

1. IMMERSION in a field of distance

'distance is the primary condition for getting close to the content of a work'

Theodor Adorno (in Grau 2003: 202)

Several writers on the topic of installation art (Bishop 2005; de Oliveira 2004; Rosenthal 2003) have pointed to the importance of the issue of immersion. Claire Bishop, in particular, argues that that the immersive capabilities of installation art constitutes a breakthrough in the sphere of art practice. She explains:

Installation art ... differs from traditional media (sculpture, painting, photography, video) in that it addresses the viewer directly as a literal presence in the space. ... installation art presupposes an embodied viewer whose senses of touch, smell and sound are as heightened as their sense of vision. (2005: 10)

What is remarkable about installation art, according to Bishop, is that the viewer is embodied. This assumes that the viewer is not embodied when looking at other modes of art, and that assumption can and will be disputed in this chapter. As far as touch, smell and sound are concerned most works of installation art are visually oriented. Virtually none use touch because of the restrictions in the maximum security environment of the gallery/museum. Very few use smell, and sound is also rare in those varieties of installation art that do not use video. Video installation on the other hand often uses soundscape very effectively. But video does not fit into Bishop's definition outlined in the above passage where she states: 'Installation art ... differs from traditional media (sculpture, painting, photography, *video*)' [emphasis added]. The main reason why she excludes video is because it is most commonly dependent upon a flat screen that the viewer cannot walk into. However, there are instances of multiple screen configurations that allow the viewer to enter and we will deal with such an instance in this chapter. Also, it will be argued here that video is actually

more immersive than most instances of sculptural installation art. The reason for this lies in the phenomena of the suspension of disbelief and the integration of the visual field with bodily and spatial awareness.

We can elaborate on the passage quoted from Bishop above by creating a dichotomy between embodied and disembodied art. Disembodied art is the art of the gaze, which is to say the mode of art typical of the gallery/museum experience ruled by the regime of 'look, but don't touch'. That is fundamentally the logic of Bishop's claim. But it is flawed because our visual sensibility is integrated into our bodily and spatial sensibility. Recently I visited an exhibition of contemporary British art, British Art Show 6, in which there was an immersive installation in one room and a single screen video projection in adjacent rooms. The immersive installation seemed influenced by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, there was sand on the floor the walls were painted dayglo orange and there were palm trees. Walking did produce an immersive effect and the combination of the signs did conjure up a sense of the tropical, but it was a very *theatrical* sensation. In the next room was Alia Syed's *Eating Grass*, 2003, a single screen projection. This proved to be *extremely* immersive. *Eating Grass* is like a dynamic cinematic 'painting' with shifting forms and colours that integrate into its ambient soundscape. The effect is like visual music, but there is also a nonlinear narrative dimension. Walking out of the video room back through the sand and palm trees one was struck by how fake and theatrical that experience was compared with the depth of the video immersion. Given the right kind of imagery our mind can empathically enter the screen and if it does the resulting experience is deeply immersive. Returning to Bishop's thoughts on the centrality of immersion to installation art she continues her argument:

Instead of representing texture, space, light and so on, installation art presents these elements directly for us to experience. This introduces an emphasis on sensory immediacy, on physical participation (the viewer must walk into and around the work) (2005: 11)

The opposite of sensory immediacy is being asleep. If one is awake one's senses are immediate. There is no less immediacy looking at a painting than there is looking at the various features of an installation. The crucial point in Bishop's definition of installation is that it concerns works of art that one can walk into. But the argument proposed in this book is that this act of 'walking into the picture', as it were, does not necessarily lead to greater immersion. In most instances the theatricality and/or informational nature of the installation ensure that there is more distance than immersion even when we 'walk in'. In the majority of cases we are looking at objects arranged in a room. Using an aesthetic thought experiment one could imagine creating an installation by using one's authority as an artist to declare that a gallery filled with paintings was a readymade work of art. Which is to say the viewer should no longer look at the paintings on the wall as separate entities but imagine them as created by the one artist as an integrated whole. This scenario is not radically different from most experiences of installation art, even the contingent nature of the interrelatedness of the objects fits the deconstructive agenda informing installationism. What is most instructive about this scenario is that it points to the fact that what is most important about the model of installation art as 'the picture that one can walk into' is the expansion of narrative possibility. One of the key arguments in this book is that this expansion of the narrative dimension is one of the most fundamental contributions of contemporary installation art. And it is a contribution that connects narrative installation art with video art, cinema and media art.

Because the instances of installation art that achieve deep immersion are relatively rare due to the fact that they entail a disruption of the habitual functioning of the museum, we cannot accept Bishop's attempt to use immersion as a defining feature of installation art. Taking a more circumspect approach it can be suggested that the immersive capability of most installation art is not significantly greater than the immersive capacity of any other art form. It can be argued, for example, that the multimedia nature of film with its integration of sound, image and story is actually more immersive than the majority of instances of installation art.

In terms of most visits to art exhibitions in which installation art vies for our attention with its current major competitor video, it is video that wins in terms of immersive potency.

In rare instances, however, we encounter fine art installations that provide what might be termed deep immersion. Such installations typically require an extremely well thought out and executed *mise en scène*. And by using that cinematic term I bring the discussion back to the leitmotif of narrative cinema. The key instances cited in this chapter are Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, 2003; Ann Veronica Janssens' mist installations; Carsten Höller's *Test Site*, 2006; Gregor Schneider's *Die Familie Schneider*, 2004; and John Bock's *Klutterkammer*, 2004. Four out of the five instances require highly elaborate theatrical-like constructions that help explain the rarity of such super-installations. Four out of the five instances have an obvious narrative dimension that links them to cinema. We might refer, therefore, to deep immersive installation as 'films that one can walk into'. The narrative dimension becomes even more evident in the virtual reality immersion possible in media art. Two such installations will be dealt with in this chapter, Char Davies' *Osmose*, 1995, and Maurice Benayoun's *World Skin*, 1997. The crucial difference between computer generated virtual environments and physical environments is that the virtual environments are inherently informational, which indicates their potential for narrative as well as corporeal involvement. This is especially evident in the case of *World Skin* which combines three-dimensional graphic immersion with a distinctly narrative *mise en scène*.

INSTALLATION AND NARRATIVE IMMERSION

The crux of the theoretical tack taken in this chapter is that even deep immersive installation is prone to an unfavourable comparison with narrative immersion. Deep immersion is fundamentally one of sensation and emotion which can be described as the degree zero of creative engagement on the part of the viewer. One can compare it with Matisse's belief that art should be 'a comforting influence, a mental balm—something like a good armchair in which one rests from physical fatigue.'

(in Chilvers 1996: 331). One can ask, for example, to what extent does riding down Carsten Höller's slides in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, 2006, facilitate creative and critical engagement on the part of the gallery visitor? As noted in the introduction Tate Modern curator Jessica Morgan reports that 'Höller firmly believes that slides should be far more widely used in public life. The idea is that if we all went down a slide on a daily basis it might profoundly change our lives' (in Lovell 2006). I suggested that Morgan's reference to slides 'profoundly changing our lives' is typical of the hyperbole associated with commentary on fine art. One wonders how such statements can be made with a straight face. What is significant about Höller's intervention in Tate Modern lies not in the 'life changing' experience of riding down a slide but the deconstruction of the sanctimonious atmosphere that permeates the art museum. If we had slides in every museum that might radically change the way in which such institutions operate, but Höller's slides remained framed by the art system as a 'work of art' with a title and year *Test Site*, 2006, and they will be taken down to make way for the next show. And with regard to the question of narrative, the interpretation of Höller's slides I have just given is an instance of giving an immersive installation a narrative context, in this case the narrative of deconstructing the sanctity of high culture and bringing art into life. Without a narrative framework such as this the experience, however much fun, becomes less likely to alter the institutional fabric. Höller's intervention is very valuable but it must be understood as being more than simply 'amusing' without getting tied up in absurd claims for its 'profundity'.

And one can mention other instances in which deep immersion and a liberational narrative are intertwined; for example, the work of media artist Eero-Tapio Vuori. Vuori's work goes beyond the confines of gallery-bound installation art by creating performative events that lead viewers out of the museum into the real world in a controlled manner where actors interrelate with the visitor in a manner that mixes fantasy with reality. One of his events involves taking the gallery visitor into a forest and asking them whether they would like to strip naked and take part in what appear

to be pagan rituals. Such actions go several steps beyond the work of more gallery-bound faux-primitives such as Paul McCarthy and John Bock. The message behind Vuori's work is that there is more to life than a mortgage and a nine-to-five job. There is no sense in which his work can be reduced to Matisse's bourgeois notion of art as relaxation. It is also the case that Vuori's work has an open-textured nonlinear narrative structure; and I should emphasise that when I refer to 'narrative' in this text I am always considering it as a continuum that includes linear and nonlinear narrative.

At the linear pole of the narrative continuum lies work that is conventional, rule governed, and designed for 'easy' or 'passive' consumption. At the nonlinear pole lies the transgressive and/or playful narrative that is oriented towards active reception. And with regard to active reception we can also cite Bertolt Brecht's famous attack on the passivity of narrative immersion and his introduction of the distancing effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*).

The importance of the nonlinear pole of the narrative continuum is that it allows the artist-author to play with conventions in such a manner that the viewer-reader becomes critically and creatively engaged. James H. McTeague notes that Brecht believed that 'total absorption in the character robbed the actor and audience of the necessary objectivity to see the role from more than one point of view' (1994: 26). Similarly total sensory immersion might have an effect akin to the 'retinal art' that Duchamp dismissed in favour of an art of ideas.

It has already been noted that Dada and Surrealism are not only a crucial component of the genealogy of installation art but were also characterised by an intersection of visual art with a literary dimension. The nonlinear narrative strategies of montage and chance pioneered by Dada and Surrealism are so crucial to deconstructive art that it is possible to argue that installation art that engages in pure sensation without a nonlinear narrative dimension is not deconstructive; it becomes, instead, akin to 'retinal' art. Sensory immersion softens the critical faculties leading to what De Oliveira et al. refer to in their recent book on installation art as 'the empire of the senses' (1993).¹ This is the kind of anodyne art that late

capitalism could wholeheartedly embrace. It is an art that does nothing to encourage critical reflection on behalf of the viewer.

As was noted earlier, narrative immersion has the advantage that it not only embraces a play with form and sensation, but also a play with content. And it is possible for the viewer to become immersively involved in the narrative play, yet retain the capacity for critical distance. In the case of watching narrative film the informed viewer can become deeply immersed in the narrative yet be able to instantly switch to a more critical mode of viewing that might note the use of camera movements, point of view, and ideological messages etc. The ability to seamlessly switch from imaginative immersion to rational analysis is a remarkable cognitive feat comparable with F. Scott Fitzgerald's assertion that the 'test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function' (Fitzgerald 1945). But contemporary research in cognitive psychology is supporting Freud's contention that the border between reason and imagination is thinner than we might think (Phillips 2006)

Video, like film, is an excellent narrative vehicle; even when the sequence is nonlinear and the screens are flat on a wall they attract and retain not only sensuous but also cognitive attention. When screens are deployed in a sculptural manner (e.g. Jana Sterbak *From Here to There*, 2003) the immersive effect is intensified especially if deployed in such a way that the viewer can 'walk into the picture' (e.g. Ergin Cavusoglu, Michal Rovner, Jane and Louise Wilson, Athanasia Kyriakakos and Dimitris Rotsios)² then video becomes exceedingly immersive. But the most powerful immersive technology is evident in the sphere of digital art where the viewer can become involved via input devices and/or become immersed in three-dimensional virtual reality.

