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## **The magic of projection : augmentation and immersion in media art**

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# Prologue

## Artist Statement

Image 4: Sophie Ernst, *Victory*, video sculpture, 2004.

For in and out, above, about, below,  
'Tis nothing but a Magic Shadow-show,  
Play'd in a Box whose Candle is the Sun,  
Round which we Phantom Figures come and go.

*The Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam (1048–1131)<sup>1</sup>

.....

1 FitzGerald (2009) p. 39

As a 19 year old high-school graduate I started an apprenticeship as an industrial mechanic. I worked at the BMW factory in Munich for three and a half years. Our first assignment, which lasted about six months, was to file down a piece of metal, day by day, bit by bit. We were not making something, but learning to use the most basic tools and materials that we would employ for the remainder of our professional lives as mechanics. After six months of sawing, filing, measuring metal I could handle the material more or less intuitively. Three years later, I designed and built a small printing press as my ‘Gesellenstück’, my degree piece. Next to handling metal, I had studied mechanics, hydraulics, physics, material science even history of mechanics. To be able to execute my craft I needed physical as well as theoretical knowledge.

In my view, contemporary art is largely a discursive intellectual endeavour. As an artist I am not a producer of objects, but I see art as “a *speculative tool* for rethinking current social and political conditions” [italics S.E.] as curator Charles Esche has put lucidly.<sup>2</sup> I understand art as ‘modest proposals’. Esche introduces ‘modest proposals’ as “essentially speculative in that we imagine things other than they are now yet those speculative gestures are intensely concrete and actual. They avoid the clearly fantastical as well as the hermetic purity of private symbolism in order to deal with real existing conditions and what might be necessary in order to change them.”<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the day to day practice of art contains important elements of craft. Like a mechanic, I need physical as well as theoretical knowledge of my materials and tools. My intention in writing this thesis was to take an in-depth look at the principal medium I use in my sculptural practice: projection. The underlying question of my research is how do we experience projections and what are image traditions projections relate to. Besides ‘rethinking current social and political conditions’, I consider how to communicate this to my audience. With each work I question how are projections experienced. I ask questions about projection as a material entity, questions about the machine (for instance a media projector) or image carrier or format (slide or data file). Making a work also involves questions about projection as a communication medium and what image traditions projection relates to. Yet, these questions are posed foremost with a practical interest: how to create a desired experience for the viewer.

.....  
2 Esche (2005) p. 3.

3 Ibid.

I took the writing of this text as an opportunity to question projection in general. The desire to rethink projection as a material and medium not only grew out of my praxis but also from conversations with colleagues: artists, art-students, filmmakers, projectionists, media technicians. The text is directed at these colleagues first and foremost. I see it as a small step in an ongoing conversation between practitioners on the application, effects, technology, historical bearings and social impact of projection as a medium. Nonetheless, I hope to engage art historians as well as students of media-studies, albeit from my perspective of practice. The debate I engage in is not a purely academic one and is held in erratic places and forms. I refer to writings from the 1920's on the possibilities of film by practitioners such as Moholy Nagy, van Doesburg and Vertov, I also include contributions such as the practical instructions on projection and philosophical interpretation of the imaginary by 18<sup>th</sup> century scholar Eckartshausen. Much of contemporary theory on video- or projection-art has been written by artists.<sup>4</sup> What sets this field of enquiry apart from art history or media studies is that as an artist I take on two perspectives: projection as a material in praxis as well as a medium in communication with audiences.

The theoretical research into projection builds a body of knowledge useful to the craft I develop as sculptor.<sup>5</sup> In my projection praxis the research is embodied in the art works. In the thesis text I hope to make this explicit and to give insights into material and medium. In what follows I am taking a predominantly *instrumental perspective* to artistic research.<sup>6</sup> Tools and materials are not neutral components of an art work. Even when we are not explicitly aware of the material makeup or the interface of mediation, they influence our experience of a situation. Both material and medium embody certain meanings and history and will trigger associations.<sup>7</sup> I work with the projection of light in relation to sculpture. The materials I use are partly ephemeral: light, projected images, sound, conversations, narrated memories,

