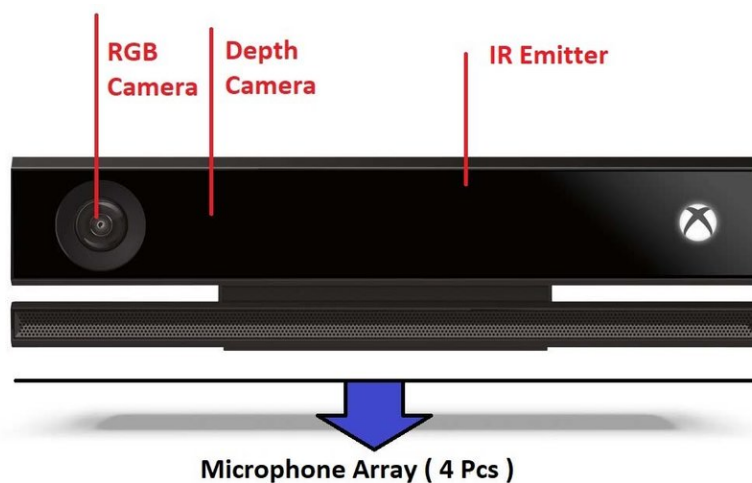


Fig 99: Diagram of Microsoft Kinect Sensor.

Although the Kinect was designed to be a controller, allowing gesture and bodily movements to integrate with game environments, independent developers have created makeshift software retooling its video camera and infrared sensor to be a capture device for volumetric moving images. I have worked with an early

package, created by Jasper Brekelmans, necessitating a greater than normal period of set up and installation than professional software but with the benefit of being in dialogue with the software's author, who himself was adapting the program in relation to user experiences. Realising that the Kinect, needing a electrical supply, would limit the possibilities of shooting to an indoor or studio environment, I had the unit adapted to accept power from a power drill battery so that, combined with a laptop, I had a fully portable rig; a unique and bespoke tool to suit my requirements.

The intended workflow for the adapted Kinect, in conjunction with Brekelmans' software, was to capture point cloud and HD imagery, which would then be turned into a shareable digital object and could be imported into an existing 3D CGI software such as Cinema 4D. However, this proved complex and unstable, with the unique qualities of the original image seen in Brekelmans' previsualising software (designed to edit and prepare the 'object' for export) losing definition and becoming less subtle. Any export into software such as Cinema 4D would also mean that the 'footage' would be reintegrated into precisely the kind of totalising 3D software environment, locked to the ubiquitous Euclidean grid, I was seeking to avoid. As an initial workaround, I began to screen capture the footage as it played in the capture software. The footage could be manually moved in three dimensions using the mouse trackpad and shortcut keys, giving a freer and slightly unpredictable quality to the 'virtual camera' movement than the plotted and rendered approach usually obtained within 3D software. This 'gestural' intervention became increasingly interesting to me, reintegrating a manual interaction into a usually totally digitally automated work flow (digitality being replaced by literal 'digits'), and substituting the rather quantised quality of lens movement obtained from closed-system software with something of the undisciplined, febrile quality of organic movement. In the absence of the ability to actually build new software or hardware, this kind of 'misuse' of existing tools and the incorporation of manual techniques that refuse the totalising logic of 3D software environments proved a viable alternative, allowing the production of imagery more distinct than standard CGI.

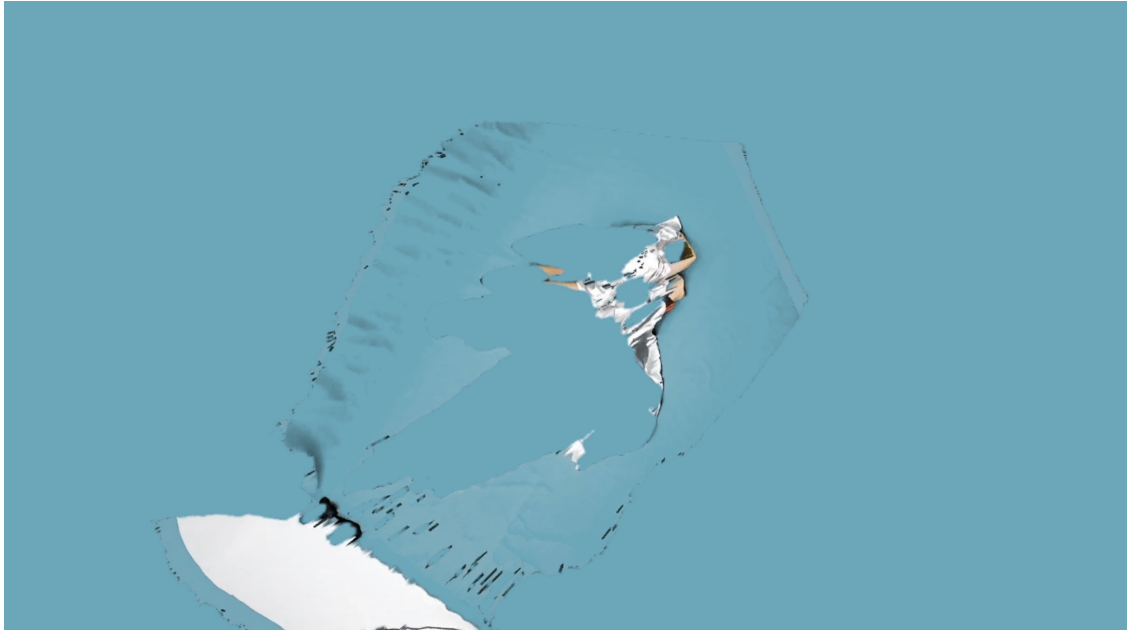


Fig 102: Experiments with manually controlled volumetric image manipulation. Captured with the Kinect and Brekelmans' software and subsequently placed on a neutral background. Showing the abstract perspectives generated by the 'virtual' camera (David Panos, 2018).



