

**Beyond the Museum Walls: Situating Art in Virtual Space
(Polemic Overlay and Three Movements)**

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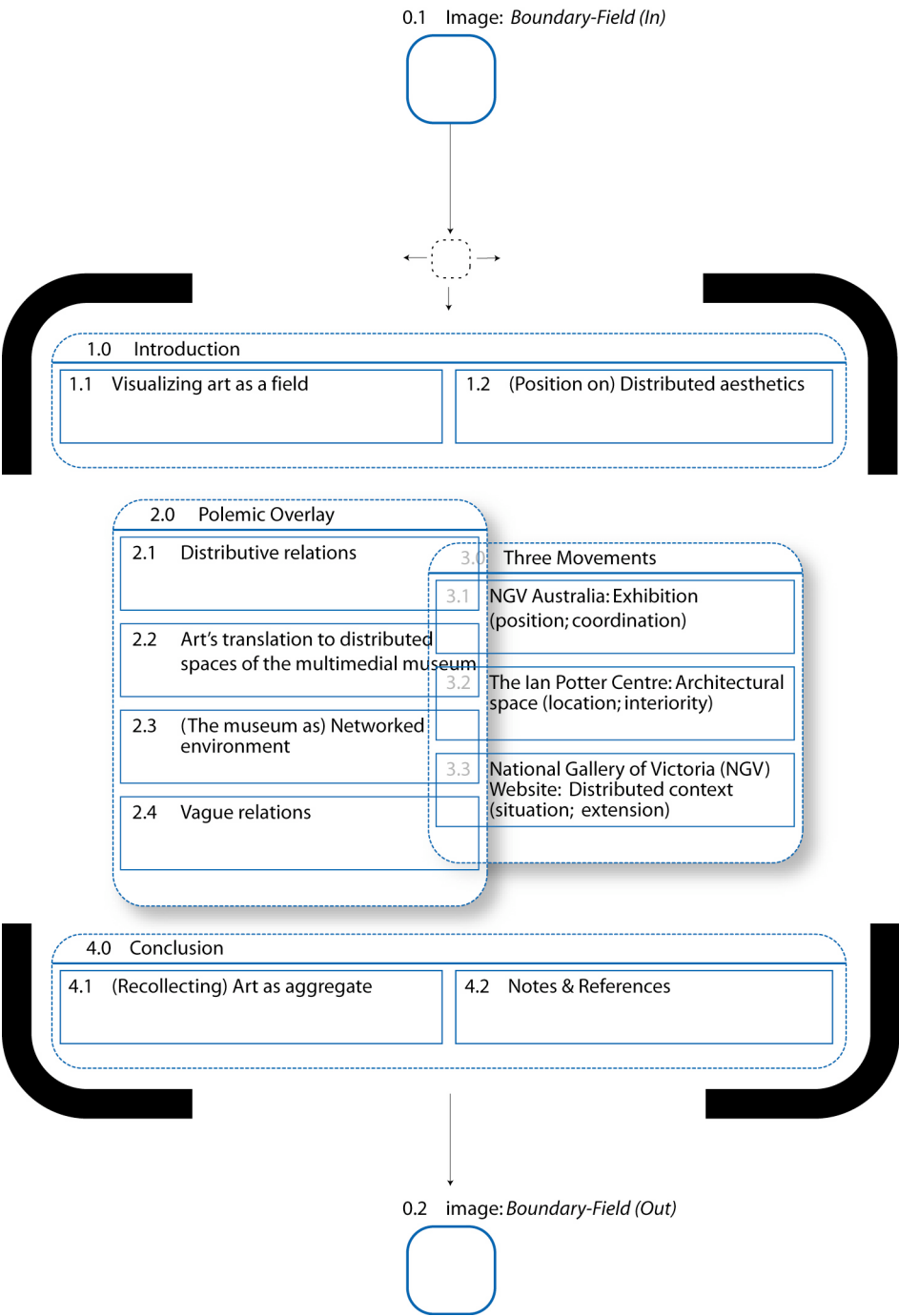
Author's Note:

This paper began as a long exposition on the topic of virtuality and the art of exhibition and is now abbreviated for the purposes of publication.

The schematic content-structure that has been included offers a visualisation of the resulting format of this presentation, offering the reader a different insight into its own “distributed” character.

Regarding the beginning and end images that frame this paper: this pair of digital image works are based on my initial encounter with the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia – the National Gallery of Victoria’s campus dedicated to Australian Art on the occasion of its inaugural public opening. In an intertextual sense, these artworks are influenced by photographs documenting the installation design of *The Field* – the exhibition that marked the launch of the NGV’s St. Kilda Road building back in 1968 – and subsequently reproduced in the *Fieldwork* catalogue. [1] These images reveal the museum as a hybridised field of relations; an aggregative mixture of art and objects, surfaces and overlapping spaces.

00. Image: *Schematic content-structure*



01. Image: *Boundary-Field (In)*



Vince Dziekan, *Boundary-Field (In)*. Digital image 2003

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Visualizing art as a field

Art does not exist in a vacuum. Rather, it operates within a field of practices and positions. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu observed that history is immanent to the functioning of this dynamic system. The movement to historicize – of nature's slide into culture and of culture's becoming history – perpetuates art. Its return trajectory, its feedback into the system (as historical legitimacy validates particular art forms and naturalises their distinctive practices) announces the emergent qualities associated with cultural production. With each incremental move, as the shifting of one coordinate affects all relationships to other positions, repercussions are felt across the whole field. Art is shaped as the continuum emerging out of this self-transforming, topological dis-positioning.

The naturalisation of art's cultural law is made manifest in a variety of ways, embodying ideas about the consolidated art object, the bounded cubic environment of the gallery and the enclosure of the museum, as both architecture and archival parameters. Intriguingly, these institutionalised expressions run counter to the more dynamic properties of the art field, instead being reliant largely upon a program of cultural "freeze-framing". The art object, gallery space and museum apparatus are powerful spatial representations that shape our perceptions and understanding of art. The influence of such "received ideas" on the form – and resulting conformity – of the cultural field cannot be underestimated.

