4. Fountains and Grottos: Installation and the Neobaroque

Sean Cubitt

Here the path begins gradually to ascend beneath a depth of shade, by the side of which is a small bubbling rill, either forming little peninsulas, rolling over pebbles, or falling down small cascades, all under cover, and taught to murmur very agreeably

—Ian Hamilton Finlay

Preamble

We inhabit a new baroque, “at once a technique of power of a dominant class in a period of reaction and a figuration of the limits of that power” (Beverley 1993: 64). As in the old, the arts add layer on layer to the geology of allegorical significances, and simultaneously discover the vortex of instability at the heart of allegory itself, the native rock that splinters the palazzo’s facade at the Trevi Fountain in Rome. Like the theological allegorists of the seventeenth century, our phenomenologists throw their hands up in amazement at the raw immensity of sensuous experience. For them and us, globalization has produced not wealth but crisis and a retreat from mercantilism into a quasi-aristocratic distillation from the world (see Nehrlich 1987), a chaotic splurging of the superabundant fruits of overproduction in spectacular transformations of the natural into artifice, and the thoroughly mediated interactivity of audience participation in the spectacle of its own rule (see Maravall 1986: 75). Though the centers of each culture are regions of absolute power sequestered from the masses, court, or corporation, their cultural effect is centrifugal and turbulent. Its characteristic forms are the cabinet des merveilles (Stafford 1994: 217–79), the treatise on everything (Ellul 1964: 39–49), the picaresque in the baroque, the road movie, the CD-ROM, the DJ set (Toop 1995), and the chaotic mosaic of the trip as the apotheosis of transcendental
and infinite communication (Calabrese 1992) in the accelerated modernity of the late twentieth century.

The vernacular literatures of the fourteenth century and the printing presses of the fifteenth should have brought about a new communicative democracy, but the Latin clery hung on to the old international language as the measure of their intellectual caste. Just so global English, in a curiously abstracted form (kept apart from rapidly differentiating spoken dialects, in the process of becoming new tongues), provides engineering, transport, and Internet with a lingua franca divorced from local intercourse. That abstraction from the social propels us toward the accretion of ornament and, within that transfiguration of the natural into monumental artifice, toward a rage to control: to gather the entirety of the natural into the artifice of the human. For the baroque, this took the form of the explosion of nature into the human world: for us, its central metaphor is the virus, the irruption of the unholy into symbiosis with the administered efficiency of the modern. Like the baroque, we like to believe that we live in the emergent moment of a new and global civilization, when in fact we live entirely inside the crisis of a culture that, faced with the sudden reality of its other (the “savage” for them, the cyborg for us), is unable either to discover or to disengage its eyes from the empty grounds on which it has built its meanings. The ornamentation of design and manufacture masks our disembodiment, our immaterialism. An obsessive fascination produces the familiar unhappiness, the inability to choose what path to take: the road of absolute power or the woods of utter anarchy. Our arts, like theirs, are the expression of the strife between total order and abject chaos.

Of all the arts, music is most sensitive to the vicissitudes of order. John Cage’s response to the crisis in composition provoked his determination to open the edifice of formal music to the entropic, the aleatory, the unconfined. The absolutes of duration and extension, themselves codified by Kant from the logic of Cartesian geometry, Cage subjected to the accidents of an unscarable acoustic world. Yet this represents not only an openness to the other, but a controlling gesture toward the musicalization of the world, a restructuring of contingency around the structured listening of the musical ear. Music has become hegemonic, so that we hear even that which is least musical as though it were “stripped of its associative attributes, a minimally coded sound existing in close proximity to ‘pure’ perception and distant from the contaminating aspects of the world” (Kahn 1992: 3). The attempt to include the extramusical within music, far from reconnecting music with the world, abstracts the world’s sounds from their materiality, bringing them into a world of pure meaning, but a world that, because of its very purity, can no longer signify. This satisfactorily Zen conclusion, however, generates only a central void, around which the musicalized objectivity of the world is forced to evolve its ever more arcane extrusions of noise over silence. In what follows, I want to suggest that the baroque had found certain techniques of working with both sound and the immanent collapse of meaning; techniques that inspire material aesthetics, indicating exits from the impasses of accelerated modernity’s new baroque.
The Emblem in the Garden

