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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Soft Wave, Electric Soul

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Maya VanderSchuit

Committee in charge:

Professor Brian Cross, Chair
Professor Anya Gallaccio
Professor Yolande Snaith
Professor Alena Williams

2019

The thesis of Maya VanderSchuit is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California San Diego

2019

EPIGRAPH

"We live in a time of iridescence, of scintillation between the virtual and the real—an *iridereal* perhaps, where surfaces are no longer concretions to be encountered but rather sites of dazzling encounter."

Tavi Meraud

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Soft Wave, Electric Soul

by

Maya VanderSchuit

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2019

Professor Brian Cross, Chair

Soft Wave, Electric Soul is an MFA thesis exhibition of recent work by Maya VanderSchuit. The mixed-media installation uses the surfaces of digital video projections and iridescent materials to explore the body's phenomenological relationship to real and virtual spaces.

PROLOGUE

It must have been around 7pm when I climbed into my sleeping bag. I shifted back and forth to get comfortable, the synthetic down making audible rustlings. My body was exhausted, sore, and sunburnt, but not yet ready to fall asleep. It wasn't dark and the sky was still subtilely aglow—I couldn't prematurely shut my eyes before the sky had shut hers.

I unzipped the tent "door" to watch and to feel. Still reclined, I looked out at the sailboats rocking back and forth. I was listening to the clinging of the masts, to the small waves crashing on the pebbled shore, to my tent door brush open and closed. Through the shifting aperture of the tent's opening, I observed how the sea and sky was divided by a soft gradient of pink/orange/red that hovered over the horizon line.

The opening and closing of the unzipped nylon door became a sort of breathing shutter. Its curved lines reminded me of a camera lens, or viewfinder. Wind blowing from the ocean would determine the temporality of the tent-door's shutter. I enjoyed the unpredictability of it's reopening and then closing.

PART 1: *Soft Wave, Electric Soul*

INTRODUCTION

hold a shell up to your ear.

can you hear the ocean?

I'd like to indulge in this thought for a moment. Imagine that the sea is, in fact, inside of this shell that you are holding up to your ear. You hold immensity in your hand. It is a dream of expansive space being enveloped in the contours of a mollusk.

I am curious about an outside that is simultaneously an inside, something like a shell that breathes… perhaps a membrane? Something like salt. A breathing, membraneous shell that offers a place to rest. Something that sweats, cries, replenishes, draws the toxins out of your body. I am interested in the immediacy of felt experience in nature. What is it like to breathe in the world and feel it breathe as well?

Soft Wave, Electric Soul uses the surfaces of digital video projections and iridescent materials to explore the phenomenology of real and virtual spaces. The show is comprised of three digital video projections, entitled *low tide blur*, C*atch & Release*, and *A sort of seeing*, as well as one sculptural work, *energeia.* The optical phenomenon of iridescence, or thin film interference, is either materially present or pictured in each of these works. Iridescence is the interaction of light waves on a surface that creates the effect of multiple colors occurring simultaneously. This color-effect can be seen in the natural world on the wings of butterflies, on the skin of squid and moths, in the inside of seashells and so forth. Iridescence acts as metaphor for the dialectics of the Deleuzian fold, and interior and exterior negotiations. The concept of the "fold" suggests a certain multiplicity of substance where texture and material

infinitely fold and unfold into numerous components. Thus, surface is an "elastic force" that contrasts notions of a finite presence. This material exploration situates the exhibition within the realm of the experiential and the felt, whilst also looking at the fluid perceptions of real and virtual localities.

The works featured in *Soft Wave, Electric Soul* delve into the temporalities, movements, and forces of matter in relation to the body and space. Each work in the exhibition is influenced by theoretical readings on art and philosophy, as well as by personal experiences of moving through landscapes. The shifts in point of view and formal to informal tone throughout this paper reflect this diversity of inspirations.

CATCH AND RELEASE

Figure 1.1 *Catch and Release, 2018. digital video projection, 10min loop.*

Upon entering the gallery, one is confronted with a free standing wall with digital video projections on both sides. The first, *Catch & Release,* distorts the boundaries of surface by collapsing multiple videos into one, unified cinematic space. The video was filmed underwater and depicts a hand holding an iridescent abalone shell. The hand moves the shell, tilting it back and forth to reveal the material's luminescent qualities, as well as the dappled light patterns that occur when the sun shines through the water. The water acts as a sort of lens, filtering the sunlight and creating distorted rainbow wavy lines on both the hand and the shell.

Abalone are a type of sea snail that can be found off the coast of California and in places where the climate is fertile to their production, like New Zealand or Mexico. The soft body of the

abalone is housed inside of the hard shell which serves as protection from predators. Living abalone reside attached to the rocks, whereas the "shells," or empty mollusks, can be found by free diving down to the the base of a rock. Abalone are known for the iridescent surface found in the concavity of their interior side.

After touring Demetri Deheyn's lab at Scripps Institute of Oceanography, I learned that this optical phenomenon is created through the structure, or material organization, of the shell. Therefore, the colors, unlike ones brought about by pigmentation, cannot fade over time. Thus, the shell is not exactly a surface at all, but rather a material that is comprised of multiple microscopic layers with the possibility of revealing themselves based upon angle of incidence.

Iridescence in the video projection is an illusion of the real that exists only as an image; the viewer's eye angle cannot change the experience of the color. The phenomenon, thus, only occurs in relationship to our body and to light in the real. Digital reproductions of the phenomena can only produce a single dimensional image that does not respond to our movement or site lines. The digital ontology of iridescence is confined to the shell's movement within frame. If the abalone were unmoving and still the colors would not change. In this scenario, viewers would be unable to discern whether the shell were actually iridescent, or just rainbow-hued. Color is rendered dynamic through the hand's movement, and subsequent shell's movement, in the water.

