DARK ROOMS

ARTISTS SPACE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has been four years since Artists Space presented its first Dark Rooms show. Artists Space has always created outlets for sitespecific and transitory installations, but there is a particular financial burden placed on the artist in the case of installations involving projections and media. The cost factor as well as the scarcity of outlets often discourages artists from realizing innovative and important projects that have much to contribute to contemporary art. Also, in many cases, there is an identity problem; too often we as viewers, see pieces in only the context of whether the piece addresses the visual arts, or film or media. The Dark Rooms concept and resulting shows, have highlighted and begun to create a less rigid context for a number of artists through pieces which have enriched and informed us, regardless of what discipline or particular medium they address.

This exhibition, our third Dark Rooms effort, presents installations by artists working with film projections, slide projections and also with video. I am very grateful to the New York State Council on the Arts Film Program which awarded us a grant to assist with production and mounting of this show. I also would like to thank Valerie Smith and Dan Walworth of the Artists Space staff, who worked together on the selection and organization of this show. They have effectively demonstrated that a collaboration among different disciplines produces exciting and innovative results. Dan Walworth has contributed an informative essay to this publication which situates the work in a critical and historical context. Finally, I would like to thank the artists who are participating in this show. It takes a leap of faith on everyone's part to produce a *Dark Rooms* exhibition. Only with their unique and special visions of the possible, could we have attempted to make this show a reality.

Susan Wyatt

Executive Director

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THE POINT OF LIGHT

o illuminate," says one person. "To obscure," says another. "To get a suntan," says a third. The point of light, both as a question and as a luxurious organ, asks for a solution, a lotion that might let us see without getting burned. What would this lotion be with regard to an eye?

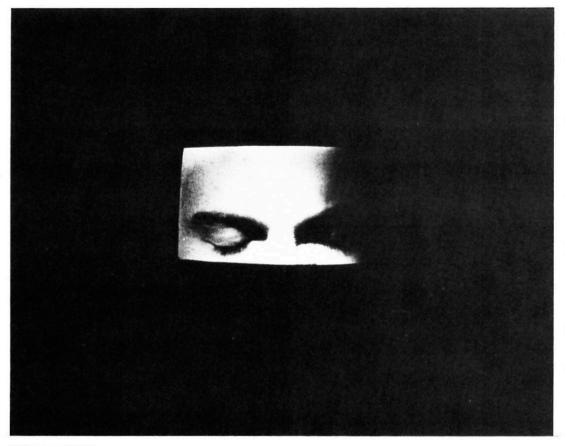
Perhaps the cinema is the place to begin thinking about solutions. Over the past ten years, film theory has produced a rich body of work by including within its scope the concerns of psychoanalysis and social theory. This inclusion has permitted film theory to consider both the spectator and his/her social milieu as moving parts in the cinema machine. The spectator is no longer a control element in the experiment who exercises his/her "free will" when filling out the little questionnaire cards at the of the show. Today we speak of the spectator as a desiring subject who is constructed by the apparatus, however faulty or incomplete it may be, and this subject has become as much a question as the object of a questioning.

The rearrangement of the parts and processes of classical film theory has a corollary in the development of film and video installations as sculpture. Here again, the various aspects of production and positioning of the spectator of both cinema and sculpture have been skewed to permit, for the moment, a questioning of their social and psychological tickings.

Instead of one screen, there are two, three, or many, as in the work of Anne Bray and Kendall Buster. The light source can be multiplied, refracted or, in the case of Charles Long, deflected to another screen altogether. The projector is no longer sealed in

a booth, and can become a display in its own right. Moreover, the spectator has forfeited his/her place of quiet immobility. He/she stands and moves about the room without a single, comfortable place to rest his/her eyes: the room is full of attractions and distractions wreaking havoc on the sanctified cinema.

