

Navigating the concentric interiors of the Glass Pavilion at the Toledo Museum of Art, the building unfolds along a serpentine walkway. Through the museum's glass walls, the view opens uninterrupted. Yet both the vista beyond and the building within are mediated by the curved glass surface that surrounds the visitor. In her extraordinary new book, *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, Giuliana Bruno explores this connective tissue—the membrane that subsumes the divisions of interior and exterior, past and present, public and private.

Ranging from architectural history to fashion, from contemporary painting to light projection, the texture of Bruno's writing is itself membrane-like. Each new subject extends the scope of her exploration laterally. This lateral expansion evokes the sensory perception of a perambulatory observer, resembling the embodied experience of an excursion through a museum.

Traveling through Bruno's text, the reader encounters surface as an envelope that eschews mental and physical interiority. Instead, the subject engages the face of things—where history and experience are inscribed for us to perceive and reimagine. Like the immateriality of light, Bruno investigates how social and historical relations are projected onto the skin of the art and the architecture surrounding us.

SARAH OPPENHEIMER

Anthony McCall,
installation
view of LONG
FILM FOR FOUR
PROJECTORS, 1974.
Photo by Henry
Graber. Courtesy of
the artist and Sean
Kelly Gallery,
New York.

Giuliana Bruno by Sarah Oppenheimer

SARAH OPPENHEIMER: I would like to begin by addressing the possibilities of surface. The book seems to operate like a very thin membrane, which stretches across all sorts of nodes and locations. I was excited by how the writing structurally mimics the formal material you describe. Maybe a good place to start would be for us to tease out what you mean by *surface* and how surface operates in the book.

GIULIANA BRUNO: There is a tendency in our culture to denigrate surfaces. People say something is superficial when they want to put it down. But, in fact, surface matters. It's so sensual and central to our lives. Surfaces are a primary form of habitation and they are everywhere in artistic expression. So I wanted to think about the surface as a place of connection, as a meeting place, beginning with the fact that our primary form of habitation is our skin. The skin is a membrane that breathes, connecting outside and inside, and it defines the contours of our bodies, of our selves. So the first surface is our body and we communicate with others through touch. In this sense, the surface is a zone of encounter between us and the space that surrounds us. A second skin that covers us, clothing, represents another layer of surface in which we present ourselves to the world. A third "superficial" envelope is the surface of the walls that we live within. And how not to recognize that the canvases of paintings, the skin of things, and the textures of sculptures are also essentially surfaces? Last but not least, we have the surface of the screens that today surround us everywhere in space. Given that we live in a world of surfaces, it seemed to me that we needed to rethink how important this connective membrane, this very elusive material of surface is. This is a material that creates contact and that can also connect mediums and art forms together. Surface is the precise site that the body, fashion, architecture, painting, and cinema all share. So, by way of surface encounters, I want to link together all these fields and disciplines that have been traditionally considered separate. Surfaces for me are ways of imagining the visual and the spatial arts not as distinct but as together.

You are right that my aim is to convey this through the surface of writing

Krzysztof Wodiczko, installation view of *IF YOU SEE SOMETHING...*, 2005, four projected video images with sound. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong, New York.



itself. So instead of abstractly defining the term *surface*, I introduce the reader to these different surfaces and they fold into one other over the course of developing my ideas. The book starts as a more personal meditation on texture and the surface of our body. I first introduce a "sur-face," that is, the surface as it contains the face. We rarely think about this but the face is our primary form of communication and also contains the traces of our life history. It is a drawing of what we live through, a map of our own history. I wanted to start the book with this very concrete sense that there is surface materiality that we live in, that begins with our body and then expands to all these other surfaces that I am interested in—the textile surfaces of fashion and the texture of painting layering its canvases; sculpture as it deals with its own surfaces; and architecture and film, with their own visual fabrics. There are all these disciplines and mediums of contemporary culture and surface is one place where we can not only see the connection between all of these different ways of imagining in visual and spatial arts, but where there is also a potential for transforming them. For me, surface is ultimately the site where art forms are currently being transformed. Architects are increasingly conceiving the façades and interiors of their buildings as permeable screen-like surfaces. Walls are projected upon much more as if they were screens, and are treated as textures, as though they were canvases. At the same time, artists are reinventing the art of projection. As film screens move into the art gallery, they interact with architectural surfaces on the walls and acquire sculptural materiality as they sit in space, physically.

