

Necro-Techno: Examples from an Archaeology of Media

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP / ORIGINALITY

I certify that this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract: Thesis and Creative Research

Thesis

An increasing number of artists are resurrecting technologies considered practically obsolete. Bygone processes and narratives (particularly those of the pre-cinematic era) are being excavated in what Finnish writer Erkki Huhtamo has termed "media archaeology"¹

Why are we witnessing the resurgence of these techniques in the context of contemporary art, and what is their relevance today?

In this dissertation, the intentions and methods employed by contemporary artists who enlist archaic technologies are discussed, and the effectiveness of their strategies evaluated against a background of the history of vision, technology and contemporary commentaries on media.² While all art involves interaction between the viewer and the artwork, the works discussed here provide a particular opportunity for active engagement in perceptual experience. Magic, humor, immediacy and play are invoked by the following artists as useful means for addressing the complexity of issues surrounding technological "progress"

I will consider the work of four prominent practitioners to exemplify crucial themes and questions relating to the nexus of creativity and technologies of representation. **Ellen Zweig (USA)** extends notions of performance and history by enlisting phantasmagoric and camera obscura effects; **Paul DeMarinis (USA)** invents ingenious optical-audio kinetic sculptures which honour eccentric histories; **Toshio Iwai (Japan)** expands the vocabulary of pre-cinema through his zoetrope and stroboscopic devices; and **Jim Pomeroy (USA)** presents subversive three dimensional (3-D) performances and persistence-of-vision devices. As the practice of these artists attests, technologies do not become obsolete; they can resonate well past their commercially viable use-by dates.

¹ Erkki Huhtamo, "Time Traveling in the Gallery: An Archeological Approach in Media Art", *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, eds. Anne Moser and Douglas McLeod (Cambridge: MIT, 1996) 233.

² For clarity, the word Media will be capitalized when I am referring to print media and not capitalized when I am referring to media technologies (radio, cinema, photography, etc.).

This thesis shows that by exhuming and extending the sometimes absurd objects and stories surrounding former technologies, these artists are successfully emphasizing the often overlooked role of human engagement and the cyclical nature of technology, rather than fore-fronting the technical apparatus and its lineage. Far from being dead or buried in nostalgia, archaic media are offered as evidence of a lively continuity and multiplicity of both function and meaning.

Creative Research

In my own practice, I have been exploring the sculptural, experiential and sometimes humorous possibilities of light and optical phenomena in installations that frequently feature obsolete technologies (such as camera obscuras, phantasmagoria, periscopes and the photographic rifle), often in combination with newer media technologies such as video, photography and digital imaging.

These exhibitions have incorporated a machine for making rainbows, a camera obscura/fibre-optic journey through the center of the earth, paranoid dinner-table devices (*Liquid Scrutiny* was influenced by a drawing of a 17th century Czech camera obscura goblet), an interactive computer/video rifle (an installation entitled *To Fall Standing* referenced French physiologist E.J.Marey's photographic rifle of 1882), and a periscope birdbath. In the spirit of 19th century chimeras, I merged site-specific portable camera obscuras with garbage bins, flowerpots, portable toilets, birdhouses, mobile homes, removalist trucks, televisions and Tibetan cheese boxes.

These works affirm that our fascination with surveillance and the extension of human vision is not just a recent preoccupation of the electronic age, but part of a lively legacy that continues to find application in the present. My intent is to engage viewers in playful participation while considering historical narratives, natural phenomena and the implications of current media practice.

Preface

Imagination
 creates the situation,
 and, then, the situation
 creates imagination.
 It may, of course, be the other way around:
 Columbus was discovered by what he found.

James Baldwin, *Imagination*

In the early 1990s, inspired by American composer and sculptor Paul DeMarinis' investigations into early sound technologies and Australian Joyce Hinterding's forays into the materiality and sound of electricity, I began to consider the history of vision (along with optical phenomena and the devices that have emerged) as a point of departure for my work.

In particular, seeing an image of the photographic rifle (1882) by French physiologist Etienne Jules Marey in Siegfried Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command* significantly influenced my course of action.¹ The photographic rifle represented a startling conflation of culture and technical apparatus; Marey's curious device also made explicit the connections between defense and vision.

I also entered a walk-in camera obscura for the first time. I was struck by how such a seductively simple yet extraordinary occurrence could be so generally unknown.²

Ten years on, this is no longer the situation. Artists, museums and civic planners have revitalized earlier-known optical devices, such as the camera obscura and

¹ Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History*, (New York: Norton, 1969). Marey is now more widely known as reflected in the publication of two major monographs on his work. Marta Braun has written a terrific account of Marey's accomplishments, which encompasses his scientific mechanical expertise and his photographic works in *Picturing Time, The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). See also Francois Dagagnet, *Etienne Jules-Marey: A Passion for the Trace*, (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

² The camera obscura is a darkened box or room with a strategically placed tiny hole facing a brightly lit scene. Light reflecting from the scene travels in a straight line through this opening (or aperture) and projects an inverted view on the opposite wall or screen of the box or room.

