

The Medium Alone is Not Enough: An Archaeology of Diffused Entities and Illusory Spaces

Katarina Andjelkovic

Abstract

"In recent years, a material, elemental and environmental, approach to media seem to be in the center of a whole series of developments in media theory,"¹ Antonio Somaini pointed out wishing to indicate that media have to be considered in their material embeddedness, in their environmental dimension, and not exclusively as technical means. Starting from this assumption, the article analyses different historical stages of the relationship between the materiality of the medium and its representation. The transformative impact of old technology on the medium starting with the experimental photography and film practices of the 1920s and 1930s toward performative film work of the 1970s, revealed a growing fascination with surface projections and how they identify light as a medium that form space. By contextualizing the problem of the medium (space, light and time) within the history of surface projections, I explore how projections structure the perception of space to argue that this insight can challenge the very notion of materialism in relation to the medium. The aim is to demonstrate that medium's concern with the dissolution of its boundaries challenges the notion of materialism and thus affect a deeper divide between materiality and representation. I will conclude by demonstrating that this work paved a way to numerous innovative architectural experiments in connection with surface materiality: from their application in scenography to the modern surface condition of facades and contemporary practices that concretise the surface tension of the media as the training ground for spatial contemplation.

Introduction

Starting with reflections around the micro-processes happening on a technical level, these historiographic possibilities are most strikingly reflected in László Moholy-Nagy's proposals for multiple, simultaneous projections onto all kinds of surfaces. Referring to surface projections, the Avant-garde artist and Bauhaus professor Moholy-Nagy was critical of thinking that did not fully take account of the medium's technical possibilities of both photography and film.² In his experiments he was dealing with projections on light-sensitive surfaces. Since modern times, these micro-histories have been coupled with theoretical reflection and artistic practices to turn these surface phenomena into the dichotomy of medium's materiality and representation. On the other hand, elaborating on a remarkable change that took place in painting, in his *Vision in Motion* (1947), Moholy-Nagy was critical of the modern vision claiming that "the man at the wheel sees persons and objects in quick succession, in permanent motion."³ In his observation, a new way of painting means rethinking the limitations of the medium. In that regard, he criticized the Cubists claiming that their 'vision in motion' is not so much in representation of objects but in a constantly changing moving field of mutual relationships⁴ – the so-called 'vision in relationships.' Applying these theoretical ideas in his practical and pedagogical experiments, Moholy-Nagy anticipated debates around the anxiety that pervaded the period of the 'cinematisation' of art. The complex dichotomy of materiality and representation was finally addressed by Mary Anne Doane who claims that these issues are closely linked to the question of unrepresentability of the projected-image art, with a clinging to the idea of the materiality of the image.⁵ However, the medium's concern with the dissolution of its boundaries remains unresolved. This is due in large part to the underestimation of the medium's architectural surroundings. Namely, the mentioned debates only rarely tackled Moholy-Nagy's relationship with space and what is the unique contribution to the spatial context of his experimental usage of then new media, film and photography. In 1930, one of Moholy's friends, art historian Franz Roh finally captured space in Moholy's work and interpreted his method as "the forming of space by means of coloured flashing light." Following his claims, I argue that this spatial context should not be considered only as the materiality of the medium or visual force of relationships, but also as the medium concern with the dissolution of its boundaries.