The absurd, the obscene, and the mysterious return as the repressed of the enlightenment, the necessary resistance spawned by domination. As modernism ascends the Kantian path of medium specificity in Greenberg's account (1965: 193), so it generates surrealism, propaganda, and pornography. Neoclassicism and the neobaroque are the oscillatory poles of the contemporary as it navigates through the aporias of community: one thinks of Jeff Koons. In the contemporary, and for much of the century, we have eschewed allegory as bloodless abstraction and favored either abstraction itself or realism or iconographies without definite semantic reference. But despite the materialist claims of these strands of modern practice, abstraction, realism, and surrealism have shifted toward a kind of metaphysics, a displacement of meaning toward an elsewhere that is only compounded when cultural relativism sites it in an audience or a culture. The notorious Paris exhibition Les magiciens de la terre can function as exemplary neobaroque in its metaphysics, its immaterialism, its deferral of meaning to the place of the other, and its enchantment with the sensory superficies beneath which it presumes an enduring but always absent monad. Shamanism has become the chinoiserie of the late twentieth century.

As musical serialism and later minimal art sought, through multiples and rule-governed series, to annihilate the hierarchies that guaranteed the domination of the semantic, semantics as domination, they posed the question, increasingly pressing for a potentially globally networked society, not of meaning, but of the conditions under which meaning may become possible. Deprived of metaphorical thought, they reach a bleak plateau of insignificance. Stressing the techniques by which they produce themselves, their democracy becomes the fragmentation of the encyclopedia, but allied to a baroque sensuality of the pure object, its eroticism (see Lippard 1968), and, in the endlessly repeated fetishism of the thing, the minimal and serial achieve a decoration of the void. But these Eurocentric traditions of late modernism fail to negotiate the complex interweaving of the sensual and the conceptual, and in the binary opposition of these categories, are debarred from apprehending what it is to inhabit meaning, and be inhabited, in an age that has apparently abandoned it.

Ian Hamilton Finlay's garden at Little Sparta in Lanarkshire can suggest some initial understandings of what might be sublimated from the crucible of the baroque if the prejudices against ancient forms can be sloughed off. Stephen Bann (1977) notes of some of Finlay's print works that they are powerful reincarnations of an aesthetic that advancing rationalism had plowed under: the tradition of the emblem. These succinct combinations of image and motto throve in the baroque and are still apparent, however etiolated, in the language of corporate logos, albeit, as E. H. Gombrich notes of public architectural usage, by the nineteenth century “they had acquired the faculty of making themselves as invisible as the abstractions they were supposed to symbolize” (Gombrich 1972: 183).

Gombrich unearths the roots of the emblematic in a sermon given in 1626 by a
teacher of rhetoric, Christophoro Giarda, which describes how God, unable to make visible to the dull senses of men the radiance of His virtues, "spoke—and with a word all the elements, and within the elements all the species of things... He turned into so many Symbolic Images, as it were, of those perfections and made and designed them all at once and presented them in the Library of the Universe, or if you prefer so in this theatre, to the contemplation of man" (cited in Gombrich 1972: 148). In the emblem, the representation of an animal, a tool, an effect of the weather becomes an allegory of potentially stunning complexity, rising up from the most sublunary to the most sublime, its very simplicity a Platonic marker of its approximation to the divine. Finlay's one-word poems of the 1960s paved the way for his remaking of this tradition in the context of his secular, ecologically informed remaking of the poetry garden.

At Little Sparta, among the ponds, plants, and trees are small, mainly stone ornaments and inscriptions (photography tends to give them a monumentality they do not in general possess). Many of them pursue Finlay's self-proclaimed "neoclassical" interest in the history of European rationalism. Others, more germane to the topic at hand, carry simpler evocations. On one tall, slender tree is the plaque "I SING FOR THE MUSES AND MYSELF," a phrase quoted by the apostate emperor Julian from the musician Ismenias, at once a traditionalist statement of dedication to the muses, an act of independence, and a statement on behalf of the tree itself. It is possible (though I can find no documentary evidence) that Finlay is a believer in the actuality of the Muses. What is clear is that the plaque acts to emblematize the tree. The tree is no longer purely itself, though it retains its living sap and its discrete position in the garden as itself. It has acquired in addition the function of meaning, and in payment for this burden of signification, the song of the wind in its branches has become an art.

Another plaque, in a grove of birches, reads "THE SEA'S NAVE/THE WIND'S SHEAVES." Here the punning of sea and tree familiar throughout the garden, of architecture and harvest, are woven into an auditory pun, in which the onomatopoeia becomes integral to the susurrus of the leaves. Finlay so involves his garden not only in the restitution of the lost art of the emblem, but also in the reintegration of sound and word, sound and image, sound and referent. Heard from the position of Douglas Kahn cited earlier, this suggests also a retrieval of a further art outside the hegemony of music. The baroque garden was a place of water, of fountains throwing rainbows in the sun, of gurgling, bubbling rills, splashes and plashing, drips and trickles: Finlay's trees, and his own fountains and streams, articulate not only a remaking of the ancient arts of hydraulic spectacle, but their articulation with the word as spoken and heard. This is no logocentrism. These are the voices not of the reader, certainly not of the poet, but of the grove itself and, in its rhyming with sea and field, of the wider ecology beyond.

