

# BODY / SPACE / TIME / INTERACTION<sup>1</sup>

FROM PERFORMANCE TO DIGITAL VIDEO INTERACTION -  
COMPARATIVE CONCEPTS AND PROCESSES IN THE WORK OF  
PERFORMANCE ARTIST MARINA ABRAMOVIC, VIDEO ARTIST PIPILOTTI  
RIST, AND DIGITAL ARTISTS GOLAN LEVIN AND ZACHARY LIEBERMAN

*By Kai Losgott (2007)*

## Introduction

It is inherent in the nature of "being" that our identities both define and are defined by the nature of the spaces we move through. This discussion focuses on ideas and definitions around the social and personal use of space and the body that have informed art discourses since the 1970s. It by no means attempts a comprehensive overview of the period. Instead, it glances at the development of processes, techniques and concepts concerning participation and interactivity by different artists over three generations of art-making. The approaches investigated range from performance art to video and digital interactive art. Although their media and methods might seem to vary, these artists and their works are all primarily defined by their strong sense of the performative. Hoffman & Jonas (2005:37) give an example:

For their 2002 exhibition 'How are you today?' [Figure 21] at the Massimo de Carlo Gallery in Milan, Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset left the exhibition space apparently empty. It was only at second glance that visitors saw a small opening in the ceiling, just big enough to stick one's head through. An ordinary ladder from a construction site was placed underneath the hole to enable visitors to climb up ... And discover on the other side the kitchen of an ordinary Milanese apartment inhabited by a friendly lady and her occasionally visiting friends [my italics].

The interaction between the friendly lady, and the visitor, and the blurring of public and private spaces, is what happens between every maker and "viewer" of an artwork. Meanings are made in the negotiated space between the reader and the writer, the artist and the audience. In 1960 the literary theorist Roland Barthes wrote in his essay *The death of the author*<sup>2</sup> that no text had an inherent meaning.

This implies that the Milanese housewife in her kitchen is a text, which will be interpreted or "read" differently by every visitor. By agreeing to appear as part of an artwork, she and her home become cultural artefacts, which have no inherent meaning, owing to this freedom of interpretation. To answer the question in the installation's title: one body is unlike another, on any particular day. Every body brings its own history of experiences

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<sup>1</sup> Essay written as study material for Unisa study material

<sup>2</sup> For full version, see Sontag & Barthes (1996).

to the decoding of an artwork - and who am I to discount another's history? Over the past three decades, formerly alternative cultural voices such as feminism, the black consciousness movement and the gay rights movement have drawn attention to thousands of years of political rule by an "old boys' club" of middle-aged white heterosexual men,<sup>3</sup> in the guise of objectivity.

The visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999:116) agrees that objectivity is a myth, for the body is an imprecise measuring device. Universal standards, by consequence, can never have existed. "Nowhere is the erosion of boundaries more apparent than in the transformations of [our understandings of] the modern body. Once considered the clear frontier between internal subjective experience and external objective reality, the body now appears to be a fluid and hybrid borderland between the two, as subject to change as any other cultural artifact". We now understand that identity is a construction, and this construction is reflected in the body. Together with environmental politics and an increased awareness of eastern spirituality, as well as the integration of electronic technology into every day life, these shifts have drawn the very nature of the human experience into question.

These debates have suggested the need to develop new ways of seeing, new ways of empowering each individual. Echoing this shift of focus, How are you today? Draws the introspective eye of the gallery visitor towards the small rituals and performances of life outside the art world - people watching people watching people, watching themselves watching others watching themselves. "Real life" does not suddenly stand still just because you have entered a traditional "art space" such as a museum or a gallery, and "art" does not stop when you walk out of the door. The intervention into the architecture of the Milanese apartment deconstructs the politics of the art space and breaks down what, where, when and with whom we might consider something art, "not in terms of fixed roles of subjects and objects, but rather in flexible roles as producers, consumers, users and participants" (Von Hantelmann, in Hoffmann & Jonas 2005:180). We can choose what or who is included in or excluded from the spaces we inhabit. This discussion looks at a few artists among many whose work has opened up new spaces and directions.