Partly in response to the innate predispositions that sketch out the activities that constitute the complex ecology of art, the intention of my larger interdisciplinary project – which sets out to investigate virtuality and the art of exhibition – is to situate the digital within the existing discourses surrounding art and the position it assumes within contemporary cultural practice. Virtuality is determined conditionally by the productive capacities of its social space. This is not limited to the technical capacity of surface and positionality in relation to the production of forms of illusionism but also is dependent upon protocols of viewing and institutional rules of engagement. This latter point is developed by Bourdieu and his use of the term "habitus", which is drawn from his sociological critique of the cultural field. As a set of dispositions that generate practices and perceptions, he defines habitus as the system of:

durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively regulated and 'regular' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing actions of a conductor (Bourdieu, 1993:5).

It is a central contention of my project that the infrastructure that upholds the project of art (of which the exhibition is a critical component) becomes increasingly strained by the integration of digital media and its adaptation across the range of institutionalised practices and operations. In tracking the cultural movement leading towards the realisation of a hybridised (indeed "cybridised") species of art, I am particularly interested in the impact that is exterior or exerted from outside (from across the field's range, as it were) upon the ontological interiority of the art object by an array of spatial practices. These practices involve architectural factors of gallery spaces, the design of an extended typology of spaces (which today involves digitally-mediated communication spaces, a variety of multimedia modes and the Internet), and curatorial issues associated with the format, constitution and composition of the exhibition itself.

For its part, the exhibition form brings together these features into a distributive, aggregative complex of relations, which can be considered as a field in itself. Approaching the exhibition as an "event-structure" enables it to be discerned as an articulation of the virtual, existing, as it does, in a way that is 'maximally abstract yet real. This reality is that of potential – pure relationality, the interval of change, the in-itself of transformation' (Massumi, 20002:58). Working back from this event, any of a number of art's associated tenants are betrayed, such as the constitution of different museological spaces, the role of artefactuality and the exercise of authorship in artistic production. The value in concentrating my investigation on the exhibition encompasses this range of inter-related concerns.

1.2 (Position on) Distributed aesthetics

In this particular paper, the space that I wish to traverse is evoked by the term the “multimedial” museum. This interest is centred on the contentions and implications sensed in the advanced technologisation of art, of which the latest turn involves digital media. What are the consequences of digital technology on art as attention turns from the medium’s restructuring of content to the exerted affect of the digital on the constituent parts that, taken together, uphold art’s institutional armature?

The more oblique approach that I have chosen to take draws upon the distributive characteristics found in this configuration – of art and technology, of the digital and the virtual. While not addressing possibly more immediate or obvious points or issues, the underlying qualification is my attempt to discern digital communication’s profound effects on art’s institutional self-relations and speculate on their broader reconfiguring. To this end, I will not be addressing Net art in any explicit way. Instead, I would like to entertain the possibility that transplanting art, in the broader sense of its cultural construction, to the virtual site of the Internet disrupts art itself and feeds back onto our understanding of its institutionalised premises. [2] The discussion of art, through focussing in on isolated examples or instances of work, will be set aside in favour of looking at the spaces that are found operating around it.

A recognition of the distributive properties embedded within contemporary museological space – that I sense have risen to the surface and reflected its multifaceted nature and “scattering” – leads onto my second qualification. This paper will not entail a discussion that focuses upon the species of new museological spaces that have been established expressly on the premise of advocating electronic or new media art. Rather, my interest here is in the accommodation of digital media – not only as art works, but also importantly across a wide range of organizational applications in the museological context – within the existing, historically legitimated framework of the art museum. To this end, I will frame the subsequent discussion by focussing my attention upon The National Gallery of Victoria and in particular the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia (NGVA). [3] The choice of this institution is not premised on any particular uniqueness. Rather, as an exemplar of the dominant museum model or class, it has been chosen because it offers a localised, site-specific experience of a much more ubiquitous phenomenon – the encounter between the cultural logic of the postmodern museum and digital technologies.

From presence on the gallery wall through to the plane of the computer screen, *what does situating art across such distributive spaces offer to a different apperception of art?*

2.0 Polemic Overlay

2.1 Distributive relations

Addressing the distributive relationship that interconnects the artwork, museology and digital technology is an increasingly central dialogue within cultural practice and policy. In order to embark on this discussion, the digital and the virtual need to be explored through positioning them within the broader field of cultural production. This includes identifying the rhetorical operations of the digital and the condition of virtuality in a variety of modes and practices that pre-exist their appearance as media.

Inevitably, such meditations broach the bigger philosophical question of a digital aesthetics. Extending beyond the deployment of the digital as a medium for artistic production, any negotiation of the digital as an aesthetic redirects the focus to the different modes of production and perception that arise from resulting social, cultural and technological arrangements. These modes, which are all productive, expose distinctive assumptions that have become so institutionalised (internalised, normalised and naturalised) to have slipped from immediate visibility. In attempting its broader media historicisation, I sense that, rather than myopically setting our focus on the digital as a medium, it is critical to explore the new relationships that emerge with other institutional predispositions that are exposed through the digital. Are we at risk of missing the mark if we insist on confounding all things digital as “new” and “virtual”?

In his broader theorisation of the cultural implications of virtuality, Brian Massumi asserts that the virtual is a “transitional fringing” of the actual and is a property common to all emergent forms. He elaborates:

“Digital Art” is in no way synonymous with “virtual reality”. What matters is the “how” of the expression, not the “what” of the medium, and especially not the simple abstractness of the elements that the medium allows to be combined (Massumi, 2002:175).

Digital media, in their own right, might be said to have a very limited link to the virtual, ‘Nothing is more destructive to the thinking and imaging of the virtual than equating it with the digital’ (Massumi, 2002:137). Digitisation, beyond its immediately apparent use as a medium can be applied as a theoretical technique, which offers substantially more towards a speculative, universal re-definition of art itself. Richard A. Lanham positions such a “digital rhetoric” as a general interdisciplinary project taking place within the humanities and social sciences that is discernable in much contemporary intellectual and artistic endeavour. In his discussion of electronic textuality and its rhetorical implications, he asserts:

Technology isn’t leading us in these new directions. The arts, and the theoretical debate that tags along after them, have done the leading, and digitisation has emerged as their condign embodiment. We needn’t worry about digital determinism. We must explain, instead, the extraordinary convergence of twentieth-century thinking with the digital means that now give it expression. It is the computer as fulfilment of social thought that requires explanation (Lanham 1993: 51).

