

BEYOND THE FRAME

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis essay describes a body of work developed for the Low Residency Masters of Applied Arts program, which is presented in the form of three video installation environments: *Ripple Effects* (2012), *Veiled Effects* (2012), and *Shoreline* (2013). Video images of outdoor scenes are projected onto sculptural forms that set up points of indeterminacy to address our mediated and constructed relationship with the environment.

The research focuses on a phenomenological connection to the environment supported by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's concept of the "chiasmic embrace", a relationship that acknowledges a two-way communication between our bodies and the environment. There is also a consideration of Timothy Morton's "dark ecology" that looks at the underbelly of environmental critique. The art works developed for the thesis examine how the aestheticization of nature turns it into abstract and ideological space, ignoring it as a complex and interconnected ecosystem. The work that emerged from the process of research and experimentation engages a vision of nature as an altered, synthetic, and hybrid environment.

My practice is contextualized in part by examining what I find productive and generative in the work of Dan Graham, Bill Viola, Diana Thater, Ann Hamilton, and Char Davies, artists whose practices focus on an embodied awareness of the environment. In addition to Merleau-Ponty, and Timothy Morton, the ideas of thinkers and theorists such as Susan Stewart, Terry Smith, and Marshall McLuhan, add perspective to a discussion that addresses the relationship between aesthetics and environmental ethics.

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INTRODUCTION

Landscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what a frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.

W.J.T. Mitchell (5)

The impetus for this thesis project began with an experience I had while out in my canoe prior to beginning the Master of Applied Arts (MAA) program. Most of the residents had left for the season, making the lake seem remote and isolated. It was late in the day and the warm summer air pressed down heavily as I paddled. I paused in a small bay to watch a swell from a distant passing boat cross the lake and make its way toward me. In a sluggish, rolling bulge, it shifted everything in its path, gently up and then down. As it passed under the canoe, in the moment of the lift, I felt the boundary between myself and the environment dissolve—the air on my skin, the motion of the boat, colours, smells—all sensations became amplified and more cohesive. In that moment, I was intensely connected to all the living elements around me, keenly aware of the intimacy of this bond. It was also a moment of profound awareness, of how this sense of belonging and personal connection to the environment has become rare in our fast-paced and technologically focused lives.

Another part of this story that is important to add to the scene is that there was also an injured dragonfly floating in the water beside me. What might be considered a sublime component of the experience, was the realization that like the dragonfly, I was a very small thing bobbing along, subject entirely to the “forces of nature”, which were calm and warm and pleasant at that moment, but could quickly become harsh and precarious, as it was for the dragonfly. My expansive reverie ended as I focused on the predicament of the dragonfly, picking it up out of the water with my paddle, and placing it into the canoe. Knowing how futile this gesture was, I still wanted to save the life of a dying thing.

This intention, over my feelings of connection to the environment, indicates the concept and philosophy of “dark ecology” introduced by Timothy Morton, English and Ecology professor, who advocates abandoning Romantic, pre-industrial ideas of nature in favour of coming to terms with the ecological crisis at hand. Morton’s ideas were a post-

production focus for my work that ties the discussion of aesthetics more closely to ecological critique.

My intense experience on the lake was disconcerting and difficult to articulate, however I felt it provoked something important, not only about my own close relationship to the environment, but also how the pictorial framing of nature promotes a fantasy that we are somehow outside observers of our own atmosphere. The installation work was a physical exploration to shape a nebulous sense of “oneness with nature” into a critique of environmental attitudes. My original task was to capture something of the embodied experience on the lake and create a space that could convey a sense of phenomenological awareness of nature—a task that would evolve through various processes in the studio. The sculptural components came to be included as means to expand the two dimensional aspects of digital video projection. I was also working to counter the effects of an “assumed” spectator who was external to the pictorial plane. The work was intended to operate as a surrogate experience of nature, drawing the viewer into intimate proximity with an environment that was at the scale of their own body.

During the process, I wasn’t completely sure how the works would operate, but in retrospect, my choice of materials set the tone for each installation. In *Ripple Effects*, the hard, reflective surfaces and jarring mechanical noises drowned out the ambient nature sounds from the video sound track. The unnatural movements and multiple projections were disorienting, creating a dystopian aesthetic. Where I had originally planned for “nature” to provide a soothing, ambient background, *Ripple Effects* evolved into a carnivalesque depiction of nature. In *Shoreline*, the silky fabric, soothing atmosphere, and restive water sounds operated more seductively. The seductress however, turned out to be an uncanny construct, disembodied from its location in the natural world, as it emanated eerily out of a floating fabric apparition—a possible a siren call to technological union. My original intention to bring the viewer closer to nature through embodiment became instead, a pairing with the technological. This introduced another aspect of environmental critique regarding the darker side of ecological issues. As noted, this perspective came through a consideration of Timothy Morton’s work that situates ecological issues within our post industrial and post nuclear environment. Tracing though my process to see how the installations evolved demonstrates that an iterative process produced intuitive

responses to materials and allowed productive relationships between ideas and forms to develop.

The three art works examined in this paper are: *Ripple Effects* (2012), a 360 degree video and sculpture environment that immerses the viewer in constructed and abstracted scenes of nature and was exhibited at Emily Carr University in Vancouver, in July 2012 for the interim MAA exhibition; *Veiled Effects* (2012), a studio piece which depicts a process of material experimentation that bridged both the first and second year exhibition pieces; and finally *Shoreline* (2013), produced for the graduation exhibition at the Charles H. Scott Gallery in July 2013, which is a video sculpture that presents an intimate and contemplative experience of nature at its most unnatural.

CHAPTER 1 Expanding the Video Experience

1.1 Establishing the Ground In-between

Before discussing individual works, some terms will be outlined in order to clarify how they are used in the context of this paper, where “nature” refers to the environment and “all” of our planetary ecosystem, and “landscape” refers to scenes that are culturally framed depictions of outdoor space. According to Humanist Geographer, Yi Fu Tuan, the words “nature”, “landscape”, and “scenery”, have become nearly synonymous, collapsing into one idea through paradigm shifts in how space is conceived. According to Tuan, the pre-Socratic Greeks referred to nature as “The heavens above, the earth beneath, and the waters underneath the earth” (132). He further explains that as the Aristotelian concept of nature was adopted, the vertical orientation remained but did not include the “All” of the cosmos and only referred to what was of planetary origin. Also, with a focus on Cartesian space and the attempt to create “illusionistic” depth of field in pictorial representation, a new focus on the horizon as vanishing point emerged. Nature continued to lose its sense of the sublime as it lost its verticality, becoming the background for European cathedrals and portraiture. Tuan points out that today these scenes can barely move us “to any response more strenuous than the taking of a snapshot” (133).

“Scenery” and “landscape” also experienced shifts where scenery originally referred to theatrical stage illusions and the word landscape, rooted in the Dutch word “landschap”, referred to cultivated units of farms and fields (Tuan 133). The concept of

landscape also has aesthetic ties with the picturesque and thus is perceived as something to be “looked at” and taken in entirely within its frame. Timothy Morton describes the existing portrayal of nature as scenery, as sadistic. He states, “Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman” (5). The installation works presented in this thesis subvert this kind of consuming gaze by creating environments where the viewer participates by walking around in the space, incorporated into the dimensionality the work.

In the close-up framing of conventional cinema, nature is blurred behind intimate views of the human actors. Alternately, the characters move so quickly through scenes that the outdoors is reduced to a blur. Chris Lukinbeal, a cultural geographer specializing in media and urban landscape studies, explains that framing nature as background turns it into space, a mere location for human drama to unfold (6). Western culture has a long history of portraying nature in this manner beginning with the visual apprehension of land through picturesque framing and Romantic depictions in paintings from the 16th to the 19th centuries. This was accompanied by the actual apprehension of land through Colonial expansion.

These depictions tell narratives about how space is ordered rather than conveying, in geographic terms, any “sense of place” or location. Terry Smith, contemporary art historian, critic, and artist, explains in his essay “Visual Regimes of Colonization” that the portrayal of the environment was a process tied to “practices of calibration, obliteration and symbolization (specifically, aestheticization)” (483). This aestheticization was part of a process of mapping and reportage where land in the new colonies was depicted to look like picturesque British scenery (Smith 490); a kind of familiar packaging intended to promote emigration. The paintings progressed from pastoral visions of countryside as settlement was established, into paintings that were done as “portraits of property” (Smith 491). This depiction deliberately overwrote or denied prior habitation or depiction of land by other peoples (Smith 486). Smith describes how Aboriginal Australians have a version of mapping that exists more like a conceptual field of what is present in the environment and “being alive within it” (488).

As I worked out ways to represent my own “conceptual field” around my experience of place in the natural environment, I looked to the work of Maurice Merleau-

Ponty, whose perceptual philosophy explains a phenomenological relationship existing between our bodies and the environment. In a very different and darker view of nature, Timothy Morton presents an alternate way to perceive and move forward in our increasingly complicated relationship with the environment. He does this by posing a relentless set of questions about essences where we completely drop the “constant elegy for a lost unalienated state” that never really existed (23).