Fig 103: *Ibid.*

3.5 The Digital Figural?

This section will consider the ideas of the figural and related notions of vitalism and the moving image (set out in subsection 2.4 above) in relation to my practical and artistic submissions. These ideas have not so much directed research outcomes (they were encountered and developed after many of the studies and works presented here were created), but serve as a useful contextual frame, and point to ways to read and understand the digital moving image techniques I am proposing. The figural reposes aesthetic practice away from the resolutely textual/critical frame that is universal at present in Contemporary Art discourse, and return art to the ambiguous “half-light” described by Lyotard (2011, 5). The ways in which both Lyotard and Deleuze conceive of art (and in particular certain painting practices) in relation to the notion of the figural offers a very different lens from which to consider the kinds of aesthetic outcomes that have emerged from my practice, one that feels more intuitively apt to the line of inquiry pursued.

In this section, I will discuss two bodies of work that form the practical submission for this research. The first is *The Searchers* (2018), a loosely organised body of work, bringing together a number of the techniques developed over the preceding years. It presents a triptych of screens which re-picture a choreography between two performers covered in fabric, each view underpinned by the same flat plane of digital colour. One view shows an unfolding ‘dance’ shot by an HD camera, which documents a mute negotiation between the performers, producing a number of distinct and reconfiguring forms. Another view shows a linear abstract ‘body line’, achieved through my experiments with Keylight (see 3.3 above), twitching and shuddering graph-like across the screen. The third view is a volumetric representation of the dancers, their bodies represented as hollowed out and torn, with a jerking virtual camera constantly shifting perspective from pixelated close ups to abstracted long shots. These works are augmented by a number of small screens displaying looped

gestures, forming a kind of background rhythm of energetic motions. All works can be viewed at <https://www.gem.rip/david-panos>.

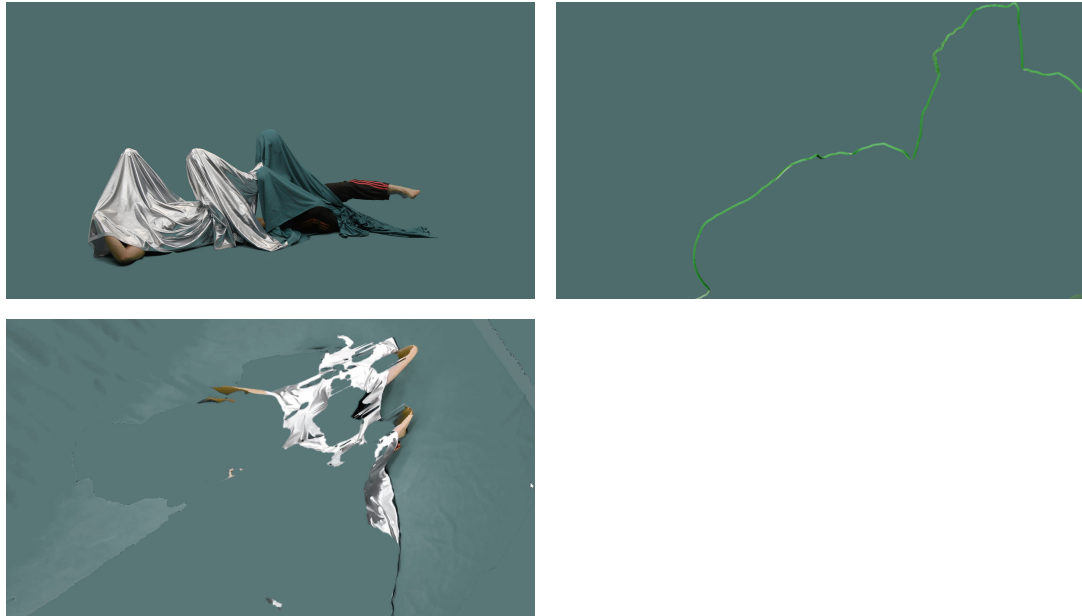


Fig 104: *The Searchers* (David Panos, 2018). HD video stills from a screen triptych using different techniques to re-visualise the same performance.

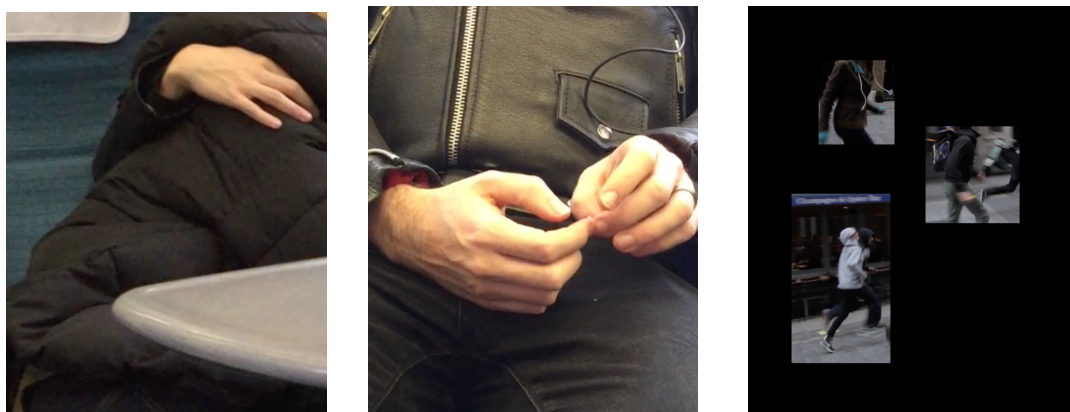


Fig 105: *The Searchers* (David Panos, 2018). HD video stills of looped gestural videos.



Fig 106: *The Searchers* (David Panos, 2018). Test installation of screen triptych.

The other submission is a short series of ‘video’ paintings, studies in volumetric video capture and manual perspectival manipulation (see section 3.4 above), loosely gathered under the title “Unform Views”. These research studies explore different ways to break with the neat perspective of 3D software, turning space inside out. Also included are a number of fragmented views that have been collaged together to form new spaces, with subtle virtual camera moves that create a kind of parallax effect. The viewer can read the three dimensional nature of the image and the scene shifts in a way similar to the logic of a 3D environment; however, these views have been manually rotated, so different elements of the coherent view refuse to align and gently pull apart, breaking with the regularised perspective that comes from the ‘grid’ of 3D CGI software. All these works are available as videos at <https://www.gem.rip/david-panos-3>.



Fig 107: *Uniform Views* (David Panos, 2021), HD Video still, 1'. An early experiment not included in the submission.