As multimedia experiments proliferated, performative film works from the 1970s were gradually beginning to draw attention to their architectural surroundings. Experimental film-makers associated with Fluxus cinema⁶ were openly critical towards the 'painterly' and 'poetic' visionary experience of previous Avant-garde films with references to the materiality (or dematerialization) of the medium.⁷ One of the Fluxus members had proposed a multiple-screen film installation that would bring the film loops together for spatial contemplation within a gallery-based viewing area.⁸ A key figure in British Avant-garde cinema, Guy Sherwin, pushes the limits of cinema with his exploration in film's fundamental properties: light and time. By investigating the mechanisms of projection, Sherwin creates illusory space within the screen. In his art installation "Paper Landscape" (2015) originally from 1975, he deals directly with light and the material of the polythene screen to which the white paint is applied. The problem of projecting light is manifested in the expanded surfaces of diffused entities and dissolved boundaries, which pays homage to the hybridization of media in contemporary arts. Both trained as painters and gradually moving their practices toward the time-based media, Moholy-Nagy and Guy Sherwin were familiar with this trend. They felt the limitations of the medium and started painting with light instead of pigment. Their experimentation with the projected image exemplified ways of instrumentalizing shared scientific and artistic methods, firstly regarding the modes of display. On one hand, Moholy-Nagy's aesthetic-pedagogic Bauhaus project structures the perception of space; while on the other hand, Guy Sherwin's film performances play with the illusory space and seek to activate and organize the viewing space beyond the projection screen.

Immaterial Supports and Interest in Space

The transformative impact of old technology on media is a barometer for investigating the confines of the medium. When stepping out of the technical possibilities of the specific medium, such as painting or film, interest in materiality is gradually lost and gives place to a new hybridization of forms and an expansion of immaterial supports. This is testified in Moholy-Nagy's early works, in his replacement of pigment for light only to sketch with light a photography in the same manner the artist works with pigment at his canvas (fig. 1). He chooses to work in the medium that he refers to as 'the constructed space' or in the 3d constructions; that is, the medium that extends the picture plane into real space to produce an almost endless range of shades and hues, abstractness and veritable spatial effects (fig. 2).⁹ While the architects of the same period wrote about architecture as "being the magnificent play of masses brought together in light"¹⁰ (Le Corbusier) only to confirm the materiality of the building, Moholy-Nagy's focus was on creating a new kind of 'illusory' architecture in painting with the "immaterial material" of light, as he called it. It seems that Moholy-Nagy's method was inspired by German modernist architects' speech about architecture while looking for modernist expression, which is, "losing the materiality of the surface" while using more glass. Inspired by the hectic features of modern urban life, Moholy-Nagy contemplated the materiality of architecture through a signal, flash, light and abstract signs, only to be able to domesticate the transparency of glass materials into his own vision of creating space. More importantly, Moholy-Nagy saw this shift as a logical continuation of his efforts to emphasize the dynamic of perception and to generate interactive space. Therefore, this is the first indication of his interest in space and, undoubtedly, it coincides with the emergence of the modern metropolis that foregrounds the importance of perception.



Figure 1: Left: "A 19" by László Moholy-Nagy, oil on canvas, 1927.
Credit courtesy Hattula Moholy-Nagy © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2009.
Right: László Moholy-Nagy, Fotogramm 1922 [photogram with spiral shape]
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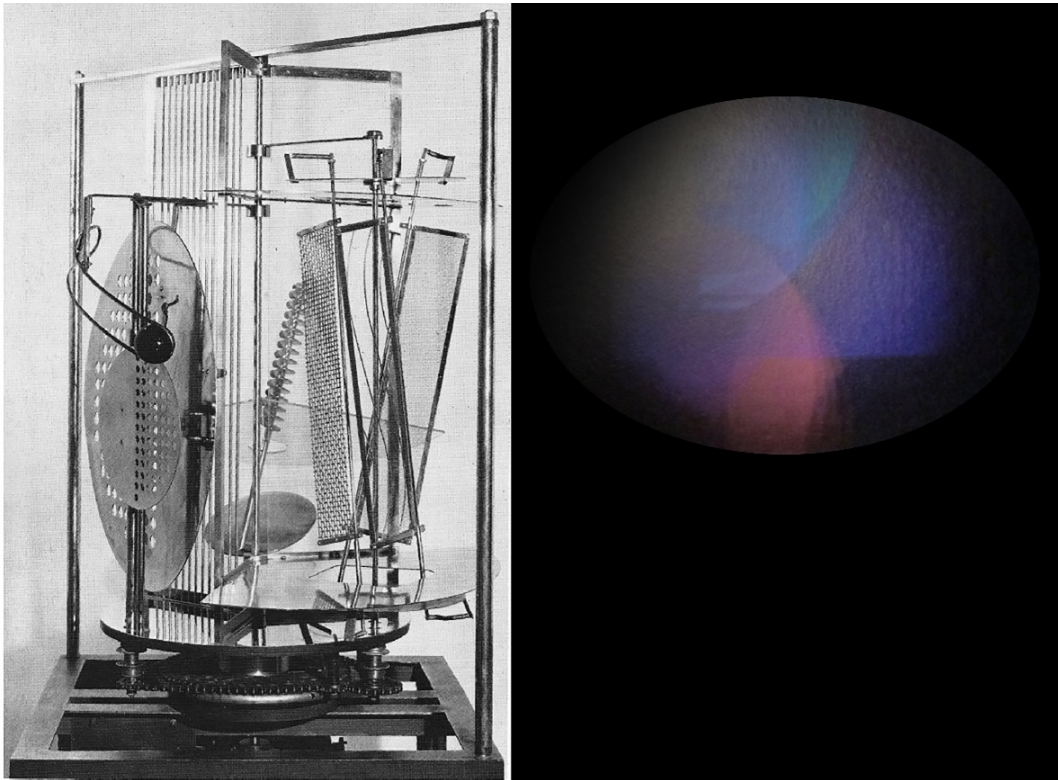


