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MAKING SOUND VISIBLE: SYNAESTHESIA AND SPECTATORSHIP
IN MEDIA ART

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PRESENTED
AS PARTIAL REQUIREMENT
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BY
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NELSON L. HENRICKS

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For Neil Henricks (1940-2013)
and Zelda Nelson (1943-2015)
whom I lost on the way.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette thèse recherche-création explore différentes modalités pour rendre le son visible, en ciblant la question *Qu'est-ce que cela signifie de rendre le son visible?* Ma recherche est ancrée dans un projet de création intitulé *A Lecture on Art*, une installation vidéo à quatre écrans. Cette oeuvre est basée sur un texte d'Oscar Wilde, lequel promeut l'Esthétisme, un mouvement en art et design anglais qui a émergé à l'époque Victorienne. En utilisant la recherche-création comme méthodologie, j'examine comment l'acte de rendre la production de la trame sonore d'un film visible peut affecter le public de l'art contemporain. Je me sers de la synesthésie comme instrument philosophique pour analyser cet acte et pour explorer la place de la perception synesthésique dans l'histoire de l'art du 19e et du 20e siècle : la synesthésie est dépeinte comme un catalyseur pour l'abstraction moderniste, ainsi que pour l'émergence des pratiques intermediales au 20e siècle. J'esquisse la transformation de l'esthétique de la fin du 19e siècle à nos jours. Dans ce processus, je positionne des pratiques sociales marginales en relation aux idéologies dominantes et une argumentation est construite pour l'utilisation de l'*affect* dans la théorie et la pratique de l'art. En décrivant mon cadre théorique, je justifie l'utilisation d'anecdotes autobiographiques comme moyen de présenter la collecte de donnée effectuée durant le travail en atelier. Je postule que les pratiques en art peuvent être comprise comme de la recherche, et je justifie comment nous pouvons qualifier cette connaissance produite en atelier. En suivant le fil synesthésique qui traverse l'histoire de l'art, j'élabore les nouvelles perspectives concernant la place de l'esthétique et le *spectatorship* dans la pratique et théorie de l'art.

MOTS CLÉS: synesthésie, *spectatorship*, médiation, intermedia, arts médiatiques, marges, technologies de la communication, esthétisme, esthétique, affect, recherche-création en atelier

ABSTRACT

This research-creation thesis explores different modalities of seeing sound and focuses on the question *What does it mean to make sound visible?* My research is anchored in the creation project *A Lecture on Art*, a four-screen video installation. This artwork is based on a text by Oscar Wilde promoting Aestheticism, a British art and design movement that emerged in the Victorian era. Using research-creation as a methodology, I analyze how making the production of a film's soundtrack visible affects contemporary art audiences. I employ synaesthesia as a philosophical instrument to examine this act, and explore the place of cross-modal sensory perception in nineteenth- and twentieth-century art history: synaesthesia is depicted as a catalyst for Modernist abstraction, and for the emergence of twentieth-century intermedia practices. I chart the transformation of aesthetics from the late nineteenth century to the current day. In the process, I situate marginal social practices in relation to dominant ideologies and an argument is made for *affect* in art theory and practice. When outlining my theoretical framework, I justify the use of autobiographical anecdotes as a means to present data collected during studio-based research. I make an argument for art practice as research, and attempt to qualify how knowledge is produced in the studio. By following this synaesthetic thread that runs through art history, I offer new perspectives on the place of aesthetics and spectatorship in art theory and practice.

KEY WORDS: synaesthesia, spectatorship, mediation, intermedia, media art, margins, communications technology, Aestheticism, aesthetics, affect, studio based-practice

INTRODUCTION

This research-creation thesis examines the question of making the production of sound visible in media artworks, and speculates on what ramifications this act can have for spectators. The focus of my doctoral work is a four-channel video installation titled *A Lecture on Art* (2015), which was presented at Galerie Dazibao in Montréal during the spring of 2015. Based on a kind of visual score, *A Lecture on Art* rendered the production of the soundtrack visible in a number of ways. In my research, I employ cross-modal sensory perception—a phenomenon more commonly referred to as *synaesthesia*—as a tool to analyse the different ways I make the production of sound visible in my art practice. In this introduction, I convey information on synaesthesia by way of an autobiographical anecdote. This is followed by a historical overview of Victorian communication technology, scientific and cultural perspectives on synaesthesia, and synaesthesia's role in the emergence of aesthetic modernism. The confluence of scientific, technological, and artistic perspectives in the late nineteenth century is an important point of reference for *A Lecture on Art*, and lays the groundwork for a more detailed discussion of these ideas in subsequent chapters. When outlining my theoretical framework, I justify the use of autobiographical anecdotes as a means to present data collected during studio-based research. Finally, I offer a brief overview of the contents of the thesis chapter by chapter.

0.1 Description of the Creation Project

While reading Richard Ellmann's biography of Oscar Wilde in 2012, I made a fascinating discovery: a text written by Wilde that had been annotated to record his speech, cadence, and inflection. What I found intriguing about this text was that it acted as a sound recording: a visual score.

(– –) Everything made by the hand of man | is either ∘ug°ly | or (/) ∘beauti°ful; (– –) and it might as well be beautiful as (/) ∘ug°ly. (– –) Nothing that is made | is °too ∘poor [pooah], | or °too (/) ∘trivi°al, | (– –) to be made with an idea [ideah], | of pleasing the aesthetic ∘eye.

   ∘Americans, | ∘as a class, | °are not (/) ∘practical, (– –) though you may laugh | at the (/) ∘assertion. (– –) When I enter [entah] a room, | I see a carpet of (\) vulgar [vulgah] (/) ∘pattern, | (– –) a cracked plate upon the (/) ∘wall, | (– –) with a peacock feather stuck °be∘hind °it. (– –) I sit down | upon a badly glued | machine-made (/) ∘chair [chaah], | that creaks | upon being (/) ∘touched; | (– –) I see | a gaudy gilt horror, | in the shape | of a (/) ∘mirror, | (– –) and a cast-iron monstrosity | for a °chande∘lier. (– –) Everything I see | was made to (/) ∘sell. (Ellmann, 1988, p. 629)

This excerpt is part of longer text that Wilde wrote during his North American lecture tour of 1882. He was twenty-five years old, and had not yet produced the works for which he would be best remembered. His travels lasted fourteen months, and took him from New York City to cities along the Eastern seaboard, up to Canada, and to the American West. Wilde gave several lectures in New York, a city that functioned as his home base. The American actress Helen Potter presumably attended one of the New York events. Potter made a living impersonating well-known public figures on stage. She transcribed and annotated Wilde's lecture, recording the cadence and inflection of his voice for posterity. Later, this text, along with several others, was published in a volume titled *Impersonations* (1891). Potter's annotated text acts as a visual score: a method for sound recording and reproduction in an era when emergent audio technologies were forcing a shift from a textual culture to an oral one.

The emergence of communications technologies such as the telegraph, the telephone, and the phonograph in the nineteenth century occurs in an era obsessed with preserving the human voice. It is also an epoch intrigued by the potential of communicating with the dead: at séances, female mediums channelled spirits from the afterlife, occasionally embodying male voices. Potter's annotation and performance of Wilde's voice can be aligned with these twin impulses. The

emergence of communications technology and mediumship are strongly intertwined in the Victorian imagination, raising questions about vocal embodiment, gender, and social agency.

The four-channel video installation presented at Dazibao is based on Helen Potter's annotation of Wilde's voice. The images were projected on the north, south, east, and west walls of the darkened gallery, lending the work an overall cross-shaped configuration. Due to this arrangement, the viewer was not able to see all screens simultaneously.
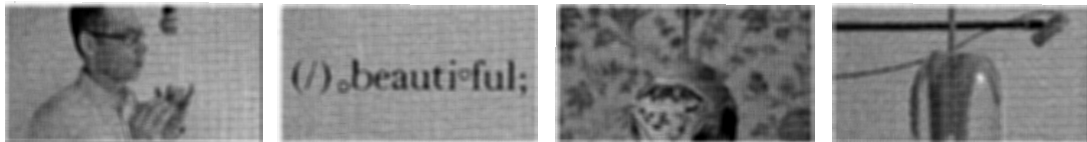
Figure 0.1: *A Lecture on Art*, screens 1 through 4, Nelson Henricks (2015)

On the first screen, I perform Wilde's text following the inflection and intonation indicated by Potter on the second screen. The annotated text is presented like a slideshow, but edited to follow the rhythm of my speaking voice. On the third screen the spectator sees a film for which the spoken text acted as voice-over. Images and objects related to Wilde's text appeared on this screen, though the film was not strictly illustrative of his words: at times, the direct relationship between word and image was interrupted. This alternating relationship between illustration and interruption stymies audience expectations and creates points of tension. When anticipated correlations do not appear, the spectator is compelled to make an intuitive leap. In this way, the images open up Wilde's words to interpretation and critique.

Finally, on the fourth screen, the viewer sees objects being manipulated to produce sound effects. In film, foley artists create sounds that augment filmic reality. Like the voice emanating from the first screen, the sound effects from the fourth screen were heard throughout the entire space. *A Lecture on Art* is the

culmination of a decade-long series of works focussing on different modalities of making sound visible. These projects make the synaesthetic nature of the video medium explicit. Multiscreen, spatialized presentations of video works imply new modes of spectatorship, ones that break with the proscenium frontality of cinema. Placing the public in immersive multiscreen environments calls into question conventional cinematic experiences.

In the hyphenated category *research-creation*, does *research* refer to writing and *creation* to studio practice? This was a question I asked myself when I began making *A Lecture on Art*. Research is presumably more rigorous and academic; creation is open-ended, airy, and artistic. The ordering of the two terms—research before creation—implies that text-based research precedes, frames, or anchors the flightiness of creation: a term such as *creation-research* would imply a completely different procedure. Rather than engaging in hierarchical thinking, I have chosen to think of research-creation as a lateral construct: as two categories that mutually reinforce one another. Studio-based creation is a form of research. Text-based research can be creative and open-ended. My work over the past three decades has been committed to experimentation and innovation. These are not just aesthetic affectations, but ways to engage in experimental thinking and to produce new knowledge. This text integrates experimental techniques as a means to think through problems in alternative ways.

As a methodology, research-creation frames my creative process, data collection, and the composition of this text. It welcomes interdisciplinary approaches, permitting various theoretical currents to be allied. In my research I have privileged cross-filiations, gravitating towards artists, authors, or texts that forge links between two or more disciplinary fields. I strive to bring to light ideas that may be secondary to an artist's or author's primary argument, and, in this way, I create new knowledge.

One of the principle aims of this text is to chart the wayward path of synaesthesia in art throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

In doing so, I hope to trace the correspondence between the early modernist fascination with cross-model sensory perception and the history of communications technology, and examine how this informs my own practice in time-based media art. Tracing the synaesthetic thread that winds its way through art history, I examine how the question of cross-model sensory perception has been taken up by various artists and thinkers, and its subsequent transformation along the way.

0.2 Autobiographical Anecdote: Synaesthesia

Why would a letter of the alphabet have a colour? This was a question I asked myself at some point in my late twenties. Perhaps there was some multicoloured alphabet book I had read when I was a child that had imprinted these strong associations between colours and letters in my mind. What intrigued me was how consistent these associations were, especially when I was thinking about someone's name. Alice would be light blue, Bruce would be a dark reddish-brown, Charles would be white. The first letter of a person's name would colour the word completely. The same was true of the person's surname. If I forgot someone's name, I might only be able to recall it by its colours. This was sometimes useful in jogging my memory and helping me out of a potentially embarrassing situation. Some years later I learned that this phenomenon had a name: synaesthesia. Naming the condition lent some coherency to my experience, though for some reason I didn't think of my letter-colour associations as synaesthesia, or of myself as a synaesthete. In my imagination, synaesthesia was something dramatic, spectacular even. My own experience of letter-colour association was something discrete and unassuming, existing on the threshold of consciousness. I later learned that the intensity of synaesthesia varies from one person to another. For some it is subtle. For others it is overwhelming, almost debilitating.

The synaesthetic tendency for an initial letter to tint an entire word expands outward to the things they stand for. Months and days of the week take on the

colours of their names: I associate the month of May with red, and Thursday is always a deep, dark blue. The colours however, are not so intrusive that the experience of looking at a calendar or reading a book becomes the equivalent of navigating a rainbow. A page full of words does not resemble a colour chart. Instead, the colours arrive more like a memory. If I shift my focus from a word's meaning to its appearance, the colours come. So, for example, a typed list of words beginning with the same letter—*sample, sonnet, sunset, syrup*—produces a strong sense of a specific shade of yellow. This method—typing out lists of words to generate colours—was my starting point in 2012 when creating a series of twenty-six monochromatic paintings: a synaesthetic alphabet. I liked how the idiom of abstract, non-objective painting could be used to represent an intensely subjective state that is directly linked to language. The fact that I am colour-blind undermined the rigour of this exercise considerably. Persons affected by colour-vision deficiency have a decreased ability to see colour accurately. In my case, my red-green blindness causes me to confuse blue with purple, green with brown, and grey with pink—and so on. The inability to discriminate many colours from one another lent a comedic and paradoxical aspect to this exercise. How could I be certain that the blue I associate with the letter *A* was, in fact, blue? How could I be sure that the colour I was mixing on my palette matched the blue I saw in my head? Alas, my attempt at representing subjective experience was certainly doomed to failure. Paradoxes such as these fascinate me.

0.3   Synaesthesia: A Brief Description

synaesthesia
From the Greek *syn-* (with, together with, by means of, at the same time as) and *-aesthesis* from the Greek *aisthesis* (sensation) (Webster's Third International Dictionary, 1961)

Synaesthesia is a neurological condition "occurring when stimulation of one sensory modality automatically triggers a perception in a second modality" (Baron-Cohen and Harrison, 1997, p. 3). Cross-modal connectivity within the human brain can manifest itself in multiple ways. For example, in grapheme-colour synaesthesia, numbers or letters of the alphabet are associated with colours. Music-colour synaesthetes, on the other hand, see colour in response to sound.

Among the earliest references to synaesthesia is John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), in which he discusses a blind man's ability to associate colours with music. A wide-ranging interest in synaesthesia on the part of both artists and scientists, however, did not flourish until the mid-nineteenth century. Théophile Gautier's descriptions of coloured hearing (*l'audition colorée*) in the 1840s were influential for Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud. Baudelaire's poem "Correspondances" (1857/1978) and Rimbaud's "Voyelles" (1871/2010) both refer overtly to synaesthesia. Both poets are associated with Symbolism, a movement in French art and literature that included the writers Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Joris-Karl Huysmanns, and visual artists such as Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau, and Édouard Vuillard. For the Symbolists, the senses and sensuality were of great importance: their interest in synaesthesia extends from this.

My intention here is not to provide a detailed history of synaesthesia. This task has been taken on by many authors and researchers, and it is work that need not be repeated (Baron-Cohen and Harrison, 1997; Dann, 1998). What interests me specifically is how an interest in synaesthesia occurs at a crucial art-historical moment. In the visual arts, it is possible to trace a synaesthetic path from Symbolism to Aestheticism, to visual music in painting, and, ultimately, to visual abstraction. In the chapters that follow, I will link synaesthesia to the emergence of aesthetic Modernism. Growing interest in synaesthesia in the arts was paralleled by the arrival of communications technology in Western culture. Between 1840 and 1900, society was transformed by inventions such as the telegraph, the telephone,

the gramophone, photography, and cinema. Fascination with synaesthesia arrived at a historical moment when new technologies called into question the relationship of sensory perception to the body.

Mechanically reproduced images liberated artists from representing reality. As a reaction against Realism, Symbolism is one point of origin for Modernism in the visual arts. Recall Théophile Gautier, who wrote descriptions of coloured hearing in the 1840s. Gautier also coined the maxim *l'art pour l'art*—art for art's sake—a philosophy of artistic autonomy that resonated throughout the twentieth century. Gautier's ideas would have a profound influence on the English art historians John Ruskin and Walter Pater. By the 1880s, Ruskin's and Pater's teachings had coalesced into a British art movement called Aestheticism. A broad-based arts and crafts movement, the Aesthetic Movement included the artists James McNeill Whistler, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Aubrey Beardsley. Oscar Wilde was a visible and controversial spokesperson. The use of musical themes and subject matter reflects Aesthetic artists' fascination with synaesthesia. The musical titles for Whistler's paintings—his *nocturnes, harmonies*, and *symphonies*—imply that painting was to be appreciated as music: for its abstract and formal qualities alone.

The 1880s saw a marked upsurge in scientific research on the subject of synaesthesia also. Among the first medical descriptions of the phenomenon is Francis Galton's *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (1883). In it, Galton reported on coloured vowels and the correspondence between sound and vision. A veritable explosion of research into synaesthesia follows, one that persisted until the 1930s (Baron-Cohen and Harrison, 1997, p. 4). According to John E. Harrison and Simon Baron-Cohen, this slackening of interest was due to the rise of behaviourism in the social sciences (ibid.). Richard E. Cytowic confirms this (1997, p. 20). Cytowic also suggests there may also be a concurrence between homosexuality and synaesthesia. This correlation is interesting to consider within the context of the Aesthetic movement, where the two were also interconnected.

While synaesthesia fell from favour within the scientific community during the twentieth century, artists, filmmakers, and composers continued to explore the possibility of cross-modal sensory perception. A synaesthetic thread runs through twentieth-century visual and time-based art: from Scriabin's musical composition accompanied by colour organ (Brougher, 2005, p. 73) to Kandinsky's paintings and stage pieces, and from Eisenstein's theories of film montage to Gene Youngblood's expanded cinema of the 1960s and 1970s. This fascination is perhaps owing to the high frequency of synaesthesia occurring in individuals working in the creative sector. Neuroscientific and neuropsychological perspectives that reveal the incidence of synaesthesia in the general population varies from one in 25 000 to one in 200. Ramachandran and Hubbard claim that synaesthesia is more prevalent in poets and artists who regularly construct meaning via unlikely connections: they propose that synaesthesia can help us understand the brain's capacity for metaphor, and the origins of language (2001, pp. 18–23).

For many years, my work in video installation has explored different modalities of making sound visible. In certain installations, the production of the soundtrack—an activity that is normally concealed from the spectator—is made visible and explicit. This act of representation opens a metatextual space in the work, a vantage point from which viewers can witness the work in the process of creating itself: it functions as a distancing device. In other videos, text functions as a visual score, at once generating the soundtrack while simultaneously representing it visually. Images of sound waves featured in certain installations literally make sound visible for the spectator. For this reason, synaesthesia asserts itself as an appropriate means to reflect on diverse modalities of visibility. It offers an opportunity to examine what it means for spectators of multichannel video installation works to have synaesthetic experiences, and make the production of sound visible for them.

0.4   Theoretical Framework and Anecdotal Theory

My theoretical framework is an interweaving of six trajectories: research-creation, art history, communication theory, social history, poststructuralist philosophy, and identity politics. I am using intermedia as a model: points of overlap between these disciplines are seen as less important than the margins that lay between them. I occupy and activate these intervals in order to make new connections.

I have distributed information gathered during studio-based research throughout the following chapters in the form of autobiographical anecdotes. The periodic intervention of an auto-ethnographic voice allows important information to enter via an alternate route, thus lending the thesis text a more porous and open-ended structure. In his article, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," Joel Fineman argues that, as a literary form, the anecdote is "a prescriptive opening that forever forecloses any finalizing or finitizing closure" (1989, p. 61). Anecdotes undermine the authority of theory, and force it to reckon with lived experience. Using Fineman's ideas as a base, Jane Gallop has developed a new way of theorizing which she calls *anecdotal theory*. In her book of the same name, she writes:

> Theory has a considerable will to power; it wants to comprehend all it surveys. Theory tends to defend against what threatens that sense of mastery. Theory likes to set up an ideal realm where it need encounter no obstacle to the expansion of its understanding. ... Anecdotal theory drags theory into a scene where it must struggle for mastery. (2002, p. 15)

The autobiographical anecdotes acknowledge the intertwined relationship of theory and practice, and strive to anchor speculative thinking in an experiential base.

Explorations of art history and communication theory have contributed greatly to the creation of *A Lecture on Art* and to the writing of this text. In art-historical terms, the period I am concerned with spans from 1850 to the present day. I have

given special focus to Aestheticism (1880–1900), Minimalism and Conceptualism (1960–1976), and to neo-conceptualist practices in contemporary time-based art (roughly 1990 to the present day). Research into video art and video-installation art has been significant when developing my arguments concerning interdisciplinarity, intermedia, and spatialization. Via the notions of *media art* and *medium*, playful links are made between contemporary art and Victorian *mediumship*. That said, the principle goal of art-historical research has been to provide a frame for my art practice in general, and for the installation *A Lecture on Art* in particular.

Time-based media art shares a common border with communication theory. My research has focussed on the birth of communications technology in the nineteenth century, the emergence of media art in the twentieth century, and the repercussions that new technologies (and reconfigured old technologies) have had in the twenty-first century. Using the arrival of the telegraph, the telephone, and the gramophone as a point of departure, I explore nineteenth-century vocal culture in Britain and America, and the link between Victorian technology and the spiritualist movement. This research situates Helen Potter's annotation and performance of Oscar Wilde's voice in a social historical context.

In contemporary art, the influence of structuralist and poststructuralist authors such as Roland Barthes and Jean-François Lyotard has had a deep impact. The linguistic turn that marked the arrival of conceptual art in the 1960s saw artists exploring semiotics and the materiality of language, thus paving the way for the use of narrative and storytelling in the 1970s. As an artist who works with language, I am drawn to structuralist and poststructuralist theory. While I acknowledge that art-historical writing from this perspective asserts a bias over my practice, I see poststructuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and feminism as porous categories: socio-economic analysis and identity politics nuance my arguments in specific ways. As a blanket term, identity politics parenthetically contains postcolonial theory, feminism, queer theory, and race politics. Identity here refers to subjectivity and subject positions from which social effects (politics) emerge. This dynamic can

be summed up by the feminist slogan "The personal is political." Personal experience affects how individuals engage with social structures. Identity politics is a useful tool for examining homosexuality, gender, and voice in the Victorian context, and makes it possible to unfold a social or political dimension from *A Lecture on Art.*

In chapter 1, I provide a brief history of video as a creative medium, and describe its crossover with experimental cinema, dance, music, and expanded cinema practices in the 1960s and 1970s. A preoccupation with diverse modalities of making sound visible guided my research from 2004 to 2014. Video installations I created during this period addressed this question in different ways. I position my research-creation project *A Lecture on Art* in relation to a personal history of time-based media. In doing so, I lay the groundwork for a discussion of the question of interdisciplinarity in chapter 2. I employ the notion of *intermedia* to reflect on the radical potential contained in marginal spaces. I use research-creation methodology to examine studio-based art practice: I explore the artist's studio as a site for the generation of new knowledge. I will examine studio-based research and attempt to quantify the knowledge produced there.

Following this, I discuss the video installation *A Lecture on Art* in three different ways. In chapter 3, I examine historical perspectives on synaesthesia, Oscar Wilde, and the Aesthetic Movement. I position Victorian vocal culture and technological mediation of the human voice in relation to mediumship and male impersonation. I make the politics embedded in these acts explicit. Chapter 4 explores the history of synaesthesia and multiscreen presentation devices in twentieth-century art. I depict the position of the spectator in relation to these phenomena as one that oscillates between engagement and disengagement. Critical engagement is fostered via this fluctuation. The spectator is granted the potential for self-empowerment.

The conclusion examines *A Lecture on Art* in relation to aesthetics and synaesthesia. Wilde's *Lecture on Art* is an appeal for aesthetics and the beautiful. Common conceptions of these ideas have transformed greatly since the end of the

nineteenth century: beauty is no longer beautiful. In light of the *deskilling* of art practices that occurred from Impressionism onward, notions such as *aura* (Benjamin) and *affect* supplanted aesthetics. Using this as a starting point, I will examine how works I produced either concurrently with, or following, *A Lecture on Art,* signal a material turn in my practice. New materialism offers a compelling vantage point from which to examine *A Lecture on Art* and the works exhibited with it, as well as subsequent projects that investigate the question of aesthetics and artists' labour in the studio. Do these projects indicate a movement away from language and towards materiality? I will attempt to account for why I feel this has occurred in my practice, and what ramifications this could have for other artists, and for art-historical discourse.

CHAPTER I

HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK & RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1.1 Introduction

Artistic experimentation with film and performance art arose during the earliest moments of the twentieth century; the emergence of single- and multi-channel video art in the 1960s built and extended upon these pioneering efforts. My practice in the field of video art occupies a place in contemporary media-art history. It is useful to situate my practice and the distinct set of questions that *A Lecture on Art* raises within the broader framework of twentieth- and twenty-first-century time-based art. In this way, my research objectives can be contextualized and explained.

The bulk of this chapter recounts a history of video art and video-installation art as they are linked to my research-creation project, with a focus on specific artists and works that are relevant to my practice. This is in some ways a personal history: I will describe specific videos and installations in detail, especially as they relate to my research-creation project. Readers desiring a less subjective description of the video-art history may refer to Appendix A: "A Brief History of Video Art."

My research question emerges from a thirty-year practice in the fields of contemporary and time-based art. It is important to orient the reader to my previous work to provide a methodological context. I will devote some pages to a survey of my videos and installations produced since 1988, honing in on specific works that relate to *A Lecture on Art*. The final sections of this chapter present the research problem, and articulate my research question and objectives as they relate to my practice, and to broader social contexts.

1.1.1. A Brief History of Time-Based Art

A Lecture on Art's hybridized mixing of different forms of time-based art extends from art movements originating in the first half of the twentieth century. The Futurists, Dadaists, and Surrealists were the first to explore performance art, audio art, and experimental film, often in relation to concerns arising from more traditional forms such as painting and sculpture. When the centre of avant-garde activity shifted from Paris to New York during the Second World War, artists' uses of time-based media became nuanced by other concerns. The blurring of disciplinary boundaries—between dance, music, theatre, and the visual arts—was one means for the avant-garde to expand conventional definitions of visual art. The events at Black Mountain College in 1950s—and John Cage's "Theatre Piece No. 1" (1952) in particular—set the agenda for time-based art practices in the 1960s. Many artists associated with the Fluxus movement were Cage's students at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Marcel Duchamp's objective of blurring the frontier between art and life also informed their anti-expressionistic, comic, and understated performances of the Fluxus group. Duchamp's aspirations harmonized with Cage's collapsing of disciplinary boundaries. Both Cage and Duchamp's preoccupations signalled a movement away from reductive formalism toward an art of ideas.

The Korean artist Nam June Paik was initially associated with the Fluxus movement. Nearly every account of the history of video art identifies him as the first artist to work with video, though this status has come to be seen as contentious (Rosler, 1990, p. 44). In fact, video first appeared in gallery environments when Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell, who was operating under the influence of Duchamp's ready-mades and Cubist collage practices, integrated televisions into his installations in 1958. What does make Paik unique in this historical context was his sustained and wide-ranging exploration of video as a creative medium. Paik, who was

educated in experimental music in Cologne, Germany, (and where, coincidentally, he first met John Cage), had some experience with film, magnetic tape, and electronics before coming to video. In his experiments during the early 1960s, Paik customized the internal circuitry of functioning television sets in order to distort their imagery. With the help of Jud Yalkut, he documented these interventions on 16mm film: this footage was later edited into finished films co-authored with Yalkut.

Similar to Vostell, Paik also integrated television sets into art-gallery installations, a gesture that can be situated in relation to Duchamp's found-object practice. Many artists at the time were incorporating everyday objects into their art. Robert Rauschenberg, also a student of Cage's from the Black Mountain years, invented what he called the *combine*: paintings that integrated three-dimensional objects to the point that painting became sculptural. Like Paik's gallery installations, Rauschenberg's combines also owed a debt to Duchamp's ready-mades. Paik's innovative work, then, occurred in a context in which the appropriation of mass-produced objects and images was accepted and encouraged.

Found object and collage aesthetics, combined with a will towards interdisciplinarity, gave birth to what Dick Higgins of the Fluxus group would later term *intermedia*: an attention to the spaces or gaps between disciplines. Intermedia is distinct from interdisciplinarity. Whereas interdisciplinarity describes a place of contact between two disciplines, intermedia suggests filling a gap that separates two mediums. So, for example, an interdisciplinary combination of music and theatre provides us with opera. The intermedia space between music and theatre gives us George Brecht's *Drip Music* (1962), a performance in which the artist, standing on top of a stepladder, pours water from a watering can into a metal bucket. Based in an expanded, Cagean definition of music and a Duchampean urge to eradicate the boundary between art and everyday life, Brecht's performances emphasized the visual aspects of sound production.

In 1965, the Sony Portapak, the first commercially available portable video camera, was introduced onto the consumer market: Paik was quick to purchase one. The Portapak recorded video on reel-to-reel magnetic tape similar to audio-recording technologies with which he would have previously worked. From this moment onward, Paik launched a wide-ranging exploration of video, uncovering every possibility the medium offered: from single-channel videos to sculptural environments built with television; from Fluxus-styled performances to live satellite broadcasts. In this innovative period of his career—from roughly 1965 to 1975—Paik would exhaust many of the possibilities that the video medium had to offer, and would set solid precedents for future decades of exploration. And so, although Paik was not the first person to use video per se, he was unique in the depth and breadth of his practice.

Paik's research coincided with the birth of a global information culture. He was directly influenced by Marshall McLuhan's writings on mass media and globalization. However, during the 1960s, tendencies other than the work of Paik and Fluxus would influence the emergence of video as a creative medium. The first years of the decade witnessed the arrival of a new generation of college- or university-educated artists who, like the Fluxus artists, reacted against abstract expressionism and formalism. Minimalism—and later conceptualism—significantly redefined notions of audience involvement and artists' labour. It was particularly under conceptualism that artists' uses of film, video, and audio flourished. Turning their backs on medium specificity, conceptual artists chose materials or forms that best suited the ideas they were working with: content trumped form. With direct links to Duchamp, conceptual art was characterized by the use of language. Similar to Fluxus *event scores*, or Cage's visual scores, some conceptual artworks existed only as written statements. Conceptual art placed emphasis on process instead of product. Some artists questioned the commodification of art, and pursued the dematerialization of the art object. Others eschewed the production of objects altogether, instead opting to engage in *body art*, which later developed into

performance art. The dematerialization of the art object prompted artists to use the body as a specific site and as a medium for creation. Ephemeral, performative acts were yet another method to evade the art market. Unstable, impermanent, or mass-produced media that problematized the notion of a unique or original commodity were also amenable to these aims: artists gravitated towards the use of photography, film, and video. Compared to film, video was immediate, accessible, easy to operate, and affordable. Many artists began performing in their studios solely for the eye of the video camera. A grainy, grey-and-white Portapak-image aesthetic characterizes the production of the first generation of artists exploring video.

Generally speaking, videos made on the Portapak were unedited, single takes: no editing equipment was commercially available. These videos usually present the artist performing for a static camera, using the playback monitor as a visual reference. Watching oneself on a video screen while performing for a camera was akin to performing in front of a mirror. In the text *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism* (1986), Rosalind Krauss analyzes performances of the 1960s and 1970s conceived for the video camera. Describing the performer's use of instantaneous feedback and the monitor-as-mirror, Krauss draws attention to the double meaning of the word *medium*. In Modernist, Greenbergian parlance, the medium refers to the material characteristics of a given art form. But what does it mean to infer that the essential characteristic of video is not a physical substance, but a psychological model? To support this shifting use of the word *medium* from the material to the psychological, Krauss remarks:

> Everyday speech contains an example of the word *medium* used in a psychological sense; the uncommon terrain for that common-enough usage is the world of parapsychology: telepathy, extrasensory perception, and communication with an afterlife, for which people with certain kind of psychic powers are understood to be mediums. (1986, p. 180)

For Krauss, the body of the performer, bracketed within the instant feedback loop of the video camera and television monitor, becomes a mediumistic conduit. She underscores the paradoxical relationship of embodiment and disembodiment to communications technology. Her recuperation of this other sense of the word *medium* lends new meaning to McLuhan's adage "The medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7).

Many performance-based videos of the 1960s emerging from body art are concerned with corporeality and embodiment: the body as material, as instrument, as site. The artist is usually mute in these pieces. Other performance-based videos investigate language, and ultimately, spoken-word narrative. Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, and William Wegman relied on monologues to investigate the psychodynamic relationship between performer and spectator (Acconci), to juxtapose language and image in an exploration of semiotics (Baldessari), or to subvert popular culture (Wegman). The deployment of narrative in Canadian artist Lisa Steele's videos works to explore the question of embodied memory. When reading the scars on her body (*Birthday Suit: Scars and Defects*, 1974) or recounting the story of her mother's death (*A Very Personal Story*, 1974), Steele examines the way in which memory is linked to embodiment.

Figure 1.1: *The Ballad of Dan Peoples,* Lisa Steele (1976)

Of works she produced during this period, Steele's *The Ballad of Dan Peoples* (1976) is noteworthy. In this single-channel video, the spectator sees the artist seated facing

the camera. She is wearing a man's dress shirt which is unbuttoned to reveal her torso; in her lap is a small, framed photograph over which she places her hand, partially obscuring the image. In an eight-minute, unedited long-take, she recites a disjointed stream-of-consciousness narrative, mimicking the speech and vocal mannerisms of her dead grandfather. Eventually the photograph is revealed to be a portrait of the same. Steele, performing within the mirror-like, instant feedback loop of a video camera connected to a television monitor, acts as a mediumistic conduit for a dead spirit in the sense implied by Krauss above.

