



there is something here

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there is something here

Prelude

desert — landscape — site

Tire tracks run across the hilly plain, weaving in-between the juniper and sage brush. Mounds of trash, the odd relic here and there: an iron grate, a pile of shoes, broken glass and dismembered furniture, stripped animal bones shining white in the moonlight. The sound of howling coyotes and ATVs mingle with the rumbling of the highway, whose sound carries far across the open space.

The desert is the stage of Westerns. It is a place of Manifest Destiny for a colonial expansion, a place of damnation and transcendence, where cowboys are actors and actors take on the gestures of cowboys. At the same time, it is one of many locations of survivance¹, to use Gerald Vizenor's term, where Native American communities have lived since time immemorial, and where they continue to weave the past and the future into the present.

In the contemporary world of the western United States, the desert is a place of recreation that retains some of its outlaw nature. It seems to be a place that allows for transgression. The desert embodies freedom without responsibility, freedom from normal rules of conduct. There are traces everywhere. This is not a pristine wilderness; our messy lives are evident here and we can only guess at who has come before us. Regardless of the persistent remnants of human activity there are rarely any humans to be seen. The ground is dust and volcanic rock, with patches of dry grass. Rusted pieces of metal—wire mesh, cans—blend into the colors of the landscape. Beyond a binary of image and reality, the desert traces are

¹ "Survivance is an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion; survivance is the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent." Gerald Vizenor, "Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice," in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, ed. Gerald Vizenor (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.

phantasms of the neither living nor dead. Reality is in question as the temporal flux of past, present, and future are felt as one. Here, time feels endless, like being fully immersed in the virtual space of a fiction.





Photograph from *there is something here*. Inkjet print, 86" x 129".

Seeing is Believing

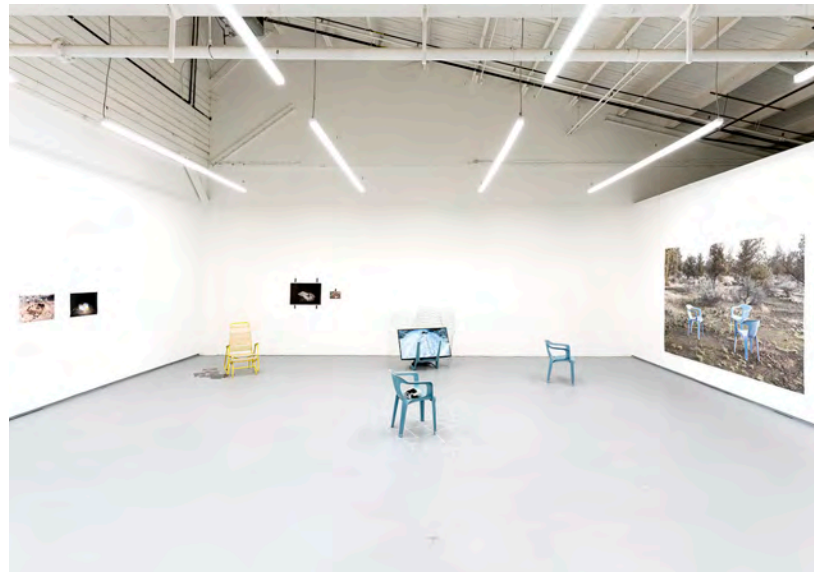
ways of looking (landscape & ideology) — linear perspective — VR

My terminal creative project is an installation titled *there is something here*. This appears to be a tautological statement but is meant to point to a simultaneous presence and absence—an absent presence and a present absence—or co-presence of different times and places within one space that dissolves the boundary between real and virtual, fact and fiction. The installation functions as a whole, irreducible to any single part, and includes worn outdoor chairs, a flat screen TV, a VR headset, a large-scale photo print, other smaller photographs, a metal wire mesh and a grid-like pattern on the floor made of holographic tape.

The representational and figurative in my work function as abstractions, gesturing toward ideas beyond individual idiosyncrasies. I am more interested in a general form as an aggregate of ideas. In this project, I use prevalent representations of the Western cowboy and its attributes as icons denoting abstractions such as freedom, rugged individualism, masculine dominance and taming of the landscape. In this same vein, I consider landscape painting and photography and their ideological uses in the context of the American West as the preeminent idea of the American nation itself: the land of freedom. As the photographer Mitch Epstein says: “Landscape is a mirror of society.” How we frame our view of the land is both indicative of our relationship to it, but also produces a relationship that might have been otherwise.

