



a certain presence + other recent work
dorsey dunn

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This is a book of ideas, and of means. It is a recording of word-based sketches from which installations both compact and expansive have sprung. And though the materials of these environments consist largely of non-literal sound, physical objects, and open space, each piece has its origin in words. In my own process, grounded as it is in the literature and language of diverse cultures, this is a natural arrangement. For if the language of words, both spoken and written, is the most complex and beautiful organization of sound we will ever experience, it makes sense to me to begin my work here, in this limitless intersection of wave and idea.

Each of the pieces documented here has had a life on the page and a parallel but not identical existence in its physical creation and exhibition.

They are close, but not the same. The translation from one to another, like any translation, involves paraphrase and adaptation. What this book provides, then, is simultaneously a visual representation of the completed works and a look at the words which gave shape to the ideas involved. The title essay is, in effect, a recollection of that movement from word to piece.

It's important to note that the pieces in this catalog live on their own. Inevitably, they share a certain presence, the influence of their maker, but they are all imbued with an access to privacy, so that others may have an experience of them which is theirs and not mine. They are generally systems in need of a subject — a participant to bring to life what is latent in the piece. This is their invitation.

The work of Dorsey Dunn takes us on a journey of discovery within ourselves. Through his dynamic installations of experiential art the artist attempts to create new levels of sensory and emotional intensity. Inspired by language, music composition, and memory in concert with artistic expression, ideas are transformed into visceral experiences. These thoughtful, immersive works of deep meaning instill a new found perception and emergence of self-realization in the viewer. Both meditative and transcendental, the work transports you to a place that is at once familiar and unknown.

Theatrical and dramatic, the installations are site-specific, with a primary concern for using the psychology of the space to produce an environment that directly influences how the work is experienced. Dunn's installations require the presence and participation of the audience. Defying the five-second law of average time spent by the viewer with an artwork, the audience must take time to acclimate to each of the environments and experience the piece.

The work challenges us to go beyond the limitations of traditional art world viewing, engaging senses other than visual. When sight is removed from the equation, other senses kick into gear to compensate, hearing suddenly becomes much more acute. The space becomes defined by the sound enveloping the audience and takes on a physical presence, redefining sound as sculpture.

With the use of basic properties such as light and sound, Dunn creates an exploratory atmosphere that raises our consciousness. Moving from a room filled with fog, white noise, and light, one is drawn into the gallery to a transitional space before entering into a completely dark room filled with a calming narrative soundscape of human breath. We suddenly become aware of how fundamental breath is to the natural human condition. Similar to the sound of silence when all we can hear is our own breath, *A Certain Presence* brings us back to before birth in utero and on to the first and last breath, leaving a memorable lasting impression.

Susan Joyce is an independent curator organizing professional exhibitions with a primary focus on art and technology. She is co-director of Fringe Exhibitions, an experimental new media art gallery in Los Angeles. Since 2001 she has been a member of Survival Research Laboratories, producing live robotic performances. Currently she is co-chair of Edgy Products an exhibition for the Inter-Society for Electronic Art (ISEA 2006).

It's 2003. San Francisco. We'd long since begun this conversation. Sipping his tea in the Canvas Gallery, Dorsey suggested that we exist primarily in the stories we tell of ourselves and that others tell of us. Sometimes we hear these stories directly. Sometimes they are overheard. And sometimes they are unspoken but narrated through the movements, expressions, and gestures of those around us.

Existence is social and identity is relational. We exist in relation to others, and in relation to our past and to our imagined future selves. There is a difference between the seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, sensational body that remembers the past and the past that is actively constructed in conscious thought, in words. Body memory is more than muscle memory. It is the physical and psychical viscera that are the substrate of lived memory, distinct from, but essential to, told memory. It is a tricky, elusive, slippery thing to capture, to evoke, or to provoke. Our active, chattering, categorizing conscious minds quickly turn visiting and revisiting sensations into stories.

The most banal examples of this wisp memory often go unnoticed, taken for granted. But sometimes they force their way into consciousness. It happened to me last night; I heard Dave Brubeck's 'Take Five'. Slight muscle tightening. Attention focus shift. Then the 'aha' moment as I remembered a night decades ago. A night that until those first notes traveled along my auditory nerve had been far from my conscious mind. Now it was right smack bang

in the center. It was like being visited by a ghost of myself, and of those who were with me that night. Dorsey's installations set the stage for this kind of visitation, and thus question the dichotomies of now and then, self and other, experience and event.

Narcissus was the beginning. Ideas explored in *Narcissus* are glimpsed in many of the pieces described in this catalog. An ambitious project conceived on a long plane flight, *Narcissus* places a lone person in a room with soft walls projected with processed images, initially of themselves and later of other visitors. Viewers outside the room see blurred visual and auditory impressions of the interior space. Playing with ideas of identity, reflection, privacy, and voyeurism, *Narcissus* underscores that time is experienced as continuous, but is remembered as stories relating discrete events. Like the eponymous Narcissus' reflection, this piece and the others in the catalog are alluring yet disturbing provocations that force us to look in the distorted mirror of our memories. In *Narcissus*, people see themselves as perhaps they have not seen themselves before. They are invited to reach into the uneven reflections they see there. Bystanders see the resultant ripples of that reaching out.

That Autumn with our tea, we talked of philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology – of Merleau-Ponty, Maurice Halwachs, Edward Casey and Wilhelm Dilthey. I was excited. An emphasis on quiet, unstructured, unscripted, visual/acoustic provocations of this kind were

strikingly different from popular visual media that take the experiencer on a journey of explicit consumption, scripted carefully by the artist. There is something soft, ephemeral, evocative, intangible, essentially limbic and not frontal lobe in the work. Something disturbing yet familiar, like the moment before you realize the reflection in a shop window is you. Emotional, not rational. This is fitting; neurological research has pointed to the role of the limbic system in remembering, and in this has underscored that memory, feeling, and emotion cannot be separated.

Fast forward to the Spring of 2006, and this catalog. Aptly named *Art Memorative**, the pieces in the catalog point to the swirling, non-linearity of remembrance as it is experienced before the story is formed and told. We also are reminded that stories we tell are only a small part of our selves. In that spirit, I will make a short digression into identity and confession. I am not trained in installation art; I am a psychologist by background. My orientation to these pieces comes from a lifelong fascination with memory and with exploration of the boundaries of my skin-encapsulated ego. Experiences that force reflection beyond, that play with the figure/ground of consciousness fascinate me – from the ‘loss’ of the conscious self in the ‘flow’ of activities like snowboarding and dancing, to moments of stillness like sitting on a beach when a thousand me’s and you’s in a million places are all present and gently wandering past my mind’s eye. But we are seldom given the space to relish these enchantments. In these works we are. The installations are clever, no doubt, but they are not self-conscious, not pretentious, not attention-seeking. They have impact whether you consider yourself an aficionado of ‘high-

brow’ art or of ‘low-brow’ culture, whether you are an artist, an enthusiast or just passing by. That is because they are essentially about you and your memory-making.

