Materialist Performance in the Digital Age

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There has been a renewed interest in film and video performance over the last decade, evident in the emergence of the VJ (Video Jockey) and VJing as real-time visual performance. Groups such as 242.pilots, for example, have been described as a real-time video ensemble, improvising and re-animating, live with images, what the jazz band has traditionally executed through sound. The processing speed of digital imagery has enabled such new forms of image manipulation, often developing audiences via sonic communities inhabited by sound artists whose initial focus was experimental music. Coupled with this, there has also arisen renewed activity in public, multi-screen performances of formalist, animated imagery by film artists such as Guy Sherwin, Greg Pope and Bruce McClure – as well as growing interest in its previously subjugated history. This form of audiovisual performance first emerged in the 1960s, when artists such as Peter Gidal, Paul Sharits and Ken Jacobs began to work with 16mm, Super 8 film and slide projection, when such secondhand equipment became available at low cost. What is the significance of this historic form of film performance’s continued practice in relation to the new digital situation described by media theorist Vilém Flusser?

The Technical Image

Flusser’s concept of the technical image productively marks the shift from analogue to digital technologies, a shift favouring the image ahead of the text as a communication tool. For Flusser, technical images are meaningful surfaces ‘created by programs, they are dependent on the laws of technology and the natural sciences’.[1] They are now constructed inside computers, rather than through photographic chemical processes. For Flusser, the means of constructing these meaningful surfaces are rendered invisible, creating a form of amnesia in its audience that urgently needs to be addressed:

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. [2]

… any criticism of technical images must be aimed at an elucidation of its inner workings. As long as
there is no way of engaging in such criticism of technical images, we shall remain illiterate. [3]

The technical image re-iterates Martin Heidegger’s concept of Weltbilt articulated in ‘The Age of the World-Picture’. [4] There, Heidegger identifies a calculative rather than meditative thinking, predicting the rise in the kind of techno-scientific thinking unleashed by the recent mobilisation of imaging technologies in neurological research. Like Flusser’s allusions to illiteracy and amnesia, Heidegger speculates ‘whether thinking will come to an end in a bustle of information’. [5]

Flusser’s technical images, benefiting from the digital’s painterly hyper-malleability, foreground concepts ahead of phenomena: ‘Ontologically traditional images mean phenomena, while technical images mean concepts.’ [6] This emphasis marks a shift in the relationship between structure and content, signifier and signified, that were Peter Gidal’s central arguments in support of his concept of ‘Materialist Film’ in the 1970s, and performed in Paul Sharits’ early Flicker films and Ken Jacob’s Nervous System performances during that period. It is of value to review such film-based, performative practices then and now, to identify affinities and differences in relation to the digital, and to assess such a practice’s ability to provide productive insights and commentary into its inner workings – in short, to lay bare the contemporary technical image so critical to Flusser’s analysis.

In this light, the recent formalist, multi-screen, 16mm moving image performances by film artists such as Guy Sherwin, Bruce McClure, Greg Pope and the perennial Ken Jacobs can be read as directly responding to the new immediacy and speed permeating digital technologies: the rise of Vilém Flusser’s technical image and the consequent disappearance of reflective space that Neil Postman has also indentified. In Technopoly, Postman notes that we embrace the ‘wondrous effects of machines and are encouraged to ignore the ideas embedded in them’. [7] For Flusser, this amnesia has migrated from the machine, to be incorporated inside the image itself.

