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BLIND ALLEYS,
BLINDING AND BLINDED ALIENS:

MAPPING THE OUTER LIMITS OF THE
TECHNICAL IMAGE

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Melbourne moving image and projection artist Marcia Jane's *Energy Field 8* was installed at Carriageworks, Sydney in the *Expanded Architecture* exhibition (October 2011). Both its phenomenological roots and the way this work displays a new sociability interest me. Jane's practice is situated along a historical line of critical enquiry into retinal activity traceable back to Goethe. Her *Energy Field Series* re-tools for digital use the formal erasures of structuralist film, where the relationship between the signifier and the signified are inverted. Secondly this reincarnated minimalism expands the field of social and political potential that Hal Foster intuits within its original 1960s form, revealing trauma's structure, making explicit the denials and forgetting of a dread and catastrophe often expressed through science fiction narrative.

Jane transposes architectural space as content, uncoupling analog lens flare and camera focus from its photographic moorings to mime as sonic equivalence. In *Energy Field 8*, two identical DVDs of circular white flickering lights were projected side by side in pulsing dialogue, randomly shuffling sequences to avoid synchrony. The lights are magic mirrors, deities to forgetting. On their 'surface' the *Energy Field Series* present as mindless mechanical repetitions, but this research is no blind alley. The projections uniquely expand the situations in which they are placed. Jane is meticulous about ostensibly simple configurations; fashioning sightlines and reflections to the sculpture's form unique to each space.
This minimalist series extends optical research from Goethe’s “Theory of Colour,” through Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian in painting, includes Dan Flavin’s minimalist fluorescent sculptures and emphasizes conceptual art’s take up in cinema through 1960s structuralist film, incisively articulated in Peter Gidal’s writings and practice. Goethe observed his own visual processes:

Let a black object be held before a grey surface, and let the spectator, after looking steadfastly at it, keep his eyes unmoved while it is taken away: the space it occupies appears much lighter. Let a white object be held up in the same manner: on taking it away the space it occupied will appear much darker than the rest of the surface. Let the spectator in both cases turn his eyes this way and that on the surface, the visionary images will move in like manner.2

Such afterimage effects are at play in Energy Fields. Goethe insisted his experiments were reproducible by any dilettante, situating his observations of light’s subjective effects in opposition to Newton’s objective scientific experiments.

Kandinsky actively sought out scientific research into colour’s psychological impact to incorporate into his creative practice: “It is often the case that to improve the bottom left hand corner, one needs to improve something on the right.”4 It is such optical thinking that Jane invites her viewer to discover and perform when moving through the gallery space.

Dan Flavin’s fluorescent minimalist assemblages similarly draw attention to features of the room and affect the physical perception of the space. In Flavin’s 1966 memorandum to his twin brother killed in the Vietnam War (Monument for Those Who have been Killed in Ambush (to Pk who reminded me about death)) the red light impacts optically on the viewer. Although initially this red physically invokes nausea and suffocation, “the intense colour changes over time, fading to become a much more rosy orange.”5 Angela Vetessee views Flavin’s work and wonders “about the meaning of life, even though without any ‘cosmic cosmetics’ and even though he was deliberately wisely and tenaciously avoiding an answer.”6 Flavin echoes Frank Stella’s celebrated minimalist mantra (“what you see is what you see”): “It is what it is and it ain’t nothin’ else.”7

Synchronous with minimalism, late 1960s structuralist film jettisoned content. Deke Dusinberre describes Room Film (dir. Peter Gidal, 1973) as “almost relentless in its denial of tangible images.”4 Erratic camera movement, extreme close-up and low illumination turn attention to the film and screen’s surface. In its anti-representative haze, objects like a pot plant or a desk remain indistinguishable from their shadow. For Gidal “to intervene crucially in film practice, the un-thought must be brought to knowledge, thought.”9 Jane incorporates minimalist and structuralist technique into her production method – home-processing emptied Gidal-like black and white film, with dust’s “noise” and uneven exposural “drift” in its flicker, further layered with traces of colour and textural artifacts from her studio-based video transfer – to distill
a historical inter-medial (almost traceless) trace. Jane's practice sources these historic lines of content's deferral in favour of the performance of perceptual process. In Jane's practice architectural space colonises this deferral.

