

Malcolm Levy

OTHER-FRAMES

February 28 – March 21, 2015

'Other-frames: Malcolm Levy and Sensing Images'
by Nathaniel Stern

There is no such thing as a digital image.

Or at the least, there is no such thing as a purely digital image. Our machines are built and programmed so as to box in and grid out pictures as thousands of tiny and perfectly legible squares. But at the level of the pixel, there are always mis-takes, mis-steps, and mis-representations that occur when translating from coded image forms to the printed page or screen. With print, the ink might clot or dry slightly differently in a given region.

A minor imperfection on the paper may cause a divot and thus a variation in its pulp-and-pigment versioning. There could be a surge in amperage that causes the printer head to overshoot. Or, more visible and known to us in the everyday, a color of ink could run out, or an ink valve could need cleaning. On screen, there are variations of light reflecting and refracting in and around what we see. Not all liquid crystal (the “LC” in LCD screen) responds to electrical current exactly the same; and dead pixels remind us just how fragile our computers, data, and images are. All of these real world elements – referred to as “analog” since the advent of the digital – create imperfections in our images: a glitch, a bad print, an inconvenience of ink or cleaning, having to go into shade, or needing a new printer or screen. But they also reveal that our expensive and ideal machine worlds never do precisely what we want them to.

In fact, there is no such thing as “digital.”

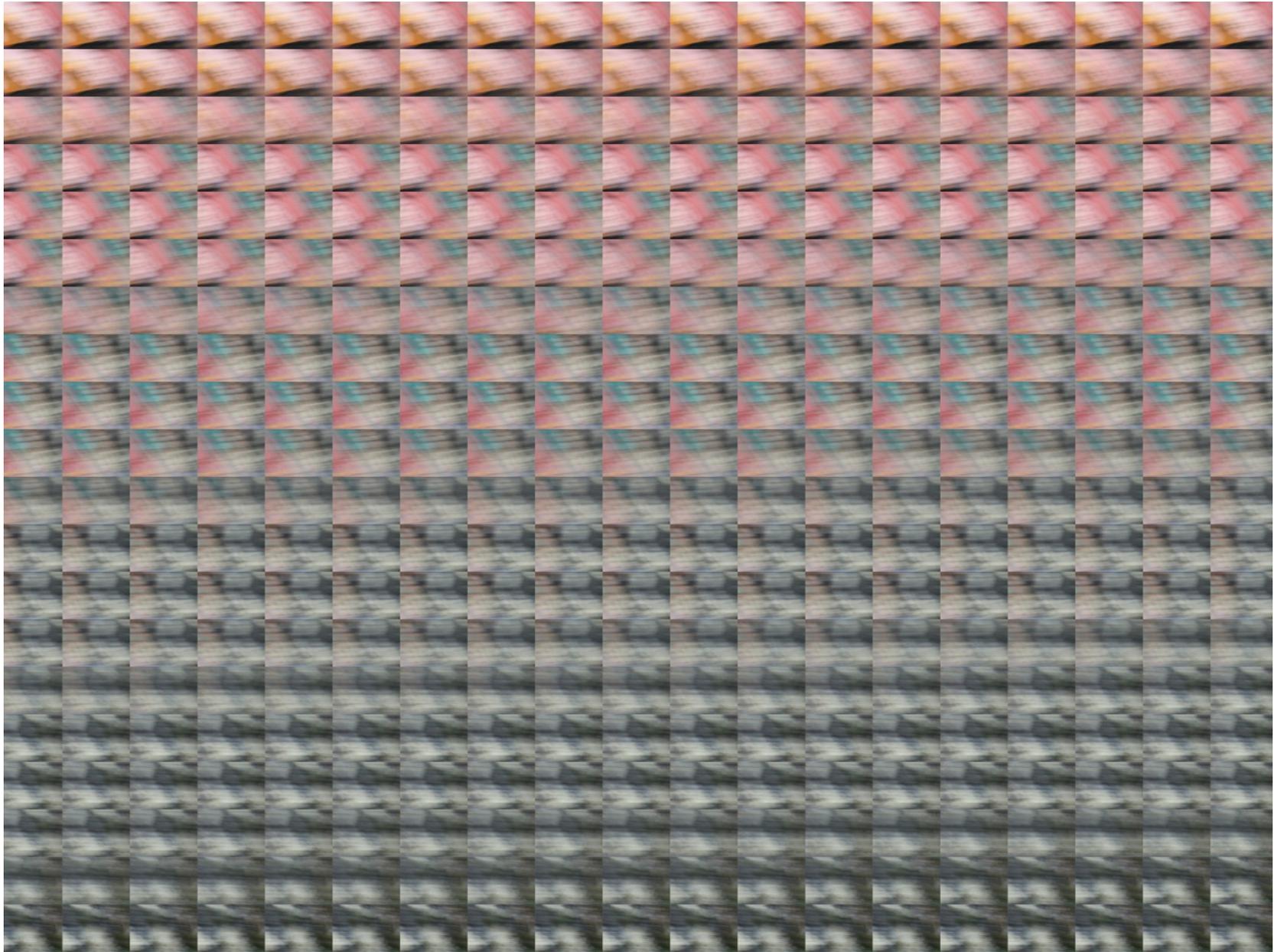
If nothing else, Malcolm Levy’s *other-frames* perform how digitality is a construct, and a precarious one at that. At the level of the microprocessor and smaller, there are no zeros and no ones sent in perfectly-timed sequence as data. Each “bit” of digital data, every “one” and every “zero” travelling from point A to point B across copper and silicon circuitry, is in actuality somewhere around five volts, and somewhere around, well, not five volts. These imperfect groups of electrons are cleaned up for noise, then thresholded at around 2.5 volts for an approximate value. We are consistently told that digital images never degrade. This is mostly correct... except when we actually do anything with them. Each time data is copied or moved, transformed and re-saved, or transferred from one place to another, there is a risk of some kind of failure. Why do files and hard drives fail? Because they are messy. It is so easy to forget that most drives in existence are little better than our tape decks from the 1980s: rust filings shifted around by magnets in order to store information. It is certainly accurate to assert that it’s more efficient to

