

Surface Encounters

Empathy and Intermediation

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Introduction

There exist what we call images of things,
Which as it were peeled off from the surfaces
Of objects, fly this way and that through the air . . .
I say therefore that likenesses or thin shapes
Are sent out from the surfaces of things
Which we must call as it were their films or bark.

—Titus Lucretius Carus, *De rerum natura*¹

For Lucretius, the image is a thing. It is configured like a piece of cloth, released as matter that flies out into the air. In this way, as the Epicurean philosopher and poet suggests to us, something important is conveyed: the material of an image manifests itself virtually on the surface. Lucretius describes the surface of things as something that may flare out, giving forth dazzling shapes. It is as if it could be peeled off, like a layer of substance, forming a “bark” or leaving a sediment, a veneer, a “film.” This poetic description and its philosophical fabrication go to the heart of my concern in this text, which addresses matters of aesthetic encounters as mediated on the surface of things.

1. Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. Sir Ronald Melville (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1997), 102–03.

What constitutes an aesthetic encounter? How do we experience the relation between materiality and virtuality in an aesthetic space? Can we understand virtuality as a form of potentiality? If so, how is this relation mediated? To address this issue, we must go beyond the realm of pure visuality. The matter of my concern is not simply visual, but tangible, spatial, and environmental—that is to say, material. I would therefore begin by questioning the place of materiality in our virtual world. To engage materiality and our encounters with material space in virtual, mediated form, I suggest that we think about surfaces rather than images, and in so doing explore the fabrics of the visual and a phenomenon I call the surface tension of media. In order to pursue a receptive materialism, and to approach the transmission of empathy in art, I propose performing critical acts of investigation on the surface, focusing especially on screen surface and mobilizing the wide potential of material expression across the “screens” of different mediums.²

I have long argued for a shift in focus away from the optic and toward the haptic in order to understand the tangible spatiality of the visual arts, their moving, habitable sites, and the intimate experiences they offer us as we walk through the public spaces in which they reside and with which they interact.³ The “haptic,” a relational mode derived from the sense of touch, is what makes us “able to come into contact with” things, even virtually. This reciprocal contact between us and objects or environments occurs on the surface. It is by way of such tangible, “superficial” contact that we apprehend the art object and the space of art, turning contact into the communicative interface of a public intimacy.

This is why I prefer to speak of surfaces rather than images: in order to experience how in visual space the virtual manifests itself materially on the surface of things, where time becomes material space. Digging into layers of imaging and threading through their surfaces, my theoretical

2. I expand here upon a central concern of my book *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014) in which I turn to the concept of surface in order to investigate the place of materiality in our contemporary virtual world.

3. See also Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (London and New York: Verso, 2002); and Bruno, *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007).

interweaving of materials emphasizes the actual “fabrics” of the visual: the surface condition, the textural manifestation, and the support of a work as well as the way in which it is sited, whether on the canvas, the wall, or the screen. I am particularly interested in what we may call the phenomenon of the “becoming screen”—that is, in the play of materiality that is brought together in light on different, intersecting screens—and in offering a theorization of the actual fabric of the screen as a material surface-space. I am also interested in the migratory patterns of such visual fabrications and in tracing their material history as well as their shifting geographies. In this way, I want to rethink materiality and show how surface matters in the fabrics of the visual, for it is on the surface of mediums that textures come alive and the “feel” of an aesthetic encounter can develop.

Surface Matters in Visual Fabrics

In this age of virtuality, with its rapidly changing materials and media, what role can materiality really have? How is it fashioned in the arts or manifested in technology? Could it be refashioned? I ask these questions at a time when contemporary artists themselves appear preoccupied with materiality in different forms and are questioning the material conditions of their mediums. There is much potential for a reinvention of materiality in our times when not conceived in opposition to the virtual. In claiming that this relation is visibly and actively pursued in the visual, plastic, and moving-image arts as well as in architecture, I theorize it as a surface condition. The surface is for me configured as an architecture: as a partition that can be virtually shared, it is explored as a primary form of habitation for the material world. Understood as the material configuration of the relationship between subjects and with objects, the surface is also viewed as a site of mediation and projection, a zone of encounter and admixture, memory and transformation.

