

## **Chris Meigh-Andrews, Sculptural Video Installations: 1989-1995**

### **1. Video Installation: Relationships between Images & Space**

Margaret Morse examines the nature and functions of video installation, speculating on some of the most fundamental questions raised in relation to what she considers "undoubtedly the most complex art form in contemporary culture".<sup>1</sup>

Morse's analysis of video installation presents the notion of an art form that can never be liberated from the act of production, pointing out that the gallery-dependent installation is in stark contrast to 'commodity media' such as painting or sculpture in which the museum represents the ultimate validation. Installations are by their nature, impermanent and ephemeral and never completely disengaged from their original location. The gallery space is simply the 'ground' for the installation- the sculptural objects and/or structures, their placing, and the televisual images must be experienced directly through the physical activities and presence of the spectator. Unlike performance, the artist is deliberately not present, leaving the gallery visitor to 'perform' the work. Video installation is emphatically *not* proscenium art, an attribute it shares with other non-commodity art forms that include performance art, earth works and expanded cinema. It is important to note, however, that although video installations share much with other so-called "non-commodity" art forms, in recent years there has been a particularly significant commodification of video installation work.

The artist's activities in the gallery are the final stage in a series of actions that includes planning and logistics, funding applications and innumerable organisational and practical considerations that both hamper spontaneity and prevent improvisation. Nevertheless, the inevitable risks involved in realising the work in the gallery space create a tension, and Morse identifies this gap between the conceptualisation of the work and the realisation of an idea or proposal as an installation as being at the heart of the work's cultural significance. Thus the video installation is seen as an experiment in the representation of culture:

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Morse, "Video Installation Art: The Body, the Image and the Space-in-Between", *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, ed. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, Aperture, 1990, p. 154.

*...a new disposition of machines that project the imagination onto the world and that store, recirculate and display images... (presenting) a fresh orientation of the body in space and a reformulation of visual and kinaesthetic experience.*<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on the simile of Plato's cave, an imaginary space in which the spectator is separated and removed from that which is being watched, Morse discusses the video installation as a work in which the visitor is surrounded by the physical present- the 'here and now', engaging with a spatial experience which is grounded in an actual, rather than an illusionistic space.

*The underlying premise of the installation appears to be that the audio-visual experience supplemented kinaesthetically can be a kind of learning not with the mind alone, but with the body itself.*<sup>3</sup>

Video installations have from the outset been mixed media- CCTV, combined with pre-recorded video, slide and film projections, sound and photography, often containing more than one tense simultaneously. Morse suggests that the key to distinguishing between installations may be to determine whether the spectator is expected to engage in two and three-dimensional spatial worlds, or remain in 'real' space. All installation is ultimately 'interactive'- the viewer is presented with a kind of variable narrative of spatial and representational possibilities that s/he must negotiate.

In my own video installation work, I have been interested in notions in which this distinction is only useful insofar as it is perceived that the work embodies both approaches, often simultaneously. My sculptural video installations made in the period between 1990 and 1995 often require that the spectator moves between the illusionism of the two dimensional image and the gallery space in which the work is sited.

### **Eau d'Artifice (1990)**

Commissioned to develop a large scale piece for the exhibition "Visions and Transmissions" at the Harris Museum in Preston, I decided to extend ideas which began with the making of *An Imaginary Fountain* a triple-channel, 9 monitor installation I had made the previous year.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

<sup>4</sup> *An Imaginary Fountain* was presented as part of the exhibition "External Affairs", Canada House, London, Sept. 1989.

*Eau d'Artifice* was originally conceived as a video wall 'in the round'. The main sponsor of the exhibition, Samuelsons Communications, had offered access to video wall technology- the loan of the necessary hardware and software plus the programming expertise. My proposal was to construct a unique video wall, expanding the nine monitor *Imaginary Fountain* of the previous year into a circular structure of thirty five identical screens stacked in seven concentric rings of diminishing size. Thus the bottom row comprised of a circle of eight monitors, the subsequent seven, the next six, and so on. <sup>5</sup>

In the original plan the image sources would be programmed to change in a cyclic and fluid manner, electronically imitating the cascading patterns of water in a "real" fountain. In the final event, however, internal problems at Samuelsons forced them to withdraw the video wall programming technology. Rethinking my ideas for the piece, I retained the installation structure, displaying four separate synchronised image sequences, dividing the circular pyramid formation of monitors into four zones. Thus the four image-sequences would correspond to the components of a fountain with a 'source' at the top, two separate cascading sections, and a 'pool' at the bottom. Planning a kind of colour 'narrative' for the sequences, the fountain images would run through a visual cycle- a compressed 'day', in which the fountain began in the 'cool' light of the early morning, later lit with warm daylight, shadows moving around to reach a red sunset, after which the water spout was shut off, allowing the pool to settle revealing the sculptured classical face of the spout reflected in its still water.

