

Making and Appreciating Abstract Art Today

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Fine Arts

with a

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by

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Authorization to Submit Thesis

This thesis of Jonathan S. Matteson, submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Arts with a Major in Studio Art and titled "Making and Appreciating Abstract Art Today" has been reviewed in final form. Permission, as indicated by the signatures and dates below, is now granted to submit final copies to the College of Graduate Studies for approval.

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Abstract

“Everything is expressed through relationship.”

Piet Mondrian (1995)

eXOspACES is a sublime, *Cyberpunk*-inspired collection of abstract digital videos and sound art pieces that express my angst about current trends in technology.

Based on remixing my best jet-fighter gameplay and solo jazz improvisations on electric bass, *eXOspACES* is a culturally-relevant, abstract multimedia collection of scalable, adaptable, and customizable, digital art projections that participants are encouraged to manipulate using settings such as “Loop, adjust speed, quality, brightness, volume, etc.”

Reminiscent of the upbeat, synthetic textures of arcades and roller rinks, awe-inspiring planetariums, and dynamic liquid/laser light shows from my youth, *eXOspACES* offers the reader-writer an ominous, albeit nostalgic, look at the frightening times we face in the Information/Digital/Computer Age. And, as a hand-picked selection of “lossy” new media, its uncanny obsolescence evokes the sublime by echoing environments akin to the pre-Oedipal wombs of the past like caves, cathedrals, and cinemas.

Acknowledgements

“The creative artist functions best in a challenging atmosphere
and that whatever serves as a challenge is legitimate.”

Willard Bohn (1968)

When I think about those who helped me succeed at “a noted national leader in student-centered learning and interdisciplinary research that promotes public service,” I feel eager to follow their example and find students that I can support in similar ways.

Therefore, I must express my sincere gratitude to my major professor Stacy; thesis committee members, Greg, Dave, and Evan; peers, particularly Ashley Vaughn and Logan Brashar; the College of Art & Architecture faculty and staff like Susan Treu; and our dear students and their supporters, especially the Whitesel and Harder families.

Moreover, I am honored to have collaborated with art historians Johanna Gosse and Daniele Di Ludovico, Brian Dyre from the Department of Psychology & Communication Studies, Jovanni-Rey V. de Pedro, Roger Rowley and the rest of Prichard, Ridenbaugh, and Reflections Art Galleries staff and volunteers, Digital Humanities, Film Studies, Joe Pallen and Rose Graham from Creative Services, The Argonaut and Moscow-Pullman Daily News, Pullman Regional Hospital, Vandal Games Overnight, Sunnyside Elementary School, and Sou'wester Lodge.

Dedication

To God and my family for their love.

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Introduction

“The first thing that impresses the student of Scandinavian art is the infrequency with which one meets representations of the human figure. Man is here not the center of interest as is the case with the Greeks and Latins. It is nature and natural phenomena that hold the place of honor.”

Laurin, Hannover and This (1968)

Pertinent to the roots of my *Swedish-American* aesthetic and, by extension, this thesis project, the quote above helps contextualize my personal research efforts including investigating the expressive potential of systematically abstracting personally significant pieces of time-based multimedia through digital montage—uniting aural and visual modes together to make a synthesis appear as an estranging, yet entrancingly beautiful, sensuous object to behold in a weird but wonderful way.

In the contemporary art world, it seems expected that an artist perform the role of magician-storyteller in that we, eccentrics, feel compelled by society to get a schtick/act/routine of *edutainment* down, so that we might incrementally enhance our wealth by transforming the ordinary into the extraordinary in front of a captive audience on a regular basis. Yet, as Keith Haring (1984) remarked, “I am continually amazed at the number of artists who continue to work as if the camera were never invented...as if airplanes, and computers, and videotape were never heard of.” I suppose this is due in part to digital art’s commercial downside, “that the computer can produce an arbitrary number of equally good ‘originals,’ which can be a detriment in the business world of art.” (Peitgen and Richter 1986). However, I thought to exercise my rights and lead by example in constructing aesthetic experiences that challenge politically-motivated perspectives, patrons, and artists alike in public and private settings.

