

## SENSORIUM: EMBODIED EXPERIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY ART

CAMBRIDGE, MA

Now that we are accustomed to instantaneous communication networks, high-speed transportation, GPS technology, and the ubiquity of plasma screens on surfaces big and small, Fredric Jameson's famous assertion of the need to grow new navigational organs seems like a romantic notion. The human sensorium is indeed adapting to this technologically-mediated hyper-aesthesia. *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art* [MIT List Visual Arts Center; October 12, 2006–April 8, 2007] features the works of nine international artists which address the effects of technology on our senses. Its underlying ambition, however, is to reach beyond the sensorium into the dark, the subliminal, and the out-of-body.

*Sensorium* directly engages the optical, auditory, and olfactory senses. In *Office Edit*, 2001, Bruce Nauman allows us to monitor the nocturnal events occurring in his office with infrared surveillance technology. Natascha Sadr Haghighian humorously subverts the correlation between seeing and believing in *The Microscope*, 2007, which, blind to its specimen, quietly sings popular songs. The pungent odor of Sissel Tolaas' *The FEAR of smell—the smell of FEAR*, 2005, saturated the entire exhibition. Tolaas has artificially reproduced the body odors of various men who were under extreme duress and embedded the scent in the wall paint. After the exhibition, it was covered by a fresh coat of regular paint, but the stench still lingered; perhaps it will echo subliminally for several exhibitions to come—an odd sort of monument to an ephemeral physiological state.

The exhibition also addresses the shifting sense of community that results from high-tech telepresence gadgets and widespread access to the Internet. Now people can easily meet in the chat-rooms of cyberspace, parking their bodies in one location while engaging experientially in another. During an extended absence from home, Christian Jankowski and his girlfriend would meet in these metaphoric rooms. He later transcribed the romantic exchanges and hired various actors to recite the couple's dialogue. *Let's Get Physical/Digital*, 1997, conveys a disturbing discrepancy between the lovers' impassioned rhetoric and the material bodies that do not touch. The traditional face-to-face relationship has been superseded by a technological interface that alters the dynamics of the exchange and questions the locus of the self in the body.

When the sensorium is challenged, the working definition of self is destabilized. Mathieu Briand's *UBIQ, A Mental Odyssey*, 2006, aims to transgress the boundaries of the monadic individual in favor of shared experience. Visitors walk around the exhibition wearing head-mounted cameras: through these camera eyes, they witness their own line of sight on two small screens inside the helmet. At the push of a button, they can elect to change their view to that of another visitor, thus seeing the exhibition from the other's perspective. While this may suggest the possibility of intersubjectivity, it is



crucial to note that this perspective is only optic. While donning the helmet may allow one to see from another person's location, the cultural inflection of looking remains resolutely one's own. In this light, the technological innovations that challenge the human sensorium are merely more of the same: an interface has always mediated humans' understanding of the world governed by the laws of physics, even if it was not called so before the advent of computers.

Nowadays, technological metaphors are used to describe almost every realm of experience. As such, they are often as powerful as technology itself in establishing cultural frames of reference. The techno-sublime is one such term. Ryoji Ikeda's *Spectra*, 2006, is a long, totally darkened, narrow corridor, except for a horizontal red laser at the far end. One at a time, visitors grope along the corridor walls; at intervals, they are blinded by a split-second shock of white light. In the catalogue essay, Yuji Hasegawa states that the corridor is also filled with high-frequency sounds "and although the visitor will not notice the sound when first entering, oscillation patterns will be present..." She also states that *Spectra* "appeals to a level of awareness that precedes thought and is therefore extremely difficult to convey linguistically." This extrasensorial, extralinguistic character of Ikeda's work lends it the adjective sublime.

Anri Sala's video installation *Naturalmystic (Tomahawk #2)*, 2002, sums up the crux of the exhibition. A man sits in a recording studio behind a microphone. Donning the headphones, however, we do not hear music: instead of lyrics, the singer's voice produces the ominous sounds of a Tomahawk missile that gets increasingly louder and then suddenly explodes. This work reminds us of the sublime's proximity to the unclaimed experience of trauma. It also reminds us that the technologies that mediate our sensorium are never neutral; we would do well to ask whose interests they serve.

—Anja Bock

## DAVID SCHUTTER

CHICAGO

David Schutter's project is decidedly old fashioned: he paints scenes based in observation. Past works have included textured, barely discernable gray-hued still lifes more concerned with capturing something like the trace of objects than with clear descriptive documentation. These paintings display signs of much revision and wet paint working into wet paint, thus capturing Schutter's studious process. The canvas' surface reads as a meeting between eye, mind, and hand. In this respect, Schutter's most contemporary references might be the long-gone artists Giacometti or Morandi—models for the value of constant revision and return. His recent project looks even farther back. Shown in two locations, these are paintings after works from Berlin's Gemäldegalerie [Bodybuilder & Sportsman Gallery; March 1–April 21, 2007 / Museum of Contemporary Art; March 3–April 1, 2007]. What's more, Schutter painted them during a 2006 residency in Berlin, where he also made observational drawings of paintings by Gerard ter Borch, Franz Hals, Rembrandt van Rijn, Peter Paul Rubens, Jacob van Ruisdael, and Johannes Vermeer. He later worked on new paintings that are attempts to remake the original masterworks. In all this, Schutter's process is resolutely conventional—a genuine return to a philosophical notion of painting's practice.

One constant remains. Scumbled and weathered beyond recognizable details whether it is a still life or a history painting, each work arrives at a motley assortment of grays as Schutter reworks colors and forms past the veracities of observation, memory or documentation. What remains is trace and faint, at times serene, at times agitated. Similarity ends here, however. Schutter's still life paintings are old fashioned in a very different way from his paintings after historical works. To paint the action of looking and resolving our understanding with the world upon objects belies attention to the things with which we live our lives. But to paint the action of looking and resolving our understanding with the world upon paintings from the past belies attention to the method-

ABOVE: Anri Sala, *Naturalmystic (Tomahawk #2)*, 2002, video, 2 minutes [courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth, Zurich and London, Johnen Schottle, Berlin, Cologne and Munich, and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris]



## COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: SENSORIUM: EMBODIED EXPERIENCE,  
TECHNOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY ART:  
CAMBRI

SOURCE: Art Papers 31 no3 My/Je 2007

PAGE(S): 58

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.