This change to the formal intentions of the piece led me to carefully consider the question of the spaces between the screens; as apparent movement down from the top of the fountain to the pools became something that occurred in the mind of the spectator rather than through the agency of computer technology. The illusion was now of a different order, as there was now no sequential movement from screen to screen, simply the illusion of movement down the fountain structure. What was initially a set-back and a disappointment turned into an opportunity to re-think issues about the nature of the illusion, and the spectator's complicity in it's construction. The technologically-driven video wall would have been more spectacular, but less 'participatory'. I decided that the tension in my new video fountain should be centred on this relationship between the

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<sup>5</sup> The seventh row, which was the top, should have had two monitors, making a total of thirty five, but for practical reasons a single monitor was used.

audience and the work, and that all the technology should be as visible as possible, presented as an integral part of the work.

An important aspect of this audience participation was physical, or sculptural. From a reading of the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I had become interested in the notion that perception was a bodily process - "an intertwining of vision and movement." In "Eye and Mind" Merleau-Ponty wrote:

*I have only to see something to know how to reach it and deal with it, even if I do not know how this happens in the nervous machine. My mobile body makes a difference in the visible world, being part of it; that is why I can steer it through the visible. Conversely it is just as true that vision is attached to movement. We see only what we look at. What would vision be without eye movement?* <sup>6</sup>

My decision to concentrate on video installation was centred on a desire to explore and develop the sculptural and tactile aspects of image-based technology that I felt were implicit in the video medium. The move away from screen-based video tape had been prompted partly by an interest in developing strategies for engaging the viewer more actively in the perceptual process- to encourage an active awareness. The idea for an 'in the round' video wall had been one facet of that strategy; I hoped to encourage the viewer to literally 'take a walk around the work', and my decision to present the technical equipment- the playback decks, cables etc., was part of the same approach.

In order for the four image-sequences to provide the participatory illusion of the 'fountain', they needed to remain synchronised, and as each video player had to rewind every hour (the maximum duration of the 'U-matic' source tapes) the playback decks were electronically 'locked' together using a newly available, custom-built device called a "synch-starter".

The synch-starter, originally made for the exhibition of multi-screen work at Montevideo in Holland, was first used in the UK during the 1989 Video Positive festival in Liverpool. Able to accurately synchronise up to seven video players using the control-track (a series of timing pulses recorded onto the tape used during editing) of the U-matic system, this device opened up a new set of possibilities for multi-screen work, and my

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<sup>6</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", James M. Edie, ed. *The Primacy of Perception*, North-Western University Press, 1964, p. 162.

subsequent installations from this period all used it to ensure accurate timing between screens.

The use of shifting colour changes refers back to *Field Study*, an installation I made in 1981, but in *Eau d'Artifice* the use of these chromatic shifts is less formal, used for distinctly 'narrative' reasons. This narrative exists only in the temporal dimension, and is only revealed by watching the work for some time. My intention with this temporal illusion was to reinforce the idea of the work as a total 'shape'. It becomes a 'fountain' in the viewer's mind through two related perceptual processes; the viewer fills in the space between one screen and the next, completing the flow between the screens, and the viewer sees the illusion of the fountain evolve. Significantly, it is also an aspect of the work that only exists in its performance and not something that comes across in any documentation of the work.

The colour changes in *Eau d'Artifice* were all accomplished by controlled lighting and the use of filters during the shooting rather than in post-production. In this sense the work anticipates my later interest in the nature and properties of light as part of an investigation into notions of flow and flux. But *Eau d'Artifice* grew most directly from the concerns and ideas that surfaced through the making of an earlier single screen video tape *The Stream* (1988), as is clear from a statement written for the Harris exhibition:

*The idea of an electronic fountain connects to my interest in using images and sounds which parallel the video and audio signals themselves, which are, in essence, streams of flowing electrons travelling along the cables from their source to the display which forms the final images and sounds we see on the screens and hear from the speakers. This in turn can be understood to have a further parallel to the flow of human thought, moving from the perceiving receptors of eye and ear to the continuous movement of ideas through the mind.*

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Having discovered the potential of the synch-starter for accurate multi-screen installation work, and interested to further explore the participatory possibilities opened up by the imaginary space between screens, I developed a proposal for a new work that would encourage audiences to engage with fluid movement across the gallery space.