Such emblems have four elements: the carved word, the living tree, and the sounds of tree and word. Here the tree and its sound are "real," neither recordings nor representations. But both are artificial in the most ancient sense, crafted so that we may experience them as filled with a human, if not a commodifiable, meaning. In fact, the very humanity of their significance deprives them of associations with a creator, if
not with the sacred, and links them to Andrew Marvell’s oceanic “green thought in a
green shade” (“The Garden,” line 48; Marvell 1976: 101) and Ben Jonson’s dreamy
pastoral where “The soft birds quarrel in the Woods / The Fountaines murmure as the
streames doe creepe, / And all invite to easie sleepe” (“The Praises of a Countrie Life,”
lines 26–28; Jonson 1954: 252). I do not want to interpret Finlay’s work, certainly not
as linked to the pastoral unconscious of the English baroque, but to point out a
specifically rhetorical aesthetic here in which the emblematization of the living wood
allows us to hear it likewise neither as music nor as nature, but as an element of a
metaphorical ensemble in which the imagination of the real becomes a poetic zone,
“commencing in delight and ending in wisdom.” This stands at a stage between the
(Cagean) myth of a naive and pure perception and the mediation of a recording,
photo- or phonographic, a critique of the natural or the industrial sublime.

The word of the emblem opens a channel between mark, sound, voice, and
image. In supplanting image with green things, Finlay’s garden renders a meditative,
pleasant and instructive space in which these orders of knowledge are not so much
challenged as invited to play in a different mode of reverberation and echo. This is a
sound art that restores the renaissance sense of “wit” to “Alberti’s dictum that statuae
ridiculae (humorous or funny statues) were appropriate for a garden [where] play
combined with the unexpected” (Lazzaro 1990: 152). For Nicola Salvi, architect of the
Trevi fountains in Rome, fountains and their waters “can be called the only everlasting
source of continuous being” (cited in Moore 1994: 49): since Heidegger, our being has
become becoming, and the everlasting conquered by the fleeting. Salvi claimed indefi-
nite wisdom: at Little Sparta, the fountain has been appropriated to wit, where
Finlay’s best-known exemplar is cut in the shape of a dripping aircraft carrier on
which, occasionally, some waterfowl perches. The intermittent trickling sound sur-
rounds the stone ship with an other world, the unexpectedness, the hard illumination
of metaphor.

The Monstrous and the Monstrance

Freud recounts the story of a man who finds sleep after his son’s death and who
dreams that his child was standing beside his bed, and caught him by the arm and whis-
pered to him reproachfully: “Father, don’t you see I’m burning?” (Freud 1976: 652; empha-
sis in original). Among the functions of the dream, for Freud, is the apparent return of
the son to life and to his father’s side. When he awakes, he finds a candle has fallen
onto the bier and the boy’s winding-cloths are alight. Flame, fire, raises the dead, if
only for an instant: the instant before we wake.

What does the Wimshurst generator, central device of Judith Goddard’s instal-
lalion Reservoir (1993), resemble, in silhouette, in its moment of stillness, if not the
monstrance, the golden sunburst about a crucifix in which the Blessed Sacrament of
Catholicism is carried when it is shown (Latin: monstrare) in the ceremony of bene-
diction? The monstrous nature of the Eucharist is its categorical impossibility, a com-
bination of bread and Godhead, the sacramental presence of the divine in the humblest of foodstuffs, and that the Son of God would have died to return to his Father. In its baroque solidification of light into gold, it tempts with transgression of divine boundaries. The monstrance of the Wimshurst arcs, and in its light we seem to see the momentary passion of God for his creation, which is all and more than we can stand of God’s love. “The conquest of the superfluous gives a greater spiritual excitation than the conquest of the necessary. Man is a creation of desire, not need” (Bachelard 1967: 34). This is the relation of the secular to the sacred.

It is monstrous that God should devote his love to us: it defeats our understanding of nature and insults reason. But such too is the flash of the senses in the senseless moment of conception to which all dreams of fire, following Freud, are condemned to refer us. And monstrous to demonstrate that impossibility, a Faustian travesty of nature to make fluid electricity from static, to mime the crack of creation from the rubbing of resins, to make a miniature of the awesome lightning of God’s hand, the thunder of his voice pronouncing the first words: “Let there be light,” the words that Edison first dreamed of recording when, in Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s 1881 story L’Eve future, he preempts the cinema with his talking automaton (see Michelson 1984; Bellour 1986). The logos is sound giving birth to light: in recording, their simultaneity is their magic; in the emblem, their disjunctive concatenation is their poetry.

