

***CHAOS AND CAPACITY:***

***CURATOR'S STATEMENT***

This exhibition marks one crucial passing over or 'phase shift' in the making of contemporary art. With the exploration of 'threshold points' of transformation between ordered systems and chaos, the increasing recognition of moments of mutation, of self-organization and self-generation that occur when organisms are pushed far from equilibrium in various forms of biology, nonlinear 'complexity' dynamics in advanced mathematics, as well as the paradigms unleashed by virtual reality and new cosmologies, contemporary art practices again seem to reverberate with Marcel Duchamp's observation that "art is a road which leads towards regions that are no longer governed by time and space." While much banter has been devoted to '80s bashing in the past decade (think of Julia Kristeva's characterization of "disturbing images that were totally conventional in their pseudo-audacity"<sup>1</sup>), or explication of the viscissitudes of the image during the last decade as the quintessence of "mannerism," more recently the onrush of new technologies, programming linguistics, cyber philosophy and sensitive, exponentially increasing interdependent economic and political relationships have given rise to art forms that are more reminiscent of Baroque theatricality, or Futurist fusions that revivify rather than abolish specifically 'aesthetic' practices. Artists at the end of the '90s are not threatened with ghosts of the rococco, or the seductive, brilliant aberrations of a Pontormo or a Parmigianino. The moment of an mannerist "hysterical

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva. Remarks at The Drawing Center, New York City, November 20, 1996.

sublime" and the politics of simulacra have passed.<sup>2</sup> These artists have often come in this dawning digital era to have more of a dialog with Malevich or Rodchenko or Kandinsky concerning how to use art and integrate technology, the better to envision the new worlds or space-time configurations already emerging (thinking both with and against Beuys, too).

Malevich, for instance, could have been thinking of cyberspace when he wrote in 1915 that "Objects have vanished like smoke."<sup>3</sup> Malevich's invention of "suprematism" was at once a "sensation of infinity" and a "means of cognition," for "man's path lies across space."<sup>4</sup> In his derision for representation of existing reality, Malevich insisted that art open up onto the virtual. He demanded that his art be freed from the earth and earthbound conventions ten years before the first rockets touched the sky. His sense of space cut across facilely defined interior/exterior lines, for an internal, mystical sight was not Malevich's sole stopping point. In 1920 he wrote a pamphlet on the possibilities of interplanetary flight, on satellites and space stations. His claims and demands for the artist were strenuous and extraordinary: "Our contemporaries must understand that *life will not be the content of art, but rather that art must become the content of life*...Not one engineer, military leader, economist, or politician has ever managed to achieve in his own

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<sup>2</sup> The aesthetic and political dead-end of 1980s style simulation-art was pretty well prophesized in Joseph Nechvatal's 1988 essay "A Prophylactic Discourse on Simulated Art," in *Collected Essays 1983-1990*. Paris: Éditions Antoine Cadeau, 1990. For instance, Nechvatal writes "If Simulated art looks like something we have seen before in its efforts to appropriate the free-floating signifier by wiping out the myths that make any sign legible, then the Simulationists began a process of erasure that soon moved beyond the defunct art beliefs, to subvert *all* metaphysical art conceptions, particularly those which had justified their own art process in the first place...in the process, it ends up treating its own ideas exactly as it does the old universals -- as rubbish...this exploitive rationality comes even closer, not to "truth" -- a category it has long ago shattered, but to the open realization of its own coercive animus, purified of all delusion, including, finally, itself." Nechvatal concludes that "we have been estranged from our higher desires by simulation, which finally reduces all of its proponents into the blind spectators of their own simulation." *Collected Essays*, pp. 37, 40.

<sup>3</sup> Kasimir Malevich. *Essays on Art, 1915-33*. Vol. 1. Trans. X. Glowacki-Prus and A. McMillin. New York: G. Wittenborn, 1968. p.36.

<sup>4</sup> Kazimir Malevich. "Suprematism," *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*. Ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt. New York: Thames & Hudson, 1988. p. 144.

field *a constant, beautiful, forming element such as that achieved by the artist.*"<sup>5</sup>

Malevich's and the other Russian avant-gardes were eventually smashed by the instauration of a murderous bureaucratic regime; the other various Western avant-gardes self-destructed or were subsumed by a far more subtle process of acceptance, engulfed by an omnipresent, omnivorous commodification. The complacency of what Jean Baudrillard has labelled the "art conspiracy"<sup>6</sup> has perhaps become starker with the dramatic and rapid social, economic, and technological changes that have been appearing with increasing rapidity and rapacity for at least a quarter-century and more, changes only more evident now in the end-time of the '90s. Yet even Baudrillard, who professes very little interest in "art," in fact being unable or unwilling to see it having any "vital function" any longer, can say that "Only form is capable of opposing the exchange of values," a "form" that "is inconceivable without the idea of metamorphosis.

Metamorphosis allows you to move from one form to another without bringing in value."<sup>7</sup> Such a "form" would also be an "event," crystallizing a fragment of reality (this is its responsibility to the void), without being instantly recuperated and recirculated in ideological or "aesthetic" terms (or sheerly economic ones). In such an entwined, interlocked and to date still largely deregulated global system, what the late philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis dubbed "the planetary casino," dominated by socio-economic networks instantaneously linked by cyber and information technologies, Baudrillard's definition of "form" seems to set the bar at an nearly impossible height for contemporary image-makers. Yet, if one is to attempt to redefine art for this end-time, the notion of "event" or "metamorphosis" simultaneously links such activity to what made art so significant previously in human history, before the current hypertrophy of the visual.

Calling for the creation of "forms" that fail to circulate in the usual aesthetic or economic universes, Baudrillard's dystopia, however tenuously, still connects up with the far more optimistic image of Félix Guattari's "new aesthetic paradigm." Since "an ecology of the virtual is just as pressing as ecologies of the visible world" artists renew

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<sup>5</sup> Malevich. *Essays on Art*. Vol. 2. pp. 17-8.

<sup>6</sup> Jean Baudrillard. *Le Complot de l'art*. Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1996; *Entrevues à propos du "Complot de l'art."* Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard in Catherine Francblin, "Jean Baudrillard, la commedia dell'arte," *art press* 216 (September 1996): 43-48. p. 48.

an urgent responsibility in creating passages to what Guattari hopefully describes as a "post-media era" characterized by social creativity and active reappropriation of media and its instruments. In articulating the "processual" capabilities of this manifold, rich and virtual "machinic heterogenesis," Guattari tries to enunciate the qualities of such an assemblage or configuration which "extracts its consistency by crossing ontological thresholds, non-linear thresholds of irreversibility, ontological and phylogenetic thresholds, creative thresholds of heterogenesis and autopoiesis."<sup>8</sup> The example of fractal symmetries for Guattari shows how the notion of scale has to be altered to include the ontology engendered by the "fractal machines" which invent the scales they traverse, which were however "already there." These paradoxes of fractals are only comprehensible once one has been released, and once one is freed from interpreting, these phenomena or assemblages in terms of "energetico-spatial-temporal coordinates." This example of fractals can be supplemented by another, even more familiar one pointed out to us by molecular biologists, that of the genetic code imprinted by DNA, a chain of being validated and mediated by proteins, the matter which was originally encoded; as Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Francisco Varela have argued, all such efforts to ground the autonomy of the living must take these paradoxical forms of autopoiesis; the logic of the cell is one of self-production via a circular determination between its boundaries and its dynamics, which both produce these boundaries and is made possible by them<sup>9</sup>. It is in this sense that Derrida refers to DNA as yet another "trace," another link in a chain of supplements. Such phenomena offer up a definition of complexity -- they cannot be reduced to the sum of their parts nor are they separate from their products. Where these complex systems reveal an intermixed and only apparent hierarchial constituency they are linked up via this model of circular causality Varela has termed "operational closure."<sup>10</sup> This is a manner of being, Guattari writes, that is not being identical to itself, rather a "processual, polyphonic Being singularisable by infinitely complexifiable

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<sup>8</sup> Félix Guattari. *Chaosmosis*. Trans. Paul Bains and Julian Pefanis. Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995. p. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Francisco J. Varela. "Introduction," *Understanding Origins*. Ed. by Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Francisco J. Varela. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science. Vol. 130. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1992. pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Francisco J. Varela. *Principles of Biological Autonomy*. New York: Elsevier-North Holland, 1979.

textures, according to the infinite speeds which animate its virtual compositions."<sup>11</sup> This "ontological relativity...is inseparable from an enunciative relativity." In this universe, the multifarious "existential machines" cannot be mediated by Transcendent signifiers which the sciences have long since been freed of but "are to themselves their own material of semiotic expression."

In this situation, Guattari writes, "Patently, art does not have an monopoly on creation but it takes its capacity to invent mutant coordinates to extremes; it engenders unprecedented, unforeseen and unthinkable qualities of being."<sup>12</sup> What Guattari terms "enunciative relativity" is called forth from the self-affirmation of the "existential nuclei," the "autopoietic machines." This "new aesthetic paradigm" works with, by, and through scientific and ethical paradigms, not least since these arenas operate through similiarly creative "processual relays" -- "technoscience's machinic Phylums are in essence creative, and because this creativity tends to connect with the creativity of the artistic process."<sup>13</sup> For Guattari, it is not only the scientific machine, the mystical machine, the literary machine, but "every species of machine" that is located "always at the junction of the finite and the infinite, at this point of negotiation between complexity and chaos."<sup>14</sup> This coexistence on a plane of double immanence is proffered by the "initial chaosmosic folding." Creative intensities are born in this potentiality of "the event-advent at the heart of limited speeds at the heart of infinite speeds" where the virtual is converted into the possible, the reversible into the irreversible, or the deferred into actual difference; this "chaosmosis" does not swing between order and disorder, being and nothingness, but rather is a "relative chaotisation in the confrontation with heterogenous states of complexity," producing sensible bifurcations "inscribed in an irreversible temporality" that remains in play with "a-temporal reversability," or "the incorporeal eternal return of infinitude"<sup>15</sup> best summarized for Guattari by Mallarmé's famous opening lines of *Un coup de dés*:

#### A throw of the dice

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<sup>11</sup> Guattari. *Chaosmosis*. p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 106.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 107.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. pp. 112-3.