The 1960s were a period of unprecedented crossover between the visual arts, dance, film, and music. Take for example, this photo documenting a performance of Steve Reich's *Pendulum Music* (1968) at the Whitney Museum of American Art.
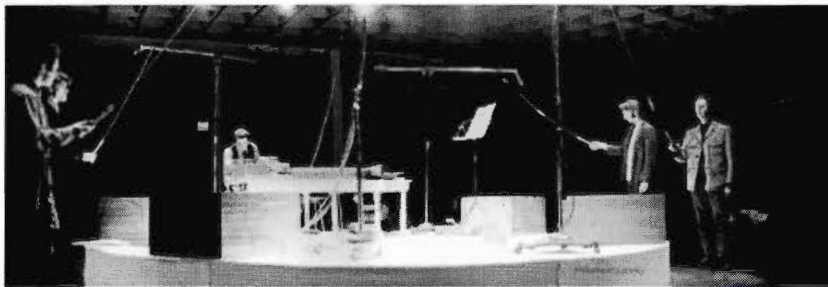
Figure 1.2: Steve Reich's *Pendulum Music* (1968) at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1969)

Reich is a well-known composer of minimalist music. The list of written instructions for *Pendulum Music* does not resemble a musical score. Similar to a Fluxus event score, the detailed written instructions are like a proposal for a piece of conceptual art. The performers are asked to switch on the microphones and release them. The microphones swing like pendulums above the live speakers, producing rhythmic waves of squealing feedback as they gradually slow to a standstill.

The image above shows, on the extreme left, the artist Richard Serra and the composer James Tenney, and on the extreme right, the artists Bruce Nauman and Michael Snow, all of whom Reich invited to participate in the work. Nauman, with

his parallel use of film, video, photography, holography, and sculpture, is a prototypical conceptualist, choosing the medium that best serves the idea he is exploring. Like Nauman, Snow has also worked in diverse media. Serra, who made films, videos, and sculptures, championed Snow's film *Wavelength* (1967), and presented it publicly on numerous occasions. Composers such as Reich frequently performed in galleries or museums: contemporary art audiences were often more receptive to the process-oriented nature of their music. This deskilling of the musician/performers extends from Duchamp's will to collapse the boundaries between art and life to Fluxus concerts that propagated this philosophy.
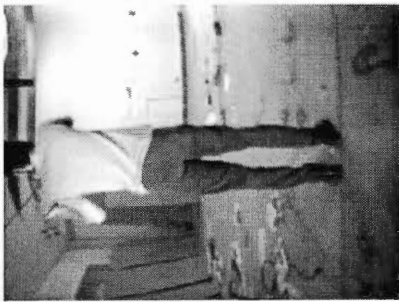
Figure 1.3: *Violin Tuned D.E.A.D.,* Bruce Nauman (1969)

Interdisciplinary crossover between conceptual art and minimalist music is literally embodied in videos such as Bruce Nauman's *Violin Tuned D.E.A.D* (1969). This work is part of a series that Nauman produced during this period in which he documented repetitive activities in his studio. Actions are performed for the camera for the entire length of a reel of videotape, thus suggesting endless or perpetual activities without beginning or end. In the video, Nauman has retuned the four strings of a violin to the notes D, E, A, and D. At approximately six-second intervals, he draws the bow across the strings, producing a resonant chord. Nauman contrasts linguistic signification (the word *dead*) with musical abstraction (the sound of the chord D-E-A-D). If Nauman is making the violin speak, how does the sound make the listener feel? What affective value does it carry? By emphasizing music's ability

to communicate abstractly, Nauman questions the authority of language in the production of meaning.

The collapsing of disciplinary boundaries that occurred in the 1960s has arguably not been repeated. Perhaps its repetition is now unnecessary. Instead, disciplinary crossover became a model for neo-conceptual artists working today, who, like Nauman, Snow, or Serra, tend to choose the medium that best serves the idea they are addressing. Meanwhile, the intermedial and interdisciplinary character of conceptual art facilitated video's hybridization with other technologies and vernaculars. Film, in both its mainstream and experimental modes, has had a significant influence on video art. The introduction of colour video and video editing in the 1970s permitted artists to mimic cinema and television more directly. Many artists were strongly critical of television, at times appropriating images from pop culture and subverting them. Though video art was strongly linked to television—both as a cultural phenomenon and as a material technology—it also had connections to the history of experimental and narrative film, to sound and audio art, and to performance art, forms whose histories are considerably longer. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, artists drew increasingly from these historical precedents.

Conceptual art's exploration of the materiality of text and language opened the door to storytelling and narrative, a tendency exemplified by artists such as Lisa Steele and William Wegman. New narrative video of the 1980s borrowed aesthetic strategies from mainstream cinema and television, from experimental film, and other sources.[1] The use of autobiographical, fictional, theoretical, and poetic texts lent some of this work a literary flavour. Other artists eschewed spoken or written word altogether, in favour of lyrical visual narrations. Though new-narrative videos generally abandoned an oppositional stance toward television, they nonetheless demonstrated an experimental bias that favoured ambiguity over didacticism. Artists

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[1] It was during the mid-1980s that I first began producing and exhibiting single-channel video, and my work is best understood as operating within the category of new narrative, and its hybridized borrowing from multiple lineages.

such as Gary Hill and Bill Viola are in some ways exemplary of this tendency. In his practice, Viola adopted a vocabulary derived from experimental cinema and electro-acoustic music while eschewing text. Hill's practice, on the other hand, was insistently verbal, examining semiotics, philosophy, and language via spoken-word and on-screen text.

It is worth pausing for a moment to examine *Around & About* (1980) by Gary Hill, both as an example of 1980s narrative work and as a precursor for formal strategies deployed in *A Lecture on Art*. His explorations extend and build upon conceptual uses of language by artists. The foundation for Hill's video is a voice-over: a stream-of-consciousness poem read by the artist himself. The text is composed in the style of a letter, perhaps written in a moment of confrontation. The personal pronouns *I* and *you* are employed throughout—for example, "I think I can agree with myself that it's not a matter of choice. You might think that agreeing is a kind of choice, even a blatant choice, but that's not all you're interested in either" (Hill, 1980). Readers conventionally understand the use of first and second person pronouns to refer to the writer (the "I") and the reader (the "you"). In the case of *Around & About*, "you" seems not to refer to some person in the past, but to the viewer watching the video in the present. It is as if Hill were speaking directly to the spectator: "We can assume there is something happening, or not something happening. I don't know. Perhaps it's unfair to go on" (Hill, 1980). Hill narrates the experience of being a spectator watching a video.

The picture edit of *Around & About* is also noteworthy. The video consists of hundreds of still images that are edited to the rhythm of Hill's voice. On each syllable uttered, Hill cuts from one image to another. This technique has a peculiar effect on the spectator. In an interview, Hill explains:

> The image's existence is directly tied to the speech: unless I speak the image does not change or does not move. This really puts one inside the time of speaking since every syllable produced an image change; suddenly words seem

quite spatial and one is conscious of a single word's time. (Morgan, 2000, p. 217)

The synchronization of word and image locks the spectators' focus in the here-and-now. This technique, combined with a direct address voice-over that narrates the viewing experience, creates a high level of engagement for the spectators, bracketing them in the collapsed present.

The 1990s saw the re-emergence of conceptual art, sometimes referred to as *neo-conceptualism*. Neo-conceptual practices are best exemplified by the Young British Artists, though similar kinds of work were appearing in North America and around the world. Performance-based video made a return, with many artists adopting low-tech Portapak aesthetics of their forbearers. The proliferation of neo-conceptualist practices was paralleled by increased presentation of video installation in museums and gallery contexts. A brief recounting of the history and evolution of video installation and multiscreen projection is useful at this juncture. This also helps situate the research-creation project *A Lecture on Art* and establish my research objectives.

1.1.2. Video Installation and Multiscreen Work

The construction of art environments in exhibition spaces grew directly from contemporary art discourse of the early 1960s that questioned the nature of the gallery. The creation of site-specific works—either inside or outside conventional exhibition venues—opened the possibility of considering *location* as an integral part of the artwork. Site-specific art challenged the primacy of the gallery as the only suitable place for presenting art. Artists began to think of galleries as more than just showrooms: they could just as easily become total information environments in which the audience was situated *inside* the artwork. Happenings, concerts, theatrical tableaux, and multimedia presentations expanded notions of how gallery spaces could

be used. Installation challenged notions of permanency, bringing the process-oriented environment of the artist's studio directly to the audience.

As mentioned previously, the Fluxus artist Wolf Vostell is credited as the first person to introduce television sets into gallery environments—as early as 1958, in most accounts (Rush, 1999; Hanhardt, 2000). Nam June Paik's exhibition at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal, Germany, in 1963 and the group exhibition *TV as a Creative Medium*, presented at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York, in May 1969, are also recognized as watershed moments for video installation and electronic art. Paik was also among the twelve artists who participated in *TV as a Creative Medium*. For the latter half of his career—roughly from the mid-1970s onward—he would dedicate himself to the production of spectacular multichannel video installations, setting an important benchmark for artists who followed.

Multiscreen projection has a much longer history than the video medium, one that is rooted in narrative and experimental cinema. Abel Gance's *Napoleon* and ambitious projections during the 1964 and 1967 World's Fairs are often cited as important precedents, moments when multiscreen was imagined as a commercially viable future for mainstream cinema. The utopian ardour of these proposals, however, faded against the economic and technical realities: this mode of presentation was never adopted by the film industry and was instead relegated to the underground. Filmmakers Jordan Belson, Jud Yalkut, and Stan VanDerBeek—directors whom Gene Youngblood grouped together under the banner of the *Expanded Cinema* (1970) movement—are important pioneers. Andy Warhol is also significant for his work with multiple projections: the double-screen films *Outer and Inner Space* (1966) and *Chelsea Girls* (1966) question linear narrative via the spatialization of cinematic experience.

Artists' exploration of multichannel video during the 1960s and 1970s builds upon these precedents. As mentioned above, Paik's video installations set the agenda for much that would be done in the 1970s and 1980s. Gary Hill and Bill Viola quickly emerged as his successors. Both Viola and Hill actively blended conceptually

based methods with aesthetic strategies derived from underground film and experimental music. Both were key producers of new-narrative work. Rather than taking an oppositional stance towards mainstream media such as film and television, they borrowed these codes and hybridized them with more innovative forms. One major factor that distinguishes Hill and Viola from Paik is their use of frame-accurate synchronization of multiple video signals. Paik played multiple video feeds on a variety of screens, but there was no fixed relationship among the screens as a whole. The images played alongside one another in an aleatory manner. When watching a Paik installation, one has the general impression of information overload: images play against each other in a random manner. Both Viola and Hill, however, began to coordinate the relationship between screens. Frame-accurate synchronization of multiple video signals permitted the artists to control when two or more images would be juxtaposed. In this way, montage is not only linear, but also lateral and spatial, which allows the juxtaposition of images to become more conceptually and aesthetically complex. The technical sophistication of Hill's and Viola's installations positioned them as important forerunners for the use of video in gallery contexts, and, in many ways, they set the standard for multiscreen work during the 1990s and 2000s.

There were, however, artists who reacted against this tendency toward technical sophistication. Neo-conceptual work of the 1990s arose from the wide availability of home video cameras and lightweight, affordable video projectors. Single-channel videos projected in galleries, whether accompanied by other elements or not, were considered video installations. Many of these artists emulated the performance-for-the-camera aesthetic of early video: artists such as Sam Taylor-Wood, Gillian Wearing, and Paul Harrison & John Wood are good examples of this tendency. Their work was often technically simple with minimal attention given to editing, lighting, and framing—lending *arte povera* sensibility to their productions.

The end of cinema's first century also permitted artists to engage in a kind of cinematic archaeology, reassembling the fragments of broken medium and fetishistically re-presenting it. An example of this approach can be found in the work

of Douglas Gordon, an artist closely aligned with the British neo-conceptualist movement of the 1990s. In *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), Gordon presents a VHS copy of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) in frame-by-frame playback mode on a consumer-grade VHS deck. Gordon's practice exemplifies the impoverished ethos that characterized the work of many artists of his generation, but he transposes it from the performative to a found-object aesthetic.

Other artists working at this time would engage in more technologically complex articulations along the lines of Viola and Hill. Stan Douglas's split-screen or multiscreen installations such as *Der Sandmann* (1995) or *Win, Place or Show* (1998) engaged in complex deconstructions of cinema and television, based in the history of the respective mediums. Notable is Douglas's *Pursuit, Fear, Catastrophe: Ruskin, B.C.* (1993) for its use of a player piano in the gallery space: the instrument provides a ghostly musical accompaniment for a silent film, making obvious reference to early cinema. *Pursuit, Fear, Catastrophe ...* is an important precursor for my own research in making the production of the soundtrack visible for the spectator, making labour that is normally hidden explicit. Other artists employed multiscreen projection to challenge cinematic conventions during the 1990s and 2000s. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on three: Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Doug Aitken, and Tacita Dean. Comparing and contrasting the ways in which these artists presented their works facilitates a deeper discussion of how multiscreen installations frame or implicate the spectator.

Figure 1.4: *If 6 Was 9*, Eija-Liisa Ahtila (1995)

In *If 6 Was 9* (1995), Eija-Liisa Ahtila presents a cinematic narrative phrased over three screens. The projected images are horizontally adjacent to one another from left to right, and thus preserve the cinematic convention of an audience's position when watching a film in a movie theatre. Unlike conventional cinema, Ahtila's installation presents scenes using multiple camera angles simultaneously: a character may appear in centre screen, while close-up shots of details of the décor appear on the left or right screens. Single actions are seen from multiple camera angles on each of the three screens, though framed in radically different manners: from wide shots to close-ups to extreme close-ups. Ahtila's multiscreen installations are more participatory than single-channel works. By allowing the spectator's eye to drift from one screen to another, Ahtila lets the viewers create their own picture edit. Because Ahtila is often depicting extreme mental states—anxiety, aggression, or madness—the fragmented staging of the installation functions both conceptually and affectively: the multiple screens heighten the sense of confusion performed by the on-screen protagonists, and communicates this to the viewer.

Figure 1.5: *Electric Earth*, Doug Aitken (1999)

Existing in both single-channel and multichannel versions, Doug Aitken's *Electric Earth* (1999) presents a young man experiencing a series of telekinetic or paranormal events as he walks through nocturnal Los Angeles. In the single-channel version, the loose narrative progresses in a linear fashion. The installation version presents the same narrative, but uses eight projected images presented in three

separate rooms. Dividing the story into three chapters, Aitken presents the beginning of the story in the first room, the middle of the story in the second room, and the conclusion in the third. Aitken uses architecture to frame the viewer's experience: the spectator is impelled to proceed from one room to another sequentially. Much like the work of Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Aitken's work breaks down the action presented in each space into multiple shots: actions are presented simultaneously from different camera angles, wide shots are juxtaposed with close-ups. Again, the spectators are granted greater latitude in constructing an experience than they are in conventional cinema.

The third work, the audio/video installation *Foley Artist* (1996) by British artist Tacita Dean, pays homage to Beryl Mortimer and Stan Fiferman, two ageing sound-effects artists who made important contributions to the history of British cinema. The installation comprises several elements: a wall-mounted video monitor, eight audio speakers, a 16mm tape recorder, and a dubbing cue sheet presented in a light box.[2] On the video monitor the spectator sees Mortimer and Fiferman going about their work—creating footsteps and kissing noises—sound effects that aid in the production of a cinematic illusion. The sounds they make are audible on speakers distributed throughout the space. Aside from the video monitor, the only visual representation of the sound is the dubbing cue sheet, which is on the wall facing the screen.

Foley Artist shows how the soundtrack is created: the spectator creates an imaginary film in his or her mind, evoked by the sounds fabricated by Mortimer and Fiferman. The artist draws attention to the extent to which cinematic experience is constructed both for, and by, the spectator. Dean is also interested in how making the production of the soundtrack visible acts as a distancing device. Putting herself in the place of a foley artist who has gone to the movies, she writes:

> It must be a strange relationship to cinema, to never let yourself be taken in by the fiction of it all: to go to the movies and listen to the foley, where the

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[2] A dubbing cue sheet is a kind of visual score that represents the soundtrack of film, in this case, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *King Henry IV Part Two*.

cinema kiss is always only a measure of your trades' expertise and each
footstep a matter of professional competence. (Dean, 2000, p. 45)

As cinematic illusion is constructed, it can necessarily be deconstructed. A foley
artist watching a film is always at a remove. By accentuating sound and revealing
what is normally hidden, Dean distances the spectator from cinematic illusion.
Foley Artist deconstructs cinema by breaking it down into a series of parts. The
spatialization and fragmentation of cinema opens up a distance, a space for critical
reflection for the spectator.

Multiscreen installations of the 1990s and 2000s engaged in cinematic
deconstruction have influenced my practice. Like the installations of Ahtila, Aitken,
and Dean, my video installations question the orthodoxy of conventional cinematic
presentation. Multiple screens presented in a single space permit the viewers to
create their own picture edit. Using the architecture of the gallery to stage video
installations is another method to engage the viewer in the construction of cinematic
experience. Making the production of the soundtrack visible to the spectator acts as
a distancing device. It is important to keep these principles in mind as I turn to a
detailed discussion of works I created prior to *A Lecture on Art*.

1.1.3 My Previous Work

My research with video, film, and performance began in 1986. Like any artist with a
long established practice, I recognize recurring themes in my art—tendencies that
sometimes take years to fully articulate and assert themselves. For example, *A
Lecture on Art*, with its preoccupation with diverse modalities of making sound
visible, is the crystallization of techniques, themes, and motifs that have been in
development for over a decade. But the installation is not only this. *A Lecture on Art*
is also rooted in older, deeper impulses: questions asked and answered over a thirty-
year period. The following paragraphs provide a brief overview of three decades of

production, zeroing in on those works that relate directly to *A Lecture on Art,* and which frame my research problematic and objectives.

Questions of narrative, autobiography, and identity motivated my practice during the 1980s. The binary of landscape painting versus mapping formed the thematic core of *Legend* (1988), a video that listed the factors that define personal identity. Retrospectively, I recognize that *Legend* was a kind of self-portraiture, the result of a process of self-discovery that is necessary for many emerging artists. At the time, however, I was fearful of accusations of narcissism and made a deliberate decision to move away from autobiography and engage content outside my personal experience. This was done via the use of appropriated text. *Murderer's Song* (1991) was derived from newspaper accounts of a childhood friend who killed an RCMP officer. *Conspiracy of Lies* (1992) was based on a found diary. These videos stand as early precursors to *A Lecture on Art* in their use of found text.

Two opposing impulses—autobiography versus documentary—established a pattern in my practice, a checkerboard alternation between voyeuristic *outward-looking* works with self-reflective *inward-looking* ones: video as window, video as mirror. Video's use as a mirror—as a tool for self-reflection—is one of the medium's official clichés. Many early practitioners appear in their videos, a factor that led Rosalind Krauss to explore this phenomenon. My self-reflective works—*Emission* (1994), *Shimmer* (1995), and *Crush* (1997)—extended from the notion of video-as-mirror, using it to investigate the construction of subjectivity.

Television has been described as a *window on the world*: the edges of the screen act as a frame. Employing Laura Mulvey's reflections on spectatorship as a starting point, I began to delve into the dualities of voyeurism versus exhibitionism, visual pleasure versus alienation effects: video-as-window. Early television was live and unrecorded: the residual characteristics of directness and immediacy are fundamental to video as a medium. A trilogy of videos, *Window/Fenêtre* (1997), *Handy Man* (1999), and *Time Passes* (1998) explored these ideas.

Filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein remarked that in film editing, where one image replaces another in linear succession, the sequential juxtaposition of images creates meaning in a manner similar to Japanese ideograms. For example, the symbol for *bird* plus *mouth* does not signify *bird's mouth*, but instead, *sing*. "What Eisenstein was attempting to suggest by these examples was the way in which film, whose signs are moving photographic images and therefore *wholly* tangible, can communication conceptual abstractions on par with other art forms" (Cook, 1990, p. 181). This idea was significant to my self-reflective works, in which poetic associations were often more important than temporal and spatial continuity editing. In these videos, mental space is depicted through a visual montage that mimics the manner in which visions and memories flash upon the screen of the mind. As I began to explore multiscreen video installation, my practice moved from the cinema to the gallery. This impelled me to explore new forms of image montage.

In his book *The Language of New Media* (2001) Lev Manovich describes film and video editing for multiple screens as *spatial montage*. Via the precise side-by-side juxtaposition of images, film montage as described by Eisenstein—and the attendant production of meaning—becomes more complex:

> In addition to montage dimensions already explored by cinema (differences in images' content, composition, and movement), we now have a new dimension—the position of images in space in relation to each other. In addition, as images do not replace each other (as in cinema) but remain on the screen throughout the movie, each new image is juxtaposed not just with the image that preceded it but with all the other images present ….
>
> The logic of replacement, characteristic of cinema, gives way to the logic of addition and coexistence. Time becomes spatialized … (Manovich, 2001, p. 325)

Investigation of how meaning is created through the spatial juxtaposition of images became fundamental to my research.
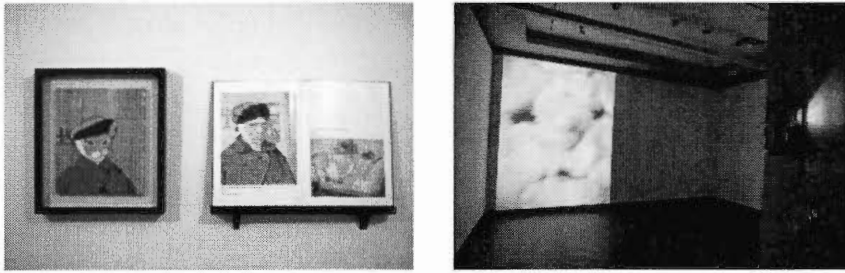
Figures 1.6 & 1.7: *Fuzzy Face*, Nelson Henricks (2001)

Two of my earliest video installation works, *Fuzzy Face* (2002) and *Happy Hour* (2003), found their starting point in the comparison of two still images. *Fuzzy Face* contrasts Van Gogh's famous *Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear* (1889) with an amateur artists' reproduction of it. The copy, however, differs from the original in several ways—most notably, in that Van Gogh is depicted as a cat. The installation is staged in two rooms. In the first, the two images—a reproduction of the Van Gogh original and the amateur artist's copy—are presented using typical gallery conventions. In the second room, a video is projected on the wall of a darkened room. The looped, unedited video is a shot of me gluing cotton balls to my face for seven minutes. The action is deadpan, rapid, and workman-like. Once my face is covered, I then take another seven minutes to remove the cotton. A fuzzy residue remains on my face once the entire fourteen-minute action is completed. Once this action is over, the footage runs backwards, repeating the cycle, but this time in reverse motion. As the loop plays, I transform into either an animal or a human, with the aid of a material (cotton) that has wide-ranging cultural associations.
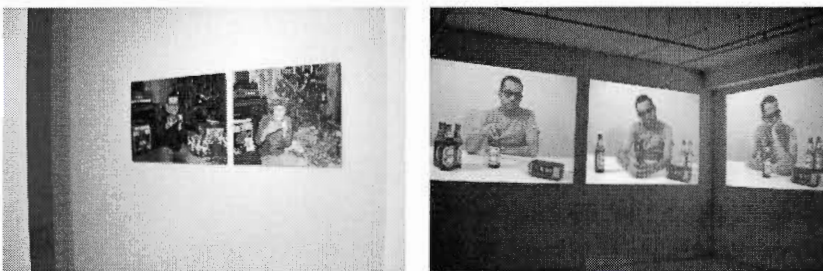
Figures 1.8 & 1.9: *Happy Hour*, Nelson Henricks (2002)

Happy Hour finds its starting point in two photographs: the first is an image of myself at age twelve on Christmas morning. I am sitting under the tree, holding a digital alarm clock. The second image is a reconstruction of the first, taken when I was thirty-eight. The original Christmas photo is the *score* and the restaged version is the *performance*, but what is revealed in comparing them? A multiscreen video work in the second room attempts to materialize the immaterial meanings that emerge when two images are compared. The focal point of the two photos is the alarm clock. In the video, I appear on screen, sitting behind a table and facing the camera: the alarm clock featured in the two photos appears in the lower right-hand corner of the screen. As the time 5:00 p.m. rolls over on the clock's face, I begin to drink beer, and continue to do so for the next hour. Once 6:00 p.m. arrives, I stop, completely inebriated.

By staging the work in two rooms, *Fuzzy Face* and *Happy Hour* explored how architecture can be used as a form of montage, and how the spatial juxtaposition of two images creates meaning. When one image is compared with another, I become conscious of what moves between them: significations that are difficult to articulate, as they lie at the limits of language. The video components of both *Fuzzy Face* and *Happy Hour* attempted to produce meaning via the lateral juxtaposition of images. These notions became increasingly important as I began to create double-screen installations that relied on DVD synchronization technology. In these works, linear, sequential Eisensteinian montage extends across a lateral dimension. Images are juxtaposed side by side: montage—and the attendant production of meaning—is spatialized.
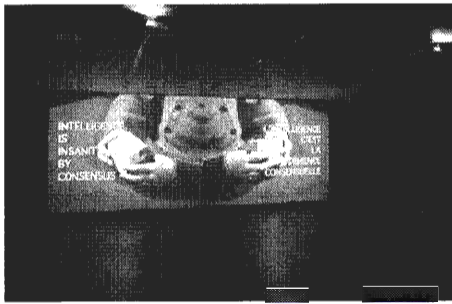
Figure 1.10: *Satellite,* Nelson Henricks (2004)

The first of these, *Satellite* (2004), is made up of images culled from scientific and educational films of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. These visuals are intercut with nonsense aphorisms in an attempt to counterbalance the dominance of the scientific paradigm. *Satellite* was based largely on an educational film titled *Hearing and the Ears*. In it, the interpretation of sonic information by the brain is explained to the viewer. What I found fascinating about this film was how it positioned the spectator in a certain manner. When the experience of hearing is narrated and shown to the listener, a self-reflexive space is created. Imagine reading a description of what happens to the eye and brain when you are reading. The experience brings about a heightened state of self-consciousness, altering how you experience time: you seem to exist more intensely in the here-and-now. *Satellite* marked the beginning of a decade-long exploration of sound and subjectivity, and laid the groundwork for the research undertaken in *A Lecture on Art*.
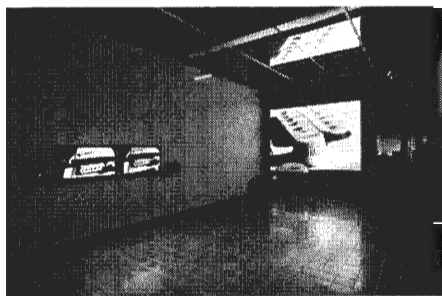
Figure 1.11: *The Sirens,* Nelson Henricks (2008)

Other works of the 2000s would follow this trajectory. *The Sirens* (2008) is a triple-screen video installation that focuses on singing and embodiment. Entering the gallery, the spectator sees a large-scale projection of a super 8 film. On an adjacent wall are two video monitors that show how the soundtrack for the super 8 film is made: the spectator sees people making non-musical sounds with guitars, rubbing their fingers on wine glasses to produce clear high-pitched tones, or performing other sound-producing actions. On the main screen, a series of seven short episodes describes experiences of singing and listening to music, depicting how singing can locate us "firmly and comfortably inside the body" (Henricks, 2008). The installation attempted to put the viewer into this embodied state of existence by presenting the creation of the film's soundtrack on the two adjacent monitors. Making the production of a film's soundtrack visible acts as a distancing device, allowing the viewers to participate critically in a cinematic experience, while also making them conscious of the film's constructed-ness. It also solicits heightened engagement from the spectator: when witnessing a film in the process of making itself, the viewer is drawn into a collapsed present, bracketed from either the past or future. These ideas would be very important to subsequent works, and to *A Lecture on Art* in particular.
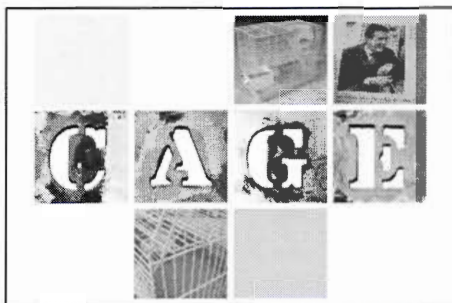
Figure 1.12: *Untitled (Score)*, Nelson Henricks (2007)

The two-channel video installation *Untitled (Score)* (2007) was developed for an exhibition entitled *The Hearing Eye*, a project that paired seven visual artists with seven composers. The artists were invited to create non-traditional visual scores that were then interpreted by musicians and composers. In my contribution to the exhibition, the notes A, B, C, D, E, F, and G were used to write three- and four-letter word/melodies. The soundtrack created by Jackie Gallant is a reading of this score. So, for example, on the left screen the letters C-A-G-E appear. On the right screen, the viewer sees a cage, while hearing the notes C-A-G-E. Though I have long been preoccupied with questions of language and translation in my work, *Untitled (Score)* is the first piece I made that is directly linked to the notion of synaesthesia: the transposition of information from one sensory register to another. The use of a visual score to dictate the production of a soundtrack became a core concept for *A Lecture on Art*.
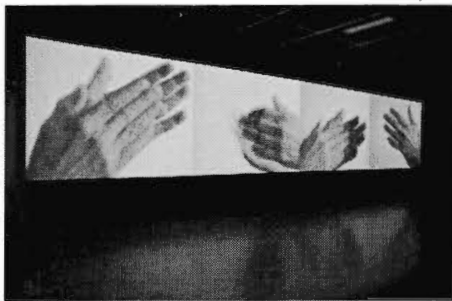
Figure 1.13: *Unwriting,* Nelson Henricks (2010)

The four-channel video installation *Unwriting* (2010) continued to engage in the notion of translating language into sound. Thematically speaking, *Unwriting* was concerned with writer's block and communication breakdown. Yet in this apparent failure of language, moments of transcendence occur. In several sequences, the hands of a writer are seen on screen using different types of writing technology to generate music: clicking typewriter keys and breaking pencil leads are edited together to create complex polyrhythms. The breaking pencil leads—typically a

moment of frustration—are transformed into an emotionally affecting phenomena. Like Nauman's *Violin Tuned D.E.A.D.* and *Untitled (Score)*, *Unwriting* emphasizes the power of music to communicate abstractly, and questions the authority of language in the construction of meaning in this way. *Unwriting* shifts signification from a linguistic register to an affective one.

Figures 1.14 & 1.15: *2287 Hz*, Nelson Henricks (2011)

During one sequence in *Unwriting*, a series of waveform monitors are seen on screen. The waveform monitor presents a graphic representation of a sound wave that is also heard in the gallery space. The motif of a sine wave that is both audible and visible became the central motif of *2287 Hz* (2011), a triple-screen installation work that was staged in two rooms. In the first space, the viewer sees a wall-sized video projection of a dancer performing a series of simple movements. Entering the second room, the viewer encounters an array of objects: two video monitors, a turntable, an oscilloscope, three speakers, and two light bulbs perched on microphone stands. The multimedia installation in the second room creates a soundtrack for images seen in the first room: the two spaces are separate, yet linked. The focal point of the video is a text that appears as on-screen titles in the second room: an anecdote that implies a relationship between the physical properties of sound and intense states of fear and anxiety.

2287 Hz works via the juxtaposition of two spaces. The first room represents the world as known through the body; the second, the world as known through

language. The motif of the siren (both mythic figure and audio device called upon in a crisis) is used to question scientific explanations of incommunicable subjective states. These explanations create new mythologies that then intervene in the forming of relationships between language and body. Once again, the structuring of a viewer's experience by staging the installation in two separate architectural spaces bears similarities to *Fuzzy Face* and *Happy Hour,* and to Doug Aitken's *Electric Earth*. The preoccupation with different modalities of making sound visible acts a precursor to *A Lecture on Art.*

As was the case in *Unwriting*, the oscilloscope in the second room presents images of sound. At one point, a singer is seen on one of the video screens. With her voice, she attempts to produce a perfect sine wave, which is rendered visible on the oscilloscope. This act of making sound visible—literally presenting sound that is both seen and heard—is a kind of degree zero for this work, crystalizing the synaesthesic tendency that unites *2287 Hz* with *Satellite, The Sirens*, and *Untitled (Score)*. In each of these installations, the question of making sound visible manifests itself in several ways: by narrating the process of hearing to the viewer (*Satellite*), by making the production of the soundtrack visible (*The Sirens, 2287 Hz, Unwriting*), by presenting images of sound waves that are simultaneously seen and heard (*Unwriting, 2287 Hz*), or by translating the printed word into musical melodies (*Untitled [Score]*). My research problem emerges directly from these diverse modalities of making sound visible for the spectator.

1.2   Presentation of the Research Problem

When surveying art history from the beginning of the twentieth century up to the present day, one notices that a variety of artists have been preoccupied with the relationship between sound and image in their work. Bruce Nauman's *Violin Tuned D.E.A.D* and Tacita Dean's *Foley Artist* are just two notable examples. Within my own practice, a growing fascination with different modalities of making sound

visible has been apparent in video installations I created since 2004. My hypothesis is that making soundtrack production visible acts as a distancing device, one that grants the spectator a space for critical engagement. The creation of a new four-channel video installation entitled *A Lecture on Art* (2015) has been an integral component of my doctoral research exploring this hypothesis. *A Lecture on Art* extends from themes elaborated in my artistic production since 2004, and is framed within the broader context of contemporary art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My thesis articulates discoveries made during the production of *A Lecture on Art*, and makes research that contributed to its development explicit. Before discussing the research question, I will revisit *A Lecture on Art*, and provide a detailed description of its formal aspects. My aim is to demonstrate how *A Lecture on Art* relates to my previous work, and how it is framed within the history of time-based media art as a whole. This will establish a strictly delimited context in which to define my research question.