One way of broaching the distributed aesthetics that come to bear on art today is to understand the museum apparatus as a technology, in and of itself providing a paradigmatic filter for structuring signification and framing art. Apparent when electronic, multimedia and networked components are integrated within museological space, whether as art or didactic material (or increasingly alternating between both) the delineation of where one begins and the other leaves off is becoming increasingly blurred. Such problematics, associated with the fragmentation and dispersal of both art object and its viewing subject, are brought to the surface by introducing digital technologies into the mix and contribute to the continuing and concerted reconceptualisation of the various institutions upholding art. What kind of cultural reprogramming might emerge accompanying this technologisation?

For example, the pronounced deaesthetisation of the artwork coincides with the dematerialisation of its primary site (the museum) leading to a blurring of the division between art and non-art. Miwon Kwon, in tracking the genealogy of site-specific practices, recognises in the slippage that results between site and content a ‘correspondence to the pattern of movement in electronic spaces of the Internet’ (Kwon 1997: 93). Whether partly in response to this challenge, or as a result of an increased “virtualisation” of the museum, the overly narrow correlation of site-specificity with physical site was subjected to subsequent reinvention as a cultural framework defined by the institutions of art. It follows that site needs to be defined as more than physical location: ‘Beyond the Museum, the site comes to encompass a relay of several interrelated but different spaces and economies’ (Kwon 1997: 88). The ability to reconceive the site as more than a place is crucial to the conceptual leap that leads to redefining the role of art and artists. Reinvented as an infrastructure of propositions, the virtual museum is a network of unanchored flows, demanding mobility, adaptability and nomadic properties from the artwork.

2.2 Art’s translation to distributed spaces of the multimedial museum

The museum – having come to be art’s primary model or “technology” within modernity – plays an instrumental role in modelling the contours of artistic practices. Revealed in the light of new technologies, its physicality and structure are reconceived as a matrix of different, but interrelating spaces. The role and interplay of these spaces (museological, architectural, art historical, communicational) I contend, have all been, and will continue to be, increasingly challenged by digital technologies. The interrelationship between artistic practice, digital media and

communicative interaction has become intertwined in what might be described as a “confused” relationship that connects the artwork and museum. Recognising this, Mieke Bal has identified the museum as “multimedial”. Importantly, she senses far-reaching implications in developing this aspect of the museum by appealing to the curiosity about ‘what could happen if the mixed media nature of museums were to become a paradigm of cultural practice, in general’ (Bal, 1996:3).

Positioning the contemporary museum in a consumer society of mass markets shifts the museum’s role away from creating an arena for the contemplation of the unique artwork and its aesthetic immediacy to a staging of experience and affect. No longer can the museum be viewed as simply a physical container, its operations consigned to a homogenous display space bounded by four walls. Contributing significantly to this new conditioning of the museum (what nowadays it needs to offer to its “customer”, the kind of visitor experience it needs to facilitate) is the importance that multimedia, defined both as content delivery and technology infrastructure, has come to play in meeting the ambitions of such a “service” mandate. In major museum organizations collections, education programs, marketing and communications are supported increasingly by a comprehensive multimedia technology infrastructure. With the additional hidden infrastructure of electronic and multimedia technologies that are to be found “behind the walls”, as it were, the architectural issues of organising spaces and manipulating settings for displaying artworks is now more decisive than ever, and as much virtual as physical.

Using the term “multimedial” to describe this object identifies the crux of the dilemma as located in an understanding of the relationship between different aesthetic orders. In order to engage with these interactions critically means determining the kind of aesthetics involved; defining aesthetics, in this instance, as a program or type of application – a translation of techniques that come to expression in material terms and that encompasses both designed intention and interactive interpretation or involvement. Emphasising such a form of “relational aesthetics” shifts attention away from the determination of isolated types or forms, and instead focuses upon the “in betweenness”, the integrative capacity of mediated spaces. [4]

Translation implies a transposition, a recasting or swapping of places. The transfer repositions content into a different form, medium or structure. This leads to the question of where the actual content of art resides in the first place and whether it really can be condensed into an unchanging, immutable object or artefact?

These translations have a history too. The crux of the matter, in an earlier technological stake, was poised on the question of the relationship between art and reproduction. What happens to our conception of art as it is transformed by mechanical reproduction, translating the art object (painting, sculpture) into a graphic facsimile, and later photographic image? [5]

In order to attempt to extricate ourselves from being mired within the well-worn pitting of “original” against “copy”, instead consider art’s reconfiguration as a phase, or, better yet, a “phase space” that gives body, dimension and contour to the virtual. Massumi (2002: 33) describes phase space as: ‘The organization of multiple levels that have different logics and temporal organizations, but are locked in resonance with each other and recapitulate the same event in divergent ways’. A phase diagram is a construct used to demonstrate and visualise the changes in a given system, whose parameters are represented as an axis of a multidimensional space. Time, however, is not considered to be one of the dimensions but rather is allowed to flow, letting the system evolve. Transposing this description onto the artwork might offer a way into reconsidering it as a synthetic trajectory traced by the arrangement of interconnected temporal and spatial positions.

The need to enable shifting and multi-faceted perspectives that are flexible and dynamic is critical for the museum. This is especially so if it is going to remain relevant, providing a productive space that offers new ways of seeing and understanding the art of the past, particularly in relation to the increasingly digitised present. Perhaps more crucially even, what impact might the digital – actualised through formations comprised as an aggregate of networked communication, multi-modal content and hypertext structures – have on the modelling the type of institutional

framework for the art of the future? Beyond the gallery's walls, *what happens to art as it translates to the distributed space of the web?* For instance, how might the contemporary museum website contribute to our negotiation of art in our era where virtuality is increasingly the base or ground that we measure the relationship between ourselves and the world around us? Not so much a concern with originality (which tends to dominate any critical discussion of art's apparent loss resulting from being inflected by technologies of reproduction), but with the repositioning of a singular site of origin to "multiple", "many", even "any" sites of distribution.

2.3 (The museum as) Networked environment

Art, communicated through the combinatorial form of the exhibition, is not only accommodated by the spatial realization of architectural spaces any longer. Increasingly influential is the way that the design of an extended typology of spaces, including the Internet, structure creative practices, viewer experiences and their subsequent interactions. Importantly, any elaboration of the digital hinges on the pivotal issue of the intervention and intersections of new technologies with the ecology of cultural production.