In addition to my tenure in the green industry as a new media marketing consultant, the fact that I am a young *Gen X* white male who was raised in a blue-collar family of musical, *Protestant* ministers has helped influence my decision to decenter naturalistic depictions of the human figure. Thus, my work peacefully confronts cultural norms associated with the *Greco-Roman* mimetic aesthetic that underlies *Western* civilization and its infamous military-industrial complex. As such, interesting parallels exist between my iconoclastic works associated with *Eco-cinema*, aniconic, theosophical, and animistic *Art + Design* that I will address in the next section.

***eXospACES* Multimedia Miniseries**

“Every great artist gives birth to a new universe,
in which familiar things look as they have never before looked to anyone.

This new appearance, rather than being distortion or betrayal,
reinterprets the ancient truth in a grippingly fresh, enlightening way.”

Paul Zelanski (1995)

An analogy to the recording artist is useful to understanding my approach to making and appreciating abstract art today. Here is another parallel from the practice of a different artistic endeavor. Music made in a studio setting differs from the direct, unedited kind that is performed in front of a live audience by a band or a busker. Like the studio musician, my artworks are the result of successive recordings that I have made in a private, professional space using a variety of electronic tools before a final compilation is released to audiences for appreciation in the discursive spaces of society. To construct captivating experiences, I set a sequence that allows for improvisation to varying degrees. Musical components, the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic coalesce to ensure, in a visual parallel, an evocative experience that is both compelling and complete.

Inspired by *Cyberpunk* films from 2017 (e.g. *Blade Runner 2049* and *Ghost in the Shell*) and bands like *MUSE*, I posted this *neONNOir* mini-series on popular social media sites like *YouTube* and *SoundCloud* to (1) encourage critical thinking and empathy about the “high tech, low life” aspects of contemporary life; (2) expand my oeuvre by encouraging reflection on our digital and technological consumption patterns in these reflexive, hyper-connected times; (3) express angst about the coinciding rise of addictive algorithms, *eSports*, *SpaceX*, space force, drone warfare, and deep space discoveries, among other current trends that have yet to be outlawed in the early 21st century; (4) analyze the social, financial, and environmental development of an artwork of mine in real-time with web-based analytic tools.

As such, my interdisciplinary artistry appears. For example, the sound art pieces that I produced are smartphone recordings of me practicing musical techniques (e.g. plucking, raking, slapping, and tapping steel strings with my hands) via *Jazz* improvisations on my 4-string electric bass where I explore relativity by switching between minor and major tonalities, as a metaphor for the ebb and flow of our visual universe. Also, I incorporated copyright free music, which was selected initially by duration, then timbre in support of my “red donkey” political persuasions that provide an interdisciplinary parallel with the *Political Science*. But, unlike music videos, neither sight nor sound

in *eXOspACES* were made for each other. Instead, my artistic process unites objects to create an artistic tension that resolves itself in the mind of the viewer.

These parallels in artistic processes guide my editing of these recordings using a basic movie editing software program on my laptop with data that originated from my smartphone/tablet. I abstracted their vibe through additive, subtractive, reorganizational, and substitutional creative means, preserving the original pitch at times. Consistent with a *Cyberpunk*-inspired work of art, a series of adjustments and exports occurred before a final at *the bottom-end of high-definition*, meaning 720p that exists between *VHS* and *Blu-ray* quality. In doing so, I artistically manipulated mainstream mobile device technology as medium/message to index my movements through recorded performance—processes that parallel those of post-war “American” abstractionist and today’s archiving techniques such as dithering, which is like weathering or “foxing” for digital objects so they appeared distressed, compressed, and degraded as a metaphor for entropy. In fact, the active ambiguity that is apparent in these layered works caused me to caution “Discretion is advised for viewers with photosensitive epilepsy” since these rapidly changing sensory experiences can potentially be physically harmful and/or disturbing to some viewers.

In the tradition of passing down artistic conventions, beyond striking symmetrical balances, I used sacred geometry such as mirroring, spiraling, and other systems-based approaches akin to those used to construct megalithic sites, mandalas, geoglyphs, and sand painting to bring a sense of visual stability. By doing so, I was able to offer several stunning ways to watch light dance and toggle between what is near or far, low or high, closed or open, cool or warm, providing opacity to composite elements between layers, that appear to alternate between 2-D and 3-D. For example, Figures 1 and 7 are still images from a couple pieces that showcase a few of the many levels of abstraction and depth that these episodes seamlessly blend between.