store only two forms of datum (mostly on and mostly off), and create complexity from large quantities of those ones and zeros, in relation to one another. For this reason visible degradation is rarer in the digital age. But once an error presents itself, one does not simply perceive a bit of noise in their content, per degraded video and audiotapes of years gone by. A seemingly minor misreading / miswriting of a bit or byte – caused by anything from cosmic rays or electromagnetic waves to background radiation or simple aging – can remake an entire file so as to be illegible, and this new “bad” version is the one copied over forevermore. We’ve all had this experience several times, usually with an all too important Microsoft Word document that has been “corrupted” by nothing more than its own materiality.

Levy’s work re-members – that is, embodies again – the materiality of our digital machines. Computers and processors, he shows us, are just as chaotic and noisy and substantial as their analogical predecessors. And if you’ll forgive the pun, this matters. As I write this text, I am looking at a still from one of Levy’s videos on his website, with the simple denotation “*Sao Paulo Graffiti (series 2) 3*”. It is a semblance of a landscape, with a sky the color of reeds, and an occasional purple tinge that seems to ripple from left to right, sea to shore. There’s a trail of amplified color near the center and moving upward, where the sun may have risen or set. The road, like the sky, zooms by horizontally at high speed nearer the bottom of the page, but it somehow still feels like it’s in slow motion. This passing careens across almost half the image – though I’m not sure in which direction – and leaves vestigial traces of grays, deeper purples, turquoise, a diminutive smudge of green. On the other side of the road, the bottom of the print (is this closest to us?), the reed-like streaks appear again, as if they want and need to trickle into a stretch of purple, just beyond the frame.

It is strikingly beautiful.

As Levy’s elusively descriptive title suggests, this image – which gallery viewers experience both as a light box print, and as part of a video – was shot in Brazil, using a camera pointed at graffiti encountered by the artist while traveling in the Villa Magdalena area of Sao Paulo. But it is not an image of Sao Paulo, at least not in the traditional, photographic sense (a “photo of graffiti”). As with all his works, Levy’s capture is achieved by focusing his lens on a specific surface, then rapidly jerking his camera around for between one and ten seconds. It’s simple enough, but what happens at the level of the chip, which the artist reminds us is more accurately described as an image-sensor, is somewhat magical.