While the position of author has been privileged in the production of traditional art (artist) and likewise his or her exposition through museological arrangements (curator), multimedia offers the means by which the end-user can assume a more productive role. The discursivity of multimedia, and how it can be associated with a dialectical aesthetic, is characterised by the ways in which montage-like spatial juxtaposition – achieved through hyperlink structures and search-ability – is drawn upon for narrative effect. The functionality of links and databases extend upon already existing tabular, classificatory forms, such as the collection archive, catalogue, and methods of spatial arrangement in galleries – all technologies intimately associated with the historical evolution of the museum. Adopting a museological aesthetic that understands, and is more effectively calibrated to digital communication technologies will see the museum emphasised as a machine for creating juxtaposition, a generator of conditions for dialogical encounters with the unforeseen (enabling, even privileging, the experience of surprise, the unexpected and perhaps the random).

The challenge faced by museums in response to their increasingly digitally mediated context entails reconsidering their adoption of a hierarchical mode of interaction with digital media. Based in large part on a media-centric point of view, the hierarchical mode adopts a stance that might be characterised as "hard" design, in its implementation of a unidirectional, predetermined, authored point-of-view and emphasis upon fixed and bounded constitution or outcome. This approach sets up a clear scale or hierarchy of relations between media; multimedia, in this arrangement, is firmly entrenched as supplementary. Through exposing its non-integration – recognised in the purposing of multimedia as an enhancement that seeks to compliment the experience of art – such supplementarity slides quickly into marginality. The role played by margins, however, is intrinsically connected with the central or core purpose of the institution of art. [6] By keeping the interaction with multimedia marginalised, clearly framed and set slightly apart, are we witnessing the institution's vain attempt at staving-off the disruptive potential implicated by digital technology?

In place of the centre-margin dynamic, a more "dialectical" mode offers an alternative that encourages the processing of experience at the intersection of the actual and virtual, in the overlap of physical and digital states. As a practice that moves beyond a restrictive sense of establishing fixed forms, a dialectical approach draws upon synergies that can be achieved by composing formations of otherwise intangible rules, routines, patterns of application and usage. Herein lies the opportunity that presents itself through employing relational (soft) design to connect anticipations (the 'expected' codes, conventions, conditions) with unexpected encounters in new aggregative formations.

Importantly, this aesthetic seeks to integrate and augment established, hierarchical relations, to use them as a foil rather than replace them with an entirely new paradigm. Achieving such a space of contradiction depends on the reader having expectations that can be overturned. Crucially, the realisation of this aesthetic is not achievable through multimedia alone...although multimedia does offer a distinctive way of exploring such modes of interaction.

2.4 Vague relations

One casualty of this incursion of digital technologies into the institutional space of the art museum is the softening, ensuing vagueness of the previously hard and fast distinction between content and structure. In architectural terms, the clear demarcation of gallery space both sets off a sanctuary of art from the secular, everyday world while at the same time structuring the viewer's travel through the narrative of art and its history. This is most clearly illustrated through the conventional form of the "en filade" arrangement of flowing rooms and their connecting passageways. In terms of productive techniques, frames (developing from the rectilinearity of the portable easel painting) and framing devices (presentation techniques and "hanging" arrangements) can be said to design and define. Their respective techniques of differentiation, acting as buffers and borders, delineate the artwork within from the context of the gallery wall, whose surface stands as a synecdoche for the museum as a whole.

As the museum's simulacral environment becomes ever more pronounced, it is harder to distinguish the border between interior and exterior. However, as the walls are broken by deconstructive architecture (from being indented or punctured with excised gaps), they let the real, lived "outside" leak in. This rupture can conjoin art with its social and cultural setting as much as it can dissipate, even to the point of contaminating the hermetic closure that the museum offers. As with the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia (NGVA) – designed by Lab Architecture Studios – one such aperture opens a gallery room to the museum's external surrounds, juxtaposing modernist landscape paintings arranged on its walls with a picturesque view across the river and adjoining parkland. It can also confuse, particularly in an indiscriminate appeal to non-linearity by creating sightlines that link images and objects across vistas.

Disjunctive juxtapositions are just as likely to result given the impossibility of totally controlling this fluid, ever-changing situation. The exhibition design for *Fieldwork* was particularly prone in this regard. [7] For its part *Fieldwork*, which was mounted on the occasion of the opening of the NGV's new campus dedicated to Australian art, is a representation of the influence that curatorial design has come to increasingly play upon the resulting exhibition. Here the overall curatorial design was translated across catalogue publication, exhibition layout and the composition of the inventory of its survey. Curator Jason Smith introduces the idea that "looseness" and an "open enquiry" about the ways that artworks operate 'is necessary to this enterprise, therefore throughout *Fieldwork* a strict chronological sequence has been subtly subverted in favour of contextual juxtapositions, and this too has demanded a fluid approach' (Smith, 2002: 120). Another way that a more distinctively dialectical interaction expressed itself was through the self-referential relationship between this exhibition and its embedded reference to *The Field* – the exhibition that announced the opening of the NGV's Sir Roy Grounds Building in 1968. In his overview of the *Fieldwork* exhibition plan curator Charles Green notes:

'Even though all of these movements (refereeing here the late-Modernist legacy left by pop, minimalism and conceptualism), and more, do appear in *Fieldwork*, they don't make much sense as a story unless we understand – and this is what the exhibition aims to show – that there weren't smooth transitions from one movement to another, that art has been a disputed field and that the chief disputes were already latent in *The Field* back in 1968'. (Green, 2002: 12)

It is the continuity, rather than an evolutionary plotting of styles and their successive movements, that is exemplified by the non-exclusivity of the three dominant artistic directions represented and which informed the resulting curatorial survey. The construction of the exhibition acknowledges 'art's nature as a discursive field of representations' (Green 2002: 14).

In some ways the exaggerated, even "showy", influence that design played in mediating between artwork and exhibition space confounded some of *Fieldwork*'s curatorial strategies. As demonstrated by the "micro-example" offered up by the four panels that comprise Australian artist John Nixon's *Self-portrait (non-objective composition)*, one was left wondering at what was occurring at the border between the artwork and its exhibition space. [8] What was actually added to the enquiry about this work by the window aperture that neighbours these plywood panels? We

might choose to dismiss this curatorial “touch” simply as a bit of idiosyncratic “play”, which reinforces the spirit of the architecture. More disconcerting, though, was the wall fitting that intruded upon this collection of works, which in the spirit of the artist’s assemblage aesthetic fugitively masqueraded as just one more component of the work. In this curated arrangement – where each connection and every inch of exhibition space has been considered and intended as meaningful – can the designers of the exhibition have it both ways?