I want to go from my confession to a piece that bridges cultural (as well as personal) history and ritual in the form of Catholic confession. Inspired by the rise in blogging, *Confessional** is a commentary on the forms of self-revelation that are now commonplace in our contemporary socio-digital, disembodied, internet culture. For many bloggers their daily diaries are a form of confessional. However, a more traditional confession requires a listener, someone who can speak the path to absolution. In a confessional booth the movement and breath of the priest can be heard beyond the screen. In the landscape of bits and bytes, maybe there’s no one beyond the screen. And if there is, you cannot hear them and they may never respond. And as the number of typed confessions rises, each one risks being lost in the clamor, the cacophony, of those wishing to be heard. But then, does it matter? Is this more about the writing than the being read? Unnervingly, in *Confessional* it is your own voice, your own presence, mixed and remixed that comes bouncing back at you.

In *Confessional*, an oral form of revelation with prescribed roles for speaker and listener is transformed. The transformation offers a comment on textual, internet confessional. Many of the pieces in the catalog explore transformations of this kind, but many also uncover the processual, psychic folding of time by playing back sounds that have been recorded previously. *Inflection Loss** explores distortions in memory of place(s) via the removal of inflections

on sounds. In linguistics, inflections are markers on words that specify gender, tense, or person. Stress, pitch and tone are also inflections; here no sounds are added or changed to the root word, but the intonation and relative strength of each sound is altered regularly to convey meaning. *Inflection Loss* explores what happens when sounds are transformed to remove these inflections. It is well known in psychology that removal of stress, pitch and tone creates disturbing and sometimes incomprehensible speech. In this installation we are asked to contemplate whether erasure of inflection in recorded sounds leads to a memorial confusion. We are invited to wonder whether the sounds we are hearing have their root in an earlier experience we were part of. Or are these sounds from a different time? With inflections transformed or removed, are the sounds we are listening to ghostly, distorted presences from before or are they entirely new entities? The point is we cannot fully recognize the sounds as having been made by us, but there are familiar traces that nuzzle. In those recognitions we are reminded that we leave our traces wherever we go. Usually these are physical, visual traces; it is unusual for sonic traces to come back to us. We are invited to contemplate what the original sounds were like, and in that to consider what it is to capture ‘reality’. In these days of obsessive collecting and recording, this is a good question to ask.

Staying with the theme of translation, *Paraphrase* addresses the translation of the visual into the auditory, and *FE* transforms revelations in a small group conversation into public performance. Visitors to *Paraphrase* are invited to see sound. They are invited to sculpt a soundscape using the

skills of visual capture. In *FE*, hearing the sampled fragments from a conversation between friends jumbled and mixed feels like eavesdropping. The fragments are not about getting a ‘sense’ of the conversation, what matters is the feeling of the conversation. The intimate nature of the content reminds you of your place in the act of listening. The speakers do not know you are overhearing them. Personally, listening to the voices evoked memories of childhood. The undulating voices and tones reminded me of falling asleep to the sound of adult voices in the next room. They reminded me of the liminal space between dreaming and waking when I hovered away from my body and floated around the edges of the conscious and unconscious. Who am I in this space, and whose are the voices? What is their relationship to me at the center of this soundscape? Should I be listening?

*Resonances** most clearly steps into the space of forgetting, reminding us that memory as a concept is meaningless without the complementary concept of forgetting. Sometimes forgetting is a protection, sometimes it is good to forget, sometimes our minds and bodies, as in amnesic incidents, erase that which is difficult. *Resonances* explores decay, takes us to a sonic twilight of fading memories. Perhaps that is why I found *Resonances* the saddest piece, the most uncomfortable. When a name, a face, a place from the past floats into my mind, there is a twinge of sadness that they had not been consciously with me in the moments before. As they step into the psychic space, I become aware of them, but also the gap they have just filled. This reflex betrays my prejudice for remembering, for savoring things dear. One can see easily how

rituals of everyday remembering are constructed to actively keep the past present, because left on their own memories will be like the sounds in *Resonances*, they will loop and fade and then only infrequently burp back in.

It is apt that the catalog ends with a quote from W.G. Sebald, a haunting comment on loss. Sebald, a vociferous critic of official cultures of mourning and remembering, eschewed inauthentic memory-making. His work points to literary forms within which to approach memory and remembering, forms that allow an oblique evocation of memory, of feelings — noting that when remembered directly, as facts, often memories lose their essence. In their telling, they too often become dry, dead accounts. Sebald's work reminds us that memories are active in the stories of the present, but also that the past is structured in terms of the present.

As I close I reflect that Dorsey's pieces have reminded me that people construct their identities actively — these installations point to, give us space to rediscover what might have been neglected, left to the side in that identity construction. They make us look more closely; they remind us of who we were, who we are and who we thought we could have been. They are meditations on the phenomenology of existence. They are about recovering something of what happened... and recovering something of the rememberer in the process. In these fuzzy recognitions, it is one's own inner life with its fluidity of past and present that is unearthed and recognized. This is an embodied recognizing and remembering — the pieces are not simply sonic, they are architectural. The direction of the sounds matter; your body has a place, a role, in

the soundscape. These soundscapes contest the idea that the environment in which we live is a fixed and passive background; the environment is not external to human existence and independent of people's subjective experiences. The metaphors of mind-as-place and memories-as-photographs (to be retrieved whole, given the appropriate cue) need a similar dusting off. As I contemplate all these issues — active memory, the role of place/space, identity, stories, immersion in the social/physical/sonic/architectural world — I cannot help but consider the legacy of culture in body movement, posture, positioning and gesture. Our moment-to-moment positioning in space consciously and unconsciously reflects our past experiences, but also works to suggest how we fit (or don't) into now. This past in the present can be felt most keenly when we travel to new places; we strive to listen, watch and engage others so we can know whether we are behaving 'right' — that is, according to the moral and social order as it is manifested in people's movements through space. We remember other places and lessons learned previously and draw on these.

When pondering these thoughts, I recounted to Dorsey that his work reminded me of the awareness I experience when I visit Japan. That somehow, in following a chain of random (perhaps free, probably romanticized) associations, his work evokes rituals of remembering, the honoring of personal and ancestral past that seems to be part of everyday life in Japan. I recounted how, when I'm in Japan, my social and physical movements reflect a different choreography, about the ways in which remembering seems so much part of the social life of people and things there. The

description of one aspect of *A Certain Presence* in particular struck me — 'both alone and in the company of others'. This view seems less common in our Western discourse of memory processes as rational retrieval and mental

computation. He nodded, a little surprised. 'You know I grew up in Japan, don't you?' I did not. But without inserting Dorsey completely into his work, or seeing his work as a pure reflection of him, it somehow makes more sense to me now.