I was also interested in how some artists draw attention to the way landscape tropes are used to conceal ideologies as Dan Graham demonstrates in his ongoing Pavilion series. While looking to dramatize particular aspects of my work, I considered how such artists as Bill Viola, Diana Thater, and Ann Hamilton effectively convey emotion in their work: Bill Viola, through his use of monumental scale, frame speed manipulations, and theatrics, creates strong visceral responses for the viewer; Diana Thater, whose video work, use of 360-degree space, and concerns about the environment set up the viewer to question their own perspectives; Ann Hamilton, whose focus on the human gesture brings the viewer into intimate awareness of their own embodied presence; and most recently the work of Char Davies has become significant as an example of how a technological interpretation of nature can operate as both a critique of the form as well as emphasize the significance of embodied awareness in virtual space.

1.2 Immersion and Installation

In her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Susan Stewart, Professor of English and the Humanities, describes landscape as something that we move *through*, not something that moves through us (71). However, my experience on the lake was not a “moving through”, but rather a “being within” nature. In order to get close to the state of immersion that I felt, I looked to patterns and rhythms around the lake that might instigate a meditative and embodied sense of place. I produced multiple recordings of repetitive water movements, reflections, and swaying wetland plants with the idea that these images might convey a contemplative mood. The resulting videos, however, shown on a flat screen monitor, could not represent the sense of vitality of what I had encountered. The presence of the monitor as an object also situated the images in both a mechanical and virtual space. These observations led me to further explore ways in which to express the quietude and nuance of natural

processes that are best experienced through immersion. The translation of a natural scene into an artificial environment, without literally transporting the natural materials into the gallery, paradoxically required the use of highly illusionistic and artificial forms. I was aware of the contradiction between the artificial forms and the naturalistic scenes, however the full extent of the how this contradiction operated developed over time as the process and works evolved.

The process began with a series of investigations using digital video that became exciting as the dynamics between projections, sculpture, and architectural space became evident. Through the process of experimentation, the impact of immersive space and its potential to affect the viewer both aurally, visually, and sensorially was taking shape. Investigating the physical properties of projected light led to using clear acrylic panels for the structure in *Ripple Effects* that worked as both projection and reflective surfaces.

1.3 *Ripple Effects* (2012)

The piece *Ripple Effects* was exhibited in the Abraham J. Rogatnick Media Gallery for the MAA 2012 interim exhibition at Emily Carr University. The media gallery was specifically chosen rather than in the open Concourse gallery as it allowed control over the ambient light and came equipped with its own projector and sound system. The media gallery also offered the opportunity to completely utilize all surfaces—the walls and extra high ceiling—as projection surfaces.

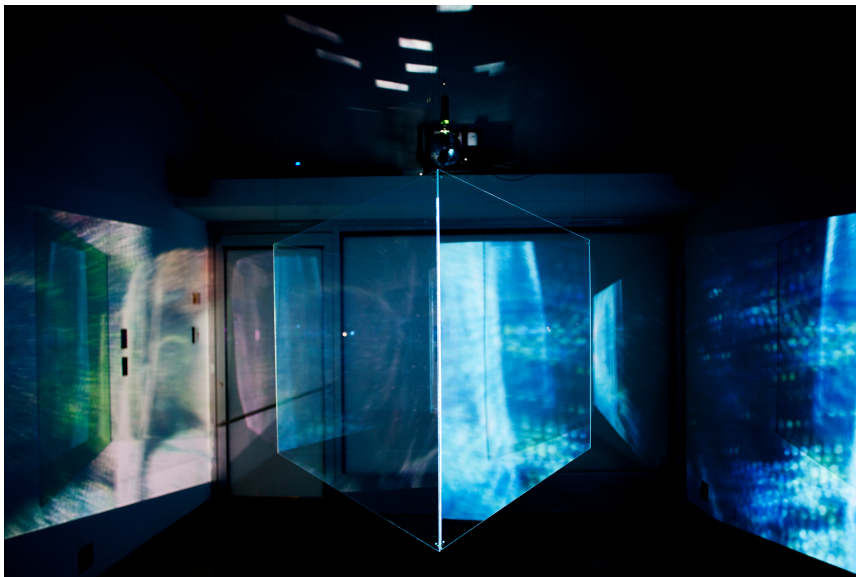


Fig. 1: Joanna Smythe, *Ripple Effects*, 2012. Installation in the Abraham J. Rogatnick Media Gallery, Emily Carr University, Vancouver, 2012. Photo: Kai Mushens.



Fig. 2: Joanna Smythe, *Ripple Effects*, 2012. Installation in Abraham J. Rogatnick Media Gallery, Vancouver. Photo: Minttu Mantynen.

Fig. 3: Joanna Smythe, *Ripple Effects*, 2012. Installation in Abraham J. Rogatnick Media Gallery, Vancouver. Photos: Minttu Mantynen.

One incidental issue with the projections was that in order to maximize the reflective properties of the acrylic, the projection needed to enter the structure at a right angle and at mid-point. Having the projection at this height caused the image to be blocked if a viewer walked in front of the projector. However with three projectors in the gallery installation, the viewer's body could only partially block the image and became more of a shadow-like form within the overall scene, adding a "live" sculptural dimension to the work. Margaret Morse, Professor of Film and Digital Media, explains how moving images affect the space of the installation:

I have come to think of this possibility for repetition, contrast, and migration of images across a shape as a poetic dimension of video installation; that is, it is a practice that deemphasizes the content of images in favor of such properties as line, color, and vectors of motion, with content of their own to convey. The choreography of these properties is another kinaesthetic dimension of transformation. (164)

Noting formal properties and de-emphasising content, Morse describes how establishing a dimensional field also creates a "charged space-in-between" activating the installation in a way that makes its composition akin to choreography, and the consideration of the

viewer in the work becomes part of the planned movements.

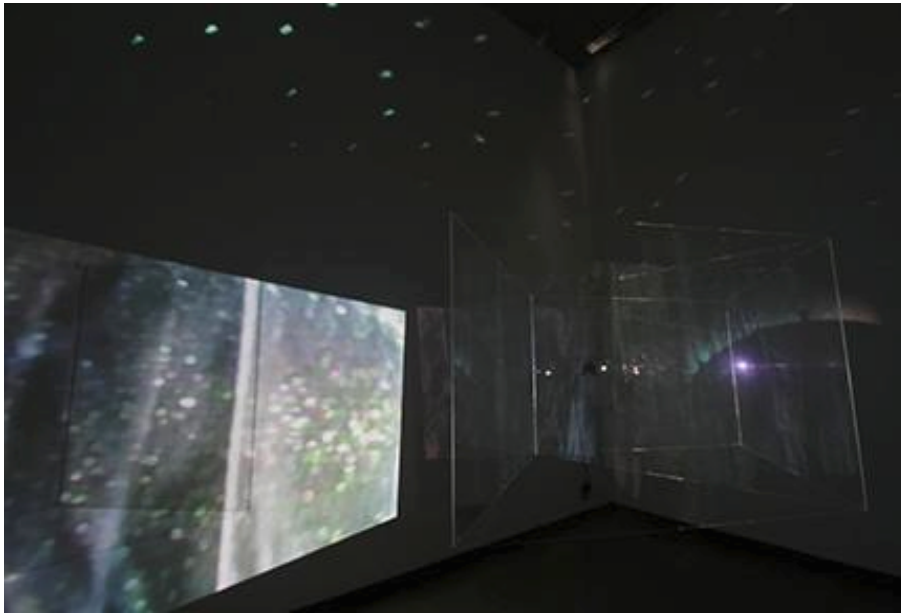


Fig. 4: Joanna Smythe, *Ripple Effects*, 2012. Installation view showing ceiling reflections and spherical mirror ball; shadow on wall. Photo: Joanna Smythe.

The upper portion of the media gallery with its extended height was an ideal space to activate through projection. A mirror ball was used as a reflective surface to bounce a projection into the ceiling space. The majority of the projection was masked off so that only a small portion would hit the top of the ball and shine into the ceiling, which was a projection of a swamp water scene. The purpose for choosing this subject matter was to show nature in an inverted relationship to its expected orientation. The work of Diana Thater has been a strong influence on my approach and one of her strategies to get the viewer to look differently at nature is to disrupt viewing perspectives. Projecting the swamp onto the ceiling was done to draw attention to how power and value is often established in space relations through height. By repositioning what is normally located under us, (the unpleasant smelling swamp water) to celestial heights, it subverts the cultural hierarchical interpretation of a given ecosystem.

At the same time the intention was to create a simulacrum of a starry night sky, with the small moving squares establishing a sense of depth and deep space. The mirror ball also formed a silhouette on one wall, reminiscent of the Earth viewed from outer space (see Fig. 4 on the right). An additional and unanticipated effect of the revolving mirror ball was that it emitted a constant, low mechanical drone that disturbed the

soothing sounds of lapping water and bird song from the video soundtrack, a sound that was disruptive, but in keeping with the mechanistic and artificiality of the installation.

