

A close-up photograph of a camera lens mounted on a tripod. The lens is partially covered by crumpled, translucent pink tissue paper. The lens is black with a textured ring. The tripod is also black. The background is a plain, light-colored surface.

DEPTH
OF PERCEPTION

SLIK
SH-705E

PHONY DENSITIES

JON DAVIES

Now I'm a lawn mower, moving all by myself across the lawn.

It's the middle of the night.

I'm a bag of money, falling slow motion into the picture.

1-800-DIAL-CASH

Now I'm a genie.

Now I'm a liquid cleaner ... on the floor.

On one side, I'm very white.

On the other side, I'm still dirty.

I'm an animated character, winking to the camera.

A tomato being sliced in half.

A piece of meat being cooked on the grill.

I'm ketchup being squeezed out of a sandwich.

Ice cream being put into a cup.

Being eaten.

— Tony Oursler, excerpt from *Telling Vision 3* (1995)¹

American artist Tony Oursler's delirious monologue captures the often bewildering psychic and physical effects of watching television. More than a hundred years of exposure to screens have loosened our grip on both our own materiality as embodied subjects and that of the objects inhabiting the world around us. To follow Oursler, we take our places next to the bottles of ketchup and the Kardashians in a 16:9 HD hall of mirrors of our own devising. The screen's two-dimensional plane allows us visual but not material access to things and experiences far beyond our corporeal

and geographical limits. This mercurial illusion of reality diffuses our attention, dematerializes the world and frames our imaginations.

Standing at the interface of screen images and physical objects, the exhibition *Depth of Perception* presents works by fifteen artists that play with our hold on materiality and substance in an ephemeral and flat-screen era. As objects onscreen are without depth, their apparent fullness and presence is false; in an artist statement Paul Sharits uses the term “phony densities” to describe the illusion of the screen’s promises.² Scholar Kate Mondloch characterizes the physical screen as a foil for the immaterial images it carries. She describes our interaction with media installation art: “This mode of viewing is simultaneously material (the viewer’s phenomenological engagement with actual objects in real time and space) and immaterial (the viewer’s metaphorical projection into virtual times and space).”³ As we shuttle back and forth between interacting with digital artifacts on screens and interacting with the material objects that surround us, the two commingle and their qualities co-infect. *Depth of Perception* engages these simultaneous registers of perception with the artworks vibrating between tangible and ephemeral states. Here in the gallery, everyday objects and conventions of looking are made strange.

Surface and Depth

Since at least the 1960s visual artists have considered the formal qualities inherent to film (followed by video), whether it be framing, projection or the materiality of celluloid film, magnetic tape and pixels.⁴ In gallery spaces their engagement with shutter clicks, spinning reels, boxy monitors and projection surfaces brought out the sculptural qualities of the projection apparatuses that, in cinema, had been hidden away in a booth. Their work conceptualized sculpture *in* time or, conversely, conceptualized film and video *as* and *in* sculptural objects and spaces⁵ to engage timely questions of presence and perception, illusionism and objecthood, embodiment and mutability.



The pioneering early video work of American artist Peter Campus focused on the interface of a body and its mirror image. His 1970s series of closed-circuit works confronted viewers with their own video surveillance image (live or delayed) in a series of disorienting choreographies. Campus's single-channel works such as *four sided tape* (1976) present the artist as medium: he transforms the technology of video and is transformed by it. We see him break, scratch and peel away his own image—including his face, that locus of empathic identification—through the use of chroma-key and other image manipulation techniques specific to video as an aesthetic medium. Radically destabilizing our sense of surface and depth, he engages in a violent pas de deux with his own reflection to get at what lies beneath.

Peter Campus, *four sided tape* (video still), 1976. Courtesy of the artist and Cristin Tierney Gallery, New York.