Most importantly, I argue that materiality is not a question of materials but rather concerns the substance of material relations, which are also conveyed by virtual mediums. I am interested in the space of those relations and in showing how they are configured on the surface of different

mediums. As we consider that art, architecture, fashion, design, film, and the body all share a deep engagement with superficial matters, we can observe how surfaces act as connective threads between art forms and structure our communicative existence. In order to open this theoretical space for a reinvention of materiality in intermediation, I therefore want to address in particular here how the surface mediates material relations, which include affects, the creation of virtual interiorities, and the passage of empathy.

In proposing that we pay attention to surface materiality, I engage deeply with the pleats and folds that constitute the fabric of the visual and, in this regard, pursue what Gilles Deleuze calls a “texturology:” a philosophical and aesthetic conception of art in which its “matter is clothed, with ‘clothed’ signifying . . . the very fabric or clothing, the texture enveloping.”⁴ To make this textural shift involves tracing what we might call the enveloping “fashioning” of the image and weaving this across different mediums.

This requires thinking of mediated images materially, for it means viewing them as textures, traces, and even stains. The visual text is fundamentally textural in many different ways. Its form has real substance. It is made out of layers and tissues. It contains strata, sediments, and deposits. It is constituted as an imprint, which always leaves behind a trace. A visual text is also textural for the ways in which it can show the patterns of history, in the form of a coating, a “film,” or a stain. One can say that a visual text can even “wear” its own history, inscribed as an imprint on its textural surface. It can also show affects in this way. After all, the motion of an emotion itself can be drafted onto the surface of an image, in the shape of a line or in the haptic thickness of pigment, and it can be tracked down with tracking shots. An affect is virtually “worn” on the surface as it is threaded through time in the form of residual stains, traces, and textures. In visual culture, surface matters and it has depth.

4. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 115.

To understand this relation between materiality and virtuality, we thus need to expose the work of the surface and show how textural matters manifest themselves there. As we plumb the depth of surfaces that surround visual culture, we can also see how they envelop us. Skimming the surface, we not only can weave together the filaments of visual existence, exposing their traces in layers of experience, but also trace patterns of transformation. Surface especially matters as a site in which different forms of mediation, transfer, and transformation can take place.

The Surface Tension of Media: Screen, Canvas, Wall

A material transformation occurs as images travel across the surface of different mediums. Many changes affected by the migration of images happen on the surface and manifest themselves texturally in the form of a kind of surface tension, which affects the very “skin” of images and the space of their circulation. In this sense, I claim that aesthetic encounters are actually mediated on the surface and that such mediated encounters engage forms of virtual projection, transmission, and transmutation.

Let me offer some examples to make this aspect of the material fabrics of the visual and their relation to a surface tension more concrete. In contemporary architecture, as exemplified in the work of Herzog & de Meuron, the façades of buildings are engaged as pliant surfaces of intermediation. These surfaces, which have become lighter and more tensile, may be energized by luminous play, texturally decorated as if they were canvas, stretched as membranes, and treated increasingly as envelopes.⁵ In contemporary art, such surface tension has emerged as a textural form of fashioning the image as well and, as a concept, is driving an aesthetic development that emphasizes the dressing of visual space in different

5. See, among others, David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mostafavi, *Surface Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002); and Philip Ursprung, ed., *Herzog & de Meuron: Natural History* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2002).

mediums.⁶ Such wearing of surface is an important phenomenon that art and architecture also share with cinema. Think of the cinema of Wong Kar-wai in which atmospheric forms of imaging are stitched together on the surface in patterns of visual tailoring. Here we find a dense, floating surface in which one senses the material of light and the fabric of color, emphasized by the visual pleating of editing that itself creates volume and depth, grain and granularity—the final effect being that residue and sedimentation appear retained in the saturated surface. We almost never see clearly through the fabric of this screen, for several coatings and planar surfaces are constructed out of different materials, and all are folded together. There are so many layers to traverse on the surface that the screen itself, layered like cloth, takes on volume. Here, the virtual space of film becomes a space of real dimension in which the viewer is empathetically absorbed through an aesthetic journey that connects exterior and interior space on screen fabric.

