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The magic of projection : augmentation and immersion in media art

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Epilogue

Artistic Practice

Image 89: Louis Wain, *A Magic Lantern Lesson*, *The Sketch Periodical*, March 14, 1894, p. 364.

“The question, then, is this: is the enjoyment of art even possible without empathy, or in any event on a basis other than empathy? What could such a new basis offer us?”³⁸⁶

Bertolt Brecht (1939)

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386 Brecht (2014) p. 143.

When I made Queen Victoria speak, it was too strange for the local council members of Wakefield. With the interjection I intended ‘the beholder look up’. They looked up alright and thought “it was an odd, bizarre and ludicrous thing to do”.³⁸⁷ The local politicians in Wakefield experienced the sound-tag as an insult. It was not my intention to solicit empathy by putting words into Queen Victoria’s mouth, the intervention was intended as a provocation. Possibly some viewers did not agree with my point of view, nevertheless, they experienced the situation as a critical augmentation.

It is possible to describe projection art as a dismantling of media illusions and the cinematic screen or, quite the reverse, as a cinematic immersion. I am not interested in questions pertaining to the cinematic. Rather, I look at projection as a layering of space with virtual images. I hope to have demonstrated how this layering diffuses the boundaries of reality and illusion. Our imagination is shaped by all kinds of projections. I have described projections as sculptural, immediate, performative, magical, contradictory, as a social practice, consumer product, or a political act. I have distinguished two basic attitudes to projection: immersive and augmentative. Immersive projection presupposes a *willing suspension of disbelief*. Technology is often obscured or hidden. Augmentations make the invisible visible within an existing context. The projected image is inserted as a possibility into an existing situation. The distinction between immersion and augmentation has led me to look at two qualities projection can have: either empathetic or distancing.

Immersion evokes a sense of empathy. An immersion renders the screen (projection interface) transparent and increases our emotional involvement. We tend to ignore the presence of the projection technology and experience that which is materially absent as present, thus giving primary belief to the secondary image world. We exchange the conscious for the imaginary, and enter from a realm of belief into a realm of disbelief. The immersing artwork must create the illusion of totality, the “semblance of truth”: it is total real life else we would not suspend our disbelief. Augmentation on the other hand can be seen as a method to distance the viewer from what she sees. It brings together the real and virtual by expanding the screen with a projection. An augmentation is a ‘mixed reality’. The augmenting artwork is selective as to the aspects of reality it wants to represent

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³⁸⁷ Wakefield Express, Saturday 30 June 2012. <http://www.wakefieldexpress.co.uk/news/local-news/queen-victoria-is-not-amused-by-gagging-in-wakefield-1-4695663> (accessed on 20.11.2015).

and to put at critical scrutiny. This is not a question of belief or disbelief of realism, but of deliberate “research”. In a similar vein, science does not tell us what *is* reality, but only what we can *say about* reality. By augmenting we gain understanding through *making strange* (alienation or distancing). I distinguish between *magical* and *critical augmentations*. The distancing effect, Bertolt Brecht’s ‘*Verfremdungs-Effekt*’, Shklovsky’s ‘*ostranenie*’, turns a familiar object from something ordinary, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking and unexpected. However, I do not think that augmentations are always critical. Before Enlightenment augmentations were *analogical demonstrations*, magical symbols visualising invisible, and engaged the recipient empathically. Also today, the media augmentations of our smart devices are magical symbols. They alienate us and commodify our lives.

On the whole the distinction between empathetic immersion and critical distancing is not new. As I have mentioned earlier, Brecht made a division between dramatic and epic theatre. His idea refers back to Schiller’s debate with Goethe on epic and dramatic poetry.³⁸⁸ Schiller wrote that ‘dramatic action’ moves in front of our eyes, whereas ‘epic action’ appears to invite our movement. He elaborates on this significant difference: while immersed in dramatic action the viewer is tied to the presence (‘*sinnliche Gegenwart*’), there is no space for imagination or reflection. Unlike dramatic theatre, an epic action lets the viewer move about according to her subjective inclination – it allows for pauses, anticipation and sidesteps.³⁸⁹ My interpretation of the distinction between dramatic and epic action is the opposition I drew between immersive and augmenting projections.

