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## DISSOLUTION OF THE FRAME: IMMERSION AND PARTICIPATION IN VIDEO INSTALLATIONS

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Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day  
Charles Baudelaire

But inside, no more limits!  
Jean Tardieu

In an early Sam Taylor-Wood photograph, the British artist appears in the role of Jackson Pollock, imitating the legendary pose of her historic colleague painting in his studio on Long Island. Barely recognisable as a female, Taylor-Wood restages Pollock's dance-like rhetoric, familiar from the Hans Namuth photographs that have become world-famous icons of the modern artist-subject. In *A Gesture Towards Action Painting* (1992), Taylor-Wood directs attention to this key moment in art and media history — the moment in which the artist-subject enters the picture via the physical act of painting ('action painting'), and thus bursts through the boundary separating self and representation, art and life. All this is indexed and inscribed on the canvas as moving traces of colour.<sup>1</sup> Taylor-Wood's appropriation of an artistic gesture that has crystallised into a myth can be taken as the starting point for a reflection upon the effects of contemporary video installation. In Pollock's gesture and its replication, a number of categories circulate, such as those of the theatrical, the notion of performance, *mise-en-scène*, repetition and the transformation of 'the image' (the screen) into a theatrical space or *mise-en-abyme*, as well as the transformation of the observer's perspective to a range of experiences made up of differing (art) historical perspectives.

Pollock's working method marked a turning point in the development of art, dissolving the traditional notion of the artwork into structures of action and performance. Film, photography and video — the 'new' media whose history is inseparable from that of the dark room, the technical and metaphorical transparency of the black box — made the concepts of such work accessible to a wider public. Pollock's drip technique — an act of painting liberated from the control of reason — eliminated the boundaries of the picture's surface,

<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between work and artistic action, Harold Rosenberg wrote: 'On the screen, a picture should not be manufactured, but an event should occur.' See Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters', *Art News*, December 1952, p.76; and Regine Prange,

'Die mythische Geste', *Jackson Pollock. Number 32, 1950*, Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1996, pp.29-36.



Sam Taylor-Wood,  
*A Gesture Towards  
Action Painting*,  
C-Print, 1992. Courtesy  
Jay Jopling/White Cube,  
London

and smoothed the path for a multiplicity of concepts of experience-oriented artistic pursuit, which steadily withdrew into dark environments as successive generations of artists increasingly improved their aptitude in the realm of new media. Taking the form of theatrical scenes and kaleidoscopic, large-format projections, these projects added the parameter of time to the space-defined visual parameter of the classical museum; indeed, the mechanical means of representation increasingly shifted the focus of visual perception from the experience of space to the experience of time. Pollock's colour diffusion — a seismograph for the artist's ecstatic osmosis (practising a kind of auto-immersion), which also visually dissolved the material basis of the painting — was a harbinger of this transformation of artistic practice. During the decades that were to follow, and aided by new technologies, artists perfected ways to stimulate the observer by creating spatial settings that engrossed him or her entirely. If the all-over effect of action painting triggered the potential dematerialisation of the support and included the physical presence of the body in the process of representation to the point at which, according to Pollock himself, the artist literally stepped 'into' the picture, then so, too, does the viewer today experience the reality-altering maelstrom of projected images in spaces of cinematic illusion.<sup>2</sup> Such images inscribe themselves in the viewer's mind either as emotional overkill or as detached moments of reflection, triggered not only by the inclusion of time as a point of reference in its own right, but also by the atmosphere generated by sequences of images lighting up in the dark, often with acoustic accompaniment.

### From the White Cube to the Black Box

Sam Taylor-Wood belongs to the generation of artists whose working methods have absorbed the cinematic experience. Their installations transform the static, presentational space of the museum into a space for projection and illusion. Relating the all-encompassing effect of Pollock's paintings to the present, we can now say that the artistic practice of the past two decades has turned the black box into the new arena for the dissimulation of the frame. The black box has become a sphere for virtual events, where the public experiences moving pictures as engrossing images that stimulate

the senses, while the boundary between the self and visual representation blurs. The museum itself is undergoing a metamorphosis, and is becoming a cinema in-process, in which, as Boris Groys has noted, the necessity for darkness creates a state of invisibility that often fuses with the structural impossibility of viewing a video work in its entirety.<sup>3</sup> This fundamental lack of visibility becomes a challenge for the observer as perception turns into participation.

Paradoxically, however, the power that unfolds in Pollock's action paintings connects the affective history of the white cube closely with that of its paradigmatic opposite, the black box. Since 1945, the reception of modern art has been inseparably united with the representative function of the white cube as a framing device. In a white cube, an object is dissociated from its real surroundings, and this de-contextualisation elevates the object to the status of an artwork. For Pollock's painting, the 'intensified presence' of the evenly lit, 'white, ideal space' became the setting for the performance of an existential aspect of expression — the embodiment of the artist-subject in the image — revealing a practically archetypal aesthetic effect.<sup>4</sup> Hans Namuth's visual characterisation of the screen as a 'stage' for the artist-actor has evolved in the contemporary context into the black box, the new field of action for the public. The black box reacts to the experience of projected images and sound dramaturgies, and, through the intensity of stimulated emotions, it ultimately interacts with narrative structures and numinous scenes. Brian O'Doherty, a leading analyst of the white-cube ideology, states that the white cube connects 'some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory' with 'chic design to produce a unique cult space of aesthetics'.<sup>5</sup> If this is so, then the black box is the aesthetic that corresponds to the space of modernity, one that demands distance and embodies unity. The black box fascinates because its magic is of an entirely different order. It draws its power from the revitalisation of a stimulating aesthetic rooted in the immersive effect of the spectacle, which beckons with the theatrical allure of the unknown. Immersed in the illusory worlds of video spaces, viewers can cross the threshold of the immeasurable without jeopardising their own physical safety.

