

Objects Arrested in Time and Space: Abstraction and Affect

Robin Curtis

Roaming through the 2015 Venice Biennale during the preview weekend at anything but a leisurely pace, I encountered an installation that halted my tour and appealed to me to consider the relationship between two forms of an object on display there: one was materially present before me in the form of a large block of transparent and colourless ballistic gel at rest, with both globular and jagged pathways visible in its interior that had been formed by the trajectories of air and matter that were now held within it like fossils; the other was an event depicted within a silent, looped film, presented on a flat screen monitor behind that block, showing what had transpired within the block at an earlier point in time when several bullets had passed through it (*The AK-47 vs the M16*, 2015).¹ The combination of the two objects in this installation invited a comparison between these very different media and the way in which each sought to contain past vitality.

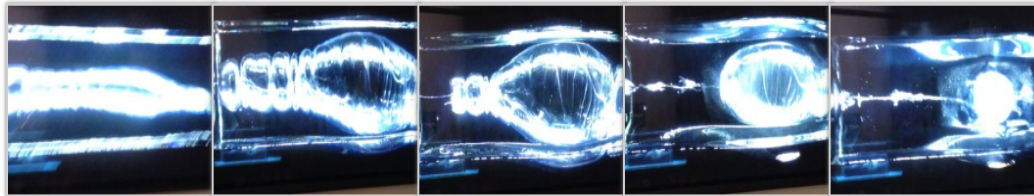


Objects Arrested in Time and Space: Abstraction and Affect, via criticalcommons.org

Affect is a comprehensive term for the multiple forms of intensity, which present themselves in a pre-conscious field of human experience that facilitates correspondence between individual (animate and inanimate) bodies and the atmosphere that surrounds them.² Attention to sensory-affective experience, and the development of a range of perspectives on affect within cultural theory in roughly the last twenty years, have been invaluable in recent efforts to highlight qualities of

encounter and exchange. These encounters would perhaps have remained undetected and indescribable to accounts that are more focussed on the meaning and trajectory of events and activities and would leave many aspects of our embodied experience unexamined. Why do we choose to fix our gaze upon one particular object among all the many things and beings we move among (and why am I occupied still by this installation in particular)? When we do find ourselves transfixed by something that is unaccountably riveting, what is our response to this moment of aesthetically initiated “*Innehalten*”?³ Is this pause a form of reciprocal or complementary stasis with the object in question, an attentiveness or alignment with it?

The contrast between two different forms of traces (a block of ballistic gel and a film) of the same event (the firing of bullets into that block) that was presented by this installation highlights a number of issues that have occupied me in my research in recent years: the power of the specific form of abstraction made tangible in the movement of the moving image as an impulse for affect that operates independently from narrative or content, human figure or facial expression; the impression of reciprocity between animate and inanimate bodies that comes about by way of such movement; the effect of various forms of materiality on my own sense of involvement as one body among others; and finally, the ways in which the notion of *Einfühlung* (empathy) and the *Einfühlungsästhetik* (or empathy aesthetics) may help to better grasp the affective forces at work here.⁴



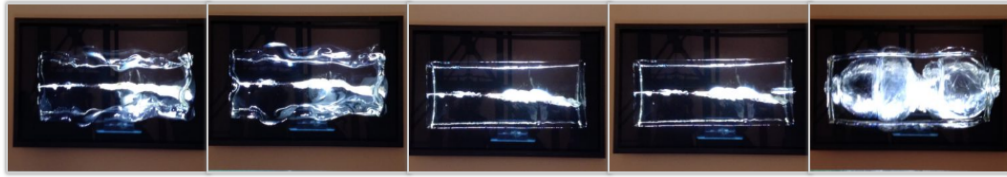
Figures 1-5: author's photographs of The Propeller Group, *The Ak-47 vs the M16*, Venice Biennale, 2015

There in Venice I personally (and obviously not untypically for the contemporary viewer of just about anything) felt the need to respond to these objects by taking a series of snapshots and finally a brief film of the film in question with my phone. While one might see such photos as the contemporary form of the sketches made by generations of art historians of the objects before them, that were used as a system of notation (and indeed take them consciously as a form of notation), I would argue that, despite our impression that we might be documenting what we have seen, these contemporary responses are different, especially in light of the fact that we are aware that far better quality images of the object or event in question are invariably already available online.⁵ The contemporary practice of partaking of the world via one's phone seems to be less an attempt to focus one's attention and more one of momentary absence or abstention, a deferral to the apparatus in my hand and a stilling of my body to act as a

tripod for that apparatus. Is this a form of affective emulation or simply one more example of interpassivity?⁶ The clip you see here is the fragment that I filmed, showing only a brief portion of the film in question: the image sways and the sounds of the muffled, distant conversation and other installations can be heard in the background.