Like campus's work, Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller's film *Cut* (2013) renders the screen as a skin to be punctured and penetrated, with the cinematic interface acting as a fragile boundary between inside and outside. Through editing found footage with surgical precision, they craft a disturbing montage that exploits our reflexive identification with the figures we follow onscreen (what film theorists have evocatively called "suture"⁶). Close-ups of wounds, spilled blood and other unsettling tactile images inspire a certain nausea as the film potently cuts through self and other, the "flesh of the world"⁷ and our very own blood and guts.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work in phenomenology articulates how the perceiving self is always embodied and present within the world, never simply a detached, masterful eye/I. Judy Radul's work has long reflected on phenomenological questions, especially regarding perception and moving image technologies. Her camera, chair, conch shell and heater from the series *Object Analysis Spectator Poem* (2012) take the form of strange sculptural juxtapositions of familiar objects with fields of colour (in the



form of painted copper sheets that evoke cast-off screens), which wrap around and hang off them parasitically. Radul seeks to chart the distance between a perception and its representation; the objects and the sheets thus visualize a failed convergence. Additionally, each object was posed outdoors and photographed via a mirror, as if to catch it unawares. The photographs are then presented in the gallery in view of their subjects, forming a complex web between objects, perceptions and representations.

Dublin-based artist Linda Quinlan's work plays with the visual and the tactile as intertwining registers of perception. She is particularly drawn to the sensory confusions that characterize synesthesia—a neurological phenomenon in which sounds become associated with colours, for example. In *MROOUCTKH* (2011), a black-and-white video juxtaposes two



entities: a hungry, disembodied mouth and a spinning, shimmering rock. In *We woke early to a triangle surveying the room* (2011), a set of textures and forms interplay: pineapple-printed tights on a dancer's legs become a snake and a crocodile. The yellow colour of a heard but only briefly glimpsed tennis ball seems to leak out from the screen to form a puddle of silicone on the floor, rupturing into the gallery space.

Objects without Dignity

As digital screens offer greater and greater verisimilitude—to the point that HD imaging now seems to uncannily offer us *too much* visual information—the infrastructure of our cities erodes from neglect, and consumer products become emblematic of toxicity, globalized exploitation and

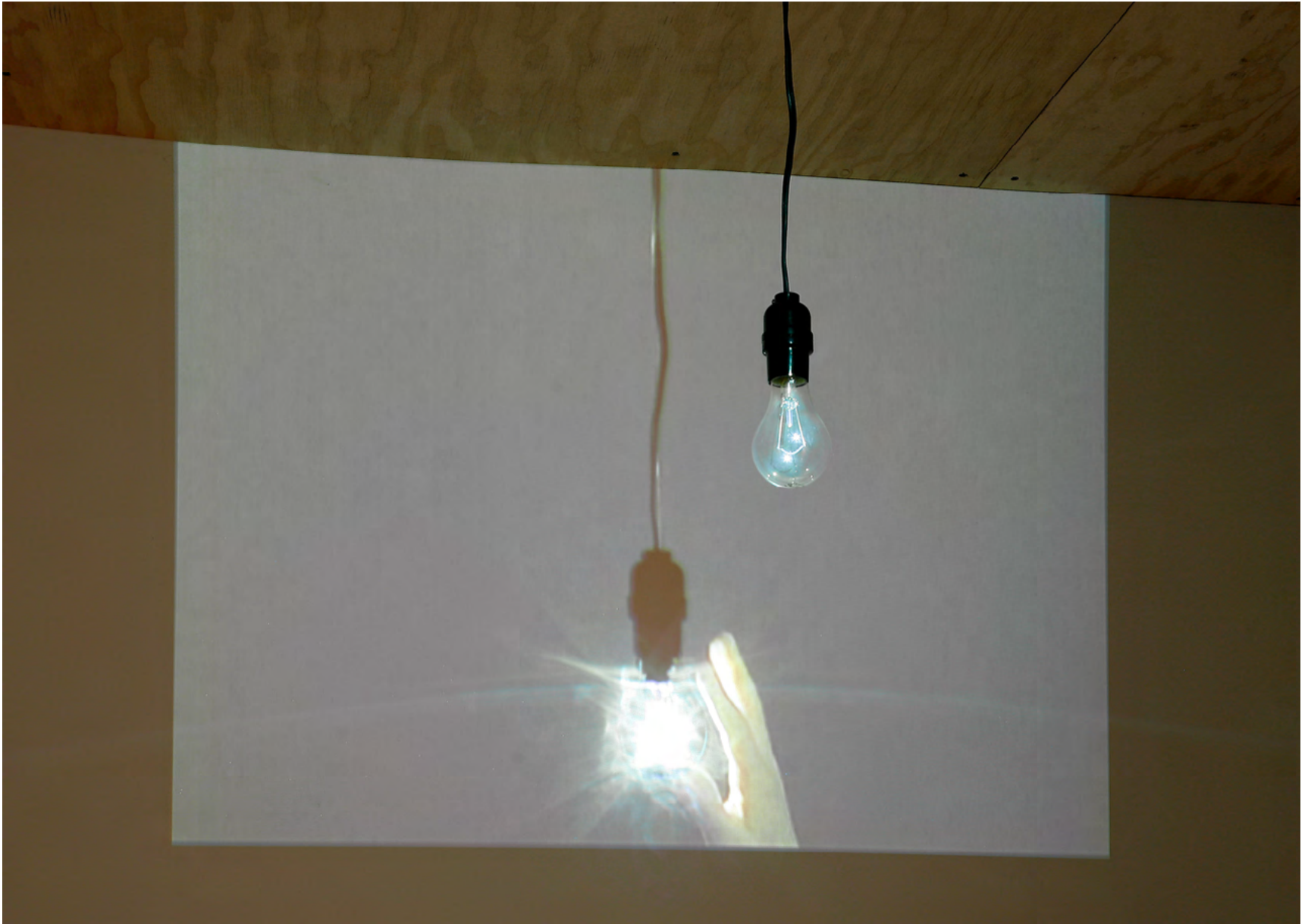
Linda Quinlan, *We woke early to a triangle surveying the room* (installation view: *Hypercolon*, SMART Project Space, Amsterdam), 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