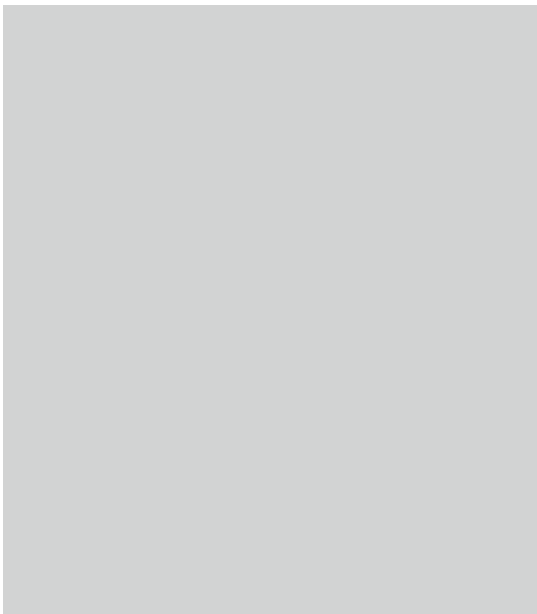
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4 The writings by artists and filmmakers such as Tony Oursler (2001), Catherine Elwes (2005), Michael Rush (2005), Stan Douglas (2009), Valie EXPORT (2011), Jonas Mekas (2011), Chris Meigh-Andrews (2014).

5 Borgdorff (2012) p. 18.

6 Henk Borgdorff distinguishes four (not mutually exclusive) perspectives on the relationship of theory and practice in artistic research, namely, instrumental, interpretative, performative, and immanent. Borgdorff (2012) p. 17.

7 For instance 'remediation'. Bolter and Grusin explain how a new medium re-mediate older forms of mediation. They define *remediation* as a "complex kind of borrowing in which one medium is itself incorporated or represented in another medium." Bolter and Grusin (2000) p.45.



partly concrete: architecture, objects, projection- and sound-technology. Together they can layer images, objects, and meanings extend our sense of space and immerse us into virtual worlds.<sup>8</sup>

It is often said that video is a new medium in art. I studied sculpture in the mid to late 1990's and video or computing was not even part of our curriculum. In a pre-internet world it was not easy for a student at a provincial art school to find access to the theoretical discourse on video art. The few publications on video art I found in the library would either establish video art as a medium void of history or project its origins back to television, performance art, experimental film or film in general. It was even harder to see video art of the past decades.

Those video works I saw in exhibitions in the late 1990's were mostly related to an experimental film tradition or used film as their subject.<sup>9</sup> There were a few exceptions that left deep impressions.

I believe I saw *Tall Ships* (1992), an interactive video installation by Gary Hill, at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.<sup>10</sup> I was fascinated by the expanded sense of space it created and my feeling of immersion into the virtual image. I was largely oblivious to the interactivity of the work, it appeared magical. In 1998, I did a summer-course on video with Valie EXPORT. She showed us her work, experiments with layering and mirroring of images, and works that used projection in space as part of sculpture. Around the same time I saw Tony Oursler's video sculptures *Eyes* (1996) at the van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, spheres suspended in space with eyeballs projected onto them. Another work I noted was Nalini Malani's *Hamlet*

8 To speak with Bolter and Grusin, I *remediate* the medium of drawing and oral narration of memories by integrating them into the video installation, achieving some transparency when apparently letting the viewer witness the creation of the memory before their eyes. Bolter and Grusin (2000) p.30.

9 For instance: Douglas Gordon, *24 Hour Psycho* (1993), Tacita Dean, *Disappearance at Sea* (1996) Eija-Liisa Ahtila, *Consolation Service* (1996-99), Pierre Huyges, *L'Ellipse* (1998), *The Third Memory* (1999), Stan Douglas, *Overture* (2001).

10 The work comprised of a long narrow corridor of projections at either sides. Viewers walking through the corridor triggered video images of people approaching and retreating.

*Machine* (2000) which she installed at the WWVF in Amsterdam. The work spread across the floor as well as over all the walls of the gallery.

In all these works the experience of projection was much more immediate than I knew from the cinema. Projections extended the sense of space, layered images and time, and spread over three-dimensional screens. Oursler's time-stream introduced me to a history of projection in which these attitudes had been applied and tested in the past.<sup>11</sup> The time-stream lists events in the history of the projected image from disparate fields such as optical science, spiritualism, and Vaudeville entertainment. To me, the ambivalence of projection as a material made it attractive for sculpture.

