

# pricklings: appearance

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**ABSTRACT:** What is the manner of appearance? Is appearance the mode of virtuality coming-into-significance? What is the time of appearance and what is it that appears? This paper takes as its problem *appearance* within the discourses of electronic arts and culture. It considers *appearance* in two ways; as a philosophical term that hinges upon the arrival of the unexpected (a matter of time), and also *appearance* as the way things look (their manner). How can we judge appearance when the very terms of judgment fix its possibilities? Often the terms of the digital are fixed on the object in a too finite manner that prescribes style and in doing so arrests the possibilities of chance and poetics. My area of interest is electronic writing as inscription at the points of undecidability between new media arts, architecture and visual arts.

**KEYWORDS:** appearance, surface, the thing, the virtual, electronic writing research, inscription, digital architectures,

## INTRODUCTION (TRANSIT ZONE) ...

In my attempt to demonstrate the translation between screen to page in the arena of knowledge formation (academia), I have encountered a problem that concerns the *appearance* of the text. For example, how can we, do we, think about beauty and aesthetics and the body politic in the inscription of the digital? Things that can be bought to this problem include the relationships between the virtual, the digital and the apparitional: the fuzzy philosophical categories of *appearance* and *thing*. That things are not what they appear to be is not so very remarkable, that things are just what they appear to be (on the other hand), may well be. This is research writing that operates in a mode of play with the terms in question. As textual spaciality, it is made of dense connective tissue that begs a slow read and wishes for transit zones of passage and passing.

## WRITING (INSCRIPTION) ...

For the purposes of this research, when I am thinking about *writing*, all the elements of signification and their inter-relationships come into play. This play of effects includes: the notations of alphabetic text (words and

punctuation); images (both moving and still); video and audio; the relationships between any or all of these elements in any given spatial zone. Alongside the elements of writing it is also important to acknowledge the actions of vehicle or platform, that is the architecture and its point of reception/perception; be it internet, one to one, one to many or, many to many. For example, is the work in question a web site accessed via a personal computer in a domestic environment; is it displayed on a screen that is integral to the design of public space, be it interior or exterior; is it accessed by a hand held device, a cell phone or a PDA?

## methods ...

Gregory Ulmer has shown that the process of writing research in an electrated age requires an experimental method that is unlike the writing of instrumentalist language [1]. This way of writing can be categorized as writing without a cause, sans fixed address with nothing to prove. At the same time, it is writing that is crucially faithful to transformative acts. Explicit in this methodology is a politics that exceeds dialectical engagement. This is provocation by dint of the unfamiliar in the familiar rather than the dialectical point taken, disputed and furthered. Or, put differently, I am moved by the unknown rather than the already given. "The digital," being computation, works with given sets of already known terms – its very premise is the understanding of an already known lingo – its very possibility is coded into the program – that is, everything is available within a certain range of calculation. So the question begging is – at what point can anything new be made from the digital? Perhaps precisely at the points that are undecidable and have no use value, the points that exceed: this would be the *appearance* that is *event*.

## INSTANCE, (JUST A MOMENT) ...

"You define the present in an arbitrary manner as *that which is*, whereas the present is simply what *is being made*" [2].

Appearance, in the fullness of its possibilities both terrible and joyous, includes; the time of appearance (duration—its connectivity to other things); the event of appearance (its affect), which includes substance and nuance—the poetics of appearance. The virtual is intimately implicated in the actualizing of the world. It is more than what happens via the screen, it is more than the articulation of the real in digital form. Its time of appearance is before language: the space of memory and forgetting. Appearance is the act of coming into view - as if from nowhere. As the *arrival* of the unexpected *appearance* marks the passage between outside inside out: "It is coming out of this frame, something and yet nothing, and—oh! More absurdity! [...]" [3].

Appearance makes an entrance not quite in the way of material matters in a manner that tests the agreement of truth. For example, "The appearance of things seems to be

\_\_ but what are we *really* seeing here?", as if there is something before the act of appearance that could be ascertained. Yet in paying attention to what the appearance of the surface *represents*, we omit to notice the tension of surface itself. Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us that;

“It is the way this piece is made: how it comes to be, how it comes into being. Not where it comes from (since it never comes from anywhere but the one and only matter), but how its own coming, happening, advent, is done, folded and unfolded in its singular event. This is time as matter: the time of the coming, how it comes to itself, how a matter is connected and folded unto itself, how it coalesces. Getting space.” [4].