As frontiers between actual and virtual become increasingly slippery, will a more pronounced “virtual” art be realized as the next step in the decomposition of the physical? Any definition of the virtual museum, as illustrated by the preceding observations, will necessitate its redefinition, from a far too narrow categorisation - and over-simplified application - as a space for presenting art works on the web, to an extended application that includes the increasingly complex meshing of art, exhibition design, curatorial practice with digital technology and multimedia in museums. Exploring the contours (the rub of these slippery elusive spaces) can be likened to the incremental sliding and shifting of glass surfaces within a camera lens – each new position changes our way of describing the site in which art is encountered. At either extreme, at the focal points of macro and infinite horizon, two orientations appear to emerge as different but nonetheless potentially divergent positions: the application of digital technology serving the enrichment of the experience of art and/or digital technology as a critical challenge to the very constitution, and viable future of art itself.

3.0 Three Movements

3.1 NGV Australia: Exhibition space (position; coordination)

Dialectical interactivity offers a useful way of engaging with the multimedial condition of the museum. To traverse this interstitial space entails moving the study of the museum from an exclusive emphasis on it as object to seeing it as an embodiment of ideas and discourses. A study of the museum along these lines recognizes the museum as a “constructed space”. This description encompasses a way of looking at the idea of the museum and how this idea has found its expression in tangible forms as well as the way it shapes otherwise intangible social practices. As described by Paul Q. Hirst: ‘We can consider constructed objects as components of a discursive formation, and relate the practice of construction, inclusion and exclusion of objects to the rules and patterns of such formations’ (Hirst, 2003: 384). Importantly, this observation accommodates the forms of “subjectification” involved in modern constructed spaces as part of what might be described as their surface of emergence.

Discursive orders can be observed in forms of spatiality. An obvious example of one such narrative ordering that is relevant to this enquiry is the physical layout of galleries. Another representative instance, while less immediately apparent but no less crucial to the stories conveyed through museological space, is the archival tendency expressed in the catalogue-form of museum collections. While each instance offers a distinctive end-morphology, these arrangements are essentially differentiations of a larger system and can be considered as physical specificities shaped by form-generating conditions of becoming. The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia (NGVA) offers an interesting representation of such a discourse, as the museum makes the transition from being an arena of ritualistic display to the staging of art history, setting up dialectical interactions across its spaces of exhibition.

The NGVA negotiates received ideas about art and museum design offering an interesting set of design solutions that also provoke a number of related problematics. The interior layout of the exhibition spaces make an obvious effort to move away from the given of the “en filade” approach. This linear, singular narrative constructed through the linking of rooms and implying the chronological succession of art history, was viewed by the architects as too limiting. In addition this was identified as contributing to the associated ergonomic problem of gallery fatigue, which is induced symptomatically by this monotonous progression). By creating the long, intersecting sinuous filament structure and the circuitous “spooning” relationships between connecting rooms, as well as bridging spaces that intersect across the gaps created as a result of the void, the option is made available for the visitor to determine his or her course and navigation through the galleries. Although introducing a non-linear option through its architectural layout, the overwhelming experience of the NGVA is a sense of an ascending progression through art history.

The passage through the spaces exhibits a strong chronological organizing principle. In terms of floor plan, the layout of gallery and transit spaces merge display and supporting areas. The two main intersecting filaments organize the three-levels of galleries in such a way as to instil a compositional (and strategic, from a curatorial perspective) non-linearity. Starting at the ground level, the visitor's journey originates in the Indigenous Gallery displaying Australian art's aboriginal heritage through historical artefacts and contemporary indigenous artworks. Next, the second level organizes the trajectory across the four distinct wings of the co-joined twin filaments. A counter-clockwise circumnavigation leads the visitor through early Colonial, Victorian era, and late nineteenth century academic painting to the Heidelberg school, which represents the first development of a truly distinctive national vernacular in painting. The continuation of this figure-8 floor plan proceeds through early twentieth century to late Modernist-influenced developments culminating in the nominated Contemporary Projects space. Continuing upward to the top floor, the implicit logic of the museum was made manifest in the inaugural exhibition, *Fieldwork*. This exhibition outlined, in rhyming fashion, the course of recent internationalised art from Colour Field, Pop and Conceptualism onwards through Neo-expressionism and Postmodernism, closing with the various pluralistic approaches of the advanced art of the last decade of the century. As one moves onwards and upwards through the legacy of Australian art, the ascent reinforces a linear, progressivist reading of forward development and refinement leading to wards a higher aesthetic order.

In spatial terms, much thought has gone into creating a distinctive, state-of-the-art arena aimed particularly at a mass audience for art and its appreciation. This is achieved by creating an overriding sense of thematic "packaging". Foregoing a doctrinaire approach towards neutralised, homogeneous display space in favour of a much more idiosyncratic solution, the architects have strived to break down the formal barriers in an obvious effort to engage the wider public with the museum experience. The participant in the museum is transported through clearly marked "pavilion" spaces that evoke the eras of art by utilizing display techniques and an array of design languages. Further supporting this spectacular engagement is the added participatory stimulus to navigate the spaces in a less predetermined way. The rhythmic overlapping facilitated by bridged walkways across the gulf of the central voids between spaces encourages a non-linear passage through the galleries. It is as if these individual galleries work as "packets" analogous to the way in which content can be digitally structured for hypertext activation. This design of pavilion spaces anchors these self-contained art historical narratives and locates the visitor/user in the larger overall matrix of relations.

Another pronounced design strategy involves the creation of "vistas". The proliferation of these vantages, offering sight lines between and across architectural spaces, recognizes that circulation is not exclusively a matter of physical movement through a space. It is equally about visual and conceptual travel. On the one hand, vistas operate by interjecting the collection of the objects found in an immediate space with those of another order. This operation undermines the effort to enclose the narrative frame of reference. Vistas create a vicarious experience in which the drama of art is staged. The intersection of these sightlines situate viewers within each other's field of vision. In turn, the visuality involved in this reciprocal sense of seeing and being seen enmeshes each participant in the overall narrativity of the space. Either way, this movement results in an unmooring or decentring of the experience of art that can induce in the observer a pronounced sense of interest as much as a profound sense of distraction.

