

THE ENGAGEMENT AESTHETIC

EXPERIENCING NEW MEDIA ART
THROUGH CRITIQUE

FRANCISCO J. RICARDO



VOLUME 4

INTERNATIONAL TEXTS IN CRITICAL MEDIA AESTHETICS

FOUNDING EDITOR: FRANCISCO J. RICARDO

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Art through Critique

FRANCISCO J. RICARDO

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CHAPTER ONE

The engagement aesthetic— An introduction

First, some notes on visual culture in connection with the title of this book, which is less about new art than how to experience it. The question that this book examines is how art or text created using electronic/mechanical media may resemble (or differ from) previous kinds of aesthetic encounters, and which aesthetic and literary criteria inform the character and structure of new works. These questions would not matter if we thought of new media as old media, that is, as the same, contemporary forms of art, literature, performance, and communication that we have always had, except utilizing new machinery and technology. But that feeling—new media as a “more efficient” version of old media—is not what electronic art and literature provide us. What confronts us in new media art and literature is not merely a “better” way to design, to see, to read, or to write. A pencil is more efficient than a chisel because it reduces the work required to make a mark, to write—yet with each, the creative effort in what is written is still entirely in the mind of the author. But in the new art and literary media that I am discussing here—a small sample of a growing category of creative systems variously called new media art, electronic literature, and other names—the aim is not to “produce” more efficiently, but to complicate the act of production itself, to transform it into a plural act, so that it emerges out of entirely new kinds of interactions and sources, perhaps between users and a work as in Rafael Lozano-Hemmer’s public projections, or

between a viewer and a work as in Amaranth Borsuk's augmented reality literature, or between several media *within* one work, to include works that reflect their own structure, as we see in Andrew Neumann's electronic sculptures, the poetry generators of Nick Montfort, and the autonomous readers of John Cayley and Daniel Howe. In fact, the idea of a "work" is itself complicated by its appearance as a *practice*, such as by redefining architectural space, as does Paul Notzold's SMS-based art, or Mader, Stublić and Wiermann's spatial reconfigurations of existing buildings. The "when" and "where" of a work, too, is distributed into a pluralistic matrix of multiple "emergences" as in the work of Golan Levin, and Sheron Wray and Fleeta Siegel's interactive performances, or the electronic dance works of Jamie Jewett and Luke DuBois. None of these kinds of work is "already" finished, each has its own character, yet each is remade every time it is invoked, produced, viewed, or read. To experience such works is to look, read, think, and feel differently about art, literature, image, and text because the aesthetic focus is not on heightening our sense of an object or a work, but on what comes between us and the work—the act of engagement itself. It is an act that opens out to many possible directions.

And in order to explore some varieties of engagement as an aesthetic experience in depth, it is not necessary or possible to produce a compendium of electronic works of art and literature. The aim is, rather, on seeing, reading, thinking, and feeling—for these provide the three basic elements that viewers, readers, visitors of new media works have the power to produce: reflection, critique, and meaning. The essays here aim to foster at least one of these sensibilities, which is to say, to empower our experience and argue for the difference and integrity of a new aesthetic.

Reflection is the extended moment between perception and judgment, it occurs after seeing and before finally deciding that what has been seen is of *this* or *that* quality. Meaning is the extended moment after certain (positive) judgments that bring us back to reflection. To find something meaningful is to be able to reflect on it at length. Critique is the language by which perception comes to reflection, reflection arrives at judgment, and judgment ascends to meaning. Thus, critique is what I offer, it is the language of this book—reflection, judgment, and meaning are an opportunity, and a decision for each reader.