To an amenable audience projections can be deceptive. Horkheimer and Adorno observed that media are not neutral or benign. Culture industry offers and we, people with leisure, accept.³⁹⁰ We may be more literate today when it comes to media, yet, Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s observations about media in relation to power remain valid. New augmentation technologies are emerging as products of the culture industry, they appear to give consumers an active role in the process of generating ‘clouds of information’. To the industry, technology is of no interest unless it becomes an ‘object of desire’, or rather an object of demand

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388 Schiller (1881) 392.

389 Schiller (1881) 392.

390 Adorno, Horkheimer (1997) p. 124.

creating profit expectations.³⁹¹ Media scholar Mark Bolas even concludes from his research of mixed reality that we have come to prefer the virtual world and “tune away from the real world”.³⁹² Why do we tune into the virtual? It appears to offer something useful to us in way of information and experience.

How do we experience projections? I have asked this question at the onset of this book and have looked at contemporary art, image theory, media history and stories. As artist I ask this question and look for answers with each work I make. In my sculptural works, I have used projections both as immersion and augmentations, aiming at either compassion or irritation. Projection can make the hidden visible. The hidden can be an interface (Anna Anders), the inner self (Tony Oursler), the socially marginal (Krzysztof Wodiczko), the architecture of power (Aernout Mik), or intimacy (Janet Cardiff).

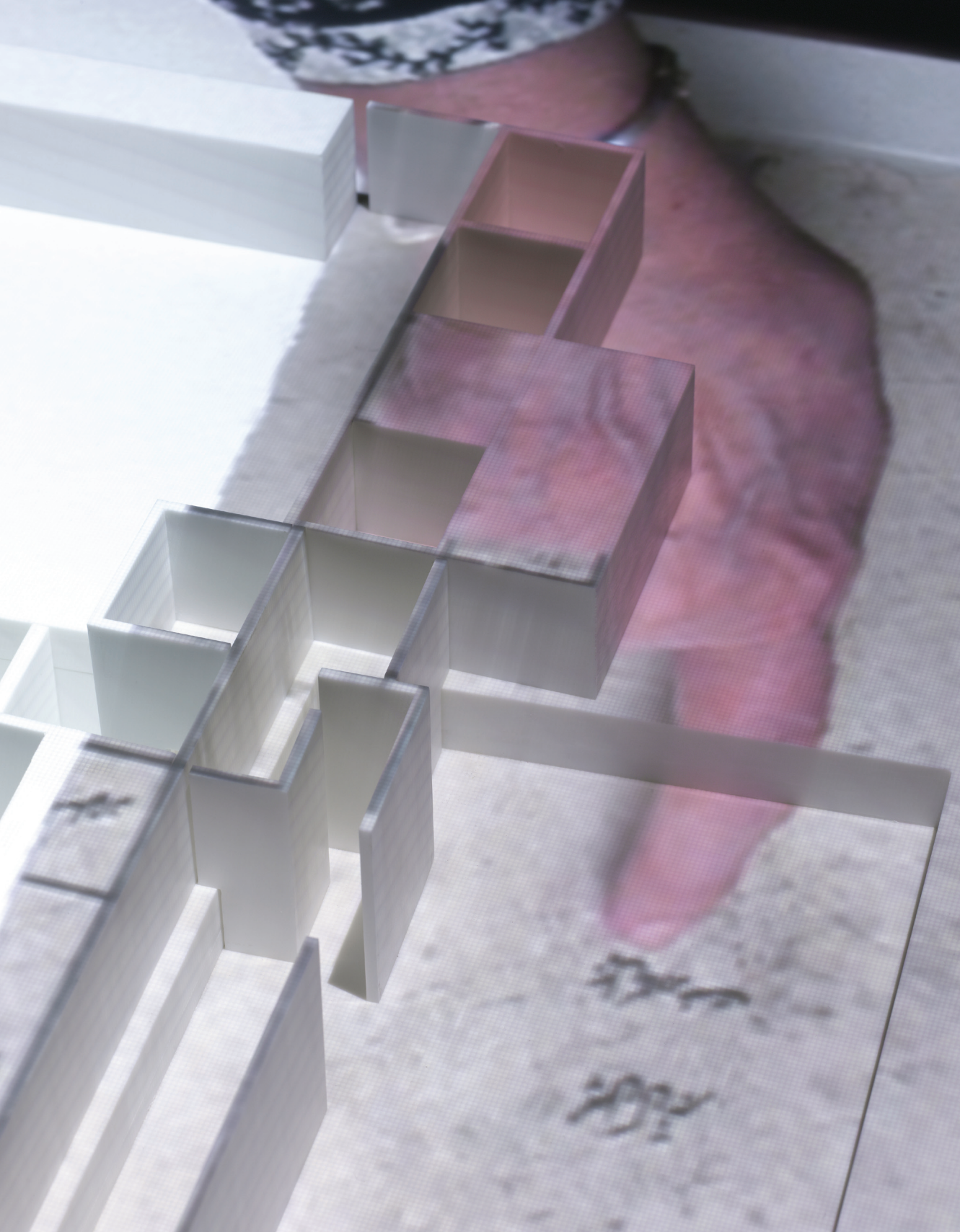
What is the relation between my theoretical findings and my artistic work? With my projections I look for layers of memories in spaces. Memory means being mindful. Mindful means being aware. A memory of a space could mean being aware of certain qualities of that space. The sound-tagging of the Victoria statue in *Silent Empress* was intended to reveal memories of a colonial past. The question asked was, what if Queen Victoria were to apologise? When the statue answers a situation arises. *HOME* (2006-2012) reconstructs spaces through layers of memories. For this project I collected over 100 hours of video material documenting personal stories of migration. In places like Karachi, Bombay, Birzeit, Tel Aviv, London and Lahore I talked to writers, artists, historians, architects about their biographical memories connected to a particular house.³⁹³

