

# In The Flesh

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Nat Chard

David Clark

Michelle Gay

Stephen Kelly

Jolanta Lapiak

Cheryl Sourkes

Curated by Robert Bean

Anna Leonowens Gallery, NSCAD University

1891 Granville St, Halifax, Nova Scotia.

## In The Flesh

Robert Bean

Curatorial Statement

*The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual.*<sup>1</sup>

For the last 100 years perceptual modalities have been and continue to be in a state of perpetual transformation, or, some might claim, a state of crisis. If vision can be said to have any enduring characteristics within the twentieth century, it is that it has no enduring features. Rather it is embedded in a pattern of adaptability to new technological relations, social configurations, and economic imperatives. What we familiarly refer to, for example, as film, photography, and television are transient elements within an accelerating sequence of displacements and obsolescences. Part of the delirious operations of modernization.<sup>2</sup>

"In the Flesh" is an exhibition by contemporary artists who explore the relationships of embodiment and technology through themes of complexity, sensorial experience, interactivity, physical computing and digital conceptualization. Conscious of working in a culture of obsolescence, the artists in this exhibition critically and creatively explore the agency of the technologies they engage. While consumer markets and the structures of control societies persistently reify the conditions of embodiment and sensorial experience, many artists continue to invent the potentiality of technology in our own time.

Experiencing something *in the flesh* has usually been a guarantee of actuality and presence. To encounter someone or something *in the flesh* implies an experience that is direct and unmediated. Although this notion functions to describe a common understanding of experience, embodied perception is already a form of mediation, an interface of sensation and affect that allows me to feel and apprehend what is around me. The actual and the virtual are never separate. Most often, I confirm what is in the flesh through my vision, like the days when I saw Princess Diana, Bill Clinton, and later, Monica Lewinski in the flesh. In these cases, the presence of notable and recognizable historical figures confirmed what popular culture affirms as being "in the flesh." My knowledge and visual perception of such figures were enhanced by an encounter that was not mediated by representation systems such as television, photography or text. Sound, smell and tactility will also confirm what I perceive to be an actual presence.

The spectre or apparition, by comparison, would imply the inverse of such an experience. This is what common sense, historical convention and intellectual boredom has stereotyped as the virtual, the imaginary or the theoretical. When I touch the keyboard, move the mouse, focus my eyes upon the screen, I am active in a world of sensation. The extensions of human appendages as prosthetics also imply the metaphor and physical reality of being *in the flesh*. The Cyborg mythology of late twentieth century science fiction is more than present in the contemporary use of prosthetic technology. Our connectivity is actual and virtual in this domain as well. Prosthetic technologies are systematically redefining the previous limitations of physical disability and access.

At the same time, we know that being *in the flesh* has raised serious doubts about how and what the human sensorium perceives. The origins of scientific method were hatched in these moments of doubt. In relation to contemporary technology and the systems of accelerated distraction that they imply, to discuss experience in the generalized and historical terminologies of art and media has become increasingly difficult. The instability of media and technology has created an environment of continuous flux and change, an environment where the expectations of established meaning and experience have become provisional.

Digital culture, the purveyor of new technology, is already historicized. It is neither new, nor was it revolutionary in the context of a political history. Digital culture has been transformative and the use of digital technologies in all aspects of Western capitalist culture has influenced and altered our experience of daily life, labour and leisure.

The clutter of language and definition that has developed during the emergent epistemologies of digital transformation has left a lexicon of terminology that continues to be debated and redefined. The post-digital environment seems less encumbered by definitions and classification and is more responsive to the myriad ways that technology functions as an interface between the body and the machines that typify our everyday existence. How many emails did you send and receive today? What is your relationship to cellphones, Facebook, eBay, YouTube and other forms of on-line shopping? Do you own and use webcam technology? Is a Blackberry fundamental to your daily activities? These are questions that define our identity as *data images*.<sup>3</sup>

If there is one thread of unity between the artists in this exhibition, it is the fact that the technologies they use and reference are integral to the conception, reception and process of making implied by each work.

