Mutable Sculpture

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ABSTRACT
Edrex Fontanilla and Robert Goldschmidt collaborate on a series of video art sculptures that explore materiality, continuity, and the limits and assumptions of viewers' perceptions. Through the presentation of the falsely real, the artists explore the various unstable ontological states between video, sculpture, and installation. Fontanilla proposes the phrase *mutable sculpture* to describe creative work that experiments with the intersection of digital video projections and sculptural surfaces. Because of the role of the mind in resolving the perception of reality, concepts from cognitive science inform the artists' creative strategies. A viewer of mutable sculpture observes unique visual and aural stimuli that compel the viewer to reevaluate cognitive and perceptual information. A mutable sculpture is defined by its ability to adopt the characteristics of virtual objects through the layering of virtual and physical space.

Keywords
Video art, mutable sculpture, video installation, collaboration, visual abstraction, aural abstraction

The Artists' Motivations
In "Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image, and the Space-in-Between," Margaret Morse speculated that "exploring the materialization of the conceptual through all the various modes available to our heavily mediated society is at the heart of the cultural function of video installation" (Morse 155). Emerging and evolving technologies and their respective means of presenting a virtual space through video has profound ontological and cultural implications.

Our creative techniques seek to hybridize the physical with the virtual. We utilize the dual presentation of physical and virtual space in a video installation to challenge the viewer to cognitively and perceptually unify the spaces. Dissonant sensory cues in our video art sculptures primes the viewer of our creative work to ponder certain ontological questions concerning the combination of physical and virtual space.

The authoring methods we employ seek to reconcile the disparate characteristics of two seemingly irreconcilable realms. The volatile, intangible nature of digital media strongly contrasts the nature of the physical counterparts. Not bound by the rules of the physical space, a projected image is easily changeable; however, the materials that serve as the projection surface are not.

Conceptual Beginnings
Vito Acconci mused that video is a distinctly placeless medium, unlike the site-specific nature of art installation (Acconci 132). Video lacks the aura of the original unlike sculpture, in which the original object and reproduction are unmistakable. These aspects affect the viewer's determinations when interpreting the cognitive perceptual phenomena we seek to invoke.

Morse classifies video as a proscenium art, a form of expression that speaks to an *elsewhere* and *elsewhen* (borrowing Emile Benveniste's two planes of language). Video excludes the spectator, physically separating him or her from the diegetic space temporally and physically. The frame or screen form an impenetrable plane of representation that shields the viewer from implication in the artwork. A common approach to alleviate the inaccessibility of the viewer would be to incorporate sculpture and installation. We believed it was important, however, to begin our investigation of video art by first authoring a work within the constraints of cinema's black box.

Overlooked
In 2005, we authored *Overlooked,* an eight minute, fifty-

two second video piece that plays with the dimension of time, and the scale and perspective of visual and aural abstractions. The video sought to invoke a physiological experience in the viewer. We implemented ideas in the psychology of human timing to affect the viewer's sense of the passage of time.

Figure 1. Screenshot from *Overlooked*

Ideally, *Overlooked* is viewed in the cinematic black box. The large screen completely fills the spectator's field of view (including the periphery). The theatre's audio system offers the potential for aural immersion. The viewer's reality is subsumed into the non-place depicted in *Overlooked*. The video begins with an asymmetrical, amorphous form shape-shifting over time. The form appears to be replaced by swirling fragments that seem to define a single dynamic, ephemeral entity. Aurally, *Overlooked* mixes unworldly computer-generated tone beds with highly abstracted sounds reminiscent of acousmatic works. Throughout the course of the visual sequence, the aural dimension shifts the form of the perceived objects in the video.

Overlooked was authored so that the image or sound do not permit the original identity to be clearly identified. When watching *Overlooked*, the viewer defines the entities in the plot based entirely on his or her biases and predisposition. In this way, *Overlooked* implicates the viewer in the same way that a physical art installation would.

Overlooked strives to have the viewer engage in haptic viewing. Throughout the course of the video, two-dimensional forms take on three-dimensional characteristics. The final sequence of visual forms makes the viewer conscious of the screen, as the shapes seem to press against the imaginary fourth wall between the artwork and its audience. Placelessness and the lack of aura of the original do not preclude the possibility of a

strong haptic viewing effect in video. The physical interaction between the digitally created images and the imaginary fourth wall – the screen – is only perceived, and not actual. This is a key aspect of *Overlooked*. In this way, we believe that *Overlooked* serves as an ideal first step in helping to define our notion of *"mutable sculpture."*

Mutable Sculpture
The hybridization of the physical and the virtual in art-making is a well-established approach, but we pursue a unique conceptualization called "mutable sculpture."