Origins of a Practice
In the 1960s, under Abstract Expressionism’s influence and Minimalism’s rise in painting and sculpture, film artists in Europe and North America, including Sharits, Gidal and Jacobs, interrogated the film apparatus itself, emphasising structure over content to produce what became known as Structuralist or Materialist Film. For Gidal, such work is reflexive, referencing its own structure:

I would like to make a film that is at one and the same time a film in its own right and as explication of the mechanisms of its own making. Thus the film would be both about something and about itself.
I have been making films that fall into this concept since 1967. [8]

Apart from the films themselves, Gidal’s later text Materialist Film is the densest and most articulate manifestation, in written form, of the concept. [9]

The 1920s avant-garde’s lack of narrative is seen as a precursor to this formalist work, for which P. Adams Sitney and then Malcolm Le Grice develop the term Structuralist Film, and Gidal later Materialist Film. Referring to American practices, both Annette Michelson and Sitney outline the structural focus of these films as ‘a practice that focuses on the signifier, rather than the signified, on form ahead of content’ [10]; ‘the structural film insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline’. [11] Sitney identifies a checklist of four characteristics nearly always present: fixed camera position, flicker effect, loop printing, and screen re-photography. Le Grice expands Sitney’s definition to include processes leading to these effects: ‘I shall add to them a number of other concerns, like celluloid as material, the projection as event, duration as a concrete dimension’. [12] The basic idea of laying the apparatus bare is derived from Russian Formalism. [13]

Rosalind Krauss describes such a materialist referentiality in relation to Paul Sharits’ four-projector Sound
Strip/Film Strip (four screens, 8 minutes, 1971-72), installed at the Albright-Knox Gallery in Buffalo, New York, in 1976:

Right away, then, we realize that we are not in the middle of the filmic illusion, as we are when seated in the theater, oblivious to the hidden machinery in the projection booth mounted behind us. We are, instead, at a tangent to the illusion, forcibly aware of the generative pair: projector/projected; aware, that is, of the mechanisms that are closer to the birth of the illusion. [14]

Paul Sharits’ flicker films can be considered exact, single-frame focused, graphic animations, with frame-to-frame shifts in image, text or colour to create flickering afterimages or retinal effects. Images appear to float in front of the screen, their repetition building tension and trance effects. In his two-screen films such as Razor Blades (1965-8) and Vertical Contiguity (1974), subtle shifts in a film’s registration as it slides through the projector gate, and slight differences in projector speed, also become apparent when the two screens are butted next to each other – this adding further movement to these works, and bringing further attention to the projection apparatus itself.

I wish to abandon imitation and illusion and enter directly into the higher drama of: celluloid, two dimensional strips; individual rectangular frames; the nature of sprockets and emulsion; projector operations; the three dimensional reflective screen surface; the retinal screen; optic nerve and individual psych-physical subjectivities of consciousness. [15]

In Ken Jacobs’ Nervous System performances, he performs his theories directly, ‘rorschaching’ his audience. [16] This Nervous System machine has what looks like a large fan in front of its two bulky slide projectors. This fan works as a shutter for inching of filmstrips through the two projector gates. Lewis Khlar describes this method as a practice that uses the found single frame to communicate with history. [17] Paul Arthur describes this machine as ‘a two headed cinematic apparatus liberated from its linear shackles of 24 frames per second in order to stop and start, jump backward and forward at will. In turn, the movements of human shadows and other natural forms fed through the machine are blasted apart’. [18] In her discussion of Jacobs’ more recent New York Ghetto Fishmarket 1903 (2006), Pierson’s reference to the use of visual effect as part of a salvage operation on history describes a method for reclaiming history, an operation that is at the heart of Jacobs’ practice. [19] This suggests a method for addressing the illiteracy Flusser which identifies in the surface characteristics of the technical image.

_A Subjugated History and its Return_

Despite a common moving image ancestry, Materialist Film is absent from Manovich’s _The Language of New Media_ (2001). In asserting that ‘Vertov is able to achieve something that new media designers and artists still have to learn – how to merge database and narrative into a new form’, [20] Manovich renders invisible the whole history of post ‘20s avant-garde cinema including Gidal’s Materialist Film concept – which also claims Dziga Vertov’s _Man with a Movie Camera_ (1929) as a precursor, along with a general ‘20s European avant-garde. For Manovich, computer users ‘speak the language of the interface’ [21] spawned by cinema. Where montage between shots was cinema’s critical development, the montage within a shot introduced by the ‘20s European avant-garde is an essential characteristic of digital media. Fernand Léger’s and Dudley Murphy’s _Ballet mécanique_ (1924) [22] and Vertov’s ‘endless, unwinding of techniques’ [23] both represent this innovation.