The influence of capital on landscape painting and early photography is clear, as those who amassed enormous fortunes from building the railroads and exploiting Native lands commissioned and offered patronage to artists.²

² See: Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, C. 1830-1865*, New Directions in

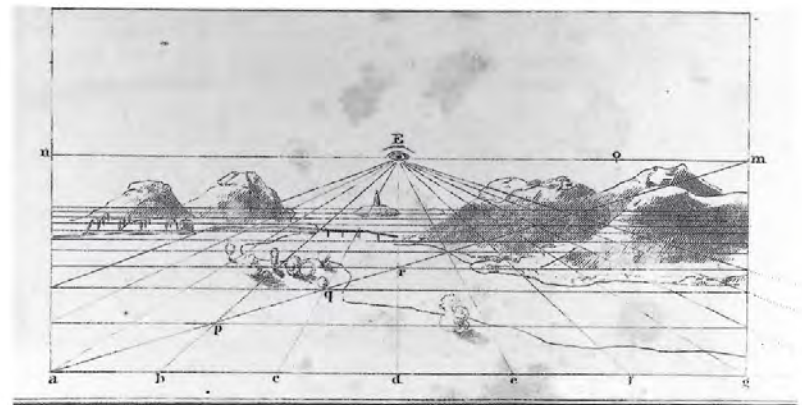
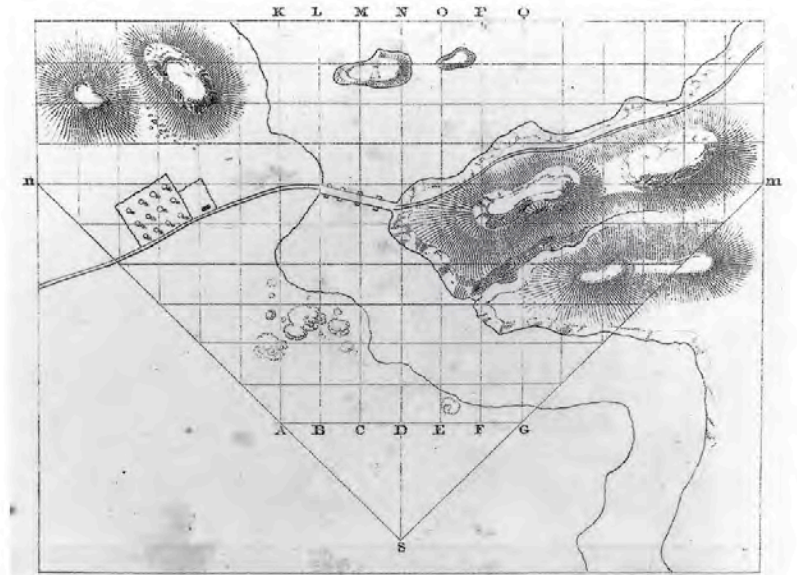


Installation view, *there is something here* (2022).

American Art (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking, 2003); Tyler Green, *Carleton Watkins: Making the West American* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018)

Albert Boime has written impactfully about the relationship between American landscape painting and Manifest Destiny. In his analysis of what he calls the “magisterial gaze,” Boime argues that the view from on high, looking down on an expanse of landscape below, was deeply enmeshed with the idea of the land being there for the taking. “The western expansion and the romantic ideology that accompanied it and conveyed it to the public were products of an Eastern consciousness sensitized to the view from the heights. Just as America was the product of a European colonizing tradition, so the West was the product of an Eastern mercantile mind-set.”³ Ways of seeing and representation are not then purely aesthetic but ideologically conditioned and socio-political. Nineteenth century paintings and early twentieth century photography of the American landscape are precursors to the American Dream of a blank slate of endless possibility, highlighting its foundations in a colonial and Romantic ideal. Landscape is the cultural view of so-called nature, a way of seeing that can tell us a lot about ourselves.

The magisterial gaze is not only settler-colonial, but also masculinist; the land to be looked at and explored gendered female, the explorer a man; a dichotomy of passive and active, with agency in the hands of the conqueror.⁴ The conflation of Woman and Nature is reproduced in the simultaneous emergence of landscape painting along with the genre of the female nude. The male gaze is fixed on both land and the female body. As explained by geographer Gillian Rose, “the sensual topography of land and skin is mapped by a gaze which is eroticized as masculine and heterosexual.”⁵ This relationship between gender and landscape, or simply the gendering of landscape as such, is present in my work via the performance of the cowboy. Following from my earlier character The Prince, I take on the masculine role of



“Method of drawing a perspective view from a topographical plan,” from *The Magisterial Gaze: Manifest Destiny and American Landscape Painting, C. 1830-1865* by Albert Boime (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 24–25.

³ Boime, 47

⁴ Gillian Rose, *Feminism and Geography: The Limits of Geographical Knowledge* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1993).

⁵ Rose, 97.

the cowboy, focusing on his apparel and gestural language, drawn primarily from cinema and television, but also from the commercial uses of the cowboy in advertising. This figure is far removed from the reality of the cowboy, whose history is much more diverse in terms of both race and sexuality. I am interested in the fictionalized and homogenized version of the cowboy as an embodiment of an ideal and a means of control. In my work, I embody this ideal male subject thereby queering him through the particularities of my femme body and the indeterminacy of improvisational performance, perhaps bringing him once again closer to the ambiguity of the real cowboy.



Still from *Desert Cowboy* (2022).



Vintage Marlboro Ad, 1965.