Artist Iftikhar Dadi summed up the project as follows: “*The HOME project can now be thought of in several registers: an oral history archive; a personal biography of intellectuals; an act of translation across visual media; and the larger questions this body of work continues to evoke, preventing any sense of easy closure of historical injuries lodged in memory that continue to have real effects. In this sense, the open-ended inquiry enabled by HOME has a structural analogy to the nature of its material – memories do not remain safely in the past but overflow as existential*

391 Ibid.

392 Computer scientist Steven Feiner says unless technology is an object of desire “it will not take off”. Faculty Summit 2012, Microsoft Research Connections <http://research.microsoft.com/apps/video/default.aspx?id=169813> (Accessed on 20.10.14).

393 Ernst (2012).



*dilemmas into the present, just as HOME cannot be circumscribed by one location or in particular material forms.*³⁹⁴

In the *HOME* videos, showing hands drawing floor plans, are mapped onto architectural models. It places the viewer into the projection beam; the hands of the protagonists are layered onto the hands of the viewer. The drawings appear and disappear while the protagonists describe the spaces and ask questions: What do we choose to remember and how? Are memories inventions and when is remembering political? Where is the line between nostalgia and memory?³⁹⁵



Also in *No Place Like America* (2007-2010) the viewer is immersed into projections. The subject of the work is economic migration. Like in *HOME*, the videos are mapped onto a nondescript white structure (in this case cardboard boxes). The projection shows intimate living spaces of the portrayed men. The sound track adds a further space description; the protagonists imagine their life in America.

The works I described have a layering of projections into space in common. The difference between the approaches is that *HOME* and *No Place Like America*

394 Dadi (2012) p. 17.

395 Ernst (2012).

are immersive and solicit empathetic responses, whereas the *Silent Empress* and *Victory* (2004), the work described in the introduction, is aimed at creating a critical distance.³⁹⁶ Empathy and critical distance are responses to immersion respective augmentation. Nonetheless, the works all are propositions, possibilities projected into space. The created situations are experimental designs testing questions such as: What do we choose to remember and how? Are memories intimate inventions or is remembering political? Is it possible to draw a line between nostalgia and memory? What if we could re-enter imagined spaces? What is real, what is projected? How can an object of the imagination be real? Like a ventriloquist's dummy, projections magically reveal an aspect that is inherently present in an object. The dummy says unspoken things the ventriloquist would never say. The ventriloquist oversteps boundaries through his dummy to provoke a reply from his audience. In *HOME*, as a viewer I take the place of the speakers. I imagine their presence by watching their drawings materialise. Judging from the visitors comment book at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park, viewers identified with the stories and the work triggered personal recollections. The augmentation of the *Silent Empress* reveals something invisible or unspoken about the object. The viewers responded with disapproval and their objections resulted in censoring. Both works are rethinking social and political conditions. The former work by creating a situation, the latter by changing an existing situation.

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396 At the exhibition *HOME*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park (2012) a comment book was kept which documented this.



