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"A HYPERAESTHETIC CASE STUDY: JENNIFER STEINKAMP"

Summary

Emerging digital cultures have to this point been more conducive to systemic analysis than to the close reading of individual art works. We must delineate objects, spaces, and sites worthy of consideration in their own right, rather than simply as manifestations or harbingers of things to come. Jennifer Steinkamp's site-specific projections – explorations of color, environment, and the conditions of spectatorship – open up spaces mental and geographic for the contemplation of the future present. Her work, which I categorize as "light in space," constitutes a remarkable project for an hyperaesthetic analysis.

"Once you know the future, you can make it come earlier" Joseph Brodskey, "At a Lecture" (1996)

I. An Ontology of the Phenomenological

"Gag" – I walk into a house, the sound of gagging penetrates the air, I ascend the staircase, look up and see that the skylight has been covered with an imagescape that swirls in tandem with the retching sounds.

"Un-titled (1993)"– I open a door, and all is darkness, except for a luminous play of color on the floor in front of me. There is no way to resist walking into the light, the projection plays down on me like a sunset devised by a technologized god.

"Elbowroom"– I open another door, walk into a small room and the projected light moves from blue tones to red, the airy heavens looping into fiery hells and back again. The interlaced projections take hold of the space, and I watch the wall in front of me swell and deflate like a lung.

These are just three records – descriptions, really – of the effects of Jennifer Steinkamp's artistic interventions on and in space and on and in me. It is difficult to categorize phenomenological experience, much less create a coherent aesthetic around it Yet Steinkamp's work begs an ontology of the phenomenological, and places it in direct conjunction with the social. For Steinkamp's work is about the place of bodies in space and their relationship to the work, the environment, and each other.

Emerging digital cultures have to this point been more conducive to systemic analysis than to the close reading of individual art works. The next step in the development of a what I have called a hyperaesthetics for the techno-culture is to delineate objects, spaces, and sites worthy of consideration in their own right, rather than simply as manifestations or harbingers of things to come. So, in today's session I will be discussing Jennifer Steinkamp, who is doing some of the finest computer-generated work anywhere.

II. Hardscapes and Imagescapes

Steinkamp's lush imagescapes do indeed immerse viewers in shimmering fields of color and form but I will eschew what has been a quite common set of comparisons for Steinkamp – those made with non-figurative painting, and to the Abstract Expressionists and color field painters in particular. Critic David Pagel states this case: "Without paint or canvas, her abstractions fulfill many of the Abstract Expressionists' intentions, simultaneously pushing painting into the fourth dimension." I am not implying that there is nothing to be gained by discussing Pollock or Rothko, but rather that art criticism routinely bows to these venerated masters whenever abstraction enters the frame Abstract Expressionist paintings, however, were generally quite autonomous from their environments, while Steinkamp's major projects have all been explicitly site-specific.

This attention to the environment of the piece is an integral part of Steinkamp's finely focused process of production. From the earliest 3-D modeling of the space of the exhibition, to the development of animations on high-end SGI graphics engine hardware, to the melding of image and sound, Steinkamp is determined to precisely situate the work within its architectural context. She develops detailed three-dimensional computer schematics of the hardscape and then designs a series of renderings to plan for the deployment of the projectors and speakers. Once that is completed she begins to run a series of simulations of the play of light within the space. Lately, as she has developed a lasting collaboration with the techno-sound artists Grain, she has been incorporating the aural dimension into her simulations as well. All of these elements combine to transform the inert white walls of a specific space into extruded, pulsating abstractions.
For "Un-titled (1994)," the exterior, rounded walls of the California Museum of Photography's theater served as a parabolic canvas for Steinkamp to create a dynamized audio and imagescape with movement both elliptical and mirrored. "Balconette" (1994) made use of an otherwise anonymous architectural detail at the Allen Memorial Art Museum in Ohio, playing off romantic implications of an inaccessible portal. Lately, Steinkamp has been able to develop her own environments, most successfully with "Swell" (1995). In a light proof room, projectors are situated on either side of specially constructed wall . There is a pass-through enabling the spectators to walk from one side to the other It becomes apparent after a few moments that the "front" projection extends only part of the way across the wall, and that in fact, appended to the wall, is a scrim of equal height, which serves as the screen surface for the "rear" projection. It becomes further apparent that as other spectators move from the front to the back, they intersect with the projection and their shadows become a part of the piece itself. With this awareness comes the invitation to interaction, the conscious decision to cross from spectator to element of the piece, to become involved in "Swell's" social construction.