pre-cinematic techniques. In *The 1994 International Symposium of Electronic Art* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Helsinki (in which I participated), eight of the twenty-four artists exhibiting were incorporating aspects of pre-cinematic technologies into their practices. In Australia, The Sydney Observatory playfully enlisted a zoetrope from 1987-1997 to demonstrate the big bang theory (designed by Nick Lomb). At the Museum of Sydney, a video narration incorporating a technique reminiscent of early phantasmagoria was skillfully employed in *The Bond Store* (designed by Ross Gibson, 1994). *Phantasmagoria: Pre-Cinema to Virtuality* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, 1996, established connections between the theatrical early films of conjurer George Méliès' and pre-cinema references from several contemporary artists. Opening in late 2001 at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles, a major exhibition, *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen* (catalogue essays by Barbara Stafford and Francis Terpak) featured "eye devices" that have been designed through the ages to augment perception.³

A fascination with almost-forgotten media has become part of present culture - and it is often accompanied by a sense of play.

This thesis accompanies my studio/creative research, which has been significantly influenced by the mechanisms and metaphors (what Paul DeMarinis has termed "mecanaphors") of media history. In the preface to his *L'oeil vivant, essays (The Living Eye, Essays)*, Jean Starobinski addresses the difficulty of attaining a balanced perspective on a work. Here he commends the value of "*le regard surplombant*" ("the look from above"):

Despite our desire to lose ourselves in the living depths of a work, we are constrained to distance ourselves from it in order to speak of it. Why then not deliberately establish a distance that will reveal to us, in a panoramic perspective, the surroundings with which the work is organically linked? We would try to discern certain significant correspondences that haven't been perceived by the writer, to interpret his mobile unconscious, to read the complex relations that unite a destiny and a work to their historical and social milieu.⁴

³ Barbara Maria Stafford and Francis Terpak, exhibition catalogue, *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen*, Getty Research Institute, Nov. 2001 - Feb 2002.

⁴ Jean Starobinski, *L'oeil vivant, essais*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1961) 26.

Starobinski proceeds, however, to also warn of the dangers of this view, specifically the risk of the disappearance of the work itself into its context. He accordingly encourages an approach that vacillates between distance and intimacy.

In line with Starobinski's notion of panoramic perspective, a useful strategy for me has been to discuss artistic practitioners who are also exploring the mechanics and histories of archaic technologies and whose works represent a spirit of thoughtfulness and playfulness that I aspire to. This will allow me to address the practical and theoretical concerns I surround myself with, while avoiding strident personal declarations. This paper accompanies my visual work, but is not an explanation of it.

Paul DeMarinis, Jim Pomeroy, Ellen Zweig and Toshio Iwai may not see their work as being primarily or significantly about media archaeology, but rather about a diverse range of social, psychological and perceptual issues in which archaic tools have been incorporated. For the most part, these artists choose from a range of available technologies where nothing is considered "dead" After all, the jackhammer didn't supersede the chisel. Technologies from various time periods are not only "juxtaposed", but available for use. I risk both oversimplification and stridency by lumping these works together, but there are enough enticing links between these artists' practices to inspire the development of a worthwhile dialogue.

Discussions about media histories have occurred mainly in the areas of pre-cinema vision technologies or in studies of visuality, with less focus on audio or tactile technologies. Our everyday language is also highly permeated by optical terminology, as dramatically illustrated by Martin Jay. To open *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, he seamlessly integrates twenty-one visual metaphors - in one paragraph⁵

⁵ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 1.

However, technological developments for extending the range of our hearing (the telephone, microphone, loudspeaker, phonograph) have been some of the most profoundly influential inventions, especially since the 19th century. The history of sound has recently received increased attention, apparent in the sheer quantity and scope of new publications in sound theory.⁶ The profile of sound as an art form has also been substantially elevated.

Nevertheless, theories of sound are not the focus of this paper. Rather, in Volume 1, I've chosen to concentrate on the work of four artists who collectively incorporate a sweep of sensory devices. There are many practitioners whose works would happily fit within the context of this thesis, but I've chosen to explore these four more fully as examples of issues or modes of practice representative of archaeological concerns, while occasionally citing additional practitioners.

The illustrations are indicated by figure numbers within the text and are located on the image sheets following the chapters.

In Volume 2, the visual research I have undertaken is represented by image sheet documentation - and a brief description for each project is provided in the Exhibition Notes. In a written addendum to the thesis, two of my projects will be discussed in detail.

⁶Cultural theorists writing about sound include Adalaide Morris, Alain Corbin, Bruce R. Smith, Jonathan Rée, Steven Connor, Leigh Schmidt, Emily Thompson, Mark M. Smith, Barbara Engh, Hillel Schwartz, Karin Bijsterveld, Martin Harrison and Richard Rath. This list was provided by Douglas Kahn, whose *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*, (Cambridge: MIT, 1999) is a considerable addition to sound theory.