Re-embodying the Electronic Image: Painting as Body in Contemporary Moving-Image Art

The last two decades have seen a growing penchant for on-screen evocation of painting, manifest in such fields of moving-image art as video, experimental cinema, and new-media. This tendency is evidenced in works Bill Viola, Lech Majewski, Pipilotti Rist, Ori Gersht, Sam Taylor Wood, and Peter Greenaway, to name but a few widely exhibited examples.

Greenaway's ongoing project, *Nine Classic Paintings Revisited*, begun in 2006, engages such venerated masterpieces of painting as Leonardo's *Last Supper* and Rembrandt's *Night Watch.* Employing multimedia projection, Greenaway animates the canvases in an elaborate play of light and sound. Greenaway's installation, *Heavy Water* (2012), yet another case in point, involves moving-image projection over chalk drawings on board in the artist's own hand.

In a similar vein, the 2011 Venice Biennial featured Pipilotti Rist's projections of video over small sized canvases of Venetian Veduta paintings. On the same occasion, at the church of San Lio, Lech Majewski presented his *Bruegel Suite* (2011), a series of video pieces driving from a full length film, *The Mill and the Cross* (2011), where *The Road to Calvary* (1564) by Pieter Bruegel the Elder is manipulated via cinematic live-action and sound. Majewski has engaged old-master paintings in a series of video *tableaux*, titled *Blood of a Poet* (2007), and in an earlier film, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (2004), where the eponymous triptych by Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1504) is extensively explored, its images interwoven into the story of a tragic love affair whose female protagonist is, significantly, an art-historian.

Looking back to the year 2000, it is crucial to note the series of video works created by Bill Viola under the title of *The Passions*, where painting is evoked in ways that shall be extensively discussed in the following pages. The steadily growing number of moving-image works which gravitate toward painting points to the emergence of an intriguing aesthetic current, which this paper proposes to address.

In a teasingly titled essay, 'The Trouble with Painting' (2005), Catherine M. Soussloff observes that, as in *The Trouble with Harry* by Alfred Hitchcock, where a dead body refuses to rest in peace, 'painting persists in complicating more recent media and approaches to visual culture'.[1] As an indicative example, Soussloff cites the 2004 Whitney Biennial, 'where lush and monumental canvases appeared to predominate'.[2] The 2011 Venice Biennial could be cited as a more current example, noting the three large canvases by Tintoretto elected as focalizing elements for the central pavilion.[3] In an introductory statement, posted at the website of the Biennale, curator Bice Curiger referred to a certain 'pictorial energy […] fuelled by the friction that results from letting a painter who belongs to tradition become involved in a contemporary context'.[4]

While the present paper does not address the issue of easel painting and its place in contemporary art, it does pursue Soussloff's line of thought, in particular her assertion that the persistence of painting 'frustrates efforts to move on with the narrative of the history of art'.[5] One could speculate on how the strain of multimedia works mentioned above troubles the notion of 'new' media in an (apparently regressive) reconstruction of master paintings, particularly in those cases where monitors either 'fake' canvases, or are actually replaced by them, as in the cases of Greenaway and Rist.

In *The Virtual Life of Film* (2007), David Rodowick expands on the problematic of the very concept of 'new-media'. In fact, he overtly challenges the idea of 'newness' embedded in this widely accepted term. Adopting a skeptical approach, Rodowick observes that the aesthetic of the new media − or rather the '~~new~~ media', as he chooses to reference them − is heavily indebted to traditional cinematic aesthetic, where a sort of synthetically composed 'perceptual realism' prevails.[6] Rodowick posits, quite convincingly, that 'an idea of cinema persists or subsists within the new media as their predominant cultural and aesthetic model'.[7]

Rodowick's concern lies with the potential for a more specific 'new-media' aesthetic to emerge, a potential he regards as yet unfulfilled. Asking, 'what kinds of aesthetic experiences computational processes will innovate once they have unleashed themselves from the cinematic metaphor and begin to explore their autonomous creative powers', he ends with the anti-climactic postscript, 'if indeed they eventually do so'.[8]

Bearing the above observations in mind, I propose to consider the expressed recourse to painting as signaling one route currently explored in the arts of the moving image, toward disengagement from the cinematic paradigm. A significant body of works (re)turns to painting as, paradoxically, a new frontier for new-media aesthetics. And, while the larger number of these works still preserve photographic visuality – expressed in color, tone, saturation, and depth of field – they take certain liberties with formal markers which have traditionally distinguished screen-based art from the 'oil on canvas' medium.