Let me be more specific about my own work. It is, as already indicated, a quasi-documentary spatial organisation of images, objects, sounds, and narratives. The dialectical confrontation of these elements is intended to capture the observer into the immediate aesthetic event and, at the same time, to produce a reflection about its meaning. For example, a cockfight, as they take place in South East Asia, Central America or Indonesia, together with its typical sounds is projected onto the 'sublime' classical sculpture of the Nike of Samothrace. I confront the viewer with the fact of victory being the result of blood-shed, cruelty, and gain-seeking [*Victory*, 2004]. I have never felt an urge, or the need for that matter, to interpret my work: you experience what *you* experience. Rich countries have always attracted migrants from poor regions, from ancient Rome to the United States. When I project young South Asian men talking about their wishes to emigrate to the US onto randomly stacked cardboard boxes, the viewer becomes intuitively aware of the utopian character of such wishes and of the sweet dreams they produce nevertheless [*No place like America*, 2008]. I try to avoid unreflected commiseration by repeatedly



Image 6: Sophie Ernst, *Lightwalking*, performance, de Fabriek, Eindhoven, 1999.

11 Tony Oursler, *Timestream*, internet timeline of the moving image, MOMA (2001) <http://www.moma.org/interactives/projects/2001/timestream/> (accessed on 15.2.2016).

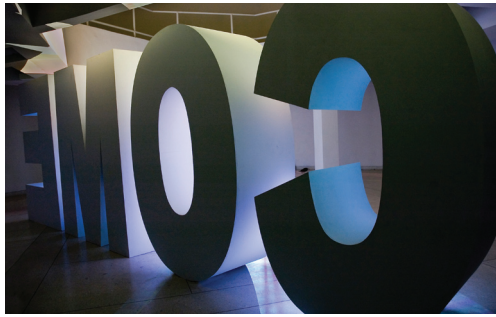


Image 7. 8: Sophie Ernst, *Jannat*, video installation, Alhamra Art Center, Lahore, 2006.



referring to the interface.<sup>12</sup> If a Palestinian writer tells the story of his home left during the Naqba<sup>13</sup> and is plotting the floor plan, I do not show his face, but only his drawing hands thus distancing the narrative from the all too natural direct sympathy [*Home*, 2006-2012].

In all of these and other works, I use projections to visualize the dialectical confrontation of the moving image with its screen, gesturing to historical events, real-world objects, previous artistic representations, and personal stories. What we get is a new narrative linking different historical periods, different regions of the globe, and different personal experiences. Projection as a ‘language’ is an intricate medium. As a user of this ‘language’, it took me a long time to understand its ‘semantics’ and its ‘grammar’. When I started to work as an artist some fifteen years ago, my approach was rather naïve being enthralled by the immediate effect of a light projection [*Lightwalking*, 1999-2000]. In the course of time, I became aware of the manifold expressive possibilities of light in space. Its demonstrative use is much older than film or video.

In order to trace different techniques, different applications, and different effects and associations, I have gone into the history of projection. Quite early, projection was used to astonish, to surprise, to overwhelm. In a similar vein, I have projected paradise-like images, as you may see them on South-Asian trucks, underlayed, however, with the sound of military aircraft, onto very large plywood letters C-O-M-E arranged in an inviting perspective [*Jannat*, 2006]. Later on, the functions of projection were secularised “ter lering en vermaak”, to educate and entertain, of which today’s cinema and power-point are obvious examples. At the same time, projection became independent as a medium in art.

