Animation Installation: the Affect of Place

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Abstract. Goosebumps, hairs stand on end, a knot in the stomach, an inexplicable feeling of chill or even panic… walking through an unfamiliar place can have a visceral impact on the human subject.

This artist's presentation will consider the experience of viewing animation within the context of a site-specific installation and, through reference to examples of exhibitions by Birgitta Hosea in which contemporary animations are displayed as an intervention in historic spaces, will investigate the affect of site and the impact of the viewing context on the embodied perception of an animation.

Keywords. Animation, site-specific, installation, museum, phenomenology, kinaesthetic, embodied experience

1. Introduction

Animation was traditionally seen in a cinema as part of a film festival, or on TV, or more recently on our computer screen. In these viewing contexts the viewer is most often seated in a fixed position that she stays in for the duration of the viewing experience and does not directly physically intervene with the images on the screen before her [1] (mobile, touch-screen media is an interesting exception to this). Vivian Sobchack argues that static metaphors dominate film theory – the picture frame, the window and the mirror – and that these deny the dynamic nature of viewing. [2] How does the viewing experience of animation differ if the work is installed in three-dimensional space as part of an art exhibition, museum display or visitor attraction rather than from a fixed seating position?

In examining this question, this paper will consider examples of four site-specific installations that incorporated animation. Writing about site-specific installation is always problematic as documentary photographs do not capture the embodied experience of watching animation while moving through three-dimensional space. This paper will begin by adopting the strategy of using thick description in the form of a guided visualisation from the perspective of a visitor for the first two installations under consideration and then proceed to an analysis of that experience. The second two installations will be considered more briefly.

2. Visitation (2004)

Imagine…

Leaving behind Euston station and crossing over Euston road, you are at once confronted by the imposing caryatids of St Pancras Parish Church inspired by the Ionic Temple of the Erectheum on the Acropolis. It takes a few moments to locate the entrance to the medieval crypt below the more recent 19th Century church building. More caryatids, huge women, frozen in a pose, they guard the entrance equipped with empty jugs and extinguished torches. At the doorway you read a sign that warns you that you are entering the space at your own risk. Crossing the threshold, going down steps and entering an underground chamber the temperature drops and there is a musty smell. In the first, dimly lit room you are handed a torch by the curator and as you walk further, you are plunged into darkness. Without a map or any directions, the pitch-dark space is unfamiliar and unfathomable. Guided only by the dim glimmer of a projection barely glimpsed round the corner or the haunting soundtrack echoing through the corridors, you explore the tunnels with trepidation, your torch occasionally picking out the details of ancient brickwork or a family tomb or a headstone. The same film is repeated on different screens throughout the space – either full projection on the wall or piles of old TV sets that were malfunctioning, detuned or incorrectly colour calibrated. So like in Freud's description of getting lost in the city in his essay on the Uncanny [3], you find yourself turning a corner and then returning to the same image that you thought you'd left behind. As you walk in front of the TV sets your actual physical body creates an impact on the image through 'interference' with the transmission of the video signal.

Fig. 1. Exterior and interior, *Visitation*, the Crypt of St Pancras Parish church, London

In his essay on the Uncanny from 1919[3], Freud investigates the term through its linguistic roots in German in addition to a consideration of what is essentially his own personal experience. The text starts with a quotation from Ernst Jentsch's 1906 paper, *On the Psychology of the Uncanny,* that defines the uncanny as: 'doubt as to whether an apparently animate object is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate'.[3] Through his analysis of ETA Hoffman's short story *The Sandman*,

Freud focuses on the terrifying figure of the Sandman who tears out the eyes of naughty children and develops the argument that the reason for the fear that he calls 'uncanny' is a reminder of 'what was once familiar and then repressed'[3], a trigger for the various psychological complexes that he had identified in his theory of psychoanalysis. For Freud the uncanny leads us to question what is familiar, what is reality: 'It is thus solely a matter of testing reality, a question of material reality.'[3] In other words, the uncanny is scary because we don't know if it's real or an illusion. It unsettles us, because it questions what we complacently think we know or are familiar with. In *Visitation,* the use of digitally manipulated video and re-animated photographs plays on this notion of an uncanny combination of the familiar with the strange – indexical images are taken out of context and re-assembled, thus challenging the limits of (unmanipulated) photographic representation.