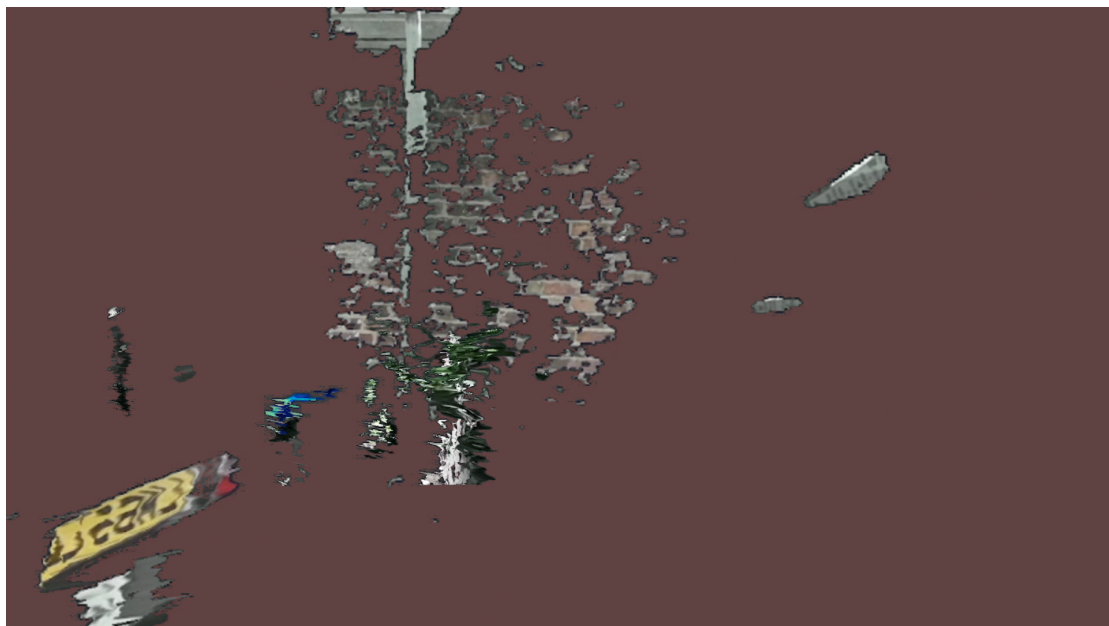


Fig 108: *Uniform Views: Exterior/Lost Highways* (David Panos, 2021), HD Video still, 3'45"

A number of the formal strategies pursued in these two bodies of work can be productively read against Lyotard and Deleuze's discussions of several paintings in relation to the figural. On some level, CGI animation and the kinds of heavily mediated video I have been working with more closely resemble painting than traditional film form (the idea of the video painting is not a new one, having been coined by Brian Eno in the 1980s to describe 'ambient' video works designed to

be experienced in a contemplative mode more associated with pictures than films). I have been working at the intersection of figuration and abstraction, not unlike the painters most discussed by the theorists of the figural; Cezanne, Paul Klee and Francis Bacon. Such artists looked to represent not just figurative facsimiles of the world, but rather focus on transcribing the energetic or gestural essence of bodies and environments.

My abstraction of figures into linear elements or 'body lines' is reminiscent of Klee's conception of the line as a fundamental artistic element. Klee's work on lines suggests a complex relation to space at an intersection between flatness and volume. Lyotard observes how for Klee:

"the line and the chromatic element are in conflict—a conflict that overlaps with that of interior and exterior, masculine and feminine. Here the function of drawing, mastered at the cost of gruelling effort, no longer consists in geometricizing 'matter' by taking refuge in the closed outline, but rather in taking part, with color as a companion whose shifts it embraces, in the origins of a creation free from any model" (Lyotard, 2011, 218).

My abstracted colour key lines throw the viewer between two and three dimensional representations, and between the 'live-ness' of lens-based inscription and the flat, quantised nature of computer generated virtual space. This suggests a similar openness, or unboundedness, as that traced by Klee's line.

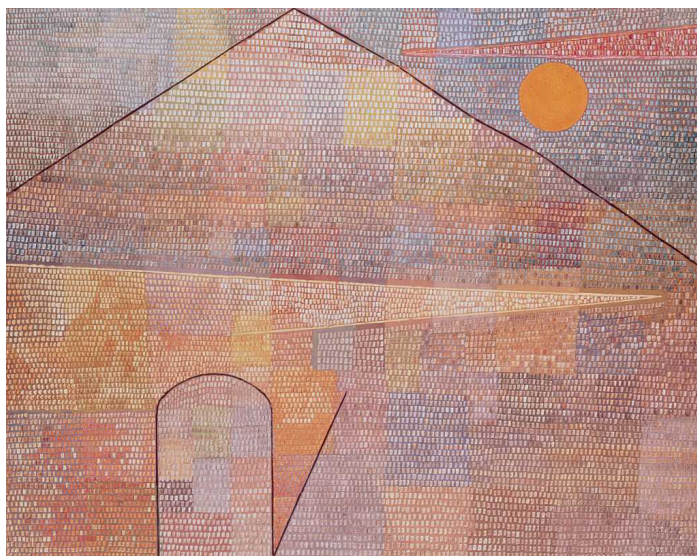


Fig 109: *Ad Parnassum* (Paul Klee, 1932).

An active line on a walk, moving freely, without goal. A walk for a walk's sake. The mobility agent, is a point, shifting its position forward (Fig. 1):



The same line, accompanied by complementary forms (Figs. 2 and 3):

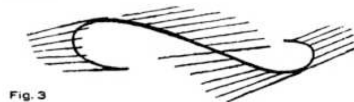


Fig 110: Paul Klee's experiments with lines 'on a walk'. Left: a page from *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (Klee, 1953). Right: *In the Magic Mirror* (Klee, 1934).



Fig 111: *The Searchers* (David Panos, 2018), still from screen triptych. The principle of the 'body line' bears resemblance to the shifting planes of Klee's lines.

My 'body lines' seek to capture a level of essential energetic movement as an ambiguous and unruly element within the typically controlled space of the digital. For Lyotard it is the wanton uncertainty of Klee's line that holds phantasmatic force and places it in relation to the figural: "the line records neither the signifiers of a discourse nor the outlines of a silhouette; it is the trace of a condensing, displacing, figuring, elaborating energy, with no regard for the

recognizable" (Lyotard, 2011, 232). Lyotard describes how Klee's line can be read in relation to his encounters with dance, and quotes a 1924 lecture where Klee states that "Dancing consists in softly modulating the body's lines" (Lyotard, 2011, 222-4).