Other visual techniques include shifting the orientation of the frame from portrait to landscape to match the common side-by-side arrangement of our eyes—since vertical TVs and PCs are, understandably, rare—thereby changing the top-down, bird’s eye point-of-view (POV) provided by the mobile gaming applications I repurposed in this artistic endeavor. The “aim high” vantage point and intense action sequences provided by jet-fighter games offers the viewer-listener a visual pun on lofty perspectives. I often eliminated backgrounds in the editing process to offer a defiance of gravity.



Figure 1. Laptop screenshot of a still from *Pulsar* in fullscreen and *YouTube* player settings.

Like an attribution, I purposely left behind symbols and other traces of my primary source materials to cite my research so patrons could feel safe enough to move beyond it. For example, *Blade Runner* (1982) and its sequel *Blade Runner 2049* (2017) are considered *Cyberpunk* films due to this dystopian genres' earmarks like “expressionistic lighting, dark silhouettes, atmospheric haze, and an underlying sense of doom. Yet in this bleak world, bursts of color do occasionally appear. Bright lights, neon signs, and holographic ads create a strange dichotomy between desperation and hope” (Tanya Lapointe 2017).

Further, I find it artistically interesting that so many viewers can adjust “poor” sound-image levels in *eXOspACES* and designate whether or not a digital file should loop or end, be embedded, shared or not, be bright or dimly lit, and transform from large or small, fast or slow, sharp or not, etc. Intriguing yet, as Peitgen and Richter say is, “with the rise of digital or so-called ‘new’ media, the means of experimentation, production, representation, distribution and consumption are all the same” (Peitgen and Richter 1986). Time will reveal whether art historians agree that creating art the viewer can manipulate digitally will be a pivotal moment in the history of art history. They will decide whether creating art in a medium that could be played with by the audience—looping, adjusting speed, quality, brightness, volume, with lossy, poor images, nostalgic plays with people’s psychophysical

projections, especially pareidolia, as a time-based *Rorschach* inkblot test of sorts—is a significant step forward or not.