The editing process for *Catch & Release* considers the digital ontology of video as an ethereal space where layers can be obscured and flattened. The work's form was created with layers of video that have been built up, subtracted, and added upon. In *The Virtual Life of Film,* Rodowick looks at the distinctions between film editing and digital video editing processes. He states, "Editing may be added, subtracted, or refashioned interactively because the data components retain their separate, modular identities throughout the 'editing' process" (22). This

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ability to write and re-write digital images mathematically created new editing possibilities and the formulation of a digital ontology. The film makes use of some of these digital-specific editing possibilities.

Catch & Release was created by making use of green screening technology, masking, layering, and blurring in order to produce the final effect. In the primary video, the background, or body of water, was masked out using an digital editing platform. This created the negative space necessary for adding more layers of video. Some of these added layers include abstractions created from distorting the initial video file. Through the collaging of multiple videos, Catch & Release becomes a collapsed cinematic space of digital video. As such, the work illuminates a mystery of surface and interior/exterior relationships—reminiscent of iridescence. Timotheus Vermeulen, in The New Depthiness, states, "Though the makeup of the word "surface" suggest layers—the "sur"- and the "face" it does not necessarily imply distance" (26). The digital videos are not physically, or ontologically, separated, but rather, they are enmeshed into a flat image created from the manipulation of pixels. It is only in the digital video projection that the imagery comes to have a presence in physical space.

Everything was new, borrowed, found, re-found. Breathing, my mouth closed around the plastic snorkel.

My body was parallel to the water's surface and the earth as I circled a rock maybe 50 feet from the shore. I looked and searched with an openness for whatever there was to find or see.

I was hovering at the surface, gently kicking my legs left right, left right, when an abalone shell was handed to me. I held it by it's edge—delicately, but firmly enough not to drop it. Time seemed to slow down.

My hand felt how the rough outside transitioned into the smooth, curved, disk-like inside. I tilted the shell back and forth to observe the iridescent interior. I pressed record with my opposite hand, attempting to capture the shell's prismatic effects and the wavy patterns of light produced by an interaction of sunlight on and into the water. I was mesmerized by these dynamic color shifts. After about thirty seconds, I handed the abalone back to the person who had found it and then swam back to shore in order to pack up my things.

Shells. Boats. Vessels. I began to think about how the singular body, human or animal, inhabits and moves through landscapes. I became fascinated by the chapter 'The Nautilus and the Drunken Boat', part of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*. Barthes discusses the text *L'Ile Mysterieuse* by Jules Verne in relation the main character's attachment to his sailboat named the Nautilus. I am interested in Barthes' ideas regarding the phenomenology of sailboats and how they discuss ideas regarding the personal experience of mobile, finite space.

Barthes describes that "the manchild re-invents the world, fills it, closes it, shuts himself up in it" (5). I am not interested in the notion of a "manchild," but rather, the individual's instinct to reinvent the world and to escape into an inside that is simultaneously an outside. Barthes talks about the impulse towards imagination, travel, and "an exploration of closure." in relation to the sailboat, and to the world the man has created. (5) This notion of closure is then related to the "common delight in the finite" one also finds in tents and huts. Here, Barthes clarifies that the sense of exploration is not necessarily an opening, but an closing. One is asked to use their imagination and to revert back to the imaginative thinking state like a child. The great immensity

of the world is fascinating, but it is because of it's relation to the intimate space created by being able to close oneself up inside of it.

Barthes states that the main character participates in "the ceaseless action of secluding oneself" by living on the sailboat. I would argue that the joy of the finite, or closure, can be twofold: intimate and immense. One can close oneself up in the immensity of a landscape by traveling on own's in an uninhabited landscape. You do not have to seclude yourself into a tent or a cave—-the entire landscape can be that cave. However, there is a sort of comfort that attends retreating into a tent at the end of the day because it provides both a temporary shelter and a temporary home.

In a chapter on the phenomenology of shells in *Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard quotes Charbonneaux-Lassay, writing, "'Taken as a whole, with both its hard covering and its sentient organism, the shell, for the ancients, was the symbol of the human being in its entirety, body and soul. In fact, ancient symbolics used the shell as a symbol for the human body, which encloses the soul in an an outside envelope, while the soul quickens the entire being, represented by the organism of the mollusk" (4). To me, the gallery space becomes a world, or a shell, that can be created with light and objects, and then closed or partially closed. It becomes a space, and shelter, that is at once immense and intimate. The installation environment becomes a place experienced by the body, yet rooted in thought. Shells are metaphorical of illuminating a dialogue surrounding the mind/body dialectic.

A SORT OF SEEING

A sort of seeing, 2019.

a sort of seeing that makes

makes your throat swell

when your eyes open

underwater

& everything falls out

fall into a kind of sleep

that rests

only to hear

then come up for air

breath into

spit into

let it blur

cross the other eye

you see straight?

A sort of seeing, 2019, is a digital video projection of a poem that recalls a

memory of swimming off an island in southern California. Turquoise words are paced

rhythmically, as if spoken aloud. The text in the video is a reflection on personal experience,

vision, and bodily sensation. Experience is fragmented into bodily sensation and presented as a

coalescence of memories.

The words on screen are a contemplation of sensory perceptions. In *Body and Image,*

Christopher Tilley relates the terms outside to the body and inside to the mind. He also

describes that "Meaning is derived from and through the flesh, not a cognitive precipitate of the

mind without a body, or a body without organs" (25). Therefore, a body is necessary to produce

or garner a sense of meaning from the world. Additionally, Tilley brings Bergson into this

discussion, stating his "conceptualization of the body is that it is a body in action, a moving body

rather than the frozen or static body of the materialist (or empiricist), or idealist, gazing at the

world" (25) With this in mind, *A sort of seeing* considers the moving body to be a site of

mediation between binaries of body and soul, outside and inside, matter and memory. It does

this through conveying bodily sensation as a series of disjoined thoughts and contemplations.