But here, as the millennium turns, the divine is as remote from us as from the graving needle of the phonograph. Marina Benjamin describes Goddard’s installation succinctly:

In a white space, a Wimshurst machine enthroned in a perspex case faces a projection of a waterfall whose deep roar fills the air. The Wimshurst’s majestic stillness is broken only when the beam-breaking viewer crosses an invisible threshold. Then it comes to life, with a smart industrial snap, producing electric sparks, that are instantly magnified and projected in place of the water from the Villa d’Este. In a black space a trio of ceiling mounted water drips release droplets one by one onto a metal tray passing time. When the beam-breaking viewer triggers a strobe, the light transforms the water drops into iridescent jewels that appear by turn to be suspended in space and to travel upwards in defiance of gravity. To one side of the space a trio of 3” LCD monitors broadcast the familiar trace of an ECG, the human equivalent of the disembodied spark, and every so often the transient, flickering image of a gender reassignment operation wipes over the three screens. (Benjamin 1996: 68)

We think of accidental things: the contingent storms striking obliquely on the accidental slime that first knit molecule to molecule at the threshold of life. Or more erratically trace our primal tale to Mary Shelley’s Promethean (forever overlaid with James Whale’s psychopathic) Dr. Frankenstein among the swagging clouds, beckoning the spark of life into his ill-assembled New Man from the tumult overhead. The electrical spark, the flash of an instant fecund with futurity, is our most powerful emblem of beginnings: not fear, but terror, reason’s complement.
The beginning of video was monstrosity, the act of showing, as it was for the cinema (see Gunning 1990; Burch 1990: 162–85). The exhibition is exhibitionist. But in Reservoir’s space, the showing includes, as cinema does not, the illumination of the visitor, instantly promoted from spectator to participant, not because by breaking the beam she triggers new actions, but because projected light illuminates and makes visible the viewer with the viewed. Video drags us back from the darkness into the originary light. Meanwhile the sudden whirling of the machine, the clattering of the strobe, the spark and its amplification in light and sound become again emblems, rhetorical moments of a complex never quite in sync with itself.

Here are not just flowing images of water, electronically mediated, but actual water, and electronics operating in the same space, signaling danger because they are dangerous. But wet electricity is the elementary human body, which the installation draws into audible visibility, even as it unpacks its sources: it is our bodies, at their conception and in their workings, that are dangerous, and whose delicate waterproofing is at risk and in question.

Of all our emotions, fear keeps us most profoundly in touch with the world, even as it teaches us to flee from some part of it. Afraid, we no longer contest the world’s claims over us, and so recognize the materiality of our bodies, the physis we share with the world, even when it appears sometimes so alien and far away. At the same time, though, you realize that the world is not as innocent or natural itself, but is already changed by its contact with our species. If I were tempted to psychoanalysis of water, and to the sort of daydreams that an angler has beside a deep, slow stream, seeking the maternal metaphor to pair with God’s paternal roar, I’d have to disturb my charm with the reflection that in this work are no rivers or lakes, but only fountains, the artificial taming of the flow.

The articulate and organized flow of water is the human world manifesting itself in imitation and recreation of the natural, and thus an even fitter metaphor for the currents that power the machinery of the piece, not harnessed so much as poured into conduits, channels, flows. And interrupted. A curtain of water in video projection and the three drips whose fall, every now and then, is interrupted by the stroboscope and reversed are transmutations of water through the fire of electricity, and in their combination is the germ from which begins the process culminating in the viewer (viewed).

Dispersed among these elements, the body is itself no longer legible as the origin, which for so much of contemporary Western society it has become. This body too can be dissolved, as easily as your attention and sense of self can be dissolved into the flow of water projected in the first chamber of the work. Mesmerized by the flow of water and images, dissolving in their ambiguous motion up or down, the body is no longer anchored. In the second chamber, the droplets, like the stella maris, ascend in spite of gravity into the empyrean, emblems of the Mother Gods.

Transverse, the flash of creation as it slashes across the continuum of mat(t)er, transverse the heartbeat of the electrocardiogram, though held in its place by wires in vertical tension echoing the fall and rise of water, and flashing once and once again
the documents of the human hermaphrodite, the vulnerability and instability of sexual identity before the surgeon's knife. The ease with which at first you want to make a sexual sense of this primal scene disperses as it is delayed, like the sound of the drips caught, amplified, delayed, and treated, difference deferred as identities are multiplied, not endlessly, but enough, at the place that coy doctors call "the waterworks."