'Sao Paulo Graffiti' (DuraTran Lightbox Print, 40" x 30")

There are two mainstream image-sensors: a CCD (charge-coupled device) or CMOS (complementary metal oxide semiconductor), each of which converts light into electrical signals in different ways. And in short, Levy's movements overload either sensor. The analog to digital conversion (ADC) can't keep up with him. He challenges the chip's sensibility, its ability to sense and make sense. Says Levy:

“Neither technology has a clear advantage in image quality.... CCD sensors are more susceptible to vertical smear from bright light sources when the sensor is overloaded.... CMOS sensors are susceptible to undesired effects that come as a result of rolling shutter. In both cases one [sees] multiple examples where the concept of the sensor, as a controlled process, is problematic from the beginning.”¹

Levy can wax lyrical about the inner-workings of ADCs and semi-conductors, serial pixel transfer and circuitry, all invoking the physical presence of metal and electrons, silicon and plastic, as a veritable minefield of potential problems for that never-perfect photo capture we aspire to for our holiday vacation album. His is not the description of the flawless digital machine, the impressive megapixel count, letter-number combination motherboard (G5! i7!) that somehow abstracts and makes infallible the conversion of our memories into Facebook pages, ready for consumption, again.

On the contrary, Levy reminds us that such jargon is just a strategy to have us buy more stuff. Most digital camera sensors capture a spectrum of color and light smaller than traditional film, which is then artificially enhanced to please our eye. The detail of film is greater than most large megapixel counts can offer – pixilation instead of grain. The outcomes of minor errors and corruption actually have a greater potential to entirely destroy an image once in digital form, rather than “ruining” only part of where film may have been overexposed, for example. Here I'm not praising the analog over the digital, but rather arguing, along with Levy, that no manner of tricks with code, hardware, or language can get us away from the fact of matter.

¹ Levy, Malcolm, “Other-frames and the Moving Image,” forthcoming chapter.

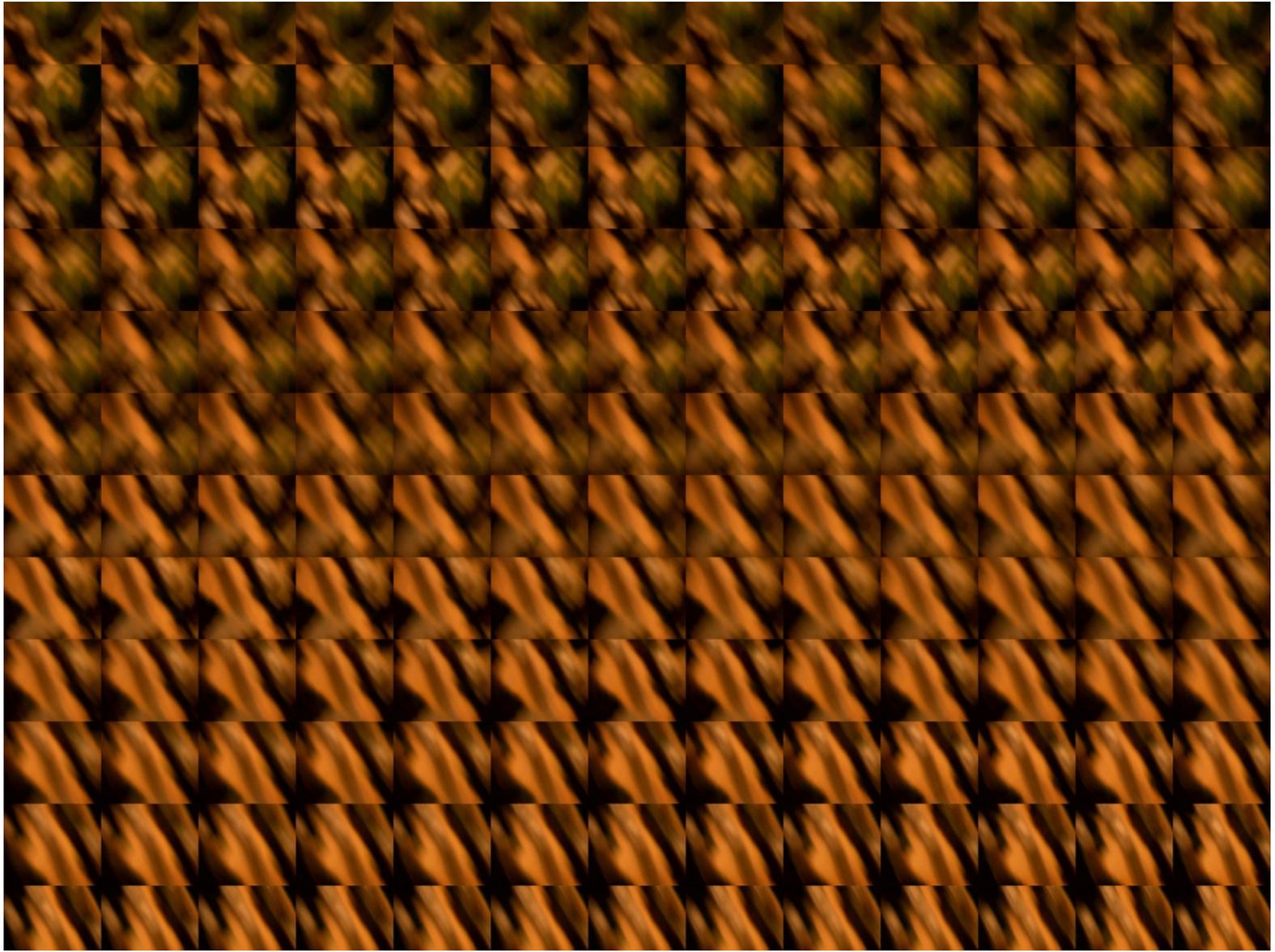
Despite what we and our commercial industries desire, our devices are not pure mathematical abstractions of our experiences, or perfect memory conversion machines.