In my attempts to create 'body lines', I filmed a duo of performers to bring about a shared motion and elongated planes for capture. This created odd silhouettes of their conjoined, fabric-draped bodies, as described in subsection 3.3 and 3.4. I have already noted how the dancers' gestures can be seen as 'hieroglyphic' and ambiguous, echoing Deleuze's book on the figural, where he describes Bacon's coupled figures as a "*diagram* whose lines would bring together nothing but sensations. There is one Figure common to two bodies, or one 'fact' common to two Figures, without the slightest story being narrated" (Deleuze, 2003, 66).

The merging of bodies into a single energetic yet diagrammatised proposition could be a description of screens from *The Searchers*, yet I read this text after these images were conceived. When I was first directed towards Deleuze's writing on Bacon as potentially useful in relation to my practice, I was amused: Bacon had been a youthful obsession of mine and I had long since written off his work as appealing only to an adolescent mindset. At the time, I had been fascinated by Bacon's refusal to succumb to determinate meaning, or to 'explain' his work as anything other than instinctual; the idea that such images could not be fully accounted for was fascinating to me. In many respects, Bacon's paintings and this question of meaning must have remained embedded in my unconscious, as there are clear echoes both in the execution of these video works and in their intention to repose or rather refuse interpretation, dealing instead in questions of embodiment and abstraction.

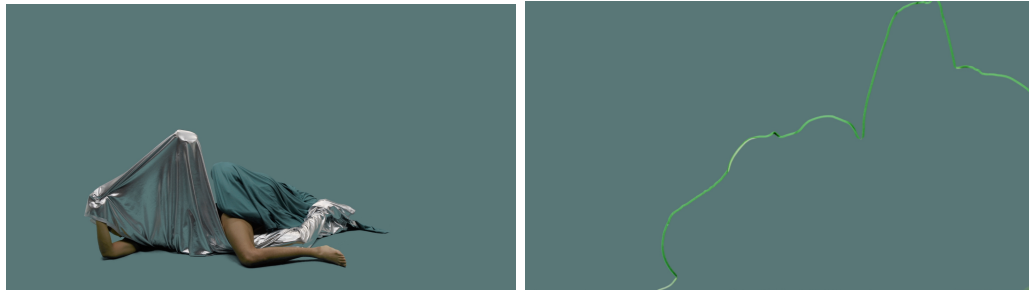


Fig 112: *The Searchers* (David Panos, 2018). Two stills from screen triptych.



Figure 113: Unconscious influence from Francis Bacon's conjoined figures. Left: *Two Figures in a Room* (Bacon, 1959). Right: *The Wrestlers after Muybridge* (Bacon, 1980).

If Klee's conception of "a line taking a walk" and Bacon's 'diagrams' hold libidinal energies in their open-ended ambiguity (both speaking of and against figurative bodies), they also have a quality that cuts against the regularity and order of a 'geometric' approach to painting, whether in terms of fixed point perspective or the idea of fundamental Platonic solids. In subsection 2.4 I trace how Lyotard sees the figural as standing against 'good form' – a distorting, disorganising principle that corrupts regularising structures. In my experiments with 'neither/nor' images, I have consistently sought to contaminate the frigidity and overdetermination of digital virtual space with chaotic elements brought in through indexical, lens based capture – whether through the uncertain status of animated 'body lines' or the torn and imperfect, gesturally manipulated 'DIY' volumetric image.

Ronald Bogue maintains that “Figural space is unmarked by the coordinates of a regular dimensionality, of a fixed up and down, left and right, foreground and background; its objects defy ‘good form,’ ready categorization, or denomination; and its time is that of the event, a time free of sequential demarcations of past, present, and future” (Bogue, 2003, 115). Bogue shows how Deleuze considers the “irrational, involuntary, accidental marks” of painting as “neither significant nor signifying: they are asignifying” (Bogue, 2003, 123), but in their “chaos” they point towards the unrepresentable world of the figural. Both Lyotard and Deleuze see the ‘bad forms’ of the figural as creating palpable distortions to ‘good form’, “vibrating until it disjoins” (Lyotard, 2011, 53), or causing structures “to stir: walls twitch and slide, chairs bend or rear up a little, cloths curl like burning paper... Everything is now related to forces, everything is force” (Deleuze, 2003, 59). The pulsating quality of volumetric capture as it tries to reconcile infrared and video signals speaks to a painterly representation of the world where everything is shot through with a figural energy (see fig 114). My volumetric studies, *Unform Views*, unmoor this ragged 3D imagery from its anchoring grid, substituting the digital rending of computation contingent accidents with digits gesturing across a mouse pad.



Fig 114: Still from volumetric capture experiment; pulsating video (David Panos, 2019). This video can be viewed at <https://www.gem.rip/david-panos-2>

Where Lyotard and Deleuze see Modernist painting post-Cezanne as freeing the figural from the interstices of rule-bound Renaissance painting (see subsection 2.4 above), and returning to a freer notion of space and line, in 3D CGI fixed point perspective returns to representation with a vengeance. Hito Steyerl has written about how the multiplication of screens, complex montages and textual visual arrays of the internet displaces a single point perspective, but the new 3D pictorial logic of gaming and entertainment has converged with military imperialist technologies, so that 3D images represent a new structure of sovereignty and dominance (Steyerl, 2012, 23). Artists, by relying on 3D software deeply reliant on this grid are now not just forced to adhere to a pictorial logic abandoned by art in the 19th century, but are working with systems deeply complicit with capitalist control and domination.

I have been trying to prod and disrupt the totalising logic of the 3D grid, working with captured 3D material in two dimensions so it can create impossible distortions more akin to the flattened irregular perspectives of medieval painting, where allegory and mythic structure took precedence (see fig 115), or other painters from the post-war moment that sit between abstraction and figuration (see fig 117). This is an attempt to wrest new signifying capability from these tools, disrupting any reading as readymade element belonging to industrial culture, and to re-inject the images with an uncertain, vital force. However, it also expresses my instinct to break with the constricting, singular, Cartesian logic inscribed into CGI.