2 On the spatial relations between cinema and museum see Giuliana Bruno, 'Collection and Recollection: On Film Itineraries and Museum Walks', *Public Intimacy: Architecture and The Visual Arts*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007, p.41.

3 Boris Groys addressed the question of why contemporary artistic production follows a line of development toward the articulation of 'invisibility' by means of mechanical film-production methods, in so far as it traces the spatial parameters common to film reception by overdetermining its temporal parameters

and making it virtually impossible to see the whole work under the conditions of a museum display. See 'Immaterial Communication' (a conversation between Ursula Frohne, Boris Groys and Peter Weibel), in Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager (eds.), *Concepts on the Move*, Amsterdam and New York: Lier en Boog, 2002. For more on 'Darkening Exhibition Spaces', see Boris Groys, *Die Logik der Sammlung*, Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1997, p.22. For a reflection on video installations in the 1990s, see also Ursula Frohne (ed.), *video cult/ures*, Cologne: DuMont, 1999.

4 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, p.14.

5 *Ibid.*

## The Art of the Spectacle

Cinema itself is inextricably linked with modernism in our culture's metamorphosis into a cinephilic one through mass media. Regardless of whether its forerunners were the panorama, the wax museum, the amusement park or the architecture of nineteenth-century metropolises that brought about the *flâneur*, cinema evolved into the pinnacle medium of the twentieth-century entertainment industry, doing so despite (or perhaps because of) its popularisation through television. Cinema has decisively shaped the artistic developments of the past decades with an aesthetic that even Erwin Panofsky recognised as a 'necessity' of modern life rather than as an 'adornment'.<sup>6</sup> In spite of its technological sophistication, something survived in cinema that was uncanny to modernism: the popular rhetoric of nineteenth-century simulation embodied in the narrative style known as melodrama. To this day the core of the entertainment culture is based on this development — on people yearning to be in other places, taking on other identities. Viewers achieve such transitions and transformations by means of emotional affect and the perfect illusion — an illusion that uses optical effects and new visual technologies that make the frame of reference, by which the image is conventionally characterised, disappear. Blurring the boundary between spectator and spectacle allows viewers to imagine themselves as being part of what affects their perception.<sup>7</sup>

This sort of stimulating aesthetic first began to be investigated as early as the eighteenth century. For example, English gardens, imaginatively landscaped as living paintings through which one could stroll, can be regarded as immersion practices that foreshadowed the cinematic effects of Hollywood in their attempts to transport the visitor to different realities. Alexander Pope describes the artful concealment of fences in such gardens; the alternation of landscape accents; and creatively staged surprise-effects in the form of follies built to look like classical temples and monuments, ruins, illuminated fountains and bizarre grottos. His commentary documents a basic need for illusory effects that both imitate and exaggerate real life.<sup>8</sup> The emergence of the Gothic novel in this period heralds the theme of overwhelming attraction

6 See Erwin Panofsky, 'Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures', *Three Essays on Style* (ed. Irving Lavin), Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1995, p.122. For a critical exegesis of Panofsky's essay, characterising his approach to the aesthetic experience of film as an attempt to safeguard a concept of reality, which had been lost in the destruction of the illusionary space in abstract art, see Regine Prange, 'Stil und Medium. Panofsky "On Movies"' (ed. Bruno Reudenbach), *Erwin Panofsky. Beiträge des Symposiums, Hamburg 1992*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag 1994, pp.171–90. For the relation between art and cinema, see also Thomas Hensel, Klaus Krüger and Tanja Michalsky (eds.), *Das bewegte Bild.*

*Film und Kunst*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006.

7 Early film spectacles such as those by Anthony Griffiths, on the other hand, imitated the panoramas of English landscape paintings or Francesco Piransi's spatial caprices. They seem to quote the visual practices of the panorama, the forerunner of Cinemascope, which also attempted to convey a total illusion — suggesting to the viewer that he or she had reached another place simply by looking at something, and without having had to physically move location. See Kerry Brougher, 'Hitch-Hiking in Dreamscapes', *Notorious: Alfred Hitchcock and Contemporary Art* (ed. Kerry Brougher

and Michael Tarantino), Oxford: Museum of Modern Art, 1999. Today's theme parks and hotels in Las Vegas and Japan are another variation on this particular pleasure: fairy-tale settings that provide a dream world for visitors, where the eternal boredom of ordinary life is temporarily set aglow by means of the absolute immediacy of the experience, in comparable fashion to a scene from a film.

and emotional stimulation as a medium of entertainment, a development that was to go far beyond Friedrich Schlegel's articulated prophecy of an 'escalation of the aesthetic of the interesting'.<sup>9</sup>

### The Aesthetic of the Remake

Degraded to a mass medium by Hollywood, film has experienced its artistic elevation through the medium of video. Contemporary video installations do not simply employ the effects of audience identification that make commercial entertainment films successful; they also employ distancing approaches that consciously instil disillusionment within the observer, at the same time as creating a palpable detachment from the visual effects of cinematographic fictions, as has been shown by Juliane Rebentisch's illuminating analysis concerning the aesthetic phenomena of cinematographic installations.<sup>10</sup> Roughly one hundred years since the birth of film, the artistic 'remake' uses various methods and degrees of alienation to bring film classics back to their elementary structures, critically illuminating the history of the medium's effects through analytical procedures. Such strategies that alienate 'original' films are employed by contemporary artists as a means of exploring the reception of cinema, the technical aspects of which have become cultural constants for spectators (i.e. the 'cinematic character' of the black space, the conventional narrative that presents the flow of the plot in sequences of images, the montage techniques that create the illusion of 'real life').