Imponderabilia (Figure 22), a little known work performed early in her career by the veteran Yugoslavian performance artist Marina Abramovic, together with her partner Ulay, is an example of the efforts over the last three decades to break down the political barriers of the art space and the exclusivity of the museum and gallery world. She (Abramovic 1998:154-156) writes about becoming the "living door" to a museum: Imponderabilia. In a chosen space. Performance: We are standing naked in the main entrance of the Museum, facing each other. The public entering the Museum have to pass sideways through the small space between us. Each person passing has to choose which one of us to face. Duration: 90 minutes. June 1977. Galleria Comunale d'Arte Moderna, Bologna, Italy. Visitors: 350. The performance was interrupted and stopped by the police. When the public, passing between us, entered the museum they realized that they had been filmed by a hidden camera and they saw themselves on the monitors.

Watching themselves make this usually quite "unthinkable" decision on video forces visitors to reflect on what was done so quickly and unconsciously, highlighting "the overriding importance of imponderables in determining human conduct" (Abramovic

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<sup>3</sup> This culturally entrenched system of male domination and discrimination historically rooted in all social institutions, (government, work, media, family, church, etc.), is known in feminist theory as "patriarchy".

1998:161). Which pair of genitals would you be more ashamed of brushing up against, and, to exacerbate the question, in such a public place? It is the small internal choices which determine the larger consequences of our behaviour in the world. "The piece forced people to confront their attitudes and feelings about gender and sexuality, the body of the 'other', through a direct physical intervention in the architecture of both a building and a social event" (Warr 2000:124).

Starting with her performance videos and films in 1973, in a long career often utilising shock to seize the imagination, Abramovic has sought to make the viewer's body vulnerable through the vulnerability of her own body. When she appears naked, it is to appear in the costume shared by the entire species, and to lend a sense of frankness to her actions. In her performances she publicly endures extreme physical and mental states while remaining focused and present, using body and mind discipline techniques learnt from adepts, shamans and mystics around the world, as she documents in her diary (Abramovic 1995). She has exposed her body to self-flagellation, cutting (occasionally inflicted by audience members), burning, freezing, suspension, crawling snakes, confined spaces with rats, extreme temperatures, severe discomfort, and sitting or holding body postures for extraordinary lengths of time, the full extent of which can be seen in her retrospective book *Artist Body* (1998). In this visceral way, the "viewer" or "audience" comes to see himself or herself as an active "participant", which encourages independence of thought and reflection.

## Empowering screen space

By empowering individuals, the political philosophy of the 1970s hoped to empower society at large. Performance art in the seventies' Europe and America was born from this wish: that the viewer could become a living part of the artwork, an actor or a dancer in his own right as he moved through a gallery or performance space and interacted with others - "actual" performers or other audience members. More than viewer, he was an audience, a reader, the writer of his own opinions and interpretations of what he experienced in time and space - an artist in his own right. Video art, with its screen-space, soon promised to take the concepts of performance even further. In the 1960s, with the first cheap and portable cameras, it was born as an "alternative" medium on the fringe of the art scene. An often-cited milestone piece linking body, technology and sound in a playful way was Nam June Paik's *TV Bra for Living Sculpture* (1970) in which the cellist and art activist Charlotte Moorman caused a scandal by wearing small video monitors on her naked breasts during recitals (Figure 27). The video on the monitors re-played the spectacle.

Today, video remains the most popularly accessible medium to make room for so many possibilities, evoking new ways for the body to move, think and to travel. As with Elmgreen and Dragset's visit to the Milanese apartment, the Swiss video artist Pipilotti Rist muses that her work "helps to open up your principal space: your mind and body. You may wish to imagine as many "real" spaces as you can, but you can also open up your own primary space and expand it, so that you no longer return to a closed personal space" (Obrist, in Phelan et al 2001:26). Rist relates the space inside a person to the imagined space inside the screen: a virtual visiting place for a virtual body.