In this way, these mediums are finding ways of connecting but they are also transforming each other, revealing that today's culture is a surface condition—which, to me, is positive.

so: The introduction of the face as a surface seems to function in your text in two ways. One is that it serves as punctuation within a field. The skin or the surface is expansive. The face is a wrinkle within this field where surface congeals into a recognizable thing. Secondly, the face introduces the possibility of inhabiting this continuous membrane. For example, I am thinking here of your discussions of works of art in which the viewer's body inhabits a projection. One of your key historical referents here is László Moholy-Nagy and his complex projection mechanisms. Can you talk about how projection works doubly in that it's both animated by a surface and also inhabited by the body?

GB: You hit right upon one of the most fundamental ideas about surface—it mediates between inside and outside, and that mediation is also a form of projection. Film was invented and, at the same time, projection was defined by Freud as a psychic mechanism that regulates the boundaries between subjects and objects, and mediates the transfer between what we perceive as internal or external. I find it very interesting when artists use projection in a way that questions this idea of inside and outside—so that the screen as a surface becomes this place of transfer where you can really project affect, project mental space, project history traces. Think about the installation by Krzysztof Wodiczko,

Guests, at the 2009 Venice Biennale or his similarly conceived projection *If You See Something...* from 2005. You walk into a space and you think you are seeing a wall with glass windows cut into it, but in fact it is a screen. The windows are projections. They are screens in which one can catch glimpses of the life of immigrants, the guests of the country we are in. These projected foggy figures of people are trying to push against these imaginary window-screens to come toward you. The immigrants are not seen clearly because they are never seen clearly in society. They are invisible citizens. But they are trying to make themselves visible by pushing toward you. So this membrane of the screen becomes a material possibility for us to connect. It presents a form of empathy, allowing us to reach to the other side via projection. Surfaces like these are things that one touches and they touch you in return. So the surface of the screen represents "touchability" in a larger sense—the possibility of encounters between interior and exterior space, but also between subjects, works of art, and people.

so: Throughout your book you return to how this contact happens—I don't want to say through the surface, but actually *on* the surface—and how it is linked to affect. How is affect borne on the surface of things?

GB: If we start from thinking of the surface as a skin, as something that covers our bodies and then connects to the different forms of surfaces that surround us, it follows that we cannot really comprehend space by *looking* alone. By shifting away from this notion that we understand a canvas, or architecture, or cinema by way of looking only, I want to emphasize a haptic mode of art reception, a more relational mode derived from the sense of touch that surfaces convey. The reciprocal *contact* between us and objects or environments occurs on the surface, in close encounters with art objects. As forms of materiality that touch us and can be touched, surfaces affect us. And it is in this surface intimacy that affects become revealed: surfaces affect us also because they retain the stains of time. Objects have their histories written into their surfaces. They particularly affect us because of that. Anything that occurs on the

surface, including the lines in our faces, shows its historicity, shows the traces of life. So the experience of surface intimacy makes us come to terms with the history of the work we are looking at, or the history of the space we are living in. The way we use objects, are surrounded by them, and incorporate them into our lives, is not just a layering of surfaces but a layering of their histories in lived space. So, the surface is really not superficial at all, it contains depth. Contemporary artists are dealing with the fact that the surface is really not flat, there is volume, thickness, and texture there; they pay attention to all aspects of materiality, to the way it affects us, and to everything that is imaginatively built and projected in the layers of surfaces. And this is what I like to call the *depth of surface*, its thickness.

so: That is really fascinating in regard to projection—if we think of surface not as flat but actually as a zone or thickness: an expanded space. I am thinking of two very different examples you give in the book: Michaël Borremans's method of projecting the viewer into the picture space and Anthony McCall's *Line Describing a Cone*. While these works are radically different, both constitute a surface condition. Could you clarify the space you are demarcating by contrasting these two very different works to articulate the potential of projection?