Accordingly, for artists of the post-cinematic era, cinema and film are not interesting primarily as examples of particular genres, but as repositories of the raw visual materials that flood the pictorial worlds of ordinary culture.<sup>11</sup> Two general tendencies can be discerned in their working methods.<sup>12</sup> First, video installations by artists such as Pipilotti Rist and Doug Aitken respond affirmatively to the illusionary, affective principles of the cinematic parameters by creating spatial all-over effects through perfectly matched images and sounds that captivate the viewer in a kind of hypnotising reality camouflage. In order to attain such effects, they consciously draw on professional editing

<sup>8</sup> See *The Works of Alexander Pope*, 8sq., vol. IX, London 1757, Letter XL, 'A confutation about defining a garden, various opinions and some general reflections'. Also: <http://books.google.de/books?id=IQcfAAAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=inauthor:Alexander+inauthor:Pope&lr=#PPP1,M1>

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe* (ed. Ernst Behler) Bd. 1., Munich, Paderborn and Vienna: Schöningh, 1979, pp. 217–367.

<sup>10</sup> See Juliane Rebentisch, 'c) Die kinematographische Installation (Boris Groys, Walter Benjamin)', *Ästhetik der Installation*, Frankfurt/

M: Suhrkamp, 2003, pp. 179–207.

<sup>11</sup> The emergence of non-linear structures and the possibility for interactive audience participation from expanded cinema through television, video and electronic media has been prompted by a desire to investigate communication structures and the relevant electronic possibilities. The disruption of the holistic cinematic experience is generally referred to by the term post-cinematic. See Peter Greenaway, 'Toward a re-invention of cinema', *Variety Cinema Militans Lecture*, The Netherlands, 2003; also cited by Matthew Clayfield, 'A Cinema Exploded: Notes on the Development of Some Post-Cinematic Forms',

[www.braintrustdvd.com/essays/cinema-exploded.html](http://www.braintrustdvd.com/essays/cinema-exploded.html)

<sup>12</sup> For the remake based on found-footage compilation or manipulation in contemporary art, see Stefano Basilico (ed.), *Cut: Film as Found Object in Contemporary Video* (exh. cat.), Milwaukee: Milwaukee Art Museum, 2005; and *Remakes* (exh. cat.), Bordeaux: CAPC, Musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, 2004.

techniques and the entire technological repertoire from MTV to Hollywood production, endeavouring to overwhelm the viewer, visually and acoustically. In such immersive installations, the exploration of mainstream themes are the focus of interest: the need for transcendence; the desire for extraordinary sensations, such as those experienced at a rave or a dance club; the permeation of technology; the magnetism of the information flood; mass media's influence on every area of contemporary culture; the attraction of velocity; and the fascination of potential omnipresence, which is the futuristic promise of the media.

Second, the other, more conceptually defined direction in video installation exposes cinema and media culture as constructed spectacles. Working with found footage and icons of film and television history, artists such as Douglas Gordon and Steve McQueen open up reflective approaches to the nature of cinematic images and their relevance for the patterns to be found within the viewer's inclination towards identification. These impulses, both iconophilic as well as iconoclastic, are inherent in the concept of the remake. They indicate an interest in transforming the usual models of representation in the cinema, a theme that is the focus of each formal reframing of found materials. Rather than pandering to the public's need for filmic spectacle in the manner of such famous cinematic hits as Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954), *Vertigo* (1958) and *Psycho* (1960), or David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1985), these approaches draw attention to the conditions of the medium itself, and by shifting the focus of the remake to the cinematic *dispositif*, the position of the observer becomes the actual subject of the work. Splintering the viewer's perspective (through multiple-viewers, double vision, split-screens, time-delay, etc.) invalidates Christian Metz's principle of identification with the camera (or actors).<sup>13</sup> The observer's position, which up until this point had experienced a defined frame of reference within the space of a museum or a cinema, loses its certainty regarding the object of reception because his or her ability to synthesise information when viewing images is challenged by the temporal conditions of visual awareness. The fundamental destabilisation of the spectator that this involves — further heightened by the spectator's freedom of movement in front of individual installations — is a prime characteristic of the paradigmatic transformation of the museum setting from a situation that focused on the viewer's optical reception of the work to one that focuses on the viewer's responsibility.<sup>14</sup>

13 See Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

14 For more on this, see Groys's comments in 'Immaterial Communication', *op. cit.* For an anthology on current video-, film- and computer-based artworks, see Jeffrey Shaw and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Future Cinema: The Cinematic Imaginary after Film*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003.

For collections of video art, see Ingvild Goetz and Stephan Urbaschek (eds.), *Fast Forward: Media Art Sammlung Goetz*, Munich: Kunstverlag Ingvild Goetz, 2003; and Joachim Jäger, Gabriele Knapstein and Anette Hüscher (eds.), *Jenseits des Kinos. Die Kunst der Projektion. Filme, Videos und Installationen von 1963 bis 2005, Werke aus der Friedrich Christian Flick Collection im Hamburger Bahnhof, der Kramlich Collection und aderen Sammlungen*,

Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2006.