The discussion that follows addresses the place and function of painting in the aesthetics of contemporary screen-based arts. A review of the theoretical premises for discussion will be followed by analysis of three video installations, which shall serve

as specific case studies substantiating my argument. In the present paper I draw on a growing concern, manifest in the last decade's critical literature, with embodied aspects of aesthetic experience. The writings of Vivian Sobchack, Brian Massumi, Laura U. Marks, and more recently Jennifer Barker, manifest the critical interest in embodiment, which is in turn heavily indebted to Gilles Deleuze and Maurice Merleau Ponty. Searching for handy theoretical tools with which to conceptualize the seemingly regressive recourse to painting, I turn to Laura Marks's proposition, to the effect that 'haptic images' manifest a 'desire to squeeze a sense of touch out of an audiovisual medium'.[9]

Marks's concept of 'haptic visuality' and its place in contemporary aesthetics, particularly in video-art, may be brought to bear on the issues addressed in the following pages. I shall be concerned with on-screen evocations of painting, and shall speculate on the role they might play in re-embodying the electronic image. Marks's concept of haptic experience, where 'the eyes themselves function like organs of touch',[10] is most suggestive in this respect. In what follows I hope to meet the challenge posed by Marks, who notes that '[i]t is timely to explore how a haptic approach might rematerialize our objects of perception, especially now that optical visuality is being refitted as a virtual epistemology for the digital age'.[11] The present paper may contribute to the evolution of 'haptic' criticism by highlighting the growing presence of painting in digital art and pondering its participation in the birth of a new aesthetic. At a time when, to quote Marks in *Enfoldment and Infinity* (2010), electronic images and sounds 'demand cognitive attention as information to be processed, not sensuous material to be experienced',[12] I propose to pay close attention to painting as a major vehicle of the haptic, re-investing the electronic image with a sense of body.

The moving-image works at stake are thus to be approached with heightened haptic awareness, attention focused on how they provoke tactile, and visceral, engagement. If, as per Rodowick, the electronic age has seen the erosion of a once available 'haptic continuum', or 'reciprocal presence of artwork and perceiver',[13] it may be interesting to reflect on how electronically rendered 'oil on canvas' might serve as vehicle of restoration.

Two critical concepts, *presence* (Gumbrecht), and *intensity* (Massumi), are pertinent, even crucial, to the question at stake. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's assertion of 'new, presence-based ways of thinking aesthetics',[14] is premised on his conception of aesthetic experience in terms of substance and intensity, beyond culturally specific meaning. For Gumbrecht, the aspect of presence in aesthetic experience implies a non-hermeneutic condition, where connection is forged 'with a layer in our existence that simply wants the things of the world close to our skin'.[15] In 'a culture which is predominantly a meaning culture', however, fleeting revelations of presence are 'necessarily surrounded by, wrapped into, and even mediated by clouds and cushions of meaning'.[16] Massumi's call for 'integrating the dimension of intensity into cultural theory',[17] and Gumbrecht's rejection of 'an exclusively semiotic […] concept of the sign',[18] have opened the way for understanding aesthetic experience as an oscillating movement between concrete presence, and culturally specific processes of semiosis. It is, as per Gumbrecht, a tense simultaneity of 'presence effects and meaning effects'.[19]

The argument made in the present paper is further supported by Gumbrecht's assertion that mediatic modality specifically determines the relation between meaning- and presence-components in objects of aesthetic experience.[20] While Gumbrecht chooses to refer specifically to music as facilitator of presence,[21] I propose to examine the specific mediality of painting, and its function as catalyst of presence

effects. And at this point it becomes crucial to turn to Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze for a concept of the ontology of this particular medium. In *Eye and Mind*[22] and *Cézanne's Doubt*,[23] Merleau-Ponty elaborates his concept of painting as the one medium capable of translating perception into concrete, embodied experience. As concrete as primary experience, and what is more, ontologically equal to it, painting is not conceived by Merleau-Ponty as re-presentation. Rather, it is referred to as a 'piece of nature'.[24] Painting, *Eye and Mind* implies, affords access to the 'thickness' of being, deep into the 'fabric of brute meaning'.[25]

We are thus dealing with a notion of painting that implies a fully embodied aesthetic experience. 'The painter takes his body with him', Merleau-Ponty writes, '[i]t is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into painting'.[26] Painting therefore invites, or elicits, the sort of haptic look suggested earlier, one that 'envelops [the things], clothes them with its own flesh'.[27] It is by virtue of this unique mode of engagement, where painting 'palpates' the flesh of the world and simultaneously participates in its formation, that it becomes a privileged medium for Merleau-Ponty. Painting translates primary, or primal, experience, where 'quality, light, color, depth […] awaken an echo in our bodies'.[28]

In Merleau-Ponty's writing, visuality is closely related to tactile sensation. '[T]he visible spectacle', he writes, 'belongs to the touch neither more nor less than do the "tactile qualities". We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility'.[29] Consequently, Merleau-Ponty points to texture and surface as essential aesthetic aspects of painting. Cézanne, he maintains, privileges the sheer material sensation of paint, 'pursuing reality without giving up the sensuous surface'.[30] Cézanne 'does not try to use color to *suggest* the tactile sensations which would give shape and depth.

These distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception',
Merleau-Ponty insists. Rather, Cézanne's painting enables access to 'the presence, the
insurpassable [sic] plenitude which is for us the definition of the real'.[31]

Deleuze may be helpful in clearing this point a bit further. Like Merleau-
Ponty, he conceives of painting – particularly Francis Bacon, whose works seem to
constitute for Merleau-Ponty the epitome of painting – as having to do primarily with
affective intensity. '[T]here are no feelings in Bacon', Deleuze writes, 'there are
nothing but affects: that is, "sensations" and "instincts".[32] Deleuze's explicit
identification of painting with body, as in the following passage, is most germane to
the present discussion. 'What is painted on the canvas is the body, not insofar as it is
represented as an object, but insofar as it is experienced as sustaining *this* sensation'.[33]
Linking Bacon to Cézanne in conversation with Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze asserts that
in both Bacon and Cézanne, 'paint comes across directly onto the nervous system'.[34]

Now, to posit that painting, or rather paint, 'acts immediately upon the nervous
system',[35] is to make a very strong claim for the potential of this medium to catalyze
Gumbrecht's 'presence effect'. In his discussion of hysteria, Deleuze seems to suggest
this in even stronger terms. Asking 'can we speak of a hysterical essence of painting?',
he postulates a notion of hysteria as the sensation of excessive presence. Hysteria, for
Deleuze, implies that 'things and beings are present, *too* present'.[36] Painting, in its
hysterical capacity, presents an attempt 'to release the presences beneath
representation […]'.[37] For Deleuze, painting is the mediator of presence par
excellence.

My thinking on the persistence of painting is thus informed by the
phenomenological concept outlined above, as well as contemporary ramifications
thereof. The individual works to which I now turn seem to elicit the sort of 'palpating'

or haptic look postulated by Marks, Sobchack, and Barker. These works, I shall be arguing, facilitate the emergence of 'presence effects' even as they engender elaborate 'meaning effects'. I wish to follow this oscillating movement, with particular attention to the emergent aesthetic of presence and its formal attributes.

A visitor entering the Hungarian pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennial would encounter small sized, framed portraits hung around the gallery space. Those who would take the time to linger in front of each portrait would notice very slow and miniscule changes in form and texture, as the person in the portrait would gradually change expression and position. It would take quite some time before one noticed that she was watching a 'moving picture', misleadingly painterly in its color scheme, surface texture, long periods of immobility, and classical gallery framing (fig. 1). The video portraits that opened the installation *Col Tempo*, by Hungarian filmmaker and visual artist Péter Forgács, obviously masquerade as paintings. Only gradually, almost unwillingly, do they reveal their hi-tech mediality.[38]

Col Tempo constitutes a large size installation, leading the visitor through eight exhibition spaces. The work draws on the artist's research in an Austrian archive of racist anthropological study, established under the Nazi regime. From among the numerous portraits in the archive, mainly POWs and Jews before deportation, but also camp guards and civilians from neighboring villages, Forgács selected a significant collection to be presented in various formal modes throughout the installation.

The portraits under discussion derive from authentic film footage found in this archive. These are short film clips documenting the subjects of study, ordered to turn their heads right and left so as to present profile and frontal facial views. Transferred to digital video, filmic motion had been extremely decelerated, so much so that changes over time are practically microscopic, thus almost unnoticeable. In fact, it

requires close scrutiny to discern minute eye movements and very slow changes in head position.

Even more intriguing in my view is the unexpected appearance of dark crevices, or pores, that open up in the epidermal surface of the picture, only to disappear a second later. The blemishes in surface texture originate from flaws and scratches on the original film negative. Counter to convention, these had not been digitally eliminated. Rather, they seem to have been emphasized. The presence of concrete material lesions, pores or crevices, threatens the integrity of the facial image, drawing perceptual attention away from subject matter – the portrait – to the very materiality of the surface. Here, again, it is helpful to recall a passage from *Cézanne's Doubt*. 'Forgetting the viscous, equivocal appearances', Merleau-Ponty writes, we 'go through them straight to the things they present. The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects […] the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things'.[39] It is precisely those viscous, unstructured appearances that Forgács brings to the fore, tapping into a stratum of experience where, to draw on Sobchack, a 'nonhierarchical unity of the sensorium' prevails.[40]

I propose to read the *Col Tempo* portraits in light of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of faciality, where '[t]he face constructs the wall that the signifier needs in order to bounce off of'.[41] In a reading thus informed, destroying the wall, or dismantling the face,[42] would mean forcing the image 'through the wall of the signifier. […] toward the realms of the asignifying, asubjective, and faceless'.[43] Evoking a certain 'thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing',[44] Forgács seems to succeed in recovering Deleuze and Guattari's pre-semiotic intensity of an asignifying facelessness. Subverting perceptual realism, motion, and story – all widely acknowledged markers of cinematic aesthetic – the work places instead marked

emphasis on surface and texture, at the same time suspending motion to a point where story is practically eliminated. The mode of engagement thus elicited conforms to Marks's conditions for haptic visuality. The haptic look 'tends to rest on the surface of its object rather than to plunge into depth, not to distinguish form so much as to discern texture'.[45] Misleadingly painterly, the *Col Tempo* portraits engender expectation for a type of aesthetic encounter that is more often associated with painting than with moving-image art. What is at stake is a more immediate form of encounter, where paint and matrix are sensually engaged. In the sort of experience thus produced, 'the viewer respond[s] to the video as to another body and to the screen as another skin'.[46] Forgács is able to lead the viewer into aesthetic engagement of the haptic sort, where presence is powerfully evoked, and experienced.