Returning to Freud's 'uncanny' experience of getting lost in the red light district of a large city, his feeling of having been there before but not remembering when, Jane Rendall conceptualizes his notion of déjà vu while in the act of walking as 'the spatial structure of unconscious hiding or folded memory'.[4] Indeed, the uncanny experience of the *Visitation* installation came not only from viewing moving images, but also from spatial and haptic experience. The installation was created specifically for the Crypt of St Pancras church – an ancient, dark, dank series of brick tunnels housing family tombs in chambers and dating in part from the medieval era.[5] An appropriate site for a project about the paranormal, the Crypt is a liminal space between the world of the living and the world of the dead; between the past and the present; between the light and the dark; between the seen and the unseen: a portal into the underworld. The Crypt has a palpable presence, a spine-tingling 'aura' lacking from brightly lit, commercial 'white cube' gallery spaces.

In this site-specific work, moving images imagining psychic London were shown in various tunnels and chambers of the ancient underground Crypt. The work used digital video manipulation and animated photographic collage to visualise the psychic realm and to investigate the use of digitally manipulated images to convey the unrepresentable - London, outside rational control or reason, peopled with many beliefs and perspectives, too vast to be comprehensible.

In his essay, 'Walking in the City', philosopher Michel de Certeau argues that a city is not the rational, ordered place intended by planners and architects. The city is a giant text in flux, storied by the interconnected activities of its masses, who are not passive, but practise the spaces in which they live. In other words, a city is a system in process that is enacted by its inhabitants not a fixed place. It is constantly changing and impossible to define.[6] Similarly, part of the experience of an installation is to walk through it with many different routes possible and it is by walking through three-dimensional space that the visitor makes sense of it.

3. Medium (2012)

Imagine…

Leaving behind the hustle and bustle of Bethnal Green tube station, making your way though the hectic throng of traffic and pedestrians and pushing open the huge, heavy door of St John on Bethnal Green church. The stone interior is light and spacious with huge high ceilings. It's December. It's freezing cold. Muffled sounds can be heard from different directions, but you choose to turn left and ascend the staircase. The decaying walls are teeming with life – fungi of astonishing beauty spreads around delicate patterns of cracks in the plaster. As you reach the top of the staircase, that is not normally open to the public, you are slightly out of breath with the effort. The Belfry is pitch dark.

Inside in semi-darkness, framed by the vaulted space, a medium attempts to communicate with spirits through a Ouija board. She is in her own world and seems to be incapable of seeing you. Shrouded in cotton wool ectoplasm, she channels voices from cinema's past and raises digital spirit guides that are emanations of her own inner states. In a trance like state, she communicates from the other side through automatic writing until the presence of you, the onlooker becomes too much to bear, and in her final state of possession she looks you in the eye and shrieks in your face.

This performative installation was conceived as a tableau vivant: a living picture, a moving sculpture that combined a live performer and projected animation with a soundtrack of sampled audio clips from Hitchcock's *Rebecca* and Powell and *Pressburgers A Matter of Life and Death*.[7] This work uses digitally manipulated images to conjure up the spirit world of the media that surrounds us as an investigation into how that forms individual subjectivity. It was inspired by Jeffrey Scone's book *Haunted Media* [8] as well as extensive research into the performances of Victorian mediums and spirit photography – one of the earliest forms of photographic manipulation.