It is as such that I think projection has to be studied. Not only its instrumental properties, but also the manner in which it can be used as a medium in artistic praxis. In extension of my occupation with visions of paradise and utopias, I have interviewed madrassa<sup>14</sup> scholars on their idea of heaven. Their faces are projected onto the classical

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12 The interface is the boundary between medium and viewer; i.e. paint on canvas, projection screen, computer windows, a touch pad. Or as Illingworth and Pyle define: interfaces refer to the “common boundaries ‘between two systems, devices, or programs’”. Gane and Beer (2008) p. 53

13 Naqba in Arabic literally means disaster, refers to the exodus of the Palestinians in 1948.

14 Madrassa in Arabic means any kind of school, here: Islamic religious school.

heads of the *Dying Gauls*.<sup>15</sup> The first approach was purely visual: the two types of heads fit extremely well [*Dying Gauls*, 2007]. May we hypothesize from this fit a similar existential situation over more than 2000 years? Any scientific method of testing such a hypothesis would be at a loss. The suggestive layering of projection sets the viewer thinking.

Next to an historical analysis, my thesis explores the expressive possibilities of projection which we find in the dichotomy of *empathic immersion* and *critical augmentation*.<sup>16</sup> Most art works exhibit a combination of both empathy and criticism, but the one or the other may be preponderant. When I ‘augmented’ the monument of Queen Victoria in Wakefield with a loud-hailer and let her apologize for imperialism [*Silent Empress*, 2012], the onlooker had little opportunity to ‘immerse’ himself in the feelings of the subjugated peoples. He was assumed to be knowledgeable about the facts. The objective of the *Silent Empress* and *Victory* are rather similar: to confront memorials of victory and domination with the implications for the victims. The critical confrontation by way of augmenting projection of images and sound can produce, however, quite different reactions: the viewer of *Victory* is irritated; the viewer of *Silent Empress* is provoked, which adds a performative dimension to this work, namely the annoyed intervention of the city administration.<sup>17</sup>

When I embarked on the present research, I was curious to find out more about an image tradition beyond the field of art history. I asked why projections are always experienced cinematically, suspending one’s disbelief?<sup>18</sup> I looked for historical examples of projection used in a sculptural way. By sculptural I mean projections

15 The sculptures of the *Dying Gauls* (Epigonos, 1st century BC) were commissioned in commemoration of the victory of the Greek over the Galatians, Celts from Asia Minor. They are part of a larger group of defeated enemies made up of Gauls, Amazons, giants and Persians. Unique in the representations of these enemies of the Greek is that they were depicted without a triumphing victor. They can be seen as defeated but heroic warriors.

16 An interesting link can be made here to the concepts of immediacy (it suggests a unified space and makes the act of representation transparent) and hypermediacy (it offers a heterogeneous space and makes acts of representation visible). Bolter and Grusin (2000) p. 34. A significant discrepancy between augmentation and hypermediacy is that augmentation, in my reading, is space based.

17 Council chiefs not amused by art installation, The Sun, 2 July, 2012. <http://cda.uat-thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/4406683/Council-chiefs-not-amused-by-artinstallation.html> (accessed on 15.2.2016).

18 Also Bolter and Grusin observe: “The logic of immediacy has perhaps been dominant in Western representation, at least from the Renaissance until the coming of modernism, while hypermediacy has often had to content itself with a secondary, if nonetheless important, status. Sometimes hypermediacy has adopted a playful or subversive attitude, both acknowledging and undercutting the desire for immediacy.” Bolter and Grusin (2000) p. 34.

that expand into space, not simply become visible on a flat screen. To emphasize the difference, I categorize projections as either immersive or augmentative. The terms immersion and augmentation can mean many things in different contexts. In what follows I will use them strictly as technical terms. I understand immersive projections as *screen based* projections presenting a secondary (cinematic) reality, whereas augmentations are *space based* projections, mapping an image onto space. Without doubt all projections need a *screen* to materialize and *space* to be experienced in. What I refer to here are two different attitudes towards space and screen. An immersive projection will emphasize the virtual space of the projection over the viewers space, an augmentation is a *mixed reality* of both virtual and material space. At the level of experience, immersive projections may solicit suspension of disbelief and evoke an empathetic response, whereas augmentations will tend to make the familiar strange and could create a critical distance.<sup>19</sup> The distinction reverberates Bertolt Brecht's theory of *Verfremdung* (distancing). These findings made me address my artistic practice in a new way.

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19 In the course of my research I formulated a third response. Augmentation can also be experienced as 'magical' in the sense of an analogical demonstration which is a magical symbol visualizing the invisible. For instance, as is the case of mobile devices, online applications augmenting our everyday experiences.