Our creative endeavors are distinguished as mutable sculpture because of a confluence of factors. The core of the work is the exploration of the physicality and the continuity of the perceived patterns. The art moves *freely* between the virtual and physical aspects of the artwork. At any moment in the viewing of our work, the perceived phenomenon could be caused by a physical element, or by a digitally generated one.

The mind is a powerful and flexible tool for shaping the human perceptual experience. Its capacity for learning, pattern grouping, and reification enable swift perceptual comprehension. The layering of virtual and physical space presents new and unique perceptual tasks to accomplish. At times the virtual can extend and even reinvent the physical. However, the virtual can reorganize and even fracture the perception of the physical.

Cascade
Cascade was our first iteration of mutable sculpture that moved away from cinema and the black box model. The increase in ambient light in the installation of *Cascade* permits the sense of scale to be returned to the viewer.
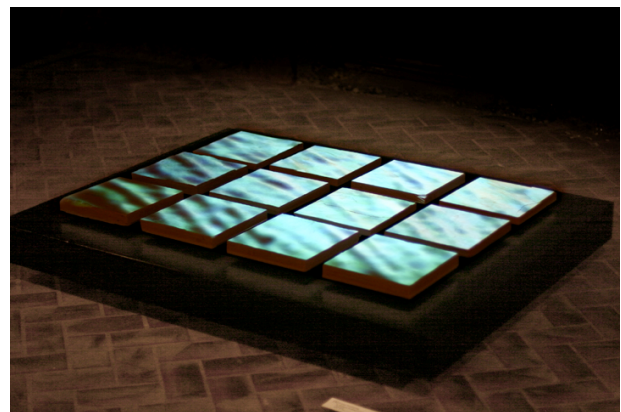

Figure 2. *Cascade*

Three inches from the ground floats a 56" x 44" x 10" wooden platform that is stained black. Twelve squares of pink coral flagstone are then floated off this platform. The stones serve as the projected surface. They provide an irregular substrate and contain luminescent flecks.

Moving image is projected only on the squares, offering fluid patterns that slowly transition from one aesthetic to another. The middle sequence of events include a stuttering concatenation of stop and go visual gestures.
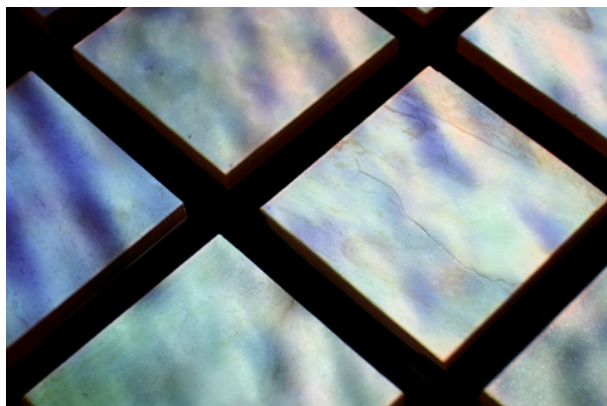

Figure 3. Closeup of *Cascade*

The black pedestal alludes to its precursor, the black box, but the squares that fragment the projected image shatter the proscenium screen. Despite the fragmentation, all of the patterns of *Cascade* move in tandem. Lev Manovich once argued that the dataspace is never continuous, but a fragmented conglomerate of cellspaces.

"The contrast between the continuity of cellspace in theory and its discontinuity in practice should not be dismissed. Rather, it itself can be the source of interesting aesthetics strategies" (Manovich)

While *Cascade* loops the ten-minute video so that the end flows seamlessly into the beginning, the viewer is still offered a strong sense of phrasing within a viewing episode. The unique combination of materials and digitally authored patterns give rise to new patterns. The patterns move freely between the virtual and physical aspects of the artwork.

Torrent

The most recent iteration of our creative investigation of mutable sculpture is *Torrent*. This video sculpture consists of several "red-oak" stained wooden panels of decreasing size hung in an articulated arc. Comparably-sized beveled maple squares laminated with quilted maple veneer are floated over the hung panels.

There is less subtlety between the veneer's markings and

that of the turbulent video patterns projected on the squares. Acconci argued that "the screen might be seen as some kind of distorting, inside-out mirror..." (Acconci 126). As in Cascade, the video for Torrent in combination with the inanimate physical creates a new, animated art object, but it may also intimate what lies underneath the veneer surface as Acconci's inside-out mirror. The projected image is reminiscent

Figure 4. *Torrent*

of the role of its predecessor, the television. While Torrent's objectives relate to the human brain's processing of visual information differently than in previous works, it continues to tease out the nature of hybridized physicality. Torrent's essence moves freely between the real and the virtual.

Things to come

The selected works *Overlooked*, *Cascade*, and *Torrent* help to delineate integral characteristics of our notion of mutable sculpture. We have more art projects in the works that further explore the fusion of virtual and physical space.

References

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