Guy Sherwin’s ongoing filmmaking emerges out of the phase of reflexive practice that I have evoked here via through the activities of Gidal, Jacobs and Sharits (Sherwin himself also worked in this earlier period). For example, in his early Phase Loop (1971), Sherwin’s deft, calculated intervention is to punch holes into a loop of black leader in the centre of the image every twenty-four frames, whilst placing a scratch on the soundtrack area every twenty-six frames. The flash of light and ‘tapping’ sounds created when this loop is projected consequently drift in and out of sync in an unending animated dance of perceptual play,
exercising the audience’s eye and ear co-ordination, endlessly looping ‘a microcosm of film’s temporal experience’. [24] Phase Loop heralds the terrain explored by hand-made, camera-less animation in the following decades, remaining in step with the precepts of Gidal’s Materialist Film in which the film’s structure becomes its content.

Further, the self-contained simplicity and mathematical foundation of Phase Loop predicts the characteristics of numerical representation and modularity that Lev Manovich places at the heart of digital media, three decades later. [25] For Manovich, New Media’s secondary characteristics of automation and variability arise from this core – characteristics that are also locatable in Sherwin’s work via a loop’s interminable repetitions, the phasing of its essentialist ‘pixels’ of image and sound, the variation of a projector’s speed, and the repeatability of the loop’s construction. This is a moving image/sound form that is now part of the landscape of any web grazing by computer or mobile. In the digital, mobilising his work’s modular and variable potential to respond to digital media’s ascendancy, Sherwin revisits these concerns with a new emphasis on live filmic performance and multi-projection. [26]

For Manovich, the avant-garde tradition sourced by Sherwin, and Gidal’s Materialist Film, this ‘avant-garde became materialized in a computer.’ [27] In the digital, the formal editing strategies used to create the technical image within analogue image construction – traditionally taking place in the artist’s studio, within the camera and optical printer – are now executed inside the computer, having migrated into the post-production process.

Techniques or camera-based effects such as dust, film scratches, the blur, flash frames, lens and exposure flares, reticulation, processing mistakes and light leaks – all qualities borne out of limited access to the means of production or signifying the limits and nature of the technology itself – are transported into menus and buttons as simulations in film editing software such as I-Movie, Adobe Premiere or Final Cut Pro. There is a shift here from political and financial imperatives to aesthetic choices. Such in-camera residue, camera-based effects and optical printer manipulations, like masking, travelling mattes, double exposure, time-lapse, subtitling, under- and over-exposure, have all migrated from the filmic event into the post-production process. They figure as an afterthought inside these editing programs, to be aesthetically spun and nuanced as ornamentation at no extra cost.

The density of techniques available for constructing and manipulating technical images inside the computer approximates the process of animation. Manovich identifies animation as the core practice of painterly, digital, moving image production. [28] He also outlines affinity of digital production with pre-cinema toys: ‘the manual construction of images in digital cinema represents a return to the pro-cinematic practices of the nineteenth century, when images were hand-painted and hand-animated’. [29] The digital image’s malleability, its ability to break, stretch, distort, morph, pulse and colour-shift seamlessly, transforms the image from a photographic medium to a painterly one. The warehouse of techniques accumulated in avant-garde and experimental film practice moves to centre stage, populating computer software’s filter, transition, distortion and image-adjustment menus. Stressing this shift, Manovich identifies the serial database of John Whitney’s Catalog (1961) ‘as the founding moment of new media’. [30]