failed capitalist dreams.⁸ Objects aren't what they once were; they appear wan and limp when measured against the screen's spectres. Describing pervasive obsolescence, philosopher Peter Sloterdijk posits, "The modern object is an object in time without any dignity [...] an object in a history of objects which surfaces in passing and which is meant to disappear."⁹

Vishal Jugdeo's *Stage Design for Disassociation* (2011) presents a dark and anxious *mise en scène*. The installation focuses on the backstage recording of a performed conversation between two women, Patty and Cynthia, which plays on a large monitor on the gallery floor. Simple black furniture and sculptural objects such as pots and a roll of carpet surround the monitor; two of these vessels "speak" as the two women at particular moments in their dialogue. Set in what appears to be an empty sound-stage—the actors' scripts are visible—Patty leads an anxious Cynthia through a quasi-therapeutic "open conversation" about the end of things, fullness and emptiness, and personal empowerment. The installation

Vishal Jugdeo, *Stage Design for Disassociation* (installation view: *The End of Money*, Witte de With, Rotterdam), 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



stages a literal disassociation as the women's subjectivities overflow from their bodies to inhabit these simple objects in the gallery. The work also provokes a generalized feeling of unease—mirroring Cynthia's own confusion during her session—as we are asked to contemplate the volatility of human emotion surrounded by cold, unfeeling objects.

A similarly inert light bulb hangs from the ceiling as part of Hadley+Maxwell's installation *...Um* (2006), a work selected from the Oakville Galleries permanent collection. Ostensibly quite simple, the work consists of this unlit light bulb—an object that has come to symbolize intellectual inspiration or a fantastic idea—onto and through which a video of an identical bulb is projected. This phantasmagoric light bulb is animated in all the ways the “dumb” sculptural one is not: it nimbly turns on and off and is moved around by an encroaching hand. The video offers a kind of mocking