'Meaning-effect' considered, however, it may be noted that the augmented sense of presence with which the portraits are invested functions as well on the level of interpretation. Once the archival footage of victimized subjects is formally tagged 'painting', and thus aesthetically experienced, its subjects seem to regain the human presence and dignity of which they had been deprived in darker times. Unlike the video installation featured in the adjacent space of *Col Tempo*, where the very same footage projects in conventional cinematic speed on monitors tiled on a wall, the portraits in the first gallery – practically motionless, and framed so as to make the electronic support unnoticed – assume the aura of museum pieces. The choice of exhibition mode, which eliminates the mediating technology from view, alleviates, if momentarily, the loss of 'haptic continuum'[47] and its ensuing anxiety. But only momentarily, and here I go along with Gumbrecht's emphasis on the 'eventness' of that sensation of presence which he terms *epiphany*. '[E]piphany within aesthetic experience', Gumbrecht posits, 'is an event because it undoes itself as it emerges'.[48]

What is at stake are fleeting sensations of embodied engagement, a certain sense of immediacy emerging when aesthetic experience occurs at a level of 'pre-conceptual thingness'.[49]

Pomegranate, by Ori Gersht, is an HD video work which comes the closest possible to misleading simulation of painting on screen. A three minute, fifty-two second long video, Pomegranate was commissioned by Tate Britain for its exhibition 'Single Shot' in 2006 (fig. 2). It forms part of a trilogy, alongside Big Bang (2006) and Falling Bird (2008). The first twenty-three seconds of the work present a carefully composed, perfectly still scene, quoting a 1602 still life, Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber, by Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560 -1627). Notably, Gersht introduces a number of changes vis-à-vis the original still life by Cotán, with the pivotal replacement of the quince with a pomegranate, which gives the work its title.

The composition of vegetables and fruit, rendered in highly saturated color, illuminated in high contrast against an opaque black background, maintains its painting-like visuality even beyond the first 23 seconds of stillness. Motion is finally introduced when a bullet blows open the suspended pomegranate.[50] The work's extremely decelerated motion – the event is captured in high velocity, 1600 fr/sec, and played-back at a pace of 25 fr/sec – evokes quite explicitly Harold Edgerton's stroboscopic photography. The resultant effect works against the grain of cinematic aesthetic. Like Col Tempo, Pomegranate strives to override the aesthetic rules and necessities of its electronic medium, presenting a strong leaning toward painting which in this case is explicit in the choice of a still-life painting as source for visual reference. However, while the work is explicitly non-cinematic in its purely still moments, it effects an essentially dialectical move. While video is markedly stilled, the still-life is caught up in a cinematic event.

In the first twenty-three seconds that constitute the work's period of stillness, viewer attention concentrates on the pronounced painterly texture of the image, particularly the surface of the wooden frame which forms a *trompe-l'oeil* continuity with the work's actual frame. The suggested penetration of the image into the viewer's space enhances the sense of tangible presence, suggesting an illusory possibility of ontological boundary-crossing. Encasing the monitor within a traditional museum frame is an aesthetic choice that shifts viewer attention away from the mediating technology, inviting a mode of encounter that gravitates toward tactile engagement with object, surface, and texture.

While Gersht adopts *trompe-l'oeil* from the original Cotán still life, he augments the impact of this trope by slightly lowering the viewing angle, thus effecting an increase in foreshortening. The viewer finds himself directly facing the wooden ledge, on which the squash and pumpkin are placed, the shadow cast by the squash intensifying the object's apparent penetration into Real space. What is more, the work further problematizes traditional spatial relations. On close scrutiny it becomes clear that *Pomegranate* does not allow easy understanding of its spatial configuration. The pomegranate, for example, seems to hang alongside or even slightly behind the suspended cabbage, yet when it is shot through by the high speed bullet in the 24th second, its swinging motion leaves the cabbage untouched. Moreover, the blood-red juice and kernels that burst out of the fruit do not descend, as expected, on the other vegetables or the wooden ledge, save for a negligible number of juice drops. The pomegranate must in actuality be suspended much further to the front, further than can be discerned by the naked eye. The eye is actually misled by the opaque black background to interpret the space as flatter, or more depthless, than it really is. An attentive viewer may thus experience dialectical movement in and out

of the depicted space. On the one hand, *trompe-l'oeil* pushes squash and wooden ledge out of the frame into the viewer's ambience, yet on the other, the eye is restricted to the surface by the flat black background and unclear spatial relations between the suspended elements. This sort of tension is essential to painting, while it has no major role in film or video aesthetics. To an even greater extent than the works discussed earlier, *Pomegranate* turns its back on the cinematic paradigm which still prevails in digital video art at large. Gersht elects to rely, manifestly, on a medium that is technologically obsolete, yet conceived as more effective, or rather affective, in a phenomenological perspective.

This said, the role of motion and event in this work must not be overlooked. The question to be asked is if, and how, the focal event and its concerns are supported by the work's overt reliance on painting. Let me thus dwell briefly on the event itself, where a pomegranate, blown to shreds by a high speed bullet, sheds its 'blood' and 'flesh' in extreme slow motion.