Elizabeth F. Churchill is a senior researcher at the Palo Alto Research Center. Her research focuses on the design of social technologies.

** This essay was originally written for the full catalog, Art Memorative. For more information on works mentioned here but not found in the following pages, please see dorseydunn.com.*

One of the oldest and most deeply ingrained of Japanese attitudes to literary style holds that too obvious a structure is contrivance, that too orderly an exposition falsifies the ruminations of the heart, that the truest representation of the searching mind is just to 'follow the brush'.

Junichiro Tanizaki

TRANSPOSITION

As a child I read many books. The discovery of language came early for me, and I lived within a world of written characters that had lives quite apart from their meanings: strings of glyphs whose shapes, sounds, and meanings arranged themselves in a strange and infinite union. The first books I can remember reading were adventure mysteries; I read many of them, carried by their hidden, urgent questing, and marveling at the effect of narrative itself, the stages of reading a book, as I would later learn, mirroring the arcing transits of so many other passages through the world. In these first acts of reading there was a pronounced effect of journey: the work enveloping the reader, lifting the mind for a period of time and almost palpably transferring it to another place. There was the exhilaration of giving oneself voluntary access to this movement, knowing that the experience could be had again simply by revisiting the text. On subsequent visits, of course, the eyes have changed. We absorb and understand according to our timeline, parsing the present through the evolving prism of our experience and the fluctuating illumination of our memory. The past, too, moves and shifts in an uncertain accord with the present. But the necessity for a transposition of the observer to

a work — of whatever kind — has remained with me. The observer must be drawn in. Through the years, the process of teasing apart the elements of that moving energy — the push/pull of the work — has been a primary preoccupation.

We say: the observer is 'moved by the work'. The phrase is bottomless, and the endless analysis of just what factors in a piece contribute to its affecting character is itself among the potential frustrations of producing work. Nevertheless, the question is essential: how has a particular work triggered more than a cerebral response? What aspects of, or triggers in the character of the work have given it 'soul' — which is to say, the means of communicating emotionally? These questions have no finite answers: their open-ended quality is one motivation to engage in the act of making. The transposition of the reader is, among other things, an effect of duration, of time spent engaged in the work, surrounded by its processes and soaking in the atmosphere of a new and evanescent place. It also may be an effect of narrative space, of archetypal association, or of mood. That these elements border on the intangible, the indefinable, is a necessary aspect of their persuasive power. Despite the knowledge of its artifice, the space to which a successful work brings its participants is quite real in effect. This is the space of the 'experiential inner dialogue', in Los Angeles artist Steve Roden's formulation, the means of creating which it is worthwhile to identify, or at least suggest. My work has been, and continues to be, an exploration of precisely this process.

INSTALLATION

The term ‘installation art’ covers a wide spectrum of forms. For my purposes, I think of installation generally as that art which incorporates the crystallizations of a medium such as painting or sculpture with the time-based movements of theater and music — within a physical space. This space may be physically well-defined, but it is nevertheless temporal. In my view, an installation makes use of all the physical aspects of a space, above all the somewhat unpredictable actions of its visitors, to produce, ultimately, a composite atmosphere of self-reflection. Put another way, my installation work is primarily concerned with the individual’s presence in a particular space, and the myriad existential possibilities suggested by that presence. An emphasis on the visitor flows directly from a concern with transposition, with reaction. The created environment serves to deliver the observer to a narrative space which discourages mere observation in favor of tangible engagement: it has its own absorbing physical reality. And it is this access to a palpable surround which differentiates installation art from other forms. Moreover, as in film, sound is frequently the unrecognized but essential power in this work, given its very strong spatial and emotional communication; this is one reason I have focused my efforts on work which uses sound at its core.

JOURNEY

How to transpose the visitor into the desired space? A narrative movement will serve to make certain connections: to sketch the parameters of a new route — journey being the foundation of narrative — is to speak to the latent nomadism in the human psyche and to rekindle an archetypal presentiment of

voyage, of difficulty, of discovery through what must of necessity be a labyrinthine passage. Every true journey shares in the irresistible iconography of the labyrinth, meaning in part that it offers both risk and reward. Further, a narrative of such passage can hold the scent of life-movement: this is the meaning of icons such as the physical labyrinth and the mandala, and it fuels their magnetism.

With this in mind, I have often worked with sight-obscured environments not just as an auditory enhancement, but as a simulation of the journeying unknown. *A Certain Presence* follows this path. The entrance to the piece is entirely obscured by fog. Inside, light sources are calibrated to provide less and less guidance as the observer travels further into the piece. Only by moving into the obscurity, by seeking what is inside, does one gain a sense of the space. Even then, the lower room of the installation is wholly dark, and the sound experience there is navigated by faint floor lighting. *Presence* is a journey downward and through; and it is made to give a sense of accompaniment in the journey. The sound fields are built upon close recordings of human breath, a breath which moves and pauses around the visitor. Thus the normally physical aspects of an installation, with its particular organization of space, vanish, and the individual is left to contend with the ether, and the world of sound. Where the recurring symbol of the labyrinth is shorthand for the individual’s interaction with the world, one’s journey through it is always tensioned by the availability and indication of some kind of path. *Presence* offers a journey of hidden directions, in which, with sight obscured, one’s encounters will be unexpected and frictionless.

RETURN

The idea of return seems built into the seasonal thought-loop of our own and many other species. To a place seen at a particular time; to a collection of people, or to one; perhaps to the imagined memory of an experience whose firm details have somewhat faded. What is interesting is that the idea of return combines both remembrance and intuition. Return is inextricably linked to the sense of something left behind, willingly or not. This is not nostalgia, or it need not be. Return in this case is an observational awareness, the sense of a place occupied, left, and seen again. We may have a memory of a particular thought or mood that overtook us *in this very place* sometime previously. Something has been maintained during one’s absence, or resurrected with one’s arrival. References to the idea of return can be quite powerful, in that they invite an audience to participate directly — not just in a type of memory-movement which has almost certainly affected them in the past, but in the observation of that memory at work.