Each node in Jane's series expands the space in which it is situated. In analog times the CarriageWorks rectangular hall serviced train maintenance, its floor retaining a remnant track that Jane runs towards her projection. Symmetric placement of the installation's globes might suggest the foreboding headlights of an approaching train, were it not for the throbbing space in which the mobile spectator can align and shift reflections around the walls; and with the glass doors at one end, even move linger into the parking lot. Yet from one angle, line of sight, the circles bleed onto the wall like luminescent virtual road-kills. Jane elicits a different looking to the urban legend from cinema's inception, when the Lumiere Brother's L'arrivée d'un Train en Gare de La Ciotat (1895) caused the audience to scream and move back in avoidance. A moment of crisis returns as sublime space.

Train travel, central to cinema's birth and further inducing time's compartmentalization required new ways of seeing to cope with travel's quadrupling of speed. For commentator Wolfgang Schivelbusch looking out the train window traumatically exhausted the old perceptual apparatus initiating "a process of decentralisation, or dispersal of attention," blurring the landscape: 'The flowers by the side of the road are no longer flowers but flecks, or rather streaks, of red and white. "Blurred" residue remains as signal in Jane's practice and her "wave field" performs as if inside a sonic camera obscura.

The digital explosion provides a new technological moment requiring further perceptual re-orientation. Jane's technical sublime performs Vilem Flusser's technical image. Each site hard-wires the viewer as "terminal" for global capital's relentless technological hum. Those entering the room are interrogated. The set-up conjures a trace of a B-grade movie police torture scene, a performer blinded by lights in stage fright, or a roo (or skip) caught in a barreling truck's headlights being asked a final existential question. Here lies speechless commentary on issues of information overflow, surveillance and surface that Flusser identifies as features of the technical image. Where classic images capture phenomena, technical images communicate concepts. For Flusser the technological sublime manifests a collective amnesia:

The technical images currently all around us are in the process of magically re-structuring our 'reality' and turning it into a 'global image scenario'. Essentially this is a question of 'amnesia'. Human beings forget that they created the images in order to orientate themselves in the world. Since they are no longer able to decode them, their lives become a function of their own images: Imagination has turned to hallucination.

For Victor Burgin conceptual art's assimilation into art history comes at the cost of "amnesia in respect of all that was most radical" and stresses that "the consequence of modern art's disavowal of modern history remains its almost total failure to be about anything of consequence." He has a point.
Flavin's work, for example was criticized "because it makes no statement about political issues and isn't politically correct." Gidal's work was marked as utopian, apolitical, non-narrative and narcissistic by his feminist contemporaries. Relatedly such features are identified decades later through trauma theory as descriptive of traumatic memory, and further returned within the architecture of digital technologies as performed in Peter Tscherkassky and Martin Arnold's materialist cinema. I also place Jane's practice within this new materialism.

Hal Foster, less dismissive than Burgin, assigns to minimalism "a contemporary crux, a paradigm shift toward postmodern practices" and intimates an insidious collusion with "transgressions of North American power in the 60's" but wonders how to map this through art criticism, its history and semiotics. In analysing Flavin's "expanded field" and minimalism's "catastrophe" Foster pries open this caesura a little further, re-birthing a 1966 Tony Smith anecdote comparing the incompleteness of New Jersey Turnpike to the "drill ground of Nuremberg." He further stitches Viola and Turrell's technological sublime to Benjamin's "dream kitsch" and Kracauer's "mass ornament" and then expresses a need for such surfaces to be trooped productively and critically.