GB: For Borremans, the projection of the viewer into the picture plane is more connected to the idea of his drawings literally drawing you in. In order to experience the work, you must come close to its surface, and appreciate how the paper bears traces of some former history. He draws on used paper—paper that has been consumed, that has visibly been lived with. The texture of the surface looks distressed and you are affected by it. You feel like you want to enter into that surface to feel the material. You are also drawn into the different scales of the drawings, and are projected into the activities of the people that populate them, who fiddle with things and objects in disquieting ways. So the surface here holds different forms of projection for the viewer.

What Anthony McCall does could seem very different, as the work has to do with light. People don't think of light as a surface. People think of surface

as solid, as a thing, right? But I think that light makes material space. If it wasn't for light, if light was not bouncing off the surface of our bodies, or activating the canvases of paintings and the surfaces of screens, the visible world wouldn't exist. So light is really the primary form of our habitation and makes surfaces come to life. This is particularly true of cinema. The surface of the screen comes to life as light hits it and makes shadows come alive. McCall does not show films—yet, he exhibits the materiality of cinema because he makes projected light as tangible as a surface. What he started to make in the '70s and has reinvented now, in a new digital incarnation, are what he likes to call "solid light films." So he calls them films, but he also calls them solid. They have a sculptural presence. They exist in space. They are in a sense surfaces that one literally can enter into and touch. When spectators enter the gallery, they often become projected into the piece as their bodies move through the space. In a way, McCall makes you encounter cinema as a solid form, as something that lives in space as a sculpture but also exists as architecture. As a viewer you cannot stay at a distance. You are always involved in that surface space and are projected into the work.

so: There is a kind of bizarre negation of touch. You reach to touch the work and it is not there. In some way you learn the space through touch: through an absence of object. In this regard, it's fascinating how you pinpoint the historical progression of cinema. You contrast Siegfried Kracauer's description of the modern architecture of the movie theater with an architecture defined by a body in motion. McCall gives the moving body a space in which to touch rather than only to look. How has the relationship between projection and the moving body evolved historically?

GB: You are completely right, one of the fascinations for me about the McCall pieces is that they pick up on an architecture of projection that I see going back quite far. First of all, I think that people have disregarded the surface of the screen as a thing. Screens are everywhere but very few people are aware of their existence per se as surfaces. There is also this false notion that the screen is a fixed, rectangular surface and just a

Objects have their histories written into their surfaces. They particularly affect us because of that.

minor support for what happens. But the history of the screen and of projection would tell us differently. Interestingly enough, the word *screen* comes from the Renaissance—way before screens were actually invented or understood as we understand them today. During the Renaissance *screen* actually meant a piece of architecture. It was a partition made of a piece of fabric, or sometimes paper. Like a painter's canvas stretched on a frame, it was often used in front of windows to filter light. There were fire screens and window screens, and the screen was also a panel that transformed space. It was literally a surface like the skin that defines the relation between inside and outside and also the relation between private and public. In the nineteenth century, this notion of screen expanded to become what we now understand to be a screen—a plane for the luminous transmission of moving images. In the age of modernity, different optical devices such as magic lanterns or phantasmagorias started using screens, creating movement by filtering and projecting light, making shadows and light materialize. The first projections were not that dissimilar from Anthony McCall's. They were in a sense apparitions of light where something would be, as you said, both present and absent. And you brought up a very important point, as this goes well beyond literal touching. There must be something that's absent for us to be able to imagine it. I am very interested in this kind of imaginative form of projection, where material apparitions become mobilized in surface space. In the early history of film this architectural sense of the surface was quite present. The movie palace of the 1920s and 1930s was in fact a kind of environmental surface. Audiences of two or four thousand people sat in spaces that played with light in atmospheric ways. Kracauer calls it *surface splendor*, when he talks about the screen as a white surface that interacts with architectural ornaments and light. Ultimately, he describes the entire experience of modernity as being that of a surface condition, showing that urban mass culture is actually defined by surface affects. So this is huge. For Kracauer, "superficial" sensory

stimulation is the very aesthetic root of modernity. Surface defines the form of perception that we think of as modern.

so: In your book you refer several times to the increasing obsolescence of the filmic medium. I understand you to be referring to both the materiality of film, and the modern architectural relationship between viewer and screen.