Figure 2: László Moholy-Nagy, Light Prop for an Electric Stage, 1922-1930
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Anyhow, nothing more clearly betrays our human vision in exploring new perceptual conditions of the modern metropolis than the new media of the 20th century did. Driven by his major inspiration to bring about the revolution of vision, Moholy-Nagy tackled more closely the questions around film projection. In his first book *Painting, Photography, Film* (1925, fig. 3), he proposed multiple projectors set behind moving mirrors or fastened to pivots that would project several moving films, simultaneously, onto large concave, textured, convex surfaces, and geometrical solids. Despite the fact that these theoretical ideas for “Polycinema” (1922, fig. 4) were never realized in practice, Moholy-Nagy’s proposal for multiple simultaneous projections onto all kinds of surfaces is related to the practices which were anticipated by Russian Avant-garde filmmakers and gathered under the term expanded cinema.

Foregrounding the intrinsic properties of the medium as the very substance of his work, Moholy-Nagy was engaged in exploring how scientists, X-Ray technicians and criminologists, among others, deployed camera. Behind this problematic, he discovered the unused technical capabilities of the camera apparatus and searched for the technical means to record and control kinetic light play *Lichtspielen* (the action of light, fig. 5) directly onto light-sensitive film, by lenses and mirrors, by light passing through fluids, water, oil, crystal, metal and glass. The filtered, refracted and reflected light is directed upon screen and then photographed. Through this process instead of pigment, light becomes the primary medium of plastic expression. It is clear that the kinetic component of this process reaches its highest development in his films (1929-33) at the juncture of New Vision aesthetics and scenes of everyday life.



Figure 3: László Moholy-Nagy, *Painting, Photography, Film* (Volume 8 in the Bauhausbücher series in 1925). Translated by Janet Seligman (London: Lund Humphries, 1969) © Licensed under CC BY 2.0

