Moving Image

What are the techniques used to display video in gallery spaces and what are visitors’ reception habits for the moving image? While an exhibition can be a space for critical reception, the usual modes of presentation for video works tend to evoke cinema spaces and position audiences in the role of passive beholders of the image. How can the space of presentation be a tool for immersion, but also create a critical distance and implicate an active audience? In Isaac Julien’s TEN THOUSAND WAVES (2010) the spectator enters the work’s space, moves in between screens and selects perspectives. The activation of the beholder renders the act of spectating visible by making the audience a part of the installation. The installation expands the convention of the screen-projected moving image, as well as film’s illusion of linear narration. The relationship between immersion, ruptures and distancing dynamizes a multi-screen video projection, making it an environment to plunge into, and also a montage that is only perceivable over time and by an audience that chooses to move to various positions and spectate specific parts of the work. The set up leads to the interrelation of screens and architectural surroundings. The importance of the space of presentation demands an adaptation of the installation for each presentation. How does the surrounding architecture influence an installation like TEN THOUSAND WAVES? What are the strategies of installing such complex works in a space and how can they be transferred to other locations?
Isaac Julien

Indépendant Cinema

In the closed space of cinema there is no circulation, no movement, and no exchange. In the darkness, spectators sink into their seats as though slipping into bed. This model is broken apart by the folding of the dark space of cinema into the white cube of the gallery. Michael Snow on La Région Centrale

In an increasingly troubled time of emergencies, war and dis-information, moving images in a gallery context could represent an alternative view—one in which images can play a critical role in shaping our understanding of the world, rather than merely being used as a tool for art market propaganda. If we look at exhibitions such as curator Mark Nash’s recent show at Musac—One Sixth of the Earth: Ecologies of Image (2012)—the gallery rather than the cinema, has become an important space for interventions that re-view the differing cultural, political and aesthetic perspectives that make up “moving image” culture from around the world. After a period of exchange through the ’60s and ’70s—summarized in Chrissie Illes exhibition Into the Light: The Projected Image in American Art 1964-1977 (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2001)—one can observe both a continuity and an apparent gap between projected installation and experimental film today. Instead of forming a field of interaction, the contemporary modes of presentation for the moving image almost seems to separate these two practices, as if they existed in two different worlds.

This shift brings with it a growing set of questions, including: How do we consider the phenomena of contemporary artists working with film and video today? How did post-cinema become an increasingly common presence within the art gallery context?

I would argue the distinctive experimental approaches to visual imagery that were once the aesthetic hallmark of the New Queer Cinema in the early 1990s, have transitioned into the space of the contemporary gallery. See for example the work of Ming Wong from Singapore. This growing trend is marked in my own career as an artist and filmmaker who, after Derek Jarman’s death in 1994, witnessed the end of an Independent (queer) film culture in the U.K. Regrettably, what Ruby Rich once rightly crowned “New Queer Cinema”, has long vanished. It can be argued, however, that elements from the genre have reappeared in advertising, in mainstream television, and in art galleries. Through experimentations with film and video, the distinctions between narrative, avant-garde and documentary practice have become unclear, along with shifts in viewer’s experiences. With new digital technologies cognition gets blurred across several frames, influencing viewing habits and subjectivities.

The Mobile Spectator

It is now left to artists and filmmakers to make utopic interventions into spaces that are open and receptive to thematic and visual experimentation. Contemporary museums and galleries are certainly creative spaces where a legacy of innovation continues and aesthetic interventions are not only possible, but also recognised. This is my main point: that the emerging displacement of cinema into an art context, can be seen as a continuation of some of the concerns of an earlier independent cinema. Along with installation works from the ’70s this mutation can be seen as a reconfiguration of sorts—from one technology to another, from celluloid to digital, makes new interventions possible. Combined with this are changes in the nature of spectatorship and subjectivity. Deterioritalization of the gallery means that spectators coming to these spaces may have a different set of expectations, beyond those of a general cinema audience. The concept of the “mobile spectator” challenges the normative habits spectators may bring to the exhibition space. Spectators are encouraged to un-learn certain habits of spectating—particularly when it comes to moving image installations. Exploring the concept of the mobile spectator and trying to unfix the habits that may be carried over from the cinema is an important part of my recent work. How does the architecture of exhibition spaces relate to these concepts? In works like FANTOME CREOLE (2005), WESTERN UNION: SMALL BOATS (2005) and TEN THOUSAND WAVES (2010), I want to address these issues, through the use of multi-screen projections. This is not about the question of number of screens—four screens, five screens, and now nine screens in TEN THOUSAND WAVES—but about breaking away from the normative habits we have in the exhibition of, and also the viewing of, moving images. WESTERN UNION: SMALL BOATS (2007) is not about “storytelling” as such, but about creating an environment through which an accumulation of sensations, through images and sound, will create a complex, thought-provoking and intriguing artwork. The installation was realized in such a way that, on the one hand, the viewer will form new, empathetic identifications while they, on the other hand, experience these images from an unexpected point-of-view.