Will never  
Even when launched in eternal circumstances

From the depths of a shipwreck...<sup>16</sup>

Mallarmé concludes, "All Thought emits a Throw of the dice." Yet this would not be a Pascalian wager with pre-established categories, but that of infinitely expandable chaosmodic foldings.

It is not an accident that the epistemological basis for Guattari's prognostications, the notions of autopoiesis first elaborated in the joint work of theoretical biology by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela<sup>17</sup>, in its complete self-referentiality, has been called "Leibnizian for our day."<sup>18</sup> In the model Maturana and Varela first developed, the characteristics of autopoietic, or living systems are defined by their autonomy (they subordinate all change to the maintenance of their own organization); individuality (they maintain an identity independent of their interactions with an observer); unity (their operations specify their own boundaries in their process of auto-production); and they do not have "inputs" or "outputs," rather they can be "perturbated by independent events and undergo structural changes which compensate these perturbations," in a series of changes which "may or may not be identical" (these changes will likewise always be subject to its self-organization, whereas the language of "inputs" and "outputs" refers to the "domain in which the machine is observed, but not to its organization").<sup>19</sup> As opposed to organizations that remain constant by being static (i.e. a crystal), autopoietic machines retain their consistency by keeping relationships constant between their various components despite their states of flux and continuous change. Maturana and Varela's model was radical in its rejection of the dominance of evolutionary, functionalist, and

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<sup>16</sup> This translation is not from Guattari but from Stéphane Mallarmé. "Un coup de dés," *Collected Poems*. Trans. Henry Weinfield. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. pp. 124-45. English critic Penny Florence makes the case that "Un coup de dés" is the first virtual poem, or "virtuality *avant la lettre*."

<sup>17</sup> See Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela. *Autopoiesis and Cognition*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science Vol. 42. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980. A more popular, layman's presentation of the material in *Autopoiesis and Cognition* is laid out in Maturana and Varela's *The Tree of Knowledge*. Rev. ed. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Robert S. Cohen and Max W. Wartofsky. "Editorial Preface," *ibid.* p. v.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 80-1.

teleonomic approaches to explain living systems. They claimed "the notions of purpose and function *have no explanatory value* in the phenomenological domain which they pretend to illuminate, because they do not refer to processes indeed operating in the generation of any of its phenomena."<sup>20</sup> The activity of autopoietic machines create the space in which they exist, and are not reliant upon the categories or other distinctions made by an observer. It is this radical self-enclosed circularity, that has no "outside," that prompts comparisons to the Baroque monads of Leibniz.

Maturana and Varela's work in due course separated. While Maturana remained faithful to the monadic vision of *Autopoiesis and Cognition*, Varela increasingly explored how the environment meaningfully guided, interacted or determined an organism's perception, as opposed to the strict view of autopoiesis where perception is the closed system's response to an event triggered by the environment. Varela and others coined the term "enaction" for this more interactive description of how the organism changes with and in response to its environment.<sup>21</sup> Here the variable sensory surfaces connecting the organism to the environment and its recurrent motor patterns are more important than emphasizing the circularity of the organism's responses and representations to itself. Varela increasingly takes a position where Western cognitive science meets Buddhism:<sup>22</sup> as opposed to the monadic circularity of the original autopoietic theory, in Varela's recent work the monads expand out not only to become more fully a part of the environment but to empty themselves in the larger surrounding realm; consciousness, the common-sense, reflexive loops of autopoietic, living systems, is shown to be an illusion, an empty-set. Relying in turn on the work of R. Jackendoff and Marvin Minsky<sup>23</sup>, Varela argues that

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 86. Maturana and Varela also controversially claimed that "reproduction and evolution are not essential for living organisms." *ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch. *The Embodied Mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.

<sup>22</sup> For an explicit example of Varela's interplay with Buddhist thought, see the series of volumes he edited and narrated of conversations between various Western thinkers from different sciences and areas of expertise with the Dalai Lama: *Gentle Bridges*, Ed.s by Jeremy Hayward and Francisco J. Varela. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992; and *Sleeping, Dreaming, Dying*. Ed. by Francisco J. Varela. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1997.

<sup>23</sup> R. Jackendoff. *Consciousness and the Computational Mind*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987; Marvin Minsky. *The Society of Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986; M. Minsky and S. Papert. *Perceptrons*. Rev. ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987.

the most persuasive recent models of cognition jettison the concept of the unified self. Consciousness appears to present a coherent account to itself, stories, of processes that are often radically heterogeneous. These models of cognitive activity present the functioning of the mind "not as unified, homogenous unity, not even as a collection of entities, but rather as *a disunified, heterogenous, collection of processes*."<sup>24</sup> Much of Guattari's work consisted in multifarious practices aimed at mapping, explaining and adapting such processes.

The epistemology of the new cognitivism is intimately connected with the fractal textures, the virtual, overlapping folds and inflections of a developing and transforming visual art that of necessity definitionally has moved light years away from the constraining dualisms of much 20th century art which has preceded it. Its "work," as art historian Christine Buci-Glucksman has described it, is 'towards the building of a post-abstraction which "tools" the world and reveals it to us.'<sup>25</sup> For Buci-Glucksman, these gestating paradigm changes constitute no simple radical "break," but are themselves implicated in prior modernity of Klee's lines, of Smithson's entropy-art, of Pollock's convex/concave spaces, and perhaps especially of the historical Baroque with its "mathematics of infinity (knots, spirals, undulations, interlaced design, vectors and folds)."<sup>26</sup> The Cuban novelist and critic Severo Sarduy was drawn to the Baroque since in its "symbolic space...we encounter the textual citation or metaphor of foundational space, postulated by contemporary astronomy"<sup>27</sup> with its cosmology of the ever-expanding "Big Bang." The Baroque, especially the neo-Baroque, came to represent a "loss of thread," of artifice spiraling out of limits of subordination, of destabilized hierarchies and harmonies. Its pictorial language may have derived from the dominant "logocentric" religious motifs

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<sup>24</sup> Varela, Thompson and Rosch. *The Embodied Mind*. p. 100. An excellent overview of Maturana and Varela's relation to the development of cybernetics and Varela's opening out onto third-wave cybernetics and researches into artificial life is provided in N. Katherine Hayles. *How We Became Posthuman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksman. "The Fractal Challenge in Art," *fractalisations*. La Seyne-sur-Mer: Villa Tamaris, 1999. p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 13. An extraordinarily influential philosophical study of those loops and spirals is Gilles Deleuze's *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Trans. Tom Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Also see Christine Buci-Glucksman's preface "Puissance du Baroque," in *Puissance du Baroque*. Paris: Galilée, 1996.

<sup>27</sup> Severo Sarduy. *Barroco*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamerica, 1974. p. 14.

and figures hegemonic at the time, but its chaotic, variegated forms simultaneously questioned and distanced itself from the same authority.<sup>28</sup> It is this "springing" and rhizomatic outgrowth past finite and stable forms that make the Baroque imaginary so relevant to artists today.

The unstable, eliding spaces and monads of the Baroque often have to be evoked to provide analogues to the expansion and contraction of the wave-like oceanic spheres of today's activity. The dissolution of usual subject/object relations and personae in cyberspace only dramatically ratifies similar disjunctions of informatically and media-formed identities elsewhere in the social realm. These immersive relations recall Lascaux in more than one way, although now the Platonic cave is a synthetic mediasphere, a telematic and informatic cyberdome. Maurice Blanchot has written that "the first moments of art suggest that man has contact with his own beginning...only when, by the means and methods of art, he enters into communication with the force, brilliance, and joyful mastery of a power that is essentially the power of beginning...of a beginning-again that is always prior."<sup>29</sup> The current challenge if not dissolution of art forces one to again and again recall its origin or first moments. For philosopher Gilles Deleuze, this origin lies in abstraction, since all art is abstract and is born from abstraction; he relies on anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan -- "Primitive art begins with the abstract, and even the prefigurative...Art is abstract from the outset, and at its origin could not have been otherwise."<sup>30</sup> Against Wilhelm Worringer's dating of the abstract line with imperial Egypt, Deleuze finds it there from the start, in the prehistoric use of an abstract, nonrectilinear line. Historian Arnold Hauser suggests that after Lascaux we had wait until Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec in the 19th century to discover a similarly animated and perspectivist line.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 104.

<sup>29</sup> Maurice Blanchot. "The Birth of Art," *Friendship*. Trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Leroi-Gourhan quoted in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. p. 497.

<sup>31</sup> Arnold Hauser. *The Social History of Art*. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage Books, 1957. p. 6.

Art, Deleuze and Guattari have written, preserves, and is the only thing which preserves. These blocs of sensation still require air and emptiness, for "even the void is sensation." A work of art can only be such, if, in the words of the Chinese painter Huang Pin-Hung, it saves enough space for the horses to prance in -- if it leaves room for possibility, for breath.<sup>32</sup> One of the greatest myths, Deleuze argues in writing about Francis Bacon, is that of the totally empty, blank canvas that must be filled:

It is an error to believe that the painter is before a white surface. The figurative creed issues from this error: in effect, if the painter was before a white surface, he was able to reproduce there an exterior object functioning as model...The painter has many things in his head, or around him, in the studio. All this that he has in his head or around him is already in the canvas, more or less virtually, more or less actually, before he begins his work...So although the painter does not fill up a white surface, he has instead to empty it, disencumber it, clean it.<sup>33</sup>

Objecting to a facile opposition of the abstract and figurative, that all too often has reinforced the ideology of the model and the copy, Deleuze claims the painter "paints over images already there," sweeping away, retaining, or using as an aid a host of "givens." This series of *avant-coups* is necessary to release the unpredictable, virtual energies of the *apres-coups*, Deleuze's peculiar elaboration of intensity and intensities.

From this vantage point, perception of past art mutates. Deleuze has characterized the "all over," smooth, intensive and excessive line that spills beyond and can no longer be contained in the grid of Paul Klee's *Pedagogical Sketch Book*,<sup>34</sup> which at first glance can be contrasted with the system of points, lines, and planes, the more rational and "industrial" abstraction of Kandinsky. In Deleuze's way of thinking, Klee's work is aligned with the plane of immanence, with operative, horizontal, rhizomatic concepts, while Kandinsky's spiritualized figures are usually interpreted as an expression of the

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<sup>32</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *What Is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. pp. 165-6.