GB: I use the idea of surface and screen as a large umbrella term. I see a relation between canvas, wall/architecture, and screen. This material intersection is most clearly visible for me in the work of Robert Irwin, and that is why it's on the book cover. But there are many examples, like the way Diller Scofidio + Renfro have recently refurbished Alice Tully Hall in New York. You walk into the auditorium and you encounter a surface made from one single tree. The layer of veneer is so thin, that when light comes to the surface from behind it, it looks like a skin. It's as though the walls are blushing. So here you have a luminous wall that is acting like a screen fabric but is also literally projecting an affect. You have an architecture that reads like a cinema. A form of transformation happens in what I call the *surface tension* of media—between the materials of canvas, architecture, and the screen.

We have had a really limited understanding of the power of the screen as a medium. In the case of conventional cinema, it has been confined to this fixed geometry that spectators stare at from a distance. But what I see happening today is much closer to those projective forms of phantasmagoria that I was describing before, and to the perambulatory experiences of *flânerie*. The first movie theaters were little storefront places where you would go in and out of to watch images. It was more of a transitory experience, just as you come in and out of an art gallery today. This contemporary moment of post-cinema, if you will, where screens are literally in every art gallery and in every museum, has an interesting connection to the origin of film. At the moment of its obsolescence, the film medium is re-inventing its pre-cinematic roots, which are in live urban space and museum

culture. In fact cinema emerged at the very same time that private collections started to become public museums. The nineteenth century established a form of viewing that had a body moving through space looking at a sequence of pictures. People think of paintings as discrete objects but if you understand painting in space—if you understand that a museum viewer moves and doesn't look at anything singularly in isolation—you start realizing that cinema and the museum share a form of spectatorship. Cinema's form of spectatorship—looking at a sequence of moving images—is in fact much more connected to how the viewer walks through a museum, looking at collections of things and mentally connecting them together. There is an interesting correlation that happens today when the screen from the movie theater re-enters the museum. In a way, it's almost as if these two modes of operation finally come together.

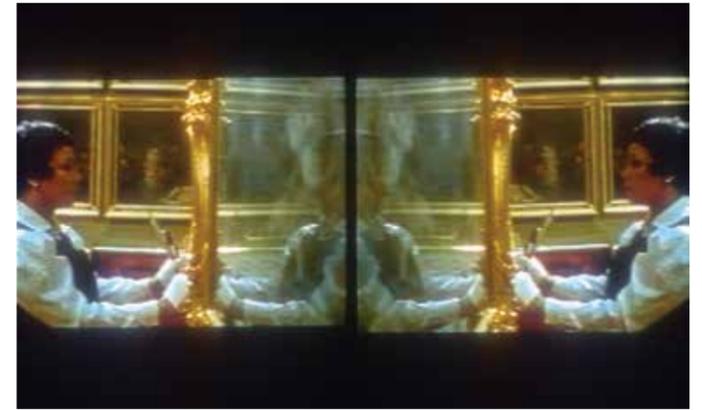
so: A fascinating example in your book of precisely what you are describing is your discussion of the processional movement through the Sir John Soane's Museum as represented in Isaac Julien's *Vagabondia*. In particular you note how Soane designed both the house and the collection to facilitate the processional path of the visitor. It struck me how you related this architectural and curatorial context to a moving viewer navigating multiple screens in a contemporary museum space. In contrast, you refer to Pipilotti Rist's work as an "all-absorbing condition." It seems like you are establishing an important distinction here. Can you speak to that?

GB: Julien's work is particularly important in the argument but also in my attraction to the kind of work where museum and cinema significantly come together. Julien actually generates his work based on notions of how we perceive artworks in a museum. So when he goes to the Sir John Soane's Museum to make *Vagabondia* he is not simply staging work that he will later show in an art gallery. He is studying and analyzing and working his way through understanding how a house museum functions, how this collection