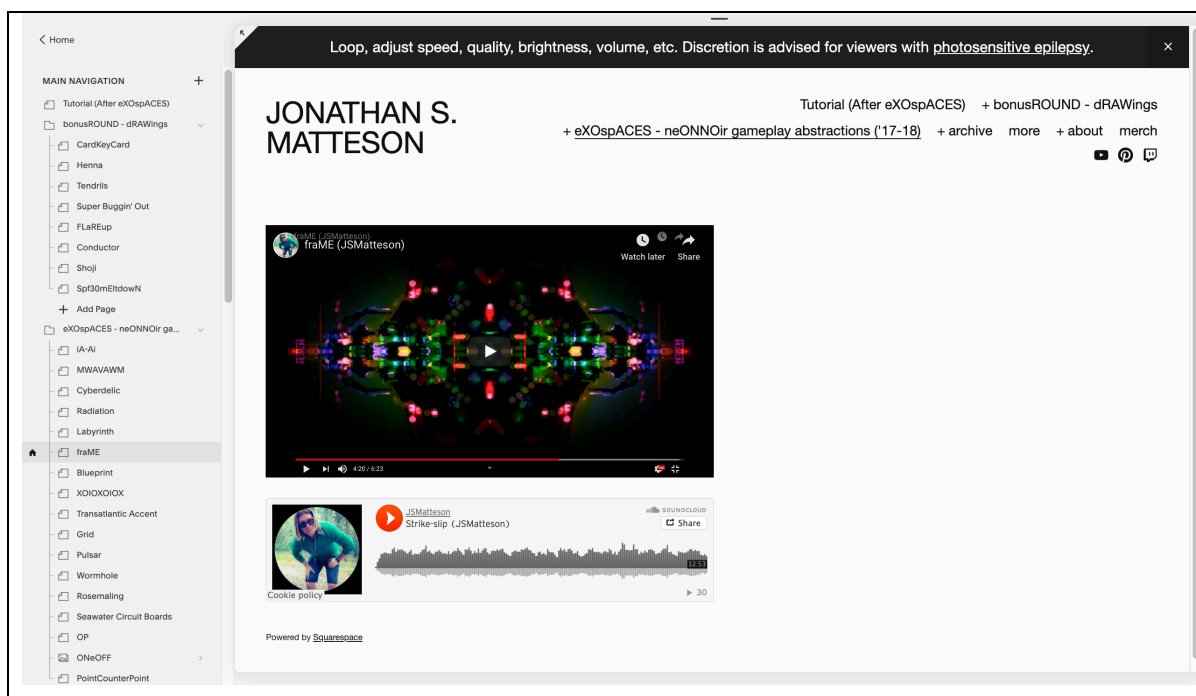


Figure 2. Laptop screenshot of jsmatteson.com and its “white cube” look and feel webpages such as *frAME*.

bonusROUND is a group of digital “dRAWings” that I produced like minigames to augment *eXospACES* by simplifying screen captures in similar ways yet based on differing mobile device applications other than jet-fighter games to provide bonus content with a twist.

Another focus with *eXospACES*, which is apparent in how I play with the capitalization of this miniseries’ title as well as other works, is to publicly challenge conceptual and technical cultural norms related to the verbal, not just non-verbal, modes of communication for the purposes of expanding the public’s psychophysical awareness of nested meanings that welcome viewers to actively interpret each piece. For example, “XO” could be perceived as a nod to affection or a marker in the same way that a visual field with the jet-fighter could be interpreted as childhood nostalgia or drone warfare—encouraging active engagement instead of passive patronage.

Thus, the thread that runs through my multimodal processes of simplification (see above) providing people with variations of image on a particular theme. Nevertheless, in any artistic series there are always a few standout pieces that exceed expectations and hold up under scrutiny over time. For example, each time I listen to *tSUNami* it stands out as one of my most successful sound art pieces I made because it is formally attractive and non-formally significant. Plus, I published it with a playlist to reward curiosity about the context of its creation.