In other words, the technologies deployed in this exhibition perform specific functions as enabling tools that are inherent to the meanings that are implied or produced. This diverges from the typical ways that contemporary digital and electronic technologies have been packaged for popular consumption and indicates creative options that are available. In this respect, the discourse of culture and science has shifted from static archives of texts and image and has entered into a flow of media and code.

Formerly, discourse was considered a linguistic activity; now it is a multimedia activity. Forms of expression and reading can no longer be considered as simply spatial or temporal, or distinguished by simultaneity and succession. Rather, digital culture presents us with mixed, layered, and heterogeneous audiovisual images unfolding in a nonlinear space and time. 4

Accessibility to video, audio, photographic and other forms of digital reproduction technologies generally has to be presented in a form that is user-friendly. The user-friendly interface does not necessarily imply simplicity. In fact the general frustration and difficulties that many of us have experienced in the process of adapting analogue practices to pre-designed digital applications would indicate that the transition has been less than obvious. On the other hand, the user-friendly interface ensures that the consumer or user does not need to be an expert in computing and creating software code that will direct machines to perform specific tasks. This means that I can unpack my iPod, plug it into my computer and have immediate access to a network of musical data. I merely need to learn how to manage my data files through network access to be successful with this technology. The rapid transition of the consumer market to the digital snapshot is related to this pattern as well. For cultural historians such as Jonathan Crary, technologies such as television and the personal computer have been over utilized to perpetuate "routinization," a spatialized spectacle of distraction and inattention rather than to enhance an ethical awareness of human potential.

Spectacle is not an optics of power but an architecture. Television and the personal computer, even as they are now converging toward a single machinic functioning, are antinomadic procedures that fix and *striate*. They are methods for the management of attention and use partitioning and sedentarization, rendering bodies controllable and useful simultaneously, even as they simulate the illusion of choices and interactivity. 5

In many respects, this historical criticism defines the task of contemporary artists working inside the multimedia discourse of digital culture. The works in this exhibition challenge certain aspects of Crary's reduction. They prompt us to question the term *virtual*, a word that has been historically situated in the gaming industry as a sensory helmet and glove apparatus and identified by the oxymoron *virtual reality*. By 1995, the Oxford English Dictionary had adapted a definition of *virtual* as denoting "not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so."<sup>6</sup> While the etymology of the word *virtual* continues to transform, fold and mutate historically in a network of adaptations, the common sense understanding of the virtual, instigated by the digital industries and echoed in popular media, has given the impression that somehow, the effect and experience of digital technologies is not real or tangible. Adapted uncritically, these terms have also been deployed to imply an inherent inauthenticity of experience associated with digital technology; an implication that these technologies are inherently alien to human cultural experience. What is mystifying about these tropes in language and understanding is a need to propagate static and essentialized notions about the potential of digital technology and media as embodied experience.

The virtual is a transformation of the materiality of representation - defined not by invisibility per se, and certainly not by immateriality, but by a technological transformation of the lived materiality of human communication, which is informed by the velocities, automation, and geographically distributed nature of communication across and through computer networks. What is worked now is the space of communication - a composing of bodies and information in space-time regardless of distance in the architecture of global computer networks. Although these architectures are invisible from the point of view of the user, they are no less material for that. It is not that representation has become more and more immaterial and insubstantial. Rather, the eye and hand have gradually withdrawn their powers and relinquished them to machines - the very definition of automation -and in this way, the concept of the interface comes to define, both figuratively and literally, the machinic connectivity of digital culture.<sup>7</sup>