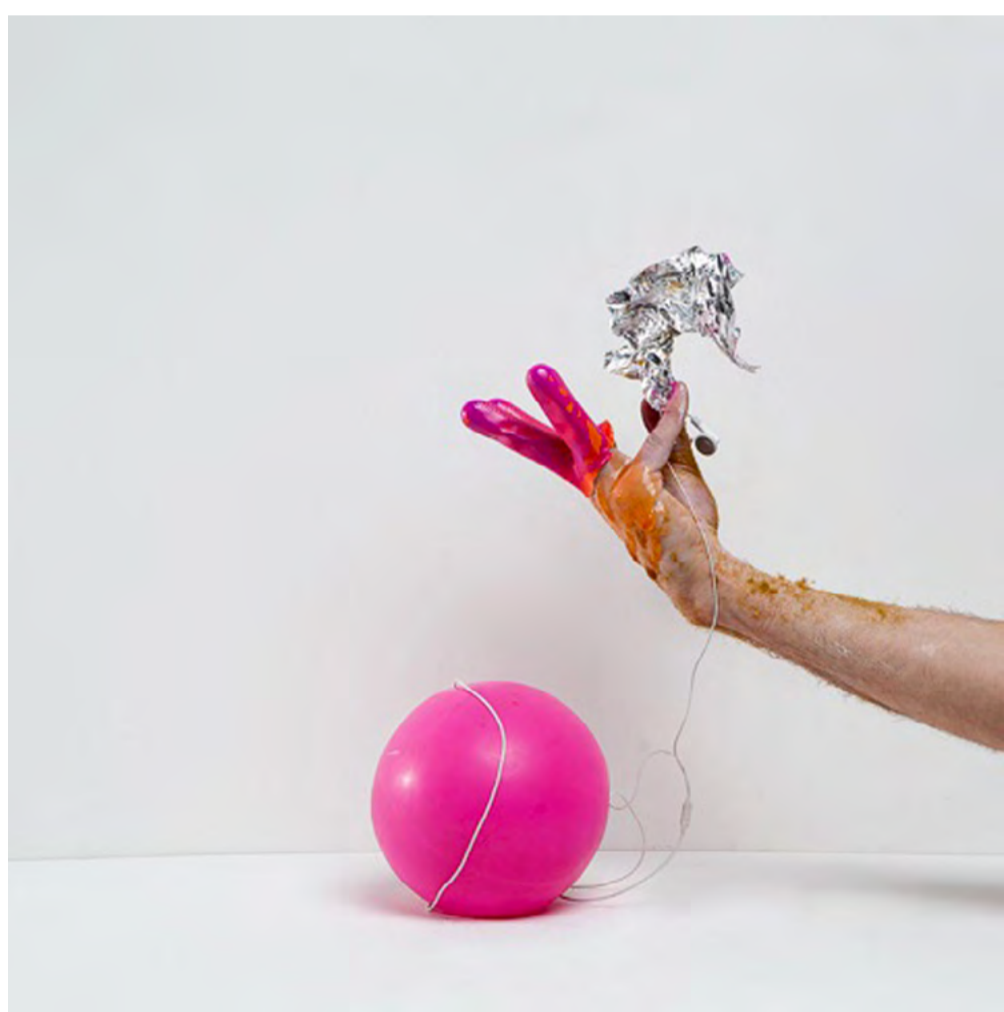
Hadley+Maxwell, *...Um* (installation view: *Into Black*, Western Bridge, Seattle), 2006. Courtesy of the artists and Jessica Bradley Gallery, Toronto. Photo: Mark Woods.

challenge to the static, real bulb, as it shows off all of the tricks its projected doppelgänger is capable of. On top of all this, the real bulb does not even illuminate anything; only the projector casts any light into the space.

Material Behaviour

Despite the exaggerated potency that objects seem to acquire through the power of the screen, their messy materiality in the physical world—or “meat space”—remain. Describing her practice, artist Helen Marten speaks of “exploring what it means to be a tribal human preoccupied with the status of toothpaste, the floppiness of pasta, eroticism of rubbish, or tedium of hair.”¹⁰ Beyond their capacity for artifice, moving images are capable of reacquainting us with the dense *thing-ness* of objects.