The Skin of the Wall

To further address the issue of surface encounters in mediatic form, we can also turn to the interdisciplinary and multimedia practices of Diller Scofidio + Renfro.⁷ This architectural studio performs acts on the surface, creating moving images and an enveloping “fashioning” of continuous surface space. They make surface into a virtual medium and at times even turn it into a structural form. Diller Scofidio + Renfro produces this surface condition by weaving surfaces together and across the fabric of different artistic mediums. Here, the architectural surface is the vehicle for a virtual transmission, becoming a form of mediation and transformation. The studio constructs spaces that are actually “mediated” on the surface

6. See, for example, David Joselit, “Surface Vision,” in *Super Vision*, ed. Nicholas Baume, exh. cat. (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art; and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006); Joselit, *After Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Chrissie Iles, “Surface Tension,” in *Rudolf Stingel*, ed. Francesco Bonami, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 23–29; and Cassandra Coblenz, ed., *Surface Tension*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: The Fabric Workshop and Museum, 2003), <https://www.fabricworkshop.org/exhibitions/surface/essay.php>.

7. For a reading of the multiform practice of this architectural studio, see the exhaustive monograph by Edward Dimendberg, *Diller Scofidio + Renfro: Architecture after Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). See also Hubert Damisch, “Blotting out Architecture? A Fable in Seven Parts,” *Log*, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 9–26; and Mark Hansen, “Wearable Space,” *Configurations* 10 (2002): 321–70.

as it engages the surface of the screen in the process of building space. Furthermore, in its sites, the surface can become animated and create forms of imaginary, virtual projection. In this way, these architects create surface encounters that can induce empathy with space.

Think of Alice Tully Hall in New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, as refurbished by the studio. Here the surface has acquired its own performative character, taking center stage in a luminous form. Curtained with a thin veneer of wood, the interior walls of the auditorium are as light as curtains, and they become as luminous as screens. As light transpires from behind the thin layer of their material surface, it creates atmosphere and mood in the entire auditorium. This surface effect is enhanced by the fact that the pinkish light emerges through the walls as if perspiring through the surface of their skin, giving the impression that the walls are blushing. This form of "superficial" contact is an expression of spatial empathy, and it makes possible a communicative interface. Here, the surface shows its tangible potential to become fully a theatrical space. When light is filtered outward in this way in the auditorium, it creates a textural surface that takes on the shifting, performative qualities of a space of projection. The surface becomes a screen, and it creates a spectatorial public intimacy. Activated with atmospheric translucency in this way, wall, curtain, and screen are no longer separate entities but take on related characteristics, becoming conflated spaces of mediation, transmission, performativity, and spectatorship.

Screening Material Space

The surface encounters that Diller Scofidio + Renfro creates show that a material transformation occurs as luminous textures travel across the surface of different mediums. In fact, surface tension here affects the very "skin" of images, creating aesthetic encounters that are physically and virtually "mediated" on the surface and engaging forms of projection that become transmission—and this includes the creation of atmosphere and the transmission of affects.

Diller Scofidio + Renfro constructs a dialogue with the material of projection, performing mediatic interventions, or builds by “installing” in space a frame for atmospheric luminous play. Architecture and film are related in fundamental ways as medial spatial practices, and even end up converging as modes of screening. In the cantilevered media center of Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art, for example, the studio actually framed the exterior sea view and put it in dialogue with the display of computer screens that face the large window. Here, the notion of aperture is reimagined, becoming the screen of a new atmospheric cinema. In such a way, the work creates moving frames in architecture and produces deeply “mediated” surface encounters.

When a surface condition is activated in this way on visual planes, it changes our way of thinking about space. This new form of superficial materialism initiates a major transformation: it demands a re-vision of space, thus challenging received modes of visibility, the dichotomy between materiality and virtuality, and the specificity of medium. If we consider Diller Scofidio + Renfro’s form of fashioning space within this larger frame, the very nature of what we have traditionally understood as canvas, window, and wall changes to incorporate another form: the screen. An architecture of mediatic transformations comes to the surface at this very junction, where surface tension can turn both façade and framed picture into something resembling a screen. This filmic screen, far from representing any perspectival ideal, is no longer a window but is reconfigured as a different surface. Made of translucent fabric, this screen is closer to a canvas, a sheet, or a curtain. Partition, shelter, and veil, it can be a permeable material envelope. On this material level, the current intersection of canvas, wall, and screen is a site at which distinctions between inside and outside temporally dissolve into the depth of surface. The screen itself is reinvented as a material architecture of “becoming”—the tensile surface that connects and mediates texturally between art forms. It all appears to fold back into screen surface—that reflective, fibrous canvas texturally dressed by luminous projections.