Just as learning to manage the effects of various materials became part of the production, adapting and adjusting to constraints during installation offered some insightful developments¹. There were other unanticipated aspects of the installation of *Ripple Effects* that became part of the finished work. The windows in the gallery needed to be covered to block light. By doing this from the outside, the window glass became an additional reflective surface for the projections. This type of provisional adaptation is one of the interesting aspects of an installation practice, where the work exists in an incomplete state until it is actually installed, with each space having its own contingencies that activate the work in different ways. The idea of continuing to develop the work based on relationships that are produced on site is an exciting aspect that has the potential to expand the work and allow it to have new meanings configured into each separate space, making each installation an individual and evolving work.

The overall intention with *Ripple Effects* was to expand the projected image onto sculptural materials and place the viewer into a quasi-soothing environment that was nature-like, but not entirely readable in its artificial presentation and moving images of nature that are normally still. This was done to disturb the viewer's sense assuming complete ease and visual command over the scene. Cartesian perspectives were disrupted by immersing the viewer into a moving landscape that presented a close-up view of nature as it might appear out of a car window driving down the highway through a forest. It reminded me of the scenery on a rear projection screen that zooms past behind actors sitting in their unmoving cars. It was in this piece where the idea of landscape being treated as background first emerged.

With conventional seated cinema, the mechanical camera movements and jump cuts do not disturb us, which demonstrates how we have come to accept these artificial disruptions in time and space as a natural and normal way of viewing the world. Media

¹ The viewer coming in front of the projector was a result of the positioning of the projectors at body height to maximize the angle of projections, however it introduced an interactive component for the viewer that I allowed and incorporated in the piece. In *Shoreline*, the graduation piece, the projector was ceiling mounted and isolated the projection onto the fabric. The viewer was invited to engage with the fabric, at which point they would come into the path of the projection, a more incidental effect, but again, offering further engagement and interesting interaction for the viewer.

studies professor Martin Loiperdinger and Bernd Elzer, a media studies doctoral candidate, explain in their journal article, “Lumiere’s Arrival of the Train: Cinema’s Founding Myth” how early cinema audiences viewing the Louis Lumière one minute film *Arrival of the Train* (1885), (which depicts a train coming into a train station “moving” in the direction of the audience), were purportedly terrified as they thought the train might come off the screen and crash into their seats. This was no doubt an exaggeration perpetuated for publicity, but nonetheless described the initial surprise of the audiences to the first moving pictures (98), but when fixed in a seat, there is no other perspective for the viewer. Anne Friedberg, Media Theorist and Film Studies professor points out that the position of the cinematic audience “guarantees the dependence on the constructed view provided by representation” (398). She adds that even though there is a sense of omniscience—seeing everything from every point of view—this sensation is illusion only. The film spectator is literally invisible not only in the film but also to themselves and therefore *must* assume the subjective position presented by the camera lens. In video installation work however, the viewer maintains their own subject position. They are (bodily) free to move around the installation, independent of the camera perspective, shot, or angle, freeing them from the rectilinear viewing frame as well as the controlling viewpoint of the camera.

1.4 Power and the Picturesque: Dan Graham

The constructed prism shape in *Ripple Effects*, while functioning as a reflective surface, also references Dan Graham’s pavilion series begun in the 1980s that reminds us how landscape tropes can be used subversively to mask power relations. Graham’s pavilions, set in parks and leisure spaces, use the same reflective glass as the surrounding modern office towers. Similar to the techniques used in Colonial expansion, where the wilderness spaces of the “New Worlds” were overlaid with picturesque representations of pastoral British landscapes, we are asked to look at the reflections in the office tower glass rather than at the towers themselves. In a Canadian Art article surveying Graham’s pavilion works, artist and writer Josh Thorpe quotes Graham describing how the mirrored office towers are “an attempt by the corporation to appear innocuous, and in harmony with the city and nature (reflecting skies, clouds, and trees), while preserving the one-way gaze that keeps the public ignorant of what goes on inside” (“Searching for Dan

Graham”). This representation becomes an extended metaphor where we are asked to suspend our disbelief about what we see and accept the constructed vision of the office tower as being part of the natural landscape.



Fig. 5: Dan Graham, Triangular Pavilion with Circular Cut-out Variation H, 1989-2000. Holland Park. Used by permission of the Institute of Contemporary Arts.

Graham’s mirrored pavilions use the same material as the office towers, but reduce the scale to that of the human body. Graham also contrasts the business location of the office towers by situating his pavilions in leisure spaces such as playgrounds and parks, which allow the viewer to engage in a playful manner, also contrasting the work behaviour prescribed in the office tower. By constantly subverting the devices of corporate architecture, through scale, purpose, and location, Graham’s pavilions expose the manipulation present in corporate strategy to “naturalize” their ideologies.

In a personal encounter with one of Graham’s works, *Two Half Cylinders* (2008), at the Rennie Collection, gazing into the warped cityscape within the convexly curved surface, I had the distinct sense of being present in a twisted, “othered” space, (a more accurate depiction of the warped relationship between social and economic forces within the city). This mirrored, alternate view underscores the nature of subjectivity; seeing one’s body separate and away in the mirror space without the “self” attached. Graham acknowledges this subjective gaze, stating the effect is intentional and that all of his “forms are inhabited and activated by the viewer. A sense of uneasiness and

psychological alienation is produced by a constant play between feelings of inclusion and exclusion” (Graham 39).

Like Graham’s pavilions, the reflective properties of the acrylic prism in *Ripple Effects* implicates the viewer where they can see aspects of their own form, like catching a glimpse of oneself in a window with “nature” all around (see Fig. 2 and 3). An important aspect of Graham’s work is contained in the reflective properties of the glass, which directly places the viewer as subject within the mirror space. *Ripple Effects* also establishes the viewer in a similar subject position, but with the prism set at oblique angles to the projections, the viewer is required to negotiate the installation space in order to find a position that makes them visible as either reflection or shadow.

While we often watch nature documentaries indoors on television, the nature scenes in *Ripple Effects* behave in a distinctly unscenery-like manner, actually moving onto the viewer’s body and through the structures in the room. The artificiality of the environment with the moving landscape and a moving viewer sets up the questions of the “naturalness” of what is being represented, and asks how this reflects our vision of landscape. The multiple reflections and movements also disturb any sense of what is of central importance, the mediating device (the prism), the images of nature, or the viewer’s own presence. A post-production consideration of the work could also situate it to reflect the actual condition of our existence in the world where we are synthesized into a multi-layered and interconnected environment of natural and engineered materials.

1.5 Re-visioning Nature: Diana Thater

The work of Diana Thater has been an ongoing influence and especially interests me where she melds her video sculptures into the architecture of the exhibition spaces. She states one of her goals is to change the way audiences view film and video in galleries (*Light and Space*). As is the focus of my work, Thater inserts an alternate visual reality over an existing one. Her use of 360-degree space in conjunction with film and video demonstrates a concern for form and structure and a visual aesthetics that also relates to my own. Thater’s socially engaged practice involves her viewers at a level that could alter their perspectives about pressing and critical environmental issues.²

² Although Thater no longer uses trained animals, her piece, *China* (1995), a synchronized 360-degree six channel video of the two trained wolves, China and Shiloh, who were used in the film *White*

Thater often “overlay[s] an animate pictorial architecture on top of an inanimate, dimensional one” (Thater 12) that brings together multiple presences and realities. A focus of her work is to draw attention to the single perspective with which we engage the animal world and the environment. Thater accomplishes a subversion of the cinematic gaze by positioning the viewer as the “invisible eye” of the camera, making them feel out of place as an interloper into the environment of the animal. Thater destabilizes the viewer’s position by altering the colour of the light in a space, changing how time is perceived through slowing the film speed, and especially through changes in scale. She states: “Scale is the most important thing in art. In my work things are always a different size than they are in the real world so the viewer is physically conscious of the objects she approaches” (Thater 17). Thater emphasizes that everything the viewer sees including their ideas of nature are “constructed and machined” and she is not interested in engaging nature as a soothing, picturesque environment:

I don’t want nature to be contemplative and reassuring but sublime and terrifying. Not in the 19th Century way where it is yawning wide -- endlessly dangerous and devouring, but like that 21st century way -- like a dead or dying body because we’ve killed it and it is gone and that *is* terrifying. (“More Stars” 25-26)

Thater’s purpose is to completely disorient the viewer in order to allow a shift or reorientation of their perspective about her environments.

Thater’s use of film and video allows her to control viewing perspectives. She states, “Time and space ... are the two hardest things to make a viewer consciously recognize ... I alternate between, and often combine, making time (with editing) and making space (with installation)” (Thater 30). Thater expresses non-time as the unmoving image of clouds in *White is the Color*, 2002, and endless time in the animations of spinning galaxies shown below in *Dark Matter*, 2003. The spinning galaxies are the ultimate concept of cosmic and dimensional space, but are compressed into two “flat” screen plasma monitors. A stationary image of *White is the Color* is seen through a door into an adjoining room, contrasting timeless space with the “no time” of an unmoving cloud.

Fang II, is a work that demonstrates through extending the artificial circumstances of trained animals to hold a pose, how the projection of our fantasies of nature onto the bodies of animals, is repulsive and transgressive.