I might augment this notion of occupied space with the idea of bringing to life an energy, in this case sound, which has a presence in a space that our human faculties are not capable of discerning. *Inflection Loss** is an archive of sounds which pass through a room in ways we cannot hear: the sounds may be too quiet, too brief, too hidden by other sounds, or obscured in some other way. The piece, installed two weeks prior to an exhibition, regularly analyzes a brief sample of sound from the space, extracting and cataloging the dominant frequencies of the room — frequencies which visitors, their ears biased towards voices and specific events, have not heard. The installation presents a memory which

has thus far not been known to any person. Nevertheless, the appeal is to the idea that this happened, and that it continues to happen, imperceptibly, even as the public witnesses the event. *Inflection Loss* returns us to a given space with a new set of perceptions: the witness hears the results of prior time. Again, the imprecise now, when called to one’s attention, strikes us as a curiously slippery thing. *Inflection Loss* continuously monitors this ‘now’, and provides its own parallel and voluminous account of that listening: its output is simultaneously indicative of an entirely different sound topology surrounding us without our knowledge, and, in its sonic evaluation and diffusion of an instant in advancing time, of a sharply defined ‘edge of the moment’.

SIGNS

Transposition as an environment of journey and return. In creating an appropriate space, it is sometimes useful to give particular points of access — signifiers of what is to come which bind the observer to the process. The sign is memory; it is a flag to one or more areas of experience and it fills the new space of an artwork–observer interaction with background associations. *Suspension* acts in this way. The piece is a modern incarnation of the Sword of Damocles. It is a seven-foot, motor-driven pendulum tipped with a long, sensor-bearing blade that is aware of — and attracted to — the presence of visitors. In my experience, the myth of Damocles no longer resonates with an average audience, and yet the name is familiar. So too, are the images of the pendulum and a large blade suspended. Taken together, the name and the images immediately conjure a sense of threat and justiciable action.

The Damocles story is one of aspiration checked and envy put down. I include a brief synopsis of the story with the piece, and an explanation of the mechanism's perceptive abilities, to fill out the initially foreboding aspects of the physical object, which is quite audible as it turns and swings while monitoring its environment. These elements seem to be enough: the space of this installation appears less important with such a heavy emphasis on the machine itself, but on experiencing the piece, it is the area that *Suspension* defines — the reach of the knife and the visitor's estimation of its range — that ultimately gives the full shape of the installation.

LANGUAGE

Many of my pieces include spoken language. Most literal, and most dangerous, verbal language is, for me, an inescapably powerful aspect of an installation's potential. A language that is so literally understood by the observer is automatically a source of information far more direct, and thus perhaps also distracting, than any instrumental sound, video image, or other element of an installation piece. Language too clearly stated can prompt in the viewer an effort at parsing which is largely functional and which pulls one away from the space of transposition. I want to examine this borderline, but, more importantly, my goal is to explore aspects of the essential beauty of language as communication and as phonetic construction through a delicate balancing of recognizable speech and voice-based abstracted sound. *FE* is an early example of this effort. A twelve-channel sound diffusion, *FE* occupies a large oval in the center of a given space. From each loudspeaker comes the voice of one woman and, more quietly, one instrument

— either cello, violin, piano or synthesized tone. Standing near one loudspeaker, a listener can clearly hear the voice, at spaced intervals, recounting in direct and intimate tones a story of some personal significance. Crucially, this voice is not an everyday voice; it is of a quality that we associate with closeness and intimacy, and it draws the listener in a way that is initially both empathetic and voyeuristic. Any sense of voyeurism drops away, however, as the listener understands the content of the speech, which in each case deals with the minor existentialism of the everyday — people speaking of moments which have only a very personal intensity. These stories intermingle in twelve vocal textures: the loudspeakers are close enough that each voice mixes with the rest as the listener's position within the space changes, and this mixing moves each voice smoothly from language to abstracted sound. In listening to *FE*, one has the impression of a strange simultaneity, of discrete narratives and distinct points in time merging into the continuous wavefront of communication.

PERIMETERS

The transpositional space of installation, filled with languages of tone, speech, and light, can be a space without evident boundary. My most far-reaching installation, *The Narcissus Project*, is a complete environment in which the physical space is utterly transformed by video and audio. What was tangible space in this case becomes a fluid, self-determined field. For one visitor at a time, *Narcissus* synthesizes itself entirely from the visitor's presence; it creates a theater of the individual in a space all one's own. A visitor, for instance, might see a ghostly multiplication of his body to the left and a superimposition of his

head on a city street background to the right; he might hear his own footsteps continuing to walk about the space. At first, the transposition here is directly into the obsessive self, the reaction to which, for most people, is a substantial dose of both craving and aversion. Later, as the participant's visit wears on, the transposition expands to include a multi-faceted environment containing imagery and sound from many other participants. Their presence and expression in the very same spot provides that particular sensation of recall previously discussed. The movement of the piece, into a purely narcissistic experience and back, encapsulates the narrative of journey and return more fully than any of my other work. *The Narcissus Project* is a place apart, enclosing the visitor in a space the perimeters of which are for the visitor to determine.

IMPETUS

Throughout, it is the communicative power of the work which is my interest. This work which receives the force of our own impetus and gives shape to the life lived. The creation which mirrors or embodies or shades our own wandering narrative. Whether the work is inwardly or outwardly directed, whether such distinction matters; whether its repercussions are felt in the immediate present or somewhere beyond the reach of one's impressions; whether the accompanying silence is overwhelming or barely perceptible; it is the work of building oneself and one's world which occupies and mystifies us. It is demanded of us by an unseen claimant. However, this is never a task alone; we are empathetic and social. Thus the miraculous word, the generation of sound, the shared story. Languages, word-borne and wordless, aid

us, to a point. The work is fueled by a limitless and self-limiting desire, the wish always to be connected, perhaps to be completed — paired with the impossibility of perfect communication. In speaking to another's narrative, we are mining linkages which have perhaps always been latent — in the same way that the brain at birth has yet to close off any pathways. We may use words, images, touch, sound — any means in this construction. We may create whole environments, or messages of the most discrete simplicity. The work then becomes an attempt to find modes of sympathetic resonance within a limitless and partially understood series of reflections from the personal and public storehouses of memory.

It so often appears that the creative act is surrounded by a multi-layered frustration. The outlying area is remarkably free, somewhat disconcertingly free; an unbounded zone of movement and choice. This is the field of our vocabularies, our methods, our practice. We may work with so many different means. The danger in the preparatory stage is vertigo, perhaps an endless wandering, a frustration of aimlessness. Later, it is the core which frustrates, the central event of a work's introduction to the world. However we choose to wrap and deliver our act, our work and its release as communication are the last we truly see of it. The manuscript, the sounds, the painting — leaving our hands they enter a transactional space in which the negotiants — the creator, the collaborators, the receiver, the audience, the work itself — act independently, attempting to establish a consensus of the event, and each retains an understanding of the exchange which is unlike the rest. If the materials and the impetus ever

appeared clear to the creator, that story is forever masked to the recipients, who have immediately attached narratives of their own to the work in question. The result is paradoxical, and stimulative. We address the creative task knowing that what is produced will have many identities, that the negative space in which the work passes from one to another, or to many, is a panorama of communicative failures at least as important as any successes. And that, ironically, over time the characteristics by which the creator understood the work are perhaps the least important of its attributes.