In advanced promotion of the new gallery, much visual emphasis was placed on the dynamics of the cathedral-like spaces that are created between the two filaments. I am interested in reading these upward-looking vantages and the translation into dramatic terms. Viewed from the floor of the Indigenous Gallery, with our feet firmly planted on the ground (one is tempted to say "terra firma" – which quickly slides connotatively into "terra australis" and the more contentious "terra nullius") our eyes wander upwards, into a luminous volume. Large blocks of even illumination line the undersides of the overhead walkways and replace their function as load-bearing structures by acting as light emitting features. Looking up, as this orientation situates our view (from the context of the Aboriginal past up into the realms of Western art historicism) we are blinded by this solid light. Read in this way, our understanding and interpretation in the presence of Australia's Indigenous art is sealed off from an encounter with that of other eras – and its innate auratic powers (mysterious, enigmatic qualities) reinforced. By contrast, it is in looking "down" (from the

platform of the two floors above dedicated to the two most recent centuries of Australian art's development) and "back" into the Indigenous past that we are able to position ourselves so as to explore this dialectical set of relationships. "Viewed" in this way, the conscience of Aboriginal art haunts the entire gallery.

3.2 The Ian Potter Centre: Architectural space (location; interiority)

The opening of the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia saw the new campus branded as "imagining the future not the past". On the surface its provocative architectural expression and accompanying museological design would certainly appear to support this publicity. Sitting atop Melbourne's new civic agora, Federation Square, the building presents itself as a shifting canvas. Combining an assemblage of tumbling, solid and crystalline components, the architecture is disconcertingly unstable, constantly transforming depending on proximity and differing vantages (in space as well as across time). Its non-consolidation is further exaggerated by eccentric surfacing (using a variety of materials and treatments) and the addition of jumbled, exposed metal armatures and glass planes – the building offers itself to photography as sliding planar expanses subject to continual composition and decomposition through framing, angles of view, time of day. This transmutability is accentuated by light. The building appears as if in a perpetual state of hide-and-seek, disappearing as shadows emerge and envelope, reappearing as arcs of light trace the influence of neighbouring volumes upon each other.

This play of materiality – and the uncertainty one begins to sense of any fixed relationship to physical coordinates – continues seamlessly through to the building's interior architecture. The interior space works like an idiosyncratic stage set – characteristics played upon in advanced modelling and promotional photography, where even without art (perhaps importantly so) the space itself is portrayed and rendered auratic. Walls do little to divide or define. Instead they seem to be piled up, awaiting their edification, or wedged together, shooting upwards and outwards at exaggerated tapers. Ceilings crumple, their surfaces articulated by permeated and perforating light. Expanses of wall space are pierced by oddly shaped and eccentrically located apertures.

Just what sort of "projection" can be read into this highly mediated, exaggeratedly designed narrative? Common to the experience found in such a highly contrived environment is a sense that the "art" has become increasingly coincidental to its interaction with the space in which it exists. [9] Space itself is perceived as a reified entity, 'such that it constructs not an experience of itself but some other euphorically dizzy sense of the museum as hyperspace' (Krauss, 1990: 14).



Gallery maps – the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia (reproduced with permission)

Artistic practice, curatorial approaches and installation design have become increasingly sensitive to the fluidity of communication and semiotic dynamics, and might be shown to be illustrative of the influence of "new museology". [10] Having already defined space as a 'set of relations', Henri Lefebvre uses the term "texture" to draw attention to the active exercise of spatial practices:

It is helpful to think of architectures as “archi-textures”, to treat each monument or building, viewed in its surroundings and context, in the populated area and associated networks in which it is set down, as part of a particular production of space. (Lefebvre, 1991: 118)

The resulting exhibition “complex” can be considered analogously as a hypertextual structure made up of interconnections, passages, allusions and linkages.

Behind the spectacular façade presented by the NGVA, contortions of the qualities of physical space are replicated beyond the gallery walls – in the tangled coil of coaxial cables, networked servers and interconnected information databases. An extensive and thoroughly considered integration of multimedia technologies is a vital feature of the overall design strategy. By way of facilitating increased access to art through the social interface of the museum, multimedia technologies and the Internet have become increasingly instrumental to the NGV’s operations and activities. Information architecture was factored into the overall, underlying design of the Federation Square precinct, which also includes the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI). At the NGVA, this infrastructure includes an extensive digital signage system for public address, onsite control systems (including way-finding touch screen plinths) and database support for production and presentation purposes. Together with the coordinated refurbishment of the gallery’s Roy Grounds Building (and its reorganisation as NGV International), the scalability of this approach has been put to the test over the last few years. The expectations for managing over 50 exhibitions annually, each with their own content requirements, along with operations running across both buildings was factored into this preliminary stage of development.

Within the museum’s environment, this hidden, parallel universe shows its face primarily through the proliferation of animated information screens that poke out of crevices at irregular angles and jutting “cores”. These inset pulsating surfaces offer up a variety of screen content providing ambient veils of imagery and didactic exhibition or event information, serving interpretive, directional, commercial and self-promotional purposes. A template format has been designed for managing as many as 400 new information screens per month. This type of documentary material is also widely used in the wall-mounted image screens, providing tonal as well as illustrative textual content. Onsite kiosks are another obvious outlet of the NGVA’s wired and networked environment. Presenting interactive products enabling a gallery visitor insight and enrichment, they are found throughout the gallery, offering supportive background and ancillary information. Within its first year of operation under these new conditions, the Multimedia Department developed and produced over 70 interactives, 1000 pages of content, 2,500 images plus hours of audio/visual material.

Although to date it appears that the imperative of the NGV’s digital focus has been the “onsite” side of the ledger, concerted development has also been undertaken to develop the organization’s online Web presence. The synergies of incorporating information and communication technologies throughout the organization has enabled the museum to better realize its mission through utilizing the creative potential of digital media and multimedia tools. [11] Using its technologies towards onsite and online strategies, the museum’s stated aim is to provide an enhanced and enriched viewer experience – principally focussed through a strategy of surrounding art with wide-ranging information – that extends this experience in terms of both accessibility and temporality.

