MAPPING AESTHETICS

Video Mapping in Relation to Gernot Böhmes theory of Atmospheres and a New Aesthetics.

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1. Introduction

I will be examining the new media art practice of Video Projection Mapping in relation to Gernot Böhme’s theory of a New Aesthetics. An aesthetic theory that qualifies itself as the study of being in environments, principally concerned with the production and reception of atmospheres in which perception is understood as the experience of the presence of persons, objects and environments. Video Projection Mapping, the technical shaping of material, or even materiality makes an interesting contemporary case study, especially in relation to the liberation from the subject / object dichotomy, and Böhme’s concept of “the ecstasies of the thing”.¹

To consider how something is present in our environment we have to observe how it is present through our perception and how we perceive that it is in its actual presence. Sensory experiences are given a predominant role in creating, experiencing and interpreting environments and space. This manner of experiencing, integral to Böhme’s new aesthetics, is related to a phenomenological approach and tradition in aesthetics. In Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s “Phenomenology of Perception” he states that phenomenology is “a philosophy for which the world is always ‘already there’”² and that “It is a matter of describing, not of explaining or analysing”³. In keeping with these fundamental ideas I will be describing my own perceptual experience of Video Mapping and how it relates to Böhme’s theory of atmospheres and a new aesthetics.

2. Böhme’s Concept of Atmospheres

According to Böhme, atmospheres are intangible and without secure ontological status. It is uncertain, whether we should attribute them to the objects or the


³ vgl. Ebd. S, 9
environments from which they proceed, or to the subjects who experience them. Atmospheres therefore mediate between subject and object, and, production and reception, as in-between phenomena.

Atmospheres stand between subjects and objects: one can describe them as object-like emotions, which are randomly cast into a space. But one must at the same time describe them as subjective, insofar as they are nothing without a discerning Subject. Atmospheres combine what was traditionally divided up into Production Aesthetics and Reception Aesthetics.⁴

Hence, Böhme introduces atmospheres as a third element to the traditional antithetical relationship between production and reception aesthetics and the subject / object relationship. In fact it is crucial to Böhme’s concept of atmospheres, to liberate them from the traditional subjective / objective dichotomy: “In order to legitimate the idea of atmospheres and overcome their ontological unlocalizability, it is necessary to liberate them from the subjective-objective dichotomy.”⁵ By liberating atmospheres from the subjective-objective dichotomy and therefore combining production and reception aesthetics, artistic activity is no longer consummated in the creation of the work. Instead, artistic activity pertains to the production of particular perceptions and the various kinds of receptions experienced by the observer/audience which in turn also play a role in the production of the work itself. One might say as a third ephemeral part, atmospheres come into being in the interaction between time, situation, space, forms, materials, artist and audience. In this way the aesthetics of atmospheres emphasizes space and spatiality and the corresponding relationship to the persons and objects within these environments. In the following section I will focus on the experience of objects in accordance with Böhme’s theory of atmospheres.


3. The Thing

Böhme’s philosophy of a new aesthetics is concerned with the relation between environmental qualities, human states⁶ and the means by which they are related. As previously stated, particular to this intermediary position is the concept of atmosphere which the subject experiences as ‘something out there’, immaterial, and without secure ontological status. Accordingly objects exert an external effect, radiating into the environment, ‘filling it with tensions and suggestions of movement.’⁷ This experience of atmospheres in relation to objects, is what Böhme refers to as ‘the ecstasies of the thing’.

In this way the thing is not thought of in terms of its difference from other things, its separation and unity, but in the ways in which it goes forth from itself. I have introduced for these ways of going forth the expression ‘the ecstasies of the thing’.⁸

Here Böhme conveys that not only do objects have a way of going forth, but they are experienced through their relationship to things outside of themselves, rather than as separate individual units. Thereby emphasizing spacial relationships between, room, situation, light, object, perception and time.

In the final chapter of Böhme’s book; ‘Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik’ he quotes from Abraham von Frankenberg’s biography of Jakob Böhme. Through the examination of this literary excerpt, which depicts Jakob Böhme’s perception of an atmosphere emanating from an inanimate object, Böhme elucidates his ideas on an aesthetic of the ephemeral.