My video installation *Shadow on the Land* (2020) directly engages the magisterial gaze and landscape, juxtaposing the view of the landscape as constrained by the frame with a situated physical engagement with the matter of dust, cracked and hollow earth, horizon line and compass needle, sun and shadow. The video is 45 minutes long and looping, the performance barely visible in the blown-out footage. It is projected over a large wooden stretcher frame, suspended in mid-air, that casts its shadow on the image. The shadow of the frame bears down on the view of the landscape in the same way that the image-making traditions and landscape representations, closely tied to western expansionism and Manifest Destiny, constrain and instrumentalize the landscape itself. This juxtaposition of immersion and distance is indicative of the two poles of my practice: surface and depth. I am equally interested in the tactile qualities of surfaces as in the depths of somatic experience; the constructed frames and the life that spills beyond their constraints. The shadow of the frame on the video is an index of the constructed frame and its functioning. It is also a reminder of the constructed nature of landscape, and of the act of looking.



Installation view, *Shadow on the Land* (2020). Photo: Jonathan Bagby.

spectatorship & participation — active/passive — the emancipated spectator

All performance navigates the individual and the collective. To this end, it always engages the question of freedom. The embodied experience of the performer takes place in unison with spectatorship, the relation of interior and exterior heightened and put to work in the performance. In Jacques Rancière's defense of the spectator as always already active, he cautions against the subsumption of the individual to the collective, echoing a similar feminist critique of the construction of spectatorship as passive.⁶ In the words of choreographer, performer, and director Faye Driscoll: "We are always already participating."⁷ Rancière is arguing against the theater as a space primarily for community-building which in its ultimate form would do away with theater all together, and for the theater as a place of actualization through the individual translation of narratives. The value of live performance lies for him in the telling and retelling of stories from a particular point of view that is then taken up by the viewer and interpreted through their own lived experience, without physically participating in the performance. Connections are made between performer and audience, but the audience is not rendered into a single mass of communal experience. He goes so far as to say that participatory theater is a tool of indoctrination, not liberation, that abducts the spectator's subjectivity. This is something I seek to explore in my terminal project through the use of the VR headset within the space of the exhibition. The immersive nature of virtual reality is participatory in the way Rancière critiques it: it captures the attention of the viewer to create a totalizing experience seemingly without an outside, a naturalized space. It relies on the subject position and exploits it. In my terminal project, my intention is to both undermine

⁶ Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Artforum International*, vol. 45, no. 7 (2007)

⁷ Faye Driscoll, "Faye Driscoll in Conversation with Philip Bither," *Walker Reader*, May 22, 2020, video interview, 58:13, <https://walker-art.org/magazine/faye-driscoll-in-conversation-with-philip-bither>

the subject position itself, revealing it to the viewer as a construction, and to position the viewer as participant for other viewers in the exhibition space, implicating them in the social act of spectatorship.

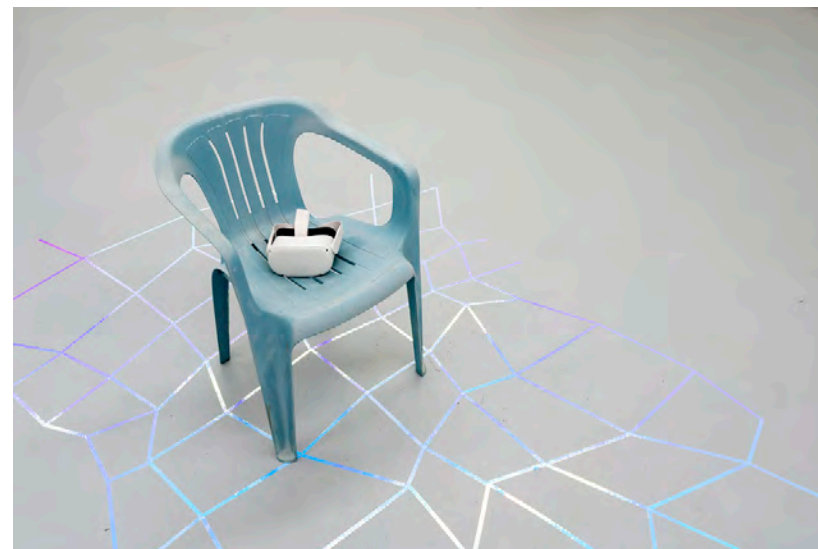
In her essay *Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness* (2020), Mieke Bal defines the contemporary in contemporary art as having to do with the performativity of the artwork that brings the viewer, artist, artwork, and exhibition space into a co-performance. The artwork works in so far as it is taken up by the viewer: “At any given time, what each of us sees when looking at an image, whether historical— ‘old master art’ —or contemporary, is a new image, fresh from the thought-act the viewer and his or her baggage of experience, earlier viewings, and thoughts brings to bear on it. That makes art contemporary: it acts on and with its viewers in the present.”⁸ The “exhibition-ism” that Bal calls for in her essay, “is a plea for taking the cultural practice of exhibiting, and hence, a plea for taking exhibiting under certain conditions as a model for making, presenting, and thinking about art as contemporary.”⁹ The contemporary is the re-actualization of other times and places into the space of the exhibition, creating a temporal togetherness. In this way, the art exhibition is construed as event, rendering it time-based and dynamic, relying on the viewer to complete it.

There is something here is organized around this concept of temporal togetherness that Bal proposes, to tie together two seemingly disparate strands of my practice: photography and plastic arts on the one hand, and time-based art on the other. My work always engages with performance in some way, whether the end result is time-based, two-dimensional, or sculptural. For me, this is related to something like the tactile gaze or kinaesthetic empathy which is at play whenever we look at anything. The art object or installation becomes a

⁸ Mieke Bal, *Exhibition-ism: Temporal Togetherness*, *The Contemporary Condition* (Berlin, Germany: Sternberg Press, 2020), 11.