15 Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', *Artforum*, vol. 5 no. 10, Summer 1967, pp. 12-23, reprint in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, New York: Dutton, 1968, pp. 116-47.

## Representation as Visceral Experience

The experimental character of many video installations by younger generations of artists brings them close to the realms of performance art. The sense of immediacy achieved by the correlation between stage directions and space recalls the performative practices of the late 1960s and early 70s, which focused mainly on the body and the mind, while social and media conditions were explored through film and video. In this respect, the works of the 1990s differ fundamentally from early video works and the approach that shaped the artistic usage of the medium until well into the late 80s. On the one hand, the framework coordinates — which still remained more or less intact in the monitor sculptures of, say, Nam June Paik, Marie-Jo Lafontaine, Bruce Nauman and Bill Viola — increasingly dissolve into variable image fields. Multiple projections onto walls, ceilings, floors and free-standing screens transform the static framework of the black box into an experience of spatial infinity. Cinematographic formats allow for kaleidoscopic panoramas of moving images, in which the larger-than-life protagonists occupy the space with an almost tangible corporeality, like actors on a stage. On the other hand, the once minimal actions of early video works make a transition from a 'documenting aesthetic' almost entirely devoid of stage directions, towards theatrical micro-dramas that involve the audience in psychologically charged narrative structures and fictional sequences of dialogue. The role of the spectator thus oscillates between that of eyewitness and potential actor — as in the works of Tony Oursler, Monika Oechsler and Eija-Liisa Ahtila.

This form of 'reception aesthetic', which Michael Fried has criticised as being a 'fictitious viewing position' right from the start, is based on a distinctive psychology of reception with a performative disposition that recalls early documentary videos by Nauman, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden and Joan Jonas.<sup>15</sup> The recent works are comparable to the earlier ones in the sense that they use the medially heightened physical presence of the (virtual) protagonist to transpose a gripping sense of action to the (real) spectator, and also use physical, psychological and institutional framework conditions to imply a real-life situation. In the early 70s, by occupying the void between artist and audience, film and video broadened the visual spectrum of an art world dominated by performances and happenings. With an emphasis on 'presence and place', the immediate presence of both performers and spectators was originally the prime characteristic of these 60s art forms. The 'video performance' has taken these situationally-based artistic forms of expression a step further, creating complex compositions that interweave action and recording media without actually abandoning the 'aura' of the live act as the point of orientation for the audience. Fried criticised many works of Minimalist art for their 'theatricality' — for the importance that they placed on the viewer, how they depended on the presence of the spectator to experience a certain 'sense of duration', echo or 'endlessness'. However, his criticism was magisterially undermined by the deliberately theatrical approach of work in the 90s, which not only points out the significance of the time factor



Dan Graham,  
*Body Press*, 1970–72.  
Black-and-white  
production still,  
16mm colour film,  
20mins. Courtesy  
Marian Goodman  
Gallery, New York &  
Paris

in video as a medium in itself, but actually accentuates the performative nature of the relationship between the spectator and the artistic formulation.<sup>16</sup>

An early attempt to experimentally investigate this transition or breach between representation and physical experience is Dan Graham's film installation *Body Press* (1970–72). In it, a man and a woman are standing back-to-back in a cylindrical room of mirrors, and each is guiding a camera around their

naked body. After the actors exchange cameras at a certain point, they continue the performance, while the pictures are projected on the opposite walls of the room. The viewer is thus confronted with an almost life-size documentation of their bodies, in a treble mirroring that represents the three-fold viewpoint of actor, camera and spectator. The cubist fragmentation of perspectives helps to restore the physically tactile aspect of the performance to the filmic images, while intensifying the portrayal of the bodies — both in their relationship to real space and to the space of projection — in an 'image bursting' dynamic that shifts the filmic representation closer to that of sculptural presence.<sup>17</sup> In addressing the human body and its relation to architecture and to the medium as the virtual extension of the (public) space, *Body Press* foreshadows the time-delay video installations and mirrored, semi-transparent spatial constructions Graham later made, in which the viewer and the object viewed are brought together by multiple mirroring devices. The key no longer lies in the apotheosis of visual action, but, rather, in the transfiguration of the moving, active body and its reflected images. As in Graham's later mirrored environments, the spectators in the installations no longer see themselves in terms of the gaze alone, but actually perceive their own physical involvement. This dynamic transformation of space leads, in fact, to a spatialisation of the temporal, with significant repercussions for the projected image.

In his installation *Deadpan* (1997), Steve McQueen works with similar ways of affecting the viewer. As is the case with many works from the 1990s, McQueen's film image is shown in a closed, dark space, and it covers an entire wall from ceiling to floor. The black-and-white film shows a scene in which McQueen re-enacts a sketch from a popular American silent movie, taking on the role of Buster Keaton in the comedy *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928). He stands

<sup>16</sup> Whereas Fried stigmatised all art that included the beholder, many artists have been working since the 1960s on a systematic deconstruction of the myth of the disinterested viewer.

<sup>17</sup> See 'Dan Graham, *Body Press* (1970–72)', in David A. Ross (ed.), *Seeing Time: Selections from the Pamela and Richard Kramlich Collection of Media Art*

(exh. cat.), San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999, pp.70–71.

<sup>18</sup> See Chrissie Iles, 'Steve McQueen. *Deadpan* (1997)', in *ibid.*, pp.134–35, here p.135.