A plea to Flavin by Father Giulio for the transformation of his Milanese Chiesa Rossa through a permanent installation, productively indicates minimalism's relation to trauma, addressing Foster's critical call. The priest had been deeply moved by Flavin's memorial to his twin brother but Flavin initially rejected the commission due to his hostility to the Catholic Church. In a final attempt to influence Flavin, Giulio described the traumas manifest in his district, a "district troubled by uncontrolled immigration, administrative chaos, the Islamic enigma, the fear of the illegal immigrants, that they will be expelled." Giulio concludes: "precisely because we always attempt to forget what is assailing us, I would like the interior of the church to recall all the sufferings of the city today." On receiving this letter Flavin reversed his dismissal, replying, "this will be my great testament.

The modernist turn to refine the essentialist qualities of painting and sculpture which minimalism extends in its extreme focus on form can be counter-read through trauma theory as "content denied," laying bare amnesias of removal, erasure, forgetting and assimilation that in Australia were performed on the land, on the bodies of the natives and new arrivals, a vortex of negations activated at the First Fleet's arrival. Like Kafka's writing machine from "In the Penal Colony," Jane's Energy Fields re-inscribe on the viewer the acts of denial and amnesia executed in our name, in White Australia's service. The phrase initiating Terra Nullius; "there is nothing here," is the tradition re-written onto punters' bodies. As Ghassan Hage brings home by quoting a young Arab-Australian reacting to a liberal discussion on Mabo's impact, even as migrants we are complicit in this forgetting: "What are you going on about anyway? If the Anglos didn't do the killing you wouldn't have been able to emigrate here. You owe 'em mate. They cleared the land... especially for you." When they do rise to the surface such denied abuses and their attendant guilt often reside dissociated inside science fiction's future. For example, Roger
Lockhurst connects “alien abduction narratives” to traumatic memories. Meaghan Morris identifies the Mad Max Trilogy as sublimely replaying histories of colonization and in discussing terror’s arrival to Australian shores in On the Beach concludes “we replay our genocidal past as apocalyptic future.” Energy Field 8 inquisitively places the viewer inside the abductive dread of H. P. Lovecraft’s short science fiction story Colour Out of Space (1927) in which a colour arises out of a meteorite crash in the blasted heath region, contact bringing insanity and death. The vibrating spheres recall the delivery of the disabling opening of the television series The Outer Limits (1963-5) beaming a difficult presence as unknown future into modernist lounge rooms. David Seed argues that such science fiction safely processed the threat of annihilation manufactured within middle class America by cold war politics and the Cuban missile crisis.

There is nothing wrong with your television set
Do not attempt to adjust the picture
We are controlling transmission
We will control the horizontal
We will control the vertical
We can change the focus to a soft blur
Or sharpen it to crystal clarity

Reclaiming minimalism from such a past is Jane’s deft move, one that performs traumatic memory’s structure and uncannily witnesses its content. By recycling through a historic gap, Jane belatedly folds this 1960s a-historical minimalism back on itself historically, formulating a double negative, recovering the gap to a dissociated past, installing an antipodean stage for a Beckett play never performed. This new minimalism enables the social to return inside Jane’s systemic biofeedback loops. Given our ambiguous position caught between global capital’s centre and margins, Australia is “not a bad place to be” to witness and intrinsically re-perform denied abuses back onto our complicit bodies, enticed by style and fashion, corralled like sheep, into an amnesic gallery space.

Goethe’s body-centred research returns inside the gallery space with a new political edge. Just as Flavin’s fluorescent sculptures can dys-member social and political atrocities, traumatically fulfilling Hal Foster’s intuition about minimalism’s critical narrative crack, Jane’s wormholes refract, ricochet and spill through the gallery’s walls and doors and into this writing to articulate an “event without a witness” that my body never-the-less experiences as numbingly real: White Australia. After Flavin and Gidal, in search of a critical practice designed for post-Mabo Australia and paraphrasing Guilio, can Jane’s method recall the sufferings in Australia today?


14. Laura M. Rossi, "Pages from a Diary," in *Dan Flavin: Rooms of Light*, 57.


18. Laura M. Rossi, "Pages from a Diary," 65.


20. Laura M. Rossi, "Pages from a Diary," 67.
