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Toward Ilinx

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Toward Ilinx

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Anna Marie Wittenberg

June 2017

Thesis Committee:  
Charles Long, Chairperson  
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The Thesis of Anna Marie Wittenberg is approved:

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## **Introduction**

The work I am including in the Thesis exhibition can be separated into two categories: an installation of interactive steel sculptures, two of which feature moving image and sound, and a single channel video that identifies more closely with traditional cinematic and/or theatrical forms. Despite the formal differences between these two approaches, the performative act, of both subjects featured on screen and of the spectator and their experience in an exhibition context, are central to my artistic investigation. Though my work often begins with some form of research, the pieces rarely take the form of a preconceived idea. Consequently, this paper does not function as a key to unpacking or navigating the work, but an exploration of topics that interest me and have woven their way into the work.

One of my primary interests is structure - culturally, formally and psychologically. My recent focus is the cultural role of play, both in the realization of art and in human activity at large. Reflecting this interest, I have organized this discussion around ideas about play: first, the initial step to the play act, the drawing of Johann Huizinga's 'magic circle' and its relationship with the theatrical stage; followed by cultural theorist Roger Caillois' four types of play: Mimicry (mimesis), agôn (competition), alea (chance) and finally ilinx (vertigo). These and subsequent topics are interspersed with descriptions of my pieces relevant to the discussion.



## Drawing the Magic Circle

*We play and know that we play, so we must be more than merely rational beings, for play is irrational.*  
- Johann Huizinga (*Homo Ludens*)

Johann Huizinga was a Dutch cultural historian working predominately in the first half of the 20th century. An aesthetic historian, Huizinga is most known for his work on the Middle Ages. *Homo Ludens* (1938) is often cited by contemporary cultural theorists as a foundational text in the field of play theory. Huizinga's central objective in Homo Ludens, 'man of play' in Latin, is to find a precise definition of play and clarify its role in the development of 'essential' aspects of culture. Though he frequently cites and critiques precedents who had written speculatively about the origins of various primitive rites and rituals observed in predominantly colonized civilizations, Huizinga focuses on a more universal interest in the specific and curious, albeit elusive, role of play in the creation of culture at large. According to Huizinga:

Play is a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being 'not serious,' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it.  
(Huizinga, 13)

Written two decades later in 1958, French cultural theorist Roger Caillois takes up Huizinga's project in Men, Play and Games, expanding his observations of the play-instinct with a keen interest in the classification of different forms of play in various cultures and animal species, and the sociological needs they may serve. Caillois designates four forms of play: Agon (competition), alea (chance), mimicry andilinx (vertigo), into which any type of play or game can be categorized. Backgammon, for

example, would be a combination of alea and agon, charades both mimicry and agon, ice skating ilinx and mimicry etc. Caillois also establishes two modes of play that form a continuum onto which one could determine the amount of structure involved in a play-act, with *ludus*, structured activities with rules on one side, and *paidia*, spontaneous and unstructured acts, on the other. According to Caillois, humanity's instinctual need for order and rules always pushes us from states of *paidia* to *ludus*, thus continually creating cultural instability. For Caillois, as with Huizinga, play is free, separate, uncertain and unproductive, yet regulated and make-believe (Caillois, 4). Caillois pays special tribute to Huizinga's definition of play as a "free activity," one that takes place in a dedicated and isolated space that is separate from ordinary life.

*The 3 Actants (2017) is a group of three interactive steel sculptures titled as follows in descending physical scale; ROT, BLOT and Bench Point. Installed in a loose group in a dimly lit space, two of the sculptures incorporate video and audio by way of projectors and small screens embedded in steel frames, accompanied by hidden speakers. Standing among the grouping, ambient sounds of creaking wood from ROT might be heard layered with the sounds of fireworks from BLOT, or lapping water from one with inaudible restaurant chatter from the other, all of which is occasionally punctured by some staccato interruption of a firework or slowed down poem.*



Illustration 1. *BLOT*, Steel, projector, 2017



2. Installation view of (L) *Bench Point*, Steel, vinyl pads and laser pointers, 2017 and (R) *ROT*, Steel, mirrored screen, projector and speaker, 2017

Huizinga commences his analysis by establishing what he calls the ‘magic circle,’ the aforementioned space that is separated from ordinary life where play takes place:

All play moves and has its being within a play-ground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the “consecrated spot” cannot be formally distinguished from the playground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga, 10)

In the context of fine art, this act apart can be seen as the act of creation, the operation of the art work once installed and/or the experience of the spectator with the art object. The magic circle can be both the place of creation and/or the site of its installation.<sup>1</sup>

In the case of theater, the stage is the magic circle. Bertolt Brecht describes the advent of modern theatrical productions, and the merging of ‘dramatic’ (strong centralization of story) with ‘epic’ (more episodic) forms, as the moment when the stage began to tell a story.