Becoming Screen

This “becoming screen” is a fundamental aspect of Diller Scofidio + Renfro’s work, and it also defines the state of our contemporary visual culture. Such a phenomenon is at the center of a material reconfiguration of visual space that involves the projective surface and the way in which it constitutes a place of encounters. The screen has become an omnipresent material condition of viewing and a site of virtual relationality, and this is occurring paradoxically just at the point that cinema, at the very moment of film’s own obsolescence, comes to inhabit today’s museums and art galleries. A refashioning of visual space is taking place in a proliferation and exchange of screens. Such refashioning of the fabrics of the visual displays tension at the edges, in the space that exists beyond a particular medium, in the interstices between art forms, at junctions where both transgressive and transitive exchanges between the arts become palpable on the surface.

The screen acts as the actual surface of this refashioning by returning us to the absorptive materiality of a permeable space of luminous projections. As screen-based art practices enact such a return to materiality by emphasizing surface luminosity and textural hapticity, the memory of film is materialized in contemporary art. The screen is activated outside of cinema as a historically dense space—re-enacted, that is, as a mnemonic canvas that is fundamentally linked to the technology of light. Walking through the art gallery and the museum, we encounter webs of cinematic situations, reimagined as if collected together and recollected on a screen that is now a wall, a partition, a veil, or even a curtain.

It is important to engage the virtual movements that are taking place in material ways in our environment of screen surfaces. This passage is crucial because it affects the sedimentation of the visual imaginary—its residues—as well as further transmissions and transformations. To be sure, the exchange that has taken place on the field screen of visual archives profoundly affects the fabric and architecture of the visual experience. In suggesting that we weave through this visual fabrication and the material relations that link together screen, window, and wall across

time, exposing the threads that connect the visual to the spatial arts, including the migrations between cinema and architectural space, my aim is to reclaim materiality as an intermedial surface condition and to foster further explorations in surface tension and depth.

Empathy, Projection, and the Surface of Things

In theorizing surface materiality in this way, I also want to touch on the surface of things and suggest that this membrane conveys the material relation that develops virtually between subjects and objects. I am particularly interested in these surface encounters and in considering how they can express a form of empathy. It is important to emphasize in this regard that empathy is a form of virtual exchange.⁸ This process of connection occurs not only between people but also between persons and such things as space. As the German philosopher and psychologist Theodor Lipps clearly put it when defining his vision of empathy at the cusp of modernity, *Einfühlung*, or empathy, can be a virtual mimicry or transfer that is activated between the subject and his or her surroundings.⁹ One can empathize with expressive, dynamic forms of architecture, with colors and sounds, or with scenery and situations, and these virtual “projections” include atmospheres and moods. In Lipps’s words, “a landscape expresses a mood. Such ‘expression’ says exactly what we intend by the term ‘empathy.’”¹⁰

Empathy is thus a form of virtual “transport:” a psychic passage set in motion not simply with physical beings but also with material space, including such things as the surface of the earth, settings and locales, forms and formations, tints and tones, hues and shapes. According to

8. The literature on this subject is extensive. For an introduction, see Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou, eds., *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873–1893* (Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994). For an overview of the history of *Einfühlung*, see Juliet Koss, “On the Limits of Empathy,” *Art Bulletin* 88, no. 1 (March 2006): 139–57. See also Robin Curtis and Gertrud Koch, eds., *Einfühlung: Zur Geschichte und Gegenwart eines ästhetischen Konzepts* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2008); and *Art in Translation*, special issue on *Einfühlung* 6, no. 4 (December 2014).

9. See Theodor Lipps, “Empathy and Aesthetic Pleasure,” in *Aesthetic Theories: Studies in the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Karl Aschenbrenner and Arnold Isenberg (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965).

