2003

Flickering Affects

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Publication Details
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ABSTRACT
All digital work is made and viewed in the glow of the flicker: the image moves, our eyes move, our body enters into some digital space. Whether or not a screen is present, the viewer of digital installation art is implicated within this flickering affect. This paper discusses three installation works by New Zealand artists informed by digital practice. I argue that an affective viewing experience can be examined through the semantics of the flicker.

KEYWORDS: digital affect; installation art; electronic temporality; sensation.

Figure 1: James Walton, "Untitled" detail 9.15pm, 3D digital still from projected animation, 11'15", 2001.

Someone else (an artist) has created a space, an immersive fiction to which I find myself drawn. It is an animated video, whether it is looped is unclear. Waves lap and crash against a sheer rock face; seaweed drifts in the currents; the moon seems to hover above, its reflection flickering in the water. I am a viewer of a piece of digital installation art. I stand in a gallery aware of the screen before me, but wanting to somehow step within it. Katherine Hayles has argued that cyberspatial realities generate a flicker between their material supports and our witnessing bodies. Hayles questions the language of presence and absence in discussions of digital practice and experience, arguing that in virtual realities it is more productive to think of the body and the network as participating in patterns of randomness/noise which flicker between various codes. Hayles' flicker suggests a movement between bodies, both organic and not. Hayles discusses the textual codification of networks and digital environments and for Hayles the flicker is found within the structures and metaphors of signification. This paper argues that these instances of flickering digital pattern are not uniquely textual nor solely found within the screen, but can also be found in the gallery spaces of installation art practices. It is not too much to imagine that under the signifier of the flicker whenever we encounter digital installation art in a gallery, we actually enter into some digital space: the screen, (images or objects) move, our eyes move, our presence is more than felt.

The three works that I present here show that the flicker can be widely applied, without diluting its key focus on materiality and subjectivity. The flicker helps connect complex sensations and experiences and materially locate them across a variety of bodies. The flicker can thus capture something of the installation environment that is bypassed in discussions of digital art works as an extension of the textual screen; as well as offer a tool by which the viewer and the art work can be discussed together, as part of a mutating environment, rather than separately as subject and object. The notion of flicker foregrounds movement and uncertainty in an analysis of the digital. This makes it possible for signifying systems to shift or mutate, and as such understandings of subjectivity cannot be based on identification of and with stable surrounding objects. "I am not that 'table' because I do not appear to be that table" is no longer a statement that remains true. Material conditions of both my being and that of the table may flicker so that in a particular moment our patterns may change and we may find ourselves flickering between discrete borders.

In her development of Lacan’s floating signifiers, Hayles connected the signifying process, and thereby subjectivity, with the actual technologies of signification. She suggested that technologies are not only transmitters but may reorient, reprocess, and reinterpret the system. It is through these movements that Hayles foregrounded the material conditions of signification and subjectivity. As such, flickering signification extends the productive force of codes beyond the text to include the signifying processes by which the technologies produce texts, as well as the interfaces that enmesh humans into integrated circuits.

Focusing on the relationship of viewer to art object I am going to take with me this word ‘flicker’, move it away from a textual context, and focus on three relationships (integrated circuits) created by digitally informed installation art. In this way the flicker becomes part of a wider language for the discussion of the apprehension of material visual objects.

As it is commonly understood, flicker, is a movement which occurs in time, a vibration or a quivering - a brief spell of recognition. Or as Hayles puts it "plunging into the river of information implies recognising that you are
the river.”[8](p.174) Inside its spaces the viewer embodies the flicker - here not here; there not there; me not me. This idea immediately recalls Haraway's cyborg figure, Hayles calls it "body-plus-equipment-plus-computer-plus-simulation" as such is it is "impossible to locate an originary source for experience and sensation."[8](p.174) Relevant for my purposes is the argument that the flicker will not allow a single point of view for a viewer, or fixed location to the experience of the work, and acknowledges the duration essential to any viewing practice.

**Figure 2: James Walton, "Untitled" detail 10.30pm, 3D digital still from projected animation, 11'15", 2001.**

UNTITLED

The work that I opened this paper with is by Dunedin artist James Walton. The work "Untitled" (2001, 3D digital animation, 11' 15" loop) explores the virtual spaces of imaginative geographies. By generating a meditative environment of large scale back projection and sound, Walton encourages the viewer to step closer and closer to the edge of a cliff below which soft waves crash. When originally installed the desire to enter into the work was so strong I saw viewers actually touching the screens of the projection. These flickering viewers found themselves to be both inside and outside the screen. What did we hope to achieve by reaching for a screen?