<sup>19</sup> Rosalind Krauss on James Coleman's *Box (ahharetturnabout)* (1977), in Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide*, New York:

Zone Books, 1997, pp.161–65.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Newman, 'McQueen's Materialism', *Steve McQueen* (exh. cat.), London and Zürich: ICA and Kunsthalle Zürich, 1999, p.60.



immobile with his back to the facade of a house that slowly falls towards him, only to leave him unhurt, to the viewer's surprise, due to a window aperture in the wall that falls precisely over the place where he stands. The lower edge of the projection is flush with the floor of the installation space, so that it looks as though the wall of the house were actually falling into the room where the viewer stands—which is to say, falling *out* of the projected space. The scene, which is silent and lasts 4 minutes, repeats itself as the film plays on in an uninterrupted loop. The splitting of the point of view represented in the image into a variety of camera angles, combined with the dramaturgy of the depiction—and intensified by means of the ever-increasing speed of the falling facade towards the end of the loop—causes the viewer to become increasingly physically aware of the repeated event. McQueen thus insists upon the physical tactility of the cinematic experience, by confronting the viewers with the time and space of their 'own physical reality'.<sup>18</sup> Viewers are pulled into the event, becoming aware of themselves while watching the scene—an effect that is emphasised by the reflection of the image on the floor of the black box. The black box can be freely entered by visitors, who are then allowed to experience the space-filling resonance of the projected light as a physical reality the closer they get to the image and, hence, to the event. Referring to James Coleman's installations, Rosalind Krauss once stated that the physical distance between the observer and the image is lost, as if in a 'lightning storm'.<sup>19</sup> Krauss's statement can be generalised as a commonplace phenomenon in any art involving projections of light, because of the fact that video images themselves create light in space. This explains their power to attract viewers into darkness.

The slapstick-like, yet claustrophobic repetition of the scene in McQueen's *Deadpan* functions as a quotation of the monotonous repertoire of performance of the 1970s, which aimed to 'hit the viewer in the centre of his physical presence'.<sup>20</sup> The moment of anxiety sensed by the viewer when the facade of the house drops dangerously towards the actor bears comparison with that felt in considering Chris Burden's spectacular performance *Shoot* (1971), the documentation of which shows him standing in anticipation of being shot in the arm—just one of many examples of performative approaches from the 70s that aimed at provoking physical and psychological reactions

from audiences. Moreover, McQueen's work displays the characteristic suspense motive, to the extent that the facade's fall is a fear-inducing rather than humorous event. Differing from the logic of the 'original'—wherein Buster Keaton poses as the clueless hero notoriously privileged by his good luck—the 'replica' brings to light the construction of the typical rhetoric of naivety in this popular genre. This shift of meaning is revealed in the minimal signs of anticipation that precede

Steve McQueen,  
*Deadpan*, 1997.  
16mm black-and-  
white film, video  
transfer, silent,  
4mins 30secs.  
Courtesy Thomas Dane  
Gallery, London



the threatening series of falls: McQueen's tense pose and perspiration marks can be read as traces of suppressed fear. By emphasising the physical threat and suggesting a psychological state of anxiety, McQueen revises the episode's feigned harmlessness, as it is achieved by the editing of the earlier film. The excluded human affects, which have been banned from the comical nature of the historical version, return in its remake as the off-screen spectres of filmic de-realisation techniques. Chrissie Iles has commented: 'The viewer is caught somewhere between the past memory of the original silent film, the phenomenological time of the sequence's reconstruction, and the time and space of the viewer's own physical reality.'<sup>21</sup> It is the remake that allows for what Hal Foster calls 'the return of the real' by demonstrating that one can only speak of a real when the effect of reality's representation collapses — as in abjective practices of shock, trauma and horror.<sup>22</sup>

The motive of the fear-inducing collapse (not to be confused with the calculated suspense of the Keaton film) turns McQueen's restaging into a symptom of suppression concerning a threatening reality by the illusionary character of filmic representation. The artistic imitation marks the boundary between filmic reality and life, between the artificiality of cinematic illusion and anticipated 'life-like' reality. Nevertheless, McQueen's scene is also based on the pretence of a performance solely staged for the camera; its relation to reality remains as much a construction as Keaton's performance because it also mediates its subversive message by emphasising the danger of the moment through its own repertoire of theatricality. As Erika Fischer-Lichte has pointed out, not even the 'performative aesthetic' that emerged during the 1960s by means of 're-defining the relation between the actor and spectators' was able to 'transgress the boundaries between art and life, between the aesthetic and the social, political and ethical'.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, McQueen's performative repetition, in subverting the controlled and directed logic of the narrative, brings the suppressed uncanniness and uncertainty of an amusement-gearred destructive aesthetic into being. His physical appropriation of Keaton's scene — in practice a kind of meta-iconoclasm — robs the original of its fake harmlessness as created by its illusionary filmic features. Without

21 C. Iles, 'Steve McQueen', *op. cit.*, p.135.

22 See Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real, The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996, pp.126–168; also, Hal Foster, 'Obscene, Abject, Trauma', in *October* 78, Fall 1996, pp.106–124. On the relation between representation and reality in images, see also Michael Wetzell, *Die Wahrheit nach der Malerei*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1997. Concerning the strategies of generating reality effects in visual media and contemporary art, see Ursula Frohne, 'Berührung mit der Wirklichkeit: Körper und Kontingenz als Signaturen des Realen in der Photographie der Gegenwart', in Hans Belting,

Dietmar Kamper and Martin Schulz (eds.), *Quel Corps?: Eine Frage der Repräsentation*, Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002, pp.401–26.