The work's connotation of violent injury to the body is doubly emphasized in its Hebrew title, *Rimon*, which designates at one and the same time the biblical fruit, pomegranate, and a lethal weapon, a grenade. In fact, I suspect that to an Israeli ear the word *rimon* would connote warfare and violence before any other meaning came to mind. Apparently, however, *Pomegranate* distances itself from what Deleuze has referred to as 'anecdotal violence'.[51] Its evocation of Edgerton's scientific photography mitigates and aestheticizes the violence of the event. Rather, it is Deleuze's 'violence of paint' that begs recognition in this work. For Deleuze, the 'violence' of paint has nothing to do with anecdotal violence,[52] and rather everything to do with intense affect located in a pre-structured body, a 'body without organs' which is but 'flesh and nerve'.[53] *Pomegranate* seems to produce this affective excess through reliance on an

expressly painterly aesthetic, formed by means of color, texture, surface, and motionlessness. The haptic experience provoked thereby is constituted through sensual engagement with color and texture. With its technological apparatus eliminated from view, the work is best conceived, and engaged, as 'painting that moves', oscillating between 'presence-', and 'meaning-effect'.

The Passions, for which Bill Viola was commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, is yet another series of video works that overtly turns to painting as an(O)ther aesthetic option for digital moving-image art. In the catalogue for the *Passions* exhibition at the Getty, curator John Walsh thus describes the works in the series: 'The pieces themselves are made to function like paintings and even resemble them: they are framed, on the wall, silent, steady and almost still, offering direct, intimate encounters'.[54] The series converses with medieval paintings, mainly in the Getty collection, and features extremely decelerated motion in all of the pieces that comprise it. *Emergence* (2002) is an 11 min., 49 sec. digital video, which stands out as probably the one work in the series where painting is evoked to the fullest. Based on a *Pietà* by Masolino, *Emergence* powerfully tips the scale toward painterly aesthetic, not solely via arrest of motion but also through marked emphasis on texture. This is manifest in the male figure's white body makeup, and in the roughly painted bluish backcloth. The work exhibits a color scheme of saturated hues, which is expressly non-realistic. Albeit digitally manipulated, the setting and imagery are suggestive of a tangible presence of paint. Moreover, the employment of rear-projection in *Emergence* goes a long way toward rendering the electronic apparatus transparent to the viewer. *Emergence* succeeds in recuperating precisely that 'reciprocal presence of artwork and perceiver', the loss of which Rodowick bemoans.[55] Albeit electronically captured and exhibited, the work is able to generate a sense of

unmediated presence similar to *Col Tempo* and *Pomegranate*. The three works under consideration invite close contemplation over long periods of stillness, as in traditional gallery viewing of painting.

The Passions series gravitates toward painting first and foremost, though not exclusively, via its extreme deceleration of motion. In *The Quintet of the Astonished*, belonging to the same series, Viola responds to a painting by Hieronymus Bosch, *Christ Mocked* (c. 1490-1500), in the collection of the National Gallery, London. The work, recorded in high speed, diminishes the pace of original action by sixteen. Mark Hansen, in *Critical Inquiry* (2004) and Carrie Noland, in *Postmodern Culture* (2007), have focused their concern on the work's deceleration of motion and how it allows to note the most minute changes, or 'microbreakdowns' of affect. For Hansen, the *Passions* series probes 'interstitial microstages of affectivity',[56] consequently 'lay[ing] bare the embodied materiality of subjectivation'.[57] Most pertinent to the present discussion is Hansen and Noland's introduction of a phenomenological perspective, in their assertion that when time-based art is brought to a halt, it is the 'thickness of the now',[58] that is intensely brought to the fore.

However, the view of how 'new media art deploy[s] technology in order to expand self-affection',[59] may be largely expanded if *The Passions* is not analyzed exclusively in terms of temporality, but rather in light of its embrace of painterly aesthetic. I thus propose that critical attention be addressed to the overt and expressed indebtedness to painting in the *Quintet of the Astonished*. Like *Pomegranate* or *Emergence*, this work lacks depth, and places manifest emphasis on surface even as it boasts a limited color scheme and dramatic contrast lighting, bringing out skin texture and musculature. These visual traits, to which should be added the absence of sound, are precisely those means of visual rendering which make Viola's video gravitate so

distinctly toward painting. It is thus that the work achieves its 'thickness'. More than

intensifying the sense of 'now', as Hansen would have it, the work manifests what

Merleau Ponty calls 'quality pregnant with a texture', which makes us sense 'the

thickness of flesh between the seer and the thing'.[60]

And thus, taking on Hansen's assertion that Viola's images are 'supersaturated'

with an 'overabundance of affective information',[61] I propose to attribute the affective

overdetermination in *Quintet of the Astonished* to the work's intense emphasis on

surface, texture, and coloring. The 'thickness' discerned by Hansen may not be as

profoundly time-based as the addition of 'now' seems to indicate. Rather,what is at

stake is 'thickness' denoted via suggestion of *presence*: concrete, embodied, and

tactile.