NARRATIVE IMMERSION VERSUS VIRTUAL REALITY

What is perhaps surprising is that digital art is almost completely absent from the fine art mindset. Amazingly, there are no references to new media art in the current literature on installation art despite the fact that issues of

immersion and interaction with the viewer are as relevant to new media art as they are to installation art. One can recall, however, that it took two decades for video to enter centre stage in the world of art; and over a century in the case of photography.

It is also the case that if we turn our attention towards new media art we gain valuable insight into the history of immersive technologies. Visual immersion begins with the invention of perspective and Maurice Owen argues that Roman wall painting is the first instance of what we might refer to as ‘virtual reality (2007). The wall-dissolving power of Renaissance fresco painting is well known, and one can easily refer to this as a modern technology due to its basis in geometry. And there are other technologies that we should be familiar with; for example, in a recent study that attempts to locate virtual reality in an historical context Oliver Grau (2003) has provided some valuable insights relevant to the topic of installation art. One of the most pertinent historical precedents Grau cites is the invention of the panorama. Grau reports that on 17 June 1787 ‘Robert Barker patented a process under the name of “la nature à coup d’oeil”, by which he meant a panoramic view could be depicted on a completely circular canvas in correct perspective. ... when viewed from a central platform at a certain elevation ... The application of this invention became known a few years later under the neologism “panorama” (Grau 2003: 56). Grau notes that the importance of the invention of the panorama what that it ‘installs the observer *in* the picture’ (Grau 2003: 57).

Sir Joshua Reynolds, President of the Royal Academy judged the invention ‘capable of producing effects and representing nature in a manner far superior to the limited scale of pictures in general’ (Grau 2003: 57). But, significantly, its impact on fine art was negligible. Instead, it became a device for public spectacle when, on 14 May 1793, Barker opened a purpose-built rotunda to display his panoramas in Leicester Square, London.³

In spite of the fact that being *in* the picture is an involving perceptual-phenomenological experience, the wonder of such immersive effects is easily displaced by alternatives that offer not simply perceptual but also

narrative (cognitive) involvement. The advent of cinema eclipsed and annihilated the fashion for panorama when it was introduced at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Grau reports that ‘for a short time, the panorama united with the new technology of cinematography in the *Cinéorama*. First presented at the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris’ (Grau 2003: 147).⁴ But what is most interesting about this phenomenon is the phrase ‘for a short time’. The significance here is that ultimately people became more immersed in narrative content than in purely sensory-perceptual experiences. *Cinéorama* was resurrected in the 1960s in the form of Cinerama, but there were no more than a hundred dedicated Cinerama theatres world-wide. The contemporary popular immersive spectacle is the IMAX cinema.

The common feature of panorama, Cinerama and IMAX lies in the fact that they stress sensory immersion over and above narrative immersion and this is their weakness because people appear to prefer narrative immersion. It is noteworthy for example that IMAX has begun to digitally remaster Hollywood narrative films in order to bolster its audiences. Our preference for narrative immersion makes sense if we accept that one crucial difference between humans and other animals lies in our ability to create imaginary worlds. The philosopher of consciousness Daniel Dennett notes that, from an evolutionary perspective, the capacity to create imaginary worlds enables human beings to test out ideas and actions before trying them out in the real world in potentially dangerous situations (Dennett 1996).

ROLAND BARTHES’ ‘READERLY’ AND ‘WRITERLY’ TEXTS

Narrative immersion, however, can also be shallow, or even insidious due to the fact that it can transmit questionable ideological messages to a mass public. Herein lies the basis for the distrust of linear narrative on the part of avant-gardist art theory. One can see this distrust clearly in Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1973 orig. 1957) and in his distinction between the ‘readerly’ and the ‘writerly’ text in *S/Z* (1974). But there is no longer a clear dichotomy between the readerly and writerly text. The proliferation of

film theory, cultural studies and media studies in the education sector since the late 1970s has led to a growing sophistication in the way in which many people view conventional mass media narrative to the point where even pulp fiction can be transmuted into a complex text via a creative reading. The implosion the neat ethico-aesthetic dichotomy between linear and nonlinear narrative is especially evident in art in the work of Cindy Sherman and the video installations of Candice Breitz. Which is to say, whether one is confronted with a linear or a nonlinear narrative there is ample potential for a creative engagement and critical reflexivity.

One of the fundamentals of a critical approach to narrative is bearing in mind its fictive and constructed character. One of the pioneering methods for revealing the constructed nature of narrative was Brecht's distancing effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) which snaps the spectator out of the comfort zone of passive immersion into the realisation that what they have been immersed in is a construction. *Verfremdungseffekt* is, accordingly, a deconstructive device.

One technique, or 'effect', was to break the narrative action so that the actor could address the audience directly. The thinking behind the *Verfremdungseffekt* is to enhance people's consciousness not only of the constructed nature of the narrative they are watching but also to suggest that it is possible to become passively immersed in one's everyday world. Brecht's aim was to encourage a more active consciousness that would resist such passive immersion. And it is interesting to note a resonance between the Brechtian position and Bishop's description of the impact of the theatrical medium of installation art when she observes:

Many artists and critics have argued that this need to move around and through the work in order to experience it *activates the viewer*, in contrast to art that simply requires optical contemplation (which is considered to be passive and detached). This activation is, moreover, regarded as emancipatory, since it is analogous to the viewer's engagement in the world. A transitive relationship comes to be implied between 'activated spectatorship' and active engagement in the social-political arena. (Bishop 2005: 11)

But if we examine her reflections more closely we see that they actually *contradict* the Brechtian position. Bishop claims that ‘moving through the work’, which implies immersion, activates the viewer and that this can translate into a more active role in social reality. What she leaves out is the crucial element of distance. She is claiming that *immersion* activates while Brecht argues that immersion deactivates. Moreover, we can add Barthes’ thoughts on the topic, because like Brecht, Barthes argues that immersion leads to passivity whereas being confronted with a more challenging text leads to an activation of the reader. At this point in the discussion I would suggest that from an ethico-aesthetic point of view there is not a great deal of difference between immersion in a theatrical *mise en scène* created by an installation artist and immersion in a literary, cinematic or videographic narrative. Both modes of immersion are prone to the Brechtian-Barthesian critique.

One of the problems in Bishop’s formulation is that it takes for granted that just because we can walk into the work of art it is no longer simply a work of art but something akin to social reality. Bishop effectively presumes that installation art has achieved the goal of bringing art into everyday life which I am arguing is simply not the case. Instead what we have are varieties of theatrical *construction*. So long as the viewer remains aware that she or he is viewing a construction then a creative and critically reflective engagement is possible. But if the immersion is so total that the viewer loses critical distance then the effect is regressive. There may be an experience of *jouissance* but the degree to which this is emancipatory is debateable. Oliver Grau tackles this problem when he notes that in immersive environments:

a ...core element of art comes under threat: the observer’s act of distancing that is a prerequisite for any critical reflection. Aesthetic distance always comprises the possibility of attaining an overall view, of understanding organization, structure and function, and achieving critical appraisal. This includes searching for hypotheses, identifications, recollections, and associations. Notwithstanding the longing for ‘transcending boundaries’ and ‘abandoning the self’, the

human subject is constituted by the act of distancing; this is an integral part of the civilizing process. As [Theodor] Adorno expressed it: 'distance is the primary condition for getting close to the content of a work' (Grau 2003: 202)

This is an important and substantial observation when considering the immersive experience because it alerts us to the possibility that the more immersive the experience becomes the more likely it will diminish our critical faculties. One can cite the pioneering installation artist Hélio Oiticica's use of cocaine as a metaphor for such a diminution in *Block-Experiments in Cosmococa*, 1973. Drugs can offer a consciousness-expanding technology but there is also the considerable danger that the immersive experience they offer becomes an end in itself. Ultimately, critical-creative consciousness is the most valuable 'technology'.

With regard to the sensual dimensions of immersion it is significant that in the course of his comments on critical distance Grau quotes Hartmut Boehme's almost Biblical assertion that: 'All happiness is immersion in flesh and cancels the history of the subject. All consciousness is emancipation from flesh to which nature subjects us' (in Grau 2003: 203).⁵ Boehme's Cartesian mind-body dualism is open to considerable theoretical criticism but it retains some heuristic value, pointing to the putative dichotomy between the embodied and disembodied gaze implicit in Bishop's analysis of the immersive potential of installation art. This issue will be dealt with in more detail below, but first I would like to examine the work of Olafur Eliasson, an installation artist who comes closest to the enduring desire to place the viewer *in* the picture in a manner akin to the panorama. One of the key features of Eliasson's works is that they make the viewer aware of the synthetic nature of the environment in which they are placed, which is very different from Bishop's claims for the realism of immersive installation. Moreover, the fact that one realises one is in a constructed environment leads to a more reflective aesthetic experience.

CULTURE NOT NATURE—OLAFUR ELIASSON

At face value Eliasson's installations can seem to be an attempt to appear *natural* rather than cultural, the very embodiment of the search for the romantic ideal of the 'innocent eye' {Ruskin, 1857 #1256}. For example, Eliasson's *Your natural denudation inverted*, winter 1999-2000, was an installation in the courtyard of the Carnegie Museum, Pittsburgh, that used steam as a medium for a representational sculpture that refers to the natural phenomenon of steam rising out of the ground in Eliasson's ancestral homeland, Iceland. As the warm steam escaped onto the icy courtyard in the Pittsburgh winter it left a layer of ice on the tree's branches, a live real-time event. One would be forgiven for seeing this work as an evocation of 'natural' direct presence over and above mere 'cultural' *re*-presentation.

This installation, however, is most certainly cultural rather than natural. The steam was piped from the museum's heating system. What appeared to be naked reality ('natural denudation') was indeed 'inverted'. It was a mechanical apparatus constructed out of the building's heating conduits, scaffolding, a water supply, and mechanically manufactured steam. Significantly Eliasson refers to his installations as 'pictures', and we can suggest that rather than *presenting* nature Eliasson constructs a *re*-presentation, a 'picture' that we can walk into. According to that formulation we are not coming closer to innocent experience we are instead ascending the orders of simulacra towards ever more virtual realities.