The computer’s corralling of avant-garde techniques has elicited a response by this avant-garde’s contemporary successors, in their continued use of film. Sherwin, McClure and Pope stress the ephemeral, visceral, performative and direct qualities of their practice. In contrast to the pervasive and overwhelming ‘global image scenario’ of the digital as described prophetically by Flusser, film becomes a more elusive and transient medium, ironically value-adding to its cache in the Fine Art world – although its collectability, as ever, remains unclear. As Andrea Picard notes in relation to McClure’s work:

His pieces are unique, but not in the sense of an objet d’art, rather as an ephemeral experience. This
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can be difficult for a museum to grapple with for many reasons, including archiving, storage, display, fear of obsolescence, immeasurable value, and so on. In short, what would they collect and how would they show it? [31]

Much like the rise in income that a popular music band gains from live performances as compared to recorded song sales, the film artist’s response has been to perform live what was initially constructed or explored in the studio – to reclaim, in measured improvisation, that space of immediacy and the ephemeral that the digital tames and colonises through instant availability.

One quality lost in technique’s migration into the digital realm is the corporeal experience of shine and transparency, which for Stephen Prince remains available in film’s celluloid: ‘Grain – bits of silver halide suspended in the emulsion of a film stock – gives the celluloid image its special luminosity and vividness.’ [32] This is a quality identified in proto-cinema media such as magic lanterns, tiffany lamps and the stained glass windows of the Gothic Church. As an act of refuge from digital media’s proliferation, recent moving image art practice has honed in on such elusive differences. McClure’s sonic assaults of flicker and abstraction perform after-images and optical residue, un-photographable retinal effects, which was the purview of Stan Brakhage’s concept of ‘closed-eye vision’. Sherwin focuses on this perceptual gap by mining perceptual ambiguity. In his Man with Mirror performance, originating in 1976, the audience becomes disoriented as to whether they are viewing an image or a real touchable body, an image perceptually loosened from its on-screen moorings.

Within these artists’ recent multi-screen presentations, such manipulations are now elusively experienced in live ephemeral performance, re-performing and laying bare those processes that have been rendered invisible in digital technology’s polished and aesthetically nuanced technical-image surfaces. These artists address Flusser’s invocation to lay bare, in the tradition of Russian Formalism, the technical image’s inner workings.

**Elusive Contemporary Practices (1): Sherwin**

Sherwin’s practice sits inside a dialectic of ‘material simplicity/perceptual complexity. The fascination is in seeing and knowing how something is made, but being surprised by how it appears’. [33] Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological insistence that ‘the way we experience works of cinema will be through perception’ is evident here. [34] In collaboration with Lynn Loo, in *Cycles #3* (1972/2003), for example, Sherwin’s method of experimenting with and presenting perceptual effects is reminiscent of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s method in his 1810 *Theory of Colours*. Goethe observed such visual phenomena as afterimages and recorded their effect. For Goethe, this work responded to Newton’s more objective scientific research on colour, which did not account for the phenomena he had observed. His subjective yet repeatable observations included:

> 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. [35]

When projected, the multi-screen *Cycles #3* presents flashes of circles in varying rhythm, creating afterimages, perceptual traces, artifacts that are not physically present on the film, but nevertheless are directly experienced by the eye. The viewer is asked to observe as Goethe once observed, to reflect on the experience he or she encounters, to underline that gap between what is perceived and what is physically and materially present on the film stock. We learn and encounter how the eye acts in the world in a different register to when we read and graze images on a computer screen.
After forty years of practice, it is clear from the way Sherwin presents this work that he is aware of such perceptual effects, and has incorporated their experience into the timing and structure. In its finest moments, we become disoriented as to whether we are watching an image or an afterimage. We consciously bear the ambiguity. Where a flash of light creates an afterimage, Sherwin mischievously, physically places this same effect on the film, while at other times he does not. We are never sure if what we see is physically present or merely a byproduct of the way our retina works. The operation of the viewer’s sensory cluster is *Cycles #3*’s subject. These are unrecordable, ephemeral, perceptual events, presented fleetingly, lying outside the reach of the digital image; they identify a gap between such an image and the body’s perceptual apparatus. Like Goethe’s writing on colour, this subjective play is comprehensible as research into the moving image’s perceptual impact.