No understanding can come from within. Knowledge is dependent on the interplay of the world and us, and for that knowledge to have power and meaning, we cannot split it between us and the world, subject and object. We must put our own existence on the line, if we would learn from the green world or what we have made in it. Then knowledge, too, should fill us with holy dread and prescient fear, as it did our first parents in the Garden. That garden, too, was super-natural, nature made orderly and laid out for its creatures, an Eden that the gardens of the Villa d'Este, like so many others, yearned to evoke. But where they sought to tame nature into suitable guise for humans' consumption, Goddard's garden of electronic delights seeks to re-organize perception into the shape suited to these objects.

If technology can be accused of placing a medium between us and the world, still we must accept that experience, upon which all knowledge must be built, continues, and that that experience must be an experience of the technological. There is a technology that has shaped the woods and fields as much as the roads and houses, each mired in deep with history—a quality of time of which nature was always by definition ignorant. Indeed, if anything, only ignorance is natural—and to be avoided as such. The same technology that makes the landscape picturesque and birds sing has shaped our own perception. Not only our world but the frame through which we look at it are technological, and it behooves us thus to undertake a prolonged and difficult meditation upon what the technologies of experience and perception are, not in pursuit of some lost pastoral or religious moment of natural ignorance, but because we must recognize the possibility of constructing that relationship anew. It's no novelty to argue that even our own bodies have been technologized, or that sexuality has been instrumentalized and remade in the image of a world order in which oppression can be mapped from class to gender or vice versa. To unfix the social ordering of sex, the still potent mythologies of gendered creation and origin, to re-create the creation of subjectivity in the technological: these are good works to undertake, better to achieve.

The roar of a cascade at Tivoli is transformed not only by recording but by the specific acoustics of the space in which Reservoir is installed, as is the sound of the three drips. The sound art of water "taught to murmur" is modified in the age of recording, amplification, and broadcasting, seeming to secure a sense of purpose even in the pursuit of tranquility. Here the amplification and the transport of sound from one place to another is anchored to the physical presence of sound sources, not to diminish the recorded, but to place it as itself a mode of flow, across which the sudden crack of arcing voltages functions in a complex allegory of the natural and the scientific, the rational and the metaphoric. In its way, it too is a garden: not a retreat, to
paraphrase Finlay's *Unconnected Sentences on Gardening*, but an attack. It assaults the human body, splitting it abruptly into its emblematic constituents, and inducing its sense of terror with surgical exactitude in the secular mystery of the living auditor.

**Electricity, Scent, and Sound**

The emblematic inhabits Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1994), an *impresa* also in the literal sense of an imprint made of the interior of a house subsequently demolished. The intensity of memory evoked in touching the meticulous trace of weathered interiors, like the cellular memory you have of furniture from childhood or of forming chords on a much-loved but forgotten musical instrument, locates the specificity of this house as the beginnings of an allegorical exploration of the metaphorical structure of the concept “house.” Similarly, it washes through the connection between water and electricity in the exposed cabling of installations by Susan Trangmar and Chris Meigh-Andrews.

In Meigh-Andrews's *Streamline* (1991), where structures of intertextual connotation are played as malleable memories, the flow of images and electrons is mimicked in the reversing flow of water along a stream of monitors. But here a problem in the aesthetics of sound recording becomes urgently apparent. When the image reverses direction, the sound retains its linearity. At this point, it is severed from its indexical function, which it shared with both recording and the photographic: “What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then” (Barthes 1977: 44). That illogicality is uncoupled in the leap the sound makes away from the image. The metaphorical structure breaks down. The piece is condemned to comment on and resist a logic of representation and intertextuality, rather than build a new metaphor.

A related failure dogs the epic construction of Douglas Gordon's *24 Hour Psycho* (1996), in which Hitchcock's 1960 *Psycho*, transferred to video, is slowed down to fill a day, projected on a big, translucent screen so you can walk around it, see its obverse, and contemplate the minutiae of its mise-en-scène with the attention of an iconologist. The artist (in conversation) explains that he wanted specifically to use only domestic equipment to build the image, ruling out the possibility of slowing the sound track to match. As a result, not only do we lose the pursuit of the cry in Bernard Herrmann's score (see Kalinak 1992: 3–16; Chion 1992: 135–37) and the constructions of interiority and eavesdropping that power the film (see Weis 1984); we are also plunged into Maxim Gorky's "realm of shadows" (appendix to Leyda 1983), the primal scene of the movies as simulacrum, ghosts without color or sound, pure signifiers on a fatally linear course. Again, like *Streamline*, *24 Hour Psycho* can only, as a result, elaborate a metacommentary on the movies, without dispersal of slowed-down sound into its constituent rumbles and, specifically, without an inversion of the sound track comparable to the reversal of the image, so losing the serialist democratization of the
image-sound hierarchy as well as the possibility of investigating the metaphorical structure of recording. (For an example of such a metaphorical structure in amplification of performance art, see my analysis of Laurie Anderson in Cubitt 1994).