<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze. *Francis Bacon, Logique de la Sensation*, I. Paris: Ed. de la Différence, 1981. p. 57. Contrast this conventional sense of abstraction or creativity in visual art and writing, the "blank canvas" or "empty page," to the operations or "worklessness" of Maurice Blanchot's "white space" of literature: *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1982; *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

<sup>34</sup> Paul Klee. *Pedagogical Sketch Book*. Trans. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. New York: Praeger, 1953. Much of this argument is indebted to the elegant exposition in John Rajchman's *Constructions*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.

vertical, the transcendent, the hierarchical. Yet Jackson Pollock's innovation -- his materialism of extremely variable, omni-directional lines that either invert or refuse to form inside/outside, figure/ground relationships -- touches limitlessness in a manner that leads us to rethink earlier abstraction as well. Pollock at once shows up the limitations of Clement Greenberg's Cubism-based perspective and leads us to look again at the earlier geometries of Malevich, Mondrian, and Kandinsky. Pollock's contourless, unlimited space which is also a unique expression of immersion draws Deleuze back again to Mondrian, for example, whose square sides of unequal thickness bespeak a contourless diagonal. At first glance Kandinsky's art would be easily categorized in Deleuzian terms as "arborescent" -- generalizing, purifying, reliant on a code rather than a diagram, but Deleuze returns and he finds "nomadic, contourless" lines. With Kandinsky, "abstraction is realized not so much by geometrical structures as by lines of march or transit that seem to recall Mongolian nomadic motifs."<sup>35</sup> Following Deleuze, Bernard Cache looks again at Klee "in whose work vectors can be found everywhere," and Mondrian's non-symmetrical squares, "as if Mondrian were seeking a certain freedom while nonetheless grappling with the most crystalline geometry...Was Mondrian moving toward crystalline symmetry?"<sup>36</sup> Reaching back even further in Western art history, Cache writes of the seminal importance of Cimabue (d. 1302), who "like many other primitives, made of the cross the system of generative axes of a plane; that is why [Francis] Bacon was so interested in him. For once the frontal plane is in place, the projected flesh spreads out, slips and bends like a surface of variable curvature on an abstract plane."<sup>37</sup>

So though its roots can be found throughout some of the strongest moments of modernism, the definitive constructions from a post-Cartesian and non-Euclidean space are found in the experiments of contemporary architecture. There the putative release from topology (in various projects by Greg Lynn, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Bernard Tschumi, Kazuo Shinohara, Toyo Ito and others) bespeaks a more general freeing up, conceptually and practically, of notions of the virtual. This has nothing to do with the "virtual reality" that is commonly concerned with

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<sup>35</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. p. 575 n. 38.

<sup>36</sup> Bernard Cache. *Earth Moves*. Trans. Anne Boyman. Ed. Michael Speaks. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995. pp. 52,110.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. p. 75.

reproducing artificially familiar sights and sounds so as to make them appear "real." For his definition of the virtual Deleuze relies on Proust's description of states of being which are "Real without being actual, ideal without being abstract."<sup>38</sup> For "the virtual must be defined as strictly a part of the real object -- as though the object had one part of itself in the virtual into which it plunged as though into an objective dimension;" the virtual, Deleuze emphasizes, "*is fully real in so far as it is virtual.*"<sup>39</sup> The virtual is differentiated from the merely possible in that the virtual is part of the immanence of actual forces, rather than an abstract possibility that partakes of a transcendent form; the virtual is linked to the potentials of the "abstract machine" that is "real although not concrete, actual although not effectuated."<sup>40</sup> To take seriously the virtual is to take seriously the actuality of "releasing unseen forces in our landscapes and opening new compositional possibilities in our works," and to accept "these *real* moments of *divergence* in our space and time."<sup>41</sup>

With the artists in "Chaos and Capacity," a highly technological environment is taken as a given even if their work happens to be hand-made. Especially recently, innovations have given rise to near-utopian hopes of a instantly communicating and communicable "global village" united in a play of difference; in turn those hopes have appeared overblown given the all-too-real structural limitations whether economic, political, psychological, or aesthetic of the new cyberspaces. While not quite the new "snake oil," the new information technologies have much to answer for; just in terms of accessibility, theorists such as Jonathan Crary have noted that given less than 20 percent of the world's population today have telephones, "participation in the emerging information, imaging, and communications technologies *will never* (in the meaningful

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<sup>38</sup> Proust quoted in Gilles Deleuze. *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. p. 208.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp. 209, 208.

<sup>40</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*. p. 511.

<sup>41</sup> John Rajchman. "Weakness, Technologies, Events (An Introduction)," *D: Columbia Documents of Architecture and Theory*, Vol. 1 (1992): 161-6. pp. 165, 166.

future) expand beyond a minority of people on this planet."<sup>42</sup> Yet that these capacities are carrying impacts equal to those accompanying the industrial revolutions of a few centuries earlier can no longer be disputed. Already back in 1967, an artist like Robert Rauschenberg could scold "If you don't accept technology you better go to another place because no place here is safe...Nobody wants to paint rotten oranges anymore."<sup>43</sup>

In "Chaos and Capacity" the relationship with technology begins from a standpoint that is usually highly ambivalent, yet this departure is accepted, often taken and worked out to produce permutations and revelations of the real only possible within these virtual fields the technology makes feasible.

Gary Hill extrapolates with a philosopher or scientist's precision and a poet's passion and sense of mission the myriad liminal pathways among body and mind, in a form only his manipulation of various video technologies affords; Hill's work provokes and in fact requires a veritable if minor *satori* on the part of the viewer for its existence, not just its comprehension. Hill uses the feedback loops of video technology to highlight ineradicable and sometimes well-nigh insufferable gaps and aporias of communication and language. These experiments in language have ranged from the phonetically reversed spoken texts that are again re-reversed (*Why Do Things Get in a Muddle*, 1984), a process extended to Japanese in *URA ARU (the backside exists)* (1985-6); other works register an almost Gnostic fascination with the dismemberment of experience, such *Disturbance (among the jars)* (1988) and *Incidence of Castastrophe* (1987-8). *Remarks on Color* (1984) where a child reads Wittgenstein's famous treatise was another liminal linguistic exercise; in one instance "angles" becomes "angels" in the child's enunciation. A more complex installation work like *Dervish* (1993-5) again reveals an "incidence of catastrophe" where the artist's intentionality is completely released or obliterated, delivering to us in Deleuzian terms a cut across the plane of immanence, where "the artist

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<sup>42</sup> Jonathan Crary. "Critical Reflections," *Artforum* 23 n. 6 (February 1994): 58-59, 103. pp. 58-9. Although this argument seems to slight the issue of the *access* whole communities may have to a single computer instrument in areas on the wrong side of the North/South divide, he is surely on target that the invention and development of these technologies is inseparable from their social context of capitalist marketization.

<sup>43</sup> Rauschenberg quoted in Sarah J. Rogers. "Body Mécanique," *Body Mécanique: Artistic Explorations of Digital Realms*. Columbus: Wexner Center for the Arts/Ohio State University, 1998.

brings back from the chaos varieties that no longer constitute a reproduction of the sensory in the organ but set up a being of the sensory, a being of sensation, on an anorganic plane of composition that is able to restore the infinite."<sup>44</sup>

Hill has been characterized as a sculptor, and a sculptor of sound,<sup>45</sup> while his more recent, transitional works like *Dervish*, *Reflex Chamber* (1996), and *Marking Time* (1998) appear to move toward 'realizing an electronic Artaud-compatible "theatre of cruelty."<sup>46</sup> In *Marking Time* the artist's intimate relationship with the technology seems to supercede its reality as a prothesis, the distance between the video technology and Hill's voice and body seeming to thin to a disturbing layer of nothingness, pulling the spectator into a quaking experience of reconstruction, trauma and breakdown. *Dervish* was what poets George Quasha and Charles Stein termed a "Panning god-machine" where the viewer had to earn and create a "virtual centre" within the sandstorms of the electronically induced whirlwind. *Reflex Chamber*, on the other hand, has been likened to an epileptic seizure where the eclipse of consciousness simply has to be accepted as part of the work for much of its duration.<sup>47</sup> Hill dramatically highlights the constrictions of the human nervous system and perceptual apparatus; the self itself is "virtualized" and shown to be non-substantial. At the same time that one is confronted with the loss or limitation of faculties and a certain solipsism of perspective, one has been plunged ever more deeply into them, in an often uncomfortable and highly fraught experience of embodiment. The resort to Antonin Artaud is more than implicated here, who proclaimed the revolution of a body without organs, and who maintained that the space in which he could survive had not yet been created.<sup>48</sup>

Other artists in "Chaos and Capacity" who utilize the latest technologies, such as Joseph Nechvatal with his robotics-assisted acrylic paintings, or Michael Rees and his computer-aided design (CAD) sculptures reproduced through rapid prototyping

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<sup>44</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *What Is Philosophy?* p. 203.

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Derrida. "Videor," *Passages de l'image*. Paris: Editions Centre Georges Pompidou, 1990. p. 160.

<sup>46</sup> George Quasha and Charles Stein. "Two Ways at Once," *Gary Hill*. Montreal: Musée d'art contemporain Montreal, 1998. p. 49.

<sup>47</sup> Steven Shaviro. "Fringe Research: Gary Hill," *ArtByte* Vol. 1 n. 4 (October/November 1998): 14.