Thater creates further disorientation through the stark contrast between what is being depicted (nature, outdoors) and the complete technological re-imagining of the scenes into interior landscapes where the viewer is being represented as the alien in the world of the animal and the environment.

Figure 6 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Fig. 6: Diana Thater, *Dark Matter*, 2003. 2 Flat Screen Monitors, 2 DVD Players, 2 DVDs and Lee filters. Dimensions variable. Installation View, Haunch of Venison, 2003.

These juxtapositions of how time is “read” through movement, and how we orient ourselves through the perpetual vanishing point of Cartesian space, are elements that can be manipulated to engage an alternate viewing of what we take for granted in our environment.

Video imagery itself has illusionistic properties that situate the viewer in the specific time and space of the original recording. With projection, the frame can be expanded until it dissolves into the architecture of the room, establishing an immersive effect as the viewer is engulfed in the scene. Morse describes this space in her essay, “Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image, the Space-in-Between”, how the “frame of an installation is then only apparently the actual room in which it is placed. This room is rather the *ground* over which a conceptual, figural, embodied, and temporalized space that is the installation breaks” (155). Alternately, as Thater’s work demonstrates, the projected image can be set on any surface, using any variation of scale to create particular effects. Morse further sets out that the cultural function of video installation is the exploration of the materialization of the conceptual:

[E]ach installation is an experiment in the redesign of the apparatus that represents our culture to itself: a new disposition of machines that project the imagination onto the world and that store, recirculate and display images; and, a fresh orientation of the body in space and a reformulation of the visual and kinaesthetic experience. (156)

For the viewer, there is a direct sense of being within the space and time of the projected image, and with the added effects of dimensional objects and sound, a simulacrum of reality is produced. Morse’s articulation of the cultural function of video installation follows Thater’s statement that everything we see is mediated, but through reorienting the

perspective of the viewer using the same machinery by which the mediation is produced, a “fresh” orientation of the body is created that brings about new thinking that can arise only through a kinaesthetic and embodied experience.

CHAPTER 2 Embodying the Video Experience

2.1 Veiled Effects (2012)

The decision to use video projection in conjunction with sculptural elements in my work is a way to reactivate the projected image and make tangible the volume of space through which it travels. Projecting onto actual bodies or objects that have “thingness” recuperates some of the essence that is lost in the ethereal and mechanical reproduction of the recorded environments. The notion of “thingness” came to my attention when experimenting with the path of the light from the projector. The work of James Turrell, who is known for his video and light installations, plays with our perception of light and its illusory qualities. Turrell explains this principle:

Although light exhibits wave phenomena, nevertheless it is a thing—it is optical material. We don’t treat it as such. Instead we use it very casually to illuminate other things. I’m interested in the revelation of light itself and that it has thingness. It alludes to what it is, which is not exactly an illusion. (Taylor, chpt. 4)

This play between illusion and optical material is one of the main attractions for me in projected video imagery. A considerable amount of time was spent in process-based experimentation observing how the projected image travelled through space as well as observing its volume and shape as it emerged from the lens of the projector. I found the “thingness” of the light was best expressed by “trapping” it on various surfaces, which interfered with the conventional purpose of the projection, but created a whole new field of exploration for me.

These initial investigations led to the studio piece *Veiled Effects* (2012) where the focus was to identify the sensations and contours of the original event on the lake: light reflecting off the water, multiple forms of ripples, under water scenes, and numerous other vignettes that might capture what it was like to be “present” in a natural environment. Viewing the images on a monitor or as a projection on the wall did not achieve the desired level of emotional intensity or immersion I was looking for, so I continued to search for ways to structurally “expand” the imagery.

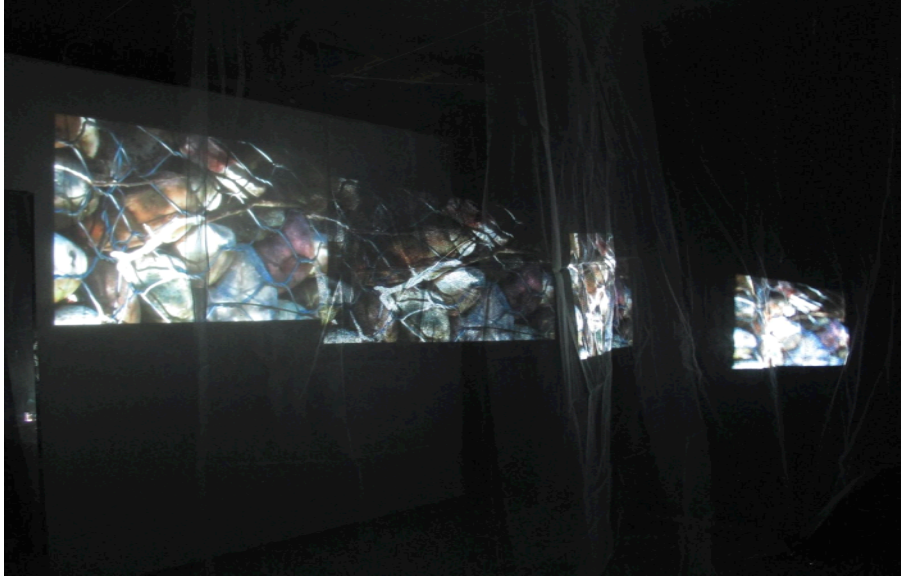


Fig. 7: Joanna Smythe, *Veiled Effects*, 2012. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Studio Image. Photo: Joanna Smythe.

In order to achieve this dimensional space and “shape” the projected light, I discovered semi-transparent tulle fabric was useful as a screen, which at the same time allowed the image to pass through it. Several yards of the fabric were arranged into panels, and suspended in front of one another in order to allow the projected image to “catch” on each layer as well as continue on its expanding trajectory. It was fascinating to see how each image hung like an independent holograph where it touched the fabric. A sense of how to further manipulate the video image started to emerge. By re-filming the projections at close range while walking along the scrims, an apparent microscopic intimacy with the image was produced which created an effect of seeing living cells under a microscope (an example can be seen in the rectangular figure in the foreground on the left in Fig. 4). This work evolved to be the footage used in *Ripple Effects* in 2012. It was also the initial experimentation with fabric that led into the final exhibition work for *Shoreline* in 2013.

Bill Viola’s piece *The Veiling* (1995), which is discussed next, uses very similar materials to that of *Veiled Effects*. At the time my work was being developed, I was unaware this piece and in retrospect I am glad that I did not know about it as this allowed me freedom to experiment without restrictions. While freely re-enacting some of Viola’s strategies, what I learned in my experiments was very different from what is produced in Viola’s work. However, after being introduced to *The Veiling* I came to examine Viola’s

work more closely and found it interesting how he activates video space to add to the emotional tension among the actors.

2.2 Expanded Film Space: Bill Viola

Bill Viola's piece, *The Veiling* (1995) relies on dramatic performances by human actors, but Viola also engages similar techniques to Thater such as changes in film speed and scale to create contrast and alter the sense of time within the narrative. *The Veiling* consists of nine parallel panels of suspended sheer fabric. Two projectors are mounted at either end of series of panels. From one projector, the image of a man walks forward out of the dark and straight ahead "through" the panels. From the opposite projector, the image of a woman walks forward, seemingly toward the man. They come together and merge in the central panel, but any sense of actual contact dissolves as they pass through one another and dissipate further into the depths of the screens.

Figure 8 has been removed because of copyright restrictions.

Fig. 8: Bill Viola, *The Veiling*, 1995. Video/sound installation. The Fabric Institute. Web.12 April 2013.

The movement across the multiple screens creates a self-enclosed world and the slowed film speed expands the sense of time. Viola describes the ability to "record the time flow of experience, and then to stretch or compress it, reorder events, and otherwise manipulate image and sound" as the reasons he was attracted to video in the first place (Viola 249). Viola projects his human forms at the same size as the viewer, so there is an immediate identification with the work in the recognition of the sameness of scale. The installation arrangement also engages the viewer through their own movement where they can follow the progression of video "bodies" as they come out of the projectors, onto the scrims, and then meet on the central panel. The projectors are not concealed and are part of the viewing environment. There is no pretence to be "real" in the way conventional cinema masks its mechanical origins, and the performance aspect of Viola's work brings it into the time and space of the viewer rather than that of the film. The effect of reproducing the essence of the human body in dimensional space as Viola does in this piece, creates an intimate drama which is an effective strategy, however, with my focus on an environmental issues, I do not want to literally put "bodies" into the work,

preferring the human presence to be that of the viewer who participates in the environment of the installation.

Conventional cinema immobilizes and disembodies the viewer in relation to the actual site of the theatre, while their presence is situated in the imagined and multiple locations within the film. Chrissie Iles, Film and Video Curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, in a roundtable discussion “The Projected Image in Contemporary Art”, states that if “you bring the image down to the floor, you’re negating cinema, if the space is painted white, then it refers to a gallery, if it is black then it is more of an immersive space, like cinema” (Turvey et al. 80). Video installation separates from cinema in that the viewer is generally mobile and encounters real space and real objects. As Iles puts it, if the viewer “takes a walk” it makes the work reference the gallery (Turvey et al. 80).