3.3 National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) Website: Distributed space (situation; extension)

If the field of art and its primary physical space, the museum, can be considered as exhibiting distributive characteristics in and of themselves, then what purposes can networked environments serve? As introduced earlier, the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia (NGVA) was designed with a clearly articulated operational plan for the onsite employment of its multimedia communication infrastructure. Beyond the gallery walls, however, the online environment offers a far less controllable space. Will this transposition– the alteration of the spatial ground within which art situates itself – consequentially shift multimedia’s subservience? By curtailing its purposing toward supplementing and enriching the art experience, will it be through a more dialectical application of digital media that

more challenging propositions for art will be unshackled and left to wander? It is through the example of the apparently benign art museum Website that some of these implications can be sensed.

The NGV's Website is representative of other comparable organizational sites. I believe that looking at such sites is particularly relevant because of the complication that managing logistics of "spread" and scale brings as well as the issue of accommodating diverse types of authorship and readership. Even a passing tour of the site collects together content as different and divergent in intention as information about the restoration of a Tintoretto's *Doge Pietro Loredano*, shopping for a NGV logo-emblazoned baseball cap or booking a flight with Qantas. If we are looking for an equivalent to the type of art experience that we have come to expect in a gallery, then we will be surely disappointed. In fact, there is no art, as such, to be found amongst the sundry pages – art is non-existent there if evaluated according to orthodox analysis.

It was in response to a prerequisite partitioning, converted into a self-sustaining ideology, that the Modernist museum moulded itself. Brian O'Doherty provides the most complete spatial interpretation of this dogma, duly termed the "White Cube":

The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art'. The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions are preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. Some of the sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics. So powerful are the perceptual fields of force within this chamber that, once outside it, art can lapse into secular status (O'Doherty, 1986:14).

In comparison to such a cloistered space, the Internet is a relatively borderless frontier – art on the web disappears in the white noise of an open channel. Tapping the NGV's Website for three hours resulted in downloading over 1000 pages, which contain thousands of images, the thumbnails of stranded facsimiles. Taking this observation on board, maybe we are looking at the relationship between artworks and their exposition in the wrong way – or at least looking at it with eyes that have been trained by habit and our preconceptions about engaging with a particular kind of art. A particularly prevalent approach to designing exhibition spaces on the Web draws from the readily available, conventional metaphors that are affiliated with the stereotyped, physical museum. These include displaying content in virtual galleries, navigating via the metaphor of connecting rooms, site mapping transposed graphically as museum setting and artworks defined by the accoutrements of walls and frames. Perhaps an alternative perspective is warranted?

To move against the grain, then, what can the experience of organizational art sites bring to a deconstruction of art's institutional foundations? The home page and its cascading structure of branching sub-categories, each revealing their own sub-menus in their turn, represents a direct manifestation of the abstract matrix of relations of art and its distributive field in traversable and illustrative form. As Pierre Bourdieu teased out in his sociological critique of art:

It would be found that one of the most significant properties of the field of cultural production, explaining its extreme dispersion and the conflicts between rival principles of legitimacy, is the extreme permeability of its frontiers and, consequently, the extreme diversity of the "posts" it offers, which defy any unilinear hierarchization (Bourdieu, 1993: 43).

This particular site can be viewed as illustrating Bourdieu's notion of the field as an "indeterminate site", exhibiting traits of elasticity, uncertainty and extreme dispersal held together by their ever-changing arrangement as relationships across the field of cultural production. The art Website offers, through its distinctive form, a visualization that brings the privileging of the unified, formally consolidated sense of artwork – in contrast to a more fluid, intangible

and dispersed constitution – to the surface; raising its predispositions up, literally, to its flat (and flattening) field-like surface.

4.0 Conclusion

4.1 (Re-collecting) Art as aggregate

Recognising form as a relational property – moving from fixed, consolidated form to the active dynamic process of formation – is especially warranted if we are to meaningfully address the manipulability and distributive qualities associated with digital media technologies. Such a relational aesthetic should be taken into account to determine their deployment across a range of museological spaces. For example, to discern art on the Web implicates a shift in perspective of what it is that actually constitutes the artwork. A sociological perspective on art recognizes the productive relations that exist between producers of the work (for example, the artist who makes the object, in its expression of materiality and symbolic sense) and consumers, or “end-users” (those that apply resulting meaning and ascribe value). Considered in this way, the artwork is an outcome that emerges from the operations of the cultural field. Art might be said to “come together” aggregatively.

The artwork as pure, formal unity is unrealisable through multimedia. Bridging the divide between an understanding of traditional media, such as painting and sculpture, and new media involves re-thinking the organicity of media forms. Drawing upon the transportable qualities of digital data, the difference between media forms can be generalised as being a matter of the conversion of that data into a variety of output options. Especially as exemplified by digital media, formation is the active principle that governs art’s emergence from relations in its field. As reflected in convergence media, where no singular or essential form need assume primacy, what might be called a transitional state takes precedence. This shifts focus from a concentration on form, unity and media-specificity to an aesthetic based on formation, multiplicity and distributive characteristics.

The situation of an artwork in exhibition space involves differentiating between its exposition as a uni-dimensional intrusive “alien” and the more indeterminate, vague interrelationship it may assume with the space in which it is encountered. Interactive content is ephemeral. I am reminded here of Richard Kurin’s comments that museums, in order to stay viable, must urgently respond to, and creatively address, the increasingly vital need to actualise or make tangible otherwise intangible forms of cultural heritage. [12] This methodological challenge marks an epistemological shift from conservation of material artefacts to “material ‘work’”, in recognition that elements emerge out of material procedures rather than pre-exist as givens, or as “presets”.

As Bourdieu has summarized: ‘it is a question of understanding works of art as a manifestation of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated’ (Bourdieu, 1993: 37). In this paper I have concentrated on how the conditions of virtuality affect the operations of the cultural field. While this expansion is partially facilitated by the distributive properties of Internet, analogous manifestations have been identified in gallery environments and exhibition design. The concept of phase space extends the notion of space beyond the physical construction (constriction) of the gallery’s four walls, induces the disassembly of the artwork, and instead encourages a reconsideration of art as a conglomeration of different phase-like states of becoming. The exposition of art as an emergent phenomenon arising out of the cultural field is a significant articulation that brings into clearer view otherwise overlooked, virtual aspects without which art could not exist.

4.2 Notes & References

Notes:

[1] *Fieldwork: Australian Art 1968-2002* was the inaugural exhibition of The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia. The exhibition inventory represented a diverse selection of work from over ninety artists, surveying the main artistic

currents in Australian art since 1968. The exhibition was developed, designed and realised through an integrative working relationship between the curators (Jason Smith and Charles Green), architects and selected artists.