1.3 The Creation Project: *A Lecture on Art*
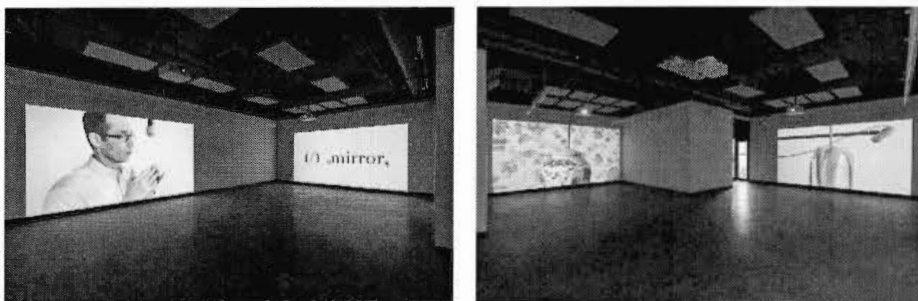
Figures 1.16 & 1.17: *A Lecture on Art*, Nelson Henricks (2015)

The four-channel video installation *A Lecture on Art* (2015) was presented at the artist-run gallery Dazibao in Montreal from April 30 to June 20, 2015. The images were projected on the north, south, east, and west walls of the darkened gallery, lending the piece an overall cross-shaped configuration. On the first screen, I

perform Wilde's text following the inflection and intonation indicated by Helen Potter. The performance for the camera, filmed against a white wall in a single unedited take, references the aesthetic of conceptual performance work of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as neo-conceptualist practices of the mid-1990s. The white wall in the background invokes the artist studio as a site for cultural production, rather than cinematic, theatrical or televisual contexts. Bruce Nauman's assumption that if "I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art" presents the artist as labourer, and emphasizes the importance of process over product (Kraynak, 2003, p. 194). Thus, *A Lecture on Art*, by employing the trope of an artist-performer filmed in a studio, situates itself within a specific art historical lineage and adopts it as a critical and methodological context. *A Lecture on Art* echoes works such as *Fuzzy Face*, *Happy Hour*, and *2287 Hz*, which also make use of this aesthetic convention. In *A Lecture on Art*, my body is used not only to embody the language, but also the voice of another person. This gesture can be read in relation to early performance-based video practices (notably, the work of Lisa Steele) that took on embodiment and mediumship as their primary content.

The second screen of *A Lecture on Art* presents the annotated text one word at time, as a series of still photographs. Using computer software, I was able to erase other phrases, thus isolating single words within the whiteness of a blank page: this underscores literature and reading as contexts. I also included annotations for changes in pitch and words in parentheses indicating pronunciation (i.e., *vulgar [vulgah]*). Symbols for short or long pauses (--) appear on their own. The sound of my voice acted as a guide to editing title panels. Thus, when I say the word "everything" on the first screen, the word *everything* appears on the second screen. Editing to the rhythm of my voice lends a staccato rhythm to the words as they appear, while also forging a strong formal link between the first and second screens. My approach to editing the second screen was directly inspired by Gary Hill's *Around and About*. The synchronization of spoken word and image creates a high level of engagement for the spectator and attempts to temporally bracket them in the present, in the here-and-now.

In conventional cinema, images often illustrate the text or voice-over: the spectator hears the word *table* and then sees a *table* on screen. In my works, this link is problematized. The images presented on screen can be different from what is being narrated or described, thus opening up room for interpretation. This unstable relationship between word and image is enacted on the third screen of *A Lecture on Art,* which presents a film for which the spoken text functions as voice-over. Images and objects related to Wilde's text appear on screen. At times, the link between the text and image are direct and literal: for example, during the passage in which Wilde describes a series of objects he sees when entering a room—a carpet, a plate, and a peacock feather, a chair, a mirror, and a chandelier—each one of these objects appears on screen at the moment its name is uttered. At times, however, the images are more oblique or indirect in relation to the text: sage-green paint is poured onto a blue and white Chinese vase during the opening lines of Wilde's discourse, and a paintbrush spreads oily black paint on blue-and-white floral wallpaper during Wilde's remarks on the aesthetic virtues of a Gothic cathedral. The disjuncture between the images and words in these sequences unfolds the text in new and unexpected ways: the images provide an indirect commentary on the text.

The third screen is inhabited by a ghostly presence: an invisible hand that moves an Ouija board planchette, taps keys on a typewriter, and causes vases and plates to fall. This poltergeist animating objects on the third screen causes them to produce sound. These actions find a response on the fourth screen, where the viewer sees objects being manipulated to produce sound effects. In mainstream cinema, foley artists create sounds that enhance cinematic realism: footsteps and sounds other than dialogue or voice-over. In *A Lecture on Art*, every visual action seen on the third screen finds a sonic counterpoint in the fourth screen. Thus, when a plate mysteriously falls from the wall on the third screen, a performer drops a plate onto a carpeted floor on the fourth screen. When an invisible force knocks a vase from a table, a performer simulates the sound of it hitting the floor.

The performer on the fourth screen was filmed against the white walls and grey concrete floors of my studio, again linking these actions to conventions derived from early performance-based video. The images echo the functional or procedurally based aesthetics of conceptual art and post-conceptualist works such as Tacita Dean's *Foley Artist*. Microphones are visible in each shot on the fourth screen, thus emphasizing their functionality. In spite of their functional nature, the images are also visually stylized, albeit coded with the blank-aesthetic neutrality of contemporary art galleries and studio spaces.
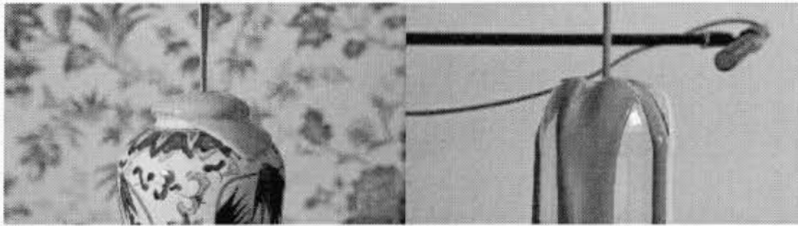
Figure 1.18: *A Lecture on Art*, Nelson Henricks (2015)

The repetition of actions on the third and fourth screens sometimes causes the images to mirror one another, thus reinforcing the sonic connection that links them. Sound from the first screen (my voice) and sounds from the fourth screen (foley sound effects) were audible throughout the gallery space: the speakers were hidden in the ceiling of the gallery and were not visible to the spectator.

In *A Lecture on Art*, sound was rendered visible or tangible on screen in three ways. Firstly, the annotated text is a visual score: a visual representation of sound. When the visual score is performed, the production of the voice-over—an act that is normally hidden from the spectator—is rendered visible. In a similar manner, the foley work visible on the fourth screen makes labour that is usually concealed in conventional television or film explicit: the sound effects created by a foley artist. By emphasizing diverse modalities of making sound visible, *A Lecture on Art* effectively presents a film in fragments: the performer and voice-over (Screen 1),

the script (Screen 2), the filmic image (Screen 3), and the sound effects (Screen 4). Because the four projections were presented in a cross-like configuration, viewers were never able to see all screens simultaneously, and were thus impelled to perform an active role in reconstituting the fragments into a coherent whole. Making the production of the soundtrack visible acts as a distancing device, soliciting heightened engagement from the viewer. *A Lecture on Art* draws in the spectator, while simultaneously breaking the cinematic illusion.

1.3.1 *A Lecture on Art:* Supplementary Works

In the Dazibao show, *A Lecture on Art* was accompanied by three bodies of work in painting, drawing, and photography that employed synaesthesia as a methodology. I will not dwell on them for long because they are not central to my thesis project. That said, because they were produced alongside *A Lecture on Art*, they indicate other avenues explored in the process of creation, and so it is pertinent to discuss them momentarily. These pieces were presented in a small, brightly lit space in the entrance of Dazibao. Audience members passed through this room before entering the main gallery space, where *A Lecture on Art* was presented, and they would encounter them once again when exiting the main gallery. All three pieces used the alphabet as a structural device.

Figure 1.19: On the left, *Monochrome A to Z (for Grapheme-Colour Synaesthetes)*, Nelson Henricks (2012) and on the right, *Monochrome A to Z (Synaesthesia Paintings)*, Nelson Henricks, (2012-2014)

Upon entering the gallery, the viewer was first confronted by a series of paintings entitled *Monochrome A to Z (Synaesthesia Paintings)*. Executed between 2012 and 2014, these works represent the colours I associate with letters of the alphabet. As an ensemble, they are arranged in three horizontal rows, in a configuration mimicking the placement of keys on a computer keyboard. From top to bottom, from left to right, the panels represent the letters A to Z: the first letter of the alphabet is in the upper left-hand corner, the last in the lower right. With this piece, I explored colour in affective terms. Traditionally speaking, the questions of subjectivity, representation, and language have been evacuated from abstract painting: representing a subjective experience of language reverses this tendency. The fact that I am colour-blind doomed the entire project to failure. Colour-blindness and failure, rather than acting as an impediment to the entire exercise, invigorated it.

A companion piece, *Monochrome A to Z (for Grapheme-Colour Synaesthetes)* (2012) hung on an adjacent wall. This work comprised twenty-seven small, framed drawings that were arranged in two horizontal rows. Twenty-six of the twenty-seven drawings are composed with grids of letters. Each one was made by typing one of the letters of the alphabet over and over again. For synaesthetes making associations between letters and colours—grapheme-colours synaesthetes—these images are monochromes. Like the *Synaesthesia Paintings*, these drawings fluctuate between signification and abstraction. Though seemingly simple to execute, the manual process for creating these pieces requires concentration and precision. The final versions were sometimes the result of multiple trial-and error-attempts. The twenty-seventh drawing—a log that lists each letter, the date of production, the time, and the number of attempts necessary to complete it—renders the procedural, performative, and temporal aspects of the work visible. The drawings act on multiple registers. Firstly, they function as actual monochromes: each one is an identical, greyish colour. Secondly, the drawings fluctuate between graphic and sonic representation: certain repeated letters—all the vowels and consonants such as

M or Z—function as sounds. Finally, for grapheme-colours synaesthetes, a third and privileged level of experience is available: the drawings function as colour monochromes analogous to the paintings, but in a manner that employs the subjectivity of the synaesthesic spectator as a site.[3]
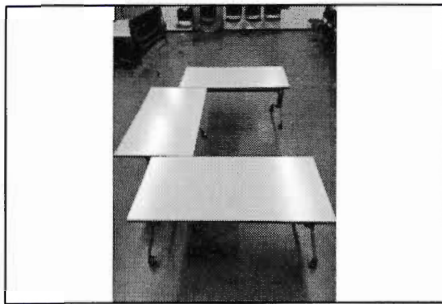
Figure 1.20: *Table Arrangements*, Nelson Henricks (2014)

The third piece in the entrance of the gallery was a slide projection entitled *Table Arrangements* (2014). During the fall of 2012 and the winter of 2013, I taught a twenty-six-week class at Concordia University. Each week, I would arrange the seven tables in the classroom to form a letter of the alphabet. These images were then posted on my Instagram account every Monday, from September 2012 to April 2013.[4] For the Dazibao exhibition, I transferred these images to slides and presented them using a slide projector. This method of presentation repositioned the work in a pedagogical context while also reintroducing temporality to the images.

As a whole, the exhibition *A Lecture on Art* draws together four pieces that focus on *reading* and interpretative acts necessary to constitute works of art, in the sense explicated by Roland Barthes in his text "The Death of the Author"

[3] I did manage to have one studio visit with a fellow synaesthete. He said he perceived auras of colour around the pages of letters.

[4] Occasionally I would add the hash tag *#tablearrangements* to these images. Interestingly, the works would be then interpolated with floral displays—table arrangements created by florists for weddings and parties—thus permitting a cross reading with Bruce Nauman's *Flour Arrangements* (1967).

(1968/1977). Readers are also important to *A Lecture on Art*.[5] The exhibition's title presents the word *lecture* as both a noun and a verb. This double meaning of the word *lecture* intrigues me. Artist talks are a staple of contemporary art discourse: another means of emphasizing the authority of the artist. Entering the exhibition, some audience members might have expected a didactic, authoritative posture—alas—one that never materialized.

1.4   Research Question and Objectives

It is important to ask how the above-described works, taken as an ensemble, open up or unfold the research question. My research explores a variety of modalities of seeing sound and focuses on the question *What does it mean to make sound visible?* But to whom is this question directed: to the audience, to the viewer or gallery-goer, or to myself? I have chosen to leave this aspect of the question open.

There are certain perils involved in writing about one's own practice. In "The Death of the Author" (1968/1977), Barthes outlines the dangers of an overreliance on causal linkages between an author and the text he or she produces. The author's voice has enormous weight when placed in relation to an artwork. Articulating my intentions or offering clear-cut explanations runs the risk of robbing the work of room for interpretation, effectively shutting it down. For this reason, I shall attempt to avoid speaking of intentions. There is also a danger of over-speculation when assuming the position of a potential spectator. It implies an impossible guess at the subjective state of the viewer. Instead, my focus is on meaning: what does it *mean* to make sound visible? This position still implies the existence of both a creator and a viewer for the work, while placing the focus on the possible significance of modalities of *making sound visible* for both. This nuance will, I hope, permit me to bypass assumptions concerning the subjective state of the viewer, and avoid forced

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[5] This was the approach that the critic Nicolas Mavrikakis took to the exhibition in his review that appeared in the May 9, 2015, edition of *Le Devoir*.

or over-determined readings of the video installation I have created. A speculative aspect still exists in the project, but it has been shifted to a semiotic level: to possible readings generated by either artist or audience. Phrasing the question in this manner allows for a more playful, open-ended approach to research—one that is expansive rather than reductive.

To respond to my research question, I have engaged in a research-creation project that is both theoretical and historical, involving the writing of a thesis text and the creation of a video installation. I am interested in art history from roughly 1850 to the present day, a period that loosely corresponds with the emergence of Modernism and its transformation into what has been variously named *late Modernism* or *postmodernism*. I favour a view of art history that eschews harsh demarcations or periodization; for example, the notion that the 1960s represented a distinct rupture from the Modernist period, and a definitive entry into the postmodern world. Though the emergence of a global media culture obviously had enormous ramifications in the field of contemporary art, I opt for a long postmodernism, one that identifies precursors in practitioners of the early twentieth century (for example, Duchamp) or the late nineteenth century (artists such as Alphonse Allais). My goal is to contrast and compare early Modernism with late Modernism/postmodernism, in order to take stock of what might have been gained or lost in the process. In this way, the objectives of early Modernism can be compared and contrasted with the world of today: the question of how aesthetics and beauty are framed and validated within systems of power can be examined.

Synaesthesia, a neurological condition implying cross-modal connectivity within the human brain, is used as an interpretative tool, and as a generative strategy for creation. For individuals capable of making synaesthetic connections (synaesthetes), a single piece of sensory information can activate two or more senses simultaneously: for example, music-colour synaesthetes see colour in response to sound. The term synaesthesia is thus appropriate to address the question

of *making sound visible*. As a key concept, it opens onto the realms of art history and neuropsychology.

In the process of writing this text, I have grappled with how to define my use of synaesthesia: is it a method, a methodology, or a metaphor? I have settled on the term *philosophical instrument*. From an etymological perspective, *philosophy* literally means a lover or friend of wisdom or knowledge. *Instruments* on the other hand are devices for study and measurement, for the collection of data, and for diagnosis. In musical terms, an *instrument* is also a device for producing sound. I *play* an instrument, I *improvise*. Musical instruments can be used to transpose, to shift, or to translate information from one register to another. In this sense, synaesthesia as a philosophical instrument seeks play or improvisation as a means of generating knowledge. As a seamless line that winds its way from the Victorian era to the contemporary moment, synaesthesia can be used as a tool to compare and contrast the aesthetic objectives of early Modernism with artworks produced today.

In his article "Three Texts on Video," Tom Sherman describes video as the ultimate philosophical instrument: its immediacy makes an optimal tool for exploring the nature of reality (2005, p. 60). Eisenstein defined cinema as a synaesthetic medium due to its ability to combine sound and images: a similar claim can obviously be made for video (1942/1970, p. 87). Gene Youngblood described expanded, multiscreen projection devices as synaesthetic in their ability to engage multiple senses at once (Brougher, 2005, p. 120). In this way, the video installation *A Lecture on Art* can be depicted as a synaesthetic philosophical instrument: an optimal device for opening a discussion of aesthetics and spectatorship. I will examine these ideas in greater detail in chapter 2 and chapter 3.

As a philosophical instrument, synaesthesia is a tool with which to examine art-historical tendencies since the mid-nineteenth century. As a lived experience, it becomes a generative strategy for research-creation practice. Synaesthesia as a methodology, and as a metaphor, becomes a lens through which I may examine the

meaning of *making the production of sound visible,* and the effect this has on the spectator when presented in the synaesthetic medium of video-installation art.

1.5   Implications and Relevance of the Research Project

The question of synaesthesia and sensory crossover has been significant in the visual arts and since 1850. By following this thread and bringing certain ideas to light, I will offer new perspectives on the place of sensation and subjectivity in art history. This investigation could also be of interest to scientists and researchers exploring the history of synaesthesia.

Analysis of the question of making sound visible in video installation is useful for artists, curators, art historians, and theoreticians working in the field of contemporary time-based art. In recent years, artists who explore sound have been the subject of exhibitions in major venues, thus demonstrating the institutional legitimization of this field of artistic research. While many artists are employing visual techniques to represent sound, little focus however has been given to the question of different modalities of making sound visible and its affective value for the spectator. My research thus fills a gap in the study of contemporary art discourse, with possible applications in the fields of philosophy, neuroscience, and communication theory.

A Lecture on Art acts as a platform for addressing these questions, and allows the general public to engage with these questions experientially. By making sound visible, *A Lecture on Art* draws attention to the constructed nature of cinematic representations. In this context, the objectives of early modernism can be compared and contrasted with the world of today. The question of how aesthetic consensus is framed and validated within systems of power can be examined. As such, this research-creation project makes a valuable contribution to art historical scholarship, and to the field of contemporary art.

How does studio-based research produce meaning or knowledge? To some extent, I will also attempt to qualify the nature of studio-based research, and to qualify the knowledge that is produced there. Making my working methods explicit could perhaps benefit other researchers exploring research-based creation in the studio, or studio-based research and its potential applications. In this text, I hope to valorize the production of meaning in ways that are multi-layered or open-ended, in the manner implied by Barthes. This approach can be contrasted with scientific or quantitative methodologies that tend towards the production of a single sense or meaning. In the humanities, linking ideas together in order to build thematic vectors creates knowledge. The creation of connections is the creation of metaphors. This necessarily implies the production of gaps—spaces that allow spectators to read and to interpret—and engages them also in the production of new knowledge. Ultimately, my hope is that the thesis text will function as a *creation* project: an open-ended and sometimes experimental work, without necessarily sacrificing academic rigour or analytical engagement.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY: INTERDISCIPLINARITY, RESEARCH-CREATION, AND
THE STUDIO

The aim of this chapter is to outline my methodological framework. I will begin
with an in-depth discussion of interdisciplinarity as it relates to video art. Using
texts by Gary Kibbins and Tom Sherman as a starting point, I will explore the
notion of *intermedia* as a model for interdisciplinary practice. In doing so, I will
advocate the use of video as a philosophical instrument, one that employs
marginality as a means to engage in social critique. Following this, the writings of
bell hooks[6] and Deleuze & Guattari will make the radical potential of the margins
explicit. Using intermedia, marginality, and the rhizome as springboard-concepts, I
will launch into a description of research-creation as methodology. Research-
creation will be situated in relation to other methodological approaches, and within
the context of studio-based practices. The final section of this chapter will account
for studio-based research in qualitative terms: how do artists engage in the
production of knowledge while working in the studio?

2.1   Video, Interdisciplinarity, and Intermedia

In the previous chapter, I provided a brief history of time-based media, positioning
video in relation to interdisciplinary crossover in the visual arts. Inspired by the
work and writings of Marcel Duchamp and John Cage, the Fluxus artists explored
gaps between disciplines: they referred to this practice as *intermedia*. This

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[6] The author always writes her name in lowercase letters.

hybridized, multi-faceted approach was a reaction to critics such as Clement Greenberg, who during the 1950s and 1960s emphasized the specificity and purity of painting, sculpture, and other art forms. The Fluxus artists challenged Greenbergian aesthetics, and can be seen as a last gasp of the twentieth-century avant-garde's preoccupation with the question of ascribing distinctive characteristics to a given medium.

Surprisingly, the issue of defining video as a specific medium within a multimedia hybrid environment continued to occupy theorists and practitioners until the early years of this century. This was in part due to the convergence of film and video that had occurred during the 1990s. As filmmakers turned to distributing their work on videotape and DVD, medium-based distinctions between film and video ceased to be viable. With the arrival of computer-based editing software for both film- and video-makers later in the decade, definitions of disciplinary boundaries—especially ones founded on material characteristics—ceased to be meaningful.

It is ironic that video, in positioning itself as the interdisciplinary medium *par excellence*, came to be regarded as amorphous and sprawling. Seemingly anything could be called "video art." Its heterogeneity and lack of a disciplinary centre undermined its very stability as a medium. That this idea came to preoccupy practitioners and theorists in the first decade of the 2000s is perhaps not coincidental. The complete absorption of video and film into on-line platforms such as Youtube.com was taking place, thus forcing an even greater amalgamation of practices that were historically regarded as distinct. The increasing presence of film and video in museums and commercial galleries since the mid-nineties abetted this. And one must not forget that the sting felt by many video artists was still fresh: they had been snubbed filmmakers for decades owing to the degraded and impoverished nature of their chosen medium. That filmmakers were now using video as an editing

technology and as a distribution tool was at best seen as a sardonic vindication, and, at worst, as a form of colonization.[7]

Heated debates concerning video's future as a medium began in the mid-1990s. In his text titled "Vision After Television: Technocultural Convergence, Hypermedia and the New Media Arts Field" (1996), Michael Nash announced, "we have witnessed the death of video art" (1996, p. 382). Nash's declaration was founded on the observation that television was in decline, and gradually being replaced by computers and the internet as the primary source of moving image entertainment in the home. As a medium, video would be absorbed into a broader "media arts field," one that combined moving images and text in ways that weren't previously possible (Nash, 1996, p. 383). In "Flaming Creatures" (2000), the filmmaker, media artist, and theorist Gary Kibbins responds to Nash's text. In the process of defending video's vitality, Kibbins also pinpoints the reason why video is so difficult to define as a medium. Both within and beyond the realm of the visual arts, video is allied with a broad range of cultural phenomena. He writes:

> [T]he brief and half-hearted search for video's ontological essence has been a bust, revealing [video's] affiliations to be complex, changing, uncertain, and marked definitively by its encounters with other disciplines and properties. In no particular order: video's television counterpart; its industrial counterpart; its consumer counterpart; its associations with theatre, film, performance art, installation art, real-time representation; its surveillance capabilities; its "cheapness"; its "slickness"; its illusory qualities; its lack of depth, and so on—these are the frequently contradictory characteristics which define it … (Kibbins, 2000, p. 46)

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[7] An aside: as someone whose practice has hybridized 8mm and 16mm film with video since the 1980s, I did not share this bias personally. That said, it is important to acknowledge that a separation between film and video existed. These differences were less about medium specificity in the sense implied by Greenberg, and more about communities of practitioners with shared conventions, goals, strategies, and audiences. In my telling of the history of time-based art in the previous chapter, I tended to emphasize overlap and crosstalk that occurred between film and video. This reflects the dynamics of my own practice more effectively, and, in my opinion, accounts for aesthetic developments in video art more accurately. From the perspective of 2017, a belaboured discussion of the differences between film and video seems like hair-splitting. For this reason, I will use the word "filming" throughout this text, though some might insist that "videoing" would be the correct term.

In the previous chapter, I described video in relation to experimental film, performance art, television, and mainstream cinema. As Kibbins points out, one could easily expand video's multifaceted hybridity to embrace other cultural phenomena. Video's multiple uses—as a surveillance tool, as a scientific instrument, as a home movie recorder, as a production and distribution tool for pornography—compound the difficulties of defining the medium in ontological terms. Ultimately Kibbins argues for a definition of video art that focuses "on an understanding of how video is being used," thus passing from ontology to utility, but this is not the point I wish to make here (Kibbins, 2000, p. 46). Instead, I want to focus on video's interstitial character. I propose to describe video as a *marginal* medium. This is not because it has a kind of outsider status within the realm of contemporary art. Far from it. As mentioned above, video is well represented in museums and commercial galleries. Video's ubiquity denies its marginality, at least within the ecology of contemporary art and the art market. When describing video as *marginal*, I instead wish to emphasize its interstitial and multifaceted location both as an artistic tool and within the world at large. It is a medium that interfaces with other media. It is a medium with artistic and non-artistic uses. It is a medium without a disciplinary centre.

That video occupies gaps between other disciplines, that it lacks a centre, or that is possesses a wide variety of use values can nonetheless be regarded as strategically advantageous. In "Video 2005: Three Texts," video artist and theorist Tom Sherman posits that video's marginality is precisely what makes it a powerful tool. As mentioned in the previous chapter, he states that video is "synonymous with intermedia, the art of filling the gaps between media" (2005, p. 56). For Sherman, video occupies an intermedial space between film, television, performance, and surveillance technologies. Kibbins's list of roles for video—its industrial counterpart, its consumer counterpart, and so on—could easily be added to Sherman's list. According to Sherman, video is an intermedia art form, "a liquid, shimmering, ubiquitous medium that absorbs everything it touches" (2005, p. 56).

Video flows within these disciplinary margins, but it also connects. Later in the text, Sherman posits that video, as intermedia, provides artists with a unique critical tool. This is largely due to its mobility and immediacy. Says Sherman, "Video permits the absolute transfer of reality into a malleable material, the simultaneous, digital architecture of optical/acoustic perception" (2005, p. 60). Building on Marshall McLuhan's arguments for media as extensions of the senses, Sherman depicts video as a means of connecting with the world absolutely. This has startling implications:

> Video is not only the best medium for critiquing television and cinema, its media next of kin, it is also a perceptual, philosophical instrument for questioning reality in broader terms, for finding problems with the way we connect with the world, and doing something about it. (Sherman, 2005, p. 60)

In the following text, my use of the word *intermedia* should be always understood as implying the existence of a space, gap, or margin, rather than as an interdisciplinary overlap and superimposition. Seen from the perspective of intermedia, video offers an enormous potential for the crossover of aesthetic strategies and conceptual methodologies. Video's ability to flow in the margins that separate disciplines lends it a radical potential: a mobile and multifaceted position from which to engage in critique. Its immediacy and capacity to function as an extension of the human sensory apparatus, combined with its cultural and industrial associations, grant it a special status. It becomes a philosophical instrument with which to ask questions concerning the nature of mediation and the real.

2.2   The Margins as a Space for Radical Openness

> I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance—as a location of radical openness and possibility. (hooks, 1990, p. 153)

In feminist, queer, and post-colonial theory, in race and identity politics, the word *margin* is charged with specific meanings. In the above quote, taken from "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness" (1990), the African-American feminist bell hooks appropriates this space as a site of power for racial, sexual and gender minorities. In this text, hooks examines the question of language through the lens of race politics and post-colonial theory. For hooks, dominant ideology propagates itself via the mainstream media. It occupies a position of monolithic centrality in our lives, and acts as a colonizing presence in marginal communities. Those who are silenced feel compelled to reach the centre in order to gain access to voice: the risk of being co-opted is constant. hooks proposes speaking from the margins as a radical gesture that upsets the existing balance of power. By turning the tables and appropriating the margin as a centre for counter-cultural discourse, the margin becomes a site for empowerment and resistance. Says hooks:

> Marginality [is] much more than a site of deprivation; in fact I [am] saying just the opposite, that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. ... I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose—to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center—but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternative, new worlds. (hooks, 1990, pp. 149–150)

For hooks, questions of voice and language also play into the equation. She writes: "Language is also a place of struggle. The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew" (hooks, 1990, p. 146). Hooks sees the ability to challenge the authority of language as one way to decentre power structures in our society.

Seen from the perspective of political action or social agency, hooks's conception of the margin, and the radical potential of multiplicities and difference, finds a parallel in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the *rhizome* as a means to destabilize centres of power. Deleuze, a philosopher working under the

influence of Foucault and Marx, and Guattari, a Lacanian psychoanalyst, collaborated on several books that meld psychoanalysis with poststructuralist theory. *Anti-Oedipus* (1972/1977) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980/1987) are a two-part work grouped under the subtitle *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Together, these two tomes critique the homogenizing effects of capitalism, which is depicted as a kind of soft fascism, undermining diversity and agency in Western culture. The authors offer the second volume—*A Thousand Plateaus*—as a toolbox of techniques that permit readers to go beyond the homogenizing effects of hierarchies, fixity, and stasis. One tool they offer is the *rhizome*. In biology, a rhizome is a networked root system: think of a potato plant or a field of grass, a series of modules are linked together in a horizontal, non-hierarchical manner. A rhizome has no centre—or rather, it has a series of centres—or perhaps it is all margin. A rhizome is like a rodent's burrow: a network of tunnels with multiple entrances. Deleuze & Guattari propose it as an alternative to the totalizing effects of what they call arborescent structures: tree-like formations that consolidate power in centralized locations, like the limbs of a tree that extend from its trunk.

As a non-hierarchical network, the rhizome can destabilize the arborescent. The rhizome's ability to do this emerges from six defining principles: *connection* and *heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography*, and *decalcomania*. The characteristics of *connection* and *heterogeneity* allow different positions or ideas to form strategic alliances. This potential is pertinent to both intermedia and identity politics. *Multiplicity* refers to the rhizome's endless capacity for lateral connections without origin or cause, moving beyond limited Cartesian dualisms. Taken together, connection, heterogeneity, and multiplicity give the rhizome its mobile and destabilizing potential, lending it a fluidity when compared to the centralized, static, arborescent structures. *Asignifying rupture* refers to the capacity of the rhizome to contain the arborescent, and vice versa. Existing institutions are sometimes used as platforms to launch experimental projects: asignifying rupture allows us to move freely from one register to the other. Stratified and centralized

formations can contain potential rhizomes; rhizomes can employ hierarchies and centres of power as strategic points of departure. A rhizome is a map—a *cartography*—that describes a territory. Like a map, the rhizome can be used as a tool.

> The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation. It can be drawn on a wall, conceived of as a work of art, constructed as a political action or as a meditation. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 12)

The rhizome thus resembles decalcomania due to its malleability.[8] Engaging the notion of printing or transfer, decalcomania functions not only as a representation, but also as a tool. Its enabling potential affirms its utility as a means towards agency and action.

Deleuze & Guattari's definition of the rhizome echoes Tom Sherman's depiction of video as a fluid, interstitial medium. "Artists choose to work in media that overlap and offer multiple paths to and from audiences. Video flows through and around all other media. Video saturates—it really connects" (Sherman, 2005, p. 56). In this way, video-as-intermedia-as-rhizome can be seen as a networked or interconnected array that evades linearity—thus having the potential to destabilize centralized structures from its marginal position. In the video-installation *A Lecture on Art*, the four screens work together as a rhizome, in a lateral, non-hierarchical manner. By breaking down a film into component parts—performer, script, décor, and soundtrack—and isolating them on separate screens, the cinematic experience is literally fragmented: its function is made manifest.

Bell hooks's conception of marginality is useful when applied to the notion of intermedia. She demonstrates how a political dimension can be unfolded from

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[8] Decalcomania is a process that allows designs on paper to be transferred onto glass or porcelain.

margins or gaps. As an intermedia artwork, *A Lecture on Art* makes connections and forges alliances among diverse voices (i.e., queer and feminist) to counteract and fragment homogenizing power structures. Linking communities allows us to reconsider the centralization of power associated with the word *discipline:* it sets the stage for an examination of the marginal voices represented in the creation project *A Lecture on Art.* Who is allowed to determine what constitutes 'good' aesthetic practices? Can existing hierarchies and the historical narratives associated with them be destabilized? Opening up the radical, rhizomatic potential of intermedia allows the objectives of early Modernism and of contemporary art to be compared and contrasted with one another. I am permitted to question of how aesthetic consensus is framed and validated within systems of power.

Bell hooks's preoccupation with language and voice is a compelling vantage point from which to examine *A Lecture on Art.* Helen Potter's performance of Oscar Wilde's voice finds a corollary in women engaged in male impersonation in the Victorian era, and in female mediums of the spiritualist movement, who, when channelling the voices of dead spirits, found a means for social political agency. I will take up these ideas in great detail in the following chapter.

2.3   Research-Creation as Methodology

The process of making *A Lecture on Art* reaffirmed my conviction that studio practice constitutes an important method for thinking and questioning. Research-creation recognizes art-making as an integral part of study. In the upcoming section, I will provide a definition of research-creation as a methodology. This will be followed by an exploration of studio-based practice, and an examination of how the studio can be used as a research-creation context for the production of knowledge.

In his text "La recherche-création en pratique artistique," Pierre Gosselin outlines two methodological parameters for research-creation (2006, p. 28). The first is the *constructionist* nature of artistic research: instead of collecting data and

submitting it to analysis when producing knowledge, art-based research tends to construct or elaborate representations. These representations are modelizations of knowledge emerging from subjective experiential processes. The video-installation *A Lecture on Art* acts as a modelization of research I conducted, and thus corresponds to the constructionist axis of Gosselin's proposition.

The second methodological parameter of Gosselin's definition is the heuristic nature of artistic practice (2006, p. 28). Heuristics gravitates between two poles: subjective/experiential ways of thinking on one hand, and conceptual/rational ways of thinking on the other. The subjective and experiential character of heuristic research lends it a phenomenological aspect in its exploratory mode—the subjectivity of the researcher is taken into account—while its conceptual, rational, and objective aspect allows for comprehension and analysis. The creative act involves taking risks, engaging in uncensored improvisation and experimentation, launching oneself into the void, and then picking up the pieces: assessment, interpretation, and synthesis. This cycle repeats itself, with new experimentations and further consolidation, until the work is considered complete. Heuristics accounts for research-creation in the studio, but can also be applied to the writing phase, and thus permits provocative interweaving to take place.