Fig 115: Seeking inspiration in painting before fixed-point perspective; *Reconstruction of the temple of Jerusalem* (15th century), illumination from William of Tyre's *Histoire d'Outremer*



Fig 116: Exploring non-Western perspective; *Han Xi-zai Gives a Banquet* (Gu Hong-Zhong, Five Dynasties period 907~950), retouched sector of extended scroll.



Fig 117: Distorted perspective in post-war painting; *If Not, Not* (Kitaj, 1975-6). This seminal painting has been an inspiration for my *Unform Views* experiments with manually adjusted volumetric capture.

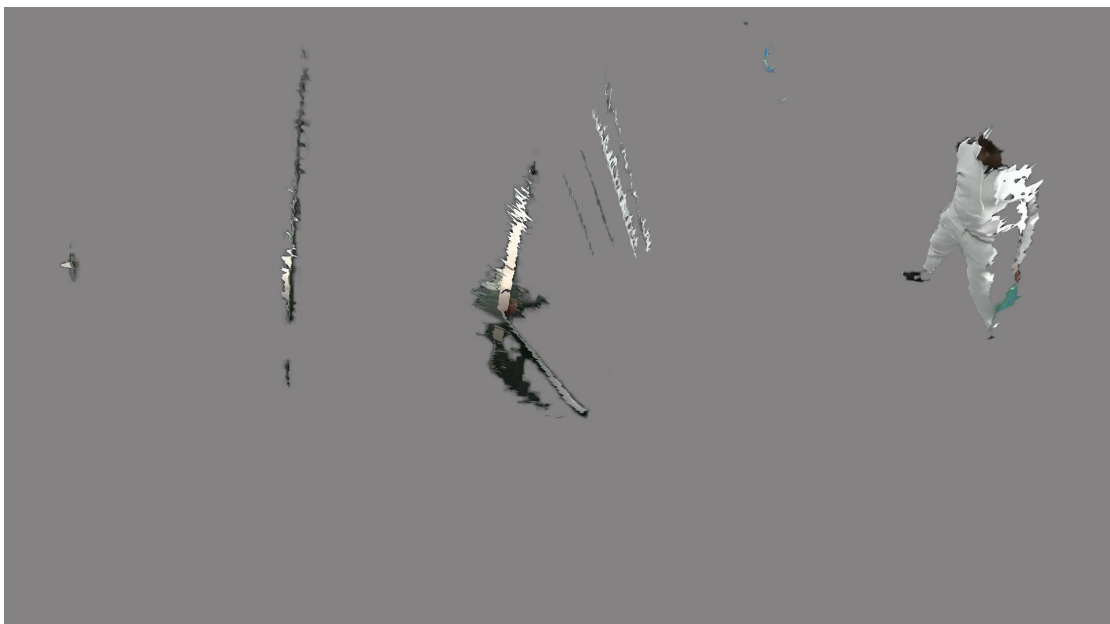


Fig 118: Distorted perspective in *Unform Views: Aerial Twist* (David Panos, 2021), HD Video still, 44'. This video can be viewed at <https://www.gem.rip/david-panos-2>

Another element discussed by Deleuze in his work on Francis Bacon and the figural, again harkening back to traditional, religious or medieval forms, and analogous to elements in my practice, is the use of the triptych. Deleuze sees Bacon's use of the triptych as a case of 'simultaneity':

"at least three levels or orders coexist... it is each sensation that exists at diverse levels, in different orders, or in different domains. This means that there are not sensations of different orders, but different orders of one and the same sensation. It is the nature of sensation to envelop a constitutive difference of level, a plurality of constituting domains" (Deleuze, 2003, 37).



Fig 119: *Triptych August 1972* (Francis Bacon, 1972).

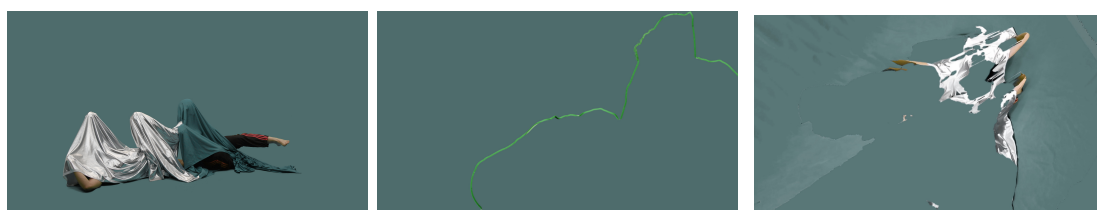


Fig 120: *The Searchers* (David Panos, 2018), digital screen triptych.

As my practice has moved from a focus on single screen films to the presentation of a variety of looped shots spread across multiple monitors, I have sought to unravel the linear logic of traditional filmmaking and editing: instead of a sequence of images montaged in time I have tended to present images simultaneously. I have intended that screens are read alongside each other, so that one image acts as the 'unconscious' of another. In *The Searchers*, where

three views of a similar moment are presented through different levels of abstraction and forms of digital representation, I have used a strategy that has been a constant across my recent bodies of work (from *The Dark Pool* (2015) to *Time Crystals* (2017)). I have been interested in the possibility that different modes of image, when read across and through each other, might point to 'layers' of reality or different orders of existence. Abstract views thus are re-cast as a poetic instantiation of processes hidden from view. Images of green screens as a ghostly element consuming bodies and objects, the interweaving of human movement into the hard pictorial planes of the digital of my 'body lines', and the interpellation of different levels of footage (HD video, manipulated video and volumetric capture) have always suggested to me a traversing of different planes of existence. Not only is there a simultaneity across the triptych of processed videos in *The Searchers* (2018), the triptych itself is also designed to be read against several smaller screens of looped iPhone footage. Thus, the triptych's manipulated videos, can be seen in symbolic or metaphorical relation to the more prosaic depictions of reality on the smaller screens, underlined by the way that the sounds from each video mix together to become different parts of a total score.