Hyperreality and Daguerre

Jean Baudrillard has noted that an obsession with simulation appears to be a key feature of modernity-postmodernity; and one can remember that one of the pioneers of the technical vision, Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, inventor of the first practicable mode of photography, was a stage designer and creator of dioramas:

the sets he realised from 1817 to 1822 for shows at the Ambigu Comique or the Opera, brought him unanimous praise from critics and public. He displayed original creativity with his light effects, creating moon-rises or moving suns that remained in people's memory. {Niepce, 2004}

Eliasson's recreations of natural phenomena harbour distant echoes of Daguerre's dioramas and Barker's panoramas. One might also mention the enduring and apparently insatiable modern fascination for technological spectacle and simulation to the point where prosthetic perception seems valued more than direct perception. Indeed that is probably the entire point of what Eliasson means when he speaks about his work in terms of 'pictures'. The *raison d'être* of art seems to be based on our enduring preference for representation over reality.⁶

Reinforcing his insistence on the artificiality of his creations, Eliasson has asserted that 'nature is a product of civilisation', and that Iceland's lonely landscape 'has already been reproduced' {O.K.v.G 2004}. It most certainly is the case that the way we look at things is culturally mediated. We can consider Michel Foucault's claim that body, mind and imagination are 'inscribed' by constantly evolving regimes and disciplines of social power.⁷ The extreme Foucauldian position is that what we call being human is almost entirely a socio-cultural construction and Eliasson seems to agree when he notes:

I believe that nothing is there before our birth, before our 'cultivation' or cultural education. I strongly believe in cultural influence, that there's only one cultural history. ... Our consciousness is the result of historical experience handed down to us through others.' {Morais et al. 2002}

If we accept Eliasson's point of view then consciousness seems victorious. There is almost a ring of rationalist humanism to Eliasson's words. Is he suggesting that human beings are actually in control? Are we returning to the self-confident utopian modernism of the machine age?

When we read Eliasson's words, however, we must remember that here is a purveyor of illusion who is probably well aware of the accusation that his work is purely 'retinal', sensory, or spectacular. In his statements he

appears to be attempting to distance himself from the body, trying to position himself favourably with respect to a provision of critical reflection. But in a highly immersive installation such as *The Weather Project* at Tate Modern, 2003, visitors experienced a sense of play and *jouissance* that seems more akin to the body than to the intellect.

But this experience of *jouissance* was one of several facets of this work. One can also point to the fact that, Eliasson's *The Weather Project* totally overcame the panoptic surveillance of the museum. It opened up a zone in which people had *freedom* to enjoy what was essentially a public art environment. If *freedom* is the ethical core of modern democratic society then we should extend it not only to the artist—which is the current attitude of the museum with regard to most installation art—but also to the *viewer*. What is significant about this observation is that what is essentially an *ethical* proposition intersects with what would otherwise merely be an experience of the senses. It is this intersection that makes *The Weather Project* an outstanding work of immersive installation art.

DISSOLUTION

At this point I would like to return to Harmut Boehme's statement: 'All happiness is immersion in flesh and cancels the history of the subject. All consciousness is emancipation from flesh to which nature subjects us' quoted by Grau in the course of his discussion of critical distance (Grau 2003: 203). What is fascinating about Boehme's statement is the fear of the body that is wrapped up tight inside it. Here is someone who has evidently experienced the full force of the *other* of the rational self, and has retreated back to reason for consolation. One might say that the body has a mind of its own which can utterly befuddle and even disintegrate the ego. Freud described this situation in terms of a divided self and, more recently, in *Kinds of Minds* the philosopher Daniel Dennett argues that the evolution of consciousness has left human beings in several minds, the most prominent being the rational mind and an *other* which might be referred to as the mind of the body or, after Francisco Varela (1991) the 'embodied mind'.

And in order to illustrate this ‘other’ of the rational mind Dennett quotes, not Freud, but Friedrich Nietzsche:

‘Body am I, and soul’—thus speaks the child. And why should one not speak like children? But the awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body. The body is a great reason, a plurality with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a shepherd. An instrument of your body is also your little reason, my brother, which you call ‘spirit’—a little instrument and toy of your great reason ... Behind your thoughts and feelings, my brother, there stands a mighty ruler, an unknown sage-whose name is self. In your body he dwells; he is your body. There is more reason in your body than in your best wisdom. (in Dennett 1996: 78–79)⁸

It is evident that the Nietzschean standpoint does not accord with the Freudian position that the rational mind is superior to the body, indeed Nietzsche reverses this polarity; and one can detect significant Nietzschean, as well as Freudian, features in the aesthetic philosophy of Surrealism. Freud referred to the mind of the body disparagingly as *das Es*, ‘the it’: Id. Nietzsche’s more positive approach may be closer to the truth than Freud and Gilles Deleuze puts forward a compelling case for Nietzsche’s position in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1983).

But all this talk of the body-mind and its remarkable power for empathy to the point of ego dissolution is only to make the point that such forces are not going to be released in an art gallery. We keep our distance when we enter the gallery and when a work offers us interaction it had better be good because we generally don’t want to cross that line, even if it is not actually taped onto the floor we expect it to be there. Like Pavlov’s dog the regular gallery visitor has been totally conditioned by the gallery’s panoptic regime. It takes a work like *The Weather Project* to make us realise what the art gallery/museum might be like if it could overcome its fear of the visitor, and vice versa.

The next example of immersive installation art I will examine will benefit from an exploration of the body/mind problem via the thought of Jacques Lacan whose version of psychoanalytic theory was influential on feminist theorising of the body that came to the fore in discussions of art in the

English-speaking world in the 1980s. Freud characterised the baby as being in a condition of polymorphous perversity in which the whole body was an erogenous landscape. Lacan has a similar notion wherein the very young child knows little distinction between the inside and the outside, the body and its environment. This would be a highly immersive, emotionally charged condition due to the fact that feelings are intensified by the lack of distinction between self and other. As Judith Feher-Guerwich notes the months old child 'still feels undifferentiated from its surroundings' (1999: 23).

Something must happen to make the child aware of its separation from the world around it and enable it to be conditioned by social rules and regulations. Freud used the metaphor of socialisation as 'castration' in the Oedipus Complex. Castration is an appropriate analogy as it suggests that when we become split off from the mind of the body a chasm opens up in our being that makes us all the more socially dependent and therefore malleable. We constantly search for that lost primal sense of bodily being via relationships with others (who are, unfortunately, similarly split) but inevitably in vain. Freud's castration metaphor, however, is marred by its gender bias. The Lacanian mythology of the origin of the social self has the advantage of being less gender specific. Instead of castration Lacan uses the metaphor of the 'mirror stage', which is useful here because it can serve as a figure for the imagination.

Briefly, we can understand Lacan's allegory of the 'mirror stage' as a reverse Orphic journey through the mirror away from the corporeal, polymorphously perverse, illusion-generating universe of the underworld that is the unconscious mind into the light of social reality and egohood. According to Lacan's mythic narrative the very young child sees its body as a coherent whole for the first time in a mirror,⁹ and in the moment of self-recognition enters into what Lacan calls, rather grandly, the 'Symbolic Order'. There are three 'orders' in the Lacanian scheme,¹⁰ the Symbolic, Imaginary and the Real. The mirror can be understood as figuring the Imaginary, and the Real refers to what might, metaphorically, lie behind the mirror: which is to say, a repressed mind of the body.¹¹ In Lacanian

terms the mirror, the zone of the Imaginary, is the interface between the two worlds: social consciousness, on the one hand; the 'Real' is that which is not subject to the Symbolic Order, something akin to the Freudian Id or the Jungian 'shadow'.

Very little of Lacan's speculations are based on scientific evidence, and his theory is akin to a mythic narrative. But it has proven effective as an aesthetic model possibly because Lacanian theory is more a work of art than a work of science. Nevertheless, some scientific support for Lacan's mirror stage came to light in the 1990s with the discovery of mirror neurones, and we will deal with that in chapter three.

For Lacan the importance of seeing oneself in the mirror, or photograph, lies in the fact that one sees oneself as others see one, and as one sees others. In effect one becomes constructed in terms of the external gaze of others. One begins to accept an artificially integrated, disembodied, externalised image of oneself which supersedes the sensual-corporeal experience of self that allegedly characterises the pre-social condition.

The relevance of Lacanian theory to the topic of immersive installation will become evident in the next work which is even more immersive than Eliasson's *The Weather Project*. The question posed by such work is whether it might be possible for a work of art to take the viewer through the Lacanian mirror? And if it can *should* it?

MISTS OF IMMEDIACY: ANN VERONICA JANSSENS

The art historian and theorist Mieke Bal tells a Carrollian story of when she was in an art gallery in Lisbon looking at works by Peter Paul Rubens and Marcel Broodthaers, she saw a door in the corner of the gallery. Bal opened the door and without looking at the information plaque she walked into a room filled with a thick mist—the door swung shut behind her. Bal's eloquent report of her experience is both evocative and informative:

I found myself totally immersed in a piece ... I was standing in nothingness. Blissful, bright and totally opaque was the space that surrounded me, and that dimmed all sound. No, space is the wrong word, too worldly. The world was on the other side of the door. Where

was I? In a strong literal sense, nowhere. I saw nothing, with my eyes wide open. But whereas the idea of nothing is usually associated with darkness, the dense, impenetrable mist packed into the space whose limits I could not even guess was so bright it seemed made out of kitsch fantasies of heaven. (Ball 1999)

Bal appears to be describing a sense of bliss, but as the sensation of nothingness gradually dispelled and she became able to discern aspects of the room, in the same way that our eye gradually accommodates to darkness, she reports that she experienced a degree of anxiety:

The change in the space consisted of a gradual, partial receding of the absolute opacity of the white that surrounded me and that stuck to my skin, challenging my sense of my own boundaries. Because when this receding took place I became aware of my own dissolution. Thus, the after-effect of the event retrospectively turned the initial experience into an unsettling one, which it had not been until then. (Ball 1999)

Bal's description of her totally unprepared immersion is instructive because it fits in so perfectly to what one would expect from a sensory deprivation experience. Her experience, moreover, can be interpreted from a Lacanian point of view as, at least, *touching* the pre-socialised condition in which the body has no boundary and where the distinction between body and environment is blurred.

And because conscious perception requires a self that perceives, one can compare the dissolution of the boundary between body and environment with the dissolution of the boundary between self and other that can be accompanied by the blissful feelings of 'love'.

Accordingly, it is not surprising that Bal became unsettled when this sense of corporeal oneness began to recede as her brain accommodated to the surroundings and reinstated the separation of body from those surroundings. Indeed one could describe it as an unsettling resurrection of the mirror stage. The feeling was obviously of some weight because Bal refers to it as an 'anxiety "of the heart"'. She quotes Blaise Pascal 'the heart has reasons that reason knows nothing of' (which is reminiscent of Nietzsche's meditations on the body). It is as if Bal had touched some

sweet thing she had lost contact with while dwelling with the rest of us in the cool reality of the Symbolic Order.

