Close Your Eyes,
Drive As Fast As You Can

1

Probably something akin to *Sculpture 101*, which was taught by a totally chilled-out dude named I think Michael Quintero who was like the nicest guy ever and who had a teaching assistant named Stanley who was one of those older extremely talented guys who are usually employed by college art departments, who was a good-natured curmudgeon and wore plaid flannel shirts exclusively and claimed to be from Northern Vermont. The both of them put up with Econ majors making sculptures of monkeys and prissy girls not wanting to get their hands dirty with the casual insouciance that can only come from a sort of deep level of happiness and calmness that made me sad that I hadn't been a Sculpture major or hadn't at least taken a few more classes with them so that I might have had a chance to decompress a little bit and share in the general warmth and contentedness these guys exuded.
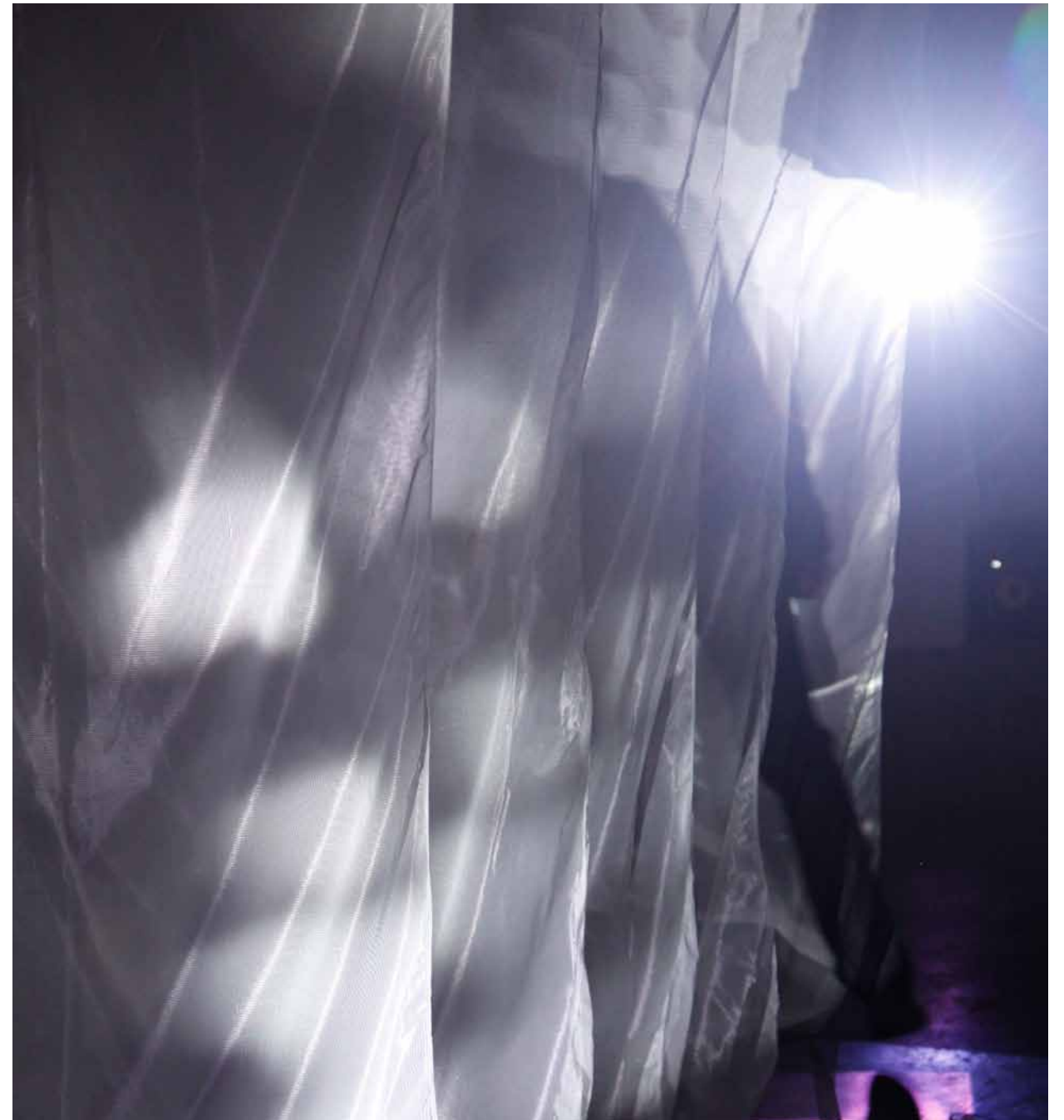
2

I think it's officially called "3D".

In the 2010 Spring semester, while hurriedly trying to figure out what classes to take in the upcoming Fall 2010 semester, the SIM class, *Video Sculpture*, seemed like a good fit based on what I was interested in at the time: it seemed to involve making video pieces and creating physical installations/environments/items for them. So, I registered for it.