### EVERYDAY THINGS ...

Appearance is *everyday invocation* - the working of the unhomely. The apparitional (appearance/event) as the unhomely or *unheimlich*, frequently acts as the *thing* that fuels the work of art or architecture. This word *unhomely* is from the German *unheimlich*. In *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt*, Mark Wigley describes *unheimlich* as “the uneasy sense of the unfamiliar within the familiar, the unhomely within the home”[5]. Martin Heidegger is the philosopher of *being* whose sense of *unheimlich* is most referenced in architectural discourse. For Heidegger, language as *grounding* becomes language as *dwelling*. “Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells”[6]. Where and how does *being-digital* have an effect on the (*un*)heimlich of the ‘house’, the *structure* of being? The proliferation of communication technologies has affected the Heideggerian sense of dwelling and sent it nomadic, dis-orientated and no longer grounded in, or by, the earth. Home is now a term in rupture: something one carries with(in) as memory, matter, image and duration [7].

### PROVOCATION THINGS ...

In its Latin derivation, appearance is *to call forth*. An act of provocation can incite, instigate, anger or irritate. A question for appearance then, might be, what is the manner of its arrival? How is the action of appearance figured in different discourses? In evolutionary terms, natural selection demands an obstacle, a provocation to overcome. When Elizabeth Grosz writes about the *thing* in relationship to architecture she is not concerned with outlining its philosophical lineage [8]. Instead of the spooky malevolent ‘thing’ of post World War II, (Heidegger’s haunt perhaps), or the Other of a binary subject/object, she takes instead Darwin’s *take* on the *thing* as *evolutionary necessity*. “The thing is the provocation of the *nonliving*, the *half-living*, or that which *has no life*, to the living, to the potential of and for life” [9]. This provocation or obstacle (event and/or catastrophe) is the question and the means by which life becomes, grows, develops and changes.

### pricklings ...

Gilles Deleuze uses the term *pricklings* to describe the sensation that accompanies the animated state of the body that looks about, that senses before language [10]. This spacetime is the molecular, obscure time of proprioception that nevertheless affects the movements of a body. To ‘look about’ denotes a state of heightened awareness of environment, of being ‘amongst’. Materiality itself is called into question: matter becomes unsure or open to other ways of seeing, being. This state can be provoked by expectations of fear or pleasure – by an expectation that something is about to occur. Fight or flee – an instinctual response to an intuitive feeling. At this moment the whole of what one is (memory, perception, intelligence) is bought to bear upon any action, in a manner that is precise, deranged, crazy, mad, and at the very least unreasoned.

### swerve ...

That this moment of fight or flee could be categorized as an evolutionary response has been recognised as way back as Lucretius. He called the moment of provocation the *clinamen* [11], a word derived from Latin that means to bend, to curve. It is the action and affect of the swerve. It’s worth noting that the Japanese equivalent of the Western category *thing* is *mono*; “[...] *mono* suggests both thing and matter; it involves not only the teleologically identified object, but also the dynamism of the event”[12]. In this understanding of *thing*, both consciousness and ghosts (or spirit) can be thought of as things, that is, matter is not immediately of the earth. Thinking, writing and researching Digital Arts (whatever this may be), has at its limits poetics and reason. Once the *thing* is isolated from the stream of surfaces,