Finally, as a methodology, research-creation is open to borrowing across disciplines within the human sciences. If the medium of video can be described as an intermedia instrument for philosophical inquiry as I propose above, it is best framed within a research methodology that encourages intermedial crossover. My research covers a broad range of fields and seeks cross-disciplinary filiations. Research-creation appears to be an ideal methodological framework with which to achieve my goals.

Within the parentheses of research-creation, my position is primarily a poststructuralist one. Questions of language and translation have been central to my practice since the 1990s: they are foundational in *A Lecture on Art*. Representations of speech and language, and the acts of interpretation and *reading* depicted in *A*

Lecture on Art, are best understood on a theoretical base concerned with critiquing structures modelled on language. That said, as I hope is evident, my interest in poststructuralism does not exclude identity politics, feminism, or Marxism. The invocation of bell hooks above demonstrates that forays into other disciplinary fields can be fruitful. The theoretical framework for this thesis is derived largely from art history (Aestheticism, Conceptualism, and time-based art), communications studies (the emergence of technological mediation in the nineteenth century and its wide proliferation today), social history (Aestheticism, Victorian vocal culture, and emergent communications technology in the late 1900s) and scientific research (synaesthesia). The creation of strategic alliances among diverse disciplines lends my research a rhizomatic, intermedial aspect.

During the production of *A Lecture on Art* and the writing of this thesis, research and creation were pursued in tandem. They have inflected upon one another in the iterative, circular manner. Research linked to the creation of the video installation was historical, almost documentary at times. It influenced many formal and conceptual aspects of the work and has contributed directly to the writing of this text. In a reciprocal manner, research conducted for the thesis influenced work done in the studio.

What goes on in the studio is difficult to describe. Discoveries are made during the process of making the work: these discoveries can be aesthetic, technical, or conceptual. Pierre Gosselin describes studio-based research as heuristic. His definition is drawn from a number of sources, among them, Clark Moustakas's *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology and Applications* (1990). In this book, Moustakas provides descriptions of different aspects of heuristic research, as well as strategies for collecting, organizing, and synthesizing data. Moustakas stresses that, as a qualitative research method, heuristics encourages the researcher to represent his or her subjectivity, and favours means of data collection that allow for this to occur. The data collected during the creation and exhibition of *A Lecture on Art* have been integrated into the thesis text in the auto-ethnographic form of

autobiographical anecdotes. The language used in these sections is diaristic, poetic, or literary in tone. In permitting me to adopt a different kind of authorial voice, the autobiographical anecdotes provide pertinent information that might be difficult to communicate otherwise: information pertaining to the production of the work and discoveries made along the way. The autobiographical anecdotes correspond to what Gosselin refers to as the phenomenological aspect of heuristic research—its subjective and experiential axis—another significant benefit of adopting research-creation as a methodology. Anecdotal theory, with its grounding of speculative thinking in an experiential base, allows theory and practice to be intertwined.

2.4   Autobiographical Anecdote: Fake Studios

My mother was a professional artist. After she died, my brother and I were faced with the problem of what to do with her studio. My mother's studio was on the first floor of her house, occupying a space that would normally be dedicated to the living room. A row of almost floor-to-ceiling windows lined the south wall overlooking the deck. On the paint-smudged east wall was a custom-made easel that permitted her to work on larger canvasses. When I first arrived at the house in February, the space had contained a number of messy tables covered in art supplies: paints, brushes, sketchpads, bottles, and jars of all sizes. Over the course of several months, my brother and I had been packing things away: cleaning off the table tops, putting things in boxes, eliminating unnecessary furniture, and generally tidying up. By mid-May, the space no longer resembled a working artist's studio. It was somewhere between being a studio and something else: an empty, undefined space.

The root of the problem my brother and I faced was this: we were meeting with a realtor and were discussing how to stage the house so it could be sold. The three of us were going from room to room with the realtor, and were discussing what changes needed to be made to render the house more appealing to potential buyers. We arrived at the half-empty studio: the space contained some paintings and

art supplies, a bookshelf full of books, CDs, and DVDs, and tall cabinet on which was perched a television set. I proposed to the realtor that we clean it out completely, move in some furniture from the den, and make over the space into a living room. The realtor didn't think this was necessary. My mother lived in a small town. "A lot of visitors will know your mom was an artist. You can just clean it up, and stage the room as a studio." This at least solved the problem of what to do with the wall-mounted easel.

The next day, I set up an easel in the space and put a painting on it. I tastefully arranged an array of paintbrushes in a glass vase beside it, and placed the vase on a paint-spattered stool. I put a large unfinished canvas on the wall-mounted easel, removed any remaining tubes of paint, and cleared out the last remaining worktable. While assembling this imaginary stand-in for a real studio, I was having a strong sense of déjà vu. "I have already done this before. And recently. But where?" The answer came to me in a flash. Only a few months earlier, I had been building a fake studio in my studio and filming it for *A Lecture on Art*. The staged studio in my mother's house, like the fake studio I had built in my studio, fulfilled the same criteria: it met expectations of what an artist's studio should look in purely aesthetic terms. It was a clichéd representation of an artist's studio designed for non-artists. The space looked good. It looked nice. But there was no way you could actually make art in it. There was nothing functional about it.

2.5   Studio-Based Research

Until now, I have provided an intermedial account of research-creation, one that recuperates the margins as a site with radical potential. The constructionist axis of research-creation (creating models or representations) and its heuristic one (thinking-through-doing) are united in the artist's studio. If the artist's studio is considered as a space not only for creation, but also for research, how can the knowledge produced there be described? What kind of knowledge does

constructionist, studio-based experimentation generate in a qualitative sense? In short, how does one talk about what goes on in the studio? I would first like to broach this question by examining how the artists' workspaces are represented in *A Lecture on Art*. This will be used as a point of departure for a more general discussion of the conceptual, *post-studio* studio, with the aim of redefining the studio not only as a space for creation, but as a research laboratory.

In the video-installation *A Lecture on Art*, images of artists' studios appear on three of the four screens. On Screen 1, I am seen performing Helen Potter's annotated version of Oscar Wilde's text in my studio. As mentioned in the previous chapter, my performance evokes the codes of 1960s and 1970s video art in which artists—for example, conceptual artists such as Nauman and Steele—document themselves performing in the studio.
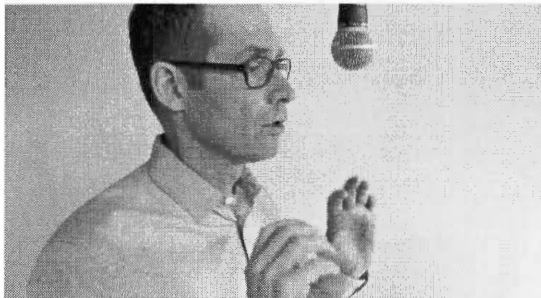
Figure 2.1: *A Lecture on Art* (Screen 1), Nelson Henricks (2015)

Screen 3 presents another type of workspace: a simulation of a Victorian artist's studio. As the camera slowly dollies back, this studio is revealed to be a construct that is framed within another studio. This *mise-en-abîme* emphasizes both artifice and labour: the studio as a metaphoric and literal construct.
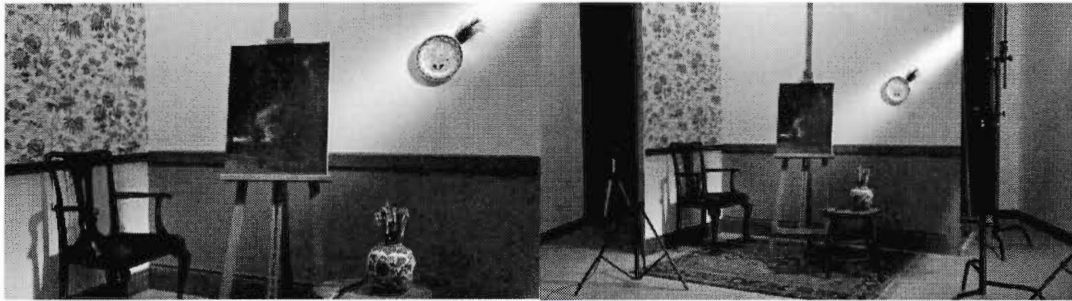
Figure 2.2: *A Lecture on Art* (camera dolly out on Screen 3), Nelson Henricks (2015)

On Screen 4, spectators see a series of sound-producing activities that are presumably executed in an artist studio. In the film industry, foley artists create sounds that enhance cinematic realism. The performer on the fourth screen was filmed against the white walls and grey concrete floors of my studio, again linking these actions and images to conventions derived from early performance video by conceptual artists.
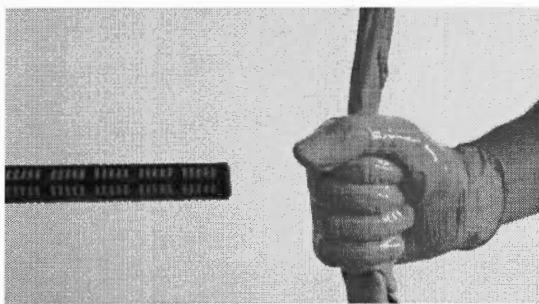
Figure 2.3: *A Lecture on Art* (Screen 4), Nelson Henricks (2015)

In *A Lecture on Art*, the studio is presented as both an aesthetic construct, and as a functional workspace. The relationship between these two modalities collapses in the final moments of the sequence, when a wad of crumpled paper appears on both Screens 3 and 4 simultaneously.
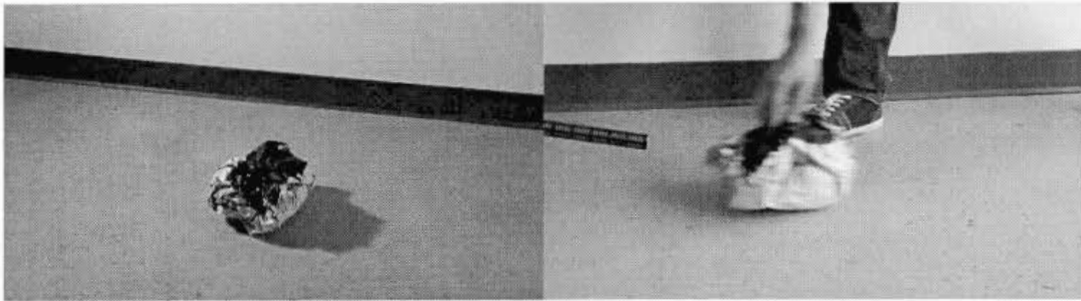
Figure 2.4: *A Lecture on Art* (Screens 3 and 4), Nelson Henricks (2015)

The same act is shown twice: on Screen 3 in a more theatrical manner emphasizing artifice, and on Screen 4 in a manner emphasizing functionality. The similarity between the two screens allows them to be swapped with one another. This hints at the possibility of confusing the gallery with the studio, and vice versa. The images of artificial and functional studios that appear in *A Lecture on Art* again open a reflection on studio-based research-creation both as a real process (the making of the work), and as a metaphor (artist's work as a socially constructed cliché). The artist's studio is examined as a *mythic* space in the Barthesian sense of the term. Presenting the artist's studio as an aesthetic object—as an artifice, as a construct— opens a space in which to reconsider the nature of artist's labour. What is a studio? What is produced there? Via this questioning, I hope to establish that the artist's studio works as a site not only for creation, but also for research.

In popular culture, the artist's studio has been romanticized. It's a location for heroic suffering or for moments of madness or inspired genius, or a place where erotic encounters with nude models are enacted. Aside from being a site of creation, the studio performs many concrete functions that are not readily contained within popular mythologies. In his widely reprinted text, *The Function of the Studio* (1971/2012), Daniel Buren enumerates a number of roles that an artist's studio can play, and, in the process, demystifies this space. Buren's text is widely regarded as marking a decisive moment in the emergence of post-studio practices—site-specific or conceptually-oriented ways of working—that eliminated the need for fixed

workspaces. Artists such as Robert Smithson, who engaged with non-traditional materials, locations, and means of production, or John Baldessari, whose well-known course on post-studio practices enshrined this dogma within the institution, exemplify this position. However, as Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice point out in the anthology *The Fall of the Studio* (2009), the post-studio position that has been elaborated from Buren's text does not need be taken literally. Despite the profound transformation of studio-based practice that has occurred since the 1960s, the studio is still alive and well. The term *post-studio* should instead be seen as marking a shift in artist's labour and what is produced via that labour.

> The historical use of the term 'studio' sealed the gradual transformation of the early-modern artist's workshop from a place of manual practice to one of intellectual labour. It embodied the gradual blurring of the distinction between artistic and academic activities and thus could be said to emblematize a virtual condition of personal artistic reflection or 'studious activity' that permeates contemporary artistic ways of making. In this respect … if conceptual art grants us a new understanding of the role and significance of the studio, on the one hand, and of the nature and identity of the space, on the other, it does so neither by discarding the customary model of the studio, nor by inventing a new one altogether: it revisits the stakes of an existing yet over-looked model of the studio. (Davidts & Paice, 2009, pp. 9–10)

The word *studio* is derived from the Latin *studium* or Italian *studio*: a room for study. The conceptualist post-studio studio reinstates the studio's former role as a site for research.

As for Buren, in spite of elaborating a position that seemingly negates the validity of studio-based practice, he nonetheless manages to provide a comprehensive overview of how artists actually use their workspaces. First of all, and perhaps surprisingly, he emphasizes the artist's studio not as a space of production, but as a showroom or gallery: a location for visits with curators, collectors, and commercial gallery owners. For Buren, an artwork only truly exists in the studio, in its original context of creation. The act of exhibiting or exposing an

artwork is a movement towards an external, artificial environment: the artwork sacrifices some of its aura in this transition. For Buren, the solution to this problem is to produce the work on the site where it will be exhibited, which thus allows the artist to maintain the auratic relationship between the work and its place of creation. The manner in which this motivated Buren's own production need not be overstated.

Though Buren's post-studio position offers a clear justification for his practice, it fails to account for the ways in which other artists' use their studios, both within the context of high Modernism and within the conceptualist movement of the late 1960s. The relationship between studios and galleries is complex, with the studio space sometimes acting as a double of the exhibition space. For example, when Mark Rothko was working on his paintings for Menil Chapel, he constructed an approximation of the site in his studio. When the paintings were completed and installed, the chapel was modified to mimic Rothko's workspace, thus facilitating a truer presentation of the work (Thomas, 2009, p. 35). That artists' studios tend to resemble the *white cubes* of exhibition spaces is an agreed-upon mutual convention, an unwritten contract that allows the migration of artworks from the studio to the gallery to be more seamless, less traumatic, than the one depicted by Buren. To some extent, this permits the artwork to retain its original auratic presence. Buren unwittingly underscores this when emphasizing the promotional and commercial function of the studio space: the studio-as-showroom that leads toward the outside world. The gallery and the studio cannot be strictly delimited from one another.

Buren's rejection of the artist's studio as a workspace in *The Function of the Studio* also fails to account for artists who are not exhibiting prolifically, or who have no engagement with the art market. For them, the studio retains its primary function as a workspace. His position also elides those artists whose practices

attempt to demythologize the studio *as a specific site*.[9] In videos such as *Violin Tuned D.E.A.D.* (1969) and *Stamping in the Studio* (1968), Bruce Nauman explored the precarious status of the artist's work within the context of the studio, a stance that embraced boredom and failure. The studio as a location for doing, experimenting, building, and prototyping, is counter-balanced with its use as a space for looking, thinking, and being inactive: for doing nothing. Nauman underscores that the artist, in addition to being an author, is also a *reader* of the work in the sense described by Barthes. For him, time spent looking and thinking is as important as making. Even Rothko was said to have spent more time looking at his paintings than making them, gauging their effectiveness on a purely phenomenological level, assessing their ability to produce the desired level of affect. This again reinforces Davidts and Paice's emphasis on the studio as *studium*: as a place for study or research.

2.6   Autobiographical Anecdote: Bad Ideas

The wad of paper that concludes *A Lecture on Art* (Figure 4) was a discovery I made while filming the rough-cut version of Screen 3 at the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery of Concordia University. This shot didn't make it into the final edit, but I feel that some memory of the process of creating it remains in the finished work. While looking for an image that could accompany the words *bad art*, I instinctively crumpled up a piece of paper and threw it onto the gallery floor. If a light bulb can metaphorically represent a good idea—the moment of inspiration or illumination—a crumpled wad of paper is its opposite: a stand-in for the failed and rejected one. In this instance, this could either be the notion of *bad art* that Wilde refers to in his text, or the perceived failure of the Aesthetic Movement as a project.

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[9] Other artists who could be included in this category are Ian Wallace, Paul McCarthy, Martha Rosler, and Martin Kippenberger, among others.

When I set out to refilm this sequence one year later, I created a wad of the blue and white wallpaper that was liberally splashed with broad swatches of black paint. I first filmed this object at Dazibao, the gallery where *A Lecture on Art* was to be presented. By forging a link between the space seen on screen and the space where the work was being presented, I hoped to draw spectators into a *mise-en-abîme* that could function as a distancing device. Alas, during editing I realized the images filmed at Dazibao didn't cut well into sequence, leading me to reshoot the paint-spattered wad of wallpaper a second time in my studio. In any case, while filming, I noticed that there was a strong enough resemblance between the gallery and my studio for spectators to make this connection intuitively. The black, recessed base of the gallery walls resembled the dark rubber splashguard at the bottom of my studio walls. The two spaces could easily be mistaken for another: the gallery as studio, the studio as gallery. The fusion of the Leonard and Bina Ellen Gallery, the Dazibao space, and my studio is implied, even if it isn't explicit or overtly named. I feel a memory of these discoveries and processes remains present in the final work.
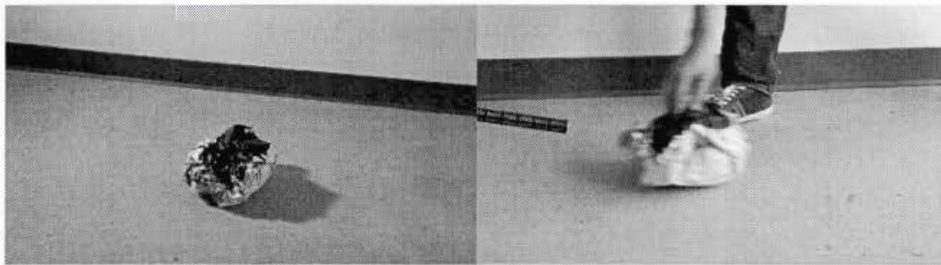
Figure 2.5: *A Lecture on Art* (Screens 3 and 4), Nelson Henricks (2015)

2.7   The Studio as Research Laboratory

A Lecture on Art draws attention to the studio as a social and aesthetic construct in a number of ways. Recall the description above of the camera movement on Screen 3 above (Figure 2). At first, a simulation of a Victorian artist's workspace is visible. As the camera dollies back, the audience realizes that this studio is actually a film

set, contained within another studio. By revealing the process of its own making, *A Lecture on Art* is presented as incomplete or in the process of constructing itself. This self-reflexive folding of the artwork backward into the process of its own creation functions as a distancing device, and invites spectators to participate in the construction of the work.

Techniques that reveal how an artwork is made go against standard conventions. In his text *Social Space* (1974/1991), Henri Lefebvre explains why artists tend to avoid drawing attention to how their works have been crafted. Like Buren, Lefebvre contemplates how the studio as a site of production is intimately linked to an artwork's auratic function. For Lefebvre, however, the maintenance of aura also depends upon an artist's ability to erase any traces of labour that went into the work's making:

> The object produced often bears traces of the *matériel* and time that have gone into its production—clues to the operations that have modified the raw material used. This makes it possible for us to reconstruct those operations. The fact remains, however, that productive operations tend in the main to cover their tracks ... [Artworks] are further characterized by their tendency to detach themselves from productive labour. So much so, in fact, that productive labour is sometimes forgotten altogether, and it is this 'forgetfulness'—or, as a philosopher might say, this mystification—that makes possible the fetishism of commodities ... (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p. 113)

A self-reflexive artwork, one that reveals the process of its creation, dismantles its own aura. Nauman's video-performance works, in which acts of creation are filmed in his studio with a video camera, engage in a process of demystification. Speaking of Nauman's practice in the context of post-studio practices that nonetheless reclaim the studio as a site of production, MaryJo Marks writes:

> [Nauman] implied that even while merely sitting or pacing he was, nonetheless, working; and doing so in a place, the studio, designated for work.

Moreover, he was hardly idle, generating a vast number of artworks in the span of a few short years. But his studio was productive of certain psychic states, as well. If some artists were analogizing their studios to other cultural models—Andy Warhol's 'factory', for instance, or Claes Oldenburg's 'store', both suggesting commerce and producing tangible goods—Nauman's studio became a laboratory for behavioral experiments as much as aesthetic ones. (M. Marks, 2009, pp. 96–97)

Marks thus adds an additional function to Daniel Buren's list: the studio-as-study becomes a research laboratory. If an artist's studio can function as a laboratory for experimentation into psychic states and perception, how can the knowledge produced there be qualified? In his text "It Is Not the Objects that Count, but the Experiments: Marcel Duchamp's Studio as a Laboratory of Perception" (2007), Herbert Molderings examines Duchamp's New York studio, and compares the function of the ready-mades to the epistemic objects of science. For the author, an epistemic object provides answers to questions. Duchamp's found-object sculptures, however, are not modelizations of knowledge: instead, they are a means by which to objectify the process of questioning. As Molderings recounts, the French mathematician Henri Poincaré and his theories of concerning the nature of gravity and four-dimensional space inspired Duchamp's work. The display of the ready-mades within Duchamp's studio—a staging of the work that, according to Molderings, was never repeated in any public context—was a means of engaging in perceptual experimentation.
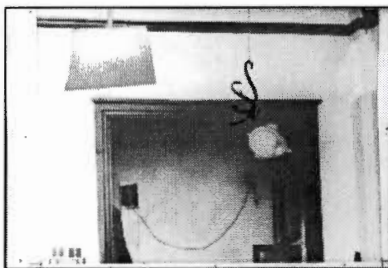
Figure 2.6: Duchamp's New York studio, Henri Pierre Roché (c. 1917)

"Completely displaced from their normal positions, everyday objects populate a room, the coordinates of which are upside down" (Molderings, 2007, p. 151). This provocation was meant to move the audience's mind toward a critical posture, one aimed at critiquing the production of stable, fixed knowledge in both art and science.

> The Readymades were neither works of art nor scientific demonstration apparatus. They were aesthetic experimental objects, the purpose of which was to generate a creative atmosphere for speculatively imagined thought process, the outcome of which was always carefully recorded and preserved. They did not objectify any new, experimentally acquired knowledge but rather the opposite: non-knowledge or, to be more precise, the very fragility of the seemingly so safe epistemic foundations of a modern, scientifically organized way of life. (Molderings, 2007, p. 151)

Duchamp's ready-mades were cues to provoke experimental states of mind, permitting spectators to question preconceptions and received ideas concerning the nature of knowledge. As such, his studio performed a very different function than a traditional artist's workspace, and foreshadowed the post-studio posture of the studio-as-research-laboratory.

> Just as Duchamp's approach to art had changed, so, too, did the nature and purpose of his studio. What used to be a painter's studio was now a laboratory of experimental perception and theory, a place where thought experiments could be empirically visualized. (Molderings, 2007, p. 151)

Molderings's depiction of Duchamp's studio-based research provides a productive contrast with empirical methods of knowledge production.

In my doctoral work, the studio becomes a metaphor and emblem for research-creation as a methodological position—a location for making intermedia art. The artist's studio functions not only as a space for making, but also as a study, an experimental laboratory, and a double for the exhibition space. The collapsing of the gallery and the studio space described above, the presentation of *A Lecture on*

Art as potentially unfinished or in progress, and the fragmentation of the cinematic experience across multiple screens, invite the public to participate in the processes of research and questioning, and in the construction of meaning.

2.8   A Space for the Reader

Perhaps studio work is not so much concerned with the production of knowledge as with the arrangement of information capable of producing knowledge, a task that is ultimately taken on by the artist and the audience. As a space for perceptual experimentation, *A Lecture on Art* invites spectators to enter experimental states of mind. Seen as a rhizome, the networked arrangement of screens acts as an open-ended or interpretable structure. It thus stands in contrast with didactic or reductive models and their pursuit of a single sense or meaning.

The creation of open-ended or ambiguous structures that are somehow interpretable or readable is not the same as producing knowledge in a scientific laboratory. To some, this position could appear to be irresponsible—lazy even—or lacking the necessary rigour associated with knowledge production. For those working from a poststructuralist position, however, in which very notions of *truth* and *objectivity* have come under scrutiny, this attitude is less problematic. Writing from the perspective of documentary filmmaking, the theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha questions the necessity of producing fixed or reductive meanings in research-based work. In a manner similar to Deleuze & Guattari or bell hooks, Minh-ha emphasizes the importance of instability and decentralization. She writes:

> To compose is not always synonymous with ordering-so-as-to-persuade, and to give the filmed document another sense, another meaning, is not necessarily to distort it. If life's paradoxes and complexities are not to be suppressed, the question of degrees and nuances is incessantly crucial. Meaning can therefore be political only when it does not let itself be easily stabilized, and, when it does not rely on any single source of authority, but rather, empties it, or decentralizes it. (Minh-ha, 1991, p. 41)

Trinh T. Minh-ha's conception of a documentary practice does not seek to prove something conclusively. Instead, it provides viewers with a space they must navigate in order to draw their own conclusions. Lending viewers agency in the production of meaning or knowledge is politically enabling: authority and power can be challenged.

The historical research conducted in preparation for *A Lecture on Art* was almost documentary in nature. The goal, however, was not to produce a single, reductive sense or meaning from the information gathered. Instead, by creating a modelization of the questioning process, a forum is created in which spectators or readers may actively construct their own sense or meaning. But how does this occur? In a text entitled "The Porcupine and the Car" (1995), Bill Viola describes processes by which artists construct structures in which meaning is discoverable. Viola positions the audience as "working backwards into a system," a kind of reverse teleology: spectators engage in a decoding process that permits them to discover preencoded meanings (1995, p. 68). He uses video games and jigsaw puzzles as analogies for describing how viewers interact with artworks.

> If one wants to make a jigsaw puzzle, one must first start with a complete image, and then cut it up and hand the pieces to someone saying "Here put this together." The participant, working backwards into the system, has the point of view that he or she is creating this image bit by bit, building it up from nothing piece by piece until all the parts fit together in one whole. (Viola, 1995, p. 68)

Borrowing the notion of information encoding and decoding to describe this process, Viola elaborates upon the above metaphor:

> The act of encoding information is the act of arranging elements into a pattern, putting intelligence, purpose, or intent into something. The act of decoding (retrieval) is to extract that organization out of the pattern, sensing the intent or intelligence behind the organization of that pattern. (Viola, 1995, p. 68)

It would seem rather that studio work—at least in the case of installation works such as *A Lecture on Art*—is engaged in arranging information into patterns that can then be synthesized into knowledge by the viewing public. The artwork is a rhizomatic structure, a burrow possessing multiple points of entry, one that is capable of generating multiple meanings.

In "The Death of the Author" (1968/1977), Barthes describes the reciprocal relationship between the artist-author and audience-reader, and ascribes the reader a position of even greater importance than the one proffered by Viola. Instead of travelling along a single trajectory of encoding-decoding, the reader discovers that the text constitutes "a multi-dimensional space," which cannot be deciphered, only disentangled (Barthes, 1977, p. 146). The authority of authorship is dispersed: the reader is empowered. In a later work, *S/Z* (1970/1974), Barthes describes the relationship between the reader and text in even greater detail, and makes a distinction between texts that are *lisible* (readerly) as opposed to *scriptible* (writerly). For Barthes, the *readerly* text allows for only passive enjoyment. These are traditional literary works that transmit meaning in a straightforward, linear manner. "[I]nstead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, [the reader] is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text: reading is nothing more than a *referendum*" (Barthes, 1970/1974, p. 4). The reader is reduced to a consumer of texts in both the material and monetary senses of the word. The *writerly* text, on the other hand, lends agency to the reader, who assumes an active role in the production of meaning. These are more experimental, self-conscious, or self-reflective works. The fixed, univocal *readerly* text is replaced by the *writerly*: a text in which multiple meanings and points of entry are operative.

> In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure

of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as they eye can reach,* they are indeterminable … (Barthes, 1974, pp. 5–6)

The writerly text thus corresponds to *A Lecture on Art* and artworks that allow for multiple points of entry. Given the place that reading as a performative act is granted within the context of *A Lecture on Art*, Barthes's ideas concerning the *readerly* and the *writerly* are particularly resonant.

As research-based practices within the fine arts continue to proliferate, and as art-based research gains currency in other fields, it is vital to account for how artistic approaches distinguish themselves from the social sciences. One example is *Personne et les autres* (2015), an exhibition organized by the artist Vincent Meessen and the curator Katerina Gregos, as presented at the Belgian Pavilion during the fifty-sixth Venice Biennial. It featured nine works that explored the colonial relationship of Belgium to the Democratic Republic of Congo. In her essay "The Dream and the Shadow" (2015), Gregos examines the question of research-based art practices and considers how they distinguish themselves from anthropological or ethnographic conventions. Citing the artist Maryam Jafri, she states:

Artistic research differs from research in the social or physical sciences in that art can open up a fantastical space where imprecision, ambiguity and contradiction—the very things that the natural and social sciences avoid—come into play. (Gregos, 2015, p. 14)

"Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge": using this aphorism from Aimé Césaire as a point of departure, Gregos argues that artists hybridize poetics with "the deep insight drawn not from the scientific disciplines" (Gregos, 2015, p. 27). In this manner, artists account for human experience within history in a manner that allows for imagination and optimism.

> Artists are able to translate this process of reimagining the world into forms that hold their own promise and alternative knowledge, in their own right. This knowledge is not to be found in the false promises of consumption and digital socialization, in the logic of techno-rationalism, or in turning ourselves and our bodies into endlessly productive monads. (Gregos, 2015, p. 27)

Imprecision, ambiguity, and contradiction; paradox, open-endedness, and lack of closure. Artists are engaged in the production of spaces in which knowledge is discoverable: the construction of objects, images, or experiences that are in some way readable and interpretable. Though this description may cause some to shudder, I believe this position is important to defend. As Gregos implies, open-endedness does not necessarily imply abandoning rigour or deep insight.

For Gregos, the relation of the margin to the centre is also important when examining the question of how artists engage in the process of *rewriting history*. According to her, the artists in the exhibition share a concern with

> going against the grain of entrenched historical narratives and historical essentialisms, and [with] recontextualizing deliberately suppressed or marginalized histories, bringing them into the present, and aligning them with contemporary concerns. They therefore offer relevant considerations for the present and productive insights into how the past impacts the present. (Gregos, 2015, p. 17)

With its roots in historical research, *A Lecture on Art* is guided by similar aims. My research into Oscar Wilde's text revealed how the British Aesthetic Movement was marginalized due to its associations with homosexuality and effeminacy. As a result, Aestheticism was largely discredited in art-historical narratives written in the early twentieth century, and art historians downplayed the important role it played in the emergence of Modernism. Helen Potter's annotation of Wilde's voice and her personification of male public figures can be allied with first-wave feminism (the Suffragette Movement): the appropriation of male voices by Victorian women was a means of challenging the dominant orthodoxy. Recuperating these hidden histories

becomes a means for reflecting on the contemporary moment. These are ideas I will take up in greater detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER III

AESTHETICISM, SYNAESTHESIA, AND MARGINALITY

3.1   Autobiographical Anecdote: The Studio Visit

> Although many of us have rejected the Romantic idea of artist as creative
> genius, we critics still cling to the related notion that the studio is an arena
> where an artist grapples with creative process. An artist's invitation to visit the
> studio, then, would seem like a gesture of uncommon intimacy. Affording the
> critic the privilege and responsibility of helping the artist to articulate the
> issues giving rise to his or her art, the studio visit further allows judgement of
> what has been going on in this creative sanctuary. (Welish, 2010, p. 170)

Studio visits are an important part of art making. During the development of a
project, artists sometimes present work-in-progress to curators, critics, gallerists,
and other artists, in order to garner feedback, or to gauge the effectiveness of their
efforts. Studio work is often done in solitude. Critical input from outside sources
can play a determining role in the final form a work takes.

In the spring of 2014, I invited an artist—one who had been working with
video for several decades—to come and see a new work-in-progress, *A Lecture on
Art*. By this point, I had finished draft versions of the first three screens of the four-
channel video installation. On the first screen, I could be seen (and heard) reading a
text written by Oscar Wilde, following annotations added by Helen Potter. As
described in the introduction, Potter attended one of Wilde's talks, transcribing his
words and adding symbols to indicate pauses and speech patterns, effectively
creating a visual recording of Wilde's voice: the second screen of *A Lecture on Art*
presented Potter's annotated version of Wilde's text word for word. On the third
screen was a film intended to accompany the voice-over. This draft version of this

sequence featured a series of interior and exterior location shots: they provided a parallel visual narration that effectively illustrated Wilde's text.

> Everything made by the hand of man is either ugly or beautiful; and it might as well be beautiful as ugly. Nothing that is made is too poor, or too trivial, to be made with an idea, of pleasing the aesthetic eye.
>
> Americans, as a class, are not practical, though you may laugh at the assertion. When I enter a room, I see a carpet of vulgar pattern, a cracked plate upon the wall, with a peacock feather stuck behind it. I sit down upon a badly glued machine-made chair, that creaks upon being touched; I see a gaudy gilt horror, in the shape of a mirror, and a cast iron monstrosity for a chandelier. Everything I see was made to sell. I turn to look for the beauties of nature in vain; for I behold only muddy streets and ugly buildings; everything looks second class. By second class, I mean that which constantly *decreases in value*. The old Gothic cathedral is firmer and stronger, and more beautiful now than it was years ago. There is one thing worse than no art, and that is bad art. (Potter, 1891, p. 195)[10]

The draft version of the third screen featured many exterior day shots gathered around Montreal during the summer of 2013. I was especially curious to have my visitor's feedback concerning this aspect of the work, with which I wasn't completely satisfied. The sequence began with images of the steps, columns, and cornices of the neo-classical Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, which were edited to the rhythm of the first two sentences of the above paragraph. Details of the façade of the Notre Dame Basilica in Old Montréal accompanied the second-to-last sentence, *The old Gothic cathedral is firmer and stronger, and more beautiful now than it was years ago.* Images of these historic locations were intercut with footage gathered in an industrial park close to Montréal's Pierre Elliot Trudeau Airport: medium shots of a disused parking lot by a warehouse worked in counterpoint with the neo-classical museum and Gothic cathedral seen previously. I informed my studio visitor that I intended to film a Modernist Mies van der Rohe-styled building to replace the warehouse and parking lot imagery. This would be intercut with footage of

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[10] The text is presented here without Potter's annotations in order to improve readability.

cathedral and museum—perhaps I would even travel to London to film a Gothic cathedral there.