A sort of seeing's poetic structure was informed by Rene Gladman's experimental prose,

Gertrude Stein's novels, as well as other poetic works. *Untitled (Environments)* is a text by Rene

Gladman that reads as a stream of consciousness re-telling of her day—things she read or

notices, lines she drew, etc. The string of sentiments seems like a personal collection of

thoughts, as if only Gladman can make sense of their meaning. A comparison can be made to

Gertrude Stein's nonsensical word and sentence relations in *Geography and Plays.* This full

length text, while greatly different in both content and form, is similarly confounding. Somehow

The frequent, apparent distinctions find an invented cohesion on part of the reader. It's a puzzle

that doesn't necessarily require putting together, or being made sense of, but doing so can be

imaginative.

A.R. Ammon's *Corson's Inlet* is a poem that provides less diffuse clues into it's meaning. Here, Ammon's depicts a seascape by reflecting upon his experiences of walking along a dune laden inlet. He notices the subtleties at play in the environment such as its tides, sea life, and weather. Ammon's considers the daily fluctuations of sand dunes: "Manifold events of sand change the dunes shape that will not be the same tomorrow" He continues, "So I am willing to go along, / to accept. / the becoming /thought to stake off/ no beginning or ends,/ establish no walls" (3). *Corson's Inlets* uses poetic imagery to consider the natural environment's state of becoming. This description of boundless space that has no walls relates to his conclusion that "tomorrow will be a new walk." A place that changes so constantly cannot have architectural confines. I would argue he acknowledges that the ever-changing seascape is ungraspable, or unknowable, beyond the present day or moment. It can only be understood in the specific moment of walking along the inlet. Therefore, this sort of knowing is experiential and relies upon being physically present in the environment.

I was swimming in a little cove on Catalina island. I was exhausted, my throat was swollen, and my foot had a deep gash. Floating in the salt water helped relieve my body aches, fever, and cleansed any open wounds. Out of curiosity, I decided to open my eyes. My vision was obscured by a sudden rush of salt water that stung my eyes and caused my contact lenses to fall out instantaneously.

I stumbled my way back onto shore, the little rocks were sharp and my foot was wrapped in tape to cover a wound. My newly-blurred vision brought about a sense of calm that I hadn't felt in a while. I found myself falling asleep on the shore. It was as if this minimizing of visual information had relieved my mind of something and enabled me to be calmed by the sensation of the warm sun on my skin, the sound of the ocean, and the sand under the length of my body.

Upon awaking, I heard two people nearby. It was a couple that I had met on the trail the day before. They offered to share with me their snorkeling gear. I walked some ten minutes back to my tent and put in new contact lenses so that I could see. I returned to the beach and walked back into the water, this time with proper gear and my camera.

I prepared the gear while I continued walking into the ocean. It is common practice to breath into, or spit into, the lenses of your goggles so that they do not become foggy during a dive.

While in the water, I heard the sound of a boat. It is difficult to intuit the location of a sound because of the way acoustics work underwater. The noise was slightly unsettling since I had travelled far from shore. It seems that when your vision is obscured, your other senses are heightened. I began to feel cold and decided to turn back. It wasn't until two months later that I wrote the text for *A sort of seeing,* 2019.

Envelopes. Thoughts. Thinking. I began thinking about the boundaries of the body. Where does it start and stop? How can these barriers be extended or expanded? In *Cinema in the Expanded Field*, Gregory Bateson states, "The mental world is not limited to the envelope of our bodies" (8). My interpretation of this is that the thinking body, or the body which produces thought, is not confined to its form. Thus, I would say the mind and body relationship is one of non-dualism, which is in opposition to ontological dualism. However, I would like to complexify the binary notions of duality and non-duality by saying that the "mental world" is reliant upon having a body, but it is not limited to its "envelope." As such, it relies upon the physical nature of the body to produce this thought. The thought, stemming from physical sensation, can extend beyond the confines of the body. The inseparability of the body and mind, as such, works together in an effort to press upon the boundaries of corporeality. Sensation and

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movement derived from the body produces conscious thought that begins to make the edges of the body dissolve.

In Gladman's *Untitled Environments*, she writes about the writing process starting in the body and then moving outwards. An excerpt reads, "And I found in my narrative these other narratives that opened under water, that glowed in deepest night, that you could read without alarm, that were blown-out geometries, maps, that were textiles hanging from the calendula underground, always having something to do with bodies, moving through other bodies" (14). She is acknowledging that her reflections are propelled by her physical experiences of the day. Her stories, written productions of thought centered in embodiment, work to permeate spatial boundaries. Gladman's narratives "open under water" and glow at night (14). Each of these statements considers a movement from one space into another, or an emanation from a discrete form. For something to open underwater, it must push against the seams of its closing as well as against water's pressure. Similarly, if something is described as glowing, it means the light is extending beyond the light itself. The written story, a result of conscious thought stemming from bodily sensation, emanates beyond the body and into the natural world.