<sup>48</sup> Antonin Artaud. "I Hate and I Renounce as a Coward," *Artaud Anthology*. Ed. Jack Hirschman. San Francisco: City Lights, 1965.

manufacture procedures, often do so to affirm a highly personal and expressive, even romantic language of a reconfigured 'unconscious.' As poet Michael McClure has remarked, "We are like the people before Copernicus when we speak about the unconscious." Despite the iconization and influential framing of the fabled 'unconscious' by theorists like Freud and Jung, McClure continues, "as artists we experience what is identified as the unconscious all the time, we just refuse to name the lineaments drawn around it. It is as if the unconscious has been made with stained-glass pictures when it seems to us to be really flowing."<sup>49</sup> This is experience that is constructively adrift, predicated on the collapse and surfeit of sign-systems of all sorts; it is flamboyant, erotic, inescapably feminist, both immersed in the quotidian and approaching alchemical mutations. McClure has said -- "And we're aswim in it." In this world, Joseph Nechvatal avers, "Only one language remains more and more contemporary -- the language of *Finnegan's Wake*."<sup>50</sup>

There is real detail in their investigations. Rees copiously scavenges the Western image archive for mappings of the body and the psyche, from Leonardo's drawings to the illustrations of *Gray's Anatomy*, 17th-18th century alchemical engravings, Muybridge photos and Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*, as well as Eastern sources found in Tantric yoga, balancing "objective" with intuitive imagings of reality. For Rees, the myth of Pygmalion is "right at the heart of the computer," symbolic of the need for mastery through modeling of nature, of male sexuality and its tendency to objectify its fantasies of the real. In Greek mythology Pygmalion, the King of Cyprus, fell in love with the image of the sculpture he had created, beseeching the gods to bring it to life. According to one version Aphrodite created Galatea for Pygmalion. Rees claims "Pygmalion is a huge problem, and of course he's a sculptor."<sup>51</sup> In placing a uterus in a skull in *Ajña 5* (1997) Rees conflates the two seats of human creativity and fertility, slyly raising the notion of the male sexuality driving new cyber technologies, technological creativity as "womb envy." Yet these works cannot be reduced to a banal oppositional model of

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<sup>49</sup> Michael McClure. "Towards Perception," *Francesco Clemente: Testa Coda*. New York: Rizzoli International/Gagosian Gallery, 1991. p. 98.

<sup>50</sup> Nechvatal in Philip Pocock. "Joseph Nechvatal," *Journal of Contemporary Art* Vol. 5 no. 2 (1992): 49-54. p. 54.

<sup>51</sup> All quotes from Rees are from interview with author, January 18, 1998.

sexual politics, since the problem of Pygmalion also involves what Western culture has always termed "the spiritual." For Pygmalion, entranced by the illusion of the world or *maya*, the actual world is not enough. In traditional terms, one could say Pygmalion lacked "faith." The hyperbole surrounding current media technologies and cyberspace are only the most recent Pygmalion incarnations of this will to know and will to power. Rees' project resonates with myths ranging from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to the phenomenon of the popular "voluptuous cyberframe" of computer gaming game Lara Croft.

An extraordinary cultural hubris is exposed through Rees' art. These sculptures take up the issues of the performative aspects of language -- what is said is real or taken to be a functioning map-- and so challenges what Michel Foucault would call the various disciplinary regimes of knowledge, something that historically art was consigned to do but rarely ever does. That these intensely personal sculptures are manufactured through rapid prototyping technology, better known for its mass production wares for the aerospace, automobile, medical and toy industries adds yet another layer of irony and subversion. According to Rees, with rapid prototyping, industry again reaches "this Pygmalion point: creation by imagination." Rees' creations -- queasily recognizable yet foreign, organic yet obviously nonorganic, lifelike embryos that reek of death -- are only possible due to the unprecedented flexibility and transparency of design afforded by the multi-dimensional imaging of computer-aided design (CAD) programs. Form 2 CAD models show thickness, and the design of a solid model with surface capabilities, allowing the artist to design an organic model, or imaginary body, that can be manufactured as a solid. This remarkable reproducibility and fluidity of codes and languages between 2nd, 3rd, and 4th dimensions caused Rees to leave his career as a "hands on" sculptor behind. Not the least of the Pandora's boxes opened by Rees' work, in the forefront of design and computer modeling where "there is potential for rapid feedback from design to object, back to design, back to object," is its enormous social consequences. These new design interfaces make possible user-designed objects and alterable tools that make centuries worth of development in mass or flexible production/management techniques in control and marketing redundant.

Joseph Nechvatal is another artist who creates intensities in a particular, peculiar interface between the personal and the social. He first began computer/robotic-assisted paintings in 1986 as an "overload into overmind" strategy of image production. The question Nechvatal wanted to pose, was "Could I invoke the potential of the human spirit to overcome outer world suppression through inner development the way magic and situationism could?"<sup>52</sup> He envisioned a tabernacle "filled with ever-changing and moving traces where we can perhaps rid ourselves of a whole mass of notions. A tabernacle made up of all previous statements and images in the moment of their derepresentation."<sup>53</sup> Nechvatal archived from a number of sources -- photography, mass media, electronic pictures, figurative images purloined from religious traditions or kitsch shops -- and mixed them with his own drawings to form a collage that was then photographically reproduced, fed into computer digitalization, and then mechanically reproduced via robotic armed painting. The results of this process, simultaneously programmatic, technological, sacred and aleatory, were "shreds of an ecstatic reality which do contain neither time nor space in any conventional sense."<sup>54</sup> The canvases are so overloaded they become gravitational black holes; time is so accelerated it strangely seems to stand still. Owing much to Dada and Surrealism, especially Georges Bataille's vision of atheist spirituality and transgression, Nechvatal sought to counteract a culture inundated with media pollution and increasingly cybernetically organized via computer technology with canvases created from a plenitude, an image-glut so overwhelming that the spectator was led into another perception, another state of mind that could possibly challenge and rechannel the image flow. From the early '90s Nechvatal introduced computer viruses into these already satiated and uncanny visual experiences; with works from the "computer virus project" the viewer latches onto fragments or slices of images that have been methodically eaten away. These works were not directly referring to the ongoing AIDS crisis, but incorporated it as part of a larger set of metaphors. AIDS becomes another figure for the permeability of the body and the body politic; the virus as

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<sup>52</sup> Joseph Nechvatal. "An Ecstasy of Excess," *Joseph Nechvatal, An Ecstasy of Excess*. Mönchengladbach: Juni-Verlag, 1992.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Noemi Smolik. "On the Cave, the Ecstasy, the Images," *Joseph Nechvatal, An Ecstasy of Excess*. Mönchengladbach: Juni-Verlag, 1992.

not just disease and breakdown, but also an ecstasy of breakthrough and a plurality of possible selves.

In holding onto and continuing the venerable tradition of painting, Paul Pagk and Lydia Dona offer up work consonant with how Guattari described new definitions of the fields of the body -- "partial and yet open to the most diverse fields of alterity."<sup>55</sup> Rather than consigning painting to history's dustbin, they both explore its possibilities as a new language of virtuality. In a near existential manner, Pagk's tendentious paintings test structural limits; conflicting systems coexist on the same canvas or abruptly break off; color conjunctions that are not supposed "to work" are recombined in objects at once obviously material, "grounded," extended from the body, and ephemeral and in danger of collapse. At once minimalistic and metaphysical, Pagk's paintings can take on a spectral presence which turns the specular tables, then the viewer is read as much as the painting. In exploring again the elemental vocabulary of line, shape, texture, and color one is led to traverse Pagk's processual steps in a journey that appears both preordained or Talmudic and companionable with Italian "weak thought," *pensiero debole*. Papably rooted in a physicality and *grund*, there are rivulets of more personal experience -- tangible, sensible phenomena -- even though Pagk's paintings evoke another world. In this world, its "laws are fixed and immutable," although this world also seems to be based on "a mathematical equation whose solution can never be finite."<sup>56</sup> In presenting fragments or cracked, fragile steles from a paradoxical, virtual universe Pagk creates a fundamental visual experience in this one. Pagk's paintings do not reveal any special gash or chasm of the sacred and profane, although they do operate in Adorno's sense that "all art works look like those puny allegories one finds in cemeteries...No matter how perfect art works may pretend to be, they are lopped off."<sup>57</sup> In works like *Firebird* (1997) or *Exout* (1995) they leave a radiant afterimage or flicker or tone where none perhaps in actuality exists. They are paintings which can also be read as an exercise in abandonment where painting's peculiar sensory virtues and *raison d'etre* surreptitiously return.

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<sup>55</sup> Guattari. *Chaosmosis*. p. 118.

<sup>56</sup> Adrian Dannatt. "Field Commander," *Paul Pagk*. Toulouse: Galerie Éric Dupont, 1992.

<sup>57</sup> Theodor W. Adorno. *Aesthetic Theory*. Trans. C. Lenhardt. Ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann. London: Routledge, Kegan & Hall, 1984. p. 184.

In Dona's frequently lush, liquid, dematerialized fantasms, the inverted and displaced grids seem a prefatory "chaosmosic folding" where the painting surface is made a pregnant "conceptual skin." What Guattari called "choices of finitude" are here, barely marked in the passing of their multitudinous unfoldings; these paintings are profound physical registrations of myriad metamorphoses, stark graffiti in the post-Platonic cave. Borders are made permeable, and the usual rhetoric of abstract painting -- drips, grids, vertical/horizontal lines -- are turned into motion and displacement, vectors for new knowledge and perception. In Dona's paintings, axes turn, planes advance and recede, bifurcate. Nonrational architectural geometries mutate. Dona mimics the Pollock "drip," but standing upright; using diagrams from car manuals as Duchampian ready-mades, Dona both connects with and recontextualizes modernist conceptual irony; in her paintings codes are too full, are overwhelming, they bleed off the edges. In works like *Germinal Borders and Cellular Excess* (1996) the colliding planes, cellular overflow, rhizomatic traces, both precious and garish "garment center" color schemes leave us like a desert nomad after a tremendous, unprecedented sandstorm. In *Portraiture Into the Green Side of the Gaze* (1997) the apparently more centered composition is threatened by implosion and devolution; creeping foliage and slipping screens again open out onto an omnipresent void. Dona's work again stages the question that according to Andrew Benjamin defines the contemporary enterprise of abstract painting, that is, "the relationship between the finite and the infinite."<sup>58</sup> This can be a voracious relationship. Dona has claimed that "I want the painting to stare at you until your body and its body dissolve. At that point I disappear as an artist. I'm not anymore the maker. I'm after painting that is the ghost of its own shadow."<sup>59</sup> Dona may work with erosions and intense absences, desert winds, but within these shadowy sheens also hovers the ecstatic, a provocative if perhaps unprovoked guest of these folding screens of presence and absence. Both Dona and Pagk point to the possibilities of painting that emerge after decades of the critical deconstruction of modernism. Dona represents a liquid state, Pagk a dry one. Dona opens the window on the proliferating, arcane alterities and connectivities that cannot wait to arrive. Her radical displacements of the language of

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<sup>58</sup> Andrew Benjamin. *What Is Abstraction?* London: Academy Editions, 1996. p. 38.

