

OPERA & THE CULT OF THE DJ

Justine Poplin

Video as projected light form can 'be' the Diva and take on its own physical presence. By using projection as a vehicle artists can initiate an alternate dialogue by creating a screen or screens that are physical in presence and through this physicality take on their own psychological space.



Fig. 1. Swimming in Foreign Places, 2000, Justine Poplin, Video Installation: custom made screen: cotton & pvc 1m x 1m Melbourne Australia © 2011 Justine Poplin.

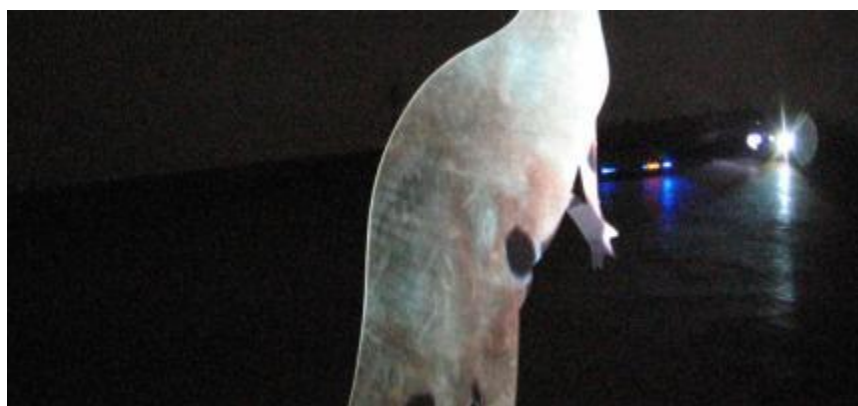


Fig. 2. Habitat: Being the Alien, 2006, Justine Poplin, Video Installation: custom made screen: Perspex 152cm x 160cm x 2cm Beijing China © 2011 Justine Poplin.

The title of this paper 'Opera & the Cult of the DJ' was chosen to initiate a dialogue and to question the place of Opera in today's culture. The word opera in Latin simply means 'a work'. So, what is opera in the 21st century when opera is the amalgamation of all arts and supposedly a reflection of the times? It could be stated that the DJ or VJ for example is the contemporary New Media Diva. Michael Rush points out, that Bill Viola's video works are "explorations of light and form, matched by his interest in spiritual source material." [1] Video as projected light form can 'be' the Diva and take on its own physical presence if used in an extratraditional way. There are several Artists that will be discussed throughout this

paper that are making work that embodies a physicality in video projection, later I will discuss how video's physical presence became one of the driving forces of inquiry in my own work.

Artists working in the field of video art and new media have at times limited the creative outputs of their work exhibited in the gallery or public space by the notion of 'the screen'. The screen I am speaking of is generally rectangular in shape within the interface of a computer screen; or majestically projected onto flat, uninspiring surfaces boasting an aspect ratio of 4:3. There are however; other possibilities that artists have explored to create 'physicality' in projection, which extends preconceived notions of screen-based culture. Video projection can engage in creative strategies that push boundaries that extend the message of the medium. The patron saint of the digital age (Wolf, 1996) Marshall McLuhan theorised that media is an extension of the human body. "Just as clothing is an extension of the skin, the axe is an extension of the hand, and the car is an extension of the foot, the media are extensions of the mind." [2] An example of this is Australian artist Stelarc he has taken McLuhan's theory on literally in his own work where he digitally and/or mechanically extends the human body. We can re-contextualise 'the media' to assume the position of media/medium/new media/ video.