ENERGEIA

Figure 1.2 detail of *esti ti diaphanes*, 2019, plexiglass, light, water, and iridescent film. This work is a 16" x 16" version of *energiea* (44" x 44").

energeia, 2019, is a sculptural work that uses iridescent material, water, and an acrylic tank to explore the dynamic properties of color and light. A sheet of iridescent material is suspended in a square acrylic tank. The work's title comes from Agamben's text *On Potentiality.* In this text, Agamben discusses Aristotle's definition of potentiality in terms of both light (energeia) and darkness (skotos). (2) The sculpture's material choices are informed by questions surrounding seeing and sensing in relation to light and darkness. The iridescent material exhibits different colors, each produced by a particular wave length of light. However,

its see-through qualities are highlighted when it is immersed in water. These prismatic colors, a result of the combined effect of lighter-value with darker-value colors, and translucency are brought together in *energeia* as a way complicating our phenomenological relationship to color.

As such, the work looks at one's perception of light in relation to one's body, vision, and movement. In *Matter and Memory,* Bergson states, "Our perception being a part of things, things participate in the nature of our perception" (7). Here, Bergson talks about an entangled web of participation between the object and one's perception. *energiea* explores this idea of participatory perception that intermingles the object with the body. One cannot perceive an iridescent phenomenon without a direct relationship to both the object and to light. The phenomenal experience of color relies up on the material's physical properties and a moving eye that is present to observe it. In short, iridescence necessitate presence.

energeia exhibits some resemblances to Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube, 1963-5,* or Larry Bell's cubes, as seen at Hauser & Wirth's exhibition *Complete Cubes* in 2018. Haacke's *Condensation Cube, 1963-5,* is a perspex cube filled with water and condensation and raised to the height of eye level by a steel frame. (24) In addition to the work's formal presentation as a transparent cube filled with clear liquid, it explores the systems and processes at play in the formation of condensation. *energeia* and *Condensation Cube* exhibit similar formal elements, such as featuring rectilinear boxes created out of clear material filled with water. In contrast, however, *energeia* is more like an enlarged aquarium tank that is open at the top. As such, condensation is not created on the perimeter of the box, but instead, little bubbles are produced that cling to folds of iridescent material and to the tank's walls. Thus, *energiea* is not a system of enclosure, but rather an open system in which the viewer and sculpture work together in the process of perception.

In *The Spell of The Sensuous*, David Abrams reference's phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas regarding a co-dependent relationship between the object being

perceived and the perceiver. "Our most immediate experience of things, according to Merleau-

Ponty, is necessarily an experience of reciprocal encounter---of tension, communication, and

commingling" (1). The inclusion of the iridescent material in the body of water, with it's inherent

dynamic properties, creates the sense of commingling between body, light source, and

sculptural object. As the viewer moves around the object, the color experience changes. The

folds of the material are revealed and concealed based upon the viewers eye angle height.

Thus, *energeia* asks viewers to remain in motion as they experience the work.

As I filled up the tank with water, I noticed how the iridescent sheet would

repeatedly sink and then lift. I watched how the material appeared to change colors as the

water's movement created foldings and unfoldings. Observing this reminded me of when I had

brought long strips of the same material into the ocean. I recalled the way its dazzling, dynamic

colors were revealed by the waves.

But here, in the gallery, the water's didn't collide with the shore or sand. Instead, it met

the edges of a transparent, plexiglass tank. My effort of pouring from one vessel into another, or

from container to container, produced these collisions. Once the tank became full, its iridescent

sheet settled into a suspended position and slowly began accumulating small bubbles.

I proceeded to walk around the tank. All the while, my eyes admired the opalescence

and tried to comprehend how the bubbles were formed. I still don't know.

Potentiality. Translucency. Waves. What is the sensation of sight? Aristotle

suggests that we feel ourselves seeing by vision— and what we see is color. (2) He expands

upon this by suggesting that "sensation is only potential" (2). I think of potential, or potentiality,

as something dynamic, changing, growing, becoming, and perhaps living. The dynamic color

qualities of iridescence that are perceived through movement reflect my notion of potentiality.

However, I would like to complexify this statement by discussing the translucent qualities of the

iridescent material. Translucency works to challenge our visual perceptions. We see ourselves

seeing not just through color, but through shifts between opacity and translucency. These

fluctuations complicate our sense of depth, since they have no spatial referent. For example,

something solid-looking could have the same density as something see-through. A translucent

iridescent film, suspended inside of a translucent body of water provides the curious scenario in

which we may ask ourselves: Are we actually seeing what we see? What are the factors of

vision beyond wavelengths color?

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre states, "Space contains opacities, bodies and

objects, centres of efferent actions and effervescent energies, hidden--even impenetrable--

places, areas of viscosity, and black holes" (19). Space, in addition to surfaces, is a site of

"energy" and "action" in the work. *energiea* uses the dialectics of transparency and opacity to

explore the potentiality of spatial negotiation, binary thought, and the phenomenology of seeing

itself.

LOW TIDE BLUR

Figure 1.3 *low tide blur,* 2019. digital video projection on loop, with lens filters, dimensions variable.

low tide blur, *2019,* explores the dynamic qualities of color and form as they depend upon their ecological surroundings such as ocean tides, the timing of waves, and the movement of living things. Similar to C*atch and Release*, iridescence is found in the abalone shell on screen. In this piece, however, the abalone is filmed close up, resembling a pure abstraction. The shell's form becomes obscured and then is revealed as strands of green seaweed move in the ocean's waves. The low tide made it possible for the coastal reefs, covered in this verdant aquatic plant, to be reached by walking in shallow water.

A departure from *Catch and Release* is the duration of the film itself and the amount of time spent filming. *Catch and Release* was made from a brief thirty second clip, while *low tide blu*r was filmed within chunks of 5-10 min. Durational choices depended upon how long it was physically possible to maintain footing in the sand, or a resting place atop of a reef. Oftentimes, filming would stop due to being knocked over by a wave, or because a hand moved to regain

stability and resulted appearing in the frame.