But there is compensation. There are deep ties which bind all of us to the world at large. These are behaviors, empathies, modes of existence, essential signs and narrative methods which we may use to convey in the work the thing we wish all would see. The labyrinth of journey and inquiry that is the instigator and end result of the creative act is mirrored in iconography throughout all cultures from the earliest human records. This is a shared questioning, an interrogation of perception, and, at some level, a mutual understanding of the mazed route which must be followed. Languages differ, as do important aspects of cultural interpretation, but the stages of the archetypal journey are widely recognized and documented, embedded as they are in a memory which has been developing for millennia.

MEMORY

In the shadow of the work and the process described here is a more general consideration of memory. In a sense, the transposition which I have discussed is a trigger in itself – to memory. And somewhere in the bands of memory's

focus lie the roots of this movement, of this language, of our consideration and our work. The collective record of the human species is filled with images of the exercise of remembering. In a sense, we are nothing more than memory, each one of us a lightly-recorded collage of personal and public memory, and the cumulative effects of that memory's forgetting. The ideas and images which exert the greatest pull within each mind are the deepest imprints of experience, and perhaps additionally a set of remembrances bequeathed to each of us before our births. Some of these motivations will evolve with time and further experience: the process of our own internal sculpture; others will remain, much as we found them in childhood, solitary beacons. With each step in time, forward or back, the expansive fractured landscape of one's experience takes on a new perspective, and we are able to trace differently the wandering episodic routes. These are narratives: multiple, multiplying; seeded junctures, ambiguous horizon lines, ends temporarily reached. A recursive illustration of ourselves, elaborated by a language which is most often verbal but not always so – the memory of memory. Within the density of our experience we recognize structure and its absence; we regret perhaps a few paths missed or abandoned; we savor certain other unexpected journeys, surprising returns. And immediately following this recognition: the divergence of public and private, the separation of self. In our communication with the external world we recognize certain perimeters in language, certain vagaries in comprehension, both within and without. We recognize distance, and the urge to overcome it.

ATTACHMENT

Memory is what we become. The passing present, with its always disappearing sense of the infinite, has a finite scope – this moment. It is the imprecise but palpable now. Sheltered precariously within this constant transition, what is immediately knowable, which is to say what seems to have transpired, is in permanent recession from the observer, and not simply diminishing in breadth and detail exponentially as compared to time passed, but in fact shifting, saturating, fragmenting and soon enough rearranging itself according to unspoken and often unrealized wishes and influences. Like a slowed film reel dropping frames, the continuous fabric of our perception now breaks apart, exposing crevasses of forgetting. The imagination may pick up and improvise where needed, often by reaching for aid externally, sometimes by abandoning the scarred site. What was at one point clearly remembered is replaced by other bearers of memory, aural and visual recordings of a moment, which are, axiomatically but perhaps unfairly, considered to be truer representations of a particular experience or point in time. Despite the shifting of contents, the actions of memory and its processes of storage and recall maintain in our minds a continuity which we, for the most part, rely upon. Over time, each of us is left with a particular set of foundational remains. We are aware of their presence by the continuous stream of daily associations which bring them separately to the surface, each one triggered by some external action. They, in turn, remain influential in our interaction with the world at large; we are conscious of this fact to greater and, more often, lesser degrees.

ENDGAME

In the end, the mirror cannot be avoided. Each creative act is infused with a certain reflexive quality which is distinct but inseparable from the whole work. It is not only about a search for linkages among people, but about methods of linking varied images, ideas, and memories within the self. Likewise, each observer of such acts is first of all alone, with the same internal processes at work. The identities of creator and participant are constantly interesting questions, for both. That unbridgeable gap remains a tantalizing query. Who made this? Who am I making this for?

Thoroughly paged through, the story of a creator's works is in part revelatory and in part merely prelude to further questions: a return to the beginning. At some point the answers of a moment lose their indicative power and seem merely the abstracted associations of a mind in brief pause. Moving on, the vision and the language and the impetus change. The reasons why oscillate through some difficult line – a tangent that is one's own trajectory. This is the evaluation of memory. Rather than manifesto, a true summary document would immediately admit its provisional nature, its reliance upon imperfect models and recollections. The document itself is journey, and can only leave off at a point of new departure.

** This essay was originally written for the full catalog, Art Memorative. For more information on works mentioned here but not found in the following pages, please see dorseydunn.com.*



Installation view, upper floor, Fringe Exhibitions, 2006, Los Angeles

A Certain Presence

significant breath

The symptoms of a distracted mind are grief, anxiety, trembling, and irregular breathing.
Patanjali

VIEW

A sound installation that seeks to build an intensity of aural and material experience through a combination of limited sensory deprivation and a highly focused sound environment, *A Certain Presence* is an enunciation of human breath. It is an attempt to merge exterior and interior manifestations of breath — that of the piece and that of the visitor — into a whole that is both interlinked and individual.

The piece is prepared for specific exhibition environments. Two high-ceilinged rooms are required: an initial transitional space in which the visual sense is lost, and a second space in which, with extremely low light, sound is experienced. In the first room, the space is lit from one end only — the one opposite the entryway to the second room, which is completely blacked out. The first room is clouded by fog; a row of lights at one end are of sufficient strength to fade gradually into darkness across the distance to the entrance of the second room — but no more. The visitor experiences the full spatial volume of one end of the first room; that volume gradually fades into blackness. In the second room, in darkness, the visitor is both alone and in the company of others, each gaining an understanding of the spatial characteristics of the room entirely by sound.

Sonically, the spaces mirror the guided experience of the lighting. In the first room, two loudspeakers are mounted with the lights. From them a subtle and

complex resonance is heard; this sound moves horizontally across the near wall of the first room and provides a white noise-like break from the exterior world; it is the wall of experience. As with the lights, this sound is no longer perceptible once the visitor has reached the entrance to the second room. Inside the second room, only the sound of a person breathing is heard. Amplified through a series of eight loudspeakers set in pairs along the length of the room, the breathing varies gradually over time and gently moves in a rolling, wavelike motion through the space; visitors may remain for some time as the breath moves through its extended non-verbal narrative.

READING

Breath comes from the very first moment: in the womb, it is hearing, and the sound of the mother's breath, that the child perceives months before any other sense becomes available. Breath is natural and automatic, simultaneously in the foreground and background of the life of the body, and an essential link to the life of the mind. Its richness is often buried underneath its basic function, and yet it is unavoidably there — in a reachable and transforming space.