10. *Ibid.*, 405.

Lipps, *Einführung* can be an actual function of these spatial configurations and relations, and it expresses the “feel” of the ambient. Understood in this way, empathy can be seen as a particular form of transmission and mediation that occurs on the surface of things and in the environment. I would ultimately claim that empathy is an atmospheric matter, activated in the projective layers of material surface encounters.¹¹ And these kinds of virtual encounters include all that passes on surface space, whether skin or screen.

In this sense, empathy can be further articulated in terms of a material passage and even interpreted as a form of “projection.” An aid in advancing this interpretation comes from the writings of Wilhelm Worringer. The art historian writes that empathy is the virtual exchange of a vital feeling and represents a material form of encounter with aesthetic space. Let us listen to his specific words on this subject, which suggest that empathy may be configured as a kind of projection:

A gratification of that inner need for self-activation [is] the presupposition of the process of empathy. In the forms of the work of art we enjoy ourselves. Aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment. The value of a line, of a form consists for us in the value of the life that it holds for us. It holds its beauty only through our own vital feeling, which, in some mysterious manner, we project into it.¹²

I return against the grain to Worringer’s notion of empathy, in contrast to the opinion that empathy and abstraction occupy distinct aesthetic realms. In light of Lipps’s theory of *Einführung*, we now fully recognize that one can virtually empathize with any spatial or abstract phenomenon. One can feel empathy with an abstract figure, shape, or form, and even empathize with an outline, a silhouette, a contour, or a line. Spatial construction is an active process that, as the art historian August Schmarzow also showed, engages our capacity to sense our surroundings haptically, and such a process can involve a kind of virtual projection from

11. This subject is further explored in my book *Atmospheres of Projection: Environmentality in Art and Screen Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

12. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1997), 14.

within the subject onto abstract forms of space.¹³ In this sense, we can further elaborate on Worringer's idea that the impact "of a line, of a form consists in the value of the life that it holds for us." A dynamic is created in an evolving, twofold empathetic exchange between subjects, objects, and spaces. At the heart of empathy is an image in motion, the expression of an internal movement, which arises in surface encounters. As Worringer himself would have it, empathy is the projection of a vital energy of the beholder and also a spirit that moves in matter. In listening to his words again, we may "sense" this matter of projected life energy in a passage in which he cites Lipps's own formulation of this projective resonance:

The urge to empathy as a pre-assumption of aesthetic experience finds its justification in the beauty of the organic. . . . 'What I empathize into it is quite generally life. And life is energy, inner working, striving and accomplishing. In a word, life is activity.' . . . The crucial factor is, therefore, rather the sensation itself, i.e. the inner motion, the inner life, the inner self-activation.¹⁴

Recapturing Worringer's line of argument and taking it a step forward in a different direction, I therefore suggest thinking of empathy as something that moves, both inside and outside of oneself. Empathy is something that moves in us. It is also something that moves in matter.¹⁵ This vital matter can be a projection of our inner activation—that is to say, a material manifestation of our inner motion. Conversely, the energy of space and the vibrancy of matter can virtually transfer onto our bodies. What is at stake, then, in addressing empathy, is a relation that can be understood as a real form of projection. This necessarily involves engaging with surface-space as a threshold or membrane, which has the capacity to hold in its very shape a set of projections between interior and exterior space.

13. On Schmarsow's theory of space, see Mitchell W. Schwarzer, "The Emergence of Architectural Space: August Schmarsow's Theory of *Raumgestaltung*," *Assemblage*, no. 15 (August 1991), 50–61.

14. Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, 4–5.

15. On the subject of a vibrant materialism, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

Projection and Surface Encounters

With this in mind, we can approach some final issues that pertain to surface encounters and projection. I am interested in the creation of permeable membranes that can offer the possibility of material aesthetic encounters. In this sense, I want to draw attention to the “surface tension of media” because this phenomenon can open up a space for material relations in our virtual times, and because, at the same time, it can advance the idea that surface encounters on screens can project a form of empathy. Let me offer a telling example of these possibilities as materialized in the luminous use of visual technology and new media practiced in the public art of Krzysztof Wodiczko. Since 1980, this artist has produced more than eighty large-scale public projections on buildings, in many different countries.¹⁶ Wodiczko uses the medium of projection to make the face and façade of architecture into a dense surface, creating a permeable site for mediated, virtual experiences of memory, history, and subjectivity. In this way, he exposes the actual architecture of projection, in a mediation of various mediums that is material and creates empathy.