Then there is the third stage to Bal's experience which can be described as a return to the Symbolic Order. This occurs when she turns away from her description of the experience to an intellectual exegesis. Bal is renowned for her application of narrative theory to art history and so it is not surprising that her intellectualisation of the experience is based on this framework. She shatters her 'kitsch fantasies of heaven' by introducing the technical term 'retroversion' explaining its use in narratology. She explains that it is a device in which readers are:

given access to a universe of events that run through time in different directions, criss-crossing where time thickens. Retroversion empowers the reader or viewer; it gives access to unknown worlds. It opens up our lives to manifold possibilities that console us in our grief of being bound, hands and feet, by time's tyranny. (Bal 1999)

What she does in this third phase is as interesting as the rest, she brings to bear a fundamental premise of modernity which is the implosion of time and the explosion of points of view. One can trace this perception back to the Cubist shattering of the single viewpoint of Renaissance perspective, to montage, the aesthetics of chance and the efflorescence of 'isms' each of which provides us with yet another, different way of seeing. **Accordingly, our return to the Symbolic Order is not a return to a single 'Order' of the real, a single way of seeing the things we call real, but to multiple orders of socially constructed reality; each one permeated with the deconstructive force of imagination.** Bal reinforces this point later in her essay when she quotes Rosalind Krauss: 'modern sculpture begins where the fixed positions from which we weave fictions of space are abandoned in favor of new, hitherto unknown, positions' (in Bal 1999).

Bal's eloquent and evocative account of her surprise encounter with Janssens' mist installation is instructive because it suggests that it might be possible on occasion to at least brush up against the mirror if not actually step through it.

Ultimately, however, when we step into a mist installation we are stepping into an illusion. Bishop would not agree because she argues that ‘instead of *representing* texture, space, light and so on, installation art presents these elements *directly* for us *to experience*. This introduces an emphasis on *sensory immediacy*’ (Bishop 2005: 11). Well yes that is *almost* the case, but we have to remember that what we are witnessing is a construct, a mode of theatre. Only then can we step back and comment on it in a manner that is significantly different from the way in which we might comment upon an experience of being immersed in a thick mist while on a walk in the Scottish Highlands. Bal’s *reflections* on her experience are as important as the experience.

If the mist installation Bal entered was not a construct housed in an art gallery Bal would not be writing about it because it would not be art. It is also the case that if such works were about the experience alone then they would be pure spectacle. But this is not the case, Janssens’ mist installations arose out of her work as a conceptual sculptor and as such, like Eliasson, her work is primarily about *reflection* upon sensation, not an ego-dissolving, submissive immersion in sensation. We are firmly in the realm of the mirror even in the depths of Janssens’ mist. ‘The Imaginary’, or to use an older term, imagination, remains the heart of the aesthetic experience. And in this text the term imagination is used most often in the sense coined by David Hume who gave it a cognitive role as the mental faculty responsible for the synthesis of simple ideas into more complex configurations. Hume will be dealt with in more detail in chapter three ‘Recombination’.

Janssens’ mist installation is less a sensory deprivation experiment designed to dissolve the ego boundary than it is a chance to reflect, as does Bal, upon that boundary. Like Eliasson’s *The Weather Project* Janssens preserves a balance between the bliss-like effect of sensory immersion and the reflective distance that accompanies serious art.

There are installation artists, however, such as John Bock and Paul McCarthy who appear to subscribe to a more hard-core Dionysian dissolution into corporeal consciousness. Before examining their work I

would like to return once more to Hartmut Boehme's antique aphorism 'All happiness is immersion in flesh and cancels the history of the subject. All consciousness is emancipation from flesh to which nature subjects us' (in Grau 2003: 203). Boehme has a point because a Dionysian voyage into the mind of the body can be a voyage not only away from reason but also away from society. In its extreme form it is an excursion into a condition Western culture labels 'madness'. In smaller tribal societies people who develop an unusual empathy with the elusive and potent Nietzschean self (or *Other*) of the body might be considered shamans but in our massified, materialistic, pragmatic-rational, and statistically averaged culture this is not the case. We may enjoy madness in artistic representations but not in real life. The reason why madness can be released in the art gallery/museum is because a regime of distance is imposed upon it. Part of that distancing is due to the museum's capacity as protector of the precious art object; but there is another reason. Since the days of Expressionism and Surrealism the art gallery has also become a socially condoned zone for the properly managed display of the *Other*.

An excessive, Dionysian mode of expression is quite acceptable in our capitalist democracies but only within the confines of the socially segregated, institutionalised world of fine art. And the fact that artists can receive considerable approbation and, for the principal players, financial reward for delivering such cathartic manifestations to a predominantly middle class art loving public means that they are quite happy to be so contained, roped off and subjected to serious, distanced scrutiny rather than taking their 'liberation of desire' into everyday life.

REGRESSION: JOHN BOCK'S *KLUTTERKAMMER*

The German artist—his nationality is relevant due to references to expressionism—John Bock's installations are a self-conscious theatre of the Id. And although his immersive installations appear to be about the body and materiality they are also quite hyperreal. Lacanian theory seems too heavy, too serious as a framework for understanding this artist. The problem is that we are *not* dealing with authenticity when we examine the

work of Bock. There is no question of a traditional German Expressionist romantic exploration of the soul. Instead Bock adopts the *persona* of the mad artist in the manner of an actor. He appropriates that persona and parades it in a carnivalesque manner but strictly within the confines of the art institution where the parody can be understood and enjoyed by the cognoscenti. But if we think on what Bock is doing, he is actually parading the absurdity and failure of the aesthetic politics of the 'liberation of desire'.

Surrealist artists practiced 'the liberation of desire' approach only to become another 'ism'. One might also cite the resurgence of belief that *jouissance* can change the world during the days of the drug-fueled 'flower power' movement of late 1960s and early 1970s which argued for social change via tuning in, turning on and dropping out. Most of its adherents dropped back in soon after. The main instance of social transformation that can be pointed to is the women's movement which achieved its goals via communication and organisation within the sphere of middle class consciousness. One can also cite the gay and lesbian movements which embraced the concept of the liberation of desire but not to the extent of forgetting to organise. In other words any ethical philosophy that advocates an abolition of reason as a means of changing society is fundamentally romantic and anachronistic.

What we witness in Bock's work is an essentially comic, theatrical deconstruction of the deadly serious notions of the unconscious mind, the Lacanian 'Real' and the Nietzschean *other* of reason and the romantic stereotype of the artist as madman.

With regard to immersion, however, Bock's *Klutterkammer* (a conflation of *Kultur*, clutter, and *Wunderkammer*) installation at the ICA, London, 2004, is of interest here because it was a highly immersive installation. Bock effectively built a labyrinthine gallery within the gallery which had the effect of releasing the visitor from the panoptic regime of the museum. The gallery guards tried their best to keep an eye on the visitors but Bock's structure made this extremely difficult due to its labyrinthine complexity. Like Eliasson's *The Weather Report* this deconstruction of the panoptic

regime of the museum actually becomes, in retrospect, more significant than the regressive *jouissance* we experience via the immersive experience.

Bock's galley within a gallery was made out of 'poor' materials (almost obligatory in sculpture at the turn of the millennium): chip board, polythene, scaffolding, plywood, cling wrap, rough-hewn wood, plywood, and cinder bricks. The result looked like a stage set for a remake of *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, 1920, a classic of German Expressionist cinema.

Klutterkammer possessed a peculiarly attractive infantile and demented quality. One could enter the installation through plywood tunnels but the less agile were accommodated via two doors. The tunnels presented the viewer with more of a challenge and an adventure. Inside the tunnels there were Annette Messenger-like or Mike Kelley-like stuffed creatures hanging from the roof and apparently meaningless videos.

The viewer was thoroughly immersed. When one crawled in these tunnels and climbed the ladders one noted not only their Arte Povera credentials but also the fact that they were sturdily constructed. However mad the architecture might have appeared it was actually structurally sound. Such observations flagged the fact that all the Bockian demented infantilism one was immersed in was actually a carefully constructed *mise en scène*.

And within this labyrinthine fun house were peppered Bock's videos and photography and sculptural constructions. Outstanding works were a giant stuffed toy-like insect, a dancing potato (remiscent of Fischli and Weiss) and a grunge-aesthetic mobile framed by a cling wrap anti-geo dome. There were also some apparently angst-like works (such as a photograph of a Rudolf Schwarzkogler-like bandaged up body) but they seemed somehow sweet in this environment. The individual 'works of art' on display complete with unobtrusive, no-frills, typed labels seemed like simulacra and subterfuge because the real work of art was most certainly his aggressive interrogation of the institutional spaces in which installation art is ineluctably encompassed.

From the point of view of immersion what seems most evident from *Klutterkammer* is that it is more fun being in Bock's gallery-within-the-gallery than being in the gallery.

As with all installation art, however, the crucial point of *Klutterkammer* is that Bock's highly deliberate silly craziness is utterly dependent upon its framing by the academy of deconstructive art. A respected art museum such as the ICA effectively bestows the condition of 'High Art' onto Bock's playground. Perhaps, then, Bock's most crucial achievement is to have gained superstar status within the contemporary installation art phenomenon. It is really quite curious to consider the fact that since the dominance of the anti-art discourse of deconstructive art artists are unthinkingly rewarded for making fun of art. By becoming an art clown, by making fun of the seriousness of his German Expressionist forebears, Bock is applauded and rewarded by an fine art system wherein anti-art has become, in effect, an academic style; a convention that is accepted without question. The fact that this is entirely contrary to the theory of deconstruction appears to be of slight concern.

The regressive-immersive qualities of Bock's environments are less important than the fact that the deconstructive art establishment is willing to frame Bock's calculated nuttiness as art. Despite the fact that we are given the illusion of immersive freedom within Bock's apparatus we, like him, are ultimately indebted to an institutional fabric, what Foucault would call a regime or discursive formation, for allowing us to have such gigantic Wendy House experiences.

And of course we can drag onto the stage of *Klutterkammer* the panoply of art historical justification. We can discover echoes of early twentieth century German Expressionism: the reverence for child art and the art of the insane evident in *Der Blaue Reiter* and *Die Brücke*. This connection seems relevant as Bock is a German artist and expressionism was one of Germany's major contributions modern art. But Bock's work is expressionism in the age of mass media, popular culture and consumerism.

This is less Expressionism in the sense of bearing the soul than it is pure play, sculpture as theatre, but the key question is whether this play is a privilege reserved exclusively for the artist-genius or whether there is an 'emancipatory' dimension. Certainly Bock invites us into a regressive experience and if we put the hyperreality argument aside for a moment then even a momentary regression in a fundamentally pragmatic world might be of some therapeutic value. But what really matters is what happens when we leave. Play is a serious business when it challenges the Protestant work ethic. But *Klutterkammer* does not do this, it does invites the viewer into *the artist's* world of licensed excess but it does not encourage the viewer to take the virus of play out into the external world. Even when the museum is overtaken and its panoptic regime seriously compromised, it remains in control. It is, as ever, a hermetically sealed container for the virus of play.

Ultimately, the bureaucratic apparatus of the museum is the representative of the Symbolic Order, the administered world, the Protestant work ethic, Freud's 'reality principle' etc. Accordingly, we do not receive the message that we should take play out into the streets. Instead we leave it, like Bock, safely inside the museum.