EXHIBITIONS

Fringe Exhibitions, Los Angeles, 2006

A Certain Presence

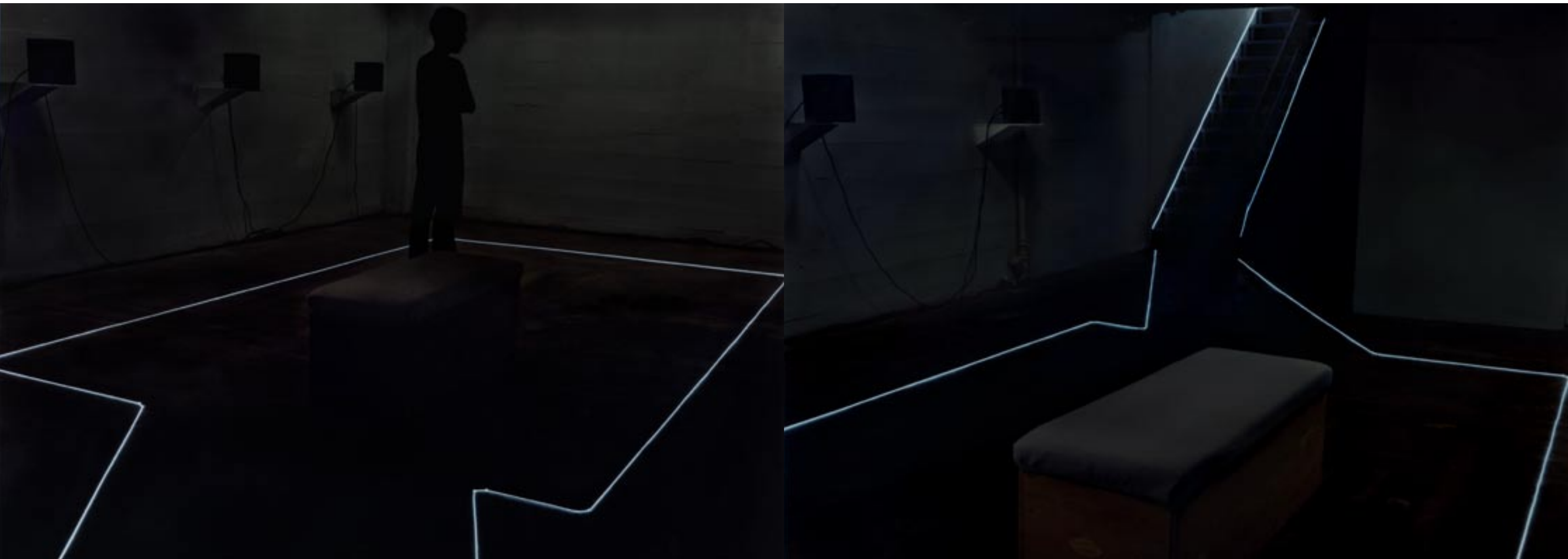
significant breath



installation views, upper floor, Fringe Exhibitions, 2006, Los Angeles

A Certain Presence

significant breath



installation views, lower floor, Fringe Exhibitions, 2006, Los Angeles

Paraphrase

the sound of light

The original is unfaithful to the translation.
Jorge Luis Borges

VIEW

What is the sound of light? *Paraphrase* is an imagined translation of image into sound.

It is a subjective view, a paintbox whose medium is sound. Visitors can interact with the system to create images and compositions by using the camera like a brush.

The installation uses a high-quality miniature camera, suspended site-specifically, for input. What is seen by the camera is analyzed by custom software and synthesized as sound. The process tracks shapes on screen, and measures a variety of image characteristics while giving video feedback of the resulting sound 'conception'. Pitch, harmonic partials, and spatialization of sounds, for instance, are derived from the composition of elements in the camera's field of view and diffused through an 8-channel system that can be variously configured.

READING

Paraphrase is simultaneously an investigation of the parameters of visual perception and the act of translation itself. The electronics involved continuously track structures and changes within a moving image, breaking down the visual into a series of differentiating parameters. Naturally, these parameters do not begin to sum up the image; no component analysis could fully represent the 'effect' of an image in the human mind. What is critical in this case is that the data give

sufficiently articulated cues such that listeners will recognize corollary changes in the soundscape as they view and work their surroundings.

The overall soundscape of *Paraphrase* reflects the sinusoidal vibration which characterizes all sound. A wash of resonating timbre underlies a constantly changing surface of shorter sounds which, with slight gestures, those interacting with the piece may draw in.

Borges famously questioned the directionality of translation — of the supposition that a translation should by definition be incapable of surpassing the original. Instead, he proposed that the translation — without a judgement of relative value — was perhaps altogether a different artwork, and entirely appreciable in its own right. Of course, he was referring to written languages. But the principle holds across media.

Paraphrase inscribes one time-based medium in another, and yet the resulting world — of sound — lives and breathes on its own: it exists beyond the confines of its source.