The stage began to tell a story. The narrator was no longer missing, along with the fourth wall...but the actors too refrained from going over wholly into their role, remaining detached from the character they were playing and clearly inviting criticism of him. The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an

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<sup>1</sup> Upon first encountering Huizinga’s original conception of play and Callois’ taxonomical groupings, I immediately felt some kinship with my interests in artistic engagement. The framework for what qualifies play, the import of establishing a site, limitation and resistance, all the while engaging the body, mind and desire, are facets that I strive to embrace with my work. I am compelled to note however that Huizinga does write directly about the (limited) role of the play-instinct with the “plastic arts”, a social phenomenon that he considers to be an activity of decoration. Such activities, he goes on, are a low form of the play-instinct similar to infantile child’s play and/or mimicry, reminiscent of the craft-role of artistic production associated with ancient Greece (Huizinga, 168). I have chosen to disregard this interpretation.

experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding.  
(Brecht, 71)

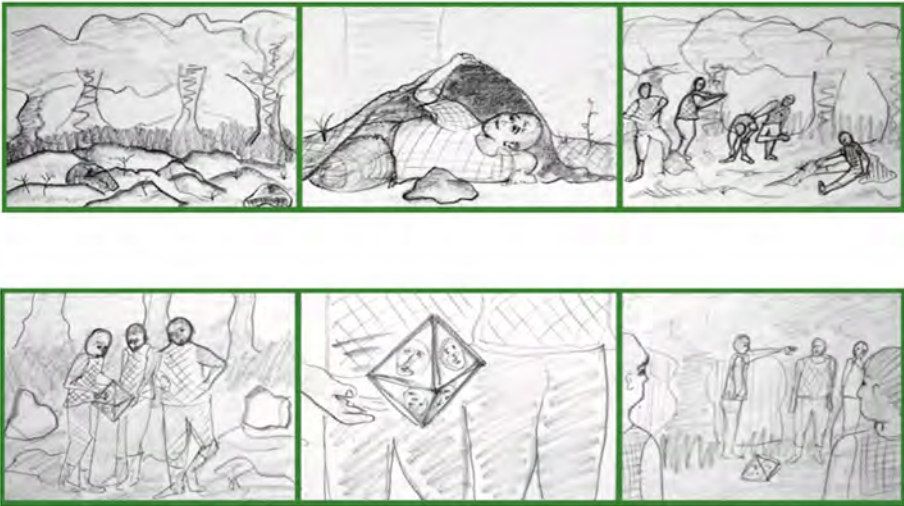
This shift or activation of the audience's participation away from uncritical absorption via empathy, toward alienation, that can then redirect one's focus back to oneself, is interesting to me. I am curious about the role of alienation in redirecting a viewer from a projected fantasy, or spectacle, back to one's own body and corporeal experience.

*Maypole (2016) is a 12-minute single channel video with panned stereo sound that depicts eight men performing a Maypole ceremony. The projected image is roughly 7'x12', installed such that the bottom of the frame is almost touching the floor, large enough in scale to allow the figures featured to be approximately life-size. There is a beginning and an end however the video does loop as the actions depicted take place over the course of a day. The seating is comprised of a number of thickly lacquered, folding cane chairs, evoking nature but far from natural. The course of events that unfold on screen are as follows: the eight men wake from the forest floor; two men roll an eight sided-die that features caricatures of each man's face; the results of the dice roll designates the man who walks off screen to chop down the tree; the men wait as the tree is being chopped; the tree chopper drags the tree back into the scene and all the men proceed to tear away the branches; the men erect the stripped tree-trunk; the men gather around the tree and sing a chord; the Maypole's ribbons are (magically) revealed; the men perform a Maypole dance which culminates in their collapse and disappearance from screen; the loop begins again. There is no dialogue and the only time the human*