My guest disagreed vehemently with these propositions. First of all, why was my visual narration focused on architecture? This was clearly leading the project in the wrong direction. Secondly, why was I going to Europe to gather images for a text addressing a North American context? There were plenty of examples of Gothic revival architecture here in Canada. In her opinion, all of the exterior shots could be eliminated. Aside from pointing the work in the wrong direction, these images were too obvious—too literal—and didn't open up or unfold the text in a compelling or critical manner. In short, the entire video needed to be scrapped. There was only one short section that escaped criticism: a simulated Victorian interior that had been filmed in my studio at night. "This is good. This is interesting." The studio visit concluded with her saying to me, "I don't think you understand what Wilde's text is about. You need to get to the bottom of it." *Get to the bottom of the text*. This became my main objective during the summer of 2014. The images that now appear in *A Lecture on Art*—and the words that follow—are the results of my attempt to dig deeper into Wilde's words.

Occasionally, visitors to my studio asked me why I chose to work with Oscar Wilde as a subject matter. This is a fair question, and I anticipate it is one that readers of this document will also pose: my answer to this question is layered, and does indeed shed light on my methodological bias. How I found myself reading Richard Ellmann's biography of Wilde was the result of a long process. When I was in my twenties, representations of gays and lesbians in mainstream media were scarce. The most visible depictions of queer life were to be found in literature. For this reason, the writings of William S. Burroughs, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Jean Genet, Christopher Isherwood, Quentin Crisp, and others were of great interest to me, and to other gay men of my generation. Some of these writers I researched intensively. This exploration was framed within a broader interest in nineteenth- and twentieth-century English-language literature that included intensive readings of

Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf, and others. In part, my reading was motivated by my practice as a writer: text and voice-over constituted a significant aspect of single-channel video works I produced in the 1980s and 1990s. My reading of queer authors can also be understood in relation to identity politics: by learning how my predecessors approached the problem of representing queer subjectivity, I gained an awareness of how I might do the same in my own work. Reading Richard Ellmann's biography of Oscar Wilde was one outcome of this process.

But really, when people ask me about Wilde, they want to know if *I am a fan.* Perhaps they assume that, in understanding my orientation towards Wilde, they will grasp my intentions: is *A Lecture on Art* a critique of, or an homage to, Wilde? If pressed, I wouldn't say that I am a huge admirer of Wilde's work. In my opinion, Wilde was a brilliant humourist and aphorist: he will probably be best remembered for his epigrams and plays. That being said, I approach Wilde more with ambivalence than as a devotee. If it weren't for the events that ended his career—the discovery of his affair with Lord Alfred Douglas, his trial, and imprisonment—one wonders what attention would be accorded to his work today. In reality, it is Wilde's martyrdom that makes him an important, even emblematic, figure for the gay community. He became a queer icon. This is an important point. The figure of Wilde, in some ways, marks the emergence of the modern homosexual. His canny sense of self-promotion indicates that, aside from his literary production, Wilde's public image was perhaps his most significant invention. In this regard, he can be seen as proto-Warholian: an act of artistic self-creation in which art and life seamlessly blend into one.

With the question of my relationship to Wilde now out of the way, I will turn to a detailed description of Oscar Wilde and his North American tour of 1882. In the process, I will provide a historical overview of the Aesthetic Movement, identifying its philosophical underpinnings and key players, while also describing the broad social impact of the movement. Aesthetic poets and painters were fascinated by synaesthesia: both the Aesthetic Movement and synaesthesia played significant roles in the emergence of Modernism. I will examine the subsequent suppression of

Aestheticism within art-historical narratives due to its association with effeminacy. Following this, I will situate Helen Potter's annotation and performance of Wilde's text within the contexts of Victorian vocal culture, gender performance, and the emergence of communications technology in the nineteenth century. I will position the transcription and performance of voice in relation to mediumship and male impersonation. Ultimately, my overriding goal is to establish the importance of synaesthesia within a narrative recounting the birth of Modernism, and to make the Aesthetic Movement's links to marginality explicit. Effeminacy—the presence of female and queer voices within both Aestheticism and emergent communications technology—opened a space for radical potential in the Victorian era. My goal is to shed light on the relationship between communications technology and marginality in the Victorian epoch. In doing so, I will build a foundation for a discussion of synaesthesia and media art that will be undertaken in the next chapter.

3.2   Oscar Wilde, The Aesthetic Movement, and Synaesthesia

On January 2, 1882, Oscar Wilde arrived in New York City, and embarked upon a yearlong tour that would take him to destinations along the East Coast, deep into the American South, to a dozen cities in Eastern Canada, and far into the American West. Wilde was just 28 years old, and had not yet written the works for which he would achieve fame. His motives for doing the tour were primarily financial: he was badly in need of money (Ellmann, 1988, pp. 150–151). He was also promoting a play he had just written—*Vera; or The Nihilists*—and hoped to stage the work in America (Ellmann, 1988, pp. 150–151). These personal objectives aside, Wilde's mission was ostensibly to promote Aestheticism, a British arts and crafts movement of the 1870s and 1880s.

The roots of British Aestheticism can be traced back to German philosophy and theories of consciousness. *Aesthetics*, a term derived from the Greek word *aesthesis*, means "the perception of things by the senses" (Calloway, 2011, p. 16). It

first entered philosophical discourse in 1735 in the writings of the Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. Gradually, it became the accepted term for philosophical inquiry into the nature of beauty in both its theoretical and concrete aspects (Calloway, 2011). German philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schiller, and Johann Joachim Winckelmann followed in Baumgarten's footsteps, addressing the question of beauty in the late 1700s. As the term gained greater currency, it acquired the specific meaning of a pursuit of beauty in both life and art (Calloway, 2011). On British soil, John Ruskin and Walter Pater took up the notion of aesthetics in the 1850s and 1860s. No doubt Wilde first encountered these ideas while studying under Ruskin and Pater at Magdalen College in Oxford from 1874 to 1878. Thanks in part to the efforts of Ruskin, Pater, Wilde, and others, Aestheticism coalesced into a coherent movement during the 1870s. By the early 1880s, Wilde had established himself as one of the most visible and outspoken promoters of this new approach to art and design.

Though conceptually rooted in German philosophy, in practice, Aestheticism owed an immense debt to French Symbolism. In their writings, poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Joris-Karl Huysmanns, Charles Baudelaire, and Arthur Rimbaud, emphasized the importance of sensuality and the senses. The Symbolists were greatly inspired by the ideas of Théophile Gautier, a poet, novelist, and art critic, and originator of the maxim *l'art pour l'art*—art for art's sake. Via this notion, Gautier attempted to shift the mind of the spectator away from an appreciation of art for its moral, narrative, or practical value. Instead, art was to be valued as music is: for its abstract and formal characteristics. Gautier's art-for-art's-sake philosophy, with its favouring of sensory crossover, is paralleled by his research into *audition colorée*—literally, *coloured hearing*—which he experienced while under the influence of hashish. Published in 1843 and 1846, Gautier's texts are among the earliest descriptions of synaesthesia. They attracted the interest not only of artists, but of scientists as well.

It is reasonable to assume that the Symbolists' fascination with sensation and sensory crossover extends from Gautier's descriptions of coloured hearing. Baudelaire's poem "Correspondances" (1857/1978) and Rimbaud's poem "Voyelles" (1871/2010) both simulate experiences of synaesthesia in the mind of the reader. In "Correspondances," Baudelaire describes a unity of sensation—"Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent." There is no evidence that Baudelaire was synaesthetic: his depiction, like Gautier's, was probably inspired by hashish use (Baron-Cohen & Harrison, 1997, p. 9). The same is true of Rimbaud: like Baudelaire, he was probably not a synaesthete. His poem *Voyelles* nonetheless participates in a Symbolist fascination with correspondences between the senses, influenced by Gautier's *art for art's sake* dictum.

Voyelles

A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu : voyelles,
Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes :
A, noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes
Qui bombinent autour des puanteurs cruelles,

Golfes d'ombre ; E, candeurs des vapeurs et des tentes,
Lances des glaciers fiers, rois blancs, frissons d'ombelles ;
I, pourpres, sang craché, rire des lèvres belles
Dans la colère ou les ivresses pénitentes ;

U, cycles, vibrements divins des mers virides,
Paix des pâtis semés d'animaux, paix des rides
Que l'alchimie imprime aux grands fronts studieux ;

O, suprême Clairon plein des strideurs étranges,
Silences traversés des Mondes et des Anges :
— O l'Oméga, rayon violet de Ses Yeux!

(Rimbaud, 1871/2010, p. 167)

It is perhaps difficult for readers in the twenty-first century to grasp the drastic break with the past Rimbaud's poem represents. As a reaction against Realism,

Symbolism is comparable to the emergence of Impressionism in the visual arts: the introduction of mechanically reproduced images freed artists from depicting reality. Similarly, Rimbaud's poem, in taking synaesthesia as its subject matter, is not concerned with representing objective reality so much as it is with describing subjective experience. As a text about language—about vowels—the poem is also self-reflexive: the use of language as a narrative tool is secondary to its function of transposing sound into colours. Rimbaud uses synaesthetic association as a means to open up or unfold language toward something other than narrative. This was innovative and radical.

Wilde, Pater, and Ruskin transplanted Gautier's *l'art pour l'art* philosophy onto British soil. Artists such as James McNeill Whistler, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Frederic Leighton, Aubrey Beardsley, and the poet Algernon Swinburne took on these new ideas wholeheartedly. Symbolism and Aestheticism bore a number of marked similarities. In his book *The Aesthetic Movement* (1996), Lionel Lambourne draws parallels between Baudelaire and Swinburne: both shared the objective of reinstating the importance of the artist as a primary arbiter of taste and style; both sought to upend art's didactic function. According to Swinburne, art could never be made a "handmaid of religion, exponent of duty, servant of fact, pioneer of morality" (1868, p. 90). Painting and poetry were to be appreciated as music is: for their abstract and affective value, rather than for their ability to transmit moral dogma. Liberated from the task of representing objective reality, Aesthetic artists reacted against Realism by depicting subjective experiences, in lieu of the real. Synaesthesia was a means to achieve this objective. In *The Victorian Avant-Garde in Context*, Lynn Federle Orr states that, as a notion, synaesthesia "permeates Aesthetic painting" (2011, p. 30).

> Musical references abound in Aesthetic painting, both in imagery and titles (famously, Whistler's many *Nocturnes* and *Harmonies*). Musical vocabulary also pervades the language of Aesthetic criticism, as when Swinburne comments on the 'melody of colour' and 'the symphony of form'. Eliding the

community paved the way to the aestheticism of the end of the century and eventually led to the unrestricted pursuit of beauty for its own sake. (Ojala, 1971, p. 20)

Questions of changing class boundaries also account for the Movement's broad appeal beyond the realm of high art. Besides the advances it provoked in poetry, the visual arts, and art criticism, Aestheticism was also a decorative style, one that appealed to the emerging bourgeoisie. The class mobility spurred by the industrial revolution allowed those who had not inherited assets, land, or capital—those with new money who "had to buy [their] own furniture"—to place themselves at the social vanguard by decorating their homes in the new Aesthetic style (Lambourne, 1996, p. 13). The decorative aspect of Aestheticism was characterized by several immediately identifiable motifs. Peacock feathers, sunflowers, lilies, Asian-blue-and-white china, Queen Anne chairs, black lacquer furniture, neoclassical and Gothic architecture—even the green and yellow walls of London's Grosvenor Gallery—all were markers of this new design trend. All the fabrics, furniture, china, paint, and wallpaper needed to makeover one's home could be purchased conveniently at the Liberty Department Store in London. Designers such as Thomas Jeckyll, William Morris, and E. W. Godwin, and architects such as Richard Norman Shaw and William Nesfield made significant contributions to the movement. In this sense, Aestheticism represents one of the first full-scale integrations of fine art and decorative craft—one that overlaps with the Arts and Crafts Movement and Art Nouveau, and which prefigures Bauhaus of the 1930s and the Pop Art of the 1960s.

Its direct appeal to the middle class circumvented aristocratic traditions that named landed gentry as the sole arbiters of taste and style. Popularizers of Aestheticism

offered a radical template for self-expression through the fashionable commodity that was almost entirely unprecedented, as least in its demographic

and geographical reach. This was particularly true in terms of the freedom implied in the exhortations of Aesthetic Movement supporters to ordinary consumers to 'do-it-themselves', to make informed and creative decisions about the decoration of their homes and the dressing of their bodies. (Breward, 2011, p. 204)

In both the art gallery and the shop window, Aestheticism achieved a high degree of visibility within Victorian popular culture. By the 1880s, it had effectively become a fad, complete with its own army of zealous followers, as well as its vocal and ardent critics.

Oscar Wilde's 1882 tour aimed to indoctrinate North Americans in this radical new style and philosophy. The lecture series was organized by the improbably named promoter Richard D'Oyly Carte, and was timed to coincide with presentations of the Gilbert & Sullivan musical *Patience* (1881), a satire that lampooned the affectations and obsessions of the British Aesthetes. As a cultural artefact, *Patience* is a testament to the prominence of the Aesthetic Movement in popular culture, both in the United Kingdom and North America. The Gilbert & Sullivan musical was merely the tip of the iceberg indicating a more widespread cultural phenomenon. Wilde and the Movement were targeted directly in popular songs written in the style of the musical. Editorial cartoons published by the satiric review *Punch* openly derided these dedicated followers of the fashion. The main protagonist of *Patience*, a fleshy poet named Reginald Bunthorne, was in part modelled on Wilde and Whistler. D'Oyly Carte's parallel tours of *Patience* and Wilde thus performed a double function: they provided American audiences the opportunity to first enjoy the opera, and then go see the *real* Bunthorne in the flesh.

When Wilde stepped off the S.S. Arizona on January 2, 1882, a customs official asked him if he had anything to declare. "I have nothing to declare but my genius" was allegedly his response (Morris Jr., 2013, p. 25). The local media welcomed Wilde as a celebrity. His first lecture promoting the Aesthetic Movement, however—*The English Renaissance*—received fair to harsh reviews in New York,

Philadelphia, Washington, and Boston. Some critics complained that his lecture style was monotonous and boring. Others focused on the speaker's outlandish costume: Wilde had a green overcoat tailored specifically for the tour (Ellmann, 1988, p. 154). His long hair and his short-legged knee breeches worn with stockings caused a scandal (Ellmann, p. 164).[11] The first month of Wilde's tour was also marred by some missteps, temporarily causing the press to turn against him. Hecklers performed silly stunts at his events, sometimes interrupting his lectures. When Wilde was speaking in Boston on January 31, sixty Harvard students wearing knee breeches and hats—a mocking tribute to the Bunthorne character featured in the Gilbert & Sullivan opera—occupied the first two rows of the hall. Each one held a sunflower in his hand. In this instance, Wilde was able to turn the situation to his advantage with his characteristic charm and wit:

> I see about me certain signs of an aesthetic movement. I see certain young men, who are no doubt sincere, but I can assure them that they are no more than caricatures. As I look around me, I am impelled for the first time to breathe a fervent prayer, "Save me from my disciples." (Ellmann, 1988, p. 182)

As the tour went on, Wilde learned to win over the press and public. He adapted his delivery and his lecture topics in the interest of showmanship. In addition to *The English Renaissance*, two other speeches, *The House Beautiful* and *The Decorative Arts*, were written to play to the interests of North American audiences. Wilde revised his texts considerably while he was on the road, fine-tuning and tailoring his speeches as he ventured from city to city. Thus, final lectures were emended to such an extent that they were almost entirely different texts by the end of the tour. The official published version of Wilde's *The English*

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[11] The various outfits Wilde had created for the tour are well documented in a series of photographs taken in Napoleon Sarony's New York studio during Wilde's first week in New York. They are a testament to Wilde's careful management of his public image.

Renaissance bears only a passing resemblance to the *Lecture on Art* published in Helen Potter's *Impersonations*.

Wilde was in Montréal on May 14 and 15, 1882, during his first tour of Eastern Canada. He spoke at The Queen's Hall, now destroyed, but most likely located where the Eaton's Centre now stands. During his visit, Wilde stayed at the Windsor Hotel on Dominion Square, a portion of which still stands. He visited the Notre Dame Basilica and took a carriage ride to the top of Mount Royal. During his presentation of *The Decorative Arts* that evening, he told the audience how much he enjoyed the view from that "hill behind your lovely city" (O'Brien, 1982, p. 62).[12]

Reactions to Wilde's lecture in the Montreal newspapers were varied. It is interesting to sample one—from *The Montreal Star*—if only to gauge how avant-garde Wilde's ideas seemed to the general public at the time.

> We evidently have in Mr. Wilde a gentleman, an enthusiast, and a scholar, the head and front of whose offending is that his tastes are 'eccentric' …. That it is quite possible to exaggerate the importance of aestheticism we admit, and that Oscar Wilde has done so, we think very likely; but without going to the extreme lengths which he would lead us, it is quite possible to benefit greatly by his teaching. (O'Brien, 1982, p. 68)

Wilde's North American lecture tour of 1882 played an important role in indoctrinating the general public in the philosophical aims of Aestheticism, and in the break it represented with the art of the past. Though some were scandalized and others insulted by Wilde's brash proclamations, though his costume and mannerisms provoked incredulity and laughter, his ideas had lasting and far-reaching impact. In his essay, *Aestheticism in the Marketplace: Fashion, Lifestyle and Popular Taste*, Christopher Breward argues that the Aesthetic Movement's popular appeal was where its impact was most radical. To some extent, its influence was compounded by

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[12] A writer for *The Montreal Star* facetiously complained, "It was not nice to hear our cherished mountain reduced to a hill" (O'Brien, 1982, p. 62).

public figures such as Wilde, and by newly reconfigured notions of commodification and promotion.

> This more complex relationship between the worlds of art appreciation, identity formation and commodity culture that seemed so especially suited to Aestheticism's mode of address was necessarily dependent on the existence of new commercial networks, media and outlets in which the pure principles of the Movement risked dilution at best, debasement at worst. But it was, ironically, in this sphere, in the rough and tumble of the late Victorian marketplace, that 'art for art's sake' made its biggest impact. (Breward, 2011, p. 195)

The Aesthetic Movement's broad reach—from the gallery to the shop window, from high art to the domestic sphere—was influential both socially and politically. For the emerging bourgeois, the Aesthetic Movement was a means to access markers of social status and affluence via the marketplace. For women, it offered an unprecedented template for self-expression. It also redefined the role of artists within the social landscape: its echoes were felt long into the twentieth century. According to Lionel Lambourne:

> The lasting triumph of the Aesthetic ideals emerges from its clear-cut advocacy of the supremacy of the role of the artist as innovator and arbiter of style. Indeed echoes of Aesthetic arguments can be heard in twentieth-century criticism of works as diverse as the paintings of Jackson Pollock ..., and the abstractions of Mark Rothko, sometimes so reminiscent of Whistler's magical and mysterious Nocturnes. (Lambourne, 1996, p. 229)

This sentiment is also echoed by Christopher Breward, who estimates that Aestheticism "ushered in a new conception of identity formation, avant-gardism and commodity value of art that would reverberate through the twentieth century to Warhol and beyond" (Breward, 2011, p. 203).

Paradoxically, the Aesthetic Movement's popularization contributed to its trivialization. Subsequently, the key role the movement played in the emergence of Modernism has been downplayed. Other factors also abetted this. By the 1890s,

Aestheticism had transitioned into Decadence; a movement that was associated with moral transgression and homosexuality. In 1895, Oscar Wilde was convicted and imprisoned for gross indecency when his love affair with Lord Alfred Douglas was publicly exposed. According to Lynn Federle Orr, Wilde's trial and his ensuing fall from grace were decisive moments in this transition.

> The fall of Wilde effectively discredited the Aesthetic Movement with the general public. However, with new devotion to the cultivation of any experience for its own sake, Aestheticism had been transmuted into Decadence. And it is in part this association that initially hindered the objective reassessment of Aestheticism and its role as a crucial step in the late-nineteenth-century movement toward modernity. 'These Victorians are intolerable', proclaimed British critic Clive Bell in 1914, staking Modernism's independence from the previous generation. In 1910 Roger Fry had established the twentieth-century narrative repudiating British Aestheticism and privileging instead French Post-Impressionism with its insistence on '"significant form" rigorously divorced from "associated ideas"'. It is now recognized that Fry and Bell, and later the American critic Clement Greenberg, adopted the vocabulary of Aesthetic criticism, while ignoring Aestheticism's own formalism as a precursor to modernist concerns. This prejudice continued late into the twentieth century and has only begun to be rectified. (Orr, 2011, p. 37)

Orr's observations, especially those concerning the critics Bell and Fry, are heavily indebted to Elizabeth Prettejohn's text *From Aestheticism to Modernism, and Back Again* (2006). Prettejohn begins her article by underscoring the communication and crosstalk occurring between Aestheticism and Post-Impressionism: Van Gogh's use of the sunflowers is but one striking example of this. From there, she argues that Aestheticism was devalued due to its associations with the feminine, effeminacy, and homosexuality. Aestheticism's perceived effeminacy was not due solely to the use of female figures as subjects in painting by artists such as Rosetti, Burne-Jones, and Leighton: dandyish and queer figures such as Wilde, Leighton, and Beardsley, marked Aestheticism as mannered and effete. Its reliance on a controlled, decorative style that eschewed "manly originality in favour of passive imitation of historical artistic styles," combined with its "frequent preference for smooth or reticent

brushwork over the vigorous handling that characterises much French avant-garde painting" contributed toward this identification (Prettejohn, 2006, p. 6). According to Prettejohn, it is Aestheticism's *aesthetic*—its lack of *manly originality* and *vigorous brushwork*—that led to its devaluation within art historical narratives describing the emergence of Modernism:

> The sense that there is something feminized about Victorian Aestheticism has perhaps been the underlying reason for its paranoid dismissal, not only by the early twentieth-century modernists in the aftermath of the Wilde trials, but by many later critics who have castigated Aestheticism for its unmanly withdrawal from political or social action. In the historiography of modern art, Victorian Aestheticism has consistently been configured as the feminized 'other' of manly Modernism, something that is clearly reflected in its lower status in twentieth century art-historical canons. (Prettejohn, 2006, p. 6)

Prettejohn goes on to argue that the characteristics that led Fry and Bell to dismiss the Aesthetic Movement's contributions to the development of Modernism—its associations with effeminacy and homosexuality—are not reasons to relegate it to a secondary position. Instead, its associations with marginality and alterity are reasons to take it much more seriously.

A revaluing of Aestheticism that valorizes, rather than denigrates, the Movement's associations with effeminate or queer marginality allows us to reappraise the place of other voices within modernity. As the African-American feminist bell hooks writes, the margins can be "a space of radical openness," a means to challenge the hegemony (hooks, 1990, p. 145). Marginality also offers a compelling vantage point from which to examine emergent communications technologies in the Victorian era. Research into the telegraph, telephone, and gramophone, and their connection to mediumship and the female voice, played an important role in the development of *A Lecture on Art*. The notion of *medium* is charged in specific ways.

3.3   The Emergence of Communications Technology in the Nineteenth Century:
Helen Potter, Victorian Vocal Culture, and Gender

It is reasonable to presume that, during the first months of the 1882 tour, the American actor and performer Potter attended one of Wilde's lectures. She transcribed his words and annotated them to create a kind of visual score: a stenographic recording of Oscar Wilde's voice. The text was later published in Potter's book *Impersonations* (1891), a 239-page volume in which she documented the speech patterns of twenty-six public figures. Potter was a minor celebrity in the United States in the 1890s, performing her depictions of writers, actors, and political figures to wide audiences. In a chapter titled *To Students. How to Prepare Impersonations*, she provides detailed instructions concerning how to study lecturers and actors. Potter's book exists as a trace of her performances, and functions as an instruction manual for future impersonators.

Aside from its pedagogical and mediating function, Helen Potter's book has a secondary goal: to record ephemeral voices for posterity. In her preface she writes:

> The works of artists in clay, marble, and iron, and on canvas are enduring, and eagerly sought for. But the most wonderful of all, the power of the human voice, goes to the winds and is lost forever. Seek as we may, the winds tell us not of these masters of oratory and song. Their master tones reach not our ears, and we know of their power only by tradition.
>
> Now, with what skill we have, we will endeavour to perpetuate some of the work of our own time. The work of a few of the best orators and artists of this age and people, we will record, as accurately as our methods of annotation will allow. (Potter, 1891, p. IX)

Writing is our oldest recording technology. It was the dominant tool for the mediation and preservation of oral culture for millennia: in the nineteenth century, its supremacy was challenged. Potter's annotation of Wilde's voice reflects changing attitudes toward the status of voice, and technologies used for recording voices, in the Victorian era. "Who can say after the advent of the phonograph, that

we may not yet be able to extract music from the walls that surrounded the great masters of ages past. Then what a privilege would be ours; then could we go, as did the students of old, and receive their lessons again and again" (Potter, 1891, p. X). To understand Potter's dream of extracting music from the walls, it is important to situate her practice within Victorian vocal culture, a context in which there was conflict not only between the aristocracy and the middle class, but also between the oral and the written.

In *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*, Ivan Kreilkamp describes the emergence of notational systems for recording voice, in the first half of the nineteenth century. Isaac Pitman's *shorthand* built on earlier forms of stenography. Where his system represented a break from the past was in its reliance on phonetic systems: Pitman's symbols do not represent words, but sounds. According to Kreilkamp, "Pitman's invention of the shorthand system of phonography in 1837 defined the Victorian period itself as phonographic—obsessed with print's relationship to voice and with the effects of transcribing or writing voice" (Kreilkamp, 2005, p. 30). These shifts occur at a time when attitudes toward writing and voice were in flux. Within the context of rampant industrialization and the rapid appearance of mediating technologies such as the telegraph, the correlation between the written word and the human voice was charged with a new symbolic value. In the words of Kreilkamp,

> Victorian print culture grants special authority to forms of writing that pay homage to, or even pass themselves off as, transcriptions of that voice whose death knell was supposedly sounded by print. ... Speech increasingly becomes the sign of the human and the humane. (Kreilkamp, 2005, p. 6)

This kind of writing, which attempted to reintroduce the affective value of the human voice, was a response to the twin threats of factory work and the emergence of mass culture. Writers such as Charles Dickens, himself an adept practitioner of shorthand, attempted to capture the sound of the human voice and

integrate it into their novels, thus lending their works liveliness and authenticity. This shift also contained an ideological aspect: "Voice began to be represented as the ideal to which writing aspired; oral utterance now became a signifier of the human in a culture in which language seems threatened by industry and utilitarian systems" (Kreilkamp, 2005, p. 30). Written representations of sound emerge at the precise historical moment when technologies other than writing—the telegraph, the telephone, and the phonograph—challenge writing's supremacy as the sole means for recording and transmitting the human voice.

> The excitement that greeted [phonographic shorthand] reveals the early Victorian period as yearning for storage and recording capacities that only become available later in the century with the invention of the phonograph. Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin argue that "the cultural work of defining a new medium may go on during and in a sense even before the invention of the device itself" (Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, p. 66); along these lines we can see phonographic shorthand as doing the cultural work necessary for the later invention and reception of the phonograph. (Kreilkamp, 2005, p. 70)

Pitman shorthand thus anticipates the invention of sound reproduction technology. The phonograph—from *phono-* (voice) and *-graph* (writing)—was literally a machine for inscribing voices on wax cylinders and disks. In his book *The Audible Past*, Jonathan Sterne links the emergence of phonographic technology to a culture preoccupied with storage and preservation of the human voice. For Sterne, these impulses were inextricably linked with mortality.

> Early recording enthusiasts praised sound recording for its preservative promise; early anthropological uses of sound recording expanded the metaphor. While Edison wrote of using the phonograph to preserve the voices of dying persons, the American anthropologists who first used sound recording in their work often explicitly justified it in terms of the phonograph's potential to preserve the voices of dying *cultures*. (Sterne, 2003, p. 311)

In his book, Sterne also draws a parallel between the preservationist tendencies underlying early sound recording and new technologies for food preservation such as canning. The mass production of canned food began in 1849; consumption of the same became widespread by the 1880s. The interweaving of these phenomena in the public imagination gave rise to expressions such as *canned music*, a phrase the composer John Philip Sousa used to describe phonograph music (Sterne, 2003, pp. 292–293). That these reproduction technologies should come to be regarded as inauthentic—see the etymological root of the word *phoney*—paved the way for Walter Benjamin's definition of *aura* in relation to mechanically reproduced art (Benjamin, 1936/1968).

The arrival of sound recording and preservation technology in the mid-nineteenth century also parallels changes in funerary practices. Beginning in the 1840s, new practices for chemical embalming emerged. Between 1856 and 1869 eleven major patents were granted for materials, fluids, and processes, for the preservation of the dead (Sterne, 2003, p. 295).

> The implied logic in preserving the voices of the dead through sound recording follows an identical path to this new approach to preserving the dead in general: a disregard for the preservation of the voice in its original form, instead aiming for the preservation of the voice in such a form that it may continue to perform a social function. (Sterne, 2003, p. 297)

The Victorian era was an age of elaborate funerals and park-like cemeteries. Prevailing attitudes toward death were different from what they are today. John Peters writes that "what sex was to the Victorians, death is to us: the ultimate but inescapable taboo. … We chuckle at Victorian primness, congratulating ourselves on our liberalism on topics sexual, but nothing is so veiled to us as death, so cloaked in euphemisms—or as pervasive in popular culture" (Sterne, 2003, p. 291). Technologies such as the telephone, the telegraph, and photography emerged in this cultural context, and are linked with mortality in overt ways. Alexander Graham

Bell's first prototypes for the telephone incorporated parts of an actual human ear, excised from a corpse taken from the Massachusetts Ear and Eye Infirmary: the tympanum of the middle ear is the basic model for all speakers and microphones. As Friedrich A. Kittler remarks in *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, "Wherever phones are ringing, a ghost resides in the receiver" (1999, p. 75).

Sound recording and playback technologies also reflect the Victorian epoch's deep desire to speak with the dead. Spiritualism, a mixture of science and religion, emerged soon after the debut of Samuel Morse's telegraph in 1844. The rapping and tapping of otherworldly spirits on tables in séance parlours mimicked the disembodied clicking of the telegraph receiver. At séances conducted by *mediums*, the material world received transmissions from the afterlife through what was called the *spiritual telegraph*. Spiritualism was a response to the unprecedented and provocative quality of "disembodied communion" that was the essence of telegraphic communication (Sconce, 2000, p. 21).

Attempts to make contact with the dead via newly invented technologies manifested themselves in other ways as well. Nineteenth-century photographers attempted to capture images of phantoms on film. Like the spiritual telegraph, spirit photography accorded supernatural powers to mechanical devices. William H. Mumler took the first spirit photograph in the 1860s when he accidentally exposed a negative twice. Capitalizing on the market for these images, photographers such as Fred A. Hudson and William Hope quickly followed suit. The practice of spirit photography continued and endured well into the twentieth century (Kaplan, 2008). This phenomenon demonstrates the powerful connection felt between representational technologies and communication with the dead, a mythology that persists in popular culture to this day.[13]

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[13] Takashi Miike's film *One Missed Call* (2003), in which the character's deaths are foretold via premonitory telephone calls from the afterworld, and Hideo Nakata's *Ringu* (1998), in which a cursed videotape causes viewers to die within seven days of viewing, attest to the persistence of this myth.

The Victorian medium can be regarded as an allegorical figure for the mediation and preservation of the human voice. Through the body of the medium, voices of the dead were channelled, humanized, and allowed to perform a social function. In *Haunted Media*, Jeffrey Sconce examines the link between electronic media and paranormal phenomena. He draws attention to the place of women within the spiritualist movement, and emphasizes notions of voice that are more political in nature.

> The Spiritualist movement provided one of the first and most important forums for women's voices to enter into the public sphere. The majority of "mediums" were women, and mediumship itself was thought to be a function of the unique "electrical" constitution of women. While in a state of mediumistic trance, these women were able to comment (through the "telegraphic" voice of the dead) on a variety of contemporary social issues ... (Sconce, 2000, p. 12)

Mediumship was not only a spectacular enactment of women's ability to communicate with the dead, but it was also a means for them to appropriate social power. This echoes contemporary post-colonial, queer, and feminist theory, in which notions of *silencing* and *access to voice* resonate with political significance.

In her performances, Helen Potter channelled the voice of Oscar Wilde in a manner similar to a medium channelling a dead spirit. Ostensibly, the goal of these performances was to mediate and represent—in the same manner that cinema or television presents absent figures—as well as to preserve, the human voice for archival or pedagogical reasons. Beyond this, her impersonations of men were also a challenge to social norms. Male impersonation by female actors in the Victorian period is not as uncommon or outlandish as one might first assume. In *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City*, Peter Bailey describes it as a regular feature in popular stage entertainment. Performers such as Vesta Tilley, Bessie Bellwood, Ella Shields, Annie Hindle, and Ella Wesner were well known for their parodies of the social type of the "fashionable young man" (Bailey, 1998, p. 120). A

more overt political dimension can also be found in Helen Potter's acts of impersonation. In her performances, Potter depicted female political activists such as Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Anna Dickinson: all were important figures in Women's Suffrage Movement. Potter's work thus poses a double challenge to patriarchal Victorian society: by critiquing masculinity through pastiche and by mediating the voices of prominent women activists.[14]

Victorian vocal culture was both influenced by and opposed to communications technologies that emerged from rapid and widespread industrialization. The birth of sound-recording technology occurred against the backdrop of a culture in which death played an important social function. In the Victorian age, technology was sometimes accorded a supernatural power, allegedly permitting mediumistic communication with the dead. The figure of the female medium finds a parallel in male impersonation by female actors, and draws attention to the social and political ramifications of vocal mediation. These vectors all converge in the figure of Helen Potter and her mediumistic embodiment of Oscar Wilde's voice.