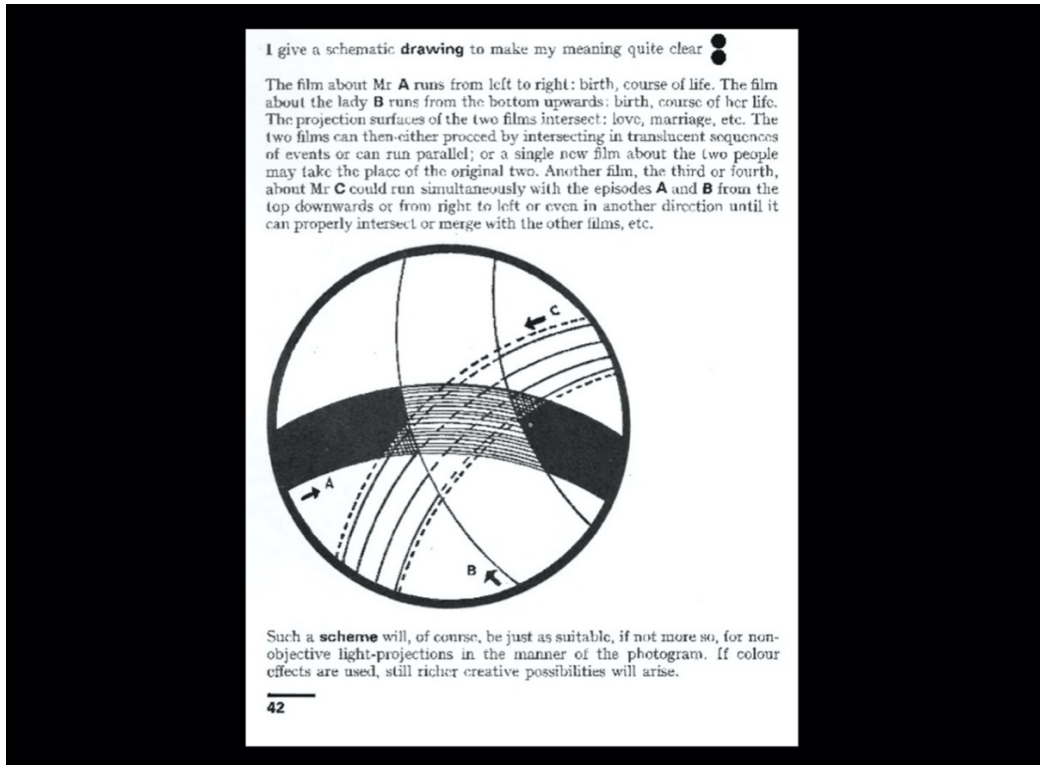


Figure 4: László Moholy-Nagy's ideas for "Polycinema," 1922 © Licensed under CC BY 2.0

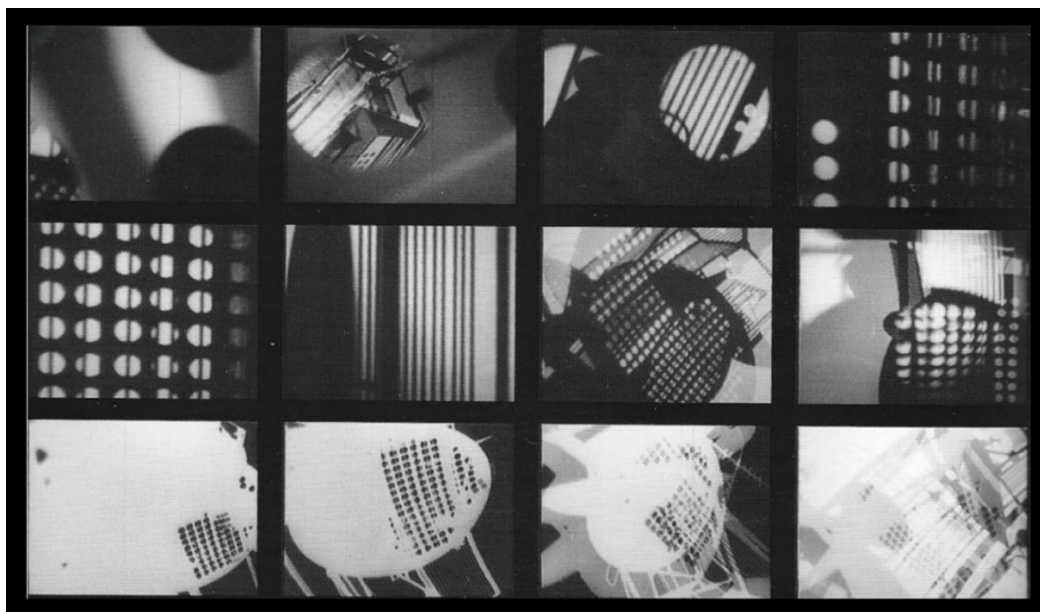


Figure 5: László Moholy-Nagy, Film stills from *Lichtspiel: Schwarz-Weiss-Grau*, 1930. © Licensed under CC BY 2.0