*voice is heard is when all eight men sing in unison, along with the occasional grunt or yell. The entire video takes place on one set in front of one backdrop.*



3. *Maypole*, Still from video, 2016



4. *Maypole*, Page from storyboards

In What is Cinema?, French film critic and theorist André Bazin discusses the difference between the audiences' awareness in the context of theater versus that of cinema. According to Bazin, with theater there is a "reciprocal awareness of the presence of audience and actor" (Bazin, 102). He refers to the 'footlights' that demarcate where the audience ends and the stage begins as the real and symbolic meeting point of the awareness of both spectator and performer regarding the dramatic representation taking place on stage. The footlights demarcate the magic circle. There is an active understanding between the two sides of the footlights of the rules of engagement - an understanding that Caillois might argue imply an act of mimicry on the part of both viewer and performer. The cinema, on the other hand, presents an autonomous, or perhaps one-sided experience. The spectator sits in a darkened room and witnesses an event unfold. Nothing stops the viewer from total submersion and identification, at least in one's imagination, with the world and characters presented on screen. There are no live beings performing, who are also perceiving, to bar the viewer from total identification. With cinema, the spectacle becomes the world without any resistance.

Bazin continues this line of reasoning regarding the shift in analysis required of the spectator of the screen versus the stage; "It is no longer on the phenomenon of the actor as a person physically present that we should concentrate our analysis, but rather on the ensemble of conditions that constitute the theatrical play and deprive the spectator of active participation" (Bazin 103).

*The line between submersion/identification and conscious awareness/reciprocation is something I find particularly interesting. Perhaps in*

*hindsight, I believe both the Maypole video and The 3 Actants deal with this line, with Bazin's footlights. With Maypole, there is only one set and one primary vantage point from which everything is shot, so despite it's being a video, the conditions are closer to an amateur adult theater set. The crudeness of the mise-en-scène and the amateur acting allow for the seams of the production to show through. It is no secret that the 'grass' is cheap carpeting and the tree trunk is a cardboard tube. The lifelike scale of the figures and exposition of various facets of their bodies (an accidental eye opening here, a miss-step in the dance there), further this 'realism'. On the other hand, it is a video and the benefits of the technology are exploited. The ambient and practical sounds are non-diegetic, the camera pushes in to details allowing for privileged views made possible only through editing and cinematic representation, cuts allow for magical acts to take place. With The 3 Actants, the stage is the exhibition space and the performers are also the spectators, an interchangeability that attempts disrupt the footlights.*



5. *Maypole*, Still from video, 2016





6. ROT, 2017

### **Mimicry, Agon and Alea**

*Whatever its site, closed or open, scenic or nomadic, close to or distant from itself, theater is always a public meditation on the relation or non-relation between artifice and life.*

*- Alain Badiou (A Theatre of Operations)*

According to Caillois, despite their opposition, agôn and alea both obey the same law - proposing the ideal of pure equality denied by 'real life'. Either the rules of the game provide a fair field for proving a winner as is the case of competition, or exactly the same chances of winning must be provided in games of chance. Regarding this realm outside of 'real' life, (again Huizinga), "here, then we have the first main characteristic of play: that it is free, is in fact freedom. A second characteristic is closely connected with

this, namely, that play is not “ordinary” or “real” life. It is rather a stepping out of “real” life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga, 9).

Mimicry is of a different order and it is no coincidence that a theater piece is called a play. Questions about performance and the impact of a shifting perceptual relationship between player and audience have always been of interest in my artistic investigation. Brecht describes the implications of alienation in the oft-cited essay on Chinese acting. He begins with a description of a “working class” German folk production at a county fair. He describes a campy *mise-en-scène* and flat-footed acting, far flung from the epic event being portrayed. The effect of this dissimilitude, he observed, was the creation of a compelling distance that prevented the spectator from being able to simply identify with the characters (Brecht, 91). The nature of the production and the ‘quality’ of the performance created a conscious gap.