In texts accompanying the works I have produced, drawing on Marxist theory, I have gestured towards the idea that the levels of digital abstraction I am interested in are somehow analogous to the deep abstractions which stem from living in a society dominated by value and commodities as structuring formations. Kerstin Stakemeier raises the affinity between the digital image and the structures of finance capital (see subsection 1.4 above) and I have tended to think that my digital manipulations somehow hint at the subterranean processes behind capitalist reality. In *The Dark Pool*, I imagined that objects being consumed by green screen artefacts were subject to a kind of hollowing out or abstracting process, rooted in Marx's idea of commodity fetishism. In *The Searchers*, the 'body line' images' resemblance to a line graph echoes the representation of market data (see fig 121), while the volumetric footage suggests a logic of control and manipulation.

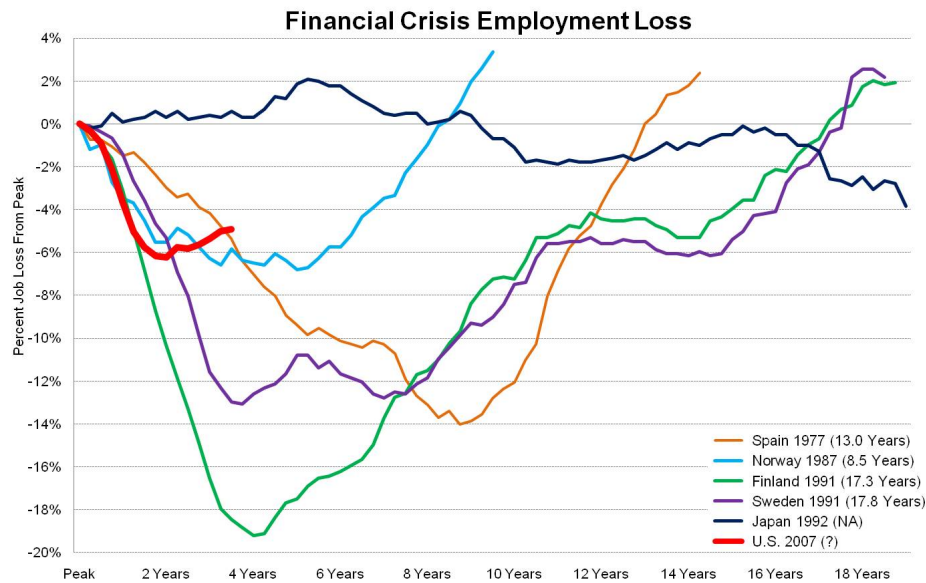


Fig 121: Line chart mapping employment loss in relation to financial crisis.

The idea of abstract video imagery somehow revealing hidden processes raises one of the central propositions of Lyotard and Deleuze's discussions of the figural, and a term borrowed from Klee's philosophical writings: the notion of an aesthetic 'interworld' (discussed in section 2.4 above). The various formal strategies discussed so far in relation to the notion of the figural – the ambiguity of line, the deformation of 'good form' and the possibility of simultaneity – all point towards the potential for art to conjure the 'invisible':

"In art, and in painting as in music, it is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces. For this reason no art is figurative. Paul Klee's famous formula – 'Not to render the visible, but to render visible' – means nothing else. The task of painting is defined as the attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible" (Deleuze, 2003, 56).

Just as, for Deleuze and Lyotard, the 'invisible' figural is discussed in the vitalist language of 'force' and energy', I have been attempting to connect the abstractions I am interested in revealing through video effects to vital and embodied processes. If I have drawn influences from Marx in considering the abstract nature of contemporary existence, I am only interested in the most 'embodied' interpretations of Marx's theoretical framework. Alfred Sohn Rethel's *Intellectual and Manual Labour, A Critique of Epistemology* (1978) builds on

Marx's insights to reassert that many of the 'abstract' qualities of capitalism are rooted in embodied social relations. For Sohn Rethel, the "economic concept of value is a real one. It exists nowhere other than in the human mind but it does not spring from it. Rather, it is purely social in character, arising in the spatio-temporal sphere of human interrelations. It is not people who originate these abstractions but their actions" (Sohn-Rethel, 1978, 20). Sohn Rethel's concept of 'Real Abstraction' suggests that the abstractions of commodity exchange, value and money are not, as bourgeois idealists would have it, phenomena that spring forth purely from the intellect, but have their roots in very real lived processes of exchange and labour; they act corporeally before they manifest mentally.

Following Sohn-Rethel, I would like to argue that there is a more embodied or even 'vitalist' Marx, which I take as an inspiration for my own attempts to represent or suggest hidden energetic processes using digital effects. Poet and academic Keston Sutherland's excellent essay *Marx in Jargon* (2008) points out the way Marx's use of rich metaphors in *Das Capital* often have a literary and visceral quality expunged from translations in favour of more dry, technical language (Sutherland, 2008). For example, Marx uses the term *gallerte* (or 'gelatine') to describe the theoretical notion of abstract human labour 'congealing' into commodities. This conjures images of human bones and bodies being crushed, boiled and poured into objects. Sutherland understands Marx's gory metaphors in literary terms, seeing Marx as a stylist or satirist (2008); however, I would like to suggest that to some extent we take such language literally: Marx's insistence on phantasmatic and corporeal language – as in the use of the term *gallerte*, a gory metaphor for an entirely abstract process – seems to echo Lyotard and Deleuze's conceptions of invisible unconscious forces that nonetheless structure and impact our sensuous reality. In both instances the writers are not proposing an idealist or rationalist 'metaphysics', but rather a notion of reality in which the differentiation between abstraction and corporeality is blurred or interpolated.

This is underlined by Lyotard's insistence that "Klee's interworld is not an imaginary world, it is the displayed workshop of the primary process" (Lyotard,

2011, 232). This rather obscure notion is clarified by Ronald Bogue, who explicates that the aesthetic interworld is “midway between an objective exterior domain and a subjective, internal imaginary realm, a natural world but one that in ordinary experience is not seen – an invisible nature in potentia, a possible world made visible through art. Klee’s interworld is the world of art as *natura naturans*, as force and energy in the process of constructing its own cosmos” (Bogue, 2003, 114). My artistic work can be seen to take a figural approach to Marxist categories, with my videos giving an image to the ‘invisible’ processes of fetishism and alienation. Just as Lyotard and Deleuze see artworks, and painting in particular, as able to show us invisible aspects to the world, I have sought to bring out different levels of late capitalist reality through simultaneous presentations of digital images.