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<sup>7</sup> Chris Meigh-Andrews, "Eau d'Artifice: Some Notes and References to Ideas Behind the Work", Harris Museum, Preston, Nov. 1990.

### **Streamline (1991)**

The proposal for *Streamline* stressed the potential physical interactions between the audience and the work. I wanted to continue exploring ideas about movement across screens, and slender 'narratives' that could be expressed through this temporal dimension that I considered to be an aspect of the formal 'shape' of the work. I was also particularly interested in questioning relationships between technology and nature, exploring notions of the 'natural' and the 'artificial', and with the idea of bringing aspects of the landscape into a gallery space.

The piece was conceived to cross an entire gallery floor, encouraging visitors to cross the space following the motion across the monitors. A bridge seemed an apt device, as it had both a metaphoric and a practical dimension; serving as a viewing platform and a way of crossing the room. It also reinforced the landscape concept and linked with the sub-theme of communication; the 'bridge-building' implied by the message between male and female, between one side and the other. It also suited my taste for symmetry, simultaneously crossing the centre of the line of monitors and connecting the two halves of the space created by the bisecting line of screens.

If the synch-starter had been important to the synchronising of the four tape sources in *Eau d'Artifice*, it was crucial to the functioning of *Streamline*. The movement from screen to screen relied on exact and consistent timing. The nine channels of video needed to stay in synch in order for the work to function.

Although proposed for a gallery space, it was first shown in a public space, commissioned by the Bluecoat Gallery and exhibited at Mercury Court, Liverpool in August-September 1991.<sup>8</sup>

*Streamline* consists of nine very accurately edited tapes, each looping a cycle of approximately 4 minutes. The tapes are timed so that when the image of a paper boat launched at one end of the line of monitors by a pair of female hands it is seen to move across the line of screens to be retrieved by a pair of male hands at the other end. Once this cycle is complete, the image on the monitors 'freezes', and the cycle reverses, the image of the launching female hands appearing at the opposite end of the line of

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<sup>8</sup> *Streamline* was later exhibited in a gallery at the Media Arts Festival in Osnabruck, Germany, in 1993.

monitors and the cycle beginning again, this time moving across the line in the opposite direction. This forward-reverse action of launching, flowing across the line of screens and retrieving continues until the sixty minute tape has played through, then the tapes rewind and restart, and the process begins again.

Structurally, the work is based on a chain of interrelated loops. Each tape contains edited loops of a specific timed sequence, the entire line of monitors operates as a loop, continually repeating a forward-backward motion. (The image-sequence never goes backwards but has been electronically 'flipped' in post-production, so that the same sequences were seen to move in the opposite direction.) Once the tapes have completed an entire one hour pass of repeating loops, the tapes rewind and replay, which involves another level of looping.

Being able to accurately synchronise nine channels of images had a profound effect on my way of thinking about the 'shape' of *Streamline*. As discussed above, when using a post-production effect such as the 'flip', which I had used before, for example in my videotapes *An Imaginary Landscape* (1986) and *The Stream* (1988), the image change was limited to a single motion within the flow of unfolding images on a single screen. Using that same image effect across a line of screens simultaneously affected the entire 'shape' of the installation. An image effect then becomes a spatial one, by virtue of the scale of the movement. There is thus an interrelationship between the moving image and movement across space- the whole line of monitors has become a kind of animated 'object' akin to kinetic sculpture.<sup>9</sup>

Working with these elements I was again aware of the close relationship to music that working with moving visual abstraction often evokes. I had graduated from 'composing' for a single performer to composing for an ensemble. In comparison to the task of a composer, I was working with a very simple structure, and the interrelationships between and across screens was very basic, but it gave me a glimpse into a potential for the medium I was making tentative first steps towards.

Although I was interested in continuing with multi-channel installation ideas, the next opportunity to make a video installation took me in a different direction. I responded to a

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<sup>9</sup> Similar perhaps in concept to the "Time-Energy Object" of the Vasulkas.

commission for a site-specific piece on the theme of "River Crossings", as it was clearly connected to some of my central concerns.