In *Veiled Effects* the intention was to create a close-up perspective of nature through an exaggeration in scale. The viewer would be enclosed in an intimate and contemplative world of water, rocks and reflections, but at the same time have a sense of disorientation due to the scale alterations, extraneous camera movement, and disturbing mechanical sounds from the rotating mirror ball. There is also uneasiness when one is unable to see the boundaries or edges of one’s environment, as attention needs to be directed everywhere at once. An integral part of the immersive experience is brought about through being in a darkened space where the viewer must rely on various environmental cues to direct them through the work. The reduced light also requires the viewer to engage with the space sensationally as well as visually in a whole body manner.

Marshall McLuhan, communications and media theorist, discusses how we have become less aware of our surroundings due to an overreliance on our visual faculties. He describes our general disengagement with space as result of our relationship with technology and that we use technologies as extensions of our bodies through which we “see”. McLuhan developed a concept called “acoustic space” to describe the environment we inhabited prior to our use of advanced technologies, particularly writing.³ McLuhan states that in preliterate times, people negotiated their surroundings using all of their senses rather than a predominantly visual or “rational” approach:

³ For a more complete explanation of acoustic space see Marchessault, especially Chapter 5 “Experimental Seminar”, pages 86-93.

Acoustic space is organic and integral, perceived through the simultaneous interplay of all the senses; whereas “rational” or pictorial space is uniform, sequential and continuous and creates a closed world with none of the rich resonance of the tribal echoland ...The man [sic] of the tribal world led a complex, kaleidoscopic life precisely because the ear, unlike the eye, cannot be focused and is synaesthetic rather than analytical and linear. (“The Playboy Interview”)

Through the introduction of written language, and subsequent technologies, McLuhan theorizes we have lost physical and psychological connection to the environment as we observe “through” technology in a visual, analytical, and disembodied manner. What is relevant about his description of acoustic space is that it privileges the whole body as a site of knowing, that recognizes the importance of embodiment as being fully aware of our surroundings. The installation work creates an enveloping atmosphere and sets up the conditions a “simultaneous interplay of all the senses” making the viewer aware of their bodily presence in the work in a way they will hopefully carry beyond the gallery.

2.3 Embodied Space: Ann Hamilton

The presence of the human body is indirectly addressed in most installation work, in that the viewer needs to enter the space to take in the various dimensional, aural, visual, and sensory apparatus. After working with installation components and realizing how intimately the viewer can be involved, I became interested in how other artists address this potential. Where Viola’s portrayal of the human body seems to operate at a theatrical level, Ann Hamilton work operates more as a “performance of presence” as described by Joan Simon, independent curator and writer (“Objects”). Simon explains that Hamilton’s work often requires a performed human gesture or action to complete the work. In my most recent piece, *Shoreline* (2013), I address the viewer directly by leaving a written invitation for them to walk within the fabric folds in order to experience the work in a fully sensational manner, with the projection also forming on their body. This seemed like an important aspect to include, as it was such an evocative experience while designing the work that I wanted to offer it to the viewer.⁴

I have been aware of Ann Hamilton’s work for quite some time but did not become interested in her practice until I started working with fabric. Because Hamilton has a background in textiles, she has a very considered approach to its use. It was

⁴ While the *Shoreline* doesn’t immediately address labour, the rigging of the work involved much handwork that as an art form ritualizes labour and mimics the domestic action of hanging laundry.

important to be clear in my intentions about using fabric and fully aware of its domestic implications and connotations for hand labour, so its significance in Hamilton's work, with her background in textiles and focus on labour, became a research focus. The piece, *ghost . . . a border act* (2000), was of particular interest, especially her use of fabric in the context of being installed in a former textile factory.

In *ghost . . . a border act*, Hamilton contemplates the accumulation of the slow handwork done by thousands of workers, over many years, and creates a scale of human effort that becomes monumental. Stewart comments on how the relationship between the nature and the machine is inverted, with the machine time imposing its order over the human body:

[W]e...realize that the transformation of nature is often worked by a reordering or remaking of time, as if geological time had been ordered within domestic space. Her [Hamilton's] works have explored especially the relation of the time of the body to the time of the machine: thus we see juxtaposed the temporality of devices, linked to clock or artificial time. (Stewart, "As Firmament" 20)

Hamilton's work expands the time of bodily labour and ritualizes the presence of the body in the disturbed, mechanized existence of the factory. She acknowledges the vacancies created by mechanisation that transfers where the body exists to its "presence" in the movement of a machine.

Hamilton also addresses the idea of the "maker" or artist as labourer, frequently employing many workers and volunteers in her installations. The work of the artist is a re-enactment of the work in the textile factory that metaphorically reconstitutes the human element involved in mass factory production.

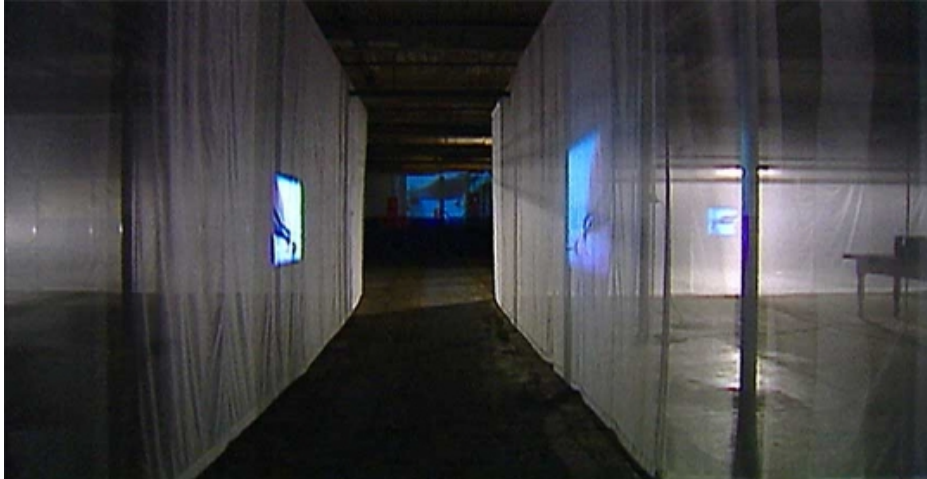


Fig. 9: Ann Hamilton, *ghost . . . a border act*, 2000. Production still from the "Art in the Twenty-First Century" Season 1 episode, "Spirituality," 2001 Segment: Ann Hamilton. Used by permission of Art21, Inc. 2001.

The work, *ghost...a border act* consists of two thirty foot square, silk organza room structures that are suspended within the architecture of the open factory space. Enclosed within each fabric room is a ten-foot long wooden table with a projector mounted on a rotating housing and enclosed in an acrylic vitrine. The subject of the projection is a close-up of the tip of a pencil drawing a line, which is projected simultaneously from both projectors, however, one video shows the line being drawn, and the other projector, run in reverse, has the effect of the line un-drawing or “eating” itself. The projectors are on motorized mounts constantly circling in opposite directions, an ironic moving movie. The acrylic vitrines also act to mirror and refract the projected images (much in the way the prism performed in *Ripple Effects*), and circulate around with the main projections. The speed of the rotations is “at the speed of a slow walk” or the time it would take the viewer to walk around the room following the projector. The viewer is implicated in this relationship through the time involved in watching and “walking” the installation. In the absence of actual workers in the factory, Hamilton draws attention to the essence of the mechanization process that replaces human thinking, human bodies, and ultimately produces only an empty building.

The time put into planning, arranging, and constructing artwork, while being performance-like at times, is also an act of artistic labour. Hamilton explains what this means in terms of being present in her own work:

I am...interested in the way the body through physical labor leaves a transparent presence in material and how labor is a way of knowing—this is very different

than speaking about labor in terms of class relations and social history...Labor with materials can be a way of being present. (74)

Hamilton acknowledges how physical work is a way of being present in one's body and the environment. This presence also seems to me as an act of caring that can remain in the places we inhabit or the objects we construct.

Chapter 3: Landscape Space

3.1 *Shoreline* (2013)

Building on the concepts developed in *Veiled Effects and Ripple Effects* that examined how cinematic and pictorial practices relegate nature as background scenery, I wanted to change the focus for the final exhibition to present nature as if it were the dramatic protagonist whose beautiful face is viewed in an intimate close up. While the earlier works had been about experimentation, with *Shoreline* I wanted to create something more deliberate and refine the elements that had been previously explored.

In *Ripple Effects*, upon entering the installation space, the viewer was assaulted with the excess of visuals and sounds. Conversely in *Shoreline*, the viewer is drawn to the work through its pleasant formal elements, sensual fabric, and soothing simulation of the seashore.