*The cast of “Maypole” is made-up of eight amateur actors from the Los Angeles area. Albeit economy was a deciding factor, it was important that the piece feel relatable, the characters approachable as people, not convincing or professional. I was also keen on experimenting with play myself in the building of the narrative. Subsequently, the first act of the sequence engages with chance to drive the narrative with the rolling of the die, the second act incorporates competition with the destruction of the tree, then the third act incorporates both mimicry and vertigo with the dancing around the Maypole. I have no interest in relaying this information to the viewer, but I was curious what the impact might be of structuring a narrative in this way, hoping it might impact the performers’ experience. According to Huizinga; “There is something at stake” - the essence of play is*

*contained in that phrase,” and both the die roll and the tree ripping scene were shot in a single take (Huizinga 40).*



7. *Maypole*, Still from video, 2016

Contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou was interviewed by European Graduate School professor and writer Elie During in a discussion whose transcript is titled “A Theatre of Operations.” They discuss the symbolic, cultural role of theater and possible implications of the performative act. Badiou defended the idea that the theatrical project is and always has been a public meditation on the relation between artifice and life. During asks Badiou about participatory forms of theater (speaking more about performance art) and the possibility of performance creating a collective subject. Badiou responds:

We could perhaps say that performative experience lies at the intersection between the idea of participation, the construction of a new collective, and another requirement of contemporary art; that of the importance of improvisation and openness to chance. A performance is a Passion without a script. (Badiou & Daring, 25)

*Bench Point has two thick vinyl pads fixed at chest and hip height, skateboard grip tape on the floor plate and rubber grips on the object's 'hands.' There are two bright red screws that poke through the rubber grips that serve as buttons to activate two laser pointers, this being the only color on the object. From one perspective the form of Bench Point, the sparest object of the three, might echo a kneeling body. The other two works might also evoke a body by their proximity to furniture, both of which incorporate seating. Should the written verbiage specifying 'interactivity' in the works-list be overlooked, the words "USE WITH CAUTION" appear on the floor in vinyl letters on either side of each object, signaling some type of user interactivity. Of the three metal objects included in the thesis exhibition, Bench Point was the first one I made. Prior to that I constructed an early prototype for a steel stand that housed a projector and an early version of BLOT. Bench Point afforded me the opportunity to test interactivity without the complexities of video. I thought the laser pointers might provide just enough of a useless objective, a bland spectacle, the ability to emit two pixels of a projector's 2,073,600. There is a spotlight on the object, theatrically lighting the form, or anyone who mounts it, while the wall remains in shadow for the laser pointer's visibility.*