3.4   Mediums and Media

In the previous pages, I have charted some of the paths followed in order to get to the bottom of Oscar Wilde's text. The images and motifs appearing in *A Lecture on Art* emerged directly from this research. I have refrained from explicitly detailing the links between the video installation and the data collected. To do so risks robbing the work of a space for interpretation, thereby shutting down the possibility of readings that go beyond my intentions. Instead, this text presents my research as a parallel object to the video installation: it functions as a fellow traveller, rather than as a

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[14] An obvious and compelling move to make here would be to claim that Potter, in reclaiming the queer voice of Oscar Wilde, was an early champion of gay rights. Alas, Wilde's disgrace began in 1895, five years after the publication of *Impersonations*, so neither Potter nor her audiences would have been (consciously) aware of Wilde's homosexuality.

guidebook. Like the video installation, the above paragraphs are intended to open Wilde's text—and Helen Potter's stenographic representation of Wilde's voice— upon diverse axes, thus creating multiple points of entry for the reader.

When examining the Aesthetic Movement and communications technologies emerging in the Victorian context, I have attempted to bring to light marginal positions, both queer and feminist. This activates the political potential of the intermedial margins that I described in the previous chapter. *A Lecture on Art* attempts to recuperate hidden or lost histories, and mobilizes them towards radical ends. Research-based art practices that engage in processes of rewriting history use marginalized histories as a means to illuminate our understanding of the present (Gregos, 2015, p. 17). Like an angry poltergeist knocking vases off the tables or shaking the chandeliers, a ghostly presence interrupts conventional master narratives. The effects of these disturbances are not restricted to the past: they also have ramifications in the present moment. My examination of synaesthesia and communications technology in the nineteenth century thus impacts upon a discussion of video art in the twenty-first century. Video installation, as a technological apparatus, is a direct descendant of devices that first emerged in the Victorian era: photography, cinema, phonography, and so on. As such, it continues to embody the social discourses that framed the development and broader usage of these media. A similar argument can be made for synaesthesia. That an interest in aesthetics and synaesthesia should emerge in the Victorian period is not surprising. It was a reaction to rampant industrialization, and was an appeal to the senses: to the corporeal, and the phenomenological. If similar questions have arisen in the current moment, it is important to ask why.

In the domains of art history and communications theory, the word *medium* has strong connotations. For Marshall McLuhan, a medium is not only a technological apparatus: it is also an ideological structure that modulates social discourse. The media shape the ways people speak and think: *the medium is the message* (McLuhan, 1964). For Modernists such as Clement Greenberg on the other

hand, the medium refers to those material characteristics of a given art form that mark it as unique in an essentialist sense. The art historian Rosalind Krauss expanded this definition, harmonizing it with the one provided by McLuhan.

> "What if a medium were not a material support … the materials worked by the guilds? What if it were the very foundation of representation, the way painting's chessboard supports the actors on its stage? What if it were a logic rather than a form of matter?" (Krauss, 2011, pp. 16–17)

With this definition, Krauss effectively dematerializes the notion of medium, recasting it as an ideological framework.

In 1978, Krauss wrote about performance art conceived for the video camera in a seminal text titled *Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism*. Describing video works of the 1960s and 1970s in which the performer uses the video camera and monitor as a mirror, Krauss asks rhetorically what it would mean to say, "The medium of video is narcissism," to infer that the essential characteristic of video is not a physical substance, but a psychological model? (Krauss, 1986, p. 180). To support this transposition of the word *medium* from the material to the psychological realm, Krauss remarks:

> Everyday speech contains an example of the word medium used in a psychological sense; the uncommon terrain for that common-enough usage is the world of parapsychology, telepathy, extrasensory perception, and communication with an afterlife, for which people with certain kinds of psychic powers are understood to be mediums. (Krauss, 1986, p. 180)

For Krauss, the body of the performer, bracketed within the instant feedback loop of the video camera and television monitor, becomes a mediumistic conduit, underscoring the paradoxical relationship of embodiment and disembodiment to communications technology. In Chapter 1, I described how Lisa Steele, in *The Ballad of Dan Peoples,* (1976), acted as a mediumistic conduit for a dead spirit in the sense implied by Krauss above. This demonstrates the utility of an expanded

definition of medium, one capable of problematizing notions of embodiment and presence.

The Victorian avant-garde's deployment of synaesthesia as a means to shift spectatorship towards an appreciation of art for its formal characteristics was, in itself, radical. Moving the spectator's engagement in the artwork from moral affirmation toward aesthetic appreciation—an appreciation of pure sensation—places the Aesthetic Movement as an important forerunner to Modernist abstraction. Synaesthesia, and the metaphoric interlinking of music with colour, facilitated invention in the fields of painting, music, and cinema in the twentieth-century, and became a catalyst for interdisciplinary crossover in time-based and media arts. These linkages will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV

SYNAESTHESIA & SPATIALIZATION: BETWEEN ENGAGEMENT AND
DISENGAGEMENT

4.1   Introduction: Frames and Contents

Artworks are more than just material objects. They are also the immaterial meanings
that can be derived from them. In a similar sense, framing devices are not simply a
material means for staging or presenting artworks. They also contribute to how we
interpret or read them. It is important to give attention to how artworks are staged.
Conceptualist and post-Conceptualist art practices drew attention to contexts for
production and presentation—the artist's studio, the white cube of the gallery or
museum, and so on. Like these structures, frames and framing devices are
inextricably mixed up in the content of the work: *the medium is the message,* as
McLuhan once said (1964, p. 7).

Mechanisms for the presentation of film and video in gallery contexts are even
more complex in this regard: they not only invoke art-historical references, but also
the social history of moving-image production and reception—the film set, the
sound recording studio, the cinema, and so on. Film theory, as well as hypotheses
concerning the filmic apparatus and spectatorship, has had a broad influence on
writings concerning the presentation of moving-image works in gallery settings. Art
history and film history act as overlapping categories, and recent decades have seen
productive intertwining of the two. Presentation devices for film and video not only
inflect upon the content, but they also frame the spectator as well, directing how he
or she will receive or experience the work of art.

The previous chapter focussed mainly on the textual content of *A Lecture on Art*: an unfolding of Oscar Wilde's words in a Victorian context, and an assessment of the impact of this gesture within the context of the contemporary moment. The current one addresses *framing devices*—namely, multiscreen time-based media art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and its relationship to synaesthesia. Since the 1990s, a number of texts written by art historians and curators have examined multichannel video installation in gallery contexts. I will focus on those approaches that contrast synaesthesia and embodied engagement with distancing devices and critical disengagement. While the use of multiple screens in *A Lecture on Art* seduces and entertains, it also employs a number of techniques that seek to alienate the viewer. Ultimately, I will argue that by inducing a paradoxical state of engaged disengagement in the spectator, multiscreen video produces a space for critical reflection.

Before embarking upon this journey, however, I would like to once again pick up the sinuous thread of synaesthesia that winds its way through early twentieth-century art and cinema. Cross-modal sensory perception will be used as a tool for examining multimedia aesthetic experiences. Tracing this lineage will also permit me to shed light on the connection between nineteenth-century aesthetic practices and expanded, intermedial uses of time-based media in the present day.

4.2   Synaesthesia Since 1900: Abstraction and Expanded Cinema

In Chapter 3, I described how synaesthesia was employed within the Aesthetic Movement as a means to move spectators toward an appreciation of art for its formal characteristics. Théophile Gautier's maxim *art for art's sake* granted art an autonomy from history, religion, and morality. Art was to be enjoyed purely for its abstract qualities.

When the narrative of Modernism's emergence was beginning to take shape during the early years of the twentieth century, the contributions of the Aesthetic

Movement were downplayed. Impressionism and Post-Impressionism were favoured as precursors. Synaesthesia on the other hand, continued to fascinate artists, musicians, and filmmakers, and was employed as a catalyst for cross-disciplinary research in many fields. In the fine arts, synaesthesia was a means to conceptualize the shift from representation to abstraction, and was a useful device for making the objectives of abstract art comprehensible to the general public. Art audiences were encouraged to experience painting as they would a piece of music. This analogy remains functional today. Didactic information accompanying the exhibition *America is Hard to See* at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2015 is a striking example of this. Borrowing a title from a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe, a wall panel for a section of the exhibition, *Music, Pink and Blue,* reads:

> Synesthesia is a neurological syndrome in which a person's senses are transposed: colors may be experienced as sounds or sounds as physical feelings. This condition became a powerful metaphor for many artists working in the early twentieth century. They were fascinated, as Georgia O'Keeffe put it, with "the idea that music could be translated into something for the eye."
>
> An analogy between music and visual art proved especially useful in explaining the significance of abstract art to those that still greeted it with skepticism. Instrumental music had always expressed feeling without any explicit content; painting and sculpture, surely, could do the same. Even representational imagery might express sensations other than sight, such as a landscape alive with sound or a body moved by it. Increasingly, visual artists declared an affinity with music, while composers and choreographers began taking cues from the visual arts. (Whitney Museum of American Art, 2015)

American artists such as O'Keeffe, Charles E. Burchfield, and others, followed in the footsteps of Aesthetic artists such as James McNeill Whistler and his musically inspired *arrangements, harmonies*, and *nocturnes*. They also emulated developments in early European abstraction conducted under the banner of Orphism, or by *Der blaue Reiter* group, who counted the artist Wassily Kandinsky amongst their members.

The final sentence of the above quotation draws attention to intermedia crossover in the arts: in this regard, Kandinsky's practice is exemplary. The artist is known for his abstract paintings, works that were inspired by his well-documented interest in synaesthesia (Kandinsky, 1912). Parallel to his visual-art production, the artist also created a number of multimedia works for the stage. Like other artists associated with Orphism and *Der blaue Reiter*, Kandinsky used an interdisciplinary approach inspired by Richard Wagner's conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*: literally a *total artwork* uniting sound and vision, and capable of stimulating all the senses. Wagner proposed that this unification be achieved through theatre: his elaborate operas were monumental in both their ambition and execution. The Russian composer Alexander Scriabin, whose works bears a more direct relationship to synaesthesia, also inspired Kandinsky. Scriabin associated specific colours with musical notes, and transposed colour directly into harmony. He conceived multimedia performances integrating scent and dance, and made use of coloured light projections in works such as *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (1910). When *Prometheus* was presented in New York City in 1915, Scriabin employed a device known as a *chromola*—a light instrument designed by Preston S. Millar—to provide the visuals (Brougher, 2005, p. 73).

Kandinsky's interest in Wagner and Scriabin's experimentation with stimulating all the senses resulted in "several compositions before the First World War which incorporated music, dance, and coloured lights" (Washton Long, 1980, p. 52). Working under the influence of Madame Blavatsky and theosophy, Kandinsky wished to evoke spiritual or mystical experiences for spectators. The artist conceived four colour-tone dramas between 1909 and 1914, the most famous of which is *Der Gelbe Klang* [*The Yellow Sound*] (1909). Though it was never performed in his lifetime, *Der Gelbe Klang* demonstrates how the artist attempted to elaborate his visual art practice through time-based art forms. As such, Kandinsky's colour-tone dramas stand as important precedents for later explorations of colour-sound correspondence initiated by artists working in film and video.

The advent of colour-sound film in the 1930s marked the arrival of a medium capable of meeting the synaesthetic and intermedial aspirations of early Modernists. Experimental filmmakers working in the short-film format—Oskar Fischinger, Len Lye, Norman McLaren, Mary Ellen Bute, and others—created abstract moving-image paintings, accompanied by musical soundtracks: these films have been referred to elsewhere as *visual music* (Brougher, 2005). Of the four artists listed above, Mary Ellen Bute is notable. Originally trained as a painter, she began her career researching stage lighting and colour organs as a means of painting with light. From the 1930s to the 1950s, she produced over a dozen short abstract animations. Working in collaboration with musicians and animators, Bute created films resembling Kandinsky paintings in motion: geometric or biomorphic forms mutate and transform in counterpoint to the musical accompaniment.
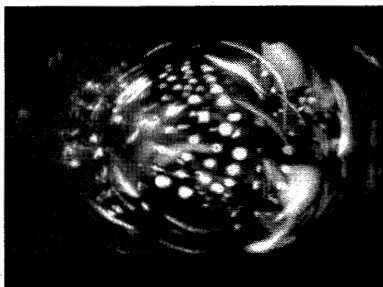
Figure 4.1: A still from *Synchromy No. 2*, Mary Ellen Bute (1935)

Drawing upon the ideas of music theorist Joseph Schillinger and bearing titles such as *Synchromy No. 2* (1935) and *Rhythm in Light* (1934), Bute's creations depend on tightly synchronized relationships between sound and image. Her research—along with that of her colleagues—crystallizes the early twentieth-century avant-garde's preoccupation with synaesthesia, and constitutes an important precedent for time-based artists who would follow.

The Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein is significant because he described the link between synaesthesia and colour-sound film in theoretical terms. Eisenstein is,

of course, well known both for his films and for his ground-breaking theories of silent film montage that he developed during the 1920s and 1930s. In his book *The Film Sense* (1942/1970), Eisenstein updated his ideas in order to account for the arrival of colour film stocks and synchronized sound. Invoking visual music, Symbolist poetry, and Alexander Luria's case studies of the synaesthete *S.,* Eisenstein's research makes overt reference to cross-modal sensory perception.

It is fascinating to read Eisenstein's theories concerning the emergence of sound and colour film now: what has since become a standard convention is once again fresh and new. In the chapter entitled "Synchronisation of Senses," the author's excitement is frankly palpable.

> To remove the barrier between sight and sound, between the seen world and the heard world! To bring about a unity and a harmonious relationship between these two opposite spheres. What an absorbing task! The Greeks and Diderot, Wagner and Scriabin—who has not dreamt of this ideal? (Eisenstein, 1942/1970, p. 87)

Eisenstein's account is a reminder that film and video, in the manner in which they combine colour image and sound, are fundamentally *synaesthetic media*. Later, he goes on to describe Kandinsky's works conceived for the stage, and to cite Rimbaud's *Voyelles*. Eisenstein favours the approach of Rimbaud over that of Kandinsky: he is highly critical of the latter. Describing *Der Gelbe Klang*, Eisenstein writes:

> Such a method *consciously attempts to divorce all formal elements from all content elements;* everything touching theme or subject is dismissed, leaving only those extreme formal elements that in *normal creative work* play only a partial role ....
> We cannot deny that compositions of this kind evoke *obscurely disturbing* sensations—but no more than this. (Eisenstein, 1942/1970, p. 117, emphasis in the original)

Kandinsky's work is problematic due to its separation of form from content. For Eisenstein, the challenge instead is to ascribe fixed semiotic values to colour in the same way Rimbaud does in "Voyelles." Ultimately, however, Eisenstein abandons this approach. Individual experiences of synaesthesia are extremely mutable: exact relationships between colour, sound, and meaning can never be categorized systematically.

> In art is it not the *absolute* relationships that are decisive, but those *arbitrary* relationships within a system of images dictated by the particular work of art.
>   The problem is not, nor ever will be, solved by a fixed catalog of color-symbols, but *the emotional intelligibility and function of color will rise from the natural order of establishing the color imagery of the work, coincidental with the process of shaping the living movement of the whole work.* (Eisenstein, 1942/1970, p. 150–151, emphasis in the original)

Overall, Eisenstein favours more arbitrary methods, ones that are dictated by the artwork itself, and which offer the viewer greater flexibility when encountering or reading the work. In her text "Synaesthesia in Film Theory" (2009), Sabine Doran offers a lucid summary of his position:

> [Eisenstein's] emphasis on synaesthesia as a mental form of imaging differs radically from the spiritual notion of synaesthesia propagated by artists such as Kandinsky and Scriabin, who claimed that the artist's synaesthetic sensations provide insights that were otherwise inaccessible. In opposition to this claim, Eisenstein's notion of synaesthesia involves an interface between the creator (the director), the medium (the film), and the receiver (the spectator). Eisenstein resists the notion of synaesthesia as a concept based on absolute relationships between sounds, colors, and forms, but rather emphasizes the "arbitrary relations" of a transformative process, in which associative structures and forms of mental imaging are both sensually as well as intellectually experienced. (Doran, 2009, p. 245)

For Eisenstein, the synaesthetic potential of colour-sound film is best realized when sensation is balanced with intellectual context. The receiver or spectator's position in this transaction is similar to Barthes's *reader*: one of active engagement in the

construction of the text, of the artwork. In this way, Eisenstein's theories represent a break from formal exploration of the early Modernists. They also anticipate the intermedial approaches of mid-century American artists, who would grant the viewer wide latitude in constructing or completing the work.

If synaesthesia inspired filmmakers and visual artists to explore the field of music, it also provoked musicians to look toward cinema and to the fine arts as sources for inspiration. Intermedia crossover permitted music to become more visual, and more theatrical. In 1936, the filmmaker Oskar Fischinger invited the composer John Cage to write music for one of his films. Rather than using pre-existing musical compositions as a source (as Bute often did), Fischinger wished to develop the soundtrack in tandem with the images. The filmmaker's interest in the correspondence between the sound and vision led him to state: "Everything in the world has its own spirit, which can be released by setting it into vibration" (Rich, 1995, p. 147). Cage seized upon this remark: it inspired him to explore the sound-producing capabilities of objects other than musical instruments, or, what music theorists referred to as *noise*. Cage's work built on precedents established by other composers. Edgar Varèse's *Ionisation* (1931) incorporated an anvil, a whip, and a siren as instruments. Luigi Russolo's *Art of Noises* (1913) and his *intonarumori* devices also blurred the frontier between music and everyday sound. Varèse, Russolo, and Cage's use of unconventional techniques parallels the emergence of visual art practices such as collage and found-object appropriation. In a manner similar to Duchamp, these individuals posed a fundamental challenge to existing conventions of authorship.

Cage's collaboration with Fischinger also attuned him to the possibility of working with film technology and prerecorded sound. In 1937, speculating on the future of music, Cage writes:

Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating. The sound of a truck at fifty

miles per hour. Static between the stations. Rain. We want to capture and control these sounds, to use them not as sound effects but as musical instruments. Every film studio has a library of "sound effects" recorded on film. With a film phonograph it is now possible to control the amplitude and frequency of any one of these sounds and to give it rhythms within or beyond the reach of the imagination. Given four film phonographs, we can compose and perform a quartet for explosive motor, wind, heartbeat, and landslide. (Cage, 1961, p. 3)

Cage's anticipation of the use of pre-recorded sound in music is both visionary and intermedial. His collapsing of the boundary between music and cinema, as well as his broad conception of music as the "organization of sound," led him to consider the role of silence in his work (Cage, 1961, p. 3).

Cage's most famous work, *4'33"* (1952), is a silent composition in three movements first performed at the piano by his frequent collaborator David Tudor. It's a clear illustration of Cage's philosophy of indeterminacy, his willingness to abolish the boundary between musical and non-musical sounds, and, by extension, the boundary between art and the everyday. It also unwittingly emphasizes the theatrical aspect of sound production.

For Cage *4'33"* was a public demonstration that it was impractical, if not senseless, to attempt to retain the traditional separation of sound and silence. For the audience it perhaps proved something else: as their attention shifted from listening to something that wasn't really there, to watching something that was (Tudor's restrained actions) they must have realized that it was equally senseless to try and separate hearing from seeing. The theatrical focus of the silent piece may have been unintentional, but nevertheless Cage knew that 'theatre is all around us,' even in the concert hall. In the same year, 1952, Cage arranged an event which deliberately moved out beyond 'pure' music into what was unmistakably theatre. This was the so-called Happening at Black Mountain College, the first post-war mixed-media event. (Nyman, 1999, p. 72)

Cage's unconventional methods for sound production lent his work a visual and theatrical aspect, one that he actively exploited. No doubt his collaborations with his

partner, the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, encouraged him to adopt a stance that further erased any distinction between the sonic and the visual, between the musical and the theatrical.

Building on Walter Pater's observation that art aspires to the condition of music, the music theorist Christoph Cox embarks on a brief discussion of graphic scores.

> Pater's remark captured the spirit of 19th-century aesthetics, which glorified music as the most ethereal and transcendent of the arts. Less than a century after Pater's declaration, however, this view was turned on its head, as avant garde composers began imagining a music that aspired to the condition of painting. Morton Feldman, John Cage, Cornelius Cardew, Anthony Braxton and other dedicated their works to painters and started to conceive the visual aspect of musical composition—the writing of a score—no longer merely as a means to an end but as an end in itself. (Cox, 2006, p. 187)

Visual scores by musicians are the flipside of visual representations of music created by painters or filmmakers. It is worth examining the place of visual or graphic scores in the work of Cage and other composers: Helen Potter's transcription of Oscar Wilde's voice can be contextualized within this tradition.
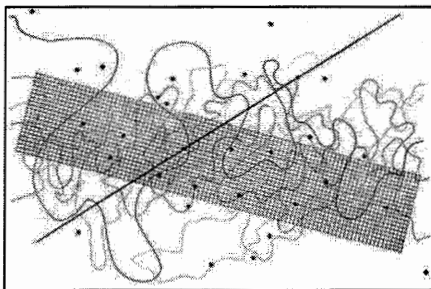
Figure 4.2: A page of the graphic score for *Fontana Mix*, John Cage (1958).

For Cage, the goal of creating a graphic score fulfilled practical concerns in addition to aesthetic ones. Sheet music that resembled a Kandinsky painting was more open to chance procedures: to indeterminacy. In contrast to the strict

regulation of performance dictated by traditional sheet music, graphic scores indicated only rough parameters for realization, thus granting the performer greater agency in interpreting or *reading* the composer's intentions. The similarity between this position and Barthes's "Death of the Author" (1968/1977) is worth noting. Graphic scores also participate in the avant-garde's tendency towards *deskilling*, an idea that I will return to in the following chapter.

Aside from being synaesthetic visual representations of sound, graphic scores can also be seen as precursors for *event* scores written by the Fluxus artists for their concerts, which in turn set the stage for text-based works by conceptual artists: written proposals that may or may not be used to generate art objects. For Cage, the visual scores lent an aesthetic treatment to a functional object, again blurring the boundary between art and life. For the Fluxus artists, however, and later, for the Conceptualists, the score or proposal provides a radical questioning of the art object, displacing the aesthetic experience from a formal to a conceptual register, and ultimately contributing to the dematerialization of the art object.

The distance between the synaesthetic painting of the 1880s to the total and unprecedented collapse of disciplinary boundaries in the 1960s is vast. The appreciation of visual art as music—and of music as a visual art form—called into question the *purity* of artistic disciplines in the Greenbergian sense. In the text "Art and Objecthood" (1998), the critic Michael Fried outlines his objection to the theatrical in Minimalist art specifically, and in contemporary art in general. The characteristics that Cage endorsed, and which Fried rejected—the relationship of the art object to the spectator, the importance of time and temporality (duration) as components of the artwork—were crucial markers of interdisciplinary and intermedia practices.

According to theorist and historian Michael Betancourt, interdisciplinary and intermedia works in the 1950s and 1960s can be characterized by three tendencies:

    1) the creation of multi-screen projection environments;

    2) a fusion of projection with various kinds of live performances; and

3) the "combination of different image technologies—film, video and the theatrical, optical projectors of various types used in concerts and other live stage performances" (Betancourt, 2013, p. 138).

By inserting the spectator into an immersive, multi-sensory theatrical environment, these forms synthesize the avant-garde explorations of synaesthesia in ways that privileged audience participation and interaction. Visual music films by Bute, Fischinger, and others laid the groundwork for the emergence of spatialized cinematic practices. By allowing the public to choose where they would cast their gaze, immersive film and video installations by artists such as Stan VanDerBeek and others granted the public greater agency in constructing aesthetic experiences. Like a musician reading a graphic score, the public plays a role in creating or completing an indeterminate artwork. The American writer Gene Youngblood would parenthetically group the experiments of these artists under the banner of *Expanded Cinema* (1970).

Youngblood's book provides a sprawling account of experimental film and video art in the 1960s and 1970s, and their integration within a multimedia hybrid. He characterizes this convergence as *synaesthetic*. Youngblood's use of the term owes little to scientific definitions, and more to Eisenstein's assessment of colour-sound cinema as a fundamentally multi-sensory experience. In spite of this qualification, the writer's specific definitions of *synaesthetic cinema* and *synaesthetic video* are amorphous and hard to pin down. Michael Betancourt corrals Youngblood's sprawling criteria by focussing his attention on the word *expanded*. In doing so, he provides a nuanced reading of the same. According to Betancourt, the term *expanded cinema* was developed to

> describe a range of artistic and technical practices, following the idea of "expanded consciousness" rather than the formal expansion suggested by Stan VanDerBeek and Mary Ellen Bute. The exhibitions produced under this name did not meet the standard expectations for film screenings— … but of some other model for screenings, less formal, less recognizable as part of a

commercial presentation. While this difference in exhibition was accompanied by other formal innovations—multiple projections, curved, domed or shaped screens, the mixture of slides with moving images, combinations of film and video—these formal differences were not the primary focus of expanded cinema. (Betancourt, 2013, p. 141)

In the book *Visual Music* (2005), Kerry Brougher elaborates on Betancourt's proposition, going on to state that the main goal of expanded cinema—of immersive multiscreen installation environments—was a metamorphosis of human perception, and an *expansion* of human consciousness.

Youngblood proposed that because of changes in art and technology we were on the verge of a new "synaesthetic cinema" that would leave behind such conventional and outmoded concepts as narrative and drama for mind-expanding film experiences operating on all the senses. This new "expanded cinema" was multimedia or "intermedia", fusing digital, holographic, videotronic, and laser technologies, and was at the time in the process of plunging headfirst into a brave new world of heightened consciousness. (Brougher, 2005, p. 120) [15]

Within the vernacular of 1960s counterculture, "mind expansion" is a euphemism for drug use: the use of mind-altering compounds that had the potential to transport the user to a higher, more enlightened level of consciousness. At one point in *Expanded Cinema*, Youngblood states that "synaesthetic and psychedelic mean approximately the same thing" (1970, p. 81). Synaesthetic cinema provided a simulation of psychedelic drug experiences for those who might be too cautious to take LSD. Within the utopian rhetoric of the period, expanded consciousness was one means to lead individuals toward political action. Expanded cinema questioned conventional framing devices for cinematic presentation—and the spectator's

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[15] Interestingly, Brougher charts a parallel destination for the synaesthetic impulse that winds its way through the twentieth century: to projections and light shows at rock concerts and in club environments.

sensory and corporeal engagement within them—in the pursuit of social change. Synaesthesia played a part in this endeavour.

According to art and film historian Sabine Doran, the shift from the nineteenth-century aesthetic traditions and scientific descriptions of cross-modal sensory perception gave way to new forms of interactive engagement prefigured by Eisenstein's melding of the intellectual with the sensual (Doran, 2009, p. 242). To construct this argument, she cites Susan Buck-Morss's "Aesthetic and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered" (1992). Responding to Benjamin's foundational essay (1936/1968), Buck-Morss develops the concept of open aesthetic systems that she calls *synaesthetic systems*: sensory apparatuses that do not split the mind from the body, or which are "not contained within the body's limit" (Buck-Morss, 1992, p. 12).

> The field of the sensory circuit thus corresponds to that of "experience," in the classical philosophical sense of a mediation between subject and object, and yet its very composition makes the so-called split between subject and object (which was the constant plague of classical philosophy) simply irrelevant. In order to differentiate our description from the more limited, traditional conception of the human nervous system, which artificially isolates human biology from its environment, we will call this aesthetic system of sense-consciousness, decentered from the classical subject, wherein external sense-perceptions come together with the internal images of memory and anticipation, the "synaesthetic system." …
>
> The synaesthetic system is "open" in the extreme sense. (Buck-Morss, 1992, pp. 12–13)

Buck-Morss's synaesthetic system is phenomenological in its conception. Building upon Benjamin's ideas, she contrasts synaesthetic systems with what she refers to as *anaesthetic art*: works that operate within the realm of the *form versus content* dialectic critiqued by Eisenstein. Anaesthetic art is fundamentally opposed to the synaesthetic. Sabine Doran summarizes this binary as follows:

> The "anaesthetic" is the ideal of Wagner's total artwork (the *Gesamtkunstwerk,* or fascist film, for that matter), which merely combines the senses without this combination thereby giving rise to a meaning that would be intrinsically and organically tied to the work itself. Buck-Morss points to Benjamin's description of Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk:* it creates mere surface patterns and numbing effects. The "anaesthetic" neutralizes shock effects ... (Doran, 2009, p. 244)

Doran's triangulation of Buck-Morss, Youngblood, and Eisenstein is significant. Not only does synaesthetic cinema engage the spectator in a phenomenological sense, raising consciousness (Youngblood) and countering the neutralizing effects of form separated from content (Eisenstein), but it also offers recourse to the social or political dimension outlined by Benjamin as a means to counteract the "anaesthetizing" effects of the spectacle (Buck-Morss).

If I have found it necessary to trace a history from painterly abstraction to expanded cinema, it is to establish that synaesthesia, both a model and a methodology, is deeply embedded in the history of multiscreen film and video as a framing device. The synaesthetic current initiated in the nineteenth century moved from static media to time-based and intermedia forms—from painting to film to multimedia installation—in the twentieth century. Expanded modes of presentation amplified the synaesthetic potential of cinema. Seen from this perspective, multiscreen video installation can be described as a synaesthetic medium, one whose power to enthral is founded upon both intellectual and bodily engagement. This fact can be easily be overlooked. The growing ubiquity of these artworks has perhaps rendered audiences insensible to this fact (much in the same way that they are less conscious of the synaesthetic nature of colour-sound film in general, as described by Eisenstein). It is thus important to shed light on this lineage. In the terms and perspectives evinced by theorists such as Eisenstein, Youngblood, Buck-Morss, and Doran, synaesthetic framing devices allow for the coexistence of aesthetics and politics.

4.3   Spatialization and Video Installation: Engaged Disengagement

In Chapter 1, I provided a general overview of the history of video art, video installation art, and multiscreen film and video work. Bill Viola and Gary Hill, and by Eija-Liisa Ahtila and Doug Aitken were used as examples of contemporary artists working with multiscreen video projection: the ways in which their works frame or implicate the spectator was examined. In the process, I argued that the spatialization and fragmentation of cinema opens up a participatory space for the audience. Following this, I identified myself as a player in the history of video installation art, describing multiscreen works that I made between 2004 and 2011, and which employed different modalities of making sound visible: I used them as a platform for defining my research question. I now invoke these histories as a context for a more detailed examination of multiscreen video installation as a framing device. In the following section, I will attempt to account for the paradoxical dynamics of engagement and disengagement that are solicited by multiscreen projection when used in gallery spaces.

In conventional film-editing as defined by theorists such as Eisenstein, one image replaces another in a linear fashion: meaning is produced through the sequential juxtaposition of images over time. As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the use of frame-accurate synchronization of multiple video sources permitted artists such as Bill Viola and Gary Hill to explore more complex forms of image montage. The juxtaposition of screens in space allowed linear film editing to acquire a lateral dimension. In his book *The Language of New Media* (2001), Lev Manovich describes film and video editing for multiple screens as *spatial montage*. Via the precise side-by-side juxtaposition of images, film montage as described by Eisenstein—and the attendant production of meaning—becomes more complex:

> In addition to montage dimensions already explored by cinema (differences in images' content, composition, and movement), we now have a new

dimension—the position of images in space in relation to each other. In addition, as images do not replace each other (as in cinema) but remain on the screen throughout the movie, each new image is juxtaposed not just with the image that preceded it but with all the other images present on the screen.

The logic of replacement, characteristic of cinema, gives way to the logic of addition and coexistence. Time becomes spatialized, distributed over the surface of the screen. In spatial montage, nothing need be forgotten, nothing is erased. (Manovich, 2002, p. 325)

As one can deduce from the above citation, Manovich is concerned with the juxtaposition of images *within a single frame*. Though he either ignores or elides multiscreen video installation by artists—a domain in which the notion of spatial montage perhaps finds its richest application—his definition is very much indebted to the history of split-screen or multiscreen cinema: he cites Abel Gance's *Napoléon*, the Czech Pavilion at the 1967 World Expo, and Youngblood's *expanded cinema* as important precedents. Multiscreen video installation, staged in the architectural environments of museums and galleries, transposes the spatial montage as described by Manovich above to a physical, three-dimensional, architectural space.

One of the general objectives of Manovich's book is to identify ways in which computerization has produced new forms of spectatorship. This has opened up new aesthetic possibilities for moving-image work. Spatial montage solicits audience attention in a manner that mimics "user experience of multitasking" and the multiple windows of the graphic user interface of home computers (Manovich, 2002, p. 325). The installation works of Eija-Liisa Ahtila and Doug Aitken described in the first chapter—or my own works, in which I employ spatial montage as an aesthetic device—provide the spectator with a heightened sense of engagement via their similarity to daily experiences of work and leisure in a screen-based culture.