And so what is *critique*, in the sense meant, and as the method offered here? It is not an ideology, a school of thought, or an attempt to share my personal views on the work shown here. It is not a reduction of impressions down to a final verdict. It is the opposite of that, it is about conceptual integrity, about finding something behind and beyond the senses, beyond reading, beyond seeing. Judging work as good or bad, for example, is not critique; it is the *end* of any possible critique, it has a distancing effect. The judgment and the work are separate. But critique, when true to itself, is meditative, and therefore true to the art it considers. Strong critique is not synonymous with strong judgment; it is often the inverse of that. As a kind of truth, critique is not about secreting blunt and polarizing verdicts that either praise or dismiss creative work. Critique is a kind of *reasoning* that begins in sensory experience, and takes the work and the viewer somewhere new—beyond what the viewer may have initially seen. And in all of this, the point of departure is decreasingly textual and increasingly visual, because Western culture is now almost synonymous with the phenomenon of *the image*. The image is something so all-encompassing that it exists less as a specific kind of object than as an archetype; it speaks for what exists and makes claims about “what matters” as cultural reality because the production of imagery is of different kinds—and all are cultural products—to include the retinal image, the public image, the design image, the techno-scientific image, the fashion image, and the entertainment image. The once-pure connection between image and art (art being the institution where images were considered valuable because they had something unique, contemplative, and crucial to say to us about ourselves) has become thoroughly pervaded with and saturated by every other *non-art* creation and use of images. It is not that art has expanded outward to all aspects of social life—we know this because there is no evidence that the museum or gallery has entered the common interest of most people—but rather that the emergence of post-printing, post-text technologies that began with the invention of photography have carried the creation and delivery of imagery far beyond the secluded realms of art, with its expensive large-format books, its pristine white walls, and its climate-controlled galleries. If the image now defines human connection by way of social media, the entertainment industry, and other forms of technological conveyance, then art has come along

with it, of necessity. Breaking rank with the guarded traditions of painting, sculpture, theater, or literature, the image has launched on a major reversal through the expansion of its own function. It is no longer about its uniqueness, and no longer connected exclusively to ideals of the beautiful, the perfect, or the sublime. Unleashed on all corners of society, the image is sullied and compromised—and made real—as it returns to art with a chronicle of what it has seen and what it can show us. And so it is that art now follows media.

Consequently, museums and publications devoted to art regard the image in its new feral contexts. The art image in contemporary work may still be framed and hanging on the gallery wall, but it now disregards that context and operates as a window to worlds that are far from where art *was*. The contemporary images we find most familiar are those centered in action on the streets, fashion runways, rooming houses, police stations, brothels, cafés and bars, prisons, hospitals, morgues, and cemeteries, skyscrapers under construction, hallways in buildings, etc. Each milieu is more intensely common and intimate to us than the “old image” in its usual art contexts—the portrait, the nature image, and the image of still life.

The question of why the image is no longer defined by its place in art can be answered simply: it is created by technologies aiming to place it *within* popular culture rather than *above* it; these new systems aim for perfect *convenience* rather than perfection of *craft*, and so, visual products are no longer largely developed in the remove of a studio or developing room. Cameras now produce, transfer, and transmit images with contextual immediacy—at the moment and location of capture. Today’s image-taking workflow is thus culturally embedded in a social setting: *seeing* leads to instantaneous *capture*; capture leads to instantaneous *transmission*, which in turn leads easily to instantaneous social *response* through equally mediated forms, as the image is again recycled back into the cultural stream.

Since we don’t speak of art without reference to the image, and since we don’t think of the image without reference to a medium, much contemporary art has become defined by its *methods* for appropriating or inventing visual work. What counts as *aesthetic* in what we see, therefore, is no longer based on affinity or preference alone. As technology entered artistic production, art became less exclusively concerned with producing objects, and turned

increasingly to the artistic obsession with production processes. And as we cannot apply questions of beauty to *processes* in the way that we could do with *objects*, endless variations of new criteria—or *scarcity* of criteria—have come to determine the artistic merit of art; if the process for creating it is unstable, the stability of consensual definitions (such as what constitutes a “masterpiece”) is also undermined. Since art and technology have become codependent, *how* can we see and appreciate new kinds of art no longer based on conventional, object-based practices like painting? In fact, much of this new art isn’t merely made *with* technological media, it exists only *through* the activation of such media, something that has been true since the first film. Film, unlike the photograph, can be experienced only while a (filmic) medium is recreating and projecting it. The evident conclusion here is that, if film is an art form (although categorical claims for arthood are, I think, deeply problematic—some films are aesthetically concerned, others not), then it is the first form of electronic art—it is art lacking the self-assurance of a standalone *object* and experienced only through a *process*. Regarding the art of film, as with the electronic, we can know that seeing a process rather than seeing *through* a process is unique in art history, and resembles the aesthetic of music and dance for which the audience must remain engaged differently.

To repeat the obvious, many forms of the (now electronically created) image have emerged outside of their place in art contexts and institutions, in fact, the primary production of images is independent of educational, publishing, news, business, or scientific institutions, even though these sources commission many of them. But as images continue to be created by all, with limitless abandon, and with unconstrained distribution, the standing of artistic convention and institutional art may continue to recede from the authoritative back to the nostalgic.