Emergence, discussed earlier, veers even further away from the cinematic than

Quintet of the Astonished. It is practically a case of screen transformed into canvas, a

transformation achieved via use of visible brushstrokes on the backcloth, as well as

the actor's exposed body smeared all over in white makeup, pronouncedly frontal

camera angle undermining perspectival depth, and finally the mise-en-scéne

reconstruction of Masolino's *Pietà* in *tableau vivant*. As noted earlier, the aesthetic

choice of rear-projection renders the electronic apparatus invisible, contributing to the

sense of immediacy which underlies spectatorial encounter. If in the *Quintet of the*

Astonished the painterly quality is not evolved to its fullest, in *Emergence* one cannot

escape the powerful suggestion of paint, which seems to equal easel painting in its

palpability. Isn't this what Vivian Sobchack has in mind when she elaborates on 'what,

without a thought, [our] fingers know at the movies'.[62] Sobchack's *cinesthetic* [sic.]

subject, postulated in *Carnal Thoughts*,[63] is well equipped to grasp the appeal of

Viola's work, which speaks directly to embodied perception. It is via recourse to

painting, not merely 'microbreakdowns' of time, that Viola's works, *Emergence* in particular, reawaken a sense of body in image and viewer alike, in an age where embodiment has become problematic.

At this point it may be worth noting that the works under discussion appear wholly devoid of self-irony. The works indeed seem committed to restoring the active agency of the artwork, namely its ability to constitute real human experience. Ann Wagner has pointed out this conspicuous lack of irony in Viola, noting that 'what is missing from Viola's spectacular meditations on life and death and transience is any built-in mistrust of his medium. Nor does irony bracket his message. Instead his work insists – […] against the grain of his predecessors' sheer reluctance and skepticism – that we believe in the magnitude and meaningfulness of what camera and artist give us to see'.[64] One could wonder whether the absence of irony has to do with a certain restored assurance in the power of the work to communicate figurally, in the sense proposed by Rodowick. Is it that laying irony aside makes it possible to probe painting beyond its capacity of cultural signifier, rather as powerful mediator of presence? And, is any critical treatment of this phenomenon prone to be suspected of 'despicably bad intellectual taste', as Gumbrecht reports to have been the case upon his introduction of 'concepts such as "substance" […], "presence", and perhaps even "reality" and "Being"' into the critical discourse on aesthetics.[65]

Col Tempo, *Pomegranate*, and *Emergence* are by now part of a growing corpus of new-media works which signal a reemergence of painting as core aspect of electronic aesthetics. Is their reliance on a seemingly regressive, low-tech medium to be conceived as digression, a move of nostalgic regression lacking self-irony? Or rather, as I would like to propose, might this emerging tendency highlight deep-seated anxieties essential to the shift from analogue re-presentation to code-based, digital

imaging. David Rodowick has elaborated on this shift and its anxieties in his ongoing exploration of the new media. For Rodowick, a profound phenomenological change is occurring in the way we perceive and experience the visual. 'We are confronted with something new in the image', Rodowick writes, 'something that disturbs the perceptual defaults of the chemically based analogical image. […] A subtle shifting of gears is taking place in our current ontology, in our relation to the world and to others, as mediated through technologically produced images'.[66] This 'shifting of gears' appears to be the most appropriate background for critical reflection upon the growing recourse to painting in new-media art.

The insistence of painting to remain 'in the picture' cannot be easily catalogued as mere regressive nostalgia for the obsolescent, as proposed for example by Matilde Nardelli. In a critical discussion addressing what she regards as 'the pursuit of outmoded technologies',[67] Nardelli postulates a certain 'pursuit of obsolescence' which she seems to find in installations that feature nostalgic items like old film projectors, magnetic tape recorders and other such apparatuses.[68] While it may be tempting to explain the increasing reliance on painting as mere 'pursuit of obsolescence', I doubt whether this approach affords a deep enough probe into the phenomenon pointed out here. The argument I have been making pivots on a conviction that more is at stake than just a 'melancholic product of our phase of media change'.[69]

In *The Virtual Life of Film*, David Rodowick wonders 'whether or not the electronic arts […] set significantly different conditions for perception, involvement, and pleasure in the image'.[70] Assuming, as he apparently does, that a difference indeed exists, Rodowick deems it 'phenomenologically significant for audiences in ways that are still difficult to anticipate'.[71] My claim is that works which rely heavily

on painting, in the vein demonstrated above, trouble the notion of electronic ontology speculated by Rodowick. Rather, these works engender a hybrid brand of aesthetic experience, qualitatively different from that of cinematically premised video-art. The sensual, almost visceral intensity of the experience offered by this brand of video-painting, may best be approached via Deleuze and the image of the painter as butcher.[72] Mieke Bal has taken this thought further in her analysis of Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox* in the Louvre, in which she highlights a self-referential association of paint with flesh, putrefying flesh.[73] But the paint, Bal emphasizes, is not to be experienced as re-presentation of flesh, subject matter notwithstanding. Rather, the 'daring roughness of the handling of the paint' functions as sensual mediator, making death concretely felt via powerful suggestion of the presence of rotting flesh. In Bal's reading of Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox*, painting 'becomes […] the medium for overcoming the nonrepresentability of death'.[74]