It is hoped that audiences will gain a better understanding of the contexts surrounding them. This will be achieved not only through the images and sonic aspects of the work, but also through the experience of the design of the installation itself, in terms of the way the spectator enters the installation, and through the sculptural design and arrangement of the nine screens. This should also be an effect of the way the the montage of images and sounds works across the nine screens, which enable a re-mapping—or the re-evaluation of—such journeys as featured in the work. Of course, questions of global migration are well known in the dominant media, through news reportage or documentaries, but these experiences are seldom used as the basis for a poetic meditation as a cinematic experience in a gallery or museum context. Thus, the architectural installation of the screens and how they interrelate with the 9:2 surround sound make for an immersive haptic experience. Of course, all of this expands on the linear single screen-projected image, which is the normative way we read film generally. The work of someone like Pipilotti Rist is exemplary in exploring this dynamic. Rist works with an architectural frame where she is interrogating the image, the screen and sculpture, transforming these elements into a kind of soft architecture. In her work, she presents tiny projections on model buildings (SUBURB BRAIN (1999)); or on a spectator’s lap (LAP LAMP (2006)), instigating a movement away from the idea of projection on a screen as such.

Parallel Montage

On the other hand, we recognize film as a media in decline. One of the things that the digital revolution has done is to break time and frame, and detach media—image or data—from the object. A theme in recent work by artists such as Tacita Dean is that 16mm film is almost disappearing. In addition to this new, seemingly objectless media, the breaking down of frames in a topographical sense is something already occurring in virtual space. Therefore, the idea of frames and images as being in circulation already exists. In my work, this concept of moving images is transferred...
into physical space in the form of a parallel montage. Classic parallel montage in a single-screen work is perhaps best exemplified in a Griffith-style “race to the rescue” sequence. Here, cutting between two shots brings two separate spaces together: one shot shows the rescuer and the other shows the rescue. Cutting between the two implies simultaneity: one person is in danger at the same time as the other rushes to the rescue. Across several screens, simultaneity can be shown rather than simply implied through a cut—for example Zhao Tao on the tram in TEN THOUSAND WAVES—or several different strands of the same film can be shown at once. This offers more visual information but also creates a challenge for the spectator, in that it provides more than the eye can take in at once. Thus the work becomes sculptural.

Although I am very much interested in how montage facilitates narration, I also make use of montage as a tool of sculpture, in the sense that the question of montage is connected to the way the image is sculpturally projected. In a work like TEN THOUSAND WAVES, I am interested in the spectral floating of the body and the way that montage across space can create a sense of synchronicity. Synchronicity is speeded up, in the sense that digital technology can enhance the flow of images, but also in terms of the synchronicity of image and sound. It is a question of the use of sound and sonics that is sometimes underplayed in visual art presentations. Sound is an elementary component that I use to orchestrate parallel montage within the space, and the use of non-diegetic sound to help form the way we are able to read images. I am interested in the use of screens, how their architectural placement can define the way images and sound move through a space, and how the images can create a kind of seduction. I use the aesthetics of cinema—performance, colour, sound etc.—as a form of seduction, with the goal of producing an identification of desire with someone, for example, a political dissident. Montage is not only capable of deconstructing something, but also, in the juxtaposition of spaces, of making a new image come alive. A lot of this has to do with the architecture of a particular space and how it is filmed, but also the architecture of the image and how this can be translated into the actual space of presentation.

Choreographic space

The installation of a multi-screen video projection is a montage in so far as it is only perceivable over time and by a spectator that decides to move to various positions in the space and view different aspects of the work. This type of installation is orchestrated in an extremely detailed way and demands a high level of technical expertise. The whole installation is developed through the use of synchronized sound and image in a non-linear fashion, where you use, on the one hand, parallel montage to create temporal ellipses in the images, and on the other, sound design to create further disjunctions between sound and images. For example, in TEN THOUSAND WAVES you might hear the police distress call or the sound of traffic but actually be looking at the Goddess Mazu in a tranquil landscape. Different spectators might react to these disjunctions in different ways. One might rationalize it as an analepsis, recalling an event that they have already seen in the installation, another might interpret it as a signal to move to a different screen.