The resources available to us include refusal of the notion of modernity, and especially the conception of modernity as crisis. As an aesthetic strategy, the result can be astounding: the work of Daniel Reeves, an American resident in Scotland, is able to draw on that most secular of religions, Buddhism, to define a natural organization of space and time, through the use of organic materials (wood, stones, rice, water) and images of landscapes and animals. The result, as in his 1990 installation *Eingang/The Way In*, is of time and space in harmony: impassive, gorgeous, it looks and smells delicious, and returns to the gallery the possibility of an ecological relation to the world from which too much of modernity has severed most of us. One thinks of Wilfrid Thesiger, the great traveler, for whom the only invention worth taking on his explorations was the camera, or of Sam Peckinpah, for whom the modern world’s only saving discoveries were cinematography and six guns. A sense of nobility disengages itself from the work, a sense compounded by the Rilke poem on which it draws, which reads in part, “Whoever you are; some evening take a step / out of your house which you know so well. / Enormous space is near, your house lies where it begins” (Rilke 1981). Unburdened by Rilke’s philosophical engagement with the “death of metaphysics,” Reeves can read the poem as a modern route to the unknowable sublime, immanent as the sky is omnipresent. Reeves’s work is a grotto in the garden, a place of retreat.

A second route involves a change of direction within the problematic of modernism. The German critical theorist Jürgen Habermas formulates the issue thus in his critique of the philosopher of history Michel Foucault: “To be sure, as long as we only take into account subjects representing and dealing with objects, and subjects who externalise themselves in objects or can relate to themselves as objects, it is not possible to conceive of socialisation as individuation” (Habermas 1987: 292). If a central characteristic of Western modernity has been the construction of a self-reflexive subjectivity, a human thought that can reflect upon its own rationality and in doing so take itself as object, and if in doing so, such a subjectivity is also bound into a dialectic of subject and object in all its dealings, not only with itself but with the world, then it is incapable of genuinely understanding the processes of modernity as relationships between subjects, between people. Such is the philosophical kernel of the aesthetics of art’s autonomy from Kant to Greenberg and the source of its impasse at the high point of modernist art practice. One can either move backward toward the magical recovery of a lost union with the world or one can move forward by insisting that the production of such a subjectivity is a historical and therefore a social construction.

At the moment that you recognize the existence of another subjectivity, you enter the realm of the ethical. In Keith Piper’s *Trade Winds* (1992), in which packing cases reveal the dismembered body of an African bound to the diaspora of the slave trade and migration, the notion of identity is itself put through the mill of ethics. To cry
out for a postmodern amorality seems to me premature, and dangerously so. In Piper’s work we see globalization as the continuation of empire by other means, a continuity unmarked by epistemological breaks or historical rupture. Like Reeves’s *Eingang*, Piper’s *Trade Winds* filled the gallery with the smell of wood, but where Reeves used monumental sections of trunks from storm-damaged trees, Piper’s were splintered, rough-finished packing crates, their smell not the promise of a persistent nature awaiting our return but the fading scent of home as it is turned into another exportable commodity, like the scent of spices fading in Rita Keegans’s *Cycles* (1992). Piper’s installation mourns the disintegration of African roots in the process of diaspora, equating the dispersing scent with the constantly fading phosphorescence of his digital images. But it may also be read—against the grain—as a variant on the fountain, as the splattering scintillation of light and scent into a world outside the rough-hewn boxes, and with a more complex understanding of the genocidal as the unnecessary, contingent, brutal condition of a modern subjectivity, a modern ethics.

To the extent that the work thrives on its odor, part of the sensorium we have yet to mechanize, its scent hauls us into the present’s ephemerality; to the extent that it collides recorded and manipulated images and sounds with the haptic and the internal organs of the sense of smell, it matches the material with its histories. Those histories include an act of global barbarism that made the modern and that forms the unavoidable conditions for the existence of the work. It is in such a moment of dark meditation that the material technology of metaphor makes itself apparent. The neobaroque has made its own the old baroque’s disjuncture from the world, yet in the debris of history it is still possible to make a bricolage from the shards of a forgotten art, itself ruptured by Platonism, to discover in its efficacy ways we might understand our new relationships.