Connecting the cultural eruption of the image with electronic media, something extraordinary happens—this forest of symbol-creation systems also incinerates the clean boundaries that hold between technology, science, and art. All are now converging into a buzzing *mélange* of optical production. This also holds between what could be called “enterprises of image manufacture” such as the game, fashion, and entertainment businesses collectively known as the culture industry. For example, if we read between the lines of

all that has been written about the art of contemporary and technological media—however loosely one might define this—we find several fields or disciplines being strangely argued as “central” to digital art, others strangely absent from their indispensable relation to it. In the former kind of association—the extraneous—the recent connection between “digital” and “game” in the connotative space of artistic discussion can lead one to view these terms as synonymous with each other—evidence if nothing else of claims made without regard to history, since *art* and *game* are not only different words, they are different universes. But, with the exception of Fluxus and some experiments (e.g. *the exquisite corpse*), art’s history has evolved quite distinctly from that of games. Art has experienced an unprecedented opening-up of its traditions, and in the digital sphere (which art historians have neglected), art has become more immaterial, more dynamic, without being contradictory, and more internally self-transformed without becoming displaced or ahistorical than non-electronic art. Yet for their part, digital art critics, too, have often neglected their own connection to art history, with the result that one world has remained unable to comment on the other intelligently. To be sure, what art history could share with electronic art is less an appreciation of physical materiality than an array of methodologies that can explore and explain varieties of style as they evolve through form. Lacking this, the cyber side of artistic criticism puzzles over lingering questions, such as what defines digital, electronic, or new media art in the first place without reviewing how modern art has grappled with questions of media aesthetics since the adoption of new expressive forms like photography, collage, film, and installation art.

I am not the first to assert that a *new* approach to address what is meant by digital or electronic or new media art is needed. It is a kind of criticism that attends not to surface or *sensory* questions like, “What does it look like?” or “Is it computer based?” but to conceptual probes about its hybrid origins, the reasoning and intent of some of its artists in choosing this creative direction, and how its processes may cause “art” or an aesthetic experience to emerge. These are, I think, considerably more interesting questions.

As its title suggests, this book’s primary interest turns to several problems in how we think about—the aesthetic aspects of—works of art produced using new and electronic media, with relevance to earlier kinds of work. By “earlier” I don’t mean *traditions* of art

alone, I also mean *industries* of art, as I will define shortly. The chief role of the artist is to create art; the patron and the collector sustain it; and the curator convenes and conveys it. All of these specialists have a role in the historical completion of the work, but the critic, theorist, or historian will elevate it, making it relevant to a time and audience other than the artist's own. But since, historically speaking, creation is continual, whereas understanding must follow what has been presented to the world, there is a temporal gap between what is made and what is understood. So the natural response is for public taste to apply older standards and criteria to newer work. Of course, as each epoch of art brings different aims to its viewers, one should first interpret works through *contemporary* sensibilities rather than older ones. It makes little sense, for example, to read modern abstraction in painting with a Renaissance eye. Likewise, the sculpture of the nineteenth century, still centered on appreciation of the chiseled image, offers little to the viewer encountering minimalist work from the 1960s, with its emphasis on fabricated symmetry and space-age materials over figurative representation. And if the artist creates work for the *now* while the public views that work through *tradition*, the critic must connect one age with the other not merely by expressing judgments but by making arguments about how to see the new in the now.

As I have just mentioned, the departure of contemporary sculpture from the rubble of its legacy did not come with the advantage that the contemporary sculptural reading could be extended to new forms in space. Instead, a decidedly traditional—not to say Romantic—sensibility has to this day prevailed as a centerpiece of sculptural interpretation. It is as if the modern pelican were judged as the reptilian pterosaur from which it emerged. If the universe of art evolves through media transitions like the animal kingdom evolves through genetic ones, the extinction of any specific form says nothing about the question of life itself, which for art is the ontological question. And so, to see something like Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*—that lengthy slab of steel that cut across a public plaza in the 1980s—with a Romantic's eye is to force a chapter of contemporary sculpture into a kind of prehistoric misreading. What interested Serra is not merely the *object*, namely the enormous metallic partition that he placed across the pedestrian flow, but more importantly, the *process* that is the experience of one's immediate encounter with it,

the phenomenological commitment of its physical order—an order that has taken the place of normal aesthetic convention, of seeing alone—and for this reason he imagined this enormous barrier of steel cutting the federal plaza on which it was placed as imposing a new way of thinking about oneself, an object, and the space surrounding both as three continuous variables, such that