23 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004, p.352.

24 See B. O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*, *op. cit.*, p.15.

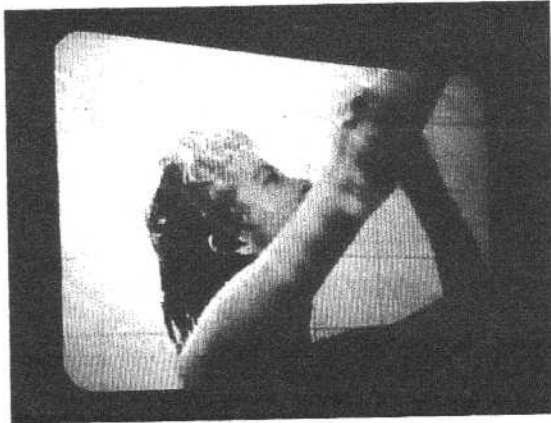
25 For more information on Gordon's film adaptations, see Russell Ferguson, *Douglas Gordon*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001; Katrina M. Brown, *Tate Modern Artists: Douglas Gordon*, London: Tate Publishing, 2004; Philip Monk, *Double-Cross: The Hollywood Films of Douglas Gordon*, Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2003; Russell Ferguson

(ed.), *Douglas Gordon* (exh. cat.), Los Angeles and Cambridge, Mass.: Museum of Contemporary Art and The MIT Press, 2002; and *Douglas Gordon: Kidnapping*, Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1998. Specifically on Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho*, see Ursula Frohne, 'Douglas Gordon, *24 Hour Psycho*, Anamorphosen des Kinos', *Kunsthistorische Arbeitsblätter*, vol.11 no.4, pp.15–24; and Ursula Frohne, 'Double Feature: Filmadaptation in Contemporary Art', *Fälschungen. Zur Autorschaft und Beweis in Wissenschaften und Künsten* (ed. Anne-Kathrin Reulecke), Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2006, pp.364–89.

embezzling the fake character of his own restaging of the scene, McQueen preys on spectators' disillusionment, simply by re-inserting the unconscious and suppressed psychological dimensions of the filmic logic. With this slight but effective shift of focus, McQueen's seemingly banal adaptation of an iconic sequence from the filmic narrative breaks with the naturalisation strategies of a cinematic reality that has acquired the status of a second-order reality.

### Spaces for Projection and Suggestion

The connections between repetition, drama and effect — so clearly highlighted by McQueen — distinguish the black box not only as a projection room, but also as space in which the psychological and the affective are evoked, in contrast to the contemplative cliché of the white cube. While recalling the affective characteristics of the white cube as 'shadowless, white, clean, artificial — the space is devoted to the technology of aesthetics', the metaphor of the black box consists of the return of the repressed.<sup>24</sup> Enabled by means of the aesthetics of new technologies, this return is not only the product of an affirmation of the flood of images common to popular culture, but also compensates for the deconstruction of areas that are otherwise excluded and



suppressed in commercial media aesthetics. The museum thus becomes a new venue for cinematic experiments of a kind that have fewer and fewer possibilities of presentation in established film institutions. The film and video sequences of artistic installations develop their own visual dynamics by perpetuating themselves like traumatic events to the point of obsession. In the repetition of individual sequences as generated by the rejection of narration, the motif of time comes to the fore as an aesthetic experience somewhere between excess and reduction.

Douglas Gordon has emphasised this in his remakes of such films as Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), which he slowed down so that it takes 24 hours to play, thereby disturbing the continuum of the film. The almost static images in *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) return the medium to the state of a raw material whereby the narrative flow breaks down.<sup>25</sup> The double meaning of the word suspense corresponds to the dialectic of meaning that is an indicator of Gordon's process: by stretching the film and removing its sound, he de-activates the linear narrative that is of central importance to the build-up of tension, in Hitchcock's films in particular. In doing so, he shifts the emphasis to the absolute presence of the moment and the drama of details, gestures and poses, the isolation of which, in frozen schemes of expression, restructures the relationship between actor and viewer. The technical potential for this kind of structural dissection of film and its use as a ready-made was not available

Douglas Gordon,  
*24 Hour Psycho*, 1993.  
Courtesy Gagolian  
Gallery

before the advent of video, which conceals the frame-by-frame structure that would normally appear in a slow playback. Gordon has taken advantage of this process of 'video analysis' in order to examine the 'symptoms' of the film scientifically as a touchstone of our cultural self-awareness. The fact that the aesthetic of some of his other works, specifically those using compiled archival film material, is dominated by extreme states of mind — psychoses, ecstasy, madness and euphoria — serves to intensify the space of projection and hence the viewer's experience. This is especially so when the projection screens are free-standing and the images are projected onto each side of a screen, prompting viewers to move around the space in order to view the work in its entirety. In these installations, the projector's rays inevitably hit the viewer at certain points, and the viewer's shadow falls on the projected image 'like a negative intrusion in the scene'.<sup>26</sup> Gordon holds up a mirror to the viewer's hidden fantasies in these deconstructive reframings of old footage.<sup>27</sup> Since Gordon's works are wrenched from their context and stripped of their scientific and educational function, the sensation of abnormality is experienced as a confrontation with the repressed areas of one's subconscious, or regarded with a detached and disinterested attitude towards the tormented character of the pictorial sequences. The deconstructive reframing of found film not only openly reveals the relationships connecting the director, artist and viewer and their exploitative desires, but also confuses the way that the viewers see themselves watching the (altered) film material, as they develop an awareness of their own synthesising function in the reconstruction of film history.