Conclusion

What might the idea of the ‘digital figural’ mean? In one sense, as outlined in section 2, the elusive notion of the figural provides an alternative way to conceive of the possibilities of art, the aesthetic and the visual. It returns art to the domain of the non-rational, to the realm of “dream” and “the unconscious” that Lyotard considers is ‘killed’ by discourse and textualisation (see the quote from *Discourse, Figure* that prefaces the introduction to this thesis (Lyotard, 2011, 9)). I have used the term ‘digital figural’ to gesture towards the possibilities that I feel lurk in digital image technologies if artists can free themselves from the conceptual strictures of Contemporary Art. If we can begin to ‘play’ again with digital imagery, adopting an attitude of intuition and praxis and breaking away from the industrial software and hardware that currently proscribes and prescribes these potentials, there are rich new visual experiences to be had. In this sense the idea of a ‘digital figural’ might revitalise technology as a formal medium capable of prompting new thoughts through affect and aesthetic.

This is not to obscure or forget the problematic tendencies of digital media, their opacity, and their deep complicity with capitalist instrumentalism. However, when digital technology is contrasted to or collided with the deforming qualities of human energies, such issues become merely a contradiction to be constructively negotiated, rather than an absolute block to creative possibilities. As Jacolby Satterwhite has stated (and quoted in subsection 1.4 above) “If you add so much warm energy to such a cold artifact, it creates a nice tension” (Aima, 2019). I feel this sentiment is echoed by many of my practical experiments that harness bodily movement through indexical capture or gestural manipulation, and then set them within the overcoded space of the digital, allowing them to become unruly elements in tension with the controlled space of binary logic.

In their writings on the figural, Lyotard and Deleuze deal exclusively with Modernist painters and poets, seeing such artists as able to disclose that which is obscured by discourse – the inchoate realm of desire and dream that is beyond language. This begs the question of how far it is possible to make analogies between superficially similar formal techniques and strategies when transferred from paintings and into digital space. It is clear that the substructure of the digital as a picturing medium (the code and binary machine logics that undergird it) is itself a deeply linguistic, ‘coded’ space, rigidly defined and completely opposite to the ‘bad forms’ of the figural. In his 1981 book on Francis Bacon and the figural, Deleuze briefly discusses the difference between analogue and digital technology, speaking of the codifying structure of digital processing (echoing my observations in subsection 3.3 above about the limitations and ‘deadness’ of remediated digital effects):

“Analogue synthesizers are “modular”: they establish an immediate connection between heterogeneous elements, they introduce a literally unlimited possibility of connection between these elements, on a field of presence or finite plane whose moments are all actual and sensible. Digital synthesizers, however, are ‘integral’: their operation passes through a codification, through a homogenization and binarization of the data, which is produced on a separate plane” (Deleuze, 2003, 116).

If the digital is rationalising and homogenising at its core, are any attempts to disrupt and contaminate its logic that are still enmeshed within the digital doomed to misfire? My strategy in pursuing a ‘neither/nor’ digital image has been to counterpose the relatively ‘live’ flows of movement indexically captured by digital video, with the entirely generated, artificial worlds of CGI. However, if both information sources are digital, can the representation only ever be a superficial ‘remediation’? Lyotard does maintain that the figural’s disruptive force can be brought forth in media beyond painting through a process of “condensation”, the “gathering together” of “fragments sampled on various objects”:

“This leads to the constitution of the chimera, with each of these fragments remaining recognizable in its own right... The figure-image it engenders will make it impossible to find a counterpart for it in reality – it deconstructs the ‘good object’... Condensation can attack the other rows of the figure: if it

deconstructs the figure-form, the good order expected in the arrangement of the staged objects is what is disconcerted – such is the case, I believe, for double exposures in photography and cinema. Even representational (Euclidean) space itself can suffer harm, through curvatures and anamorphoses. In any case, the presence of the figural distinguishes itself negatively, through disorder” (Lyotard, 2011, 324).

Following Lyotard we can see how the subtle, trembling quality of my ‘body lines’ or the rips and tears at the edges of volumetric images might still indicate the presence of the figural, even within the totalising structure of virtual space.

Over the course of my research, however, a further underlying concern about the digital *per se* has emerged. Where I once held an unshakeable conviction that artists must engage with the most modern media available to them and felt wary of artists choosing to continue using ‘outdated’ analogue technology, I have begun to wonder about what is lost in the ‘binarisation’ process. What does it mean when all of our experiences of sensuous reality are mediated through the filter of digitality? Has there been an almost imperceptible dulling of the senses, and the ability to really ‘see’ or ‘hear’, when constantly exposed to media that has been so heavily re-coded (especially as heavy compressions that shed supposedly ‘unnecessary’ information have been applied to sound and images, sometimes as the inevitable side effect of supposedly ‘higher’ resolution formats)? Strangely, in having to consider the digital more closely, I have developed a respect for analogue media and often wonder if another possibility exists for artists that goes beyond digital equipment, but does not lead back to old analogue mechanisms. Nevertheless, it is the digital that shapes our contemporary world, whether we like it or not. Whereas the aesthetic of analogue media always invariably conjures the past (see the discussion of celluloid in subsection 1.3 above), the digital speaks to the present.

Another concern that might be raised from my thesis is whether, despite my enthusiasm for new aesthetics, I am subconsciously seeking to a return to the familiarity of Modernism. My account of the practices of the Avant-Garde in subsection 2.2 clearly demonstrates a desire to reinstitute some of their

instinctual, materialist approaches. The analogies between my practical research and the techniques of particular (if often atypical) Modernist painters such as Bacon and Klee in subsection 3.5 could be read as a retreat into the past. However, I would maintain that such similarities have been borne more out of coincidence than influence, and that any such resemblances are the consequence of refusing the dominant frameworks available for artistic practice today. I would like to think that my overview of Modernism gives us the opportunity to historicise the present, allowing us to re-examine what art could or even should be. I am interested in aspects of 20th century Avant-Garde approaches but the idea of form I am petitioning for is not transcendent or metaphysical (as critics like Rosalind Krauss would argue defines much Modernism (see subsection 2.2)) or seeking for authentic 'depth' and aura, but rather erotic, libidinal and vital:

“What Lyotard calls ‘depth’ (*profondeur*) is not a negativity that refutes the flatness of surface. It operates in another dimension, the laterality or scansion, pure difference, that disunites and recombines both discourse and figure as the force of desire” (Rodowick, 2001, 10).