The viewer becomes aware of himself and of his movement through the plaza. As he moves, the sculpture changes. Contraction and expansion of the sculpture result from the viewer's movement. Step by step the perception not only of the sculpture but of the entire environment changes.¹

Need we really state that this aesthetic articulation (where the problem of shifting positions in projected space becomes *the* experience of the work) is totally alien to earlier kinds of sculpture?

When, in history, a kind of art emerges that has something new to say, three reactions are possible. One can accept the new art, one can ignore it, or one can attack it. There are many possible permutations. Sometimes it can be accepted, and then ignored, as happened with Suprematist painting, the De Stijl artists, and most Abstract Expressionists. It can be largely ignored, as happened with Minimalism, which was primarily of interest only to critics and curators. It can be accepted but later attacked, as happened with Op Art, Pop Art, and even much of Andy Warhol. Or it can be attacked before being accepted—this is what happened to Marcel Duchamp's readymades and related constructions. And sometimes, if art is taken as a visual but not meditative form, it is attacked—sometimes destroyed—and only then ignored.

As the best-known case of artistic decommissioning of the last century, *Tilted Arc* was ordered demolished on the grounds that it made no sense as a sculpture for one federal bureaucrat who waged war against it—it is the *new* rather than the archaic that can be made extinct. Its destruction is a case of the troubling triumph of conventional expectations of art over open engagement. It is a view of art that is resistant to or unaware of engagement inherent in works where *process* is more important than the *object* itself. It signals an outmoded obsession with seeing art as a static form, seeing a work as a fixed point of expression, relating to everything as a sculptural constant—that is the enemy of new art.

If viewers of the 1980s (not so long ago) could not engage with *Tilted Arc* as legitimate art, how can a more contemporary art-viewing public be brought to engage with digital and new media as aesthetically legitimate? However we define new media—something I identify as media born outside of the traditions of material arts that include photography, sculpture, drawing, painting—my point is that we are not encountering work revolving around the idea of *viewing*, of a spectatorial aesthetic alone, but an additional engagement aesthetic—or many—that defines the new. And so it is to a detailed critique of this expansive artistic experience and process that I turn next, by examining different works, positions, and analytic methods from which I hope new interpretive and critical attitudes may emerge. Each side of this critique, from formal, to psychological, to linguistic, provides a different facet of this overall engagement aesthetic.

As I mentioned, the book is not historical, although it contains retrospective references; it is not defending or attacking a theory, although it is speculative and theoretical in character. There are some constant positions, however. One is my disappointment with the nearly systematic way in which art historians have ignored or overlooked the artists, the art and literature, and the aesthetic issues described here merely because they were related to technological production in some way. Some artists like Manfred Mohr have been producing work since the early 1960s. In an October 1967 missive from ARTFORUM's editor, Philip Leider, to art historian Matthew Baigell, Leider rejects a manuscript on electronic artist Charles Csuri, adding that "I cant [sic] imagine ARTFORUM ever doing a special issue on electronics or computers in art, but one never knows."² ARTFORUM denied computer-related art at a time when it championed the work of Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, and other artists whose art was constructed by others, out of instructions, and with high-tech materials never forged by human hands. In any historical record, elitism and duplicity are sometimes indistinguishable.

And so, the forms of engagement aesthetic to which I refer throughout this book have largely escaped art history and criticism. As I show, however, Rosalind Krauss has come closest to extending conceptual and contemporary art criticism with the aims of rigorous new media art as I present here, and so her earlier writings provide an occasional bridge in this book, which nonetheless avoids

art history's canonical strictures. Another consistent position of the book is the defense of meditative suspension of judgment in the encounter with electronic art of any kind. I argue for immediacy of *feeling*, rather than of *verdict*, and this distinction is for me the point of separation between "better" and "worse" in art. When *all* electronic art is dismissed, as I later quote a major name in computer games, I have to ask why such dismissal is so quick, accompanied as it is, with the claim that computer games are themselves a legitimate form of art. I don't enter the debate as to whether computer games are art or not, because the question is not posed correctly: art emerges in expressive works, not in categorical abstractions or media. Additionally, if we can not exclude from the category of art the astonishing kinds of things that museums have chosen to exhibit lately, then we have also lost the ability to deny any claims by anyone to call art whatever they wish—and this includes commercial videogames. We can, however, proceed through critique, which is why I wrote this book. We could, for example, simply ask: Is there in claims for the arthood of anything a reasoned *engagement with an aesthetic*? If so, what is it? Or does the claim for arthood resemble more a reach for association with the *status* of art, perhaps as an attack against existing art practices? This book is entirely devoted to exploring the first two (and most complex) of these three questions, the last one belongs to the realm of individual inquiry thereafter.