The isolated section of beach, which is the cinematic focus of the work, brings “nature” into the foreground. This close up perspective establishes intimate proximity and removes the distraction of vanishing points or receding horizons. Also, by removing any reference to its origins as a rectangular projection, the video is transformed into an object within the fabric. The choice to use imagery of the shoreline and isolating it in a suspended vignette, could also be viewed as a type of forced framing that highlights how we romanticize the sublime aspects of nature yet want to consume it in its most truncated and disciplined form. Stewart in her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, describes Edmund Burke's definition of beauty operating on this push and pull between closeness and distancing as “the interface between the sublime and the picturesque”(75):

...but that the former is individual and painful, while the second is social and pleasant, resting upon love and its attendant emotions...While the sublime is marked by a potential recklessness, a dangerous surrender to disorder in nature, the picturesque is marked by harmony of form, color, and light, of modulation approached by a distanced viewer. (75)

However if the viewer does not have this controlled distance, the close proximity with “ordered” nature in *Shoreline*, might see how this fantasy has turned into something other than the scene we thought it was.

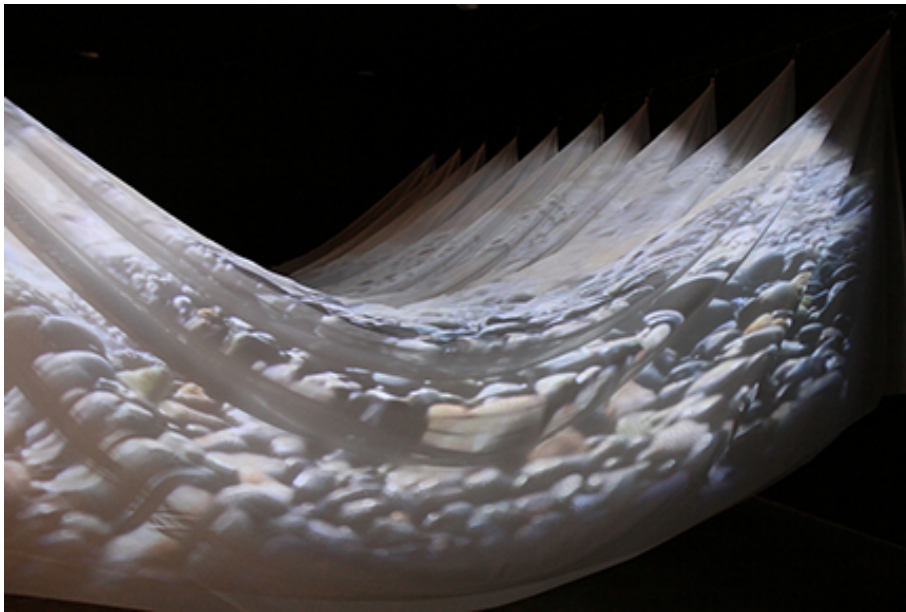


Fig.10: Joanna Smythe, *Shoreline*, 2013. Fabric, airplane cable, projector, 3 min. digital video loop. dimensions variable. Installation at the Charles H. Scott Gallery, detail shot. 2013. Photo: Joanna Smythe.

The effect I was working toward was a calming, sensual, embodied experience. At the same time however, I wanted to hint at something unnatural and possibly ominous with the shoreline existing as an independent entity. While it is impossible to completely determine how a work might be perceived, the works highlight that what is historically considered as “natural” may no longer exist. Our new ecology is an integration of natural forms with those that are entirely constructed and artificial

During the production of the work, which came out of the idea to extend what had been discovered in *Veiled Effects*, the physical aspect of how the various fabrics felt as I manipulated them came to be an important aspect of the work. Sheer fabric is a sensual;

we know how it feels next to our skin and the sensations registers even just looking at it. In “Remembering the Senses”, Stewart describes how this operates:

To the extent that works of art also make possible particular sense experiences, such thematic uses of the senses call forth an originary and complex kind of synesthesia - not just in the mixture of sense impressions as in ‘a bright noise’ a ‘cold color’ or a ‘sharp aroma’ but as well in a synthesis of imagined and material experiences. (64)

The sense of synaesthesia Stewart refers to is an integrated way of being in the world. The fabric appeals at this same sensory level evoking associations with the interior, the domestic, the unconscious, and with sleep and dreaming. Fabric, like water and light, is soft and unstructured; it takes on the shape of what it covers or it can suggest other forms through its own weight and fluid structure.

As the twenty-two meters of sheer fabric were rigged to cables suspended across the studio, the construction of the work was like my own personal performance where I was hanging linens or running through the laundry strung across my childhood backyard. It was about concealing and revealing; it was about static electricity. When the projection of the shoreline was laid over the fabric with the sounds of the water arriving and dissipating, the fabric became like waves and surface; moving through the excess fabric became like swimming.

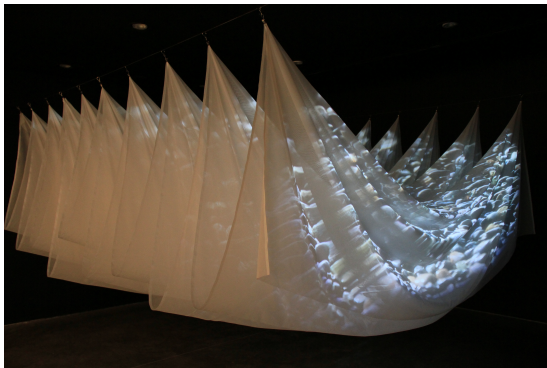


Fig. 11: Joanna Smythe, *Shoreline*, 2013.

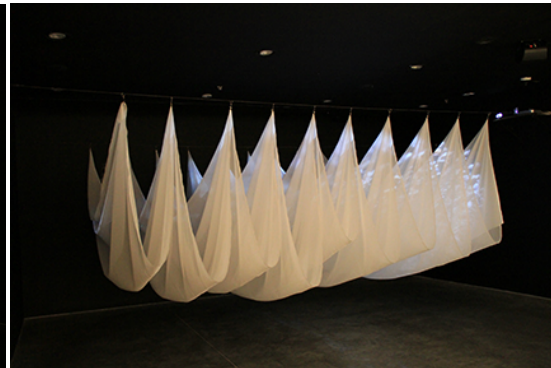


Fig. 12: Joanna Smythe, *Shoreline*, 2013.

Mixed media. Installation view in the Charles H. Scott Gallery July 2013. Photos: Joanna Smythe.

The configuration of the fabric at this point needed to relate conceptually to the content of the video as well as hold the projection on its surface. Various experiments with the fabric demonstrated that there needed to be two sets of cables in order to produce draping that could hold a flat area on the top and provide a surface for the video projection. In the final structure each draped section of fabric is about one foot in width at

the centre and arranged in close proximity to the next drape, creating a horizontal projection surface for the video. As discovered in *Ripple Effects*, the projected video light also penetrates the semitransparent fabric and “fills” the structure.

The video playback speed was reduced in *Shoreline* to exaggerate the sounds of the water and moving pebbles. The change in film speed is not immediately apparent, having no other visual references, but the effect draws attention to the sounds of the pebbles as they roll back and forth with the wave action, a detail that would be hard to observe in real time. There is also a barely perceptible floating movement within the video image, a result of the hand-held recording that moves up and down with the action of my breathing, and with the altered film speed, results in uncanny movement that appears to emerge from within the fabric.

The final arrangement of the fabric in a continuous undulating structure, is suggestive of repeating waves, but also of ship sails that are rigged to hold the wind (or in this case, the light from the projector). It was also a consideration that the drapery fabric has a specific domestic function of screening vision, which contains the double entendre of “screening a video” and “screening vision” and becomes an additional layer of interference between the viewer and what is outside. Additionally, viewing an image of nature on top of highly artificial and manufactured materials such as the polyester fabric and airline cable literalizes how nature is used as raw materials to produce manufactured goods. Conversely, the pairing of natural and artificial forms could suggest a synthesis between natural and human-engineered forms.

Stewart states that through the creation of models and images of the landscape we perceptually shift the scale of our bodies to be larger than the model so that the vastness becomes contained (*On Longing* 71). According to Stewart, where we are terrified by the sublime in nature we are soothed by the picturesque, the ordered version of landscape (*On Longing* 75). Through “framing” nature, according to Stewart, we essentially make the gigantic, miniature; we encapsulate it and reduce it until it becomes viewable as an “overseeing” whole.

Cinematic form relies on continuous framing. An establishing or master shot is frequently used at the beginning of a new scene to indicate the location. In *Shoreline*,

there is no master shot only the close-up. Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari discuss how the cinematic close-up of the face turns it into landscape deterritorialized from the body:

The close-up in film treats the face primarily as a landscape; that is the definition of film, black hole and white wall, screen and camera. But the same goes for the earlier arts, architecture, painting, and even the novel: close-ups animate and invent all of their correlations...(191)

The act of framing in *Shoreline* is taken to its extreme, where the viewer is deprived of the ability to look around and take in the “whole body” so the landscape then becomes a face.

The fixed gaze on a moving shoreline counters our normal roving eye that wants to keep moving and take in the whole scene. Unlike viewing conventions such as radical shifts in time and space created by jump cuts, the viewer in *Shoreline* is presented with movements within the projection that do not have a narrative purpose but instead are the result of the camera being held by a living, breathing body. The camera movement is a reinsertion of the body into the machine of the camera and a disruption to the invisible eye that the audience is expected to assume.