⁹ Bal, 19.

locus of an intensity that produces affect and actualizes the work in relation to the viewer. “Affect, a relationship of intensity, is only possible in the present.”¹⁰ Like Bal, I also want to counteract the distance of traditional art viewing by introducing the theatrical into the exhibition space. The viewer is invited to sit in the chairs and wear the headset, becoming a part of the choreography. Similarly, the grid pattern on the floor made with holographic tape is activated as the viewer moves around the space. Shifting in color, it turns a vibrant turquoise similar to the grid boundary within the headset when the viewer stands directly on top of it, but is almost invisible from afar.



Installation view, *there is something here*. VR headset on plastic chair, holographic tape.

¹⁰ Bal, 22.



Lygia Clark, *Dialogue of Hands*, 1966.

Propositional Objects

Lygia Clark's propositional objects & performance — costume as propositional object

A starting point for my inquiry of the Western is through the “post-Western,” defined by Neil Campbell as dealing with the cowboy cult and using audiences’ existing knowledge of Westerns (and their tropes). The West is here described as a mythic and haunted terrain of hope, yearning, and loss. In my exploration of Western tropes of the cowboy, I use costume to enter a similar space of subversion through my body and improvisational movement. Costume for me acts like the “propositional objects” of the artist Lygia Clark, creating an opportunity for play and exploration of possibilities through the material constraints of the object in relation to the body—a rediscovery of agency.

What is a propositional object? It is an object that has certain material properties and thus certain affordances, or ways that it can be interacted with. It proposes an action. These affordances will be different for differently abled or trained bodies, within different cultures and contexts. The propositional object was for Lygia Clark an invitation for “everyone to experience his or her own body as an agent of choice.”¹¹ Clark was not interested in the artist’s body and was against the conflation of the artist’s body with the artwork, which she saw as a fetishization. Her objects were propositions for interactive engagement, usually among two or more participants, made of mundane and cheap materials like plastic bags, elastic bands, water. These objects were then intermediaries in a kind of pedagogy based on discovery, which brings to mind Rancière’s claim that what is needed for an equal exchange between teacher and student, or indeed performer and audience, is a third entity; a material that can act as a mutual

¹¹ André Lepecki, “Affective Geometry, Immanent Acts: Lygia Clark and Performance,” in *Lygia Clark: The Abandonment of Art, 1948-1988*, eds. Cornelia H. Butler and Luis Pérez-Oramas (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 279.

interface, extricating knowledge and authority from the teacher or performer and leveling the playing field. In the context of performance, “It calls for spectators who are active interpreters, who render their own translation, who appropriate the story for themselves, and who ultimately make their own story out of it.”¹² But first, something must be offered.

Though loaded with meaning in a way that Clark’s propositional objects were not, I take costume to be a propositional object in the sense that it offers the possibility of going beyond what is known beforehand through an improvisational movement practice that is somatically motivated. The feel of the costume and what it affords drive an exploration of becoming-other by feeling differently. I have explored this in previous work; the durational performance *Cowboy Legs* and the performance for video *Les Amoureux (hat & lariat)*, are both examples of the way a performance emerges out of the use of costume in generating movement and feeling, recursively. My leather pants in *Cowboy Legs* localize and create a real ground and a suspended reality for that performance. Jean-Luc Nancy’s “somewhere” of bodies and a body of contradictions, swerve around my character in *Cowboy Legs*. The performance is durational and lasts an hour and a half—the standard length of a feature film. Over time and through my embodied experience I take on the stature and composure called for by my chosen costume. Yet this character is not another person, he is a shell composed of ideas and notions, made material through my flesh. He has no history, but the performance weaves different time scales together: cinematic, real, immanent. “The body’s not stupid or impotent. It demands other categories of force and thought.”¹³ Bodies are where the visible and the invisible meet. The flesh of the world, touching and being touched, is an unspeakable tremor of the membrane. In both *Cowboy Legs* and the two perfor-

12 Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator,” 280.

13 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard Rand, *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 13.

mances for *there is something here*, leather is skin covering skin in a double articulation of concept and material that references the material histories of industrialization and extraction in practices of hide tanning.¹⁴



Cowboy Legs (2019–), durational performance.



Still from *Les Amoureux (hat & lariat)* (2020), performance video, 12:54.

14 Excerpt from my unpublished object biography of the leather pants, *Object Biography: Leather Pants* (2020).

*freedom & agency — grid/mesh (structure) — improvisation:
fugitive embodiment*

There is something lying there, on the ground, barely distinct from the ground itself. I look closer and see that it is a rusted iron mesh, folded over itself a few times and flattened, creating a layered grid shifting in the same colors as the dusty ground: pale gray and brown. It is camouflaged—a grid disappearing into the landscape, just like the mesh covered by textures in a computer-generated environment.