recreated and generated a work of *recollection*. He revisits the way that particular collection was organized in space, how it was redoubled in space by way of mirrors that made it reflect and refract. Sir John Soane, who was an architect, built these folding cabinets where images would literally unfold one after the other from a cabinet of curiosities. Julien uses that movement of images folding together as the actual structure of his double screen installation: the two screens are joined at the seams and are folded together as though they were really part of a cabinet. So you have a screen surface that becomes a kind of collector's cabinet and that makes you realize the connection between collection and recollection. The mnemonic structure—how memory is created by forms of collecting, what collections retain as history on their surfaces, and how they are animated in forms of recollection—is central to the creation of Julien's own archive. By that I mean his cinema is a kind of layered archive. In his installation of *Ten Thousand Waves*, which was up at MoMA this winter, he was actually making the screen itself into a piece of sculpture sitting in space. The nine screens were installed so you could see them from a perspective from which you rarely see screens—from the lobby looking up and also from the higher floors looking down. So you became aware of the screen as a thing—one that occupies and transforms space. And you could never see all the screens together from any single perspective. You had to move through work that is as fragmented as a memory space and as layered as a cultural archive. This invests us in rethinking how the activity of spectating is more perambulatory and more related to other public forms of visual culture. We are returned back to the moment when cinema and the museum existed together, where spectacles of street life were relayed together in architecture and cinema.

The way Pipilotti Rist used the same space at MoMa for her 2008 installation *Pour Your Body Out* is very different. She conceived of the screen more as a continuous surface, as if it were an enveloping curtain. Her work tends to be all-immersive in ways that resonate with the surrounding effects of digital space. Yes, there is a cinema as we know it and it is becoming obsolescent. Celluloid is

Isaac Julien, *VAGABONDIA*, 2000. Double-screen projection, 16mm film transferred to video, color, sound, 7 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York, and Victoria Miro Gallery, London.



Wong Kar-wai, Still from *IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE*, 2000, 35mm film, color, sound, 98 mins. Courtesy of Universal Studios Licensing LLP.