EXHIBITIONS

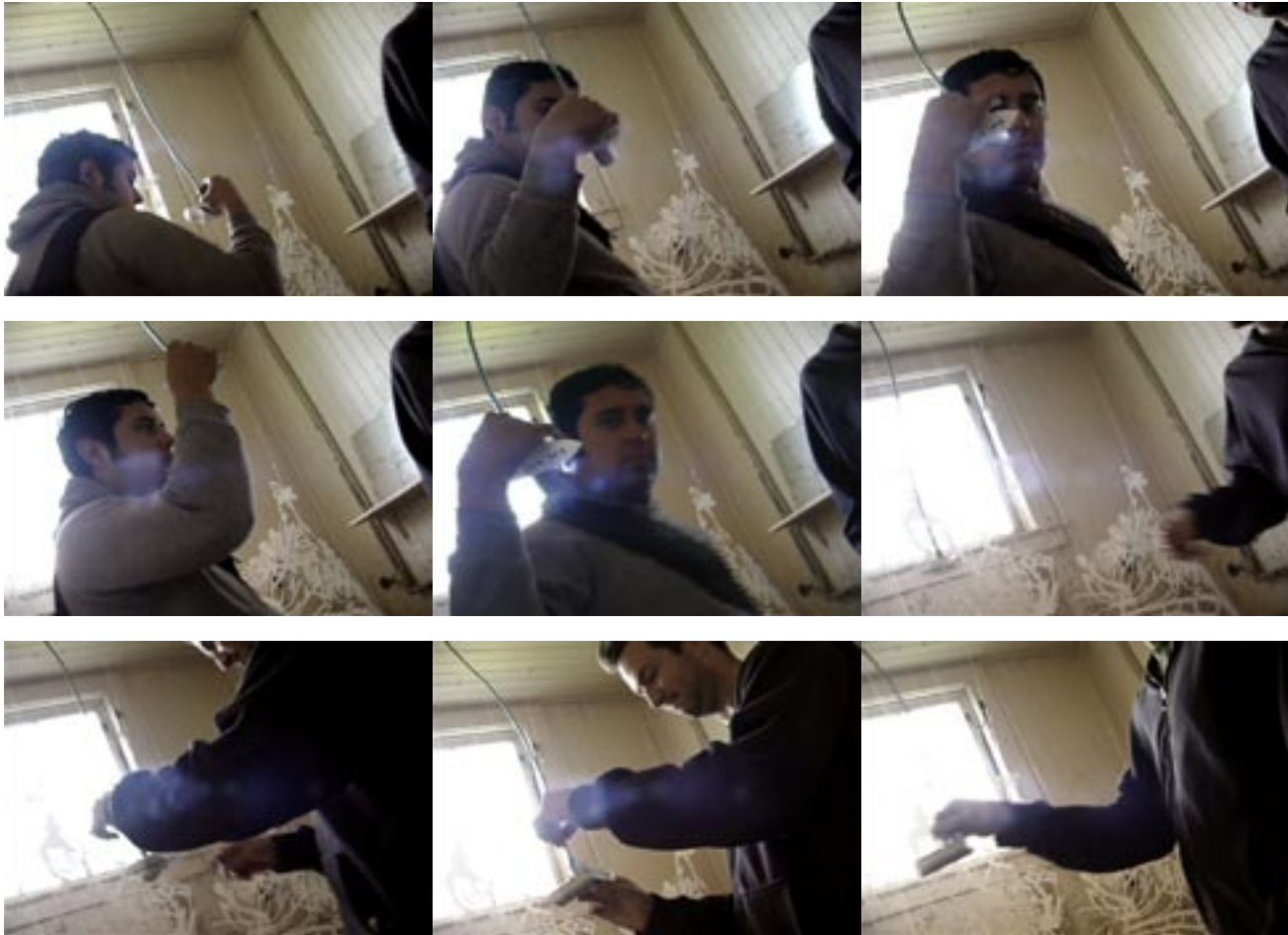
Headlands Center for the Arts, Sausalito, CA, 2005
I-5 Gallery @ The Brewery, Los Angeles, 2005.



installation view, I-5 Gallery @ The Brewery, Los Angeles, 2005

Paraphrase

the sound of light



video stills, Headlands Center for the Arts, Marin County, 2005



installation view, I-5 Gallery @ The Brewery, Los Angeles, 2005



Suspension

damocletian avoidance

What I saw confounded and amazed me. The sweep of the pendulum had increased in extent by nearly a yard. As a natural consequence its velocity was also much greater. But what mainly disturbed me was the idea that it had perceptibly descended.
Edgar Allen Poe

VIEW

Suspension is a mechanical reformulation of a pendulum, with the addition of motor control over the speed, arc, and plane through which the pendulum swings. Using two linked motors, the installation recreates the natural feel of a swinging pendulum while allowing its swing to rotate and change speed in space. Unlike the long wire of a traditional pendulum, *Suspension* uses a thin, seven-foot aluminum rod to swing a weight at one end. One digitally-controlled motor at the end of the rod controls this swing; another motor then controls the positional angle of the first, allowing the arc of the pendulum to be moveable in three dimensions.

The pendulum weight in this installation is a large blade that swings at torso level. *Suspension* is a scythe. It is a reminder and a threat to the self, a mechanical Sword of Damocles. Its prodding message is one of urgency and situation, for *Suspension* is aware of its audience: attached to the knife are proximity sensors which act as positioners: if someone moves within range, the installation is attracted to that presence, and the pendulum rotates and swings closer; if that person is too close to the knife, the motors adjust the plane position — but not the fluid arc — of the pendulum to move away. In an installation setting, this would produce a smoothly swinging pendulum which is interactive but in a retiring sense: it

displays an obvious affinity for visitors but avoids actual contact. *Suspension*, for example, might begin moving as one would expect of a pendulum: slowly, with a short period close to the ground. As visitors arrive, it might drift closer but then be forced to turn aside, maintaining a watchful distance.

READING

The cutting sweep of the pendulum carries with it a silence and purity of action that has remained essential through the ages. The unmediated physicality of the image is perhaps even more surprising now than when Foucault first exhibited his great pendulum in 1851 in a proof of the axial rotation of the Earth. The pendulum operates largely without sound, save for the quiet hiss of air as it passes; it seems to require no added energy to continue its motion indefinitely. Its shape and action produce an ancient signification that retains its strength in an increasingly non-physical age. The pendulum, in incarnations from the Sword of Damocles to Poe's inquisitorial torture, conjures sensations of time and death. *Suspension* exists to exploit these connections.

EXHIBITIONS

CCA Gallery, Oakland, 2004
SignalFlow Festival, Mills College, Oakland, 2005

Suspension

damocletian avoidance



installation views, CCA Gallery, Oakland, 2004



video stills, CCA Gallery, Oakland, 2004

Sit With Me

varied representations

VIEW

Sit With Me is a multi-channel sound installation, comprised of various full-length works running simultaneously through headphones, and placed on the open floor of a suitable space. The entire installation is stored in two white packing boxes, one of which contains the playback devices and remains as the centerpiece of the work. The other box contains round white cushions for use by listeners and viewers. The cushions and headphones are distributed widely around the single packing box in an amoeba-like shape. The headphones, which lie open on their own, have volumes set such that they are comfortably wearable but also that, in a calm atmosphere with the headphones unused, the room is filled with the distant, quiet sounds of all the pieces combined.

READING

The work accumulates. One's scattered creative acts, accomplished at some cost, filtered through the mind and the body, given life and space and eventually separated from the creator, remain as they were left, temporary maps whose currency remains discrete. We disseminate them; keeping copies and storing their contents and methodologies in one kind of archive or another. The works rest in a closet or a locker or a basement. With digital work 'storage' may simply mean copies on a variety of media which we believe will be stable and retrievable for at least a few years.

Each piece has its moment of intersection with our ongoing process, and then it

becomes in many ways obsolete. The individual works speak for themselves, and for a brief, imprecise period they speak in unison with their creator, but quickly the gap widens and they are cut loose, for the one who made them has moved on to other concerns.

At certain moments one's thoughts roam over the dot-pattern of this work which extends in a long and perhaps crisscrossing shape over the months and years past. A broader map is there, its focus alternately sharpened and dulled by the quality of memory associated with its landmarks. And yet it is a whole; it is an individual. The thoughts and echoes of a particular knowledge resound throughout, as if this cumulative act were perhaps the product of a single stroke.

Sit With Me is a miniature retrospective in sound. It is an archive of aspects of an individual's sonic character, captured over several years, boxed and put aside; then, on occasion, re-visited, unpacked and set running in the manner of a holiday gift. It is a series of portraits, of shadowplays.