Jakob Böhme sieht ein zinnernes Gefäß stehen. Der Anblick des sanften Scheinens, den er an diesem Gefäß bemerkt, weitet sich ihm zu Gottesschau. Nicht von tiefem Ringen, vom Beten, Fasten und Kasteien ist die Rede, sondern davon, daß dem Schuster Böhme in seiner alltäglichen

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⁷ vgl. Ebd. S, 10
⁸ Ebd. S, 10
Here Böhme introduces the idea that the perception of atmospheres arising from objects, is not the result of religious practice but rather a sensual perceptual experience in an everyday environment. Video mapping, with its projection of light and images onto mundane objects and architecture in our local environments, encourages sensual perceptual experiences in everyday situations and is therefore an interesting contemporary practice to apply Böhme’s theories to.

4. What is Video Mapping?

Video Mapping or Video Projection Mapping is a projection technique employing software to map projected images onto irregularly shaped objects and surfaces. A technique that has partially grown out of VJ culture, projection mapping merges architecture, digital imagery and illusion, intervening in public space and urban environments, as well as clubs and art galleries. As a visually dominated audio-visual medium the audio for the most part is mapped to the visual, for in sync performance.

The first known record of projections onto 3D objects was in 1969, when Disneyland opened their Haunted Mansion ride. They used fake disembodied heads as objects and projected singing faces onto them with 16mm film. With an initial start in optical illusion, video mapping has grown into a new form of media art and as yet there is no critical writing about it.

What is interesting about Video Mapping in relation to Böhme’s theory of Atmospheres is the role of the object, that is the surface or surfaces that are projected onto. These surfaces, objects, things, often regarded by practitioners as futuristic replacements for the rectangular screen, are a point from which

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9 Böhme, Gernot *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik*, Suhrkamp Verlag Frankfurt am Main 1989, s. 166
video mapping can be categorized into two main modes: firstly the artist's (as subject) relationship to the object as a blank canvas on which to project and secondly, the perception of the object as a thing with its own inherent 'ecstasies' which the projection functions to illuminate, drawing our attention to a voice or spirit already perceived to be radiating out from the inanimate.

The first time I experienced the video mapping technique as produced by Ilan Katin at the Chalet Club in Berlin, 12.12.2012, I was drawn to the way in which the light was projected onto an empty picture frame, a cupboard, a door, gently outlining the existing form. This soft light, respectful of form, illuminating rather than dominating seemed to animate the inanimate object, giving it a spirit. Rather than feeling like the artist was projecting this feeling of spirit onto the object, it was as if the artist was directing my gaze towards a vitality that was inherently there. One could say that a concreteness of 'the ecstasies of the thing' as defined by Böhme became apparent.

The use of mapped, projected light, functions to illuminate the presence of objects, diffusing a 'shimmer of being'\(^\text{10}\). Bego M. Santiago’s public work entitled ‘Liven Up Your Home' projects onto an abandoned building on an urban street in Prague, 2.05.2012. Her aim is to ‘highlight the existence of dozens of abandoned buildings in the historic centre of Prague’ \(^\text{11}\).

For this video mapping performance, windows light up in turn and flicker as if the building is speaking to us. Shimmering forms change their appearance, depending on illumination and position. The surrounding environment becomes part of the work as the projection spills beyond the canvas of the abandoned building. Our view stretches over numerous perspectives and alternating contours, as the building’s presence is activated. Santiago manages to illuminate the forgotten life of the abandoned building, presenting moments by which to


\(^{11}\) http://www.begomsantiago.com/BARROCO [gesichtet am 06.08.2013],
perceive its presence as the illumination of an urban environment directs our gaze to its long forgotten aesthetic values.

As people walk past along the street they are projected onto, merging and becoming part of the building's out reaching illuminations. An occasional tram goes by, momentarily becoming one with the abandoned building as the projected light makes no differentiation between what is intentionally part of the work and what is incidental. In expanding the canvas, that is, blurring the boundaries that define a work from its surrounding environment, it becomes clear that an art work is not a complete, whole entity, but the result of relationships between the work, objects, light, audience, situation, space and time.