Each chapter is a separate essay that appears to focus on specific works. That's not the main purpose for the writing presented here. I discuss works only as specific points in a grid of critique that is not viewable as a weave of loose ideas, or as a tightly reductive framework, or even as a theory. It is an endorsement of the belief that we should be open to new work, not because it is "new" but because it comes at us from a different world, one where image, text, and even communication itself (as the final chapter's statistical analysis suggests) is, at the level of deep structure, radically different from conventional expectations, and that perhaps if our view of electronic art and literature were as dynamic as the work itself, we might be more contemplative of *process* as an aesthetic necessity.

CHAPTER TWO

Engagement as subjective system in electronic art

Perception provides me with a 'field of presence' in the broad sense, extending in two dimensions: the here-there dimension and the past-present-future dimension. The second elucidates the first. I 'hold', I 'have' the distant object without any explicit positing of the spatial perspective (apparent size and shape) as I still 'have in hand' the immediate past without any distortion and without any interposed 'recollection'. If we want to talk about synthesis, it will be, as Husserl says, a 'transition-synthesis', which does not link disparate perspectives, but brings about the 'passage' from one to the other.¹

– M. MERLEAU-PONTY

Of all the kinds of engagement that we can experience in the new art and literary work of electronic media, the first deals with a changed attitude about what images do for us. In electronic art, images are promoted from their conventional function as optical phenomena to devices for critiquing perception. I open with this complex epigram by Maurice Merleau-Ponty because his axiom,

and the essays in this book, together take the same point of departure. It states that, if there is more than a singular way of perceiving something, then, inevitably, perception becomes a kind of critique. And since electronic media are forms of perception, they contain the evidence and method of their own critique. Let us begin with Merleau-Ponty, who describes two kinds of seeing: spatial (“here-there”) and temporal (“past-present-future”). Later, my argument will embrace several others.

The thesis that proposes a means for thinking about the kind of artistic work I’m describing here begins with this kind of “transcendental perception.” It amounts to the conviction that there is a visual kind of experience, however fleeting, when three subsequent actions take place and become an aesthetic possibility, a kind of engagement that is extended and contemplative rather than immediate and conclusive. First, a moment emerges when *perception* no longer seems dependent on simple acts of *observing*; second, when perception begins to promote a sense or belief that feels like a seed of *understanding*, and third, when this idea or feeling that one has begun to understand something then itself becomes a reach back into the thing one is looking at as a kind of new perception, and this continual return is a basis for *contemplation*. But contemplation is a starting point in this book, not merely an aim. That potential is suggested in the quote above by the appearance of a personal verb: to *hold*, rather than to understand (this is not equivalent to *judging*). When artistic perception turns toward a kind of holding, the aesthetic in process moves from one of contemplation to one of complex engagement.

Contemplation has been the historically predominant goal of art. The term contemplation, which today seems antiquated and haughty, designates the activity of “thinking-about” prior to—and toward the development of—a *judgment*. By implication, the presumed greatness of a work of art or literature correlates with the length of this contemplative moment between observation and judgment. In great works like the *Mona Lisa*, judgment is almost indefinitely held back by contemplation. But in electronic art—at least the cases I’m probing here—this internal line from contemplation to judgment is made circular, oscillating, reflective, because the works I’m discussing (and there are many like these) are ones whose nature is always unstable; their structure becomes part of their content, and together this assembly fluctuates in

continual change. Since neither contemplation nor judgment, if we accept these terms, impart a sense of completion, they cannot individually portray a suitable statement or aesthetic of new media art. This art's circular rabbit-hole of structure-content melding and continual perception and holding is best understood as one of *engagement*. Engagement signifies a continual state, a relationship of progressive moments that persist without repeating.