What does this mean, this uncomfortable eye? Is it a pathetic, 1980's version of épater le bourgeois? Nowadays we think of the cinema as a means for taking the eye to its limit, and beyond, to places and scenes it could never go as a mortal eye. One could trace this conception of the cinema back to Dziga Vertov's "Kino-Eye" and the artistic enthusiasm generated out of the young Russian revolution. Vertov spoke of the imprecision of the human eye and the path which "leads through the poetry of machines, from the bungling citizen to the perfect electric man." Today we have much less faith in the technological advances prescribed for the eye. One doesn't need a telescope, for example, to see the dangers of Star Wars. More and more the program for perfecting the eye plays itself out on the side of showing, while the desire to see is restricted. In the movies, the eye is excited only to be lured into a rhythm of shots that is measured out in a framed and cohesive space (nothing like what is involved in the day-to-day experience of vision) to which a subject can adapt simply by demanding no more than to be entertained, and whose desire has been reduced to the amiable fantasies of the industry's censorship committees. In this way, the cinema, the very means for liberating the eye, has become the means for containing it within certain limits; as a means for adapting the eye to the exigencies of a specific social order. Consider for a moment the cinema as a



KENDALL BUSTER

Detail of Untitled Film Installation, 1987 2 8x8' walls, rear screen film loop projections, black and white super 8

model, as a manual for the safe and correct operation of the human eye, brought to you by the makers of Bufferin.

We can retain from Vertov the idea of a dialectic of the eye that develops along with and changes the world which nevertheless seems to be watching us as it displays itself. In this conception, the eye (including the wide variety of scopic machines) is not presented as a better and better approximation of some predetermined object (read: adapting to reality), but rather, it is a zone whose function is to avoid precisely that object to

which it is most sensitive, that is, the point of light. But how can this be?

For Jacques Lacan, this point of light is also the place of the gaze (*le regard*, which contains the sense of "regard" in English: that which regards or concerns the subject).² Following Freud's theory of castration, he notes that this gaze

is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but insofar as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack.³

The point here is simply that the eye, like any human organ, must acquiesce to the demands of culture by sacrificing a portion of itself. For the eye, this separated object is the gaze, the point of light which, should it reappear, reduces the subject to nothing, to a mere point of vanishing.

In this sense, the subject is split, that is to say that the subject always comes with an unconscious. On the one side there is the centered subject of consciousness reduced to a geometral point, and on the other there is the gaze of the subject that has been separated off, banished from consciousness. If this gaze comes back to him/her from its exile, however, it can only alienate the subject from any center whatsoever, reminding us that desire, in this case the desire to see, is never a purely subjective matter, but that it requires an object hopelessly lost in the real.

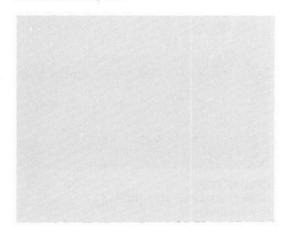
For Bray, the effects of this object are more clearly felt in the audio portion of the piece: the excuses which perpetually defer or redirect desire along a metonymic path, or the baby's cry, an object not yet lost to the signifier and, as such, beyond our adult understanding.

Long's mirror fragments play with light the way a realist painter might use perception: the subject is caught in a translation of light, pulled down in a maelstrom of cynicism which begins and ends with a question mark. The image and the screen that mediate the subject of desire and the elusive object is where the work of the cinema takes place. There the flow of light is refracted, filtered or stopped up altogether. Depth of field cap-