Fig.2. *Medium*, St John's Church, Bethnal Green, London

As in *Visitation*, the site was an integral part of the work. Prior knowledge of the building (or similar such ecclesiastic buildings) has an effect on how you perceive the space. In her work on space, Doreen Massey argues that space is not fixed, essential and eternal, but plural, relational, in a state of flux, always in the process of being produced, subject to the result of interrelationships.[9] Massey contends that space is an open system, in which layers of co-existing stories coincide by chance.[9] Visualising the conjuring of spirits in a historic building designed for spiritual practice added another dimension to the work that would not have been present in a conventional art gallery. The film, the soundtrack and the performance were only a part of the work. Making an effort to get to Bethnal Green on a freezing December night, previous associations with churches and church buildings, the coldness of the draughty stone interior, its scale and the height of the ceilings, being perhaps a little out of breath at the top of the stairs, trying to work out the perimeters of space in the Belfry in the darkness, the framing of the work by the arch of the ceiling and the acoustic resonance of a space designed for bell ringing: all of these factors contributed to the work.

The projected images representing spirit guides and electronic ectoplasm were created with a mixture of stop motion, manipulated video and live drawn animation. In some sections the performer wore the same costume as the digital doubles projected behind her, creating a doppelganger effect. In other sections, she created live automatic writing and drawings that simultaneously appeared on screen, leading the spectators to question their assumption that the projected imagery actually was pre-recorded. Possessed and re-animated by voices channelled from old films, she recalls Alan Cholodenko's notion of the *animatic* force that underpins cinema in which lifeless still photographic images are re-animated in the act of projection. For Cholodenko film is a type of animation. In his interpretation, the concept of animation – giving the illusion of life through movement - takes primacy over the manner in which the images were created. Developing this idea to encompass the act of spectatorship, Cholodenko reminds us that the viewer both reads and is written by the text. This is a reciprocal process, as Cholodenko says, "In spectring the subject, the gaze turns the subject into spectre(s)."[10] In addition, spectatorship is situated in the context of an interconnected web of other viewing experiences that both inform and are informed by each subsequent act of spectatorship. In Cholodenko's words, 'Cinema spectres the spectator even as the spectator spectres it, each having the other as its spectre, its haunted house, its corpse and its crypt.' [10]

Moving on from site-specific art installations, this article will now more briefly consider animations created for two historical sites now used as museums.

4. Turple (2012)

The strategy of using site-specific installation in historic buildings is not restricted to the world of fine art, but also used by museums to develop multiple narratives of space that add an extra dimension to their own interpretation of authentic historical artefacts. The Bletchley Park Trust, which looks after the historic centre for code-breaking in World War II, commissioned a series of art works to mark the centenary of the birth of cryptographer, Alan Turing, whose pioneering work led to the development of the first computers. The *Ghost Station* exhibition, curated by Art Hertz, was sited as a series of interventions into the permanent collection in the huts where Turing and his colleagues

worked together. Rather than recalling specific historic narratives, the artworks engaged in different ways with cryptography to not only commemorate the historic activities that had taken place in the space, but also create a link with contemporary society and communications technology.

Fig. 3. *Turple*, Bletchley Park, Milton Keynes, UK

The exhibition featured artworks such as, *Turple,* an animation generated by computer code in which the word 'Turple' is slowly changed into the word 'Apple'[11]. This text is inspired by the reference to a bite taken out of an apple in the Apple logo - itself a reference to Turing's suicide by eating a poisoned apple. The animation was sited in Hut 8, the Bombe Room, an auratic space where Alan Turing conducted his research into breaking the Enigma code. The animation served as a reminder of the brilliant work that had once happened in this ramshackle and neglected building and of the significance that Alan Turing's work still has. The exhibition took place just before the Bletchley Park site was restored and the site has now been redeveloped into a more modern visitor attraction that opened in 2014.

5. CUT! (2014)

CUT! was an exhibition at the Old Operating Theatre Museum in London[12]. This museum is sited in a former anatomical theatre and herb garret from the ancient St Thomas hospital. There has been a hospital on this site near London Bridge for over 1,000 years and, in this project, the museum's creative director, Kevin Flude, was particularly interested in attempting to bring back a sense of all the people who had once worked in this space that is now filled with lifeless items - glass cases and curious objects. Animations inspired by the museum's quirky range of artefacts from medical history were created by students from MA Character Animation at Central Saint Martins. The forty films that the students made were curated by student curators from MA Culture,

Criticism and Curation at CSM and placed as interventions into the museum's permanent collection, like a haunting or re-animation of the historic objects.