Merleau-Ponty's concept of painting, as the ultimate medium capable of granting a sense of presence and close encounter with the real, makes it possible to reflect upon the appeal of this sensual medium for new-media art. Its role in the emergence of novel forms of aesthetic engagement for the electronically rendered image may thus be considered. First and foremost, it becomes evident that the place and significance of painting in new-media aesthetics may not be marginalized, neither can it be theorized in reductive terms as mere nostalgia for the obsolete. Ann M. Wagner has shown that already in the 1970s, the then emerging medium of video presented manifest anxiety over the loss of immediate presence of object for viewer.[75] Wagner asks, '[d]oes confidence in the directness of vision really survive translation and reproduction by technological media?'.[76] Video artists of the 1970s used, and abused, the performer's body in order to create 'situations that connote the problematic

real of technologically mediated experience'.[77] Wagner, and Rodowick in particular, describe a gradual widening of the gap between human experience – constituted by a range of modalities spanning visual, kinesthetic, proprioceptive, and visceral perception – and the information-based image.

Surprisingly enough, this leaves painting as the one medium still coded as indexically related with the Real. This is a curious reversal of a modernist concept of unilateral progress from painting to photography to film, the newest always conceived as highest in the hierarchy of the index. It may be that the very persistence of the photographic/cinematic paradigm in new-media art is the cause for this reversal. The more the digital image leans toward a photographic hyperreal, the more it is experienced as alienated from the sort of primary, asignifying intensity discussed by Massumi and Gumbrecht, among others.

In Deleuze, as earlier in Merleau Ponty, painting is distinctly conceived as a medium of presentation far exceeding re-presentation. Painting, in the texts cited earlier, attains a degree of presence that approximates the real, reaching as close to Massumi's intensity as art ever can. Reading Gumbrecht with Merleau Ponty and Deleuze, might it be argued then that painting, even if electronically simulated and rendered, still functions as powerful catalyst for those 'moments of intensity' that Gumbrecht associates with the concept of presence.

Drawing on the growing critical interest in presence as aesthetic concept, I ask whether new-media art is 'hystericizing' itself into fuller presence by assuming painting's 'clinical' essentials. Through augmented tactility, texture, and 'body', painting performs as powerful intensifier of presence. In the face of the age's anxiety of disembodiment and much elaborated loss of presence, painting is made to perform, to adopt Nardelli's phrasing, along the vibrant interface between matter and virtuality,

body and code, presence and re-presentation. 'Presence, presence … this is the first word that comes to mind in front of one of Bacon's paintings', Deleuze writes.[78] Deleuze celebrates Bacon's liberation of paint from outline and structure, manifest in the recurring motif of flesh without bone, formless flesh undifferentiated into distinct organ structure, the epitome of the 'body without organs'. It is the 'violence' of paint as raw flesh, its destruction of form, that tips the scale toward presence. Similarly, the pores on the surface of Forgacs's portraits, the white body-makeup of Viola's actor, and the emphasized surface texture of Gersht's window ledge, render the electronic image at once painterly and sensually present.

The re-emergence of painting in new-media aesthetics merits further attention. This intriguing re-investment of the electronic image in a painterly 'body' may best be considered in terms offered by Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological theory of the film experience, where 'our lived bodies sensually relate to "things" that "matter" on the screen'.[79] New-media art, particularly the moving-image brand, seems to be seizing upon painting as a time-old portal to presence, where the image retains its 'thingness' and continues to 'matter'. I thus go along with the Gumbrecht's assertion, and seemingly deep conviction, that 'it makes sense to hope that aesthetic experience may help us recuperate the spatial and the bodily dimension of our existence; […] to hope that aesthetic experience may give us back at least a feeling of our being-in-the-world".[80]

As demonstrated in the present discussion, painting retains a significant, even crucial role in the formation of new-media aesthetics. To conclude with a Deleuzian formulation, I would assert that *Col Tempo*, *Pomegranate*, *Emergence*, and other works which share this unique aesthetic formation, may be regarded as 'cerebrally pessimistic but nervously optimistic'.[81] While presenting the utmost technological

sophistication, these works resist the inescapable anxiety which follows in its wake. Relying on the 'hysterical' power of painting, they reflect a certain assurance in the ability of new-media art to re-establish a sense of presence and regain art's wavering hold of the real.

[1] Catherine M. Soussloff, 'The trouble with painting, the image (less) text', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4:2, August 2005, 204.

[2] Soussloff, 'The trouble with paining', 204.

[3] The three Tintorettos presented were: *The Last Supper* (from the Basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore), the *Stealing of the Dead Body of St. Mark*, and the *Creation of the Animals* (both housed at the Gallerie dell'Accademia).

[4] http://www.labiennale.org/en/art/exhibition/curiger/illuminations.html (consulted 10 August 2011).

[5] Soussloff, 'The trouble with paining', 204.

[6] David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, Cambridge, 2007, 93.

[7] Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 97.

[8] Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 97-8.

[9] Laura U. Marks, *Touch; Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media*, Minneapolis, 2002, 3-4.

[10] Marks, *Touch*, 2.

[11] Marks, *Touch*, xiii.