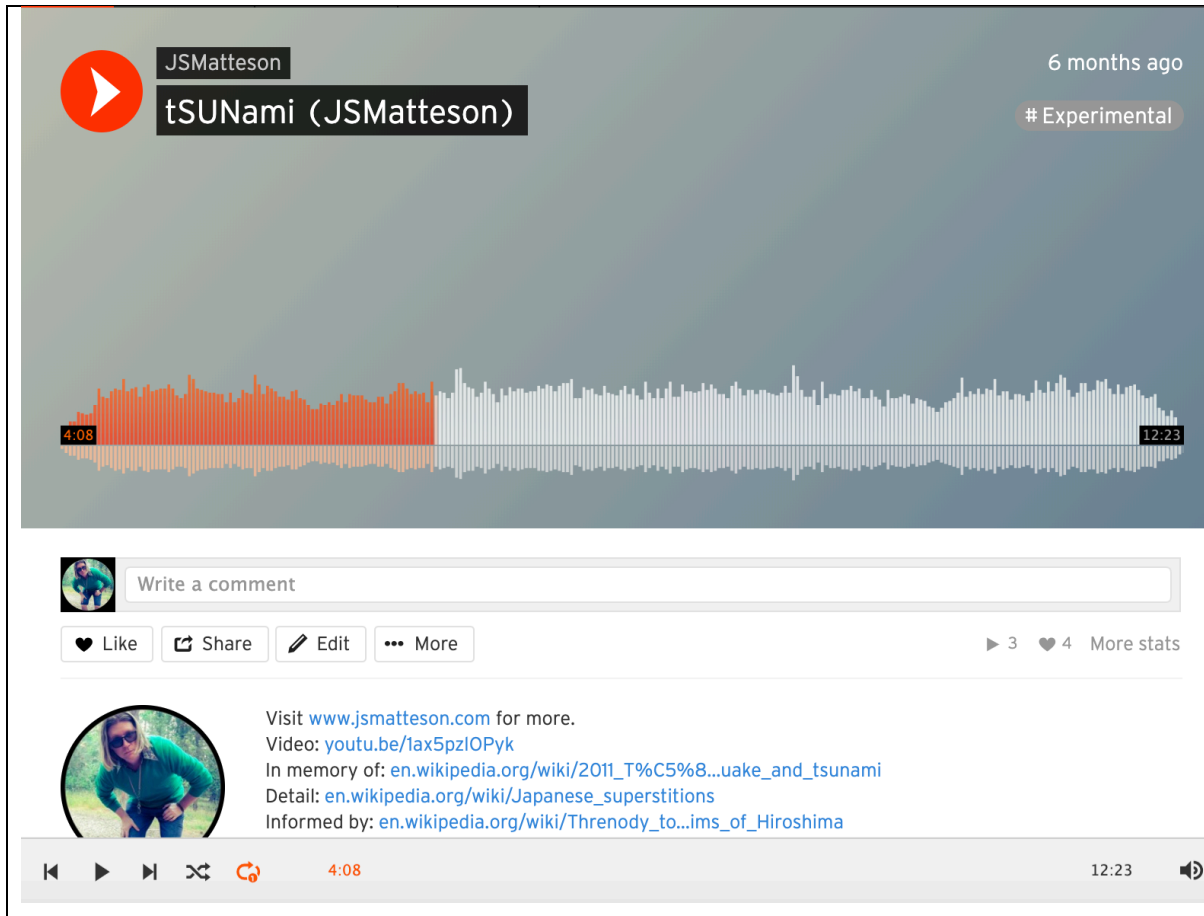


Figure 3. Laptop screenshot of my SoundCloud channel and my favorite recent soundscape.

Elsewhere in my work, the visual that comes to mind is *Nymphaea (After Monet)*, which includes the intertextual use of its title to play off the public's affection for *Impressionism* and other modern movements. Therefore, for the sake of stirring a sense of immediacy, I also avoided making things appear too finished or frozen.

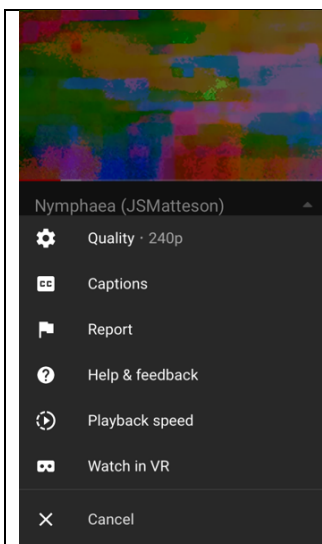


Figure 4. Smartphone screenshot of general *YouTube* settings.

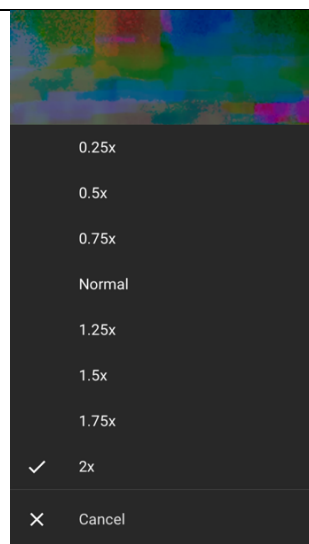


Figure 5. Smartphone screenshot of *YouTube* playback speeds.



Figure 6. Photograph of *Nymphaea (After Monet)* installed with QR code at the *Ridenbaugh Art Gallery* in 2018.

Whereas, in the case of my amalgams, the *fraME* (visual art) with *Strike-slip* (sound art) union was a happy accident due to a rule I gave myself to match things up first by duration, then using timbre.