With the interactive digital art which emerged in the 1990s, now extensively networked, documented and represented on the web, the user has the ability to control a seemingly unlimited, new technological space, which the body interacts with "virtually". It is important to realise that every artwork, starting with basic traditions such as painting or writing, is "interactive". Elmgreen and Dragset, the artists responsible for *How are you today?* Remark that often their "installations turn out to be more performative than ... [their] performances - performative ... In the sense that the action is just happening in the imagination of the audience. Sometimes the most thrilling action is the one that happens in your imagination" (Elmgreen and Dragset, in Hoffmann & Jonas 2005:188). Today, the imagined projection of the body into the technological realm, and the nature of the computer screen, in which seemingly "real" shapes and forms are actually representations of data stored somewhere else in the machine, have earned these interactions the description "virtual". Today, an art experience could easily take the form of a networked computer game, or a performance with live participants, for instance in a chat room or through video-conferencing. This implies that performers no longer need to be even in the same location or time-zone, thanks to wireless connectivity and the vast servers which keep the Internet up and running around the clock.

The Internet's ability to deliver by click on demand also helps to solve a problem particular to time-based art. The success of this art form depends on the sustained presence of the viewer. In an exhibition space, people come and go. If participants are displeased, they are free to walk away. Rist is aware of this same challenge. "With video you have to watch for at least a minute before you can decide, and that's too much time to give a bad video." She considers it a matter of technique. "Creative expression is a 'summing up of time' (Zeitschöpfung). With video you give the viewer fifty hours' work in one minute, so video is like concentrated time. Video-making must be precise (or else it will bore the viewer)" (Phelan et al 2001:15). The experience of this "concentrated time" can open up new meanings and spaces.

The concentration Rist discusses is evident in Abramovic's performative personality. She is intensely watchable because of her extensive preparation, but she is not an actress playing a role she has rehearsed. Her own person, as presented in the moment, becomes the site upon which the ritual dramas of the psyche are enacted, and through the empathy of those watching, she makes a "contract" with them, a shared state of concentration. This is the performance artist's "summing up of time".

For the 1996 Texas video screening *In Between* (Figure 23), visitors are literally asked to sign an agreement not to leave the video installation until the full 40 minutes are over. They are provided with blindfolds and headphones before entering. On the soundtrack of the video, the artist is heard speaking a hypnotic script telling listeners to deeply relax their bodies. In shocking contrast, in the visuals she is seen tracing and pricking lines on various parts of her body, at times drawing blood. As in *Imponderabilia*, where museum visitors confronted their own actions on video, the presence of video stands for the act of witnessing, a confrontation, and an important choice. Participants might choose to be blindfolded without headphones, completely oblivious, or they might choose to only see, or only listen. If they choose to see and listen at the same time, both together will heighten their vulnerability to the experience, its "imponderability". Most of Abramovic's performances bind participants between horror and delight, with "imponderable" choices in a state "in between" what one might not want to endure, and what one cannot help but endure. This kind of state, again, can help to inject participants' concentration and investment into the time required to fully experience an artwork. Abramovic explains: "On their way out each of them is given a certificate,

in which the artist thanks them for their time and trust. Without fulfilling these conditions, the work cannot be seen" (Abramovic 1998:360).

# New artist identities

Today, making a success of being a career artist has become increasingly dependent on wearing many different hats. Contemporary artists such as those discussed, in inventing themselves and their work, have drawn on bodies of knowledge often outside the traditional realm of art. Marina Abramovic would not have been able to turn her neo-shamanic performances into a successful art career, had it not been for the extreme discipline and voluntary deprivation of her Yugoslavian communist party upbringing. Rist was a singer in a rock band and a designer of pop concert stage sets before she became recognised for her video art. The art historian Peggy Phelan also credits her with being "one of the few women in the art world blunt enough to admit that her art is a business" (Phelan et al 2001:40). American digital artists Golan Levin and Zachary Lieberman, to be discussed later in this article, refer to themselves as artist-engineers.

By working in such new contexts and public places, many artists since the 1970s have moved their practice entirely out of the studio. They have left the limits of the gallery system, the goals and concerns of the art object, and moved away from the isolation of the individual artist towards concept art and social and group concerns. Many have initiated new integrations of sound, space, body and image to create hitherto unknown art forms. Consider the career of Laurie Anderson, who integrated composition, singing, performance, film, electronic media, sculpture and stage design to stage some of the worlds first epic multimedia operas. In the 1980s her song *Walking and Falling* unexpectedly became an international hit on radio. Like many others of her generation, the opening up of new spaces has brought her a wide and varied career, with popular and academic recognition for her radical innovation. For example, in the composition *Two songs for tape bow*, Anderson plays a device made from a tape recorder in which the magnetic pickup device is attached to a bow, which allows her to control playback speed and direction<sup>4</sup>

Artists like her have established the tradition of multimedia performance technology taken up by today's digital interactive artists, such as Levin and Lieberman.