Levy is avowedly inspired by structuralist filmmakers from the 1970s. These artists more or less turned the film camera on itself. In response to Hollywood, they made films not to make money but to study the apparatus of the camera. “Each film is a record (not a representation, not a reproduction) of its own making. Production of relations (shot to shot, shot to image, grain to image, image dissolution to grain, etc.) is a basic function which is in direct opposition to reproduction of relations.”² Here avant garde practices produced abstract films that purposefully framed and amplified the properties of film and camera: grain and scratches, pans and zooms, saturation and exposure, weight and counterweight, and more were accented as always present, presenting, and eventful. Levy follows their work by mapping and imaging the analogies and idiosyncratic inner-workings, the sensations and perceptions, of digital and computational media apparatuses.

Some of Levy’s stills look like dramatically shot architectures, others as if abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko had made a photographic contact sheet. I see Caribbean roller coaster motion blurs, and unicorn hairs under a microscope. Video game skylines after bedtime, and drunken firefly time lapses. Green lagoon waterfalls, and dark and dirty rainbows streaked by coarse, dry paintbrushes. But Levy’s works are none of these things; his process is not to take images of something, or from somewhere.

In the video “*Shanghai Future Cities Model 3*”, Levy focused on a miniature design model of what the largest city in the world might eventually become, located in the Museum for Urban Planning in Shanghai. His other sites featured as part of this exhibition’s artworks include Passages Jouffroy in Paris, the inspiration for Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project, and the Judisches Krankenhaus Berlin, a Jewish hospital throughout World War II. These choices are, of course, never absent from the videos and prints.

² Gidal, Peter, *Structural Film Anthology*, London, British Film Institute, 1978, 4.



Shanghai Future Cities (DuraTran Lightbox Print, 40" x 30")

The spaces, Levy's motivations for choosing them, his gestures with the camera, his amount of sleep or exercise, what he had for breakfast and his plans for napping later in the afternoon, his inspiration from the structuralists, his busy schedule and son's daily needs, and more, are all folded into every sequence. But Levy intentionally magnifies the impact and implication of the digital apparatus in this series.