And so, as contextualized by Merleau-Ponty in the opening thoughts above, there are two ways to take in Edmund Husserl's notion of a *transition-synthesis*—a passage from one perspective to another—as one variant of engagement. One way corresponds to transition-synthesis as a *concept*, an idea or notion “out there” like a geometric hypothesis; the other takes transition-synthesis as an *experience*, a moment when this principle becomes subjective and immediate to the observer. In the first case, a transition-synthesis is captured by the mechanism of language, it is articulated as a kind of universal observation that is external to the body, which is to say, it is *chronicled*; the second is by sensation, as something intimate, *felt*. A cinematic metaphor provides the analogy for framing the concept-experience spectrum visually in a work of art: in watching a film, the eye converges on psychological meaning around a very mechanical paradox—the whole emerges only through a series of momentary impressions, each overtaken by the next; a film's identity is constructed through an array of frames that lead to scenes. There is no single moment that encapsulates the entire meaning of a film. If the work is to bring the viewer into a here/there and before/after transition-synthesis, however, it cannot exclusively comprise a never-ending chain of sensations pouring from torrential change, since the viewer would not attain a stable perspective on the overall work. As change must oscillate with non-change, the term *synthesis* suggests transitions of *perspective* combining transformation with stasis, and as an opening example of the engagement aesthetic that transcends mere looking, the instrumental art of Andrew Neumann deploys two such transitions, specifically, of time, and of space.

As rationale for the radical character of so much contemporary art, Husserl's transition-synthesis points to something especially evident in the kineticism of mechanized and digital works, that is to say, in works where a series of perceptual shifts occurs as the work undergoes change. I refer to this not just in a *physical*

sense, for Alexander Calder's dangling mobile fins could easily fall within crude ideas of *shift*. But Calder's is a kind of "static shift"—the content (the propeller-like components) of the work changes while the overall structure does not. The perceptual shift in Calder—stationary objects that become rotating ones—can be described as a before-after change that is limited to one of motion, not to ontology, and the change in question is optical, but not one concerning alteration in the nature, essence, or being of the work. It merely rotates, albeit interestingly. But more fundamentally, how does one characterize artworks that bear a different kind of ontological structure-as-content shift of the kind I discussed above? One indication, as I will explore next, is whether description of changes in a dynamic work requires *different language* to describe each such change.

That is, works that convey change but which do not convey a transition-synthesis are those whose *structure* and core *perspective* remains static, despite a succession of flow or imagery. In this case, movement is not essence; it is a characteristic of an essence, so movement by itself is not enough to comprise the essence of a work of art, and it is that essence that must be altered. Thus movement or change alone is not the essential part of any work, any more than the movement of a celluloid strip is essential to the film being projected on a screen—the strip's movement is necessary to the medium, but not essential to the content.

Many artists working in new media relate this type of unidirectional transition of flow to interactive works by expanding the painterly metaphor of a canvas sustaining color fields in dynamic behavior to objects in motion. It is a metaphor; the principal ingredient is a background onto which visual activity is apparently projected, variations of events on the backdrop being the basis of new media works. Some artists, like Neumann, work with ideas of transition-synthesis by converting an expanded structure into expanded perspective. Consider how the more linguistically conjectural work, *Text Rain*, projects onto a wall a downpour of letters and words—crucially, in fact, a poem—rather than mere colors and shapes in a repetitious flow.² In this work the canvas metaphor has grown beyond two dimensions, capturing and reflecting the body of the viewer standing before it. As the work rehearses a poem line by line, each letter of every word descends delicately until any of its projected boundaries collides with some part of the