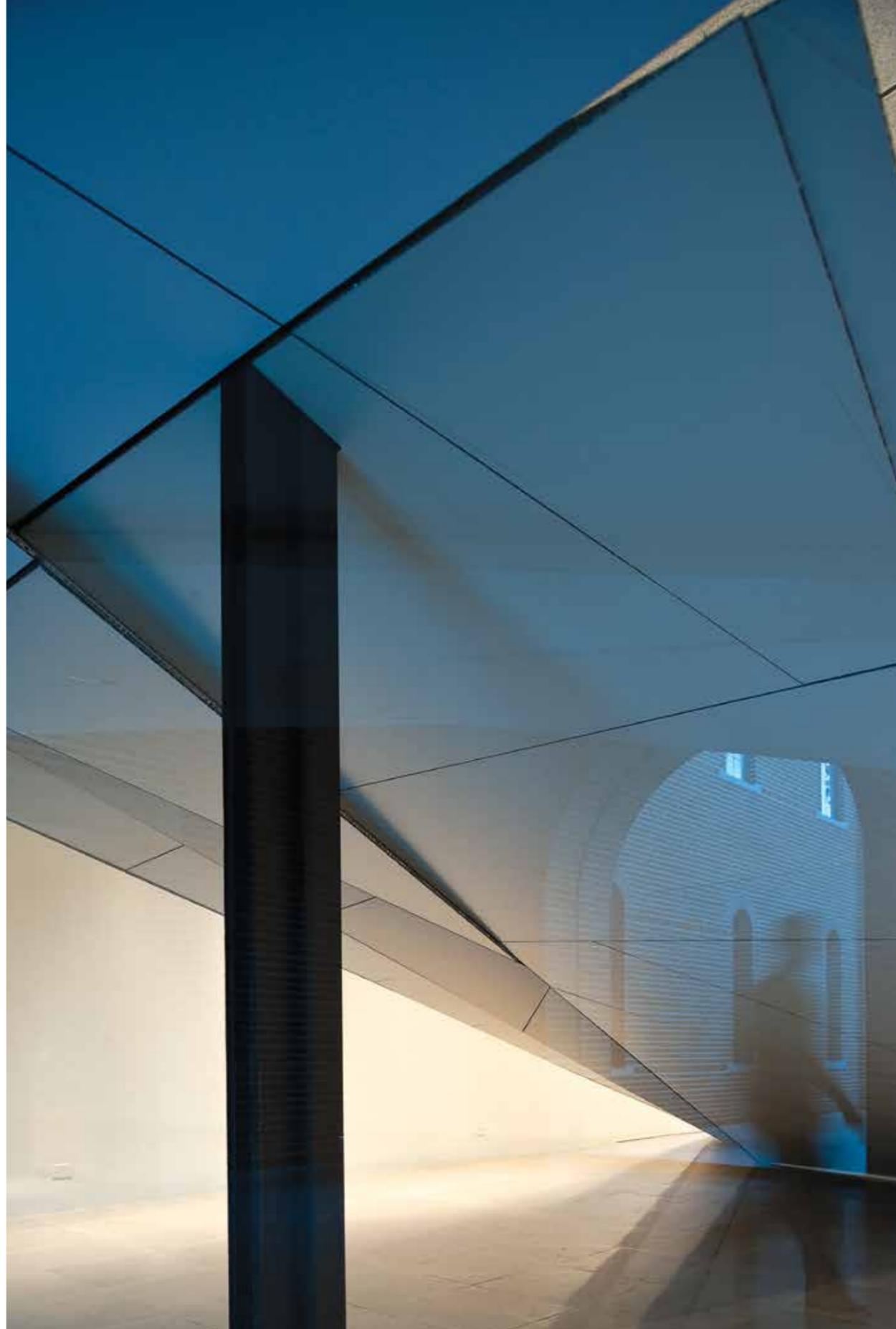


leaving us. Perhaps even the structure of how we watch films in a movie theater is in decline. Many have talked about the death of cinema. I am interested in this because when things are dying they become fascinating. They morph. So I look at this moment of obsolescence as a potential for showing us a history that was also a history of potentials—not just what happened but what could have happened or what might result in a different future.

so: In thinking of both historical and mnemonic experience you refer to the sartorial—which is simultaneously dependent on sequential construction and is singularly non-linear. You describe a number of projects that use this process of construction to present a multiplicity of moments simultaneously. One central example in the book is Wong Kar-wai's work, in which he collapses multiple time frames on the same plane. Is there anything about time in that sense that you think is relevant?

GB: Totally. One of the reasons why I am attracted to surfaces is because they absorb the mark of time and the experience of living in that time. Here is this

white surface that we have lived with for over a century now and onto which all of these different histories have been projected. They, in a sense, stain that surface. The entire history of modernity in a way has been projected upon this white thing. And so, time is very important as a sense of duration but also as a mark of experience. Wong Kar-wai works with a single screen but he's layering different times onto the image and the picture plane. His works are always unfolding in somewhat mnemonic ways. You are looking at something in the present but it always involves a longing for something that was once there, or that might have happened, something untouchable, ungraspable—and yet, because of a trace, it becomes really present on the surface of the screen. And the image is constructed in such a way that you must pass through a layer of surface to see this—almost like a screen into a screen. You look through opaque windows and you perceive a dense, curtained space; or a door becomes a frame for another aperture. So you have this sense of entering into a layered space that is physical space but also mental space—imaginative and mnemonic material stitched together.