Wodiczko’s projections sensitize us to the texture of the surface onto which the image is projected. The space onto which these images are projected is never invisible but always rendered tangible. In *The Tijuana Projection* (2001), for example, Wodiczko animates the human body in projection against the body of a building’s form. The face of a woman mouthing her story is projected as if her facial skin were adhering to the spherical surface of the dome of the city’s Centro Cultural, and, in this way, we are made to empathize with both face and façade at once. In *Hiroshima Projection* (1999), gesticulating hands are projected in close-up onto the moving surface of a river, thereby appearing to activate mnemonic flow and creating empathy with this fluid space. In these works, the moving image is carved out of the material surface of the

16. See, among others, Krzysztof Wodiczko, *Critical Vehicles: Writings, Projects, Interviews* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999); Andrzej Turowski, ed., *Krzysztof Wodiczko: Pomnikoterapia*, exh. cat. (Warsaw: Zacheta National Gallery of Art, 2005); and Rosalyn Deutsche, “Krzysztof Wodiczko’s Homeless Projections and the Site of Urban Revitalization,” in *Evictions: Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 3–48.

architecture that supports it, animates it, and moves it. A form of mediation, the architectural surface acts for Wodiczko as a partition: that is, it functions as a visible screen of projection, which includes the projection of empathy.

Guests, an installation from 2009, makes this even more evident. Walking into the dark space of the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, you thought you were seeing eight windows, scattered on three walls, and, looking up, one skylight. But the walls had no openings. These frames were not carved in stone. The windows are projections—“screens” on which one can catch glimpses of the life of immigrants, the “guests” of the country we are in. *If You See Something...*, from 2005, was similarly structured. The surface of these imaginary windowed architectures functions as an elaborate form of mediation, for these luminous screens provide access to, and create empathy with, the personal narratives of society’s invisible citizens. It is significant that the migrants are never seen or heard clearly. They appear as shadows through the light, silhouettes in a digital shadow theater. The interrelation of visibility and invisibility in society is concretely materialized here, uncovered on the nonexistent panes of glass windows that are dressed as screens.¹⁷

As we look closely at these walls, which act as windows, we can perceive them as actual screen surfaces.¹⁸ In order to see, we must navigate through a surface that is visually configured as a white, dense material. A milky, textured substance appears to our senses, and, acting as a cover for the window-walls, it mediates the relationship between seer and seen. In this sense, we perceive the materiality of projection, which is digitally configured to approach screen surface. Closer to a veil or curtain than

17. See Ewa Lajer-Burchardth, “Borders,” in *Krzysztof Wodiczko: Guests*, exh. cat. (New York: Charta Books, 2009), 32–45; and Lajer-Burchardth, “Interiors at Risk,” *Harvard Design Magazine*, no. 29, Special Issue “What about the Inside?” (Fall–Winter 2008–09): 12–21.

18. My critical reading of Wodiczko’s work here and in *Surface* owes much to private and public conversations with the artist, whom I wish to thank. See in particular Giuliana Bruno, “Krzysztof Wodiczko,” an interview for “In the Open Air: Art in Public Spaces,” a project of *Bomb* magazine and PBS’s *Art 21*, Sculpture Center, New York, October 29, 2007, online at <http://bombsite.com/issues/999/articles/3592> (accessed 29 April 2015).

to a pane of glass, this surface is the actual visual tissue of projection. And thus, as we try to make out the foggy figures of the displaced people and hear their stories through muffled sound, we experience the mediatic quality of the screen as a veiled, and veiling, surface.