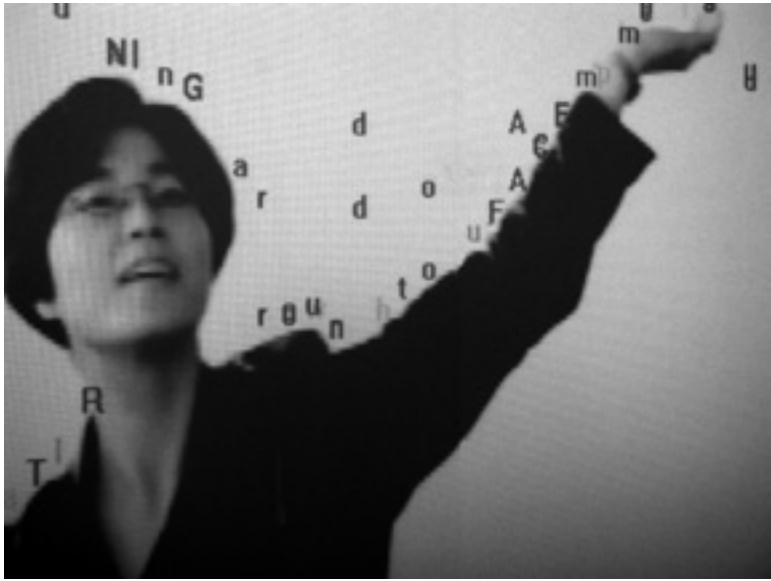


FIGURE 1 *Camille Utterback and Romy Achituv, Text Rain, 2000. Interactive Computer Installation, size variable, video projection. Detail.*

viewer's body, also projected into the same representative space of the work on the wall. But even so, fully integrating the viewer into such a flowing experience still does not produce the meaning-preserving circularity implied in Husserl's transition-synthesis. Work in constant motion, discarding old states for new ones, but not reinforcing a cohesive spirit with a structure that is indistinguishable from its content, lacks the fulcrum necessary to such a moment.

Transitions of Time

Of course, one would be tempted to reduce much of new media art to temporal flow, like film.³ Indeed, works of agitation and flow do follow aesthetic patterns in their own right, but the archetypal notion of a *torrent*, though compelling aesthetically, is not a very complete metaphor for depicting the transition-synthesis: *structure*

as distinct from *content* remains unchanged. Interacting with surging forces always implies *departing* from some original state of things and setting toward another that has not yet developed. Moving from an existent now to a potential later, such experiences convey less a balance between motion and stasis than of persistent procession. The viewer, continually awash in new modes, hues, and layers, nonetheless fails to detect any actual cadence or completion. But a transition-synthesis, anchored on the stability of memory as the basis for one's impression of change, demands a point of reference. And since the absence of a temporal fix renders such awareness impossible, memory and perception are indefinable without reference to one another. Perception alone is not enough.

Perception is never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it.⁴

Bergson defines the dominant relationship between memory and perception, that momentary break between what *was* experienced and what is *being* experienced, as something temporal, linear, and metaphoric with cinematic projection, something whose principal meaning-making process concerns relative motion. Subjectively, as the capturing element of perception shifts, the recording sense of memory remains stationary, each fueling a kinetic contrast that forms both the original impression and all recollections of it. So, Bergson maps their consolidation in a two-dimensional way, representing memory along the horizontal axis, and perception along the vertical. Each impression thus captured from the event stream incorporates into something like a static collection, an archive of impressions, or a totality of recollections.

If I represent by a cone SAB the totality of the recollections accumulated in my memory, the base AB, situated in the past, remains motionless, while the summit S, which indicates at all times my present, moves forward unceasingly, and unceasingly also touches the moving plane P of my actual representation of the universe.⁵

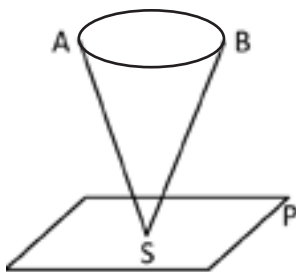


FIGURE 2

As perception and memory converge toward each other, a third process, meaning-making, begins to fill the juncture of the points. Between them, the depths of memory and the surface of perception define a space, outlined conically so as to emphasize its progressive nature, where primary observations evolve into full concepts. Drawing from the immediately acquired as well as from the previously established and memorized, initial perceptions oscillate between both poles, eventually resolving toward a final conceptual form congruent with, and incorporated into, what already dwells in memory.

Let us refer once more to the diagram we traced above. At S is the present perception which I have of my body, that is to say, of a certain sensory-motor equilibrium. Over the surface of the base AB are spread, we may say, my recollections in their totality. Within the cone so determined the general idea oscillates continually between the summit S and the base AB. In S it would take the clearly defined form of a bodily attitude or of an uttered word; at AB it would wear the aspect, no less defined, of the thousand individual images into which its fragile unity would break up.⁶