Engagement in multiscreen work is produced in other ways as well. Entering the gallery, the viewer is confronted by multiple images. When the logic of *replacement* is superseded by *coexistence*, the spectator is free to choose where they

will look, and what they will look at. A visitor encountering *A Lecture on Art* might choose to watch the performer, the text, the filmic images, or the foley soundtrack, but can never see all screens at once. That visitor must effectively create his or her own montage of the work. This affords the viewer a greater independence in constructing the work than is permitted in single-screen films or videos, where one image replaces another in linear succession. Like the synaesthetic cinema described by Youngblood, multiscreen work engages the spectator bodily: the viewer is free to move about the space in order to view the work. The act of reconstituting the work, of assembling the parts into a coherent whole, grants the audience a role in creating or constructing the work. This is another means by which multiscreen work solicits active engagement.

Other researchers support this hypothesis. In her essay for the exhibition *Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art, 1964–1977* (2001), the curator Chrissie Iles situates early film and video installation work in relation to Minimalism and its preoccupation with site specificity. "Minimalist artists engaged the viewer in a phenomenological experience of objects in relation to the architectural dimensions of the gallery—not to pictorial space—transforming actual space into a perceptual field" (Iles, 2001, p. 33). Enacting an affirmative recuperation of Minimalist theatricality as defined by Michael Fried, Iles goes on to argue that early film and video installation works informed by this approach break from the fixed frontality of conventional cinematic projection and replace it with spatialized mobility.

> The darkened gallery's space invites participation, movement, the sharing of multiple viewpoints, the dismantling of the single frontal screen, and an analytical, distanced form of viewing. The spectator's attention turns from the illusion on the screen to the surrounding space, and to the physical mechanisms and properties of the moving image … (Iles, 2001, p. 33)

Structural filmmaking and film installations produced under the influence of 1970s apparatus theory—Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone* (1973), for instance—can be considered examples of this type of work. As was the case in the expanded cinema contexts described by Youngblood, the ability of the audience to circulate within the gallery space permits them to participate in the completion of the artwork. According to Iles, the movement of the spectator from the passive space of the cinema to the active environment of the gallery engenders a shifting of attention from cinematic illusionism toward a critical regard of the mechanisms that constitute it: the projector, the screen, the frame, the camera, linear montage, et cetera.

Video installation's capacity to provoke an analytically "distanced form of viewing," its ability to break cinematic engagement in order to draw attention to the gallery space and to the "physical mechanisms and properties of the moving image," as described by Iles above, produces what has been variously referred to as *an alienation effect, an estrangement effect,* or *distancing devices.* These are techniques that make the spectator conscious of the structure or apparatus that acts as a vehicle for the content. The German dramatist Bertolt Brecht wrote extensively on this notion. He was introduced to this idea through the writings of Russian literary theorist Victor Shklovsky and his text *Art as Device* (1925/1991). Shklovsky's and Brecht's terms—*ostranenie* in Russian and *Verfremdung in German*—have been respectively translated as *alienation effect* or *estrangement effect.* For the sake of simplicity, I will use the term *distancing device,* thus preserving a memory of Shklovsky's *device* while also evoking the notion of spatialization via the term *distance.*

Iles's invocation of distanced forms of viewing above reflects the deep integration of these concepts in contemporary art history and theory. Brecht was writing from a Marxist or Socialist perspective, one that called for social emancipation of the audience. This could be achieved by making the spectators conscious of their complicity in the spectacle, and of their willingness to be seduced

and manipulated by theatrical tropes. "The Modern Theatre is Epic Theatre" (1957/1964) functions as the first full statement of Brecht's intentions. Writing on the subject of opera, Brecht called for "a radical *separation of the elements*," of words, music, and production (Brecht, 1957/1964, pp. 37–38, italics in the original). By enacting this separation, a new attitude is solicited from audiences, one that required them to become active participants in the spectacle. The anaesthetizing effects of entertainment are counteracted: the viewer is propelled to adopt a critical position. By the manner in which the spectator's attention is solicited, Brecht's notion of epic theatre provides "a problem-creating as opposed to problem-solving engagement with drama's audience" (Storr, 2006, p. 14). Moments of self-recognition problematize the public's experience of the work, and incite them to ask questions about their willingness to be hypnotized and seduced by the spectacle.

In his plays, Brecht used of a number of techniques to distance or alienate the viewer: "Certain incidents in the play should be treated as self-contained scenes and raised—by means of inscriptions, musical or sound effects and the actors' way of playing—above the level of the everyday, the obvious, the expected (i.e., [they become] alienated)" (Brecht, 1957/1964, p. 101). When describing a scene from his staging of *Die Rundköpfe und die Spitzköpfe* (1957/1964), Brecht describes how the act of making the music or sound effects visible could function as a distancing device:

> Before the fifth scene a young nun entered through the subsidiary curtain carrying a gramophone and sat down on some steps. A record of organ music accompanied the first, pious section of the scene (up to the sentence 'What will the young lady bring with her?'). The nun then got up and went out with the gramophone. (Brecht, 1957/1964, p. 101)

Brecht's intention here, it would seem, is to provide a melodramatic musical accompaniment for the pious speech, and then cut it abruptly. Withdrawing the emotional narration furnished by the music effectively pulls the rug out from under

the spectator, making him or her conscious of how the emotional tenor of the scene is established by the gramophone music. Later, Brecht discusses the integration of sound effects in theatre, but advises, "It is best to place the record player, like the orchestra, so that it can be seen" (Brecht, 1957/1964, p. 103). Brecht claims that the use of sound effects "add substantially to the spectator's illusion of *not* being in the theatre" (ibid., p. 102). Making the record player visible to the public thus counteracts this effect by drawing attention to the artificial, mechanically reproduced sound source.

The inclusion of record players on stage during Brecht's plays is not dissimilar to strategies I employed in *A Lecture on Art*. Images of turntables were a repeating motif in *The Sirens, 2287 Hz*, and other works.[16] In *A Lecture on Art*, the visible turntable and the performance of foley work draw attention to the constructed nature of cinematic experience, exposing phenomena that are normally hidden from view. They problematize audience engagement, and privilege conscious awareness of multiscreen video installation as a "problem-creating as opposed to problem-solving" framing device (Storr, 2006, p. 14). This induces the viewer to stake out a critical position when confronting the work.

Multiscreen video installation presented in gallery spaces incites embodied participation via spatialized presentation techniques. Brechtian distancing devices, on the other hand, provoke the analytically distanced forms of viewing necessary to produce critique. This paradoxical coexistence of engagement with disengagement requires a more complex account of the dynamics of spectatorship. In her book *Installation Art* (2010), the art historian Claire Bishop discusses video installation (pp. 94–99). She emphasizes the dual nature of the viewer's experience, and argues that it is possible to be fascinated by the images on screen while also being aware of the conditions of presentation. To support her argument, Bishop invokes Roland Barthes's "Leaving the Movie Theatre" (1984/1986). In this short text, Barthes

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[16] Most recently, the curated exhibition DOCUMENT XXL, which was presented at Artexte (Montreal) during April, May, and June 2017.

describes modes of spectatorship in which the audience is both attentive to the film on screen, and to the cinema itself: "the texture of the sound, the hall, the darkness, the obscure mass of the other bodies, the rays of lights, entering the theatre, leaving the hall ..." (Barthes, 1984/1986, p. 349). In Bishop's reading, Barthes advocates a doubled fascination with cinema: one that permits spectators to be seduced by the spectacle, while, at the same time, to distance themselves from it via an awareness of the spatial conditions of viewing. With a heightened awareness of the context for presentation, Barthes and Bishop allow the audience to oscillate between positions of criticality and seduction, engagement and disengagement. One need not cancel out the other: they coexist in harmonious proximity.

For Bishop, this paradoxical fluctuation between engagement in what is occurring on screen and disengagement, provoked by an awareness of the cinematic apparatus, animates a large number of contemporary video installation works. She cites works by Isaac Julien, Douglas Gordon, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, and Stan Douglas as examples.

> This enthralment with the 'surroundings' of cinema is the impulse behind so much contemporary video installation: its dual fascination with both the image on screen and the conditions of its presentation. Carpeting, seating, sound insulation, size and colour of the space, type of projection (back, front or freestanding) are all ways with which to seduce and simultaneously produce a critically perceptive viewer. (Bishop, 2010, pp. 95–96)

For Bishop, this split focus distinguishes contemporary video installation art from works of the 1960s and 1970s, which were more deliberately confrontational. The paradoxical relationship audiences have with video installation—their ability to oscillate between positions of engagement and disengagement—produces a "critically perceptive viewer" (ibid., p. 96).

The art historian Kate Mondloch offers another perspective on techniques for producing engaged spectatorship. In her book *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (2010), she asks if gallery visitors are truly empowered when they are granted

mobility and choice in spatialized installation works. In the 1960s and 1970s, active spectatorship was considered politically radical. Participatory film and video environments, such as those championed by Youngblood and Iles, challenged the codes of mainstream cinema and television. The viewer's freedom to construct the work echoes Barthes's *birth of the reader* (1968/1977): the spectator became an active and engaged participant, rather than a passive, anaesthetized recipient. Invoking video installation by Douglas Gordon, Bruce Nauman, Doug Aitken, and Eija-Liisa Ahtila as examples, Mondloch wonders if this position is still valid in the twenty-first century. Citing the writings of film theorist and conservationist Dominique Païni, Mondloch asserts that the freedom of the audience to create their own experience is also the freedom to *not engage* with the work: to not pay attention, or to be distracted. Multiscreen video installation reflects a broader cultural shift to a screen-based culture: viewers are surrounded by—and interact with—multiple screens on a daily basis. This is bound to have an impact on spectatorship. Though critics habitually claim that multiscreen works offer a strong critique of the linearity of cinema and television, a less optimistic person would say that they merely reinforce distracted viewing habits: the act of wandering through video installations in galleries and museums mirrors everyday experiences in malls or commercial spaces.

The way in which the general public looks at video installation is formatted by dominant media culture: multiscreen, spatialized work may no longer pose the radical critique that they did in the 1960s and 1970s. Audiences might decide not to look at video installation works for very long, or with much attention, unless artists or institutions provide cues that encourage them to do so. If Mondloch's assertion is accurate, techniques that encourage engagement are in some ways even more vital than distancing devices in contemporary art today. This is perhaps where the different modalities of making sound visible used in *The Sirens, 2287 Hz,* and *A Lecture on Art* is most crucial: they foreground video's identity as a *synaesthetic medium*. As outlined by Eisenstein, Buck-Morss, and Doran above, synaesthetic

media have the capacity to engage the spectator both sensually and intellectually, both bodily and mentally: they emphasize what Mondloch refers to as "the embodied conditions of *all* media viewing" (Mondloch, 2010, p. 76). As a means to counter the anaesthetizing effects of the spectacle, synaesthetic media's emphasis on embodied presence is vital. Identifying multiscreen video installation as a synaesthetic medium harmonizes with Tom Sherman's assessment of video as an intermedial philosophical instrument: as a means "for questioning reality in broader terms, for finding problems with the way we connect with the world, and doing something about it" (Sherman, 2005, p. 60).

As engagement is doubled with disengagement, and the real (gallery) with the virtual (screen), so embodied presence is doubled with absence. Media are also mediumistic in the Victorian sense of the word: they are conduits for ghostly presence. The coupling of absence with presence draws attention to the paradoxical way in which spectatorship is structured in a screen-based culture.

> By dispersing focus across screen spaces that coexist, and indeed sometimes compete with the actual exhibition space, certain media installations generate a forceful, critical effect that hinges precisely on this tension between illusionist/virtual and material/actual spaces. In a curious amalgamation of gallery-based spatial experimentation and political aesthetics, this model of spectatorship proposes that viewers be both "here" (embodied subjects in the material exhibition space) *and* "there" (observers looking onto screen spaces) in the here and now. In so doing, this new double spatial dynamic, staged as a bodily encounter in real time, radically reinterprets the conventional ways that technological screen interfaces have been described and experienced. (Mondloch, 2010, p. 62)

As a synaesthetic, intermedial medium, multiscreen video installation solicits audiences to oscillate between a series of oppositional positions (engagement/disengagement, real/virtual, presence/absence). Via this movement, they are encouraged to participate in experimental ways of thinking.

In the first section of this chapter, I mapped out a history of synaesthesia in the twentieth century. In the process, I depicted multichannel video installation as an extension of early Modernist preoccupations with different modalities of making sound visible. With the arrival of Eisenstein, I identified a moment of rupture: a break from spiritual or formalist uses of cross-modal sensory perception, and a validation of synaesthesia as experienced both intellectually and sensually. Intermedia and multisensory projection environments—what Gene Youngblood refers to as *synaesthetic cinema* in the context of the expanded cinema movement— privilege the position of the audience through their emphasis on the conditions for projection and reception. Eisenstein and Youngblood both attach importance to the subjectivity of the spectator in attempts to foster critical engagement. Sabine Doran takes these ideas and combines them with those of Walter Benjamin and Susan Buck-Morss to advocate for a synaesthetic cinema that combines heightened forms of bodily and intellectual engagement.

According to Chrissie Iles, the emergence of video installation in relation to Minimal and Conceptual art followed a similar trajectory: the viewers' ability to move freely in the gallery or museum space granted them a role in constructing the work. This mobility enabled spectators to adopt a critically distanced posture when experiencing the work. Susan Buck-Morss's hypothesis that phenomenological, corporeal participation in the work can counter the anaesthetizing effects of the spectacle or Brecht's theories concerning distancing devices support Iles's argument. The adoption of a critically distanced perspective, however, need not annul our engagement with the work. According to Claire Bishop, our pleasure is heightened by our ability to oscillate between positions of engagement and disengagement: she invokes Roland Barthes's writings on cinema to describe this dynamic. In this way, Bishop asks us to redefine our conception of spectatorship. Kate Mondloch, on the other hand, questions whether the radical potential of active and participatory spectatorship continues to be operative in a contemporary screen-based culture. What was once empowering now simply reinforces distracted

viewing habits. For this reason, methods for creating engagement are perhaps more important than providing critical distance. If this is the case, a recuperation of the history of synaesthesia in relation to media and intermedia art is significant. Recasting multiscreen video installation as a *synaesthetic medium* allows artists to engage audiences both corporeally and intellectually. This is an appropriate response to redefined notions of spectatorship, ones resulting from the viewer's immersion in a screen-based culture.

I stated earlier that, via a paradoxical oscillation between positions of engagement versus disengagement and presence versus absence, the public was compelled to participate in experimental ways of thinking. If a space for critical engagement is created in *A Lecture on Art,* one that the gallery visitor may occupy, it is fair to ask what questions I hope to raise in this space. In response, I offer the following: What would Oscar Wilde think of art at the beginning of the twenty-first century? How has the definition of aesthetics transformed since the emergence of Modernism? Is the notion of aesthetics something that can be discarded, or can it be recuperated? Can a feminized or queer notion of aesthetics be taken "out of the closet"? There are issues that I will address in the following chapter.

CONCLUSION

5.1. Autobiographical Anecdote: Outing Aesthetics

Conversations I had with individuals both during and following the presentation of *A Lecture on Art* were instructive, sometimes permitting me to think about the work in new ways. Some of these conversations took place during studio visits; others were undertaken in the form of more experimental encounters. For example, during the 2015 edition of the *Mois de la Photo à Montréal*, I was invited to participate in a *speed-dating* style event that paired local artists with fifteen international curators. Tables were set up in a large, brightly lit gallery space. At each table sat an artist with a portfolio. Curators from Canada, the United States, Europe, and Latin America circulated from table to table, conducting thirty-minute one-on-one studio visits with each artist. The activity took place over the course of a single day.

My portfolio consisted of my laptop. I had organized a selection of videos and digital images, starting off with the Dazibao show—*A Lecture on Art* and the monochrome works—followed by two new projects, *Life Session* and *Tristram Shandy (Alas Poor Yorick!)*. Reactions to *A Lecture on Art* were generally positive. The curators posed questions about my process, and about aesthetic and formal decisions I had made. As the day went on, the meetings became increasingly tiring. In spite of my fatigue, I managed to find answers to everyone's queries. By the time the last interviewer arrived, however, I was completely exhausted.

As fate would have it, my final visitor was also my most challenging one: a young independent curator from Buffalo, New York. She posed many complex questions, urging me to clarify my position when I offered responses that were overly ambiguous. I laid out my ideas concerning the marginality of queer and female voices in the emergence of Modernism, and the consequences this implied

for aesthetics, and for beauty. She asked me what I thought about aesthetics. Did I think a recuperation of aesthetic beauty was a good or a bad thing? I wasn't really sure. It felt like a trick question, but did my best to answer.

"Sure, I am fine with aesthetics," I responded. "I am all for seduction, for pleasure, but I am against empty formalism, against *art for art's sake*."

My interlocutor returned to the problem of queers and aesthetics, and asked me bluntly, "Are you trying to take aesthetics out of the closet?"

I was dumbfounded. "I don't know," I replied. "I will need to think about that." The question made me uncomfortable. Was this really the essence of what I was trying to do in *A Lecture on Art*: out aesthetics?

During the weeks and months following this exchange, I came to conclude that this question—or at least some variation on it—had indeed animated the project all along. When I initially encountered Wilde's text, my first thought was, *What would he think of the world of today: our architecture, our mass-produced furniture, our interior design, and our art?* The realities of class and wealth undercut the idealism of Wilde's propositions. The possibility of inhabiting domestic environments filled with beautiful, handcrafted objects is a lifestyle that is out of reach for most people, a luxury that few can afford. Instead, most individuals will buy their furniture at places like IKEA or other big-box stores. The only handcrafted object is the one you make yourself at home. In and of itself, Swedish Modern furniture demonstrates how our conception of beauty has shifted over the past 135 years. Natural, hand-carved forms have given way to clean lines and the principle that *form follows function*. Queen Anne chairs, peacock feathers, Japanese fans, and blue-and-white china seem fussy and grandmotherly. What was once avant-garde is now quaint: anachronisms best relegated to the sets of *Downton Abbey*.[17]

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[17] During the production of *A Lecture on Art*, my eyes became fine-tuned to the interiors of this British television show. I recognized many of the objects, motifs, and styles as ones inspired by the British Aesthetic Movement. I was actually somewhat envious. When I was hunting for objects to build the Victorian decors for *A Lecture on Art*, it occurred to me that I was walking in the footsteps of my Victorian forbearers, literally embodying their actions in my search for blue-and-white china, peacock

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Wildean concept of aesthetic beauty was challenged on a number of fronts. Architecture, design, and art all adapted to the new economic realities of speed and mass production in their own ways. In the visual arts, the historical avant-garde challenged aesthetics in their embrace of mass-produced images and objects. Found object and collage practices were paralleled by the emergence of artists' uses of reproducible media such as photography and film. By mid-century, theoretical currents such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism discredited aesthetic beauty as being overly subjective, and contingent on dominant ideologies or systems of power. The criteria for what constituted 'correct' aesthetic practices were defined and maintained by the wealthy and the powerful. For this reason, those criteria could not easily be disentangled from politics. My reticence to endorse Wildean aesthetics and the cult of beauty during my studio visit with the curator from Buffalo, stems in part from these factors.

This conclusion will attempt to describe what happened to aesthetic beauty since 1882. It is not my objective to provide a detailed account of the development of aesthetics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A task that broad could easily serve as the basis for an entire thesis in itself. Instead, I will briefly overview a few key ideas and thinkers, especially as they pertain to *A Lecture on Art*. In the process, I hope to render in broad brushstrokes the transitions and developments in aesthetic theory from the 1880s up to the present day. This will serve the dual function of answering the question of whether a positive rehabilitation of aesthetics is possible, while also laying the groundwork for a reflection on materiality and affect— research-creation methodology and studio-based practice will be used as a catalyst for a discussion of the latter. Art-making will be characterized as a means to model answers to the question of how aesthetics might be recuperated, and for what ends.

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feathers, and Queen Anne chairs. I was performing the Victorian avant-garde in a twenty-first century context.

5.2. Aesthetics and Anti-Aesthetics

In the last chapter, I examined the relationship between aesthetics and synaesthesia in the twentieth century, and described the consequences this had for contemporary art. Interdisciplinary and intermedia practices inspired by synaesthesia led to a valuing of art on the basis of criteria other than that of beauty. As I mentioned in section *3.2: Oscar Wilde, The Aesthetic Movement, and Synaesthesia*, the artists and critics allied with Aestheticism participated in an important transition. Their conception of art, one rooted in eighteenth-century German philosophy and in nineteenth-century French Symbolism, coincided with the emergence of new forms of artistic patronage (the commercial gallery, the art collector) and a repositioning of art's relationship to other social institutions. Théophile Gautier's axiom *l'art pour l'art* effectively divorced art from its religious or moral functions, and encouraged an appreciation of art for its abstract qualities. Thus, when Wilde writes, "All art is quite useless," in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), it should not be read as yet another clever aphorism (1981, p. XXIV). Rather, it is a direct appeal for aesthetic autonomy: art need not possess any use value other than to exist for itself. Art was positioned as a distinct sphere of activity, one guided by its own rules and principles. This separation of art from its social function, however, could not be sustained for long. By the first decades of the twentieth century, the boundary between art and life was beginning to crumble.

Ironically, as an ideological position, the philosophy of aesthetic autonomy contained within itself the seeds of its own destruction. As Peter Bürger explains in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974/1984):

> Only after art, in nineteenth-century Aestheticism, has altogether detached itself from the praxis of life can the aesthetic develop "purely." But the other side of autonomy, art's lack of social impact, also becomes recognizable. The avant-gardiste protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life,

reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences. (Bürger, 1974/1984, p. 22)

Aesthetic purity came at the cost of social impact. In any case, art could never be truly considered autonomous. Even the most experimental practices remained dependent upon the art market, and the network of collectors, patrons, and institutions that supported cultural workers. The freedom artists claimed for the exploration of interdisciplinarity and intermedia practices was permitted both in opposition to, and within, the structures that allowed art to flourish. The historical avant-garde's imperative to erase the boundary between art and everyday life—an attitude embodied by the Dadaists in general, and Duchamp's ready-mades in particular—is a reaction to the aesthetic autonomy granted by Gautier and Wilde. From this point forward, aesthetics would be supplanted by *anti-aesthetics*.

> The anti-aesthetic dismantles the aesthetics of autonomy on all levels: it replaces originality with technical reproduction, it destroys a work's aura and the contemplative modes of aesthetic experience and replaces these with communicative action and aspiration toward simultaneous collective perception. (Buchloh, 2005, p. 25)

The emergence of image-reproduction technologies in the 1800s undermined the aura of the artwork: the artwork's existence as a unique and individual object in the world was challenged. Anti-aesthetic practices embraced mechanical reproduction and communications technology avidly. Walter Benjamin described these dynamics in detail in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936/1968). Technological mediation transformed aesthetics.

Another way to account for the fall of aesthetic and the rise of anti-aesthetic practices in twentieth-century art is by recourse to the notion of *deskilling*. First coined by Ian Burn in 1981, in the context of artistic production, the term refers to "persistent effort to eliminate artisanal competence and other forms of manual virtuosity from the horizon of both artistic production and aesthetic evaluation"

(Bois, Buchloh, Foster, Krauss, Joselit, 2005, p. 575). Deskilling first appeared in the late nineteenth century. As an artistic strategy, it links the visible, manual labour of Impressionists and Post-Impressionists to Cubist collage and to Dadaist found objects. Deskilled art practices, notably those of Duchamp, open the door to Cagean indeterminacy, to Fluxus events, and to Minimalist and Conceptualist uses of photography, film, and video. Bruce Nauman's exploration of the artist's studio as a workspace questioned the skill necessary to be considered a working artist. Deskilling thus lays the groundwork for contemporary practice such as my own, and is an appropriate tool for analyzing video installations such as *A Lecture on Art*.

If Aestheticism valued beauty and artistic skill, can a recuperation of aesthetics in the contemporary moment be considered retrograde? Recall Elizabeth Prettejohn's assertion that the British art critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry championed Impressionism and Post-Impressionism when writing their narrative of the emergence of Modernism. According to Prettejohn, Aestheticism's marginalization within art history was due to its association with homosexuality and femininity. Its reliance on a controlled, decorative style that eschewed "manly originality" combined with rejection of "the vigorous handling" that characterizes Post-Impressionist painting, also positioned it as an art movement very much invested in the idea of artistic skill (Prettejohn, 2006, pp. 5–6). This being the case, perhaps it might be worth taking aesthetics 'out of the closet.' *Reskilling* allows artists, critics, and historians to cast a critical eye on deskilling and anti-aesthetic practices. In the process, radical potential located in beauty and aesthetics, and questions relative to skill, can be revalued.
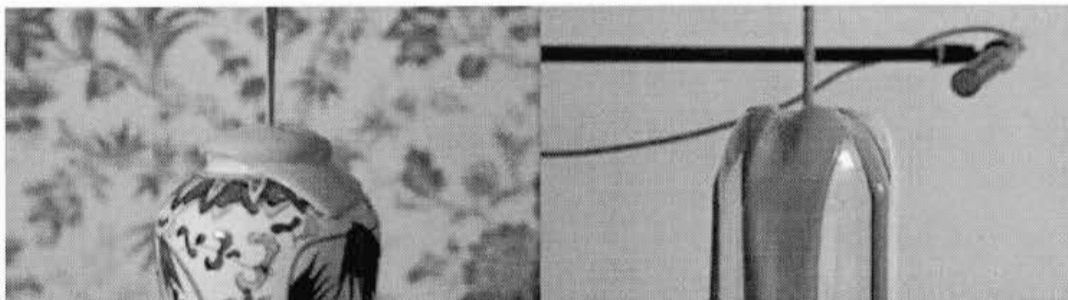
Figures 5.1 & 5.2: *A Lecture on Art*, Screens 3 and 4, Nelson Henricks (2015)

Whether or not a video installation such as *A Lecture on Art* endorses *deskilling* or *reskilling* is debatable. Aesthetics and anti-aesthetics are seemingly pitted against each other via the spatial juxtaposition of multiple screens. For example, the highly crafted and faux-historic imagery on Screen 3 is positioned in counterpoint to the functional and contemporary imagery on Screen 4. Aesthetic skill and anti-aesthetic deskilling seem to confront to one another. This opposition, however, is highly ambiguous. The functional imagery on Screen 4—the creation of sound effects—is deliberately staged and highly aestheticized. The beautiful artifice on Screen 3, meanwhile, is ruined by a stream of dripping paint. In more overarching terms, the technical sophistication of the framing device necessary for presenting the work—the synchronized playback of four video images—seems to point to an all-encompassing recuperation of skill, and of technical mastery. In this way, the close proximity of deskilling and reskilling presented in *A Lecture on Art* permits the two terms to interrogate one another.

In a thematic issue of *Esse* magazine dedicated to the question of reskilling, the art critic Stephen Horne addresses this issue in relation to works by Chris Kline, Lynn Cohen, Yam Lau, Lani Maestro, and me. In spite of a recuperation of the idea of skill in recent years, Horne argues that deskilling continues to exert an influence on the work of many contemporary artists. He reflects on artworks that, while superficially seeming well crafted, subject the notion of skill, or of making, to critique. The work of mine that Horne examines, the four-channel video installation

Unwriting (2010), is concerned with writing and writer's block, and the difficultly of translating experiences into words. On the surface, *Unwriting* appears to be well made: it is aesthetically seductive and technically controlled. Due to the narrative content of the work, however, the installation appears to be engaged in the process of writing itself, of describing its own making. This lends *Unwriting* a reflexive aspect, one that problematizes the apparent technical and formal refinement that characterizes the work. Horne writes:

> To describe a work of art as "well made" or "skilled" is usually to fall short of saying anything pertinent. Works of art "in themselves" propose not the hierarchical vocabulary of the "well made" but the anarchical "well-enough-made". Nelson Henricks's video retrospective held last year at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery at Concordia University presented a number of video works narrating, as subject matter, Henricks's own struggle to write for video. The arbitrariness that results from immersing oneself in contingency as a source leaves the artist with the task of sorting through memory and its attachments and disconnections from the social or historical milieu. Writing as a performative task as Henricks formulates it is a kind of Proustian quicksand with which one engages in the search for artistic form. From this perspective the notion of well-made looks absurd or at least, anomalous. As an everyday art critical concept, "well made" at least requires further and very precise contextual elaboration if it is to be meaningful. (Horne, 2012, p. 12)

For Horne, *Unwriting* is one example among a number of artworks in which the harmonious proximity of reskilling and deskilling are used to question one another. He goes on to invoke specific works by the other artists, who are also grappling with this question. Ultimately, Horne concludes that the deployment of technique poses a significant challenge to conventional hierarchies:

> These artists and exhibitions present diverse investigations of spatial and temporal construction in which non-knowing, emptiness, and the unforeseeable are privileged modes of being and doing destined to perpetually undermine the realm of skill, know-how, technique—all the behaviours that belong to the realm of pre-determined goals and the criterion of "efficiency." (Horne, 2012, p. 16)

The provisional space of "well-enough-made" places deskilling and reskilling in a reciprocal and reversible position in which they might interrogate one another. In this sense, practices that balance skill with deskilling undermine the systematic rigour of science. Horne's position echoes that of Katerina Gregos, and her valuing of "imprecision, ambiguity and contradiction" as an alternative paradigm for knowledge production (Gregos, 2015, p. 14).

The presentation of the *Unwriting* as incomplete, or in the process of making itself, foregrounds an openness to non-knowing, and to the unforeseeable. Similar arguments could be made for *A Lecture on Art*. The presentation of a film in fragments—the isolation of the script, performer, décor, and soundtrack on separate screens—privileges instability and uncertainty. Thus, *A Lecture on Art*, via the self-reflexive presentation of the process of its own making, submits anti-aesthetics and aesthetics—deskilling and reskilling—to mutual questioning and critique.

"Everything made by the hand of man is either ugly or beautiful, and it might as well be beautiful as ugly. Nothing that is made is too poor or too trivial to be made with an idea of pleasing the aesthetic eye" (Wilde cited in Ellmann, 1988, p. 629). Returning to Wilde's words—ones that remain resonant today—it is fair to ask what artists and critics have lost when supressing the concepts of skill or beauty. Artists and art historians need ways to describe how audiences relate to artworks outside the parameters of language: beyond searching for meaning or reading artworks as texts.

5.3   Autobiographical Anecdote: Foley Sound and Research-Creation

It is February 2015. I am working in my studio. I am trying to create the sound of paint impacting on the top of a blue-and-white vase. I have a sound in mind and I am trying to find a way to make it. Some sounds have been easy to find. To create the sound of a door closing, for example, one has only to execute the action and the

familiar and recognizable sound is produced. Unfortunately, this method doesn't always work. After repeated attempts, I have learned that dribbling paint on top of a porcelain vase produces *virtually no audible sound whatsoever*. In an attempt to make the sound of dripping paint louder, I have increased the paint's viscosity by mixing materials such as salt or sand with it. This has proved to be a failure both visually and sonically: this neither *looks* nor *sounds* right. The trick, it seems, is to replace the vase with something more resonant.
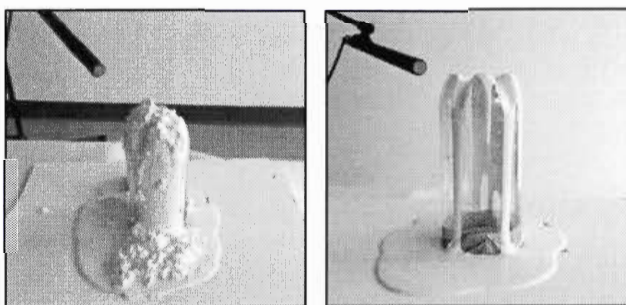
Figures 5.3 and 5.4: Production stills from the creation of *A Lecture on Art*, Nelson Henricks (2015)

The search for a solution has led me to devise the following method. I have decided to place microphones on both the inside and the outside of a plastic bottle. I will then pour paint over the bottle, and record the sound from two different positions. By mixing these two recordings together—from the inside and the outside—I can perhaps simulate the subtle and discreet sound I am searching for. I have purchased several water bottles from a local corner store. The bottles have been emptied, and their labels removed, and they have been left to dry for several days. Once dried, the bottles are inverted and mounted in squares of heavy cardboard that have holes cut into them: the upside-down bottles are placed in these apertures and taped into place with thick layers of gaffer tape. This not only stabilizes the bottle for the shot, but also protects the internal microphone from paint splatters. Over the course of an afternoon, I have constructed four or five of these assemblages, to facilitate the rapid

filming of multiple takes. This absurd, meticulous, and time-consuming process has been devised to capture a sound that lasts but a second.

So here I sit in the studio, engaged in an absurd activity, and I think to myself, "This is research-creation." But what is the status of this activity as creation? And what is its status as research? An action is executed until one is satisfied with the result, but what is the criteria for success?

1) The result must somehow correspond with intention. The artist has something in mind, and tries to materialize this immaterial conception. The physical manifestation must correspond with an abstract, imaginary model.

2), In some cases, the actualization of an intention produces an unanticipated result. For example, pouring paint on top of a flower evokes a variety of emotions, and suggests multiple yet complementary ideas, multiple layers of meaning. The result is an image that is multifaceted and open to a variety of readings. It is like writing an allegory or a metaphor, but it is created with visual means.

3) Finally, the action has to succeed aesthetically. If one were to use the filming of an action as an example, a person walking should not hesitate or stumble: this would lead the audience to focus on the moment of failure. The action must be executed in such a manner that it appears effortless and easy to do. It cannot draw attention to the possibility that it can be done ineptly or poorly. If one were to use sound production as an example, the sound would need to be believable, but it would also need to feel right. It would need to have the right degree of subtlety or impact. It would need to function both mimetically and affectively.

Taken in sum, studio-based research is concerned with—among other things—the materialization of the immaterial, the creation of metaphor, and the production of *affect*.

Wilde's conception of aesthetics refers narrowly to beauty, a notion that has been justifiably subjected to scrutiny under contemporary theory. But without this conception of aesthetics, how can I describe the sensory and material aspect of an artwork? How can I describe the attractive lure, the repulsive block, the sense of being overwhelmed by excess, or the uncanny feeling of an intelligence that seems to inhabit an artwork? Affect is a means of accounting for these sensations and actions: it is a means by which to take aesthetics out of the closet.

