

The Paradoxical Object: Video Film Sculpture

reviewed by Amanda Hickok
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In *The Paradoxical Object*, published by London's Black Dog Publishing, Joan Truckenbrod explores the paradoxes presented by her own artistic medium, the new and quickly expanding digital realm that fuses both video and sculpture, engaging the viewer in a multisensory, and often extrasensory, experience. Video and sculpture are inherently opposing forces—the former ephemeral and transitory, the latter fixed and tangible. In this emergent art form, the collision of these two mediums merges the physical and virtual worlds, imbuing the temporal and transient with durability and palpability, and injecting once static objects with life and fluidity. Layered onto these juxtaposing forces is the experience of viewers, who become part of the art itself, as they experience not only the three-dimensionality of the sculpture through space and time, but also the temporal narrative of the video, its aural elements and light and shadow interacting with their bodies. As the video and sculpture absorb and project, so does the imagination of the viewer, allowing the artwork to break through to the fourth dimension, dissolving the boundaries between space and time and between dreams and reality.

A recurring theme in Truckenbrod's work—and one that may be used as a metaphor for video sculpture itself—is that of the estuary, particularly in its role as a transformative haven in the lifecycle of salmon. An estuary—a restless environment of opposing forces, as intermittent spurts of salt water rush in to mix with the fresh water, producing endlessly fluctuating water content and pulsating tidal rhythms—serves to transform the bodies of salmon and prepare them for their seaward transition. Similarly, Truckenbrod's installations are dynamic spaces of transformation for the viewer. In *Quantum Realities* (2000), a virtual portal (a video projection) opens on the floor of the gallery, revealing the underwater world of salmon as they make their journey upstream—where they will spawn and die, the remains of their bodies then nourishing the new salmon—their vivid red bodies writhing against the current, the water seeming to splash the viewer. Swimming salmon appear again in Truckenbrod's *Against the Current* (2004), projected this time onto a hospital bed, layering the lifecycle of salmon over an object associated with human sickness and death, thus reanimating the bed as an active participant in the human lifecycle.

In the section "The Hand Becomes the Lens," Truckenbrod discusses the entangling of both haptic and scopic perception in both creating and experiencing video sculpture, as well as the role of the hand, through which we come to grasp the physicality of objects and realize the visions of the imagination. In Krzysztof Wodiczko's *The Tijuana Projection* (2001), audio of stories of loss and remorse from local residents and prisoners accompany projections of their hands on the St. Louis Public Library, making the heart-wrenching tales tangible as the library becomes almost anthropomorphic.

Tony Oursler also uses projections of the human body in his work *The Influence Machine* (2000–11). These projections form sculpture from light, as a face seems to emerge from a cloud of smoke or the leaves of trees—using technology as an extension of our own psychological states, as he plays on dreams and fear in this video-phantasmagoria. In Truckenbrod's *Elastic Solition* (2010), light forms sculpture, but through shadow instead, as a group of seven-foot fiber figures intervene in the video projections of ocean tides, microscopic

natural phenomena, and a nude body, creating an eerie and enclosed space around them through their cast shadows.

The body is paramount in both the creation and perception of video sculpture, a concept Ann Hamilton continuously underscores in her work. In *aleph* (1992-93), a video of her mouth trying to speak but impeded by pebbles is shown opposite a wall of books, from which body parts (sewn and stuffed with sawdust) hang. Viewers can almost feel the struggle to speak without swallowing the pebbles, as objects impede communication, contrasting with the body impeding communication on the opposing wall. Nam June Paik makes use of the body as well in his *TV Cello* (1971), a "cello" of video monitors to be played by Charlotte Moorman, each monitor showing video of the performance in real-time cut with video collage. The body is an integral part of the video sculpture in this piece and an agent of its realization.

Though it is somewhat strange to realize that Truckenbrod is, at times, speaking about her work in the third person—even quoting herself—this eccentricity is easily obscured by her extensive knowledge of video sculpture and genuine passion for the medium, and in the way she makes the textual content interesting and accessible. The text is an "estuary" of its own—a combination of the artist's insights as well as art criticism, poetry, mythology, and music theory—exploring the paradoxes of video sculpture from multiple intersecting vantage points. Despite a few egregious proofreading errors (e.g., "Nan June Paik") and a lot of repetition, this book successfully does what I have so rarely seen before—it bridges the gap between coffee-table book and meaningful criticism, proving useful and engaging for both the layman and the art expert, for casually exploring a new medium or delving deeply into its metaphysical implications. The division of the book into five subthemes—though each section discusses similar concepts and several of the same works—makes it easy to take one's time with this book. The subject matter is complex and intoxicating, but it's possible to read each section separately, out of order, and over time without missing or forgetting the central ideas. Though some of the images are intense and visually arresting (e.g., Wodiczko's *CECUT Project*, the Orta's *Light of Stone*) many works don't translate well to print—nonetheless, the images are beautiful, dark, and mysterious, enticing the viewer to imagine the profundity of their realization.