A small, waterproof GoPro camera was used to make both digital videos. The process for *low tide blur* involved holding the camera as close as possible to the shell without creating a collision or clink. A sense of depth within the frame is abstracted because of the two objects' proximity. There are a few moments when the water becomes so low that the shell emerges out of water and we may come to realize that the space within frame is only a shallow submersion of a few inches. Therefore, the tide's movement helps determine the depth of space within frame. Apart from this, the shell's curvature is the only other subtle spatial referent for deep space.

For Merleau-Ponty, "depth vision is said to be a construction, either by the senses or by the intellect" (21). In *low tide blur,* the camera body, the human body, the body of water that makes up the ocean, and an abalone shell are all the components that comprise "depth" within frame. However, the digital ontology is the only "vision" present in the filming process. The camera was hidden underwater and under the sea grass. This created the scenario where your eyes were unable to "see" what the camera was "seeing." Therefore, this new digital seeing, or digital ontology, complicates Merleau-Ponty's argument on depth. In *The Primacy of Perception*, he states that "We are (as Cartesians) always on the hither side of depth, or beyond it" (21). How does this apply to the camera as a body? Perhaps there is a separate phenomenology of the camera where this viewing apparatus interprets depth spatially and temporally different from the human eye.

Once a camera's vision is inscribed as a digital pixel on the camera's SD card, the question becomes one of digital vision. The condensation of time and image is then transferred into the editing software and projected upon the gallery's walls. *low tide blur's* editing process involved zooming in and cropping the digital video into panorama-like aspect ratio. The video is projected onto the backside of the freestanding wall within the gallery, creating a band of video

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near the top of the "screen." As such, the image is flattened to the ontology of the gallery space, but it recalls a sort of window or landscape into another space.

Both of my hands were full—my left hand grasped an edge of the abalone shell, while my right hand held the camera. Part of me wanted to do longer takes of a similar shot from yesterday, but this was a new day and I knew that it didn't make sense to try and recreate the same shots. This new day brought with it a murkier water visibility, more seaweed, a lower tide, a swell that sent wave after wave, and bright sunshine.

I noticed the green sea grass, attached to the reef, moving with the motion of the tide. If this had been yesterday, I would have needed to dive many feet in order to reach it. Today, I walked up towards the reef, measuring the depth next to my body. It stood about hip high. The waves kept coming and I struggled to keep my balance. I found that if I were to lay on top of the reef, I could maintain my stability for longer durations.

I stretched out my arms, extending the shell and camera into the sea grass, and pressed record. The objects were concealed beneath the grass, so I could not see the dazzling light patterns or prismatic hues. I held the camera close to the shell, imagining what it might be seeing. However, my focus was on keeping my body stable enough to film. I timed the filming to happen in between the sets, or waves that come in a series.

It wasn't until the evening when I went through the footage that I noticed each take seemed much shorter than the actual experience of being in the water. When I was filming, I continually re-negotiated my body position in relation to both the camera's body and to the ocean's body of water. This must have influenced my sense of time.

Interiority. Exteriority. Curves. Informed by reading Giles Deleuze, Wilhelm

Leibniz, and Gaston Bachelard, I began to consider iridescent surfaces as a site of infinite

movement where spatial binaries become destabilized. How does the spatial orientation of our

bodies relate to our perceptions of space? In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard muddles the

paradoxical terms interior and exterior. He postulates:

> Inside and outside, as experienced by the imagination, can no longer be taken in their
>
> simple reciprocity; consequently, by omitting geometrical references [...] we shall come
>
> to realize that the dialectics of inside and outside multiply with countless diversified
>
> nuances. (4)

The mind, is able to imagine the negotiation of interiority and exteriority without its "geometrical

references." Without this reference, the construction of space becomes less finite. The thinking,

imagining body is able to destabilize notions of discrete space. The complexity of iridescence,

with its microscopic depth and glossy surface, asks one to imagine these nuances of interiority

and exteriority. It's visibly imperceptible depth has potential—it is no longer static.

Bachelard suggests that "imagination is defeated by reality" in the form of shells. (4) An

abalone shell's form produces two sides, an iridescent interior and rough exterior. One can

imagine the soft body of a sea snail taking up residence in the concavity of a shell. However, the

abalone shell has several holes lining one of its sides. It is through these holes that the animal

breathes and eats. The outside, thus, becomes incorporated with the inside through these small

openings. This exchange between animal and sea is how I consider the interior and exterior

negotiations of an iridescent surface. It is a fluid, membraneous relationship.

PART 2: Past Works Not Included in The Exhibition

WATER ECHOES IN THE SKY

Figure 2.1 *water echoes in the sky, 2018.* site-specific work at the Steele/Burnand Anza-Borrego Desert Research Center.

      In this work, the Steele Brand Research Center is used to perform visual research of sorts. The glass windows around the outside of the facility serves as the site of investigation for *water echoes in the sky,* 2018. Digital video projection and spotlights are used to explore the building as. a light box and the slanted, glass surfaces as prisms that reflect and refract light.

      Underwater footage of abalone shells is edited to exhibit a series of circular apertures, similar to the holes in the shell that are used by to breathe and reproduce. The video is projected across the building and expands onto the floor and the roof.

The windows glow from the interior, reminiscent of a pastel light box. Six spotlights, affixed with iridescent filters, are placed indoors and point towards the window shades. These lights provide the surface, or negative space, surrounding the abalone apertures.

Viewers of the work were invited to move between the outside and the inside of the research center just after the sunset and until darkness. The colors of the lights and projections were mimicked in the sky. As the sun sets in the desert, the harsh shadows disappear and the light becomes soft. The vast space of the desert is echoed in the expansive sky. The sky transitions from blue into a gradient of pastels, almost iridescent like the inside of an abalone shell. The color shifts continue, as if are holding the shell in the palm of your hand and moving it around.