<sup>59</sup> Lydia Dona in Raphael Rubinstein. "Abstraction in a Changing Environment," *Art in America* (October 1994): 102-9. p. 106.

modernism, her demonstration of its fungibility, allow that language to mutate.

It is not so wide of the mark while registering the activity of the artists in "Chaos and Capacity" to invoke the condition Thomas Merton ascribed to the 4th century "desert fathers" who had to make "a clean break with a conventional, accepted social context in order to swim for one's life into an apparently irrational void."<sup>60</sup> They were intimately and courageously embarked on testing conceptual, ontological limits, of probing and provoking transmutation. Gudjón Bjarnason's enterprise is similarly and persistently testing structural-symbolic limits in painting and sculpture, posing the question of entropy as breakdown or breakthrough. In common cause although in different respects with Dona or Nechvatal, Bjarnason thrives in an absence of "signature style," pioneered so unmistakably through the earlier achievements of Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke. Some of Bjarnason's sculptures are blasted and twisted, a ceaselessly malleable play and transformation of signs. At times using an open-cast mine in a lava field in Iceland, Bjarnason has ignited his sculptures with dynamite, inevitably leaving remains lost or embedded in the landscape. Shown in a gallery context, Bjarnason's works of a profoundly questioned, ambivalent relationship with nature are doubly denatured. While play of control and indeterminability is characteristic of the work by a multitude of contemporary painters, Bjarnason separates them as two conflicting systemic tendencies: his canvases of geometric abstraction -- squares, angles, emergent crosses (as in *Secret Sympathy* 1997) -- coexist as separate entities from others marred with industrial grime, burnt, or organically designed in part from the fall of the rain (in works like *Disaster Writing* or *Beyond Pleasure*, 1995). Again we see a processual paradigm that explores the composition of sign-systems, limning boundaries between meaning created by "nature" or by human hand. Bjarnason's installations have also included inserted casts of body parts, as if to remind the viewer of human scale, human fallibility and limits, the fecund if fallible sources of signs. Using the various sculptural, painterly or architectural means at his disposal Bjarnason presents boundary edges of the unrepresentable, ideograms of chaos. The Pope has recently advised us of the coexistence of reason and faith; about the balance of human comprehension and elemental powers; Bjarnason's work suggests a

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas Merton. *The Wisdom of the Desert*. New York: New Directions, 1960. p. 9.

struggle, suggests that the subject matter may not be adequately covered in calm encyclicals. As with Hill, Nechvatal, or Dona, conscious intention is loosened, ultimately lost in order that something else may come into being.

Ingo Günther uses video technology to present and inflect the most common semiology of nationalism and politics, almost serendipitously leaving these signs in this ever-so-slight distance to the viewer to reexamine or reconstruct. For some time Günther has shunted between various roles -- United Nations correspondent, an organizer of independent television in the former East Germany, an experimental video artist and former assistant to Nam June Paik, an artist working from satellite data and military intelligence, manager of the *Ocean Earth* satellite data agency, a commentator on the Japanese TV station NHK, instigator of the virtual nation *Refugee Republik* via the Internet, there are others as well -- as a means to explore various communicative praxes within new media technologies. Günther has said, "If art helped to portray and interpret the metaphysical world, maybe it can now be expected to describe, if not to shape, the metamedial world."<sup>61</sup> Günther usually incorporates telesthesia, the relation or perception of distance, in his work, while probing with yet another level of detachment, representing, or strangely framing, in a near Zen manner the different phenomena he creates. In 1992, in *Exhibition on Air*, Günther installed ten transmitters hidden in a gallery ceiling which emitted video signals into the electromagnetic spectrum; the audience walked through the empty gallery space carrying small antennas with television monitors, searching for the subtle electronic images they could only pick up when they came close to the specific sites. Takashi Serizawa compared the experience to "aborgines walking across the Australian continent without any possessions, following their songlines."<sup>62</sup>

Günther's other works carry this same sort of unraveling minimalist poetry. At Documenta 8 in 1987 Günther displayed *K4 (C3) (Command Control Communication and Intelligence)*, air photos from satellite data of an Soviet air field in Afghanistan and a U.S. air strip in Honduras on a large marble stone; the viewer's hand or form would

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<sup>61</sup> Günther quoted in Peter Friese. "Creative Subject, Demiurge or Informant?," *Ingo Günther: REPUBLIK. COM*. Ed. by Susanne Rennert and Stephan von Wiese. Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz Verlag, 1998. p. 43.

<sup>62</sup> Takashi Serizawa. "The View from Orbit," *Ingo Günther*. p. 66.

shadow these ordinary yet portentous markers of international politics. *K4 (C3)* invited the viewer "to enter into a physical relationship with this work. I wanted to expose them to the extreme temptation of being able to step in and succumb to the charm of directing world history...but without knowing in which direction it would proceed."<sup>63</sup> Perhaps especially in the series of "flag" works -- *Shaheed* (the Arabic word for martyr), *In the Realm of the West-Wind-World*, *Ephemeral Monument to the Cold War* -- Günther is presenting an openness of event and context rather than any unidimensional personal interpretation. This is particularly true of the complementarity of a work like *AntiFeyerabend (For Paul Feyerabend)* which is both a homage to a notoriously difficult and enigmatic purveyor of anarchist epistemology, and a divergence from the same. In his various prodigious ranging through different populations and spheres of culture, means and processes of media, Günther plunges the viewer into a post-avantgarde stance, where his or her activity provides the focus of the work. Günther has consciously echoed Beuys in his formula *Refugee = Capital*, which replaces the earlier artist's *Art = Capital*. Whereas perhaps it was the very lack of specificity in most of Beuys' works that made the references all the more German or Teutonic (the universalisms derived from Rudolf Steiner's theosophy notwithstanding), Günther's work finds its breadth in local, particular media realities, presenting Wittgensteinian language games or language practices rather than primal aura. For all its democratic or even utopian resonances, Günther's work is usually concerned with processes and struggles already well-recognized and well underway. As Günther has mused, "Maybe I'm a discoverer rather than an inventor."<sup>64</sup>

The legendary filmmaker Stan Brakhage, who in the '50s and '60s helped invent a vigorous and experimental "New American Cinema," more recently takes Imax film stock, the raw matter of multi-million dollar Disneyland and entertainment complex projection machines, and transforms it via his extremely lyrical action painting into a millennial statement inspired by a long and careful study of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Brakhage, too, claims not really to have invented anything, but rather "I've just

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<sup>63</sup> Günther in "Post-Gargarin Projects," *Ingo Günther*. p. 141.

<sup>64</sup> Günther in "Obsolescence of Territory," *Ingo Günther*. p. 85.

been trying to see and make a place for my seeing in the world at large."<sup>65</sup> Brakhage has consistently retained his exceptional integrity and commitment to what poet Robert Kelly called allowing "the *prima materia* of film, the Visual, constitute its own story."<sup>66</sup> Through various extreme and lapidary means Brakhage, in more than 250 films, has evoked different forms of vision -- of dream, trance, closed eye or hypnagogic vision, of prenatal trauma, of childhood, of spectrums usually invisible -- to present "an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure in perception."<sup>67</sup> His films can "*only exist in the eye of the viewer.*"<sup>68</sup> Brakhage has proposed that film is the quintessential medium to challenge Western Renaissance perspective and restore the continuity of inner and outer, the physical and the psychological, the loops of the eternal present of perception, exploring what Gilles Deleuze called "the Cézannian world before man, a dawn of ourselves."<sup>69</sup> Intense physicality was always implied in this call to an pre- or alinguistic vision; with the frequent resort to the hand-held camera the body as navigator and epistemological device is inevitably prioritized. Brakhage has used various filmic devices to broach the subject of the optical apparatus in his visionary project of seamlessly dissolving into one another the outer phenomenal world, the various modes of human perception, and the cinematic apparatus itself. Using anamorphic lenses, bits of glass, rapid montage, multiple superimpositions, Brakhage has decentered the viewer's standpoint so that what it finds resemble the "all over" field paintings of Pollock and Abstract Expressionism.

In his pursuit of what he called "moving visual thinking," the work of art as what poet Charles Olson termed "a high energy-construct and, at all points, an energy discharge,"<sup>70</sup> Brakhage's vast oeuvre -- from his first film *Interim* (1952) through *Dog*

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<sup>65</sup> Stan Brakhage. *Brakhage Scrapbook: Collected Writings 1964-80*. New Paltz: Documentext, 1982. p. 188.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Kelly quoted in Stan Brakhage. *Metaphors on Vision*. 2nd ed. New York: Film Culture, 1976. p. 83.

<sup>67</sup> Brakhage. *ibid.* p. 23.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. p. 84.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Olson. "Projective Verse," *Selected Writings*. New York: New Directions, 1966. p. 16.