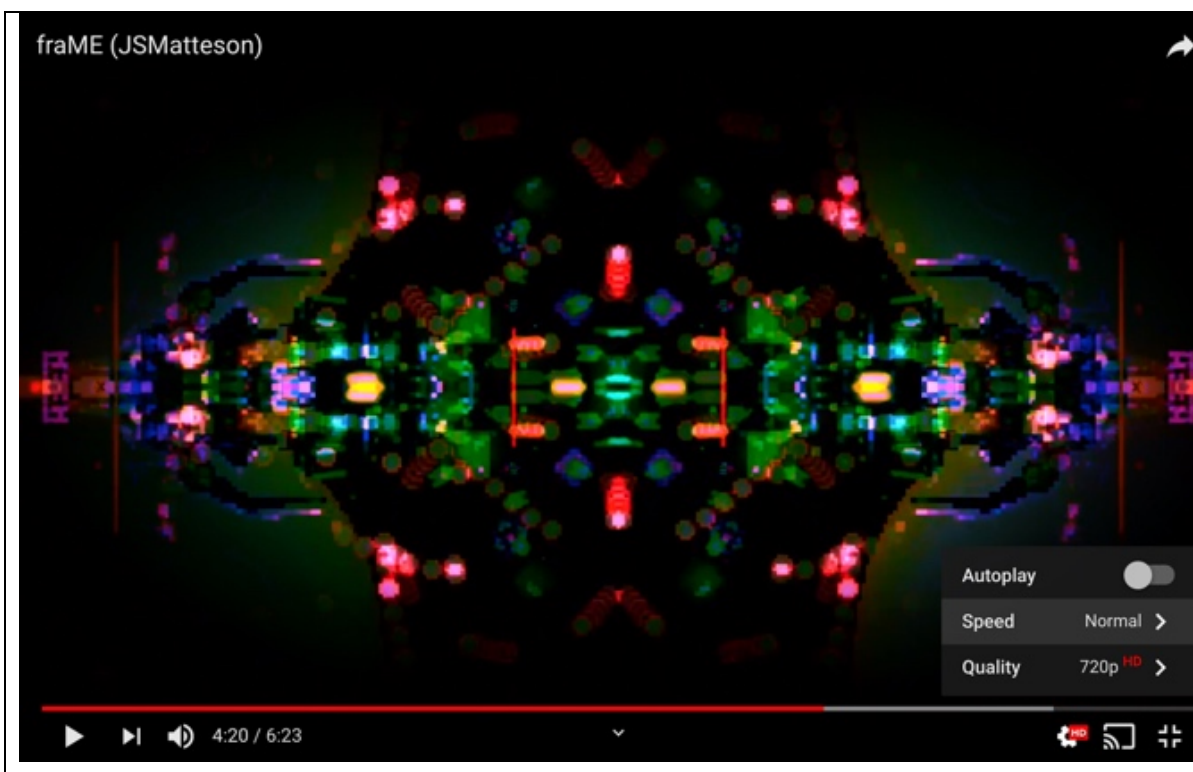


Figure 7. Laptop screenshot of a still from *fraME* in fullscreen and *YouTube* player settings.

Exhibition and Reception

“The American imagination demands the real thing
and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake;
where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred.”

Umberto Eco (2002)

As someone who was raised to be weary of *earthly* wisdom, the reason I do not think that it is strange to see flat screens in an art gallery is because of Hegel’s assertion, “art is the sensuous presentation of ideas.” A collaboration with curators is to encourage site-specific presentations of *eXOspACES* in which curators-as-viewers can assert their aesthetic perspective in the display of this audio-visual series as a social practice.

For my part in a three-person MFA group show that we cleverly titled *Asterisk*, I put a few of my works on display in the upstairs gallery spaces within the Prichard Art Gallery. To prompt visitors to search online to see the rest, I featured a few scalable objects from *eXOspACES* that were temporarily bound to fixed dimensions as follows:

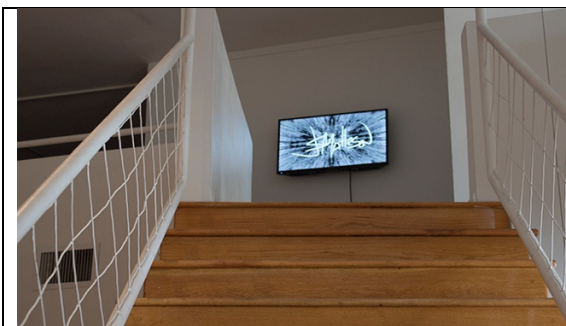


Figure 8. *eXOspACES* looping title wall slideshow presentation located upstairs.



Figure 9. A possible second impression that now includes Gallery I and II.