SLOW. MOTION. MOTION. STILL. FLATNESS.

Figure 2.2 *Still . Motion. Still. Motion. Motion. Still. Flatness,* 2018. digital video projection, 7:30 min on loop.

This work, entitled **S*till. Motion. Motion. Still. Flatness.*,** *2018,* is an eight minute, single take film of the Salton Sea. When does the sea disappear into the sky? The sky disappear into the sea? When does a photograph become a video? A video become a photograph?

These are the questions I considered as I set up my tripod, aiming my lens toward the Salton Sea. I wanted to let the landscape reveal itself, or unfold, in the eight minute duration after pressing the little red button "record."

The static shot asked me to notice what was there, instead of actively searching or seeking what to film next. I noticed the reflective quality of the water, the little waves that hit the shore, the wildlife that passed through, and the smoke plume in the distance. Things slowly transformed before my eyes and I was thankful for the stillness.

Still Motion Motion Still Flatness, 2018, looks at the illusory qualities of the landscape as time unfolds with one long take. The reflective qualities of light slowly, almost imperceptible transform on the surface of the water and in the sky as the film continues. The main, discernible movement within the frame is the plume of smoke that arises. This plume grows higher and higher until eventually leaving the frame. The subtleties of both the passing of time are coupled with a fascination in the soft colors of the desert landscape. The light sky blues, pastel pinks, taupe-like earth tones, and atmospheric whites all combine to create this palette. The desert landscape, thus, is depicted as a site of delicate transformation that produces optical illusions and complicates our sense of time.

SHELLS/GRASPS

Figure 2.3 *Shells (Grasps),* 2019. unfired clay, iridescent pigment, pastel, and surf wax

Shells (Grasps), 2019, What is it like to reside in the palm of your own hand? To feel grasped by your own flesh and bone? To take up the space where your fingers gently curl over? I began to be curious about the idea of being pocketed in a refuge of your own making, one that doesn't require any materials, just your own body. I pressed the clay into my hand, making a mold of the negative space. A tangible form of the space in my hand.

The forms are left to air dry and then are coated with an iridescent pigment. Then, they are coated with layers of pastel. Each layer is rubbed into the clay, until the colors begin to blend into one another. The little shell-like forms are then coated with a layer of surf wax, both for its texture and as protection against moisture. When held, the sculptures have both a sticky an chalky texture. It is also in the hand that the optical qualities of iridescence are seen in relation to the static colors of the pastel. When the shells are viewed from a stationary standpoint, or when they are not moved, there is a blurring of the dynamic iridescence with the fixed oil-pastel markings. In the final exhibition form, multiples of these miniature shells are scattered about the floor of the gallery. The notion of an individual objet dissipates, as each piece comprises the whole.

UN-CIRCLE. BEND. WHILE IT'S HOT

Figure 2.4 *un-circle. bend. while it's hot,* 2018. mixed-media installation, dimensions variable.

un-circle. bend. while it's hot, 2018, is a multi media installation that uses digital video projection and found materials to explore the immediacy of felt experience in nature. The work takes place in two rooms— one large and one very small.

In the first room, a projector is placed in the corner by the entrance to the gallery. Lenses of different types and shapes are taped to the the projector, causing the beam of light to bounce around the room and fracture the video in two. At the same time, the lens acts to obfuscate and obscure the digital video projection.

Projected on to the walls of the gallery is a ten minute long film of the Salton Sea's shoreline. The unmoving camera is focused upon the movement of the water meeting the sand and fish barnacles. The subtle undulations of the water are seen on two of the walls: the far wall, and the front, protruding wall.

The movement of shoreline into little waves highlights the transparency of the water. Such a clearness of the water contrasts the color gradient that appears when viewing the Salton Sea from an elevated ledge. As the water gets deeper, the colors shift. However, this shift is only apparent when your sightline is higher than the sea itself. If you stand at the edge, the water looks predominantly blue. A curiosity about the formulation of color in nature, particularly as it depends upon depth, atmospheric phenomena, and the moving body is central to this work.

In the corner of the second room, a three foot wide plexiglas semi-circle exhibits material tensions by being held together by gaffers tape tied into a few messy knots. A predominately blue abstracted projection is layered onto this object. The gallery walls, floor, and sculptural object all become surfaces for the video. Digital video is purposefully obstructed, blurred, and bounced around the room. Its only representational referent is a street sign that comes into view every couple of minutes. Beyond this, the video is a swoosh of movement produced from filming the sea out of the window of a moving vehicle.

QUIET YOUR MIND, CATCH THAT FEELING

Figure 2.5 *Quiet Your Mind, Catch That Feeling*, 2018. photobook, 68 pages, 20cm x 20cm.

Quiet Your Mind, Catch That Feeling, 2019, is a photo book of stills from digital video taken while swimming or surfing off the coast of Southern California. It records the dynamic light shifts in atmospheric phenomena and it's reflections on the water. The stills are isolated frames of video that were chosen based on several compositional elements. At times, the selection process resembles a choreographic approach. The body is often pictured in motion, at a distance, and often as a silhouette. At times, the figure is captured in a precarious in-between movement. In reality, these motions may not even be perceptible to the eye as they are not held for longer than a moment.