### Beyond Illusion

Drawing the viewer into the work is, in many ways, typical of the way artists address the conventions of cinematic media. Rather than encouraging a critical distance from the Hollywood aesthetic — so familiar that it has been completely internalised by viewers — Doug Aitken speculates on the audience's total sensual absorption by appropriating and intensifying the industry's techniques. By sending the viewers of his installations on fictional journeys through passage-like visual scenarios, he turns an illusory effect into the vanishing point of scopophilic desire.<sup>28</sup> Generating overwhelming panoramas in a delirium of visual and spatial experience, Aitkin creates cinematic landscape views that emerge like *fata morganas*, and can best be described as vast. In his poem 'Correspondances' from *Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire describes this vastness in terms of the sense of boundlessness and fascination he felt at entering into an 'other reality' without fundamentally

26 See Lynn Cooke, 'Douglas Gordon: Ein visueller Mensch, einer der sehen kann', *Douglas Gordon* (exh. cat.), Hannover: Kunstverein Hannover, 1998, n.p.

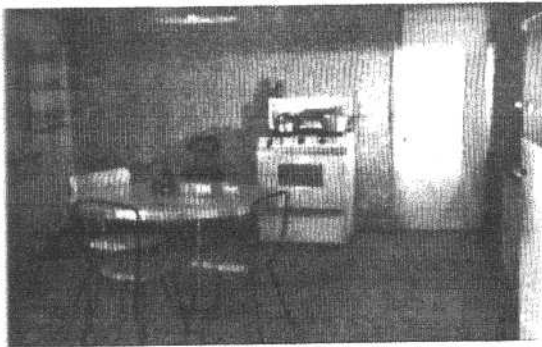
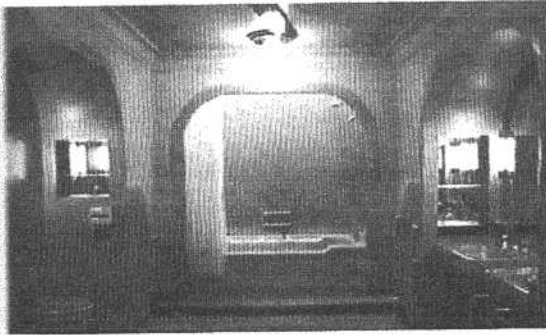
27 The voyeuristic relationship to the image is the focus of many works by artists whose media are photography,

video and film. Victor Burgin, Stan Douglas, Pierre Huyghe, Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall explore issues surrounding cinematic identity, which is connected with the public's expectations and the autocratic control of the director at the helm of the cinematic apparatus. For more on this, see Kerry Brougher,

'Hitch-Hiking in Dreamscapes', *op. cit.*

28 For more information on Doug Aitken's works, see Daniel Birnbaum, *Doug Aitken*, London: Phaidon, 2001.

29 From the monologue spoken by the protagonist in Doug Aitken's video installation *Electric Earth* (1996).



Isabell Heimerdinger,  
*Interior*, 1997–2000.  
C-Prints, 122×162.5cm  
Each. Courtesy Meyer  
Riegger Galerie,  
Karlsruhe

departing from the coordinates of the 'real world'. This immersive attribute, which is vital to the experience of many an Internet user navigating through artificially generated spatial systems in the guise of a substitute persona, has converged with the frame-bursting, space-bursting visual rhetoric of Aitken's video installations as a horizon of cultural experience. Surrounded by visual backdrops made up of cinephilic projections of exotic and mysterious locations and cityscapes, the audience is enthralled by the immersive charm of the images, which are aimed less at revealing the machinations of filmic illusion than at conjuring up the experience of absolute presence within the projected scene. The visitors can bask in the glory of a film scene and sense the same electrifying effect described by the protagonist in Aitken's *Electric Earth* (1999) when he speaks about achieving ultimate oneness with his surroundings through dancing: 'A lot of times I dance so fast that I become what surrounds me, that's like food, like I absorb the images, absorb the information, that's like I eat it. That's the only now I get.'<sup>29</sup>

Isabell Heimerdinger's pictures of 'abandoned' film sets with the figures airbrushed out of them visualise the loss of reality in another way, linking it with the digital technique of special effects. Her film stills might be regarded as scenes in which the viewers imagine themselves as actors, and can also be read as images of the consciousness of the absent characters. Our cultural memory automatically occupies these empty spaces in her manipulated film stills, which can be visually decoded immediately as cinematic ambience, for they suggest to us that we know these places without ever having actually been there. Heimerdinger's images refer to that which is absent in much the same way as cinema itself invariably refers to an image originally recorded, whose transience is said to have prompted Cocteau to remark that film watches death at work.