### ***Cross-Currents (1993)***

The project brief for "River Crossings", devised by Camerawork, was for site-specific lens-based works in relation to a number of designated sites along the River Thames. The potential of the Cafe Gallery in Southwark Park particularly interested me, as the description immediately identified aspects that were relevant to the concerns in my previous work:

*The Cafe Gallery in collaboration with Camerawork proposes to commission an installation for the gallery and derelict adjacent lido. The gallery is uncluttered white walls, the lido decay and nature.*

The proposal guidelines also gave me further inspiration:

*The public can visit the gallery but not the lido so the proposal must link the lido to an audience in the gallery. The lido can be used to install objects but not equipment or lighting. At the end of the gallery is a barred window which overlooks the lido, also access to the roof of the gallery can be made available for photographers/artist, a periscope for example could be installed.*

The contrast between the "white walls" of the gallery, and the "decay and nature" of the lido suggested an electronic blend of images to pull the two contrasting aspects of the site together. The empty and disused lido was very attractive, as I felt the absence of 'real' water in the lido would be a wonderful counter-point to the illusionistic water that I proposed for the gallery space. I envisaged an electronic link between the indoor and outdoor spaces that would be echoed by the relationship between the lido and the gallery via the "small barred window" referred to in the description.

My proposal was for a large-scale video sequence of a swimmer projected onto a raised platform 'floating' in the centre of the gallery space. This sequence would be interrupted periodically by a 'live' video image of the derelict lido, projected in place of the pre-recorded swimmer. The proposal was for a blending of live images of the present with pre-recorded aspects of the past, a work that brought together aspects of the interior of the gallery and its exterior surroundings, with references to the electronic and the 'real':



*Cross-Currents is concerned with temporal and spatial transitions or crossings, where inside and outside meet; where past activity is revived technologically in the present; where illusion meets concrete reality. These multiple crossings are achieved technologically and electronically through the wires that connect the two spaces. The solitary swimmer underlines this theme by repeatedly crossing the floor of the gallery, and simultaneously cross-referencing with the still images arranged sequentially around the walls.*<sup>10</sup>

In *Cross-Currents* movements across the frame were extended to include the temporal and institutional spaces, so that the two 'frames' represented in the work cut back and forth between the past and present and between the interior of the gallery and the outdoor lido. Aspects of 'nature' in the installation were presented as a force that was eradicating and transforming the exterior site through the agency of time. The live camera looking at the overgrown swimming pool was in the 'here and now', at least temporarily- the date and time displayed along with the image each time it appeared on the screen, and continuously in the gallery space on a small plinth-mounted television monitor. Significantly, the camera could also be seen 'live'. Gallery visitors could peer through the tiny gallery window through a gap that I had hacked through the mass of undergrowth between the gallery and the lido, to catch a glimpse of the deteriorating pool and the scaffolding with its mounted surveillance camera.

The videotape of the swimmer also involved the exploration of time structures. Using techniques of temporal sequence manipulation learned from my study of the American composer Steve Reich, I reversed the device he employed for *Slow Motion Music* (1968), beginning my swimming sequence in ultra-slow motion and gradually returning to normal speed in stages.

In terms of the video technology, the installation explored the potential of several special techniques. The commission budget, although not substantial (£3,000 production costs) facilitated access to high quality production facilities. The swimming sequences were shot on "Betacam", a broadcast tape format, chosen to enable the use of variable speed slow-motion in the post-production and editing process discussed above. The soundtrack was also slow-motion, and required the use of digital sound processing to reproduce the effect of the accompanying synchronised water sounds.

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<sup>10</sup> Chris Meigh-Andrews, "Proposal for Cross-Currents: An installation for the Cafe Gallery" , March, 1992

*Cross-Currents* is the first major video projection piece I made, although I had made a special projection piece for a weekend solo event at The London Film Maker's Co-op in 1992 called *Heaven and Earth*.<sup>11</sup> LCD video projectors at this time were comparatively new. Still bulky and with relatively low illumination levels they were nevertheless opening up a new potential for video installation work as they were far less costly, and much more compact and light weight than the CRT-based video projection systems that had been around since the late 1970's. The major aesthetic disadvantage of video projection was the resolution, as the 625 line image, when projected, revealed not only the lines, but the pixels, degrading the image considerably, especially when viewed from close proximity. These limitations aside, projection video opened up new possibilities for gallery installation, not least because it freed the artist from the 'box' of the television monitor with all its connotations, and because the video image was no longer restricted to a particular shape, size or aspect ratio.