Taking an official Fine Arts class for the first time since the second semester of my senior year at good old Denison U., which was way back in the Spring of 2002, when I had taken a Sculpture class[1], was something of a shock to my system. On the first day of *Video Sculpture* class, we went around the room, our chairs of course in a circle, saying our names and majors and announcing what we were interested in and what we were hoping to get out of the class. I muttered something about interactivity and cinema. Another guy, pursuing his MFA in Sculpture[2], said that he was interested in "entropy". As in: that was his entire response. So I felt a bit like a fish out of water, a babe in the woods, out of my comfort zone, whatever sort of cliché makes sense to signify that I felt awkward and strange.

The course consisted of weekly assignments. Every week we had to both film/create a video and conceive a physical installation for the presentation of the video. Ideally, I came to learn, we'd conceive of the video and its physical manifestation *simultaneously*, so that they'd be conceptually linked and intertwined and as inseparable as possible. I admit that my first few assignments in the class involved an "I made this video, now where can I stick it?" modus operandi. I had always thought of the video image as its own

thing that existed on a screen or flat surface. To then have to think about it in three dimensional space and to conceive a way to link the concept of whatever the video content was with whatever form in which I chose to display it was, well, tough. I was able to get away with projecting onto walls for a little while. My first project was about entertainment and television and people watching the time-based image, and consisted of an hour-long video of my wife and I on our couch watching *Mad Men* compressed into 60 seconds via time-lapse, so I projected into this weird built-in entertainment center-looking cabinet in the classroom. But eventually the jig was up and I had to take it all up a notch[3]. This led me to start seeking out new materials to project onto and through, and to start lugging what can only be described as random shit back and forth with me to class every Monday afternoon[4]. In my search for interesting new materials, I came upon Backstage Hardware, which is on the first floor of the Boston Design Center in the Fort Point neighborhood of Boston. It's a hardware store that also carries theatrical/film supplies, like duvetyne, muslin, gaffer's tape, and something called tropical netting. The actual purpose/function of the latter item is unclear. It's basically white transparent material that is actually very fine netting. Anyway, the first time I ventured into the store, wide-eyed and giddy, I bought five yards of it[5].

I started doing experiments with the netting, projecting video onto and through it. Its malleability as a quasi-fabric and its ability to both capture the image and let the image pass through refracted, made it a fascinating thing to play with and shape. Due to its flexibility, I started basically including it in every project[6]. It could take on any shape and still capture whatever image was being projected onto it. I used it for more abstract things, like videos of stylized store fronts, where the layers became less representational and more textural. I also used it for things that were more figurative, like portraits, using the netting to physically add layers to the image. I came to realize how different kinds of footage would appear when projected onto the material. Higher contrast images were easier to discern than lower contrast or flat images.

These studies came to a head when it was time for our final project. Envisioned as a culmination of The Things We'd Learned This Semester, it

had to be multi-channel, meaning more than one video stream had to be involved, it had to include sound, and it had to be awesome[7].
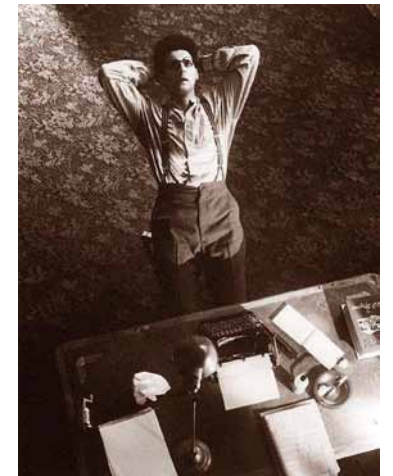
My original idea for this *pièce de resistánce* was to shoot a two person dialogue scene, in high-contrast black and white, each character with his/her own screen/video feed. These feeds would be projected directly toward each other, with a third screen in between, capturing the spill over through the (of course) tropical netting. I envisioned each video as back-lit and smokey, aesthetically someplace between film noir and the French *nouvelle vague*. Men in suits conversing. Atmospheric. A study in form. As detailed elsewhere in this document, I'd been getting into this idea of deconstructing cinematic narrative devices, and I thought this could be another avenue for deconstruction: take the two-person dialogue scene, strip it down to its essence, isolate the two characters, put it into an installation environment and see what happens.

The problem with this idea was that I couldn't come up with anything for these magnificent gentlemen to talk about. I mean, I had no idea. Nothing was coming, and nothing was coming after the usual period of nothing coming. It got to the point that I felt a bit like Barton Fink in his Hollywood hotel room/Hell. But I had to start shooting, because this was a semester and thus a finite period of time, and I had to get on with it if I wanted to have something "awesome" to show in our big-final-day-of-project exhibitions.

Going somewhat by the seat of my pants, I invited my parents over for dinner and told them that we'd be shooting something with my Dad[8]. I decided to keep the idea of a black and white, high-contrast look, but have the subject be silent. The footage would be more of a straightforward "portrait" of a person/character than of a "scene". I shot the footage of my father in this way, with him turning left and right, changing the shot from wide to medium to close-up to extreme close-up. He stood in front of a black duvetyne backdrop, so the light completely fell off and disappeared behind him, so that when projected onto the netting, the background would disappear[9], too.