**The Future Sounds**

Vaucanson built a duck. It was the talk of Europe in 1741. It ate, defecated, walked, and quacked like a duck. It was an automaton, and with his flute player and whistling drummer boy, was one of the most celebrated of a day that revealed in aimless invention. Vaucanson was something of a celebrity, and rather than lose him to Frederick the Great, Cardinal Fleury gifted him with the inspectorate of silkworks. Vaucanson not only accepted the sinecure: he set about improving the silk mills, his inventions forming the basis of the Jacquard loom of 1804, itself, with its punch-card-governed machinery, a prototype of the computer (Giedion 1948: 34–36). Like Babbage’s difference engine in an age of swift returns, Vaucanson’s mill failed to take root under the Catholic and absolute monarchy. He survives more frequently in histories of automata and simulation. Yet there is something remaining in D’Alembert’s homage to him of the marvelous materiality of the things he made. The proof of these Cartesian devices was their breath: their ability to sound.

Such was the apogee of fountain design: that fountains might neither merely emu-
late the natural nor guide it toward artifice, but give to the garden the voices of instruments and people. Hidden devices transformed the running water into cunning replications of hunting horns and laughter. In an age without recording, they formed a fixed, repeatable repertoire of sounds, in the meeting of water and air where the voice is. Elaborated beyond the sound arts of Tivoli, the fountain became an element of technique, a site for marveling at the ingenuity of men and the wealth of their patrons, a commitment of the fountain to the arts of music. So the fountain began to lose the structural power of metaphor, to tumble into the banality of abstraction, and its moment at the cusp of crisis, between the human and the natural, dissolved.

With electricity, we have again a miracle in our midst. That light, music, TV, and the telephone have become all but necessities of urban life cannot remove the wonder that can still overwhelm us when, faced with Goddard’s Reservoir, we glimpse the unearthly powers that snake through our conduits and weave themselves into our most intimate lives. Only the fear we have of nuclear power stations still recalls the awe with which the 1920s viewed the Battersea power station or Edison’s laboratory. Yet we have not, since the days when the roar of Nikola Tesla’s arc generators could be heard ten miles away, discovered the fountain’s equivalent for this mysterious force. Perhaps, like our forebears, we find this fluid so precious that we content ourselves with electrical and electronic irrigation. The marvels of the shopfront display and Coney Island have faded into our background; perhaps because they existed only to celebrate wealth, not themselves (see Williams 1982; Schivelbusch 1988; Marvin 1988), they came to disenchant not only the night but metaphor itself. Nowadays, we turn to the archaic, baroque chinoiserie of the firework for our most spectacular celebrations. And where the electric still amazes us—perhaps approaching an oil refinery at night, or in some crazy laser display—it is the vision, not the sound, that catches our breaths.

The claims of the radio arts (see Kahn and Whitehead 1992; Strauss 1993; Augaitis and Lander 1994; Weiss 1995) are powerful incentives to an understanding of the ways in which distribution technologies have altered our relation to the electrical. But the conditions under which both radio and electricity have been delivered to us as largely domestic and even individualized consumer goods have curtailed their possibilities. Radio has become largely a medium for distributing materials produced beyond broadcasting: a medium for discrete programs, just as electricity is the medium enslaved to devices that replicate older machines—cookers, brooms, candles, typewriters, pianolas. The tyranny of the Cartesian walkman and the in-car stereo has transformed sound’s distribution into consumption. As with computing networks, the struggle is not just to gain access (access to what?) or to remedy the content (why create a better Price Is Right?), but to reengineer the machinery that defines consumption as consumption, as technique of individuation and domestication enforced by the headset and the multiple private radios that populate so many homes.

How are we to know that we are in the broadcast world? The telephone and radio monopolies bifurcated over the cartelization of one-to-one and one-to-many transmission: there is no many-to-many. We want the Internet to be this democratized zone,
but anyone knows how it reproduces the formats of magazines, TV, and library catalogs, how impoverished its soundscapes are, how narrow its solo windows at the terminal. We do not know what a network sounds like. You might buy white goods—fridges, say—on the basis of their hum: not many do. We are happy to select them for their efficiency and looks, but not their sounds, which we will live with for decades. But then, with other, more carefully marked machines, we have an aesthetic: the purr of a well-tuned bicycle or a 16mm projector, the precision of a clicked shutter are pleasurable things that have their own beauty. The machines that tend to be so marked for us are the machineries of transport and communication, the sounds of networks, however mundane—even the flush of a WC can satisfy. What we hear is the perfect functioning of the support.