Thirty years ago, the first of the "new" media was video. Today, "video art", like performance, abounds in more practices than any one art historian could assimilate in a lifetime. "Video", as an approach, implies far more than mere film making. It could be documentary, such as a video diary, or fictional, such as an animated film poem. It

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<sup>4</sup> These historical recordings, along with many others, can be accessed as mp3 files on [www.ubuweb.com](http://www.ubuweb.com), under the "Airwaves" and "Artsounds" projects. On the Artsounds record, *Hereditary Language* by Les Levine, and *Rite of Passage* by Thomas Lanigen Schmidt, make for interesting examples of 1980s sound art pieces.

could be used to document and distribute performances, therefore prolonging their significance. It could be used as a performance medium in itself, in the form of taped and edited monologues, actions, original or re-edited films. It could also become a presentation element within real or virtual spaces (in performances, installations, or as part of a digital interactive work within a cybernetic system). All this is defined as "video". Rist, whose work is often described as lyrical, says that her video installations are like a handbag, because "there is room in them for everything: painting, technology, language, music, movement, lousy flowing pictures, poetry, commotion, premonitions of death, sex and friendliness" (Phelan et al 2001:19).

## Rist's working processes

In the 1990s video exploded into the museum and gallery system (in Europe and America), "taking up a central position as the twentieth century came to a close" (Neshat, in Elwes 2005:1). For Rist, video empowered a new kind of personal performance, as subject or as the camera- eye itself. She says: "I opted for video because I can perform all the steps myself, from the camera work to online editing, and that suits me. I can work all by myself or in a small team" (Phelan et al 2001:10). Despite the success she has had, or perhaps because of it, she still produces most of her art with low-budget software after exhaustive hours of experimentation. In this way she discovers the images which speak to her personal, artistic sensibility.

By sheer volume, more than 100 years of the moving image, massive budgets, crews and an endless demand for more, "video art has been outdone - in both form and content - by music clips, TV advertising and film. ... The important thing in art is the quality behind the artist's basic motivation" (Phelan et al 2001:15). These traditional media forms can be adapted or negated by video artists. Rist, for instance, goes against the traditional desire for easy pictures and logical happenings. For her, video becomes more than just the contrived combined electronic presentation of both image and sound; it becomes a technology with its own unique functions and concerns, and she embraces it for its limitations.

"I do not want to copy reality in my work; "reality" is always much sharper and more contrasted than anything that can ever be created with video. Video has its own particular qualities, its own lousy, nervous, inner world quality, and I work with that"<sup>5</sup> (Phelan et al 2001:12). She draws her subject matter from the flaws and triumphs of her young, white, Swiss, middle-class feminine dream space, shaping them into almost essential figures for flaw and triumph. "Rist stages, records, edits, and reworks until she arrives at 'this moment that comes close to inner feeling'" (Weintraub 2003:139). The video tape is to Rist as the vulnerable body is to Abramovic. In this spirit, she transmits,

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<sup>5</sup> Video has also been associated with a particular aesthetic (for example low budget, or the fuzzy low resolution "home movie" look of television pixels), but as technology improves and becomes more cost-effective, video is beginning to rival even the quality of cinema film (in the form of High Definition Video [HD]).

distorts and manipulates the video signal by various devices and technologies. Speaking about the thicket of blur, fuzz and static hiss that bleeds across the surface of the video (*Absolutions*) Pipilotti's *Mistakes* (Figure 24,25), Rist (in Phelan et al 2001:47) says:

I subjected the images to all kinds of interference: I played them too quickly for two simultaneously activated recorders, then put the pictures through a time-based corrector that evens out irregularities. That was only one of twenty-five kinds of disturbance that I experimented with on the tape. Asking too much or too little of the machines resulted in pictures that I was thoroughly familiar with, my inner pictures - my psychosomatic symptoms.