*Star Man* (1961-4), to *The Text of Light* (1974) and to the abstract photographed films of the '80s and early '90s -- has undergone a number of shifts through the decades. In attempting to produce a visual form that conveys the actual perceptual process of the body and its nervous system, Brakhage has hand-painted film, baked it, dyed it, scratched it, photographed through crystals and prisms, used the grainy 8mm background itself as a figure for vision. With their painstaking separation of language and perception that evokes a state before the differentiation of self and external world, filmmaker Bruce Elder has observed, Brakhage's films loses rhythms and forces "so as to remobilize the energy that those laws bind into a system, freeing it to roam across the body, or the artwork."<sup>71</sup> Eventually, in many of his works of the '90s, Brakhage relied less and less on gestural, all over forms and rather used repeating loops of reprints and superimpositions to restore centered perceptions; the repetitive circle form appears, and recessive depth, both emphasizing a structure foreign to the use of the entire surface of the celluloid in the earlier work; this new formal symmetry indicates an "epiphanic time,"<sup>72</sup> and, with the moving vectors meeting other moving vectors, is a new, religious sensibility of time mapped into space. Brakhage's cinematic oeuvre can resemble his writings in *Metaphors on Vision*, where one statement counterbalances the next, another assertion contradicts the preceding, so that no seamless whole emerges. It has been pointed out, with extreme irony, that Brakhage, with his artisanal practice, his hand-held cameras filming domesticity, sex, birth, death, perception, "and God," in his insistence that 'any art of the cinema must inevitably arise from the amateur, "home-movie" making medium,'<sup>73</sup> ends up coinciding with a filmmaker with a completely opposite position in regards to the film and culture industry, and to the social and political roles of the cinema. Jean-Luc Godard, after his Marxist, Dziga Vertov Group period of the late '60s and early '70s, claimed 'the real "political" film' would be a "home-movie,"<sup>74</sup> a stance which led directly to his first

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<sup>71</sup> Bruce Elder. "On Brakhage," *Stan Brakhage: A Retrospective, 1977-95*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1995.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Brakhage. *Brakhage Scrapbook*. p. 183.

<sup>74</sup> See David E. James. *Allegories of Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989. pp. 55-7 for a comparison of Brakhage with the diametrically opposed pole of Godard in their relation to the dominant film/culture industry and how best to subvert it. Godard's comment on the home-movie is found in Colin MacCabe's *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980. p. 23.

works in video and television like *Six Fois deux* (1976) and *France/tour/détour/deux/infants* (1976), co-directed with Anne-Marie Miéville.

Rodney Graham's recent investigations into states conscious and unconscious is executed through film, albeit with an extremely critical relation to the function and history of the medium. Graham has noted that his first film, *Two Generators* (1984), was "to create a burlesque travesty and a spectacle that would inspire negative thoughts about cinema."<sup>75</sup> It has been suggested that Graham's Technicolor CinemaScope *Vexation Island* (1997), where Graham plays the leading role in this Robinson Crusoe/ repetition-compulsion 16 mm film loop, in its crisp color and inviting, paradisiacal tropical locale, serves as a metaphor for the escapist nature of the medium itself; fantasy and illusion is regularly dished up to the willing, passive consumer. Graham has called *Vexation Island* as well "a costume picture, that is say, a travesty" that also "aspires to be an accurate diagram, pleasingly rendered, of the catastrophic events that conjoin states of consciousness."<sup>76</sup> Many of Graham's works have explored the notion of "screen memories," according to Sigmund Freud fictions created by the unconscious to cover over real, often traumatic memories. *Vexation Island* is not alone in suggesting that the cinema itself is a screen memory. In *Halcion Sleep* (1994) Graham is shown in a 26-minute continuous video take sleeping in the back of a van taking him from a motel room to his home in the center of Vancouver after he has ingested a double dose of the sedative Halcion, the drug chosen, Graham has written, due to the pleasant thoughts of the past evoked by the name -- the bird of legend who builds her nest in the sea. In *Coruscating Cinnamon Granules* (1996) what appears to evoke constellations of stars and their flickering infinity was actually filmed in the artist's darkened kitchen which served as a camera obscura, the radiating stars produced by sprinkling cinnamon grounds over the spiral electric stove. The unconscious, the imagination, the "clinomatic image," the clinamen or element of the unpredictable has been evoked in Graham's prolific work in installation, prints, photography, sculpture, architectural models, books, video and film by a variety of means, often by way of a supplement -- an appendix, a graft, a gloss, an annex -- that assures an overdetermined reading.

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<sup>75</sup> Rodney Graham. "Siting Vexation Island," *Island Thought* 1, no. 1 (Summer 1997): 9-18. p. 11.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid. pp. 15-6.

Much as the loop of the action in *Vexation Island* suggests an unfolding, eternal present, Graham's earlier work is full of extensions that make sure the past is not ever completely resolved. This has reached Baroque proportions -- in *The System of Landor's Cottage: A Pendant to Poe's Last Story* (1987) Graham added 300 pages of his own and paragraphs from another, 18th century writer to Edgar Allen Poe's short story, transforming it into a novel, a *mise-en-abyme*. On the other hand, in *Dr.No* (1991), Graham inserted a card following page 56 of the Ian Fleming detective novel, introducing an hallucinatory encounter between agent Bond and a poisonous centipede before diverting the story back into the original. In installations such as *Parsifal 1882 -- 38,969,364,735* (1991) and *School of Velocity* (1993) Graham applied calculations and extensions to the music of such different artists as Richard Wagner, Carl Czerny, and the pop singer Engelbert Humperdinck. In several different installation works from 1986 on, it has been Freud who was inserted into Donald Judd-like floor or wall-mounted sculptures; in one 1986 work, the steel, medite and red lacquer sculpture doubled as a bookcase for *The Interpretation of Dreams (Die Traumdeutung)* as other works did for other books by Freud from 1986-93; in 1996, *Schema: Complications of Payment*, Graham presented a videotape collection of posters, a painting, and other sundry material explicating Freud's discussion of paying a debt to Dr. Josef Breuer, offering up such a plethora of information that the artwork becomes another *mise-en-abyme*, so overdetermined it presents the unrepresentable, sliding into incoherence, repetition/compulsion, an object lesson in bottomless obsession.

If in *Vexation Island* and *Halcion Dreams* Graham's critique of the cinema verges on an autopsy,<sup>77</sup> in the hybrid experiments of Toni Dove the cinematic language is decomposed, rearranged, both subjected to a shock therapy and extended into the at times bewildering if more continuous nether regions of virtual reality and a real interactivity that enacts the virtual potentialities of perception and the body. Building from more static filmic installations and discrete videos, Dove was the co-creator of one of the most remarked upon and earliest artistic events in virtual reality, *Archeology of a Mother Tongue* (1993), and continues to play with narratives in a manner located somewhere

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<sup>77</sup> Alexander Alberro. "Rodney Graham's *Vexation Island*, Loop Dreams," *Artforum* 36 n. 6 (February 1998): 72-5, 108.

between the coherent demands of a novella and the more fragmented appeal of the music video. Though her work usually finds its home in the film festival or the forward-looking museum exhibit, Dove's oeuvre demands a new type of public and public space, and may soon innovate in introducing more serious issues and viewing experiences into the often already "themed" contemporary shopping mall, or be exhibited in situations produced through novel public/private economic collaborations that open up the "white cube" of the contemporary museum or gallery space so that digitally-based work can be outfitted and experienced; her explorations with interactive television on DVD present another avenue for future presentations. *Archeology of a Mother Tongue* took virtual reality's nature as a prosthesis quite seriously, and its four interactive visual-aural "envelopes" opened up various culturally-informed journeys querying into the death of a young girl. Dove used the medium of VR to pose questions of the mapping of the individual body onto the city, and the body of the city onto the individual psyche through the evocation of this virtually represented material world. In earlier installations Dove had evoked multiple layers of sounds and voices, breathing and music, and even the color schemes of *Archeology* are recognizable from her earlier installations. Thematically, as well, *Archeology* achieved in a more thorough, immersive environment the project of a feminist psychoanalysis posed in some of the earlier works; the 1990 work *Mesmer: Secrets of the Human Frame*, for instance, retold the famous Freudian case study of Dora from Dora's point of view and in her voice.

The feature-length, three-part, interactive laser disc and sound installation *Artificial Changelings* (1993-7), subtitled "A Romance Thriller About Shopping," takes these concerns into a unique experience of interactivity. Through video sensing technology, the viewer can enter different interactive zones with the two female characters: when closest to the screen, the spectator is placed inside the thoughts of the character; a few steps back and the character addresses the viewer directly, though not in a predictable manner the viewer can control (different, slight movements evoke different responses from the screen); the viewer moves even further back and prompts a trance/dream state; in the last interactive zone the viewer enters a time-tunnel into another century. Dove's narrative features Arathustra, a 19th century kleptomaniac in Paris during the rise of the department store, and Zilith, an encryption hacker of the future; while the

narrative is a layered and complex allusion to the construction of female identity during the various permutations of the Industrial and then Information Revolutions, as a participant in the "responsive movie" the viewer's actions dissolves images, creates transpositions, changes the color washes and speed of the action, and switches the modalities and registers of the narrative itself. Dove succeeds in evoking and demonstrating what Brian Massumi has called "that slipperiness of experience" that is the virtual, "the body moving outside of itself in the movement, and moving through itself at the same time."<sup>78</sup> It is a cliché perhaps that all art is "interactive" in the sense that the spectator "completes" the work of art, and "interactivity" in new media art is often the fetish of pushing a few buttons; Dove's presentation of interactivity engages the abstractness of the body and perception, its consistent ambient and sensory qualities, its creation of an unpredictable and not entirely definable relationship with the screen "object." Among other things, Panamarenko brings to the viewer experiments filled with notions of the fourth-dimension, a mathematics of the infinite, a grappling with epistemology that only an artist perhaps can provide. Like a latter-day rendition of the great Renaissance explorer Pompeii the Great who proclaimed "It is necessary to travel, it is not necessary to live," Panamarenko is an exemplar of the artist-as-inventor, the artist-as-navigator. While providing an often ludic dimension to contemporary debates about the "machinic" and the nature of "desiring production" and "desiring machines," Panamarenko also harks back not only to Pataphysics' science of chance, and to Vladimir Tatlin's *Letatlin* glider (similarly inspired from close study of insects and insect flight like many of Panamarenko's would-be flying objects), but also, going back to a much earlier, extraordinarily fertile time, to the myriad inventions of Leonardo da Vinci, another artist who crossed the engineering/fine art disciplinary boundaries with some dexterity and ease. When he first came onto the art scene in the late '60s, Panamarenko, whose *nom de guerre* indicated either an abbreviation of the Pan American Airline Company or of a rumored Soviet general, following one of his role-models the American ace and "self-made" millionaire Howard Hughes, proclaimed himself an "aeronaut" and a "multimillionaire," parodying the themes of the decade.