VISIONS OF EXCESS: JASON RHOADES

If Bock transposes the manic self-expression of Expressionism into a simulacral, hyperreality then Jason Rhoades does something similar with the American Dream. But whereas Bock takes something putatively 'authentic' and transforms it into simulacral theatrics, Rhoades hyperrealises the already hyperreal. Rhoades' immersive installations are a theatre of dementia and dissolution; and like Bock, Rhoades' *mises en scène* take over an entire gallery space thereby becoming thoroughly immersive. *The Black Pussy ... and the Pagan Idol Workshop* is such an installation constructed in London at Hauser and Wirth in 2005. At the sensory, immersive level *The Black Pussy ... and the Pagan Idol Workshop* treats us to an experience not unlike the regression to childhood evident in Bock's *Klutterkammer*. In *Black Pussy* we find an adult psyche

metaphorically hurled through the Lacanian mirror into the polymorphous perversity of the American Dream.

A very large room is piled high with mountains of kitsch stacked on chrome-plated modular shop shelving. Adrian Searle provides us with part of the itinerary: 427 slang terms for the vagina in neon (e.g. Virginia, Pouter, Fun Hatch, Baby Hole), 180 *beaver*-felt cowboy hats, 'sculpted into forms that vaguely resemble penis-heads and vulva shapes', 556 Native American Dream Catchers, 799 ceramic donkeys, 232 small brass Egyptian pyramids, 146 pipe cleaners, 'a few right-handed Koons bunnies' (Searle 2005), and the list of bric-à-brac goes on. There are car tyres chrome-plated hub caps, miles of electrical cables feeding the neon signs and there is a disco soundtrack playing constantly. It is a confusing but generally 'fun' environment.

The viewer walks amongst the towers of this stuff and the effect, as in Bock's *Klutterkammer*, is like being a child again. Somehow all these baubles become delightful and elating and it is precisely at this point that one becomes suspicious of this work. It apparently has no meaning.

Reading Searle we find that *The Black Pussy ... and the Pagan Idol Workshop* was inspired by Islam. The 'pagan idol workshop' stems from the idols that were once housed in the Ka'bah in Mecca, before Muhammad banished them. Searle also reports that Rhoades was influenced by Moustapha Akkad's film *The Message*, 1976, starring Anthony Quinn, about the life of Muhammad and Reza Aslan's book *No God But God*, which Searle notes is 'a fascinating history and analysis of Islam ... Aslan's engaging and informative work does much to counter the wilful ignorance and bigotry perpetrated about Islam, especially by rightwing commentators and bellicose evangelists in the US' (Searle 2005). We begin to think that perhaps there is some meaning to *Black Pussy* after all. Searle also informs us that *Black Pussy* is the third in a triptych of exhibitions the other two including:

Meccatuna for a gallery in New York; and *My Medinah, In Pursuit of My Ermitage ...* in St Gallen, Switzerland. All three allude, in more or less

obtuse ways, to Muslim culture. For *Meccatuna*, Rhoades wanted to take a live bluefin tuna to the holy city of Mecca, and have it circumnavigate the Ka'bah. This proving impossible—as well as dreadfully unwise, not least for the sake of the fish—someone was dispatched from Saudi Arabia to Mecca, where he bought a case of tinned tuna, which was dispatched to New York, the cans being displayed in an installation whose centrepiece was a one-third-scale model of the Ka'bah built from 1,000,000 pieces of Lego. (Searle 2005)

In the context of the 'war on terror' it is just as well that fine art is socially esoteric, otherwise *Meccatuna* may have inspired an Islamic outcry. An American artist making reference to Islam during the current war on terror is obviously significant. But the reference in *Black Pussy* is muted. Amongst all the bric-a-brac the only thing that would alert us would be the hookahs which are drowned in all the other stuff. Then we can contemplate why Rhoades would even think of a tuna swimming round the Ka'bah. Presumably it would be going around anti-clockwise with the pilgrims. What we find here is Islam confronted by the surreal.

Modern Western art is with very few exceptions without God, and in place of God Surrealism puts forward the Freudian unconscious epitomised by the sex drive. *Black Pussy* begins to make sense. The number of Muslims who believe in God vastly outnumber Christians or Jews. Belief in God in the West has been on a rapid decline since the *coup de grâce* that was the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859. There is obviously a clash of cultures here that came to something of a head on 11 September 2001 when the Twin Towers—which could be described as a cathedral to capitalism—were destroyed by Islamic Jihadists. Rhoades appears to be pointing to that clash with his Dionysian evocation of sex, drugs (the hookahs are also accompanied with bongos) and disco music. Ours is the culture of degeneracy. We know this because Rhoades, like Paul McCarthy (who will be examined below), consistently portrays American culture in terms of a Dionysian carnival.

What we discover from this brief encounter with the work of Jason Rhoades is that the effect of child-like fun we may experience when immersed in *The Black Pussy ... and the Pagan Idol Workshop*, 2005, is

contradicted by the manic sarcasm of the work. What we are being immersed in is not the pure *presence* which Bishop claims as a key feature of historical installation art but something more contemporary: the pure *illusion* of hyperreality. The fact that when *The Black Pussy ... and the Pagan Idol Workshop* ends the conveniently modular shop shelving systems will be broken down into units to be sold off to collectors and museums around the world for the usual inflated prices only adds to the black comedy.

Like Bock, Rhoades' work is ultimately framed by the art system. The viewer is afforded a pleasant regressive experience that ultimately does very little that might be described as 'emancipatory'. There is really nothing to be shocked about, because the overwhelming register of Rhoades' work is one of nihilistic humour.

ECHOES OF THE 1960S: PAUL MCCARTHY

Bock and Rhoades were born in the same year, 1965, and their work reflects the exuberant hopelessness of art at the turn of the millennium. There is no real attempt to be emancipatory because to think in terms of emancipation in the context of the globalisation of capitalism seems absurd. It is interesting therefore to examine the work of Rhoades' mentor Paul McCarthy, who is twenty years his senior and possessed of a world view that belongs more to the 1960s and 1970s that Bishop refers to in her history of installation art. But due to one of the anomalies of the fine art system McCarthy came into stardom with the newer generation and his work tunes in very well with that of Bock and Rhoades due to its obsession with a theatre of the absurd. But there is evidence that this artist has not totally relinquished a social-critical stance.

Although McCarthy is not primarily an installation artist when he does produce installations they are immersive and most definitely corporeal. The crux of his work is video-performance art which developed out of the experiments in those media in art of the 1970s. A significant number of performance artists of that time were deeply involved in the direct

corporeal expression. One can point to the work of Marina Abramovic, the Viennese Actionism group, Vito Acconci and Mike Parr.

McCarthy's modus operandi is conflation of performance and video art; and the installations he has created fit into the category of the fragmented *mise en scène* consisting in his case of deliberately messy scattering of the props he has used for his performances interspersed with videos of the performances. And one can add that the intersection of sculptural and videographic installation in the work of Bock and McCarthy is usually especially effective from an immersive point of view.

The principal content of McCarthy's performances are scatological and highly corporeal. There are many references to bodily fluids but always via relatively benign and theatrical surrogates: tomato ketchup stands in for blood, mayonnaise for semen, brown sauce for diarrhoea. In *Hot Dog*, 1975, McCarthy smeared himself in such materials, made mud pies with them and proceeded to stuff his mouth to breaking point with hotdogs, gagging himself with a bandage so that they wouldn't fall out. The photographs of that performance are quite remarkable, disgusting, but at the same time because they are photographs there is a sense of distance. And we can note that the substances he uses are not only symbolic of bodily fluids but are also mostly associated with icons of American over-consumption such as hot dogs and hamburgers. Significantly Ralph Rugoff notes that

Even his most extreme performances such as *Sailor's Meat* 1975, a videotape in which McCarthy appears in a blonde female wig, make up and black bikini panties and at one point lies on a bed humping raw hamburger and ketchup, make direct allusions to popular culture, in this case, referencing images from soft-core B-movie stills. (Rugoff 1996: 45)

One can also mention McCarthy's obsession with comic characters evident in his use of masks in his performances such as Alfred E. Newman (*Mad* magazine), Pinocchio, pigs, pirates, and US presidents. Then there is the deconstructive relationship of his videos to the artifice of Hollywood films which is heightened by the fact that he lives and works in Los Angeles. McCarthy's work could be described somewhat glibly as Viennese

Actionism goes to Hollywood; which is to say we have the gore and bodily fluids but without the angst and realism (the macho Viennese Actionists used *real* blood).

In his account of the work of Paul McCarthy Rugoff makes the particularly pertinent observation that a ‘contaminating intrusion of the symbolic into the real, is one of the conceptual poles around which McCarthy’s art spins’ (Rugoff 1996: 49). But McCarthy does not counter that intrusion with reality. Instead he attempts to contaminate the American Dream with his Dionysian theatrics of the subversive body.

Metaphorically McCarthy politely spreads not shit but brown sauce on the mirror of the American Imaginary. The American Empire that arose out of its demonstration of awesome industrial and military power during WWII became as much a colonisation of the imagination as an extension of political influence via covert and overt support for corrupt puppet regimes that supported its interests. McCarthy’s theatre of the Id should, accordingly, be understood not in terms of an expressionist search for contact with the primal energies of the body, but rather as a negative print of a Walt Disney cartoon: something that shows us the underbelly of the American myth-making machine.

Although McCarthy’s emphasis on the body seems to point to an immersive concern for immediate presence, this is contradicted by his use of masks, props and *mises en scène*. In spite of the apparently extreme visceralness of his work there is no sense that the viewer is losing critical distance. McCarthy’s installations are essentially the sets and props for his videos without the actors, and without him. Those bodies are present only in the form of video projections onto the stage sets and props that are scattered around the gallery space his installation inhabits.

McCarthy’s work, then, appears to be concerned with absence in a manner that relates modern/postmodern visuality conceived as a disembodied gaze. Performance art, in contrast, is usually concerned with the *presence* of the performer. Rugoff notes that typically McCarthy carries out his videoed performances with a limited ‘hand picked’ audience. (Rugoff 1996: 49). Rugoff also notes that the audiences often appear in the

videos to be thoroughly stunned. He quotes Barbara Smith ‘They sit dummy-like, dressed up, with almost no expression as they watch an assortment of incredible actions’. (in Rugoff 1996: 50).

McCarthy is keeping his larger audience at a distance for good reason, because the distance afforded by seeing his work in video form facilitates the essential ingredient of comedy. Ultimately this work is dark, anarchic comedy. One could compare it with the sculpture of the Chapman brothers. What McCarthy shows is pure surface: a kind of demented pornographic cartoon. But why on earth would we be repulsed by his work when we have seen much worse on the news and television history programmes that cover modern warfare? We know that what McCarthy is touching on is real—the imperial iron fist behind the velvet glove of consumerism. The genius of his work is to show the underbelly of the real as unreal, as absurd and savage.