Virtual worlds are built of wire mesh, hollow on the inside and covered in textures that simulate the real or imagined. The grid acts as armature for projection, allowing us to build and imagine, yet it also separates and contains. Similarly, Agnes Martin used the grid as a transcendental device to generate a vibratory feeling of light and space from the picture plane, but also to enact control over herself.¹⁵ The grid maps the landscape, and the mesh creates a virtual simile. Landscape and land become enmeshed in our minds, even though landscape is already a cultural construction and virtual views just an expression of that by technological means. “The grid’s mythic power is that it makes us able to think we are dealing with materialism (or sometimes science, or logic) while at the same time it provides us with a release into belief (or illusion, or fiction).”¹⁶ The grid is the modernist structuring device *par excellence*, and it is hard to imagine a world that does not rely on it. “Can the expansion of Western culture from the sixteenth to the twentieth century be described in terms of a growing totalitarianism of the grid?”¹⁷ This is a question explored by



¹⁵ Olivia Laing, *Everybody: A Book About Freedom* (Norton, 2021), 157.

¹⁶ Rosalind E. Krauss, “Grids,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 12.

¹⁷ Bernhard Siegert, “(Not) in Place: The Grid, or, Cultural Techniques of Ruling Spaces,” in *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Fordham University Press, 2015), 98.

and historian Bernhard Siegert. Drawing on Michel Foucault, he defines the grid as a “cultural technique” which enacts control. Significantly, the grid allows us to account for things that are not there, to map and schematize emptiness as something that can be filled, to make the unknown predetermined according to our needs. The grid is a coding device, a means of giving everything its place systematically. In the colonization of physical space, “Nothing was allowed to fall off the grid.”¹⁸ Writing about freedom and the body through art, Olivia Laing points to the grid as enacting a “sinister distance” that makes exploitation possible.¹⁹

In a parallel move, Lee W. Bailey has drawn out the underlying metaphor of the camera obscura and shown how it was connected to the formation of Cartesian subjectivity: “The *camera obscura* began as an experimental model for the eye and became a ruling metaphor for the mind.”²⁰ The portable “darkroom for one” became an isolation chamber, illustrating the relationship of the subject in a world of objects *out there*. This isolation is artificially maintained and falsely taken to be concrete reality, when we know that vision is not isolated from the other senses. The grid is likewise a construction that helps us order our experience in a particular way but should not be mistaken for a natural phenomenon. Our embodiment guarantees indeterminacy through our constant improvisation in navigating the world full of other beings. Grid structures may condition bodies, but they do not determine them. Bodies are unpredictable and volatile, that is their strength.

With this fugitive embodiment in mind, I point to the performativity of the gaze through the installation of my terminal

18 Siegert, 115.

19 Laing quotes James Baldwin on the sinister distance enacted by whiteness which allows white people to treat others as less than human. In *Everybody: A Book About Freedom*, 278.

20 Lee W. Bailey, “Skull’s Darkroom: The Camera Obscura and Subjectivity,” *Philosophy of Technology*, ed. Paul T. Durbin, 63-79, Kluwer Academic Publishers (1989): 64.

project, where the viewing body is also looked at by others. The space of the installation is a stage, incorporating various instantiations of the grid to propose a relation between physical and virtual. The desert landscape shown in the headset is shot at night with the headlights of a car illuminating the scene. I am dressed in leather pants and a cowboy hat, with a lariat in my hand. The performance circles the camera, variously improvising typical gestures from Westerns, such as drawing pistols, dropping to the ground, hiding, crawling, scouting. Through this work, I make a connection between virtual reality and the desert landscape as conceptual twins where disorientation plays a major part.



Still from *Desert Cowboy* (2022).



Installation view, *there is something here. Desert Crawl* (2022), 22 minutes, looping. Flat screen TV on plastic chair, metal wire fencing.

Disorientation

desert & VR as conceptual twins — timelessness, suspension — free fall

Virtual reality can be a story, told or written, action at a remove—like remote viewing or surgery assisted by simulation—an impossible vision. It is a “remediated experience,”²¹ a world felt in one’s body that differs from the actual physical surroundings, shielded from them by the page, the screen, or the headset. Virtual reality and immersion are then in some ways synonymous. Virtual reality, like linear perspective, is predicated on the single viewer. It is an egocentric technology narrated in the first person, yet to gaze is to be captured, enraptured by what is seen, wrapped up in it and entangled. The power of the gaze can be subverted via this unintended backchannel of affect. You look to possess but are possessed in turn. This subversive dynamic is mirrored in Hito Steyerl’s reasoning when she argues for free fall and losing our bearings as new possibilities for agency and resistance. The fall of linear perspective as the ruling visual paradigm is curiously bound up with its beginnings: “At the sight of the effects of colonialism and slavery, linear perspective—the central viewpoint, the position of mastery, control, and subjecthood—is abandoned and starts tumbling and tilting, taking with it the idea of space and time as systematic constructions.”²² Any ruling paradigm carries the seeds of its own demise. Though we are now subject to new and insidious methods of surveillance and control, we are also alert to perspectives as constructions, and unmoored from a stable ground we can potentially leverage this awareness to our advantage. “Falling means ruin and demise as well as love and abandon, passion and surrender, decline and catastrophe. Falling is corruption as well as liberation, a condition that turns people into things

21 Grant Tavinor, *The Aesthetics of Virtual Reality*, Routledge Research in Aesthetics (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022).