TEN THOUSAND WAVES is not only about what is in the work—or what can be seen on the screen. Viewing conditions and the way an audience relates to a space become a part of the piece; i.e., how a work is installed and how the images move throughout a space. This does not necessarily mean that people tend to move around the whole time—that is a cliché. In this work you are meant to move, but at certain points it might be to your advantage to remain stationary. You may see another visitor moving behind or through a screen, taking on the movement projected on the screen, or people that are being projected on to it, etc. Predicating the whole idea of movement and getting involved with the work by changing positions and perspectives is the fact that when the audience is looking and they are looking at either side of a screen, the screen and the act of seeing become part of their reception. The audience becomes a part of the installation. People become part of the architecture.

Actualisation

The architecture is another important aspect of an installation and of the atmosphere of a space. Also important is how the architecture interrelates with the space created by the installation. Each installation is developed specifically in relation to its architectural surroundings. While there is no formal strategy regarding how to install a complex work in a space or how to move an installation from a gallery into another kind of space, there is a certain process we follow as we develop the presentation of a work. Each time we install a work in a place we receive the architectural plans or have someone go there to make very specific drawings of the space. Often we travel to the space as a team to see what it is like and to discuss its particularities. At this point in the installation process we also have to think about the work, its colours and how the projected image relates to the space, its surfaces and the lighting situation. When working with video projections, light is a crucial factor. The obvious concern is to create a situation that allows for a precise projection in any given space. Based on these considerations, we try to decide on a colour the space is to be painted in. In TEN THOUSAND WAVES, colour is a very subtle component that changes. The colours we used for the different spaces of the installation are grey, white and then a blue, a very particular Yves Klein blue which is an homage to Derek Jarman’s Blue (1993).

After presentations at the Sydney Biennale, at the ShanghART Gallery, Shanghai, at the Reina Sofía, Madrid, and the Hayward Gallery, London (all in 2010), the work was installed in two rather bright lighting situations. At the Bass Museum of Art (2010), the installation was realized in a light grey gallery space during the Art Basel Miami. At the Kunsthalle Helsinki (2010) the work was installed in a white space. Due to conservation laws, the paint on the walls could not be changed. I found this to be an exciting challenge. In the Kunsthalle, we spread special frameless screens across three rooms. We were delighted with the way this different configuration turned out, which we decided on due to the very particular architecture of the building.

Video projections can work in spaces with a lot of light, because there is very powerful technology available. Sometimes video will not work at all in such a space, because the white space reflects back the image. So there is a very fine line that has to be negotiated. The quality of that reflectiveness, in relation to the illumination and the density of the image, become very important. The more light is projected into a space, the more light can also be reflected. In the end, it is not only about technology, but also about the architectural space and the material used for its surfaces. The presentation of TEN THOUSAND WAVES at the K20 Düsseldorf turned out not exactly the way I had imagined it would be. The room was meant to be blue, painted in a sort of Yves Klein blue, which is a lighter and very bright blue. However, in the end the walls in the
exhibition were painted in a darker blue, the carpet was black and together these dark surfaces appeared to be almost black. One could say that we are confronted with a certain standardisation in the exhibiting context, so in practical terms, we mainly see spaces that are either white or black. But what are the characteristics of that perfect white space and how black does a black box have to be? Color creates an aura. When it is too dark it reminds one of a cinematic space, it emulates traditional cinema. Projecting in very dark spaces is a bit of a cliché, because the technology of projectors is quite good today and spaces do not have to be completely dark to create a very pristine image—as we had demonstrated with the installation in Helsinki.

If you want to create a space that works in coherence with your work, you will have to find specific solutions for each presentation of a piece. This whole idea of colour and light is not to be understood as an addition to a piece, but is connected to and defines the navigational aspects of a work. If you have a space that is too dark, it is really difficult to get people to move around.

Based on our experience of showing TEN THOUSAND WAVES in Düsseldorf, I changed the colour from a blue to a mid-grey, before showing it at ICA Boston. These changes are basically the result of or my reaction to what happened in Düsseldorf. After I have decided on that grey, I was very interested to see what exactly I had chosen and how it worked; it is a bit of an experiment to ask a museum to change their gallery’s appearance. Installing works is always trial and error anyway. Something simple, like a carpet, can change the presentation. As a conclusion, one has to emphasize once more that the surfaces of an architectural space, the materials used and their colors are crucial for how a space feels, looks and sounds. Subtle changes make a big difference.

The text is based on a public presentation and an interview at HfG Karlsruhe in November 2011.

Ten Thousand Waves installed at Sydney Biennale 2010
Ten Thousand Waves installed at Hayward Gallery, London during the exhibition Move: Choreographing You, 2010