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Skin Deep:

Surfacing with Leigh-Ann Pahapill

Gabrielle Gopinath

Abstract

Gabrielle Gopinath examines works from Leigh-Ann Pahapill's compilation video and exhibition titled *Likewise, as technical experts, but not (at all) by way of culture* (2012-2013). A version of the artwork is included in *Contemporaneity*, vol. 3, no.1.

About the Author

Gabrielle Gopinath teaches modern and contemporary art history at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California. She received her Ph.D from Yale University, where her dissertation addressed the theme of bodily absence in the multimedia art of the 1970s. She has published articles on video, graffiti, sound art, and new media. Her current book project addresses euphoric and dysphoric metaphors of containment in postwar American art.

About the Artist

*The installations of Canadian artist Leigh-Ann Pahapill question how we apprehend our world, and investigate the frameworks that shape how we come to know things. Careful studies of the gallery site, its particular formal qualities and conceptual regimes, become new opportunities to query the capacity of formative structure to yield experience that can be characterized as phenomenologically immediate. Her work engages the space and the intricacies of the gallery to understand how we conceive our worlds, bringing fragments, events, and ideas into tenable meaning. The objects on view grow to include the gallery, the encounter with the objects themselves, and the process of cognition. The artist asks us to reflect upon the degree to which predetermined ideas, concepts, and ways of framing are already embedded in acts of looking. Recent solo exhibitions include *Window (re/production re/presentation)*, Asheville, NC (2013); *Penelec Gallery, Allegheny College, PA* (2013); *the Cornell Fine Arts Museum, FL* (2011 & 2012); *47, Toronto* (2009); and *DOVA temporary gallery, Chicago* (2009). Recent group exhibitions include *PROOF OF PROOF OF CONCEPT* at the *Ontario College of Art and Design University Graduate gallery* (2013); *Mirages, Fountains, and Dissociative Compositions* at *Galerie Catherine Bastide, Brussels* (2011). Pahapill is an Assistant Professor of Art at Bowling Green State University in Ohio.*

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Leigh-Ann Pahapill's compilation video *Likewise, as technical experts, but not (at all) by way of culture* brings together four videos created for an identically titled exhibition. First installed at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum, Florida in 2012, the exhibition was modified and re-installed in the Penelec Gallery at Allegheny College a year later (figs 1 and 2).

The compilation video that accompanies this article uses a four-way split screen to present four videos simultaneously. The videos were initially created to be seen in the context of an installation that also included site-specific wall paintings, photographs, and three monumental sculptures. (In their original display format, the videos looped rather than finishing at different times, as they do in the version seen here.)

All four videos offer surface views, looped sequences shot during the show's installation process. Each presents the viewpoint of a static camera pointed directly at a panel of translucent plastic sheeting. The panels ripple slightly, as if ruffled by a breeze. Arrows have been scrawled in black marker on two of the sheets, cueing the viewer to the right. A sense of urgency attaches to the marks because of their repetition and the hurried way in which they appear to have been inscribed. That said, they are less than useful as indices. Like the plastic sheeting that sustains them, the arrows are perfectly reversible. If we turned the all-but-invisible membrane that constitutes their support inside out, they would gesture in the same way, but they would indicate the opposite of what they seem to suggest in this context.

The plastic sheeting was an artifact of the installation process. Pahapill recalls that museum preparators used the sheeting during installation to protect other artworks from construction dust. This material intrusion proved serendipitous. Pahapill's working process often proceeds from the "collision" of theoretical inquiry with the particularities of a given space. Here, plastic sheeting proved an apt vehicle for exploring simultaneity and surface.

The inclusion of these looped sequences further complicated the installation's already intricate time signature, vested in the provenance of Pahapill's sculptural forms. The monumental sculptures situated near the videos are recreated props designed by Caspar Neher for Bertolt Brecht stage plays in 1926, 1931 and 1949. Installed among videos and photographs that documented the exhibition space in the process of transition, these recreations prompted a complicated mode of being-in-time characterized by contemplation of the present *through* simultaneous engagement with multiple moments of the historical past. The videos amplified this effect.

Each of the four screens opened onto a looped sequence from a different moment in the process of the work's assembly. In their initial exhibition at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum, the works played continuously on floor-mounted flat-screen monitors. In the Allegheny College exhibition, they were projected onto walls.



Figure 1

Installation view of *Likewise, as technical experts, but not (at all) by way of culture*, Penelec Gallery (Allegheny College), 2013

Like the adjacent sculptures, the videos proposed a model of existence as depthless surface. Plastic sheeting has no interior and no exterior, no front and no back. The marks found upon its surface are reversible. Likewise, a stage prop is an object that is valued for its surface appearance. Its interiority—or lack thereof—is unimportant. Façade is key.