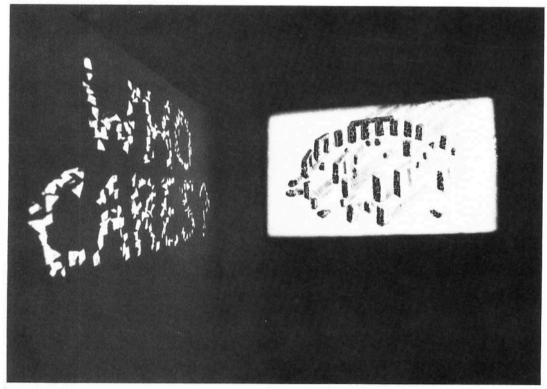
ANNE BRAY

Still From Man on First and Third
Slide Installation, 1987





JOHN KNECHTStill from *I'm Glad to the Brink of Fear*Video Installation, 1986



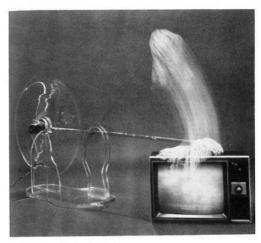
CHARLES LONG
Detail of *Gnomons' Land*, 1987
Film Installation
wood, silicone, mirror, film projection

tures the subject in a space which expands and contracts. There too the subject makes him/herself into a screen to shield against the gaze, or identifies with an image that tries to capture it.

In Schneemann's War Mop this gaze is literalized through the lack of people in a bombed out refugee camp in Lebanon. Gaping holes stare out at us from a depopulated village; holes that a flagellating mop can never stop cleaning up, like the story of the woman condemned to sweep the beach clear of grains of sand.

With Knecht's work, however, this gaze has been captured, turned to stone by the 'gladness' of the TV image. Here, on opposite ends of a wall, the images of two world leaders appear to negotiate in e x t r e m e l y s l o w m o t i o n. The gaze is vanquished in this battle of images; exiled to the darkness that surrounds any discussion on the annihilation of the human race.

The architecture of the cinema has developed itself along the lines laid down by this division, image/gaze. The point of light is always hidden, tucked into a booth behind your head that could be likened to a kind of scopic confessional: the little gate opens and a light appears from heaven. If you recognize your complicity you can be absolved . . .



CAROLEE SCHNEEMANN
War Mop, 1985
Sculpture/Video Installation
mechanized mop, plexiglas fulcrum, TV monitor
photo—Scott Bowron
courtesy Max Hutchinson Gallery

until the next screening. The only other lights indicate the inferno of "EMERGENCY EXIT." The screen is the biggest thing in the room, toward which all eyes are turned. And there the object is almost always completely mystified—the object in both senses, since, after all, the object of the cinema is "entertainment" (inter+tenir—to hold in, certainly a perverse idea).

Yet this holding or maintaining is precisely what describes the cinema's relation to the point of light. This is not to say that all cinema is perverse, but that the social and psychical structures which have formed around our culture's relation to vision have built up a kind of inertia in that direction. Kendall Buster's piece represents this perversion in nearly diagrammatic form. There, an entire economy is played out between 'looking at an exposition' and 'exposing the look.' The gaze, then, moves around the cir-

cuit depending upon one's activity within the structure: for the voyeur, it is the nothing which is always covered; for the exhibitionist it is the gleam of light in the eye of the spellbound onlooker, a light that continually threatens to fade.

To return to the problem of a dialectics of vision, we can see that is not simply a question of exploding the cinema, revealing the point of light or the gaze. Rather, it is a question of developing the apparatus along certain lines that take into account the fact that the path to that lost object is mapped out in the unconscious.

In the domain of film installation (and I include video and slides here also) we can see a marginal attempt to move against the inertia of the dominant culture. Simply by articulating a vision in that cultural space between the cinema and sculpture, the role of the image in the scopic register can be altered. For now, this space does not cradle the subject so comfortably in the play of transparency/opacity which lures us into the search for the lost horizon. Here the subject can be spread across the entire apparatus, re-organizing, at least for a time, our relation to light and its effects.

Dan Walworth

- 1. Vertov, Dziga, "We: Variant of a Manifesto," *Kino-Eye*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. K. O'Brien, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.
- 2. It should be noted that this gaze is not the same thing as that signified by Foucault's use of the term. Foucault's "gaze" implies a potential mastery and a relation to power, whereas for Lacan, the gaze appears only as a structuring absence, as a hole in inter-subjective relations.
- 3. Lacan, Jacques, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. A. Sheridan, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978.

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