

## The Land Behind : Contemporary Abstract Videos

*“Interactivity is to real space what radioactivity is to the atmosphere”<sup>1</sup>*  
-Paul Virilio

Cinema, phantasmal images that emerge from a physiological defect, tricked by the persistence of vision. Orphaned at birth as *une invention sans avenir*, indentured by malicious cartographers, it was forced to plaintively guess at a landscape that could only be seen in the black lines that border its celluloid frames. This void, a space necessary for the illusion of motion, disrupts the actualization of instantaneity and limits the potential for *noumenal vision of an unfeeling camera eye*.

In the contemporary moment, emergent technologies reject the clumsy support surfaces of the virtual image that emerged within the formal logic of painting, architecture and engraving (18<sup>th</sup> century) and then the delayed time of cinema and photography (dialectic logic of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century). Following this rejection, digital technology presents us with a paradoxical logic. Flowing through ubiquitous technology, the real time image has come to dominate the thing represented<sup>2</sup>, and a near-perfect and constant mirror, offering synchronous reflections of actual time, has come to be integrated into almost every facet of life.

Reflected in the variants of communication technology, real time representation now prevails over the real space of observation. Rather than predicated on the appraisal of a topological surface (the tactile representation of the past), factuality and authenticity are now measured in terms of speed (how quickly the image arrives down the pipeline)--the value of the representation, limited to the *depth of time* between the *physiological take* (capture) and the *psychological take* (reception). This liberation from those phantom limbs created by twenty-four points of lights flickering past us per second, not only obliterates an accidental “mental retention of images”<sup>3</sup>, it also eliminates the virtual, radically interior space of the cinematic experience.

“Now objects perceive me.”<sup>4</sup>

Concurrently, emergent technologies essentially shrink *actual space*, limiting the ability to be unseen; establishing the *impossibility of anonymity, chance, instinct*. The panoptic transformed, surveillance diffused, the few watching the many has become the many watching the few. This radical exteriority, this omnioptic landscape, comes at a great cost. Contemplation and identity now exist in real space of the virtual image rather than the virtual space of the mind; shared, commodified, mined in search of a data pattern that can be utilized by corporate interests. With the potential to transform a radical interiority into metrics and statistics, the apparatus of the cinema (celluloid, alchemical support surfaces) has been abandoned in preference of the *Vision Machine* of digital technologies. The irony being, that this was actually the original

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<sup>1</sup> Virilio, Paul, *Is the Author Dead, An Interview with Paul Virilio* in **The Virilio Reader**, edited by James Der Derian, Wiley-Blackwell, 1998. P. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid, *The Vision Machine* P138.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 135

<sup>4</sup>In reference to the writings of painter, Paul Klee, Ibid, P138

impulse of Muybridge and Marey's experiments, to eliminate the insurmountable virtual space of the mind that produces cinema affects, to develop technology which will finally close the gap between phenomena and noumena.

In this program of works completed on video, I have selected artists who reject the outward, heuristic potential of digital technologies. In contrast to the processes described above, these artists turn these technologies inward, embracing esoteric abstraction; offering an alternative to the frequently empirical functionality of emergent technologies; and creating a boundless virtual space that is reminiscent of the closed-eye vision and dialectical experience once nurtured by cinema and photography. They reference the history of avant-garde video work, yet they are original and transcendental. They are wordless, textural works that escape the statistical intrusions of the Omnopticon and immerse the viewer in an ethereal *Land Behind*.

Commissioned by POP Montreal's Auroratone, *Amethyst Visions* is a lyrical, almost hallucinatory work created by Winnipeg's Leslie Supnet. A departure from her animated work with its whimsical yet dark narrative threads, this piece references the abstract musical films of Cecil Strokes in the 1940s—efforts to sooth the effects of post-traumatic stress amongst soldiers returning from the second world war: a coalescence of the scientific, the musical, and the visual. The video's lush colour tones and mystical light flashes were created by shining different kinds of light through crystals, beads, and ceramic figurines; these glowing artifacts referencing the accompanying sound track by musician Cresting. The textures and video cracks, generated with low-fi cameras (VHS) and children's macro-toy cameras.

Supnet notes that the video is structured around the idea of moving from the outside world to the inner world and back again. This is evident in the remarkably fluid and dreamlike segues between representation and abstraction, hallucination and verisimilitude. It is an interior landscape of closed-eye animated forms that is reminiscent of Stan Brakhage's seminal *Text of Light*, which consists of refracted light textures from an ashtray captured on 16mm film.

One of the many artists included in the show who also perform their work live, Dan Browne's *Grid07* is part of a series of works which was recorded as a single take using a VJ program called Modul 8. The video was largely improvised, with a mapped out trajectory and a few filters to guide the cosmic flurry of vibrating particles that fly past the screen. At times, it seems we are flying above a pixellated, endless Canadian winter terrain. Gravel roads covered in snow, squares and rectangles carved into pockets of farm land, colonial scars on a landscape that is dreaming with us through the storm. An archive of media is reworked into geometrical forms, traced, thrown into the distance, and brought back again. It is both a tribute to pioneers in Visual Music such as The Whitney brothers and Jordan Belson and a reinvention of the genre with emergent technologies.

Montreal artist and Member of the live audio visual performance duo Le Révélateur, Sabrina Ratté's *The Land Behind* is a gestural work of architectural sketches and symmetrical feedback. Ratté's distinctive style of mixing analog textures with digital tools is immersive, almost transcendental in the way it seems to propose perfect metaphysical representations of recognizable vacant terrains, creating a virtual world to project oneself in and drift. Working intimately with sound artist Roger Teller-Craig, it is a prolific collaborations where structurally,

the soundscape and images create a remarkable synaesthetic experience. The space is otherworldly yet organic; windows as portals that peak into a reoccurring space, a color pallet whose vacant horizon burns itself into your minds eye.

Vancouver multidisciplinary artist Lief Hall's *25/27* was originally conceived as an installation, yet has gone on to play at numerous venues as a ferocious, single channel bombardment of the senses. Hall's multifaceted practice includes doing live visuals for theatre and music, sound art and performance, most recently with the now disbanded experimental noise/performance art duo Myths. As with other works in the program, we are introduced to a sparse almost alien landscape that pulses and flickers. Using 3D animation and various video filters and effects, she sculpts an experimental ethnography of a gaggle of digital monsters. Flashes and white noise disrupt our voyeurism, androgynous beings hunt, eat and prowl, all with a nightmarish instinctual indifference. This piece is predatory in every sense of the word.

Finally, also from the west coast, animator Barry Doupé has created his most abstract work to date. A collaboration with composer Yota Kobayashi, *Shikisou's* simple structure presents a uniquely meditative experience; the colors in a single sphere in the centre of the screen shift with the tones of a minimal sound composition. At times the background, serving as a sort of horizon, takes over, enveloping the sphere, drowning it in radically shifting colors and textures. The film takes its title from the Japanese term for cyclical gradation of colors. It also connotes the appearance of a visible figure, a metamorphoses. Change is the key idea explored in this concept; a temporal documentation of the four seasons in Japan. An infinite looping between concrete and ephemeral moments resonate, turning us inside out, swimming in an audio visual experience that is transcendent, ephemeral and out of reach.