One may come to think of Eadweard Muybridge's successive images of a horse

galloping. The series of photographs was able to prove whether all four of the horse's hooves

were in the air at one time because of the new, faster camera shutter. Similarly, at twenty-nine

frames per second, the digital video was able to capture the unseen movements of both the

body and the ocean waves. The methodology for taking still from video, verses successive

images, relate both to the camera specifications and the desire to choose images from a total

experience. Filming with a small, easily maneuvered GoPro enabled me to function as both a

participant and observer while being in the water. At the closing of the book, a letter to the

reader goes as follows:

I'm after a light that's warm & wild.
something not altogether made, but created out of a set of circumstances &
chance.

something spilled, tripped, & framed mid-air.

something not consciously yours or mine, but something that just is.
imperfect moments, centered in sensation & experienced by the body.
                feeling that tug, that pull.
                …thinking thoughts of not thinking.

thought, theory, & technique surrender in this moment of not-making, but
noticing.

get close in.

xoxo,

Maya

SUBTLE PARADISE

Figure 2.6 *Subtle Paradise, 2018.* mixed-media installation, dimensions variable.

     Subtle Paradise, *2018,* is an exhibition that includes the several sized media

works. In the back corner of the room, *Porous Matter and Light, Moving,* is comprised of a

number of indoor (air-filtering) plants huddled together in a circle, each with its own light

attached. The bendable lights have colored filters, creating multi-colored shadows on the gallery

walls. These shadows create a magnification of the plants by casting obfuscated forms on the

surrounding walls. Thus, what is on the wall is not an exact replica of the plant, but an imagined hybridization of plant, shadow, light, color.

This piece was influenced by thinking about expanded cinema. I began to question if cinema could be a living thing. How does cinematic time compare to the slow growth of a plant? Can the cinematic apparatus of a light function to propel narrative forward? I started to consider the plant's photosynthetic process as evocative of expanded cinema.

In the center of the room, slightly off to the left, is the sculpture *Esti ti Diaphanes*. This piece is created from suspending a sheet of iridescent material inside of a 16" x 16" acrylic cube. Diagonal to this work, situated near the entrance to the gallery, is *Diaphanes (series of 3)*. These sculptures are miniature versions of the larger *Esti ti Diaphanes* that are displayed in a line and roughly four inches apart.

In the right corner of the room is *Mid-day Sun,* a mixed media installation with projections and plants. The edges of the video have been rounded with a mask in the editing process, creating an obscured aspect ration that seems almost projection mapped. Digital video of pastel abstractions, filmed from the plants in *Porous Matter and Light, Moving.*, are projected at a tilt towards the corner and onto a series of plants in a row. These plants, potted pathos, are placed one after another. As such, they create a singular, collapsed shadow upon the wall. Their single shadow is an illusion caused by the relationship of the projection beam to the plants. There is a spatial confusion in the actual space of the gallery, and in the space of the digital video. The digital video is comprised of a video collage of both still and moving images, collapsing both time scales into one duration. Lenses and filters have been affixed to the projector, creating a soft glow that emanates beyond what is actually in the digital file. As a whole, the piece explores the precariousness of actual and digital ontologies.

LIQUID LIMINAL(ITY)

Figure 2.7 *Liquid Liminal(ity), 2017. mixed-media installation with multi-channel digital video projection, 11′ x 26′ (dimensions variable).*

      Liquid Liminal(ity), 2017, examines corporeality in deep oceanic space. Two video projections of scuba divers are projected onto the gallery's walls, their light overlapping and intersecting. One projector is suspended from the ceiling, while the other is placed directly upon the floor. A prism on a spinning turntable is placed in front of the bottom projector, causing

both the light and image to rotate rhythmically around the room. Each projection is angled towards the right corner of the room, causing the rectangular frame of the screen and its image to become skewed. Colored gels are placed in front of the projectors' lens, demarcating a distinction between essentially two iterations of the same video. The top projector is affixed with a bright fuchsia gel, while the bottom projector has an iridescent cellophane. Light, color, and image are filtered through these transparencies, transforming the pixel-based videos into hyper-saturated or iridescent-hued versions of themselves---an obfuscation of real and digital localities. As such, the installation serves as an ontological and phenomenological exploration of depth and flatness within screen space and gallery space.

In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty asserts that "Depth is still new, and it insists in being sought"(6). The diver seeks depth, inhabiting the underwater sphere with the aid of technological apparatuses. The tank fastened to the diver's back contains enough breathable air for them to survive underwater for an approximate duration of one hour. The figure within frame has mastered buoyancy and navigates deep space by swimming in a neutral, horizontal position. The opaqueness of the body and its density become less apparent in the aquatic terrain. The top video is in slow motion, while to bottom video is in real time. They are synthesized when combined upon the gallery walls. How will bodies adapt to inhabiting our dissolving, Anthropocenic world?

Three acrylic containers, filled with water, are dispersed throughout the room along with numerous white pillows. The bodies of water simulate aquariums; however, these vessels are creature-less. The lifeless pools contrast ocean or aquarium environments. They are illuminated when light from the prism reflects towards them. Viewers are encouraged to sit and spend time in the space.

BENTHIC LIGHT

Figure 2.8 *Benthic Light, 2017.* multi-media installation and performance with audio-visual score, 1 hour duration, dimensions variable.

"...space is not a lethargic and passive expanse supported by a
Cartesian endoskeleton. It is rather a realm of coiled tension,
laden with energy..."
- Vilem Flusser in Vampyroteuthis Infernalis

Benthic Light, 2017, is a collaborative multi-media installation, performance, and audio-visual score. The work features movement by Aurora Lagattuta, sound by Elisabet Curbelo-Gonzalez, and visuals by Maya VanderSchuit. *Benthic Light* uses a loose narrative structure and improvisational score to create a mythic, marine dreamworld. It explores human and octopi phenomenologies in relationship to the natural world and the fluid boundaries of screen space. Choreography responds to audio-visual elements that are simultaneously urban and organic, digital and real-time, humanoid and animal.