5.4   Affect and Aesthetics

I would like to begin by developing a general definition of affect. My approach to affect theory is rooted in the ideas of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. I feel this is appropriate, given my use of the rhizome as a means to explore intermedia and marginality in Chapter 2 (Section 2.2). In his book *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*, the theorist and artist Simon O'Sullivan describes affect in two ways: "as the effect of art on the body, and as that which constitutes the art object" (2006, p. 6). Affect is immanent to the artwork in the sense that it is "immanent to this reality, made of the same stuff, the same materials as it were" (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 34). In a transactional sense, affect describes the relationship between the art object and the corporeal subjectivity of spectators. "Affect ... names not only intensities in or on the body but also self-sufficient elements in the work (that which makes up art) (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 39). If affect were a vector, it would flow not only from the art object to the audience, but also from the audience to the art object. The reciprocal flow of affect decentres the human subject.

Later, O'Sullivan offers a more detailed definition of affect, one that builds on the ideas of Jean-François Lyotard. According to Lyotard, a work of art is not just a

cultural object. If art can be said to hold out "a promise of an infinity of forms and commentaries, and through this infinity, a promise of community of feeling, it is because it harbours within it an excess, a rapture, a potential of associations that overflows all the determinations of its 'reception' and 'production'" (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 40). Elaborating upon this idea, O'Sullivan posits that we have lost touch with one of the main defining criteria of art: the aesthetic.

> Because art is not an object amongst others, at least, not an object of knowledge (or, not only an object of knowledge), rather, art 'does something else'. Indeed, art is precisely antithetical to knowledge, if by knowledge we understood the accretion of information about 'reality' as we typically experience it. … This amounts to saying that art might well be *a part* of the world (after all it is a 'made' thing in the world), but at the same time it is *apart* from the world, and this 'apartness', however it is theorized, is what constitutes art's importance and its specificity as art. I want to explore this apartness, this 'excess' or 'rapture', which as Lyotard remarks …, constitutes art's effectivity over and beyond its existence as a cultural object. I want to claim that this excess need not be theorized as transcendent, but that we can think the aesthetic power of art in very much an immanent sense, as offering an excess not somehow beyond the world but an excess of the world, the world here understood as the sum total of potentialities of which our typical experience is merely an extraction. (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 40)

The excess of the aesthetic—the power of phenomena to act upon us abstractly, outside the limits of knowledge—is affect. Via affect theory, O'Sullivan calls for a rehabilitation of aesthetics. In a chapter entitled "The Ethicoaesthetics of Affect," he explains that his goal is to

> build up a polemical case for introducing a notion of affect into the discourse of art history. I am keen here to correct the overemphasis on ideological critique and semiotic approaches to art by attending to the affective dimension of the art experience. We might see this as a return to the notion of the aesthetic albeit a specifically immanent one. (O'Sullivan, 2006, pp. 6-7)

There are several ways one can unpack this citation. On one hand, O'Sullivan sees affect as an alternative to both the "aesthetic blindness" of Marxist, social-historical perspectives on art and to the deconstructive approach of the "New Art History" (2006, p. 40). Of the two methods, O'Sullivan regards the second—one based on Derridean deconstruction—as especially efficient, in so far as it effectively cancels out the validity of Marxist critique. Its efficiency aside, O'Sullivan remains sceptical of the poststructuralist position, which is more concerned with determining what art means, and rather than examining how art functions: "After the deconstruction, the art object remains. Life goes on. Art, whether we will it or not, continues producing affects" (2006, p. 41). In order to work his way out of this dead end, O'Sullivan adopts Deleuze and Guattari's idea of the *machinic* as a tool. Thinking of art as a machine and focussing on how art functions allows O'Sullivan to circumvent ontological definitions, and to rehabilitate aesthetics as an integral component of art's actions.

> Thinking of art as a machine in this way, literally and not just as a metaphor, side steps many of the problems and *cul de sacs* of aesthetic and art theory, particularly as Derrida reads it. Instead of offering us 'presence' (and then denying it to us), we can think of the art-machine as producing a number of effects, one of them perhaps being understood as a kind of aesthetic effect. In fact, it is here that we begin to modify the notion of aesthetic, to pull away from the metaphysics of presence, away from a transcendent horizon, and towards a field of immanence .... This aesthetic effect—or simply affect—as precisely a break in habit. (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 22)

According to O'Sullivan, where affect offers an alternative to social-historical and deconstructionist approaches to art history is in its location beyond the limits of language, or prior to them.

> Affects then are not to do with signification or 'meaning' as such. Indeed, they occur on a different asignifying register. In fact, this is what differentiates art from language, although language can and does have an affective register .... Here the realm of affect is positioned as an unreachable (and unsayable) origin

(the 'before' of language if you like). And yet affects are also, and primarily, felt experience. There is no denying—or deferring—them. They are what make up life and art. For there is a sense in which art is made up of affects. (O'Sullivan, 2006, p. 43)

In this way, O'Sullivan builds a case for inserting affect into the discourse of art criticism and art history. Affect becomes a means of recuperating a notion of aesthetics lost in social-historical and poststructuralist methodological approaches.

Affect's ability to recuperate feminized or queer aesthetics is significant. For O'Sullivan, affect is a means to move toward *ethicoaesthetics*: a Deleuzian elaboration of a politics or ethics that emerges from aesthetics. Asserting art's *ethicoaesthetic* function is not the goal of my argument here, so I will leave this idea aside for the moment and return to it later. Instead, I want to emphasize art's ability to function in sensory and bodily terms.

Though the concept of aesthetic beauty seems outmoded, art continues to affect us. In the context of the art market, seductive and beautiful objects still sell. Whether I discuss art in terms of aesthetics, aura, or affect, this function of the art object as a material and sensory experience remains operative. Within art criticism, theoretical currents such as *object-oriented ontology* and *New Materialism* have emerged as ways of speaking about the appeal of objects beyond the framework of commodity capitalism. Though these terms are obviously broader than *aesthetics*, they also indicate that materiality, sensation, and the body cannot easily be ignored.

The term *aesthetic* is not one I would apply to my own practice. Instead, I would say that my research is more concerned with materiality and affect. Using Deleuze and Guattari as a model, I define *affect* as an expanded version of aesthetics, one that contains not only the beautiful and the sublime, but any sensory response. The affective value of an image or object can at times provoke feelings of unease or discomfort. Material transfer plays with this notion of affective value. When an object is transformed into something else, its operation on affective and sensory levels—its identity as an object in the world, its capacity to produce

sensation—has been altered. These ideas animate projects produced concurrently with *A Lecture on Art*, and research-creation conducted immediately after it. In the following section, I would like to examine these works and demonstrate how studio-based research-creation can be used as a tool to respond to the aesthetic questions raised in *A Lecture on Art*.

5.4. Studio-Based Research: *Monochromes*, *Life Session* and Other Projects

While working on the video installation *A Lecture on Art*, I was completing other artworks: the series of monochrome paintings and drawings presented in the Dazibao exhibition are one example. I was also engaged in the production of artworks that were exhibited after the Dazibao exhibition, as well as artworks that are still in progress. This research in some ways responds to the issues raised by *A Lecture on Art*, while simultaneously extending these reflections in new directions, and opening new questions.
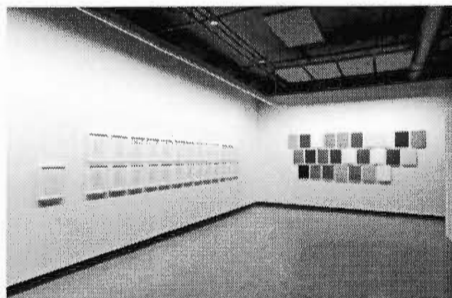
Figure 5.5: *Monochrome A to Z (for Grapheme-Colour Synaesthetes)* (2012) and *Monochrome A to Z (Synaesthesia Paintings)*, Nelson Henricks (2012)

As I mentioned in Section 1.3.2, "Supplementary Works," three bodies of work in painting, drawing, and photography accompanied the video installation *A Lecture on Art*. Two employed synaesthesia as a generative strategy. *Monochrome A to Z (Synaesthesia Paintings)* (2012) and *Monochrome A to Z (for Grapheme-*

Colour Synaesthetes) (2012) were both concerned with materiality and colour in affective terms. The paintings rendered a subjective, bodily experience of language concrete, one complicated by my colour blindness. The typewriter drawings *Monochrome A to Z (for Grapheme-Colour Synaesthetes)* (2012) also depend on subjective experience of language: the affective relationship between the drawings and spectators and has the potential to generate colour: for grapheme-colour synaesthetes, the grids of letters are perceived as fields of colour, thus functioning as monochromes. That said, my hope was that the work would also resonate for nonsynaesthetes, and that the pages would somehow be interesting on a purely material level. In both cases, language is materialized as a physical object: the sensory impact of the resulting phenomenon is balanced with its linguistic function.
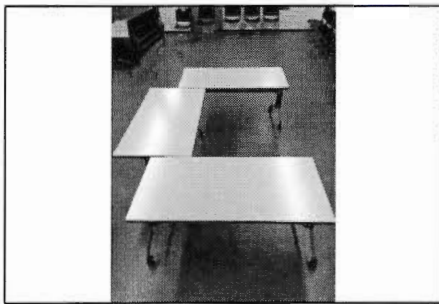
Figure 5.6: *Table Arrangements*, Nelson Henricks (2014)

The slide projection *Table Arrangements* (2014) emphasized the physicality of images as objects. Recall that the initial photos of the classroom tables were taken with an iPhone, and uploaded weekly to my Instagram account. In the Dazibao exhibition, the slide projector lent the images a physicality they did not possess in their original form: an obsolete technology was used not so much for its ability to evoke nostalgia as for its ability to lend materiality to ephemeral digital images.

The production of these works—the paintings, the drawings, and the slide projection—was driven by an interest in creating real objects that existed in three-dimensional space and that somehow engaged the audience via their materiality.

Each one points toward a fascination with affect. Taken together, these works are concerned with translation, transposition, and material transfer: letters that become colours, language that become graphic imagery, tables that become language, and so on. These tendencies continue to assert themselves in the projects *Life Session* (shown at Galerie Optica, Montreal, in winter 2017) and *Tristram Shandy (Alas Poor Yorick),* a multimedia work that is currently in progress. In the following paragraphs, I will describe these pieces in detail, and explain how their engagement in materiality signals a new preoccupation with affect.

Life Session is a multimedia installation that I initiated in 2012, the same year I began working on *A Lecture on Art*. It is based on the beginning of a 1970s gay porn film. Shot on Super8, the original ten-minute film takes place in an artist's studio. On screen, the audience see an artist drawing a live model. The artist looks at the model, the audience sees close-ups of the charcoal drawing he is working on and shots of the model looking back at the artist. After a while, the artist drops his charcoal and has sex with the model. I was only interested by the first two minutes of the film—the exchange of looks between the actors before they have sex—and how viewers are positioned in relation to them.

Figures 5.7 and 5.8: A frame from the original *Life Session* film and redrawn image of the same, Nelson Henricks (2016)

With the help of several assistants, I made pencil drawings of approximately 400 frames, roughly half the film. When the drawings for an entire shot were finished,

they were used to create an animated sequence: the new footage was then intercut back into the original film. The fluctuation between the original footage and the animated, redrawn sequences is jarring. The animated images act as a distancing device, interrupting the flow of the film and problematizing the viewing experience.
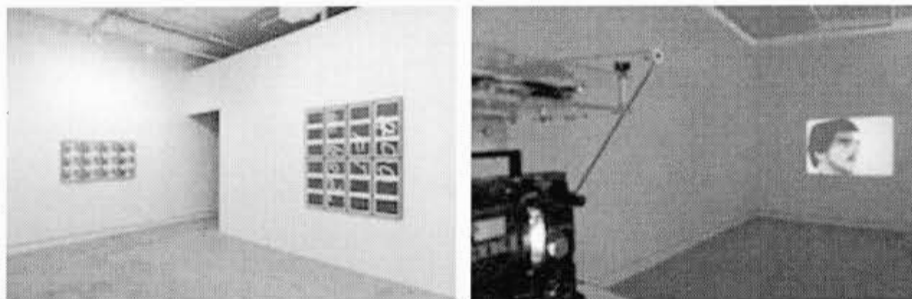
Figures 5.9 and 5.10: *Life Session* at Galerie Optica, Nelson Henricks (2017)

Entering the gallery, visitors first encountered fifty-seven of the preparatory drawings used to create the animated sequences. The public passed by them before coming to a second room, in which the 16mm film was shown. Presenting the moving-image component of the exhibition as a film—with the clattering projector providing a soundtrack—emphasized the materiality of the film-as-object. The filmstrip on the looping mechanism was visible to the public, lending another register of tangibility to the seemingly ephemeral images. Contrasting the animated film with the drawings underscored the labour-intensive, process-oriented nature of the project. The drawings materialized the ephemeral film image.

In a manner similar to *A Lecture on Art*, *Life Session* dismantles a film spatially and materially. In its exploration of the motif of the artist's studio, *Life Session* also poses fundamental questions about the myth of the artist in popular culture, and the nature of artist's work. It does so via the *mise-en-abyme* of an artist drawing a film of an artist drawing a model. What occurs when immaterial images are lent a physicality? How does it feel to be surrounded by these drawings, to feel the time and labour that went into them? The physical labour necessary to create the

drawings materializes the immaterial filmic images: in doing so, it amplifies the affective value of the film.

Finally, *Life Session* also draws attention to the question of aesthetics. The installation takes its title from Falcon Film #615, *Life Session* (1977). Falcon Entertainment—also known as Falcon Studios—is based in San Francisco, California. Founded by the entrepreneur Chuck Holmes in 1971, Falcon Studios is one of the world's largest producers of gay pornography. By the early 1980s, it had distinguished itself as a frontrunner at a time when distributing pornography was a criminal offence. Holmes was active in supporting politics at a local and national level, even helping to finance Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in the 1990s. Via widespread mail-order distribution, Falcon Studios contributed to the construction of a gay male aesthetic, a style that originated in San Francisco's Castro District. Porn offered men living outside major urban centres images of gay lifestyles at a time when representations of this kind were scarce. In this sense, these films were affirmative and enabling in the formation of a gay identity and aesthetic. *Life Session* demonstrates how degraded or queer aesthetic practices can be politically enabling for marginalized communities. More emphatically than *A Lecture on Art*, *Life Session* underscores the link between aesthetics and politics. It challenges the manner in which 'correct' aesthetic practices are established and maintained by the dominant orthodoxy. In this sense, *Life Session* fulfils what O'Sullivan describes as the *ethicoaesthetics of affect*: a politics or ethics that emerges from aesthetics.

My current project, *Tristram Shandy (Alas Poor Yorick!)* consolidates research into monochrome painting and English-language literature—presented as separate bodies of work at Dazibao in 2015—in one self-contained project. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is a farcical autobiography written by Laurence Sterne between 1759 and 1767. The novel is highly experimental, exploring the limits of typography and print design. For example, in Book 1: Chapter 12, a page printed entirely black appears at a point in the story when a character named Yorick dies.
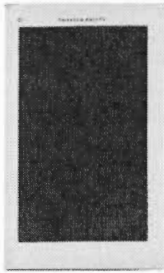
Figure 5.11: The black page from *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman,* Laurence Sterne (1767)

On one hand, the black page can be understood as fullness: an overflowing of ink and emotion representing a grief too immense to be expressed with words. On the other, it is an image of an open grave: a gaping hole, an absence, a void. The paradoxical function of the black page—fluctuating between plenitude and absence, between representation and abstraction—fascinates me.

In his book *La peinture monochrome* (2006), Denys Riout revisits the history of monochrome painting, one that conventionally begins with Malevich's *Black Square* (1915). For Riout however, important precedents existed before this. In the chapter *Les monochromes pour rires,* he describes works by the French artists Alphonse Allais and Paul Bilhaud: members of *Les Incohérents*, a short-lived art movement founded in 1882. Riout sees both Sterne's *black page* and the work of *Les Incohérents* as comic or literary antecedents to monochrome painting, ones that both predate and anticipate Malevich. This satiric prehistory—a kind of postmodernism before modernism—is the foundation of this project.

Over the past several years, I have initiated a research-creation project linked to Sterne's novel. I began by reading *Tristram Shandy*. This was followed by the creation of a number of prototypical artworks using the black page as a starting point. I collected roughly twenty different editions of *Tristram Shandy* in both French and English versions. The black pages were extracted from these books.

Some of them—now lacking the black page—were burned. The ashes were then pulverized into a fine powder and mixed with acrylic medium. The resulting black paint was used to create a series of monochrome paintings. This process of material transfer, in which a book becomes an art object, finds a parallel Sterne's black page and its fluctuation between representation and abstraction: my black paintings are representations of the black page that literally incorporate or embody the novel. The *Tristram Shandy* paintings pose questions about affect and aesthetics. When a book is burned and made it into a painting, the object's affective value is transformed. Its material identity as an object in the world, its capacity to produce sensation, have been altered. In a manner similar to *Monochrome A to Z (Synaesthesia Paintings)*, this work transforms language into a physical substance. Corporeal, sensory response is given priority over linguistic signification.

Both *Life Session* and *Tristram Shandy (Alas Poor Yorick!)* emphasize materiality and affect. At this juncture, it is fair to ask why my practice has taken a material turn. This shift is not an isolated phenomenon in contemporary art theory and practice. On one hand, it would be easy to depict the renewed interest in materiality as a reflection of the rise of the art market within commodity capitalism and economic neoliberalism. Objects, especially beautiful, hand-crafted objects, sell. In this light, a return to materials and to objects—a return to aesthetics—can be depicted as a retrograde movement towards Modernism. The recent emergence of currents such as *remodernism, transmodernism,* or *the new aesthetic* are attempts to resolve unfinished aspects of the Modernist project, or to recuperate elements lost in the shift from Modernism to postmodernism. Even cynical or satiric manifestations of formalist painting in the 2000s could be described as participating in this tendency.

I speculate that the interest of contemporary artists in material practices is a by-product of living in a culture in which our access to a wide range of cultural phenomena—to photos, music, text, and moving images—occurs increasingly in a dematerialized form. Materialization is a response to post-internet culture. If the

1960s Conceptualists sought to dematerialize the art object in opposition to the art market, in the twenty-first century there is a renewed interest in materiality, phenomenology, the body, and the real, in opposition to dematerialized, digital culture. That an interest in synaesthesia emerged during the Victorian period is not surprising. Aestheticism was as reaction to widespread industrialization, to a body dematerialized by telegraph, telephone, and gramophone. It was an appeal to the senses: to the corporeal, the synaesthetic, and the phenomenological. Aesthetic artists were not concerned with meaning, but with pure sensation. The affective value of the work trumps its signification. Can the appearance of mediating technology in the Victorian epoch be compared with the emergence of virtual, online culture today? Can a recuperation of aesthetics via the notion of affect also mark the return of the body to contemporary art and theory?

From a postmodern or poststructuralist perspective, critical writing on art and aesthetics focused on meaning, situating artworks within language-based frameworks. According to the author and artist Barbara Bolt, due to this interpretative bias, "the place, role and power of materiality in art was subsumed under the rubric of discourse or ignored" (2013, p. XI). New Materialist philosophy is a means to discuss the material turn in art. In her introduction to *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a 'New Materialism' through the Arts* (2013), Bolt attempts to account for the interest in materialist practices arising in the current historical moment. Using the notion of agential or active material—material that acts, as well as being acted upon—as a starting point, Bolt attributes this emergence to a number of factors.

> How are we to understand the resurgence of materialist theories at the beginning of the twenty-first century? With its acknowledgement of agential matter, neo-materialism questions the anthropocentric narrative that has underpinned our view of humans-in-the-world since the enlightenment, a view that posits humans as makers of the world and the world as a resource for human endeavours. The new materialist discourse derives its urgency from the ethical, ecological and political imperatives that loom as a consequence of this view of the world. ... Put simply, the idea that the world is a passive resource

for use by active humans is no longer sustainable. The matter of the world can no longer be a mere resource for human endeavour. What is at stake here, is the very ground on which humanism has been built and sustained. (Bolt, 2013, pp. 2–3)

For Bolt, New Materialism clearly has ecological overtones: our entry into the Anthropocene era marks this shift. As was the case with affect theory as defined by O'Sullivan, New Materialism does not place the aesthetic experience in the human subject. Rather, the aesthetic is seen as a relationship "between the human and the non-human, the material and immaterial, the social and the physical" (Bolt, 2013, p. 6). New Materialist philosophy displaces the human subject as the centre of all things. Like affect theory, this flies in the face of the structuralist, poststructuralist, and postmodern emphasis on discursive formations and language. This realignment is crucial to feminist and queer theory, as it forces a redefinition of social constructivist theories, and what is at stake when they are invoked.

In the humanities and social sciences, particularly in feminist theory, the new materialism involved a reaction against the cultural turn that defined cultural and political theory in the late twentieth century. Exponents of the new materialism argue that where social constructivist theories thrive, matter becomes mute. New materialism aims to return to matter, the vivacity denied by social constructivist theories that posit all social processes and, indeed reality itself, as socially and ideologically constituted. (Bolt, 2013, p. 3)

Following this trajectory, Bolt goes on to cite Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman and their introduction to *Material Feminisms* (2008). For Alaimo and Hekman, the new materialism is a means for feminism "to bring the material, specifically the materiality of the human body and the natural world, into the forefront of feminist theory and practice" (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 1). Though this perhaps seems nostalgic for 1970s second-wave feminism and body-centred essentialism, the authors are quick to point out that they wish

to build on rather than abandon the lessons learned in the linguistic turn. The new settlement we are seeking is not a return to modernism. Rather, it accomplishes what the postmoderns failed to do: a deconstruction of the material/discursive dichotomy that retains both elements without privileging either. (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p. 6)

Conceptually based practices of the 1960s and 1970s dematerialized the artwork. In the twenty-first century, there is a call to materiality and to the body. New materialism lends the dematerialized art object a physicality, a body. Via the notion of affect, feminized or queer aesthetics suppressed under Modernism can be reintroduced into contemporary art discourse. A recuperation of aesthetics via affect theory provides an alternative to the poststructural and postmodern emphasis on language and signification. Instead, an artwork's action—its effect on the body, on the human sensory apparatus—can be accounted for. Aesthetics, as least as it is used on the margins, become politics.

A Lecture on Art's deployment of synaesthesia—making the production of sound visible—draws attention to the embodied nature of aesthetic experiences. As a phenomenon, synaesthesia draws attention to the body as a nexus for sensation and perception. Exploration of practices such as painting and drawing sees my art practice reinvesting in tactile engagement. Research-creation work conducted in parallel with or subsequent to *A Lecture on Art—Life Session* and *Tristram Shandy (Alas Poor Yorick)*—further emphasize the importance of materiality and affect. Whether or not market forces, post-internet culture, or environmental and ecological issues have provoked a material turn in art, what is clear is that there is a general interest in recuperating the body within contemporary art theory and practice.

The nineteenth century's fascination with synaesthesia positioned art in an autonomous relationship to everyday life, disentangling it from its pedagogical or moral function. It also placed the art object in a direct, bodily relationship with the viewer, in a manner that bypassed language. This emphasis on bodily experience occurred during a historical moment in which mediation and disembodiment—via

the telephone, telegraph, and gramophone—were problematizing notions of embodied experience. In post-internet culture, contemporary society is experiencing tectonic shifts similar to those felt by the Victorians in their encounters with the telegraph, the telephone, and the gramophone. I am lost in a forest of screens. On a daily basis, I encounter them in public and private contexts. My experiences are mediated through them. For this reason, a renewed interest in affect, in materiality, and in the body is perhaps not accidental. It is a reflection of, and response to, the multiscreen culture artists and audiences are immersed in.

APPENDIX A

A BRIEF HISTORY OF VIDEO ART

Video's evolution is linked to social and technological change, to art-world trends and interdisciplinary crossover. The pluralist nature of video—as an art form, as a documentary and activist tool, as a technological means—has given rise to parallel histories, making it difficult to capture the essence of this multifaceted medium in a single, linear narrative. Instead we are faced with multiple histories that overlap and intertwine. I've decided not to name individual artists, but rather to focus on broader currents and trends. That said, there is one name I just can't get around: Nam June Paik.

Paik is widely depicted as the first video artist, a one-person movement whose links to the avant-garde legitimized the medium in its early years. The story of video art's birth is regularly recounted as follows: in the mid-1960s, Paik documented the Pope's visit to New York City with his newly acquired Sony Portapak, presenting it at a Fluxus concert that same evening. Over the years, this narrative has come to be regarded as apocryphal. That said, every myth has its truth, and Paik's claim to his founding role is legitimate. In a short period—roughly 1965 to 1975—he managed to do with the medium everything that would be developed in the following four decades: no small achievement.

There is a strong utopian character to Paik's work that is deeply political in its commitment to social change. Paik was influenced by communications theorist Marshall McLuhan, who is famous for slogans such as "the medium is the message" and for his visionary notion of the "global village" (McLuhan, 1964). Technologies such as video can link us in ways that were previously impossible. In the myth of video's emergence, then, the Sony Portapak is equally deserving of our attention. The

social importance of individuals being able to produce their own television should not be underestimated.

Younger readers might be surprised to learn that television was once the central platform for video; that video was not always accessible to everyone; and that, until recently, video was recorded on something called "videotape." For many years, television was live and unrecorded. The introduction of magnetic tape permitted video signals to be replayed and edited. But still, the medium remained locked to the television studio, accessible only to a select few. Released in 1965, the Sony Portapak, though anything but portable by today's standards, allowed video to move outside the television studio. It was the first time that video recording and playback equipment were available to the general public. Recorded on reel-to-reel magnetic tape, videos made on the Portapak were often unedited, single takes: no editing equipment was commercially available. The grainy, grey-and-white Portapak aesthetic characterizes the works of the first generation of videomakers.

The emergence of the Portapak also coincides with the rise of conceptual art. A radical break from formalism, conceptual art is an art of ideas, characterized by the use of language. Emphasis was placed on process versus product. Artists questioned the commodification of art, and explored the dematerialization of the art object. Some artworks existed only as written statements. Others eschewed the production of objects altogether, instead opting to engage in body art. Ephemeral forms such as photography, film, and video were used to document performance gestures. Conceptual art's rejection of the art market, art critics, institutions, and galleries gave birth to artist-run culture. In this sense, video was linked to the sixties' counterculture rejection of status quo values and authority.

The sixties were a moment of unprecedented interdisciplinary crossover— between the visual arts, dance, film, music, and theatre—but also between art and politics. Strong distinctions between art and activism did not exist. Video was used in ways that were overtly political, addressing the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, women's liberation, gay liberation, and other social causes. Practitioners

emerging from documentary traditions such as *cinema vérité* saw in video a medium that could rival 16mm film and undermine the authority of television. Video works made by women were strongly influenced by feminist thought.

As the seventies progressed, colour video and video-editing formats were introduced, allowing artists to work with the language of television and cinema. Many artists' works were strongly critical of television, at times appropriating images from pop culture and subverting them. Others adopted the language of independent cinema to explore narrative. Film, in both its narrative and experimental modes, had a significant influence on video art. Artists also explored site specificity, exhibiting works in spaces outside of gallery contexts: television was a viable location to explore. At the same time, artists presented immersive multiscreen video installations in galleries and museums, expanding exhibition conventions.

In a relatively short period, roughly ten to fifteen years, independent video situated itself on the margins of documentary filmmaking, political activism, cinema, television, and the fine arts: an ideal position from which to critique a broad range of cultural phenomena. Video's broad embrace, however, also made it difficult to pin down. Definitions of video based purely on material characteristics tended to misunderstand the medium. Looking at work methods—how video is used—provided a more accurate measure of what linked and aligned otherwise disparate practices. Video's experimental and oppositional characteristics are key to this understanding.

Thus far, we've encountered a commonly accepted narrative of video's emergence, as well as several parallel histories. Any conception of video's origins should be able to account for multiplicity. It should also be acknowledged that the above narrative is an *American* perspective: it's one that is recounted regularly in anthologies and introductions to the medium. It's good to be critical of master narratives, but it's also good to acknowledge and understand them. Local histories, with their variations and reversals, become more meaningful when set against this backdrop. The development of video in Canada and Québec provides some striking examples.

Early video from English Canada had strong roots in Conceptual art and performance art. Language-based conceptual work in Canada, however, quickly evolved into explorations of personal narrative and storytelling, a phenomenon that distinguishes Canadian video from its American counterpart. By the late 1970s, Canadian artists were adopting the language of independent cinema to explore dramatic narrative. Some works were strongly critical of television, mass media, and pop culture: as we move into the eighties, Canadian video becomes consciously postmodernist in its deployment of pastiche, parody, and appropriation.

Though conceptually driven work existed in Québec during the early seventies, activist and documentary tendencies reflected the turbulence of the Quiet Revolution. *Cinéma direct* and documentary practices originating from the francophone National Film Board of Canada (NFB) enforced this trend. In the late sixties, the NFB initiated *Société Nouvelle* and Challenge for Change, programmes that took the utopian ideals of placing Sony Portapaks into the hands of the people and actualized them, offering free training and equipment access to the general public. Artist-run video access centres in Montréal, Toronto, and Vancouver arose directly from these twin initiatives. Other Canadian video production centres emerged from the artist-run gallery network with support from the Canada Council for the Arts and provincial funders. Universities and art colleges also played an important role— notably, the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and the University of Guelph. By the mid-eighties, every major Canadian city had at least one non-profit, artist-run video production centre. Organizations dedicated to the distribution of independent video were established in Vancouver, Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montréal.

Although documentary and activist work had always been present in English Canada, these tendencies became dominant in the eighties. Videos addressing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues coincided with a wide proliferation of queer festivals. Works addressing the spread of HIV/AIDS focussed on consciousness-raising and social change. Feminism had a strong influence on LGBT and AIDS activist work. Meanwhile, fragmentation within the feminist and LGBT movements

saw the proliferation of works from various cultural communities. Works operating from the theoretical bases of postcolonial and poststructuralist theory that addressed race, gender, or cultural identity were grouped together under the rubric of "identity politics." Interestingly, identity works were largely absent from Québec during the eighties, where videomakers were increasingly preoccupied with infiltrating television.

In the eighties, a broad range of works emerged that can be grouped together under the banner of "new narrative." Extending from conceptualist uses of language, new narrative borrowed aesthetic strategies from mainstream cinema and television, from experimental film, and from other sources. The use of autobiographical, fictional, theoretical, and poetic texts lent some of this work a literary flavour, though some eschewed spoken or written words in favour of lyrical visual narrations. Using codes derived from mainstream media, attempts to infiltrate television through the perceived opening created by music video persisted. Though new narrative work generally abandoned an oppositional stance toward television, it nonetheless demonstrated an experimental bias that favoured ambiguity over didacticism. This type of work flourished in both Québec and Canada.

The nineties can be characterized by hybridization. The lines between cinema and video were blurred, due to the emergence of nonlinear video editing on computer platforms: filmmakers and videomakers were increasingly working with the same tools. This conflation was not without conflict and confusion. Questions arose concerning video's essential characteristics; definitions of medium in terms of its material base gave way to ones that favoured notions of shared methodology, history, and audience. The end of film's first century also permitted some artists to engage in a kind of cinematic archaeology, reassembling the fragments of broken medium and fetishistically re-presenting it. Others adopted cinematic language wholesale as a *lingua franca*: as a means to reach the general public. Artists began to create long-format works. Others moved into the realm of feature-length filmmaking.

By mid-decade, activist works were addressing hybrid identities (i.e., aboriginal and queer), ones that couldn't be adequately totalized within the boundaries of identity politics. Theory couldn't always account for the complexity of personal experience, and these works allowed for failure and incompletion; closure and fixity were seen as provisional. Thus, activism was hybridized with the poetic open-endedness of new narrative, and vice versa. Poetic works often addressed social or political content, though their aims were often contrarian or ambiguous.

The nineties also saw the re-emergence of conceptual art. Performance-based work made a return, with many artists seemingly adopting low-tech Portapak aesthetics in order to emulate the work of their forebears. With the wide proliferation of lightweight, affordable video projectors, video installation became increasingly present in museums and galleries, paving the way for video's return to the art world. The emergence of the Young British Artists and the Vancouver photo-conceptualists were early signs of video's integration into the art market; they also signalled the diminished dominance and centrality of American art. Canadian and Québecois artists were increasingly visible on an arts scene whose key players hailed from Europe, Asia, and countries outside of the developed West. Paradoxically, identity politics and the international art market paved the way for the globalization of the art world.

The turn of the century saw the first wide use of video editing systems on home computers. As video editing became more accessible, the medium became lighter and less time-intensive. Artists who had previously worked solely with video expanded their practices to include painting, drawing, sculpture, or photography. The presence of video installation in museums and galleries and in contemporary art biennials and triennials, as well as the growing importance of the art market, encouraged artists to diversify their practices in a manner prefigured by the Conceptualists.

Over the past three decades, the movement of feature-length film from the cinema to the home theatre has been materially abetted by video. In the last ten years, digital distribution systems have brought this arc to a close, with DVD technology

gradually moving towards obsolescence. Television now seems marginal compared to the World Wide Web. The internet has become an important distribution tool; online forums such as YouTube and Vimeo have had an enormous influence on how artists think about production and dissemination. The wider accessibility of production tools and web distribution have helped make video an international phenomenon. The global village foreseen by McLuhan is increasingly a reality.

I have repeatedly made reference to video's plurality, permeability, and hybridity. The last decade has seen the further absorption of video into a new media hybrid. In a material sense, videotape and film are now things of the past. Digital technology is the material basis of cinema, video, animation, and photography, as well as the broad and diverse fields of audio art, interactivity, web art, and robotics. Screen technologies have diversified and penetrated our lives in a myriad of ways. Owning a video camera now is as common as owning a portable phone. As moving images increasingly saturate our lives, it is important that artists comprehend the shared notions of methodology, audience, and history that inform their practices. Video is a significant aspect of this totality.

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