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<sup>78</sup> Brian Massumi in "The Interface and I: A Conversation Between Toni Dove and Brian Massumi," *ArtByte* Vol. 1 n. 6 (February/March 1999): 30-7. p. 35.

Panamarenko's often though sometimes not entirely functional heloporting "knapsacks," dirigibles, airplanes, submarines, flying saucers and automobiles explore the breadth and depth of humanity's ambitions to free itself from *l'esprit de serieux* of gravity, while ironically posing a once commonly accepted unity of the artistic and scientific enterprises.

From his earliest "poetic objects" of 1966-8 like the *Swiss Bicycle* or *Magnetic Shoes*, to his *Chickens* or *Archaeopterix* series to the latest flying saucer, Panamarenko has transformed the construction of nature into another "poetic space," into a discourse that no longer excludes human imagination and whim; all of Panamarenko's contraptions are extensions of the human body, like the *Knapsack-airplane*, which intensifies both the potentiality and the limitation of this Icarian obsession with levitation and unboundedness. Panamarenko, with his careful calculations for the aerodynamic capabilities and necessities for his various inventions, as often assumes the role of a physicist as an artist, usually to ultimately confirm an imaginative, suggestive experience rather than a utilitarian one. A comprehensive will to knowledge is brought to bear, exposing laws of nature as no-less-real for being a plaything of individual experience, inverting the technocratic quality of knowledge to which we have grown accustomed and transforming it into another domain. His *Toy Model of Space* (1993) was conceived in part in response to Foucault's assertions that no thought or sexuality could be constituted outside of power relations, and Deleuze's ruminations on his own notion of frontiers -- "the fold."<sup>79</sup> Proclaiming "power composes itself from the form of our acts," and forms the "insidious suppleness of our movements," Panamarenko argues a close observation of form unfolds its paradoxes and paradoxical freedom. Form, while constituting the "paralyzing condition of all that is," is also "the element which allows observation, perception of beauty, knowledge, action, and the exercise of power."<sup>80</sup> Concerning the relation of art and science, Panamarenko heralds the blind groping of the hundreds of thousands of "anonymous searchers" who contribute and create the often fortuitous discoveries of an official science which is usually given a far more uniform and dignified

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<sup>79</sup> Panamarenko, "Town Ho! Chabaritch! Au-delà du pouvoir! Et caetera," *Et tous ils changent le monde*/2eme biennale d'art contemporain, Lyon. Paris: Réunion de musées nationaux/biennale d'art contemporain, 1993. p. 172.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p. 172.

history. "The progress of Science," Panamarenko writes, "is in reality a course of desperate obstacles. But how could it be otherwise? We search the unknown, we search for responses to the questions we have to formulate ourselves, we search for the NEW...Let us consider the insolent beauty of this wary progression, of this grand and facetious dance."<sup>81</sup>

With the artist Niu Bo, again we are confronted with the challenging of incommensurable limits, a playful nudging against accepted translations, an evocation of shape-shifting within and across various cultural disciplines and definitions. It is not for nothing that Niu Bo takes up the central challenge of flight as one of his primary metaphors and activities against a too prematurely closed definition of the task of the artist. Niu Bo has acted in the knowledge that all-too-easy and comfortable reliance on notions of the "earth" are part of what has to be surpassed. Niu Bo has proclaimed that "In the same way Impressionist artists could not make their creations without stepping out of their studios, unless we leave the stratosphere, it is impossible for us to be free from established concepts, much less create a new culture."<sup>82</sup> Immersed in Tibetan ritual and Chinese mythologies and philosophy, Niu Bo also responds to the heretical Western call of Nietzsche's Zarathustra -- "He who will one day teach men to fly will have removed all boundary stones; the boundary stones themselves will fly up into the air before him, and he will rebaptize the earth -- "the light one."<sup>83</sup> It is the digital era which delivers a new impetus to Niu Bo's sources, emphasizing their fluidity, their deterritorialization, their often untapped possibility; ideologies once extremely powerful in the art world lose much of their *raison d'etre* in an era of cyberspace and virtual reality, whether they derive from Heidegger's too-geocentric view of the origin of art, or, notwithstanding the often extraordinary nostalgia for the face in contemporary art, the notion of responsibility to the "face of the other" in Levinas; Niu Bo's work offers a fresh relevance to these situational, cultural dilemmas of postmodernity, and he does so steeped in what remains, despite all the growth and manifest success of American

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 173.

<sup>82</sup> Niu Bo in Yusuke Nakahara. "Niu Bo's Space Atelier 1993," *NIU BO*. Tokyo: Gendaikikakushitsu Publishers, 1993.

<sup>83</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche. "Thus Spake Zarathustra," *The Portable Nietzsche*. Trans. and ed. Walter Kaufman. New York: Viking, 1954. p. 304.

Buddhism, resolutely foreign and still remote traditions. In Tibet, Niu Bo claims to have once seen a meditating monk released from the gravity of his physical body. Thus, Niu Bo's various, technologically enabled "Space Atelier" projects are stages of emulation. Likewise, Niu Bo is influenced by the myth of the Buddhist bodhisattva's body dying, passing into a pillar of smoke and evaporating into the heavens where it seeks its next incarnation -- "the soul's thought process appear to people on earth as cloud formations in the blue sky." Niu Bo's "sky painting" gives this a literal, tangible form, "wholly in imitation of this process of reincarnation."<sup>84</sup>

Niu Bo, through his work which is often a doubling or simulacra, represents a meeting or working-out between ancient technologies and phenomenologies of mind and belief with Western artistic conceptualism. Niu Bo's investigation of ways of seeing can range from the pointedly social, such as *Portrait of Evidence* (1985) a photograph where he replaced Mao's portrait in Tiananmen Square with his self-portrait, to demonstrating the limitations of the human perceptual system in *After Entering a Museum: "Facing the Wall"* (1993) where the viewer, after entering an apparently empty space, must use an infrared camera to identify the work of art buried in the wall. "Facing a Wall" points up the relativity of our notions of what exists and what doesn't, while its title also refers to the origins of Zen Buddhism in Dharma's nine-year sitting meditation before a cave wall in what is now Temple Shorin. In *A Tale of Two Rooms and a Blind Man* (1995-6) the artist installed two rooms -- one completely dark, the other brightly lit. First the viewer enters the dark room where s/he aims to understand and memorize the various material objects in it; in the other lit room a blind man awaits these viewers and their memories in order to fashion images with clay of what they relate. Like many of Niu Bo's other works, this an attempt to evoke the activity of the hidden or "third eye," the boundary between the rooms functioning as a sort of bardo point between ways of being, not just generalizations about Eastern and Western civilizations. Niu Bo sounds like a post-structuralist philosopher when he maintains that "'Seeing" is only a way of recalling;<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Niu Bo. "About Sky Painting," artist's statement. n.d.

<sup>85</sup> Compare Niu Bo with the more radical version of Derrida's "there was never was perception," that is, that perception or presence always relies on a non-presence related to a trace or writing for its existence, and therefore irremediably socially encoded and constructed. Jacques Derrida. *Speech and Phenomena*. Trans. David Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973. p. 103.

complaining of the "easy monism" of Lao-Tzu, Niu Bo wants to awaken a striving towards what Buddhism describes as "Fa Eye" and "Buddha Eye" openings, experiences only hinted at and tentatively conceptualized at the roots in works like *A Tale*. The relativity of our sensory conundrums dissolve into other dilemmas, just as Niu Bo claims the power of modern humanity to draw lines between civilizations dissipates in such a way as to create a deeper and truer sense of what a "boundary" is.

La Monte Young: not many contemporary artists have spawned whole schools and movements. Without La Monte Young, the "father of Minimalism," there could be none of its current representatives like Steve Reich, Philip Glass, or Terry Riley; out of his group The Theater of Eternal Music in the early '60s came half of the makeup of the first Velvet Underground band; the experimental tunings and dissonance of groups that have sprung out into popular music like Sonic Youth, Band of Susans and My Bloody Valentine issue from Young's pathfinding as well; although Brian Eno coined the phrase "ambient music," Young may have invented it -- Eno called him "the granddaddy of us all." A prodigious jazz saxophone player in his youth, Young was also instrumental in the heady, hothouse years of New York Fluxus in the late '50s and early '60s when his Cage-influenced performances helped invent "concept art;" their resonance has not yet expired -- his "Composition 1960 #5" where a butterfly or group of butterflies is released into a space proved a seminal influence in the early works of Gary Hill many years later. Since their fortuitous meeting June 22, 1962, Young has been inseparable from the painter and early Jack Smith model Marian Zazeela, who quickly moved from performing drone accompaniments and designing concert posters with the performing group to creating light installations with calligraphic patterns that would be projected onto the performers. In 1965 she added and combined time as an element in the light projections and by 1968 she was creating environments of "three-dimensional colored shadows" -- among the very first light installations in contemporary art. Among their more remarked upon collaborations include her *The Magenta Lights* which acts as the environment for Young's *The Well-Tuned Piano*, in which chords and microtonal scale intervals emerge over a period of seven hours or more. In contrast, *Dream House*, which was first developed in conjunction with discrete performances of Young's *Map of 49's Dream The Two Systems of Eleven Sets of Galactic Intervals Ornamental Lightyears*

*Tracery*, was designed to exist for weeks and months at a time, and did so, first as a permanent installation on Harrison St. in New York City (1979-1985), and then later on Church St. (1993 - present), both installations sponsored by the Dia Art Foundation.