The intercutting between the 'live' surveillance camera mounted on scaffolding above the lido was accomplished using a custom-made switching device, which allowed the playback deck running the swimmer tape to cut to a live 'line' input during its rewind mode. At the end of each tape cycle, timed to co-incide with the swimmer jumping forward and up towards the camera, the video playback deck switched into rewind and 'stand-by record' mode, thus displaying the camera signal fed into the line input. Once the tape had rewound, the deck switched back into 'play' mode, displaying the tape source.

### **Perpetual Motion (1994)**

The use of digital techniques for the sound track in *Cross-Currents* had raised interesting and important issues. I had become aware of the potential for video as a totally fluid and plastic medium within the digital domain. The manipulation of video sequences in *Cross-Currents* which included slow-motion and projection suggested that I needed to develop new models to enable the continued development of my work. In 1994 I was offered a residency that provided me with access to digital video. My next installation, *Perpetual Motion*, was made whilst I was the first "Resident Artist in Electronic Imaging" at Oxford Brookes University.

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<sup>11</sup> "Heaven & Earth" (1992) comprised of a series of screenings of my video tapes and a special video projection piece which was a precursor to *Perpetual Motion* (1994)

*Perpetual Motion* is in several important ways a departure from my approach to previous installation work. My first installation to use digital imaging exclusively, the image-sequences were produced using computer software and digital image processing, exploring the 'infinite' looping potential of the computer system. The work also features the use of 'renewable energy resources', drawing on ideas developed during a period of research into the production of an outdoor video installation for the Chiltern Sculpture Trail. This research project did not result in a completed installation, but produced a comprehensive feasibility study.<sup>12</sup>

*Perpetual Motion* also continues ideas consistent with my previous installation work; the tension between images on screens and the spatial relationships developed from the display apparatus in the gallery, as was the production of a sculptural dimension arising from movement across and/or between screens.

The use of 'natural' imagery and the references to natural processes in contrast and relationship to the use of technology was becoming an increasingly important theme in my work. *Perpetual Motion* draws directly on the experiences of making *Eau d'Artifice*, *Streamline* and *Cross-Currents*, but also extends ideas which surfaced in those works, refining the balance of conceptual relationships between the installation elements and the method of display.

In *Perpetual Motion* flow has become a physical experience- a wind turbine creating a flow of electricity is driven by a force of air the visitor can feel. He/she is prompted to make connections between the flowing movement of air and the flow of electricity and images by a direct physical experience that has a conceptual relationship to the ideas behind the work. This is reinforced by the arrangement of the technical apparatus responsible for the production of the images in the gallery space, and the interconnecting cables which link them in series.

The use of digital techniques was an important feature, the image-sequences produced using computer technology had, if anything, a more artificial appearance, further removed from the original source material. The flying kite and sky in *Perpetual Motion* were created by combining photographic images which had been manipulated and

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<sup>12</sup> Chris Meigh-Andrews, Catherine Elwes and John Calderbank, "Panorama: A semi-permanent outdoor video installation utilising renewable energy resources for the Chiltern Sculpture Trail: A Feasibility Study for The Arts Council of Great Britain", November, 1993.

processed in "Adobe Photoshop", and then combined and animated in "Macromind Director". These software packages facilitated the production of images with an appropriate combination of 'realism' and artificiality. The photographic qualities of the kite and sky were retained but 'treated', to resemble images from a postcard, the kite's movement was animated to give it a deliberately 'mechanical' look.

The grass sequence was shot on analogue video, digitised, slowed, and looped, so that when projected, the low resolution and jerky movement became a feature. The installation presents images of nature that were clearly manipulated and mediated- as if fragments of nature had been trapped and contained.

The equipment and devices that comprise the installation are all arranged in a logical, almost schematic way, a chain of interrelated technological objects across the gallery space. At one end of a gallery 'wind machine' (a large industrial fan) fills the space with a stream of air and sound, causing a wind turbine at the other end of the space, to turn rapidly, producing DC power. Visitors can follow the power cables from the turbine up into the ceiling where a small colour video monitor is displaying the kite flying sequence described above. A ceiling-mounted LCD projector, produces a rectangular patch of waving digitised grass on the gallery floor in the area beyond the wind turbine.