Sherwin’s *Man with Mirror* performance is relevant here. The performance consists of a single projection of a 1970s film of Sherwin facing the camera in a park, holding a white-backed 1×0.75 metre mirror, with both hands in front of him. Sherwin slowly rotates the mirror so that, at times, the reflection shows the park in front, below or above, depending on the mirror’s angle; and, at other times, an image of a young Sherwin staring into the originating camera (and thus directly at the audience). This is the film’s content, but also the performance’s structure: the film is projected onto Sherwin standing in the performance space holding and rotating a similar mirror.

Like the gap between the projected and perceived afterimage of *Cycles #3*, in *Man with Mirror* Sherwin sets up a dialogue between the projected image and his physical presence in the performance space. This situation produces an ephemeral experience onto the bodies of the audience. As the performance proceeds, a movement occurs from the real Sherwin to the projected Sherwin, and the difference in age between the old and the new becomes instantly palpable.

In a moment like this – and it seems to happen for all observers simultaneously – the moving image becomes unhinged, begins to float. The new and old merge in a single, perceptual event. The eye loses its bearings. It becomes immaterial as to whether we are watching a projection or a real presence. This gap is experienced directly, viscerally. This is a palpable experience of that unlocatability that Flusser identifies in his description of the global image scenario as amnesic, produced by the proliferation of technical images. Sherwin presents the physical history of his ageing body ahistorically, as a compacted flash of insight. While in Oscar Wilde’s famous tale, Dorian Gray’s surface looks hid the unscrupulous life history made visible in the painting of him, the relationship between Sherwin’s old and new bodies delivers no such dysfunction.

The experience of Sherwin’s performance is not available in any YouTube or Vimeo recording of the event – although the ‘oh-ah’ trace of the impact on its audience may be heard on such recordings. Sherwin’s practice here interrogates the pre-reflective experience that Merleau-Ponty described:

> My field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, yet which I immediately place in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams. Equally constantly I weave dreams around things. [36]

Inscriptions or scratches that are drawn directly on the film surface are part of the genre of direct, camera-less animation. This tradition developed through Norman McLaren and Len Lye’s studio-based, moving-image practices, and also became part of the vocabulary employed by Sharits’ multi-screen films as well as Sherwin’s *Phase Loop*. When such strips of film are viewed over a light box, they suggest a very different patterning or language to when such work is seen projected, intimating something of that gap presented and worked by Sherwin in his performances.
Elusive Contemporary Practices (2): Pope

Film artist Greg Pope integrates this camera-less film practice directly into his film performances. With long loops of black leader running through one 16mm projector or a series of them, the strips of film pass over a metal plate where he scratches and/or punctures the film ‘live’. With each pass of the loop over the plate, the abstract patterns are added to, coloured and further layered for the audience to see on the loop’s next pass through the projector’s gate. In one of the more complex versions of this intervention process, a number of projectors are directed onto a fog making machine to create, not images on a two-dimensional screen, but a cloud of kinetic activity, recalling and extending into improvisation Anthony McCall’s seminal 16mm film installation, *Line Describing a Cone* (1973). Scratches in the soundtrack area add a further synchronous, sonic layer to the dynamic movement created.

Pope has also built and used a machine that can inscribe such patterns onto the strip of film automatically. Such improvisation recalls Konrad Zuse’s Z1, built in 1935-8: the world’s first binary calculating machine, considered the world first computer, it read its instructions from a perforated strip of 35mm film. Pope’s scratch performances re-enact the operation of Zuse’s original computing machine, but place it in an immersive body-centred sonic environment that engage the senses in a very different way to sitting in front of a computer screen. The process lays bare something of that activity occurring in the computer’s covered-over circuitry.