Next, a narrative, somewhat abstract, begins to unfold, and the building is no longer radiating out to us. Instead it has become the silent screen upon which a story takes place. Within this unique work both modes of video mapping occur: the use of objects as a blank canvas upon which to project narrative, and, an aesthetic sensual appreciation of a building whose function has long ago been disregarded. Through the sensitive illumination of mundane objects and architecture the 'ecstasies of the thing' are revealed. Due to the long time neglect of the building's original function, a space for sensual perception without the often dominating functional relationship to objects, has been exposed. One could therefore say, that the abandoned building makes for the perfect inanimate object to focus our gaze aesthetically, sensually and perceptually.

Much like Katin and Santigo's examples of video projection mapping, visual art forms have a history of drawing our attention to inanimate objects and their emanating atmospheres. As Böhme points out, the Impressionists were capable of capturing atmospheric moments that highlight the presence of objects.

Atmosphäre nennt, verbreitet über die Dinge den Schimmer des Daseins. Die Impressionisten waren Meister in der Erinnerung solcher Momente.\textsuperscript{12}

In a similar way to the 'play of light and shadow on things' video mapping, through its use of technology, has an ever-increasing ability to shape our perception of materiality. Atmospheres are produced and received in a very tangible way. Perception, mediated by the development of technology, is potentially altered, reshaped and expanded. This echoes ideas from Böhme's essay on Beauty which outlines a European history of aesthetics beginning with Plato and continuing through to the present day, where he acknowledges the influence of technology on perception.

It is a bold assertion to state that people in different historical periods perceive in a different way. And yet modes of perception mediated by technology – in the visual sphere, since the invention of the telescope and the microscope – are likely to represent at least an enlargement of the field of perception and perhaps even fundamental changes.\textsuperscript{13}

Video mapping, through the use of specialized software and video projectors, enables the artist to map projections onto any surface or object and images and light can be formatted to highlight any shape or form. Without the restriction of a rectangular screen artists are able to interact with mundane objects and environments, and in doing so shape materiality, fundamentally changing our perceptions and experience of environments and the objects within it. 1024 Architecture, a video mapping collective do this successfully with their work, Perspective Lyrique', for the Fête des lumières, Lyon, 8 – 11.12.2010.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Gernot Böhme, \textit{Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik}, Suhrkamp Verlag Frankfurt am Main 1989, S, 178.


\textsuperscript{14}http://1024d.wordpress.com/category/event-project/perspective-lyrique/ [gesichtet am 03.08.2013],
Referred to as interactive architectural mapping, 1024 Architecture, project onto the facade of the Théâtre des Celestins. It was the objective of the artists to reference the theatre’s historical beginnings with the theatrical genre ‘arts lyriques’, a dramatic form of poetry and music somewhat similar to opera. This interactive work could be influenced directly by the cry of the public through the use of voice triggering technology. ‘Perspective Lyrique’ begins with contemporary electronic beat music in sync to flashing lights formatted to the architectural structures of the building creating a light and audio show with links to video mapping’s origins in VJ club culture. However the minimal projection of light, respectful of architectural form does bring this historical building to life, animating it providing it with its own voice. The projections become more complex, employing what is known amoung practioners as a ‘masking’ technique. An identical copy of the building’s facade is projected onto the building and then distorted in a way to create the illusion that the building is in fact moving, even dancing to the music. Then the building appears in the form of a face, singing to us. These facial gestures, much to the amusement of the audience, are triggered by individuals from the public who sing into a microphone. The building thereby becomes an extension of the individual whose voice acts as a trigger for the building’s expressions. Through a game of illusion an inanimate historical building becomes alive for the viewer. Rather than a sensitive highlighting of form and the building’s inherent ‘ecstasies’ a playful and entertaining spectacle takes place.