What is ultimately significant, however, is that McCarthy’s work seems to be a nonlinear narrative form that carries a social-critical message, whereas the new generation artists Bock and Rhoades seem happier with nonsense. Thought of in terms of the narrative continuum (linear at one pole and nonlinear at the other), McCarthy shifts social critical narrative towards a fragmentation of sense, Rhoades pushes social criticism to the brink of nonsense, and Bock takes us plunging over the edge. It will be interesting to see who retains the most kudos within the fine art system in the coming years.

MISE EN SCÈNE AND NARRATIVE IMMERSION

McCarthy’s emphasis on *mise en scène*, theatrics and video brings this discussion back to the relationship between immersive installation and narrative immersion. Indeed, Bock and Rhoades’ works can also be understood in terms of the narrative continuum, being at the furthest nonlinear pole where narrative dissolves into nonsense. In this subsection I will deal with installations that are less manically concerned with the dissolution of meaning seeming to be closer to a cinematic consciousness.

The installations of Paul Pfeiffer, Mike Nelson and Gregor Schneider that will be dealt with here possess a cinematic as well as a sculptural-installational sensibility and accordingly we can preface an examination of their work with a brief account of narrative immersion with an emphasis upon cinematic media.

One of the classic methods by which the cinematic medium immerses the viewer is via point of view editing. In her essay 'The Formulation of the Classical Style, 1909–1928' Kristin Thomson explains:

most classical narration arises from within the story itself, often by binding our knowledge to shifts in the characters' attention: we notice or concentrate on elements to which the characters' glances direct us. In the construction of contiguous spaces, POV [point of view], the eyeline match, and SRS [shot-reverse-shot] do not work as isolated devices; rather they operate together within the larger systems of logic, time, and space (in Persson 2003: 66; Thompson, 1985: 210)

Commenting on this passage Per Persson notes that point of view editing is:

not only a central part of classical cinema's general striving for *spatial* immersion of the spectator, but also constitutes one of the first steps toward *narrative* immersion. Enabling the spectator to attribute emotions, beliefs, goals, and knowledge to characters is the first step toward the processes of alliance, empathy, and identification, all of which lie at the core of all narrative art forms. (Persson 2003: 66)

Our engagement with the gaze of the camera, which encompasses the actors' gazes, enables spatial and narrative immersion. Accordingly, we can note that such narrative immersion is accompanied by a virtual mode of corporeal immersion. And such virtual embodiment can be compared with Lacanian meditations on the gaze and the mirror stage wherein the our perception of our body becomes socially constructed.

GHOSTS: PAUL PFEIFFER

The next instance of installation art I will treat is Paul Pfeiffer's *Dutch Interior*, 2003, (shown at the MIT List Visual Arts Center) which relates

directly to the immersive capacity of point of view in cinematic narrative. *Dutch Interior* was inspired by the film *The Amityville Horror*, 1979. Pfeiffer was particularly interested by the interplay of two points of view in *The Amityville Horror*, that of the human characters and that of a satanic presence. He was struck by the role played by the staircase in the film which became ‘a central corridor along which a meeting of gazes occurs between the human inhabitants, the family, and this non-human inhabitant, the devil.’ (PBS Pfeiffer 2004). Pfeiffer recalls: ‘there’s many really disturbing scenes where you’re looking down the staircase at the family coming up or looking up the staircase at the priest coming down.’

To create the installation Pfeiffer reconstructed the hall and central stairway of the house working with a professional miniature set designer. The result is a dollhouse-sized diorama which is fitted with a miniature surveillance camera that shows a view from the top of the staircase which in the film is the human viewpoint. The view is projected onto a large wall and as the viewer moves closer to the wall the image becomes pixelated and one can see a hole with light emanating from it. This hole will provide the spectator with a point of view commensurate with the ‘satanic presence’. Pfeiffer explains:

you’re viewing this otherwise ideal suburban house from behind a bush, or peeking around a tree, or peeking in through a window or through some corner in the house that really wouldn’t be the place where a human being would stand. It’s either too low or too high. Or from someplace that would really be uninhabitable to an adult human, maybe a child, but maybe not even that. {PBS 2004}

When the viewer looks through the hole they see the diorama itself which is built into the wall. Pfeiffer explains ‘you find yourself looking through the peephole and looking in the opposite direction from the bottom of the stairs and the entryway of the house, upwards towards the second floor’ which is the point of view being projected onto the wall. *Dutch Interior* strips the immersive narrative from the film and replaces it with the rhetoric of the *mise en abyme*, or hall of mirrors. The title ‘Dutch Interior’

begins to recall the doorways within doorways evident in the paintings of Pieter de Hooch.

We can also ask what is the difference between *Dutch Interior* and *The Amityville Horror*, 1979? The film is a work of popular culture, which must have some outstanding features due to the fact that it was remade in 2005. *Dutch Interior* on the other hand is a serious work of art. This is a significant question because it concerns the relationship between art and everyday life. The aim of the film is to immerse us in a horrific situation.¹² And it is significant that a 3D unofficial sequel *Amityville 3D*, 1983, was released; significant because it indicates that immersion is a crucial feature of this film. But in this case the immersion is into a theatrical simulacrum of a real-life horrific murder that took place on Long Island in 1974.

The fact that the human tragedy of the murder is embellished with tales of satanic possession places the cinematic versions in the domain of fantasy. It is the distancing effect of the fantastic overlay that gives the viewer his or her license to be thrilled by the echoes of a real tragedy. Pfeiffer's *Dutch Interior* is of an entirely different register because he focuses solely on the use of point of view as a device to signify the *other*. One could say he 'Lacanianizes' *The Amityville Horror*. The horror is removed, which is to say the Dionysian aspect of this theatrical spectacle is removed. What we are left with is the disembodied gaze. And what we also realise is that this gaze seems inherently aesthetic when contrasted with the prurient immersion of the gaze associated with watching a film such as *The Amityville Horror*. We then arrive at the rather surprising conclusion that immersion and aesthetic experience may not necessarily coincide. We begin to appreciate the elegance of Adorno's aphorism: 'distance is the primary condition for getting close to the content of a work'.

PRURIENT IMMERSION: GREGOR SCHNEIDER

We should not apply Adorno's aphorism as an absolute, however, but as a rule of thumb capable of flexibility according to the occasion. This is necessary when we come to the immersive installations of Gregor Schneider which can, at one level, have an *The Amityville Horror*-like

effect. Whereas Pfeiffer introduces distance Schneider appears to want to create a narrative immersion so powerful that the viewer will lose the distance that she is used to when watching a film or a theatrical performance. He wants to tip us over the boundary between the imaginary and the real that is implicit in all narrative immersion.

Cinematic immersion is an interface between the imaginary and the real. But for most people it is trivial. When we enter into narrative cinematic immersion, we treat the actors to all intents and purposes as if we were watching real people in real life situations. In spite of this we can shift effortlessly from immersion back to reality. We can also shift from imaginary interpersonal immersion into noticing the ways in which the camera is constructing the illusion via close ups, tracking shots and point of view editing etc. The only time that cinematic immersion becomes deeper is when for some reason (psychological imbalance, illness, drugs) ego boundaries are weakened, then it can become intensely empathic and that boundary between the real and the imaginary becomes very thin indeed.¹³

But, as Gregor Schneider reveals, the boundary can also be thinned if the viewer can walk into the movie or onto the stage.

Schneider began his career by turning his house in Rheydt Germany into a work of art in 1985 at the age of sixteen. *Totes Haus ur* (dead house ur) consists of rooms within rooms, false walls, false doors, false windows, a coffee room that rotates and a room of screams which recalls John Bock's pseudo-schizoid elaborations of German Expressionism. *Totes Haus ur* is a perfect instance of a post-surrealist disruption of the everyday. House Rheydt also references Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* which was similarly a disruption of the everyday domestic space. Like *Totes Haus ur*, *Merzbau* possessed a dimension of strangeness due to the fact that it was a fetishistic shrine to his friends. Schwitters would beg or filch personal belongings from them—Hannah Hoch's door key, Hans Richter's hair, Sophie Tauber Arp's bra, etc.—and place them in special niches in the *Merzbau*. It became a Calligarian cabinet of memories.

In 2004 Schneider created an environmental immersive installation—*Die Familie Schneider*—in London under the auspices of the art foundation Artangel. Artangel itself is worthy of note here because it is dedicated to art that operates outside the confines of the museum. However, in the case of *Die Familie Schneider* there were constraints similar to those evident in a gallery environment. But in this case the time limit imposed on the viewer appears motivated less by a desire to preserve the precious object than by a desire to make the experience more chilling than it might have been given more time to become familiar with it.

Die Familie Schneider consisted of two neighbouring disused houses in an East London street being turned into theatrical *mises en scène* complete with actors. As in *Totes Haus* ur Schneider manipulated the space and ambience creating a disorienting and disturbing *mise en scène*. The major difference with this work is his addition of professional actors who ignore viewers' attempts at communication making the experience one in which both the viewer and the actors are akin to ghosts. The experience is unnerving when one finds a man masturbating in a shower, and another person trussed up in a bin liner apparently dead in a stifling, seedy bedroom. It is certainly more unnerving than watching *The Amityville Horror* because one is not *imagining* that one is there, one *is* actually there. Perhaps one of the most creepy features of this *mise en scène* are the references to children, a child gate on the stairs, a closet filled with sweets, a child-sized mattress. And several commentators have referred to the terrible crimes that have happened behind the seemingly innocent facades of British houses. All of which serves to make a comparison with the prurient gaze associated with the *The Amityville Horror* more salient.

Schneider relies on surrealist-like tricks to destabilise the everyday, but there is something ultimately disappointing about surrealistic disruptions of the everyday, something adolescent and futile, Patrick Waldberg cites the following instances:

Philippe Soupault, looking somewhat haggard, would ring the doorbells and ask the concierges 'if Philippe Soupault did not live there'. Benjamin

Péret would insult priests on the street ... Jacques Prévert, at night dressed as a hooligan, would lead astray the innocent passer-by in the bourgeois quarters. Tanguy captured spiders, which he ate alive to terrify the neighbourhood. (Waldberg 1997:34-5)

Schneider's transformation of two archetypal British domestic environments into a set for a horror film comes close to prurient spectacle. But the work is afforded the requisite aesthetic distance by the device of doubling.

The interior of each house was identically constructed and even the actors appeared to be twins. At first sight this intensified the strangeness of the experience, but then it estranged the experience bringing to mind the Freudian analysis of dreams in terms mechanisms such as doubling, condensation and displacement. From an aesthetic point of view the doubling gave a conceptual, intellectual dimension to what could otherwise be discounted as a 'creepy' experience. Doubling also relates to the manner in which we become immersed in narrative cinema. T. Jefferson Klein quotes Christian Metz:

The imaginary by definition combines a certain presence and a certain absence. ... The act of perception is real (the cinema is not a fantasm), but the perceived is not really the object, it is its shadow, its phantom, its double, its reflection in a new sort of mirror. ... Cinematic fiction is experienced ... as the quasi-real presence of ... irreality itself. (in Klein 1987: 14)

The quasi-real presence which is also an absence makes cinema not only an analogue of the mirror but also an analogue of the Lacanian Imaginary that can become a source of potential disturbance of the Symbolic Order, due to the fact that **the Imaginary—in the form of myth, metaphor and narrative—helps create the Symbolic Order.**¹⁴ And what is especially significant about the use of doubling in *Die Familie Schneider* is that the artist is able to transpose an uncanny effect into physical reality. But there is little sense in which Schneider's installations fit Claire Bishop's discussion of the activation of the viewer via immersion where she claims that: 'This activation is, moreover, regarded as emancipatory, since it is

analogous to the viewer's engagement in the world. A transitive relationship comes to be implied between 'activated spectatorship' and active engagement in the social-political arena.' (2005: 11).