22 Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought-Experiment in Vertical Perspective,” in *Hito Steyerl: The Wretched of the Screen*, e-flux Journal Series (Berlin, Germany: Sternberg Press), 21.

and vice versa.”²³ Disorientation is a scrambling of what is known that offers opportunities for re-orientation and fluid self-determination. Legacy Russell has formulated her glitch feminist manifesto around these same ideas. “Glitch feminism urges us to consider the in-between as a core component of survival—neither masculine nor feminine, neither male nor female, but a spectrum across which we may be empowered to choose and define ourselves for ourselves.”²⁴ The glitch harbors potential for transformation that pushes the confines of normative subjectivity.

Experiencing virtual reality can make you lose track of time. Putting on the headset you enter another time space, like stepping through a veil. You look around, and this world only exists as far as your eyes can see. It all revolves around you. Just like Brunelleschi’s experiment with the mirror and the painting of the baptistry which demonstrated linear perspective, the geometry of VR originates at the location of the viewer’s gaze. If we take the speculation that Brunelleschi’s painting was created using a camera obscura to be true,²⁵ the connection between linear perspective and VR technology is even more salient and we could even say that VR is a natural extension of Brunelleschi’s apparatus. Like VR, the desert creates a sense of isolation or loneliness that goes hand-in-hand with the feeling of an eternal present, of time standing still. The sense of time passing is thought by Nick Young to be predicated on agential action and “feeling oneself act,” but if the world around you seems unaffected by your actions time stands still.²⁶ This is also what we typically call immersion, becoming so engrossed in something that we become unaware of time passing, suspended in the present moment.

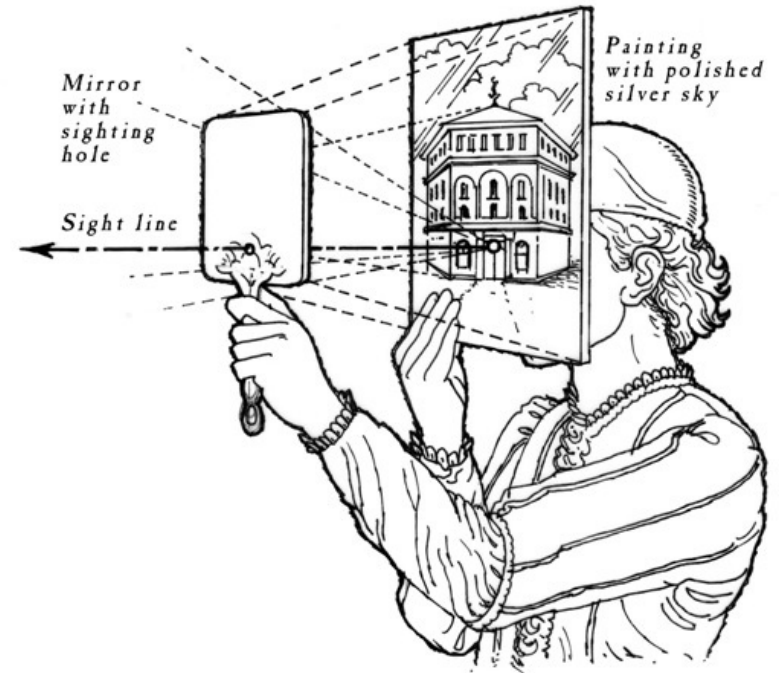


Illustration of Brunelleschi’s experiment.

²³ Steyerl, 28.

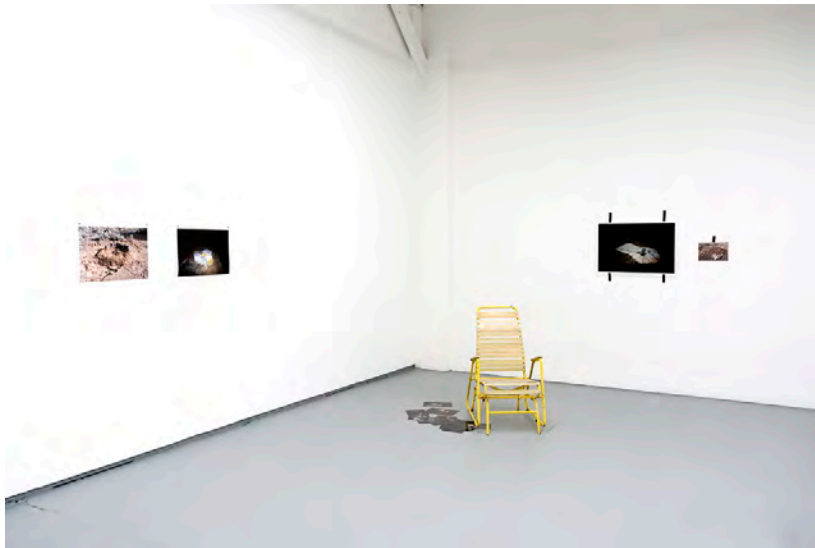
²⁴ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London; New York: Verso 2020), 11.