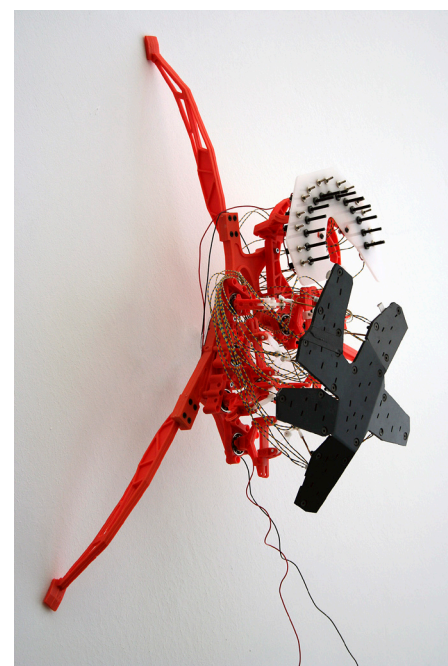
The artists whose work appears "In the Flesh," engage digital technology as potentiality, creativity, temporal and sensorial affect rather than an absence or a mysterious apparition that is phenomenologically missing or does exist in actuality. This approach to the discourse of technology considers what is possible, what is becoming, what is embodied. Subject to the *pattern of adaptability* referred to by Jonathan Crary and the contingencies of simulation, the virtual and the actual coexist to provide an interval that does not privilege a dichotomy of presence and absence. For Deleuze, actuality, as a condition of temporality and becoming, is the realization of what is virtual in our experience.

This allows us to engage the critical and creative potential of digital media and technology in a way that does not exclude experience and that envisions an ethical requirement to invent our future as what is possible, what we are becoming.

- 1 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Translated by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 208.
- 2 Jonathan Cray, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1999), 13.
- 3 For additional discussion on contemporary issues regarding identity and network technology see: D.N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001) and Tim Druckrey, "Secret Agents, Security Leaks, Immune Systems, Spore Wars..." in CTRL[SPACE]: Rhetorics of Surveillance from Bentham to Big Brother, Thomas Y. Levin, Ursula Frohne, Peter Weibel (eds.), (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2002).
- 4 D.N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 212.
- 5 Jonathan Cray, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1999), 74.
- 6 Della Thompson (ed.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English. Ninth Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 1565.
- 7 D.N. Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy After the New Media* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), 214.

Cover Image: Trojan Room Coffee Pot, Cambridge, England. The worlds first webcam, 1991-2001.

'In the Flesh' exhibition website: <http://acadia07.architecture.dal.ca/exhibition02.php>



### Nat Chard

"Prototype drawing instrument to draw an indeterminate architecture", 2004.

The exhibit shows a drawing instrument and a sequence of photographic drawings made by using it. The aim of the work is to make an indeterminate architecture, one where its meaning comes at least as much from the present occupation as from what is given in advance by the architect or other agencies involved in its production. The most common way we take partial possession of a drawing is through interpretation – the author allows a space in the work that requires our imagination to make some sort of closure. Architectural drawings need to be understood in the same way by the many agencies that come into contact with them. To achieve this they have established a sophisticated set of conventions to deny any interpretation other than that intended by the author. Interpretation is a form of reading. To circumnavigate the conventions of relating to architectural drawings I have been looking at ways of making drawings spatial, so that the observer becomes active through their

positional and phenomenal relationship to the work. The two principle spatial devices used in the instrument are folding the picture plane and anamorphism. By folding the picture plane, the plane can establish a critical understanding of what is being projected onto it – a different fold provides a different understanding. In each of the drawings the picture plane is folded differently (but also the content that is projected onto it changes). When you look at the image on the plane your position changes the image through foreshortening or occlusion, just as the picture plane is active on the projections. The anamorphism of the image privileges certain viewing positions or provides a critical review of the image when seen from other positions. Photographic media is used to make the drawings so that the agency of the projection, shadow, anamorphism and folding is precise in the image.

### Jolanta Lapiak

"speaking, reading, and/or writing", 2006.