Schneider's house of horrors has little overt social relevance. It can be described more as an intellectual analogue of the 3D version of *The Amityville Horror*. Intellectual because its apparatus of affect and its attacks on ego boundary are accompanied with the cognitive dislocation produced by doubling. If there is any 'emancipatory' value in Schneider's work then it concerns his demonstration degree to which the ego can be unbalanced by an apparatus of narrative immersion. One can draw an analogy, for example, between Schneider's house of horrors and the politics of fear currently being deployed in the cause of the 'war on terror'. And this analogy is not far-fetched because Schneider's proposal to the 2005 Venice Biennale was *Cube Venice, 2005*. This was to be a fifty foot (15.24 metres) black cube made of scaffolding covered in fabric, to be erected in the middle of the Piazza San Marco, Venice. The cube was inspired by the Ka'bah in Mecca, the holy site of Islam. But in the context of the 'war on terror' the work was rejected and a video account of the project was shown instead. If *Cube Venice* had been constructed then it would have been a highly dramatic and politically loaded sculptural installation. It would have been considerably more powerful than Jason Rhoades' solipsistic, Dali-like, paranoid-critical vision of tuna fish swimming anticlockwise around the actual Ka'bah, mentioned earlier in this chapter. Rhoades' narrative is safely locked away in the realms of the licence given to the individual artist to spin whatever web of crazy interconnections he or she may wish. *Cube Venice*, in contrast, would have interpenetrated everyday life, placing a spanner in the works of the Symbolic Order.

Another significant achievement of *Die Familie Schneider* lies in its contribution to the intersection of art with theatre, especially in terms of taking theatrical installation out of the gallery and onto the street. But this wasn't an open house, the time limit has been mentioned, there was also a preliminary telephone screening, one had to collect keys from Artangel,

and there was the ban on photography that reflected the panoptic order of the museum.

Ultimately what is interesting about *Die Familie Schneider* is the way in which it mutates Adorno's point that 'distance is the primary condition for getting close to the content of a work'. The content of *Die Familie Schneider* is precisely an *experience* of the uncanny. And in this sense it comes very close to Bishop's definition of installation art: 'Instead of representing texture, space, light and so on, installation art presents these elements directly for us to experience.' (2005: 11). We literally walk into the *picture*; and this is the best way of describing it because *Die Familie Schneider* is *not* reality. The viewer is like a ghost unable to interact with the actors. The viewer is very conscious that she has been placed in the scene without a script and this sense of dislocation serves to intensify the experience of the uncanny. One might compare the sensation of *Die Familie Schneider* with the rhetoric of absence evident in Paul Pfeiffer's *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*: a series of photographs of basketball games in which Pfeiffer erased the ball. The game is transmogrified into a mystic match wherein the players play with nothingness. There is a similar lack in *Die Familie Schneider* that is the moment of distance that makes it an aesthetic, not an actual, experience.

VIRTUAL REALITY

The varieties of immersive installation we have examined up to this point have been fundamentally of the category 'expanded sculpture'. But the immersive capacity of a purely sculptural installation has its material limitations and it is instructive to note that expanding the repertoire of variety of media to include light, photography, sound, and video can significantly enhance the immersive and narrative character of sculptural installation. A great deal has been achieved via the installation strategy but there is room for more exploration. In particular it is possible to investigate immersive and narratological effects via digital media.

Very powerful immersive technologies are available in the domain of digital art in the form of virtual reality technologies. Currently the two

major systems are the head mounted display (HMD) and CAVE. The head mounted display provides the viewer wearing it with a totally immersive field of vision via stereographic video spectacles embedded in the headgear. The HMD also provides stereophonic sound and, very importantly, has a movement tracking device that enables the computer graphics being displayed on the immersive field-of-vision display to adapt to the direction and inclination of the viewer's head. Information regarding the exact position of the head is integrated into the visual data being inputted to the eyes in a manner that provides the most powerful corporeally immersive experience currently possible. And the reason why it is possible to describe this as corporeal is because vision cannot be divorced from the body, although the dichotomy between the embodied and the disembodied gaze is plausible and informs postmodern theory, especially that of Lacan.

The relationship between body and vision can be experienced quite readily by 'driving' a virtual racing car in a high definition video game on a Playstation or Xbox, the realism of the scene is so pronounced that the effect of the car swerving to turn a tight bend creates a highly visceral response as if one were in a real car. This effect is considerably more potent when the field of vision is totally encompassed and head movements are coordinated one's view of objects in the virtual space. Oliver Grau reports that in an early HMD virtual reality experiment one of the participants 'panicked when his HMD showed pictures taken from the top of a skyscraper of the street far below, even though he was actually safely inside the building.' (2003: 163). HMD provides a powerfully immersive experience. One can even 'fly' if one goes to the Ars Electronica Center in Linz, Austria, where you can be suspended in mid air with an HMD and a computer feeding the imagery.

The principal problem with HMD is that only one user can experience it, also that user is cut off from the world around her. CAVE provides an alternative that is effectively a computer graphic installation in which a small group of people can share the illusion. But it remains the case that only one person at a time can control movement through the scenes being

displayed. CAVE consists of a room with translucent walls onto which computer generated and carefully coordinated imagery is projected. The entire room including the ceiling and floor can be projected onto. A three-dimensional effect is achieved by the now quite old strategy of projecting two displaced images onto the screen that are separated by spectacles.¹⁵ The result is that images spring out of the screens at the viewer and one has the disconcerting illusion of being 'hit' by objects moving towards one out of the screen.

One can understand why fine artists have not used these new technologies and might not be aware of their existence. There would be few art colleges in the world that could provide access to such equipment due to its advanced technical status and expense. On the other hand HMD technology was sufficiently accessible to be used in arcade games during the 1990s (such as *Virtuality*) and PCs are significantly more powerful today. There will no doubt be some readers who have experienced HMD virtual reality arcade games, but few fine art oriented readers will have experienced HMD or CAVE art works due to the fact that currently such works are confined to the parallel universe of media art which has evolved alternative exhibition spaces and alternative international exhibitions. Accordingly, at the turn of the millennium we have two art worlds, two avant-gardes, and two modes of deconstructive art, unfortunately with something of a schism between them.

The lack of awareness of such technology in the world of fine art can also be explained by the fact that the artistic tradition is focused on individuals. It would be difficult for an individual to utilise such technology due to the technical requirements. It is best handled, as in filmmaking, via teamwork and/or institutional backing. This is even more the case for CAVE which is currently an expensive and elaborate technology.

The distance between the uses of high technology HMD and CAVE virtual reality in the digital art community and the relatively low technology of the fine art community is evidenced in Carsten Höller's *The Forest*, 2002, which is an instance of a 'no-frills' approach to virtual reality using relatively inexpensive devices. For this installation Höller made use

of Olympus' Eye-Trek video eye-glasses with integrated headphones. These spectacles simulate a large widescreen television seen several feet away. They do not provide an immersive experience in the manner of an HMD, instead they were marketed as the visual equivalent of headphones. Even the fact that there are separate video feeds into each eyepiece could have been accomplished via a two screen projection. The spectacles, however, do have the effect of fixing the viewing position.

In *The Forest* two films are projected: one into the left and one into the right eye. The films are of snowy forest in twilight filmed by Höller. To begin with the two films are identical then, when the camera approaches a tree, they differ bit by bit, one to the left of the tree, one to the right, one to the front, one to the back. The resulting spatio-temporal displacements appear designed to make the viewer more aware of the cognitive and constructed nature of perception. *The Forest* may be low-tech in comparison to CAVE or HMD but it is certainly effective in terms of creating a quasi-immersive experience that destabilises habituated ways of seeing while retaining critical distance. In the end high technology does not produce good art, creative people produce good art and low technology can produce better results than high technology.

The Forest also indicates that the definition of high-tech in the world of installation art of the 1990s and early 2000s begins and ends with *video*. This is not to criticise fine art, especially when the position being pursued in this chapter is that the success of an immersive experience should not be judged solely on its capacity to submerge reflective distance. On that basis it would be instructive to address some instances of high-technology immersion, one using HMD the other using CAVE.

TOTAL SENSORY IMMERSION: CHAR DAVIES

Charlotte Davies' *Osmose*, 1995, is a work of art using the head mounted display that provides a prime instance of the interrelationship between vision and embodiment. The work consists of a virtual world made up of computer generated and stylised representations of land, sky and water. Oliver Grau provides an eloquent description of the experience of *Osmose*:

Like a diver, solitary and weightless, the interactor first glides out of a grid of Cartesian co-ordinates into virtual scenarios: a boundless oceanic abyss, shimmering swathes of opaque clouds, passing softly glowing dewdrops and translucent swarms of computer-generated insects, into the dense undergrowth of the forest. (2003: 193)

Grau also reports that the ‘interactor’ can pass seamlessly into the ‘subterranean earth, encountering there vivid rocks and roots’ and also ‘enter the microcosm of a tree’s glistening opalescent leaf’ (Grau 2003: 195). Grau’s evaluation of the immersive capacity of the experience indicates that it is of several orders more powerful than that possible within the typical instance of installation art. Of the environments discussed here only Janssens’ mist installations Schneider’s *Die Familie Schneider* and possibly Eliasson’s *The Weather Project* could come close to the immersive impact of *Osmose*.

One of the key points that Grau makes is that the immersive power and the empathic exploratory interest generated by this work lead to the illusion of ‘full-body inclusion’ (2003: 200). He describes this experience in terms of ‘ecstatic’ and ‘regressive’ emotions.

Grau notes that despite the fact that Davies’ representation consists of graphic (albeit multi-layered, three dimensional and fluid) rather than high fidelity realism, the imagery can, nevertheless, induce physiological responses. For example people who have a phobic response to being underwater can experience this within the animation-like graphic environment. Grau cites a participant’s report on the experience: ‘even when the water is symbolic, I experienced it viscerally as water and everything smothering that water means to me’ (2003: 200). **Again we confront the thin line dividing imagination from reality.**

These observations are most interesting because they point not only to the coordination of vision with the corporeal sensation but also **the implication of perception, cognition, memory and imagination—physical reality and fictive reality.** It is very difficult for us to comprehend the fact that *everything* we experience—including the body—is constructed in the

synaptic universe of the brain. But virtual reality, like psychomimetic drugs, brings us that bit closer to accepting that this is the case.