Playing between materiality and representation in this way, Moholy-Nagy revisits the medium of painting and drives conclusion in his *Telehor*: "Malevich's last picture - a white square on a square white canvas - is a clear symbolic of the projection screen." (fig. 6) In his view, painting and film are manifestations of the same medium – the medium of projected light. By establishing connections between them, he sets the context for the thesis that these two media share the same "material" basis. This is of particular importance because all effects that Moholy-Nagy used had similar purpose: either to produce the illusion of an architectonic structure hovering in an infinite space, or to render in paint the effect of overlapping shafts of light. This process was applied in the sketches for built spaces in Moholy-Nagy's sets. He was further speculating that it is possible to enrich architectural experience by projecting light on to a succession of semitransparent planes (nets, for example).

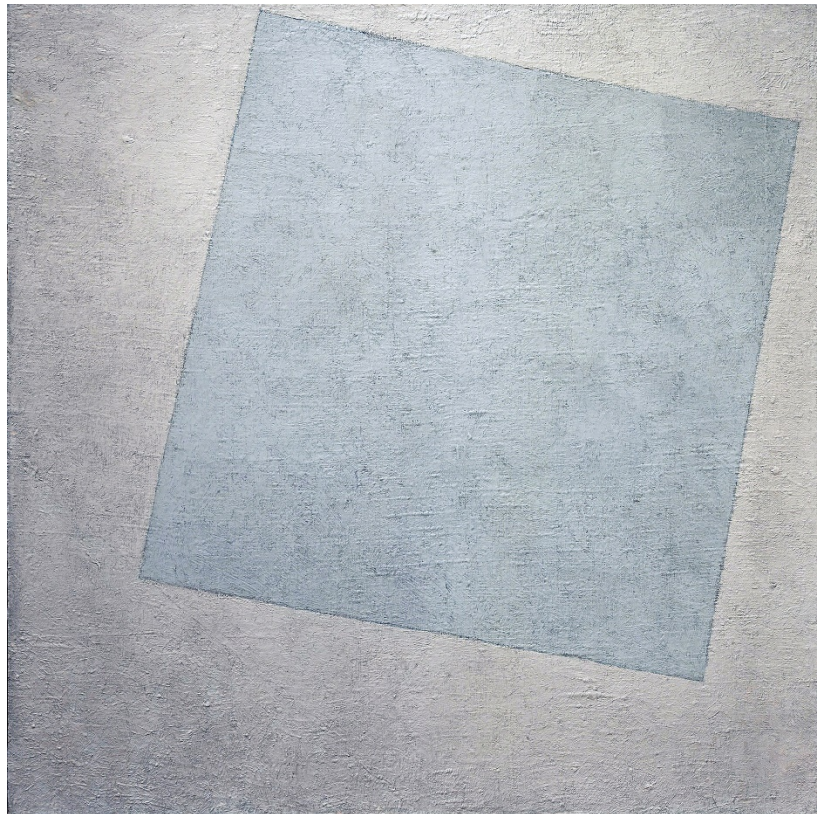


Figure 6: Kazimir Malevich, Suprematist Composition: White on White, 1918.