Elusive Contemporary Practices (3): McClure

Bruce McClure’s multi-projector film performances also define the digital’s outer limits. McClure’s instrument is a bank of four modified 16mm projectors. These allow him to subtly shift the focus, intensity and speed of his projected film loops that, more often than not, are themselves embedded with flicker effects. A handmade soundboard and sound-effect pedals give him control of the tone, volume, pitch and echo of his sounds – an ability to subtly sculpt his rudimentary sprocket-hole soundtracks on the run, in parallel to his manipulations of the projected image. The sonic rhythms, the back-and-forth between the soundtracks of each projector, shift in pitch and volume over time. These one-hour-plus performances build up a trance-like interplay between image and sound pulse, re-materialising and multiplying Sherwin’s earlier template of *Phase Loop* into a constantly changing field of audio-visuality. These loops are pared-back versions of the camera-less animation that Manovich alludes to in noting the hand-painted imagery of pre-cinema; in his bio, McClure describes himself as having ‘crossed over into the realm of the proto-cinematic’. McClure produces an audiovisual response to or extension of Steve Reich’s minimalist, process-based music pieces, which use repeating tape loops to create phasing and shifting harmonic patterns over extended periods of time.

To be in the audience inside one of McClure’s light and sound concerts viscerally impacts one’s body and breathing, similar to how sound can immerse the body in dance and movement at a rave or music event. McClure forces his imagery to behave sonically. Its complex of flicker, intensity and coloured light, of multiple projected images moving in and out of phase and focus, produce layered visual artifacts of pulse and afterimage. The pulsing light impacts like a visual bruise on the eye. As with Sherwin, there is a gap between what exists on his film loops, what you can see McClure doing as he plays his instrument, and what the eye experiences. This is highlighted by the available images of these performances, often shot by audience members to capture the event: as a blur or static, abstract shape, they bear little resemblance to the actual experience. Unlike the avant-garde palette that Manovich re-locates inside the computer, McClure’s performances resist containment or definition in digital form. On the repeatability of these performances, McClure states:

I use boxes and plastic bags as my archiving system and what seem to be precise notes to the future. In label boxes I store materials and try to identify the original film loop sources to distinguish them from prints. I do this because I look forward to the opportunity to exhume the remains, but in the end it’s always like trying to decipher last month’s bills. Recent work constantly brings me to a retracing
of worn paths causing me to note that I can never put my foot in it the same way. [37]

Even a digital video of one of McClure’s performances lacks the presence and physicality of the originating event; it becomes more like the sublimated nuisance of an air-conditioner’s whirr or traffic hum, rather than an immersive, body-centred, expanded-cinema exploration of the senses.

**Colour My World: Art and Research**

There is an uncanny resemblance between the way McClure sets up his array of projectors and their flickering streams of light, and Edwin Land’s experimental set-up with projectors and pulses of light for his 1960s experiments into colour constancy, through which he developed his Retinex Theory of Colour. [38] Both arrangements boast a subtle and meticulous control over the light pulses they emit. Land’s Retinex Theory (Land 1964) adds scientific credibility to Goethe’s subjective view, or indeed what artists since Leonardo Da Vinci have intuited. In Land’s theory, fluctuations in Mondrian’s yellow, for example, are explained as the result of the phenomenon of **colour constancy**, the colours placed around the yellow changing its perceived hue. In colour constancy, a banana is perceived as the same yellow irrespective of the red light used to illuminate it, because the coloured objects in its vicinity ground its perceived hue.