Yet, if we stand back for a moment from the ‘wow factor’ of *Osmose*, Grau’s only *critical* comment is to pose the question: ‘Why the immense technological effort in order to return, after a gigantic detour, to the real?’ (2003: 201). This is a fairly weak critical response given the amount of space Grau devotes to a description of the lyrically immersive capacity of *Osmose*. One could easily counter his comment by noting that *Osmose* is not real, it is *hyperreal*. And for Baudrillard, at least, the hyperreal is, disturbingly, more real than real: thereby threatening the reality of the real (1994).

But perhaps *Osmose* is not an instance of human beings spending immense technological effort in order to recreate reality—it can be understood instead as a technological extension of *the Imaginary*. This is the *doubling* that Metz saw in cinema taken a quantum leap further.¹⁶ In the hands of Davies art enters into the space of hallucination, and from an ethical-aesthetic point of view that might be problematic.

Bearing this in mind one can note that in his evocative account of *Osmose* Grau appears to have forgotten his earlier meditations on the topic of critical distance. We need to address Grau’s lack of critical commentary on *Osmose* by bringing distance back into the discussion. Davies’ *Osmose* is principally a sensuous experience. For most people it would be beautiful, the fact that it is corporeally immersive reinforces the sensuous effect. But what is most significant in the context of this book is that *Osmose* is not *critical* art, which does not mean it is not art, it simply means that it is not *deconstructive* art.¹⁷

The case of *Osmose* is, however, useful for the task of navigating a course through the thicket of contemporary art practice. We become aware that in spite of being produced by individuals, fine art practice is fundamentally defined by its history: its discursive and material practices. A work such as *Osmose* appears to represent a radical break with that history. We can dismiss it as pure sensation but at the same time we would have to ask ourselves why we did not apply the same logic to Janssens’ mist

installations and Eliasson's *The Weather Project*. The argument put forward in this chapter is that such works draw attention to the power of illusion. The same frame of reference could be applied to *Osmose*. If we entered into this work with critical distance in mind then we could reflect upon its seduction. As well as enjoying the lyricism of this work we could also be aware of the potential of this technology for sheer escapism.

Although Grau does not make the comparison himself it is possible to connect his account of *Osmose* with his discussion of the pioneering filmmaker Sergej Eisenstein's concept of Stereokino. Grau explains that Eisenstein imagined cinema evolving into a three-dimensional experience that would 'immerse', 'engulf', 'capture' the viewer (Grau, 2003 #1278: 155). Grau comments: 'obviously, Eisenstein is not looking to facilitate inner distance in the spectator or to construct an area of manageable, controlled reception' (Grau, 2003 #1278: 155).

The implication is that a stress on immersion and *jouissance* within the domain of mass media could be associated with a desire to increase the suggestibility of the audience to socially constructed ways of seeing. Eisenstein was working within a communist regime, but even without a political agenda the implication is that sensory immersion entails a diminution of our critical faculties evident in regression to child-like wonder and feelings akin to bliss or ecstasy.

Yet, although *Osmose* is highly sensory it should be remembered that it is a graphic environment. Computer generated imagery can be informational as well as hyperreal. Indeed in many respects virtual reality can be understood as an expansion of the graphic user interface we see everyday on our computer screens. The capacity to mix a wide variety of media within the virtual reality environment points to the fact that it does not have to be a purely sensory experience. Another antidote to the curtailment of critical distance lies in interactivity, and it is in this particular area that digital art succeeds. *Osmose* is not interactive, but Maurice Benayoun's virtual reality masterpiece *World Skin*, 1997, is.

INTERACTIVE IMMERSION: MAURICE BENAYOUN

Benayoun's *World Skin* uses CAVE to immerse the viewer in a virtual reality war zone. To recap, CAVE consists of a room, the walls ceiling and even floor of which are projection screens. Unlike the HMD which is restricted to a single user, CAVE allows a group of people to enter the three-dimensional image environment. The only encumbrance is that viewers have to wear spectacles with liquid crystal shutters that ensure that each eye receives a stereographically adjusted image. Grau explains that the 'image space is a composite of pictures from many theatres of war which are formed into a virtual panorama' via a Silicon Graphics computer (Grau 2003: 238). Visitors are provided with interactive 'cameras' and when they snap a scene with the camera a flat rectangular segment is removed from the three-dimensional projection leaving 'a monochrome area with black silhouettes' (Grau 2003: 239). The visitor is given a print on their way out. Benayoun explains: 'the viewer/tourist contributes to an amplification of the tragic dimension of the drama. Without him [sic] this world is forsaken, left to its pain. He jostles the pain awake, exposes it' (in Grau 2003: 239). Grau appears to take a contrasting point of view when he suggests that

In *World Skin*, the ubiquity of the photographic images creates a second visual skin that blankets reality and, in our memories, replaces it. Bit by bit, *World Skin's* panoramic collage of image fragments is erased, neutralized. The actions of the visitors cause a clean and non-symbolic data space to appear: They tear the skin off the image space and leave in its stead—nothing. (Grau 2003: 240)

Both interpretations seem equally valid because the point is that this work stimulates critical reflection whereas *Osmose* appeals primarily to the body via an illusion of corporeal immersion. *World Skin*, in contrast, offers immersion but not to the point where we lose critical distance. Benayoun notes that *World Skin* is 'an immersion in a picture, but it is a *theatrical* performance as well' (Benayoun 2005) [emphasis added]; and this theatricality means that we do not forget that what we inhabit is a construction.

What distinguishes *World Skin* from *Osmose* is not simply the political subject matter but the fact that the act of taking a photograph places the viewer in an active relationship with the work that can be contrasted with the passive, dreamy, floating experience of *Osmose*. The act of taking the photograph, the fact that this leaves a flat blankness in the three-dimensional skin of the dynamic image field, and the fact that the viewer is given his or her photograph as a souvenir all serve to make experiencing *World Skin* not simply an act of looking but an act of doing, which is to say a truly embodied engagement with the work that is rare in the field of fine art.

SUMMARY

The various works examined in this chapter indicate that immersion in and of itself is insufficient to release the viewer from the regime of passive consumption. All too often installation art that focuses on immersion can lead to a momentary experience of regressive *jouissance*, an echo of childhood that is the lowest common denominator of viewer involvement. On the other hand, works such as Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, 2003, and Bock's *Klutterkammer*, 2004, can dislocate the panoptic regime of the gallery/museum and give the visitor a taste of a more viewer-oriented museum experience. Such experiences can lead to a polemic response on behalf of the reader such as is evident in this book. But such responses will inevitably turn to a topic that goes beyond the passive involvement of immersion towards the active involvement that is interaction. And this is the subject of the following chapter.

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1 Which recalls Nagisa Oshima's film *In the Realm of the Senses (Ai no corrida)*, 1976. Oliveira et al. appear to be positive towards this development. Bishop, in contrast, takes a more ethical orientaton believing that installation art ought to lead to 'emancipation'.

2 Viola pioneered the video installation, more recently one can cite Ergin Cavusoglu's *Point of Departure*, 2005; and Jane and Louise Wilson's *The New Brutalists*, 2006.

3 The taste for panoramas seems to have swung from high to low. Grau reports that Goethe visited several panoramas and had one installed in his chambers. At the opposite end of the spectrum Grau cites the egregious invention of panoramic wallpaper which he notes was something of a fashion in bourgeois circles in the nineteenth century (Grau 2003: 60).

4 'First presented at the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris, it was a hybrid medium: Ten 70mm films were projected simultaneously to form a connected 360° image' (Grau 2003: 147).

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the leading German thinkers in the sphere of the histories of nature and technology crossing the disciplines of philosophy, art and anthropology.

6 And we need to make an important distinction here between the scientific use of prosthetic perception to penetrate deeper into the mysterious of nature and artistic uses of prosthetic perception that can so easily become instruments of mindless fantasy and escapism.

7 We can also conflate Foucault and Niklas Luhmann and suggest that such regimes and disciplines are autopoietic.

8 One can also note that this passage is central to Gilles Deleuze's remarkable account of Nietzsche's philosophy (Deleuze 1983).

9 Dany Nobus (1998: 105-109) provides some background to Lacan's development of these concepts.

10 At this point we should outline the three 'orders' that form the architecture for Lacanian psychoanalysis. The Symbolic Order is language dominated by an Oedipal, patriarchal order anchored in 'the-name-of-father'—which is to say the symbolic, or totemic, father. (Grosz 1990: 68, 103-104). Secondly, there is the 'imaginary order' which is described by Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy as:

the field of phantasies and images. It evolves out of the mirror stage, but extends into the adult subject's relationships with others. The prototype of the typical imaginary relationship is the infant before the mirror, fascinated with his (sic) image. ... The Imaginary Order also seems to include pre-verbal structures, for example, the various 'primitive' phantasies uncovered by the psychoanalytic treatment of children, psychotic and perverse patients. (Benvenuto 1986: 81)

The exact nature of the imaginary order in the Lacanian literature is somewhat inconsistent and unclear, but it appears to be mainly situated in the domain of fantasy and dreams, overlapping with the symbolic order in the mirror stage. Thirdly, there is the order of the 'real', which is described by Grosz as 'the order preceding the ego and the organization of the drives. It is an anatomical, "natural" order ... a pure plenitude or fullness.' (Grosz 1990: 34).

For Lacan the three orders are intermeshed. In the 1970s Lacan used the metaphor of the Borromean knot to illustrate the implication of these three orders. The Borromean knot, or ring, is made up of three intertwined loops constructed such that if just one is cut the others fall apart. Each loop, or order, is dependent upon the others. (Benvenuto 1986: 82).

11 In Nietzschean terms instead of feeling directly as we did as an infant we feel indirectly through a process he calls resentment a social conditioning of feelings.

12 The Amityville Horror, 1979, was a theatrical success and has been followed by sequels - Amityville II: The Possession, 1982, Amityville 3D, 1983, and The Amityville Horror, 2005, based on the book written by Jay Anson.

13 In such extreme states of mind we enter into the film via the imaginary and in retrospect begin to understand the extent to which the imaginary constructs the ego.

14 As the principal keeper of the cinematic Id, Hollywood—the reality studio of the American Empire—is charged with keeping the beast more or less under control. Art is not bound by such conditions.

15 CAVE does not use inexpensive polarising filters instead it uses the more elaborate liquid crystal shutter spectacles to supply the left and right eye with the appropriate, slightly different images that the brain then knits together in the usual manner.

16 It is, perhaps, fortunate that a massified use of HMD technology has been hampered not so much by the difficulty in making it affordable but by the unpopularity of closing off one's eyes from the world. The sight of someone wearing an HMD and gesturing into empty space remains an extremely odd sight that possibly activates the instinct for self-preservation into vetoing such a total cut off from the world.

17 One can note for example that Char Davies was a founding director of Softimage the company responsible for the special effects for Jurassic Park. What we begin to see is a blurring of the boundaries between mass media and art within the zone of digital art due to the fact that the same technology, computer generated imagery (but not virtual reality), is used in both spheres.