I recorded my Dad reading selections from Jon Loomis'[10] book of poetry *The Pleasure Principle*. This is a book that I've had for years and had

3
Having to sit/stand through critiques of everyone's projects for five hours, and to listen to some of the, pardon my French, absolute horseshit that people would come up with to describe their projects and the subsequent ridiculousness with which my stuff would get criticized was a highly motivating factor to improve the overall quality of my work.

4
From the Mindoro St. parking lot, which, if you haven't heard of it or haven't had to make the trek to and from it carrying something like an eight-foot-long-cardboard box or speakers or really anything at all, especially in a December wind, consider yourself lucky.

5
the last time I purchased some of it, the guy ringing it up couldn't find a SKU, asked me what the stuff was, then called across the store to the other guy working there, asking him if he had ever sold any of it, to which the guy said "Ah...once or twice", with both of those times apparently having been to me.

6
This led the "entropy" guy to remark, "You *love* that fabric, huh?"

7
This was implied in a fashion designer-esque way by the instructor; I don't know if she specifically ever said, "You better *work it*, people!!", but it was definitely the sort of thing you could hear her saying.

8
By this point I had already used my father in a few projects, and he shoulder-shruggingly would pretty much go along with whatever I had planned, being an excellent sport throughout whatever thing I was asking him to do.

9
The color black basically becomes invisible, or very faint, when projected.

10
One-time poet laureate of the US, now writing mystery novels set in Provincetown, MA.

always liked for its mix of humor, candor, and sadness. It's poetry, but the poems are more like little vignettes or stories, i.e., nothing rhymes. I excerpted some bits that resonated with me and fit together tonally. It seemed appropriate to have my father's voice saying these things[11]. I had the idea that I could be the other "portrait", and that I could also record myself saying the same Loomis text fragments. Then, when I projected each video feed through the netting, there would be an intermingling of image, not to say anything about the young vs. old, father vs. son, and other heavy conceptual business that I'm not going to get into here. The audio would be played back randomly, with each poetic fragment its own file. I'd put each set in a playlist and use the "shuffle" feature of an *iPod*. These fragments would function as a sort of disconnected voiceover narrative, challenging the viewer to make connections or associations between what he or she is seeing and hearing.

A common post-production device used in Hollywood films that have fallen into a film-executive-sweat-inducing narrative abyss is the use of voiceover narration in order to help the viewer figure out what's happening. This is usually a crap idea[12]. I liked the notion that I was recording voiceover narration to cover up narrative holes that didn't exist in the first place.

I edited the footage into crisp, quick cuts, using loops and the repetition of small movements. I knew that the tropical netting would add a softness to the image, so I stayed away from dissolves and fades to contrast the appearance of the figures as captured on the material. Each video feed would be of a slightly different length to create an asynchronous loop when viewed simultaneously, creating a limitless combination of image fragmentation.

I installed the piece, now called *Close Your Eyes, Drive As Fast As You Can* (after one of the Loomis fragments) in Squash Court #3, taking up most of the space. The installation took all of a Sunday and involved a rickety ladder, dowels, a cordless drill, three sheets of 4' x 8' tropical netting, twine, two projectors, an *iPod* and an *iPhone* to play the audio, and a fair amount of extension cords. I had my grand opening the next day, in the final *Video Sculpture* class. The reaction was mixed. The critique was a hodgepodge of everything lame and frustrating and obtuse about Fine Arts critiques.

There were some "I don't get it"s. When asked about the voiceovers, I explained my reasoning. "Well, it didn't seem like that was your intention." Ok. Thanks, TA. My instructor was concerned with what I was wearing in my portrait. "That sweater says something." Ok. Some people thought the audio was too loud, and said they didn't find a connection between the voiceover and the portraits, and others suggested that the piece would be better without audio[13].

I installed the piece again as part of *OHU*. This time, I added more panels, so there were five layers of image. There was more space for the viewer to move around the fabric and experience the layering of imagery from multiple perspectives. It was the visual centerpiece of the show, and it succeeded in creating a captivating environment for people to experience in real space. No one asked me to explain it or defend it. No one questioned my intent with the audio. People simply seemed to experience the piece, moving and drifting through the image and projected light, the audio low and reflecting softly off the concrete and plaster of the gallery[14]. The intent was never to make someone feel a specific way. I'm not in advertising, and I'm not selling anything. The intent was to put this combination of images and words and sound together in a considered space and see how it made people feel and what it all meant. There is no right answer. Not in a Fine Arts class.

11
Hey man, this was for an art class.

12
The most famous example of this is probably when *Warner Bros.* insisted on having Harrison Ford record a voiceover for Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*.

13
These students had apparently missed or chose to ignore our instructor's bulleted list of project requirements. *Work with me here, people!!*

14
It's really tough to not have audio just booming when you have a nice set of speakers hooked up to whatever sounds you've spent a lot of time crafting. The squash court setup/pooh-poohing of the audio really showed me that with sound, it's probably best to be subtle and nuanced, as long as your audio can physically be heard and deciphered (unless it's meant to be hard to hear/indecipherable).