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One of his most compelling spatial proposals was created when one of the key modernists, architect Walter Gropius, adapted Moholy-Nagy's 1925 suggestion of a 'Total Theatre'. By integrating it into his 1927 scheme for Piscator's dream of a Total Theatre (fig. 7), Gropius concluded that

"[The total theatre] can set an entire auditorium - walls and ceiling – within the film ... In place of the projection surfaces in use until now, a projection space emerges. The real auditorium, neutralised through the absence of light, becomes, through the power of projected light, a space of illusion, the site of the scenic events themselves."¹¹

The walls surrounding the theatrical space of the Total Theatre were to dissolve into screens, as these walls-screens were inherently translucent, at night, when the direction of projection was reversed, the films would have been visible to the city through the theatre's glazed exterior, transforming its urban surroundings into an activated, cinematic space – as an embodiment of the present perceptual conditions of modern metropolis. In other words, Gropius envisioned cinema not as a surface projection, but as an illusionistic space.¹²

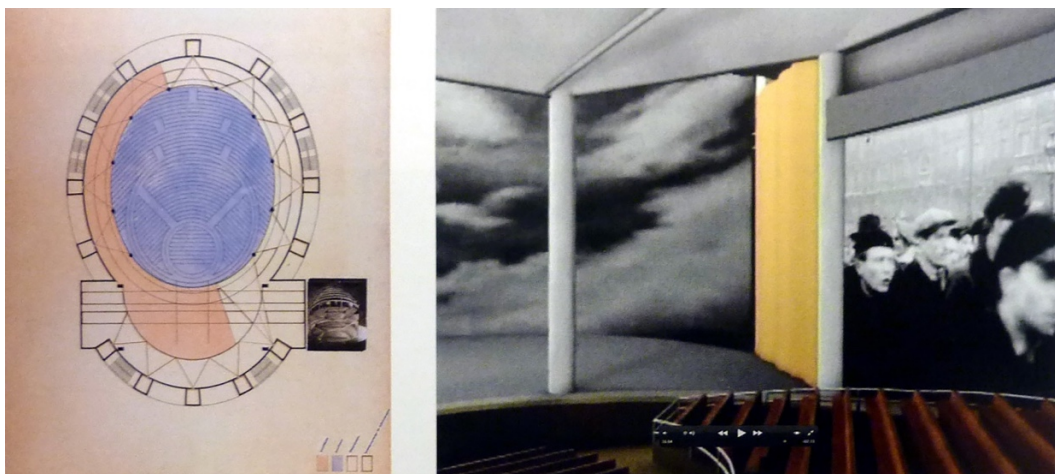


Figure 7: Left: Walter Gropius, Plan for Totaltheatre, 1927. Mixed media on paper, 100x80 cm.

Designed for Erwin Piscator. Executed: Istvan Sebok.

Right: Digital animation of Walter Gropius, Totaltheatre, for Piscatorbuhne of Erwin Piscator, 2006.

Director: Javier Navarro de Zuillaga, animation: Javier Nunez © Licensed under CC BY 2.0

Practices of the 1970s: Operability of the Surface

Guy Sherwin's live performance "Paper Landscape" 2015 (1975, fig. 8) deals with the illusory space and time within the screen by referring to its material. As a projector starts, we see Sherwin painting the white rectangle of a cinema screen. As the action progresses, the hands of a much younger Sherwin begin to appear tearing away the paper screen. The viewers see Sherwin as a real performer who gradually turns to his illusory self. Namely, he is walling himself in behind a layer of white paint to refocus the viewers' attention on the image of a landscape projected onto the surface of the screen. Light and time, as intrinsic property of the medium, become the very substance of his work. Light interacts with the materiality of the screen manifesting the multiple temporalities of the image. As past and present times juxtapose within the screen surface, the performance of the main protagonist has been gradually replaced by the film record of the past event. As a result, the projected film image starts to appear. In such expanded cinema practices, the image never unfolds on a single level of projection but always refers to something else that is behind or between its materiality. At the same time, the confines of the cinema space are dramatically reaffirmed as the live performer slices the screen (fig. 9) and steps through into the space that the audience occupies.