On the one hand, these are serious considerations. On the other hand, Rist's particular mixture of video, performance and installation is also about fun. The interactive paradigm in art has always known that reality itself is performative, and played with it. This hardly requires the latest computer technology or the live presence of performers. Too often the "serious" nature of the conceptual paradigm hides what is at the heart of the creative process and how one comes to terms with interactivity itself - by playing. Pipilotti Rist, as indicated by her poetic and informal way of speaking, has remained true to her childhood literary hero Pippi Longstockings, who refused to grow up and lose the luminosity of the world.

Rist's images are from the surrealist school of home movies, her films in the tradition of poetry. These are explorations often in the style and grammar of the experimental, avant-garde and artist's film, drawing on the traditions of performance art and assemblage (such as Dada, Fluxus), and influences from the tradition of painting (such as the abstract flicker and lurid colour of Stan Brakhage<sup>6</sup>). Yet their form is born entirely of video technology, its faults and its idiosyncrasies.

To an extent, Rist's content mocks the existing media strategies of film, radio and television. Yet her art is also a glorification of trash. In *Pimple Porno* (1992) (Figure 26), she playfully and mysteriously re-invents the porn film, re-claiming it for herself in lurid colours and distorted views. She also often re-writes and performs lyrics of popular songs in the soundtracks to her work, celebrating as well as deconstructing them. However, these are private offerings. She is not a "media artist" in the sense of those who incorporate and re-work existing footage such as news clips or sound bytes in their work. She is also not making music video, although her early work was seen as a comment on this new phenomenon of its time. Rist is quick to point out that "there is a long history of films inspired by music and other experimental new technologies."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Stan Brakhage was an American beat generation artist's film-maker who worked directly onto film emulsion, hand-painting and scratching into film to produce abstract rhythmic images capable of inducing trance states. He is known for ephemera and experiments such as *Mothlight* (1963), in which he stuck translucent moth wings to

<sup>7</sup> The avant-garde, artist's or experimental film often subverts mainstream film-making techniques; mostly breaking with the conventions of realism in approaches to theme, storytelling, image and sound presentation. This also includes the physical manipulation of the film



As MTV<sup>8</sup> is considered a cultural milestone, one might wonder what will succeed it. Dialtones, American artist/composer's Golan Levin's 2001 "telesymphony"<sup>9</sup> is a hint in that direction. Dialtones "is a large-scale concert performance whose sounds are wholly produced through the carefully choreographed dialing and ringing of the audience's own mobile phones" (Levin 2002).

A small group of musicians, ... Perform the phones en masse by dialing them up with a specially designed, visual-musical software. The audience's numbers and seat positions are registered with the Dialtones computer system before the show, and new 'ringtones' automatically downloaded. In this way, "the performers can create spatially-distributed melodies and chords, as well as novel textural phenomena like waves of polyphony which cascade across the crowd; these musical structures, moreover, are visualized by a large projection system connected to the performers' interfaces. Towards the end of its half-hour composition, Dialtones builds to a remarkable crescendo in which nearly two hundred mobile phones peal simultaneously.

Through this action, Levin amplifies the dense communications network human beings occupy. Its presence becomes symphonic in scope, both emotively and theoretically, as one reflects on the systems involved in producing such a spectacle. A group of musicians, interacting with a telephone system through specially designed software, play music from a concept developed by an artist and composer who is also an engineer. While the real performance remains firmly in the hands of the musicians, placing the instruments and a nascent sense of performance literally within the hands of each individual audience member effectively removes the orchestra and replaces it with the listener. There is a sense of play and irony in achieving this through a popularly owned lifestyle appliance.

With the increased sophistication of digital technologies, artists have been able to realise hitherto impossible ambitions. "If we could see our speech, what might it look like?" Sound is an often overlooked component in the theory of visual art, excluded by its very nature. The synaesthetic<sup>10</sup> multimedia paradigm of digital interactive art suggests that it is impossible to separate such things. In the works *Hidden Worlds of Noise and Voice* (Figure 29) (2003) and *Messa di Voce* (Figures 30, 31, 32) (2004), with Zachary Lieberman, Levin has explored an interest in phonesthesia. Phonesthesia is the experience of the fact that sounds of words share some attributes with other means of perception, such as colour, shape or texture. The artists have coined the term in-situ

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emulsion, abstract, animation, digital manipulation and 3D techniques.