By seeking another route out of Modernism's transcendental tendencies, following the 'carnal' rather than the 'cerebral' Duchamp towards the libidinous figural energies currently purged from Contemporary Art, I hope that new perspectives on digital forms, and their potential to picture the 21st century world, might be made possible.

Finally, I want to address what it is possible to achieve as an individual artist in opposition to the dominant cultural logics I find myself enmeshed within. I am under no illusions that my practical work could break the spell of Contemporary Art, or that it represents a great leap forward in the use of technology. Rather, I hope that the direction of my practice and the ideas proposed in this study might indicate potential areas others might explore further, or inspire other artists to reject the current workflows or critical frameworks that inform artists' moving image. In subsection 3.4, I speak of the difficulty in developing brand-new software and hardware when digital systems are so labour intensive and impenetrable. This is a task that would require substantial funding and an

impressive team of technicians and artists working together. Such projects are underway in various institutions and under the auspices of software companies such as Autodesk; however, these often sit within the more functionalist 'New Media' context discussed in several places in this thesis.

One way in which I have been able to share and develop the ideas in this thesis is through the Conditions studio programme in Croydon, which I established with artist Matthew Noel Tod in 2018. We have encouraged a more practical, formal approach to art making, and a situation for artistic exchange and debate. At Conditions I engage with emerging artists working with digital media in an interesting hybrid space between the physical and the digital eschewing the logic of CGI: Laura Traver works with machine vision, robotics and painting; Katie Turnbull produces moving image animations that sit between handmade and digital process; Rose Jenson Banner has begun to create drawings in relation to AI imagery. Durril Weller, though working with VR and CGI has applied systems-based processes to the algorithmic structures that shape digital moving image animation, introducing feedback to 3D objects with unpredictable, distorting results. He has collaborated with glass-maker Phoebe Stubbs to explore the way that VR remediates the physical properties of lenses and practical optical effects. All these artists are producing individual work that feels digitally mediated, but also relates to traditional media and the question of the human gesture. They are breaking with the conventions of digital imagery set by the dominant culture, and producing works where the formal proposition undermines the logic of the digital readymade in a way that, I propose, could be seen as an instantiation of the 'digital figural'.

The ideas evolved through this thesis, a new way of looking at art beyond the conceptualism at the heart of Contemporary Art, have already found their way into my practice and my teaching, and I hope will be part of ongoing discussions about digital image making and the future beyond the current boundaries of the field.

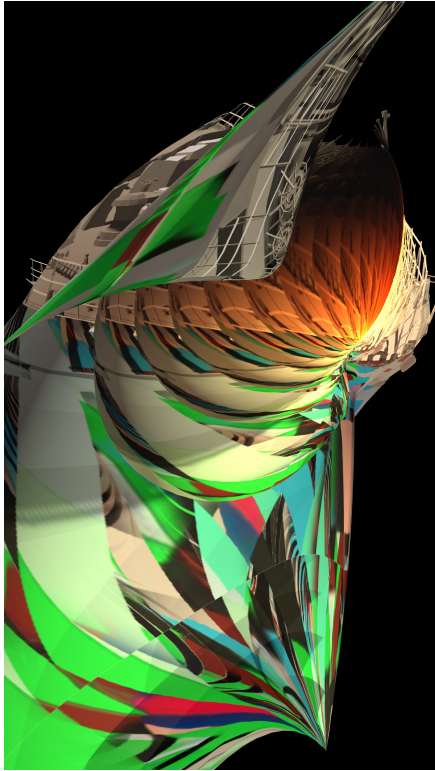


Fig 122: Left: *Ghost Ship* (Durril Weller, 2020) Right: *Work in Progress* (Rose Jenson Banner, 2022).

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Illustrations

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Notes

¹ Post-internet art is a contested term, loosely used to describe the generation of artists who grew up with the internet (rather than indicating a period after the internet). It can refer to a style or aesthetic of works that reference and comment upon digital technologies. However it was not a term usually used by artists themselves and so was not constituted as a movement.

² Throughout this thesis I have chosen to capitalise Contemporary Art, to reflect this sense of its status as a genre, rather than just a general periodisation. Similarly I capitalise Modernism and the Avant-Garde, and genres such as Conceptualism and Structuralist film as I see them as coherent movements. I will not use this convention for terms like 'post-internet' or 'post-cinema' which are more loosely defined or are contested.

³ Indexical media reflect reality - there is a cause and effect between a recorded object and the resulting outcome. This is typically used to refer to lens-based media, whereas computer generated graphics have no actual referent in the real world.

⁴ Social media site Tumblr became a locus for online subcultures in the late 2000s - in particular for emerging DIY and Queer subcultures and ephemeral micro-genres. Vaporwave was one such micro-genre which embraced a trashy internet aesthetic.

⁵ The debate around what has been dubbed 'Zombie Formalism', 21st century works that echo "the original Abstract Expressionist principles championed by critic Clement Greenberg without advancing the ideas" (Schneider, 2018), is a critique of cynical market-oriented artists but also underlines the contemporary contempt for artistic formalism. Also see Rosalind Krauss' essay *Grids* (1979) discussed on page 82, as a reference for the first wave of hostility towards Greenbergian Modernist formalism on the grounds of its privilege.

⁶ In this instance I am making a distinction between artists using video primarily for documentation (such as performance artists) and 'video art' focused on the technical formal possibilities of the medium.

⁷ Anton Jaeger has used the term 'hyper-politics' to define the period since 2015 where all aspects of life appear to have been politicised yet there is an absence of actual mass political organisation or conflict. (Jaeger, 2022). This suggests that politics has become merely symbolic.

⁸ The theory of the Uncanny Valley has become widely known in recent years but was originally proposed by robotics professor Masahiro Mori in 1970.

⁹ 1080p has been the standard resolution for HD video (with 'p' denoting progressive, rather than interlaced video). 4K (around four times greater in resolution than 1080p) has now become popularised through consumer electronics like BluRay disks. New digital video cameras made by companies like Blackmagic achieve resolutions of 12K.