The films were projected onto the wall of the famous anatomical theatre, above or below cabinets and displayed on iPads tucked away in drawers and surgical cabinets. This juxtaposition between original, authentic, auratic objects and their reinterpretation and recontextualisation through contemporary, digital animation proved popular with visitors and raised issues about the communication of history and how audiences relate to original objects in glass cases. It enabled the museum to consider how to reinterpret their permanent collection through a temporary exhibition of moving images.

Fig. 4. Animation beneath a display case, *CUT!,* The Old Operating Theatre Museum, London

Conclusion

Vivian Sobchack argues that watching a film is not a passive experience, but involves a dynamic relationship between the viewer, the film and the lived-body situation in both viewer and viewed. She considers film to be an expression of experience through experience that the viewer constitutes through her own performative dialogue with the work:

> Watching a film is both a direct and mediated experience of direct experience as mediation… Watching a film, we can see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as the moved.[2]

Sobchack maintains that a film is structured in such a way that the viewer shares in a direct experience of activities depicted in remote locations. In the case of abstract images, and by extension animation, she asserts that the viewer identifies with and projects her own experiences onto the animator's own expression of their personal experience:

> And, as we watch this expressive projection of an "other's" experience, we, too express our own perceptive experience. Through the address of our vision, we speak back to the cinematic expression before us, using a visual language that is also tactile, that takes hold of and actively grasps the perceptual expression, the seeing, the direct experience of that anonymously present, sensing and sentient "other".[2]

Her argument runs the risk of adopting a classic, auteurist interpretation of film in that a film is equated with being the personal vision of one director. It also neglects the historical, cultural and social dimension to the viewing experience. Whereas Sobchack refers to pure experience as if a film were the perspective of one person, Alan Cholodenko uses animation as a guiding principle to point towards the constructed, ideological nature of the moving image illusions we see before ourselves – whether they are formally defined as animation or live action film – and how this, in turn, affects the viewer. What we see from our own 'necrospective' is affected by the interconnected, cultural context we are surrounded with. Spectatorship becomes spectreship, says Cholodenko, becomes the act of haunting and being haunted by simulacra: undead, cultural, historical, social memes and understandings that haunt us until our minds are spectred, our thoughts are ghosts. [10]

Sobchack's argument also neglects the contribution of the embodied experience of the viewer to the context in which the work is viewed. In *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty maintains that our knowledge starts with the body and the information about the world that we receive through our senses. The senses do not work in isolation, they work together in a moving, living body to create information about the world 'out there'. The space that surrounds us is not 'some sort of ether in which all things float'.[13] Because we can move around, we can see, hear or feel objects from different angles and, thus, we orient ourselves in the world:

> ... my body is the pivot of the world: I know that objects have several facets because I could make a tour of inspection of them, and in that sense I am conscious of the world through the medium of my body.[13]

Perception takes place from an orientated position, which connects[13] and anchors[13] the subject in the world. Since birth we have moved through three dimensions and experienced being at the origin of our own perspectival space.[13] This is a fundamental experience that comes before thought. Our senses are also linked to our motor functions.[13] Without conscious intent, we move closer to something that interests us, we cover our eyes to avoid looking at something, we sway to the beat of music we enjoy. Our body is a unified system with which we connect to the world outside ourselves.[14]

Reflecting on the experience of viewing animation (or film) as part of a site-specific installation demonstrates the importance of movement through the site of reception to the perception of the work. This paper has considered the affect of site and how places themselves can have a visceral impact on the visitor who comes to look at animation in an unfamiliar setting. It has argued that a site-specific installation can re-narrate the space in which it is situated and that the site is re-storied and temporarily estranged from its original purpose. Just as the animation creates a new layer of narrative in the site, so these two church buildings - home of spirituality and spirits; liminal portals between birth, life and death - and the two historic sites – once places of employment, full of people, now museums full of original objects, but lacking their original purpose - permeate and haunt the animation in return: adding a sense of history erupting into the present, adding kinaesthetic and sensory experience.

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