The conceptual framework for the piece began to take form after reading Vilem Flusser's V*ampyroteuthis Infernalis: A Treatise* and Donna Harraway's *Tentacular Thinking: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene*. Harraway introduces the etymology of *tentacle* as "tentaculum," a Latin word meaning "feeler" (16). I began to be curious about how octopi and humans "feel" and what the similarities and differences are. I began to research diver and octopi interactions, sifting through and collecting footage from online sources and stock imagery. The appropriated videos were then edited with the inclusion of my own videos of light refracting off of iridescent surfaces. An initial take of the video included octopi wrapping themselves around divers and snatching cameras; however, as the process unfolded into a collaborative effort, the presence of divers within frame were excluded. Additionally, videos of octopi under a microscopic were added into the assortment of "digital layers" for both formal and conceptual reasons.

The rounded quality of the microscopic lens mimics the organic anatomy of the octopus. Adding multiple layers serves to abstract the images into a moving, digital collage that enmeshes the both scales. The octopi video is projected upon a portion of a rear projection screen that is balanced in the left corner of the gallery. The rectangular screen is tilted on its axis, meeting the floor and the walls at only its sharp, right angled points. The screen is

precarious, imbued with the potential to collapse at any moment and with even the lightest touch.

The macro scale of the video delineates and communicates the animal's movement; thus, recalling the films of Jean Painleve and Hana Rose Shell's *Locomotion in Water*. Octopi undulate in the water, their curious tentacles spiral and un- spiral with each progressive attempt to traverse oceanic space. This outstretching and coiling motion of their "limbs" relates to a kind of grasping of their environment. Flusser, in V*ampyroteuthis Infernalis: A Treatise,* postulates that the octopus "absorbs" and "incorporates" the earth, whereas human's "experience or 'undergo' it."(12) This distinction informed our approach to the improvisational movement score and choice of materials.

Notions of macro and micro are discussed by Lefebvre in *Spatial Architectonics.* He discusses these binaries in relationship to ontological space and the body, stating, "'porosity' extends from the macro-level of the built environment to the micro-level of the body" (13) In *Benthic Light,* macro video of the octopi's body, its movement, and methods of grasping and incorporating the underwater sphere are layered with the microscopic imagery of the creatures anatomy. The collapsed, translucent imagery reflects upon the "porosity" of scales. The projected footage creates a permeable relationship between these two.

A comparison can also be made regarding the macro-level of the performance space and the micro-level of the performer's body. Lefebvre's notion of "porosity" within the scales relates to the dynamic quality of matter in Deleuze's *The Fold:*

Matter thus offers a texture that is infinitely porous,

that is spongy or cavernous without empty parts, since

there is always a cavern in the cavern: each body, however

small it may be, contains a world insofar as it is

40

perforated by uneven passageways, and the world, surrounded

and penetrated by an increasingly subtle fluid, was like a

'pond of matter in which there are different currents and

waves.' (11)

The sound score and installation catalyze a becoming and unbecoming, folding and unfolding,

of the dancer within the performance space. In addition to the video of the octopus, the

installation includes a large scale projection of organic/man-made iridescence and analog light

from materials displayed atop of an overhead projector. The large digital projection displays

video of iridescent oil spills in urban environment, as well as close-up footage of the iridescent

cellophane that is inside of the aquarium on the "stage." The soundscape reflected these

videos. Live and pre-recorded sounds of cityscapes and bubbles were activated with a Wii

remote controller attached to the dancer's arm.

The choreographic score was based around an exploration of human and octopi

phenomenologies, as well as the idea dance encompassing a simultaneous past, present, and

future. Choreography is essentially a performance from memory; thus, it recalls notions of a

past in which the dance was practiced, the present in which it is performed, and the future

which holds the possibility for it to be re-performed. The improvisational score was repeated

three times and with three different entrances and exits. Each sequence developed throughout

the duration of the performance, yet maintained an embodied and enmeshed temporality of

past, present, and future.

Aurora Lagatutta begins the movement score clothed in a light blue coat. As the

performance moves forward, she begins to take off one sleeve of the coat, revealing another

lavender coat underneath. Lagattuta continues to both take off and put back on the four sleeves,

pausing in between each movement. The coats' arms hang by her side, like tentacles.

Underneath the two coats, she wears a dress made from plastic. The materiality of the dress is

echoed in the aquarium's cellophane and the colored gels, bubble wrap, and dichroic films placed on and around the overhead projector.

The next movement in the sequence involves situating her body next to a square glass box filled with glass beads and gum. She takes a seat and begins to fish out the gum. The gum is then balanced on her outstretched arm, inevitably finding its way inside of her mouth to chew. At this point, she begins to blow bubbles. From here, she sheds the coats and proceeds to hide behind the rear projection screen. Once behind the screen, Lagattuta shines a blue light behind her hand, creating a sort of shadow puppet on the same plane as the octopus imagery. She turns off the light and re-enters the performance space, continuing the metamorphosis.

The title *Benthic Light* was chosen because "benthic" is the region of the ocean in which the octopus lives. The word "Light" is part of the title for number of reasons. Formally, various forms of projected light fill the space, creating "an osmosis between intimate and undetermined space" (1). Conceptually, there was a consideration of the way light and optics operate in the depth of the sea. Flusser actually discusses this:

> Seawater is largely impervious to the cosmic rays that
>
> bombard the earth. Nearly all of such rays are absorbed by
>
> the water surface itself, sunlight by the first 300 meters
>
> or so. The great bodies of water are immersed in eternal
>
> night, and only the bioluminescent organs of its
>
> inhabitants puncture the darkness. (12)

The benthic region is dark, but the octopus remains illuminated. As a cephalopod, octopi have chromatophores in their skin that create their coloring. (13) The microscopic imagery of the octopi within the video footage exhibit these structures.

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