III. Light in Space

A comment once made about Robert Irwin that "the ultimate message of his work, simple yet profound, is that the more you look, the more you see," could apply, as well, to "Swell." But Steinkamp's relationship to Irwin is more pointed. An emblematic West Coast figure, Irwin was one of the seminal '60s "light and space" artists. He created both ephemeral yet important interventions into architecture and sublime painting discs that seemed to float on walls. Irwin's art challenged the viewer's perception of the environment and the play of light within that environment. Subtlety and almost diaphanous materials – neon tubes, sheer scrims, highly determined lighting schemes – were the distinguishing characteristics of his work. How all of this relates to Steinkamp should be obvious, but there is more.
Irwin was also well known for his obsession with the automobile, and the great flowering of California car culture in the 1960s (that last stand of aestheticized mechanization that Tom Wolfe summed up in his title The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby) The mobilized gaze that the driver commands from behind the wheel, landscapes whizzing by at sixty miles an hour, the glimpses of architecture, the distanciation from the human pedestrian, all of these have helped to shape both the modern and the postmodern, from the Futurists to J G. Ballard. It also fed into Irwin's art, but what the customized hot-rod was to the '60s, the full-blown, RAM-hogging, graphics engine is to the '90s And it is precisely that sort of high-end, Silicon Graphics equipment (in all its purple and indigo glory), that Steinkamp uses to create her animations Her work, like Irwin's, is involved in a highly self-conscious fetishization of technology, a reveling in luxe and sheen I have chosen to refer to Steinkamp's work as "light in space," rather than "light and space," in part because her work is designed to live in a certain space for a certain time and then to simply turn off, like a light with a switch. In Steinkamp's words, the work is "continuous and then dead." One might here think of Dan Flavin, but the tubes which remain after the power is off at least memorialize the piece; yet without power, a Steinkamp installation is simply architecture with the discreet addition of inert projectors.

IV. A Structuralist Digital Media

This inert quality is somehow reminiscent of a movie theater when the lights are up. But when the lights are down, works like "Elbowroom," "Un-titled (1993)" and "Swell" attend to the importance of color and form, and the way they can wash over the spectator In this, Steinkamp shows herself to be the inheritor of the mantle of the "pure" structuralist filmmaking of the 1960s. In her work there is a constant modulation between the aesthetization of space and the spatialization of aesthetics, without a definitive declaration of its most fervently held position. Light is here creating a physicality. Light both re- and de- materializes architecture The wall becomes another space. The space becomes another image. the image becomes another wall.
The late Paul Sharits created an extraordinary body of flicker films, some of which explored the effects of bathing an audience in an ever-changing progression of colored light In works like T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G," and "N.O:T:H:I:N:G" (both 1968), Sharits seemed to live completely within Goethe's aphorism that "color is at all times specific, characteristic, significant." Yet, while Sharits was working within the controlled space of the theater – in darkness, with the sole light source of the film projector – Steinkamp is engaging with the diffusion of environmental light sculpture, and, indeed within the constraints of a number of differing media.