### <!--inter\_000

<span class="huge">dearest d. ... those irc logs on <a href="http://www.thing.net/~dollyoko/LOSDIAS/INDEX.HTML" id="los dias" name="los dias" title="the days and nights of the dead" target="\_blank">los dias</a> are astounding </span><span class="huge">... how do you read this stuff everyday? ... i mean -- what happens to it -- in your body? ... do you read Kahlil Gibran or someone like that ... not that it's sacred but just that it escapes -- like going deeper and deeper into nature -- one of those physics quotes you had -- where inscription become something else ... but if we think this then somehow we make it 'natural' ... all this death violence first before life ... in <em>2001: A Space Odyssey</em> way way back when the landscape was vast and horizon true ... it is </span><span class="huger">THE DAWN OF TIME</span><span class="huge"> (there's a clue) ... a monolith appears on the earth ... . it's black and shiny ... rectangular : monumental ... it has no mark ... its </span><span class="huger">surface is sheer (not transparent) ... </span><span class="huge"> it is -- or makes -- a speculative presence ... . after the

appearance of this thing the chimps/apes who witness it -- see/touch it -- look at skeletal remains differently ... suddenly bones become something more than unedible matter ... the biggest chimp picks up a leg bone ... feels its weight ... and starts to break up the remaining skeleton with it ... he raises the bone high in the air between each stroke .... for stanley kubrick and arthur c clarke ... this bone -- remainder of group meal -- is the first instrument ... the first tool ... the first extension to the body segue ... another day ... the big chimp and his clan beat the crap out of some other chimps who want to drink from the same water hole ... establishing territory ... techne and power (war) forever entwined ... . chimp/ape/man throws the leg/arm bone into the air ... jump cut ... to a bone shaped space ship -- against infinite black space ... slow imminent segue to the interior of a space shuttle ... decked out like a first class passenger jet ... . a man has drifted into sleep ... . his mont blanc pen floats adrift ... weightless ... unattached to any body

---exit\_000> [13]

it makes of itself a component amongst other components. This is how we make meaning amongst us: it is necessary for cognition.

“In Henri Bergson’s terms this cognition or understanding is constituted by the order-words of language, where ready-made order-words transmit “the ready-made problems that society seeks to force us to solve” [14].

One of the great absurdities of language is that each time we attempt to understand what is happening, we also arrest, and even fix, the flow of becoming. Deleuze notes the paradox eloquently in his conversation about the work of Michel Foucault; “If you don’t constitute a surface on which things are inscribed, what’s not hidden will remain invisible. Surface isn’t opposed to depth (from which one resurfaces) but to interpretation” [15].

#### NETWRECKED ...

“Chorography assumes that the citizens of an electronic apparatus will have to make judgments on conditions in which *theoria* has been rendered ambiguous, uncertain, undecidable” [16].

Netwrecked is the feeling I sometimes get when I write/read html hypertext wall(s)creens. For instance, Francesca da Rimini’s *the days and nights of the dead* could be a black hole that sucks the user in[17]. Yet like the black holes of cosmic imaginings and calculations, there ain’t no coming-back or going-through or coming-out the other-side;

“[...] instead of opening up the deterritorialized assemblage onto something else, it may produce an

effect of closure, as if the aggregate had fallen into and continues to spin in a kind of black hole. This is what happens under conditions of precocious or extremely sudden deterritorialization, and when specific, interspecific and cosmic paths are blocked.” [18]

But all is not lost. Making black holes can be an useful inhibition releaser, and noticing them (be warned), can spark lines of flight. *Los dias* is, after all, an emotional and vital surface of effects.

#### stupid...

The fact is, the “I”, the stupidity of “I”, has to appear here before you and speak in a language that rests on no easily settled elements — that is characterized by *unease* and *undecideability*. This research-writing is not sociological in the way of empirical. It appears from the dumb emptiness of poetics and intuition, and also a philosophy that is fuzzy and unsure. It thinks that we rush too fast to make a lingo of component bits to render yet another canon of academia and that in doing so, we cut too short and define too quickly the (im)possibilities of digital productions. For example, I am unsure of these questions of appearance. They are more intuitive than intellectual, felt more than known. They made sense amongst what I was thinking/writing at the time but that sense has not survived the words that record those thoughts, (is it that I was not writing but merely recording? can I write again into the text?). Struck dumb: *farklumpft*. Perhaps I feel a little like Barthes who often worried about appearing stupid – and who was always stupid before the act of writing;

“Here I am back at the same panic stupidity inspires: is it me? Is it the other? Is it the other who is unreadable (or stupid)? Am I the one who is limited, inept, am I the one who doesn’t understand?” [19]

In the phase of stupidity – a *being* passive, dumb and emptied – I wonder why it is so blind to me – this chance to take one small thing and pull it out from amongst other things. What makes it so difficult to take one small component and hone in on its little heart? How can the interminable surface (continuum and duration) and the feeling in one’s bones (intuition), exist without recourse to ciphers of loss and redemption? Bergson whispers over my shoulder, “are you confusing differences in degree for differences in kind?”