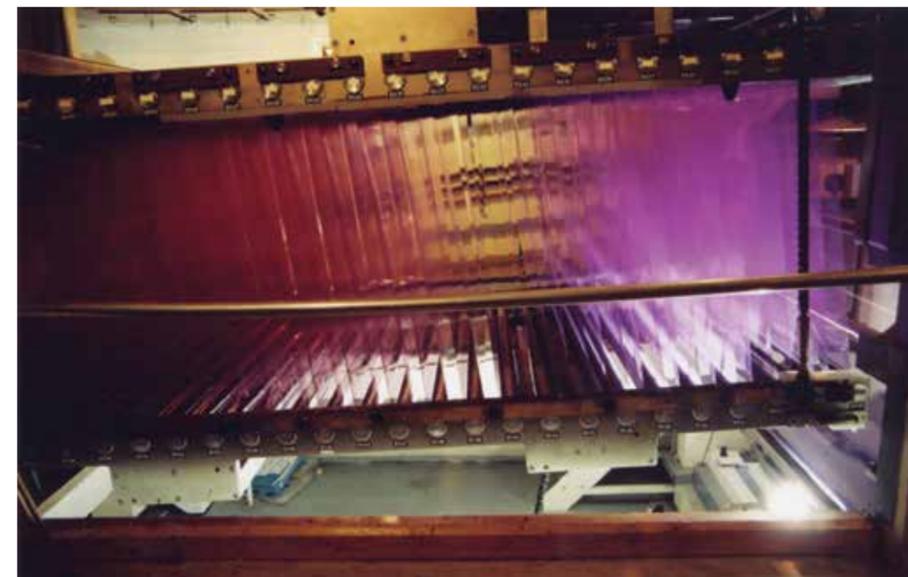


And this textural, sartorial construction folds different times and durations together in the pleats of space.

Another artist who engages temporality, in a very different way, though, is Tacita Dean. Her work makes you feel the materiality and obsolescence of a medium in a kind of durational way by making you sit for a long time with the fundamental elements of cinema: time, light, and textures. *Kodak* is interesting in that regard because she made the film when she found out that one of the last factories making 16mm films in France was closing. She decided to go there at the literal moment of the death of a medium, if you will, and she stages this absolutely beautiful meditation on the texture of light, on celluloid itself as a texture, and its pellicular structure. It is in fact a veneer but it is also a chemical coating. By observing all the textural qualities of this medium in the moment of its obsolescence, you really get a sense of its incredible potential as a surface that absorbs the marks of life and history.

And a sartorial point emerges as the artist exposes the object's process of manufacture. The film being produced in a factory resembles a sheet of fabric being industrially made. It unfolds continually from a roll, like a thin layer of cloth. There's a material and historical connection from the skin to the textile, to the fabric and to the making of film. I am very interested in the fact that, at the origin of film, the editing suites were basically rooms full of women—most editors were women—sitting at these tables doing something that could have been sewing. If you look at old pictures of "film manufactures" as they were called at the time, you realize they were like manufactures of clothing. The strip of film was like a ribbon—to be cut and spliced together, practically sewn. The montage and the editing itself resemble a form of assemblage related to clothing.

so: There is a fascinating transposition that happens between body and flatness in the way in which cloth constructs clothing as a kind of systemic form. But your decision to include fashion as a primary source in this book spoke to something much larger: how the body inhabits the space of surface and how the body is both privately and publically expressed through surface projection.



How is interior projection central to the possibility of surface?

GB: That is a wonderfully large question. Let me say that I am interested in the idea of fashioning a space. How do you tailor a space and the environment as a surface? It's not just a physical space but also a permeable space of memory and imagination and affect, which returns us to where we started—the surface as a kind of primary form of habitation defining the relationship between inside and outside. So, to me, this idea of fashioning a material space is also related to fashioning mental space. In your work, Sarah, when you transform a space by making an intervention in it that makes you see other spaces within it or connects spaces together—for instance, a window that also becomes a periscope, or when you use light to transform space—you are not simply transforming exterior space, but you are, in a sense, projecting a form of inner space into the outer space and *visa versa*. Sculptural or architectural forms are material forms that transform imaginative space. A lot of art that I am attracted to is reclaiming something that is at risk in our culture: the space of interiority and the time that it takes to live within it. While we are invaded by all these screens, they can also—if we understand them as permeable surfaces that can mediate between inside and outside—allow us to reclaim a sense of interiority and mental space that has become endangered in our culture. In the seventeenth century, the

surface space of the drawing room was created to make space for time with oneself—*withdrawing within the self*. It is interesting to me that interior space, *withdrawing space*, mental space, was being given an actual physical space, an architecture. I see that many contemporary artists and architects are striving to make spaces of this kind today, working with the process of projection in the largest sense of the term—that is to say, inducing movement between interiority and externality, and creating surfaces that are permeable spaces of relation between exterior and interior landscapes.

so: I think that there is a brilliant twist in how you resignify surface and superficiality as sites of interiority. You have confounded that possibility in a really rich way. It is where thickness is located.

GB: That is exactly what I wanted to do. You said it better than I could have. Thank you.

above: Tacita Dean, *KODAK*, 2006, 16mm film projection, black and white and color, and optical sound, 44 mins. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York and Paris, and Frith Street Gallery, London.