Figure 10. Gallery I (L-R): *fraME*, *Strike-slip* (tower speaker), and *Cyberdelic*,



Figure 11. Gallery I (L-R): *Radiation* facing *fraME* and bench seating below projector.

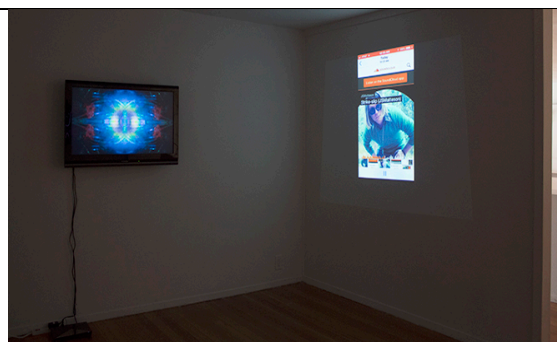


Figure 12. Gallery I (L-R): *Radiation* on a flat screen and *fraME* w/i a *FRaME* projected on the back of the title wall as a *Tutorial*.

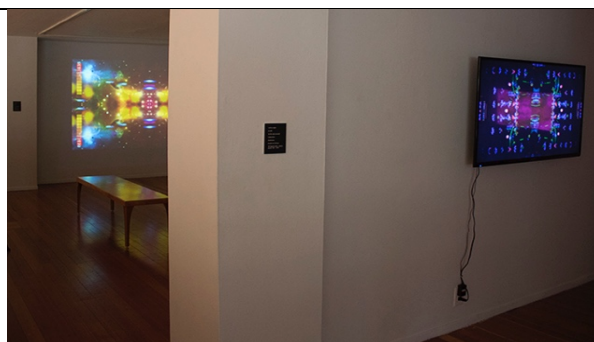


Figure 13. A closer look at Gallery II after exiting Gallery I.

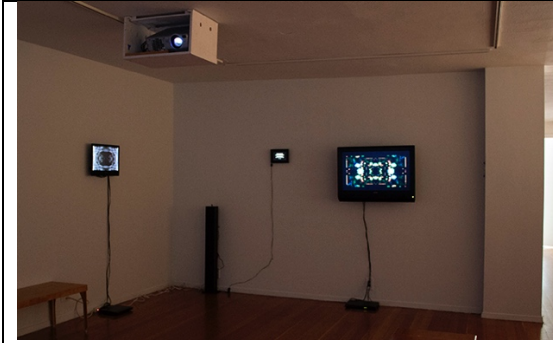


Figure 14. Gallery II (R-L): *Labyrinth*, *Heidegger Quote*, *REcurrentSEE* (tower speaker), and *iA-Ai*.

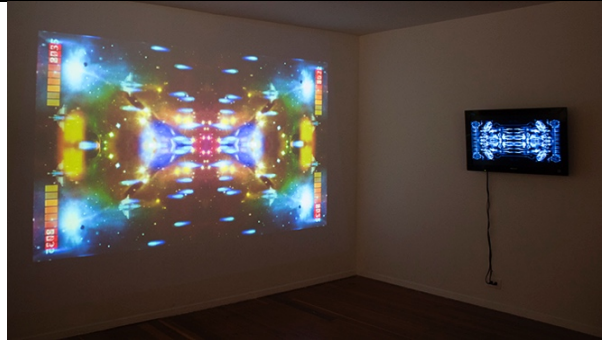


Figure 15. Gallery II (R-L): *Blueprint and Pulsar*.



Figure 16. A second look into Gallery I and title wall when exiting the exhibition from Gallery II.

As a candidate for a Master in Fine Arts (MFA) currently enrolled in an Art + Design graduate program, I wanted to celebrate the Bauhaus' centennial by completing a project like this to help perpetuate interdisciplinary approaches to making and appreciating abstract art today. Therefore, I chose sight over sound as my primary area of research because, as experts conclude, "The more complex the situation is, the more appropriate a pictorial representation becomes." And, "Not only can the visual system handle any information flow approximately ten times that of all other sensory systems together, but the information processed can have a two, and to some extent even a three-dimensional structure." (Peitgen and Richter 1986).