The film displayed as a part of this instillation, *The AK-47 vs. the M16*, by the Vietnamese/American trio of artists known as The Propeller Group, depicts a singular event filmed in slow motion: the collision in mid-air of two bullets fired toward each other by each one of these weapons within the confines of a block of ballistic gel. The weapons named in the work's title are those that were used by the North Vietnamese and the Americans, respectively, during the war in Vietnam. The work immediately calls to mind the slow motion relations between bullets and matter, figure and ground, that are familiar from a variety of genres throughout the history of cinema: from the extended, ruinous cross-fire near the end of *The Wild Bunch* (1969)⁷ (which itself was viewed at the time as a commentary on the war in Vietnam),⁸ in which all participants are eventually gunned down, to the "bullet time" made familiar by *The Matrix* (1999),⁹ which gives equal attention to the objectives of bullets and those of the bodies for which they were destined, as each moves through the suddenly viscous space.

These memories of films observed—and here I mean the recollection of specific *movements* of the films in particular, rather than the intricacies of their narratives—resonate in the glistening expansions and contractions of the ballistic gel. The abstraction contained within the representations of those films is invited to come to the fore. The power of the bullets to put an end to the vitality of a human is effaced here, as space and matter move together, animated and animate, each impacting the other. The block of ballistic gel, which at rest perfectly mimics the frames of the shot in shape, begins in its interior to billow, shake and glisten when bullets are fired into it. Its exterior expands and contracts with the force of each firing and then the collision between two bullets, as it seemingly threatens to lose its structural integrity outwards, while ultimately springing back into form. Figure (each bullet and its trajectory through matter) and ground (the matter of space made plastic via this gel) of this event itself (two bullets meeting in space) seem to be interchangeably available, with the qualia making up my perception of the event—if I were to give these qualities a name it would be bursting, shuddering, glistening, or billowing etc.—pushing their way into the foreground and obscuring the event of the collision of two bullets that they (ostensibly) represent.



Figures 6-10: authors photographs of The Propeller Group, The AK-47 vs the M16, Venice Biennale, 2015

Such adjectives as these evoke the terms chosen by Daniel Stern to describe what he called “vitality affects.” In his studies of pre-verbal infants, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant* from 1985, Stern established that babies are capable of transposing information that is perceived in one particular sensory mode into another. This doesn’t mean that they translate, for instance “hearing” into “seeing,” but rather that, percepts are encoded into what Stern calls “amodal representations,” which may be recognized in any sensory modality. Stern describes them specifically as follows: “These elusive qualities are better captured by dynamic, kinetic terms, such as ‘surging,’ ‘fading away,’ ‘fleeting,’ ‘explosive,’ ‘crescendo,’ ‘decrescendo,’ ‘bursting,’ ‘drawn out,’ and so on.”¹⁰ As such, the qualia are indistinguishable from the adjectives we might use to describe things we have seen: according to Stern these are mimicked by human observers by way of what he terms a process of attunement.

A similar alignment between the qualities of the things and atmospheres that one encounters in the world and the qualia of one’s own perception provided the basis for the relationship with the world examined within considerations of the *Einfühlungsästhetik*. According to one of its most prominent proponents, Theodor Lipps, *Einfühlung* was rooted in the involuntary and instinctive act of mimicry with bodies or objects, forms or colours, atmospheres or spaces: in short, potentially with all things and qualities, whether animate or inanimate, in one’s surroundings. In Lipps’ day (around 1900) such an act of mimicry could be observed but not explained and thus remained a hypothesis. While this inclination to mimicry when associated with inanimate objects was viewed by Lipps (and his predecessors in this field of inquiry) as a basis for aesthetic experience, in the case of alignment with human figures or facial expressions, it became the basis for the notion of empathy within the developing field of psychology.¹¹ The involuntary swaying of audience members who watched a dancer or the inner tension and visible rigidity of those watching a tightrope artist were examples of such a response cited by Lipps, even while he emphasized that such outward responses as these generally are suppressed by social convention. The motor for this kind of alignment was the vitality of the observer, which was projected onto all other phenomena, although this projection is perceived as having emanated from that other, due to the unconscious and suppressed nature of that response. Lipps described it as follows:

I feel this striving of mine within the visually perceived movement. I experience it as

something belonging directly to it. Thus I feel myself striving within this movement, striving for the kinesthetic sense of motion that corresponds to the visually perceived movement, and with it for this movement itself. To put it more generally, I feel myself within a thing perceived, striving to execute a movement.¹²

This form of automatic alignment lies at the heart of *Einfühlung* and can be applied both to a figure and the ground around it, to an object and the space around that object.

What stands out in both Lipps' and Stern's account is the significance of vitality for the experience in question. As with Stern's "vitality affects," the source for the alignment with the things of the world in Lipps' account is our impression of our own vitality: "[f]or what I feel is, quite generally, life. And life is energy, inner exertion, striving, and achieving."¹³ And yet, to return to the installation in question here, what is most striking about both the block of gel and the film of the bullets passing through it, is its emphasis on stasis, particularly due to the fact that the central event depicted by these two media is an act in which the two bullets in question annul one another's force. One could say that the installation offers a staging of comparative forms of inertness, of still-stand, and that the viewer partakes of that still-stand in the pose that was required to make the image of that installation that you see here.

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Notes

¹ The Propeller Group, *The AK-47 vs the M16*, 2015, Fragments of AK-47 and M16 bullets, ballistic gel, glass case. LED lights, 16 × 6 × 6 inches (40.6 × 15.2 × 15.2 cm).