5. The Aesthetic View

Returning to Böhme’s analysis of the experience of Jakob Böhme, momentarily struck by the presence; the ‘Daseins’\textsuperscript{15}, of his pewter vessel, and correspondingly, his experience of the ‘ästhetische Blick’\textsuperscript{16}. He defines two ways of viewing objects, one that is primarily concerned with the functionality of the

\textsuperscript{15} vgl. Böhme, Gernot Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik, Suhrkamp Verlag Frankfurt am Main 1989, S. 178
\textsuperscript{16} vgl. Ebd. S, 167
object and one that lets go, or releases: 'loslassen'\(^{17}\) and simply experiences through sensual perception.

Ein Becher ist ein Becher, ein Trinkzeug, würde Heidegger sagen. Also solches ist er zur Hand und zweckmässig, selbst seiner Materialist verschwindet gewöhnlich hinter seiner Dienlichkeit, von dem matten Schimmer seiner Oberfläche ganz zu schweigen. Es ist der ästhetische Blick, würden wir sagen, dem sich der Schimmer auf der Oberfläche erschliesst, der 'reinen Betrachtung'. Dieser Blick sucht nicht mehr das Trinkgefäss, er lässt die Dienlichkeit des Gegenstandes dahingestellt und mag sie geradezu vergessen, indem er ihn in seiner sinnlichen Präsenz würdigt.\(^{18}\)

Video mapping, by treating objects not functionally but aesthetically influences our view, encouraging us to see objects beyond and outside of their functionality, and to appreciate their sensual presence. Böhme views the 'Signalwelt'\(^{19}\), that is an understanding of objects according to their functionality, as the predominant way in which we understand and relate to the 'real' world. In order to appreciate an aesthetic of the ephemeral, to encourage an aesthetic view, Böhme suggests the need of instruction, a 'Schule des Sehens'\(^{20}\).

Die Signalwelt ist in solchem Maße heute die 'wirkliche' Welt, daß man – wenn man etwa bei Müdigkeit oder durch Alkohol sich lösend – die Lichter als Lichter und die Formen in ihrem Zusammenspiel wahrnimmt, meint, in einer Traumwelt sich zu befinden. Das Ephemere wird im allgemeinen nicht wahrgenommen, deshalb sagte ich, daß die Ästhetik des Ephemeren zugleich eine Anleitung sein müsse, eine Schule des Sehens.\(^{21}\)

Perhaps video mapping, with its ability to illuminate the presence of everyday objects, could be a part of this school of seeing.

\(^{17}\) vgl. Ebd. S, 184
\(^{19}\) vgl. Ebd. S, 184
\(^{20}\) vgl. Ebd.
\(^{21}\) Ebd.
6. Conclusion

Video mapping, with its technical ability to map light and images onto any form encourages the gaze to be directed towards inanimate objects that have come to replace the conventional screen and motivates the observer to perceive these things sensually and aesthetically. Since the video mapper perceives the object for its aesthetic value and certainly outside of its intended functional value it could be the perfect medium for exemplifying Böhme’s concept of atmospheres as in-between phenomena, and the idea of objects as emanating atmospheres outside of themselves. At times, through video mapping production one encounters a diffuse infinity and then an almost surreal clarity of formations, yet with ungraspable contours. This blurring of an object’s boundaries, and the lack of clarity regarding the separation of the art work from its environment, emphasises the spacial relationship between objects, environments and the people within them.

There is a fine line between illuminating the ecstasies of things, inherent in inanimate objects and dominating them with the projection of images. For the most part video mappers perceive objects as blank canvases upon which to project, but it is at this fragile intersection between domination and sensitive illumination that we can experience a highlighted glimpse of atmospheres, in a more tangible way. Whether this illustrates the artist's perceptions of the object during the conception process of atmospheric production as a conscious respect for inherent ecstasies in things or as an incidental effect, or the outcome of perceptual processes, the aesthetic view is in the gaze of the artist as well as that of the audience / observer, as mediated by technology. As Böhme states in his essay ‘On Beauty’:

This interconnection between technological development and the change in conceptions of beauty has two sides. On the one hand, the basic technical conditions of experience have made new perceptual pleasures available to people in the modern period. On the other, the technical mastery of light and sound, together with the technical shaping of material or, still more, of
materiality have made possible the generation of practically unlimited aesthetic effects.\textsuperscript{22}

One may then ask what impact this technology based art has on a transforming concept of landscape.

7. Bibliography


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