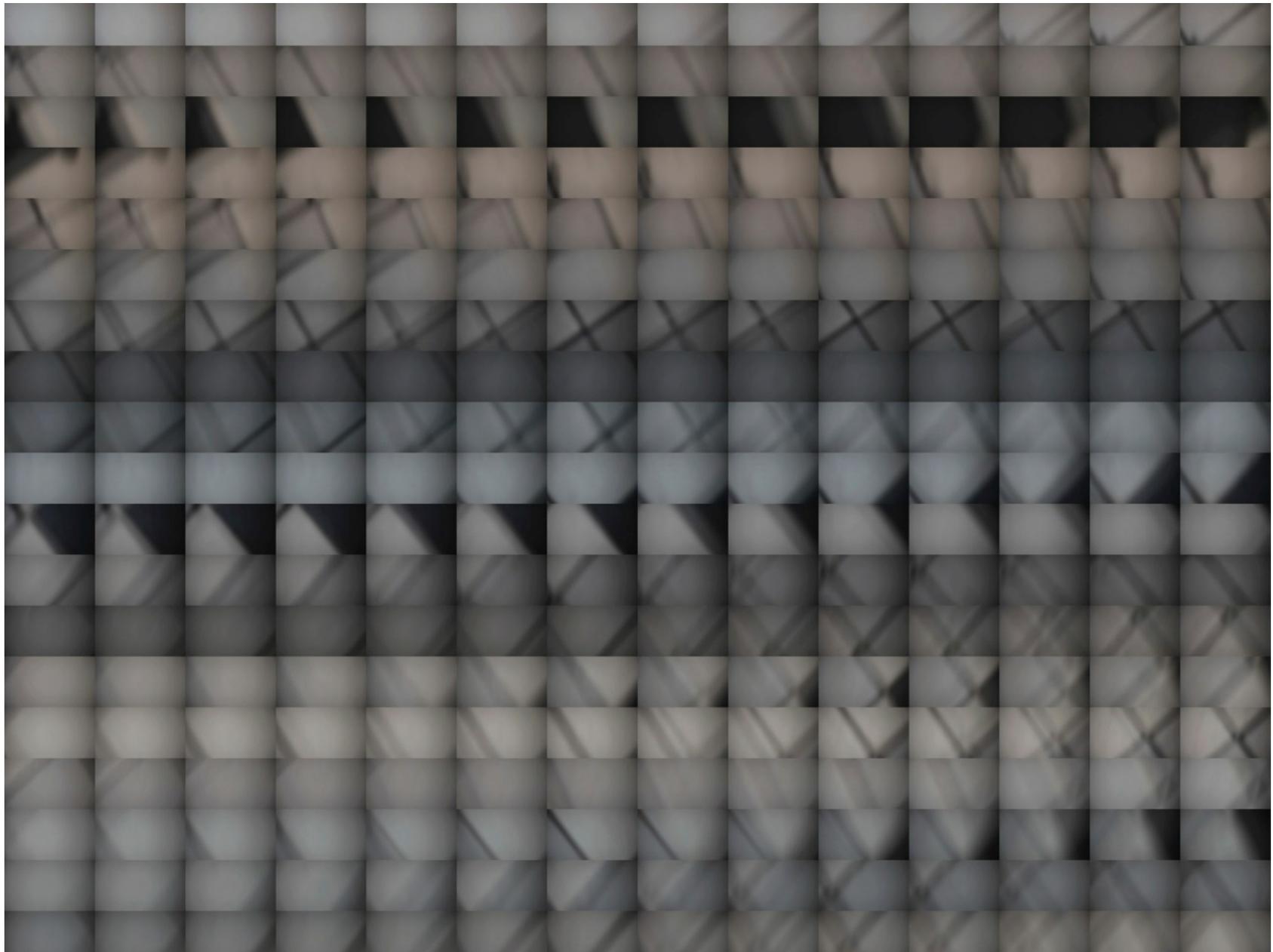
"Shanghai Future Cities Model 3", a 59-second video, begins as a pool of bright blue oceanic light that seems to cross-fade from image to image, like glowing slivers projected through an overhead aquarium. Five seconds in, blurry brownish-green algae sprouts from the sea floor, followed by diagonally-traveling, tan-colored cubic creatures that stretch into grainy, banana taffy pieces as they crawl to disappear beyond the upper left quadrant of the frame. Before long there is nothing. And I don't mean a white emptiness or fading to black, but rather no-thing that I recognize – merely an amorphous mess of moving, thinking, feeling intensities of color, shape, and vibrancy. Greens and browns, pinks and reds, clouds and starships, boats and amoeba dissolve and reappear in a gorgeous cascade of rotating life and non-life. Every-thing throbs in and out, between rhythm and syncopation.

After capturing his rapid motions with the camera, Levy imports the distorted videos into his computer, slows their speed down to a factor of more than 20 times, and quantizes the files by restricting the range of data before re-rendering these videos as something new. Here again he blends frames, analyzes, extracts, and amplifies colors, grains, shapes, and movement; he interpolates, cross-fades, then exports once or many times more – as high resolution physical prints and as new image sequences ready for playback.

The majority of work in this work is not done by the artist. It is done by the image-sensor, and by the sensing image.

Levy does not intend for this or that color or shape, does not purposefully glitch with this or that software. What he has done is capture the inner-workings of the camera, with the camera. He enhances each image as it tells him to – pumping up the volume on its already extant intensities. By intervening in, or disrupting, or making visible what the chip is and does, what the chip is not and cannot do, Levy is more or less making CMOS and CCD selfies.

"It's not a bug, it's a feature."



Passages Jouffroy Paris (DuraTran Lightbox Print, 40" x 30")

Every image, everywhere, is more than what we see.