Figure 8: Guy Sherwin, Paper Landscape 2015 (1975). Silent 10 mins. Performance using super 8 film, polythene screen, white paint and performer © Licensed under CC BY 2.0



Figure 9: Guy Sherwin performs his film piece, 'Paper Landscape' at the Tate Gallery in London, 2015
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The story makes an effective connection between the real and illusory performer, and between the real and illusory space (fig. 10), by letting the main protagonist run off into the distance to finally merge with the image of the landscape. In this way, the screen environment expands. It transgresses the surface of the image and enters into the real space. Finally, dissolving the boundaries between the screen surface and space contributed to structuring the simultaneous perception of real and illusory spaces, and embraced the “materiality” of connections between different entities. By establishing relationships between objects that belong to different material environments (real and illusory), these spatially extended *entities* (paint, light and space) have become *diffuse*. This is precisely the term that Walter Benjamin used to describe medium while indicating its spatial extension.¹³ From the perspective of the spectator, the image configuration can finally be realized as matter, at times “flying” into the space and back to the screen. With this idea in mind, we ask: if possibility of the surface is to manifest the materiality of an image

on it, what is the operability of the surface? Using Giuliana Bruno's terminology to speak of a surface rather than of an image, I argue that the operability is connected to the relation of materiality to temporality, which is also embodied in this process. As a matter of fact, Bruno's crucial idea is that the surface is "where time becomes material space."¹⁴ It brings forward the idea that the materiality is not literally about materials. Moreover, its "operable" dimension is concerned with the relations that are created in the interaction of the performer with the materiality of the surface. In that regard, the surface is seen 'as an active site of exchange,' in relation of its material embodiment to temporality, connectivity and relatedness, in the active field of relations. In other words, operability of the surface is not the question of materials, but rather consults the substance of material relations between the painted surface, the projected image on the screen, and the time dedicated to paint.



Figure 10. Guy Sherwin performs his film piece, 'Paper Landscape' at the Tate Gallery in London, 2015
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During the same decade, the emphasis on the very moment of projection in relation to performance, video and televisual liveliness, led many film-makers to envision time and space as inseparable elements of cinematic experience. Along with their ability to produce the image simultaneously as they transmit it, the performance and video practices of the 1970s have also demonstrated the lack of physicality. These engagements consisted of mediations, such as delay or liveliness, only to introduce a sense of spectator that participates in these practices as a 'performer', rather than a passive viewer. Driven by the same issue in his film-performance "Paper Landscape," Sherwin was himself a spectator physically participating in these environments and the image of himself was simultaneously projected on the screen. Continually confronting a collapse of identification between the self and the image of the self which is projected on the screen, Sherwin has demonstrated practically the process of perceptual siting in the *art of projection*. At the same time, the operability of expanded surface temporalities can be understood as surface tension that releases the boundaries of the present and the past. As such, visual patterns are edited through the non-linear layers of space and time. Retelling the story through the lifespan of the protagonist is realized in the symmetrical dialogue of the past and present, which occupies the space between the screen and the real space of the gallery. Eventually, the projected image of the landscape is visually embodied in the game of changing materiality and alternate appearances, contributing to the integration of simultaneous 'then' and 'now' in his artistic expression.

Film-makers and artists of the 1960s and 1970s ended in rejecting visual art's own conventions, and the material reconfiguration of visual space that they created was seen as a condensed metaphor of the progression through different materialities. As Giuliana Bruno claims, "it is exactly the space of projection that can sensitize us to the most basic passage of time, which is essentially a passage of light."¹⁵ Like in the installations and films of Moholy-Nagy, Guy Sherwin's performance films are characterized by an enduring concern with light and time. During the projection, *time* is used to challenge materiality, while concern with materiality was subordinated to his interest in representation. The complexity of time is added through 'live performance,' while playing with light to a desired effect is performed on a technical level of projecting. In that regard, Sherwin is interested in the painting-film connection. On one hand, his interests gravitate around paintings that function as modifiers of shadows and light effects and, on the other hand, he investigates the photo reality of the film image. Using the advantages of painting during the film projection, he devised a method of rendering film object as an image on a painted surface. In this way, Sherwin has eventually set a play between

what is visible at certain moment and what is not. The passage from materiality to immateriality is reflected in how Sherwin employs the additional layers of paint and the passage of time to reveal and hide information alternately. Depending on the source of light and the intention of the author to simulate the appearance of the landscape image, light is no longer simply framed in one layer. Rather, it is filtered through a multi-layered visual fabrication: firstly, through a pigment of white paint, and then by rendering light to the light-sensitive material reality of the film image. In other words, the sensitivity to the characteristics of the projection and transparent screen is what plays between layers of different materials.