In July 2013 the MAA graduate exhibition was held at the Charles H. Scott Gallery in Vancouver. The exhibition was a group show entitled OFFLINE, in which the piece *Shoreline* was installed. The work was presented in such a way that the viewer could see the wave-like form of the structure from the side as they walked into the gallery space. In order to get the full effect of the video on the fabric, the viewer needed to walk around the installation to where the main sound was directed. The viewer was also invited to touch and walk through the work.

While there are always challenging aspects to group exhibitions, especially with works that have external sound components and rely on darkened environments, what I learned most from the graduation exhibition had to do with how sound operated in the space. In the interim exhibition in 2012, where *Ripple Effects* was installed in the media gallery that had its own speaker system, the issue of sound did not come up to the same extent. *Shoreline* on the other hand, relies heavily on sound for texture, atmosphere, and environmental information, with the video adjusted to one quarter of its original speed in order to expand and deepen the sounds of the waves and create a heavier, more ominous effect. The space for the graduation exhibition was an open room with hard surfaces and

no speaker system, which complicated the installation significantly. This required installing ceiling mounted speakers to provide an area of enveloping sound at the focal point of the installation. The focused sound environment also prevented excess sound from spilling out or entering the space of other works. Ideally, the piece would have benefited from sound baffling, however the process of working through the sound situation led to future considerations such as a surround system that could move the sound forward and backward with the action of the waves.

A few years ago I experienced *Storm Room* (2009), Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's multi-media soundscape at the Art Gallery of Alberta. Sitting on the floor in the installation, I felt completely immersed in the "storm" with water dripping into metal pails and lightening and thunder effects crashing all around. I remember thinking how profoundly the sound affected me. Cardiff and Bures Miller utilize a 70s technology called "ambisonics" to record their sound and then create three-dimensional sound fields within their installations. As sound has recently become more of a focus in my installation work, Cardiff and Bures Miller's work will offer context for future investigation.

3.2 Sensing Nature: Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology

In the moment on the lake, where I felt my boundaries merge into that of my surroundings, there was an "essence" of being in mutual relationship with the environment. Maurice Merleau-Ponty states that phenomenology is the study of the essence of perception with its focus of "achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world" (*Phenomenology* vii). While I have some reservations about what exactly is meant by "primitive" or how this would apply in contemporary circumstances, Gayle Salaman, Professor of English, specializing in phenomenology points out that phenomenology as a philosophy supports an embodied and individual relationship to the environment, which is "an unsettling of the fantasy of a universal perspective" that is at the core of environmentally destructive activity ("Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty").

The sensation on the lake was a basic and direct connection "with" my surroundings. Merleau-Ponty states, "The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also

where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears" (*Phenomenology* xxii). Merleau-Ponty is referring to a communication that crosses the threshold of the skin and is a two-way sensing with one's entire environment. The relationship of the body to its perceived world is elaborated upon in Merleau-Ponty's later writing in *The Visible and the Invisible: Intertwining - The Chiasm*, where he describes the body as a location where the subject/object positions shift:

One can say that we perceive the things themselves, that we are the world that thinks itself—or that the world is at the heart of our flesh. In any case, once a body-world relationship is recognized, there is a ramification of my body and a ramification of the world and a correspondence between its inside and my outside, between my inside and its outside. (136)

Merleau-Ponty defines this shifting state as an intertwining with the other in a "chiasmic embrace". The work "chiasm" according to Professor of Philosophy, Thomas Baldwin, comes from the Greek letter *chi* which refers jointly to "subjective experience and objective existence" and is the nature of the relationship between one's inner life and one's experiences (247). Merleau-Ponty's thinking about the chiasm or "flesh of the world" recognizes a "oneness" of experience that accommodates the shifting loci of sensation from body into space and back again, rather than privileging the human body as the singular source of all sensation as set out in his earlier work in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Stewart, "Remembering" 60).

Chapter 4: A Question of Technology

4.1 Timothy Morton: In the Heart of Darkness

Creating work that challenges our ideas about nature leads to the question of what exactly *is* nature? As discussed earlier, the act of framing nature as one thing or another, separates it from its contiguous relationship and interconnectedness with all the other parts of the environment. The complexity of this relationship is coming to the foreground as we experience global warming, mass species extinction, soil erosion in an ever-widening sphere of ecological collapse. According to Timothy Morton, we are stuck in an 18th century Romantic interpretation of nature and refuse to address existing circumstances. He criticizes movements such as deep ecology and its proponents for "consciously block[ing] their ears to all intellectual developments of the last thirty years"

(*Ecology without Nature* 20). To instigate change, according to Morton, a full engagement with all levels of critical discourse, intellectual, creative, activist, and scientific, needs to occur. To counter deep ecology's nostalgia, Morton suggests an alternate "dark ecology"—"a 'Goth' assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world" (184-85). He explains:

Dark ecology is the ultimate reverse of deep ecology. The most ethical act is to love the other precisely in their artificiality, rather than seeking their naturalness and authenticity. Dark ecology refuses to digest plants and animals and humans into ideal forms. ("Dark Ecology of Elegy" 269)

Dark ecology lets go of the idea of nature entirely, and instead suggests we exist in a collective state with all elements that have contributed to the condition of the planet. The idea is that we learn to love and care for the "Frankenstein" monster we have created. Dark ecology presents nature as an indefinable "flux" that does not exist as one thing or another.

One of the reasons I chose to focus on the shoreline for my final piece is that its essence is an indefinable edge—water one moment, and ground the next. The shoreline is a liminal space; those spaces that are not one thing or another and break down normative hierarchies such as foreground/background. This duality is present in the structure of *Shoreline*. Is the fabric screen, or sculpture? Is the image inside the work or on top of it? The sound isn't physically attached to the work yet it surrounds it and is an integral component.

Liminality is also present in Merleau-Ponty's concept of the Chiasmus, the twofold embrace that confuses self and other, foreground and background, yet Morton categorizes Merleau-Ponty's depiction of the chiasmic embrace into that of ineffectual "nature writing" (attached to deep ecology) since both terms, self and environment, need to be maintained even as they cancel each other out, making it impossible to completely "intertwine" (*Ecology without Nature* 69). It could be argued that intertwining does not imply dissolution, but the point is that Morton identifies a "gap" between the self and other that cancels out the ability to totally merge, a gap that is necessary in order to prevent a collapse of infinity, even though there is "nothing in the gap, not even space" (*Ecology without Nature* 144). This introduces a useful paradox.

Julia Kristeva describes in her book *Powers of Horror*, this form of gap is a reaction to the breakdown of meaning (usually in an encounter with something like death or vomit) when something cannot be assimilated as outside or inside, or self and other (1). Morton brings the idea of the gap together with Kristeva's notion of the abject in relation to ecology as "qualities of the world we slough of in order to maintain subjects and objects" (*Ecology without Nature* 159). He establishes the idea that the abject parts of nature include pollution, miasma, or slime and are what deep ecology refuses to deal with or address. Abject states are dark ecology's content. Morton states, "Remaining with the dying in the present moment, and accepting the fact of our own death, are echoed in the choice to maintain the painful awareness of being alive—of having a mind that differs from our body and from itself ("The Dark Ecology of Elegy" 267). Rather than an immersion into an imaginary and ideological form of nature worship (which is essentially narcissistic), Morton proposes we gaze fully at our planetary ailments and include them in our chiasmic embrace.

4.2 Char Davies: Virtual Reality and Distance

The final artist to be included in this conversation is Char Davies, who is considered to have produced the first interactive virtual reality artworks with *Osmose* (1995), and *Éphémère* (1998). Using million dollar supercomputers (at the time) and programs developed for military simulations and film sequences, *Osmose* and *Éphémère* depict imagined elements of nature in navigable environments that explore the implications of our phenomenological existence in virtual space (Grau, "Charlotte Davies: Osmose" 196).

Timothy Morton finds an analogy between the ecological crisis and the immersive aspect of VR environments:

Both virtual reality and the ecological panic are about immersive experiences in which our usual reference point, or illusion of one, has been lost...In virtual reality it becomes impossible to count on an idea of "distance." We feel we can't achieve a critical purchase, but are instead about to be dissolved into a psychotic aquarium of hallucinatory un-being. (*Ecology without Nature* 26)

Davies's virtual interface, however, acts to paradoxically turn the viewer's awareness to being present in their own body rather than the "Un-being" of feeling dissolved into hyperspace. Using a stereoscopic head-mounted display with audio, and an interface vest

which measures lung capacity and motion, the “immersant” navigates virtual space in a non-aggressive manner; breathing in and out to move up and down, and simply leaning to move forward or backward. Davies explains that the interface was “intended to ‘reaffirm’ the role of the subjectively-experienced, ‘felt’ body in cyberspace, in direct contrast to its usual absence or objectification in virtual worlds” (“Changing Space: Virtual Reality as an Area of Embodied Being”).