This ontological model differs from most ways of understanding being that have been advanced in Western thought, because it is not presaged on a binary hierarchy. The privileged term of this binary pair is *interior* (think of the positive metaphorical valence associated with the words *deep* and *profundity*); the term of lesser value is *surface*. Pahapill advances façades as a means to question our ideas about the fixity of things and to query the role that our notions and experiences of surface may play in shaping our understanding of the world.

The surfaces in these videos are analogues to skin. This organic membrane is the site of tactile input/output, the translucent envelope through which a subject perceives the world. Imagine the worldwide network of perceptive faculties flattened out to resemble an epidermis with no interior, and no psychologically freighted depths.

This vision parallels the treatments of surface that appear in several philosophical accounts of the contemporary condition. Maurice Merleau-Ponty explored the implications of pure surface for phenomenology; Gilles Deleuze explored the concept from an ontological perspective. More recently, scholars working in the field of animal studies have claimed the surface as a platform for thought that seeks to avoid anthropocentric bias. In his recent work, Giorgio Agamben uses the concept of an infinitely extendable, depthless surface as a metaphor for the networked public sphere. This interpretation seems particularly relevant to Pahapill's videos, with their emphasis on the surface as site for signal transmission.



Figure 2

Hollowed tree from *Likewise, as technical experts, but not (at all) by way of culture*, Cornell Fine Arts Museum, 2012



Figure 3

Close-up of hollowed tree

In *The Coming Community*, Agamben elaborates an argument about the politics of networked consciousness by positing a networked poetic space that exists “outside” regular space. This poetic exteriority receives various appellations in Agamben’s text: threshold, singularity, multitude, border, emptiness, passage, and even face.¹ It is “the most difficult to think” because it is so profoundly remote from our experience: it is nothing less than “the absolutely non-thing experience of a pure exteriority.”² Agamben proposes that “consciousness” is now networked, and that this perpetually expanding network is inevitably experienced at the threshold, as a threshold. It can best be defined as the experience of “being-*within* an *outside*.”³ This is an outside-without-inside, a depthless surface.

Surfaces that resonate with this description proliferate in Pahapill’s videos. Seen as an ensemble, they produce a spatiotemporal experience characterized by the ubiquity of thresholds and the coexistence of multiple time signatures. A text-based video created for the Allegheny exhibition, composed in response to a request for a description of the work, emphasized that the multiplicity in question was not only spatial but temporal in nature. “A SIGN TO GUIDE / TO INDICATE THE PROPER ROAD TO A LOCATION / IN DUE TIME / IN THE PRESENT / IN THE FUTURE / IN THE PAST / IN A MOMENT / INSIDE AND INTO.”

Viewers moving through this installation were confronted with a complicated spatial environment punctuated by multiple screens, each depicting events transpiring on a different timeline. Being confronted with multiple visual foci in this way induced a state of distraction, at once taxing and oddly familiar: an artfully exaggerated version of the distracted interactions many of us undertake daily, through various species of screen interface.

The project’s hedgy, equivocating title, drawn from Walter Benjamin’s account of Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre, is a sentence in search of a subject—another recursive cue that

¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community, Theory out of Bounds, Vol. 1* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 68.

² *Ibid.*, 67.

³ *Ibid.*, 68.

directs would-be interpreters back to the surface. It's a verbal equivalent to the double-ply surfaces in the videos and the sculptural recreations of props that anchor Pahapill's installations. One of Pahapill's props, a hollowed tree emerging from a stage rake, exemplifies this principle (figs 3 and 4). While the pithed tree has lost its property of inwardness, what it loses in dimension it gains in terms of surface area and points of potential access. The other props that Pahapill recreates—a balcony and a signpost—are similar in the sense that they are also objects that mark thresholds. Brecht's half-curtain apparatus, one of the defining characteristics of his epic theatre, functions like Pahapill's depthless surfaces. Or perhaps it's better to say that the depthless surfaces that proliferate in this artist's installations elaborate Brecht's vision. The half-curtain allows viewers to have it both ways, puncturing the theatrical illusion while at the same time allowing part of it to be sustained. Audience members at the epic theatre partake in illusion, simultaneously remaining conscious that they inhabit the here and now. Pahapill's installations induce a similar effect in viewers by generating an origami complex of intricately folded surfaces. These surfaces invite a species of material experience that parallel the structure of our networked collective consciousness.



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