This is the flicker Hayles was citing, it is screen based and occurs as part of a direct experience of a digital work. In Walton's work, viewers are lulled into another space here but not here, our presence before the screen is questioned. Walton reminds us that our point of view is essential to the work before us, that we must spend time before the work but also, perhaps, inside it. For me, this is a real space; it generates a nostalgic longing for time and space to be able to just sit and watch. To feel and smell the salt on the breeze and taste the wind on my face. It becomes also then a virtual space.

But if we look to the familiar for metaphors of virtual spaces we find William Gibson describing them as flickering patterns. In what has got to be the most quoted passage from contemporary science fiction, in *Neuromancer* Gibson describes cyberspace as

…a consensual hallucination … a graphic representation, … unthinkable complexity … lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding…[6](p.51)

No where does Gibson present virtual space as a solid imitation of some out here kind of space. Space for Gibson is textual and mathematical, in this way it is resistant to its own materiality. Walton plays on this, as our own materiality is found to be resistant to our desires for immersion.

The physical object of "Untitled" has unexpected metamorphoses, it resists our fixing of it into imagined real spaces. "Untitled" is large enough to make us affectively aware of the smallness of our embodiment, at the same time as it makes us pragmatically aware that the image is digitally projected and rendered pixels. As such it invokes the philosophical traditions of the sublime. Here, before ‘nature’ we experience an edge to both perception and imagination, we find ourselves within a space that simultaneously overwhelms us yet cannot contain us.[5]

While this flickering of perspective could be the experience of viewing any art work, or image upon a screen, it is necessary to also think about the specificity of this affect.

"Untitled" presents time as marked and known. Sitting somewhere between flicker and affect is duration. Rebecca Carpenter explains that when Henri Bergson discussed duration he argued that it was, "set up in memory, creating a virtual co-existence of the past and present. In other words we construct time and space through experience."[4](p.21) A flicker happens in time. Affect is also (even when imperceptible) time based.

In *Matter and Memory* Bergson begins by outlining the differing ways in which a body can be defined or known, as part of this he acknowledges the relationships that that body is within, and here is where affect plays a prominent role in his theory. Bergson writes that the body

…does not merely reflect action received from without; it struggles, and thus absorbs some part of this action. Here is the source of affection.[2](p.56)

Our metaphors for virtuality generally tend to refer to our own physicality. I walked, swam, moved, drifted within virtual spaces: we have no problem with this language.
Figure 3: Susan Ballard, "sensible" detail digital inkjet prints, total 400cm x 100cm, 2002.

Bergson locates affect within the body, and this body is intimately tied to its surroundings.

Flickering affect, then, is located within the body of the viewer. The bringing together of Hayles and Bergson with the experience of viewing digital installation generates antecedents for a flickering viewer. These installation works are not simple texts to be read, they cannot be reduced into sets of signifiers. Following Benjamin, the question becomes one of how to grasp such works as objects, for, over time it is the viewer that makes the work flicker.

SENSIBLE
My installation, "sensible" (2002, 8 x digital prints, synthetic scent, and 4' sound loop) sought to test the idea of flickering affect. "sensible" explored the temporal and physiological experiences of viewing: what happens when a viewer gets so close that they can no longer focus on what it is that they see; when we reach a point where things are not seen; when they go past blur and into flicker.

Behind what appeared to be a cupboard door was a small white light filled room. On the walls were digital prints, apparently abstract blurs, but with just enough detail that viewers' eyes pulsed in and out of focus. Moving randomly around the room was a digital buzz, not-quite the sound of a bumblebee. After about a minute in the room most viewers were suddenly aware of a smell. In every electrical plug in the room were synthetic room 'fresheners'. Viewers mentioned that once they noticed the smell they found it very difficult to stay in the room and found themselves fighting their need to focus the digital prints, catch the sound, and exclude the smell from their body.

The installation was felt to creep up on the audience, in some cases generating a strong visceral response or even panic. Scent enters into the body of the viewer, violating boundaries of self and not-self. Scent enables us to imagine visible and virtual spaces which are not only 'out there' but are simultaneously 'in here'. In addition this was digital scent (synthetically produced, and fired by electricity) as such it suggested other encounters with the digital.

Figure 4: Susan Ballard, "sensible" detail digital inkjet print, 100cm x 24cm, 2002.

Although scent travels inbetween different materialities (not only organic) it cannot itself be defined as a material object. On the other hand, it does impact upon the internal topography of a body, causing that body to flicker across sensory experience and memory.