<sup>8</sup> MTV: Music television - an international television channel that invented the popular concept of the music video.

<sup>9</sup> Dialtones (a telesymphony) - access images, mp3 sample recordings and video footage at: <http://www.flong.com/telesymphony/index.ht>

<sup>10</sup> Synaesthesia: the occurrence of one sense modality (for example, vision) when another is stimulated (such as smell).

speech visualisation to describe these works, which use “a variety of augmented-reality techniques” to construct environments in which representations of speech, not unlike comic-strip speech bubbles, seem to appear from participants' mouths. These are affected by the vocalist's volume, pitch and timbre to reflect inner states. (Levin & Lieberman 2004).

The technologies employed in Hidden Worlds range from stereographic 3D goggles with electromagnetic position sensors to computer-vision-based tracking and projection systems. Participants in Hidden Worlds are able to “‘see’ each others' voices, which are made visible in the form of animated graphic figurations that appear to emerge from participants' mouths while they speak” (Levin & Lieberman 2004). For the performance *Messa di Voce* (Italian for “placing the voice”), the computer tracks the performers' heads and bodies. Through custom interactive visualisation software, various kinds of visualisations are projected in real-time behind the performers while they improvise sounds. These include “particle systems, elastic spring meshes, fluid simulations, cloud simulations” (Levin & Lieberman 2004) (Figures 30-32). A separate installation version was also released, making some of the software modules available for public play.

One of these modules, called “Pitchpaint” (Figure 32), allows participants to paint graphic gestures by singing (Levin & Lieberman 2004): Descending pitches create lines which curl clockwise, while rising notes produce lines which curl counter-clockwise, and unchanging tones produce straight lines. Because an octave is precisely mapped to 180° degrees of an arc, the singers can create attractive regular polygons by singing common scales and arpeggios. The performers erase their marks by making the sound, 'Ssh!' .

Earlier on, it was said that Marina Abramovic's performance projects depended especially on the vulnerability of the human body, and that Pipilotti Rist treats the video signal itself as a barometer of her bodily sensations. *Messa di Voce*,

Apart from the obvious physical presence of the performers, takes the vocal manifestations of the body into cyberspace, augmenting the body by extending its functions through an invisible cybernetic system<sup>11</sup> of custom software and machines. Levin and Lieberman would not be able to do this kind of work without their education as both artists and engineers, and they represent an entirely new breed of artist.

## Conclusion

If one compares earlier performances such as *Imponderabilia* (1977) and *In Between* (1988) with more recent artworks like *Hidden Worlds* (2002) and *Messa di Voce* (2004),

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<sup>11</sup> Cybernetic system, as applied here, refers broadly to computer systems engineering.

there is an evident shift towards play and accessibility. This does not only reflect a difference in intention between Abramovic as opposed to Levin and Lieberman, but might indicate the current state of the cultural shift towards public participation already begun in the 1960s. It is also a consequence of the latter's engineering process, in which the product is designed with the clear purpose of the end-user's needs in mind.

It was stated earlier that Rist believes in putting a lot of time into a video product of relatively short length to keep visitors watching. Levin and Lieberman spend months developing their work, and by the time they have finished with an in-situ speech visualisation like Hidden Worlds, once the audience is literally immersed in the environment and its novelty they do not think of walking away, as they might do with a boring video or performance.

In immersive environmental installations like Hidden Worlds, without artist/audience dividing line, or video screen, the participant truly becomes the performer or player (although the performative role of technology is not to be ignored). "Play shows us that the "now" can be transformed using language, using action, using unexpected rules or codes of behaviour, using image - that what is mutable, shadable by fiction, pretence, mischief, reinvention, action and desire" (Etchells, in Hoffmann & Jones 2005:180). Thanks to cutting-edge technologies, the latest interactive installations make the "now", the heart of the artistic impulse, always available for transformation. Both artists and art users are empowered by their ability to participate in what is mutable, and to discover for themselves new fantasies and realities.

One is reminded again of the multiple meanings evoked by a ladder, a hole in the ceiling, and an ordinary kitchen on the other side, which throw open new social choices on either side of the hole to the participant. "Sometimes the most thrilling action is the one that happens in your imagination" (Elmgreen and Dragset, in Hoffmann & Jones 2005:188).

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