Davies presents nature in its ultimate disembodied state of virtual reality, yet the viewer (immersant) becomes more aware of their embodied physicality by re-orienting to bodily functions that produce entirely different results. Attention to breath, our most primary and basic movement, subverts Cartesian principles that privilege the eye and mind over the body. In a recent interview, Davies says of her virtual reality worlds, that they were not intended to create a virtual version of nature, but to demonstrate how technology could be used in a non-aggressive manner. She explains:

Conventions in early 3D computer graphics included linear perspective, Cartesian space, and objective-realism. At the time, such realism was highly sought after by the advertising/entertainment industries. (I was well aware of this as a founding director of the 3D software company Softimage.) Similarly, VR was grounded in conventions that reinforced the worldview of (male) engineers, the military and the gaming industry. These included the same striving for realism, a point-and-shoot-or-grab interface, and emphasis on achieving domination and control. To use the medium/technology differently, that is, for my own purposes, such conventions had to be subverted, or at least circumvented. In other words, the technology had to be “turned”. (“Technology at the Service of Art”)

While Davies’s environments were inspired by the real world terrain of her home in rural Quebec, Oliver Grau, Professor of Art History, points out that the virtual environments create “rather polemic references to kitsch and esotericism...”(204). Frances Dyson, writer, media artist and associate professor in Techo-Cultural Studies, explains some possible misunderstandings of her virtual reality works, reiterating that they were a critique of traditional virtual reality interfaces and not a utopian melding of nature and technology. Dyson quotes Margaret Morse saying the “nature” represented in the virtual reality environments were “ambiguous spaces [...] bordered by code, constituted by code, and already culturally coded” (116-17).

Like my own installation practice that emerged out of a desire to expand the two dimensionality of pictorial space and bring the viewer into a relationship with the lived

space of the artwork, dimensionality was a motivating factor for Davies. Davies, who also began as a painter, wanted to alter the viewer's perceptual realm in order to encourage a fresh way of seeing and experiencing. Davies quotes Marshall McLuhan in his statement that discusses the artist's role in society:

The function of the artist in correcting the unconscious bias of perception in any given culture can be betrayed if he [or she] merely repeats the bias of the culture [...] In this sense the role of art is to create [...] counter-environments that open the doors of perception to people otherwise numbed..."⁵

The idea of "repeating the bias of culture" not only operates in my work through repeating tropes of the picturesque, but by also re-framing them as unnatural and abject forms, they become "counter environments". Davies's critical purpose is to subvert the focus of technological interfaces to enable remote acts of violence. She states her move to virtual reality or VR, was motivated by a desire to counter the disembodied "point and shoot" interface that was the driving force in VR development ("Changing Space: Virtual Reality as an Area of Embodied Being").

CONCLUSION

The experience on the lake, as a moment of recognition of my connection to nature, will resonate with me for some time. The search to find ways to translate this quasi-mystical experience led to many experiments using new materials and media, and introduced me to the ideas and practices of artists Bill Viola, Dan Graham, Diana Thater, James Turrell, Ann Hamilton, and Char Davies, in whose work I have discovered a close affinity. Their practices also demonstrate deep personal insights into experiential existence and awareness of the cultural impacts that affect our relationship to the environment.

My investigative path also led into the territory of phenomenology, an approach that helped interpret the intuitive aspects of sensation and supplied a vocabulary around a subject difficult to express in conventional terms. As a philosophy, phenomenology acknowledges the body as a site of knowing and intelligence, and recognizes our

⁵ Quote from Marshal McLuhan and Harley Parker, "The Emperor's New Clothes" *The Vanishing Point: Space in Poetry and Painting*, 1968, p241.

relationship with the world as an embodied, flowing-between experience, counter to the disengaged perspective of Cartesian rationalism.

In a culture absorbed by consumption, production, and excess, articulating a sensory bond as a legitimate way to connect to the natural world is one of my main concerns. I also want to disrupt the perspective of the “overseeing whole”; the miniaturization that Stewart indicates as the way we mediate vision to feel powerful when overwhelmed by the vastness of nature. It is my belief that we are at a stage where the environmental conditions and problems are so complicated that the view is now one of a disembodied terrain, like a face that is so large on the movie screen that it is barely recognizable as flesh. We do not understand the “range, nature and scale” of the circumstances due to its vast scope according to anthropologist and sociologist Bruno Latour (Londres-On Gaia 2). Latour asks:

Is there a way to bridge the distance between the scale of the phenomena we hear about and the tiny *Umwelt* inside which we witness, as if we were a fish inside its bowl, an ocean of catastrophes that are supposed to unfold? How are we to behave sensibly when there is no ground control station anywhere to which we can send the message, “Houston, we have a problem”? (Londres-On Gaia 2)

This question speaks to the powerlessness we feel in the face of an environmental crisis that is beyond the scale of individual comprehension, something we cannot contain within our personal perspective and thus experience as an ongoing abstract spectacle.

Video installation has become a dominant component of my multivalent practice that also includes sculpture, drawing, and painting. The installation work has expanded the perspective and scale of my imagery as well as allowed me to work more broadly and critically with concepts that I felt were not being articulated in less dimensional or experiential forms. The technical aspects of coordinating space, sound, sculpture, and projection, while challenging at times, continues to offer unlimited potential for exploration and conceptual development. Along with enhancing the audio aspects of the installations, there is room to extend the projection work with proprietary video editing software programs such as “MadMapper” that literally shape the video projections to match projection surfaces.

A project I am currently developing, where I may utilize MadMapper software, works with the idea of projecting onto constructed objects set into outdoor environments.

The idea originated with an encounter while on a recent excursion into Cariboo Mountains Provincial Park. While hiking, I came across a freshly constructed 8-foot plywood crate. There was no context for this crate being where it was and I could only surmise that hunters had built it. I upended the box into a stance to reference the monolith in Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film, *2001: A Space Odyssey* in which a mysterious structure appears to a group of proto human apes on the plains of Africa.



Fig. 13: Joanna Smythe. *Cariboo Monolith*, 2013. Photo: Joanna Smythe.⁶

Kubric's monolith corroborates the Enlightenment myth of humanity's intellectual superiority and distinction from uncivilized "nature" being introduced by "alien" (read divine) technology into the genetic makeup of the apes, which enables them to develop tools and thus "evolve" into humans. The "Dawn of Man" scene with the apes encountering the monolith, establishes the precise moment when humans become separated from nature.

Coming across an obviously constructed form in the middle of a wilderness park, stood as a marker of something "civilized" and made me think of ways I could address the overlap between what fits our picture of nature and how technology crosses into our experience of outdoor space. Although I have not worked out the exact relationships

⁶ In the photograph, *Cariboo Monolith*, the alien presence in the forest is the corporation represented by the mechanically processed raw materials, the plywood crate, standing against the monumental presence of the Cariboo Mountains in the background.

between the objects, images, and sounds for the series, or whether I want to have any popular culture references, I do want to address the way parklands represent an institutionalized form of nature.⁷ I also want to introduce more complex and layered audio into my work, as previously I simply manipulated the diegetic sounds from within the video recordings. The mix of natural and human made sounds are thoroughly integrated outdoors as jet engines penetrate even the most remote wilderness site.

In its final form, *Ripple Effects* offered picturesque and soothing landscape tropes that never completely resolved due to the extreme artifice of their presentation. The combination of synthetic forms, mechanical sounds and motion, and the controlled perspectives, stopped anything completely familiar or comforting from taking shape. The engagement with *Shoreline* in the graduation exhibition played out as I imagined, with viewers touching the fabric, lying under it, leaning into its curves to take photographs, or just watching closely, engrossed in the sounds and movements of the work. My intention was to create a formally attractive work creating an experience that could operate on various levels, offering contemplation *and* critique. At the very least, the viewer might continue a phenomenological and sensory engagement with the environment as they leave the work, staying present (for a while) in a culture that continually asks us to disconnect and accept pre-digested versions of reality.

Where my initial goal was to produce works that activated the space of the videos to create an immersive, surrogate experience of “nature”, the resulting installations turned out to be artificial, constructed, self-referential environments that highlighted the artificiality of their existence. The contrast between my original intentions and how the installations evolved in the studio and from piece to piece, offered a productive reflection on my process over the last two years. This process was informed by theory, research, and a close examination of how critique is engaged in contemporary art practice. The

⁷ In their edited volume, *Civilizing Nature: National Parks in Global Historical Perspective*, Bernard Gissbl, Patrick Kupper, and Sabine Höhler address the importance of national parks as one of the most significant tools of nature conservation on a global level. In the introduction to their text they explain the paradoxical relationship between nature conservancy and civilization as intertwined but “thoroughly ambivalent” to one another (9). They explain the development of national parks was a “scheme” of national or imperial development, but it also a badge of “civilized” behaviour with respect to managing the “aesthetic, ecological and social value of wild nature” (9). One of the aspects of “civilizing nature” reflects the imperial technologies of: “the map, the expedition, the fieldwork, the research station...law making, bureaucracy and armed surveillance” (11). It is this technological and disciplinary perspective that I would like to focus on in our current relationship with nature parks.

independent environments question aesthetics and artifice that fix certain ideas of nature, as well as offer an alternate way to envision our relationship with a human altered and constantly changing ecosystem. This type of research-based, experimental enquiry will inform my future work as I expand the series begun with *Ripple Effects* and *Shoreline* to continue a conversation about environmental ethics, articulated through a critically informed art practice.

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