Continuing the path of the flicker through these three works, the flickering of image/sound/scent in "sensible" disrupted the feeders to our materiality. The digital entered the body of the viewer. Can a scent be turned off in the same way we can close our eyes? As a metaphor the flicker describes this movement without fixing what or how this might happen. The viewer flickered.

Lev Manovich has demonstrated how common definitions of new media are often false. In one example he comments that even though we can break new media down into tiny but discrete units, "the discrete units of modern media are usually not units of meaning in the way morphemes are." (Here he also begins to suggest a move away from a purely textual analysis.) "sensible" encouraged a blurring at this contested site of meaning, blowing up the discrete units of a photographic image, (the photographic became digital) so that we couldn't help but attempt to give the marks/shapes/experience meaning. The attendant flickering of experience resulted in the breaking down of these meanings as we sought to make some sense of the sounds and smells within the space.

GALLERY 6: THE ICE RINK AND THE LILAC SHIP
The viewer of an installation in a gallery has usually just stepped off the street. They enter a space with a set of expectations: perhaps even wishing to be entertained! Wellington artist Maddie Leach is interested in these 'recreational' connections. In "Gallery 6: the ice rink and the lilac ship" (2002, video projection, 2 x 20m ice rink, skates) Leach constructed a very real ice rink upon which skaters could perform before the remaining viewers of the exhibition by selecting a pair of 'standardised' skating boots. Locked into the rack of boots was one pair in white kid specially commissioned for the artist. The air in the gallery had been cooled to 15º Centigrade, and in a separate room just visible from the rink a large video screen showed a cruise ship gliding effortlessly away from land.

Digital works are still reprimanded in the art presses for limiting the number of viewers who can 'experience' or participate in the work at any given time. Leach's Ice Rink plays upon this limitation, turning any viewer who dons the boots provided into the performer of the work.
As such they become, change and transform the work for any other viewers. The notion of separate viewer and artwork does not yield much leverage in this discussion, as the viewer interrupts the view of others just as much as their own play is both changing and assimilated into the actual work.

It is not even realistic to debate where the boundaries of this work lie, what are its parameters? By placing the two parts (rink and video projection) in close proximity and by allowing the 'viewer' to control somewhat the appearance and experience of the work Leach recalls the digital experience of virtual worlds - as well as the recreational spaces of sports arenas. Like a hypertext there are links across the pages of the gallery. One piece informs the other whilst changing the aspect of the viewer. In one the viewer is a passive receptor, in the other a hapless participant.

Judith Butler has presented a significant argument for the materiality of bodies read through their performativity. The body and its affects for Butler are "reiterated and reiterable"[3](p.22), as such performativity is not performance (the adoption of a role for a fixed period of time), but occurs through the repetition of key signifiers, processes of materialisation and the discursive productions of speech acts. The performative as it is realised in Leach's work makes it possible to develop a further argument for the flickering affect of these digitally informed installation works.

**AFFECT**
In my reworking of the flicker as a term to discuss installation practices the term itself has mutated away from something within the work and into the material and performing bodies which apprehend the art object/ installation/space.

By tracing three different manifestations of the flicker, I have found a path which lays out the ways in which the digital has already impacted on our everyday experiences in front of installation art works.

As is demonstrated in Leach's work we all enter a gallery holding onto some particular expectation of what we are about to experience. The presence of digital flicker means that this experience can sometimes involve the invasion of the screen by our bodies, the invasion of our bodies by the art work, and a strange co-mingling and interruption of our bodies as we find our selves performing across unfamiliar surfaces.

In her initial discussion of flickering signification, Hayles questions the fit or presence of noise within pattern, she asks:

> What stimuli cannot be encoded within the system and therefore exist only as extraneous noise? When and how does this noise coalesce into pattern?[7] (p.27)

In my reworking of the flicker, pattern is retained but not necessarily its code or the textual relations focused on by Hayles. Our visual metaphors are already adequate for discussions of the viewer of digital installation. The textual reduction of art works to signifiers, whether or not they flicker does not allow for the more productive experience found when the flicker is used as a term on its own to unpack the viewer, nor do they allow the flicker to be understood as noise.

The suggestion presented by a discussion of these works is that the flicker is a particular form of affect: one which is both metaphorical and experiential, one which occurs across multiple and diverse bodies, and one which is always digitally informed. Although our capacities for embodied viewing are not limited to digital media, the flicker offers a renewed argument for addressing the specific materiality of the art work and the flickering but affected viewer.