Gregory Ulmer’s project Chorography, offers possibilities for ways out of the impasse. His thinking is closely aligned with the sorts of processes artists and philosophers use to produce works that resist explication and act instead as germination points for further action. Chorography (or “chorography”) is the practice of *electracy* and a methodology for invention [20]. It operates as an analogy of the Platonian notion of chora as

it appears in *Timaeus* [21]. Chora is a paradoxical impulse that imagines a *receptacle of space* that acts as a winnowing machine. Via gentle sifting movements, the elements that form the cosmos separate and disperse, and in the dispersion of the elements, like gathers like. The thing about chora is that “it has to be totally foreign, totally exterior to anything that it receives.... It is thus an impossible surface, because it has no depth.” [22]

#### DIS-APPEARANCE ...

“If sensation is the analog processing by body-matter of ongoing transformative forces, then foremost among them are forces of appearing as such: of coming into being, registering as becoming. The body, sensor of change, is a transducer of the virtual.” [23]

The virtual denotes an arrival, the appearance of the unexpected. The moment of appearance can be felt as emotion and as sensation. For Brian Massumi it is *only through the analogue* that digital technologies make a connection to potential and the virtual [24]. The analogue is everything I/my body is *amongst* as both the designer/coder and as the reader/viewer/user, including the processes and artifacts produced by the software and the programming languages, the sound in the room or from the street, conversations with people I am amongst, body/furniture arrangements, the way the light falls or doesn't, the things and books on the shelves, the sound of email arriving or an error message speaking. Both the “I” of the sovereign body, and the digital body are so hermeneutically logical they appear dumb, or, stupid.

I deal with two very different modes of digital production: designing for the possibilities of the screen (web art writing/architecture) or designing for the purpose of *proof* – telling or representing (information architecture, or, the format of this document which may or may not appear on paper but will certainly appear on the screen). For a moment I want to consider the former mode. For the artist/designer/writer/coder there is an ongoing process of transduction between screen and body (this body, this flesh) and between the alphabetic devices of writing code and what appears on the screen. For me, there is a *felt* interval between the two very different output modes of writing and making. The net writer/designer shifts between writing with familiar alphabetic ciphers and their peripheral procedures in a html text editor to the art/writing (aesthetics) of its *appearance* as a screen surface. At once there is a series of *disappeared* alphabetic letters and punctuation marks utilized as code that surround and structure the timing and arrangements of images and sounds on the screen. The thing is, one becomes familiar with both ways of writing, and each transforms the other without assimilation. So, when I think and act amongst digital arts and culture, (including electronic writing), ‘I’ is not *in* the space of some parallel universe that runs separate to this world of the actual, material things. That was/is the dream of transcendental

cyberspace. When ‘I’ thinks electronic writing, or when ‘I’ writes electronically, movements are constituted by practices of forgetting and appearance (dumbness and chance) – a particular poetic that remains unnamable or *un-names* the remainders. There is no collective or in-common *expression* that *we* can take for granted that would precede the articulation of appearance – the moment of sensation and affect makes the *thing* of experience. Including this *we*: “[t]his “we” a mark of being in it together” [25].

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  - [7]. Duration, like memory is a complex concentration of ideas and practices. In *Creative Evolution* Bergson devotes a chapter to the affects of duration where he writes, “Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also is there no limit to its preservation. Memory as we have tried to prove, is not a faculty of putting away recollections, or of inscribing them in a register. There is no register, no drawer; there is, properly speaking, not even a faculty, for a faculty works intermittently, when it will or when it can, whilst the piling up of the past on the past goes on without relaxation.” Bergson, Henri. *Creative Evolution*.

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