[12] Laura U. Marks, *Enfoldment and Infinifty; an Islamic Genealogy of New Media Art*, Boston, 2011, 3.

[13] David Norman Rodowick, *Reading the Figural, or, Philosophy after the New Media*, Durham, 37-8.

[14] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford, 2004, 20.

[15] Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 106.

[16] Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 106.

[17] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*; *Movement, Affect, Sensation*, Durham, 2002, 27.

[18] Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 110.

[19] Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 111.

[20] Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 109.

[21] Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 109.

[22] Maurice Merleau Ponty, 'Eye and mind', in Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith, eds, *The Merleau Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, Evanston, Illinois, 1993, 121-149 [originally published 1961].

[23] Maurice Merleau Ponty, 'Cézanne's doubt', in Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith, eds, *The Merleau Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, Evanston, Illinois, 1993, 59-75 [originally published 1945].

[24] Merleau Ponty, 'Cézanne's doubt', 62.

[25] Merleau Ponty, 'Eye and mind', 123.

[26] Merleau Ponty, 'Eye and mind', 123.

[27] Maurice Merleau Ponty, 'Selection from *The Visible and the Invisible*', in Thomas Baldwin, ed., *Maurice Merleau-Ponty; Basic Writings*, London and New York, 2004, 249.

[28] Merleau Ponty, 'Eye and mind', 125-6.

[29] Merleau Ponty, 'Selection from *The Visible and the Invisible*', 251-2.

[30] Merleau Ponty, 'Cézanne's doubt', 61.

[31] Merleau Ponty, 'Cézanne's doubt', 65.

[32] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: the Logic of Sensation*, London and New York, 2003, 39 [originally published 1981].

[33] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 35.

[34] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 35.

[35] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 34.

[36] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 50.

[37] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 51-2.

[38]That painting was a pivotal concern of Forgács's *Col Tempo* was further underscored by the *Rembrandt Morph*, the work which opened the installation. The very first image encountered by the viewer, *Rembrandt Morph* consisted of what at a first glance seemed like one of Rembrandt's self portraits, only to emerge a second later as a sequence of morphing Rembrandts, in a digital work that pushes the aesthetic markers of painting to the forefront of new-media aesthetics.

[39] Merleau Ponty, 'Cézanne's doubt', 68.

[40] Merleau Ponty, 'Selection from *The Visible and the Invisible*', 71.

[41] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis, 1987, 168.

[42] Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, 171, 186.

[43] Deleuze and Guattari, *A thousand plateaus*, 186-7.

[44] Merleau Ponty, 'Selection from *The Visible and the Invisible*', 252.

[45] Marks, *Touch*, 8.

[46] Marks, *Touch*, 4.

[47] Rodowick, *Reading the Figural*, 37-8.

[48] Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 113.

[49] Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 118.

[50] As communicated by the artist in personal conversation, particular emphasis is placed in his work on achieving a high definition image resulting in highly detailed

surface texture. This tactic works to confuse the viewer as to the nature of the image (Author in conversations with the artist, Tel Aviv, 29 August 2011, 6 August 2012).

[51] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 38.

[52] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 38-9.

[53] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 45.

[54] John Walsh, ed., *Bill Viola; The Passions*. Los Angeles, 2003, 263.

[55] Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 37-8.

[56] Mark Hansen, 'The time of affect, or bearing witness to life', *Critical Inquiry*, 30:3, Spring 2004, 587.

[57] Hansen, 'The time of affect', 594.

[58] Hansen, 'The time of affect', 602.

[59] Hansen, 'The time of affect', 610.

[60] Merleau Ponty, 'Selection from *The Visible and the Invisible*', 252.

[61] Hansen, 'The time of affect', 594.

[62] Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*, Berkeley, 2004, 84.

[63] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 71.

[64] Ann M. Wagner, 'Performance, video, and the rhetoric of presence', *October*, 91, Winter 2000, 80.

[65] Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*, 53.

[66] Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 98.

[67] Matilde Nardelli, 'Moving pictures: cinema and its obsolescence in contemporary art', *Journal of Visual Culture* 8:3, December 2009, 244.

[68] Nardelli, 'Moving pictures', 244.

[69] Nardelli, 'Moving pictures', 245.

[70] Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 107.

[71] Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, 107.

[72] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 23.

[73] Mieke Bal, 'Dead flesh, or the smell of painting', in Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey, eds, *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretation*, Hanover and London, 1994, 373.

[74] Bal, 'Dead flesh', 373.

[75] Wagner, 'Performance, video, and the rhetoric of presence', 67.

[76] Wagner, 'Performance, video, and the rhetoric of presence', 74.

[77] Wagner, 'Performance, video, and the rhetoric of presence', 76.

[78] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 50.

[79] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 65.

[80] Gumbrecht, *Production of presence*, 116.

[81] Deleuze, *Francis Bacon*, 43.

Fig. 1 Péter Forgács, *Col Tempo*, 2009 (screen capture, detail)

Fig. 2 Ori Gersht, *Pomegranate* (2006), c-type, still from video, 80x100 cm

Fig. 3 Bill Viola, *Emergence* (2002), color high-definition video rear projection on screen mounted on wall in dark room