Alex Da Corte is fascinated by the incongruity of consumer desire and material fact. Drawing on the presentation and display strategies of advertising and retail, his eye-popping artworks (which are often compiled from scavenged goods, including other artists’ works) capture the moment of impact between our marketing-fuelled fantasies and the uglier, more dubious physicality of the products we consume. His music video *Chelsea Hotel No. 2* (2010) stages a variety of actions with foodstuffs and other everyday substances. Disembodied hands come in from off-screen to manipulate these materials against a blank backdrop,¹¹ the screen space a kind of laboratory for examining how they behave under the scrutiny of lights, staging and camera. The video is flanked by works from a related series of “hand photos,” displaying similarly absurdist tableaux with a diverse collection of spheres. Nearby, the slow-motion video triptych *A Season in Hell, Bad Blood* and *The Impossible* (2012) features a young man engaging in experiments involving his body and the weird solids and liquids arrayed before him. As with much of Da Corte’s video work, the triptych presents a highly seductive, designed staging where bodies perversely intermingle with things.

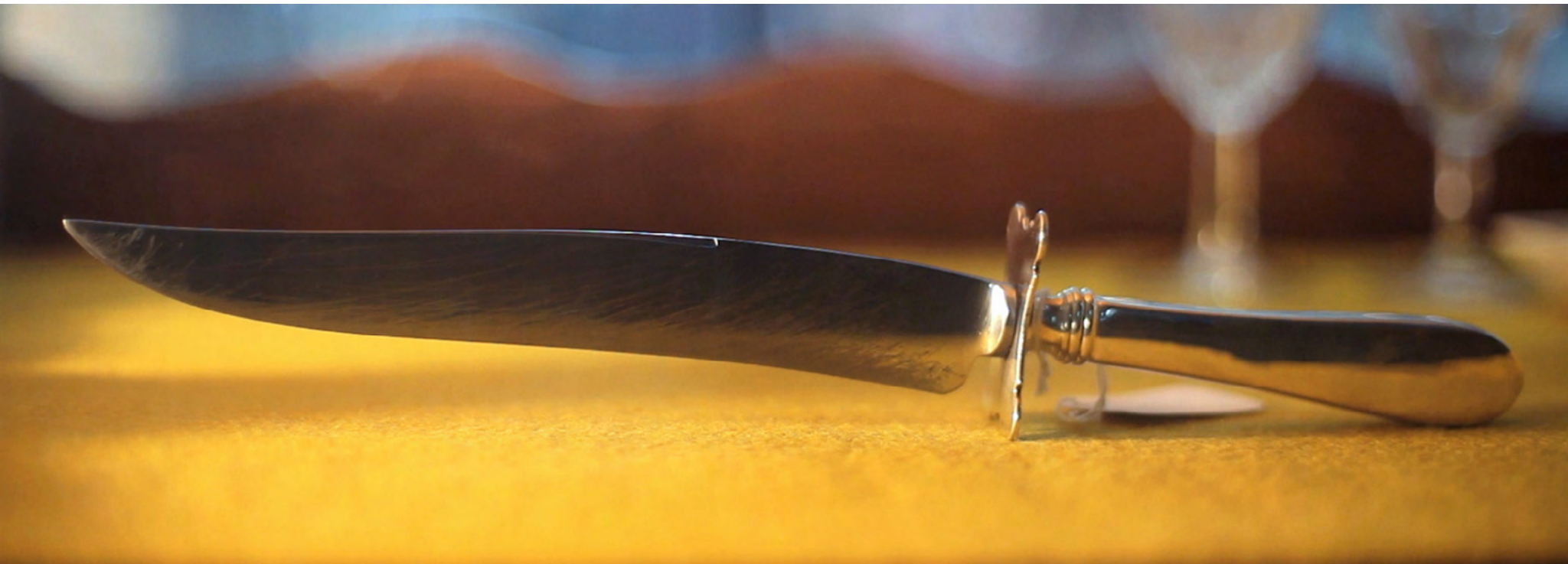


Alex Da Corte, clockwise from top left: *XXXTZ!*, *SCHWWPP!*, *ZZZPFT!*, *TAZZAH!*, 2012. All works courtesy of the artist.



Anne de Vries's video *Undercover Material* (2002) also presents us with an intriguingly tactile scene, but the exact qualities and contours of what we can see remain highly ambiguous. Evoking a bottomless clothes dryer—especially as it is presented on a boxy CRT monitor—a tumble of fabric, furniture and the occasional human body part jostle around in an endless loop. It is difficult to grasp where one object (human or otherwise) ends and another begins, let alone what kind of set this bewildering tumult was recorded in. In its dark and indeterminate depths, the morass occupies an opaque and even sinister non-space.