²⁵ This speculative theory is presented by Malcolm Park in his article “Brunelleschi’s Discovery of Perspective’s “Rule,”” *Leonardo*, 2013, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2013).

²⁶ Nick Young, “Agents of change: temporal flow and feeling oneself act,” *Philosophical Studies*, published online Feb 25, 2022, Springer Link.

*forensic gaze — lack of horizon, construction of narrative —
phantasmagoria — light & sound as destabilizing visual control*

The enveloping darkness of the nighttime photography series *Desert Shots* that is part of my project simultaneously isolates the subject matter and annihilates its context. This forensic gaze enacts abstraction through a cataloging and parsing action, and stitches together a new narrative from the isolated forms of each photograph in the series. The leap between the images across the darkness that frames them is taken in the always already participatory and imaginative act of spectatorship by the viewer. The spotlight that focuses attention directs the gaze and sets the stage.



Installation view, *there is something here*.



Untitled, *Desert Shots* (2022).

Cindy Sherman is known for her self-portraiture where she uses costume, make up, and props to conjure personas and scenarios commenting on constructed subjectivities, stereotypes and tropes of cinema and culture more broadly. Her work is often said to be about abjection, taking realism too far and ending up with a phantasmagorical and repulsive image, a mirror that sees through the conceit of gloss and glamour. Though my work does not deal with abjection per se, her work is relevant to my own both because she uses her own body and because of her interest in how mass media representation shapes us, and the tropes we live with. In Rosalind Krauss' analysis of Sherman's photography as a disintegration of form, she points to the fractured lighting of gleams and reflections as desublimation; a return of the repressed.²⁷ Not only does Sherman's work invoke feelings of disgust and shame, but more importantly it renders subjectivity as farce, thus showing the formless nature of the modern subject without an essence. In this way, Sherman's project might be deemed to (de)form and (dis)orient the subject in a similar way to how my 360 video *Desert Cowboy* functions, by destabilizing the viewer's position and revealing their vulnerability. Immersion is always accompanied by distraction. Visually inhabiting another space leaves the body of the viewer exposed to its physical surroundings, no longer able to see things coming from a distance but only becoming aware of them when they are already up close. I started thinking about this idea of disorientation in *Desire Spelunking*, a two-person exhibition with Dana Buzzee in 2021 that was installation-based and incorporated three different light sources as well as an audio track of vocalizations playing from three different hidden locations all at once but offset from each other. The sand on the floor and the 360 video performance *for your eyes only* (2021), accessible on the viewer's own device through a spraypainted QR code, added to the immersive experience and created spaces within the space of the exhibition. The performance in the video directly engaged the viewer, returning the gaze of the camera and

²⁷ Rosalind Krauss, "'Informe' without Conclusion," *October* 78 (1996).

flooding the space with the soundtrack of the performance, colliding with the sound of the vocalizations.



Installation views, *Desire Spelunking* (2021).

Vulnerability is a major concern of the video *Desert Crawl* (2022), playing on a flat screen TV installed on top of an upside-down plastic chair and surrounded by the grid of metal fencing. The video is 22 minutes long but set to loop, displaying a seemingly unending crawl down a dirt road in Central Oregon, at the same location where the rest of the components of my project are derived from. It was a physically exhausting performance of dragging my body across the hard ground, even as I was protected by the leather chaps I was wearing. There is a Sisyphean pragmatism to this action yet the obvious strain the body is under brings the bodily aspect of my work more directly into the exhibition space. The vulnerable position of crawling engages the kinaesthetic field of the spectator who is made to feel it for themselves.



Still from *Desert Crawl* (2022).

theater/performance — theatricality/performativity — performance as queering practice

Performance is a queering of body, time, and space, as described by Amelia Jones in *In Between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (Routledge, 2021), where she also elucidates the distinction between theatricality and performativity which are both crucial to understanding my work. This distinction can be framed as two poles of a spectrum. What results is the interplay between surface and depth—the depth of personal somatic experience, and the surface of the world; physical space and screen mediation; skin and movement; the social and the archeological. When vision and touch coincide, we become acutely aware of our vulnerability as the multi-modality of touch takes precedence over the localized sense of sight, and we are forced to give up control. As Sadie Plant puts it: “Sight is the sense of security. Touch is the feeling that nothing is safe.”²⁸ Improvisation requires this kind of risk. In video performance the relationship between the kinaesthetic fields of living bodies and the surface of the screen or projection, is particularly pronounced, and mirrors the duality of performativity/theatricality. Often, I emphasize this relationship by juxtaposing immersion and distance within the work itself. My intention is to orchestrate a productive disorientation, a temporary loosening of the holding patterns of our lives. To see and to feel differently, and perhaps to reveal some of the scaffolding that maintains what we take for granted. There is a false sense of security in the imagined distance of sight that can be used to undermine a hegemonical system. In my work, I attempt to bring looking and touching closer together and to cause them to bleed into each other, revealing their mutuality and undermining the safety of gazing from a distance. As exemplified by *Desert Crawl*, the gaze implicates the viewer in what is seen, bringing them into contact with the object of their gaze.

²⁸ Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technology*, (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 186.