In Conclusion: Spatial Contemplation of the Contemporary Façade Practices

It is not a coincidence that *projection* was one of the descriptive terms that was used to redraw the boundaries between the visual arts and contemporary architecture at the turn of the twenty-first century.¹⁶ From the previous discussion, we learned how projection art of the early 1920s proposed rarely discussed ways of thinking about medium's concern with the dissolution of its boundaries and their material embeddedness, that is, their environmental dimension. After all, contemporary architectural practice not only concretised surface tension of the media as the training ground for spatial contemplation, but it also became inseparable from the media, such as public and advertisement screens, or 3-dimensional projection mapping. Being capable of producing a veritable spatial effect, these façade practices have given new lease to Siegfried Kracauer's account of cinema as that which "clings to the surface of things,"¹⁷ by allowing moving images to quite literally cling to the surfaces of urban space.¹⁸ In other words, contemporary architectural practices have concretised surface tension of the media as the training ground for spatial contemplation. The surface has become an environment.

Author Biography

Katarina Andjelkovic, Atelier AG Andjelkovic, with a PhD, M.Arch.Eng., is a theorist, a practicing architect and a painter, with teaching/research experience as a Visiting Professor at University of Oklahoma, Chair of Creative Architecture, at Institute of Form Theory and History and Institute of Urbanism and Landscape in Oslo; at University of Belgrade. She lectures at international conferences and gives workshops: Europe, America and Canada; published her research widely in international journals (Web of Science); won numerous awards for her architecture design and urban design competitions; published two scientific monographs. She is a full author of the National project supported by the Government (RoS); exhibited internationally (architectural, painting and photography); won the Belgrade Chamber of Commerce Award for Best Master Thesis in Serbia in all disciplines. katarina.code@gmail.com

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Notes

1. Antonio Somaini, "Light as Medium," at Organization of Perception. Rhythm and Projection. Workshop at ICI Berlin: Kulturlabor Institute for Cultural Inquiry, January 19, 2018.
2. Oliver A. I. Botar, "László Moholy-Nagy's projection spaces," at Thinking Space: Film and Philosophy Conference, Spiral Film and Philosophy Coll., Dept of Cinema and Media Studies, York University, at TMAC, Toronto, Canada, May 11-12, 2018.
3. László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Paul Theobald Chicago, New York: Wittenborn and Co., 1947), 113.
4. Ibid, 113-114.
5. Mary Anne Doane, "The Location of the Image: Projection and Scale in the Cinema," at The Art of Projection: A Symposium on the Cinematographic and Art, Hamburger Bahnhof and Kino Arsenal, Berlin, October 29, 2006.
6. Around two dozen artists were associated with Fluxus cinema, including George Maciunas, Jackson Mac Low, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik and Paul Sharits.
7. Tanya Leighton, "I – Histories and Revisions," in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: TATE, 2011), 49.
8. Ibid, 49.
9. Oliver A. I. Botar, *Sensing the Future: Moholy-Nagy, Media and the Arts* (Lars Müller Publishers, 2014).
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17. Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film. The Redemption of Physical Reality* (Oxford/London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 285.
18. Katerina Korola, "Probing Light: Projection Mapping, Architectural Surface, and the Politics of Luminous Abstraction," *Intermedialities. History and theory of arts, letters and techniques*, no. 24-25 (Fall 2014, Spring 2015), guest-edited by Larisa Dryansky and Érika Wicky. Online publication: December 7, 2015, accessed February 8, 2019, <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1034164ar>.