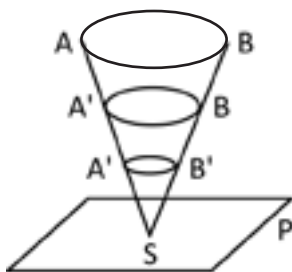


FIGURE 3

The first implication of this perceptual process is the heightened role that time plays. Not only does concept-formation through this memory model reflect a decisive break between present and past, where memory is to past events what perception is to present ones, but additionally, in this framework, what at any moment comprises perception or memory is precisely that: perception or memory. Both cannot emerge simultaneously. In the course of ordinary experience, this seems a rational assumption, what I see at first now is what I will remember later, recognition being the process linking one operation with the other. But the invisibility of this transition-synthesis is necessary to life experience so that one can assimilate and accommodate, that is, *learn*, seamlessly.⁷ This instinctual invisibility underscores precisely what distinguishes the minimal, postminimal, and formal aspects of work in Neumann's perceptual sculptures from normal visual experience, where, in seamlessness, feedback and memory embrace so interdependently that it is unnatural to grasp any work in temporal seriality or linearity. In a visual work, things beheld come together gradually and with contemplation, but the sense of perception feeding memory or vice versa is not palpable. All that is felt is the sensation of *observing* and perhaps subsequently the *a-ha* that accompanies what is thought to be the *idea* of the work. There is a perceptual all-or-nothing that does not allow the privilege either of presentation or mechanism in beholding the work. In this perceptual mode of gradual familiarization, final judgment is what one keeps; all intermediate processing is opaque.

As an aesthetic framework, any such model that connects perception with memory will do so through the bridge of temporality. What comes first is absorbed purely through perception, where it is not yet memory, and then it passes into memory, where it is no longer perception. In Bergson's diagram, this temporal membrane is clear-cut: the isometrically laid-out plane represents a moving, shifting event stream with S as the point of subjectively focused individual awareness acquiring new information over time. And memory as a process is possible because perceptual input that occurs at one point in time is superseded by subsequent, different input at later moments, and displaced earlier impressions are retained. From the perspective of this model, one significant feature of minimalism is its atemporal and antisubjective nature. It denies the possibility of selective perception of its "subsequentness" by

forcing all reading of a work as something utterly without idiosyncrasy or irregularity. From a relentless sense of equivalence and symmetry, the same perceptual experience results, regardless of the angle or position of the observer, and impedes the possibility of encountering a work in a subjective, comparative, or relative-to-others way.

To experience the minimalist aesthetic is to experience separation. The unadorned symmetries of the box, minimalism's canonical geometry, bring the viewer all the intimacy of a numeric equation. The *subject* in this world is an option, and not one accommodated by the work. With its mute and featureless character, the possibility of *subjectivity*—the notion of a central and special position for the viewer—in minimalist art would remain out of reach, indefinitely suspended, were it not for Neumann's turn, a subjectivity-adding correction produced without altering the constants of minimalism (i.e., emphasis on formal qualities; the use of fabrication over evidence of the human hand; repeating, symmetric, or serial regularity of structure and placement). Neumann expands these constants by actually *embedding* subjectivity directly into the work while still employing a rather utilitarian minimalist vernacular. Rather than altering the formal circumstances that deny subjectivity, such as by *contamination*, that is, introducing symmetry-destroying

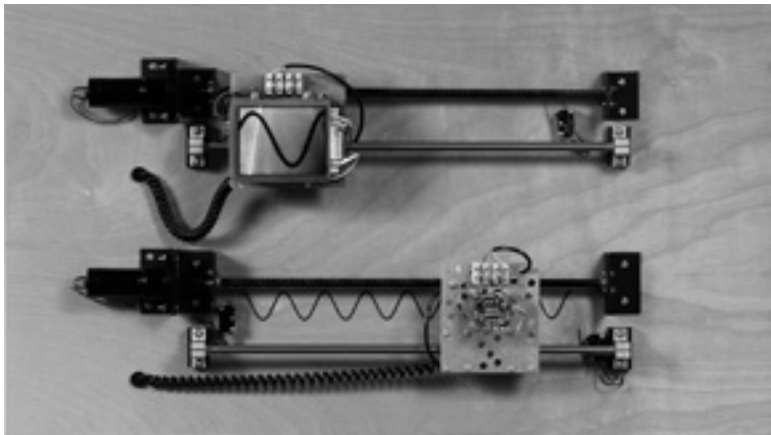


FIGURE 4 Andrew Neumann, *Phase Cancellation with Sine Wave*, 2005. Digital photo, LCD screens, solid-state video. 30" × 40" × 5".