While presenting us with an object visible in all its crystal clarity, Owen Kydd's *Knife (J.G.)* (2011) is charged with a similar sense of menace (what *Aperture* called a “crime scene”¹² atmosphere). An homage to artist Jack Goldstein's 16mm film *The Knife* (1975), Kydd's “durational photograph”



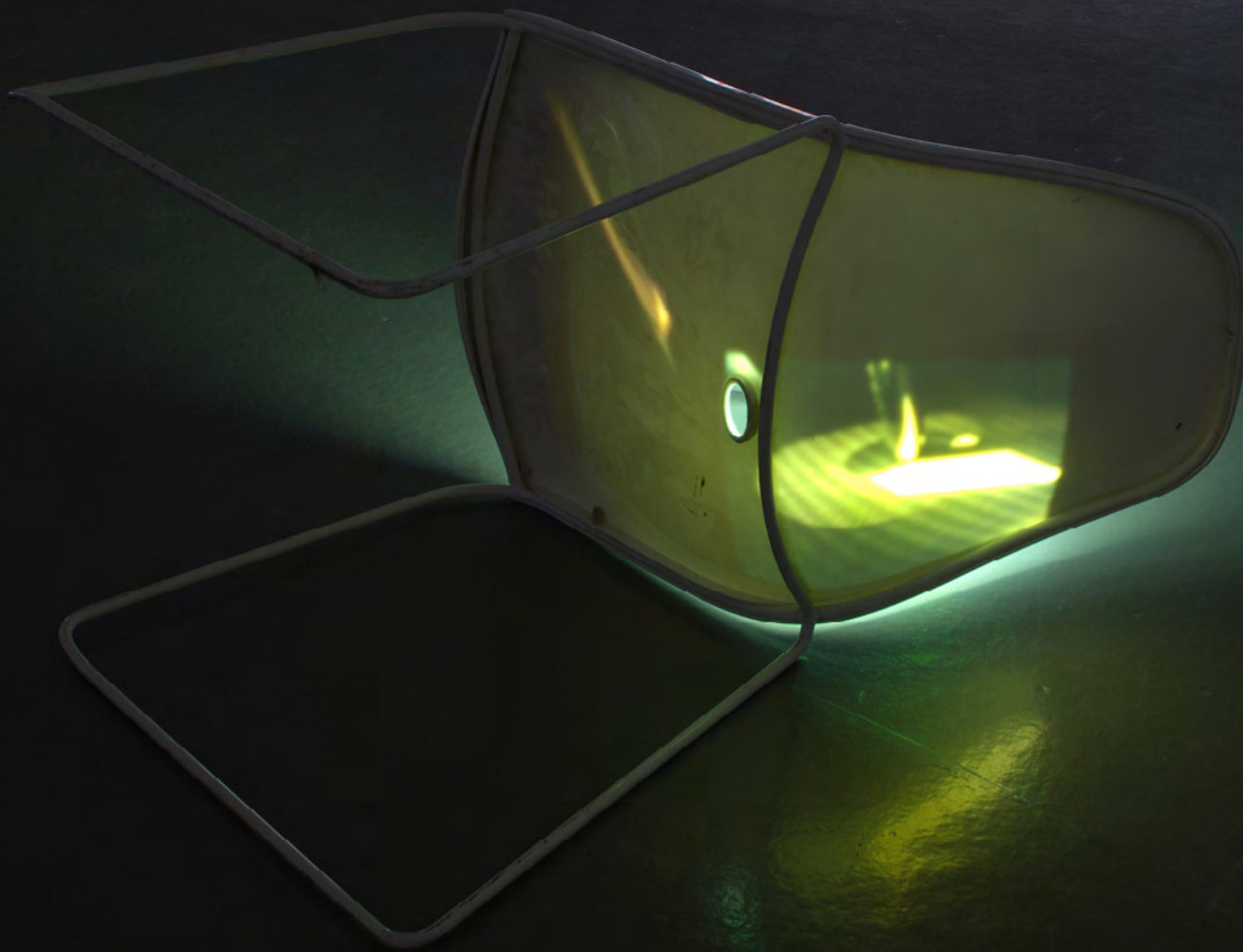
shows a brightly shining knife at rest in a store window.¹³ Seen in close-up and in HD, the knife's reflective surface acts as a distorting mirror, catching car headlights and the movement of passersby. Presented in a specially constructed display box and installed here on an IKEA shelf, the work oscillates between video, photograph and sculpture, the hard metal materiality of the blade gleaming in high-def. Kydd seeks out "atmospheric effects" to "creat[e] stillness out of duration," drawing attention to how moving images have taken on the flatness of photography thanks to the pervasiveness of flat screens.¹⁴