Video art and the New Media discipline have evolved significantly since Nam Jun Paik's shooting of the Papal visit to New York with a Sony Portapak in 1965. The seminal action of showing a slice of life in a public space by an artist created what we now call Video Art. "As collage technique replaced oil paint, so the cathode-ray tube will replace the canvas." [3] Paik became the first spokesman for video art and re-conceptualised the use of television as a medium by spiritualising and sculpting with the monitor. His work explored Fluxus ideas and the cinematic avant-garde that were new to the audience of the time. However, it wasn't until video projection was available and accessible to the artist, which in turn extended the possibilities of video to create a physical presence with video projection. "Video installation Artists are producing environments as itineraries, places to start thinking about art and life, rather than giving us maps that indicate where all the answers are." [4] Video installation can be an environment where the screen is in the centre of the room and the audience/viewer can freely roam and not have to view from a fixed position. Video installation with the use of projection creates a physical form in the exhibition space or installed environment. By using projection as a vehicle artists can initiate an alternate dialogue by creating a screen or screens that are physical in presence and through this physicality take on their own psychological space. This physical presence is illustrated in most of Tony Oursler's work and his video installation 'Influence Machine' 2006 is one example. Oursler projects video onto smoke from a smoke machine; the viewer can freely circumnavigate the work in its holographic-like, free-form state, illuminating video's post-human presence through projection. Oursler's "general theme was to mimetic technology, that is, technology that could be perceived as a direct extension of psychological states." [5] In video work such as this created from projecting pixels onto surfaces that are free-standing take video out of its rigid realm into the transcendental and phantasmagorical.

My interest in extending the possibilities of the projection screen began in my first year at university. At that time I was constructing screens or boxes that were freestanding and would sit or suspend. These were made from heavy gauge fishing line and cling film/wrap. I then projected onto and through these assemblages and the projected light would penetrate the installation and dimly leap onto the nearest wall. This was in 1991 when we were still using linear editing techniques and back projection screens were something quite magical. I then moved on to construct screens that still resembled a similar aspect ratio to a standard monitor but had them hanging or suspended in the gallery or public space. The audience again could choose a viewing point, as there weren't any seats or a bench to sit down on like what are offered in many galleries. I made several works from 1999 – 2006 that worked with these principles. It has taken many years to reach this point as the practice and passion of 'being' an artist has worn thin

on my post 30 approaching 40 year old bones. I trained as a singer from 12 – 22 years of age and was on the path to becoming an opera singer. However, when it was time to choose a university and to plan the next decade or so I chose art instead of music. I entered art school on my painting merit and embraced foundation year with the sheer choice of courses and experimented with photography, film, sound and video. I continued to pursue a connection and my Masters examined Multimedia and the Operatic Form. This led me to explore concepts of the voice and performance as realised through new technologies and cross-disciplinary means of presentation. Most of my work alludes to 'physicality' in projection, which extends preconceived notions of screen-based culture. A selection of work from this period will be discussed; the first two pieces Shower Songs and LaLaLa are traditional screen-based work. Swimming in Foreign Places, My Beautiful Laundrette, Vox Pop Environ and Habitat/Being the Alien are work that embody Opera and the Cult of the DJ and extend projection possibilities.

Futurist performance artist Marinetti showed his work 'Feet' in 1915. "To compress into a few minutes, into a few words and gestures, innumerable situations, sensibilities, ideas, sensations, facts and symbols." [6] Marinetti's work inspired the video installation 'Cropped'. Two custom made screens hang in the centre of the gallery space. Performers are shot from the waist down in bars, cafes and other public/private spaces. Cropped surveils the body language that takes place under the table. The placement of the projection screen was crucial to the work. A perspective that was normally reserved for under the table was now subverted to eye level. The screens were suspended in the centre of the space, so that projection could be seen from 360 degrees angles extending projection physicality in the space.

There are many artists that use song in their video work. Is this then the opera of our generation? When the word opera is used it often conjures up images of overtly theatrical stocky men and women gesticulating wildly and extending their voices with trained prowess. The use of voice and song as an art form has been used in the avant-garde performance work of Meredith Monk; John Cage, Laurie Anderson and most recently with Turner Prize recipient Susan Philipsz in 2010. These artists used techniques such as vocal extension, amplification and sound recording to create song and sound that crossed genre. This cross over became quite popular in Australia in the late 90's early 2000 with Artists such as Philip Brophy who in his sardonic satirical critique says, "An artist using a pop song in video art is like anyone either enrolling in a DJ course or wearing an iPod in public: Tragic." [7] Brophy's combination of buzz words; song, video, Dj and iPod all in one sentence have a resonance and cadence, as these elements are a prevalent reflection of art and culture today. Artists can work with these contemporary elements to transcend the 'tragic' to become more engaging by harnessing this cross-fertilisation of genres and extending projection possibilities.