And its opacity. Critically, the support is a physical entity, as the frame, the monitor, the walls are integral content of installation art. In effect, the support is a system, the conditions for the existence of the work. Before hearkening to its semantics, a critic should refer to the conditions of a work's meaning, its systemic positions in the webs that make it possible. The sounds that support networked distribution—boot-up warnings, error signals, the hum of the hard drive—are extrinsic. Not only do we not listen to them: they are terminal sounds, not network sounds. Alternatively, the humming and thrumming that electromagnetic activity induces in cables are extrinsic in that they are present at neither terminal. Stellar's *Ping Body* performance (1996), like other of his recent networked body pieces, begins to point in a direction that might make these connections sound. The artist's body becomes a feedback loop integrated with the network, responding to and emitting signals attuned to the bulk, rather than the semantic content, of network traffic, the body wired to connectivity, systemic. An indication of the missing sound support, the hyperamplified and distributed whine of the central nervous system in *Ping Body* argues that the elements of a body are already a webwork and connected to galactic powers.

The obverse of Stellar's optimism is audible in Mona Hatoum's installation *The Light at the End* (1988). This is a pared-down, near-minimal work, a narrow passage, the end of it illuminated by fine vertical electric filaments that, as you approach, are warm, hot, burning; that give off the odor of that burning household dust which is sloughed-off human skin cells; that hum. That Hatoum is a Palestinian woman in exile makes you draw on lived experience, establishing the viewer's innocent-yet-knowing connivance in its structure. But the suddenness with which illumination becomes threat unleashes an aesthetic double bind that leaves the work reverberating with the unlivable but inescapable dialectic of the torturer. This too is an emblem, a metaphorical structure built on the finest possible statement of its theme, elliptical as a motto is elliptical. It speaks of its support, of electricity as the web in which we are caught, that same fluid that illuminates our art and burns their skins, the prison at the end of the tunnel. This is one of the rare works that integrates the senses into a punctual nub, and so insists on the finitude of embodiment, its weakness, its vulnerability. Against the body, any body, that uninterruptible, unchanging, incorruptible certainty
of electrical supply. If any single work can endstop the endless dragging of the banal into the light, it is this cul de sac where the light scorches and the frame has become the art, an art of framing, of holding within the frame the innocent viewer who has only come to seek entertainment and has become art's victim.

I want to end with a note of hope, with some sense that we are, after all, only at the beginning of a networked world, that the sins of globalization (only, after all, a polite name for imperialism?) may not be visited on the heads of the children. I find it hard. The Internet itself should be the installation that we seek: immense, global, collaborative. But its spaces have become like land parcelled up and ready to be allocated to the homesteaders. Hatoum's dark electric wall severs us from the infinite extension of space that so transfixed the baroque and sent the seventeenth century spiraling upward through trompe l'oeil ceilings illuminated by the sudden naturalism of God's and Galileo's universe: her mid-1990s video projections precipitate instead a fall into the floor. There is the terrible pessimism that murmurs of all that we have not yet heard and may never hear, the burial of evolution under the vast certainty of business and administration. There is the terrible fear that the net is a snare and we are flies in a world wide web, that they will pave over the carefully nurtured garden to speed the traffic of juggernauts on the superhighway.

What is there beyond this Alexandrian repository of dead knowledge and printed phone calls? Certainly there will be technical advances, and equally certainly the system will be buried under what it contains, its lines of potential encrusted with ornamentation. It is no longer the soul in nature but bodies in the network that must occupy us. It is now that we have to ask of the electric, electronic, and distributed world, what is it that you want? The answer will come back to us, if we can learn to listen, as metaphor, or rather, as a structure of metaphor. The splendor has gone out of the world since Frances Quarles could write in 1635, "Before the knowledge of letters God was known by Hieroglyphicks: And, indeed, what are the heavens, the Earth, nay every Creature, but Hieroglyphicks and Emblems of His Glory?" (cited in Martin 1977). What God was, our networks are. If we are to entertain the dream of entering them, the dream of a mediated world in which people are the medium, then we must escape the commodity fetishism that assures us that the world is a relation between things. But before that great installation can be commenced, there are immense and practical arts of the social to be achieved. We have yet to secure the free flow of water to the world. If we can handle water, perhaps we will be allowed to handle electricity.

References

The epigraph comes from the inscription on a garden bench by Ian Hamilton Finlay at The Leasowes in Wiltshire, with a text derived from Robert Dodsworth's A Description of The Leasowes, his 1764 account of the garden made there by William Shenstone, the poet-gardener.

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