This archetypal force by which film moulds the construction of reality also prompted Louise Lawler to create a cinema installation that takes to the extreme the theme of the black box as a culturally defined illusory space. In *A Movie Without the Picture* (1979), she showed Hollywood film classics,



Louise Lawler,  
*A Movie Without  
the Picture*, 1979.  
Courtesy Monika Sprüth  
and Philomene Magers,  
Cologne, Munich  
& London

but removed the light bulb from the projector so that the film had neither light nor image and the audience had only the sound track as a point of reference for the plot. In the intimate atmosphere of Lawler's darkened room a new sense of cinema occurred that abstracted from the image-related dramaturgy of film and stimulated the associative capacity of the public acoustically. Whereas losing the picture would normally be regarded as a 'fault', in the context of this artistic presentation it actually heightened perception by mobilising inner processes of illusion that are never entirely uninvolved in our affective appropriation of our media culture's 'pre-produced dreams' — as already noted by Siegfried Kracauer in his description of film fantasies as 'the *daydreams of society*'.<sup>20</sup>

### Framing the Viewer

Recent developments in the field of electronic images have provided new techniques of immersion and participation, opening up wide potential for artistic application. Multiple parallel projections and narrative strands in current works by Sam Taylor-Wood, Stan Douglas and Janet Cardiff explode space and time structures. Moreover, by overlapping various camera angles, image segments and audio impulses scenographically, they also achieve 'multiple sight and sound aesthetics', which require active interplay between the viewer, the video recording and the audio recording. According to the

principle of multiplying viewpoints by using different cameras, all of which respond to one another as articulating apparatus, various perspectives of a scene are projected in parallel, thereby fragmenting not only the spatial continuity that exists in live television productions (which also use several cameras but broadcast only one angle at a time), but also the axial vision reproduced in television and cinema. This challenge to the normative syntax of the filmic medium also underlines the spatial presence of the plot, which increasingly appeals to the synthesising involvement of the audience. By dismantling the conditions of the medium in this way, the compositional involvement of the viewer is called upon to such a degree that the psychological and physical functions of the protagonist are completed only in the participatory reception of the spectator. Just as the viewer has become a participant in the scene, the parameters of the aesthetic of reception criticised by Michael Fried have become the actual principle of impact.

In the work of Taylor-Wood, the combinatory aspect of viewer involvement is the key motif. Although her life-size video projections are often distributed over all four walls of the room, they form a single story that becomes legible in the simultaneous juxtaposition of the individual picture segments, none of which are cut or montaged. This principle culminates in her work *Third Party* (1999), in which the viewer is surrounded by seven parallel scenes at a party. The individual images combine to create a spatial continuum in which people occasionally move through the fictional space and fluctuate between projections, as when the arm of one actress appears in the neighbouring screen to get a light from a man previously shown in isolation on an adjacent screen. This compositional technique of multiple projection screens whose spatial alignment replaces the diegetic frame actually crosses the 'aesthetic boundary between stage and auditorium'.<sup>31</sup> Such complex directing ultimately dissolves the classical order of the auditorium in which viewers sit still, watching what is happening on the screen, and replaces it with an all-embracing, almost tactile scenario in which the performative involvement of the viewer is a given from the moment he or she enters the room. By staggering the documentary segments in this way, the artist succeeds in almost literally transforming the black box into a party room. Physically encountering the life-size protagonists in the video sequences — as well as other spectators in the room — makes viewers aware of their own role as artists within the arena-like, all-round projection. Thus, the architectural ensemble, linked to the diegesis of the video projections, literally 'frames' the mobile spectator within the emotive space of moving images that Giuliana Bruno explores in her brilliant study of the relation between art installation, architecture and film.<sup>32</sup>

30 See Doris Mampe, 'A Movie Will be Shown without the Picture', *Moving Images, Film Reflexion in der Kunst* (exh. cat.), Leipzig: Galerie für zeitgenössische Kunst, 1999, pp. 132–33; and Siegfried Kracauer, 'The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies', *The Mass Ornament: Weimar*

*Essays* (ed. Thomas Y. Levin), Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, p. 292 (emphasis by Kracauer).

31 Martin Hentschel, 'Fotografie, Malerei, Film: Sam Taylor-Wood's Deklination der Gattungen', *Sam Taylor-Wood: Third Party*, Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz

Verlag, 2000, p. 21.

32 See Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture and Film*, London: Verso, 2002.

Whereas Taylor-Wood achieves spectator involvement primarily by visual stimulation of the physical and spatial points of reference, Cardiff shifts the aspect of spectator involvement to the level of acoustic perception, as impressively demonstrated in *The Muriel Lake Incident* (1999) or *The Paradise Institute* (2001). Cardiff's work is also a return to the cinema space as a place of virtual travel — a kind of 'proto-spaceship', as Anne Friedberg once described the function of early cinema because of its capacity to allow viewers to forget their real environment and, seated on comfortable upholstery, even their own bodies for a while.<sup>33</sup> Dolby surround-sound systems transport the on-screen events into the cinema auditorium with such acoustic perfection that the spectators feel as though they are in the midst of what is happening, dissolving the membrane between the fiction of the screen and the reality of the auditorium to such a degree that the auditorium in the cinema functions as an extension of the projection screen. Cardiff has further emphasised this aspect of absorption by exaggerating the acoustic perception in her installations: visitors are provided with headphones so that the words they are hearing seem to be addressed to them personally, with the result that they tend to look around in surprise and astonishment at other members of the audience. In this way, the audience's visual and acoustic perceptions cross and shift in relation to one another, provoking constant parallel attention to the video image and to the other spectators. This touches on the theme of the spectacle that uses the fascination of the images to grasp the body and senses of the audience. At the same time, however, this deconstructive approach to the visual and auditory synchronicity of cinema creates feelings of (self-)alienation, which achieve a more complex way of visualising the increasing spectacularisation and homogenisation of cultural praxis in commercial media emissions. Hence, the end of the illusion begins with the participation of the spectator.

Translated by Ishbel Flett.

<sup>33</sup> Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.