One final thought about film. Steinkamp's interactions between the entirely virtualized environment of her simulations, and the installations themselves – the mix of hardscapes and imagescapes – create a subsumed tension somewhat reminiscent of the working style of Alfred Hitchock. Hitchock was a skilled draftsman (one of his earliest jobs was designing advertising for electric cables) and throughout his filmmaking career, Hitchock was famous for his detailed storyboarding and meticulous pre-production notes For Hitchcock, the planning process was the movie, and the sets, the actors, the filming and the cutting were depressing distractions from the purity of his first visions.

V. OCTOBER 31st

In discussing Steinkamp, I've jumped from figures as diverse as Irwin to Hitchcock, ranged across media from painting to sculpture, and moved through technologies at a dizzying rate The discourse around art has concentrated on the concrete

object: painting, sculpture, and architecture. The advent of the computer, however, has destabilized these systems – blurring categories and boundaries beyond even postmodern models. A dynamic object demands constant recalibrations in focus, a shifting between three temporalities. Hyperaesthetics demands theorization in real time In contemporary American intellectual life there is the aforementioned fascination with the notion of the cyborg and all things wired, but there is a new ground swell against the incorporation of new technologies and new artists into the serious discourse about art. What does it say about how we have to conceive of this work? How to confront the problem so many now have with this kind of intergenericity?

One recent salvo fired in this brewing conflict was the special issue the journal October published this summer. In it, the editors are highly suspicious of the term "visual culture" as a descriptor for either a social sphere dominated by the image, or for the emerging interdisciplinary academic discourse now going under this umbrella. Two decades old, October was for the first ten years of its run essential reading for those interested in the then emerging discourse of postmodernism, but it has since calcified into a publishing organ for its remarkably prolific, if prolix, editorial board and their students. The details of their quarrel with visual culture emerge in the form of a questionnaire that they sent out to a range of art historians, film scholars, and cultural theorists, from which selection they published more than a dozen responses. The details of these disciplinary disputes will be of interest only to those who enjoy watching academics squirm through their arcane turf battles, but what this questionnaire and its responses crystallize is a remarkable anxieties that the emergent digital arts are generating among the professoriat.

From the editors' almost hysterical reaction to the opening of the Deutsche Telecom galleries of technological art at the Guggenheim Soho to the entirely hysterical comments of respondent Emily Apter on the origins of all things cyber – "Mobilizing ghostly, derealized selves within a dirty realist, sleaze, or pulp tradition (a tradition drawing visually on sci-fi, cartoons, comics, graffiti, porn, fanzines, slash and snuff movies, film noir, flight simulation, surveillance cameras, and technical imaging), cyber operates through a combination of ontological projection and ethical subjection." – there is a sense that there is something commercial and evil crawling out of all those PCs, and that the proper course is to stop in one's tracks. Columbia University's Jonathan Crary, in fact, counsels us all against "examining computer graphics, virtual reality, or other recent technological products," and suggests instead that we continue our study of "colorless, nonvisual discursive and systemic formations and their historical mutations." Now there is a rousing call to arms!

I bring up all of this not to start a generational war – cyber nomads stalking the tenured postmods – but to point out that an artist like Jennifer Steinkamp creates work that demands an open field of inquiry aware of the present technological moment and informed by a raft of artistic and aesthetic discourses. Steinkamp's insistence on acknowledging the body of the spectator, and her resistance to the facile demands for a rote sort of interactivity lends her work a seriousness that her often playful titles belie. Hers is a fully phenomenological interactivity, one in which the body in space is acknowledged as an active subject, and where the choice to orient the body in relation to the work is seen as every bit as "contemporary" as the deployment of buttons and tiresome tree structured interactions. If Steinkamp is creating the new visual culture, I, for one, want to see it.

Biography:

Peter Lunenfeld is one of the coordinators of the Graduate Program in Communication & New Media Design at the Art Center College of Design. He is the founder of mediawork: The Southern California New Media Working Group and is the editor of The Digital Dialectic. New Essays on New Media (MIT Press, forthcoming). <peterl@artcenter.edu>