The installation *speaking, reading, and/or writing* is a video projection of a tiny black figure in motion onto an open sketchbook. The black figure is speaking/writing in Ameslan (or American Sign Language - ASL) as it moves in lines across the pages of the book. This work demonstrates the simultaneity of writing, speaking and reading. This work, addresses the critique of phonocentrism in language and philosophy and explores an experience of: writing without writing, reading without reading, speaking without speaking. and the complementarity of these statements.



are not pure acts... Any act of reading relies on a finite number of customs and strategies, and they are often at work in looking. The converse is also true: We look at images in various ways ... those ways of looking often come into play when we read ... so there is 'reading' in every image and 'looking' in every text." **Arche-speaking:** Speaking of the term *speaking*, breaks from the logocentric notion of speaking as being central to speech. Rather, language is a function of embodiment. Neurological studies reveal that there are classical lingual activities in the left cerebral hemisphere in native visual-manual speakers like those found in vocal-auditory speakers. This observation suggests that the left cerebral hemisphere, which is assumed to be responsible for language, is not solely ruled by speech or phonetic writing. In addition to the left cerebral hemisphere, studies also show that lingual activities co-exist in the right cerebral hemisphere in character readers and native visual-manual speakers. This questions the possibility of an act of reading "imagery."



everywhere with time on their hands playing around with text-generators, etc. Email travels cheaply & easily. I began to collect and sort spam into categories – money, opportunities, drugs, winner, language, etc. Each "Global Citizenship" movie presents one of these categories. Each is set in a different cybercafé somewhere in the real world.

**Arche-writing:** James Elkins uses the open-ended term *graphein*, which means "to write, draw, or scratch ... when the divisions we are used to did not exist ... picturing and writing are both kinds of 'scratching' -- that is, marking on and in surfaces." In this Derridean sense of *archi-écrit*, *architecture* is yet another form of writing. **Arche-reading:** This work challenges the distinction of reading and looking when perceiving an object; the opposition between looking and reading correlate by distinguishing image from word, and art and architecture from literature. Elkins points out that "... everyday reading and everyday looking..."

### Cheryl Sourkes – "Global Citizenship"

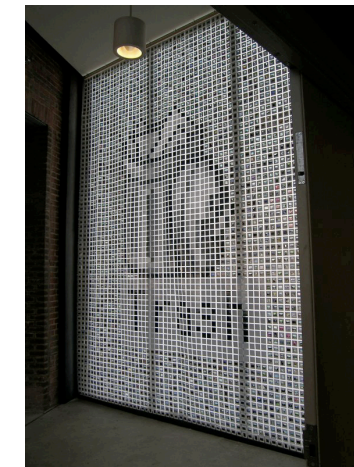
"Global Citizenship" is a series of low-resolution movies located in international Internet cafés. In each movie a layer of text crawls relentlessly across the screen. This text is actually run-of-the-mill spam - stuff people normally delete. One day I began to think about it. I pictured people in third world countries fantasizing about first world wealth, people in first world countries perpetrating low-order scams, people ev-

In 1993 a Cambridge University scientist established the world's first webcam to see if there was any coffee in the common room urn. Three years later Jennifer Ringley began webcasting her daily life live on the Internet under the historically renowned title of "JenniCam". By giving interviews that brought her webcam to popular attention, she became a media darling. Now, barely a decade and a half later there are millions of webcams on the Internet - some established by ordinary folk, others by business, still other by various levels of government. A vast number of these are available to anyone who takes the trouble to look. Initially people worried that webcams were a pernicious form of surveillance. They worried cameras in the public domain invaded privacy. However because of the limitations of 72 dpi image quality, it now appears webcams are more about a new sphere of communication than about hard data. And counter to expectation, it seems many people enjoy the opportunity to present themselves in the virtual world. Also counter to expectation, the witnessing aspect of webcam transmissions actually makes many people feel safer on the streets and in public places.

### David Clark

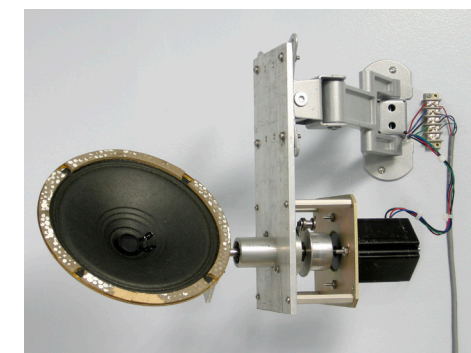
"The Light Touch", 2007.