In the installations of *If You See Something...* and *Guests*, screens can act as membranes. As the figures of the migrants move in a blur, their contours come in and out of focus, becoming more consistent as they approach the limit of the screen. The effect makes the screen feel like a tissue, a permeable, thin sheet that appears to move like a membrane being stretched. Some visitors to the installation come up to the site of projection as if wishing the space actually could extend or stretch like such a membrane. In turn, the migrants act as if the partition could bend or warp to create a passage, or as if it could be virtually traversed, like a veil. They push their bodies up to the surface and hold up hands, pictures, and objects as if wishing to push them through a layer of tissue. In many ways, this screen is shown to be elastic, flexible, and pliant.

Surface tension occurs here. This membrane is an actual screen also in the sense that it is a partition. On this site of partition, the migrants can negotiate status and story, for this membrane-like surface acts simultaneously as a protective layer and as a wall. There is substance, which is also a form of resistance, in this material of projection. As if to rebel against their status as shadows, the migrants push up against the partition as they would against a real border. But let us not forget that the virtual architecture constructed by Wodiczko is also a window; that is, it is the kind of architecture in which positions between inside and outside can be mediated. In this capacity as aperture, the resilient surface does not merely divide but also enables a passage—the channeling of empathy—which finally becomes a potential crossing of borders. Possibilities of openings and a hope of exchange can be sited on this composite, tensile, permeable screen that acts as a membrane of empathy.

Einführung: Atmospheres of Projection

Coated in the material fabric of projection, this space of traversal includes spectatorial projections and the transmission of empathy. As a visitor to this space, one is not safely positioned on the other side of the screen but rather stands on the border, for in order to perceive, one must virtually cross over and project oneself across the threshold. The fabric of this screen is so absorbent that it absorbs the viewer, too, in its surface tension. To look is to feel this tension, challenging, as the process of empathy does, who and what is outside and inside. One cannot simply stare passively at this surface. The tension of its tensile surface forces one to become engaged—to the point of wishing that borders might be crossed, and contact might be made through the membrane, across the fabric of the screen. Not only a site of critical distance, this kind of screen is at once resistant and embracing because it holds affects in its fabric. Its porous membrane enables the passage of empathy, which is itself a form of projection. In staging an epidermic form of exchange, this surface-membrane thus mediates the potential for relatedness and relationality that is inscribed in the material of projection.

The atmosphere of projection is thick. It is dense with moody, luminous light particles dancing in space, imbued with an air of cloudy, permeable palpability of virtual relationality. The visible is here “a quality pregnant with a texture.”¹⁹ Projection was indeed always an environment, and in recent times it is becoming even more of an atmosphere. Screen space is a site haunted by “the perturbations of surfaces.”²⁰ And this is what creates that particular form of “feeling in” space that is *Einführung*.

To fully sense these textural matters, think of the material history of the screen as a form of mediation. After all, an ethereal consistency is the material base of the act of screening, as the idea of projection was, historically, born out of atmospheric surfaces. The act of projection was designed to make images flare out and move, in the way Lucretius envi-

19. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining—The Kiasm,” in *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 136.

20. See Georges Didi-Huberman, “The Imaginary Breeze: Remarks on the Air of the Quattrocento,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 3 (December 2003): 280.

sioned it, surfacing from the fabric of light and the density of air. Early forms of projection, such as magic lanterns and phantasmagoria, were a weathered kind of space, imbued with vaporous things such as smoke and fog. Projection was also closely associated with elusive substances such as the hazy, misty quality of shades, silhouettes, and shadows. It is no wonder, then, that such materials of resistance and permeability, integral to the very activity of screening, would find their own digital substance in a new atmosphere of projection.

A place of passage and a point of contact between worlds, the screen continues to mediate today between materiality and virtuality, crossing the borders of mediums in surface tension and fostering the passage of *Einführung*. In the atmosphere of projection, a form of curtaining, partitioning, and partaking of space occurs, beyond medium specificity, in an architecture of “becoming” that connects and mediates texturally between art forms. Far from being responsible for dematerialization, the persistence of projection in the art gallery continues to refashion mobile and communal architectures of materiality. It even reactivates the public potential of the cinematic mode of exhibition, along with its potential to create empathy. And so, as the shadow theater that is cinema is reconfigured and rematerialized architecturally, and the white cube of the gallery turns luminously dark, we are given back the absorbent, envisioning, relational fabric of projection, displayed on yet another form of screen-membrane, where empathy can take place as a moving surface encounter.

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