Beyond the Frame

Depth of Perception seeks to defamiliarize the screen, making these chameleonic constructs palpable and present. Artists have long poked and prodded the arbitrary parameters of the frame, a gaze-restricting conceit inherited from the twentieth-century technology of cinema.¹⁵ As moving image media developed and expanded through television, video and digital technologies as well as the internet, the screen's rigidly right-angle boundaries were denaturalized and took on more metaphoric roles: what once enclosed could now act as a malleable interface.

In her seemingly haphazard installations, Trisha Baga projects digital and 3D video on and through sculptural detritus strewn among the exposed

Owen Kydd, *Knife (J.G.)* (video still), 2011. Courtesy of the artist and Monte Clark Gallery, Vancouver.



playback equipment itself.¹⁶ The liquid projections caress and illuminate anything and anyone in their path, bathing the gallery in Baga's casually inventive thought-stream of found and recorded video that "bleeds [...] between art and life and making and gathering."¹⁷ Our fragile existence and fragmented gaze are affectingly present in her provisional and performative compositions. Her shadow play is no more poetically rendered than in *Halo* (2013), a relatively stripped-down work that uses a simple plastic chair, lying on its side on the floor, as a screen for a video of light playing over a carpet. The dazzling movement of light in the video is echoed by that of the projector's beam, curved and sculpted by the chair's contours.

In her two works in *Depth of Perception*, Marisa Hoicka plays with the familiar rectangles that circumscribe our vision. *Untitled (YouTube frame)* (2011), which she created with artist Johnny Forever, is a large-scale

Trisha Baga, *Halo* (installation view), 2013. Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali Gallery, New York.



crocheted yarn sculpture that the artists have used as a frame through which an audience can watch their performance work.¹⁸ The artists infer that we have been accustomed to viewing much of the world around us—from protest footage to cat videos—online, through this highly designed, immaterial interface. By crocheting it, they offer an outsized handmade rejoinder to the disembodied code behind it. Hoicka’s playful video *This is Not a Test* (2012), meanwhile, restages the iconic SMPTE colour bars (and accompanying aural sine wave) familiar from the medium of broadcast television. Hoicka again uses textiles sculpturally, mimicking the iconic geometric test pattern’s look and sound with a colour-blocked sewn curtain and her own vocal humming.

Finally, Oliver Husain presents three films on a floating screen in a baroquely decorated space of drawn, printed and sculpted forms designed by the artist. In *Leona Alone* (2009) and *Mount Shasta* (2008), Husain uses screens, scrims and stained glass to temper our views onto both the built landscape of a suburban Toronto neighbourhood and a puppet show

Oliver Husain, *Purpled Promises* (video still), 2009. Courtesy of the artist and Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

performing a script in progress. *Purpled Promises* (2009), meanwhile, strips the action down to a camera that pushes ever forward through, in the narrator's words, a "profusion of pompous passages." Gloved hands delicately snip beaded curtains, pull aside obstacles and prepare the path for the camera's relentless journey. The film culminates with the ominous narrator describing a scenario where a movie screen comes alive, slowly moving towards and eventually crushing the audience: punishment for venturing so far into its depths.