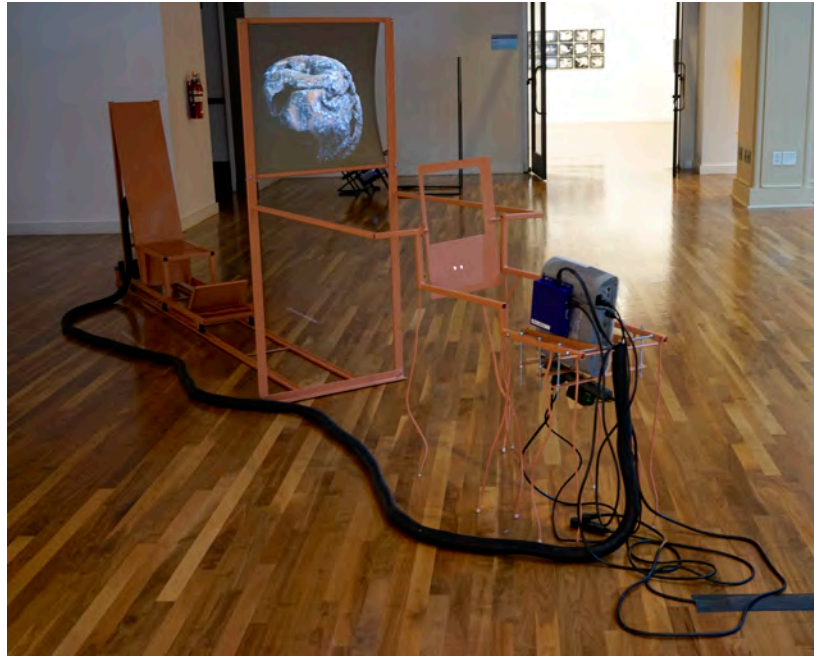
8. *Bench Point*, 2017



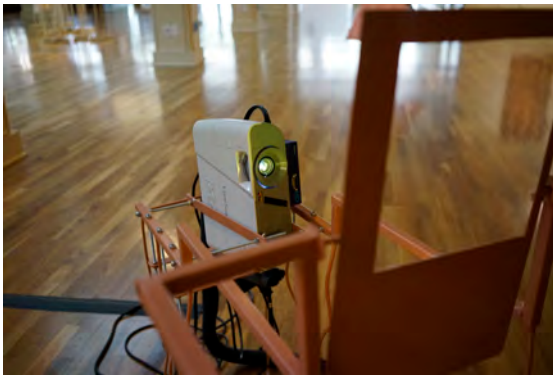
9. Detail of *Bench Point*

Regarding the role of theater being a public meditation on the relationship between artifice and life, Badiou discusses a contemporary interest in “naturalizing artifice.” He identifies a current tendency to dramatize the impact of technology and its cultural side effects by hyperbolizing technologies rapid expansion and immediate absorption into life. He sites Cronenberg’s films as exemplar of this trend and body piercings as “local metallization of flesh.” He sees all of this however as producing a “kind of monstrous equivalency [...] between vital organs and metallic chimera, thus proposing a new type of unstable equilibrium between artifice and life” (Badiou 25).

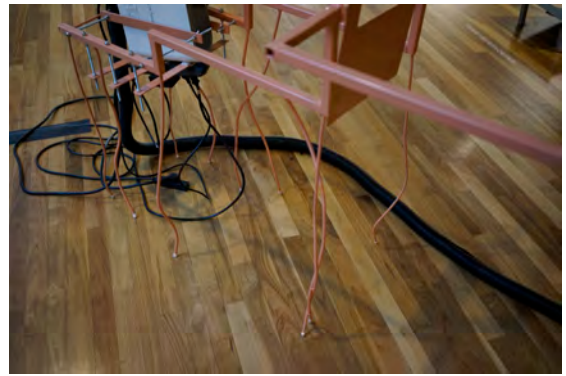
*ROT is made out of welded metal and powder coated flesh color. The only non-rectilinear forms are the wiggly legs that support the projector, the projectors cables entangled in the legs, and the curved screen. Aside from the video, the other elements that make up the work, the chair on castors, the track, the frame, the armature that connects the projector’s cage to the frame, are all constructed at right angles. The imagery projected on the screen is organic, a rotten apple. However upon closer inspection, the apple’s surface reveals a network of triangles and various geometric shapes. The edges of the form are inorganically sharp and the further the camera zooms in; the more the fidelity breaks down, revealing that it is computer generated, a 3D rendering. If seated on the chair, the rendered rotten apple encircles your distorted head while the sound of wood creaks behind you, like a Disney pirate ship in choppy waters. Then the video shuts off, and only the sounds of lapping water remain. A small yellow square fades in then out on the hidden portion of the plate, concealed from the seated figure, but casting a faint yellow light on the projector, like the sun.*



10. *ROT*, 2017



11. Detail view of *ROT*



12. Detail view of *ROT*

Art historian and theorist Eric de Bruyn takes alternative cinema theorist (and outspoken technocrat) Gene Youngblood to task for his optimistic perspective on the emancipatory potentials of new media proliferation. He quotes Youngblood regarding the impact of television on the displacement of the viewer; “technologies such as television

displace the individual from participant to observer of the human pageant, and thus we live effectively ‘outside’ of time; we externalize and objectify what previously was subjectively integral to our own self-image.” For Youngblood, inhabitants of planet earth would detach from history via this hyper mediatized alienation and throttle toward some “cosmic consciousness” (de Bruyn 20). I do, in keeping with de Bruyn and ultimately Carl Marx, identify this now nostalgic desire as perfectly in keeping with a pure capitalist metabolism – another utopic, neo-liberal myth that ultimately dies at commodity fetish. Though however quaint the proposition, the sweeter the tech becomes, so does the conversation ripen.