If we are to imagine that new technologies are 'expanded bodies' then we should take account of how our bodily intelligence has remained as a vestigial trace in our technological inventions. As we demand more control over the images and information on the screen, we have employed the hands again to help sort through it. The 'eyes on screens' have been joined by virtual hands - by the hand connected to the mouse. The installation piece titled, 'The Light Touch' is created from an archive of photographic slides utilized as pixels. The work is a contemplation of the space of the hand on the screen. The piece measures the distance between two screen icons that serve the same function; the hand and the pointer. What shades of ontological grey distinguish the hand that grasps from the thing that points?



Our hands are embedded in our minds through a complex evolution of language and thought and now, in an era that is shrugging off the body and rebuilding the sensorium around efficiencies of flow and tightening circuits of control, we should be careful that the curious and antiquated gallery experience does not disappear into the mirage we call the Graphic User Interface.

Television and film producers talk in terms of "bums on seats" and "eyes on screens". This is the price point of the image culture; the immobilized gaze of the subject is the commodity. And yet this has not been the metric of the art gallery. The art gallery does not trade in the currency of the trance. The art gallery sells you the encounter, the approach, the unfolding of your own curiosities and the bewildering stubbornness of still images.



### Stephen Kelly

(NSCAD Port Campus): "WaveUp (Sound Study 1)", 2007

(Anna Leonowens Gallery): "WaveUp (Sound and Motion Study 1)", 2007

WaveUp is a kinetic sound installation that translocates a remote ocean environment, in real-time, to an urban gallery space. This project uses speakers connected via the Internet to Fisheries and Oceans Canada wave data buoys in order to translate instrumental data into motion and sound. The ocean's behavior

mirrored throughout the installation space. Ocean waves become sound waves. The ocean's currents directly affect regional and global climates, but its physical force and influence have no representation in the urban landscape. Living in the city of Halifax, with an immediate proximity to the ocean, it is difficult to perceive the enormous and influential body of water that defines our habitat. It is intriguing that there exists a palpable gulf of experience between the two environments that are so closely inter-connected. This relationship is reciprocal, as the city has a direct influence on the global climate through pollution, heat generation, etc. The inter-connectedness of geographically separate and dissimilar environments is the major theme in this project. To address this theme, "WaveUp" aims to give people real access to a remote natural environment that would otherwise be inaccessible. Water and sound are characteristically very similar; so much so that water analogies are often used when describing the physics of sound. In the "WaveUp" project, the aural environment of the installation space becomes an extension of the ocean environment. Sound replaces water.



### Michelle Gay

"stretchpoem", 2006

Building and using computers to make and operate interactive screen/projection based art is a major part of my art practice. Since the mid 1990's I have been engaging code to drive animation, interactivity, and audio elements within computer works themselves – taking the machine out of the dominion of the common workstation and into the realm of the poetic. *stretchpoem*, a gallery sized room projection, presents lines of code infused into a multi-line story. The story appears and moves

according to the viewers touch and pressure on a Multi-touch controller developed originally for the Canadian Space Agency. Situated in two simultaneous locations – the landscape of projected text as well as the physical location in the gallery where the touch controller is located, the viewer is invited to tease the story out of the projection, one line at a time, from a distant horizon visually situated in deep virtual space. The more gentle pressure one exerts, the faster the lines come toward the viewer and the larger they become - and in a curious perceptual effect – seem to fly through and past you as they leave the frame. When the fingers are lifted off the touchpad, the lines of the story slingshot back one at a time, first quickly, and then, nearing their vanishing point, slowing down. *stretchpoem* challenges the typical process of reading, as text passages move with your body, words hide or reveal subsequent lines in layers. The protagonists in this story - embodied numbers, merge with the lines of code in an interactive fiction. This work moves past the hypertext world – integrating a virtual space with a textual space that is set in time.