In Husain's work the screen manifests as a sentient entity—not merely a framing device designed to serve our needs, but an agent capable of violently asserting itself on any viewer who dares to gaze into it for too long. Husain's homicidal screen wittily reminds us that we would do well to scrutinize who or what frames and therefore controls our perspectives on the world. Only the future can tell what may come of the screen's transformations of ourselves, and of the objects we live among.

ESSAY NOTES

¹ Tony Oursler, "Telling Vision 3," in *Tony Oursler: Vox Vernacular*, Denis Gielen, ed. (Brussels: Mercatorfonds, 2013), p. 167. ² Kate Mondloch, *Screens: Viewing Media Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 5: "'Cinema is occurring when one looks at screens, not through them,' Paul Sharits proclaimed in 1974. 'The space between screens is filled with actuality without recourse to phony densities.' Sharits was writing in reference to his art gallery-based film works that he called 'locational,' but what could a 'cinema' of looking at screens be?" ³ Ibid, p. 17. ⁴ To give just a few Canadian examples: Michael Snow, Murray Favro and Wyn Geleynse. ⁵ In a 2002 discussion, Anthony McCall claimed, "The problem is that one does not look at video screens and sculpture in the same way. However placed within a space, when you watch and listen to video or film, you enter the elsewhere of the moving image, and you leave your physical body behind, which remains rooted to the spot. To study sculpture—or to explore architectural space—you must walk, measuring what you see with your eyes and your physical body. These two experiences are diametrically opposed." George Baker, Matthew Buckingham, Hal Foster, Chrissie Iles, Anthony McCall, and Malcolm Turvey, "Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art," *October* 104 (Spring 2003): p. 76. ⁶ See for example, Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). ⁷ This phrase was coined by the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in his later work.

⁸ There is a corresponding world of what artist and theorist Hito Steyerl calls “poor images,” degraded video images that circulate on YouTube, for example, which, in their poverty, seem more reflective of our material reality than glossy, detailed HD. See Hito Steyerl, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” *e-flux* #10 (November 2009), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>. ⁹ Peter Sloterdijk, “Neolithic Intelligence” in *Screen-Based Art*, ed. Annette W. Balkema and Henk Slager, *Lier en Boog* series, vol. 15 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 163. ¹⁰ Celia Archer, “Helen Marten,” *Crack Magazine*, undated (c. 2013), <http://crackmagazine.net/art/helen-marten/>. ¹¹ The figure of the hand recurs in *Depth of Perception*, reminding us of both the human body and its uncanny double, the mannequin, depending on whether it is setting something in motion or inertly directing our attention to an object. ¹² The Editors, “Interview with Owen Kydd,” *Aperture*, undated (c. 2013), <http://www.aperture.org/blog/interview-with-owen-kydd/>. ¹³ *Ibid.* ¹⁴ *Ibid.* ¹⁵ Artist Robert Irwin notes: “I look around at the world, and it’s loaded with these kinds of frames. But, actually, there are no frames in our perception. It’s a continuous envelope in which we move. You realize that framing is a device.” Olafur Eliasson and Robert Irwin, “Take Your Time: A Conversation” in *Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson*, ed. Madeleine Grynsztejn (London: Thames & Hudson; San Francisco: SFMOMA, 2007), p. 55. ¹⁶ In *Body of Evidence* (2012), Baga created a dazzling DIY prism by projecting video (of Madonna) through a single disposable plastic water bottle. ¹⁷ Jenny Jaskey, “Trisha Baga ‘Plymouth Rock 2’ at the Whitney Museum, New York” (interview), *Mousse Magazine*, 5 December 2012, <http://mousemagazine.it/trisha-baga-whitney/>. ¹⁸ See, for example, documentation of their work *Trust My Gut: A Drag Opera Surgery* at <http://marisahoicka.com/performance-art/>.

This electronic publication was produced in conjunction with the exhibition *Depth of Perception* curated by Jon Davies, Acting Curator, and presented at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens and at Centennial Square from 18 January to 15 March 2015.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Design: Mark Timmings
Editing: Meg Taylor
Copy-Editing: Ruth Gaskill

Cover: Judy Radul, *Object Analysis Spectator Poem (Camera)*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist and Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver.

Generously supported by:



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO



OAKVILLE

Og₂

Oakville galleries