Abstract painting both intuitively and explicitly pushes such colour rules to their limits. Kandinsky actively sought out research into colour’s psychological impact [39] , incorporating this knowledge 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’. [40]

Land’s experimental design contains two identical, Mondrian-like patterns (referred to as ‘Mondrians’ in the research) separately illuminated by varied combinations of red, green and blue light for very short and longer intervals. Shooting different packets of light at each ‘Mondrian’, the experimental subject is asked to identify any differences in the two physically identical images. This procedure isolates perceptual artifacts (persistence and shifts in colour, shape and luminosity). Such subjective effects are also present in McClure’s performances, and are achieved by similar means. Land’s Retinex model, constructed from these experiments, recognises both Goethe’s and Newton’s views, integrating their subjective and objective theories of colour into the one gestalt. John McCann’s commentary on Retinex places these objective-subjective views in relation:

> The interesting paradox of the past is the conflict between physics and psychology. The physics of colorimetry has produced a robust quantitative model of quanta catch in the retina. The psychology of color sensation has pointed out that human biological processes use spatial comparisons. [41]

Land’s experiments indicate that colour constancy is the result of complex, referential, perceptual processes hardwired into the body’s neural architecture. His model shows that the colour one sees is dependent on how the eye ‘processes’ the whole field of view. This supports Gestalt Psychology’s understanding that the whole is a perceptually primary phenomenon. It also relates to Hans Hofmann’s push/pull theory of art which the Abstract expressionists mobilised; and Mondrian’s general principle of plastic equivalence: ‘The entire work must be only the plastic expression of relationships and must disappear as particularity’. [42] Land’s experiments demonstrate that such hardwiring is evaluative, comparative and referential, producing paradoxical visual artifacts that may not be materially present. Such perceptual artifacts provide the meat in McClure’s performances.

Similarly, in James J. Gibson’s concept of a **visual kinaesthetic** mobility, head movement and direct perceptual assessments of ambient light are incorporated into a visual gestalt of our environment, instantly playing before us as a totality: ‘The persistence of the environment together with the co-existence of its parts and the occurrence of its events are all perceived together’. [43] Like Land and Merleau-Ponty, this view rests on a direct perception ‘not mediated by retinal pictures, neural pictures or mental pictures’ [44] , but of a field perceived as a whole rather than the sum of parts.
In colour perception, there is thus a gap between scientifically measurable ‘quanta catch in the retina’ and what is perceived and experienced. In McClure’s or Sherwin’s performances, this gap is demonstrated in the incongruity between, for example, viewing the projected film and inspecting the same material over a light box. This gap between what is perceived and what exists as real in such cases as Goethe’s afterimages, wrongly illuminated bananas or yellows in a Mondrian painting, all suggest this perceptual gap. Although our eyes register a banana illuminated with blue light as yellow, a digital camera does not.

**In the Realm of the Senses**

Such gaps, plumbed by the visual performance practices of Sherwin, Pope and McClure, offer insights into the technical image’s limits, and point to a body-centred realm. This method is informed by and traceable back to Goethe’s subjective experiments with seeing, and Land’s work on the perception of colour.

By returning us to our senses, these proto-cinema performance practices tell us that what is real in the technical image is no longer photographic, but grounded in its sonic impact on the body. With the shrinking of reflective, critical space that the technical image’s proliferation has produced, there is a need to better utilise such body-centred knowing. Originating within analogue moving image techniques, Materialist Film has evolved as a practice preoccupied with laying bare such technological architectures, as an implicitly political project.

This is a practice whose focus on the structure of moving-image/sound production articulates an emphasis also critical to digital media, according to Manovich and Flusser. What better way to uncover the hidden or amnesic vistas of the digital realm and its malleable surfaces, than a practice that – despite its affinities with the digital arts – is itself largely unrecognised and subjugated within the digital discourse?

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[3] Ibid., p. 16.


[17] Ibid., p. 214.

[18] Ibid., p. 30.

[19] Ibid., p. 204.


[21] Ibid., p. 79.

[22] Ibid., p. 307.

[23] Ibid., p. 242.


[28] Ibid., p. 302.

[29] Ibid., p. 295.


[37] Picard, ‘Reading Between the Lines’, p. 65.
[44] Ibid., p. 147

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