² This description of affect as pre-conscious would seem to be in keeping with the basic description of affect outlined by Brian Massumi in his 1995 text, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique* 31, which is viewed as a seminal contribution to contemporary perspectives on affect within the humanities. However, a recent text by Ruth Lays challenges several presumptions gleaned from the natural sciences, upon which Massumi's perspective on affect is based. In particular and most critically, she challenges the notion of the "missing half second," postulated by Benjamin Libet, that Massumi employs in the aforementioned text to account for the lag of cognition behind affect which thus provides the basis for the clear distinction between affect and emotion that is postulated by Massumi. Furthermore Lays highlights the affinities between those cultural theorists who follow in the wake of Sylvan Tompkins and those, like Massumi, who take a more philosophical approach to affect theory, in that both approaches presume this separation between affect and signification. Lays' critique strikes at the basis of the anti-intentionalist inclinations that are widespread within the approaches to affect taken up within cultural theory. In closing she suggests that the consequence of returning to an intentionalist interpretation of the affects will be that "one finds oneself forced to provide thick descriptions of life experiences of the kind that are familiar to anthropologists and novelists but are widely held to be inimical to science" (471). See Ruth Lays, "The Turn to Affect: A Critique," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Spring 2011): 434-72. It is worth noting that this issue of *The Cine-Files* devoted to affect has similarly called for a detailed examination of an encounter with a film excerpt from its contributors, by keeping "present together, in the writing, the materiality of the film as sound and image and the question of sensory-affective cinematic experience."

³ The German infinitive verb *innehalten* is generally rendered into English simply with the verb to stop or to pause, but suggests in addition to these meanings both immobility and reflection, a drawing into oneself that offers a perspective on one's own nature and state.

⁴ It is worth noting that research into affect has in recent years often productively turned to debates that were thought to have long since been placed *ad acta*, such as those around the *Einfühlungsästhetik*, or vitalism, for that matter. For a consideration of the role that the latter may play for theories of the moving image see, for example, Inga Pollmann, "Invisible Worlds, Visible: Uexküll's Umwelt, Film, and Film Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 39:4 (Summer 2013): 777-816. As regards the significance of *Einfühlung* for the moving image, see Robin Curtis, "Einfühlung and Abstraction in the Moving Image: Historical and Contemporary Reflections," *Science in Context* 25:03 (September 2012): 425-446.

⁵ Another shot of the film itself in its entirety with all the background noise in the exhibition space of the Arsenale in Venice, that was made by another visitor to the Biennale, is available

here: "What's the effect [sic] of the AK47 vs. the M16?," YouTube video, 1:30, posted by "Peter Heine," July 31, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmJ3kb_eXwQ. A documentation of the components of the installation and an interview with the artists is available here: "Biennale Arte—The Propeller Group," YouTube video, 2:34, posted by "la Biennale di Venezia Channel," May 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJfoP7xHJVI>.

⁶ Interpassivity has been defined as "the wish for delegated consumption in art as well as in everyday culture." See Robert Pfaller, "Interpassivity and Misdemeanors: The Analysis of Ideology and the Žižekian Toolbox," *International Journal of Zizek Studies* 1:1 (2007): 33-50, p. 47, or Robert Pfaller, *Interpassivität. Studien über delegiertes Genießen* (Wien: Springer, 2000).

⁷ This scene is available for view here: „The Wild Bunch - Final Shootout," YouTube video, 4:35, posted by "Movie Scenes," December 19, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJMxGFco57Y>.

⁸ The analogy to the war in Vietnam was much noted at the time of the film's release and is considered, for instance, from a variety of perspectives by the authors in the Cambridge Film Handbook on the film. See Stephen Price, ed., *Sam Peckinpah's The Wild Bunch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁹ The scene in question is available for view here: "Matrix Bullet Time," YouTube 1:29, posted by "DerManiac," July 11, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3c8DI2c1whM>.

¹⁰ Daniel Stern, *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology* (London: Carnac Books, 1985): 54. For a critical overview of Daniel Stern's importance for investigations of affect within humanities scholarship, see Constantina Papoulias and Felicity Callard, "Biology's Gift: Interrogating the Turn to Affect," *Body & Society* 16:1 (2010): 29-56. In particular, Papoulias and Callard emphasize the degree to which Stern's account of affect is in the service of the development of a stable self in the child, aided by the mother, and as such is often misunderstood and misapplied in accounts that seek to bypass subjectivity.

¹¹ For an overview of the history of *Einfühlung* and its role within aesthetic theories of the late 18th and 19th centuries and its relationship to the birth of the notion of empathy within the field of psychology around 1900, see Robin Curtis, "An Introduction to *Einfühlung*," transl. Richard George Elliott, *Art in Translation* 6:4 (December 2014): 349–352.

¹² Theodor Lipps, *Grundlegung der Ästhetik* (Hamburg: Leopold Voss, 1903), 120.

¹³ Theodor Lipps, "Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuß," in *Asthetik*, ed. Emil Utitz (Berlin: Pan-Verlag Rolf Heise, 1924), 160.