*ROT privileges two opposing planes of visual engagement. On the projector’s side of the curved screen, the rotten apple imagery easily resolves on the brushed, rear-projector film. A plate mounted directly in front of the projector occasionally reveals short clips of a selection of imagery. Only people standing on this projector side of the apparatus can see these short addendums; minor imagery leaking from a release valve. Seated in the chair on the tracks on the other side of the screen yields a different viewing experience. The apple imagery competes with your own distorted reflection, as the now convex screen facing the chair is a mirrored finish, warping and reflecting back what or whoever faces it. This seated position also privileges the audio, the speaker being mounted on the chair directly behind the viewer’s lower back, which occasionally sends small vibrations through the sheet metal. Depending on the location of the chair on the tracks, the structure that supports the projector, the projector’s wires intertwined with the flesh colored squiggly legs, and possibly the legs of anyone standing near the*



*projector, are all framed in the negative space under the screen. The view from the other side, the projector's side, reveals the chair and possibly a person sitting on the chair in this gap, either sitting stationary or being pushed/pulled.*



13. Detail view of *ROT*



14. Detail view of *ROT*

### **Ilinx and the Body**

*If music affects snakes, it is not on account of the spiritual notions it offers them, but because snakes are long and coil their length upon the earth, because their bodies touch the earth at almost every point; and because the musical vibrations which are communicated to the earth affect them like a very subtle, very long massage; and I propose to treat the spectators like the snake charmer's subjects and conduct them by means of their organisms to an apprehension of the subtlest notions.*

*- Antonin Artaud (Theater and Its Double)*

Caillois' fourth category of play is *ilinx*, "whirlpool" in Greek. According to Caillois, the desire for vertigo is driven by an attempt to "momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind" (Caillois, 23). He specifies that this can be a direct engagement with the body, such as with whirling dervishes, tightrope walking and ring around the rose, or one of a moral order, such as "cutting down the tall prairie flowers with a switch, or in creating an avalanche of the snow on a rooftop" (Caillois, 24). Admittedly it seems to be the broadest and least specific of the four categories, but *ilinx* was the term that fixed in my imagination when I first encountered Caillois, perhaps because it tends more toward *paidia* on the *ludus* (structured) / *paidia* (unstructured) continuum. My interest in this phenomenon is also both physical and 'moral,' as Caillois would say; and I believe related to a powerful operation in a particular type of perceptual experience.

Though there are many contemporary works I could site here, formative works that I return to, works that might engage with this notion of *ilinx*, are Simone Forti's dance constructions (1960), Robert Morris' *Box for Standing* (1961) and most important, Bruce Nauman's various corridor installations of the late 60s and early 70s. As objects, Forti's *Slant Board*, Morris' box and Nauman's corridors all suggest, however abstractly, the human body. Novel at the time of their exposition, these objects simultaneously propose forms wrought out of a correspondence with the human body while also supporting a performative act. The forms themselves beg for bodily engagement; how to use this, how to occupy the negative space, can I fit in there. Driven in this way, engagement with the work becomes performative, the experience is active, even if only

conceptually so. After all, performers mount Forti's slant board but the public cannot, nonetheless physical engagement does occur at some point. That perceptual tension of an implied haptic experience collides into the conceptual understanding of the objects as formal artworks - what is this *thing*, in the world, separate from a body.