*Perpetual Motion* has been staged a number of times, with arrangements varied in relation to particularities of the gallery space. For example, at the Saw Gallery in Ottawa where the exhibition space was narrow and wedge-shaped, the wind machine was floor-mounted at the narrow end of the space, which allowed the air currents to be funnelled outwards across the gallery with the apparatus set up in a logical sequence in a progressive line across the space. Visitors entered the exhibition space from the wide end, first encountering the piece head-on, and were encouraged to walk through the piece, negotiating the elements as they progressed towards the wind source.<sup>13</sup>

At the Castlefield Gallery in Manchester, which has a square exhibition space, the wind machine was wall-mounted in one corner, the equipment arranged diagonally across the space. Visitors encountered the piece from the side, thus reading the elements from left

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<sup>13</sup> Saw Contemporary Arts Centre, Ottawa, Canada, Aug.-Sept. 1994

to right, and were therefore less inclined to engage with the elements in a sequential fashion.<sup>14</sup>

Another concern that continued to be significant from previous installation work was the relationship of perceptive thought to the decoding and reading of the work. I was still very interested in finding ways to produce awareness in the viewer of the perceptual process at work during a viewing of the installation, and to make him/her conscious of this as part of the function and intention of the installation. This is summed up clearly in the proposal for *Perpetual Motion*:

*A major theme in my installation work is flow- the flow of information, of thought, and of matter, and the constant flux of time that binds them. Crucial to this is the notion of the interdependence of these concepts, and the possibility of a consciousness that can move freely across them. I am concerned with making work that explores and celebrates this constant flux by drawing attention to the process of thought, and its free ranging movement as it shifts focus.*<sup>15</sup>

In a sense, there had been a progressive development away from the ideas of 'shape' that were present in *Eau d'Artifice* and, to a lesser extent, in *Streamline*. With *Cross-Currents* I had initiated a shift towards a kind of 'schematic' approach, in which the linked elements were to be read sequentially and made to form a 'map' in the mind of the viewer rather to be read 'all at once' and so perceived as a cohesive 'whole'. The elements in *Cross-Currents* and *Perpetual Motion* still could be seen to be producing an overall conceptual 'object', but to reach that point, the viewer needed to follow a sequence, which by so doing s/he would be made conscious of the process of building the whole from its elements. My ideal was that all this should happen simultaneously, and that consequently the viewer would take away these two co-existent models in his/her mind. I think here I was trying to make my work operate simultaneously as sculpture, and as film or music. The viewer "*takes his body with him*" as I had learned from Merleau-Ponty, but as with other time-based media such as cinema or music in which the perceiver is active only mentally and/or emotionally, a memory of 'shape' is also important. Rudolf Arnheim, speaking of the relationship of memory to film wrote:

*...to understand the structure of a film or a symphony, one has to grasp it as a whole, exactly as one would the composition of a painting. It must be apprehended as a sequence, but this sequence cannot be temporal, in the sense*

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<sup>14</sup> "Back/Slash", Castlefield Gallery, Oct.-Nov. 1996

<sup>15</sup> "Proposal for Perpetual Motion", Oxford Brookes University, April 1994.

*that one phase disappears as the next occupies our consciousness. The whole work must be simultaneously present in the mind if we are to understand its development, its coherence, the interrelations among its parts.*<sup>16</sup>

Video installation is an expensive medium to work with, and being temporary, it requires a venue in order to be experienced. Consequently, subsequent to the Oxford residency, I sought various means to continue my practice, including applications for commissions and residencies. My next installation piece relevant to this research was *Vortex*, a site-specific installation made during a period as Artist-in-Residence at the Prema Arts Centre in Gloucestershire, in the summer and early autumn of 1995.

### **Vortex (1995)**

*Vortex* was designed specifically for the unusual 6-sided exhibition space at the Prema Arts Centre, in a former Georgian Chapel in rural Gloucestershire. The first floor space had an extremely high ceiling, ideally suited for floor projection. I proposed to project a large circular image of a whirlpool onto the floor and to build a special viewing platform around it, outlining a totally integrated work that would occupy the space acoustically, visually and physically.

The central video image of *Vortex* was a macro shot of a domestic drain with spiralling water, enlarged to a diameter of eight feet. Working again with Betacam because of its infinitely variable speed and reverse slow motion, the installation had an image-sequence that began at normal speed, gradually slowed down until it fully stopped, then in reverse motion gradually increased speed until it reached full speed, then forward again, and so on, in a repeating forward-reverse action loop. This variable-speed disappearing and reappearing whirlpool of water was complete with variable speed soundtrack, the audio reinforcing the shifts in tempo and direction, the slow motion sound producing a deep and menacing rumble which resonated throughout the building.