EXHIBITIONS

- I-5 Gallery @ The Brewery, Los Angeles, 2005
- Walker's Point Center for the Arts, Milwaukee, 2006
- 55 Mercer Gallery, New York, 2006

installation view, I-5 Gallery @ The Brewery, Los Angeles, 2005





Installation view, 473 Broadway Gallery, New York, 2003

FE

vocal fugue

VIEW

FE is a 12-channel site-specific sound installation. Composed of women's voices and underpinned by acoustic and electronic instruments, *FE* fills a room with the sound of intimate but fragmented conversation. Touring the room at random reveals multiple and continuous linkages of speech, the tones of which are not normally heard in the public sphere. From the center of the room, the resulting environment is a diffuse, musical murmuring. As the listener moves about the space, particular stories come into focus. Thoughts heard cover a landscape of personal concerns: of time, its richness and evanescence; of gradual awakening; of travel and homeland; of the influence of others' lives; of dance, writing, and theater.

FE is mounted in a grand oval in the center of a larger room. Visitors are free to walk anywhere within and without its bounds. Twelve satellite speakers are suspended by invisible thread from the ceiling in an oblong shape; visible snaking wires on the floor connect these units to electronics and a subwoofer at each end of the ring, creating a 'shell' effect.

The *FE* installation develops over time. Each channel loops separately in 20 – 30 minutes, and thus the mix of 'conversation' as well as the musical background of the room evolves during the course of the

installation, never returning to its original state. The documentation of this piece includes stereo and 5.1 versions of a custom mix of the audio.

READING

The voices in *FE* were drawn from dozens of conversations recorded with the artist. *FE* is a highly personal interpretation of the meanings and aspirations implicit in speech. It is an aural view of the wondering self. It is a series of recollections, remembrances, and visions of the future expressed in language that ranges from the mundane to the epiphanic.

At the same time, *FE* examines the human perception of voice as it ranges from the comprehensible speech that emerges from each speaker to the complex tone arrangements that occur as the voices and instruments mix in various combinations throughout the space.

EXHIBITIONS

473 Broadway Gallery, New York, 2003
The Canvas Gallery, San Francisco, 2003

The Narcissus Project

private vanity

*On the green bank, to look into the clear
Smooth lake, that to me seemed another sky,
As I bent down to look, just opposite
A shape within the wat'ry gleam appeared
Bending to look on me: I started back,
It started back, but pleased I soon returned,
Pleased it returned as soon with answering looks
Of sympathy and love; there I had fixed
Mine eyes till now, and pined with vain desire,
Had not a voice warned me: 'What thou seest,
What there thou seest, fair creature, is thyself.'*
Milton

Every moment one generates an image that cannot be easily retracted. It may be changed over short and long periods of time, it may be softened, hardened, polished or left to rot, but this screen remains, always, between each of us and our world. We regard it, cultivate it; we attend to it with care.

At times, and often unexpectedly, we fall in love with a particular self-image. More frequently, we feel some dissatisfaction: the nose is thwarted; the hair is bleak or simply insufficient; the eyes reveal too much fear, the mouth too much age. In any event, the self-image is the subject of much personal wrangling. We wish to hold and preserve a certain look, or to effect certain changes.

These are the considerations behind *The Narcissus Project*, an immersive, interactive audiovisual environment which absorbs the projected self-image of a participant and returns stimulative and changeable variations of that visual and aural self.

Narcissism is an exclusion of the exterior world; the narcissist, imagining omnipotence, attempts to satisfy every desire for emotional sustenance from within. Lacan famously described the child's moment of self-consciousness — the 'mirror stage' — as the point at which the recognition of a separate, external world severs the narcissistic illusion of the womb. In this context, *The Narcissus*

Project functions like an automated Lacanian mirror, returning the participant not only to a closed world seemingly occupied only by the self, but to the conversion process in which self-regard becomes self-creation.

The Narcissus Project is a solitary experiment; it is a private vanity, playful and meaningful at once. The *NP* simultaneously serves to allow, even to encourage participants to recognize again their whole beauty. And yet the *NP* is an external, participatory process. The space acts semi-autonomously, and is thus a contradicting, counteracting partner.

It functions thus: participants enter alone; an array of cameras, sensors and microphones allow the room to track and record each entry. Once inside, the participant's image and voice are recorded, transformed and transferred to the space. Combinations of these inputs are set within varied patterns of lighting, sound and prepared video. Movement and sound from the participant trigger further permutations in the processing of real-time audio and video. The room may simulate a far-off musical conversation based on snippets of recorded audio as it simultaneously performs a stop-frame animation of the participant's body screened over the urban landscape of a prepared video. At the same time, the room may adjust its overall hue in relation to the participant's clothing. The participant may find that the location of the audio, the image and speed of the animation, and several of the lights contributing to the color of the room are all controllable by hand motion.

Participants interact with the space — building, defining, and demolishing what they find in and of themselves. The protocol of the space — the way in which it responds — is easily divined but deep enough, and sufficiently colored by random changes, to allow for long and repeated explorations. It is no coincidence that the *NP* relies heavily on advanced electronics — the very myth-

building essentials of our age. New technology is monotonously advertised with classically narcissistic language ('...without even leaving your home!'), and yet the machines never fully satisfy — they never deliver the promised autonomy. Each participant in the *NP* dominates the space by virtue of being in alone and providing all of the physical stimulus. However, only so much control is possible, and thus the space is *entertaining*.

The Narcissus Project is not theater. The space itself is fully enclosed and constructed of semi-opaque plastic panels. From the outside, observers face large hemispheres of ever-changing color and light, the diffused residue of interior projections. Likewise, the soundscape on the exterior of the space is a chaotic, redivided version of the interior dialogue. In this way, the *NP* preserves an essential privacy for the participant while mirroring the fragile, prised distance between the self and the exterior world.

The Narcissus Project retains a relative history. Here again, it is not flawlessly narcissistic. Pieces of each participant's immersion are archived and appear randomly during the latter stages of later visits in the form of brief visual and/or aural cues. Thus, even before departing the space, participants must consider, within the context of their own exploration, the presence and questioning of others. An essential aspect of the intention behind the *Narcissus Project* is to create such potentially intimate juxtapositions. Just as the individual's self-definition in the world is the first work of art, so is the realization that the incomplete self is not alone the first work of compassion.

EXHIBITIONS

- [test 1] Urbanlab, Chicago, 2002
- [test 2] Melting Point Gallery, San Francisco, 2002
- [test 3] Kunsthaus Tacheles, Berlin, 2003



video stills, Urbanlab, Chicago, 2002

*But now, when I try to remember them... I think how little we can hold in mind,
how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life,
how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects
which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on.*

W. G. Sebald



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