Despite the fact that, as Rudolf Arnheim says, "visual things cannot be conveyed by verbal language," I have chosen to allow the following quote by Martin Heidegger to be burned into a small screen

meant for digital photographs that I included in this exhibition as follows: “Everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology, whether we passionately affirm or deny it. But we are delivered over to it in the worst possible way when we regard it as something neutral; for this conception of it, to which today we particularly like to do homage, makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology” (1977). *eXOspACES* is intended to provoke study on social engineering, including the influence that *Eurocentric* philosophers have had on the evolution of eugenics.

Conclusion

"It is, though, an ironic truth that
the moment when art claims to be 'above' contemporary life
is always the moment it becomes controlled by it."

Alastair Mackintosh (1975)

After launching the *eXOspACES* project, I offer the following reflections:

- This portfolio, *eXOspACES*, of Internet Art projections juxtaposes the still, silent, and simultaneous computer printouts that I made to reflect light instead and presented at my BFA show in 2016, *TRANSLATIONS*. I am encouraged to see how my work is developing to 4-D from that flat work I did earlier.
- *Aesthetics*: Although a standard of beauty seems always to be based on a specific canon of proportions, sensuous objects that gain enough momentum to transcend its time function as ideologically flexible, “one size fits all” syncretic containers that can support a myriad of mental constructs. Moreover, Slavoj Žižek’s comments on cultural capital and commodities seems to acknowledge this since he presents “a materialist conception of ideology that drew heavily on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian idealism” (Wikipedia 2019).
- Artists and designers must remain sensitive to cultural shifts, including the current and unprecedented professional gaming phenomena that is being covered more frequently in the media these days. The Power of Art confirmed these suspicions when we read, “video games are causing a shift in consciousness” (Lewis and Lewis 2014). Using games, which are meant for play, to practice war is a sobering reality.
- Beyond being derivative of the gestural, action, and color field painting, which goes back to Titian, my work is not unlike John & James Whitney, Chris Watts, Damian Gilley, Felipe Pantone, Cory Arcangel, BRIZBOMB, Silvia Weidenbach, Daniel Crooks, Jaron Lanier, Yang Yongliang, Frans Bak, Ed Ruscha, Olafur Eliasson, Mark Tobey, Doug Aitkin, Bill Viola, Pat O’Neill, Yinka Shonibare, Sabrina Gschwandtner, William Morris, and others. However, my work is mine, so I am only comfortable with listing these names as influences.
- As someone who loves watercolor, especially wet-in-wet works, I assume that Rothko (unwittingly) appropriated Leonardo’s smoky/hazy sfumato technique to communicate a similar stirring sense of immediacy and otherworldliness but scaled up and without the figure.

Odd Nerdrum's response to this notion would interest me. I think and speak like this, as my students, so I make connections like this that other people might think strange.

- Synesthesia is experienced when senses are mixed, so our overexposure to multimedia made me want to offer an experience that could speak to overstimulation since we transduce neural energy through our senses. I suspect that this phenomenon will continue to be experienced and discussed in our hyper-connected culture.
- Due to our tribal, xenophobic condition, appreciating an abstract work of art can be quite an estranging experience for a reader-writer—enough to provoke pareidolia (e.g. seeing faces in the moon, etc.), I posit, as an aftereffect—meaning we imagine familiarity where there is none. Therefore, the avant-garde must reject bourgeois chauvinism as cowardly. This might seem to be a tremendous aside, but, again, this is what and how I thought to share here.
- Rather than relying predominately on color and form wheels, scientific models like homunculus are visual aids that could help artists and designers grasp sensation and perception concepts better and appreciate the important role they play in the reception and interpretation of a work of art or design.
- Art as an idiosyncratic practice, instead of the social kind, does little more in group setting than cover up hidden similarities that need to be brought to light. It is dangerous to dwell only on our differences in interpretation because we ignore consistencies via human nature and nurture (cf. human geography, visual culture, et al.).

I provided the above list in hopes that you, the reader, will research these topics as well.

For more, please visit jsmatteson.com and as follows:

jsmatteson.github.io/eXOspACES/

youtube.com/jsmatteson

soundcloud.com/jsmatteson

twitch.tv/jsmatteson

pinterest.com/jsmatteson

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