Working with the illusion of surface and depth implied by the image, I introduced a superimposed layer of electronically-generated text. These texts, created using vector-mapping techniques, provided a digitally produced perspective to match the movement and scale of the spiralling vortex of the water currents, so that the words seemed to be

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<sup>16</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, University of California Press, 1974, p. 315.

drawn into the whirlpool, reducing in size as they spiralled down into the centre of the drain and disappeared into the abyss.

This use of texts as 'image' has been an aspect of a number of single video tapes I have made previously. In *The Stream* (1988), simple texts appear at points in the flow of the tape to reinforce the idea of self-reflection and contemplation in relation to contrary states of mind: "I Am/I Am Not; I Can/I Can Not; I Will/I Will Not, The "I" as an active participant in the flow of cognition. In *The Room With a View* (1982), text was utilised to signify an autobiographical recognition of the self: "Me"; and "Me Then", etc.

In *Vortex*, the text is less personal and more connected to the idea of an abstract element in contrast to either the fluid whirlpool imagery or the spiral walkway structure:

*The texts are intended to act as a bridge between the image (the whirlpool) and the structure (the spiral walkway). The words themselves, when superimposed onto the moving video sequence, become honorary objects, floating on the surface of the image and then being submerged into the vortex itself, seemingly distorted by some gravitational forces which are made visible by the behaviour of the water. Thus I intend that the words/phrases will help to make visible the ideas within the work- to mirror the actual relationship between the video image and the original phenomena it represents. The words in Vortex occupy a distinct middle ground between experience and phenomenon, offering a simplified (and hopefully poetic) version of everyday experience- sandwiched as they are between the mind and the world.* <sup>17</sup>

The intention was to make a work which contained multiple levels of symmetry: The visual symmetry of the vortex image, which implied its 'mirror' image underneath; the intellectual symmetry of the word-image relationship; the temporal symmetry of the clock-wise and counter clock-wise movement of the video image-sequence; and the symmetrical relationship between the spiralling vortex image and the structure of the viewing platform.

*Vortex* had the largest physical structure of any work that I have made to date. Designed to enable the viewer to move around the circular whirlpool image and as she/he walked upwards to a vantage point overlooking the image, this spiral ramp started at floor level and via six steps reached a height of approximately 4 feet. As the space was in semi-darkness with only the reflected light from the whirlpool to illuminate it, the edges of the

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<sup>17</sup> "A Note on the Use of Texts in Vortex" from exhibition statement, October, 1995.

walkway were lined with reflective material, and the viewing platform had a raised guard-rail. Loudspeakers were positioned under the walkway to maximise the impact of the soundtrack.

The theme of the spiral is also meant to operate on several levels. The vortex of water and the physical movement of the spectator around the image were intended to mirror the electro-magnetic processes at work in producing (and reproducing) the video image. I wanted to suggest that the rotating action of the video recording and playback mechanism- the spiral formed by the video tape in the helical scan mechanism were exploiting the same elemental forces.

In summing up my ideas about the piece in the exhibition statement, I wanted to locate the work in a place where the imaginary world of the image and the physical space in the gallery were held together by the installation. For me *Vortex* was an attempt to occupy a kind of 'middle ground' between the total illusion of the image on the screen and the real physical presence of sculpture, with the words appearing and submerging, making transitions between these two possibilities:

*The image of the vortex represents a point of transition into an unknown place or state. the constantly disappearing water provides a visible representation of an invisible (but real) force. The texts float between the two worlds of the physical and the illusory, a part of both and yet also occupying a place of their own.* <sup>18</sup>

The video installations in the period under discussion in this essay were all primarily 'sculptural'. All were gallery based, featuring a combination of screens and sculptural structures incorporating the video equipment. In these works I attempted to construct a viewing experience which emphasized an active relationship between visual perception and physical participation, in order to encourage an awareness of the actual process of thought within the mind of the viewer, a notion that I have continued to explore and refine in later digitalprojections and site-specific installations.

Chris Meigh-Andrews, 2003.

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<sup>18</sup> from "Vortex; a Video Installation by Chris Meigh-Andrews", exhibition statement, October, 1995.