Exhibition dates: 28 November 2002 to 16 February 2003.

[2] To this end one is reminded of Walter Benjamin, who in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* essay posed an earlier version of this question as to whether photography, through its very technological invention – and subsequent intervention through the process of reproducibility – had not transformed the entire nature of art. See: Benjamin, Walter, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, transl. Harry Zohn, (London: Fontana Press, 1992).

[3] Both abbreviations – NGV and NGVA – will be used throughout the paper. As a point of clarification: NGV will be employed in reference to the National Gallery of Victoria as a larger institutional entity and organizational structure, whereas NGVA will be used in the cases of specific reference to the architecture, program and exhibition activities of the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia based at Federation Square, Melbourne.

[4] Relational aesthetics is a term that holds particular currency in contemporary art discourse. Today, this position – developed most fully by French curator Nicolas Bourriaud – bases itself on the structural principle of inter-human relations and their social context, which he recognizes as predominating in much art in the post-consumer/communication era. See: Bourriaud, Nicholas, *Relational Aesthetics*, transl. S. Pleasance S & F. Woods, (France: les presses du reel, 2002).

[5] Andre Malraux's important text 'The Museum Without Walls' is central to this discussion; its reinterpretation by postmodern theorists (Crimp; Krauss) is outlined more thoroughly in an expanded version of this paper.

[6] Considered in architectural terms, Michael Benedikt offers a detailed exposition of the deconstructive potential of "marginalia" to blur boundaries. He refers to this strategy as "hierarchy reversal". See: Benedikt, Michael, *Deconstructing The Kimbell: An Essay on Meaning and Architecture* (New York: SITES/Lumen Books, 1991).

[7] *Fieldwork: Australian Art 1968-2002*, The Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia, Melbourne; 28 November 2002 to 16 February 2003. See: *Fieldwork: Australian Art 1968-2002*, eds. L. Prager, M. Trudgeon and D. Waite, (Melbourne: The National Gallery of Victoria, 2002).

[8] The deconstructive challenge presented by a "microexample" is implicit in Massumi's description that follows (quoted at length):

An example is neither general (as is a system of concepts) nor particular (as is the material to which a system is applied). It is 'singular'. It is defined by a disjunctive self-relation: a belonging to itself that is simultaneously an extendibility to everything else with which it might be connected (one for all, and all in itself). In short, exemplification is the logical category corresponding to self-relation.

As a writing practice, exemplification activates detail. The success of the example hinges on the details. Every little one matters. At each new detail, the example runs the risk of falling apart, of its unity of self-relation becoming a jumble. Every detail is essential to the case. This means that the details making up the example partake of its singularity. Each detail is like another example embedded in it. A microexample. An incipient example (2002: 18).

[9] Gerhard Mack's *Art Museums Into the 21st Century* provides a useful example of architectural discourse on contemporary museum design. See: Mack, Gerhard, *Art Museums Into the 21st Century* (Basel, Berlin, and Boston: Birkhauser, 1999).

[10] The reader is directed to Peter Vergo's edited collection, *The New Museology*, for a useful and wide-ranging presentation of this approach. See: Vergo, Peter (ed), *The New Museology* (London: Reaktion Books, 1989).

[11] Reference is drawn from notes taken from the presentation by Helen Page, NGV Multimedia Manager, at *OzeCulture*, the Department of Communications, Information Technology & the Arts national conference, held in Brisbane, Qld, July 30-31, 2003.

[12] From notes taken at a public lecture given by Dr. Richard Kurin of the Smithsonian Institute at the National Gallery of Victoria International, Melbourne, on 9 November 2004.

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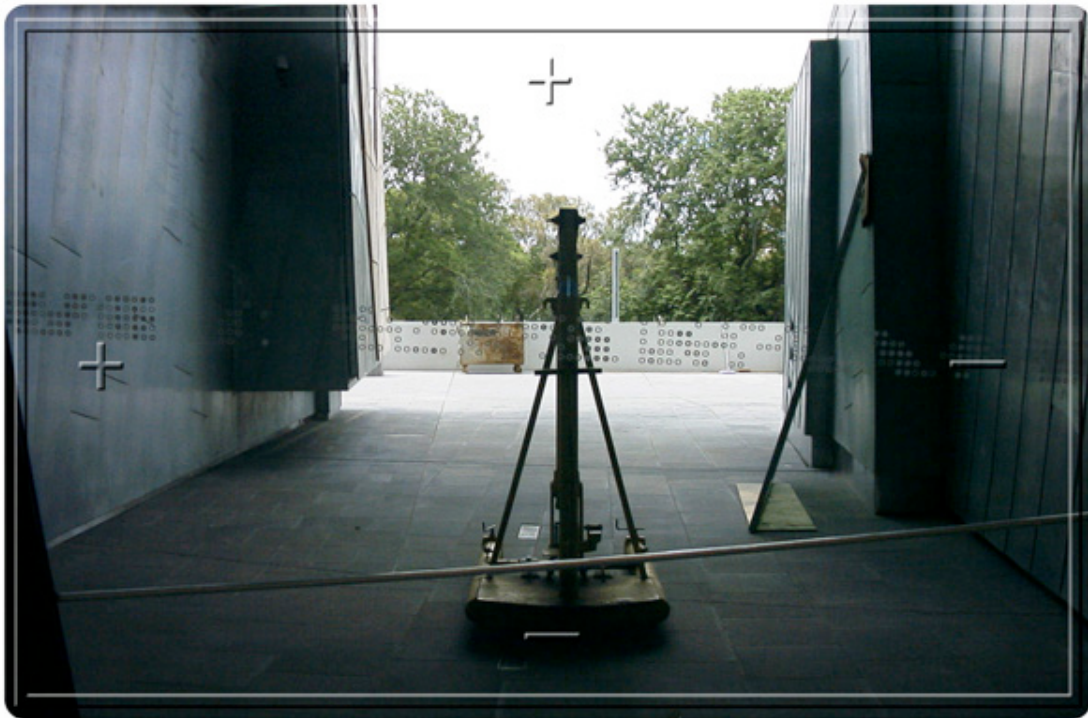
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02. Image: *Boundary-Field (Out)*



Vince Dziekan, *Boundary-Field (Out)*, digital image 2003