15. *Box for Standing*, Robert Morris, 1961

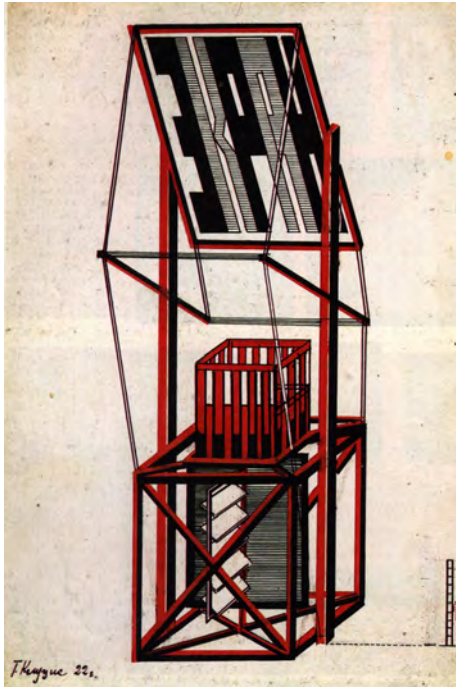


16. *Green Light Corridor*, Bruce Nauman, 1970



17. *Slant Board*, Simone Forti, 1961

*I looked at DIY virtual reality chairs, arcade car racing games, Gustavs Klucis Radio Orator Propaganda Stands and the nordic track when I first started thinking about The 3 Actants. Objects whose function took center stage. Excluding the propaganda stands, there is an economy of form due to the object's function, but there is also an aggressive, almost brutalist aesthetic. That brutalism also lends itself to an aesthetic of control. Bruce Nauman repeatedly expressed a desire for his architectural constructions, such as the corridors, to allow for direct interaction, but of a very limited nature. He did not "like the idea of free manipulation," providing games outright that gave the viewer agency to generate meaning willy nilly. The control imposed by the dimensions and limitations of the physical space was paramount (Kraynak 30).*



18. Design for Loudspeaker *Radio-orchestra*,  
Gustav Klutskis, 1922



19. Custom Virtual Reality Cockpit, 2017

*Engaging The 3 Actants, especially BLOT and Bench Point, is intentionally awkward. It takes a certain amount of trust in the objects as they force one's center of gravity off balance. Once destabilized and reliant on the object to be supported, the spectacle takes a back seat. In a gallery context, the participating body is then also on display along with the work. The viewer crosses from spectator to participant to performer for another spectator.*



20. *BLOT*, 2017

Antonin Artaud was a major 20th century avant-garde French dramatist, writer and theater director. In his most prolific work, “The Theater and Its Double” (1938), he proposes the germs for the creation of his Theater of Cruelty. “At first by crude means, which will gradually be refined. These immediate crude means will hold their attention at the start. That is why in the “theater of cruelty” the spectator is in the center and spectacle surrounds him” (Artaud 81).

*Fantasy Foam is a simple, single channel looping video that I made before Maypole. It features a single take of a memory foam couch that slowly morphs over the course of a conversation between two women as they quietly discuss their ideal fantasies of relaxation. The useful discovery for me was an object that suggests a body but never featured one, a psychological site for projection; and the fact that the prop appeared to be computer generated, but was not. The piece also nods to ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response), a pseudoscientific phenomena exploited by Youtube auteurs whereby a tingling sensation is produced on the skin by particular acoustic stimulus like whispering. I was hopeful that the two whispering women might lull the spectator, activate the skin, then deny that by an aggressive audio edit that involved layering the women's descriptions on top of one another as the piece progressed, forcing the viewer to choose who to focus on, destroying the soothing atmosphere.*



21. *Fantasy Foam*, Still from video, 2016

Furthering his proposal for a Theater of Cruelty, Artaud makes the case for a physical theater, one comprised of gesture and totems opposed to language and the banalities of narrative tradition.

I propose to return through the theater to an idea of the physical knowledge of images and the means of inducing trances, as in Chinese medicine which knows, over the entire extent of the human anatomy, at what points to puncture in order to regulate the subtlest functions.  
(Artaud, 80)

He advocates the incorporation of violent imagery to arrest and hypnotize the viewer, in an effort to bring theater back to its ritualistic origins - perhaps back to an atmosphere of paidia via an operation ofilinx.

*Several years ago I made a video titled “~” of a wavy, glass bottle being digitally manipulated such that it wavered and vibrated to a droning soundtrack. Another two-channel installation involved a professional drummer playing a snare drum in reaction to the movements of a digitally manipulated image of a mop that would also wiggle and vibrate over time. The only action the rotten apple rendering performs in ROT is to spin at varying speeds on varying axis. Spinning can be hypnotic, but also destabilizing. The curved reflective projection surface serves to push this destabilization. At times, the vantage point of the camera moves in opposition to the apples rotation, lending to that almost nauseating feeling when a train passes by the window, moving in the opposite direction.*