American artist Robert Whitman's work 'Shower' 1964 is one of the earliest examples of the shift away from the cinematic experience of film and into projection possibilities in projection in installation. It was only after I made the work Shower Songs that I found Whitman's work. Shower Songs is an Audio Visual Environment that was created for 1st Floor Gallery in Fitzroy Melbourne, sound recording by Jennifer Sochackyj. In this work, video was projected onto the gallery wall. The position of the projection was on the inner corner of the wall wrapping the 90-degree angle. This work demystified the singer having them tangible and in a familiar space. The bathroom is usually a scene of intimacy and exposure of fragrant wet white lathers, of glass, ceramic, curtain, Hitchcock and song. The viewer is taken into a steamy, aural, visual environment where several people sing and bathe. Is it erotica, routine, love-scene, post-coital wash-down or recitative?

La la la is a screen-based work that explores voice and presentation. What is good pitch, tone and timbre when they can be digitally altered? What is a good voice? In an overexposed room flooded with light 9

performers sit in front of the camera one by one and repeat a sequence of 3 notes, that are played to them on an analogue Dictaphone, an aural examination of the recognition of time and pitch. A screen test. Each shot is a tightly framed over-exposed headshot. The close-up composition was used to create tension and to put the viewer in the place of the singer. Ultimately each singer's 3 notes la la la were edited audio visually constructing a composition that lasted for as long as the average pop song 2'33.

Swimming in Foreign Places was a site-specific work curated by Camilla Hannan and Nat Bates (Liquid Architecture). There were two sound artists Hannan and Bates and two video artists Van Sowervine and myself. The couplings were to perform a live surround sound mix to pre-recorded video. At the time I was reading a lot about Bauhaus and Dada performance and came across László Moholy-Nagy "Nothing stands in the way of making use of complex APPARATUS such as film, automobile, elevator, airplane, and other machinery, as well as optical instruments reflecting equipment, and so on. It is time to produce a kind of stage activity which will no longer permit the masses to be silent spectators, which will not only excite them inwardly but will let them take hold and participate—actually allow them to fuse with the action on the stage at the peak of cathartic ecstasy." [8] Laszlo inspired the work I created for Swimming in Foreign Places. I custom-made a circular screen that hung in a tree like a strange fruit. The projection started with a gradual ripening of colours from green to earthy browns this being used as a metaphor for a fruit ripening on a tree. After several deaths of fruit a tightly cropped singer's headshot appeared. The head (the artist) was hanging in the tree singing a song without melody. This was layered with sur/subtitles taking us into a place not many of us have been. The lyrics projected were from Abel Meeropol's 1936 poem, which 3 years later became the well-known blues ballad 'Strange Fruit' sung by Billie Holiday.

My Beautiful Laundrette performance installation is a site-specific work. Behind the doors of an after hours laundrette in Melbourne, a piano introduction to a Mozart aria from The Marriage of Figaro is audible. Two whopping speakers spill the melody into the street. The audience assemble outside (the doors are locked). Inside the dimly lit laundrette the diva is plugging in pieces of equipment preparing for the performance. The aria she will sing is from an opera where the character has lost a pin; she has misplaced her stereo jack, and ponders whether the mix is good. She is standing behind a dj booth wearing a powdered wig, mixing herself into the soundtrack with karaoke sur-titles on the custom made screen above her head. The aria ends and other lyrics appear on the screen, another Mozart aria 'Batti Batti', then Kate Bush's 'Hounds of Love', followed by Britney Spears' 'Hit me Baby', all songs are about love, all sung by women and all transcending time when seen in text form. Voltaire once said: "anything too stupid to be said is sung". Seeing the lyrics displayed in this form whether classical or pop amalgamated the texts and made one no higher art form than the other, a blend of genres transcending time.

Vox Pop Environ is another site-specific work that was made for a Melbourne pub's disco room. Manzoni, the artist who is most favourably know for selling shit, sold his bodies of air (artists breath) in the 1960's for 3000 lire and he wasn't a singer. 'Vox Pop Environ' digitally replicates and projects the gestures we use when we sing; the eyes, the mouth, the hands, all vehicles for external physical expression, the mechanisms > the trachea the vocal chords the diaphragm hidden. Multiple projections of operatic gestures were projected onto balloons (the screens) atop slim wooden rods with a plaster base. The singer is now a balloon (a diaphragm) on a stick inflated by artists breath, performing to a pre-recorded soundtrack composed from voice samples, extending vocal performance and projecting a physical performative presence.