The art of Young and Zazeela has been termed "an aesthetic of sustained experience."<sup>86</sup> In the Harrison St. installation, for example, conceptualist and historian Henry Flynt has described the aural environment created by Young's "magic chord" sustained by electronic generators; sounds changed with the movements of the spectator as with the first *Music and Light Box* (1967-8) -- "forming beats at different speeds or melodic snatches." These audio effects were also influenced by the parallax configured floating mobiles above, lighted in different hues according to morning, afternoon, and evening. Formed of aluminum rings hung in three points like a helix, each quadrant of the ceiling featured a row of what appeared to be six mobiles -- the two rings and their four shadows. Moved by slight air currents of ventilation or convection, at certain moments the two mobiles in a quadrant would come into phase and create isometric mirror symmetry about the midpoint; these symmetries were considered an analogue to Young's theory and practice of tuning. As with Young's experiments with tuning frequencies on levels according to advanced mathematical computations, these light phenomena mixed in calculable ways although the human nervous system's perception of the interaction was not directly determined by the phenomena. As Flynt summarizes,

The scientific apprehension of phenomena is strongly evoked here... Cognition is aimed at the apparitional moment which manifests the underlying order allowing the entire ensemble of drifts. For this result to be meaningful, every moment of the time-evolution of the system must be stored (and judged symmetrical or not) by the observer.<sup>87</sup>

As could be expected from the pair's immersion in ancient Indian and Chinese musics, performances with and discipleship of the late singer and spiritual leader Pandit Pran Nath, the Harrison St. installation or the current *Dream House* can be easily experienced as temples, or shrines. In these shrines, however, as Flynt points out, not only are there no conventional symbolisms or rituals of belief, but they exist quite unlike the shrines of

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<sup>86</sup> Henry Flynt. "The Lightworks of Marian Zazeela," *Sound and Light: La Monte Young, Marian Zazeela. Bucknell Review* vol. XL, no. 1 Ed. William Duckworth and Richard Fleming. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1996. p. 107.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

the past that were products of handicraft, these are born from the "technological production of constant, pure transmissions." Although a profound consideration of geometry was the basis for numerous religious monuments in the past, Young and Zazeela's installations treating the vibrational frequencies of sound and light are based on advanced Western scientific constructs. Their radical open-endedness and complete lack of thematic directionality tie them back into Young's philosophical roots of minimalism, much like the primary natural influence that was the wind blowing through the clefts of the Young's childhood log cabin in Idaho.

Cyberpunk novelist William Gibson, who coined the word "cyberspace" in his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, recently decried the Internet as the abolition of privacy and the advent of unprecedented surveillance and control. Paul Virilio has mournfully declared that "at the end of our century not much will remain of this planet" that will be "shrunk and reduced to nothing by the teletechnologies of generalized interactivity."<sup>88</sup> None of this has deterred the denizens of the complex social and artistic networks coordinated and activated through The Thing.net who recognize a living 'readymade' when they see one; here, in real-time online, the 'events' are as evanescent and fugitive as the best moments of performance and conceptual art in the not-so-long-ago past of the '60s and '70s that nevertheless seems worlds away from the current techno and cyber realities. Through the guise of "new media art" what Lucy Lippard so presciently defined many years ago as the "dematerialization" of art and the *objet d'art* executed by conceptualism and minimalism is carried to a new level over the Internet, creating mirages and disappearing acts so that artist Manuel Schilicher can characterize the goings on as resulting in "theory and nothing." Even given the visual canniness of many a web project or the live video streams of an artist's performance The Thing is another fulfillment of Duchamp's call for a post-retinal art. In its spontaneity and leveling of the stratified art world of collector-critic-gallerist-artist The Thing recalls the coalescence and cohesiveness of many an early 20th century avant-garde community, but this time operating without an over-arching umbrella of an optimistic socio-political project. To act in such a way that even suggests the word "community" in such an extremely commercialized and hierarchized art

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<sup>88</sup> Paul Virilio. "The Third Interval: A Critical Transition," *Rethinking Technologies*. Ed. Verena Andermatt Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. p. 12.

environment is already a radical achievement. That achievement, too, is already and consistently put to strenuous tests by the popularization and commercial overflow on the Net, as well as increasing governmental attempts to regulate ideas as well as commerce; the early hopes for the Net as sort of "post-structuralist utopia" are already somewhat jaded. As virtual veteran S. McKenzie has noted -- "Such was my experience in virtual communities: high times, excitement, blood-pumping exchanges, both public and private, and now...\*just\* settlers."<sup>89</sup> The Thing is a wager, an organismic and rhizomatic window to keep specific flows of living, artistic reciprocity current and viable; it is also another variation on the nature of art as an unrepresentable, a praxis-process beyond representation.

The proclivities of The Thing, not unlike many other artists included in "Chaos and Capacity," reminds us of the peculiar definition of "event," of compact intensities, described by Jean-Francois Lyotard as the activities of "forms...which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable."<sup>90</sup> Following here critic Rey Chow, we can see how the power of "presentations" which contain their own emptiness (Huang Pin-Hung's space for the horses to prance through) or play off an inevitable absence or "the unattainable," has unmistakable resonance with classical Chinese aesthetics. As she points out, the opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching* are:

The way that can be spoken of  
Is not the constant way;  
The name that can be named  
Is not the constant name.

Chow refers to the notion in Chinese aesthetics of the "trampoline effect," where through the taut tightening of a spring, its sudden release will ensure even higher reaches in

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<sup>89</sup> S. McKenzie. "MOOspace/DEADspace: Renegades and Settlers," *Cultures of Cyberspace*. Ed. Alan Sondheim. *New Observations* 120 (Winter 1999): 16.

<sup>90</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. p. 81.

the "infinite vaster spaces of the unseen."<sup>91</sup> For Chow, these ideas are compatible with Lyotard's promulgation of works of art that necessarily involve a "dispossession" of what we know or think we know, that disrupt the convenient oedipalization and privileging of tragedy, that short-circuit the normal routing "space of donation and exchange."<sup>92</sup>

The "less is more" philosophy that pervaded ancient Chinese poetics and linguistics, proffers a confirmation, from an unexpected corner, of a 'postmodern' aesthetic that urges the viewer to "be witnesses to the unrepresentable,"<sup>93</sup> and especially of Lyotard's championing of multiple narratives and art as "legitimate" modes of "knowledge" against the enthronement of an official, hegemonizing worldview of objective science that relies on exclusion. In Chinese history itself, such notions gave rise to extraordinary paradoxes; as Chow explains, for example, when the May 4th Movement, launched in 1919, was moved to advocate an aesthetic "autonomy" for literature to support their experimental aims, ironically this returned these rebellious intellectuals to the position traditionally proclaimed by Chinese literati, that the "literary" or "aesthetic" was a privileged realm above the dominated lower classes with its "vulgar, womanly narratives." Keeping in mind that these matters have never been played out in other than a less-than-straightforward manner in the literary past of China, Chow cautions that now, particularly for a non-West, Third World audience, "what should concern us now is no longer the unrepresentable itself, but more alarmingly, how the unrepresentable is put to use,"<sup>94</sup> lest once again a supposedly liberating play of totality and difference surreptitiously reinscribes a Western hegemony.

Each artist in this exhibition testifies to the new and often extreme divergences, or the difference, the multiplicities generated in what seems at first glance like an ultimately homogenized and standardized universe, deterministically driven by impersonal if not

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<sup>91</sup> Rey Chow. 'Rereading Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: A Response to the "Postmodern Condition"' *Cultural Criticism* 5 (1986-7): 69-93. pp. 87-8. The "trampoline effect" is discussed in Simon Leys. *The Burning Forest, Essays on Chinese Culture and Politics*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1986. pp. 29- 32. I am indebted for the Chow reference to Sande Cohen, particularly chapter 5 of his demolition derby treatment of official and status quo aesthetics in *Academia and the Luster of Capital*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

<sup>92</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard. *Driftworks*. New York: Semiotexte, 1984.

<sup>93</sup> Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition*. p. 82.

<sup>94</sup> Chow. "Rereading Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies," p. 90.

anti-human structures and socio-economic-techno-scientific combines. They are each ultimately concerned as well with what poet Bob Perelman characterized as "birth and existence as if the body/moving made spaces it could understand."<sup>95</sup> In the ever accelerating flux of the flotsam and jetsam of globalized contemporary art, to postulate an artistic 'survey' is a mission impossible, Sisphyean and absurd. Much like a club DJ, curators are reduced to sampling, to capturing elusive moments, perhaps only randomly or tentatively locatable, of radiant, liberating realities, potentials that could only be actualized by new artistic means and visions. In "Chaos and Capacity," artists navigate a little of what an earlier writer with a *fin de siecle* vision, Charles Baudelaire, characterized with some melancholy and nostalgia in "Hymn to Beauty":

From heaven or the abyss? Let questioning be,  
O artless monster wreaking endless pain,  
So that your smile and glance throw wide to me  
An infinite that I have loved in vain.<sup>96</sup>

Baudelaire's descriptions of modernity have to be superseded by those of what anthropologist Marc Augé has dubbed "supermodernity;"<sup>97</sup> instead of the shock of the new combined with the old among the cobblestones of Paris -- the "Chimneys and spires, those masts of the city,/And the great skies making us dream of eternity" -- we have the anonymous "non-places" of the airport lounge, the railway terminal, the shopping mall or hotel chain, the ATM machine, to characterize the signal spaces of our quickly paced, highly technological social regime. But Baudelaire, the exquisite poet of excess who rarely drank to intoxication, remains an example of the productive uses of critical ambivalence, which he wielded like a diving rod, like a weapon, utilizing and refurbishing the medium of lyric poetry (of which he made the stuff of synaesthesia) to provide some rents, some spaces of liberty in a resigned, disappointed society. It can be difficult to separate Baudelaire from what Baudrillard called "a sort of testimony to the

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<sup>95</sup> Bob Perelman. "A Literal Translation of Virgil's Fourth Eclogue," *Virtual Reality*. New York: Roof Books, 1993. p. 80.

<sup>96</sup> Charles Baudelaire. "Hymn to Beauty," *Flowers of Evil*. Ed. by Marthiel and Jackson Matthews. New York: New Directions, 1955. pp. 30-1.

<sup>97</sup> Marc Augé. *Non-Places*. Trans. John Howe. New York: Verso, 1995.

fatality of systems."<sup>98</sup> It is not for nothing that the metaphors of navigation crop up so frequently in the *Les Fleurs du mal*. The artists in "Chaos and Capacity" prove to be intrepid navigators under a regime of signs they cannot help but experience with profound ambivalence. They also clearly present many "unprecedented, unforeseen and unthinkable qualities of being."

Jay Murphy  
New York City  
October 1998/February 1999

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<sup>98</sup> Jean Baudrillard. *Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings*. Ed. and trans. by Paul Foss and Julian Pefanis. London: Pluto Press, 1999. p. 22.