In a painting, in a photograph, we know there is a before and after to that still, an inside and an outside to that frame. An astute viewer thinks about not just the context of the image, but also of the artist, their perspective and tools, the camera, the paint, the paper, the ink, the time of day and the cultural and scientific influences of the age. Through memory and cross-modal perception, we can feel the vastness of the room behind Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, taste the “petites madeleine” cookies made by Marcel Proust's grandmother; smell, touch, long for, extend into, placate...

But what of Malcolm Levy's *other-frames*? What do these images sense, when the image-sensors that create them are beyond sense – or at least beyond the perceptible? What do these artworks do when they show us something outside either what we or our cameras can perceive? The question here is not “Why does it matter?” but “How does it matter?” Furthermore, “What is implicated in that mattering?”

Perhaps another analogy is in order. N. Katherine Hayles calls our everyday abstractions – taking the “world's noisy multiplicity” into the cleaner forms of language and math, for example – the “platonic backhand.”³ Here we simplify and theorize in order to understand, and sometimes change, the world around us. She considers this a good thing. Thinkers from ancient Greece to and beyond Claude Shannon and his theories of information (on which modern computers are based) all require this kind of conceptual engagement.⁴ The problem of the “platonic forehand” emerged only recently, where the over-simplified abstraction of the backhand is forced onto a view of reality, “privileging the abstract as the Real and downplaying the importance of material instantiation.”

In other words and in context, we overlay a false digital perfection onto a messy reality, then pretend that is reality – and the consequences for doing so could be dire. It was not long ago that we ignored what our cars output in the form of carbon, and we still pretend our environment is not telling us, loud and clear, that it is changing. Today, we think not enough about lithium ion and plastic, silicon and super-conductors in our laptops and phones and yes,

³ Hayles, N. Katherine. *How we became posthuman: Virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics*. University of Chicago Press, 2008, 12.

⁴ Shannon, C.E. (1948) ‘A Mathematical Theory of Communication’, *Bell System Technical Journal* 27: 379–423 and 623–56.

cameras. What war-torn countries do they come from? Where do they travel to and from, and who assembles their various parts? What do they do in use, and what do they do as waste? At stake, whether in our everyday interactions or on a large scale, are the very relationships between humans and the natural world on the one hand, politics and commerce on the other.

Levy shows us our technologies were designed to have us forget their materiality, their imperfections, their inner workings and mis-workings, and their impacts on the world around us: psychic, social, and environmental.

He brings movement and change back to the foreground, and asks what they imply. What if all of us always listened to computers and cameras, to battery packs and electrons, to the material politics of translation and difference and more, with the level of care Levy affords them?

Each of Levy's works invites us to listen to, and look at, and feel for, and move with, more than just a human ecology. With other-frames, Levy is not an expert craftsman that produces only what he sees in his mind's eye. Instead, he creates encounters between abstraction and materiality, between the supposedly digital (technology-based and modern) space and its alleged counterpart, the analog (imperfect, unrefined, natural, perhaps uncivilized or primitive). He methodically breaks down these mythic opposites by showing how they are always already together, and augments their intensities so as to wind up with powerful works of art.

Here "human-nonhuman collectives... share experience."⁵ Objects and things and matter are "vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics."⁶ Levy rather synthesizes digital and analog, matter and sign, time and stasis. From the ancient Greek for "with" and "placing," synthesis refers to a combination of two or more entities that together form something new. Levy's work frames and amplifies always-already synthesized digital-analog-sign-matter "assemblages [that] are living,

⁵ Bennett, J. *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Duke University Press, 2009, xix.

⁶ *Ibid*, 5.

throbbing confederations.”⁷ He reminds us that every-thing matters – personally, politically, economically, socially, environmentally. These images, this imaging, our viewing all ask us to experience and practice attuning to machines and their habitats, in addition to ourselves and our own.

It is stunning and terrifying all at once.

Malcolm Levy’s *other-frames* do not reveal the ghost in the machine. Rather, they finally render the possibilities and potentials beyond those human constraints we thrust upon our machines, with micro-control. This exhibition and body of work do not position digital technologies and digital images as, or on, a grid of known and desired quantities.

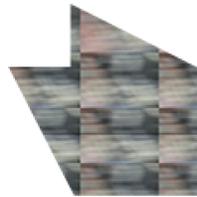
They do something else. They do something more. They ask us to do something else and something more.

Other-frames create a passage, a movement and a place to move, for thinking and feeling the relation of humans, nature, and politics.

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⁷ *Ibid*, 24.



TRANSFER is an exhibition space that explores the friction between networked practice and its physical instantiation. The gallery supports artists working with computer-based practices to realize aggressive installation projects within our walls.

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