22. *ROT*, Still from video, 2017

Elie During gave a lecture in 2016 titled “Materiality of the Image.” In it, he describes a common desire amongst artists to conjure what he coins a “volume image” or “virtual volume” in contemporary video art. Counter to content, this flat image often yields a transverse movement, signaling to its shoulder or backside, suggesting a volume. He wonders why contemporary artists seek to excavate out a volume image, and goes back to the advent of film, when the first moving images shocked the viewer with the apparent universal “shivering” of the image - *la vue animé*. Though he does not answer the question he poses, he observes the impact of transverse movement, the camera moving one way when the content is moving another, and the “cut,” referring to both the edit and the framing of what is included/excluded from the frame. He declares that cinema is so compelling because in its most formal, it reveals something inherent in movement. “The essence of the cinematographic image lies in extracting from moving

bodies the movement which is their common substance, or extracting from their mobility which is their substance.” The limitation of cinema however is that the movement, the shivering, never stops unfolding, he articulates. He contends that it wants to achieve what painting can - access to the back of the tree without having to move around it.

*The backside of the image, the impossible and inaccessible space that would validate its materiality is like an itch that can't be scratched. It was important that ROT and BLOT incorporate video that could resolve on both sides of the screen, privileging two different experience.*



23. Detail of *BLOT*

Eric de Bruyn also addresses this desire to see the back of the metaphorical tree; “Should our fantasy of “seeing ourselves” in a mirror or photograph somehow be brought to an end, the world as a whole would dissolve in a shapeless fog. Yet, Baudrillard contends, the opposite temptation is equally deadly: we must also not try to pass over to the side of our own double or holographic twin. To externalize, that is, our ideal ego as a

hologram. It may be hard, he writes, to shake the fascination of “being able to circle around oneself, finally and especially of traversing oneself, or passing through one’s own spectral body-and any holographed object is initially the luminous ectoplasm of your own body.” (de Bruyn 19) Though his stance is cautionary, like that of Badiou’s when he speaks about the pitfalls of collapsing metallic chimera with our own bodies and perception, this observation regarding a desire to traverse the image, or traverse oneself, fascinates me.

## **Conclusion**

Contemporary art historian, critic and author Claire Bishop lays forth a critique of recent trends in participatory art in a lecture she gave at Cooper Union in 2011 for Creative Time’s Living as Form. She begins by outlining the history of the polemic that led to the contemporary mode, citing Guy Debord’s originary Marxist critique of the impact of capitalism on culture, then Baudrillard who announced the shift from Debord’s society of the spectacle to McLuhan’s “medium is the message”, ending with Boris Groys who asserts that our age is one of “spectacle without spectators.” Bishop posits that participatory practices tend to self-identify as social engagement, positioning itself against spectacle. She argues that the majority of participatory artwork in the West fails because it paradoxically ends up identifying more closely with populist agendas of neoliberal governments, where all too often the audience is co-opted into roles of co-production, thus becoming affective laborers. Bishop’s desire and remedy to this is to

sustain the tension between both critiques (artistic and social) but do away with any

Tokenism in favor a “mediating object.” She quotes Felix Guitarri;

He argues that in art and education alike, there needs to be a mediating object—a spectacle that stands between the idea of the artist and the feeling and interpretation of the spectator: “This spectacle is a third thing, to which both parts can refer but which prevents any kind of ‘equal’ or ‘undistorted’ transmission. It is a mediation between them. [...] The same thing which links them must separate them.” In different ways, Rancière and Guattari offer alternative frameworks for thinking the artistic and the social simultaneously; for both, art and the social are not to be reconciled or collapsed, but sustained in continual tension.  
(Bishop, 6)

I link this mediating object with a “threshold” space that Eric de Bruyn demarcates. In his description of media and technology’s role in the dialectic between the “non-living” and “living”, previously discussed, de Bruyn positions Youngblood’s technocratic utopia against Baudrillard’s dystopic vision of a future where our “holographic avatars travel the world in our stead” (de Bruyn, 26). He identifies a common focal point:

Two totalizing views of the future, one utopian, the other dystopian, but both are focused on the holographic image as an entity that occupies a threshold space, which is mesmerizing and terrifying due to the manner in which it allows the sensuous and the non-sensuous, the abstract and the concrete, to become intertwined.  
(de Bruyn, 26)

De Bruyn goes on to disprove Youngblood, returning to Marx and the idea of commodity fetish.

In an effort to avoid illustration, or any gratuitous social agenda in my own work, I stop at the crossroads: in the threshold, putting my efforts into the generation of a mediating spectacle.

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