I further examined extratraditional notions of screen culture and performative presence in 'Habitat/Being the Alien' exploring notions of cultural identity. If you are Australian what exactly does that mean and

what image do you portray to other cultures? In China if you introduce yourself as Australian, most Chinese immediately say “kangaroo” – big rat. The work is a dialogue between the lyric and the visual. I created masks around the standard format of the rectangular workspace in preparation for the projection. The first mask was surrounding the kangaroo this mask was black as black does not project. This gives the screen the illusion of a freestanding kangaroo and in turn initiates a physical presence in the gallery space. The second mask was inside the kangaroos face; here I inserted moving footage of a face speaking, uttering and gesticulating with various marsupialistic facial expressions. The soundtrack created was ambient Australian bush sounds mixed with utterances in Chinese and Mandarin about wanting, waiting, and missing someone or something that give a sense of disconnection, longing and isolation. Songs and the land make us; we are defined by our culture and history. There is a sense of displacement and familiarity, knowledge of being an alien that creates a dialogue between the lyric and the visual.

The work I have discussed was made over a very intense period of time; I was investigating multi media and the operatic form examining the place ‘opera’ in 20th –Century Art. The work created mostly explored the use of voice in contemporary art whilst simultaneously extending methods of presentation to reach a broader audience. The hybridisation of new media is synonymous with the way we live our lives. There will always be a place for Opera in its historic sense for dramatic deaths and augmented librettos with 15 year-old Japanese girls falling in love with polygamous American sailors. There are also many contemporary Opera companies that John Jenkins and Rainer Linz discussed in their book ‘Arias – Recent Australian Music Theatre’ 1997 that employ video and new media in their work. However, these still mostly follow pre-existing conventions of opera, such as having Directors, Designers and Composers. To reiterate, the word opera simply means a ‘work’ and in the current climate of cross fertilisation of art forms this leaves a lot of room for artists to interpret and create works that reflect this. “The concept of the moving, temporal image is a key modality through which artists have articulated new strategies and forms of image making; to understand them, we need to fashion historiographic models and theoretical interpretations that locate the moving image as central in our visual culture.” [9] Opera and the cult of the dj is a reflection of the times and work that uses technological devices that extend the possibilities of video installation and its physical and psychological presence in a space. This in turn creates a shift in the expectations of the viewer and preconceived ideas about opera/multi -media and modes of presentation in the 21st-century.

References and Notes:

1. Michael Rush, "Chapter 2: Video Art: New Media, Conceptual Video and Personal Narratives," in *New Media in Late 20th Century Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999).
2. Donald A. Fishmann, "Rethinking Marshall McLuhan; Reflections on a Media Theorist," in *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 50, no. 3 (2006): 557-574.
3. Michael Rush, "Chapter 2: Video Art: New Media, Conceptual Video and Personal Narratives," in *New Media in Late 20th Century Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999).
4. Mark Pennings, "Video Installation Networks," in *Photofile Contemporary Photomedia + Ideas*, no. 74 (2005): 56-57.
5. Tony Oursler and Louise Neri, "Smoke and Mirrors: Tony Oursler's Influence Machine: A Conversation Between Tony Oursler and Louise Neri," *Tony Oursler's Web Site*, May-July, 2001, [http://www.tonyoursler.com/files/louiseneri\(3\).pdf](http://www.tonyoursler.com/files/louiseneri(3).pdf) (accessed April 12, 2011).
6. Roselee Goldberg, *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), 26
7. Philip Brophy, "Curating Video Art 101," in *Photofile Contemporary Photomedia + Ideas*, no. 74 (2005): 80.
8. László Moholy-Nagy, "Theater, Circus, Variety," in *The Theater of the Bauhaus*, eds. Walter Gropius, Arthur S. Wensinger, 49-72 (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).
9. John Hanhardt, "Nam June Paik," *Nam June Paik's official Web Site*, <http://www.paikstudios.com/essay.html> (accessed June 10, 2011).