Installation view, *there is something here.*

In her discussion of theatricality and queer performance, Jones points to the ways in which theatricality poses a threat to subjectivity and to the humanist subject. Theatricality has historically been construed as fake or artificial, in opposition to a supposedly authentic performativity which enacts what it speaks through J.L. Austin's speech act theory. "Theatricality 'perverts' enunciation, preventing the purity of performative language as Austin articulates it and making performativity queer."²⁹ How does theatricality fit into performance art which has tended to eschew the theater in search of "authentic" expression? "Antitheatricalism is clearly an articulation linked to patriarchal structures of power, which demand that the self be firmly identifiable in relation to the matrices of status established in heteronormative, white-dominant societies."³⁰ In *there is something here*, the theatricality of the assumed and caricatured cowboy gestures in the 360-video performance thus subverts the subjectivity on which virtual reality technology is based. My performance might be termed drag as I take on a masculine role, though my focus is less on appearing masculine, and more so embodying the contradictions of the cowboy myth through movement. In some ways it is a translation of the cowboy through my own body and its particularities. As such, it deviates from the norm it attempts to enact, as all actual embodiment deviates from the ideologies they profess. A parallel can be drawn here between Mieke Bal's construction of a theatrical space and Jones's queering of performativity via theatricality. As Jones says, "Theatricality threatens not only because, in its connection to drag, it blurs boundaries of the 'proper' expression of anatomically secured gender/sex, but because it demands an acknowledgment of the importance of audience to the fulfillment of the work of art."³¹ The theatrical emphasizes the audience *qua* audience, heightening an awareness of social role-play.

²⁹ Amelia Jones, *In between Subjects: A Critical Genealogy of Queer Performance* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 133

³⁰ Jones, 135.

³¹ Jones, 136.



Staging the Gaze

installation as stage — the Gestalt of the empty chair, the relaxed body

Theater is a trick. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. To be transported as an audience member is a reflection of being transported as a performer inhabiting another life, another form. The sensorial impact of wearing costume, walking differently, standing differently, breathing differently, translates. It also translates when it's not working into the feeling of ghosts watching ghosts, not really there. The imagination doesn't penetrate into the body but stays at the surface of the skin. To be immersed is to live within the structure and not just look at it from a distance, to inhabit the wire mesh that holds it all together, hollow as it is. Theater is not presence or absence, it hovers in between, another definition of survivance: Jacques Derrida's. Theater is a staging of the gaze, a technology of immersion we might call virtual reality.

My terminal project balances on the knife's edge of participation and spectatorship (the binary construed by Rancière) by choreographing the movement of the visitor in the exhibition space. The premise is the installation of the worn lawn chairs set up as both seating for viewers to watch video, and as stand-ins for the body. These same lawn chairs, along with other furniture proxies for bodies found in the desert, also appear as a *mise-en-scène* in the photographic body of work *Desert Shots* that is part of this project. While the forensic nighttime photographs are documentary, the staged photograph of the chairs is theatrical.³² In the installation of the work, realism and formalism co-exist side-by-side, destabilizing each other. These photographs perform looking in different registers, forcing a continuous recalibration by the viewer. The orchestration of viewership is key to the concept behind

³² Here, I am making use of Philip Auslander's two categories of performance documentation: documentary and theatrical, and their different effects and purposes. See "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *PAJ* (Baltimore, Md.) 28, no. 3 (2006).

my project as a whole and is foregrounded by the 360-degree video *Desert Cowboy*. As one viewer wears the headset and watches my video performance which circles around them, others watch them in turn.



Installation view (detail), *there is something here*.

The empty chair is used in Gestalt psychology to externalize the self as another, to gain distance and clarity. To gain perspective. By allowing our bodies to relax, chairs also open up a space of reverie. Muscle tone slackens and imagination has more space to roam free, unencumbered by the navigation of physical space and all the feedback it entails.³³ The chair holds the inert physical body while the virtual body moves further afield.

To sit properly in a chair is to assume an intended posture: feet on the ground, back supported, head on top of shoulders. In this way it is a form of tacit control. Similarly, VR experiences determine ways of interacting with what you are perceiving and give you a sense of agency, however illusory. VR exerts power over you and pulls you in, body first. Is VR technology then nothing but a tool of conformity and oppression, or does it have emancipatory potential? Is there freedom to be found in the VR headset? It is clear that there is no position outside the systems of power we exist in, as we are all implicated in the myths of our cultures. By investigating the tropes of the Western and the figure of the cowboy as an avatar of the ideology of freedom I hope to lay them bare, revealing their deep roots and echoes in the present along with their fallacies. Equally, my interest in virtual reality and the VR headset is not simply a means to an end, to create an immersive experience, but also to consider its conceptual and philosophical implications. My critical engagement with these ideas does not simplify them but reveals their complexity, and thus the infinite potential for subversion.

³³ This is part of Vittorio Gallese's theory of embodied simulation, which claims that immersion is more effective when our bodies are relaxed because our imagination can then make full use of our embodiment. Some examples of this include dreaming and hypnotic suggestion. Without constant signals from our body that what we are experiencing differs from our bodily sensations, we can experience virtual reality more fully. See Vittorio Gallese, "Visions of the Body. Embodied Simulation and Aesthetic Experience," *Aisthesis*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2017).

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